“Giving Feeling Form”: B. S. Johnson’s Literary Project

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ABSTRACT

This thesis assesses the novels of B. S. Johnson and, building on earlier socio-cultural readings, for the first time identifies affect, mood and space as key drivers of Johnson’s work. It suggests fresh interactions with the texts via the artistic practice and philosophical thought of the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries and reveals what more we can gain from reading Johnson now. Rather than fix this author in a canonized literary past it presents Johnson as a writer with inter-disciplinary appeal and influence.

My reading champions the continued significance of Johnson’s work and endeavours to resist teleology; it dips in and out of the seven novels, at times circling back to key passages and episodes that can be assessed in multiple ways. The thesis thus follows Johnson’s practice and is palimpsestic, it is formed from multiple layers. Working with affective energies the chapters unfold to build upon each other but also stand to be read individually or even, in true Johnsonian style, at random. The reading moves in a range of directions exploring different nodes of an organic whole that constitutes the body of Johnson’s literary output. Any thesis must build momentum and therefore this thesis culminates in an extended conclusion which for the first time places Johnson at the vanguard of a spatial turn in the humanities.

My final analysis suggests that Johnson’s practice advances the novel towards a model of “creative research” or project work – a reflexive adventure peculiar to the making process. This model is concerned with possibilities and processes rather than final resolution and happily accommodates Johnson’s vision of a chaotic, unknowable world.
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LECTURES

Introduction

*Telling stories is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality.*

B. S. Johnson

*Once upon a time is code for I’m lying to you. We experience stories as lies and truth at the same time. We learn to empathize with real people via made-up people. The most important thing that fiction does is it lets us look out through other eyes, and that teaches us empathy – that behind every pair of eyes is somebody like us.*

Neil Gaiman

Commenting fifty years apart in time, writers Neil Gaiman and B. S. Johnson pull no punches when tasked with unpacking their art. Gaiman—a British writer of comic books, graphic novels, screenplays, theatre and both juvenile and adult fiction—delivered these words in a talk entitled “How Stories Last” delivered to the Long Now Foundation in San Francisco in June 2015. The similarly multi-modal writer Johnson, by contrast, embedded his words into the body of his 1964 novel *Albert Angelo* as a metafictional outburst of creative frustration. Although half a century has passed between these utterances the two writers are united in their desire to pinpoint exactly what it is that stories do and how this end is achieved. It is striking how little the view of a story’s key co-ordinates has changed. The elements identified by both writers are truth, lies, fiction, experience, and reality and what is central to their arguments (and indeed to this thesis

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3 http://longnow.org/about/ The Long Now Foundation was established in 1996 to “provide a counterpoint to today’s accelerating culture and help make long-term thinking more common.” The name was coined by founding member and conceptual musician Brian Eno.
which assesses Johnson’s approach to the novel) is not merely the consideration of these terms in isolation or binary pairs but of the relations that are created between them and the processes that weave them together. Johnson makes this very explicit in his slightly awkward selection of the phrase “truth to reality” as the conceptual bedrock for his work; the preposition “to”, here, is easily overlooked but it foregrounds connection, direction and extension. Likewise, Gaiman configures storytelling as a portal or conduit “through” or “via” which we access another’s experience and forge connection and meaning. The terms chosen by both authors reflect the essential interrelational tensions which bring narrative into being. In Johnson’s case, and for the purposes of this thesis, the seemingly inconsequential “to” is particularly significant. Prepositions work as modifiers of lexical items that typically express temporal or spatial relations.

I have selected Gaiman’s very contemporary sound bite to illustrate how the orientating drive and concerns of B. S. Johnson’s novelistic work persist and inform those engaged in literary practice today. This is perhaps surprising because writers fall in and out of favour in the blink of an eye and what once seemed relevant and fresh can quickly become obsolete. Nonetheless it seems that certain questions endure. In 2009 the writer Christopher Fowler embarked upon a series of articles for The Independent entitled “Forgotten Authors.” Bryan Stanley Johnson makes an appearance as ill-remembered author number 40, an inauspicious ranking that he, no doubt, would have had something to say about if he had lived to see the dawning of the twenty-first century. It is questionable that Johnson would have gained any comfort from the fact that in Fowler’s opinion his early death by suicide and the quality of his “seven slender novels of increasing peculiarity” give him the distinction of being the “ultimate

4 Johnson, Albert, 167.
forgotten author.” This cursory synopsis of Johnson’s career does him a disservice. Bryan Stanley Johnson was a prolific writer. From 1963–1973, he produced the aforementioned seven novels, two volumes of poetry, two collections of short fiction and was the director and producer of film and television productions. In addition to this, Johnson was poetry editor of the Transatlantic Review and wrote for the theatre and press. Not only did Johnson write with a drive and passion that was remarkable amongst his peers, but when not writing he examined his labours, explained his position and defended his creative activity. Johnson’s project (and we shall come to this) was one of activity, of application and process. His dedication and passion for his art was well noted and he was both a celebrated and notorious fixture in the 1960s literary scene.

Johnson’s peculiar ambition and thirst for answers did not go unnoticed—Anthony Burgess archly commented, “I don’t want to talk to Bryan about the novel: he has views about it.” Johnson believed that the novel’s attractions, “the precise use of language, exploitation of the technological fact of the book, the explication of thought” should be foregrounded and what must be rejected was fiction or “telling stories” which for Johnson was synonymous with “telling lies.” The Johnsonian author was at the service of truth and had little time for the petty indulgences of the imagination. His argument followed that although people told stories to make

6 This anecdote is relayed by Johnson in an interview with the writer Alan Burns for his collection The Imagination on Trial, British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods edited by Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London: Allison & Busby, 1981). The full text can be accessed at http://bsjohnson.co.uk/page/2/.
8 Ibid., 14.
sense of existence and therefore access some vital truth through comforting structure, life was essentially chaotic. Writers should not try to hide form (an act of deception) but display the truth of their practice self-consciously, pushing the novel towards authenticity. The era of the romantic monad disguising and imposing ill-considered form unthinkingly on life’s contingencies in the name of Art was declared over and a new practice begun.

Over the course of seven novels Johnson became equated with destruction, be it the proleptic hole scored into the text of Albert Angelo, the free-falling pages of The Unfortunates, or the self-destructive tendencies that cut short his literary career in 1973. It was an association that followed Johnson from the lay world to the critical realm. Andrzej Gąsiorek describes the work of Johnson and his associates⁹ as “rarefied” and “the fag-end of a decaying [avant-garde] tradition;”¹⁰ Patricia Waugh referred to his output as a failed romantic project where the author “swings desperately into extreme, defensive, metafictional subversions of the text.”¹¹ Perhaps we should not be surprised by Johnson’s appetite for destruction. Murmurings in the sixties suggested that the novel had reached the end of its natural life cycle and become locked into an endless recycling of genre that must be abandoned. In 1967 John Barthes famously spoke of the “used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities”¹²; a sentiment echoed by Johnson when he said of the realist novel, “no matter how good the writers are who now attempt it, it cannot be made to work for our time, and the writing of it is anachronistic, invalid,

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⁹ A make-shift coterie of writers that included Ann Quin, Eva Figes, Alan Burns, Rayner Heppenstall and Christine Brooke-Rose.
irrelevant and perverse.”

In spite of this defeatist statement Johnson forged ahead. By the end of the seventies, however, critical consensus was that Johnson had failed to produce a better alternative.

This had not always been the case. Reviews for his first novel, *Travelling People*, were on the whole favourable. In his defining biography, *Like A Fiery Elephant*, Jonathan Coe notes that *The Times* review of Johnson’s debut was given precedence over notices for grand dame Daphne Du Maurier’s latest offering. The novel was deemed to be both “funny and clever” and Johnson in possession of “no small talent”.

One year later, Johnson and his subsequently more experimental novel, *Albert Angelo* were again lauded by *The Sunday* and *Irish Times* but dissenting voices were beginning to be heard. Coe points to the fact that three of the four texts that Johnson authored or contributed to in 1964 were sent out with some kind of instructions or explanation to the reviewing critic or reader—a tactic that flew in the face of critical developments that sought to remove authority from the writer. *The Glasgow Herald* responded, “If an author has to explain himself, I think he has to that extent failed.” *The Times* commented that maybe Johnson’s “departures from the Orthodox are not so radical as they first appear.”

These responses did nothing to stifle Johnson’s drive to explain and defend and he produced a flurry of letters and epi-texts staunchly outlining his position. To the writer, Anthony Smith he wrote, “*Albert Angelo* just is, and it’s that way because it is that way, and it’s no other way because I rejected all the alternatives as being worse, and no one, but no one, can think

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15 1964 saw the publication of *Albert Angelo* and *Poems* by Constable. Johnson also contributed text to Julia Trevelyan Oman’s *Street Children* (Hodder & Stoughton) and saw a paperback edition of *Travelling People* issued by Corgi books.
themselves into the position of the writer and consider those alternatives.”¹⁷ In a furious letter to the uncooperative director of Penguin Books he fumed, “May I suggest that you find yourself some new editorial colleagues, someone who knows what direction fiction in 1964 is taking?”¹⁸ Every bad or lukewarm review or refusal to acquiesce was met with a vitriolic and denunciatory missive.

Johnson’s view on the direction of fiction in 1964 was clear. All literary technique must now be “dedicated to the communication as nearly as possible of some truth believed by the author”¹⁹ but as one of his many publishers, Frederic Warburg, responded “Your ideas about how novels should be written are, if not unique, at least held by a tiny but tiny minority.”²⁰ Accusations of stubborn solipsism followed, aided by lines such as Trawl’s opening of “I, always with I…..one always starts with I……..And ends with I.”²¹ Reviews, again, were split between hailing the genius of his unbroken “vividly-described […] blank verse”²² and mesmerizing stream of consciousness and condemning his perceived self-absorption. Johnson had gained a reputation. As Coe notes, “people were troubled by his growing entrenchment.”²³ Trouble lay ahead and in 1973, before he could complete the trilogy that he planned as his defining work, Johnson took his own life and disappeared from the literary and cultural radar. The world had quickly fallen out of love with B. S. Johnson and the author once described by

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¹⁷ This letter dated 20 August 1964 is quoted in Coe, Fiery, 169.
¹⁸ This letter to Allen Lane, dated 25 September 1964, is quoted in Coe, Fiery, 171.
¹⁹ This quotation comes from the set of notes that Johnson formulated to be sent out to prospective reviewers of Albert Angelo in May 1964. See: Coe, Fiery, 156.
²⁰ Letter cited in Coe, Fiery, 213.
²¹ Johnson paid no heed to Warburg and his novels became increasingly less commercial and more narrowly focused. By the time he came to write his third novel Trawl he had pinned a sardonic note over his desk with the statement, “Anyone would think I was writing for the PUBLIC.” See: Ibid., 193.
²³ Ibid., 218.
Samuel Beckett as “a most gifted writer” became quickly marginalized and little read. Johnson scholar Philip Tew would later explain this with reference to the writer’s singularly precarious position in opposition to both the literary establishment and the social-realism of the 50s and 60s; a situation that left the author isolated and misunderstood. In short, in his lifetime, Johnson acquired a reputation for being too experimental, too combative, too radicalized and too working-class for too many people.

A literature review

A handful of scholarly Johnson articles appeared over the next couple of decades and 1985 saw Johnson sharing the bill with the modernist great Jean Rhys in The Review of Contemporary Fiction. It was not, however, until the dawning of a new century that Johnson reemerged as a fully-fledged figure of academic and popular interest. The first year of the twenty-first century saw the release of the feature film of Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry whilst 2001 welcomed the first Johnson monograph by Philip Tew. It was, however, the 2004 publication of Jonathan Coe’s award winning biography, Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson, that firmly put Johnson back in the public eye. A scholarly collection, Re-reading B. S. Johnson was edited by Tew and Glynn White in 2007 with important readings by David James, Kaye Mitchell, Lawrence Phillips and Nick Hubble amongst others. Critical Engagements devoted a double issue of the journal to Johnson in 2011 but 2013 proved to be a bumper one for Johnson enthusiasts: Picador reissued five novels to coincide with the 80th anniversary of the author’s birth and a collection of rare and out-of-print material entitled Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson edited by Tew, Coe and Julia Jordan. In the same year the BFI

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24 See Coe, Fiery, 353 for details of this private endorsement that became public much to Beckett’s dissatisfaction.
released a DVD collection of Johnson film work reflecting the breadth of the writer’s output. 2014 saw the publication of Jordan’s “‘For Recuperation’: Elegy, Form, and the Aleatory in B.S. Johnson's The Unfortunates” in Textual Practice and the collection B. S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: the possibilities of the Avant-Garde, co-edited by Martin Ryle and Jordan. Later that year the B. S. Johnson Society proudly produced the first scholarly journal devoted to the author for enthusiasts and scholars alike.²⁶

In their introduction to the 2007 collection Re-reading B. S. Johnson, Philip Tew and Glyn White point to a sea-change that occurred in Johnson studies in 2004 with the publication of Coe’s acclaimed biography stating, “In the post-Coe environment we are liberated from past-cycles of criticism, old squabbles and sour grapes, and inspired to visit Johnson’s work anew.”²⁷ The readings that followed shifted from the (often painfully) personal and biographical to broadly follow two paths. Firstly, there are those that focus on the (typo)graphic: James, Mitchell, Leigh-Harris and Buchanan (2007) and Guignery and Barton (2011). These readings tend towards an analysis of Johnson’s text in terms of performativity and reader response to Johnson’s typographic innovations. James assesses that Johnson causes the reader to think about the cognitive role he or she might assume whilst engaging in the action of reading narrative fiction. Mitchell chooses to focus on the issue of linearity (and its disruption) in Johnson’s work, seeing it as a precursor to hypertext. For Barton the textual gaps that stand as a feature of Johnson’s style are not used to pause or still but in themselves convey internal narrative realities. Buchanan stands alone in tracing the influence of Johnson on later typographic practice, noting

the interest of the Toronto Research Group in Johnson’s practice. This reading is further elaborated on in Chapter 4.

Secondly, following Tew’s decisive championing of Johnson as a critical realist there are readings that engage in a socio-political reading namely Ferrebe (2005), Hubble (2007), Phillips (2007), Hargreaves (2012) and Darlington (2014). Ferrebe focuses on issues of gender, discussing Johnson’s role in the construction of masculinity in post-war fiction. Like this present study, Hubble notes the anxious mood that fuels Johnson’s recollections of evacuation but presents a psychoanalytical reading. Phillips notes the battle for urban space in Albert Angelo focusing on middle-class gentrification and redevelopment and Darlington follows by considering the issue of class anxiety. Hargreaves takes a wider look at Johnson’s practice noting that the experiences detailed in the novels “seem at once idiosyncratic and symptomatic of postwar culture, so that private experience and public life are always implicated in each other, operating along the global, class, and sexual ‘frontiers of war’.”

In addition to this, the issue of Johnson’s aesthetics has begun to be explored. In 2005, Glyn White devoted a chapter to Johnson in Reading the Graphic Surface, and proposed that whilst some of the author’s “unique formal devices [are] often seen as rejections of realism, [they] actually seek to embrace and extend mimesis in his novels.” Many have assessed Johnson’s work as a continuation of the modernist project. 2012 saw a literary roundtable on the author hosted by writer Will Self at the Southbank Centre as part of his Modernism series and both James and Hubble (2011) see the project as extending key modernist concerns. In “Moving Beyond Modernism in the Fiction of B. S. Johnson: Charting Influences and Comparisons”

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29 Glyn White, Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 95.
(2012) Tew draws on many of these arguments and, expanding on his original thesis, makes a case for Johnson’s work as an extension of a modernist experimental project that at the same time challenged the elitism of the movement by the foregrounding of the author’s working-class identity and experience. Tew also forges connections with continental thought, revealing that Johnson sought to reject genre and the naturalism promoted by the social realism of the fifties and the sixties by aligning himself with writers such as Rayner Heppenstall who served as a bridge between Bloomsbury and the writers of the experimental *nouveau roman* in France.\(^{30}\)

**Contemporary engagements with B. S. Johnson’s work**

All of the above readings are invaluable to any scholar attempting to position Johnson’s work within the overarching narrative of twentieth-century British literature. My reading considers Johnson’s responses to modernism and builds on earlier socio-cultural readings but uniquely suggests fresh interactions with his work via the artistic approaches and philosophical thought of the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries. For the first time it reveals what more we can gain from reading Johnson *now*. Rather than leave the writer in the canonized past it identifies the factors which have brought him to the attention of a new generation of artists across a wide range of disciplines. These factors are diverse, the musicians Los Campesinos! identify Johnson’s commitment to honesty as an inspiration for their own practice. Band member Gareth Campesinos! comments that Johnson was “a renegade and a pioneer,” adding

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And now when I write, I tell the truth. Because if I’m not telling people my truthful thoughts in my lyrics, then I don’t know what I’m telling people—or why they’d want to listen. Anything less than the truth doesn’t seem fair.\textsuperscript{31}

Unsurprisingly the artist Isla Leaver-Yap notes the visual and spatial qualities of Johnson’s output noting that “the substance of Johnson’s project exists somewhere between the printed page and the reader’s eye, between linguistic and visual translation.”\textsuperscript{32} Film maker Beatrice Gibson simultaneously investigates the visual and aural dimensions of Johnson’s textual practice. Her film \textit{The Future’s Getting Old Like the Rest of Us} (2010) takes \textit{House Mother Normal} as a departure point and innovatively edits the script into a vertical structure. Employing the logic of a musical score Johnson’s eight simultaneous monologues are woven together on one screen. Commenting on Gibson’s piece, Leaver-Yap notes:

> Given Johnson’s care for the visual aspects of the book form, Gibson’s cinematic rendering inflected with a musical approach is a seemingly logical extension of his legacy—one that casts language not as a primary constituent but a contingent factor among a panoply of visual and aural devices.\textsuperscript{33}

Leaver-Yap’s words here foreground the artistic, interdisciplinary legacy of the Johnson project, one that reflects his own ease at moving between the production and practice of the poet and the novelist, the playwright and the television producer; the newspaper reporter and the critic.

Writing in \textit{Art Monthly} magazine in September 2011, John Douglas Millar notes the affinity between the worlds of arts and letters in the first half of the twentieth century, an attraction which gradually petered out as the century progressed. This mutually beneficial arrangement, it seems, has been halted by the conservatism of modern publishing and literary practice. Millar cites writer Tom McCarthy’s assessment of contemporary publishing as a stifling field in which,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} http://www.magnetmagazine.com/2010/02/01/los-campesinos-got-your-back-b-s-johnson/
\item \textsuperscript{32} https://leaveryap.wordpress.com/2010/12/20/bs-johnson-language-to-be-looked-at/
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Editorial decisions are taken by marketing boards. There isn’t much room for something that isn’t middle of the road. On the other hand, [you] can’t help noticing if you mix, as I do, with one toe in the publishing world and nine toes in the art world – it’s the artists who are extremely literate. In the current climate art has become the place where literary ideas are received, debated and creatively transformed.\textsuperscript{34}

The art world, it seems, had retained its exploratory drive obliging modern artists are to revisit the works of “Burroughs, Bataille, JG Ballard, Georges Perec, Jorge Luis Borges, Flann O’Brien and B. S. Johnson, anthologies of Imagist and concrete poetry, th[at] can all be found on the shelves of the modern art bookshop.”\textsuperscript{35} I would add to this that in the case of Johnson this interest is not limited to the arena of fine art; the writer’s compositional experiments and reflective practice have brought him to the attention of modern typographers and independent publishers such as Stuart Bailey and Will Holder who have incorporated Johnson’s texts into their publications and performances.

Douglas Millar’s piece for \textit{Art Monthly} goes on to question what the consequences are for art that looks to the \textit{literary} for inspiration and what might result from this contemporary channeling of creative energy. He notes the rise of new form: hybridized “art writing” and quasi-literary journals such as \textit{F.R.DAVID, Dot Dot Dot,} \textsuperscript{36} \textit{2HB, The Happy Hypocrite, Cabinet} that reflect a “burgeoning artistic interest in the written word – and not just the written word, but the


\textsuperscript{36} Bailey’s \textit{Dot Dot Dot} publications, Holder’s \textit{F. R. David micro}}-magazines and Holder’s edition of \textit{Roland: The Magazine of the ICA’s Visual Programme} (May 2009) all feature Johnson’s work. Will Holder also collaborated with Chris Evans in 2014 on a musical performance in which the writer’s published football reports are set to musical accompaniment.
word transcribed in a perishable material object, a book.” Consequently literary critics who are witnessing this phenomena should now respond and employ a wider variety of lenses to bring to focus a contemporary reading. Without a doubt Johnson’s appeal and influence is to be felt across modern artistic practice and this has prompted me to take a contemporary, interdisciplinary approach to my own analysis. The theorists I have employed in my reading—Kathleen Stewart, Brian Massumi, Nigel Thrift and Jonathan Flatley et al—are (amongst many other things) interdisciplinary theorists who have helped me identify a rich spatial seam in Johnson’s work which innovatively opens up fresh readings for a contemporary readership. The reading that follows champions Johnson as an artistic pioneer of the spatial turn rather than a late-to-the-party modernist at the end of a literary era. It highlights Johnson’s on-going relevance to twenty-first century artists, audiences and critics alike and uniquely explores the way in which his novelistic work constitutes an artistic project.

Evidence for Johnson’s artistic influence is easy to find—a case in point is the on-line biography of contemporary artist Mick Peter which features overlaps and affinities with Johnson’s practice. The biography explains that Mick Peter transforms imagery from fiction, illustration and graphic design into playful installations, liberating images from the flat surface of the page to create witty and exuberant sculptures. Sketches and squiggles are transformed in scale and remade in substantial materials such as concrete, acrylic resin and polyurethane. The resulting sculptures, despite their robustness, have an uneasy feeling about them, as though they are not yet entirely complete. Here we find the exploratory mainstays of the Johnson project; issues that this thesis will examine: the relationship between fiction and reality, the problem of closure, the tyranny of the


creative surface and the interplay of materiality and inscription. My reading will show that these elements all fall within the overarching field of space and its qualities. For Johnson, the novel was always already a spatial form because at the most rudimentary level the page is

an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey: therefore I employ, within the pocket of my publisher and the patience of my printer, typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel. To dismiss such techniques as gimmicks, or to refuse to take them seriously, is crassly to miss the point.39

The artist Isla Leaver-Yap foregrounds this quote in her blog and notes that “language and image are not differentiated here; they are leveled to share a common context. Johnson’s project, then, was to communicate content ‘most nearly’, in the most suitable form possible.”40 Thus, some fifty years ago, Johnson was embarking on a practical, spatial exploration of an aesthetic problem. It is an approach that I will connect throughout my thesis to Gratton and Sheringham’s concept of “project work” and in my final chapter to Paul Carter’s concept of “creative research”: artistic practice that demystifies the creative process and reflects upon itself. If, as Johnson claimed, the novel had become defunct, the duty of the novelist was to explore and reformulate all aspects of its coming into being—the material and conceptual spaces of the medium.

Working in the sixties, Johnson was constrained by the affordances of traditional media but this was no obstacle to his creativity. Indeed, if anything these constraints inspired his practice. Flexible form and practice have become commonplace today; Marc Saporta’s Composition No. 1, the 1961 book in a box that was the predecessor to Johnson’s The Unfortunates, is now available as an iPad application which replicates the random function of the

39 Johnson, Albert, 176.
40 https://leaveryap.wordpress.com/2010/12/20/bs-johnson-language-to-be-looked-at/
novel’s loose leaves through computer coding. The materiality of narrative, it seems, has become more malleable in the cyber-age, a shift that began during Johnson’s time when storytelling (the novel’s original function) had been appropriated by the televisual field. Johnson’s response in the sixties was to exploit what the novel was best equipped for—the “explication of thought,” the “taking of an audience inside characters’ minds,” i.e. the experiential present rather than the narrative past; an investigation into the very material of thought itself. In interview with Alan Burns Johnson rued that “all other writing possibilities are subjugated to narrative” and a self-reflexive project was undertaken to methodically liberate as many other affordances as he could, revealing the novel’s full potential. The legacy of these explorations and questions can be felt today in installations such as Mick Peter’s Lying and Liars (2012) which showcases the on-going discussion via eccentric hand-drawn characters in an environment of cement wall reliefs. Johnson’s belief that fiction was a form of puerile “lying” is represented by Peter’s frenetic hand-drafted sketches which fight to escape the rigid walls of formal tradition.

Like many of the artistic and literary innovators of the early twentieth century, Johnson detailed his beliefs and aims in a “manifesto” type document, the introduction to his collection

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42 Johnson, “Intro,” 12.
44 A promotional website for the exhibition explains that its title is derived from “British novelist B. S. Johnson’s idea that narrative fiction is a form of ‘lying’ and the show explores the conflict between storytelling and formal experimentation by mixing different sculptural and architectural idioms.” http://www.remotegoat.com/uk/event/158029/mick-peter-lying-and-liars/
45 These include F. T. Marinetti’s Manifesto of Futurism (1909), Wyndham Lewis’ BLAST manifesto of the Vorticist movement (1914), Walter Gropius’ manifesto of the Staatliche Bauhaus, Tristan Tzara’s Dada manifesto of 1918 and The Surrealists’ offering of 1924.
Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs. Written towards the end of his career it reveals a key set of beliefs that had changed little from the project’s inception. In the introduction Johnson presents the constraints and rules that set the project in motion; a series of “truth values” or quasi Boolean operations through which the “inputs” of the novel must be manipulated. After stating that “telling stories is telling lies” the reader learns that:

A useful distinction between literature and other writing for me is that the former teaches one something true about life; and how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction? The two terms, truth and fiction, are opposites, and it must logically be impossible.

The two terms novel and fiction are not, incidentally, synonymous, as many seem to suppose in the way they use them interchangeably. The publisher of Trawl wished to classify it as autobiography, not as a novel. It is a novel, I insisted and could prove; what it is not is fiction. The novel is a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel.46

The range of inputs that go towards making a novel are revealed as truth, fiction and form and various basic operations are outlined: truth is NOT fiction; the novel may be truth OR fiction. The logic of the project evolves by stating what “telling stories” is in order to extrapolate what the novel is not. Stories are told and therefore are best served by verbalization. Novels, like bodies, take up space and possess materiality; they are rigid in a way that storytelling is not and possess a presence. Novels might be exploited and developed then in a different way to the oral tale, to enact through gesture, form and inscription. What differentiates the novel from say storytelling or autobiography is the

sheer technical joy of forcing almost intractable words into patterns of meaning and form that are uniquely (for the moment at least) mine, a need to make people laugh with me in case they laugh at me, a desire to codify experience…47

47 Ibid., 18.
What is notable here, and will be explored in this thesis, is Johnson’s timely drive to engage with the novel (an entity formed of language) in material terms. Surprisingly for a writer in search of truth, Johnson’s creative joy is technical rather than mimetic; its roots buried deep in the Greek tekhne—“art, skill, craft in work; method, system, an art, a system or method of making or doing.” Johnson insists that Trawl is a novel by proof of its form and the processes that bring it into being. Johnson’s novels, it appears, are true not merely through their lack of fiction but because of their patterns and structures; their use of materiality and space.

We arrive then, at a central focus of this thesis and a question partially raised (but not fully answered) by Jared McGeough in his exploration of memoir and truth in Johnson’s “Introduction to Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?” in the 2007 Tew and White edited collection. Citing Johnson scholar Philip Tew, McGeough asks: “what occurs when the ‘texture and co-ordinates of Johnson’s life require a significantly different form’?” The reading that follows, although briefly discussing House Mother Normal, focuses on the “Introduction” as the key site of Johnson’s exploration of the interplay of truth, life and literature; one that transcends memoir. Building a case for Johnson as a bricoleur, McGeough identifies the introduction as the key space in which the author exhaustedly, “rearrang[es] his life’s fragments in continually new and divergent patterns” and “stages a war for reality.” It must be remembered though that the “Introduction” served as an epi-text, an appendix to a main project that was well underway and little examined by McGeough’s piece. The writing of memoir or biography was far from Johnson’s primary aim and McGeough tentatively comments

50 Ibid., 138.
51 Ibid., 141.
“Johnson sensed a need to go beyond auto-biographical novels to express the truth of the world.” He adds that autobiography was insufficient for Johnson’s needs because “its content ‘closes off’ the field of being in which the subject is immersed; language effectively forces the multiplicity of experience into objective units; events become ordered, definitive, fixed in and by language.” McGeough rightly notes here Johnson’s antipathy to a formalism that simplistically brackets the text off from the living chaotic world.

In addition to this language—traditionally the writer’s only tool—is acknowledged by Johnson to be the writer’s main obstacle; a medium that is an “imprecise tool with which to achieve precision; the word will have slightly different meanings for every person.” Any literary mode that employs this tool with a view to precision surely risks restraining an essentially chaotic reality? Change and flux must somehow be factored in and embraced because “change is a condition of life [and] rather than deplore this, or hunt the chimaerae of stability or reversal, one should perhaps embrace change as all there is.” This thesis consequently notes how change is central to Johnson’s work and the varying ways in which it is invoked: the changing shifting moods and fabric of the city, a revolving roster of literary forms, fluctuating interpersonal relationships and social and biological change. Most importantly (and only perceivable now with my application of inter-disciplinary theory) is the subject’s changing relationship to space—the way individuals conceptualize and navigate their worlds. This relationship is never fixed but stands as a process always evolving towards an indeterminate end.

52 Ibid., 133.
53 McGeough, “Memoirs,” 135. This description, I suggest, has affinities with the aims of modernist urban planners who also sought to house human activity and experience in easily reproducible modular units. The best endeavours of modernist planners looked spectacular, clean and efficient on the page but were criticized by the users of the space as soul-less and inhospitable, somehow lacking in organic vitality.
55 Ibid., 17.
For the first time my reading highlights the ways in which Johnson’s work engages with space, the structures and behaviours that throw place into relief and the gestures with which a world is activated. It positions the author at the beginning of what we now see as a broad spatial turn in the humanities. Johnson’s work is revealed as exploratory rather than ineffectual, his novels the stuff of a project to open up the field of truth he saw language and literary genre as potentially enclosing. Within this project space, chance and chaos are embraced and encouraged, processes unfold organically and are not determined by resolution. Within these textual spaces individual feeling can be explored without restriction; theorists such as Stewart and Massumi conceptualize subjective experience as a contingent unfolding of spaces that are determined by moods. Through reading the texts as a spatial project I suggest that Johnson innovatively adapts the novel to immerse the reader in an active field of being—the “truth to reality”—that he desired to capture. Such tactics reflect (and indeed pre-empt) the emerging thought of the spatial turn and creative research. It is in this way that although often Johnson is often aligned with failure and destruction, in retrospect we can credit the writer with some success in making the novel “work for its time” and preventing it from becoming “anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse.”

Theoretical frameworks
To assess Johnson’s success in creating a novel that reflects the truth and reality of his time I have necessarily been drawn to thinkers of Johnson’s generation whose ideas came of age at the time of the novels’ publication. These theorists include Chtcheglov, Debord and Foucault but

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56 This tendency can be seen even in the readings of Johnson enthusiasts. Speaking to Jonathan Coe’s biography, Nick Hubble comments, “with the literary evaluation safely out of the way in the opening pages the bulk of the biography becomes a tragic account of heroic failure.” Hubble, “Late Intermodernism: B. S. Johnson, Charles Madge and Twentieth-Century Britain,” Critical Engagements 4.1/4.2 (2011): 56.
also comprise de Certeau, Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari who were approximate contemporaries but whose works were published in the years following Johnson’s death. Secondly, I have drawn on modern-day theorists whose ideas enable a fresh reading of Johnson’s project and support the contemporary relevance of his work. These theorists include Kathleen Stewart, Tim Ingold, Brian Massumi, Ben Highmore, Jonathan Flatley and Caroline Levine. The earlier generation, born of the inter-bellum period have long been positioned by descriptors which seek to catalogue and fix their ideas—they are qualified with labels such as avant-garde, postmodern, or poststructuralist. Of the latter group, whose ideas have often built upon the early interstitial concepts of Deleuze and Guattari, it is interesting to note that not one would consider themselves to be purely a literary theorist. All operate across disciplinary boundaries and the enforced gaps between anthropology, film studies, cultural theory and art history, embodying the new flexibilities of the contemporary world. Often centred on affect and attunement, these approaches are considered by some as slippery and diffuse—but Kathleen Stewart makes an unapologetic case for what she describes as “weak theory in an unfinished world.”

Such an approach is thus fit for its time and constitutes “cultural theory that attends to the cultural poiesis of forms of living. Its objects are textures and rhythms, trajectories, and modes of attunement, attachment and composition.” Importantly, for my argument, this quotation alerts the critic to the importance of materiality (“textures”) and spatiality (“composition”) in works that are being assessed as cultural poiesis. “Weakness” here alludes to the digressive, the roundabout and the indirect rather than the diluted and Stewart fights to shake off the term’s pejorative association. Weak theory provides an alternative to historically entrenched categories which simply will not work with objects as slippery as “attunement” and “attachment” or a rapidly changing world.

59 Ibid.,”71.
Stewart’s definition gives the contemporary reader several points of entry into Johnson’s work—
his problematization of closure that becomes validated by the idea of an “unfinished world”; his
tracking of urban movement and rhythm and, to open, Chapter 1 will analyze the attunements
and moods that permeate and orientate Johnson’s work.

Weak theory is concerned with affect, a term which we must consider before proceeding.
Although weak theory seeks not to define, an understanding of the parameters of affect is
necessary before we can assess its relevance to and overlap with the Johnson project. Stewart
offers the following:

…affect is a gathering place of accumulative dispositions. What matters is not meaning
gathered into codes but the gathering of experience beyond subjectivity, a transduction of
forces, a social aesthetics attuned to the way a tendency takes on consistency, or a new
regime of sensation becomes a threshold to the real.60

Here we find the potential for thinking of affect not as a thing but as a process and that which is
being processed is energy. In Stewart’s definition, affect forms a bridge between “experience”
and “reality” through the process of transduction or “the action or process of converting
something and especially energy or a message into another form.”61 This definition strikes a
chord with Johnson’s mission statement of accessing a truth to reality that would “give this
feeling form.”62 The affective energies detailed by Stewart override binary conceptions of the
subject and the collective; “sensation” and emotion is experienced individually, but the
processing of those feelings might be directed by a larger disposition and attunement that
envelops the communal group. Affect incorporates “the commonplace labor-intensive process of

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sensing modes of living as they come into being” and if a case can be made for Johnson’s work accessing affect, accusations of solipsism and self-absorption are deflected because affect blurs the divisions between the subject and the collective. Stewart’s understanding of affect implies a product, a result for all of the thinking and feeling and sensing in which the individual is immersed. If affect works by linking, “the background noise of obstinacies and promises, ruts and disorientations, intensities and resting points,” and stretching across “real and imaginary social fields and sediments, linking some kind of everything,” what does it deliver the individual on to? What do we find at the “threshold to the real”?

One suggestion is that the end result of affect is the world itself but the term “world” is often rejected by theorists of affect as somehow being ill-equipped to describe what reveals itself to be a dynamic process. “World” conjures up the image of an inert ball of matter suspended in space and time, or a compartmentalized sphere of experience: the world of sport. Preferred instead by contemporary affect theorists is the participle worlding, a noun with adjectival qualities as well as verbal ones, a term that is active rather than reductive. Worlding is the sense of being in something personal—the present as it unfolds—a “happening” that is multi-faceted and never static. Yet worlding is both personal and social, it is a communicative act. We cannot fully experience the worldings of others but we can recognize the processes involved, and be affected to move and be moved in synchrony. This first happens in utero where biological rhythms and pulses alert the individual to the presence of another and enables the subject to “find lines of attachment, to become describable as a body by learning how to affect and to be affected in this world such as it is.” This original worlding is the instance that all future worldings hope to be.

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
to enact, bringing to mind Gaiman’s aside that “the most important thing that fiction does is it lets us look out through other eyes, and that teaches us empathy – that behind every pair of eyes is somebody like us.”

Lines of attachment can link the individual to both real and imagined bodies in what Stewart describes as the “compositional event” that is our being-in-the-world. A useful overlap appears between experiential being and the act of composing and creating—an intersection at which we might encounter a space for Johnson’s “truth to reality” a form which seeks to immerse the reader in the creator’s own personal unfolding present—a literary bloom-space—that calls on the reader to move in synchrony. It is within the individual bloom-space that affect accumulates and causes bodies to sense, react and to be. Johnson’s project investigates the potential for a literary bloom-space: the rhythmic integration of process, mood and affect into a didactic compositional event that invokes lived experience. Read affectively and spatially, Johnson’s novels move towards a cultural poiesis.

The etymology of “poiesis” is to be found in the Ancient Greek ποίησις (poiēsis), from ποιέω (poiēō, “to make”). Poiesis thus refers to human activity, the ability to be engaged in action that creates, transforms and continues. From the same root we derive the term “poetics” and the poetics of Johnson’s project can be in no doubt as they are clearly outlined in his explanatory epi-texts which resolutely maintain an anti-fictional stance. Yet Johnson’s literary practice carries him to unexpectedly imaginative places: an envisioning of his own conception, metafictive dialogues with his creations, the internal monologues of elderly protagonists. Patricia

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69 The bloom-space consists of an individual subject’s engagement in an “ever-processual materiality” according to Gregg and Seigworth in “An Inventory of Shimmers” in The Affect Theory Reader (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 9. The chapters that follow in the edited collection discuss the qualities and properties of these “gathering place[s] of accumulative dispositions” (ibid.)
Waugh both pushes the metafictionist label and criticizes his “falsity” stance as ill-advised because fiction “does not set out to inform,”\textsuperscript{70} and any writer who tries to elide fiction and lies is setting themselves up for serious problems. She frames the Johnson oeuvre as an essentially linguistic one with poetics that strive to “reduce the indeterminacy and potential misinterpretation”\textsuperscript{71} of literary language. In her view, Johnson wanted to “discover an ideal language which could directly transfer his state of mind to the reader’s”—perfect mimesis through language and nothing less. Yet Johnson refuted the label of “formalist” and was clear on the inadequacies of language, the imprecise tool that is “outside me; I cannot control it. I can only use words to means something to me, and there is simply the hope (not even the expectation) that they will mean the same to anyone else.”\textsuperscript{73} Johnson here is pragmatically aware of both the limitations of the word and his skill in arranging language in a definitive order. To combat this, he attends, instead, to the other stuff of writing: form, space, and process that Waugh fails to consider. The project seeks not to fix and determine truth but to explore, transform, and create potential.

Earlier in this introduction, Johnson’s privileging of tekhne was highlighted—a term that coincides with poiēsis but, problematically, only one aspect of it. Initially and problematically Johnson championed making but remained wary about the act of making up; invention, analogy, and poetic referentiality not fitting easily into his paradigm of truth. What starts as a problem for Johnson, a research question, gives rise to an exploratory undertaking that ultimately pushes the boundaries of his project to embrace fiction itself as “merely a different set of ‘frames’, a

\textsuperscript{70} Waugh, \textit{Metafiction}, 98.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Johnson, “Intro,” 28.
different set of conventions and constructions,” amongst many others. A contemporary reading of the project must also necessarily evolve away from any rigid literary categorization of the author (realist/modernist/modern) and no longer gauge success in terms of aims and intentions, the bugbears of much Johnson criticism, but of scope and breadth instead. Both author and reader engage in new movement that moves away from a purist literary study towards cultural practice and theory. My reading reveals a project initiated by a desire to write reality that develops into a material practice that presents the reader with cultural objects woven not only from words but also from communicative “textures and rhythms, trajectories, and modes of attunement, attachment, and composition.” It is a dormant literary project reactivated by a new affective-spatial reading.

This approach is championed by Stewart when, speaking of her own experience in writing ethnography, she advises that for weak theorists “the point is not to judge the value of the objects or to somehow get their representation ‘right’ but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating and attending to things are already present in them.” These descriptors can equally be applied to a process of “weak” critical reading in which the individual’s task is not to fix but to sense movement. The reader and the writer become equal partners in a “weak” cultural act. Stewart describes weak acts as a “noticing that gropes from a haptic space in the middle of things. The objects of such practice are things noted obliquely […] things caught in a circuit of action and reaction.” These words apply to Johnson’s practice but also to those utilizing Stewart’s theoretical framework for a contemporary reading. The novels are unfoldings emerging thrice over—once in the act of living (the worlding), once in the act of

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74 Waugh, *Metafiction*, 100.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
cultural production (the bloom space), and finally in a contemporary reading that seeks no definitive meaning or result but an immersion in

sad sagging of trajectories that held promise just a minute ago, or the serial build-up of the sense of being in one thing and then another, or all the disappearing acts people perform in search of escape or rest or the perfect life.\(^78\)

Projects of cultural poiesis thus enable the producer and the receiver of the artefacts to embrace the contradictory, the puzzling, and the failed to go beyond the issue of static mimesis by engaging instead with the flux of constitutive drives. These energies and intentions push the scope of the work beyond mere literary representation to an emerging ontology—Johnson’s “truth to reality.”

The products of cultural poiesis, and this is a key methodological statement for this thesis, should be handled with care for they constitute a “contact zone in which what emerges is not a mirror of oppression, or promise but a residue of all the moments of watching and waiting in the mode of the potential, or the very problem of a moment of poiesis.”\(^79\) This thesis thus assesses and identifies these potential perceptual modes in B. S. Johnson’s novels and it finds them to be spatial in their orientation. Against Stewart’s framework Johnson’s project is cultural poiesis because it is always, necessarily, \textit{in medias res} and problematically unable to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. Prescribed fixed form is never quite right, it fails to encase a world that is not simply a singular entity waiting “out there” to be discovered but a happening that “we come to know and \textit{enact} […] from inhabiting…”\(^80\) Johnson’s project of cultural poiesis is testament to the fact that it is no longer enough to merely still the world through representation; what is required henceforth is the bursting forth of spontaneous collaborative events, the ultimate

\(^{78}\text{Stewart, “Weak,” 71.}\)
\(^{79}\text{Ibid., 77.}\)
\(^{80}\text{Ibid., 9.}\)
“immersive fiction of being in something that feels like something”81 Thus Gaiman was right and Johnson was wrong: individuals create and feel their worlds just as an author creates text and, consequently and importantly for Johnson’s project, “the real and the ‘really made-up’ are revealed as synonyms, their distinction itself an effect of certain practices.”82 In cultural poiesis boundaries dissolve and the distinction between truth and non-truth is blurred: “everything is really made up, but is no less real for that.”83 Through its explorations and failures Johnson’s project arrives at perhaps only one conclusion and that is that “what happens [in a novel] is nothing like as important as how it is written, as the medium of the words and form through which it is made to happen to the reader.”84 It does not contend that the chaotic world is formless, but that “form is not the aim, but the result”85 of the way we live. The only truth that can possibly be found in the novel form is located in its processes, spaces and the very unfolding of the creative act.

Thesis structure

My thesis evolves thus: Chapter 1 focuses on Johnson’s socio-psychic landscape, the temporal moment that Johnson sought to capture in his novels. It enquires into the mood of the time, the seemingly imperceptible social formation that fueled the cultural production of the sixties. Challenging the long-held view of a Swinging Sixties, it identifies the latent affect of threat that fueled Johnson’s art and dictated its narrative concerns. This key affect is thus revealed as the tension acting on bodies in this very particular social formation. Chapter 2 moves on to consider

81 Stewart, “Weak,” 77.
82 Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison “The Promise of Non-Representational Theories” in Taking Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography edited by B. Anderson and P Harrison, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 9.
83 Anderson and Harrison “Non-Representational,” 9.
84 Johnson, “Intro,” 12.
85 Ibid., 16.
the impact of this affect on those bodies, the generative unfolding and its problematization. It notes Johnson’s focalization on the changing post-war capital and the rhythms of city life in his early work. Johnson’s largely autobiographical second novel, *Albert Angelo*, navigates both the capital’s waste-grounds and new housing developments offered up by the post-war designers whose formal techniques Johnson absorbed into his own work. Johnson’s eponym Albert is significantly a frustrated architect whose struggles to express himself creatively reflect the difficulty of creating new form for a new time. This chapter also assesses Johnson’s work against contemporary cultural and philosophical movements that sought to reclaim the streets for the increasingly alienated ordinary man. The first two chapters are therefore socio-culturally focused and place Johnson’s novels squarely in the temporal-spatial framework of London’s Long Sixties by using an affective lens.

Chapter 3 begins to explore Johnson’s work from an increasingly interdisciplinary perspective. The chapter navigates more theoretical and anthropological waters and charts the more abstracted spatial awareness that can be sensed in the novels of the mid period. It analyses how *Trawl* and *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* both explore the affordances of spaces and the relationship between space and power. Both novels use form to survey the ways in which different configurations of space permit different behaviours. Chapter 4 focuses on Johnson’s attention to the processes and materiality of the medium he worked in: artistic space and its literary analogue, the novel. It details his manipulation of the space of the page and his foregrounding of the marks upon it referencing the aesthetics of Klee and the anthropological frameworks of Tim Ingold. Chapter 5 assesses Johnson’s final work *See the Old Lady Decently*, a fragment of the author’s planned definitive trilogy. It posits the novel as a reaction to the recurring problem of closure in the project and as a continuation of the exploration of rhythm
that is begun in *Trawl*. The novel moves through many of the disparate spaces that Johnson’s project had previously passed explored. This is not to make a claim for it as the triumphant teleological finale of the project but rather as one more evocative and productive turn: the hijacking of a different domain, a twist with surprising results. Retrospectively we can consider Johnson’s project as a tentative engagement with rhizomatic form—matter with no discernible beginning or end but one that pulsates with life—as it considers the foundation and development of individual and collective identity. The truth of *See the Old Lady Decently*, then, is one that refuses to be compartmentalized into a single hermetic unit. Its themes and concerns spill over its textual boundaries sending out nodes to the greater body of Johnson novelistic work, a larger organic body.

My reading of Johnson’s novels has endeavoured to resist teleology; it dips in and out of the seven novels, at times circling back to key passages and episodes that can be assessed in multiple ways. The reading thus follows Johnson’s example; it is palimpsestic and is woven from layers. Working with affective and spatial energies the chapters unfold to build upon each other but also stand to be read individually or even, in true Johnsonian style, at random. The reading moves in a range of directions exploring different nodes of a rhizomatic whole, but acknowledges that, necessarily, any thesis must build momentum. My reading therefore culminates in Chapter 6 which works as an extended conclusion. This final stage of my thesis seeks to formally synthesize and draw definitive conclusions for a scholarly audience. The different spatial and affective readings of the preceding chapters are thus finally slotted into Nigel Thrift’s model of the principles that, in his view, can be identified in any significant spatial approach. Briefly these state that everything is spatially distributed, all spaces are porous, every space is in constant movement and that there is no one kind of space. My reading ultimately uses
an affective lens to place Johnson at the vanguard of the spatial turn in the humanities, in the early stages of literary spatial experimentation. Thrift’s model serves to validate this reading, but bearing in mind that Johnson himself firmly rejected the term “experimental,” I finally position the novels as “creative research” or project work. This type of practice is an “intellectual adventure peculiar to the making process”\textsuperscript{86} that refers to the ideas of historian, artist and philosopher Paul Carter, and Professors of French Literature Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham.

Chapter 1: Affective Space.

The novels of Bryan Stanley Johnson were written (and sometimes set) in England’s “Swinging Sixties”\(^1\) but capture a present that began some time previously. Although often unfolding in the very heart of London, Johnson’s work seems removed from the images of metropolitan life that have come to enter our shared cultural consciousness of that time: the mod shops of Carnaby Street, Twiggy in a Mary Quant mini-skirt, The Beatles nonchalantly crossing Abbey Road. Looking back, the British today bask in the glory of a London that shimmered in the world’s eye—a city at the centre of where it was “at.” Records for the year 1968 document a London that is peopled by the beautiful, the talented and the rich. We read that in January, “Brian Jones participates in the Jimi Hendrix Experience's recording of ‘All Along the Watchtower’ at Olympic Sound Studios in London”; in May “Mick Jagger buys 48 Cheyne Walk Chelsea for 50,000 GBP and Marianne Faithfull decorates it with expensive antiques” and in July of that year:

> Mick Jagger celebrates his 25th birthday with Marianne Faithfull, John Lennon and Paul McCartney at the Moroccan styled ‘Vesuvio Club’ in Tottenham Court Road, where some of London’s trendiest models, artists, and pop singers lounged on huge cushions and took pulls from Turkish hookahs, while a decorative, helium-filled dirigible floated aimlessly about the room.\(^2\)

These happenings have all gone on the record for posterity—these behaviours are deemed worthy of note as acts of socio-cultural significance that capture the age. We should, perhaps, pause and scrutinize the scene at the Vesuvio Club and look at its composite parts. Tony Sanchez, the owner of the club recalls, “The club looked beautiful with huge silver bowls of

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\(^1\) Johnson started writing his first novel in late 1959 and was working on a first draft of what would be his final novel when he died in 1973 factors which place his work within what Professor Arthur Marwick (1998) denotes the “Long Sixties.”

\(^2\) http://london60sweek.co.uk/timeline1968.html
mescaline-spiked punch, plus plates full of hash cakes, which had become a craze, and little
dishes with hash for people to smoke beside every hubble-bubble pipe.”\(^3\) The description permits
us to enjoy at a safe distance an archetypical scene of louche Sixties excess; to drink in the
“atmosphere.” Incongruously, within the midst of the scene the canny observer might well notice
an oddity: a floating dirigible that navigates the room. This object too is a transmitter of mood
and will serve as a touchstone for this opening chapter which seeks to investigate the mood
surrounding and informing B. S. Johnson’s project to rework the novel. Atmosphere is not only
conveyed by big events and issues and indeed as Ben Highmore notes the “big mood picture
might obscure some of the more minor and more obviously material moods that knit culture
together on the ground.”\(^4\) The chapter seeks not to force causal links but to note the positions,
surfaces and objects of the novels; to be directed by Johnson’s gaze and currents of thought.

