

Making Connections:
The Work of the Local Poet

Submitted by Eleanor Rees to the University of Exeter
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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the question 'how does a local poet achieve connections in a context defined by difference?' The creative practice section offers a collection of poetry written within given contexts, from specific places and emerging out of collaboration, commission and participative practice. Each project offers the difference anticipated by the research question. Therefore the context from which the poem emerged is made explicit to further support the argument. A local poet achieves connections in a context constituted by difference by using her imaginative capacities to produce virtual and emergent, yet real, material space.

In Chapter One I define the creative process as that of 'Local Poetics' via a discussion of Heaney's use of the term local poet and New-Materialist thought. I offer close readings of poems by Norman Nicholson, Adrian Henri and Barry MacSweeney to describe how the poem is a 'local solution to a local problem' and I present the history of participatory writing in Liverpool in relation to my own experience to support this idea. Chapter Two offers 'case studies' of my creative writing process to argue for 'local poem as more than words'. The local poem emerges from multiple influences not all of them linguistic. In Chapter Three I extend this idea to consider how a local poet writes *with* their context not *about* it making poetry *with* the agency and affordances of materials.

I conclude that connections are achieved by the local poet when multiple material trajectories acting on the sensate body become imaginative thought. In the process those material energies are transformed. Through intimate connection with an audience or reader the material process continues. I describe this activity as the work of the local poet.

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I declare this thesis to be all my own work.

However the creative practice research is informed by collaboration with other researchers and artists and they are acknowledged throughout.

Definitions:

Note on use of title 'preliminaries' to describe creative practice. This is intended to foreground the dictionary definition of the term which focusses on the 'limin'. Poems I understand as informing the development of longer work are grouped together. I do this to further support the thesis argument that the material reality of the creative writing process is spatial and non-linear and connections are made across, through and via works. I do this to avoid the conflation of literary conventions with the realities of localized poetic practice.

OED: mid 17th century: from modern Latin *praeliminaris* or French *préliminaire*, from Latin *prae* 'before' + *limen*, *limin-* 'threshold'.

Preliminaries: 1**Full**

Moon-raked, unable to sleep,
I wake landlocked
and unwilling to shift beyond
my own horizon
into a fall of snow, or a tired
embrace, or a landscape
of ships and sails, old relics
on the shore, or your hand
again or the draw and wreck
of the sea on coastal plains
that is lapping even now:
2.35 a.m. late, unearthed
and deep in a city's sleepy silence
that's remarkable and unsung,
no trains, no rush of cars;
just this flat moment
heavy in the black cloudless sky.

The church on the hill
squats in a square of shadow
under the moon-ridden moments
of shifting white, and somewhere
inside perhaps near the altar
or in the pews she is sitting
alert to our dreams, hat on
for Sunday, hunched forward
in prayer. The door creaks
as I enter, sleep-frenzied
and aware of the turn of her neck:
her startled eyes
in the shadows witness
my night-time intrusion
into the life of the dark.

*

On the main road beyond
the playing fields a motorbike
but faint like a bee in grass
must hurtle through the orange glow.

I am writing out my landlocked self,
tuning it to sense
in the folds of the dark.

A door opens somewhere in the flats,
shuts quick; a bird scuttles
on the gravel in the car-park.

*

I put a fire in the hearth tonight.
I put a fire in this house where
it had not been for years.

I lit the flame-blackened clay-back fire.
I keep checking for sparks
in the cinders.

The spider in the corner
of the grate has begun
to re-spin its web.

Transport

Almost as if something is in the wind
blown from the land,
along the arcade of hairdresser,
bookmaker, florist by the junction,
gatekeeping the avenue
into the familiar
procession of well-tended houses;
the route back to my flat, my room, my bed;
this long journey south
stalled by a car on the line.
Someone has driven over the verge.
*The team must be careful not to remove
the car too quick, there might be damage*
says the conductor,
so we wait for another to take us further south
and away from you, and here,
from thin clouds behind the salvage yard,
half a sign studied for hours,
a white van reversing into the warehouse.
Below the slope a well-cared-for wooden fence,
turn of starlings rising into the sun.

Isca

Not the wide open sea but
join and edge, land-thrust,
full lungs of cold October air.
A room with a view to the estuary
and the empty space of the marsh,
sodden oxygen
from beyond the bungalows,
pure sky, excess of water,
and wading birds in the mud,
their speech perhaps like this air
or the breeze
in through the open windows
and out onto the shore,
out to where there is nothing
that speaks
but is the same as night
looks to day – a flat oily black:
turned soil on the pastureland.

80A

Rain-heavy street;
faltering bus.

A road alight with spray,
orange water

sheened by the electric lamps' touch
all over the moisture

in the hair of the child
with her small dog.

Two girls in raincoats
run for the bus,

bags hung with shopping -
full of wetness.

Rain-storms shifting
through the wheels

of cars at the traffic lights.

The dark flat glass of closed shop
windows, insides quiet and still

as a mountain cave: fire needed;
heat in the hearth.

Tide

Behind the railway cutting
curtained windows are still drawn tight.
Aerial masts on newly-tiled roofs
point east: a train from Manchester
scowls west further into
the lock of houses, over the bridge
to the scraps of hedges where the foxes
live border-crossing the line
at dusk to the Mystery and the school car park,
and always down towards the sea
that is pulling all movement out with its
back arched, the landscape on ropes,
the city afloat, dragging all to the horizon:
water at our knees, gulls on the bow.

Drift

I say nothing to the night
or to the blackening folds of the cloud.
Terraced roofs are a pack of cards,
are my dream-talk of tented villages,
nomadic peoples, suburbs on the move
into the deep black sea over the coast;
long rhythms butt
against the vision inside my eye.

A house sits on a promontory
jutting into the ocean, waves at the door.
I build a wall upon its landscaped lawn
as the light falls, darkening
the dry stone and the planted border.
A black printed ink across the horizon.

Storm

And all there is, is darkness
and the coming of the tide,
vast wide lies thrashing
at the body of the world,
its circumference lapped by tornedoes
and sulphurous pools;
this lie is as big as the world
and contains nitrogen,
this lie is as big as the light
that passes from the sun
every afternoon into my red eyes;
this palpation of self
sinks into itself, into coastal sands,
dune and daybreak;
and hopes for a light wind, change
of direction but there is always
the punch of the moon's
drag on the belly of the girl
as she cleans or bleeds or cries
into the dawn: the oval edges
loop and hook like tongues;
the circular horizon impresses
on her bones its own demands,
sky's argument of rain amazes.
Her thunder is a light breath.
Her lightning: a strike across the pupil.
There is all this weight,
a leveling down; a heavy lift.

