

## Extract from work on Jonathan Edwards's poetry of place

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Jonathan Edwards's approach to place in *My Family and Other Superheroes* (Bridgend: Seren, 2014) is not something I want to 'box up' in the package of one particular theoretical notion of place or another: he seems to construct place poetically both as fixity and as shifting 'trajectories'.<sup>1</sup> But I do think that his poetic commitment to Welsh locality – most obviously to Valleys locality, or post-industrial south Wales locality more broadly – is most clearly expressed in his interest in people, in human community. To put it differently, I don't think that this is primarily a poetry of physical landmarks. Certainly, in 'Colliery Row',<sup>2</sup> the poem's speaker is highly conscious of the street itself: there are landmarks that particular houses create and by which the poem itself emphatically navigates. Thus, the poem travels from house number five in the first stanza, to number six in the second, to a property 'across the road' in stanza three, to number three by the end of stanza four, and to both 'the other end of the row' and house number eight by stanza five. In other words, in the sense of a criss-crossing of lines from one physical point of the street to another, we find here the sort of 'geometric personality' that Yi-Fu Tuan attributes to a relatively fixed sense of space.<sup>3</sup> However, this seems to function not as an end in itself but rather substantially as a construct within which the dramas of the street's people can take place: the bus driver who may still be drunk during his morning shift; the man who is 'half-naked' at 'the first sign of sunshine'; the skateboarding kids; the woman across the road 'who's been walking around beneath a cloud / of dark hair since she watched her husband go'. For Edwards, the place of the Valleys is, to a very great degree, the conjunction of its people – what Doreen Massey calls, in an admirably suggestive coinage, their

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<sup>1</sup> I draw here on Doreen Massey whose volume *for space* talks of places as 'temporary constellations of trajectories': Doreen Massey, *for space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> *My Family and Other Superheroes*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>3</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 17.

'throwntogetherness'.<sup>4</sup> 'What is a street for?', asks the end of 'Colliery Row'. For Edwards, it seems to be very much about what he calls the 'semi-detached lives' that the street brings into contact with one another.

As such, it is unsurprising that character follows character in Edwards's poems of Welsh locality: the worker in a Merthyr kebab shop, and the woman who likes (or perhaps stalks) him;<sup>5</sup> failed footballer Owen Jones, whose now-reduced life is a progression from betting shop to kebab shop and back<sup>6</sup> (just like the people who 'lug their lives to bus stop, chip shop, chapel' in 'View of Valleys Village from a Hill');<sup>7</sup> the travellers on the '7.54 to Cardiff', who are temporarily thrown into community to the extent that the poem's speaker knows that today is 'the third day' since the 'girl who got on one day / with a goldfish in a plastic bowl' hasn't appeared, and where there is the supportive social interchange of 'A Bless you, a borrowed tissue'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, even the poem 'Chartist Mural, John Frost Square, Newport', which takes as its focus the eponymous 1978 mural by Kenneth Budd which (to cite Rob Williams's words for *The Independent*) 'commemorate[d] the 1839 Chartist uprising in the city'<sup>9</sup> and which was controversially destroyed by Newport Council in October 2013<sup>10</sup> – even this poem, which focuses so emphatically on a physical landmark, seemingly does so in order to construct a parade of characters: variously, to cite a number of examples from the poem, 'these men, flattened by history'; 'bottom right, these three, forever dying'; a 'school-trip boy who stares'; 'king's men firing the slowest bullets in the world', and the 'tramp' at the end of the poem, with 'his

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<sup>4</sup> Massey, *for space*, p. 140.