This chapter therefore takes a haptic approach to the everyday atmosphere that knits
Johnson’s texts together, it seeks to investigate the “mood” that lies behind, around, and within
B. S. Johnson’s literary project of experiential truth. At the start of the thesis, “mood” usefully
allows us to start wide as it “incorporates the entire situation as well as the players within it.”\(^5\) It
should also be noted that due to its breadth and width, mood is difficult to map comprehensively.
As Ben Highmore and Jenny Bourne Taylor note “we could say initially that mood is made up of
individual and collective feelings, organic and inorganic elements as well as contingent,
historical and slow changing conditions.”\(^6\) Mood, it seems, verges on the all-encompassing; its

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\(^6\) Ibid.
very expansiveness rendering it impractical to navigate in any satisfactory depth. This is because mood transcends time and space: “we live in the mood-worlds we’ve inherited. But our mood-worlds are also determined by the force fields currently at work in society.”

Mood is then both temporary and historic; in addition to this, mood is not made up of the purely tangible, it consists of the contingent and the fluctuating—the impossible to calibrate realm of subjective feeling. Such breadth is both intimidating and sublime—Caroline Levine invites us not to fear it but “to feel that this vastness is also a little bit liberating” and advises not to “aspire to mastery or coverage but instead remain humble in the face of history’s unknowable vastness.”

We may approach mood then with some trepidation and with no one obvious approach to hand. In their introduction to “Introducing Mood Work” Highmore and Bourne Taylor detail mood’s differing expressions noting, for example, that “for Jennifer Carlson and Kathleen Stewart mood doesn’t exist in a declarative form (I am fearful, I am on tenterhooks, I am calm), rather it adheres to the mundane practices and scenes of daily life.”

Whilst not speaking specifically to mood, Levine notes that any potentially broad field of study “focuses our attention on both form and its limits” and that as a result “any success we do have in grasping whatever parts of the world we end up slicing into parts will happen though the work of form.” Mood, then, can take different forms and be accessed in a number of different ways, but always revolves round co-ordinates stated as of interest to B. S. Johnson: feeling, form, subjectivity, materiality, everyday experience and the pressing weight of the past.

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8 Caroline Levine, “Length and Breadth and Depth: Taking the Measure of the Nineteenth Century” (keynote address presented at The Long Wide Nineteenth Century Conference, UC Santa Cruz 31 July 2015).
9 Ibid.
The dirigible—a groovy talking point for the tripping clientele of the Vesuvio club—is our point of entry into Johnson’s mood-world of the 1960s. Floating innocuously in the hazy gloom its materiality hints at both Highmore and Bourne Taylor’s “force fields currently at work in society” and “individual feelings. Organic and inorganic elements, as well as contingent, historical and slow changing conditions.”\(^\text{12}\) Associations can easily be made to the wider contemporary world—a nod, perhaps, to Andy Warhol’s “Floating Silver Clouds” of 1966 and the New York school of minimal, conceptual and pop-art with its exploration of commodification. Warhol’s inorganic “clouds,” in turn, direct us to the contemporary appreciation for the “everyday”: the installation was crafted from disposable metallic Scotchpak used by the US army to wrap sandwiches.\(^\text{13}\) Such inelegant detritus was of interest to London-based artists as well as those in the US. Individuals such as Pauline Boty, Peter Blake and Eduardo Paolozzi were employing “found” objects and bricolage to create art.\(^\text{14}\) A more practical and mundane use of the dirigible (and another link to pop art) is its function as an advertising “blimp,” the most famous example being the Goodyear blimp which first appeared in 1925 and still continues to be used today to promote America’s favourite tyre manufacturer. The Vesuvio dirigible directs us to the growing influence in the sixties of the advertising industry in both the domestic and cultural domains and thus becomes a grim portent of a future when rock bands such as The Black Eyed Peas would be sponsored by Samsung, Apple and Blackberry\(^\text{15}\) and The

\(^{13}\) “Floating Silver Clouds” was first exhibited in 1966 at the Leo Castelli Gallery on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Its creation is detailed by Billy Klüver the engineer who worked on the project for the Warhol Foundation. See: “Billy Klüver and Andy Warhol: Silver Clouds.” The Warhol (Carnegie Museums), http://www.warhol.org/education/resourceslessons/Billy-Kluver-and-Andy-Warhol--Silver-Clouds/
\(^{14}\) Paolozzi is said to have preceded American Pop-Art with I Was a Rich Man’s Plaything in 1947.
Rolling Stone’s 2014 tour would be sponsored by Prudential Corporation Asia and Eastspring Investments.\textsuperscript{16} Seemingly inconsequential, the dirigible is there by intention; an integral piece of mood-furniture in this archetypically Sixties scene. Worthy of our consideration its materiality can help us consider how through objects such as these “the social and cultural world is lived as qualities and form, as sense and feeling.”\textsuperscript{17} This object is there to make us feel.

The mood of the present moment

The theorist most closely linked to the exploration and conceptualization of mood is Heidegger. In his work, mood (\textit{Stimmung}) connects “being” and “time”; it is the way in which an individual finds themselves to be affectively orientated towards the world and its objects at a particular moment. Heideggerian mood is pervasively external and responsive; referring to Heidegger’s key work \textit{Being and Time} Highmore notes, “mood in Heidegger is not mood that belongs to a subject; mood belongs to the ‘it’ of a phrase like ‘how’s it going?’—it points to the situation in which the subject finds itself.”\textsuperscript{18} Mood belongs to no one individual and as such may be doubly out of reach to those not caught up in its contemporary expression. As critics looking backwards we instead find evidence of mood in its residues—its expression and realization in the cultural products of its time. Created by individuals, these products channel mood through perception and attention to subjective emotion and affect (Johnson’s “personal truth to reality”), so in reading for wider mood we might be best tasked with noting the “form that attention takes.”\textsuperscript{19} These forms may be diverse but are brought to the fore by the mood which searches them out. Mood is, thus, traced back through individual experience and expression to the wider socio-cultural world

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\textsuperscript{16} http://www.rollingstones.com/2013/12/07/the-rolling-stones-announce-14-on-fire-asia-tour-sponsor-prudential-corporation-asia-and-eastspring-investments/
\textsuperscript{17} Highmore and Bourne Taylor, “Introducing Mood,” 9.
\textsuperscript{18} Highmore, “Feeling,” 8.
\textsuperscript{19} Highmore and Bourne Taylor, “Introducing Mood,” 9.
\end{flushright}
across space and time. In seeking it the critic embarks on a journey to find the original energies that shaped a subjective present.

Mood may be low-key, not immediately grabbing the critic’s attention but it is always there, difficult to read. Highmore elaborates, “searching for mood is the equivalent of looking for form: there might be examples where form is vividly on display, but there is never going to be an absence of form.”20 In what is perhaps Johnson’s most obviously “moodful” work *Trawl*’s narrator desperately segues from the present to the past in order to locate the source of his loneliness and existential despair:

The lardy cake, with— . . What bloody relevance has a sodding lardy cake to me now? I’ve had enough of High Wycombe and being evacuated: surely I must have exhausted it by now, the pain must be exorcised, the tedium of interest, of making myself regurgitate all this: for what? . . Think, then analyse, then, this estrangement from home, from London, parents, younger self . . . . . . Blank . . What use are analyses, reasons, causes? All I am left with are just things, happenings: things as they are, happenings as they have happened and go on happening through the unreliable filter of my memory. But try. What else is there to do? . . . .

Objects metaphorically float in to view as the narrator tries to analyze his stream of consciousness and memories. A question is posed over the relevance of the lardy cake which puzzlingly appears in the narrator’s mind’s eye. There is no singular equation to consistently and successfully access the mood of a piece but reading *Trawl* the critic cannot fail to notice the unusual form the author’s attention takes: the column of text, the dashes, dots and lacunae—an

exploration of experience in form. We should also note the forms that seize the reader and narrator’s attentions, the sensitivity to patterning and repetition, the charting of processes and activities that persist, an awareness of unfolding.

Johnson’s faltering attempts at self-analysis in *Trawl* suggest a Heideggerian approach in which “to be human, as the term Dasein suggests, is to be ‘there,’ caught up in the world, taking a stand on one’s life, active and engaged in *ordinary* situations, with some overview of what is at stake in living.” Guignon notes that existence is always rooted in a particular unfolding and for Heidegger this unfolding is always mediated by mood. Unhelpfully, mood doesn’t announce itself but is *glimpsed* and tactics for mood reading must accommodate this fact. In her seminal work *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart asserts:

> The ordinary is a moving target. Not first something to make sense of, but a set of sensations that incite.

> The possibility that something will snap into sense or drift by untapped.

> We struggle to trace it with big stories thrown up like bill-boards on the side of the road.

> We track it through projects and lines of progress, failure, reversal, or flight.23

The “big stories” of the sixties are easy to recount and, indeed, were employed to open this chapter. We might, instead, discard these sanctified structures and focus on the seemingly inconsequential. The lardy cake drifts into the narrator’s view—a puzzlingly mundane recollection;24 the Vesuvio dirigible probably floats by “untapped” by many on that July night in

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24 Lardy cake is a traditional British baked good but its importance during the Second World War may be explained by the fact that it could be made with very little fat (which was rationed) to flour and, in fact,
1968 and equally “untapped” by those who “read” the photograph now. In the big stories these objects possess and embody a power all their own, their presence is significant because, “the ordinary throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers […] or it falters, fails. But either way we feel its pull.” What is remarkable in one context becomes ordinary in another, its material form suddenly less important than the resonances it holds. The ordinary is a moving target.

We can guess that nightclub owner Tony Sanchez positioned the dirigible with a view to invoking the bigger picture, the gravitational “cool” of the New York and London art scenes. The creation of mood, however, is a hazardous affair that is “not a challenge to be achieved or an ideal to be realized, but a mode of attunement, a continuous responding to something not quite already given and yet somehow happening.” Mood works in different ways on different bodies. For somebody of Johnson’s generation the floating dirigible may have evoked a wartime London darkened by barrage balloons. In 1936 four hundred and fifty were released by the Committee of Imperial Defense for the protection of the metropolis. The balloons prevented German aircraft from flying low over the city and thus impaired the accuracy of Nazi bombing raids. Floating soundlessly, the balloons made material the presence of threat to the country long before the Luftwaffe arrived and thus mediated the urban population’s behaviour. Under the balloons, city-dwellers (Johnson’s inner-London neighbours) endured, perhaps, the most profound and mundane changes; the “ordinary affects” that Stewart defines as “public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but [they] are also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of.”

the required lard could be replaced with freely available and home-produced beef dripping. The lardy cake becomes a referent for both thrift and scarcity.

25 Stewart, Ordinary, 29.
26 Ibid., 127.
27 Ibid., 2.
The publicly sanctioned fear and paranoia of the war years\textsuperscript{28} became condensed into a metropolitan parochialism that endured long after the war had been won in those old enough to feel its initial affects.

Speaking specifically to the post-war period, Highmore and Bourne Taylor warn against generalization and suggest that, “while there might not be a ‘national mood’ in any hard and fast way, there are clearly levels of optimism and hope that are more or less available at particular times for particular constituents of the population.”\textsuperscript{29} Mood changes quickly and can prompt what Jonathan Flatley describes as a \textit{counter}-mood in different sectors of society.\textsuperscript{30} For those reaching majority after the war-time ambit of fear, conservative anxiety would be contested by youth movements such as the Mods who re-appropriated the war’s most revered symbols as fashion motifs. Pete Townshend of The Who, on being refused a Union Flag blazer in the Establishment’s Saville Row, was prompted to frequent the East End for his bold sartorial statement to be made.\textsuperscript{31} In a Tottenham Court Road nightclub, a silver pop-art dirigible thus both refers to and overwrites the drab war-time past depending on the journeys you have made and the moods you have passed through.

\textsuperscript{28} Poster campaigns by the Ministry of Information at Senate House, London sought to instruct war-time citizens. In one example, a mother sheltering her children in the safety of the countryside is implored by Hitler to “Send them back!” Underneath, the stark words of the Ministry of Health command, “Don’t do it Mother. Leave the children where they are.”

\textsuperscript{29} Highmore and Bourne Taylor, “Introducing Mood,” 5.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} See Paolo Hewitt, \textit{The A to Z of Mod} (Prestel, London: 2012)
Of those, like Johnson, born around 1930 Michael Serres notes “the formative years of their life was fashioned out of trauma.”32 Too old in the mid-Sixties to be caught up in the excitement of what Diana Vreeland termed the British “youthquake,”33 Johnson embarked on a project to soberly write novels of “truth” formed out of the mood world he had inherited. His aim, which he expressed with fervour (and unpunctuated urgency) in both his literary and epí-texts was to try to “say something not a story telling stories is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experiences about my truth to reality about sitting here writing looking out across Claremont Square trying to say something.”34 To achieve this paradigm of truth, Johnson explicitly situates his novels within his own emotional and geographical experience, an experience that was reassuringly ordinary rather than extraordinary: the feeling of looking out of the window on to Claremont Square in the early sixties (Albert Angelo), of eating ham out of a greasy paper packet (The Unfortunates) and of fantasizing about revenge on your unreasonable boss (Christie Malry). Johnson’s work, its moody cataloging of Stewart’s “ordinary affects” builds a picture of ‘I-and-the-world-together’35 by being woven from “the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of.”36 It is through mood that the truth of his works overrides the confines of subjectivity to tap into the larger communal truth that fuels artistic production and differentiated between Johnson’s creative projective and a repository such as the Mass Observation Project.37

33 Vogue, January 1, 1965, 112.
36 Stewart, Ordinary Affects, 127.
The affective truth of fiction

Like the Mass Observation Project, the material to be mined for truth was to be found in the everyday, but in Johnson’s case it revolved around a study sample of one. His work is focalised through his singular perspective on Life, a belief that the human condition was essentially chaotic. Consequently, to be truthful, the novels must reflect this and “reproduce the moment-to-moment fragmentariness of life, my life, and to echo it in technique, the fragmentariness, a collage made of the fragments of my own life, the poor odds and sods, the bric-à-brac, a thing composed of, then.” Walking in the footsteps of his modernist forefathers whose project had been interrupted by the onset of war, Johnson embraced stylistic fragmentation and interruption to invoke the staccato rhythms of modern life, to pull things apart with the aim of making sense. His starting point was in fact two givens: life was chaotic, and it did not tell lies. As a result, there would be no place for falsification in his novels of truth for, “the two terms novel and fiction, are opposites, and it must logically be impossible.” Nonetheless, episodes where the improbable happen frequently appear in Johnson’s writing. The most striking example, perhaps, is the fictional character Christie Malry who outrageously poisons 20,479 innocent west Londoners with a barrel of cyanide. Yet these episodes of fantasy must, in Johnson’s novelistic rubric, be born of some basic truth. Here an engagement with mood—and its offshoot affect—

37 The project was founded in 1937 by Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson with the aim of creating an “anthropology of ourselves.” The team recruited observers and a panel of volunteer writers to study, record and report on the everyday lives of ordinary people across Britain. In Bolton, the “Worktown” Project was created and paid investigators went into a variety of public situations and recorded people’s behaviour and conversation in as much detail as possible. The work continued until the early 1950s. The archive is now held at the University of Sussex. Details taken from: http://www.massobs.org.uk/original_massobservation_project.htm. Johnson scholar Nick Hubble has written insightfully and extensively on the project in Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

38 Johnson, Albert, 169.

can help. Widely circulating social and historic moods percolate down into affect: emotional workings on the individual body that necessitate a response that in most cases is measured and appropriate. But in quotidian life affect can gather into emotional intensities: “scenes of impact [that] catch the senses […] these scenes have an afterlife.” Affective energy works on the body as a physiological force but at times overwhelms the constraints of the present moment. For Kathleen Stewart intensities are the nodes in life where affect overspills and accumulates, where bodies are either forced forward into action or where affect “can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations.”

Affect creates and demands an outlet in the physical world or the imagination. The often outrageous episodes that occur in Johnson’s work (apparently contesting its facticity) can thereby be negotiated as affective intensities: junctions of the real and the possible; the moody past and the affective present. The everyday moments when potential ‘little fantasies pop up’ in an emotionally unfolding world.

Although Johnson sought to outlaw fiction in his work, seeing it as antithetical to truth, it regularly makes an appearance in his work. Through a mood reading its appearance can be reconciled by the fact that imaginative creativity possesses a value as affective overspill. Imagination plays an important role in the individual’s negotiation of reality by directing ineffable emotion and permitting individual expression. Through creative fictions one may negotiate the breadth of possibility that springs forth in any given moment, possibilities potentially not acceptable in the socially-constructed situation one finds oneself in. It is not, however, just imaginative fictions that are mediated by an affective lens; every perceived encounter with the world is dictated by attunement. Through mood the world is realized as a

40 Stewart, Ordinary, 68.
42 Stewart, Ordinary, 48.
flexible space that shifts and refuses to be fixed—the chaos of which Johnson writes. Kathleen Stewart cites the Wallace Stevens poem “July Mountain” to highlight the spontaneous and singular unfolding of the world to an individual:

We live in a constellation
Of patches and of pitches.
   Not in a single world,
In things said well in music,
On the piano, and in speech,
As in a page of poetry—
Thinkers without final thoughts
In an always incipient cosmos,
The way, when we climb a mountain,
Vermont throws itself together.

“July Mountain” (1954) was the last poem to be published in Stevens’ lifetime and its reflections capture some quiet wonder at having discovered some essential truth about an unfolding world that can never be singular in spite of one’s best attempts to confine it to the page, canvas or stave. Stewart notes that in this poem place, (in this case Vermont), “throws itself together” in every new created moment; it only exists as unrealized potential.43 The potential of the world is directed by moods and affect into a singular personal unfolding only to take a contingent material form in man’s cultural products. Johnson’s novels acknowledge both this act and the author’s accompanying disconcertion at the world’s refusal to be fixed. In *Albert Angelo*, the author interrupts the narrative to reflect:

—So that’s another shifting of reality, in the course of the book I’ve come to see differently events I believed to be fixed, changed my mind about Muriel. I have this other girl, Virginia, now, at the time of writing, very happy too, but who knows what else will have shifted by the galleyproof stage, or by publication day, or by the time you are reading this? Between writing and galleys, they’ve cut down some of the trees in Percy

Circus, for another instance, taken down the railings, you’ll just have to take my word for the description, now, now all I can say is That’s how it was, then, that’s the truth.

Here we find the realization that a contemporary Percy Circus cannot help but be different from that of today and tomorrow not just due to the changing materiality of the location but also due to the shifting emotion of the individual. These changes may, at first, appear insignificant and indeed, “the slightness of ongoing qualitative change pale[s] in comparison to the grandness of periodic ‘rupture.’” Brian Massumi goes on to point out that compared to the over-arching narratives of history it may appear that “the everyday [i]s the place where nothing ever happens.”

But through mood which directs the path of human energies, the everyday is transformed into the place where everything, the world potentially happens and unfolds.

**Intensity and bloom-spaces**

How then to take stock of an overwhelming, continually unfolding present, to capture its breadth in a single novel form? Evidence of a belief in a chaotic incipient reality (and tactics to deal with it) creep into Johnson’s early literary work. *Travelling People* runs a gamut of literary styles and genre to reproduce fluctuating experience but also features the first instances of a key Johnson technique—the breaking of the narrative flow with lacunae. *Travelling People* includes eight interludes where the plot is halted for extra information to be relayed or intertextual links to be forged. In addition to this are three “interruptions”, metafictive spaces where the narrator figure addresses the reader and explains his rationale or decisions. The reader is refused permission to lose themselves in the fiction of the text but is made to regularly “come up for air,” to take pause. In Johnson’s third novel *Trawl* the whole premise of the text is one of retreat—the voyage which fills the space of one text enacts a figurative pause in life’s chaos. Its pages document time spent

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by the author in a space of reflection away from the routines of everyday life. In 1963, after having proposed marriage to Virginia Kimpton, and looking for inspiration for a new novel, Johnson embarked on a fishing trawler to conceive a literary response to an undecided future:

this vision of a future not more than five years off: Ginnie as a wife, a child, a son, perhaps, the chime sliding down his chin, freedom to work as I have to work, a home: in the hope of that happiness, I give life one more chance: towards the chance of that future I shall voyage honestly and purposely.\(^{46}\)

The intention expressed here is to find purpose and direction, a response able to quell the chaotic maelstrom that Johnson was experiencing as life.

Frustratingly, as Johnson documents in \textit{Albert Angelo} (which directly precedes \textit{Trawl}), any imposition of structure or genre onto chaos was doomed to fail:

—Faced with the enormous detail, vitality, size, of this complexity, of life, there is a great temptation for a writer to impose his own pattern, an arbitrary pattern which must falsify, cannot do anything other than falsify; or he invents, which is pure lying. Looking back and imposing a pattern to come to terms with the past must be avoided.\(^{47}\)

In \textit{Albert Angelo}, the writer’s methodical attempts to do just this had resulted in the notorious “Disintegration” section of the text where the author abandons the narrative to declare, “Fuck all this lying.”\(^{48}\) \textit{Trawl} thus attempts to walk a different line and the moments of pause that occur in the previous novels are stretched to their full extent. By cloistering himself at sea and retreating from the familiar world the entire novel is reworked as a “bloom-space”: those points at which the body disconnects and becomes immersed in “the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations”\(^{49}\) and the overspill of affect is given free rein. Using the conveniently maritime terms of Seigworth and Gregg, Johnson uses the text to retreat and “cast a line along

\(^{46}\) Johnson, \textit{Trawl}, 180.  
\(^{47}\) Johnson, \textit{Albert}, 170  
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 167.  
\(^{49}\) Seigworth and Gregg, “Inventory,” 1.
the hopeful (though also fearful) cusp of an emergent futurity.”

Rather than rotating though a rota of styles as in the preceding texts, Trawl embraces affective approaches that operate with “a certain modest methodological vitality rather than impressing itself upon a wiggling world like a snap-on grid of shape-setting interpretability.” Abandoning a formal chronological structure, the narrator’s mind is seemingly permitted to wander in Trawl as the mood takes him: “so where has all that taken me? . . . . . . . Nowhere . . . . . Where I was before? . . Perhaps . . . . . Nowhere. . . . . . . Here.”

As a new future threatens to unfold, Trawl’s author/narrator gives rein to memory to find the sources of problems and thoughts that are yet to come. Time elides as past betrayal is analyzed in order to ward off future perfidy, “it was virtually all over with Joan: but I expected her to be there that Sunday afternoon, and she was not there,” and patterns of behaviour identified, “I like things decided: either way. Would force a decision against myself if necessary: how often have I done this with girls?”

Women become interchangeable in a stream of names and memory: “Joan” and “Gwen”, “Dulcie”, “Eva”, “Ginnie” and “Laura”. Towards the end of the voyage emotional stability appears to have been momentarily found as the narrator assures, “And I feel it will now be right with her, that I have cleared my life of the dead weight of its past, can face her completely, honestly”; he will cast his anchor with Ginnie.

Trawl’s free-fall cataloging of fear, love, hope, betrayal and angst offers it up to Seigworth and Gregg’s descriptor of “an inventory of shimmers.” It sparkles, like the sea, with glittering slippery affect; it becomes “decidedly less sure and more nonsequential [and] (any

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50 Seigworth and Gregg, “Inventory,” 4.  
51 Ibid.  
52 Johnson, Trawl, 25.  
53 Ibid., 21.  
54 Ibid., 69.  
55 Ibid., 180.
notion of strict ‘determination’ or direct linear cause and effect goes out of the window too.”\(^{56}\) Causality becomes muddied by circling emotion. Yet, this text which had evolved from an apparently “free-form” stream of consciousness is not without order or system it is just that its patterns remain hidden. With Johnson’s awareness of chaos in mind we might see his formal and figurative use of lacunae as, perhaps, akin to those events known as “bifurcation points” or “singular points” in chaos theory. Massumi explains that these points occur when, “a system enters a peculiar state of indecision, where what its next state will be turns entirely unpredictable.”\(^{57}\) Thus in the point at which the author hesitantly contemplates an uncertain future or the questionable success of his project, the direction of the narrative diverts and circles back to the anxiety and fears of the past—the dormant threatening mood that fuels present fears. In chaos theory, in these moments, the system in question (whilst deceptively still on the surface), “has not become inactive. Rather it is in ferment.”\(^{58}\) In chemistry this suggests a degree of agitation and process where internal elements combine and react. In Trawl, a novel punctuated by the latent howl, “Why am I parted from my mother and sent away to live with strangers?”\(^{59}\) we see the turbulent collision of past, present and future, the fusing of grammatical moods:

I am only what I am now . . . . . I am not
What I have been . . . . . It is as if I am
Free to be what I may be . . . . . I am not
What I shall be . . . . . I am what I am now.\(^{60}\)

\(^{56}\) Seigworth and Gregg, “Inventory,” 4.
\(^{57}\) Massumi, Parables, 109.
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
\(^{59}\) Johnson, Trawl, 56.
\(^{60}\) Johnson, Trawl, 181.
What emerges in the midst of this literary fermentation is a self-regulating structure that feeds off itself; it is organic rather than artificially constructed. Massumi describes a system that could equally qualify Johnson’s work, a “churning over, in its system-substance, its own possible states. It has folded in on itself, becoming materially self-referential—animated not by external relations of cause-effect, but by an intensive interrelating of version of itself, in material resonance.”\(^6^1\) In this way, filled with gaps, lacunae and bloom-spaces Johnson’s work can be seen as pulsing with unpredictable life; a place where “affect serves as force and form”\(^6^2\) and becomes embodied.

Christie Malry’s chaotic world

The application of a chaos model to *Trawl* works particularly well because of its use of the rhythms of the untameable sea:

> The sea swells and subsides, swells, swells, subsides, swells, subsides, subsides, subsides, swells again: impossibly consistent, constantly varied, continuously backing, sliding, rolling, foaming, breaking: perpetually owning and destroying, breaking down and synthesizing, accepting and enfolding, encompassing and losing, giving and demanding in return, drawing….\(^6^3\)

With its eddies and swirls beneath an impenetrable surface, the sea is unsurpassed as a symbol of natural chaos in which “the inclination toward order, balance, and equilibrium presumed by system theorists is complicated and even contested by unpredictable initial conditions and sudden blow-ups (such as explosions, sudden storms, and giant waves in nature.)”\(^6^4\) Again we find a useful model for Johnson’s work and its unresolved struggle with order. Within the chaotic movements of the sea, the regular motions of the tides are at work: “order arises from disorder in

\(^6^1\) Massumi, *Parables*, 109–110.

\(^6^2\) Seigworth and Gregg, “Inventory,” 5.

\(^6^3\) Johnson, *Trawl*, 95.

some predictable but assured way.” Nonetheless, irregularity rules and conditions and patterns in one body of water will not be replicated at any other place or time. Seemingly small changes can have unpredictably large effects: “what begin as trivial disturbances or ‘unfoldings’ may become major disruptions or ‘catastrophes’”\(^\text{66}\) the so-called “butterfly effect”\(^\text{67}\) that can take our line of enquiry to Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry.

In Johnson’s penultimate novel, accounts clerk Christie’s life appears to spiral out of control; everyday irritations stack up and form part of a wide web of injustice and inconvenience that Christie feels must be countered by a system of retribution. Grievances against a boss result in truck-loads of stationary being over-ordered and bomb threats called in; the Church is reported to the trading office for fraud and Her Majesty’s tax office at Hammersmith is blown up. Half-way through the text, in a chapter entitled “Chapter IX: A Promise Fulfilled, and Christie’s Younger Life; a Failed Chapter,” the author once more enters the text in a metafictive interlude in order to impose a wider framework on Christie’s story—the historical context that will rationalize the chain of events that have been included in the text. It is revealed, however, as a pointless tactic and Johnson exasperatedly confesses:

Oh, I could go on and on for pages and pages about Christie’s young life, inventing and observing, remembering and borrowing. But why? All is chaos and unexplainable. These things happened. He is as he is, you are as you are. Act on that: all is chaos.\(^\text{68}\)

A question here is raised—what is the point of methodically constructing a narrative when, “almost all of the tried-and-true handholds and footholds for so much critical-cultural-

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\(^{65}\) Slethaug, *Chaos*, 62.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.

\(^{67}\) This term was coined in 1969 by mathematician, meteorologist and founder of chaos theory Edward Lorenz.

\(^{68}\) B. S. Johnson, *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* (London: Picador, 2001) 82.
philosophical inquiry” have failed and man is afloat on a chaotic sea? *Christie Malry* charts the foolhardy attempt to devise a rational structure for living, one that seeks to contain the moments of emotional intensity that punctuate life, the moments of overwhelming grief, anger and frustration. These intensities are noted by Stewart as being endowed with an afterlife, but in Christie’s world chaos rules, and effect is invariably disproportionate to the cause. Thus, in his system for navigating life, the Aldwych bomb hoax is carried out in recompense for the irritation caused by corporate advertising and his boss’s unpleasantness; the poisoning of 20,479 west-Londoners is the result of Christie’s girlfriend not being given a chance “commensurate with her abilities.” Christie confidently implements a system of cause and effect with little awareness of the fact that, “there are no ultimate or final guarantees—that capacities to affect and be affected will yield an actualized next or new that is somehow better than ‘now.’” Satisfaction is never reached: Christie’s girlfriend never fulfils her potential, his mother can but remain dead and his acts of retribution slowly increase in scale. When Christie unexpectedly succumbs to terminal cancer, his primary concern is that his final plan has not been realised and he laments to his creator, “What does concern me is that they’ll never know whether the charges were primed, or even planted, or if they went off by accident.” The author’s response, “That’s life” mocks the human need for causal links whilst staring in the face of chaos.

Christie’s cancer develops with unprecedented speed and when his surgeon reveals that he “had never seen it spread so far, develop so rapidly,” the narrator notes that “such people have an infinite capacity for surprise.” Surprise, chance and fate are important features of Johnson’s

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69 Seigworth and Gregg, “Inventory,” 4.
70 Johnson, *Christie*, 151.
71 Seigworth and Gregg, “Inventory,” 11.
73 Ibid.
project to reveal chaos. Christie’s cancer is an unexpected turn for both the character and reader who is expecting a denouement or grand finale. Yet warning signs had appeared earlier in the novel; the author has warned his protagonist some thirteen pages before that he was facing a creative impasse; that “it does not seem to me possible to take this novel much further.” These words flag up a narrative point of bifurcation—a moment when unexpected and extreme events happen. Christie is swiftly dispatched even though the reader may have been expecting resolution of a satisfactory kind. Instead the author follows a course in which “the normal course of action is somehow exceeded, leaving open more than one alternative possibility.”

Gordon Slethaug notes the plurality of bifurcation in the poststructural “double texts” of Derrida and Kristeva (“Border Lines” and “Stabat Mater” respectively) where the use of parallel texts subverts textual authority. In Johnson a similar bifurcation can be glimpsed in Christie’s accounting columns and on two earlier occasions in Albert Angelo where pages are split into columns of direct speech and concurrent thought. The columns can be read independently, or in tandem (to find causal relations between thought and speech and action). These are early examples of Johnson’s investigation into the possibilities of the page and the infinite permutations of life that will be explored by the loose leaves of The Unfortunates (1969) and the concurrent monologues of House Mother Normal (1971). If life can suddenly bifurcate, then so must the “truthful” text which should take both reader and character in the most unexpected direction. Primary protagonists meet untimely ends, being dispatched with authorial brutality (Albert pushed in a canal, Christie riddled with cancer). The minor characters in works of supposed truth are exposed as fictional “—The one I feel sorry for is little Linda Taylor, made an

74 Johnson, Christie, 165.
75 Slethaug, Chaos, 59.
epileptic to suit my ends, the poor little figment.” Even the hole cut in the pages of Albert Angelo which promises to bifurcate through the text to the narrative future in fact transports the reader to a snippet of faux-historical fiction. Such gestures evoke a textual world enthralled to chaos and an unpredictable reading experience that aims to disorientate and disconcert the receiver of the text.

The difficulty of identifying mood

Jonathan Flatley suggests that to read for mood is to accept that aesthetic objects carry with them atmospheric residues that are made present at the moment of the audience/reader’s encounter. He warns, however, that an affective reading should not attempt to decipher atmosphere or mood or attempt to interpret a context or the surrounding politics of the era of artistic production. With this in mind, we should avoid simplistically identifying the development of chaos theory in the post-war theory as the basis for Johnson’s fascination for the chaotic impulses with life, or posit that he may have glanced at popular articles detailing “the creeping realization in the 1960s that quite simple mathematical equations could model systems every bit as violent as a waterfall.” This would lead us, erroneously, towards a basic socio-cultural appraisal and away from my reading of Johnson’s novels as a project that seeks to embrace an alternative ontology of being-in-the-world. Johnson’s attention is drawn to the everyday chaos of lived experience rather than grand historical narrative, an engagement with “simple everyday occurrences, like the falling of

76 Johnson, Albert, 173.
77 In Like a Fiery Elephant, Jonathan Coe suggests that the excerpt concerning a bar brawl that is revealed by the hole is an homage and cryptic reference to Christopher Marlowe who was killed in such a manner in Deptford in 1593. Coe notes that Johnson had a strong conviction that he too would die aged 29 and was often overwhelmed by “a belief in his own imminent death [...] the sense that his destiny had been pre-determined and was outside his own control.” 56.
a leaf or the flapping of a flag.”\textsuperscript{80} We see examples in the fragments of letter that are scattered by Christie Malry and float down the Thames, in the smoke curling up into the sky from a crematorium stack in \textit{The Unfortunates}. Johnson’s novelistic attention is mediated and focused by mood, the surrounding energies which bring a world into view. Flatley thus goes on to suggest that a mood theorist must be concerned with “discovering the sources of energy in an object, yielding to them and pointing to them—promoting their coming into being.”\textsuperscript{81} Other mood theorists warn that this kind of reading involves an investment of time and concentration for, “moods are usually described as ambient, vague, diffuse, hazy, and intangible, rather than intense, and they are often contrasted to emotions in having longer duration.”\textsuperscript{82} Mood here is differentiated from emotion purely in terms of persistence; it stands behind or swirls around the work, constituting a general orientation that slips the reader’s grasp. But within the object, particular emotions, physiological responses or affects can be discerned and this is where a mood reading must start. Mood directs its energy into identifiable affect which is expressed in the detail of the artistic artefact.

After an investment of time and concentration into the Johnson project, this thesis assesses that there is a fundamental impulse or energy that is molded and shaped across the novels—that of anxiety. In \textit{Albert Angelo} the protagonist is frustrated that he will never get to realise his dream of becoming an architect and may well meet a similar fate to the deceased teacher whose shoes he now fills; the residents of the House Mother’s home are nervous about the abuse they may receive at her hands and the stalwart of the Johnson novel, the anxious author/narrator, anticipates cruel betrayal with each new relationship. The source or object of the

\textsuperscript{81} Flatley, “Keynote,” 2014.
\textsuperscript{82} Felski and Fraiman, “Intro,” New Literary History, v.
anxiety changes form with each novel but the “feeling” (Flatley’s energy) endures across the texts. Within the narratives this energy is buffeted about and repelled onto others (in Christie’s case he blames the author for not attracting an adequate reading audience.) The ultimate destination of this energy is never arrived at but always deferred, but mood can be considered its point of origin. Drawing on Ernst Bloch’s categorization of anxiety as a “future orientated” emotion, in Ugly Feelings Sianne Ngai suggests that “realistic anxiety emerges in the context of an external threat,”83 a statement which helps us work back to the mood-world of Johnson’s work and time. Ngai cites Bloch’s description of this emotional energy as “aimless at some specific object as the fetish of their desire then at the configuration of the world in general, or (what amounts to the same thing) at the future disposition of the self.”84 In a mood reading of a work punctuated with anxiety, then, the presumed “objects” of anxiety are analogues for a rapidly unfolding future. The mood that gestates anxiety is threat (real or imagined). Anxiety in aesthetic work is the irrepressible manifestation of menacing mood.

**Threat and the Second World War**

My reading for mood in Johnson thus welcomes Ngai and Bloch and their yardsticks of “threat,” “futurity” and “configuration” as guides. The starting point is threat and any consideration of Johnson’s work cannot fail to notice the impact felt in his work of his experiences as an evacuee in the Second World War.85 Johnson (like many London children) was in fact evacuated twice: once at the beginning of the war in 1939 and secondly (and more unhappily) in 1941. The period of September 1939 to May 1940 came to be known as the “phony war”: a period of ominous inactivity on the part of the German forces and of decisive action by the British government who

made the decision to evacuate as many children from the cities as possible. Evacuation was not compulsory, but to many (including the employer of Bryan Johnson’s mother) it seemed a necessary precaution. In his biography of Johnson, Jonathan Coe notes, “at the outbreak of war, the landlord appears to have thought of this small farm in Surrey, owned by two friends of his as suitable refuge for his own son (aged 4) and the six-year-old Bryan.”86 Bryan, however, was accompanied by his mother and as a result, the spell in the Chobham countryside (helped by the fact that no bombs were yet falling on London) took on all the features of an extended holiday. This is not to say that problems did not occur, Johnson is swift to note an underlying atmosphere of antagonism towards himself as an inner-city working-class boy, yet another layer of threat born of a *class* war “being fought as viciously and destructively of human spirit as it has ever been in England.”87 Nonetheless, Coe assesses that Johnson’s writings on this time are “perversely nostalgic.”88 We learn that “whenever I have read *The Miller’s Tale* I have set it in the courtyard of this farm, the old cuckolded carpenter, his wife, and the clerk high up in that barn amidst the dusty scenery.”89 Re-living a moment partially orientated by threat, a literary counter-mood is momentarily invoked to reassuringly mythologize the past.

Moving forward to 1941 a very different scenario emerges. After the bombing of London began, Johnson was billeted with his entire school to High Wycombe. This time he would travel without his mother and the experience—which is extensively documented in *Trawl*—was to affect him for the rest of his life. Johnson was extraordinarily fond of his mother and for him,

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86 Coe, *Fiery*, 45.
87 Johnson, *Trawl*, 53.
88 Coe, *Fiery*, 45.
89 Ibid., 46.
separation was unbearable.\textsuperscript{90} Writing the introduction to a collection of evacuee testaments in 1968 he reflected on the comparative dangers of staying in the city or moving away:

But is it possible to compare a sudden and relatively short-cut burst of violence, experienced corporately within the security of the family group, with what happened slowly and over more than five years in many cases, and conclude that the psychological effects of evacuation would in fact be more severe.\textsuperscript{91}

In this quotation Johnson aligns displacement and distance with psychological damage, a greater ill than the possible physical damage inflicted by the nightly aerial raids that bombarded the city. The arrival of clear and present danger was met with a certain unifying “blitz spirit.”\textsuperscript{92} Folklore has it that the realisation of threat brought out “the best” in the remaining city population, a certain productive purposefulness that comes from finally squaring up to your enemies and fears rather than retreating from them (as the young Johnson had no choice but to do.)

From a child’s perspective, away from the city, anxiety did not dispel but searched for a clear object. As suggested by Bloch, it was projected outwards—everything become threatening. In \textit{Trawl}, the figurative “retreat” that details both experiences of evacuation, Johnson states:

The given reasons for my being evacuated – that I would be out of danger – was unacceptable, or seems so now, for at the time I had no choice but acceptance. The

\textsuperscript{90} In Coe’s biography (47), Marjorie Verney (Johnson’s cousin, twice removed) reflects that for a boy such as Bryan, “It must have been heartbreaking being taken away from his mother.”

\textsuperscript{91} Johnson \textit{Trawl}, 94.

\textsuperscript{92} Juliet Gardiner, author of \textit{The Blitz: The British Under Attack} (2010) identifies the key components of the term "Blitz spirit" and is cited by Tom Geoghegan in an article for the BBC news website entitled “Did the Blitz Really Unify Britain?” Gardiner explains: "There was endurance in the face of an external danger. People were going through it together, putting up with eight months of constant bombardment in cities like London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Bristol. People were absolutely exhausted, but on the whole there was very little panic, they went to work, went about their daily lives. And the other thing is defiance. There were no—or very few—calls for surrender, the morale didn’t implode. Our war production kept up. And even if people were bombed out, and had to go underground or leave London, they would come back to work." We can read this development as an example of Flatley’s (2012) counter-mood.

thought of my mother or father being killed, which I could conceive, was far worse than
the thought of myself being killed, which I could not as meaningfully conceive. If any of
us had to die, I wanted it to be together. This thought was often with me, but not exactly
as a thought — but rather as a threat, as an accompaniment to everything I did.  

Threat here is identified as the background to all possible future action—not a thought, but a
diffuse and persistent accompaniment, an atmosphere. In the first period of evacuation, under the
protective care of his mother and before the bombing had started in earnest, anxiety had yet to
totally dominate the young boy’s thoughts and, therefore, engagement with the world. Yet slowly
things began to change and emotion was soon to spill over. Trawl documents that in the Summer
of 1940 a Heinkel 111 crashed close to his billet and a parachuting figure made its way to land.

Approaching the pilot Johnson remembers “dragging on my mother’s arm, fearful, terrified
suddenly that the man would kill her. Yes, I remember that clearly: I was fearful for her. Not at
all for myself.” In the second lengthy evacuation this solitary case of materialised threat would
mutate into a distant, immaterial threat to his absent family—a threat that was only ever realized
as a moody cloud. Rather than returning to London with the rest of his billet, for reasons never
clearly explained, Johnson’s stay in the countryside was extended. He recalls,

For some reason two of us were left behind at Sands [his village school]. Virtually my
last link with London was gone; from then on my isolation grew, my whole life was
dominated by the fact that I was away from everything I had known. I was wretchedly
miserable, weepy at the slightest cause (or for no cause), bad company, a thoroughly
unrewarding pupil for any teacher, even for the odd saint, I suspect.’

As affect accumulates, the child’s world bifurcates three times over: the pupil is cut off from the
rest of the school, the city boy removed from London and, most overwhelmingly, the child

93 Johnson, Trawl, 94. My italics.
94 One wonders about the “veracity” of this account which fits so neatly into the narrative of a dozen
war-time films. A historic account or an early occasion of a bloom-space where “little fantasies pop-up”? (Stewart, Ordinary, 48).
95 Johnson, Trawl, 47.
96 B. S. Johnson, “The Happiest Days?” in Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson,
divided from the mother. Johnson describes here a shift in temperament and attunement to the world to a state in which “the subject braces himself for an imagined future.” On his eventual return to London not only had the fabric of the city been transformed but his personal engagement with the world had been irrevocably altered. These experiences, materialized in the form of a novel, detail the process by which mood condenses into an attunement to the world that directs behavior; emotion and perception.

Not all experiences of evacuation were unhappy ones, but nonetheless all those involved were propelled into a state of dislocation and high alert. London and the nation as a whole anticipated the threat of enemy bodies crossing into home territories as they had done across much of Europe. The cities became topologically transformed by the Luftwaffe and demographically altered by the process of evacuation. Children such as Johnson, who had endured prolonged periods of time away from home, returned to almost unrecognizable locations. For those who reclaimed the bombsites as play spaces after the war, the threat did not automatically disappear but instead, over time, became imperceptible or latent. This is because, as Brian Massumi notes,

_In the past there was a future threat._ You cannot erase a “fact” like that. Just because the menace potential never became a clear and present danger doesn’t mean that it wasn’t there, all the more real for being non-existent. The superlative futurity of unactualised

97 Peter C. Van Wyck, _Signs of Danger: Waste, Trauma, and Nuclear Threat_ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 1.
98 _The Evacuees_, edited by B. S. Johnson includes a diverse range of children’s experience. Some are positive accounts – Eileen Donald (who was billeted to Eton College) and Leslie Dunking stand out. Dunking comments, “I cannot remember hearing a single unhappy story, though surrounded by children who had been evacuees.” However, he adds “the issue is complicated by the fact that many of us who were evacuees would ultimately have come into Richard Hoggart’s ‘uprooted and anxious’ category even if there had been no war. It is a cultural cross breeding that produces the effect he describes, when a working-class person becomes uncertain about his place in the social hierarchy.” (1968, 78)
threat feeds forward from the past, in a chicken run to the future past every intervening present. The threat will have been real for all eternity.\textsuperscript{100}

Threat is inescapable; it will be felt in every intervening present, every potentiality waiting to be realized. Hans Gumbrecht (born in 1948 and coming of age at the time of Trawl’s publication) reflects on a similar mood in post-war Germany when he wonders, “so how, then, can we describe the strange presence of a past that did not disappear, even though it seemed to have lost its impact?”\textsuperscript{101} For Gumbrecht, that which persisted in post-war Germany was the overt violence and aggression of the Third Reich which was witnessed first-hand by the general populace. It resulted in what he theorizes as a “disposition of violent nervousness permeating the seemingly quiet postwar world.”\textsuperscript{102} Due to the delayed, slippery nature of latency, this claim can only be made retrospectively, by analyzing (as Gumbrecht does) the cultural outputs and behaviours of the time in a mood reading of his own. Whilst existing in a latent state we can never be sure of the force that is driving us: its presence is perversely to be found in its absence.\textsuperscript{103}

The struggle against latency

Gumbrecht clarifies that “to live in the state of a presence that has no identity is to live in a state of latency,” rationalizing this situation as an ambience in which “The future held a decisive moment of un-concealment in store.”\textsuperscript{104} Although, by Johnson’s time of writing in the sixties, the “post-war” may have seemed part of the rapidly fading past, his project suggests that a moody hangover from those years lingered and shaped the cultural output of the time. Speaking


\textsuperscript{101} Hans Gumbrecht, \textit{After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present} (Stanford, 2013), 22.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{103} Gumbrecht suggested that this “presence in absence” (26) is exemplified by Beckett’s \textit{Waiting for Godot} (1953).

\textsuperscript{104} Gumbrecht, \textit{Latency}, 163.
of the German experience, Gumbrecht reflects, “Like Vladimir and Estragon, we had been moving the whole time without making progress, without leaving the past behind us. The post-war seemed never ending.”105 The statement has echoes of Johnson’s frustration when he noted the lack of progression within British literary arts, a field in which “so many writers [were] imitating the act of being ‘nineteenth-century novelists,’ in particular, through the ancient medium of ‘storytelling.’”106 What we can ascertain from these declarations is a merging of the states of latency, stasis, and crisis that is born of the inability to leave the past behind us and a fear of what the future may bring. Johnson’s project to find an adequate vehicle to capture his personal truth to reality in such a climate, gives shape to this existential crisis and the novels systematically negotiate the difficulties of adequately capturing a snap-shot of reality. As Peter Leese notes in his study of post-war Britain:

Identity is elusive. It cannot be recorded directly in a documentary format, but it can be shown indirectly by compressing time into a symbolic sequence, by juxtaposing a series of images, by showing a run of photographic ‘stills’: by montage.’107 What is of key interest in this remark is the use of the word ‘indirectly.’ This adverb circumnavigates the subject and refutes any ‘natural’ and simplistic “connection between direct lived experience and imaginative artefacts.”108 Johnson employs the tactics suggested by Leese, and this took him some way towards a representational truth but fundamentally what was driving him was the imperceptible mood that orientated the unfurling of his world. Mood reading challenges us to look for that which obliquely directs thought and dictates theme and form. A mood reader looks at the selection of images and range of emotions, the motif and tropes that reoccur; the connections that are made (and broken), the positions held. Reading for mood

105 Gumbrecht, Latency, 28.
108 Ibid., 6
locates and traces the energies of which the aesthetic object is made and directs us to the cultural and emotional reality that provokes its coming into being.

Johnson’s novels reveal that cultural production in British post-war society, in an attempt to shake off the past, concentrated its energies in two distinct areas of expression: the minutiæ of the everyday, and the potential of the future (still firmly attached to the unfolding present – the “objective content of the present context.”)¹⁰⁹ I suggest that both areas of expression in Johnson’s novels are driven by a cloud of latent threat and the consequential anticipatory energies (both positive and negative) that emerged.¹¹⁰ As such his work is littered with cues that indicate the mood of its production: scarred landscape and bombsites, the pressing need for urban redevelopment and the oppressive spread of the soulless suburbs. Johnson’s protagonists (more often than not a thinly disguised version of himself), seek a purchase on a definable reality, but are deflected back to that which haunts them—the already known. The relationships and memories presented and explored are invariably defined by the threat of betrayal, defeat and loss—they are scarred by real, imagined and potential absence: an unfolding present ravaged by past fact and blind-sided by future possibility. They are figures who live in the world of the everyday, inhabiting flats, bungalows and care-homes but their lives are punctuated by intensities that seek release in bloom-spaces of imaginative affect that are no less real in their creative

¹¹⁰ It is not the intention of this project to make a claim for this expression being equal and uniform amongst all British writers of a similar age. Generalisations can be made: David Kynaston includes Johnson on the periphery of a group of post-war “meritocrats” who were flourishing in the 60s in the media and arts. The criteria for membership of this group was threefold: “(a) being born in 1933, or later, (b) being working class and (c) going to grammar school as a direct beneficiary of the 1944 Education Act and using that education as a ladder for further advancement.” Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957–59 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 207. Johnson famously failed his Eleven Plus exam and entered King’s College London after attending night school at Birkbeck. Kynaston cites Dennis Potter as a “classic meritocrat” and positions Johnson alongside Terence Donovan, Peter Blake and Keith Waterhouse.
processing of atmosphere. What follows are seven novels of rapid succession: mood is nothing if not productive.