At Sea

Darkness over the bow.
Ship on the tide
gale-freed and boxed
by salt, erosive and callow,
gnawing on the metal.

Boat battered into the storm.
You call like a nestling.
You are heard by the moon.
It blinks not unkindly
but without sensation. Your

cargo tightly packed in containers,
each component balanced in flux;
oil blobs within barrels
but remains in its limits.

The storm gathers strong arms into a gesture,
streaks you through the estuary
steered by engines' smart electronic flash
around the sandbanks towards the docks.

Batter us long waves.
Batter us wide-throated sea.
Let us find fix in the bite
of the winter wind, dark rain,
a full flush of breath,
shiny-faced and articulate.

One Note

Upstairs my neighbours are singing again,

playing guitar, opening sound to the wind;
the window ajar, rooftops outside lighting

with flecks of voice, brightening
the damp tarmacked alleyway to the bridge,

the fresh fall of leaf, the old school:
a lamp clicks on in an attic room at night;

drums and piano patterning the eaves.
Wet rhythms crumbling through the decades

as cars change colour, or
the newspaper print freshens to new ink:

a child with my eyes
runs across the headland beyond this river

over the ridge to the bus stop at the precinct.
Early morning, she sings open-mouthed

to the sun as it rises along the Welsh hills,
school a dry sentence: the mountains

praised with a loose tune,
a singular love she attaches to the dawn,

to Duck Pond Lane beside the supermarket,
the small brook, dark freckles of light

where the branches reach over the path, always
the risk of silence from behind the trees,

from the shadows which precede the song,
as she flies over wet grass towards the sun.

Duck Pond Lane

January 2012

Beyond the edge of town, past the other river,
 mountains protrude into a winter sky.
 In the distance somebody walks their dog
 by the far tree copse. I must have passed
 this way for years on my way to my school.
 The children have to get a different bus to cross the town
 from the one we took, children
 who brought eggs and rocks and catapults
 to fight out hurts amongst steamed-up windows.
 I am thirty-three. I write as if sixty.
 The changes somehow too overt,
 yet the hook of the hill remains the same.
 The view is precise. Only the local detail shifts -
 ripples in a pool in a high wind.
 And it is corrosive, this moment. My return
 to the hill, all that happened after my steps
 in the opposite direction sieve through my hands like dry soil.
 The sunlight casts shadows on the sandstone walls.
 I blink. A man is dissolving into stone.
 He swims through the dark, otter-smooth.
 The rock absorbs his face. He puts his arms
 into the air and dives, his body rushing fluid into stone,
 but those blackenings in the winter's sun are the position
 of the ivy's shadow. An old man walks up the hill behind me,
 his plastic bag tight in a pale hand.
 He passes and I watch the sky awhile.
 A sharp wind; seagulls though I am inland.
 The sea is always somewhere close rapping at the door;
 iron gates mark the path to the house, half ajar.
 A man in shorts exercises down the slope.
 His son sits bored at the top of the hill.
 The wind rushes in, catches my breath.
 I can smell burnt wood, soot and pigment,
 as distance conflates to the height of the hill
 ringed by potential, enclosed by all that is in sight.

*

The moment's calm pushes me out into what feels like flight,
 a rushing across the grassland to a bird-like height
 and I am opening the doors of houses,
 unlocking the gates, opening the window so the air falls
 onto a bed's soft duvet made-up for night;
 opening chests of drawers, flinging bras and jumpers.
 I am frolicking through their possessions,
 a burglar looking for clothes.
 I glide through the outer suburbs shimmying my hips,
 my breasts swing like small monkeys.

Animals follow me; I am a pied piper of pets.
I am invisible in the supermarket,
I hide inside the hairdressers.
I'm again in flight. What do I find in the corner
of your houses, dust mites and angled lamps?
The whole of your life lived in photos
though the machines you breathe through now
blink at me in the dark corners –
they hold all of your time
and they will not give it back.

Duck Pond Lane (2)

January 2012

In the opposite direction from where I began,
twenty years before this moment

as I ran from the shadows of the trees
into the morning sun, on my way to school,

seven a.m., late for the bus, the view
to Wales opening my eyes to the world

hidden in slips of rain, sea-mist,
I begin my walk behind the supermarket

where a noticeboard outlines
the *Friends of the Arno Recreation Ground*

and I learn about the history of the name
of the hill – Arne’s Hill; there was

a flour mill at the top; the BMX track
needs replacing; there was a poultry farm

once where the car park is now
and during the war all of the grasslands

were turned over to allotments.
In a photo from 1900 a young woman

with fine bobbed hair and a smile
leans against a tree on the path. Behind

her I can see cultivated land, a fence,
garden cane, trellis. Now this useful

soil is for recreation. There is new
play equipment that the children

have chosen; tyre swings for teenagers.
In the distance somebody walks their dog

by the far tree copse, alone in the familiar.
I’ve never been down there I think.

Beyond the edge of the town,
past the other river, mountains protrude

into a sparkling winter sky.
Why do we only meet now at this point in time?

I must have passed your house for years

on the way to my comprehensive

now closed, merged with another, now
a *University Academy*. The children

have to get a different bus to cross the town
from the one I took, *Thatcher's children*

who brought eggs and rocks and catapults
to fight out our hurts amongst steamed-up windows.

I am thirty-three. I write as if sixty.
The changes somehow too overt,

yet the hook of the hill remains the same.
The view is precise.

Only the local detail shifts -
local ripples in a pool in a high wind.

*

The path that leads towards the trees
is partly visible in the noon-day sun.

It is corrosive this moment. My return
to the hill from which I ran

and all that happened after my steps
in the opposite direction

shift through my hands like dry soil,
turning the walk into something

expressive, a march towards the light,
torches cast on the sandstone walls

that line the tarmac path
around the head of the hill

where a man is dissolving into stone.

He puts his arms into the air and dives,

his body rushing fluid into the texture,
he swims through the rock, otter-smooth.

The rock absorbs his face, the shadows
pull him into the whole of the hill.

I see him sink; I smell the pigment

and those blackenings in the winter's sun
are also the position of the ivy's shadow
across a gnarly branch;

while up the way behind me,
an old man's painful slow steps,

his plastic bag tight in a pale hand.
He passes and I watch the sky awhile.

There is a sharp wind; seagulls,
though I am inland. Our sea

is always somewhere close,
washing along the shore; iron gates

mark the path to your house,
half ajar and rusting.