<sup>5</sup> 'USA Family Kebab House, Merthyr Tydfil': *My Family and Other Superheroes*, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> 'Owen Jones', *My Family and Other Superheroes*, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> *My Family and Other Superheroes*, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> 'X16', *My Family and Other Superheroes*, p. 31. For the X16 bus service in south Wales, see 'Changes to bus route X16 Risca to Cardiff', *Caerphilly Observer*, 28 September 2011, <<http://www.caerphillyobserver.co.uk/news/300065/changes-to-bus-route-x16-risca-to-cardiff/>>, accessed 2 June 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Rob Williams, 'The destruction of the Newport Chartist Mural is a needless and casual act of cultural vandalism', *Independent Voices*, *The Independent*, 4 October 2013, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/columnists/the-destruction-of-the-newport-chartist-mural-is-a-needless-and-casual-act-of-cultural-vandalism-8858692.html>>, accessed 2 June 2015.

<sup>10</sup> 'Newport Chartist mural: protest as demolition takes place', BBC online, 3 October 2013, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-24386566>>, accessed 2 June 2015.

duvet / growing from his chin'. Making all of these people into a sort of *symposium*,<sup>11</sup> the resonant final line of the poem observes the way in which 'These bits-and-pieces men look at each other': the bits and pieces, in other words, of the mural itself *and* of so many lives. To make a bigger point from all this: in Edwards's commitment to the many lives of so many different people – to whom we might add, for example, the eponymous character of 'Girl' who, in 'scarlet heels, six inch' is the object of the speaker's (possibly ironic?) affections;<sup>12</sup> or the TalkTalk salesman who has 'all the flattery / you can stand';<sup>13</sup> or the Starbucks worker, Rhian, 'With her Minnie Mouse voice and her Popeye / tattoos'<sup>14</sup> – in his commitment to all these people, in his commitment to the value of their everyday lives, it seems to me that Edwards's poetic engagement with Newport's Chartist mural is of fundamental importance.<sup>15</sup> Edwards's poetry is an act of representation, in the political sense; it is an act of commitment to the visibility of those people-outside-power on whose behalf Chartism itself was advanced.<sup>16</sup> To put it another way: Edwards's poetry of locality seems to me to be an attempt, Chartist-like, to achieve a kind of suffrage for the communities that his poems both emerge out of and create.

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<sup>11</sup> My larger analysis – from which this brief extract is taken – draws Edwards's work into conjunction with ideas from the myth critic Northrop Frye, from whose 1951 essay 'The Archetypes of Literature' the notion of *symposium* here is taken: Frye suggests that the 'comic' mode of literature demonstrates 'the human world' as 'community' and is thus the archetypal pattern that is expressed in 'images of symposium, communion, order, friendship and love'. See Northrop Frye, 'The Archetypes of Literature', *The Kenyon Review*, 13/1 (winter, 1951), pp. 92-110: pp. 108-9; <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4333216>>, accessed 2 June 2015.

<sup>12</sup> *My Family and Other Superheroes*, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Bloke Selling Talk Talk in the Arcade', *My Family and Other Superheroes*, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> 'Starbucks Name Tag Says Rhian', *My Family and Other Superheroes*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards notes that 'I was keen that the book would celebrate characters in my village, Crosskeys. The poem "Colliery Row" is my version of the great John Cooper Clarke poem "Beasley Street", about a working class street in Manchester – I simply looked out of the window of my house and wrote down what I saw. Sometimes I get adventurous and travel beyond Crosskeys, as far as Newport. The poem "Starbucks Name Tag Says Rhian" is a love song to the girl who works in the café where I write a lot of poems. "The Bloke Selling Talk Talk in the Arcade" is about a man I walk past every day in the Kingsway [in Newport], his patter, his life. Crosskeys and Newport are brimming with superheroes.' See Jonathan Edwards, 'Gregory Peck, Evel Knievel and the Chartists: on *My Family and Other Superheroes*', *New Welsh Review* blog, 104 (summer 2014), <<http://www.newwelshreview.com/article.php?id=794>>, accessed 2 June 2015.

<sup>16</sup> For Chartism in Wales, including the Newport uprising of 1839, see John Davies, *A History of Wales*, revised edn (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 364-7.