Of Johnson’s seven novels, six are rooted in the experiences of his life with only 1971’s *House Mother Normal* concerning characters that are completely fictional. The novel still resounds with the echoes of the bellicose past, although sometimes it is indeterminate which war is being recalled. Sarah Lamson remembers, “ducking down the shelter when the HE started,”\textsuperscript{111} and Charlie Edwards recalls active service in Verdun and later being treated as a pariah for being exempt from fighting in the Second World War. Ron Lamson reflects on sexual adventures whilst in the Navy whilst Gloria Ridge’s adventures were closer to home: to get extra rations, women had to be “good” to grocers who “had a marvellous time of it, having it off in the back stores.”\textsuperscript{112} These residents of an old people’s home live in the past – their thoughts circle round the events and locations of their youth and they have in common two things: an experience of war (whether active or passive) and a fear directed towards their House Mother. The uncertainty of what the house Mother will or will not do shapes the course of the evening outlined in the novel: “better sing, though, don’t want to cross her again”\textsuperscript{113}; “she’s in trouble this time, not me, House Mother’ll hit her not me, this time.”\textsuperscript{114} Displaced from their private homes for their own benefit, the House Mother considers her charges to be children (as is reflected by her adoption of the name ‘Mother’) who have little concept of what is good for them. The residents have been stripped of any semblance of control over their lives; in her monologue the House Mother questions, “they are fed, they are my friends. Is that not enough?”\textsuperscript{115} The responses of the

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 112. 
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 11. 
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 98. 
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 184.
residents of the home range from defiance to despair, but nothing can be done – the only option is to sit out the term of their residency and follow the House Mother’s advice to “laugh now, prepare, accept, worse times are a-coming, nothing is more sure.”

The House Mother’s voice here is the doom-laden voice of sanctioned authority, the same one that convinced the young Bryan that evacuation was “for his own good, to protect him from danger,” and now convinces the residents that she is saving them from themselves. Authority also looms large for the semi-fictional Christie Malry and dictates that his life should proceed in a determined, risk-averse way in Johnson’s sixth novel. Looking to enter the world of work, Christie learns how little real choice he has when “the whole impetus of the interview was towards his providing a standard set of correct answers: or of losing points for wrong answers. Did Christie have to play? The General Manger made him very aware of his power.” When Christie’s mother dies at the opening of the book, she endeavors to protect her son from the threat of the future by passing on to him two things: a secret store of tinned food (an homage to war shortages) and some sage Johnsonian advice that life is in fact, chaos. Christie’s mourning is cut short as he is forced to follow convention and bury his mother in the customary and proper way. When he questions the necessity of this, the undertaker coldly tells him, “It has always gone on’ and ‘it will always go on’; there is no escaping the dictates of the past or the future. The voice of authority booms through the rest of the novel in various guises: Wagner, the Collector of Taxes, the government and the author himself, always there to be challenged. Johnson’s characters are constantly presented as being under duress, their default orientation can only take two forms—passive compliance or aggressive defence.

116 Johnson, House Mother, 204.
117 Johnson, Trawl, 56.
118 Johnson, Christie, 12.
119 Ibid., 33.
Meeting the unknowable future

Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry, then, can be read as one man’s attempt to take on authority and its oppressive demands, to right the wrongs. But in the eyes of authority, the measures are there to protect the citizen from the future: one simply must take a job, join the staff association and take a certain route to work for one’s own good. It results in a situation in which present action becomes limited and modified by a faceless “other.” Christie queries,

Who can I blame? The person who took this decision which clearly does me no good is no longer alive. But his successors, heirs, executors, administrators, personal representatives and assigns certainly are, or they would not be here in business.120

Christie decides to take on the “Man” in all his incarnations and begins, innocently enough with the defacing of an inanimate wall that blocks his way: he scrawls on it in recompense for the anxiety he feels and the control he craves. Yet as the novel progresses, his acts of retribution are never enough; Christie targets the material manifestation of his oppressors, the forms they employ to control him, but he fails to locate a singular source of his anxiety. Consequently, his targets get bigger as time passes because the problem he can’t grasp is that:

Threat is from the future. It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended. It is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over. We can never be done with it. Even if a clear and present danger materializes in the present, it is still not over. There is always the nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that. The uncertainty of the potential next is never consumed in any given event. There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger. The present is shadowed by a remaineder surplus of indeterminate potential for a next event running back to the future, self-renewing.121

The situation described here by Massumi encapsulates the mood of any war period irrespective of the individual role one may inhabit—the dislocated evacuee, the urban householder. It

120 Johnson, Christie, 24.
accounts, as well, for the war-time mood’s peculiar persistence: the fear of the potential next. Threat never leaves the subject but can only be absorbed into purposeful activity. Energy must find an outlet and so we see that, Christie’s answer to the culture of fear engendered by the authorities is to embody threat himself. Threat chaotically folds in and repeats itself. Christie embarks upon a campaign of terrorism across London, phoning in bomb threats to Scotland Yard and clandestinely taking cues from anarchist cells. By taking on the future he re-inhabits London’s past: his activities cause the kind of destruction that re-enact the havoc of the war years: thousands left dead, buildings and lives destroyed.

Despite his grand gestures, Christie is powerless to wrestle control of his life, to change his orientation. Christie is positioned by mood. His attempts to neatly align his columns do not bring emotional equilibrium, nor does the campaign of terror he unleashes on an unsuspecting world. Others happily admit defeat and let the past lie: the Shrike’s Old Mum waves her legacy from the blitz (a wooden leg) cheerfully at Christie shouting, “that’s how it happened,” “you can’t muck about with how it happened, can you?”\textsuperscript{122} For Christie, however, the battle goes on until his future arrives in the form of advanced cancer which renders him into a passive state; “defenceless under the cobalt gun.”\textsuperscript{123} He reverts to an infantile state where control has been removed and assigned to the creator he cannot die without who is left to close his account. At the end of the novel, Christie is revealed as a fictional victim of fortune who struggles and ultimately fails to live his life successfully through form suggesting that Johnson’s formula for novels of perfect truth has not been entirely successful. Yet the spaces he inhabits in the novel mirror those of the author’s time as an accounting clerk in 1952: the daily walks past the Manbré & Garton sugar factory in Hammersmith, the fishing trips to the reservoirs. There is also affective truth to

\textsuperscript{122} Johnson, Christie, 156.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 178.
be found in the boredom of factory life where workers are reduced to their jobs (“the Nutladies’) and mutinous clerks indulge in petty theft and sabotage. Johnson’s novels often map the manoeuvres of the undistinguished everyday—the seasonal bar man, the supply teacher, the care-worker and the fisherman. What marks *Christie Malry* out from the rest of Johnson’s work is a rich seam of secondary truth—the overflowing affect that becomes channeled by human imagination; the daydreams that allow the individual to “get through” the day. A large part of *Christie Malry*’s appeal lies in its overblown high-jinks: the protagonist’s irregular sexual exploits, the wedding cake decorated with genitalia, the destruction of the tax-office by an explosive model train. These moments, surely count as fiction but reveal affective reality. These moments are junctures where authentically experienced emotion peaks to intensities that demand an outlet of some kind. These intensities override diffuse *possibility* and take refuge in oxymoronic “actual lines of potential that a something coming together calls to mind or sets in motion” \(^{125}\): the products of mood propelled forward to meet an unknowable future.

In the sixties, as at every other time in history, the future was uncertain and life was changing fast. Although for Johnson, and others of his age, the war had been reduced to a repository of candid tales to be mined for their own end; his project drew on the period in more than an archival way. The all-encompassing atmosphere of his youth, one of anticipatory threat, hung low over the country like a moody cloud and persisted long into what tried to become the *Swinging Sixties* through a defiant counter-mood. The cloud’s persistence can be explained by the fact that traumatic psychological threat never really goes away but just comes to inhabit a different affective form. The individual is never *not* “in a mood” no matter how imperceptible

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\(^{124}\) See also Keith Waterhouse’s screenplay for *Billy Liar* (1963). Billy Fisher escapes his humdrum existence by indulging in fantasy and deceit.  

\(^{125}\) Stewart, *Ordinary*, 2. My emphasis.
this mood may be; no matter what counter-moods are invoked in response. Mood reveals itself in the world that we shape and becomes most apparent in the cultural products that channel affect.

As Highmore reminds us,

Mood is the form that attention takes. It is the way the world presents itself to us as ‘matters of concern’ and matters to ignore. Mood has the distinct advantage for us because it allows us to attend to the world of affect, to the world of sensation and the senses, and to the world of perception simultaneously.¹²⁶

Having established the mood of the time of Johnson’s writing, this thesis now turns its attention to the matters of concern that are revealed by the work.

Chapter 2: Urban Spaces

Writing from the late fifties onwards, Johnson was part of an in-between generation of writers distanced from high modernism by a relatively recent war and too long-in-the-tooth to join the explosive youth-driven movements of the late 60s. The Second World War had enforced a hiatus in European arts and reduced the modern urban landscape to a series of waste-grounds and building sites that remained long after armistice had been called. Ben Highmore notes that the post-war waste-ground swiftly became

a central motif within the social imaginary of postwar reconstruction in Britain. It constituted an affective landscape that played host to a mood-world that was sometimes morose or despondent, sometimes indifferent or disdainful or preoccupied, sometimes resilient or defiant, sometimes joyful and exuberant, and sometimes resigned.¹

Highmore emphasizes the liberating, but also bewildering, plurality of waste-ground and its concentration of “mixed moods.”² Those engaging with the sites’ heady euphoria on a daily basis were the young who were free to roam the rubble at will with little concern for what might take its place. Other more pessimistic moods were absorbed by the designers, politicians and urban planners overseeing the sites and a cultural elite hungry for new source material. For many, affective responses to these sites were problematic. The waste-grounds of London were troublesome bloom-spaces; focalisers of positive and negative affect. The post-war city was both haunted by the past and blindsided by the quest for new growth and artistic development.

Johnson went on the record to state that in the aftermath of war, the realm of the arts had fostered an increased conservatism³ and displayed a protective nostalgia for the reassuring forms

² Ibid.
³ Literary editor of The Spectator, Jay D. Scott coined the term “The Movement” to group together poets such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and Thom Gunn. The work composed by this group tended to be
of the past. He exasperatedly questioned, “Why then do so many novelists still write as though the revolution that was Ulysses had never happened, still relying on the crutch of storytelling? Why more damningly for my case you might think, do hundreds of thousands of readers still gorge the stuff to surfeit?” Finding little momentum in British post-war literary circles and unwilling to sate the appetites of the masses for purely financial gain, Johnson embarked on an ambitious novelistic project to re-channel the literary innovation of modernism and prevent a continuation of the lacklustre conventions of nineteenth-century realism.

This chapter outlines how, over the course of his first two novels, Johnson’s quest for a literary truth that would best serve his time shifted from the internal, reflective and subjective mode of pre-war modernism to one that situated human experience in the shifting imperfect external world. The city was enveloped in the heightened moods of waste-ground; the dissatisfaction of dislocated community and dismay at the stark form of accommodation being offered up to the urban masses. Johnson’s world and subsequent project to map this truth were pulled in the direction of both the future and the past. Taking a modernist “self” as a point of reference, the project came to explore the subject’s movement within space; the scarred post-war landscape became a catalyst for literary exploration. The result was Albert Angelo, a novel evolved in tandem with the practice of New Brutalism—the architectural movement that sought to honestly display the supporting structures and functions of a building through a new social-
nostalgic for a former Britain, a Britain that had been transformed by industrialisation and urbanisation. On the whole, the group was opposed to modernism, hoping instead to produce work that eschewed the experimental and embraced traditional form and their work was published in The Spectator between 1945 and 1955. Amongst their number was John Wain, a writer whose prose work came to be aligned with the more radical practice of the “Angry Young Men.” This loose group produced political pieces on the social alienation of the working class.

ethics of design that countered a divisive modernist aesthetic. Although in his early novels, Johnson’s urban perspective and frequent use of introspection acknowledges his debt to writers such as Joyce, this chapter suggests that Johnson’s geographical and literary explorations had a different intent—to steer the post-war novel out of modernism’s “ambit” to a new place. His characters’ explorations take a first step towards those of the French Left’s mid-century re-appropriation of the city as “the space of new subjectivities and political identities.” Finally, through Johnson, we see a rejection of the modernist writer’s retreat from the city and a pioneering use of the cityscape in social, political and material terms as an affective resource of creative inspiration.

Modernist beginnings.

Although some thirty years had passed since the heyday of high modernism in both literature and architecture, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe cast long shadows across the mid-century creative landscape. It seems that artists during Britain’s post-war period were still operating within, what David James terms, modernism’s “ambit” however much the reality of everyday life had evolved. The modernist mind had launched the most recent successful challenge to anachronistic representation, rejecting the realist novel’s bourgeois investment in clock time, superficial material detail and the exhaustive examination of social mores. Faced with a rapidly transforming and, at times, overwhelming society, the modernist projection of the world safely sequestered the twentieth-century individual within (in literature) a

6 David James, “B. S. Johnson within the Ambit of Modernism,” *Critical Engagements* 4.1/4.2 (2011): 40. James suggests that Johnson was one of the few writers who were intent on extending the boundaries of modernism (the “ambit”), rather than writing “back” to modernism in homage. He comments that writers like Johnson “began to see that the aims of experimental fiction should shift from rendering subjectivity alone towards the interrogation of the very capacity for fiction to evoke, and remain ethically alert to, social environments beyond such an aestheticization of psychological introversion.” (45.)
bubble of consciousness and (in architecture) modular form. With an eye to Jameson, such tactics are seen by Randall Stevenson as “compensatory” modi operandae that tackle the dehumanisation of technological advances and compensate “through deeper senses, formal shifts and subtler strategies, for the dehumanising, disintegral pressures of late capitalism on the self.”\(^7\) Modernists thus found compensation in the “inner self”. Romantic thought too had sought compensation and consolation—but whereas the modernist mind sought refuge in a hermetic internal world, the Romantics had found respite from the Industrial revolution in the simple life and rhythms of rural man. It was a tactic somewhat adapted by early twentieth-century writers feeling newly isolated in the city; James notes their “long-standing yet uneasy dialogue with the social spaces and struggles of daily life, allowing literary experiments to coincide with the mundane.”\(^8\) Here we should note the use of the permissive verb ‘allow’: elite Bloomsbury paying lip service to the ordinary and lowly within its works. The resulting modernist works merely “coincide” with the everyday in that they purposely occupy these spaces in order to throw more highly-prized psychological explorations into relief. The impulse of modernism remained resolutely toward the interior and as such the fictive worlds of the early part of the twentieth century became mediated by the perceptive filter of the individual consciousness, with style mimicking cerebral processes in streams of prose which aimed to “‘seize upon’ every thought or movement of characters’ minds.”\(^9\) Stevenson’s selection of the verb “seize” here reflects the modernist drive to understand completely, to capture by laying hold, an action which perversely stills the action it endeavours to encapsulate. This urge to explain and contain was the legacy handed down to writers such as Johnson.

\(^7\) Randall Stevenson, Modernist Fiction: An Introduction (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 78
\(^8\) James, “Ambit,” 38–39.
\(^9\) Stevenson, Fiction, 48–49.
Born in London in 1933, the mature Johnson looked out on a world where modernity’s relentless onward thrust had been stalled by the horrors of two world wars. In addition to this, late capitalism’s increasingly intrusive commodification of everyday life was repositioning the material world as ripe for wholesale exploitation, be it financial or artistic. Johnson’s position within modernism’s ambit is confirmed when he stated that Joyce was the “Einstein of the novel” with almost entrepreneurial talents in processing a “subject-matter in *Ulysses* [that] was available to anyone, the events of one day in one place; but by means of form, style and technique in language he made it into something very much more, a novel, not a story about anything”\(^ {10} \). Here Johnson seems to suggest that Joyce had elevated the novel above a simplistic singular function and enabled it to be re-launched to a profitable end as an all new and improved novel. Joyce had accessed the newly-apparent plurality of a modern life premised on choice and the stylistic innovation of his work was testament to the impossibility of conveying the stuff of contemporary existence in any one mode of production. Johnson claimed that

> What happens is nothing like as important as how it is written, as the medium of the words and form through which it is made to happen to the reader. And for style alone *Ulysses* would have been a revolution. Or, rather, styles. For Joyce saw that such a huge range of subject matter could not be conveyed in one style, and accordingly used many. Just in this one innovation (and there are many others) lie a great advance and freedom offered to subsequent generations of writers.\(^ {11} \)

Here, high modernism becomes associated with capitalist democracy through the foregrounding of production and the championing of choice. For Johnson, Joyce represented liberty and multiplicity; a catalyst for the further development of form.\(^ {12} \) But the time had come for the boundaries of creative expression—its ambit—to be widened; the artist’s eye must refocus.

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\(^ {10} \) Johnson, “Intro,” 12.
\(^ {11} \) Ibid.
\(^ {12} \) James, “Ambit,” 40.
Human consciousness had provided inadequate refuge from an ever-encroaching world that was now demanding to be re-mapped and rebuilt in new ways. Mid-century being-in-the-world must be honestly re-assessed and emphasis shifted from the initial part of the phrase to the latter. By the late sixties consolation would be superseded by consolidation, re-appropriation and resistance in an attempt to fuse together the fragmented external and internal world. Whereas both the romanticism and modernism had engaged in a *retreat* from the modern industrial and urban worlds, Johnson’s project would start by reclaiming the fragmented space he had inherited—the cityscapes around.

*Travelling People* and the recycling of form

A reading of Jonathan Coe’s biography *Like a Fiery Elephant* confirms that Johnson’s early work is situated deeply in the autobiographical minutiae of his own life. The rationale for this is explained in the 1965 essay “Holes, Syllabics and the Succussions of the Intercostal and Abdominal Muscles” where he references Beckett’s rejection of character as an adequate vehicle for his expression in *The Unnameable*: “Why ‘invent’ characters when you know yourself much better? How can an invented stand exactly for what you want to say unless he is you?”

Johnson’s early novels then are based on this premise and they wrestle with the problem of the representation of ‘being’ through fictional form, transferring events, spaces and people from the author’s own life into narrative with a varying degree of fictional intrusion and success. Coe notes how Johnson’s debut novel *Travelling People* was closely based on experiences that were fresh in the author’s mind, namely a trip taken on his graduation from King’s College, London. Hitching out of London, Johnson’s protagonist Henry Henry follows in his creator’s footsteps,

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heading for Holyhead and Dublin but ending up in North Wales at the Stromboli Club. Henry, the gauche graduate, bears an uncanny resemblance to the author who lists the protagonist’s qualities for the reader:

- Age: 26 years
- Height: 5’ 10 7/8”
- Weight: over
- Chest 44”
- [...] Disposition: quietly desperate
- Bearing: Torpid
- Sex: Mainly male
- Spectacles: not worn
- Teeth: well formed
- Apparel: unusual-casual

Like Johnson the graduate, Henry is ready to set out on a great adventure at the relatively elderly age of 26. To the polite enquiry, “and what are you going to do now?” he replies, “I see no further ahead than Holyhead and Dublin; when I have relaxed and recovered, then I shall see how I can best use myself.” Henry the fictional character visualizes his future in geographical terms; uncertain of the experiences that lie ahead he sees only the blank spaces on the map that will contain them. At the beginning of his debut, Johnson the fledgling novelist ponders the most effective way of manoeuvring the subject in a suddenly expanding field.

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15 Ibid., 22.
Although wary of being the “passive recipient of pre-existing form,” Johnson steers *Travelling People* into Joycean waters by running the gamut of literary form and genre. The novel opens with a prologue in which the author figure explains his rationale for using a different style for each of the novel’s chapters. Eight separate styles including the epistolary form, stream of consciousness and a theatrical script are innovatively employed over nine chapters. Yet this striking explanatory prelude, in which the narrator sits cosily in a wicker chair and justifies the structure of the earlier novel, is also an unashamed homage to Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Johnson scholar Glynn White identifies the modernist allusions in Johnson’s opening gambit, asserting, “He adopts the approach of *Ulysses*, in a Shandean setting (‘a wood and wicker-work chair of eighteenth century manufacture’), but does so in the manner of the student narrator of Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds.*” The passage stands, therefore, as a complicated mélange of literary conceits, a respectful homage and honest declaration of authorial intent, but ultimately offers little in terms of new development that will reformulate the novel for a contemporary readership.

Glimmers of progress are to be found—the narrator of the prelude declares that in this novel, “the style of each chapter should spring naturally from its subject matter,” that the mechanism of the book must be exposed and that on no account must the reader be tricked in the manner of “the shabby chicanery practiced on their readers by many novelists, particularly of the popular class.” Of these statements the first is still operating within modernism’s ambit—it is a

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19 Ibid., 12.
reworking of architect Louis Sullivan’s dictate “form ever follows function,”\(^{20}\) embraced by modernist designers as a guiding and defining principle. The phrase champions an honesty of purpose and yet more often than not the modernist project sought to mask the world with a stylized smooth veneer. This was most evident in the grand projects of urban development masterminded by architectural greats such as Le Corbusier. Entire cities or departments were created to solve urban “problems.” Rashmi Varma notes:

> The modernist city could best be understood in terms of commodification, a process that was engulfing everyday life and experience under capitalism […] what was hidden from view in those seductive arrangements of commodities was the real world of gritty and often unseemly human labour, and nasty relations of social and economic exploitation.\(^{21}\)

Varma suggests that it is this disjunct between the aesthetic veneer and a challenging social reality that was instrumental in bringing forth the “the fragmented consciousness of modern subjectivity”\(^{22}\) which in turn fuelled the pre-war artistic production that Johnson so admired. The time had now come to disavow such shabby chicanery and a new honesty must be implemented to forge together artistry and reality. In the novel form, Johnson saw this as being enacted by a rejection of superfluous style and the unveiling of the writing process and structures. Yet again, these literary developments were following certain impulses in architectural practice; the beginnings of a New Brutalism that Johnson enthusiastically championed (and which will be furthered discussed in the latter parts of this chapter.)

The success, then, of \textit{Travelling People} should be gauged in terms of how far out of modernism’s ambit Johnson manages to drag it, of how honestly the author could capture the


\(^{21}\)Varma, \textit{Postcolonial}, 3.

\(^{22}\)Ibid., 3.
experience of “being” in his mid-century world. Whereas the artificial generic mechanisms of *Travelling People* may be acknowledged at the beginning of the text, there is a failure to acknowledge the autobiographical nature of the novel—Henry Henry’s experiences at the Stromboli club were sourced directly from the author’s life. Honesty is equated with the exposure of narrative’s processes and structures rather than its source and content. In this debut novel, Johnson delicately straddles the line between fact and fiction, rather than make a decisive leap. Henry Henry’s fictional status is slyly hinted at but the reader may miss the nod; the name itself ill-conceived so as to draw attention to its constructedness. White also notes that the equally ridiculously named Mauri Bunde is fleetingly referred to in text as having been made up and concludes that, “A game is being played here, between author and reader, at the expense of the characters.” Johnson’s mission to achieve a complete eschewal of trickery is revealed as irregular. The stylistic flourishes and sly games hide what is still a rather conventional picaresque coming-of-age tale of romantic adventure which “remains within the bounds of conventional realism”—a result far short of what the author hoped to achieve.

*Travelling People* also cannot help but dip its toe in romantic waters; within its pages the countryside has an exotic pull on the young adventurer and is portrayed as a place of strange possibility and mystical beauty. Most importantly it constitutes a retreat and permits Henry to escape the oppressive clutches of the city to “find himself” like youths of old. Henry senses that by changing his environment he will be propelled into a different mode of being that is more reflective and benign. When Kim later comments, “‘I expect you’re very different in London,’” Henry excitedly acknowledges, “‘Yes! I am! Very different! Much less free and much less at

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24 Ibid., 93.
The countryside represented refuge within both the novel and real life—like Johnson, Londoner Henry was a young child when the Second World War broke out and for safety’s sake was evacuated to the countryside. Fictional Henry rejects retreat and sequestration and acts out Johnson’s youthful fantasies. He makes four attempts to return to the city, not because he is particularly unhappy but because the countryside was not London: London was home, London was all the world, all his world: the worn streets he knew, the scruffy park nearby, the sparrows and the pigeons, and above all, his mysterious, gentle beloved river, with its dirty, intriguing flotsam and jetsam. Henry longs for the urban landscape in all its dirty honest glory. Using the terminologies of Heidegger and von Uexküll we might theorize that the Dasein that is Henry comes into being (sein) in the grime of the city (da). These are the spaces that nurture him and that constitute his Umwelt: his world.

On graduation Henry’s adventures commence on the road to Dublin where he accepts a lift from a stranger and is offered a job at the Stromboli club in Wales. His options are made concrete through the windscreen.

Mr. Tuckerson turned the long car slowly left over the Waterloo Bridge at Bettws-y-coed. […] Henry made it clear as they stopped at the fork that he could not very well alter his arrangements to go to Ireland, but, not to offend Mr. Tuckerson, he said he might possibly be able to come to Aberfyllin in three or four weeks’ time.

The plucky romantic adventurer pauses at a forked road, a reverse Dick Whittington, leaving the city for unknown space to seek his fortune. It is a structural device that sees Johnson take the

25 Johnson, Travelling, 136.
26 Ibid.
27 Umwelt can be translated as “environment” or “surroundings” but usually refers back to Jakob von Uexküll’s semiotic concept of a self-centred world. Dasein is the term coined for the being at the centre of Heidegger’s seminal work Being and Time (1927), an existence that is always engaged in the world. This concept is further engaged with in chapter 6.
28 Johnson, Travelling, 25.
novel back to one of its early popular forms: the *Bildungsroman*, or “coming-of-age novel.” The central trope of the genre is the journey of development, a spatial exploration of the un-charted world of experience. Although rather conventional it is, however, perhaps a fitting form for Johnson to begin his project with—*Bildungsroman* protagonists are innovators who seek out the world rather than retreat from it, they “gradually develop their own innate potential through interaction with their environment.” This interaction can be conceptualized as a struggle with form; in such a text the individual has agency but “individual inclination comes up against social necessity, resulting in the hero’s achieving a different goal from the one expected. Human agency is not ruled out entirely, but the vicissitudes of social formation serve to ironise it.”

Sheenan suggests that “the *Bildungsroman* is concerned not with the self per se but with transformations of the self – by family, by bourgeoise society, by history.” The *Bildungsroman* foregrounds the molding of the self by social structures; focusing on the humanistic doctrine of “perfectability” in action. For 285 pages Johnson’s *Bildungsroman* takes Henry through a carefully selected range of contemporary experience; he encounters formal instruction, economics, logistics and death and gains knowledge of a world peopled with sugar daddies, “super young dollies” and dead fiancés. He dutifully attends alcohol-fuelled orgies with the moneyed nouveau-riche of the industrial North; he deals with the consequences of tragedy and makes passionate love to a woman. He returns to the city a man in control of his world, but the question of whether his creator had fully found his own artistic feet through his tentative stabs at literary honesty remains. At the very least, this *Bildungsroman* acts as a survey of the very forms that the author was trying to leave behind on his own personal aesthetic journey.

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31 Ibid., 3.
Before *Travelling People* concludes, Johnson inserts an interlude that reaffirms the Bildungsroman-esque intentions of his debut. Quoting from Tobias Smollett’s picaresque novel *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, we learn that Smollett’s protagonist had undergone circumstances which, “stealed the constitution, and qualified a young man for all the duties and enjoyments of life, much better than any education which affluence could bestow.”³² It seems that one learns to “be” not through instruction or capitalist gain but through the exploration of environment and the surrounding world. At the end of Henry’s journey, the narrator reflects on the developments the equally alliteratively named character has undergone:

It was as though he was symbolically lagopthalmos, and a change had taken place which might be the beginning of a cure or a worsening of the condition: he could not yet tell. He now realized the existence of an added dimension to truth. Diagrammatically, Henry’s idea of truth was a sphere, perfect, inviolate, in which he existed; his recent travelling had shown him that this sphere existed in space, in another element that was limitless, not truth itself, but not antithetical to it either. He still retained his original conception unaltered, but now had a context in which to place it.³³

Henry’s original conception of authentic existence had been a distinctly modernist one, a “sphere, perfect, inviolate, in which he existed.” His generic romantic adventure had revealed that this idea need be replaced by a truth found outside the inviolate circle of subjectivity. I suggest that Henry realizes that his notion of reality had been restricted by the impenetrable bubble of “self.” This bubble of self-contained ego or consciousness, so painstakingly detailed in modernist writing and so effective at blocking out the undesirably unfolding reality of contemporary life, had now burst. The impenetrable membrane dividing the internal and external worlds which had been instrumental in shaping the modernist vision must be breached.

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³³ Ibid.
Johnson remained unhappy with his debut novel for the whole of his career and refused permission for any subsequent editions, a wish that has been upheld by his surviving estate. The novel was quite simply not honest enough, not successful enough in its exposure of mechanisms and trickery. Of it he said, “Since Travelling People is part truth and part fiction it now embarrasses me and I will not allow it to be reprinted.”34 But the sheer effort to move out of the shadow of tradition was not to be underestimated—in his second novel Albert Angelo his novelistic will-to-honesty would implode as he struggled to implement both honest, transparent form and increasingly autobiographical “real” characters. Drawing on Samuel Beckett’s The Unnamable as his epigraph, Johnson presents an opening image of fictional creations as “shrieking hyenas” that must be fought. The epigraph is an apt one because it details the difficult transition that Johnson has vowed to undertake. Beckett invokes the image of a tortured author who is “not at home to anything.” He continues:

my doors are shut against them, perhaps that’s how I’ll find silence, and peace at last, by opening my doors and letting myself be devoured, they’ll stop howling, they’ll start eating, the maws now howling, they’ll start eating, the maws now howling: Open up, open up, you’ll be all right, you’ll see.35

Whilst the modernist project had looked for solace by shutting out the world, an alternative was to be found in bravely unbarring the door and letting in the outside. The results would not always be spectacular; unlike Beckett’s dramatic hounds the honest reality of the post-war world was often mundane. Johnson would go proceed to duly document illusion, fabrications and dull routine:

A few instances of the lies. It was Jim Wales, not Wells kept the greyhounds; my parents used to live in Hammersmith but now live in Barnes; the little Heathens I pinched from my father but gave the whippety player his name in payment, in slight recompense; and

34 Johnson, “Intro,” 22.
my parents have two cats, not one dog […] I could go on and on, through each page, page after page, pointing out the lies, the lies, but it would be so tedious, so tedious. The author had gained absolution and peace by making a full confession and repositioning his narrative squarely back in the space of his lived experience.

**Albert Angelo: post-war drifting in the city**

Johnson’s first novel then unfolds unevenly as a humanist exercise in semi-fictionality. Employing the classical trope of the journey it comes to a halt with a typically modernist moment of epiphany that signals a change of mode. It is a novel thus of conflicting intention—the logic and causality of the *Bildungsroman* sits uneasily with the human contingency of modernist expression and Johnson considered it a failure. In his second novel *Albert Angelo*, Johnson returns to the original aims and constraints of the project when metafictively interrupting the flow of the text to announce:

---I’m trying to say something not tell a story telling a story is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality about sitting here writing looking out across Claremont Square trying to say something about the writing and nothing being an answer to the lack of loving.37

“Story” here can be glossed as “traditional narrative” with its linear causal relations, the way in which “the (retrospective) formation of an immanent structure transforms uncertainty into inevitability”38 and removes chance. In this text, Johnson aimed to capture the chaos of a life lived in an external world after failing to do so in his debut novel; he chooses to defiantly look out rather than inwards. The many geographical references in the novel root it firmly in the sprawling capital where Johnson was fast becoming a celebrated and notorious figure in the literary scene. Born in Hammersmith and educated at Birkbeck and King’ Colleges, London

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remained the author’s home until he took his life in November 1973 and the city features in some form in all of his novels. After the summer in Wales that is documented in *Travelling People*, Johnson’s return to a post-war London was fortuitous; art and design were being coaxed back to life through the establishment of the ICA \(^{39}\) and the spontaneous gathering of informal cells such as the Independent Group. \(^{40}\) It was within the familiar context of the capital that Johnson became part of a cultural milieu that would inform his developing artistic practice. When later reflecting on the genesis of the protagonist of his second novel, Johnson remarked, “It is no accident that my hero, Albert is an architect, for I believe that my aims have much in common.” \(^{41}\) This commonality of purpose is suggestive of the interdisciplinarity reflected in David Robbins’s description of the Independent Group as, “an emerging generation of artists, architects and critics [who] grew critical of the prevailing domesticated, water-downed version of modernism.” \(^{42}\) The time had come to move forward and solutions would be seized from unfamiliar soil and practice.

Continuing the autobiographic impulse of the first novel, Johnson’s Albert is a supply teacher in London’s run-down state schools, but his bookshelves are filled not with educational theory but with the monographs of Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Frankl, a reminder of Johnson’s declaration that “the architects can teach us something; their aesthetic problems are

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\(^{39}\) The Institute for Contemporary Arts was founded in 1946 with the aim of providing a space for artistic debate outside of the confines of the Royal Academy. It acquired a permanent site at 17 Dover Street, Piccadilly in May 1950 and Johnson visited on several occasions and held a retrospective there on 25\(^{th}\) May 1972 to coincide with the release of *House Mother Normal*. His film script *Up Yours Guillaume Apollinaire* was devised in response to a request from ICA director Michael Kustow in Aug 1968.

\(^{40}\) The Independent Group met at the ICA from 1952 –1963 and was inter-disciplinary. It included amongst its ranks artists Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull and Toni del Renzio; critic Reyner Banham and the architects Alison and Peter Smithson.

\(^{41}\) Johnson, “Holes”, 393.

combined with functional ones.” Like Johnson during the 1960s, Albert teaches to earn a living, but his creativity seeks practical expression in other fields. Both author and character are informed by the modernist past, but Albert in particular finds it hard to move beyond his appreciation for classical design. Johnson’s second novel is his paean to London; Albert’s eyes feast on the early Victorian and Georgian architecture of inner London, streets that had survived the slum clearance of the twenties and thirties and provided the background to significant episodes of Johnson’s life. Albert is acutely aware of his surroundings and his observations are interspersed with what David James calls “inner ruminations.” James positions elements of Johnson’s prose as impressionistic and as having “a kinship with an early stage of modernist fiction,” suggesting that the sustained focalization through Albert is “familiar across the works of James, Conrad, Woolf.” He concludes that this technique is “one of Johnson’s debts to modernism,” all be it one which is then taken to “its formal and discursive limits.” This last qualification refutes any retrograde aspect to Johnson’s work and indeed James’ reading suggests that the insistent self-reflexivity of Johnson’s work carries forward “the ethos of renewal upon which modernism was premised.” But rather than read the novel as an extended rendering of modern urban subjectivity we might read Albert’s pedestrian interrogation of the city as an exploration of the built environment and its social relations on new terms. Albert’s meanderings are both a distraction from the banality of post-war life and an exploration of its emerging possibilities. By roaming the city streets, he attempts to reclaim an authentic relationship between the individual and their surroundings and activate his own creative project.

43 Johnson, “Intro,” 16.
44 James, “Ambit,” 41.
45 Ibid., 43–44.
46 Ibid., 44.
Similar tactics had been employed on the other side of the Channel by the French Left. In “A Formulary of New Urbanism,” a bored Ivan Chtcheglov catalogues the built environment in a strikingly similar manner to Albert:

And the swimming pool on the Street of Little Girls. And the police station on Rendezvous Street. The medical-surgical clinic and the free placement center on the Quai des Orfèvres. The artificial flowers on Sun Street. The Castle Cellars Hotel, the Ocean Bar and the Coming and Going Café. The Hotel of the Epoch. 47

Chtcheglov’s exploration of the fabric of the city reveals a Paris of architectural relics which reinforce historic behaviours and orientations. The glimmers of modernity that Chtcheglov encounters in his survey of Paris have only divided up and standardized the city for capitalist production and consumption. In response he proposed a formulary of “new urbanism” in which the city would be reclaimed for the drifters and dreamers who had been left behind. In words that pre-empt Johnson’s thoughts on the London literary scene he commented, “we are in the twentieth century, even if few people are aware of it. Our imaginations, haunted by the old archetypes, have remained far behind the sophistication of the machines. The various attempts to integrate modern science into new myths remain inadequate.” 48 In his formulary Chtcheglov urgently calls for the adoption of a new “archetype”: a pattern of communal behaviour that challenges the modernist urban project which sought to rationalize the city through structural order and uniformity. In his view, modernism and capitalism had placed barriers between the ordinary individual and the creative communal space of the street. Le Corbusier is criticized in particular for wanting to “squash people under ignoble masses of reinforced concrete, a noble material that should rather be used to enable an aerial articulation of space that could surpass the

48 Ibid., 2.
flamboyant Gothic style.” Chtcheglov proposed to reconnect the urban population with a prior unitary “cosmic reality” that must be sourced in “the urban landscape itself, which once might have seemed a charged and poetic realm, [but] had become a closed field drained of mystery and passion.” The city must be repopulated with the _flâneur_ on a mass scale, its spaces activated by ordinary footfall.

Chtcheglov’s ‘Formulary for a New Urbanism’ was written in 1953 and became an inspirational text for Guy Debord’s Situationist International who published it in 1957. From 1957 to 1962 the SI was actively engaged in a critique of architecture and urban planning, maintaining an aggressive dialogue with what it saw as the ineffectual modernist principles of planning. They too sought to reclaim the urban landscape from a modernist commodification of space that effectively razed the city and its relationships through monolithic structures and compartments. Tom McDonough astutely suggests that, “for the S. I the city was less a physical container—an assemblage of structures and routes, of functions and their interrelations—than the space constituted by and constitutive of the drama of self-consciousness and mutual recognition that lay at the heart of Hegel’s phenomenology.” This means that the city can never be authentically known or definitively mapped as every new orientation of it is modified by the present moment and all other contingent encounters of it. The situationist city was conceptualized as a place of chance and deviation in which unfolded a non-prescriptive series of catalytic spaces that opposed the “increasing hegemony of postwar functionalist architecture.”

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49 Chtcheglov, “Formulary,” 2.
50 Ibid.
52 Tom McDonough, introduction to _The Situationists and the City_ (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 3.
53 McDonough, _Situationists_, 6.
This architecture committed the cardinal sin of unthinkingly copying modernist practice. The SI aligned such urban planning with political and social restraint; an architecture that oppressed the very possibility of authentic autonomous being. Johnson’s antipathy to functionalism and its intentions was aggressively asserted when he stated, “form is not the aim, but the result. If form were the aim then one would have formalism; and I reject formalism.”  

Both Chtcheglov and the SI believed that the authentic city would be revealed through an unconstrained exploration of space and experience in tandem, *da* and *sein* in mobile situations that would immerse the individual in an ever fluctuating relationship with space. The affective, within the city, would fuel the creation and experience of new authentic forms of living and being both in theory and in practice.

This desire is also expressed in Johnson’s work. Dissatisfied Albert, architect manqué, assesses and lists the architectural features and urban reality of the post-war city. He records how,

> They send you the next day [...] up past Highbury Corner, off the Holloway Road. The five-and six-storey schools in this part stand above the three storey streets like chaotic castellations. Dead cinemas and a music hall sadden corners, abandoned. Only Arsenal stadium, older looking in its outdated modernity than last century’s houses, competes in height with the dark red brick stonedressed schools.

The old Arsenal stadium at Highbury with its Art Deco East and West Stands is the most recent addition to the urban landscape but its stylized modernity now seems passé and disconnected from both the old and new city. In London, as in Chtcheglov’s Paris, “fragmentary beauties can be found—while the promised land of new syntheses continually recedes into the distance.

54 Johnson, “Intro,” 16.
Everyone wavers between the emotionally still-alive past and the already dead future." In Johnson’s London the still-alive past is present in the affect of the bombsites and the decaying squares and terraces as future form waits to take shape. Albert is at “drift” in London, engaging in a Debordian Situationist _dérive_: the free-form passing through urban spaces that embraces disorientation and fuels the senses. Occasionally he walks mindfully alone, at other times he seeks the companionship of others perhaps aware of the fact that, “one can dérive alone, but all indications are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people.” It is an arrangement that challenges the modernist cult of individual experience and shifts experience and power outwards to the wider social and material world.

Albert does not inhabit a solitary world; after work he and his friend Terry unite to become working-class flâneurs, traversing both the gritty streets of the East End and the anodyne suburbs. The infamous Cable Street is “a place to come to remind us that other people are suffering life when most of London seems dead. It is, too, a place for outcasts, misfits, where we feel something in common, however else we differ.” Here we see evidence of what McDonough calls, “the ambivalence of the flâneur paradigm, its unstable mix of desire for and condescension toward the other.” Through his wanderings Albert charts the city’s struggle to find a cohesive, unifying identity. The shifting ethnic spectrum of the capital is reflected by his tutor group where, “You open the register, and glance down the names. Several Greek-looking

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58 The battle of Cable Street took place on the 4th of October 1936 when anti-fascist demonstrators and local people forced back the march of Oswald Mosley and his Blackshirts through the East End of London.
59 Johnson, _Albert_, 52.
60 McDonough, “Intro,” 11.
ones, a Mustapha, and half a dozen Irish. Not a West-Indian district, apparently. London is diversifying and recovering but the needs of its citizens (shelter, education) are barely being met. Albert and Terry are immersed in the subcultures of the modern city at work and at play, on their frequent dérives around the social spaces of the East-End they talk, “listen and watch, several nights a week. And [they]’ll suddenly want to see some building or other, and off [they]’ll go in the Fiat […] That’s how it so often is.” Following the dictate of Debord, the moment their work is finished, they allow themselves to be drawn by the city and its attractions, going wherever their whim or chance dictates. To “be” is to know the city and be adrift in its pleasures which are never static but changing and responsive to the call of its citizens. The modernists had positioned the city at the vanguard of contemporary life but their aesthetic solutions had emptied the streets of spontaneous collective expression and encounters. Albert Angelo charts the city’s inhabitants beginning to overflow its boundaries and reclaim the dirty streets.

The affective cityscape
As indicated by its name, Albert Angelo is firmly rooted in the London borough of Islington with its historic landmark of The Angel on the corner of Pentonville Road. The text focuses on the particular areas of Clerkenwell where Johnson spent the latter parts of his adult life and wrote his seven novels. Through Albert, Johnson’s project replicates Chtcheglov’s experience, beginning to “move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward [his] past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary.” In Albert Angelo this fragmentation takes a material form; the reader finds it perfectly exemplified in the description of what was

61 Johnson, Albert, 32.
62 Johnson, Albert, 52.
63 Chtcheglov, “Formulary,” 1.
Albert/Johnson’s home in Percy Circus. This Victorian relic is not faring well in the twentieth century. Johnson notes,

The first thing that you notice about Percy Circus is that it stands most of the way up a hill, sideways, leaning upright against the slope like a practiced seaman. And then the next thing is that half of it is not there [...] Some of the houses have patches where new London stocks show up yellow against the older blackened ones; then you know what happened to the rest of the Circus. New flats abut at an angle, awkwardly. A blue plaque tells you that Lenin once lived at number sixteen.64

The circus, completed in 1853, is indeed built on the side of a steep hill and is notable for its irregularity: there are five unevenly spaced accesses to the circus and the buildings are of variable elevation. As the passage notes, in the early sixties, half of the buildings appeared to be missing and this was due to the fact that Clerkenwell had been heavily bombed during the Blitz. Percy Circus represented a typical metropolitan site of the post-war years and Johnson’s prose is testament to the war’s topological legacy of destruction: houses are missing or “patched” and hastily constructed developments sit uneasily amongst the early Victorian stock. Within the Circus’ curved limits we see a picture of the detritus of everyday life, one that is punctuated by absence: “there is a little grass there, too, and rubbish of various kinds littered around-bicycle wheels, bottomless enamel buckets, tins, rotting cardboard.”65 History is being casually paved over and as Woolf once paused to note mid-stream of consciousness, “time passes.”66 Number sixteen, the former home of Lenin, will be demolished in 1968 to make way for the Travelodge Islington hotel. It is possible that the new development of flats that catch Albert’s eye is Bevin Court, built between 1951–4 by architects Sinner, Bailey and Lubetkin—the architect who pioneered modernist architecture in Britain during the 1930s. The Court’s Y-shaped construction of concrete boxes is still striking today and a peep inside reveals “Lubetkin’s most powerful

64 Johnson, Albert, 13–14.
65 Ibid.
circular ramp since the Penguin Pool, adapted for humans.” Human dwelling is being constructed along the same principles as animal enclosure.

Both Tew (2004) and Phillips (2007) read Johnson’s descriptions of London in *Albert Angelo* as a Lefebvrian critique of London’s social spaces, a critique in which Albert experiences London as an alienating and contesting “cacophony of practices,” full of the chaos of life. In *The Production of Space* French theorist Henri Lefebvre seeks to create a unitary theory of space where mental space and physical space becomes bonded. Like the SI and Chucheglov he noted that everyday modern life was becoming increasingly oppressive and urban social space directed (and reproduced) through capitalist hegemony. Undoubtedly London was undergoing a process of rapid transformation and in *Albert Angelo* we see an old city disrupted most radically for a working class whose needs had not been met by the pre-war aesthetic movements and whose future is uncertain. Johnson permits us to see,

> Between the highlevel Fenchurch Street line to the north, and the tall bricked-window façades of the London Western Dock warehouses to the south; cut horizontally by Cable Street in the north and then Ratcliffe Highway in the south; an area of two-storey Georgian cottages, savaged by the war, slums before it, largely derelict now, all condemned, still awaiting razing.

Albert is affronted by the area’s “serene decrepitude.” In a “gaptoothed bombsite” somebody has relieved themselves against a wall. Emotions become heightened as he shouts “Bastard! Bastard!” and he and Terry repossess their territory by urinating on the same spot. However, whilst Tew and Philips rightly note Albert’s alienation and class-driven rage, their readings do not consider the playful, exploratory nature of Albert’s urban experience which subscribes to the

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law of the dérive: Debord’s activity consisting of “playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects.” Albert, and Terry’s emotional response is recorded:

Terry followed, laughing at Albert’s anger. Albert was further offended by the clutter of buildings and wirenetting in the centre of the Square: seeing empty milkbottles on a doorstep he picked one up, looked quickly around, and, seeing no one to rat, he threw it as hard as he could, overarm, as if it were a grenade, towards the playground. It burst with a deeply satisfying sound. Terry tried to look though he were not with Albert. Albert tried to look as though he were not with Terry, laughing delightedly.

Here we see how Albert and Terry’s passions have been activated by the urban landscape, resulting in a certain giddy delirium that frees them from their daily routine. Albert draws strength from the city on a daily basis; it invigorates him after the tedium of bourgeois work exhausts him. In these situations, “you decided to walk home slowly, up the City Road, towards the Angel. City Arms; St. Mark’s Hospital for Fistula &c.; Mona Lisa Café Restaurant; vast anonymous factory block […] Across Amwell Street, down Great Percy Street, to the Circus. You feel far less tired when you reach your flat.” The city is his liberator and his inspiration, its empty sites serving as inspiration for the creation of new form at his drawing board. The city may be haunted by the relics of the past, but it is the empty spaces that will empower him to create for the here and now. The gap-toothed bombsites, far from oppressing him, become “bloom-spaces”: those points at which the body becomes immersed in “the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations” and affect flourishes.

Albert draws on the vital energy and swirling moods of the scarred city in his courtship of Jenny; the stages of their relationship are relayed through the geography of the city they navigate. Repressed Jenny is from the newly constructed suburbs where their love is contained

71 Ibid., 126.
72 Ibid., 40–41.
and compartmentalised. In the city, however, it is different and their passion is unlocked as they pass through a series of urban sites. Albert, the seasoned flâneur, chose his routes carefully, avoiding the clichéd and invoking the unexpected situation to consummate his relationship.

Then he showed her Hungerford Lane, under the rsjs, past the doorways of arch-lockups, the several smells of various different storages, and the roofline through the gap up to the right like a random clerestory mullioned by fire escapes and black leaning stacks: and where he would have kissed her, there in the winedark shadows beneath the groined arches before they turned out though the garage into Villiers Street, but for his need to do so anti-romantically, to prove it, the romance, the love. So he waited until they were in the well-lit vaulted approaches to the footpath of Hungerford bridge…

Here, Albert hungrily surveys the urban landscape with a lover’s eye noting the scent and form of the object he truly loves. To spark a similar passion in Jenny, he keeps her at a distance from the methodically-planned periphery of the city and envelops her in the exoticism of what Chtcheglov terms, “a locale less open to light, more hidden, so as to recover the atmosphere of secrecy.” The love affair flourishes in the dark spaces of the city but pales as they leave the capital and take a holiday in rural Wales. It is a mistake to leave London for, surprisingly, in the pastoral splendour of the mountains the “pitch of their loving” passes and authentic passion dies. Back home, rejected, he returns to the shadows alone, re-embarking on his nightly explorations of “all sorts of other places […] for all sorts of reasons, or non-reasons, or for no reasons, having coffee occasionally at anywhere we happen to find open: to save the loneliness the oneness, of being alone at night, for each of us.” In contrast to his modernist predecessors, Albert finds consolation in the spaces of the city rather than alienation. The city becomes his site of resolutions, passion and strength.