The wind rushes in, catches my breath
as directions conflate to here,

draw together,

a clear, focused address
to the height of the hill

ringed by potential,
enclosed by all that is in sight.

The Bird Men of the Far Hill

Out on the hill wearing black like light,
 carrying torches they cross the ridge
 into the valley's flicker and break,
 into spasm of flashes,
 triggering moon into darkness.

They are watching the river's pendulous hook
 against the rust of the landmass,
 hoping for endings and clods
 of soil to fall sharp
 into the felt of the sea.

They are out on the hill, predatory.
 They carry heavy stones in their pockets;
 cold against their legs,
 and are looking for strangers,
 unknowns, tornedoes,
 in the back of next door's shed,
 in the glimpse of your eye.

They gabble, scribe hieroglyphs into the mud
 by the golf course, to break open your breath,
 seal you within their cages. Feathered bodies
 swell at the thought of your quietness.
 They want to flatten your thighs.
 They want to emit all their hurt.
 They want you to take them
 until you are as barren
 as the winter ground
 or as pock-marked as the muddy field.

*

The mulch you find yourself in
 is sticky, wet,
 filtered mountain, tree bark, excrement.

You are made into slope,

 turfed over, never found,
 speaking only out of the roots of newly seeded grass;
 the football pitch
 studded with boot-marks.

You speak into the dusk
 but unheard, now detritus,
 the river drags your remains,
 your soil; you crumble

out into the reaches of the estuary.
Spawning salmon swim over your smallness,
fish scales and meaty hulks
 groaning against your
 dispersal
into salt and sea-vacuum,
 dark depth,

 alteration.

The House of the Dark Woods

In the hollow underneath the ridge
the house is resting in the mulch
within the far dark gleam of stars.

The house seems to blink – an agony
of hours pass. It uncurls.

The windows swing like lanterns
as it rises, full-bodied and feral,
arching into a curve that blocks out the moon,

limbers forwards like startled hare
or a mountain speeded up through time.
The downstairs windows are deep sea pearls.

The glimmer of its lurching stride
lingers in the dark that follows
into the woodland dell, so craggy and alone.

The branches bend to see the house
bound panther-like into the forest
where the trees are silent and don't sway –

into the compress of bark and twig,
into the depth of the night where all is black.

Two children smile back from behind the glass,
wave like long lost relatives
sinking into the weight of the darkness.

The lights burning out; the stars fade.
The house swishes its tail and is gone.

Cradle-Song for the City

The land curls around my sleeping body.

Hills and streets fold over the blankets,
wrapping me into woollen horizons,

rooftops, knitted moors,
a pillow for the moon

and beyond the treetops and the roofs
a great sea folds onto the shore,

on it a fleet of boats are moored,
bobbing in the wind coming in from the North.

Each boat is made of silver, a thimble,
a miniature for the town is a model

in a case on the shelf. When I pick it up
I shake its seas, garden sheds and trees.

My small hands create the winds
that rock the ornate silver boats,

their small sailors sleeping soundly
in the comfort of the gale

that wants my breath
and pulse to be its own.

The large-handed street, big-boned church,
oval-faced row of shops, all buckling

to open up their doors and windows

into rain; so I am the rain,
hair on the wind, blue eyes to the sea.

Nocturne for the Last Bus Home

City, before dark comes I want to sing for you, name
all net-curtained windows one by one.

All your lights turned on for an evening meal.
I want to speak your bevelled iron gates, the ring road

in full voice: a spring evening and I am full of you.
You give me whole numbers: "up since four," says

the woman getting on, as the bitter air breaks us
on the top deck, to the hilltop, through Fiveways on the ride

to the hospital car-park, past contracted breaths, sharp pulses,
a couple happening in the folds of your alleyways,

or the rip of skin in the maternity ward,
or on to Knotty Ash: a dragon on the playing field.

O crumbling darkness, come now come, to the blue glow
of TVs in a back room pushing across the perimeter of parkland,

patient trees in gardens waiting for someone, an ambulance
paused at the junction. The bus stops. A man,

red scarf at the neck like a wound, steps on and shadows follow
from the spooling back streets falling somewhere beneath the wheels;

wooden signposts point to cycle tracks across side roads and on
into deep quickening dusk, rushed love comes in a twilit bed,

a child's eyes spark in the floodlit sports ground and cars circle
the flower-topped roundabout while our old bus warms and hums.

Direction

Ever seeking,
 even in sleep happening
 breath after breath
 in duvet-covered beds.
 I extend towards the woods,
 the road lengthening
 like a slide rule towards the hill;
 the standing stone in the park.
 I am an arm reaching out
 to pick up apples from a bowl.
 I bring it all home
 and set it down
 with me – beside
 and between the furniture,
 my legs, these old walls.

*

Drawing down into the underside
 of the afternoon,
 the earth needs to be flipped:
 turned over like a plant pot after a storm.
 The day is heavier than me.
 It speaks louder than me.
 A train low in the cutting wails as it passes.
 I need to be gone – to go elsewhere.
 Stop. Listen. Silence and birdsong.
 Where is the dawn?
 Only blackbirds cackle outside
 this bay window. Is this my home?

Errant

Or I need to live more slowly and close
to *things* – as intimate as I can
with the body of the world.

When it takes me I am reluctant,
woven into its light, I hold on:

you come, earth, on your own terms
and leave me wanting
to settle in you but you keep moving -

my neighbours leave the house,
another arrives carrying a book,
the trains in the cutting reel past:
images on film in an old camera.
A hammer verbs on a fence beyond.

All seeps towards the next hour:
turn of the moon, sun behind the cloud.

Listen: broken stream;
a drip of water in caverns beneath the hill
sounds out amongst the curtained windows.

Hill Time

He puts his arms into the air and dives,
his body spooling into the texture
to swim through the rock, otter-smooth.

The rock absorbs his face, as the shadows
pull him into the whole of the hill.
He sinks to pigment black in the winter's sun.

A rising wind, seagulls, sea on the shore
over the horizon of rooftops and cloud
pushing him as shadow across the parkland.

The tips of the grass bend back in the storm.
A gate, the house half ajar and rusting.

An upstairs window open so that he falls
onto a bed's soft duvet made-up for night.

Machines blink at him in the dark corners.
They hold time and they will not give it back.

Shanty

Arne leans on the lock as a boat
waits for low sluices to raise the water level.

A clipper unfurls torn sails, and beyond
two cathedrals squat on the horizon line

as the noon sun flattens the tide to metal.
A slide of sheen closes the way

behind the boat's drift into the marina;
high masts of white dinghies

stand to attention as gulls sheer through cloud
in front of newly built apartments.