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74 Johnson, Albert, 49.
75 Chtcheglov, “Formulary,” 7.
76 Johnson, Albert, 60.
77 Ibid., 52–53
Tew and Phillips’ reading of *Albert Angelo* presents an author who is overwhelmed by the ineffable modern city and its inherent class struggle. Albert, in spite of his class, fixes an eye on a quintessentially middle-class profession. Phillips suggests that Albert’s gravitation towards Georgian architecture is a symptom of this aspiration and reflects the reclamation of the cleared Georgian terraces by London’s middle class after the war. Rather than seeing Albert as overwhelmed by the striated world he has been thrown into we should note instead his resolve and openness to the new—the sensual investment he makes in the morphing city. In references to Albert’s (and Johnson’s onetime) local church of St Paul’s at Hammersmith we are told,

My first real isometric drawing was of St Paul’s. My first real. Miraculous. And my parents (whatever that means) were married there, at St. Paul’s. The flyover, Hammersmith flyover, too, pleases me. It sets off the church, is a fine piece of architecture itself. Graceful, curving away as though on tiptoe.\(^78\)

Historic St Paul’s is part of a cherished family and architectural past but the flyover is part of an urban planning programme that would transport the city to a new future. In 1961 it symbolized exciting possibilities and even a certain sexual allure. The choice of Jayne Mansfield to open the sister Chiswick flyover in 1959 aligned the graceful curves of the flyover with the anatomy of the starlet. History documents how she cut the ceremonial ribbon with a wiggle and the immortal words, “It’s a sweet little flyover”\(^79\); but what Albert loves about the flyover is not its sweetness but the exciting combination of its honesty of purpose and its purposeful incongruity – the flyover stimulates his senses and inspires his creativity.

**Channeling affect**

*Albert Angelo* presents a protagonist adrift in the affective landscape of post-war London. The affective concerns the body (here fictional, but linked through time to the body of the author) and


\(^{79}\) On September 30\(^{th}\) 2009 a plaque of Mansfield’s words was unveiled in Chiswick by British actor Imogen Stubbs. The plaque commemorates the 50\(^{th}\) anniversary of the flyover’s opening.
the sum of experiences working upon it, experiences radiating from the surrounding social and
material world, whether fleeting or profound. Affective works exploit the material world as a
resource of creative inspiration and are rooted in the nuances of the everyday, the experiences
that make our world. The familiar comforts and reassures but is prone to be forgotten or taken for
granted. Everyday affects are akin to biological process that go unattended and consequently the
foregrounding of such ordinary rhythms can be startling, “a shock to a wearied system of
predefined and long-established expectations.”

The modernist “shock of the new” which compartmentalized sensibility is thus, in Albert Angelo, succeeded by the “shock of the
everyday” which puts the sensible and the creative firmly back in the exterior world and ordinary
activity. This new aesthetic of the ordinary, however, goes against tradition and can meet with
resistance. Like Johnson Albert is an artist in search of solutions and haunted by past tradition he
falters when faced with the space of the blank page and images of

Firstfloor arches, the poor stucco imitation of channelled jointing, the semicircular
fanlights […] I wonder if I can ever design anything uninfluenced by it. All clichés about
Georgian. But right, so right.

Of course, I would really like to be designing a Gothic cathedral, all crockets and finials
and flying buttresses, but I must be of my time, ahead of my time, rather using the
materials of my time, the unacknowledged legislators, and so, in accord with, of my age,
my time, my generation, my life.

Albert’s creativity is hampered by the weight of cultural history and its archetypes, as shown by
the elusion to Shelley’s words from “A Defence of Poetry.” Traditional practice haunts him. To
move forward and be of ‘his time,’” new practice must be explored by the artist.

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80 Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell, and Robin Hudson, “Affective Landscapes: An Introduction,”
81 Johnson, Albert, 107.
82 Albert’s appreciation of the Gothic style is revealing and may be inspired by the working practice of
the architects, rather than their finished (or unfinished works). In Making Anthropologist Tim Ingold
notes how Gothic architects shunned the plan or projected idea in favour of spontaneity and on-going
With closer analysis, Albert’s response to the situation can be said to follow the rules of what would come to be known as “project” practice. Gratton and Sheringham detail how contemporary artistic projects are not rooted in sublime “inspiration” but instead are born out of problem solving scenarios. Project artists are often “amateur” in approach, choosing to explore fields in which the artist may have no professional training in a democratic “de-professionalization” of the arts. In addition to this, project artists often choose to remove themselves from their standardized creative environment (studio, drawing board) and venture out into different spaces and sites to allow projects to unfold outside of boundaries. This act, referred to as *détournement* by Gratton and Sheringham removes power from tradition and bestows it on the individual subject as “the domain in question is hijacked, put to a different use”\(^8^3\) in a situationist fashion. Johnson shows Albert leaving his drawing board and taking a dérive through Clerkenwell, negotiating the uncomely flats near Myddleton passage, the reconstructed Shakespeare’s Head pub and Sadler’s Wells Theatre. By the end of the day, his drawing board is empty save for three lines and a spattering of soot from the open window. The surrounding city, in the form of London smut, is encroaching and demands to be acknowledged, yet Albert’s project has seemingly failed.

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Albert’s failure to produce a satisfactory result reflects the frustration and impatience felt by his creator to achieve perfect novels of truth. As the reader is pointedly told, “I’m trying to say something about me through him Albert an architect what’s the point in covering up…” For both individuals, creativity comes with responsibility; it holds the potential to affect change. Johnson comments that through the pursuit of truth to reality,

If [the author] is serious, he will be making a statement which attempts to change society towards a condition he conceives to be better, and he will be making at least implicitly a statement of faith in the evolution of the form in which he is working. Both these aspects of making are radical; this is inescapable unless he chooses escapism.

Writing can be radical, a term that suggests the aim of political, economic or social reform. This is because, as Caroline Levine notes, “one of the places where humans have agency is in the orders that we ourselves impose: our spatial arrangements, our hierarchies of value and distributions of wealth—our forms.” Spatial forms (social, political, aesthetic) are thus created to gain purchase on an essentially chaotic, unknowable world and they work towards the same end. In a passage which may well explain the essence of Johnson’s documented frustrations and perceived failure, Levine reflects:

Literary form does not operate outside of the social, but works among many organizing principles, all circulating in a world jam-packed with other arrangements. Each constraint will encounter many other, different organizing principles, and its power to impose order will itself be constrained, and at times unsettled by other forms […] Forms will often fail to impose their order when they run up against other forms that disrupt their logic and frustrate their organizing ends, producing aleatory and sometimes contradictory effects.

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84 Johnson, Albert, 167.
85 Johnson, “Intro,” 16.
87 Levine, Forms, 7.
Like Johnson’s quote above, Levine’s words are peppered with present participles: *organizing, circulating*, echoing Johnson’s *doing* and *making*. When form fails and will not work for the times, attention necessarily shifts to processes.

**De Certeau and the post-war reclamation of the streets**

Johnson’s experiments with form were producing texts that were becoming increasingly uncommercial and expensive to produce.\(^8^8\) His literary project was being informed and problematized by the nature of the present they were born of: a social, shifting, clashing present that form could only contain fleetingly. The power struggles between forms on Johnson’s literary page replicated those being undertaken on the streets. In 1984 Michel de Certeau wrote of the connection between experience and space, this reflection seems to neatly encapsulate Johnson’s efforts in *Albert Angelo*. De Certeau’s work *The Practice of the Everyday* championed common man’s reclamation of life from the invasive and determining forces of commerce, production and government— an activity that is initiated in *Albert Angelo* and continued to a greater extent in *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*. De Certeau theorized that, “the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves ‘consumers’ any place in which they can indicate what they make or do with the products of these systems.”\(^8^9\) The growth of the capitalist system through the twentieth century had increasingly transformed human experience from active making and doing to passive production and consumption; a change well underway when Johnson commented in 1973: “present-day reality is markedly different from say nineteenth-century reality,”\(^9^0\) and that consequently, within this context “novelists must evolve.”\(^9^1\) In de Certeau’s social model and Johnson’s literary project, ordinary individuals endeavour to become

\(^8^8\) See Coe, *Fiery*, 145.
\(^8^9\) de Certeau, *Everyday*, xii.
\(^9^0\) Johnson, “Intro,” 17.
\(^9^1\) Ibid., 16.
active users and interpreters of space defiantly creating form in the face of tradition and an emergent and overwhelming consumer society. The post-war citizen was being engulfed by a culture of mass-consumption and Johnson’s response was to create novels that would speak loudly above “the din of the marketplace vendors in pap and propaganda.” This would be achieved through an active reclamation and appreciation of the forms, processes and spaces of everyday activity.

A similar practice was suggested to social scientists some years later by de Certeau; the possibility of seeing empowerment and value in ordinary activities and an invitation to

Make explicit the systems of operational combination which also compose a “culture,” and to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element of society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term “consumers.”

De Certeau suggests here that efforts should be made to locate culture in the freely performed and spontaneously creative acts of ordinary people—the activities he describes as “systems of operational combination.” The “ordinary man” that de Certeau addresses in his preface and dedication is qualified as a “common hero” for rejecting passivity and being unconsciously engaged in ordinary tactics of resistance. Although part of the indistinguishable masses this individual holds the power to create meaning and engage politically through small-scale activity. The ordinary subject is always prior to the product and “comes before texts and […] does not expect representations”—an individual whose movements were weaved by Johnson into his novels of truth. These tactics navigate Johnson’s project outside of expected norms of production

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92 A reality also documented and contested by artists and designers working in the “as found” aesthetic of the late fifties and sixties.
94 de Certeau, Everyday, xii.
95 Ibid., preface.
and consumption. Johnson too believed himself to be an “ordinary man,” proudly revealing his credentials in Trawl:

“The class war is being fought as viciously and destructively of human spirit as it has ever been in England: I was born on my side and I cannot and will not desert: I became an enlisted man consciously but not voluntarily at the age of about seven.”

“Ordinary men” such as Johnson’s literary analogues are, I suggest, de Certeauvian “unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts,” the de-professionalized subjects of creative project work. Their creative tactics evolve through uninhibited manoeuvres, “their trajectories form[ing] unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space.” To be and to create in the everyday is to spontaneously inhabit and [re]appropriate spaces; to write the city with your bodily movements and rhythms, to etch them, like Christie Malry, with a mark or render them readable, like Johnson, with words.

The transformation of space into place

Albert’s London can be read as a de Certeauvian landscape in which a battle is underway to stake a claim on the empty spaces of the post-war city. After recycling literary genre in Travelling People, Albert Angelo finds Johnson staking a claim on the empty space of the literary page which has been wiped clean of the traces of the past. De Certeau distinguishes between “space” and “place”—the first term is indeterminate and “composed of intersections of mobile

96 Johnson details institutional reaction to his books in a lecture given to students at the University of Belfast in 1965. He claims that a national newspaper returned the review copy of Travelling People thinking it faulty as a result of its shaded pages. He also states that certain publishers refused to print Albert Angelo because of the hole scored in its pages and that the same hole caused Australian customs to believe that an obscenity had been removed from the work. Johnson welcomed such reactions, commenting that such occurrences “indicate that same kind of bourgeois and reactionary discontent and outright rejection which has always greeted innovation.” B. S. Johnson, “Holes, Syllabics and the Succssations of the Intercostal and Abdominal Muscles,” in Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson edited by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), 397.
98 de Certeau, Everyday, xviii.
elements,” it is actuated by the gestures occurring within its bounds. Johnson’s project is orientated by mood; space defining action is propelled and directed by affect. Space thus unfolds individually for the agent and “occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orientate it.” De Certeau continues:

> Space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught up in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts.

Space, then, is kinetic material enacted by the subject and once ordered by form it is transformed and stilled; it becomes the product *place*. Whilst actively inhabited by the subject space continually unfolds in the present, a point supported by de Certeau when he comments, “the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.” The attempted compartmentalization of space, more often not, is decisively overruled by the ordinary individual who resists the dictates of those who seek to direct their movements, no matter how good or sinister the intention. The struggle over space is on-going: looking forward from de Certeau’s moment of writing we see it continued by the Occupy movement in the present day.

Space is activated in a de Certeauvian sense by the movements and responses of the present whereas place is bound to the past; by earlier actions and prior attempts at occupation.

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100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Formed in response to the economic crisis of the late 2000s, a time in which “corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments” the Occupy Wall Street movement was launched in 2011 to combat social and economic inequality. Expanding internationally to the larger Occupy group, the movement’s website makes explicit its debt to de Certeau’s thought under the tab “Action” interested parties are directed to the site http://explore.beautifultrouble.org/#-1:00000 which details the tactics of everyday life.
104 In *The Unfortunates*, Johnson’s format of a box of loose folios provokes the reader into activating the literary space. Through the reader’s actions the place of Nottingham slides into view and is fixed.
and control. Place then has qualities in common with Johnson’s understanding of *genre*. He explains:

> Look what happened at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth and Tennyson all rote blank-verse, quasi-Elizabethan plays; and all of them, without exception are resounding failures. They are not so because the men who write them were inferior poets, but because the form was finished, worn out, exhausted…

On the page, both genre and place name are invoked to reassure, to imply “an indication of stability” which orientates the reader of the city or the page. But the same stability is revealed as an anachronism, the provision of a meaning that is relevant only to a faded past. In an unmapped exploration of the city space, different meaning and form is permitted to unfold. De Certeau explains that when the individual negotiates the city through place names,

> Proper names carve out pockets of hidden and familiar meanings. They “make sense”; in other words, they are the impetus of movements, like vocations and calls that turn or divert an itinerary by giving it a meaning (or a direction) (*sens*) that was previously unforeseen. These names create a nowhere in places; they change them into passages.

Proper nouns are indeed, referential, but the reality they refer to is past and they divert the individual from original, spontaneous experience. The place names of the city link “acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying out and wearing-away of their primary role.” Place and genre, bestowed by authority, seek to make concrete and still the urban and literary spaces revealed by de Certeau and Johnson as kinetic fabrics woven of the movement. Through the revision of process and practice the everyday city should be reclaimed as spontaneous and placeless—the realm of the ordinary man.

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107 Ibid., 104.
108 Ibid., 105.
Johnson’s London is relayed through the interaction between space and place—the city is punctuated by a closed set of proper nouns that define the urban boroughs walked by the author during his youth (Hammersmith and Fulham) and maturity (Islington). Voracious Johnson readers will soon become orientated by the names and recognize the areas from one book that map onto another, often acting as conduits between fact and fiction. Despite the constant cataloguing of place, there is a de Certeauvian suspicion underlying the work that these urban nominations may be slippery. Concrete evidence of this possibility is found in Johnson’s “Never Heard it Called that Before” a short story published in 1964.\(^\text{109}\) The story ponders the provenance of the name “Balls Pond Road” a thoroughfare which traverses the boundary between the boroughs of Hackney and Islington in London. The narrator opens the piece by questioning the existence of an initial referent stating, “it is natural to speculate upon the identity of the posited, alleged or implied Mr. Ball, his Pond, and his Road,”\(^\text{110}\) but assessing that “it must surely have been in that order, a Pond and then a Road, not a Road and then a Pond;”\(^\text{111}\) the relational order is assumed to be fixed. What unfolds, however, is a story in which the provenance of the city street’s name is revealed as a series of actions that occurred within a particular space at a particular time. Mr. Ball, (or Bal, Balle, Bul, Bulle, Bule, Bolle or Bole as it pleases him and the de Certeauvian reader) of seventeenth-century London suffered from haemorrhoids and was advised by his physician to bathe them in cool running water. Johnson reveals that Mr. Ball creates a spatial solution when he diverts the flowing water of the River Fleet into his garden pond and proceeds to dip his afflicted areas. Unfortunately, other decisive action takes place and a large freshwater fish decides to attach itself to Mr. Ball’s scrotum, relieving Johnson’s


\(^{111}\) Ibid., 65.
protagonist of either one, or perhaps both, of his testicles—this is allegedly supported by the dual spelling of the place name as “Ball’s Pond Road” in Hackney and “Balls’ Pond Road” in Islington. Punctuation matters.

Johnson’s ribald short story takes a sly look at local folklore and the “tall-tale” but in essence it encapsulates a rather poststructuralist approach to space and language, one that is founded on movement and deferral. The reader is initially directed to an order of elements that appear to coexist to bring a place into being (Mr. Ball, Pond, Road). However, the text reveals the key role narrative plays in the transformation of space to place and a narrative concerned with actions, affect, and intention—ordinary human activity. These meanings are, however, not stable—de Certeau tells us that the proper names of a city “slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but their ability to signify outlives its first determination.”¹¹² This suggests that the friction of repeated movement (say, by walking) erases the nominations and meanings of the past. New associations are made, in Johnson’s case, by the reader who reads the text and, in de Certeau’s case, by the walkers who enter the city space. Ball’s Pond Road is re-written by present experience and action. In Johnson’s tale city and text become aligned as “spaces of enunciation” in which the individual creates their own meaning through the forms they create. Johnson’s etymological tale is a fabrication; he has written his own meaning on to the proper name of the road, prying apart the fixed relations that previously defined it. The reader jumps down this fissure in the urban literary-spatial fabric when following the movements of the narrative. One of London’s “lost rivers” supplies the fictional Ball’s Pond—the River Fleet which runs from Hampstead Heath through “Johnson Territory”: St. Pancras, Clerkenwell, and down to the Thames at Blackfriars. Now mostly underground, the noun “fleet” derives from the

¹¹² de Certeau, Everyday, 104.
Anglo-Saxon *flēot* meaning “estuary” or “bay” and is a reference to the ancient broad tidal basin that the smaller river formed with the Thames; a basin that was developed into the New Canal Wharfs. These are the areas paced by Mr. Albert in Johnson’s second novel and by the author in everyday life. The River Fleet, source of Mr. Ball’s fictional pond, flows in and out of Johnson’s real and imagined spaces.

From de Certeau’s point of view, the city’s true meaning accumulates over time not through hierarchical systems and dictates but through the paths that individuals weave around the proper names whose meanings they either absorb, distort or help make. Ordinary pedestrians both read and write the city claiming it back as space because “to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper.”\(^{113}\) This is the role of the ordinary man in a de Certeauvian every day and it is easy to see resonances in *Albert Angelo*. The first indications are to be found in the title—the nickname the pupils have for their substitute teacher. The children align their teacher with both authority and place, in this case The Angel district of London where the novel is set. Albert is disaffected and walks everywhere in an unfolding de Certeauvian travel story which relays the struggle for the space of the capital. His parents live in Hammersmith but as he walks to his home in King’s Cross he comes to the realisation that “it seems unlikely that I shall be allowed to bring up children here”\(^{114}\)—hierarchical forces attempt not only to dictate where he can go but where he may afford to stay. Tactics of everyday resistance are shown as most powerful when engaged in on a large scale. On page 24 Albert recounts, “I and my father join thousands of others jostling along Fulham Road at a pointlessly fast pace.”\(^{115}\) Here, Fulham Road, a major commercial thoroughfare is being re-appropriated by

\(^{113}\) de Certeau, *Everyday*, 103.
\(^{114}\) Johnson, *Albert*, 20.
\(^{115}\) Ibid., 24.
the working classes in the pursuit of leisure—a Chelsea football match. Ordinary man dictates the pace and chooses it to be “pointlessly fast,” but at other times, Albert confides, “it please you to walk slowly, to be going about something so totally different from these people.” Walking is revealed as an expression of power and an interpersonal act. It reaffirms old relationships: “we walk down the whole length of North End Road. We always do that” and forges new ones: “he walked with her, she walked with him.” As Johnson shifts the narrative through the declensions, no one is exempt; it becomes the defining act of Albert’s social world: I, you, s/he, we, they, all walk and the text of both the novel and the city is written once more for each and every individual.

In Albert Angelo, spatial occupation is initiated through the protagonist’s instinctive attraction to sites of absence, more often than not bombsites or areas of redevelopment—the legacy of the war. In Stepney, he notes, “there are Georgian façades in all stages of repair, from the one beautifully-kept house in Wellclose Square to others with skeletal dormers from which the lead and boards have been stripped.” These words echo the account written by artist and critic Geoffrey Fletcher in his 1968 work, Geoffrey Fletcher’s London:

The devastation of the square was pitiful to see. […] The half dozen Georgian terraced houses left on the North side looked indescribably weary and exhausted, their bricks crumbling and their stucco returning to sand. […] On the East side, the small early nineteenth-century warehouse (the harbinger of the square’s decline) which I had always intended to draw was gone.

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116 Johnson, Albert, 45.
117 Ibid., 26.
118 Ibid., 49.
119 Ibid., 51.
120 Geoffrey Fletcher and Johnson were contemporaries at the London publishing house Hutchinson.
Fletcher wrote a series of books between 1960 and 1990 that charted the changing topology of the capital, but was most prolific during the decade in which Johnson wrote his novels. This area of London paced by Johnson, Fletcher and the fictional Albert shared a fate with many other heavily bombed areas in the East End. Neighbouring Swedenborg Square was designated a “slum” and,

within a decade Swedenborg Sq had disappeared completely beneath the Swedenborg Gardens and St Georges Housing Estate – the area was simply erased from history. At Wellclose Sq, the houses came down too but the street pattern was retained, creating a strange non-place.  

Here we see how post-war London had become defined by transformation; one in which place slips back into space. In Albert Angelo, Wellclose Square has morphed into a “non-place,” its name now a thing that “amount[s] to nothing, or almost nothing, symbolize[s] and orient[s] walker’s steps: names that have ceased to be ‘proper.’” In the novel, Wellclose Square ceases to “be” in more than one way. Firstly, access to the titular well has been revoked. Secondly, the Square’s form has been disrupted—it has become a non-square. Thirdly, Johnson highlights how all purposeful activity has ceased in this place by foregrounding the silent warehouses—drawbridges suspended motionless “from chains above a gulf.”  Reverting back to space, Wellclose Square transforms into a heterotopia outside of society’s remit, an example of the bombsites noted by Ben Highmore as providing post-war culture with “a landscape for children’s

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123 de Certeau, Everyday, 105.
124 Johnson, Albert, 51.
125 See Chapter 3 for further discussion of heterotopia.
gangs and secret societies,” a blank canvas for “all sorts of morally ambiguous activities.”

Such places wait to be activated and reclaimed by the forms of ordinary acts.

New Brutalist practice: cohesion and honest form

More often than not, non-places were co-opted by the authorities and ear-marked for the urban redevelopment project. In Albert Angelo we see Johnson forging connections between the shared problems of post-war designers and writers, the creators inhabiting a post-war period defined by its gaping “absence of a guiding philosophy.” Johnson actively sought out others working in a similar fashion and came to be a keen advocate of architects Alison and Peter Smithson. The relationship culminated in a documentary entitled “The Smithsons on Housing” which Johnson made for the BBC in 1970. The opening scenes pan over the demolition sites of Poplar as the voice over remarks: “Yet another building site in the East End of London. An East End rebuilt almost out of recognition for those who knew it before the war,” a line that could be lifted from Albert Angelo. The Smithsons had a profound effect on Johnson’s professional practice, as great as that of his oft-cited literary influences of Joyce and Beckett. The husband and wife designers were central figures not only in the Independent Group and the field of post-war architecture, but in the wider context of fifties’ cultural life, taking a central role in exhibitions and symposia at the ICA and other London galleries. With Eduardo Paolozzi they curated the “Parallel of Art and

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128 The Smithson documentary was thought to be lost but re-surfaced in 2009 and was featured in a celebration of Johnson’s film work at the NFT in June of that year. In “You're Human like the Rest of Them – the NFT's Celebration of B. S. Johnson” Telegraph critic Sukhdev Sandhu assessed it as “one of the most bizarre documentaries ever broadcast.” He adds, “As [The Smithsons] discuss their plans for the Robin Hood Gardens housing complex in Poplar, East London, they drone in self-pitying fashion about vandals and local naysayers to such an extent that any traces of visionary utopianism are extinguished. The aerial footage of the buildings is not so much futuristic as queasy. The programme, broadcast a couple of years after the collapse of Ronan Point tower block in nearby Newham, would likely have made most viewers distrust rather than look up to modern architects.”
129 The Smithsons on Housing, Film produced and directed by B. S. Johnson (1970; London: BBC).
Life” exhibition in 1952 and “This Is Tomorrow” in 1956, both significant in the development of the British pop art movement. In 1953 they became founding members of Team 10, an influential group of architects who “sought each other out because each has found the help of the others necessary to the development and understanding of their own individual work.” It was a model that Johnson seemingly duplicated by becoming active in London cultural circles and forming a make-shift avant-garde coterie of writers that included Ann Quin, Eva Figes, Alan Burns, Rayner Heppenstall and Christine Brooke-Rose.

The Smithsons defined themselves as New Brutalists, a term they coined in 1953 and subsequently expanded upon by Rayner Banham in his seminal essay “The New Brutalism,” which was published in The Architectural Review in December 1955. Banham characterized New Brutalist constructions as fitting three specifications and it is here that we can see the elements that so appealed to Johnson and that he endeavoured to apply to his own project. New Brutalist work possessed a formal legibility of plan, clearly exhibited its structure, and was constructed from materials chosen and valued for their inherent qualities “as found”. Brutalist buildings were therefore “honest” physical objects that stood opposed to the concealment and unnecessary adornment of the emergent consumerist society. Banham cites the Smithson design of Hunstanton Secondary Modern School as a key New Brutalist exemplum, explaining, “One can see what Hunstanton is made of, and how it works, and there is not another thing to see except the play of spaces.” New Brutalism is architecture that works hard to incorporate the body’s authentic interaction with the building; its aims are not the production of the perfect plan or prototype but a working functioning operational design. Banham explains that New Brutalism

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130 For further information, see: Claude Lichenstein and Thomas Schregenberger, As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller, 2001).
requires that the building should be an immediately apprehensible visual entity, and that the form grasped by the eye should be confirmed by the experience of the building in use. Further, that this form should be entirely proper to the functions and materials of the building, in their entirety. Such a relationship between structure, function and form is the basic commonplace of all good building, of course.\textsuperscript{133}

The New Brutalists’ primary aim was cohesion and unity between form and experience—the singular aspects of the building defined as “material structure”, “social function” and “visual form.” Its aesthetics had a de Certeuvian aspect that “face[d] up to a mass-produced society, and drag[ged] a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which [we]re at work.”\textsuperscript{134} The appeal for Johnson is clear to see, the Smithsons were artists involved in a project that investigated the possibility of a building’s ethical topological unity, a place where the interior, exterior and the users of the form would work together. Speaking of the Robin Hood Gardens development which was built on the site of demolished tenements, Peter Smithson said: “It is a model, an exemplar of a new mode of urban organization […] When it is finished you will be able to smell, feel and experience the new life that is being offered through your full range of senses”\textsuperscript{135}—an affective, architectural expression of Johnson’s literary truth to reality.

New Brutalism stressed its “rootedness” in the everyday and the particular properties of site and the needs of its inhabitants; a belief that “anything can be raised to become the poetry of the ordinary.”\textsuperscript{136} It saw itself as a democratic architecture of the everyday an improvement on the abstracted self-contained systems of that which Johnson identified as the “continental European tradition of the avant garde.”\textsuperscript{137} In many senses, it was an accurate observation: in the 1950s the avant-garde remained somewhat distanced from London—active in Paris but a movement still

\textsuperscript{133} Banham, Brutalism, 25.
\textsuperscript{134} Alison and Peter Smithson, “The New Brutalism” Architectural Design, April 1957, 113.
\textsuperscript{135} Peter Smithson, The Smithsons on Housing, Film produced and directed by B. S. Johnson (1970; London: BBC).
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Johnson, “Intro,” 29. My emphasis.
not completely at home on British shores. It was for this very reason that Roland Penrose and Herbert Read had founded the ICA in 1946: to support the growth of British avant-garde practice.\textsuperscript{138} Johnson operated on the fringes of these developments attending, for example, the London lecture given by Nathalie Sarraute at the Dover Street ICA but, as his semi-autobiographical novels reflect, he only made fleeting excursions into elite cultural circles. The majority of Johnson’s time was devoted to earning a living by teaching or sports journalism and establishing a writing career. His world remained that of the urban everyday—all-night cafés, public transport, secondary modern schools and workers’ unions: the ordinary places that would be detailed in his novels and inter-laced into the site-specific ethos of the Smithson—a rebuttal to the modernist paradigm of the highly compartmentalized city of sterile functional zones.

\textbf{Exposing literary structures}

Johnson’s writing reveals New Brutalist influences in several key ways. It possesses a boldness of purpose that is unafraid to reveal structure and process within the literary text. For a writer to hide behind the fictive veil was, for him, as ludicrous as an architect concealing a heating duct or water tower for the Smithsons. \textit{Albert Angelo’s} structure is therefore outlined for the reader on the first page of the book almost in the manner of an architectural plan. After the dedication, the supporting structure of the text is honestly (and brutally) exposed. It is explained that “This novel has five parts: Prologue, Exposition, Development, Disintegration, Coda.” The novel is revealed as a constructed artefact of five logically sequenced sections, all of which have a clearly defined

\textsuperscript{138} In “From Museum of Modern Art to Institute of Contemporary Art,” Anne Massey explains, ‘The ICA founders were keen to make sure that modern and contemporary art was a part of British cultural life, based on their fervent belief in the reforming powers of the avant garde […] Penrose joined forces with the British Surrealist poet David Gascoyne, whom he had met in Paris, to spread the message of Surrealism to an unsuspecting London public.” The full history of the Institute’s early days is documented in \textit{Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1946–1968} (London: ICA, 2014), 11–13.
function: the prologue and the exposition setting up the story and the development section constituting the “rising action.” The reader is lead to expect a tightly controlled narrative unit based on their previous experience of narrative form. However, what unfolds is a document further sub-divided by the use of asterisks into twenty-seven sections, where Johnson shifts the narration through various grammatical declensions, employs columns of concurrent thought and speech, cuts a hole through several pages and includes a photo-stat of an item found by the protagonist to save instead of a standard description. The reader is never allowed to evade the material reality of the unfolding document and its form. By the end of the “Development” section, the reader is therefore aware that this is not a conventionally structured novel in any sense. Through the proceeding sections the reader has been made privy to the spectacle of a writer wrestling with the fictive novel form in a furious attempt to make it work for him.

What occurs in the section entitled “Disintegration” has come to be perhaps the most notorious section of Johnson’s prose—the “almighty aposiopesis” where illusion is petulantly dropped. The section opens with a howl of frustration,

—fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him…

In “Disintegration,” Johnson shakes the reader by the shoulders and dutifully makes his confession. Holding up his writerly hands he expands on the nature of his project using the words that he will use time and time again through his epi-texts to elaborate on his project,

—Im trying to say something not tell a story telling stories is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality about

sitting here looking out across Claremont Square trying to say something about the writing and nothing being an answer to the lack of loving…

Over nine pages we are confronted with an analysis of the function of Albert Angelo, of its didactic social commentary of its cathartic release of the ghosts of old relationships, of its revelation of the fragmentation of life and experience. Above all, it is about the “enormity of life” and a writer’s frustration at its impossible codification. The narrative is ruptured by the anguish of its creator and his need to explain himself which overrides the reader’s puerile need for a story. Johnson was scathing of the indulgences of the imagination, seeing fiction as the corrupter of the novel form and story-telling as “telling lies.” His argument was that life did not tell stories but was chaotic and deserving of a form (or forms) that acknowledged this fact. The essence of the novel lay in the range of stylistic possibilities open to the writer: linguistic tools to truthfully “reproduce some of the complexity of selves” that constituted the writing individual. In “Disintegration” Johnson appears to admit defeat, confessing that, “there is a great temptation for a writer to impose his own pattern, an arbitrary pattern which must falsify, cannot do anything other than falsify; or he invents, which is pure lying.” This excruciating self-scrutiny of the passage seems at once metafictively radical and excessively punitive but it is a moment of crisis that pushes the project in a new direction.

Albert Angelo, then, shows glimmers of a move towards project-based practice, yet old habits die hard. Johnson puts aside his creative frustrations; “even I (even I!) would not leave such a mess…” to tie up the loose ends of the plot. The author reverts to a “Coda” and the

141 Ibid., 169. Included amongst Johnson’s anguished unburdening in “Disintegration” is the sneering aside, “—Tell me a story, tell me a story. The infants.”
142 Ibid., 170.
143 Ibid.
144 Johnson, Albert, 176.
final section of the novel is abruptly and petulantly delivered. On a moon-lit dérive Albert steps outside of his normal place of practice and is toppled into the Regent’s Canal by his thankless students and by an author repelled by his creation. With one stroke of the pen the architect manqué is coldly destroyed and removed from the city streets. Albert the provisional architect has failed to deliver an end product so, theoretically, the novel which documents Johnson’s early professional years in London ends with failure. Yet promise and potential is to be found in Albert’s mode of working—the détournement and the dérive, the shift away from prescribed places of practice into different spaces, a suggestion of the acceptance of deviation and deferral. Johnson’s coda reflects this when it unexpectedly veers into the realm of symbolism in the form of a fictional corpse that has been beautified for inspection. Here the final product of life is commodified and enhanced for display; a re-packaged reality which gives solace to the mourners but denies the fact of the subject’s processes and decaying leakiness:

The bodey was all painted up gust like someone on the stage thay panted the lips more red and the face hes pink and yellow thaye say it proseves it bus I think its Just plan stupid two spend and wast all that money on a thing like that it was Just a gerate wast of time and all that work fore relley nothing Just a shocking display of funeralization on behalf of the furm that was calld in

For Johnson there was no modern consolation to be found in artificial mimesis and stasis, in teleological form. What must now be investigated was the creativity to be found in ordinary individuals doing ordinary things in ordinary and different spaces. After the mighty crisis of conscience enacted in the “Disintegration” section of *Albert Angelo*, Johnson’s next two novels

145 In the same way, the Smithsons’ populist “streets in the sky” were doomed to fail perhaps due to their essential dogmatic prescriptivity. Completed in 1972, Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar, East London was a large scale residential estate composed of council housing designed to challenge functionalist mass housing projects. Flats and maisonettes were distributed along “streets in the sky”—decks the Smithsons designed as secluded, communal “pause-places” but which instead encouraged criminal activity.
become increasingly personal and reflective. The texts stay resolutely in the realm of the autobiographical and the factual, but become more practice-based; more engaged in process and reflection, posing new questions about the possibilities and different manifestations of literary and social space and the impulses that drive the artistic project.
Chapter 3 Different Spaces

Johnson’s first two novels are rooted in fixed geographic space but explore the possibilities and consequences of the subject stepping outside of its normal realms of experience. The narrative arc of *Travelling People* carries Henry Henry out of the city and into the heady landscapes of North Wales where social experience forms him into a man. Johnson continues the story in his second novel where he re-imagines the protagonist as a struggling architect manqué forced to earn a living by supply teaching. Albert tentatively steps out of the classroom and sits down at his drawing board to begin his creative project yet hits an impasse—he heads to the space of the street to find the inspiration that is missing from his architectural monographs. Moving in different spaces can initiate new experiences and perceptions yet might also come with a price. Walking along a dark canal path at the end of the novel, Albert meets a watery demise in a city of material and social change. Newly commissioned developments pave over the myths and relations of the past and modern housing complexes offer utopian living and order to the urban population. Unclaimed spaces remain, waste-grounds where affect and unregulated possibility accumulate.

To support my claim for Johnson’s novels as a project, this chapter engages with Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham’s claim that “works derived from or consisting in an experimental project can illuminate central issues of contemporary culture.”\(^1\) It shows how the experience of being, as portrayed by Johnson, becomes increasingly mediated by the dynamics of space. The project which began as a response to literary conservatism and an interrupted modernist endeavour, throws light on the increasingly sophisticated spatial awareness that was

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developing across the disciplines in the mid-sixties. To the developing configurations of Johnson’s work, I apply the coinciding spatial theories of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre and the subsequent ideas of Edward Soja. These theories, whilst evolving out of different disciplines all position the world as a system of interconnected spaces in which difference and otherness is to be permitted. It is a world in which one is propelled to be always “restlessly and self-critically moving on to new sites and insights, never confined by past journeys and accomplishments.”² This chapter thus shows that Johnson’s novels of his mid-to-late period obstinately look to the future by putting to bed the past. They begin to move from solely charting the autobiographical and the geographical to incorporate a more reflective and theoretical approach that, I suggest, reflects the beginnings of a spatial turn in contemporaneous thought. The individual novels begin to explore the potential of socio-cultural spaces and the behaviours they permit as the artistic project explores the heterotopic possibilities of the space of the text. It is an approach born of the mood of the author’s time, a period described by Foucault as “the epoch of space, simultaneity, juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side-by-side and the dispersed.”³

Understanding Space: Foucault’s heterotopia

Foucault first introduces the idea of heterotopia⁴ in a lecture founded on an abridged history of space and the western subject’s understanding of it. Starting his survey in the Middle Ages he details a world defined by a binary understanding of space in which experience is negotiated.

⁴ The concept of heterotopia was first proposed by the theorist in a lecture to architectural students in March 1967. The ideas remained unpublished until October 1984 when they appeared in Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité No. 5 pp. 46–49.
through a system of opposing pairs such as the sacred and profane, public and private, urban and rural. It was a codification informed by theology\(^5\) and presided over by a divine will that had remained accepted and largely unchallenged for centuries. Foucault presents a scenario in which space unfolds for the individual on a small scale with the reassuring knowledge that the same patterns and divisions were being enacted and reproduced across the nation state. Binary models enforced and ordered existence. After Galileo’s monumental discovery that the Earth was not the centre of a divine universe, the Renaissance period saw the sudden expansion of space and its limits. Foucault suggests a subsequent humanist extension of spatial relations: historic localization became supplanted with the (literal) widening of horizons and man’s position became simply a point in space’s wider movement; a spatial continuum. Foucault’s 1967 lecture finally points to a further development in the conception of space—one in which fixed “emplacement” is cast aside for a system based not on binaries or extension but on a matrix of interlocking spaces and kinetic relations.

In Foucault’s opinion, these newly emergent relations were significant because they were highly negotiable rather than fixed and had the ability to be both contested and confirmed. Space could therefore be freely appropriated by the individual, historical norms challenged and the modern subject’s experiential possibilities widened. In the twentieth century the individual existed not only locally in their allocated place, but as part of the multiple unfolding chaos of a surrounding world that resisted formal arrangement. No longer could space be considered as homogeneous. Foucault confirms that “the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, of our time and our history occurs, the space that

\(^5\) In Christian thought humanity can be divided into only two categories, the lost and the saved, there is no gradual transition between the two or intermediary states.
torments and consumes us, is also in itself, a heterogeneous space.”⁶ Here, Foucault documents man’s essential and antagonistic relationship with space; it is both chaotic and slippery to grasp but defines our being. Johnson echoes this indeterminacy when he says, “While I believe (as far as I believe anything) that there may be (how can I know?) chaos underlying it all, another paradox is that I still go on behaving as though pattern could exist, as though day will follow night will follow breakfast. Or whatever the order should be.”⁷ The heterogeneity of life reveals itself as ill-disposed towards synthetic form, expressing itself instead in a radical openness. Foucault surmised that “we do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light; we live inside a set of relations that delineate emplacements that cannot be equated or in any way superimposed.”⁸ In short, lived existence at the mid-point of the twentieth century was at the point of being negotiated and rationalized through an alternative spatial practice.

Counter-spaces

In the mid-sixties, Foucault suggests that the modern citizen was tentatively becoming aware of a complex matrix of perceptual experience. In the very same year, Johnson wrote,

Present day reality is markedly different from say nineteenth-century reality. Then it was possible to believe in pattern and eternity, but today what characterises our reality is the probability that chaos is the most likely explanation; whilst at the same time recognising that even to seek an explanation represents a denial of chaos.⁹

Herein lies a key problem for post-war artists (and their projects) to investigate—which vehicle best explores and captures chaos without losing its essential nature? Foucault offers up a possibility in his socio-cultural concept of heterotopias: counter-spaces that variously correspond

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⁶ Foucault, “Spaces,” 16.
⁸ Foucault, “Spaces,” 16.
⁹ Johnson, “Intro,” 17.
to or oppose the emplacements and forms of everyday living to which late capitalism subscribed. Foucault heralds these spaces as focalisers and outlets of chaos; through them the citizen has the possibility of entering “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”¹⁰ Through heterotopias the individual can experience the chaotic void outside of regimented society; it is the plural space in which the real and the fictional sit happily together, where fantasy is given free rein and possibility explored. Heterotopias function as intense bloom-spaces of affect¹¹ that transgress the boundaries of society; their role is a virtual and fluid one. Yet these spaces are essential to the smooth running of a productive society, acting as pressure valves, channelling both negative and positive affect.

Although Foucault notes heterotopias across time and space they are always culturally specific. Each society gives its own heterotopias a precise and determined function. These spaces still share defining qualities: they are often incongruous and juxtapose seemingly incompatible sites in one place; they manipulate time, accumulating it or stopping it at whim and are accessed through systemised rituals of ingress or egress. Finally, these different spaces are always relational, either mirroring or challenging other space or even serving as a hyper-perfect version of it. In the twentieth-century brutalist designs of Alison and Peter Smithson attempts were made to provide a positive social outlet in the concrete “streets in the sky” of the Robin Hood Gardens development. These were spaces where the social-housing tenants could come together to while away time as they saw fit—wide brutalist walkways designed to be simulacra of the residential streets of the East End that had been obliterated in the Blitz, spaces where “an inherent feeling of

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¹⁰ Foucault, “Spaces,” 17.
¹¹ See Introduction and Chapter 1 for further information on bloom-spaces.
safety and social bond”\textsuperscript{12} had been enjoyed. In simulating these streets the brutalist designers hoped to create a utopian space that “was not only a means of access, but also an area of social expression.”\textsuperscript{13} The resulting constructions, imposed by the housing authority, attempted to mirror an organic social unfolding. Unfortunately for the designers the outcome was not as expected. In interview, Peter Smithson reflected, “walking on the walkways is not a pleasure,” and “if you put anything out [on the shared street] somebody will break it.” Most surprisingly, “the week [Robin Hood Gardens] opened people would come in and shit in the lifts, which is an act of social aggression.”\textsuperscript{14} The Smithsons had unwittingly activated chaos, the heterotopia as pressure valve, and unleashed an unregulated transgression and deviation rather than the pleasure they had projected.

Heterotopia, then, come in different forms and Foucault identifies a multitude: cemeteries and old peoples’ homes; the spaces of the honeymoon suite and the cinema, the gardens and carpets of the Orient, and the brothel and the museum. All these spaces serve a specific cultural or social function in human interaction. Special attention is given to the examples of the mirror and the ship. The mirror exists materially but also creates an inaccessible virtual space behind its surface. For the subject it “exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there.”\textsuperscript{15} The subject sees itself, but in a virtual form and not, in fact, as others see it, the image is reversed and reality is thus distorted. The ship is a self-contained space that constitutes a “place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over

\textsuperscript{12} Alison Smithson, \textit{Team 10 Primer} (London: Studio Vista, 1968), 98.
\textsuperscript{13} Smithson, \textit{Primer}, 98.
\textsuperscript{15} Foucault, “Spaces,” 17.
to the infinity of the sea.”\textsuperscript{16} Floating, a ship is at once placeless but serves to link other positions, both enclosed and yet open. Once a vessel of trade, in the twentieth century the ship mainly served a site of relaxation and escape. Such a disparate collection of heterotopia makes evident both the strength and weakness of Foucault’s concept. On one hand, the range indicates a multivalency which permits a flexibility of interpretation and allows the term to be employed in a variety of contexts. On the other, the range suggests too broad a scope for any useful application; when a definition becomes this extensive it runs the risk of becoming redundant. The value of heterotopic thought in a literary context, and in particular, to the novels of B. S. Johnson is that it presents a radically new approach to the negotiation of lived experience, a method that was truly contemporaneous. Experience is assessed not through binary form or chronology but spatially and socially through shifting unfolding relations. In Johnson’s “truth to reality” project this presents intriguing possibilities. The problematic lay in its application; the thorny issue of “knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end.”\textsuperscript{17} A period of reflection and investigation was required and thus to continue the project heterotopic principles are employed on thematic, material and conceptual levels in his third novel \textit{Trawl}.

The heterotopic space of \textit{Trawl}

When the author enters the text in \textit{Albert Angelo} he states that the aim of his novel has been to “tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality about sitting

\textsuperscript{16} Foucault, “Spaces,” 22.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 15.
here writing looking out across Claremont Square.”18 This metafictive statement bestows immediacy upon the text, one that encourages the reader to feel that the author is addressing them directly. The pronoun “here” drags the reader back in time to the author’s deictic centre to the site of his professional practice. Albert Angelo, with its concrete depictions of London, remains a snap-shot frozen in history. Johnson rejects the constraints of time in his third novel and in this sense Trawl constitutes a retreat—in Travelling People and Albert Angelo the reader is captivated by the spectacle of a writer in medias res, trying and failing to access a literary truth in an evolving project. Trawl shows us what happens next in Johnson’s literary project; it is both narrative and the transcript of artistic, personal and paradigmatic change, a “fusion of the aesthetic and the documentary.”19 Trawl sees Johnson’s “narrator author” withdraw from society to “shoot the narrow trawl of my mind into the vasty sea of my past”20 and in doing so exorcise personal demons before venturing out into life transformed. Looking for inspiration and material to begin his third novel, in 1963 Johnson embraced the projectural practice of “re-siting”21 and left his usual place of work to join the crew of a deep-water fishing trawler on a trip to the Barents Sea. Trawl documents the activity of both his body and mind whilst on this ship: the body wracked with nausea and fatigue and the mind slowly drifting over events of his recent and distant past. Time becomes distorted, regulated not by the clock but by the rhythm of the trawl. The ship stands as the heterotopia par excellence: a self-contained yet open space that travels from one site to another. Outside of the national and political boundaries of mapped space the space of the ship enjoys its own set of rules and behaviours and the writer finds new inspiration.

19 Gratton and Sheringham, Project, 9.
21 Gratton and Sheringham, Project, 2.
Through approaching the novel as a ship’s log, Johnson moves the parameters of his text and practice. By situating both the writing process and his narrative in the heterotopic space of the ship, experience comes to be understood by the ways in which one space is similar to or different from another as the writer is taken outside of the standard parameters of his discipline.

Through the “different” space of the trawler ship Johnson seizes the possibility of investigating the relationships and connections of his life outside of the constraints of chronological narrative convention; time becomes warped. Such a process, like the voyage, is to be endured and is necessarily fraught with abjection; it is a creative rite of passage aligned with Foucault’s heterotopia of crisis, transformative but primitive. In Trawl, temporal frameworks of associations are discarded as the narrator moves from one spatial location to another. The narrator moves freely amongst the sites of his present and past along mental pathways. In a key passage he recalls a photograph of himself as a child and notes his brooding eyes full of abjection, but the image is retrospectively conjured up and informed by the narrative present and his knowledge of the man he would come to be. Does the narrator see the child or is he confronted with a reflection of the adult self in a heterotopic mirror? The picture exists outside of materiality in the author’s mind’s eye—a memory of viewing the image of a boy he has ceased to be. This act positions him as twice removed from its material reality and adrift in time. In this passage we encounter the double heterotopia of the photograph as virtual mirror; that which Foucault terms a “placeless place.” The image is both present, but nowhere; it dislocates space. Furthermore, the photograph/mirror results in a heterochronic accumulation that contests a standard understanding of time. Via the ship, Johnson activates Foucault’s fourth heterotopic principle that “the heterotopia begins to function fully when people find themselves in a sort of absolute break with
their traditional time.”\textsuperscript{22} The narrator aims to discover his essential self, but in the process he activates a spectrum of selves occurring simultaneously at different loci in both space and time. In the bowels of the ship during long shifts in the short arctic day, time loses its grip on the crew of a trawler and is revealed as an organisational construct of control. Often during times of a glut, skippers would, “give their men a four hours’ break to sleep then put the clocks forward two hours and delude them into thinking they had rested twice as long.”\textsuperscript{23} In the ship, travelling across space and time zones, formal time cannot be relied on to deliver the truth.

If time is not to be trusted in this heterotopia, can space be made to capture existence more truthfully? \textit{Trawl} plays with space at the surface level of the page, by rejecting novelistic convention and possessing no chapters; its subdivisions are few and far between. The visual and narrative flow of text is punctuated by the transcribed sound of a towing block banging against the aft of the ship at the start of each trawl. Each memory is therefore allowed the mapped space of one act of trawling before the narrator’s mind refocuses on events in the narrative present. The words are indented in from each side of the page so that they form columns of text rather than a spread across the page’s surface. This emphasizes the verticality of the prose and increases the frequency of oscillation of the reader’s eyes; as readers we sense the swell of the sea in the set of the text. The momentum of the prose is as relentless as the movement of the ship, there are few natural places to take pause and reflect, only brief moments of relief when Johnson breaks the text with ellipses. Like the narrator, the reader experiences disorientation during the extended passages of recollection as we ride the text. The narrator notes, “While they are hauling the ship wallows, and the motion is worse, I feel sickest at such points […] my stomach feels as though it

\textsuperscript{22} Johnson, \textit{Trawl}, 20.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 100.
is trying to unseat itself, impel itself upwards, eject itself free of my shuddering body.”

Johnson uses all the features of typography at his disposal to envelop the reader in the liminal experience of being at sea.

In addition to giving graphic form to maritime travel, Johnson documents the daily events of life on board a fishing trawler and the text serves as a log of the voyage. The ship’s log is a vital receptacle of truth, it stores factual information, a practice first initiated by the earlier “chip log,” a navigational tool for estimating the speed of a ship through water. The ship’s log was therefore originally conceived as a document that charted the spatial trajectory of the vessel over one journey; it was concerned with distance, and the mechanics of moving from place to place. In the same way *Trawl*’s narrative tracks Johnson’s body over one physical journey but oscillates between many mental sites. We visit the spaces that gave form to the person the narrator has come to be, the nodes where his journey crosses others, where the outer spaces affect the interior. The narrative passes through London, Chobham and High Wycombe in the past, and Germany, Denmark and various co-ordinates on the North and Barents Seas in the narrative present. These spaces are further subdivided into smaller networks of emplacement. High Wycombe is mapped out through the focalisation of an eight-year-old boy thus revealing a different network of experience and perception than that of the adult Johnson in London. The child understands the world through the cartography of sites of instruction (the school) and sites of play (the railway, the Abbey, meadowland and the waterways.) This network of sites, over time, becomes connected to the outer world:

The ornamental waterway ended in an ornamental waterfall, a fall of perhaps thirty feet, no more, but mighty and impressive to us. Even now the word waterfall recalls that place

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to me, and for years of schooling afterwards an appropriately sized-up version served to make real for me Niagara, Victoria and other Falls which were otherwise merely names.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, connections are forged between real and imagined places and time is transcended; a childhood meadow later serves as the template for all other meadows that the future narrator will encounter. This one place will be forever linked through time to other activities. The narrator recalls how later he imagined “the performance of a potent female spell (dancing three times naked round a house whilst menstruating during a full moon) in this meadow.”\textsuperscript{26} The primary experience is forged to others irrespective of temporal location or fictive status in a matrix of experience.

\textit{Trawl’s anthropological rite-of-passage.}

Despite the connective nature of experience this undertaking is a solitary one. In heterotopia, outside of society, the individual enters a liminal state. Liminality is an essential part of the crisis heterotopias that Foucault notes are a fundamental part of primitive society. Traditionally sacred or privileged places, these are spaces for those undergoing significant processes of social or biological transformation. Thus, the primitive girl experiencing her first period may retreat to the menstruation hut and women will give birth in areas removed from the shared spaces of community life. These transformations are often developmental in nature, involving the passing from one life stage to another; the girl becomes a woman, the woman becomes a mother. In a notably spatial turn the discipline of human anthropology bestows us with the term \textit{liminal personae}: individuals who “slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”\textsuperscript{27} Liminal personae are no longer happily caught up in the

\textsuperscript{25} Johnson, \textit{Trawl}, 61.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 62. My emphasis.
clearly defined network of “temporary halts” that Foucault identifies as being the loci of daily life; they take a fleeting sideways step into different spaces. Arnold van Gennep (1909) was the first anthropologist to note the significance of rituals attached to the transitional stages of human life, and his phrase for these, “rites of passage,” has passed into every day usage. Johnson’s work in which the text functions as a site of self-discovery is consciously rooted in quotidian life, but often dwells on the episodes which had a lasting effect on the man he was to become. These significant and often transitional stages are sign-posted quite clearly in his poetic work:

In the ember days of my last free summer,
here I lie, outside myself, watching
the gross body eating a poor curry:
satisfied at what I have done, scared of what
I have to do in my last free winter.  

This poem and others such as “Change is the Only Constant” which begins, “Unpleasurably I remark the coming / of the winter of my last childless year” give prominence to moments of transition when the author is aware of the passing of an old way of being. The same key episodes are revisited in many of his novels: Travelling People is based on Johnson’s last “free” summer after leaving university; Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry touches on Johnson’s initiation into the world of work and The Unfortunates’ elegiac form concerns life’s final transition: death.

In Trawl, life on board a trawler ship is harsh and unfamiliar for the narrator who is at the mercy of the elements and his fellow shipmates. The writer has moved outside of the usual site of his practice and, in the terms of project work, has willingly become de-professionalized to

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29 Ibid., 150.
avail himself of the power of the détournement. He is bestowed the title of “pleasuretripper” by the crew and is thus akin to the isolated anthropological initiate or neophyte whose “behaviour is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint.” The punishment on board is relentless as the narrator is nauseated and disorientated by the motion of the sea. Each bout of vomiting sees the narrator prostrated on his bunk recalling painful memories; thus the wretched purging of his body becomes equated with the purging of his past. Liminal detoxification is necessarily uncomfortable; anthropologist V. W. Turner notes, “the ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character, to which the neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous state.” For the narrator who rejects a standard chronological narrative time, this previous state can be hard to ascertain, but Johnson’s italicised “why am I parted from my mother and sent away to live with strangers?” is the primal scream that punctuates the novel, the original pain that must be exorcised, the orientating question.

The rite of passage as identified by van Gennep has three stages of transition: separation, limen and aggregation. Trawl’s imagery fixates it firmly in the liminal phase where, removed from society, original identity is discarded and a new means of defining the self must be found. Johnson’s intention is clearly stated at the beginning of the novel, “I . . always with I . . one starts from . .” The voyage and consequently the novel’s aim are one: a quest for personal and creative self-discovery and the arrival at a renewed, socially acceptable state of being. The transformation sought is not biological but psychological and social; before embarking on his

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30 Gratton and Sheringham note that détournement is “a situationist term meaning that the domain in question is hijacked, put to a different use.” (2005), 12.
31 Turner, Ritual Process, 95.
32 Ibid., 103.
33 Johnson, Trawl, 56.
34 Ibid., 1.
trawler voyage of discovery Johnson made a proposal of marriage to Virginia Kimpton and the journey thus becomes soaked with a mood of nervous anticipation and the threat of rejection. Separation is to be found in various forms: the geographical separation of sea from land, narrator from home but also the re-visited historical separation that Johnson endured as a child during two instances of evacuation.

To illustrate the radically transformative effect the second evacuation had on the author’s person, this reading returns to the photograph of the narrator as an evacuee. The narrator in fact calls upon the reader to consider two photographs of himself as a child. He compares the two:

The first was taken in Chobham, and shows a bright, chubby, roughly fair-haired boy, his eyes burnished with interest. The other photograph is of barely recognisably the same boy two years later: anxious narrowed, the eyes now look as though they have seen most disappointments, and expect the rest shortly, the hair is darker, combed, and haircreamed back, parted, the mouth hard, compressed: in all, the face of a human being all too aware of the worst of the human situation.\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Trawl}, 53.}

The second photograph, taken in High Wycombe, shows a child transformed by his experiences into the image of a world-weary adult. The hair has darkened, the expression hardened and the exterior neatly dressed for premature adult responsibility and disappointment. Geographical and emotional displacement translates into a psycho-social isolation that will stigmatize the narrator’s future social being. Reflecting on his failure to thrive in the Scouts he reflects, “I failed as a member of that group as I have failed as a member of all groups I have ever joined: gangs, schools, cliques, churches, cubs, scouts, youthclubs, football teams, cricket teams, tugofwar teams, tennis doubles, all of them.”\footnote{Ibid., 91.} This failure to conform socially is acceptable during the \textit{separation} phase of the rite of passage when one is in transition; the neophyte necessarily exhibits behaviour that detaches it from a set of cultural conditions. However, for a
successful transition to take place, neophytes must eventually assimilate successfully back into their original societies. It is a transition that has proved impossible for Johnson’s autodiegetic narrator to make: his liminal sense of isolation follows him into maturity and the trawler journey is his attempt to locate the root of his discontent. He writes, “I want to give substantial yet symbolic form to an isolation I have felt most of my life by isolating myself in an extreme form, by cutting myself off as far as possible from everything I had ever known before.” Johnson unconsciously chooses the acme of Foucauldian heterotopia as the counterspace in which he will reflect on the prior spaces he has inhabited in order to move forward. Through interconnecting them he hopes to gain perspective and understanding. He asks, ‘Why do I trawl the delicate mesh of my mind over the snagged and broken floor of my past?’ and gives the answer, “In order to live.” It is only in the heterotopia of the ship and the space of the text that he feels permitted, and ready, to confront the chaos.

**Liminal abjection**

In *Trawl* the narrator refers to a fractured past but by revisiting former events and emotion in a heterotopic space he begins to assemble an intricately shaped network. The mesh of the mind is fabricated of inter-connected memories and spaces; moments trawled from an angst filled past. An initial cast of the net recovers the image of a pub near Sussex Gardens and a first encounter with “Joan”. This event segues into his last meal with Joan at a restaurant on Edgware Road which connects to a student house in the same location and a different girl named Prudence, although the narrator cannot be sure of the accuracy of this name. The name Prudence is substituted as the memory takes hold and the question is posed of whether she was in fact a Peggy or a Pauline; a Phoebe or a Phyllis. Women’s names become interchangeable but

38 Ibid., 21.
feminine betrayal endures. The memory of Joan provokes the query: “[I] wondered what I had done to make her just desert me like that, was baffled by her giving me up and I still ask, Why? Why?” This and many similar episodes of rejection and humiliation are slowly revealed to be connected to an earlier key rejection that fractured the narrator’s fragile psyche: maternal rejection. Evacuation and dislocation from the maternal bosom provoke consternation and bitterness that seep into all the spaces the narrator will come to inhabit. Julia Kristeva suggests that the point at which the child first separates from the mother and identifies itself as “subject” or “I” is a key phase in human psychological development. The mother becomes absent and vanishes as the child passes from the semiotic, instinctive chora into the orderly “symbolic realm” of the father and representational language. During this process, the child experiences “the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.” Kristeva theorizes that the individual first experiences abjection, or horror, at this point of transition where it constitutes a necessary revolt against that which gives one existence but stands in opposition to one’s newly emerging constructed world. Significantly, “the abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I.” The mother must be made abject in order for individual identity to form. Consequently, anything else that similarly threatens one’s sense of self such as death or disease is cast into the same realm and inextricably linked to the mother and the initial quest for “self”. When the individual confronts the abject, imaginary

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39 Johnson, Trawl, 20.
40 The chora can be considered to be an originatory Thirrdspace (a concept that will be discussed later in this chapter) outside of space and form. In his review of Edward’s Soja’s work of human geography, Thirdspace, Rob Shields writes: “It is often forgotten that the meaning of kora—the Greek root of “choir”—is territory, the land beyond the city walls, the context of polis and supporting ground of all that is civic.” Rob Shields, “Harmony in Thirds: Chora for Lefebvre,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Vol. 89, No. 2 (Jun., 1999), 340.
42 Ibid., 1.
borders disintegrate and identity is plunged into the crisis first experienced in the chora, one’s assumed sense of self is challenged. The abject resides in the liminal state both attracting and repelling those on the margins of self-definition. Like the movement of the sea it ebbs and flows.

_Trawl’s_ world is full of what Patricia Waugh describes as “brooding abjection”\(^43\) an abjection I suggest is born of the narrator’s liminality. It is only when surrounded by the totems of abjection that the narrator’s process of truthful self-discovery can begin. The horror of maternal separation must be re-lived for new identity to be established. The abjection is of a specific type, Turner notes:

*The symbolism attached to and surrounding the liminal _persona_ is complex and bizarre. Much of it is modelled on human biological processes, which are conceived to be what Levi-Strauss might call “isomorphic” with structural and cultural practices. They give an outward and visible form to an inward and conceptual process._\(^44\)*

By entering the ship, the isomorphism inherent in heterotopia and liminality leads the narrator unwittingly to forge connections that may otherwise have remained unnoticed. In line with Turner’s observation, in this heterotopic novel the body and its processes take centre stage, Johnson’s recollections of feminine betrayal precipitate an ever increasing spiral of biological repulsion and horror. Gwen’s renouncement of his love and quest for independence smoothly segues into the graphic minutiae of a mariner’s life. The narrative eye shifts from accounts of messy urination to faecal evacuation, piles, suppositories, fish gutting and the casual cruelty of trawlermen towards their quarry. Further abjection follows: after crudely displaying the genitals of a “ginny” fish,\(^45\) the reader is shown how the trawlerman 

\[\text{\textsuperscript{43} Patricia Waugh, } \textit{Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960 to 1990} (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 132.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{44} Victor Turner, } \textit{The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual} (1967; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 96.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{45} “Ginny” is the diminutive name of the narrator’s prospective fiancée.}\]
fiddles carefully with the guts of a flat brown bastard halibut, snicks twice into the thick mass and then lays on the flat top of the pound board a bloody piece of gut, which I quickly see to be pulsing and very soon afterwards realise to be a heart, still beating, beating, a fish heart still with some kind of life left in it.\textsuperscript{46}

The isomorphism between fish and man, past and present is clear. Gwen’s rejection is an echo of an earlier maternal rejection, a portent of future rejection that prompts the sensation of the narrator’s heart being ripped out. The image is located in the abject where it exists as a repellent but fascinating “Other” against which to define “Self”. This pattern is repeated throughout the novel, the abjection of the mother becomes transferred into the abjection of womankind and the exposure of feminine complicity in the narrator’s existential loneliness. After recounting an episode of forceful sex with an unenthusiastic lover, the narrator recalls discarding a used condom under her pillow and ponders “that sick awareness which comes with almost everything I have to do with women.”\textsuperscript{47} This recollection fades into an encounter with a prostitute that precipitates a nervous tick in the narrator and finally connects to scenes of piscine evisceration where \textit{Trawl}’s supporting cast—the fishermen garbed in fetish-like rubber smocks and waders—amuse themselves with dirty jokes. Girlfriends, mothers, prostitutes, fish, condoms and gore are all connected and contaminated by the same web of association.

\textit{Trawl} ends on a cold North Sea morning, as the fishing vessel pulls into the dock. The narrator’s shipmates promise that his life will have been transformed by his experience: “When you come ashore, says Duff, You feel about ten feet tall, all these people on land just don’t know what life’s about!”\textsuperscript{48} The ship, the “trawl” is revealed to possess the ability to give exhilarating meaning to life; its heterotopic nature is acknowledged. For the narrator the voyage has indeed been cathartic. He asserts,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{46} Johnson, \textit{Trawl}, 134.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 182.
\end{quote}
I have cleared my life of the dead weight of my past, can face her completely, honestly. And it must be right for this is the last chance I give this bizarre structure of thought and laws and impressions called life, called existence, with its absurd problem, which I no more wish to solve than to have posed.49

Here Johnson makes explicit the underlying purpose of his retreat to heterotopias: to clear his life of the heavy past. There is a sense of desperation in his insistence that “it must be right, for this is the last chance,” a sense that this aim has not been achieved. Life is chaotic and bizarre, a spatial structure, an impression to be explored but no singular essence or truth has been uncovered. Within the heterotopic space, answers cannot be sought, questions are merely raised and connections noted as unfoldings spontaneously occur.

**Space and the trialectics of being**

The wider project to understand human experience from a new spatial perspective was later expanded by philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre and geographer Edward Soja. Soja noted that until the twentieth century the mapping of the human experience had been “an essentially two-sided socio-historical project,”50 and that by the late sixties the capitalist restructuring of the everyday had prompted a global paradigmatic crisis through which “an-Other form of spatial awareness began to emerge.”51 Soja’s attempt to reimagine the human geographic project thus placed spatiality at the centre of his discipline’s understanding of social being and championed an all-encompassing variation of spatial awareness that would expand on those employed before. Of these Firstspace consisted of human geography’s traditional orientation towards a “real,” material world and Secondspace consisted of the subsequent defining representations and interpretations of this concrete world. The First/Secondspace duality had reached its acme in the modernist mind-set that Johnson sought to improve upon in his early

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51 Ibid., 11.
work; *Travelling People* is conveyed through such a dialectic—a dialogue between the concrete material world and the imagined representations of it. A Firstspace experience is conveyed in the narrative by the positioning and movement of people and objects over time:

You meet people on your journeys, where your paths cross, and stay with them perhaps for seconds, perhaps for years, then travel on, travel on. Till your journey ended. Maurie’s journey had ended at the point where those of Kin, Trevor, Mira, Gwendy, Bob and himself had met: such an ending had in this case been the motive force to set all the others travelling again in different directions.\(^{52}\)

In Johnson’s debut the twentieth century hero traverses time and space on an historic *Bildungsroman* journey of self-discovery but within the Secondspace the author struggles to adequately map and conceptualize experience for a postmodern readership. The fictional Henry hints at these difficulties in a letter to a friend where he apologizes:

> Of course there is a great deal that I’ve left out, and it’s not in any sort of chronological order: a sort of partly-organized chaos in defiance of the space-time continuum instituted for our guidance […] this letter should give you an idea of my Journey into the Unknown, as you made it seem; but though not physically, the journey continues.\(^{53}\)

There is a sense here of the ontological inadequacy of representation; of a gap between the first and second spaces that form is struggling to bridge. The narrator seems to suggest that within his creation there is no feel for a life *lived*—no affect, insufficient chaotic unfolding. As if a pawn in a chess game, the literary subject moves from emplacement to emplacement with a sense of a pre-ordained destination.

*Travelling People* presents a model of social being played out in first and second spatial terms. Henry reflects on his evacuation to Dorchester where on arrival,

> the London children stood in a thin line down a long road of bright red semi-detached houses […] when the street had absorbed as many into the red boxes as it could hold, a

\(^{52}\) Johnson, *Travelling People*, 278.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 64–65.
policeman ten feet tall rounded up the remainder of the children and drove them to the next street in unfamiliar buses.\textsuperscript{54}

The children have been transported into new potentially traumatic contexts to form new attachments, but the narrative can but focus on the material and the concrete. Development is mapped in a linear fashion. The line of evacuees runs parallel and in opposition to the line of housing that waits to receive them; the two contours unwilling to cross paths. Henry tries to return “home” three times and the reader is told that Henry “dislikes Dorchester because it was not London: London was home, London was all the world, all his world.”\textsuperscript{55} The known world is divided into London and Other for the young Henry and for the purposes of mid-century human geography, evacuation consisted of the displacement of individuals from geographical location A (the home) to location B (the billing) and vice versa. Yet for many post-war children a simple return to the initial geographic position did not always constitute a return “home.” In an introduction to the anthology \textit{The Evacuees} published in 1968, Johnson reflected on the difficulty of reintegration when the children came back:

For many of the children the return was evacuation all over again. They came back to a mother whom they probably remembered, but she was sleeping with a stranger who insisted he was their father. In some cases they came from a comfortable middle-class home to a crowded flat in slum or near-slum conditions; from friends again, to an alien society.\textsuperscript{56}

Here the child-subject inconveniently sees the same space unfolding in a new way in spite of the best intentions of the authorities. The interaction of time, space and social experiences work to change the subject’s perception of the world irrevocably and thus any mapping of the world and being in \textit{all} disciplines must follow suit.

\textsuperscript{54} Johnson, \textit{Travelling People}, 144.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 146.
Soja built upon Lefebvre’s concept of *thirling-as-Othering*\(^{57}\) to arrive at the model of *Thirdspace*, a paradigm that counters binarized categories and challenges human geography’s dominance and reduction by fixed historical structures. The Thirdspace builds on the first and second spaces of analysis to arrive at a “cumulative trialectics that is radically open to additional otherness.”\(^{58}\) For Soja, Thirdspace constitutes an advance for his discipline because it is active rather than passive: “additionally guided by some form of potentially emancipatory *praxis*, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious—and consciously spatial—effort to improve the world in some significant way.”\(^{59}\) Thirdspace seeks to be inclusive of the breadth of human experience and gives free rein to new connections and representations. Soja defines the qualities of Thirdspace as:

A knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events and political choices that is existentially shaped by the generative and problematic interplay between centres and peripheries, the abstract and the concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and the lived.\(^{60}\)

Thirdspace, then, is not an analysis of a material past but embraces a multi-faceted present and its future possibilities. It permits geographers to note affect (the impassioned) and the everyday (the lived) and blur the boundaries between the categories that have been imposed onto social being. Thirdspace is creative and inclusive and, importantly for the purposes of this reading, the natural space of art that depicts the world in its *lived* form.

\(^{57}\) Lefebvre’s concept posits an Other category of lived space that is not interstitial or part of an either/or binary but radically inclusive “both-and-also.” It is a different space in which all others can be potentially found.

\(^{58}\) Soja, *Thirdspace*, 61.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 31.
We return, then, to *Trawl*, the novel in which Johnson navigates a different space of rhythms and raw emotion. A “fusion of the aesthetic and the documentary”\(^61\), it questions the past and disrupts the logic of narrative causality; it broadens the novel’s potential for expression out to constitute a Thirdspace. Although the scope of such space is overwhelming and at times oblique, Soja is clear on the principles of Thirdspace practice:

Exploring Thirdspace therefore requires a strategic and flexible way of thinking that is guided by a particular motivating project, a set of clear practical objectives and preferred pathways that will help to keep each individual journey on track while still allowing for lateral excursions to other spaces, times and social situations.

Within a project with very particular aims, *Trawl* navigates an even tighter set of co-ordinates, seeking to locate the source of the narrator’s existential isolation by re-tracing the pathways of the past. The narrative oscillates with the different rhythms of the maritime day and the trawl; in the different space of the ship the mind is freed to visit all other places in the plural Thirdspace whilst the material body follows the trajectory of the voyage. It is a novel which presents a model of social being in which:

I am only what I am now . . . . I am not
What I have been . . . . It is as if I am
Free to be what I may be . . . . I am not
What I shall be . . . . I am what I am
Now.\(^62\)

This complex compositional self is the subject of Soja’s Thirdspace, a being that “does not derive simply from an additive combination of its binary antecedents but rather from a disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstruction of their presumed totalization producing

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\(^62\) Johnson, *Trawl*, 181.
an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different." Whilst Johnson’s third novel revisits the familiar in terms of its investment in the everyday, in its recollections of rejection and dislocation its narrative possesses an alternative purpose, one of self-improvement and development, a rite-of-passage that is enacted by its very form and practice. In this way and I would suggest for the first time in the wider Johnson project, the individual text is “guided by some form of emancipatory praxis, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious—and consciously spatial—effort to improve the world in some significant way.”

**Christie Malry and the social production of space**

Soja’s trialetics and Thirddspace of emancipatory praxis were profoundly influenced and informed by the works of Henri Lefebvre to the extent that Firstspace arises directly out of Lefebvre’s Perceived Space of spatial practice (*Le Perçu*), Secondspace links to the Conceived Space of the representations of space (*Le Conçu*) and Thirdspace resonates with Lived or representational Space (*Le Veçu*). In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre’s analyses work to show that “the production of spatiality rather than history had become the central armature of capitalist development and contradiction.” Lefebvre’s three spatial layers combine to form a triad of space that is socially produced by the agents within it in an on-going process. From Lefebvre’s perspective, in the second half of the twentieth century the state was becoming

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64 Ibid., 22.
66 The term “late capitalism” is attributed to Sombart’s 1902 *Der moderne Kapitalismus* but is often associated with post-war German theorists engaging in an analysis of contemporary society. The term describes the period following the Second World War in which theorists proposed that capitalism was in its third and final stage. However, far from waning, by the nineties Jameson was writing on the resilience of the capitalism system and its emergence as a cultural dominant, coincident and synonymous with postmodernism. The term “late” suggest the evolution of a process or system. Like Foucault, Jameson describes, “the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through
increasingly oppressive and powerful and space was its most effective weapon. His work therefore details the *struggle* over this commodity and highlights the ways in which power can be accessed by *anyone* willing to confront a state that weighs down on society (on all societies) in full force; [thai]t plans and organizes society ‘rationally’, with the help of knowledge and technology, imposing analogous, if not homologous, measures irrespective of political ideology, historical background, or the class origins of those in power.\(^{67}\)

In Lefebvre’s theory the agents of space are both institutional and individual but resistance is possible because

> the social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely; the very agency that has forced spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strives to run it into the ground, then shackle it and enslave it.\(^ {68}\)

Although born into an apparently shared and mutually produced social space, in late capitalism, “the ultimate foundation of social space is *prohibition.*”\(^ {69}\) Soja suggest that in addition to the workplace, everyday life is revealed by Lefebvre as “the primary locus of exploitation, domination, and struggle.” He adds that the theorist “redefine[es] social transformation and revolution as intrinsically more socio-cultural (and less economistic) processes and goals.”\(^ {70}\)

The sight of this struggle is, for Lefebvre, the Thirdspace/layer/dimension of *le veçu*, the everyday lived space that incorporates the workplace and is explicitly explored in *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*, a short novel published in 1973 (the year before Lefebvre’s work.) In many ways, Johnson’s sixth novel is a work of Lefebvrian “cityness”—it features the rhythm


\(^{68}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 35.

\(^{70}\) Soja, *Thirdspace*, 41.
of *metro-boulot-dodo*,\(^7\) the changing material city, spatial exploration and the “simultaneous gathering and dispersing of goods, information and people.”\(^7\) Most significantly *Christie Malry* is centred round urban deviance and social transgression embodied in a character who unleashes a campaign of terror in response to the prohibitions of the state. Obviously, Malry’s increasingly outrageous acts do not replicate the actions of his creator; the truth the novel draws on is the sense of exploitation and boredom felt by Johnson on entry into an average adulthood with “forty-eight years to wait before he was free.”\(^7\) The subsequent act of writing charts Christie’s acts of resistance within a lived space where there are “other forces on the boil.”\(^7\) *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* is a literary counter-space,\(^7\) a Thirdspace, in which all the prohibited desire of post-war “everyman” can be channelled. Christie is a Lefebvrian champion of social space; one who “though defeated, they live on, and from time to time they begin fighting ferociously to reassert themselves and transform themselves through struggle.”\(^7\)

Christie Malry identifies an unlikely path to autonomy in the capitalist skill of accounting, the “double-entry” system of the novel’s title where any debit must be balanced with a credit to allow an account to be cleared. This system is articulated through spatial activity in columns which represent the sum financial and virtual activities of a business. Christie feels exploited in both the workplace and the everyday and decides to take back control of his life through spatial control. He instigates direct action in both the material and conceptual space of the ledger book page. Each instance of state-sanctified oppression must be balanced by an

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\(^7\) This translates as “subway-work-sleep” and summarizes mundane urban routine.

\(^7\) Rob Shields, “Henri Lefebvre,” in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* edited by Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin and Gil Valentine (London: Sage, 2004), 209.


\(^7\) Lefebvre, *Production*, 23.

\(^7\) In Foucault’s *Des espaces autres* heterotopias of deviance are counter-spaces that allow society to tolerate anti-social behaviour and thus *contain* the socially undesirable.

\(^7\) Lefebvre, *Production*, 23.
equally injurious action on his part. This does not appear to be a “class war”—Christie has no interest in helping swaths of society; his interests remain firmly self-serving. A “simple person,” Christie operates instead as an anarchic but simplistic “cell of one”: on becoming aware of the benefits of capital he decides that the best way to access it is to “place himself next to the money, or at least close to those who were making it.” When this tactic of proximity fails due to Christie’s lowly socially enforced position (he is a mere clerk) he becomes increasingly dismayed by his lot and decides to reject his prescribed temporal trajectory (apprenticeship, promotion, retirement) and negotiate his life in an alternative way.

The seeds of Christie’s Great Idea are sown in a Lefebvrian “moment” when he takes pause in the street and questions,

Who made me walk this way? Who decided I should not be walking seven feet farther that side, or three points west of nor-nor-east, to use the marine abbreviation? Anyone? No one? Someone must have decided. It was a conscious decision, as well. That is, they said (he said, she said), I will build here. But I think whoever it was did not also add, So Christie Malry shall not walk here, but shall walk there. If he chooses. Ah! And there I have him/her/them! If I chose so. But my choice is limited by them, collectively, to a certain extent.

I shall list my choices. I may choose to walk for some forty feet along this particular stretch of pavement at a width of approximately eight feet. On one side freedom is limited by my desire not to be hit by traffic. On the other side by whoever built this no doubt speculative office block. The first limitation I accept, forced on me reasonably enough by society. The other I do not accept.

Christie feels that his route through social space has been restricted and imposed upon both by his natural desire to avoid death and by a mysterious governing “Other.” His movement which should,
by rights, be free is blocked by the obstacles; the geographical space of the street has been privatized by capitalist society. A spatial projection unfolds before his eyes, a network of realised and thwarted possibility that is realised by Johnson’s italics in the Thirdspace of the page. Christie’s thoughts stop and start on the page; following the line of thought, the reader’s eye is drawn to a possible clear pathway down the page, one that is both traversed and enclosed on both sides by infringing text. Here, in the context of both the street and the page, Christie’s burgeoning social deviance first makes itself apparent as he challenges the narrow route he is permitted and deplores the domination of buildings built for a speculative future. These spaces do not freely unfold through social being but are monuments to materialistic gain in a city of inadequate and increasingly privatised housing.

Although not politically aware Christie, like Albert, possesses a sense of injustice at the lot he has drawn. In the above extract, his oppression is depicted spatially as a curtailing of movement by others—a loss of agency that must be addressed, but capitalism as a system is too abstract to directly attack. Lefebvre comments that the growth of the forces of production does not “give rise in any direct causal fashion to a particular space or a particular time.”82 Looking to assign blame he searches for a scapegoat for his social and economic impasse—the “mediations and mediators [which] have to be taken into consideration: the actions of groups, factors within knowledge, within ideology, or within the domain of representations.”83 The guilty parties are identified by Christie as being of the Secondspace, and Lefebvre’s Le conçu—sanctified holders of power. They are “successors, heirs, executors, administrators, personal representatives and assigns,”84 the movers and shakers of capitalism who control and reproduce. Those who stand to benefit indirectly from

82 Lefebvre, Production, 77.
83 Ibid., 77.
84 Johnson, Christie, 24.
the original crime shall be made to repay the debt that Christie feels he is owed, but wanting immediate recompense, he targets instead the material building itself, scoring the facing of the office block with a coin. The resulting mark on the unblemished building is an unbroken line of a yard in length, a visual representation of the clear path ahead he intends to make for himself, a line drawn in the sand. This first rather minor and inconsequential act will lead to other acts of increasing levels of violence and wider consequence.

Christie’s subsequent acts of retribution follow a similar pattern, the act is directed against an abstract ideology but, more often than not, the results are achieved through engagement with the body of the city and its privatized objects. There are many to choose from because “social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such ‘objects’ are thus not only things but also relations.” When Christie purloins an important letter destined for his boss Mr Skinner he rips the artefact into tiny shreds and releases them into the Thames from Hammersmith Bridge. The pieces float downstream past familiar landmarks from Johnson’s youth: Harrod’s depository, Grosvenor Bridge, Bugsby’s reach and Frog Island; the fictional scraps follow a real trajectory as confirmed by Johnson when he comments: “It was a real end for the pieces.” In the Lefebvrian representational space the letter flows out of the fictional book and through the city, along a historic river transformed by social-labour relations into a conduit for the exchange of material goods. Similarly, when Christie selects the Barn Elms reservoir as a conduit for his stolen poison, it is with the awareness that this lake is now connected to a large part of the capital via a network of underground pipes. Christie Malry may operate as a fictional cell of one but he does so via appropriating of the forces of capitalist production that shape the city, his actions reverberate

85 Lefebvre, *Production*, 77.
86 Johnson, *Christie*, 41.
down the network of urban lived space. In addition to this, Johnson forges a space of representation in the form of a novel, filling it with the authentically inhabited spaces of his life, the real and the imagined and the bubbling up of transgressions against state.

Although operating alone Christie is not, in fact, the only individual engaged in acts of resistance within the space of lived experience. Lefebvre’s *le veçu* is multi-faceted—an artistic space but also one primed for “clandestine and underground spatial practices that suggest and prompt restructuring of institutionalized discourses of space.” In chapter 12 the reader learns that Scotland Yard is baffled by Christie’s activities and the Chief Commissioner is reminded of earlier instances of crimes against the established order, this time the Battle of Stepney at Sidney Street. Christie also overhears “revolutionaries plotting a series of attacks on London, even offering up Johnson’s beloved Myddelton Square as a potential target of terrorism. Christie’s attitude to the revolutionaries is one of patronizing amusement; he refers to them as “children” and their method of selecting worthwhile targets:

‘The Railway’
‘The Reform’
‘The Roehampton’
‘Just a minute. How do we decide which first?’
‘Draw lots.’

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88 Otherwise known as the Battle of Stepney (January 1911), the siege was an armed confrontation between the metropolitan police force and members of a Latvian gang who were thought to have carried out a jewellery robbery in December 1910. Army forces were called as reinforcement and the siege led to the death of three individuals. The siege enjoys the honour of being the first British siege caught on film and stills exist of Sir Winston Churchill attending the siege in his capacity as Home Secretary.
89 Johnson lived at Myddelton Square from 1965 and 1969 and is now included in the list of famous past residents in a brochure on Islington squares by up-market London estate agents Chesterton and Humberts.
‘I know what that means if you see what I means, but what are lots?’

Their indiscriminate list of targets that will be selected by lots seemingly marks them out as “amateurs” in Christie’s eyes, but Christie is an amateur too. His reign of terror constitutes a project of retribution in which he feels his way and often fails. The toy train carrying explosives at the Tax Inspector’s office gets stuck in a bend in a pipe; his device for automatically cutting off the factory’s electric supply is discovered and dismantled. Within the boundaries of a project, a lack of professional experience is not to be feared but embraced. Gratton and Sheringham suggest that, “indeed amateurism is seen as one of the hidden strengths of the project, underlying its capacity to offer alternative, indirect ways of knowing.” Christie is an amateur but ultimately, no less efficient for that; his failures and diversion bring out his creativity.

Christie’s actions against his employer Tapper’s the Confectioners are born of a tour he takes of the premises. Whilst visiting all of the departments with Headlam he gauges spatial configurations in both process and design—the weak points in the network of activities that constitute a “factory.” He notes the opportunity he was being given: a “guided tour of the enemy defences,” gaining knowledge and power as he mentally maps out the space. He notes the grid of electrics that power the whole establishment and places of danger that could be exploited for his gain. The building is poorly designed and is not truly functional, Christie learns that the incompetent designers were so blindsided by their conceptual representation of space (the architectural plans) that they forgot to install the stairwells which were consequently hastily added to the exterior of the building. The perceived and conceived spatial realities of the factory thus infringe upon the lived experience of the workers; in such an ill-conceived social space the workers

90 Johnson, Christie, 128–129.
91 Gratton and Sheringham, Project, 9.
92 Johnson, Christie, 64.
are dehumanised and referred to collectively by their job titles. On his tour, Christie is introduced to faceless “Nutladies,” subterranean “Boilermen,” overheated “Sugar Boilers” and methodical “Box Makers” all mechanically going about their business. The double-entry system demands that the captivity of the workers be compensated and Christie’s bomb hoax results in the satisfying spectacle of the neighbouring Pork Pie Purveyors Ltd workers streaming out of the gates to freedom.

The Pork Pie workers leave the fictive space of their factory and stroll out into the reclaimed social space of Johnson’s youth. Lefebvre asserts that:

Social space “incorporates” social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act. From the point of view of these subjects, the behaviour of their space is at once vital and mortal: within it they develop, give expression to themselves. And encounter prohibitions; then they perish, and that same space contains their graves.93

Social space, then, incorporates all of life and the Johnson novels work to conflate mood, memory, geographic and social space in a Thirspace of lived experience. Albert Angelo unfolds in the Islington streets inhabited by Johnson whilst working in the Borough’s schools; Christie Malry, though written at a later date, travels back to the geographical areas of his earlier working life. Christie lives with his mother near Hammersmith Bridge and from the windows of Tapper’s confectioners can see St Paul’s Parish Church, the flyover and the Manbré & Garton Sugar Refinery that was a Fulham landmark until it was pulled down in 1979.94 Christie only leaves the area to visit the Shrike’s Old Mum, a character who just happens to live in the middle of the geographical area mapped by Albert Angelo, centred round the author’s home in Claremont Square. Readers familiar with Johnson’s work can easily fathom the intertextual references to be found in passages such as:

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93 Lefebvre, Production, 33–34.
Claremont Square must have been a fine point to view the City and the river at one time, before it was built on. But of course that is not really relevant to our purposes, since the Shrike’s Old Mum lived just on the eastern side of the ridge, down off Essex Road, at the flats in Britannia Row.95

Here we walk in Albert’s fictional shoes as he surveys architecture on a dérive down to the river and the two novels are connected as Christie moves from the space of one to the other. Christie describes the relation between the two areas in terms of cartography:

Islington is certainly up from Hammersmith, which is only some sixteen feet above sea level, […] Claremont Square[…] is just above the hundred foot contour line, say fifteen feet, making a height of a hundred and fifteen feet in all.96

In this passage two novels merge on one palimpsestic map97 where all of Johnson’s social and affective being is collected—an example of literary practice which “like all social practice [and] spatial practice is lived directly before it is conceptualized.”98

Christie’s Great Idea makes him feel invincible and indeed he settles scores against objects, individuals and the political system but he underestimates the underlying unpredictability of life to his peril. As soon as Christie has formulated his plan, he suffers the loss of his mother. Chapter III is entitled “Ave Atque Vale to Christie’s Mother,” a reference to Catullus 101, the elegiac poem written by the Roman poet on the death of his brother. The title translates as “I salute you and goodbye” a cursory phrase fit for summarizing the mother’s role in the novel for Christie’s mother barely features in the text. In Lefebvre’s model of social space, “death must be both represented and

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95 Johnson, Christie, 155.
96 Ibid.
97 Johnson’s London based texts would make fascinating material for the Maker Lab in the Humanities’ (University of Victoria) Z-axis tool which has been used in the spatial analysis and 3D printing of modernist novels. It is a programme that “does not project normalizing expressions of space (base maps) onto textual accounts of subjective experience and resists imposing GIS space upon texts that predate GPS technology. Instead, it produces warped, 3D maps used to analyse subjective experiences of space (particularly those influenced by gender, sexuality, class, and time). Rather than visualizing where elements of a text occur in a historical city, this tool expresses how and where texts themselves transform the city into subjective, interpretive versions of the historical geography to which it refers.” See: http://zaxis.uvic.ca/
98 Lefebvre, Production, 34.
rejected. Death too has a ‘location’, but that location lies below or above appropriated social space; death is relegated to the infinite realm so to disenthrall (or purify) the finiteness in which social practice occurs.”

In the text the mother’s death acts as a catalyst for the rising action; in fact, Christie’s mother only exists in relation to her son and his Great Idea, a fact that is acknowledged by the character thus: “My son: I have for the purposes of this novel been your mother for the past eighteen years […] Now that you have had your Great Idea and are set about your life’s work there is nothing further for me to do.” Christie’s mother is thus afforded the solemnity of an elegy but in death is made abject and is quickly dismissed from the social space.

Lefebvre states that “social space thus remains the space of society, of social life. Man does not live by words alone; all subjects are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose them themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify.” In the Thirdspace of Johnson’s sixth novel the reader is tasked with recognising themselves and their spatial activity. Christie’s outrageous crimes never catch up with him, but the chaos and unpredictability of life does, the realization that forces conspire to stop one being the master of one’s own destiny. Just as Christie believes that anything is possible, he discovers that he is riddled with inoperable cancer, and that he is a fictional character in a novel. Christie faces himself:

I need not have bothered, need I, it seems, if it all ends like this:
but if not like this for others it still ends. A mockery of

hope, of thinking of the next day. So I need not have bothered: all is

useless, pointless, waste

all, all pointless."

99 Lefebvre, Production, 35.
100 Johnson, Christie, 27.
101 Lefebvre, Production, 35.
102 Johnson, Christie, 178.
In death it seems, Christie experiences another Lefebvrian moment: he is a construct, his Great Idea has not borne fruit and he has failed to change the system, lost the spatial struggle. Christie Malry clears his accounts but ultimately nothing has changed, no end result has been reached. While addressing his creator he realises that his social being has amounted to nothing more than “a continuous dialogue,” a process of exploring the creative interplay of life and form; a project—nothing more, nothing less. In anger, he lashes out at his creator, the master curator of his actions: “In any case’ he said, almost to himself, not looking at me, you shouldn’t be bloody writing novels about it, you should be out there doing something about it,” but for the narrator the character has served his creative purpose.

In *Trawl* and *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* Johnson never lets the reader forget that the space of the novel is a creative project space, that it exists to explore ideas and solve problems. It is an added bonus if the processes involved result in the reader’s entertainment and reflection; as Christie helpfully points out to the narrator, “most people won’t read it.” If they do, entrenched behaviours of reading are challenged when the reader is confronted with Johnson’s bursts of non-standard expression—space is made to work and the reader must traverse columns of monologue, accounting sheets and lexis scattered across a page to pull together the “story” that Johnson despised. Johnson undertakes a campaign of resistance against the constraints of narrative convention and genre as Christie wages war against the privatized spaces of the late capitalist system. Autobiography elides with a ship’s log and anthropological study; accountancy and sociology collide. In the third and different space of the novel, a formal and generic struggle is

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104 Ibid., 165.
underway and creativity is the winner. Those involved—author, narrator, protagonist and reader—enter the liminal zone of an ongoing project together to

Explore the border areas between art, life and various forms of order and knowledge, playing with rules and constraints, invoking systems or methods of understanding, but in an amateur spirit, producing ‘works’ yet drawing the audience’s attention more to the (often mental) process to the finished product.

Liminality and process is perhaps most readily evident in *Trawl* when the narrator endures a rite-of-passage before moving on to the next stage of his life but disengagement and a sense of dark forces at play are also to be found in *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*. In this text space is reimagined as lived space that is socially produced and fought over, a Lefebvrian representational space that works through “complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art.” In this novel Johnson forges links between the different realities of space, its production and reproduction.

A spatial turn had taken Johnson some way towards the goal he was trying to achieve; it activated the possibility of moving between the concrete and the imaginary; the past and the present, the social and the individual; not with a view to reinforcing binaries but to open up thirdspaces of breath-taking scope. Yet space of any type “escapes in part from those who would make use of it,” and this in turn initiates an exploratory desire to hold fast, retain and make perpetual. A project’s permanence resides in the material object and the marks inscribed on space’s surface and this would be the next area of investigation to be undertaken.

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106 Lefebvre, *Production*, 33.
107 Ibid., 26.
Chapter 4. Inscribing space.

---A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey: therefore I employ, within the pocket of my publisher and the patience of my printer, typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel. To dismiss such techniques as gimmicks, or to refuse to take them seriously, is crassly to miss the point.\(^1\)

Any reading of B. S. Johnson cannot fail to consider the novelistic and typographic peculiarities encountered on opening any one of his novels. As the author declares in the passage from *Albert Angelo* above, Johnson’s pages are transformed from blank spaces to novel pages through the manipulation of material and typographic techniques as much as through lexis and narrative. As a project, Johnson’s endeavour was founded on rules and constraints and key amongst these was the ruling that all available affordances of the novel (within economic constraints) would be put to use in unexpected but shrewd ways. The emerging texts were malleable in their materiality, made to work harder (and therefore, in Johnson’s view more honestly) and go beyond the “arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel.”

The previous chapters have shown how Johnson’s project to make the novel work for its time helpfully throws light on the emerging spatial issues of the post-war period. Johnson’s engagement with space steadily moved beyond the purely thematic and geographic to social, political and aesthetic concerns. This exploration was not a steady one but had a tendency to circle back and move off at tangents: Johnson’s second novel, for example, carries a Lefebvrian suggestion that space may be socially produced and this is revisited again more forcefully in his sixth. The original constraints of the project gave rise to interesting “off-shoots” of the spatial project and this chapter will continue with the interdisciplinary drive of the thesis to employ

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aesthetic, anthropological and psychosocial theory to explore one. Johnson’s novels, whilst spatial in orientation, are also concerned with artistic form: any conception of space (physical or virtual) comes into being through boundaries; the marks which contain and shape the planes we inhabit and the places that we make. Johnson’s project often pauses to consider how, when confronted by space, the human impulse is to mark and possess it. These marks, be it the signs referred to in the quote from Albert Angelo or Christie’s mark scored on a wall, work as inscription, or “on-writing,” an act that transforms the spatial surface and projects meaning. Inscription denotes possession and relation and provides anchorage for the subject in a chaotic, changing world where space of any type “escapes in part from those who would make use of it.”

It is an instinct captured in the narrator’s desperate promise to a dying friend in *The Unfortunates* that “I’ll get it all down, mate” where inscription and form is used to rally against man’s essential mortality.

This chapter thus focuses on what has become a defining “node” of the Johnson project; it notes the author’s exploration of the active inscription of novelistic space. It is concerned with Johnson’s investment in form—the “arrangement of elements, an ordering, patterning or shaping” in four of Johnson’s novels. It concludes that the project harnesses graphic form not merely for form’s sake or as avant-garde posturing but to stake a claim on the space of lived experience and activate it for the reader.

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4 B. S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (London: Picador, 1999,) “Last,” 5. All subsequent references to this mostly un-paginated text will be identified by the first words of the chapter and the page number if available.

Making lines and wayfaring

On the last page of *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* the eponym’s concluding account sheet is reproduced in graphic form, declaring a final balance of £352,392 to be written off as “bad debt.” Christie is obliged to abandon his great project to settle his scores leaving Johnson’s self-declared “continuous dialogue with form” with a (by now very familiar) sudden ending. Scrawled across the page in the author’s handwriting is the phrase ACCOUNT CLOSED, underlined with a flourish. Visually, this holograph jars with the rest of the text, both the standard typesetting of the main body of the novel and the reproduction of the account sheets whose columns are neatly completed with typewritten words and figures. Such a stylistic fluctuation may appear to be inconsequential, the mere frippery of a postmodern author with a penchant for playing with form—earlier examples being the hole scored through the pages of *Albert Angelo* and the unbound leaves of *The Unfortunates*. Johnson’s “innovations” often came with antecedents, both attributed and unacknowledged. The blacked out pages of *Travelling People* are an unabashed homage to Laurence Sterne’s technique in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. This tribute is perhaps the reason why Sterne’s 1759 text is most often cited as a source of inspiration for Johnson’s work, but hidden within *Tristram Shandy* is another touchstone for Johnson’s developing style which is rarely remarked upon: the holograph or Sterne’s use of a hand-drawn line in Chapter 4 of his seminal work.7

Sterne’s line is explored by anthropologist Tim Ingold in *Lines: A History*, in his case for a new engagement with the essential energy of human activity. Ingold does not make a connection to Johnson’s practice but his reflections on artistic practice have resonance with any

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7 The 2004 omnibus edition of Johnson’s work that includes *Trawl, Albert Angelo, and House Mother Normal* also features a reproduction of the author’s autograph on the first recto page of the edition.
writer working on the possibilities, or what Caroline Levine would term the “affordances”\textsuperscript{8} of textual form. Ingold’s analysis begins with Sterne’s decision not to convey action in words but to invoke the gestures of a character graphically. Ingold comments,

When, pen in hand, Sterne recreated the flourish on the page, his gesture left an enduring trace that we can still read. The painter Paul Klee described this kind of line as the most active and authentic. Whether traced in the air or on paper, whether by tip of the stick or the pen, it arises from the movement of a point that – just as the Corporal intended – is free to go where it will, for movement’s sake.\textsuperscript{9}

Following the line visually or manually the reader traces the movements of both Sterne and the fictional Corporal who, in Sterne’s narrative, is required to wave his stick in the air. The reader thus accesses and enacts the fictional source movement kinetically instead of semantically via the medium of language. A minor point perhaps, but the holograph affords alternatives for a project intent on expanding the novel’s range of expression and capturing “truth” within its pages. Ingold reads Sterne’s line as “authentic” because it captures the movement and expression of the novel’s inception: the “truth” of its beginning. Truth here is performed by action, by the process of moving pen across paper as the writer makes his original mark to capture the reality of the gesture. Johnson, a self-professed fan of Sterne wittingly or unwittingly replicates these actions in \textit{Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry} two hundred and fourteen years later when the reader is shown as well as told that Christie’s account is closed. Yet Johnson’s engagement with marks and lines does not end with this one instance of a holograph in his penultimate novel. Indeed, on closer inspection, movement and lines become recurring motifs across the project. The pages of Johnson’s novels are never simply adorned with words but inscribed by a meshwork of the marks and lines interwoven by both the protagonists and readers of his novels.

\textsuperscript{8} Levine, \textit{Forms}, 6.

\textsuperscript{9} Tim Ingold, \textit{Lines: A Brief History} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 72–73.
Ingold’s remarks are perhaps rather romantic and invoke the heavily stylized image of the writer as monad, quill in hand. His reading is less concerned with Sterne’s objectives than with the response of the reader who will later encounter a reproduction of the line in the printed text—but in the case of Johnson, an author who truly believed “form follows function,” the intention behind any typographical irregularity is of interest to the scholar. There are clearly differences between the two authors’ use of holographs; Sterne’s construction is of an abstract form whilst Johnson’s scrawl is composed of the legible words that bring his sixth novel to a close—they also stand as signifiers that perform meaning through language. Nonetheless, Ingold’s writings can give us some additional insight into why Johnson’s inscription should not be overlooked and why it is part of his larger ongoing “dialogue with form.” Ingold’s theories are centred on the tension between the types of lines the individual generates. Quoting the artist Paul Klee he distinguishes between the active line (such as may be used in free drawing) that follows no set course and “develops freely in its own time,” and a pre-determined line (akin to those on a map) that carefully connects pre-selected points as efficiently as possible and is what Klee defines as the “quintessence of static.” Ingold endows both lines with a potential for invoking movement, but in differing degrees. The active line demarcates creative movement whereas the static line constitutes “a finished object, an artefact. Its constituent lines join things up, but do not develop or grow.” The active line is the trace of some original gesture whose potential waits to

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10 This maxim can be attributed to American architect, Louis Sullivan who used a version of it in his article “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered” in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine in March 1896, cited in Hannah B. Higgins, The Grid Book (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), 211. The original quotation is “form ever follows function”, but the phrase has entered popular usage in a simplified form.
12 Ingold, Lines, 73.
13 Ibid., 22.
14 Ibid., 74–75.
be interpreted; it involves the receiver in its unfolding, whereas the pre-determined line remains a passive referential model of teleology.