Bistro tables set up for BBQs on black railed balconies,
while below, on the prom through Brunswick dock,

the imaginary line that marks the southernmost point
pulses pink neon across the city to the north.

The Shadow Side

He is wide-eyed in the shadows,
 miniature beneath the height of the walls.
 The brick confines that reach over his walk
 persuade him into directions, steps
 he isn't sure he wants to take.
 He is walking into a fresh darkness
 painted onto the sky with a brush.
 The rain is the colour of the gull's cry,
 a teal blue, a whited grey.

In the graveyard beneath the cathedral
 in the old quarry amongst the stones,
 he sits and ties a handkerchief in knots.
 He picks up an ink pot and uterine vellum
 and writes onto the translucence
 a charm, holds it to the light,
 a sun fading slowly, allows the rays
 to filter through the fine pigment
 so they project, almost like shadows
 onto the stones, forming the names of the dead.
 The words stick to the ground like fallen leaves.

Across his vision small children run.
 Across his wide eyes the water flows clear.
 Across his forehead a shimmer of sweat.

The sun is alert and obedient.
 It fades at his command.
 From the city streets music starts to sound,
 rises over the roof tops.
 A flock of migrating birds
 lands on the branches of the trees
 around St. Bride's well
 as the children put clean water to their faces
 and wash themselves away.
 They fade into the light like chalk drawings:
 white charcoal pigment in the dusk red sun.

St. James's Gardens

Moon-faced babies lined up in rows
wobble to-and-fro -
a field of corn before the harvest.
He watches them grow
large, then small, then to bone.

Granite graves engraved with
dates – the numbers shift
as he watches – 1700, 1898
like leaf fall;
the patterns are sporadic
and rotten – soon forgotten.

Mud, mulch, rot and bone,
a plethora of sandstone.
Riot of grass and flower,
layers of body weight on body rot,
the stench of cholera in the air.
The 'healing spring' an ironic gesture.

Huskisson sighs damp in his mausoleum,
remembers to stay off the track
as the band in the archipelago
of gravestones marches across

dainty, cautious, a little lost.
Trumpets and an accordion ratchet the sky to pieces,
into swerves and loops of sound
process through the air, the musicians
play loudly, play the rhythms of crying,
the wailing put to a twelve-bar Mersey blues,
the sickness sung to death.

Broadside Ballad Collaboration
with illustrator, Desdemona McCannon.

Arne's Progress

Outside the Bounds

Arne stares back from underneath the tree,
asleep perhaps or made of sleep.

Closed lids like a dream of the sky.
Pupils within as wide as the sky.

Clouds streak across his forehead.
His skin is the texture of the horizon's mist.

He turns, cocooned in dusk-light.

A damp seeps from the roots, moss
pillows his hair, willow-thick
and as black as the wind;
the city in the distance a camel
in a desert searching
for the watering hole.
His hands are red with sandstone dust
from burrowing into the earth.

He's been clawing around, looking
for what he lost that day or an hour ago
beneath the oak's shadows. It is here, somewhere
in the tree's long roots. He scrambled,
he dug, he wept for the light
as it fell behind the city's skyline.

Arne hopes for us and the day's elaborations
but the mud in his hair sticks to his wet scalp like lichen.

The drums across the valley begin to beat.
The torches flare.
The smoke forms
into faces with eyes like his own.

Crossing Over

As he sails the coracle of willow and skins,
his bird eyes mirror the moon behind cloud.
Spring tide drags west but he paddles east.
Water seeps through the stitching a little like blood.
Arne buckles his weight over the hump of the river,
the small craft alive on the back of the wave
as he waits for the hook to reveal his possessions:
pot of ink, hunk of amethyst, a drawing
of a storm framed in gold and made of light.

He wraps these in hessian, a swaddle of ornament,
pulls up a line as the clouds move south,
rain simpers along the Welsh mountains,
calling 'Go home now. Find a dent
in the earth and burrow in'. He sings
to the wind, rows the harrying waters.
Across the estuary a ship bell starts to ring.

An Irish ferry slows its entry into the detritus
of objects on the river awaiting the storm:
a broken slate, rat's corpse, torn lace, a mirror,
the thought of the future in a golden case
open to spray, velvet inlay sodden with salt.
A handful of red hair floats like a jelly fish
caught in the to and fro, in the froth of the drag.
A cormorant extends its shining black feathers
as he walks ashore on the bone of the wing.

St. James's Infirmary

In the graveyard the children have cholera.
They lie on stretchers, on iron-framed hospital beds.
He is mopping their foreheads with mildew,
parchment, moss, quietness and winter rain

which he did until just before dawn;
long hours of talk, laughter, occasional song.
The light from the moon made everything white.

He gave them gifts of fresh river water
and they drank with their mouths as silent as stars,
small hands cupped around the tankard,
milk teeth tapping on the cold edge of copper.

Philharmonic

Arne listens to larger fizz in long glasses
and talk of staying out all night.

Tomorrow will be sleeping in,
hot breath, sweat, some slow love
amongst well-worn sheets.

But tonight under the chandeliers,
tiled walls, silted green, a haul of banter
caught at 5.30; the river's tide still high,

a violinist plays Dvorak in the shadows
as the bargirl takes his order in Irish.

Cortege

With reins folded under his third finger and thumb,
black horses high-step oiled hooves,
feathered plumes braided to their bridles.

The avenue pulses and flames, and windows smash.
A lad struggles forward, head bloodied.
A police van screeches round the corner out of view.

The horses do not bolt or flinch but hold their heads up high
as a parked car ignites and burns out in a breath.

Arne gathers the embers and tar into a jar.
The ashes he places in the back of the hearse.
Spring flowers entwine SISTER along the coffin lid

and on he drives as lamp-posts scale back
from sodium to oil, and a setting sun dampens the fires.

A bulldozer gouges an end terrace's eyes,
as an old woman in her kitchen watches through the window,
a cup of tea in her shaking hands,

and on he drives over cherry blossoms splattered on tarmac
while a man at the bus stop scrambles through a sandstorm
to a hut in the village where a brother was murdered.

At the traffic lights an 80A pounces from the junction
and ploughs straight through the oncoming hearse,
his horses enjoying the sensation of diesel,

sweat and steam in their bellies, in their long flowing manes.
They emerge on the other side
still composed, still clattering home.

Sheen

A seagull is flapping its wings in the glasshouse
as Arne stares in, globe-faced and shining,
at tables laid for dinner under the height of the palms;

and as the bird rises the vaulted roof blossoms
then derelict again, window frames reveal grey clouds
to wedding guests observing the gull's flight into time.

Yet the marriage is still perfect, transparent and glowing.
A spun-silk bride, a cake opaque as ice,
a slow first dance amongst the exotic plants.

And as he watches the glass house spin on its axis,
marble botanists in the garden slowing the sway
while white doors break open, cough jasmine pink petals.

Arne walks among the scent of salt and manure.
Heat sweats his vision, colour drips to the floor.

Magnolia

Arne lies watching shadows
waft across wallpaper,

hands behind his head, toes to the ceiling
on the slightly-soiled white sheets

until he begins to seep again.
A draft blows through the corridor,

catches, and he is away into the brickwork,
mouthful of mortar and plaster

in his stomach's translucent core,
a bright sack of minerals digesting into dust;

and then he is on the decking, waiting,
while rain drips through his contours

as he lounges on the garden furniture,
rotten wood swollen with fungi.

The parkland beyond the trellis
brims with water;

a woman with a pushchair
runs into a shelter.

He pours into the rain, holds her hand.
Lets her breathe.

Writing through the Window

Poems initiated by a shared online project with The Word Hoard, Todmorden and prompted by the discipline of writing the same view from my bedroom window and its subsequent trajectories daily over a period of one month in August 2012.

Mainline Rail

Back-to-backs, some of the last,
and always just below the view

a sunken tide of regular sound,
west to the river, south to elsewhere;

and sometimes we travel together
as I slink into their sleep whilst I sleep,

settle beside a mother with a child
coiled in her lap, click-clacking

into darkness, coming heavy,
pushing at the edges of the carriage.

And sometimes the track returns us
on the late train to the end of my bed,

luggage in one hand, my jumper in another
until they fling themselves

out of the open window,

flit though the ivy, the nettles and wire
to meet the fast train home,

waking in a stuffy carriage,
an image of my room in their eye,

the tone of the city in their ear,
in the thrust of the train's rush

towards the sea and out of here.

Becoming Miniature

Red twigs jut into the space, into the August sun. Grey
under ivy tendril spills a stillness. Spluttering gusts.

The metal roof of the parked car sparks. Slate tiles beyond
the stretch of garden wall are circled by a bird that flies in a loop

and away behind the houses pressed with satellite dishes.
Aerials all point west as if hearing the sea. Skylight windows

are tight shut slabs of opaque glass, precious stones in a crown;
and climbing onto the weave of vine, I am walking into coolness,

within the dimension beneath heat, colour stopped
on the cathedral roof of the slope of the leaf.

Light is thrown by the curve over-arm, but inside, under stacked
multiples of oval, I sit in filtered light, a flushed

yellow saturating the limits of my sight. Redbrick oven wall
scalds under bare-soft feet, legs dangling

and an ant the size of a small dog ponders past then a gale,
breeze at any other scale, begins for a second unsettling the sun.

The leaves open again. I am too small to do them any harm.

Redbrick

Midday shadows
like hands on hot skin, aerals
fixed west, attentive to distant seas, thin trees
on the embankment wilt in the wind
as the railway terrace, sticky with shade,
damp light seeping up into the walls,
grows like the oak grows,
roof starker, chimneys taller,
aerals even more certain of the west,
blocked into the sky under fat cloud,
leaning-in huge and perpendicular,
as he starts to chatter.
The door flicks opens and a tongue licks
out, ruby wiry hair sprouts from the tiles.
It turns to me and in the window panes
cross-hatched frames are golden pupils,
ovals of fire inside the cool grey
patina of cladding, staring
flushed, carnivorous, and a stairway
of yellow-molar'd banisters glints in the opening;
the way to the cellar down a scarlet gullet.
His neck is the hill and trains roll
around his forearms like amulets
though it is not him that is buried,
it is me who is stuck
in the oxygen of the day.
He is standing deep within the place.
I am only hovering on scaffolding.
His feet stand on the earth's core,
a strata I cannot see, my eyes deceive,
his stomach swills at the level of the caves
and the river on the other side of this mass
flows at the level of his heart.
I watch him through the open window.
I am sitting inside the eyes of his lover.
That is why I can see him today.
That is why his look is gold and full of fire.

Tributary

White along the horizon of roofs,
grey over the ridge of the sky,
two peaks of ivy edge into the air
above the cutting below and the trains.

Tendrils untangle, begin to order their reach
over the decking, pine and plants.
A triangular brick wall resists the rain.

Drizzle, fine damp heat
in the air, out there, under the cover
of overcast sky and angles
trajectories of reach, all moving
away from the centre.

Ivy's static shudder reaches for the west.
The spaces between each fold,
wet and riverine.

Framed Glass

Clouds full-bodied
on chimney tops
dangling their legs.

Heave of gull.
Light touch of sparrow on vine.
Stack shade

reaches down.
Light underneath.
Sharp shift blackbird

through the frame.
A parked car's roof, a lake
of grey steel,

sheen beneath
absent light.
Just the pulse

of sea breeze
turning thoughts of sun
into sketches of sun.

Small city creatures.
Tangle of aerial
massed on concrete.

A brick; some red,
some dark brown.
A window hidden

almost behind
a fence of leaves.
A bird plummets

towards the cutting
between
their lives and mine,

tips up at the entry
point,
spirals away

as a train passes
through birdsong,

rattling
louder
work noise.

Wood falling on wood.
A hammer
encroaches twice.

Midges struck white
with sun
morph
to nothing.

Brickwork
opened from ivy:
a coastal region,

flows within stasis
while all else
shifts slightly.
Stillness moves
at its own pace,

dependent
on activity,

as its edges,
 margins –
 windfall,

a flurry of dust,

call me home.
Call me home.

Temperate Rain

Levelling out the blooms, the called-forth ends of leaf
rustling into the afternoon, by your song. I can hear you
railway. I can hear you ivy. I can hear your thirst.

The water seeps through you. Gentle curl of the green of you.
Always feeling towards me; my hand out the window
testing the moisture of the clouds, reaching out my palm

to press the curve of the sky, palm up against the stratosphere,
covering up the gaps with my own skin strung in the atmosphere.
My hand drifting away from my body like a balloon

retracts back to my elbow and I am attached
as my hand has taken root up there in the sky.
I can see it pulling together the edges of the cloud,

squeezing out the rain and dirt like a dishcloth,
flattening its width against the dampness, and also just holding on.

I will give my body to the atmosphere. Maybe the gesture is an answer.

Inside the Cloud

Violet-scented, sweet colour, green voile lace leaf,
daisy whites in the short grass soaked with thundered air.