Of course, on the typeset page, the active line is an illusion and the swirl in Sterne’s work pays lip service to gesture; the original flourish of the author had been transfigured in the age of mechanical reproduction. The static line is undoubtedly the line of twentieth-century communication and solutions; it is to be found in the pixilated type of the printed page or the electronic screen and in the standardized maps used to chart the world. It is produced rather than crafted and efficiently eradicates the artisan markings of an earlier age. It is a form that subtly influences how the individual interacts with the world. Through static lines and boundaries form is imposed on the environment and place created because, as Levine suggests, “it is the work of form to make order.” Ingold suggests that man’s instinctive activity—a free-form wayfaring has been suppressed; modernity has curtailed natural human movement. Where once individuals meandered, modernity transports them through standardized “environments built of connected elements” where connectivity acts as a constraint as much as a convenience. The individual had come to occupy a world both helpfully reduced and rigidly fixed by boundaries and, as a consequence, it is only in a creative, projectural space that one still has the possibility to roam and explore freely with a kinetic authenticity. To promote this, Ingold suggests an anthropological project to re-examine and re-chart man’s interaction with space. These spaces are not passively waiting to be discovered but activated through a paradigm shift in which “to

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15 Reflecting on his writing style in an interview with the writer Alan Burns Johnson reveals a preference for manual practice: “I type at the very last stage. I work from those bits of paper in longhand on to loose-leaf lined quarto sheets. Sometimes for shorter pieces I work in manuscript books in pencil.” The interview was included in *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods* edited by Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London: Allison & Busby, 1981). The full text can be accessed at [http://bsjohnson.co.uk/page/2/](http://bsjohnson.co.uk/page/2/).
16 Levine, *Forms*, 3.
17 Ingold, *Lines*, 75.
understand how people do not just occupy but inhabit the environments in which they dwell, we might do better to revert from the paradigm of the assembly to that of the walk.”

Wayfaring is an instinctive process and a creative project that responds to and overcomes restraints rather than impose them; it leaves footsteps that work as an active inscription of human presence.

Wayfaring, then, can be considered as a spatialized approach to the anthropological codification of existence. It is realized through the subject’s linear movement in the world. The line has long been central to the on-going exploration of human experience and its representation. Johnson’s modernist predecessors, who like him aspired to capture “the moment-to-moment fragmentariness of life, my life, and to echo it in technique,” aimed for mimesis through the figurative breaking of the literary line—the rupturing of narrative chronology. In Johnson’s project an alternative approach can also be noted; one that takes place locally and graphically. Johnson’s project works through the possibilities of the essential unit of representational expression—the inscribed line—and its workings on and in space. It is an approach explored by Paul Klee in his Pedagogical Sketchbook; the “initial plan for a section of the theoretical instruction at the German Bauhaus begins and ends with the line.”

Sibyl Moholy Nagy comments in the introduction to the 1968 edition that for Klee, “the line, being successive dot progression, walks, circumscribes, creates passive-blank and active filled planes. Line rhythm is measured like a musical score or an arithmetical problem. Gradually, line emerges as the measure of all structural proportion.” Linearity conveys then not only metanarrative and the calibration of time but can be explored as a medium for creating the layers of experience, the forms and planes of a creative project. For primitive man lines (which may be smudges or

18 Ingold, Lines, 75.
19 Johnson, Albert, 169.
marks) were representative and referred backwards; they replaced a perception or a gesture and replicated the trails left by bodies in the world. But in art, as in nature, lines integrate to create new form and meaning. Generative and future directed these lines work to activate an unfolding present. This possibility becomes the basic premise of fine art where, according to Susanne Langer, “the primary illusion of virtual space comes at the first stroke of the brush or pencil that concentrated the mind entirely on the picture plane and neutralizes the actual limits of vision.”

Painterly lines hold the potential to neutralize the boundaries between the canvas and the experiential world. Rather than refer and reduce they unfold a virtual space of endless scope, a place that shuns boundaries akin to the space of lived existence. By engaging thus with both space and active lines, Johnson’s literary project takes another step towards “[the] articulation of an idea, and the effect would be perfect livingness of the work”—an authentic creative engagement in the artistic Thirdspace.

Creating artistic space

How, then, can these principles be transferred to other disciplines which seek to access a “perfect livingness of the work”? We encounter a version of the artist facing the canvas in the 1964 novel Albert Angelo. Johnson’s eponym is a supply teacher in London’s run-down state schools but has artistic aspirations. Albert dreams of being an architect but struggles to find inspiration when tasked to draw up formal plans, to project his fledgling ideas onto the passive plane of the paper’s surface. Johnson shows how, on a rare free day devoted to artistic pursuits, Albert’s drawing board is empty save for three lines and a spattering of soot from the open window. The surrounding space of the city, in the form of London smut, encroaches and demands expression,

\[\text{22 Susanne K. Langer, } \text{Feeling and Form: a Theory of Art developed from “Philosophy in a New Key” (London: Routledge, 1953), 84.}\]

\[\text{23 Ibid, 79.}\]
but Albert cannot create, his lines and his project remain unrealized. To activate his creativity, he leaves the drawing board and walks, embarking on a pedestrian interrogation of the city that unconsciously explores the interaction of movement and form. Johnson’s text then becomes filled with the names of the city: Amwell, Claremont, The Belvedere, Cable Street, Sidney Street, Claremont Square. The individual names act as possessive markers on the map, a trail of dots that connect to make an active line, a trace of a fictional movement. Albert appears to be taking literal cues from Klee when, in an attempt to fill the passive-blank space of his drawing board, he takes the line for a walk. Whilst the fictional board remains empty, a vision of the city unfolds within the frame of the page for the reader. Post-war London unfolds step-by-step:

There must be cafés for ten or a dozen nationalities—Maltese, West Indians, Somalis, West Africans, Turkish and Greek Cypriots, and so on—and we usually go in a West Indian or Somali one. There’s always a jukebox with their own pop music in it. One particular one we like has a dicegame on the ground floor and a club underneath it. Another has a football game we can play for sixpence. The Strasse has a reputation for all sorts of vice: but we never see much, and would be disappointed if we were merely tourists seeking it.  

Albert and Terry are not mere tourists or commuters they belong to the city as “London kids” and are attuned to its rhythms. Within the space of the street they shrug off their constraining daily roles to become amateur anthropologists and sociologists.

Nonetheless, tactics such as these could be interpreted as those of the procrastinator and the dilettante. Albert is, after all, positioned as an “architect-manqué” by those around him, a derisory term that suggests failure and lack, a missed opportunity to meet a particular ambition. But it is in this very lack of professionalism and training that his creativity may just be found; it

24 Johnson, Albert, 51.
25 Ibid., 51.
26 Ibid., 29.
constitutes an example of the “deterritorialisation of art,” a crossing of disciplinary boundaries. In post-war London, Johnson walked the same streets in Clerkenwell and beyond, taking projectural cues from extra-disciplinary poetics and citing Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe as creative influences:

\[
\text{To create form out of the nature of our tasks}
\]
\[
\text{With the methods of our time—this is our task.}
\]

\[
\text{We must make clear, step by step, what things}
\]
\[
\text{are possible, necessary, and significant.}
\]

*Albert Angelo* unfolds thus from Johnson’s response to this dictate. The writer must somehow reveal the writing process and structures to the reader step by step in a literary blueprint. Thus in *Albert Angelo* the five parts of the novel are outlined for the reader at the outset. Through the rhythm of footfall the protagonist connects and outlines the spaces of London whilst the author (like van der Rohe) strives to present his creation with the “methods of [his] time,”

A curious consequence of Johnson’s on-going formal exploration of the active line is that long before *Albert Angelo*’s explosive metafictive outburst in the “Disintegration” section, the author’s presence becomes foregrounded in the text. This is due to the reader becoming aware of creative decisions being made, of the inscriber behind the inscription. The reader encounters the text as a spontaneous and unpredictable “work in progress.” It is relevant to note here that Ingold suggests that an active line has affinity with an oral narrative tradition that predates inscription,


\[29\] Johnson, *Albert*, 175.
one in which “the things of which the story tells, let us say, do not so much exist as occur; each is a moment of ongoing activity.” Oral narration in this view is responsive and fluctuating, reliant on its reviver to assist in its unfolding. For one section of Albert Angelo Johnson’s prose not only foregrounds the writer but the reader too—the uncommon use of a second person narration helps to usher the reader into the work and absorb them into the text’s mundane urban rhythms. The reader thus walks the city streets with or in place of Albert, surveying the architecture, feeling drained by the demands of a humdrum job: “at the end of the afternoon you feel very tired. You have tripled your Greek vocabulary. You catch a bus home.” This narrative “You” is just one of the many ways in which Albert Angelo can be read as a novel of voices—resoundingly ordinary voices that lapse into jokey asides, obscenities and colloquial phrasing. Sections of the novel are delivered as scripted dialogues to be performed, attendance registers are called and responded to; accents transcribed. Even the homework assigned to Albert’s students is seized upon as an opportunity to directly address another party:

Mr Albert

I think you are a man who likes hitting children and kick their behinds. You call us peasants I say you are a big fat peasant and a fatty lamb chop. You goe in public houses nearly every night. You ought to hang yourself or Commit suicide in the River Thames Your a bloody nuisance a big Head…

Tensions here are created between the expected style of both a novel and a composition’s execution. The narrative and the fictional task are delivered in an informal register composed of idiosyncratic phrasing and syntax, the unsophisticated verbalizations which evoke a child’s

30 Ingold, Lines, 84.
31 Johnson, Albert, 44.
32 Ibid., 162.
speech. The moment affords both the opportunity for comedy and another example of *Albert Angelo*’s actual narrative being subordinated to “the procedures that enable it to get underway.”

The children’s compositions are recounted at the end of the “Development” section of *Albert Angelo*, the part of the novel that develops the rising action of the narrative. In fact, the section opens with an earlier assignment for Albert’s charges—a selection of compositions which revolve round incidents of aggression and deviance in the city. The juvenile prose again replicates oral delivery and contrasts starkly with the prose that follows—extracts from Frankl’s reflections on the Gothic style, a heavily stylized academic work, a formal analysis of an already finished past rather than a witnessed dramatic present. After negotiating these contrasting discourses the reader is challenged to follow competing bodies of text for the following thirty pages. In one column direct speech is conveyed, in the other, Albert’s interior monologue. Further typographic “gimmicks” follow: the appearance of a new symbol that indicates the reader is permitted to skip a descriptive section, lines of poetry appear and reproductions of a flyer “found” by the protagonist occupy the space of two pages. When the narrator/author famously ruptures the narrative in “Disintegration” to exasperatedly cry “OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING,” it appears that the strain of the novel’s aims has become so overwhelming that the literary *fourth wall* shatters. However, this project in which “accents and selections, as well as radical distortions or utter departures from any ‘actual form’ of objects, have the purpose of making space visible,” has also given the author no choice but to become visible too and much earlier in the text. Through pursuing an active line, the boundaries of *Albert Angelo* shift to allow both the instance of writing and the author to be included within its space; the novel becomes a

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33 Gratton and Sheringham, *Project*, 1.  
34 Johnson, *Albert*, 163.  
35 Langer, *Feeling*, 77.
space of active process—a “lure, a device designed not to achieve a particular end, but to allow something unforeseen to happen.”

Internal boundaries between fact and fiction have also blurred, but the result is declared by the author to be “a mess, such a mess, so many loose ends.” Albert is dispatched without uttering another word never to finish his project but leaving a vivid and active impression on artistic space.

Using Ingold’s terms, we might say that Johnson’s project positions the novel not as a literary object but as “a practice of inscription.” This act brings into relief both the materiality of the text and the inscriber whose mark does not make the creative plane transparent but bring it, instead, into presence and acknowledge its affordances. The inscriptions convey the instinctive movement of life, its contrasts and tensions. Johnson also works an active line when selecting the content of his novels, anecdotal lines that connect the dots of prior movement, that “relate, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning out their own.”

Through active lines the reader is encouraged to become part of the novel’s unfolding, to entwine their own movements with that of the text. The reader is challenged to meander and trespass; to take a different line down the page, to skip parts, to stray from the narrative path and peep through the hole in an act of literary wayfaring. Johnson integrates the paths taken on his own journey into a narrative present that includes the experience of producing the text itself. The

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38 Ingold, *Lines*, 3.
39 Ibid., 90.
text actively unfolds, “free to go where it will, for movement’s sake,” an exercise in spatial and formal potential.

**Elegiac inscription in The Unfortunates**

The investigations into form and space that begin in *Albert Angelo* continue in *The Unfortunates*, the novel which remains the most lauded of Johnson’s literary experiments. The content of *The Unfortunates* is again rooted in the everyday and typically for Johnson its subject matter is to be found in both the mundane and profound aspects of human existence: shelter and work; love, disease and death. Its paths meander across the landscapes of fifties and sixties’ Britain—joining the dots of Nottingham, Lincoln, London and Brighton on the map. Whilst the content of the novel is situated in common human experience, the format of this 1969 text—a “book in a box”—was considered rather “experimental” for its time. Johnson refuted this qualification as he believed that the term suggested the project (and its creator) had failed in some way. In the novel’s submission letter to his publisher he said:

> I think the idea has succeeded well beyond my expectations. To me, at least, it really does reflect the random way in which the past and present interact in the mind: it is an enactment of randomness which the bound book simply cannot achieve.

Johnson alludes here to a major concern of the novel: memory, or the interconnection of the past and the present through the workings of the mind. The novel was created as an elegy for his close friend Tony Tillinghast who died of cancer in 1966. Johnson had promised to “get it all

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40 Ingold, *Lines*, 72–73.
and thus create a lasting literary memorial to the man, to embody their relationship through the inscribed pages of the text.

In the first chapter, Johnson remarks that Tony “had a great mind for such detail, it crowded his mind like documents in the public Records Office.” Unable as he is to access the contents of the deceased Tillinghast’s mind, Johnson set about collating his memories of the friendship in a box containing twenty-seven unbound folios to be read in any order that the reader pleased, or chance dictated. It wasn’t the first time such an innovation had been tried, Marc Saporta’s Composition No. 1 (1963) had used the same technique but with individual leaves of fictional prose and without Johnson’s framing “First” and “Last” chapters. Julio Cortázar’s Rayuela (Hopscotch) was translated into English in 1966 and works as a “counter-novel” of 155 chapters, 99 of which are deemed by the Cortázar to be “expendable.” All of these novels disrupt and challenge the notion of a chronologically linearity and prompt the reader to engage in new ways of approaching narrative. When faced with The Unfortunates, the reader makes the decision on how to proceed with the unbound sections: the equivalent of the wayfarer standing at the intersection of many roads. The reader is gifted agency and may choose whether to read in the order assigned by the manufacturing process or to shuffle and re-distribute the leaves randomly—to read freely. If the book is borrowed, and a prior reading has taken place, the reader (if they do not shuffle) reverts to being the passive receiver of form. As Levine (via Foucault) suggests, “even seemingly ordinary arrangements of space and time permitted certain circulations of power, while foreclosing others”—once more the reader follows a pre-determined narrative line. By unbinding the leaves, Johnson subtly invites the reader to assert themselves over others, to create spatial arrangements and form for themselves.

43 Johnson, Unfortunates (Last), 5.
44 Johnson, Unfortunates, (First), 1.
45 Levine, Forms, x.
Johnson’s decision to provide a first and last chapter for his text is often used as evidence of failure of what must be an essentially aleatorical novel aimed at invoking the randomness of experience. This critique supports the position that form seeks to control and shape and indeed, the bold type of the titles “FIRST” and “LAST” stand out as anomalies amongst folios headed by pictorial symbols; the words focus our attention on the provisional boundaries of the text. By foregrounding the artistic frame, the writer draws the spectator into the passive blank space of the novel. By inscribing this plane with an active line the limitless space of experience expands. In “First” and “Last” we see not the failure of the piece but the essential tensions and constraints that enable a project to spring forth. Within these boundaries, Johnson inscribes life as “wayfaring”; every single journey in the foundational frame becomes entwined with the trails of others and the individual reader is drawn into an ever widening mesh of “becoming” that is without beginning or end and overflows the boundaries of page, folio, or text. In the case of an elegiac text, this resistance to ending is particularly significant. Johnson’s refusal to acknowledge closure in this text has been noted by scholar Julia Jordan as being “embedded in the grammar and syntax of Johnson’s prose.” She assesses that

*The Unfortunates* goes to great lengths to defer its full stops because they demarcate the moment at which memory gives way to blankness, when the confrontation with death that the text has notionally been trying to conjure suddenly intrudes: the full stops are nodal points of anxiety and of loss.

The static pooled ink of the full stop equates to movement and experience stilled and brought under control. Johnson’s rejection of this formal convention defiantly challenges the progression of terminal illness itself; alongside the aleatorical sequencing of unbound folios it permits the patient to be miraculously delivered from death’s door to rude health in one turn of the page.

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Both Jordan and also Buchanan (2014) identify the somewhat conditional nature of Johnson’s prose in *The Unfortunates*, where repetitions and qualifications conspire to undermine the authority of the narrative voice. Buchanan identifies Johnson’s sketchy portrayal of his girlfriend Wendy as symptomatic of a “draft-like prose” that makes explicit the difficulty of relying on visual memories. Once again Johnson’s prose directs the reader back to the motif of the artist facing the blank page where, “to use the metaphor of drafting, these penciled-in provisional drafts of characters are rubbed out as soon as they begin; they are provisionally established only to be effaced, made thin and indistinct.” Such loose characterization fuels the active aspect of the work—it appears spontaneous and hastily revised—a “work-in-progress,” a novel that refuses to stop. This novel is also another instance of the blurring of professional lines and spaces; this poetic, thoughtfully crafted work of experimental elegy is also an account and transcript of a day’s work where the narrator weaves the tangible product of his profession (a football report) into the final text.

**Narrative pathways in the city**

*The Unfortunates* is thus a book of contrasts; its fabula concerns the deterioration of health and pits the trajectory of cancer against growing professional and financial status. The pathways of two friends’ lives, which seemingly run along parallel lines, bifurcate sharply thanks to both

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48 Ibid., 57.

49 Buchanan makes a connection between Johnson’s prose style in *The Unfortunates* and Alexandra Georgakopoulou’s concept of “small stories”: contingent, incomplete narrative events that are used daily in communication.

50 In “Telling life, telling death: *The Unfortunates*” Tredell notes, “As in the traditional elegy, the relationship between elegist and elegized – both of whom in fact, are products of the elegy – is complex,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, V. 2, (Summer 1985): 39. Johnson’s refusal of closure, however, suggests an on-going relationship that is renegotiated over time.
chance and form before regularly intersecting at various geographical and textual points. The relationship is followed from its initiation in the student flats of London and Lincoln to its end in a bungalow on the South coast where Tony spends his last days. These openings and closings are not given any particular weight or prominence within the szujet; the loosely bound folios mean that all units of action become equally weighted and so the beginning and end points of the relationship stand as memories amongst many others—recollections of trips to the theatre, former girlfriends, and conversations in the pub. Narrative space is devoted to Tillinghast’s encroaching cancer, but with no more detail than Johnson’s accounts of tasty meals in the various restaurants he liked to frequent. This tactic stands as a defense against any rose-tinted nostalgia which may seduce and undermine the ultimate sobering truth of the narrative. Chastising himself for such a slip, Johnson notes:

I sentimentalize again, the past is always to be sentimentalized, inevitably, everything about him I see now in the light of what happened later, his slow disintegration, his death. The waves of the past batter at the sea defences of my sandy sanity, need to be safely pictured, still, romanticized, prettified.\(^{51}\)

The metaphor of the wave embodies the movement of a text in which the narrator is propelled between points in each new folio that is selected, sometimes doubling back in both time and direction. Indeed, locomotion initiates the narrative for on arrival at Nottingham railway station, the narrator exclaims, “But I know this city!” and an exploration of memory and experience is triggered by the sights, smells and sounds of the transportation hub as the narrator is transported back to his first experiences of the city he came to know with his friend. As Vermont shows itself to Wallace Stevens in a particular affective moment so Nottingham spontaneously unfolds to the narrator anew. Leaving the railway on foot, he remembers and feels as he walks through and along the spaces of his memory.

\(^{51}\) Johnson, *Unfortunates*, (I had a lovely flat), 2.
The Unfortunates is thus much concerned with finding one’s way—retracing the narrator’s steps as he hitchhikes as a young man in his memory, paces city streets as a football reporter in the narrative present and negotiates both familiar and unfamiliar terrain. Modern urban life is revealed to be crisscrossed with competing tracks and trails, spaces to be traversed:

Cast parapet, pierced rondel design, the canal oiling its way under, under, and the great letters on the end wall of a warehouse BRITISH WATERWAYS, weathered, flaking, the midland red brick sound, it appears, the red strong enough to come through that amount of blackening, of discoloration, and the buses, I remember, great green and cream buses, and yes, they have trolleybuses in this city too, the disfiguring lines overhead.52

What is unclear in this passage is the relation of the modes of transport in time, the green and cream buses appear as memories triggered by the colours of the canal, but it is uncertain if the trolley lines are perceived or remembered. In either case the trolley lines connect to an earlier memory of trams in the London of Johnson’s youth—a convenience now long gone:

I remember them taking down the supports, masts would they be called, poles, the relief of the clearing of the air, literally, in certain streets, King Street Hammersmith, for one place, which seemed so much less oppressive once overhead lines had gone.53

What is key in these extracts is the prominence of linear imagery—the straight lines of the warehouses and canal and the overhead lines which serve not only to power transport and connect places but act as the conduit through which the narrator moves in time. Lines convey and enforce power; it is noted that the street becomes less oppressive once the lines have been removed. Linear form is imposed on the environment by those who seek to parcel up the environment into profitable units for consumption. Klee recognized that by employing an active line the creative individual could free him or herself:

Man uses his ability to move freely in space to create for himself optical adventures. What are railroad ties? Functional cross-beams, occurring at regular intervals. Yes, but

52 Johnson, Unfortunates, (Cast), I.
53 Ibid.
they are also subdivisions of infinite space, capable of bisecting the third dimension at a hundred different angles.\textsuperscript{54}

The artist recognizes here the creative and liberating potential of linear arrangements. Likewise, in \textit{The Unfortunates}, as though contemplating a canvas, the narrator surveys the worlding in which he is wayfaring:

\begin{quote}
The trolleybus wires decline shallowly, irregularly away, down, then up, in the distance, this must have been a valley, beside the castle mound, from the railway, no, the railway would have altered the contours, the slope from here is from the wide bridge at the railway entrance, an artificial level, practical topography, is that it? The wires lead into the city, they lead out again, make something significant of that!\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

Practical challenges are presented here, the problem of conveying both the narrative present and historic past through only the medium of marks on a page.

Surveyed from above and from a cartographical perspective, Johnson’s literary evocation of Nottingham is angular and fixed; it is interlaced with networks that will transport the individual as efficiently as possible from A to B. But down below, in the lived space\textsuperscript{56} of the city, Johnson negotiates the city in a different way. Tasked with passing time before the start of the football match he has come to report on, his natural impulse is to meander: “Time? A quarter past twelve. Nearly two hours to kill, to have lunch, rather, before I need think of work, of going on, wander off, then.”\textsuperscript{57} Before recognizing his location, reason tells him to take a taxi straight to the football ground, but on realizing that the city is, in fact, familiar he decides to navigate the city on foot. Johnson’s tale therefore is initiated by a single step and a bond is forged between the city, the act of walking, and the mechanics of story-telling. One step leads to countless others, reflecting on the footsteps that fill our cities, scholar Michel de Certeau asserts, “their

\textsuperscript{54} Klee, “Pedagogical,” 10.
\textsuperscript{55} Johnson, \textit{Unfortunates}, (Last), 2.
\textsuperscript{56} See Chapter 3, page 147 for a consideration of Lefebvre’s \textit{lived space}.
\textsuperscript{57} Johnson, \textit{Unfortunates}, (First), 3.
swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shapes to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these ‘real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city.’”\textsuperscript{58} The suggestion here is that the lines woven through the city thus endow it with reality in an act of pedestrian inscription. As the de Certeauvian individual appropriates the urban landscape he transforms it into meaningful narrative—a “space of enunciation.”\textsuperscript{59} The walker activates the potential of the city as he engraves it with his trail in an on-going social project. It is theory that straddles the boundaries between disciplines for this pedestrian act is analogous with that of “the ‘hand’ (the touch and the tale of the paintbrush [*le et la geste du pinceau*]) and the finished painting (forms, colors etc.)”\textsuperscript{60} In Johnson’s text the enunciation is produced equally by the writer and the receiver of the text; the reader selects their own path through the novelistic space. Like any urban walker, the reader can choose to “condemn certain places to inertia or disappearance and compose with others spatial ‘turns of phrase’ that are ‘rare,’ ‘accidental’ or illegitimate.”\textsuperscript{61} In Johnson’s space of enunciation each individual journey speaks its own path.

In life as in the text each encounter with the city permits a new story to be told, but within the text the narrator relies on fallible memory as a guide rather than the stories of others. The traces he follows, then, have been inscribed in his mind’s eye and do not exist in material form. He remembers,

I should turn right, right towards the city centre, yes, ah, and that pub! On one visit here I came from this station sullen with depression, savage at myself for some reason I found it hard to define, isolate: and went into that pub, the nearer, on the corner, green glass,

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 99.
leaded panes, ordinary, for relief, which was a green shield Worthington, as I remember, if I remember. By moving freely, or wayfaring, through the city his memory is affected to reconstitute the residue of prior inscriptions—Johnson follows his own emotional shadow and trace. The act of walking triggers not only a new imagining of the city’s text but a connection to anterior mood. The walker re-encounters the emotion felt, colours perceived and even the taste of the beer, yet at other times fails to make sense of the city at all being caught in endless circuits that never deliver him to a destination. It is a sensation that Johnson struggles to describe. He observes, “The mind circles, at random, does not remember, from one moment to another, other things interpose themselves, the mind’s _________. “63 The end of the transcribed thought falls away as the mind’s focus switches to the unfolding cityscape and the movement of his feet. Johnson is adrift in thought but not lost in the city as he is automatically led down anterior paths. His mind does not remember but circles; failing to inscribe it enacts a gesture without beginning or end.

Printed form and the tyranny of the page

The themes and narrative content of The Unfortunates are supported by Johnson’s evocation of an active line through the city and the past but the biggest challenge of the text within the wider project was to adequately express the movement of the piece within the printed and standardized format of the modern novel. To further expand the virtual space of the novel, the author encourages an increased engagement of the senses involved in the act of reading. The reader feels all four edges of the page as they are shuffled and encounters the unyielding sides of the box that frame the artistic space. The eyes are drawn to the inscriptions and newspaper cutting on

62 Johnson, Unfortunates, (Cast), I.
63 Ibid. (sic.)
the inner box, the motifs that decorate the folios. The visual aspects of the page are exploited to “establish virtual proportions, connections and focal points”\textsuperscript{64} that will be overwritten by the kinetic energy of memory and perambulation. In \textit{The Unfortunates}, the author fights hard to overcome the rigidity of the printed word and bound page—the formal inflexibility that has been noted by others working with the materiality of the book such as the Toronto Research Group.\textsuperscript{65} This group, working shortly after Johnson’s death, believed that, “in extended prose or poetry the page becomes an obstacle to overcome.”\textsuperscript{66} Amongst others, B. S. Johnson is referenced as an artist of interest to the group.

\textit{The Unfortunates’} unbound folios are one step towards addressing the obstacle of the page but Johnson employs additional techniques to achieve this aim. The Toronto Research Group noted that books “organize[s] content along three modules: the lateral flow of the line, the vertical or columnar build-up of the lines on the page and thirdly a linear movement organized through depth (the sequential arrangement of pages upon pages.)”\textsuperscript{67} All three modules are modified by Johnson in \textit{The Unfortunates}: firstly, the unbound pages allow for the linear module of depth to be reconfigured as the strata of pages are shuffled. Secondly, the lateral flow of the line is modulated by hiatuses and the manner in which the frequency of clauses is lengthened and shortened by the sporadic usage of the full stop. A walking rhythm is thus invoked, with the lateral flow replicating the hesitant footfall of the uncertain traveler. The Toronto Research

\textsuperscript{64}Langer, \textit{Feeling}, 76.
\textsuperscript{67}Ibid., 60.
Group noted that, “traditional printed narrative is largely thought of as the transcription of a hypothetical oral activity: a speech line running from a point of commencement to an end,”⁶⁸ and this exemplifies the type of linear realist writing that Johnson hoped to make obsolete. It is the smooth movement of mechanized systems that Johnson would replace with his walking-pace affective prose “which alternatively follows a path and has followers, creates a mobile organicity in the environment, a sequence of phatic topoi.”⁶⁹ Thirdly, and as noted by Sebastian Jenner, Johnson also favours the “stacking of clauses upon each other” and splices commas “to form sentences that span almost a page.”⁷⁰ Johnson’s narrative transcribes movement that stops and starts—it makes and breaks relationships through the columnar build-up of lines which utilize shifts in pedestrian and mental direction as natural breaks in the text. The spatial dominion of the page is challenged.

As noted by Buchanan, Jenner and others, Saporta’s Composition No. 1 has an almost identical format to Johnson’s fourth novel—a box pragmatically used as a receptacle for loose leaves of autonomous narrative, a gesture which is centred on the premise of the power of the unbound sheets to disconcert and disrupt. However, The Unfortunates’ materiality is utilized not to invoke disconcertion but to trigger recognition. Its unusual structure encourages the reader to engage in new tactics of reading, to employ the same techniques that we may use in the course of our own daily wanderings. Like Johnson, on arrival at Nottingham Station we must decide which way is best to proceed to reach our intended destination: a full engagement with the text. Without the guidance of traditional form (linear structure, a map) we cannot proceed in a pre-determined

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⁶⁸ McCaffery and Nicol, Rational, 62.
⁶⁹ de Certeau, Everyday, 99.
manner but must rely on chance, whim and memory to piece together a whole narrative picture, to follow a life. We are tasked with perceiving the fabula from a potentially chaotic szujet in the same manner in which we attempt to make sense of the occurrences of our own lives—by forming our own structures. Johnson promised to his friend that he would “get it all down,” but it matters not in which order the connecting points in Johnson and Tillinghast’s stories are approached; the reader makes their own way and death cannot be denied. Whilst the events told and this mode of reading is perhaps not familiar to us, the movements we make are—our “muscle memories” are triggered as we weave our way through the text. As when facing an unexplored town, we activate space with our wanderings. As wayfarers the rhythms of thought, feeling and motion move in tandem creating place.

Perhaps most significantly, the trace the wayfaring reader leaves (the order of the pages that is left behind) takes the form of a new thread that intertwines with the now historic paths of Johnson and Tillinghast and a new text is potentially created (and discarded) with every fresh reading of the book. The wayfaring reader becomes part of the experience of the book, moving through its spaces rather than across the page. Ingold suggests that, “It is within such a tangle of interlaced trails, continually raveling here and unravelling there, that beings grow or ‘issue forth’ along the lines of their relationships.” Johnson’s active mode of expression reflects that the truth of human existence is flexibly connective and that ‘it is as lines of movement, not as mobile self-propelled entities that beings are instantiated in the world.’ Even in death, this movement cannot be stopped. Leaving the funeral, Johnson looks up to the sky and sees,

71 Johnson, Unfortunates, (Last), 5.
73 Ibid.
a straight column rising from the chimney of the crematorium, it went straight upwards, as far as smoke can ever be said to move in a straight lines, into the haze, the sky, it was too neat, but it was, it was.  

Through the writing and reading of the novel, Tillinghast’s movement can still be traced, it becomes eternal and the elegy form becomes inverted; rather than eulogizing the dead it “issues forth” his on-going being in an unfolding world. Yet ultimately the concern expressed is that the line chosen here as a motif is still too straight, too neat. Expressing disappointment at the refusal of his Hungarian publishers to reproduce the book in its un-bound boxed format, Johnson reflected, “What all Hungarian readers cannot help but miss is the physical feel, disintegrative, frailty of this novel in its original format; the tangible metaphor for the random way the mind works.”  

The metaphor extends not only to the machinations of the mind but to a captured “being-in-the-world,” a fragile “tissue of trails that together comprise the texture of the lifeworld.”  

In this way it can be said that Johnson really did “get it all down” within the boundaries of The Unfortunates. The restrictive form of the box protectively frames not merely what Ingold terms a “self-propelled entity” but is the constraint that unfolds the “domain of entanglement” of an authentic social being.

By designating a section as “Last” Johnson seemingly indicates the point from which the reader will unravel his or her trail from the domain they have joined in the act of reading the text, but according to Jordan, this framework was imposed by an anxious publisher unwilling to relinquish all modes of traditional novelistic form. There is no guarantee that the reader will follow this imposed directive; within the narrative there is no set beginning or end to the

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74 Johnson, Unfortunates, (We were late).
76 Ingold, Alive, 69.
77 Ibid., 70.
relational field that has been woven and the reader can freely select from the multiple entry and exist points of the larger entanglement that is the inscribed life. The box and the defining chapters imposed by Johnson have a curious dual aspect that both “afford[s] containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion.”\footnote{Levine, \textit{Forms}, 6.} They are the foundation of a project that both highlights the constructed and imposed nature of form and yet welcomes the reader into an unfolding space in which differing forms combine to create a holistic experience of reality. Within the box, the unbound folios permit the reader to explore the project space in a pedestrian fashion. The reader

Affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it “speaks.” All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taken and the walker.\footnote{de Certeau, \textit{Everyday}, 99.}

Writing and reading become aligned with speaking and walking not in a text but in a “happening” within the project space.

\textit{House Mother Normal} and isolating form

\textit{The Unfortunates} was written under the shadow of death and Johnson’s next novel, \textit{House Mother Normal} was overshadowed by death once more; it was swiftly written\footnote{Though perhaps not as swiftly as Faulkner’s 1930 novel of interior monologues, \textit{As I Lay Dying}, which was written between the hours of midnight and 4.00 am over the course of 6 weeks.} between February and November of 1970—a period in which Johnson’s beloved mother was suffering from the same disease that had taken Tony Tillinghast in 1964. A few months after \textit{House Mother Normal} was published in 1971, Johnson’s mother was dead and hope seemingly extinguished. \textit{House Mother Normal} is orientated by a different mood then the earlier works: a
“flatness” of spirit noted by biographer Coe and many of Johnson’s associates, one that had been developing steadily since Tony’s death in the mid-sixties. Coe notes that, “his mother’s death had brought Johnson the kind of pain that literature is rarely able to assuage.”

Perhaps as a consequence of the pain and a guilt arising from the exploitation of personal loss, Johnson’s subsequent novel, _House Mother Normal_ (1971) is the only Johnson novel that does not draw directly on episodes from his life. A singular first-person authorial confessional view-point is abandoned as the reader is invited into the interior monologues of different individuals who occupy a retirement home. It is therefore a Johnson anomaly in many ways—the partially-fabricated characters that had been rejected on account of their fictional status in the preceding novels are permitted within this text which explores the themes of old age and “normalcy.”

Ironically, Valerie Butler notes how _House Mother Normal_ was offered to the BBC Radio Drama department as a play for broadcast only to see it rejected possibly due to its explicit sexual content. Its form places it squarely as a successor to works of the early to mid-twentieth century that explore the interior monologue such as Joyce’s _Ulysses_ (1922), Faulkner’s _As I Lay Dying_ (1930) and _Tea with Mrs Goodman_ by Philip Toynbee (1947), and predecessor to later interpretation of the technique seen in Alan Bennet’s series of dramatic monologues _Talking Heads_ (1988 and 1989) and Graham Swift’s _Last Orders_ (1996). In particular, Bennet’s character of the centenarian Violet (played by Thora Third) would not be out of place in

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82 Coe, _Fiery_, 323.
Johnson’s work and testifies to the theatrical potential (overlooked by the BBC) of the piece but explored by filmmaker Beatrice Gibson in 2010.85

What most obviously links House Mother Normal to The Unfortunates is its experimental drive; Johnson’s interlocking of interior monologues affords the novel extended possibilities for connecting events over time. Each character is allotted the spatial unit of twenty-one pages apiece and this covers the same amount of narrative time: one evening in which the residents have dinner and are bullied into activities hosted by the grotesque House Mother of the title. The page numbers are reset for each character’s section in a manner akin to a “turning back of the clock” so that the thoughts in identical spatial positions, on say pages numbered “5” happen at the same point in time. Time is thus compressed and manipulated with the result that the text does not progress in a linear chronological fashion, but instead replays the same chunk of time over and over again. This is a novel that requires careful reading for its truth to be unlocked. As Coe notes it is a novel “can be read vertically as well as horizontally,”86 it permits new affordances to the mapped area of the page and exploits all three of the modules of content outlined by the Toronto Research Group. Just as we find a forerunner to The Unfortunates in Saporta’s experimental Composition No. 1, Raymond Queneau’s Exercices de style (1947, 1958 in English), a text in which the same event is recalled 99 times, predates House Mother Normal by some years. 87

87 Queneau was a co-founder of the Oulipo a group of experimental writers and mathematicians who employed self-imposed constraint as a means of literary production. Form, instead of being a tool of power and restraint, became generative and creative. Oulipian writers approached language systematically, viewing it as a finite collection of items that could be arranged in different permutations to an artistic end. The inclusion of mathematicians in the workshop add a scientific calculation and
Manipulation of form supports the themes of Johnson’s text where it is employed to create alienation. By allocating each character a set amount of individual space the residents of the home, on first inspection, appear to be isolated—imprisoned by the pages they occupy, prohibited from sharing space with their cohorts. The House Mother refers to her charges as “friends” but there is little evidence of this, indeed it is an empty term. The House Mother acknowledges the transience of defining labels stating “we no longer refer to them as inmates, cases, patients or even clients.” This carousel of terminology for the elderly reflects society’s difficulty in positioning those in the process of ageing and dying. These particular individuals are without family, leading the House Mother to reduce them to the category of NERs or “no effective relatives,” a negative term predicated on lack. As a result, these individuals are housed collectively in a residence outside of society, but imprisoned in their allocated units. The space of the retirement home is a liminal one, one which is positioned by Foucault as “on the borderline between the heterotopias of crisis and the heterotopias of deviance since, after all, old age is a crisis, but it is also a deviation since, in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation.” In short, within the space of the modern care home, the elderly are marginalized having no useful role in society, neither contributing labour nor acting as effective agents of leisurely consumption. These elders are consequently moved to different spaces so that

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the younger generation might take up key hegemonic positions and society may keep functioning along its fixed tracks like a well-oiled machine.

Social structures and disengagement

Within society’s sphere, the care home is the space where human wayfaring ends and stasis is sovereign. Confined to their individual units, the elderly no longer make their way freely along the pathways of life; but slowly become immobile and disengaged or “disentangled” from society. As for their youthful counterparts who engage in adolescent liminal separation, the elderly resident finds that social exclusion is accompanied by certain inner-changes that help them prepare for the next life stage they would pass through, in their case, death. In the late fifties these changes were recorded by Elaine Cumming et al in a sociological theory of the older person’s place in society that promoted the elderly’s disengagement from social structures (which is spatially enforced by the retirement home) as “universal, inevitable and healthy.”

Cummings notes that these inner-changes are exemplified by “the emergence of eccentricities and the free expression of a certain self-centeredness [which] must be related to release from the normative control of behaviour.” Disengagement theory finds positivity in the unravelling experienced in old age; it posits that personal freedom is to be found through the loosening of social and interpersonal relations.

In *House Mother Normal* the reader encounters elderly citizens who have taken a final side-step into a Foucauldian “different space” and are in the process of disengagement. This is

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not to say that the space of either the novel or the home is without structure, the organizational structure of both is composed of a series of binaries and hierarchies that interlock and compete with each other. The elderly residents have no support system and are completely reliant on the House Mother who exploits them as commodities and views them as a source of entertainment and commerce. She says, “This is my Empire. I do not exaggerate, friend. They are dependent upon me and upon such minions as I have from time to time. Nothing is more sure than that I am in control of them. And they know it.” The care home is conceived of in economic and spatial relationships of power, with the House Mother controlling the imperial chattels that have the misfortune to enter her space. The care home exists as a structural hierarchy and, unfortunately for the residents, hierarchies work by “organizing experience into asymmetrical, discriminatory, often deeply unjust arrangements. The most consistent and painful affordance of hierarchical structures is inequality.” At the top of the fictional hierarchy is the eponym and beneath her the other fictional bodies are arranged according to her perception of their power and importance. The residents are not seen as equal; their affordances are assessed and determined by their CQ counts: the standardized test for senile dementia. Sarah Lamson achieves the highest count thanks to her ability to correctly answer questions such as “What year is it now?” “How old are you?” “Where are you now?” and “What is this place?” The first three residents hold a CQ score of 10 and therefore are determined as free from the symptoms of dementia; their accounts are privileged other the others, occurring earlier in the text. The CQ count falls for the other individuals and reaches its zenith in Rosetta Stanton who is unable to respond to any of the questions. In addition to this, the level of ontological engagement displayed by the residents is formally demonstrated by Johnson in linear terms. Those with higher counts and capacities are

93 Johnson, House Mother, 190.
94 Levine, Forms, 82.
afforded more lines of text, reflecting their increased engagement with the world both past and present—they produce more form. For George Hedbury and Rosetta Stanton the opposite is true, sensorially impaired, mono and di-syllables are spread across the page incoherently, with the occasional half-formed sentence rupturing the white page.\textsuperscript{95}

With the elderly positioned as powerless captives, the House Mother unwittingly makes links between the care home and heterotopic spaces of deviation when she refers to the residents as “inmates” who could be put away in “mental wards.” Yet she sees her establishment as a “happy house”, even a “holiday camp”\textsuperscript{96} in comparison. To give credence to her vision, the residents are forced into organized activities and must joust in their wheelchairs for her pleasure and act as unwilling spectators to her sexual acts. To pump the elderly of their last dregs of profitability she sells their medication for a profit and uses them as production line workers on projects that line her pockets alone. Her late capitalist sensibilities see the residents’ lack of productivity as a deviance that defines them as “Other,” she says, “I do know that they are certainly not as we are, and that therefore by definition they do not want what we want.”\textsuperscript{97} Whilst the elderly may appear interchangeable and dispensable in the House Mother’s eye, they are defined by their affordances, what they can do for the House Mother. It is a state of affairs she takes no responsibility for. She clarifies, “I did not invent this system: I inherited it. And the end will come to me too, probably.”\textsuperscript{98} The system she speaks of is the profitable hastening of the elderly towards death but, in fact, there are a whole range of other systems at work within the

\textsuperscript{95} Conversely, Simon Barton suggests that “when there is a gap between sections of text, there is also a ‘gap’ in the characters; that that particular character is no longer thinking of anything in particular, or they are listening or watching the others in the room.” “Measuring Silence: Textual Gaps in the Works of B. S. Johnson,” in \textit{Critical Engagements}, 4.12/4.2: 161. This reading positions the gaps as thus a sign of attentiveness rather than disengagement.

\textsuperscript{96} Johnson, \textit{House Mother}, 198.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 193.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 198.
home. The residents are categorized by a roster of binaries: sentient/non-sentient, male/female, English/Welsh, mobile/incapacitated, productive/unproductive—an organizational system that enables the House Mother to organize the humanity in her charge.

The structure of Johnson’s novel is just as tightly organized as the home, drawing analogies between the relationships of power at play in both structures. The eight separate interior monologues show that the elderly life is interior and reflective as the monologues segue from present to past and them back again. The residents’ broken thoughts and lack of connection to their immediate surroundings reflect how, in Cumming’s view, “the ageing person must surrender certain potential feelings and actions and replace them with their symbolic residues in memory.”\textsuperscript{99} Thus when Sarah Lamson surveys with disgust the muck-like gravy the residents are served for dinner she is transported back to the “proper dinner” she made her husband on his return from the war. She remembers, “he could hardly eat, the poor boy, what I put before him was faggots in a lovely gravy, it was something special, I made, for him, just for him.”\textsuperscript{100} Her memory is of a husband traumatized by wartime experiences and rendered as mute and unresponsive as the future residents. She recalls that,

\begin{verbatim}
when he came in from the yard you could tell that he was ill, by his colour, 
and he asked me to come lie on the bed with him, and I did, though it was just 
after midday, and he just sort of lie
There, with his eyes shut and his face all tight,
without bothering to turn down the counterpane to rest
his head on the pillow, and it was greasy with brilliantine or
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{100} Johnson, \textit{House Mother}, 8.
something suchlike, but I couldn’t say anything could I.\(^{101}\)

Sarah’s husband has made the journey home back into the private sphere, a fact which distinguishes him from the Fallen Glorious but he is, in fact, psychologically “dead already” and merely waiting the biological end of life. Like the residents of the care home he exists in a shell, is immobile and inaccessible to those around him. Sarah’s current isolation in old age mirrors this and causes her not to reach out to her contemporaries but to travel back through the familiar threads of relationships to the structures of the past where she seeks refuge and affirmation, where she can fully “be” again—wife to her counterpart of husband. Horrifyingly for Sarah, the sanctity of this binary pairing is shockingly transgressed and mocked by the sexual acts performed by the House Mother and her dog.

**Power games and spatial struggle**

*House Mother Normal*’s form and emphasis on structures, power and submission coupled with its characterization suggest that Johnson’s work indirectly supports Cumming’s stance that the old have a “terminal dependency [on their carers that] excludes all other social relations.”\(^{102}\)

Binary social constructions, once theorized as a neutral arrangement of two equal halves by structuralist thought, have since been revealed as a hierarchy of two.\(^{103}\) Under the dominion of the House Mother, supportive social relations are interrupted. Cumming’s theory goes on to refer to linguistic structures noting that “indeed among the extremely aged, ‘collective monologue’

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\(^{102}\) Cumming, “Further Thoughts,” 382.

\(^{103}\) In her chapter “Hierarchies,” Levine asserts that binaries work as qualifying hierarchies in which the second term, “the excluded other (madness, body, woman)—always emerged as degrade or abjected.” She cites Elizabeth Grosz who explains, “the subordinated term is merely the negation or denial, the absence or privation of the primary term, its fall from grace; the primary term defines itself by expelling its other and in this process establishes its own boundaries and borders to create an identity for itself.” Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3. Cited in Levine, *Forms*, 83.
such as Piaget describes, among children, may replace conversation.” On first reading, Johnson’s narrative structure appears to be free of social interaction; its spatial arrangement and divisions map out self-contained conscious thought. However, closer inspection reveals a distinction between internalised thought and external vocalisation; Johnson uses italics to denote communication between the individual residents, and the residents and the House Mother. As Cumming would expect, these verbalisations are often rooted in immediate experience and tends towards the phatic; Charlie Edwards speaks out to curry favour with the House Mother, but as the reader only perceives one part of the exchange at any given time, characters appear to speak into empty space. By reading for structure, (for example) page 4 of both Sarah and Ivy’s sections, the reader realizes that a dialogue, albeit limited, is taking place. What emerges is a small possibility of a new horizontal power relation being formed to challenge the House Mother’s oppressive rule by those inhabiting multiple inferior positions. The home is potentially unstable, un-navigable because of its overlapping structures. In such situations Levine suggests it “becomes impossible to choose a single hierarchy to organize the world. The hierarchies break down not because they are internally contradictory but because their encounters with other hierarchies unsettle them.” Yet, at the same time, the overlap between complimentary hierarchical binaries has been demonstrated by Grosz to work effectively as an enforcer of social control.

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104 Cumming, “Further Thoughts,” 392. In his developmental study of children, Piaget noted that infants at play “cross-talk” to support their growing egocentricism and consequent blinkered engagement with immediate experience. Cross-talk is the linguistic imposition of power; despite the term “collective” it has no collaborative communicative purpose.

105 Levine, Forms, 91.

106 Levine notes, “the privileged term in each binary reinforces the privileged terms in all the supposedly foundational binaries; thus the rational, masculine, public subject governs the emotional, private woman object: he is all mind, she body.” Ibid., 83.
Retirement homes are not spaces of permanence and therefore the relationships and structures formed within them are transitory. In Cumming’s view “a very old person with no family ties has the pathos of an orphaned child and society deals with them accordingly.” In the best interpretations this suggests a duty of care, but in the worst, of dominion—children are not permitted freedom of movement and are often confined to designated areas. The House Mother too sees the elderly as infantilised, calling them “orphans in reverse” and confides, “You should understand the simple fact that they are all approaching death very quickly; and one must help them to do so in the right spirit.” This stoic statement masks her programme of care in which a regime of degradation and abuse is unleashed upon her charges. To her, the pensioners are abject: as symbols of decay and death they exist as a threat. The feeling is mutual, for the newly infantilized, the all-powerful maternal figure is abjection personified: purveyor of disgusting food, handler of shit, performer of lurid sexual acts but self-reflexively aware of the function she fulfils in the structure of the narrative:

Why do I disgust them? I disgust them in order that they may not be disgusted with themselves. I am disgusting to them in order to objectify their disgust, to direct it to something outside themselves, something harmless.

Here, using the language of psychoanalysis, the House Mother rationalizes her behaviour as an act of altruism; she is saving her charges from the horrifying recognition of their reduced capacities, reflecting their horror away from themselves and onto her. With the House Mother as “Other” a revised position for the elderly can be inhabited: their paths have come full circle as, pushed in wheelchairs and fed like babies, their purposeful activity ceases.

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107 Cumming, “Further Thoughts,” 392.
108 Johnson, House Mother, 5.
109 Ibid., 198.
110 Ibid., 197.
Instead of uniting in their subordination, the residents fight amongst themselves to claw back some semblance of individual power. Charlie and Ivy are gleeful that Ron has opened the parcel of shit because it has saved them from humiliation. Sarah’s thoughts also show her relief that she has escaped indignity this time. Ivy thinks George is a “dotty old bugger” whilst Gloria thinks Ivy is a “slummocky old cow.” They therefore enact the House Mother’s observation that they are in need of an “Other” against which to establish as “Self.” For some it is not a simple process, as a result of dementia communication of any form has become impaired. George speaks to no one and several blank pages occur whilst he sleeps. Rosetta Stanton appears unresponsive to the world being positioned in the unfavoured part of the English/Welsh linguistic binary. When Ivy enquires as to her health, her attempts to communicate fail: she prepares a response in English yet makes no sound. Ivy dismisses her as deaf, yet the truth is revealed in Rosetta’s thoughts:

I am

Terrible, Ivy

Now I can every Word you say I am a prisoner in my Self. It is terrible. The movement agonises me.