Three yellow flowers bright to the brown bark;
an iris flower open almost too far, blue petals bent back,

strata on white, stamen-yellow sticky contains a small sea of rain.
Meadow grass shaped like droplets in the wave of cornflower.

An earth path edged with red bricks reeks of mineral and mulch.
I scratch my boots along exposed soil. I am touching a scar.

I do it again; crushed sods separate between the leather.
Swallows turn and loop, wind their pattern over the slope.

A wet rope of black trees swings on the distance
and on the road beyond, crystalline light set in tarmac:

onyx, jet, diamonds, sparkle as the shower
reaches to thunder in from the sea behind the mountains.

I want the rain to start. I want to taste the grit of things.
The path back over the field springs up the meet each footstep.

Layton Cemetery

The grave stones glow vivid in the dusk
and she is walking where the paths cross.
She wears a long full black dress,
And it is as if I am in a crowd in town
everyone up and about in the evening
not visible but present, re-emergent
somehow. I am a little way
down towards the boundary wall
and disused chapel where earlier I peered inside
through grainy glass, a crust of soot;
but now a candle burns in a bright window.
She moves with a familiarity and certainty
I did not expect. It is me who is
out of place here, amongst the dead.

On Time

Take me to the distance -
the hedgerow green then raw pink -

to the horizon where I can rest away from myself,
cushioned by the edge of the day's heat.

Streetlights are coming on.
Halogen spots expand perimeters in delivery yards

and the last stretch of the sun
catches the drag of the train's

determination, late for the next station;
for I become

immersed in the flood of the orange glow containing Wigan.

And when the guard announces the next stop
I am without myself,
 lost,
 somewhere behind,
 outside the rush

in the black-red strata of the evening sky,
in a lava flow scorching country lanes,

in the motorway's fold at the junction
forming a glacial cooling tower, precipice white.

To the Lighthouse at Pen Mon

You, striding down a long lane; us, hand in hand.
Over the gate sheep roam, cows graze.

I am both in myself and moving away, you
always seeing the brightness and the curve of the sky,

like walking with a child as well as a man,
and your gaze into things is as wide,

while I am deep inside some dream,
some elaboration that doesn't hold me

like you hold me, in our stillness,
our joined circle in the length of the night,

and on the only road at the edge of the fields
an orange street lamp sovereign over the dusk.

It is always on. It never seems to go out.

Sightlines

The mountains squat on their haunches
 eyeing the storm coming in from the Dee.
 Light-full and round-faced, the liquid
 mouth of the river open like a fish

swallowing the tide, spawn to salmon,
 minnow to plaice, the water
 swims its blood to the shore

which breathes like the cormorant
 on the back of the ferry, a gull
 swept in red squawks to the sky's blue,
 bellows a love song into the rain.

On the shore pigeons rut in the gables.
 A girl runs for the bus, hair
 fathomless tendrils, her breasts
 cupped in a tight T-shirt, her shoes

today made of lead so they drag her home
 after hours of pounding the rust of the shops
 to find nothing; no stardust
 just the face of her brother

knocked down last year, sold in *The Echo*;
 the driver acquitted.

The river stands on its legs and roars.

Emergence Conference

Written and presented at the Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, 8th Sept 2012 part of the Emergence conference on Arts and Sustainability.

The Goat's Field

A cockerel scratches a cry into the afternoon.
Bright sun whites its eyes
on corrugated tin.

Voltaic panels grasp the heat along the roofs
of huddled dwellings –

four geese take-off up the field
orange feet capping the tops of the long grass
then settle back to shadows
as if there's no need to startle;
waddle along their desire-track towards the
small holding –

a cricket taps, corn-flowers lilt,
a spiral of wire fence
filled with hay

waits for the absent sheep.

A feed trough grows green algae on still water
as red berries, early-autumn-rich, straddle
the tips of coppiced trees,
stretching unabashed towards the horizon
and the mountains, their love,
always parted by geology and
the glacial cut of distant ages.

A bee bolts over my head.

The hillside's slope supports my spine
as I tilt back, sweet air in my belly,

a cabbage white's trajectory over the fence,

men's voices from the workshops
turning wood,

smoothing the oak's rings
to a glossed sheen
sculpted into new light.

Mr Seel's Gardens

Three poems written for and with a participatory research project into the history of local food production in Liverpool and presented at the launch 'Show and Tell' event, 27th January 2013, The Bluecoat, Liverpool.

Homecoming

And when my Uncle John was – Johnny was about -, I think he was about eight or ten, the story was he was so hungry. They used to have bread runs in those days, and he was so hungry he actually stole some crusty bread to eat. And he got caught and was actually deported to Canada. And he was actually deported to Canada.

Oral History Interview 2012

Alice brings in the tea, places it on the table,
shakes a spoon in the liquid,

cracks an egg on the baking dish.

Her mother wraps a cake in cling film
puts it in a tin for later as the doorbell rings.

Clara runs along the corridor
to catch her boyfriend in her arms.

A ship arrives in the harbour.
Sugar spills like snow.

The dock fills with gallons of sweet tea.
Sugar forms a tidal barrier; a hydro dam.

In the front room they sit hands on knees,
a TV buzzes, outside a police car strums a song

along the back roads. Johnny is coming home.

In a plane somewhere over Ireland
he looks down and sees rows of vegetables

sprout to honour his return.
The river loops into a plate,

a silver spiral of precious metal

and lays out soil, full mountains, mouthfuls of nitrates;
iron-boxed, his tongue longs to lick their sparkling dirt,

shredded turf and skinless hills
are a treat for a grasping mouth.

But the TV is still on;

his mother looks at her watch
eyes the horizon through the double-glazed windows,

re-tilts the aerial towards the moon
sat low on the back of grey clouds.

Biscuits dusted with blood and marrow

lie in a shell dish, a scorpion lengthens
its tail across the bananas on the crocheted table cloth.

The sun is setting slow,

and Johnny is tightened into the seat, belt at his waist,
the evening rain a pot of tea,

pouring into the burrow of the land below:

while his family swim in it, stretching reddened limbs
into the heat of the water -

a ship from the docks chugs through their wake

carrying nutrients into the tunnel mouth,
into the belly of the place.

Oral History

Born in the back streets of Everton,
her mother's mother lived in the house
she inhabited with seven children;
three grown and gone within the memory
of a husband lost in the First World War.