Let me out, or I shall die\textsuperscript{111}

Rosetta’s thoughts position her as captive: she is trapped by her failing body and the positions she is forced to inhabit; her words appear to cascade but are caught by the boundaries of the page. The movement and verbalisation that once constituted an active being in the world is now

\textsuperscript{111} Johnson, House Mother, 176.
the source of her pain. Her threat of dying falls unheard and futile; death is the only useful act that society now demands of her. Levine tells us that “all hierarchies afford gradation,” but Rosetta finds herself unable to move thanks to the overlapping of several “inferior” binary positions: old, female, Welsh, non-functioning, in her person.

The printed lines of *House Mother Normal*, then, delineate the space in which Johnson investigates both social and novelistic structures. It both narrates and visually depicts the emotional unravelling that is an essential part of human existence through the lines that can read down and across its pages, but after the raw emotion of *The Unfortunates*, does so in a measured and neutral way. Human experience is measured out in form—printed blocks of type—to create connection and dialogue the reader must flick back and forth through the pages of the novel and the lines of text to create a web of association. The reader’s attention is distracted from the plight of the old to the materiality of the book and the acts of reading and writing. In a typically Johnsonian moment of metafiction, *House Mother Normal* concludes with the eponym revealing a further literary hierarchy and struggle. She confesses, “I too am the puppet or concoction of a writer […] so you see this is from his skull. It is a diagram of certain aspects of the inside of his skull!” Here we see the form of the novel dissected. As in life, the novel contains human existence in structures; lives are rationalized through arrangements—lines arranged on a page. In the same passage, Johnson reveals himself to his audience, archly flattering them with the aside, “you always knew there was a writer behind it all? Ah, there’s no fooling you readers!” Johnson presents himself as the project manager, holding the strings of his fictive creation, (*fictio* – his form, his contrivance) a god playing with the mortals he has created. The novel’s workings

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112 Levine, *Forms*, 83.
113 Johnson, *House Mother*, 204.
114 Ibid.
and power structures are thus revealed formally—the opposable binaries of author/character, author/reader; fact/fiction, mind/world and happening/artefact.

Levine suggests that all form seeks to make order and that form possess affordances with which the individual enters into a dialogue; it is a relationship that allows the individual “to grasp both the specificity and generality of the forms.”\(^\text{115}\) Johnson had made clear statements about the affordances of the novel “the precise use of language, exploitation of the technological fact of the book, the explication of thought”\(^\text{116}\) and in *House Mother Normal* we see the form being reassessed and put to use in an unusual way. Although dealing with the emotive themes of mortality and senescence, the novel resists being positioned as an Aristotelian model of human tragedy; the reader must search in vain for any “cathartic” value to this text. Aristotle’s term goes notoriously unqualified in his *Poetics* and can be interpreted in different ways, but it is generally understood that *katharsis* purges or cleanses the emotions of the spectator through the experience of pity and/or fear. It is true that a reading of Johnson’s text may invoke some initial pity for the elderly residents; one may also experience fear as we ponder what lies ahead at the end of our own personal journal. The House Mother appears to confirm the cathartic aim of the author when she declares:

Still, I’ll finish off for him, about the sadness,
the need to go farther better to appreciate the
nearer, what you have now: if you like
our friends, friend, laugh now, prepare, accept,
worse times are a-coming, nothing is more sure.\(^\text{117}\)

\(^{115}\) Levine, *Forms*, 6.
\(^{116}\) Johnson, “Intro,” 12.
\(^{117}\) Johnson, *House Mother*, 204.
Her final words here, however suggest no renewal or restoration of emotional balance—the reader is warned that “worse times are a-coming” as she looks to the future like a malicious oracle. Johnson’s manipulation and foregrounding of form, however, never allows us to fully indulge in an emotional response to his text, we are too aware of its artifice and mechanics, its manipulation of power. Instead we return to Johnson’s intention of delivering the novel’s great purpose, “the explication of thought,”\footnote{Johnson, “Intro,” 12.} or as Levine sees the purpose of narrative, “productive thought experiments that allow us to imagine the subtle unfolding activity of multiple social forms.”\footnote{Levine, \textit{Forms}, 19.} Johnson alerts the reader to the similarities between social and aesthetic form—the basic organizing principles that allow us to negotiate a life; the structures and processes of experience.

The final mood evoked by the fictive House Mother is thus one of hyperbolic foreboding, but the mood is not sustained for long. Incongruous form is delivered unto the reader—a mysterious and ludic acrostic that the author allegedly “found in the Montgomeryshire Collections,”\footnote{Johnson, \textit{House Mother}, 204.} the journal of the Powysland Club, in Wales. We find here an entry point on to another Johnson trail: Coe notes how in the autumn of 1969, Johnson applied for a job as arts fellow at the University of Wales where he would spend six months at “Gregynog, the university’s house in rural Montgomeryshire.”\footnote{Coe, \textit{Fiery}, 271.} The curious verse is metafictively dragged into a novel by a fictional character asserting her power over her creator and the space of the page:

F for Francis
I for Chances
N for Nicholas
I for Tickle us
S for Sammy the Salt Box

Once more we are led to consider and grapple with form and its potential as the acrostic willfully obfuscates. Its lines can be read both horizontally and vertically; but no meaning is performed. It works to close the novel but, (as *The Unfortunates* before), shies away from terminal punctuation. Any conclusion is problematized.\(^{122}\) Such a device, with its multidirectional readings, is another example of the reader’s attention being directed towards inscription and structure and the potential for making and breaking connections. We are left pondering exactly who is in control of the space of the page. The poem is pure nonsense and questions the possibility of representation itself—it is all too clear that “I” is not “for chances” any more than it stands for “Tickle us.” The characters of Nicholas and Francis have made no appearance in the preceding text; “Sammy the Salt Box” stands as a ridiculous cipher of childish fiction. However, our eyes are drawn by the uppercase letters in a counter movement—reading down the poem, the word FINIS comes into view. These letters self-consciously signal the boundary of the aesthetic form and constitute the violent rupture of the relationships of the power relations constructed between the author, characters and reader in the artistic field. Halting at this boundary, the reader as wayfarer takes pause and stops to consider the illumination of a new project node—that of ending itself.

\(^{122}\) Julia Jordan writes on Johnson’s “resistance to endings” in *The Unfortunates*, stating, “*The Unfortunates* goes to great length to defer its full stops because they demarcate the moment at which memory gives way to blankness,” (Jordan, “For recuperation,” 749.) A similar case can be made for *House Mother Normal* where the blankness reflects the ultimate deferral of death.
Chapter 5: Original Spaces

Commenting on *The Unfortunates*, Julia Jordan astutely reflects on B. S. Johnson’s “resistance to endings” and goes on to build a strong case for Johnson’s refusal to stop being “embedded in the grammar and syntax” of his prose.”¹ The question of “ending” is also tentatively raised in the author’s other work suggesting that the whole Johnson project might be characterized by an overarching problematisation of closure. Johnson’s novels often display a desire for climax or definitive conclusion but frequently leave the reader with the sense of an ending that is premature. We see this in the temporal and typographical structures of *House Mother Normal* which encourage the reader to negotiate repeatedly across and through the text, and in *Albert Angelo* where the hole in the pages appears to offer the reader an early glimpse of a dramatic denouement but only leads the reader back to an inter-textual fictional past. Johnson eponyms Albert Angelo and Christie Malry are unceremoniously dispatched in narratives which are abruptly truncated by unconcealed frustration. This writer who claimed to be seeking definitive solutions appears unable to arrive comfortably at the terminal point of his creations.

All of these gestures constitute a type of “mimetic communication” which relies not just on the power of language to evoke but on what Anna Gibbs describes as “the corporeally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary.”² Here, of course, the body in question is the textual body in which Johnson cannot help but express his unease at acts of closure of any kind. Yet Gibbs goes on to remind the reader that “mimesis is rather like an image in which figure and background may be reversed,” and that,

Rather than privileging one view over another, the task of theory may then be to know through which optic it is most productive to look at any given moment. Or—perhaps more difficult—to learn how to oscillate between these views, neither of which can simply be discarded.\(^3\)

It is thus reductive to foreground Johnson’s resistance to endings without bringing into view the processes that are underway in the background. This chapter switches optic and oscillates between views to assess what happens when ending is problematized and a text no longer teleological in its composition. What constitutes the beating heart of the text when denouement implodes or is deferred?

The foregrounding of Johnson’s regular complication of ending is productive as it gives weight to this thesis’s claim that the novels constitute an on-going literary project. A defining feature of any project is a shift of focus away from goal towards initiation and process. Projects, undoubtedly are varied in their nature and Gratton and Sheringham acknowledge that as “an object of linguistic use, the word ‘project’ may designate something envisaged, something on-going, or something completed.”\(^4\) Yet it is the second qualification that they suggest holds fast as the defining aspect of project work. This is due to the fact that “rooted in the etymologically indelible make-up of the term ‘project’, this stage of envisaging, or temporal \textit{projection} into an as yet unrealised and open future, marks an indispensable characteristic of anything regarded or designated as a ‘project.’”\(^5\) The long post-war period in which Johnson was writing was thus fertile soil for project work, the latent fear and uncertainty fuelling a drive for new aesthetic and social solution in an as yet undisclosed future. In Johnson’s final work, \textit{See the Old Lady Decently}, the image of interment we encounter in the piece’s extended title might suggest a new

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\(^3\) Gibbs, “Sympathy,” 187.


\(^5\) Ibid.
determination on the author’s part to reach a satisfactory point of closure. Instead, we are presented with a novel that concludes with a beginning; jumps back and forth in historical time and elides personal history with national history, poetry and prose with image. In many ways Johnson’s final work is his most problematic.

To complicate matters further, the novel is this first instalment of what was conceived of as a trilogy—a project within a project—and the title is grammatically abridged and therefore defers both meaning and completion. “See the Old Lady Decently” stands as a fragment of the phrase that would unite all three parts of The Matrix Trilogy, to be concluded with two further novels: Buried Although and Amongst Those Left Are You. Unfortunately, Johnson’s suicide in 1973 meant that not only was his own personal ending problematized but also that of what he sensed would be his definitive work: the old lady would never be laid to rest. The writer who had poetically hoped that finally, “there is Resolution at the end,” would fail to complete the trilogy in which potentially “the solution stage … / … involves the character in either (a) overcoming his problems …/… or (b) succumbing to them.” Instead what remains is a mini-project stuck in the first two stages that Gratton and Sheringham outline: the preliminaries (including a blueprint) and a “programme [which] will aim among other things to determine the spatial and temporal parameters of the envisaged course of action, the first in the form of an itinerary or location, the second in the form of a timetable.”

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8 Gratton and Sheringham, Project, 17. Johnson’s plan for the trilogy which follow this pattern was drafted out in his notebooks and discussed by both Michael Bakewell in the introduction to the 1975 edition of the text and Jonathan Coe in the Johnson biography.
Nonetheless, the novel now stands as testament to Johnson’s final assessment of the affordances of the novel. This chapter shows how *See the Old Lady Decently* builds on earlier stylistic explorations in *Trawl* to produce a text which initially seems haphazardly form-less, but on further inspection is woven of rhythm and assemblage in a way that mirrors the growth of natural matter. These movements and rhythms are cyclical rather than linear and are carefully employed to throw into relief the rigid form of patriarchy and its imperial and hierarchical constructs. This chapter posits that (to a lesser extent) *Trawl* and (to a greater extent) *See the Old Lady Decently* inhabit the same space that would be appropriated by Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome—the organic matrix that is the tuber. Sitting deep in the fabric of the earth, the rhizome is a site of concentrated energy and vitality; it grows in unpredictable ways, becoming an embodiment of its own irrepressible potential. It has no fixed starting or terminal point but expands from the middle. Johnson’s work thus pre-empts this concept and evolve by sending out tendrils between the individual texts, investigating solution and possibilities in a project born of natural form and affective rhythm rather than imposed structures.

**The Great Mother, motherland and the matrice.**

*See the Old Lady Decently Buried* which now, due to circumstance, we must assess as an autonomous text, was conceptualised as the entry point into what Johnson conceived as a “matrix.” The resolution that Johnson sought was to be located then, conversely, in beginnings. A matrix is concerned with the formative: that which lies at the root of the matter. The matrix also refers us to the original space of the womb: in seeking closure Johnson instinctively looks back to the maternal, to his pre-history. Jonathan Coe frames this tactic as a sort of “doubling back” stating that in this text it was,
time to return to the journey [Johnson] had first embarked upon almost ten years before when he declared, in *Albert Angelo*, that ‘telling stories was telling lies.’ The difference, this time, was that he was going to tell the truth about somebody else’s life, not just his own.9

It is perhaps an oversight to position Johnson’s final text as the only one in which he graciously engages with somebody else’s life; *The Unfortunates* tightly intertwines the life paths of the author and Tony Tillinghast and the majority of Johnson texts are peppered with thinly disguised portraits of the people he encountered. Nonetheless on first inspection Johnson is a somewhat shadowy figure in *See the Old Lady Decently*; the text concludes with his birth and his fleeting appearances consist of metafictive portraiture of the mourning artist at work—the novel was the product of the loss experienced by Johnson in the wake of his mother’s death.

This grief (itself the natural problematisation of ending) had such scope that it could not be contained in one single text. Part One, *See the Old Lady Decently*, covers the years from 1908 (Johnson’s mother’s birth) to his own arrival in 1933. Part Two, *Buried Although*, would cover the years up to the end of the Second World War and detail family life and Johnson’s evacuation against a background of the decaying mother country. Part Three, *Amongst Those Left Are You*, would pit Emily Johnson’s swift death against the gradual decline of Empire and Commonwealth. The fabric of these texts would be composed of interwoven material—an assemblage of memories, family documents and photographs and Johnson’s prose imaginings of events that occurred outside the realm of his own experience. In the name of honesty and transparency the individual parts of Johnson’s literary collage were codified so that their source or theme would be disclosed. The result is a system of symbols to aid the reader. The episodes of his mother’s life gleaned from secondary sources are allocated a code which records the year of the event and his mother’s age at the time: 22 (14) therefore occurs in 1922 when Emily Johnson

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(née Lambird) was fourteen. Imagined scenes of Emily’s work in a kitchen (added for narrative “colour”) are designated “V,” with V standing for Virrels, the fictional tyrannical chef. In addition to this, “GB” marks sequences concerning Great Britain; “BB” refers to “broader Britain” (or the Empire) and “H” for passages on Field Marshall Lord Haig, the military commander that Johnson particularly despised and felt was responsible for countless deaths in World War I. Perhaps most oblique are the passages marked “N” and “O”, both of which are connected to the Jungian psychologist and philosopher Erich Neumann, author of The Great Mother (1955).

We can posit that grief informed Johnson’s interest in the maternal archetype explored by Neumann in The Great Mother, but even prior to his bereavement Johnson had an interest in female iconography. His unabashed and profound belief in the “White Goddess”—the poetic muse that is the subject of Robert Graves’ 1948 text of the same name—has been well documented by Coe in his authoritative biography. However, for Neumann, the Mother Goddess was an archetypal figure who extended out beyond the realm of the literary and into a shared cultural consciousness. The Neumann extracts that Johnson incorporates into his work are concerned with creation and birth, the processes that permit another body to come to be. They focus thus on biological systems and, in particular, the cyclical: active maternal rhythms that are prior to the controlling and divisive patriarchal line. These maternal rhythms would have been of particular interest to Johnson as they work as communicative acts and possess the ability to harness the chaotic forces of nature and put them to productive use without subduing chance. Neumann surmises:

In living reality, every development is surprising; with all its inner causality and purposiveness, it is new and unique for the consciousness that experiences and investigates it, and hence defies schematization.\textsuperscript{11}

From Neumann Johnson also takes the emblem of the “ouroboros” and employs it as the opening image of his text. This ancient and cross-cultural symbol of cyclicality is a creature with no easily discernable end; one that devours itself in an eternal process: “O let me open as though there were a beginning, though all there can be is the Great Round, uroboros, container of opposites, within which we war, laugh and are silent.”\textsuperscript{12} The [ouroboros is traditionally embodied as a serpent devouring its own tail, its extremities fused to create a circle. Endings are consumed by beginning and finding the genesis of this organic revolving system is a peculiarly difficult task. With typical hubris, Johnson’s \textit{Matrix Trilogy} appears to mount a challenge to Neumann’s suggestion that living reality cannot be schematized. To counter his pathological rejection of the terminal (against the background of the loss of his biological mother and decline of the mother state) Johnson aims to systematically discover and chart the source of his own material being-in-the-world.

\textbf{Matrical form and the charting of the family tree}

In Johnson’s last novel the reader’s attention is drawn, as ever, to the constructed nature of the text. The somewhat oblique codification of the text’s sections amounts to a puzzle that begs to be deciphered, a paradoxically impenetrable rubric that sits provocatively over the body of the text. A tension is thus deliberately created and the reader may sense a distance between \textit{two} types of emerging matrices: the angular matrix of coding, mathematics and causal structure which neatly arranges figures in binaries and tables and the \textit{matrice}: the mother, womb, and narrative source.


\textsuperscript{12} B. S. Johnson, \textit{See the Old Lady Decently} (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 17.
This tension is not only found between structure and content, but between the further subdivisions of narrative. In the sections marked “BB,” tracts of imperial history are presented for the reader’s inspection, sections which have been curiously neutered and divided into irregular blocks by lacunae:

The most striking objects to be seen at, a ‘taluk’ in the district of, and forty miles from which was then being set up by the Marquis of! A number of, or professional stranglers, joined the revolt, several forts were taken and proved too strong for. 13

Here, the reader has to work to fill the gaps in the clauses and history and add to its on-going construction; disparate fragments appeal to be linked. The same occurs in the passages denoted “GB” which chart the founding of the nation state through the founding of edifices and the defence of territory. In the introduction to the 1975 edition, Johnson’s friend and collaborator Michael Bakewell notes that in these sections, “the actual names are left out – to give generality, if not universality.” 14 Bakewell suggests that the lacunae permit a flexible and inclusive interpretation of the text—a gesture which enables the reader to gain purchase on a history from which they may have been barred. Perhaps, more importantly these gaps in structure, as noted by Levine 15, are also the points of weakness where structures of power can be pulled apart. “Solid” and “permeable” is only one set of binaries that are used to divide and rule and this set is used to stand in for the many others. The “generality” that the gaps imply is noted by Philip Tew as carrying the taint of a levelling colonial threat which “conveys the effectiveness of the male discourse of colonialism, its resistance and adaptability and its contempt for variation.” 16

13 Johnson, See, 70.
14 Ibid., 10.
system works by dividing the entire field of imperial experience into two unequal parts, indiscriminately painting the map red for Britain and erased heterogeneity.

Yet, the remaining narrative blocks pull the reader firmly back to Johnson and the maternal line. The snippets of imperial, white, male, socio-historical narrative are juxtaposed with Johnson’s vision of his immediate present and imagined pre-history: his mother’s story complete with a Shandyian fictionalisation of his own conception and his subsequent appearance in the family line:

Then there are the genes, racking through the linen (if one is lucky) sheets, rustling over the centuries, floating like an unsavage osmosis through the aeons; and similar metaphors of doubtful parentage. Her genes and mine, our children’s, all. Do genes die out? Are they not inextricably, inexplicably mixed? Why not?17

The imagery here is organic: the linen disturbed by sexual union rustles over the centuries like the leaves on the growing family tree. This growth is complimented by the sections of the text that reveal the writer’s present familial arrangements; the moments when he is interrupted by his daughter Kate, “that little girl with something of my mother in her face.”18 Whilst the sections on Greater and Broader Britain have been stripped of the human touch, the sections devoted to Emily Lambird and Johnson’s home life are embedded in the biological matrix: the flesh and blood matter from which the author sprang forth. Emily’s physical and social development up to the birth of her son is charted; as a kitchen maid she is instructed in vulgarity, learning, from Lena, the “cant term for the female genitalia”19 and watching the lewd behaviour of Virrels the chef. A quotation from Neumann in a section when Emily is eleven inverts the male/female power relation by stating that, “the first menstruation (far more important for a girl compared

\[ \text{17 Johnson, } See, \ 118. \]
\[ \text{18 Ibid., } 28. \]
\[ \text{19 Ibid., } 29. \]
with the boy’s first emission of semen.\textsuperscript{20} By sixteen, Emily is confiding in the reader that, “I’ve learned so much more since I’ve been away from home, you can’t help it with all the girls talking, I know all about it now.”\textsuperscript{21} Emily’s journey to biological and social maturity is presented as complete.

As Coe noted, \textit{See the Old Lady Decently} revolves round the personal journey of a subject other than the author, and yet, in many ways the Emily Lambird sections function as a flesh and blood preface to the main event that is Johnson’s coming into being. In the later stages of the text, the reader traces the author’s very earliest movements as spermatozoa: “Out they all set, then on this exciting journey, full of vigour and overwhelmingly inspired by their sense of purpose, dedicated to one object only.”\textsuperscript{22} The teleological object is revealed as the maternal ovum and the weak majority will fall by the side:

Why only one, since they are all equipped with the same determination and attributes, the lashing force of the tail and the nose tipped with corrosive enzyme? As ever, it is the first home who defeats the others. Perhaps that is why it is called the human race.\textsuperscript{23}

From the earliest moments of his (almost) existence, Johnson pictures himself in motion hurtling towards this projected distant goal. However, beginning and ending are conflated in the dash for an imaginary finish line which also constitutes the genesis of the author’s biological being-in-the world. This paradox is also confirmed by the acknowledgment of the fact that the material that instigates life is also able to deny it. Passages which obliquely reflect on the mother’s demise are interjected into the text including two concrete poems that appear to represent the female breast being invaded and later bisected by a typographical anomaly. Poem 2 on page 59 assumes the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{20}{Johnson, \textit{See}, 48.}
\footnotetext{21}{Ibid., 81.}
\footnotetext{22}{Ibid.}
\footnotetext{23}{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
shape of the breast of a young woman, one shaped by language and desire in the form of the human drives:

m
ma
mam
mamm
mamma
mammar
mammary
mammarry
mammarryti
mammarrytit
mammarriyt
mammary
mamMar
mamma
ma
m

The breast is built up letter by letter and line by line; the matrix of the breast is created by words that refer to the Mother: “ma,” “mam,” “mamma”. The recurrent grapheme is “m” or, phonetically, “em” the diminutive of Emily Johnson’s name and the referent chosen to stand in for Emily in the closing lines of the novel, “from them / from Em.” The apex of the breast’s curve is formed by the verb “marry” and vulgar noun “tit” the term often employed to position the female breast as an object of male desire. The breast is thus constructed by Johnson as a locus of an immediate satisfaction this is social, sustaining and erotic. However, foregrounded amongst the type is a single upper-case letter; a cell of one that disrupts the matrix of the breast.

Moving forward in the text, a second visual representation of the breast appears, but this time in the fuller shape of a mature, even matronly bosom. It is constructed by the repetition of the less sexualised word “breast,” but that time the image is bisected by a gap, which contains a
single instance of the grapheme “n” and then on the line below, “nc”. The code directs us to the source of the mysterious sectioning of the breast: “n” is the professional shorthand for needle on medical notes where “nc” stands for “no change.” The upper case anomaly seen in poem 2 is not present in this later representation of the breast, suggesting a removal has taken place, but the abbreviation “nc” indicates that the outlook is not a positive one. The poem obliquely signposts the root of Emily’s demise although here, her death is not explicitly dealt with. Instead the narrative switches from the “Em” to “Me”; deferring ending for beginning and witness Johnson’s arrival in the world in Queen Charlotte’s Annexe, Hammersmith:

Were any of these fearsome instruments needed? Did they notice her blood group was rhesus negative? Did the bag burst or leak, was Me heralded by a torrent or a trickle? Who remembers? Does it matter, again, now?

The reference here to Emily’s blood type stems from Johnson’s firm belief that the clash between his blood type (rhesus positive) and his mother’s (rhesus negative) would result in her systems attacking any future rhesus negative foetuses as foreign bodies. In this instance, Johnson’s successful arrival would prevent the safe delivery of any others; the stuff of his body had destroyed any potential siblings and, unless he himself reproduced, the family line would finish with him.

It is thus, with some relief perhaps, that both Johnson children appear in See the Old Lady Decently but other family members disappear like the proper nouns scrubbed out of the British History section. The young Emily and the family that feature in the earlier sections of the novel are long gone at the time of writing (and indeed Johnson will have died by the time of publication), but there is a sense of Johnson trying to reclaim them from a rapidly disappearing

26 Johnson, See, 138.
past. He invokes them in various ways; through fictional projection of what their lives may have been like, through visiting the spaces that they inhabited, and through reading their letters and writings. Johnson uses a formal photograph from 1916 of the family group as a prompt and reflects:

If I impose myself on this dead family, as they seem in this one photograph, Peter and Emily look innocent, Mary looks proud, and young Phil looks as though he has overeaten. But they are staring out at the camera as though they are all determined to be remembered.  

The tightly-knit family unit is here statically captured in time; the rhythm and movement of their lives are in no way transmitted by the photograph’s posed composition. It is for this reason that Johnson feels himself to be an imposter in their photographic presence, the stillness of the image is a barrier between the passive past and the dynamic present. He consequently investigates other textualities to access the energies of an earlier time. His use of the epistolary form links his last novel to his earlier works: Henry Henry’s letters are an integral reflective part of the Bildungsroman that is Travelling People, whereas Albert Angelo includes a letter from an enraged parent and the compositions of Albert’s students which take the form of a personal communication to their teacher. Christie Malry uses a letter to vent his feelings about the inadequacy of St Jude’s church in Hammersmith at the beginning of the text. In Johnson’s project letters are used to channel and transmit affect. In See the Old Lady Decently, Emily’s father Peter writes from various Field Post Offices on military service. The letters (full of fond chatter and good wishes) sit in stark contrast to those that follow: facsimiles of the notification of death form received by Emily’s mother in March 1918. The form is produced from a standardized template to allow for mass production; the only personal touch being the handwritten inclusion of Peter Lambird’s name, rank and regiment. As if highlighting the chill formalism of automatically

27 Johnson, See, 25.
generated correspondence, the official documents are followed by the details of two personally inscribed letters of condolence from Peter’s superiors on the occasion of his death.

Such official documentation was, of course, irreconcilable proof of Peter’s demise; Emily’s father never came back from the Front. And yet it was his very absence that gave his wife hope. The narrator explains that his grandfather had temporarily left the family once before in 1912 to elope with another woman and consequently, “It was because of this desertion that [Mary] never quite believed he was dead, imagined that this might be instead just another way of leaving her to fend for the children on her own.”

Similarly, Emily’s difficulty in assimilating her father’s passing is reflected in her obfuscated engagement with the dedication of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey in 1920: “My Dad it is, Emily thought, not Unknown to me, as they read the papers.” As she surveys the pictures of the procession in the Daily Express, the little girl reflects on “Our Glorious Dead, and in her unsure way dropped the e.” Here Johnson forges a connection between the personal and the general and his family matrix feeds out into the wider networks of a traumatised Europe in the 1920s a network of absences and empty tombs. The responses of the immediate family to the war are characterised by confusion and denial, but also by relief: “How happy we all were. My Daddy paid the price, widows and children will be well looked up to in this land fit for.” Pragmatically putting loss aside, Emily Lambird enjoys a “peace tea”; and documents the “sandwiches” safe in the belief that “things were back to normal.”

28 Johnson, See, 46.
29 Ibid. 52.
30 Ibid., 53.
31 Ibid., 48.
32 Ibid., 50.
End of war and empire

From a child’s perspective, life stretched out luxuriously and endlessly after armistice. The cessation of armed combat segued into a new beginning and the arrival of, what the narrator guesses must have seemed, “one of the fine summers” of Emily’s childhood. He adds, “It had seemed to her that the war had been made the reason for so many things going wrong, or continuing to be wrong: but now the summer seemed to be going on for ever and ever.”^33 For those back home the war had been a distant reality, relayed only though the media and letters home and normal domestic life could resume. However, from the perspective of the second post-war period of the twentieth century, and with the latent threat of the period surrounding him, the author pushes Emily’s pragmatism to the background and brings loss and guilt to the fore. Particular blame is placed on the shoulders of Field Marshall Haig whose name he attempts to fix in the reader’s mind though grim mnemonics: “HEINOUS ABHORRENT INHUMN GRISLY’; ‘HOMICIDE ASSASSIN INFAMOUS GUILTY.”^34 With hindsight it is evident that the First World War constituted a significant cusp for the British body politic, a development that individual members of the populace had little awareness of at the time:

Yet how fiercely they fought for it, how readily they went, the flower!
Such overwhelming patriotism for their slavery, the pathetic fools.
No less pathetic the leaders, not seeing death for their mother country in their moronic dedication.^35

The mother country was experiencing death and loss through the slaughter of its sons and through the potential loss of her imperial spoils. Britain had emerged victorious from the conflict

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33 Johnson, *See*, 50.
34 Ibid. 96–67.
but only with the assistance of its territories which would consequently push for increased autonomy. What is clear now is that:

In the post-war world, controlling and placating the various strands of empire became an increasingly difficult task. The expectations of Britain's colonial subjects had been raised during the war, which the empire and the Dominions had helped to fund.\textsuperscript{36}

Johnson engages with the root of this problem when he notes that in 1927 “the mother country continued to be burdened by the cares of an ungovernable empire, when she should have been caring nearer home. What prospects then! What an arrogant insufferable idea an empire is!”\textsuperscript{37} Johnson hints here at what will be Britain’s post-war project: to relinquish both its territories and past, to put aside its misplaced superiority.

\textit{See the Old Lady Decently} depicts a twentieth-century Britain limping towards change but clinging steadfastly to its hard-won imperial past: a country defined by its history and its structures of power. In the first post-war period, for the education of its loyal citizens, the people and produce of the whole Empire were brought to Wembley for the British Empire Exhibition. The aims of the exhibition were four-fold, namely:

To alert the public to the fact that in the exploitation of raw materials of the Empire, new sources of wealth could be produced; to foster inter-imperial trade; to open new world markets for Dominion and British products; and to foster interaction between the different cultures and people of the Empire by juxtaposing Britain’s industrial prowess with the diverse products of the Dominions and colonies.\textsuperscript{38}

The imperial othered body and its products had been freighted to the motherland for the pleasure of its citizens. Whilst proclaiming an interactive, interpersonal intent, what was actually revealed was an attitude that eschewed equality for the unwavering belief in a hierarchy in which “natives

\textsuperscript{36} http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/aftermath/brit_empire_after.htm
\textsuperscript{37} Johnson, \textit{See}, 94.
\textsuperscript{38} http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/1924-british-empire-exhibition
are very low down in the scale of humanity.” In 1924 the exotic foreign subject was the chattel of a stubbornly unchanging “England all over” which had yet to be transformed by migration. Johnson shows that for young Britons at the time, the chief draw of the exhibition was titillation—young men hungrily sought out photographs of bare-breasted indigenous females. For girls like Emily the exhibition served mainly as an exciting social opportunity, glamour away from the sphere of domestic chores.

In some ways little had changed by the time of Johnson’s youth when another exhibition was held: “Six years after the war (as after another war) they held a big Exhibition. What did it prove? It did a lot for us, they said.” The two exhibitions are positioned as baubles, highly organised acts of propaganda to placate the domestic masses after the high cost of war. The events are condemned as parallel acts, twenty-seven years apart. But whilst the 1924 exhibition glorified a colonial past, the 1957 Festival of Britain promoted domestic achievements of the present with an eye to the future of a rapidly changing nation. Empire was quickly dissolving and new accounts of history needed to be drawn up to re-bolster and re-conceptualize national identity. Nick Hubble notes how Johnson’s gapped “GB” sections

connect with a shared everyday understanding of what it was like to live in the early 1970s within a British state, in which historical memory was comprised of a mixture of traces, such as castles and country houses, and decaying class consciousness.

Whereas the “BB” sections (as noted by Tew) question the male discourse of colonialism Hubble suggests that the caesurae in the Great Britain sections work to disrupt the ancient social

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40 Ibid., 116.
41 Ibid., 80.
structures (and products) of patriarchal medieval feudalism that still held fast in the latter parts of the twentieth century. Johnson’s form reveals that Britain was struggling to change.

*See the Old Lady Decently*’s layers work together to foreground the urgency with which identities were being negotiated in the twentieth century as a consequence of spatial struggle. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha focuses on the culmination of this negotiation in the twentieth-century *fin-de-siècle* where the subject found itself “in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.” For Bhabha this *fin-de-siècle* period was marked by “a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the ‘present’”, a description which captures the gloomy uncertainty of the end of both the century and the millennium. Whilst this may be the case, I would suggest that the origin of this affective mood is to be found in the post-war period and that Johnson’s final work operates out of the tensions of a particularly powerful and productive trialectic. In the interwar period that *See the Old Lady Decently* charts, the rise of independence movements caused uncertainty as Britain pondered the future of its territories and dominions. In the second post-war period of Johnson’s youth, migrant diaspora communities sought a new home in an imperial motherland peopled with citizens wary of integration and forced to negotiate a postcolonial identity of their own. In *Albert Angelo* a glimpse is to be had of this unfolding future; Albert and Terry investigate West Indian and Cypriot cafés in a capital that was becoming unreadable:

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44 Ibid.
Out, up, round into Amwell, Claremont, Penton: The Belvedere, Pentonville Tyre Service, ΚΥΠΡΙΑΚΟ ΠΑΝΤΟΠΩΛΕΙΟ, “Η ΚΕΡΥΝΕΙΑ” Kyrennis Stores, John and Kay Fashions, Jak’s Sea Bar, Leon’s, The New Bright Restaurant. 45

From this emergent urban hybridity springs a third term—Bhabha’s interpretation of a Thirdspace of postcolonial identity and culture; a space in which “what is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.” 46 In Bhabha’s project, process does not take the subject to a specific destination but rather to the slippery beyond of the postmodern age, an interstitial space between the gaps in the ideological grid that I suggest we see the first explorations of in Johnson’s truncated trilogy.

**Positioning the subject in *See the Old Lady Decently***

What at first appears, then, to be a collage of unrelated short texts in *See the Old Lady Decently* is, at second glance, an assemblage of personal and national identity pieces connected temporally, spatially and materially. Two matrices emerge; both are concerned with change but of a rudimentarily different type. The first narrative matrix is related to the biology of the mother. Here the changes happen stealthily at a micro level: “From now on there can be no holding the pullulation of the cells: every hour there is a change, the condition of life!” 47 It constitutes a physiological change that is linked to movement and processes: the cessation of menstruation, the division of cells. Movement is held to be symptomatic of life itself:

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46 Bhabha, *Location*, 1.
47 Johnson, *See*, 131.
She felt a movement, Emily, at fifteen weeks of Me, the undeniable confirmation of her intuitions, fears, expectations. She told Stan, had him shyly feel the possibility of further movement, lay still and sleepless afterwards.

The foetus’s coming into being is charted through rhythmical kicking, hiccupping and somersaults; within the mother’s matrix it moves and she feels. The changes are small but significant for the bodies involved and they make concrete and organise the connections Massumi (2002) suggests between “being,” “bodies,” “movement” and “sensation”. For Massumi the primary characteristic of the body is its inherent capacity for “on-going qualitative change” which is arrived at through movement and sensation. Our perception of these changes is the basis for our being-in-the-world and is experienced quietly in the context of the everyday where “the slightness of ongoing qualitative change pales in comparison to the grandness of periodic rupture.” In See the Old Lady Decently, we see Johnson engaging with change on both of these levels: the personal/corporeal evolution of the mother matrix and the systematic/historicized evolution of the years 1916–1933 forged through the overlying grid of British political and social change which is begrudgingly implemented. The result is two contrasting “truths”: that of the emerging material body and that of the positioned political subject.

These two articulations of the body directly oppose each other. Massumi notes that “the idea of positioning begins by subtracting movement from the picture. This catches the body in

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48 Johnson, See, 133.
49 Writing on mimetic communication, Anna Gibbs (2010) describes mimesis as “synchrony” and as a “pervasive sharing of form.” She cites several linguistic and developmental studies that build a case for rhythm as a contagious form that is key to the mimetic communication of affect. These include Condon (1984) and Trevarthen (1999/2000) whose studies show that biological pulses between the mother and child constitute the first bonding sympathetic act between two bodies.
51 Ibid., 1.
cultural freeze-frame.” If we return to the photograph of Emily’s family, this is exactly what we find: a still of a family on the Fulham Palace Road in 1916. Any residual sense of movement is erased from the finished image:

Someone has retouched Emily’s right hand. It looks as though she had thrust it at the moment of exposure into a pocket of her pinafore, and someone was disturbed by this: either it was an unwelcome offence against unslovenliness, or it broke the pure line of the composition. As a result, Emily has neither pocket nor hand, and whatever decencies have been observed.

Through adherence to the norms of a compositional framework, Emily has become disengaged from part of her body and the “gap” between matter and qualitative change, which Massumi suggests is bridged by movement, is erased. The movement/sensation that is the human hand in motion is thus utterly redundant to the formal political/cultural description of a soldier’s family in 1916. What is foregrounded instead is the formal composition of a proud heteronormative family unit with the father hungry for war: “The composition is a classic triangle with Peter’s head at its apex: there must be thousands of paintings with a similar composition, and no doubt the photographer had learnt from them.” Massumi suggests that the role of cultural objects such as this photograph is to occupy, “the gap between matter and systematic change in the operation of mechanisms of ‘mediation.’” This photo, then, takes the body and by positioning it within the grid of emplacements that is the overarching matrix of Johnson’s Greater and Broader Britain, produces the ideological subject. The biological material of Johnson’s blood line is reconfigured as the imperial male soldier at the end of his leave; the father becomes frozen as the “local

52 Massumi, Parables, 3.
53 Johnson, See, 24.
54 Ibid., 23.
55 Massumi, Parables, 1.
This is the reductive role of the father in the final (and perhaps all of Johnson’s) work.

By way of contrast, Johnson’s mother matrix precedes the structures of ideology, history and time. To contrast with the patriarchal project, Johnson attempts to invoke the image of pre-linguistic existence, a way of being that is prior to civilisation. In the dark of the cave, for hundreds of thousands of years, primitive beings encountered the world through touch, smell and sound alone, communicating through modified grunts. With no cultural/ideological framework available to negotiate this point in time, Johnson senses that he must access “some kind of uroboric vision.” He imagines, “the whole place warm, a collective womb, the thick breathing, snorts: they must have had dreams, an unconscious, but of what primeval past? Unimaginable.”

Here Johnson’s prose defers to a purer form of communication which is predicated on the body’s regulated and un-regulated utterances. The pre-linguistic original space of the cave equates to the womb and to Deleuze and Guattari’s “smooth space” which is “filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things. It is a space of affects, more than one of properties. It is haptic rather than optical perception.” To gain ingress to this experience, Johnson suggests a move toward uroboric thought which is organic and depends on rhythmic movement and cycles; refuting beginnings or ends. In the uroboric vision we find, “In the place of honour, the best place always, the mother, the vessel, container, bringer-forth, reconciler of opposites, great balancer.”

The mother is the site of the individual’s first communicative experiences in its most basic haptic form: the pulsing of two hearts within the same body, the shared flow of blood and milk, the first

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56 Massumi, Parables, 3.
57 Johnson, See, 105.
58 Ibid., 106.
60 Johnson, See, 105.
contact of skin on skin. Johnson’s cave tableau thus shifts the mother into the foreground to counter the family portrait divided by binaries: mother/father, boy/girl; standing/sitting, black/white and military/civilian. Since the dawn of “civilization,” the father has inhabited the dominant ideological position, but with civilization’s collapse following two world wars the mother matrix offers the space in which opposing pairs can be reconciled and instinctive communication can take place.

Johnson employs his description of the family portrait as a snapshot of the mechanics of the ideological matrix, one whose linear, graphic structure opposes the maternal round and fixes the body in a rigid position in time. This process of “signifying subject formation” is identified as a type of “coding” by Massumi who elaborates,

Coding in turn came to be thought of in terms of positioning on a grid. The grid was conceived as an oppositional framework of culturally constructed significations: male versus female, black versus white, gay versus straight, and so on.61

Whilst the structures and relations Johnson uses to position his sections of prose appear to be haphazardly selected, binaries do appear: the “V” of the Virrels section designates the work as “fiction” as opposed to the “factual” nature of the other pieces. The codes of BB and GB are indicative of a British world view demarcated in the early twentieth century as either domestic (female) or social (male) and British (red) or alien:

> Great gouts of red upon the atlas, Canada the largest, then Australia, India, South Africa; little New Zealand on both edges of this Mercator’s Projection, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone […] was it necessary to go on?62

The grid matrix forms the subject by fixing the body in place; it positions and therefore discourages movement. This is not to say that movement cannot occur, but such movement is not

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61 Massumi, Parables, 2.
62 Johnson, See, 21.
dynamic or transformative, it is a mere displacement. It is a situation in which, “what defines the body is not the movement itself, only its beginnings and endpoints.” True transformation, therefore does not occur, only a swapping of ideological position. This is demonstrated in the manner in which Johnson maps the social and economic positions that Emily passes through from 1908–1933. Emily doggedly inhabits social positions in turn; she is daughter, sister, girlfriend, fiancée, bride, wife and mother. As a young girl, she fantasizes that she will “be a Mum one day,” and maybe “marry a millionaire, like Princess Mary.” Of course, as a working-class girl, the chances of social advancement are slim and instead she shifts from one lowly economic/professional position to another: waitress to domestic service; “tween” maid to parlour maid, back to waitress once more. Emily accepts her positions without complaint for, “expectations were of course low for a girl in her position” and her options severely limited to transactional moves.

The two matrices of *See the Old Lady* mesh together in a complex way; their composite parts both repel and attract each other. Because of the punctual structure of the grid, gaps appear between the static positions that Emily inhabits on the ideological framework and it is through these gaps that the biological matrix oozes, pulsating with biological rhythms that knit the piece together. This is where the definitive bodily experiences occur—significant personal

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63 Massumi, *Parables*, 3.
64 Johnson, *See*, 37.
65 Ibid., 60.
66 Ibid., 66.
67 Richard Leigh Harris considers there to be multiple “layers” at work in the novel noting, “There are various layers or strata of thought and reflection in *See the Old Lady Decently*, which both jostle, nudge and interrupt each other – the slowly shifting tectonic plates of (increasingly imperfect) memory.” Richard Leigh Harris, “‘From Embryo to Embryan’: *See the Old Lady Decently* – A problematic birth?” in *Re-reading B. S. Johnson*, eds. Philip Tew and Glyn White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 65. This image of tectonic plates neatly aligns with Massumi’s concept of the moving ground of perceptive experience (*Parables*, 7).
unfoldings that are on-going through the cycles of life. It is change that is unstoppable and therefore cannot be fixed to one moment; it is always its own becoming, never finished, potential in motion. In the biological/maternal matrix, the experiential body does not stop and is “never present in position, only ever in passing.” 68 This sense of bodies in motion and transition is captured by the closing words of the text:

So: it began with the Great Round, and everything had
to follow:

from them
from Em

from

embryo
to embryan
from Em

Me

Johnson’s play on words here highlights his own unfolding from the biological and phonetic material of his parents. Bodies spill into other bodies in the organic matrix that conjures up individual presence through plateaus of sensation and movement.

With its continual unfolding the maternal matrix constitutes an eternal present which exists outside of structured time and ideology. Its materialisation in printed language is therefore problematic and runs the risk of being expressed in a linear way. Care must be taken to acknowledge that such an endeavour “is not decomposable into constituent points. It is

68 Massumi, Parables, 5.
nondecomposable: a dynamic unity.” 69 The maternal matrix exists somewhat in opposition to any system which seeks to demarcate it through “measurement [which] stops the movement in thought, as it empties the air of weather, yielding space understood as a grid of determinate positions.” 70 We measure, fix and apply codes in order to understand, but in doing so we lose the sensation, the movement of the original space itself. For Massumi, the act of positioning is a “back-formation from cessation,” 71 this freezing of bodies in space is the antithesis of presence. This is evidenced by Johnson’s framing of the Great and broader Britain sections of history, narratives shaped and fixed by ideology, stripped of human essence:

The second greatest soldier of his time, the fourth was a servile ally of England, and from his dates the gorgeous if debased, magnificence of the; for the became do-nothing pleasure seekers who spent their time in building palaces. On he made a sally, had to retreat. 72

Gaps appear and lexical items are removed, stopping the momentum of the language and stripping the text of kinetic energy – the landscapes of history are thus dehumanised and reduced to positions and inventory, a glorified ledger book that only stand as testament to the fact that, “power, ambition and oppression persist. The passages could be of any period, quaint in phraseology, destructive in effect and myopic.” 73 Through lacunae and omission Johnson reflects the paralyzing dominance of male hegemonic constructions.

Assemblage and the rhizomatic whole.

In contrast, the maternal matrix thrives in the gaps and spaces in the waft and weft of history and narrative—adapting; changing, moving. Johnson had challenged standard narrative linearity and

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69 Massumi, Parables, 6.
70 Ibid., 10.
71 Ibid., 7.
72 Johnson, See, 114.
textual form before, but through adopting new structure or breaking the old. *See the Old Lady Decently* introduces a different type of movement driven by a different force. In one of the “GB” sections the narrative voice surveys architectural ruins and reflects, “they are probably the most successful of the many attempts to improve a piece of ground,” but that the architects would have done better to entrust their designs to “the architect-in-chief herself, old Mother Nature.” It is here that we will find an alternative creative model that operates as a growing system rather than a barrier, boundary, terminal point or division. Such systems are explored by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*—in his introduction to the text Massumi elaborates on two systems proposed by the theorists that are suggested by Johnson’s narrative matrices. Firstly, the space of nomad thought corresponds to the mother matrix in that it is “smooth or open-ended” and, within it, “one can rise up at any point and move to any other.” It thus operates outside of, (or in the gaps in), state structures and moves freely. Johnson informs the reader that it makes little difference to Emily’s story in which order her sections are read:

> Something for everybody! If you do not like this part, or that part, or the other, then skip ahead or back to a part you did enjoy. It is no part of my intention to provide a continuous narrative. [...] No, my purpose is to reflect with humility the reality of chaos, what life really seems to be like.

Despite the author’s best attempts at providing an overarching temporal code that pinpoints events in calendar time, the reader is encouraged to wayfare. Each episode constitutes an experience, perception, or intensity that does not stand alone in time but is linked to all the other perceived moments and intensities of being, creating an open system that the reader is encouraged to read at will or skip over as so desired. An “arboreal” approach to the construction

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76 Johnson cited in Michael Bakewell’s introduction to *See the Old Lady Decently*, 13.
of Johnson’s family tree in the *Matrix Trilogy*—is shown to be inadequate to map the energy of the family’s unfolding. The primacy of the “root” (the source, author, or beginning) and the “fruit” (the end) must be superseded by a focus on the middle-ground—the unfolding (the process) rather than the product.

*See the Old Lady Decently* unfolds through pattern and rhythm—the cyclical rhythm of the mother and the ourobos and what Nick Hubble calls the rising ascendancy in the text of the “counter-rhythm of working class voices and memories of [Johnson’s] mother,” which, “disrupt and ultimately destroy [masculine hierarchical discourse].”\(^77\) I suggest the reader encounters not just an act of destruction but the creation of a multi-dimensional assemblage of mother, son, grandchild; fiction, fact, past and present, time and place that work to envelop patriarchal structure. This experiential assemblage is rhizomatic—“an acentered, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states.”\(^78\) This means that the author (the General) must relinquish his commanding role and enable, instead, the rhizome to evolve naturally through pulses of energy that embody form by sending out shoots in different directions. If ruptured into separate units the rhizome still continues to grow, forming a new body of pulsing energy. The rhizome of *See the Old Lady Decently* thus has potential rhythmic links with other Johnson works through the background hum and distractions that both constitute and disrupt the narrative structure of his novels. These interruptions can be unpredictable in nature: they are organizing principles that originate from “without” the plot, emanating from the overlapping wordings of other figures who appear in other contexts. Johnson’s wife and son appear in *See the Old Lady Decently* as they had previously done in *Trawl*; Virginia is also featured in *The Unfortunates*,

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\(^77\) Hubble, “Intermodernism,” 59.  
\(^78\) Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, 21.
where Johnson’s worlding is orientated by the rhythms of Tony Tillinghast’s cancer. Overlaps and patterns also occur between and in the worldings of real and imagined characters: *House Mother Normal*’s Charlie Edwards fights in Verdun just like Johnson’s grandfather; Ivy Nicholls recalls taking the same Number 27 Hammersmith bus that is ridden by Albert Angelo in his story and the narrator of *The Unfortunates*. Albert, in turn, daydreams about hitch-hiking to Fishguard and Ireland, the same trip that opens the action of the semi-autobiographical *Travelling People.*

In *Trawl*, the narrator recalls the social pressure to work that will later torment Christie Malry and give him cause to organize his life through accounting columns. Christie’s rapid decline to cancer echoes that of Tony Tillinghast; Johnson’s teaching problems in *The Unfortunates* inform those of his analogue in *Albert Angelo* in an equally unbearable school. Although the individual novels stand quite happily as individual pieces, they are off-shoots of a larger organic mass. The barriers between fiction and non-fiction dissolve resulting in a rhizomatic project where form appears through connections, echoes, repetition, through organisational rhythm.

**Formal patterning and the use of rhythm in *Trawl***

Rhythm is thus key to *See the Old Lady Decently* and the whole Johnson project in that it organizes time and crosses spatial boundaries in order to regulate human experience. It both originates in the body and penetrates it, connecting it to the outside world. Indeed,

> The traditional claim that poetic and musical rhythms arise in the body suggests an easy crossover between artistic and nonartistic realms. Rhythm is therefore a category that always already refuses the distinction between aesthetic form and other forms of lived experience.79

If this is the case, rhythm can function as an authentic conduit between the fictive and the real. It questions and overrides the distinctions between the forms we make and are subject to; rhythm

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79 Levine, *Forms*, 53.
both orientates the individual in the chaos of lived experience and drives the creative realm. In poetry this happens by the “shaping of temporal experience through meter,” but in the novel form, although metre can be explored, more usually rhythm is created though the repetition of motif, theme and sound. In Johnson repetition is often most noticeable at the level of the characters that weave in and out of the entire project: Ginny, Tony, Wendy, but it is often to be found in the patterning of life events: betrayal, sex, death. Perhaps most overwhelmingly repetition is made up of a revisiting of place: Hammersmith Broadway, North End Road, Exmouth Market, Clerkenwell, The Angel; Cypriot cafés, churches and bomb-sites. Whilst the nomenclature changes the process remains the same: across the matrix of everyday life, individuals retrace the same actions; making and doing and creating worldings through rhythm. Langer comments that the role of motifs in art is to:

lend themselves to composition, […] [be] incentives to artistic creation. The word motif bespeaks this function: motifs are organizing devices that give the artist’s imagination a start, and so “motivate” the work in a perfectly naïve sense. They drive it forward, and guide its progress.  

The repetition of motifs in Johnson’s work is foregrounded to such an extent that it creates rhythm in the project, propelling it forward in a way that counters the halting fragmentation of the pre-war modernism. Rhythm becomes a communicative act in Johnson’s creative project. Strong examples of the organizing properties of rhythm are to be found in Trawl. The opening six lines of the novel are sectioned off from the following text which unfolds in the style of a modernist stream of consciousness. Broken by ellipses and featuring the strong repetition of a reduced lexical set, the lines perform as a chant, a reflective incantation to prepare and clear the

80 Levine, *Forms*, 75.
mind for the psychological journey that is about to begin. The focus of the chant is subjectivity; the six lines are punctuated by items consisting of singular units: *I, one, sole, single.* “I” occurs four times, beginning a pattern that will be continued throughout the extended opening section of the book. In these lines the reader finds the expression of a “truth,” an insistence on a sole way to navigate existence. The opening lines can be read therefore as *sutra*—a combination of rhythm and aphorism, “I . . . always with I . . . one starts from one” that foregrounds the omnipotence of the modernist subject position and the fragmentation of its expression. As the novel unfolds, rhythm gains prominence and the reflective meditative space carved out by of the opening passage is soon penetrated by the exterior world and its activities even though the narrator has retreated into the “down here” of the ship’s interior and the mind’s recesses. The world enters in the form of a discordant sound that reaches the narrator—the noise of the towing block banging against the side of the trawling ship he inhabits: “the towing block craangks against the stern just above my head [...] the towing block goes against my head, it seems, even inside my head.”

The sound is actioned by the faceless operators outside, passes through the vessel and penetrating the body of both the narrator and text.

The ship’s hold is a space that pre-empts Johnson’s later “uroboric vision” of the cave of the “collective womb” in *See the Old Lady Decently*. In both cases exteriority is chaotic and indistinct, peopled with “they” and “it”; connections need to be forged for the world to slide into view. Three lines in to the first extended section of *Trawl*, the narrator tells the reader that a singular sound is one of the few things that “do reach me down here”—this is perhaps due to the unexpectedly violent and harsh nature of the sound but mainly due to its repetition, the rhythm that it creates: “so every two hours or so, or two and a half, or sometimes longer, at the intuition,

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83 Johnson, *See*, 105.
CRAANGK!\textsuperscript{84} The narrator can discern a pattern arising and it is this that “reaches” him—connects him outwards to the world. The sound transmits energy—the intentional energy of the skipper, the physical energy of the crew, and the kinetic energy of the ship and the ocean for, “while they are hauling the ship wallows, and the motion is worse.”\textsuperscript{85} The narrator’s body exhibits a range of responses to these external stimuli and key amongst the response to the unpredictable swell of the sea is expulsion—a movement outward, the uncontrollable urge for the stomach to “unseat itself, impel itself upwards, eject itself free of [the] shuddering body.”\textsuperscript{86} The imagery here is of the labouring female body and of the subject waiting to be ejected from the original space of the womb.

However, the aural energy of the towing block, at first dreaded, becomes welcome, particularly once it establishes a rhythm:

It will be soon, I hope, the sooner the, twenty minutes perhaps, between hauling and shooting again, it cannot come soon enough, perhaps I can think, or sleep, better to sleep, of course, but to think would be welcome, for which I am here, to shoot the narrow trawl of my mind into the vasty sea of my past.\textsuperscript{87}

The aural energy is propelled via the body of the author along multiple pathways, through thought and the expulsion of memory and bile. The intensities occur periodically, creating the rhythm of the womb in early labour; the subject focuses on an end that “cannot come some enough.” Johnson solidifies this energy into visual form on the surface of the page; transliteration occurs and the word is foregrounded in upper case and italicized font: CRAANGK! This motif will reoccur across the text, breaking the column of stream of consciousness that plunges down the page like the trawling net sinking to its destination. Spaces occur: the columns

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{84} Johnson, Trawl, 8. \\
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 9.
\end{flushright}
of the narrator’s thoughts “down there” are occasionally ruptured by lacunae, gaps that seemingly indicate the temporal space of the haul in a spatial arrangement on the page. Each lacuna is sub-divided by with dots, an undisclosed rhythm marking out time in the space of the womb-like hold. The subject waits for transition.

Later in the text the rhythms of the labouring mother are mirrored by the rhythms of the labouring man. As discussed in Chapter 3, although an exploration of memory and consciousness, *Trawl* documents the daily events of life on board a fishing trawler, and works as an informative “log.” This practice, established on all vessels, originated from the “chip log,” a navigational tool consisting of a floating object pulled by a knotted piece of rope. As this rope passed through a sailor’s hands it calibrated the speed of a ship over water. The ship’s log was therefore originally realised as a rhythmic document that charted the spatial trajectories of a vessel over one journey; it was concerned with distance and daily activity and the mechanics of bodies moving from place to place. Imbedded in Johnson’s ship’s log I suggest the lacunae show glimpses of the workings of the chip log. Johnson’s poiesis connects readers to the early attempts by seafaring men to impose form on and appropriate the sublime energy of the sea, to make sense—through the passing of knots—of how far they had travelled, enabling the transference of information to others wanting to follow the movements of those who have come before. At the same time, it charts the trajectory of the labouring mother and the journey of her child—the subject being thrown into the world.

*Trawl*’s ship moves into a “different space” away from the familiar forms of civil life and plunders the energy of the sea and the labours of its crew. The trawler is manned by shady figures from a sub-class of “men born, drawn or forced into such a job that] were rough: indeed

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88 http://ageofex.marinersmuseum.org/index.php?type=navigationtool&id=1
there were known to be at least two murderers, discharged after their sentences, sailing from th[e] port."89 Their work is hard and repetitive, as befitting the class status of the men, and Johnson’s memories and internal musings are interspersed with the rhythms of their daily tasks. The beat of each arduous trawl is marked out by the repetition of a fricative phoneme “along beside me they haul now hand over hand at the net, eight of them doubled at the heavy brown mesh”90 the effort of the task is worked into the rhythm of the line. The trawling duties unfold in a cycle of fish haul and preparation, the men working to a rhythm that has been perfected over years:

But Stagg stands there stolidly, cloth capped, gutting automatically, economical of movement, saying nothing, thinfaced, gaunt even in the artificial bulkiness of his yellow skins, just as he probably has done the last forty years, or more, from a boy of twelve.91 Phonic repetition and echoing again carry this passage forward, reflecting the mechanical nature of the undertaking, the need for economy and speed in the pursuit of profit, but countering this is the description of Stagg which reduces him to an empty, silent, gaunt shell. Stagg has been dehumanized by the endless cycle of repetitive work.

Yet, in other passages, in other types of work with practices stretching back over the century, satisfaction and vitality is to be found:

A curiously rural scene on the deck, as the men pick at the net spread around them, repairing it with wooden braiding needles, hung up with nethooks to keep to square, sorting, checking, a rural craft seemingly […] the men now work with an ease that was not in the gutting, talking and laughing.92

The same energetic purposefulness appears when the ship is being prepared for harbour and

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89 Johnson, *Trawl*, 103.
90 Ibid., 30.
91 Ibid., 131.
92 Ibid., 177–8.
the trawlermen move around the ship cleaning her like charwomen, sousing and scrubbing and burnishing, stoning the gut-stained deckboards until they come up white again, everywhere swilling with hoses, rubbing brass, sweeping with springy brooms.\textsuperscript{93}

The everyday domestic practices described here constitute a shared communal project with an instantly discernible outcome; repetition occurs but in the participles—the suffixes denoting ongoing activity in the moment. It is a type of work aligned with the feminine sphere; the men morph into “charwomen” but are happier as a result. These activities occur in the same place—the deck co-opted by commerce for fish processing in the first case is reclaimed by the rhythms of creative, non-profit driven women’s work in the latter stages of the journey.

Form from the middle point

Both \textit{Trawl} and \textit{See the Old Lady Decently} are works which at first glance appear haphazardly form-less. At second glance rhythmic patterns appear and cycles can be discerned. Both novels are concerned with the author’s “beginnings,” both emotional and biological but reveal that a single point of origin is impossible to discern in narratives of truth that endlessly defer. The author raises the problem of form from the first page of his final work:

\begin{quote}
O let me open as though there were a beginning,
though all there can be is the great round, uroboros,
container of opposites, within which we war, laugh, and
are silent.\textsuperscript{94}
\end{quote}

If there can be no beginning—and therefore no end—what remains is an endless re-shuffling and recycling of experience (war), emotion (laugh) and sound (silence) within the artistic container of opposites (chaos and form). Without a beginning or end the process must expand from the middle point, resulting in a rhizomatic assemblage that re-appropriates the space around it—a place of

\textsuperscript{93} Johnson, \textit{Trawl}, 178–9.
\textsuperscript{94} Johnson, \textit{See}, 17.
potential and original energy. The rhizome exists as an entity existing in a constant state of change, responding to the environment around. Translated into a textual form Deleuze and Guattari present the book-as-assemblage, an artefact that exists as a whole, does not seek to unify or render static but instead unfolds in all manner of becomings that are inter-connected in a dynamic way to a larger body. This happens if the writer and reader attend to the “lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification” within an assemblage where “comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture.”95 The comparative rates of flow in Johnson’s texts—the patterns and lacunae; cycles and repetitions—create the rhythms and pulses that give birth to the rhizomatic whole and communication in its essential form. The book-as-assemblage is a singular whole of particular rhythmic multiplicity.

To create a book-as-assemblage, or to be rhizomorphous in literary production, is to cultivate by producing “stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses.”96 In Trawl the tree is felled to produce firstly a chip-log and secondly a ship. In See the Old Lady Decently, the arboreal model of the family tree is investigated and discarded for earthy rhizomatic form. Rhythms from each of the Johnson novels continue to pulse through each of the others. In embarking on the Matrix Trilogy we find Johnson at the apex of his creativity, unleashing his final formulation of literary truth on to the unsuspecting (and possibly uncomprehending) reading public. Throughout his novelistic career Johnson had wrestled with the problem of pinning down “truth in the form of a

95 Deleuze and Guattari, Plateaus, 3–4.
96 Ibid., 15.
novel,“97 to show, like Joyce before him, that “what happens is nothing like as important as how it is written, as the medium of the words and form through which it is made to happen to the reader."98 Deleuze and Guattari develop this idea one step further to declare that, “there is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made […] a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages.”99 The final Johnson work is connected by energies, stems and filaments to the others that have come before, resulting in a wider rhizomatic unit. In this larger rhizome, Johnson’s project to bridge the gap between the novel and life is achieved by creating an assemblage with the world, rather than a representation of an external reality. As a result:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel, nor the world as its object, nor one or several authors as its subject.100

The ouroboros of See the Old Lady Decently, “the book with no sequel” keeps turning. The subject that is the author is still to be born. The trilogy remains incomplete but divisions between the world and the work finally fall.

99 Deleuze and Guattari, Plateaus, 4.
100 Ibid., 23.
Conclusion: A spatial turn

The image that opened Chapter 1 of this thesis was that of a silver dirigible—an object selected and positioned according to the mood of a nightclub manager in 1966—a playful item that drifts if not tethered, that floats. Items such as these are carried by imperceptible energies and currents but are also directed by the objects they encounter in the environment. Within the confines of a room the dirigible navigates haptically, bouncing off and repelled by the surfaces it meets to be propelled along an entirely new course. It is a curious object, its shape and form maintained by internal pressure, the gas sealed off from the outside world by a smooth containing skin. In my first chapter I reflected on how floating objects such as these have become linked in the cultural consciousness to Pop Art and the advertising industry. To this I now suggest the dirigible as a metaphor for the modernist project that Johnson set out to advance and improve upon; a beautiful bubble of self-contained consciousness drifting above a world that was changing beyond all recognition. Aesthetic objects of this type are “endowed with an inner coherence [which] seems cut off from the world around it, a world that is necessarily messy, incomplete and disorderly”\(^1\); a cultural presence *above* the world rather than *in* its boundaries. The modernist object drags the eye up and away from a life lived on the ground—a beautiful consolation.

The dirigible, whilst undeniably technically accomplished and aesthetically pleasing, can only function as an item of mood furniture in Johnson’s post-war project to convey his grasp of the world—a very small piece of a larger picture. The word “grasp” here is used in the intransitive sense to foreground the difficulty of Johnson’s aims; it suggests an active attempt to gain purchase on something intangible, an elusive something that frustratingly moves out of

reach. This thesis has charted the attempts that Johnson made to reach his goal of literary change—a decisive move away from prior aesthetic positions and tradition—to arrive at what he saw as a new expression of reality in textual form. The preceding chapters have shown how Johnson’s literary change evolved through a subtle shift in the understanding of lived experience and became transcribed through marks made on a page. The truth that Johnson ultimately captures is a burgeoning post-war engagement with life as a series of spatial-affective configurations. In the Johnson novels the reader sees evidence of this in the changing spaces of London that fill the work: the morphing of waste-ground into spaces of transgression; the impact of imposed and elected dislocation, the arrival of new housing solutions and the soulless suburbs. In addition to this Johnson’s wayfaring protagonists point to issues arising over the ownership of social space and the infringement of free movement by private, capitalist concerns. Finally, Johnson’s novels are testament to a shift in the hierarchies and objects of aesthetic space—a newly developing preference for the everyday over the extraordinary; the artistic adoption of objects “as found.” This chapter will work as an extended conclusion that seeks to formally synthesize my earlier trains of thought and opens with the inclusion of a small amount of new theoretical material to enable conclusions to be definitively drawn for a scholarly audience.

The motifs and tendencies of Johnson’s project (noted above) are significant because, for the first time, they place the work at the vanguard of what Nigel Thrift, and others, have termed a “spatial turn” in the social sciences and humanities—one which began in the mid-sixties and continues to be influential in the present day. Indeed, Thrift has noted that “there are no doubt

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2 The turn amounts to an intellectual shift in the conceptualization of human “being”. Rather than being defined in relation to God or time, space has become foregrounded as fundamental to the human subject’s sense of self. The consequences of this shift have been a renewed interest in the power relations that are implicit in the man-made environment and the workings of political systems on social being. As a result, the spatial term has also prompted political activism and social commitment. Within
many reasons to believe that the spatial turn will prove to be of lasting significance”\textsuperscript{3} but chief amongst these is the fact the turn has extended and expanded man’s conceptualisation of being and increased the range of modes available for expressing this fact. At the beginning of this period Johnson implored novelists to “evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbbling from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever changing reality.”\textsuperscript{4} This call for scope and flexibility can now be read as a turn to an interdisciplinary answer to the problem of the outmoded novel form. Thrift defines the spatial turn as a realization and identification of

A constantly expanding universe of spaces and territories, each of which provides different kinds of inhabitation – from the bordering provided by the womb, through all the things in the home that are just out of reach, through the corporeal traces of the buildings and landscapes that provide a kind of half-remembered poetics, through the ways in which vast political and commercial empires – and the resultant wealth and misery – can be fashioned from the mundane comings and goings of ships and trains and now planes, through all of the billions of invisible messages that fleetingly inhabit the radio spectrum and each another dimension on to life.\textsuperscript{5}

The undertaking Thrift describes here is a subtle instinctive “noticing,” a change in perception and focus rather than the passive acceptance of a previously ratified body of knowledge or the adoption of new technology. It requires the broadening of vision through an attention to that closest to the individual. This noticing engages all of the senses and is born out of a widened exploratory practice. What Thrift describes here is a body’s total sensory immersion in experience; Kathleen Stewart’s description of “weak theory” comes to mind once more, a “noticing that gropes from a haptic space in the middle of things. The objects of such practice are the humanities new methodological possibilities have emerged through interdisciplinary practice: system such as GIS have brought new understandings to texts through the visualization of an archive.\textsuperscript{3} Nigel Thrift, “Space,” \textit{Theory, Culture and Society} Vol. 23 (2-3): 139.
\textsuperscript{5} Thrift, “Space,”139.
things noted obliquely [...] things caught in a circuit of action and reaction.” Both definitions evoke a changing and shifting world whose parameters cannot be definitively mapped by traditional practice—a model well suited to the mood of uncertainty and anxiety in post-war years. Any turn suggests rejection, a movement away; in this case the turn is away from the modernist project to reconcile the world through interiority and towards the rhythms and unfoldings of exterior, reactive worlding. Thrift’s description reads as an index of Johnson’s literary noticings and concerns—the protective womb, landscapes and buildings, transportation and mundane “comings and goings.” All of these objects have been assessed by this thesis to be key markers of the Johnson novels, which I finally present as a spatial project.

Thrift’s four principles of a spatial approach

Thrift notes that there are four principles to be found at the root of any approach to space, an organic image that returns this thesis to Chapter 5’s image of the rhizome. The first principle to be considered is that everything is spatially distributed. Thrift states that all things possess their own geography or biological structure in which cells are ordered and distributed: spaces within spaces. In Johnson’s project we see this principle expressed by the scattering of cancer cells that adorn the original casing of The Unfortunates and in the sections that detail the advance of Tony’s disease. Within Tony the cancer cells are “multiplying without reference to his will,” following their own spatial logic to “escape to another part of the body by insinuating itself into the bloodstream.” The body is transformed into something to be mapped and inscribed; a relief map of disease: “the area bombarded [...] a square, the topline of which crossed his upper lip, to
the bottom of his ribs [...] they did mark the area with lines, ink of some kind, target." In *See the Old Lady Decently*, the non-pathological cells of the developing foetus have the same in-built sense of function and position, which Thrift notes is a “fundamental process of growth." In this final novel, Johnson pits his own conception against the demise of his mother and shows how cellular matter can cut loose and become destructive, bringing the essential movement of the human body to an end. The reader sees the visual representation of this in the text’s concrete poem of the female breast which, in its first incarnation, is disrupted by a typographic anomaly and, in its second, is bisected by the symbol for a surgical needle. In the same text, the fluid organic space of the mother *matrice* is contrasted with the enforced emplacements and grid of the socio-political matrix and patriarchy.

Moving from the personal to the social and the material, Johnson’s protagonists map the interlocking spaces and places of the city, emptying them of prescribed meaning with their footsteps and explorations and reclaiming them for ordinary man. A Johnson map of the city springs forth: the real and imagined places that are woven into the novels—forgotten rivers, favoured pubs, well-trodden streets. The Angel at Islington becomes incorporated into the name of the second novel and its eponym, Albert Angelo. Such urban cartography is schematic like the famous London tube map: it sketches the city providing an outline of the essential information required by its receiver, removing superfluous detail. This technique foregrounds relation and connectivity over distance and calibration and reflects the economy of style employed by Johnson to effect in *Christie Malry* when the narrator refuses to provide a physical description of the main protagonist. Yet fleshing out the bare bones of Johnson’s topological map is an

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9 Ibid.
10 Thrift, “Space,” 140.
11 See Chapter 5 for a full analysis.
affective map, that which Jonathan Flatley describes as “the pictures we all carry around with us on which are recorded the affective values of the various sites and situations that constitute our social world.”\textsuperscript{12} What Flatley describes here is a process of attunement which although seemingly subjective is not the perceptual labour of one consciousness but,

Cobbled together in processes of accretion and palimpsestic rewriting from other persons’ maps, first of all those defined in infancy by one’s parents, and later the maps that come to one by way of one’s historical context and the social formations one lives in.\textsuperscript{13}

Again Flatley’s words here indirectly echo Johnson’s assertion that, “novelists must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever changing reality.”\textsuperscript{14} This reality invariably emerges as spatially distributed in the Johnson project from Henry’s epiphany in \textit{Travelling People} to \textit{See the Old Lady Decently} where Johnson’s affective map is shown to be informed by that of his father, his maternal family and the rhythms of patriarchal history. Johnson’s final work evolves as spatial-affective bricolage cobbled together from emotion, memory, interviews, personal archive and the sanctioned historical narratives of Britain and its empire. Everything is spatially distributed.

Thrift’s second principle of a spatial approach confirmed by the project is that “there is no such thing as a boundary or, rather, all spaces are porous to a lesser or greater degree.”\textsuperscript{15} The image of Johnson’s fishing trawler comes to mind—an instance of impermeable material space. Yet in Johnson’s third novel, the heterotopic ship is also a vessel that crosses political and temporal boundaries. Moving at the whim of the sea, the ship belongs to no one place but

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Johnson, “Introduction,” 16.
\textsuperscript{15} Thrift, “Space,” 140.
connects many. Foucault made a claim for the ship as being the heterotopia *par excellence*; in these different spaces boundaries are crossed either through natural processes of development (the elderly person shuffles off their mortal coils, the girl becomes a woman) or the transgression of societal boundaries through deviant behaviour. Johnson’s novel functions as a heterotopic text not solely due to its narrative setting but because it details the thought processes occurring during a rite of passage, the crossing of the boundary between bachelorhood and marital-familial responsibility. On the ship, we see the narrator purging the past; *Trawl* pays no heed to the restraints and boundaries of chronological time. Formative past experience is revisited and the future imagined as the sound of the trawling nets calibrates the long arctic days.

Steering, thus, into liminal waters, Johnson’s nautical reverie in *Trawl* cannot help but focalize on the precariously leaky vessel that is the human body. As Thrift notes (and Johnson’s prose fully demonstrates), “bodies caught in a freeze-frame might look like envelopes but, truth to tell, they are leaky bags of water, constantly sloughing off pieces of themselves, constantly leaving traces – effluent, memories, messages – through moments of good and bad encounter…” Thus *Trawl* is punctuated by episodes of projectile vomiting as frequently as it is by memories. There are frequent references to ejaculation throughout the seven novels and, in a metafictive interlude in *Albert Angelo*, the author reflects “Albert only defecates for instances only once during the whole of this book: what sort of paradigm of truth is that?” Although *Trawl* is the Johnson novel that most explicitly deals with a liminal state, the motif of liminality and often problematic transition can be seen across the project. *Travelling People* is a classic *Bildungsroman* that charts Henry Henry’s first adventures in the wider world away from the city.

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16 Foucault, “Spaces,” 22.
17 Thrift, “Space,” 141.
In *Albert Angelo*, hidden amongst the description of a post-war London in transition, the reader captures fleeting glimpses of urban children on the brink of physiological and social change. Better fed now that food restrictions have come to an end, these children sit,

Large and awkward at the aluminium-framed tables and chairs, men and women, physically, whom you are for today trying to help to teach to take places in a society you do not believe in, in which their values prevail rather than yours. Most will be wives and husbands, some will be whores and ponces: it’s all the same; any who think will be unhappy, all who don’t think will die.  

Here we see transition detailed on many levels: the fading of the war years and the arrival of new values and attitudes; an evolving world in which Albert feels alienated. London itself has become porous, with citizens from all the other Commonwealth territories arriving and transforming the culture, sights and sounds of the city. Temporal boundaries are slipped across as Albert resorts to his scant knowledge of Ancient Greek in order to communicate with his Greek Cypriot students who cannot otherwise communicate in modern-day London.

Christie Malry provides a link between Thrift’s second and third principles of a spatial approach. In his most notorious act of revenge on society, Christie tips cyanide into an urban reservoir so it can pass through London’s water system and penetrate the private boundaries of home, industry and, catastrophically, the permeable human body. Thrift’s third principle states that “every space is in constant movement” and Christie tips the balance in his accounting columns as the poison flows through London’s subterranean pipes. As noted in chapter 4, Johnson’s body of work comes into being through inscription and movement, through the lines that activate the artistic space, through the wayfaring characters who reclaim the city streets. *The Unfortunates* stands out as a key text that explores the relationship between space and

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20 Thrift, “Space,” 141.
movement: famously, the reader is encouraged to shuffle the loose folios of the novel and rearrange the narrative each time the text is begun. Not only are the individual paginated spaces of the novel therefore in constant movement, but so are the spaces of Nottingham that are navigated in the text—a new spatial arrangement of the city is created. *The Unfortunates* takes the reader on a journey that circumnavigates both a city and the spaces of the narrator’s mind: “The mind circles, at random, does not remember, from one moment to another, other things interpose themselves…” Such movement, whilst serving as an aide-memoir also disorientates and unsettles the reading and writing self. It provokes the feeling of anxiety that chapter 1 assesses as being key to Johnson’s writing. In his study of Heidegger’s seminal *Being and Time*, philosopher Simon Critchley comments, “What is first glimpsed in anxiety is the authentic self. As the world slips away, we obtrude. I like to think about this in maritime terms.” This explanation can be applied to *Trawl* where, by means of the heterotopic ship, the narrator is not delivered to a place but to the anxious mood of his youth. In the shifting spaces of his memory the narrator hopes the authentic subject might be anchored, but his search leads him in circles:

So where has all this taken me? . . . . .
. . . . . Here.

An image of the drifting dirigible comes to mind as we note the Heideggerian anxiety expressed in this extract, the image of a “groundless floating.” It is an expression of anxiety born of being without a place or anchor, to become no-thing and no-where. Anxiety is the feeling of watching

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21 B. S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (First), 1.
the world slide out of view, of seeing mapped place revert to experiential space that unfolds through constant motion.

The principle that every space is in constant movement fits neatly with Johnson’s deeply felt belief that ‘life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily.’

Such statements have prompted the assessment of Johnson as an aleatorical writer much preoccupied with chance and fate. Indeed, across the project Johnson’s characters frequently meet with untimely and careless ends. Chance itself is born of movement, of change of an unpredictable type and features heavily in Johnson’s work and musings. Dwelling on the source of Tony Tillinghast’s cancer the reader is told, “For [Tony] it was too much to believe that there was no reason, not for me, it is all chaos.”

His friend’s cancer had developed unexpectedly “when everything was moving for him, just when he had achieved what he had always wanted to do, so I believe… Cancer is, in one sense, but one outcome of the very ordinary evolution and movement of cellular matter that cannot be predicted and is not easily stopped, but in his fourth novel Johnson certainly tries. *The Unfortunates* is to all intents and purpose a book about death, cancer and loss and yet its pages are also filled with the mundane. Each folio details the trips, boozy meals, conversations and family life that constitute the “everyday” practice of “temptation, tranquillization and estrangement,” that keep human minds from death. Once the diagnosis has been made Johnson comments how he and Tony,

Talked just the same, only now we had another subject, an additional subject, he was keenly interested in what was going on, what was happening to him he was interested in intellectually, had distanced himself from it, I think.

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26 Johnson, *Unfortunates* (Just as it seemed), 3.
27 Ibid., 2.
Here Johnson’s words show the instinct to turn away from mortality through intellect, a distancing tactic that allows death to be studied rather than embraced. *The Unfortunates*’ materiality attempts to distance death in a different manner; the shuffling of its folios makes it a possibility that ending and death are deferred forever—a triumph over chaos.

Throughout the project Johnson’s relationship with death is complex. On one hand there is evidence of a Heideggerian assertion that death is non-relational; it may outstrip all other life events but can only be truly experienced in the moment of one’s own passing, not through the expiration of others. The abrupt deaths of his fictional characters allow Johnson’s project to keep the reality of his own death neutered and at arm’s length. Yet on the passing of Tony that is detailed in *The Unfortunates*, the narrator arrives at a distinctly Heideggerian range of conclusions about death. Firstly, reflecting back on Tony’s life he states, “everything about him I see now in the light of what happened later, his slow disintegration, his death.” The quote stands as an acknowledgement of what Heidegger terms the “insuperability of death.” Death outstrips all other things. Perhaps this declaration is unsurprising; the logical conclusion of a project that investigates a rather Heideggerian model of Dasein or “being-in-the-world.” Johnson’s subjects are always seemingly disclosed within a context and a mood; an unfolding worlding overlapping those of others. Heidegger, however, sees this type of constructed existence as inauthentic if it fails to acknowledge death:

Factically one’s own Dasein is always already dying, that is, it is in a being-toward-its end. And it conceals this fact from itself by reinterpreting death as a case of death occurring every day with others, a case which always assures us still more clearly that “one” is “oneself” and still “alive.”

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30 Johnson, *Unfortunates*, (I had a lovely flat), 2.
32 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 244.
Johnson’s earlier novels had occupied themselves with the imagined deaths of “others” and the creative unfolding of *The Unfortunates* keeps the reader distractedly moving along pathways of the everyday. Nonetheless, glimpses of a Heideggerian truth or authenticity are reached through revisiting Tony’s passing in the writing of *The Unfortunates* and an easily overlooked line: “the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us”\(^{33}\): the unavoidable facticity of death.

Thrift’s final principle of spatial approach declares that “there is no one kind of space.”\(^{34}\) As the subject (itself a configuration of dynamic cells) moves the world unfolds as a unique blooming of spaces shaped by mood and attunement; by affect working on the body and the bodies of others. Space is revealed as personalised. An example of this is to be found in *House Mother Normal* where the reader is invited to “follow our Social Evening through nine different minds!”\(^{35}\) The eight elderly residents and the House Mother inhabit the same material space (and number of pages) but respond to it in a number of different ways according to their histories and levels of sensory engagement. We also see that, as well as inhabiting present material conditions, the residents freely move through the imaginary spaces of the past which are re-activated by the affect of the moment. This model is also employed to a greater or lesser extent in *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl*, and *The Unfortunates* where objects, sounds and movements trigger the mood of prior actions and spaces. Johnson’s novelistic work thus promotes an experiential model of reality that locates subjectivity in an ever expanding, interlocking and shifting exterior world outside of time. It is a domain of overlapping worldings at the “centre” of each is an individual, but any perceived centrality arises not through the primacy of human consciousness but by the

\(^{33}\) Johnson, *Unfortunates* (Last), 6.
\(^{34}\) Thrift, “Space,” 141.
directional workings of affect, the keenly felt bodily reactions to the “unruly dynamics of living”\textsuperscript{36} that prompt human action and orientate the body. Action and emotion create the illusion of an all-embracing worlding that locates the individual at the centre. Far from being “emotions and energies [that] are naturally contained, going no further than the skin”\textsuperscript{37}, affects are two-way channels of transmission that are, according to Brennan, social in nature: “the atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual.”\textsuperscript{38} What Brennan fails to note here, however, is that the individual gets into the environment. The “world” and its objects appear differently to each and every subject.

A space for experimentation

Johnson’s project reveals the potential and plurality of novelistic space both for reader and writer. As the narrator of \textit{Christie Malry} humorously remarks:

> Again, I have often read and heard said, many readers apparently prefer to imagine the characters for themselves. That is what draws them to the novel, that it stimulates their imagination! Imagining my characters indeed! Investing them with characteristics quite unknown to me, or even at variance with such description as I have given! […] What writer can compete with the reader’s imagination? \textsuperscript{39}

It seems that the reader encounters the novel in a manner akin to that of worlding; the space of the novel is an unpredictable, affective unfolding that cannot be imposed or controlled by any one exterior force or framework. Johnson therefore initially offers up a range of content, style and typographic arrangement to make allowances for this fact. In \textit{Travelling People} a range of styles is tried on for size and discarded because, as the narrator informs the reader, “one style for

\begin{footnotes}
\item[38] Ibid., 1.
\end{footnotes}
one novel was a convention that I resented most strongly.”\(^{40}\) In *Albert Angelo*, Johnson embarked on an increasingly radical stylistic path that counteracted realist conservatism with an approach that embraced plurality. Like his much-admired Smithsons, he seized upon the radical new techniques which the artists of the sixties “[we]re painfully, with many bosh-shots, learning how to use”\(^{41}\) in the quest for alternative spatial arrangements. *Albert Angelo* features many quirks: an originally designed type character that identifies purely descriptive passages that the reader may skip; columns of dialogue opposing columns of italicized thought, “found” items and a Smithsonian “window”\(^{42}\) into the future. The techniques were never superficially used but selected to reflect the thirst for the new in Johnson’s worlding of London in the post-war years, the need for future-facing aesthetic solutions. When reflecting on his practice, Johnson mused, “subject matter is everywhere, general, is brick, concrete; plastic, the ways of putting it together in particular, are crucial.”\(^{43}\) Writing here is spoken of in terms of construction, the novel a material artefact of which the reader will take possession; it emerges through process as an innovative architecture of words.


\(^{42}\) In 1956 Alison and Peter Smithson were commissioned to create one of the key pieces of the Ideal Home Exhibition at Kensington Olympia Hall for the installation “The House of the Future.” The brief was to create a vision of a house inhabited in twenty-five years’ time and they met the brief with a startling pre-fabricated house of sweeping smooth curves. Designed in one piece, the house was to be made entirely out of plastic and to accommodate the viewing public holes were cut into the windowless walls to expose the interior.

\(^{43}\) Johnson, “Intro,” 16.
Such moves are evidence of the experimental impulse\textsuperscript{44} in Johnson’s work; a begrudging nod to the cerebral “continental” avant-garde. A claim can be made for similarities between Johnson’s project and the \textit{Oulipo}\textsuperscript{45} project in France, although the latter favoured aesthetic manoeuvres of a linguistic or more abstracted design. Syntactical play featured heavily in Oulipian work, an example being Georges Perec’s 1969 lipogrammatic novel \textit{La Disparition (A Void)}, famously written without the letter “e”—a challenge at which even Johnson may have baulked. However, \textit{Albert Angelo}, (written five years earlier) sees Johnson moving in an Oulipian fashion through verbal declensions from third to second to first person singular and plural forms, increasing and disorientating the reader and their perceived distance from the text.\textsuperscript{46}

Whilst the output of the Oulipo group was more strikingly outré than that of Johnson, there is no denying the playfulness of Johnson’s interpretation of novelistic space and the ways in which both work with constraints. Oulipo projects are based on a set of instructions or rules in the same way that Johnson applied strict parameters to the novel. Although Oulipo activities are notable for their innovation—the shock of the new—some of their practice is also research based and comes under the heading of \textit{anoulipism}, or “discovery.” In anoulipistic works, Oulipians identify artists they consider to be “anticipatory plagiarists”: those who were operating in an oulipian

\textsuperscript{44} Johnson took issue with his work being described as “experimental” thinking it a synonym for “unsuccessful”. He said, “Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is on my terms successful: that is the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems.” Johnson, “Intro,” 19. Philip Tew asserts that this reluctance to be labelled as experimental was “precisely because of its pejorative connotations, not because of the innovative radical literary praxis it signifies.” Philip Tew, “B.S. Johnson: influences and comparisons,” in \textit{The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction}, ed. David James (Cambridge: CUP, 2006,) 67.

\textsuperscript{45} The \textit{Ouvroir de littérature potentielle}, or “workshop of potential literature” is a loose gathering of (mainly) French-speaking writers and mathematicians who began operating and producing work in 1960. See Motte (1998) and Levin Becker (2012) for further detail.

\textsuperscript{46} The sections written employing the second person singular directly imply the reader in the action of the narrative.
fashion in earlier times. Other works look to numbers for creative energy. In *Albert Angelo*, the protagonist generates patterns in the changing urban landscape as a source of amusement:

I catch with my father a number twenty-seven bus […] We could have caught a number nine or number seventy-three, to place them in numerical order, had either of these splendid numbers been opportune. But we catch a number twenty-seven back to Hammersmith, my father and I. The numbers of these three (again!) buses running along the Hammersmith Road are not related by accident, these things are no coincidence. Anyone who thinks they are accidents or coincidences probably does not believe in parthogenesis either.

Here, Albert delights at the mathematical patterns that the urban infrastructure provides and the abstracted possibility of meaning through the reverse of the rural sublime. The patterns he sees are not inconsequential occurrences, but are meanings generated by the city through which he passes—the beauty of a chance discovery.

In his final work Johnson shows his awareness of the burgeoning postmodern plurality of space by positioning the text as the first instalment of a planned trilogy that would interlock family history with the changing parameters of Britain and its territories over time. The personal and the political are knitted together with the mystical and fiction employed as merely another set of frames. The novel morphs into an assemblage of source and experience; intertextuality and subjectivity, the poetic and the concrete. Within the space of the novel, affective and political maps unfold and combine with biography and snap-shots of the process of its

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47 This considered, Johnson’s adoption of Sterne’s techniques in *Travelling People* can be read as a game that positions the eighteenth century writer as his unwitting literary pretender and the weight of history is pleasingly shifted in his favour.


49 *Albert Angelo* can thus be read as an example of literature “as found,” an approach to art and literature that Thomas Schregenberger details in “‘As Found’ is a Small Affair” as being is about “the here and now, about truthfulness and reality, about the common and ordinary. It is not about visions and remote ideals. It means carefully observing everyday life, to discover its qualities, to follow the traces of what is already there and to use it as a basis for new insights and new forms.” In Pamela Johnston, Rosa Ainley, and Clare Barrett, *Architecture Is Not Made with the Brain: The Labour of Alison and Peter Smithson*, (London: Architectural Association, 2005), 81.
production. *See the Old Lady Decently* now stands as the terminal point of the Johnson project and like all of the preceding novels it is self-reflexive, a document of its own becoming. Within his texts Johnson demands scrutiny on three levels: firstly, he engages in a critique of his own work, secondly he enlists the reader (narrative flaws and failures are presented for the reader’s delectation), and finally he even dares consult the creations that inhabit his pages. The project can be said, therefore to be characterized by questions and critiques, a drive to find answers. Having identified Johnson’s approach as a spatial one (in Thrift’s terms) the final section of this conclusion looks at how Johnson’s novelistic project can be conceived of as a type of *creative research*, or an “intellectual adventure peculiar to the making process.”

**Creative research: a project in material thinking**

From the beginning of this thesis I have grouped Johnson’s seven novels together as a “project,” a term perhaps not often employed to qualify a body of literary work. As a term it bestows a certain contemporaneity on a work and brings with it associations of methodical planning and production, of end results and tangible objects. Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham see projects as “contemporary cultural practices [that] often involve setting up experiments, taking soundings, carrying out sets of instructions.” Projects are therefore task-based work that are not inspired by the muse but result from a process of problem solving. Tim Ingold supports this position when stating, “We are accustomed to think of making as a project. This is to start with an idea in mind, of what we want to achieve, and with a supply of the raw material needed to

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Johnson’s novelistic endeavours come together as a project through having clearly expressed and unifying aims: the attainment of “truth to reality” and the capturing of truth in the form of novel that clearly expressed the novel’s strength: “the explication of thought.” The raw material of the project is thus threefold: authentic emotion, encounter and thought—in short, the perceptions and movements of the author’s life. By framing the endeavour as a project its success can be easily ascertained. Ingold asserts that a project is complete, “at the moment where the material has taken on the intended form. At this point we have produced an artefact.” Completion occurs when the original intellectual concept has borne fruit and moved into the cultural at the behest of the creator; at the moment raw matter rearranges to form a new authentic object in the world.

Ingold’s statement positions making as a smooth process in which authenticity is easily reached and self-apparent, but in Johnson’s novels a different picture is painted. The creative process is obfuscated and queried:

a block of wood, a plank of wood. When does a block become a plank? When does a plank become a block? At what stage a plank a block? Plank. Block. He thought about them until the words became meaningless to him, then ludicrous to him, then nothing to him. And he was left with wood. Wood is wood is wood, he said to himself, pleased.

Albert’s reflections here on “thingness” in the creative process in Johnson’s second novel, take a step towards considering the material in “worlding” terms. Material being is presented as a continuum; objects in a worlding come to be through process, transformation and intention and refuse to be defined by teleology. Directed by mood and affect they can be no longer be considered to possess a singular reality but wait instead to be inscribed by our reference and

54 Ingold, Making, 20.
55 Johnson, Albert, 133.
transformed by our actions. Only then do “wood”, “block” or “plank” have any meaning at all. Through Johnson’s seven novels a series of creative questions are posed or implied and frustrations noted. This, in itself, is a feature of a project mode which Gratton and Sheringham champion as equally characterised by diversions and distractions; successes and failures. Johnson’s project investigates issues that may not be satisfactorily answered—when does a piece of text become a novel? How are words on a page transformed into feeling and vice versa? How can old form capture a new reality? If novels best express thinking; what is the material of thought? Ultimately, singular definitive answers are of little consequence as the project framework permits the possibility that “the outcome of the project, its final project (if any) may be less important than the procedures that enable it to get underway.”56 The success of a project is not measured against teleology.

It is the processes of a project that are revealed as generative, not only in terms of the aims of the original projection, but because they “illuminate central issues of contemporary culture.”57 My reading of Johnson’s novels as a project shows that space emerges as both a thematic object of concern and an analytical tool. From Thrift’s perspective the spatial turn constituted a significant shift away from the dictates of fixed form (or genre, literary form and tradition in Johnson’s case); it is concerned instead with a materiality that springs forth spontaneously in the present. Spatiality of this kind is born of shifting relations and is contingent. A spatial approach consists of “all kinds of hybrids [that] are continually recast by processes of circulation within and between particular spaces.”58 Attention here should be paid to the term “process”—one of the most enduring motifs of the Johnson project is that of the artist at work, the metafictive author caught in the act of creation. Gratton and Sheringham note that in a project

56 Gratton and Sheringham, “Project,” 1.
57 Ibid., 5.
58 Thrift, “Space,” 139.
“the writer/artist is physically, intellectually, existentially implicated in the execution and dissemination of the work.”

Thus in *Travelling People* the author/narrator “inhabits” the prelude and is found in an explanatory mood; in *Albert Angelo* the exasperated author enters the text and is captured gazing out of his window on to Claremont Square. Later in the project, the author of *Christie Malry* discusses the failures of the novel with his character. In *See the Old Lady Decently* the author is interrupted by his children *in medias res*. As a “project manager,” Johnson’s activity is always integrated in the work because *the process is the work*. His practice reveals Stewart’s fraught poiesis born of a “contact zone in which what emerges is not a mirror of oppression, or promise but a residue of all the moments of watching and waiting in the mode of the potential, or the very problem of a moment of poiesis.” The creativity described here fits the parameters of project work, it is spatial and material, a haptic zone of awareness and potentiality rather than an act of mimesis or representation; the residue of noticing and testing. The artist subject is revealed as a mediator engaged in the faltering process of collating rather than the remote originator of a singular perfect reflective object. Such reflexive creativity is de-glamourized and embedded in the unfolding spaces of the everyday; indeed Gratton and Sheringham refer to the “deprofessionalisation” of project work. Poiesis occurs in the foundational small acts, feelings, obligations and behaviours that form the basis of daily life; the “background noise” against which ordinary being unfolds. Johnson’s practice is a problem-solving exercise woven in and out of the spaces of the everyday.

59 Gratton and Sheringham, “Project,” 1.
60 Stewart, “Weak,” 77.
61 Gratton and Sheringham, “Project,” 12.
62 Katharine Norman is a sound artist whose work explores the role of sound in the creation of everyday experience and the transmission of affect. See “Listening at Home,” in *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life*, edited by Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell and Robert Hudson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 207–221.
Johnson novels constitute a “project” because they investigate and make material the creative decisions involved in their unfolding. This further implicates the project as a type of “material thinking,” a contemporary concept suggested by Paul Carter to be a type of “creative research” which demystifies the creative process and reflects upon itself. It is a practice in which the artist explicitly accounts for the work because they, and only they, are present at the very moment of its unfolding, much as the individual is at the “centre” of their own worlding. Carter’s work on material thinking focuses largely on the visual arts and collaboration, the practice of developing spatial aesthetics through dialogue and negotiation. Nonetheless, Carter assesses that all art forms “score space temporally, finding a line that composes it, embodying its human meaning.” He adds that, “writing was (and occasionally still remains) a material practice, in which the calligraphy itself communicates the meaning.” Indeed, in an interview with the writer Alan Burns, Johnson unwittingly reveals his investment in the materiality of prose when he discusses the drafting of *Trawl*:

Trawl has a physical shape that can be drawn on paper: Trawl begins with a prologue, followed by exposition, then development, reaching the highest point in the novel: then it explodes, disintegrates, falls down into coda. The design is a line that climbs a steep incline, then falls at a sudden point, then collapses. This was drawn on paper by a Hungarian critic [...] The shape of the book’s construction is the shape of a trawl: it drops quickly down, travels along the seabed and is slowly hauled to the surface.

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64 Gratton and Sheringham additionally note that “historically, the art of the project emerges simultaneously in the fields of literature and the visual arts, often in the context of movements that bring them together.” (2)
66 Ibid.
The will to exploit the materiality of the novel here cannot be denied. To support the case for Johnson’s project as material thinking we can also look to Carter’s dictate that material thinking is “good techne, [it] has to be open to criticism and correction.”\textsuperscript{68} Significantly, Johnson calls upon the opinion of reader, characters and himself within his texts, the real and fictional “bodies” actively and internally involved in the unfolding of the text. Aesthetics are thus developed through dialogue and negotiation although Johnson famously resented the intrusion of external “others,” the professional critics of his work. This instinctive decision reflects Carter’s position that the “net result” of such external interpretation is invariably the same, the artefact becomes “under-interpreted or over-interpreted, the meaning of the artwork is detached from the matrix of its production.”\textsuperscript{69} Material thinking serves the incipient reality of creative output.

The creative output of Johnson’s novels is driven by affect. The parameters of affect, its ambit, is inclusive rather than restrictive; welcoming of inter-relation and expansion and this leads us to the issue of scale—the moods and feelings of the everyday are too vast and chaotic to grasp and pin down in any one way in any one text. The project mode of creative research permits a range of material and creative decisions to be made and rationalized by the artist. The modernist impulse contended with the problem of the scale of truth and experience by reduction, by retreating inside the skin of the individual subconscious to the intrapersonal. Johnson’s project is realised through extension and thus it pushes the ambit of modernism to its fullest extent and beyond. The novels explore and push through boundaries via the fluid osmotic pathways between the inside and outside, subject and object, using these movements to “give this feeling [aesthetic] form.”\textsuperscript{70} The post-war act of artistic creation under investigation should then be considered a labour-intensive multi-directional project, fraught with the problematic issue of

\textsuperscript{68} Carter, Material, xi-xii.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., xi.
\textsuperscript{70} Johnson, Trawl, 181.
ending, of testing the scope of the analogues of worlding and poiesis. Within the post-war creative matrix “lie all the motives for the specific work; not all the themes – a theme may be imported if it fits the place – but the tendencies of the piece.”

For the modern day critic of Johnson’s novels, an affective lens permits the reader to override the distance between the time of reading and time of production—a distance on which, according to Carter, any critique falls. My conclusion suggests that space, the theme that reoccurs across the Johnson project, is the best paradigm for his creative research into the production of truth to reality. Only space has the room for the chaos, movement and contingency that Johnson assessed to be the key markers of both life and practice.

To conclude, we see both Johnson’s practice and aims in Carter’s reflections that:

Material thinking enables us to think differently about our human situation, and by displaying in a tangible but non-reductive form its inevitable complexity, to demonstrate the great role works of art can play in the ethical project of becoming (collectively and individually) oneself in a particular place.

Themes may be structural forms arbitrarily imposed by the reader after the event—to make sense of a prior aesthetic event—but reading Johnson now it is clear that the possibility of space as a phenomenological category in the 1960s infused the mood of the time and orientated artists to investigate their practice and take it forwards to new places. Through the novels we can identify space as the “tendency” and “motive” that prompted “different objects [to] come into [the artist’s] emotional view” and the shapes the resulting piece makes.

For Johnson, the novelist’s defining role was an inquiring one rather than a mimetic one because “What happens is nothing like as important as how it is written, as the medium of the words, and form though which it is

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72 Carter, Material, xii. My emphasis.
73 Carter, Material, xii.
made to happen to the reader.” Form evolves to become curiously subordinate to the creative act itself, the process. Ingold says that

Even if the maker has a form in mind, it is not this form that creates the work. It is the engagement with materials. And it is therefore to this engagement that we must attend if we are to understand how things are made.⁷⁵

The final four words—how things are made—echo Johnson’s own. Poiesis does not stop with the maker of the artefact or the materiality of the object itself but embraces the receiver whose worlding collides with those of the artefact and its creator. For Johnson the novel form proves to be “not the aim but the result,”⁷⁶ a transitory bloom-space where energetic paths cross in the project of an unfinished world.

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⁷⁵ Ingold, Making, 22.
⁷⁶ Johnson, “Intro,” 16.
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