Her father's father from Netherley, over the hill;
no remembrance for a time before the city.
They ate tripe and onions, saltfish,
bread and dripping, played with card
milk-bottle tops from the diary,
skipped hopscotch in front of the redbrick walls-

until the fall and the houses were demolished
before or after her mother died. Her eyes well,

and unmarried she was moved
from her old home to a flat up in the sky,
a new tower on the site of McGregor street,
where she lived on the eighteenth floor
until the block was demolished
and she made it to sheltered housing
where she's been now for seventeen years she says.

Her brother had a garden in Shrewsbury,
fresh vegetables, grass and green.
Her sister had a husband who was agreeable

and she had her mother
who she still visits in her reminiscence,
sitting in her chair by the open fire;
a fixed point in a story of absences.
She only eats half a Mars bar,
never all at once. She never wants to over-eat.
We should only eat what we need,
she says and I nod my head and agree.

Mossley Hill

On the footbridge lads meet to smoke
with their eyes closed; trains pummel underneath
and beyond them blue summer sky is streaked pink:
fresh wind from the Mersey rustles their shirts.
Down the road in the Chinese a man waits for his order,
the old lady serving speaks in bright Cantonese
and along the alley outside the take-away window
the back-to-backs are face-to-face,
hanging baskets topping in the breeze;
and in my eye-line from the counter to the back of the pub,
lamps flick on in the side bar, footie on the TV,
lovers under the pergola. A couple walk in:
she has pillar-box lips; two lads drink frothy pints
at an iron-legged table, one thumbs a roll-up,
steps outside to savour it as the late sun
rolls across the curve of the hill while
in the allotments at the back of the semis
a man raises a fork which glints as the moon
swollen and ripe, peckers the treetops,
dry mouth folding onto tips of the leaves:
and on the ridge, near the big house, a fire sparks in the woods,
an iron-age hill fort rises from the mulch,
menhir in their padlocked greenhouse
carve spiral patterns onto damp cold rock,
cows ache for the dairy, in the piggery sows give birth;
in the orchard behind the stable-yard
an apple falls to the floor, a child grabs it, runs through a wall
and away into the station where the first trains ran.
A man lies on the track, on blood-sodden gravel,
guard pale-faced, hands cupped around his eyes.
An ambulance soars over the hump of the bridge
like a halo of light; too late tonight,
and in the hedgerow mice seep into shadow,
scramble through fencing; a cat sleeps on the far wall.

‘Time to Read’: Commissioned Poems for Local Libraries

Two poems commissioned for a reading as part of *Woven Words*, Congleton Library, 29th November 2012 and reading at Runcorn Central Library, 4th October 2012.

Congleton Tapestry

*Congleton rare, Congleton rare,
Sold the Town Bible to buy a new bear.*

A wedding dress weeps as a fiancé sprints away,
top hat bounding the hairline of the hedge;
and through a well-stitched corbelled window,
wide open on the kitchen table, the 1912 Chronicle documents:
“Alleged Breach of Promise in Chester Assizes”
*He said they had never walked about the fields together.
He had not met to bring her home from church.*
Together the town tuts and cries, then sighs.
And when quietness settles in the lanes,
more flaxen rain. On the High Street
emptiness purrs in the closed-up café
as Anglo-Saxon villagers brew a pot of broth in Priestly Fields
where houses are raised then fall again
like a screen on pause; and as they wait for the decision
of the committee, a line of concerned faces,
warm-hatted, well-booted, peep from behind the hedge,
lever a large wooden wedge which tips the land like a ship at sea.
Towards Astbury Mere a union jack slinks up a flag pole.
A woman in a terraced street tries to wedge new roller blinds in her car boot.
In a window box a ginger cat strokes a spider with his arching tail.
And somewhere in 1600 a bear rushes through the shopping precinct
pursued by revellers. He expands in the damp Cheshire air,
and a waterfall of rain pours from his giant’s fur,
which turns the looms in the factories by the river Dane,
fustian cut to velvet feathers the street with down,
until wet nose at the height of the burial cairn,
the bear slows and bites the edge of the rock,
sharp teeth shaping out the ridge, then turns
and pulses, vanishing into the dusk
where below on the plain, beyond the viaduct, observatory
telescope at an angle to the night like an eye,
the land begins to quake, rock strata
jolt and shake old earth into lucent hills,
rolling slope, glacial lakes. The future waits.

Dusk Town

Shadow from the bridge slips through curtained windows
of an upstairs bedroom of a terraced house,
shifts across the duvet of a sleeping child
dreaming of the sun, as rain begins again,
bustling through clouds like shoppers on Church Street.

In the music store a guitarist thumbs a chord,
calling the clouds from cooling towers down river.

A young man who drowned in 1815 rises up and walks
towards his home on Mersey Road.
Water drips from his old bones. As he knocks
the door opens to the fire and a hunk of bread.

Bells ring; the transporter bridge swings towards Widnes.
Boys hang from steel girders, drop into high waters;
a jet plane slices the sky from east to west,
rain tacks to winds from distant seas up stream.

Across Castle Hill, a woman rides a horse into her fort,
woven mantle wet with sweat, a broth in the pot,
as atop the new steelwork of Jubilee Bridge
a welder jumps the final gap to be the first to cross,
legs stretched in mid-air above a rising tide.

Runcorn shakes itself down, dusts off fine drizzle;
gulls scatter. In the close-built Old Town streets
children carry church banners on the Whit parade,
molten tarmac sticks to their shoes in midday sun.
Over in the New Town a young couple come from the city
watch the light shift through an oval window.

A teenage boy kisses a pink-haired girl by the library,
as out where the waters widen
the drill bit burrows into the sandstone grit,
testing for the foundations of an un-built bridge
seen only in the gull's eyes it flips like a fish.

In the pub an old sailor lifts a fork on a plate of chips,
smiles as shadows sail along the High Street.
A mermaid, lost inland, sculls through dark alleys,
her tail reflects back the full moon
and the curve of the earth. She dives.

Preliminaries:2**Suburban Epic**

The red-eyed man has a face which flies north, peels
off his skull like bats' wings or folded paper caught
on the rain-driven wind from the sea. His eyes
gleam through the sockets, he smiles like a song,
leans on the gate outside the tight-lipped house;
bare arms on tarnished metal seep up the dew.
He waits. I walk towards him from the front door,
but falling back into buddleia at the edge of the road,
inside its willow basket I am encased in hands
which rub me like a child in a newly run bath or a grave,
and I plummet until upright and the red-eyed man stands
again at the gate, now with a face. He takes my hand
and we run like missiles through the dawn-raided side streets,
curtains buttoned down, all eyelids light on retina,
to the track into the woods, the bridle-path to nowhere,
and he purrs beneath his breath as we mate,
him behind, me on my knees. Blood spots the parkland.
Up against a tree bark swallows us, crisps over our pulse,
forms our breath, him in me. We are coppiced.
Day comes, he vanishes; we are two branches.

Queen Fisher

I squawk at the sun's rest over the avenues,
 my children gone, rowed off in a small boat
 sunk at dawn,
 unborn in yolk,
 un-brewed they cluster in cries,
 carried like rats in my beak
 as I fly fully-fledged
 along the shore of the river,
 openly raging,
 bare-breasted, alive;
 my crest lilt as I peck in the silt
 for my babies
 burrowed under, fully drowned, always fed.

They bleed into mud in the clutches of crabs;
 un-fleshed down rots as the salt rides in,
 and I raise my talons towards
 the scarlet-sodden sunset
 and caw at the dry lands,
 the muscle-bound height of the landmass
 which leads to the woods
 where my nestlings should soar on the wind
 but there is no bright sound;
 no beat on the air, no current or pulse,
 just mud banks, old terns, a rusting bike,
 a ferry boat like a seal's muzzle
 in fresh water where salmon spawn.

I laid my eggs in the nest of the city.
 It ate them for protein.

I fly at dusk,
 beaked head razor sharp,
 desire dead.

Seafog

I run to the rain's edge, forgotten
in the field of drizzle.

 You stood naked
 under the dying tree,
 smiling at me.

The grey encloses us, both without care,
 running down the back roads towards the city's
 ever-lasting light;
 your body unreachable,
solitary without a gift, broadening
 at the edge of the storm into a cliff face,
 your chest the height of an island cove.

I cannot climb to you though the wind is high.
The road is a slip-stream. I am shivering,
 goose-bumped and reddened, cloth-less
 and un-swaddled in a mist, sitting in
 a rowing boat, long red hair streaming behind,
 rowing away, elbows cocked,
 hot breath,
 a slight sweat, nipples alert
 in the cold night.

I can not land where you are not.
I can not bring the boat to land,

to daylight, rain, wet fog, always here.

Blue Black

*'...coming ashore in the wilds of the Wirral,
whose wayward people both God and good men
have quite given up on...'*

*Gavain and the Green Knight
trans. Simon Armitage*

*'The Norsemen left them in their well-nailed ships,
The sad survivors of the darts, on Dingesmere
Over the deep sea back they went to Dublin.'*

The Battle of Brunanburh

*Yr nylan deg ar lann, dioer
Unlliw ag eiry neu wenlloer,
Dilwch yw dy degwch di,
Darn fel haul, dyrnfol beli.
Ysgafn ar don eigion nyd,
Esgudfalch edn bysgodfnyd.
Yngo'r aud wrth yr angor
Lanlaw â mi, lili môr.
Llythr unwaith, llathr ei annwyd,
Lleian ym mrig llanw môr nyd.*

*Truly, fair seagull on the tide,
the colour of snow or the white moon,
your beauty is without blemish,
fragment like the sun, gauntlet of the salt.
You are light on the ocean wave,
swift, proud, fish-eating bird.
There you'd go by the anchor
hand in hand with me, sea lily.'*

*The Seagull
Dafydd ap Gwilym, trans. Hopwood*

Before this I was a gull.

I flew from the city
 over the blue-black estuary, along the shoreline
 towards the abandoned lighthouse.
 I flew through the wind-farm's rotating blades.
 I flew over the river's rain-battered sheen,
 sodium spots lined up into a pattern
 of a peninsula's edge, fairground-lit,
 houses strung along the coast like lanterns,
 a black-railed prom stretching to distant
 heavy mountains, marshland and flat fields
 backing away from the sea wall, grazing cattle,
 a long tarmacked path through trees
 to the beach and submerged forest
 off shore, deep in sand,
 shimmering white transparent woods vatic in the waves

and with my gull's eyes I watch from above,
 from up here, on the air currents;
 the children are two black dots
 running over the shingle from the dark night's sea
 towards a woman on her knees
 in the moonlit sand, wide-opened arms
 as if she is holding a towel on a summer's day
 though it is a December's night. Is she me?
 I look through her eyes to focus on the children.
 A girl, a boy, naked, about six and three:
 faces fuzzy around the edges,
 with hair and eyes but no definition,
 they just keep running over the wet sand,
 sea rough behind, outline of a container ship on the horizon.

I try to fly inland towards the ridge
 but air currents push me back towards the edge.

*I am kneeling, arms outstretched, squinting into darkness,
 small pale bodies running towards me.*

I am hovering over the shoreline, over the estuary,
 children running over wet sand, a woman on her knees,

then she's walking to dry land, shingle in her boots.
 I follow her return towards glass-sharp dunes.

And she drives, her hands fixed on the wheel,
 two empty seats in the back of the car,
 shadow splashed on ripped upholstery,
 seat-belts swinging, turning to the lights,
 a three-eyed wolf at the edge of the track,
 and the road ahead wet and sandy,
 pitted with last week's storm.
 An easterly catches and I am among flooded fields,

webbed feet tacked onto moulding wood
 as the vehicle rolls out of view
 to the cross-roads by the motorway.

I'm flung north,
 each wing stretched into darkness
 above a house with one light in the top floor window,
 and there she is parking in the driveway,
 closing metal gates on the semis across the street,
 opening the front door, curtains full on cold glass.

I can see her unpacking a bag on a table, turning
 on a radio, staring out of the gap
 in brocade straight at me
 here in the blue-blackening edges of the sky,
 suited to this rain that starts again
 and up and away
 behind her, behind me into the curve of the land
 about a mile beyond her home, car, fence,
 and further out at sea
 tide turns, a stone wall rises
 from beneath green swell, marks out
 a harbour wall, long smothered
 by salt, where a ship is moored,
 unloaded, a clinker low on fine water, well-nailed
 steam-bent oak and pegs, a carved
 dragon's head on its prow;
 voluminous sea subsides to sand
 then marsh, then earth, brown-furrowed mud
 and chariot-tracks, mastheads clutter distance,
 a barge steadies on the tidal flow.
 Sunlight blasts the scene with coppery emulsion.

She closes floral curtains; waves filter detritus.
 Drowned plastic bottles sink into coarse sand.

*We are with her in empty rooms
 and fossilised nights.
 We are with her on blank blue
 afternoons of silence and repeat,*

sings marram grass to the wind,
 blowing dunes into back gardens,
 flicking shingle scratches onto conservatory windows,
 catching feathers which turn me around
 and over the shore. In the shallows
 two children still play,
 throwing sand at each other's eyes.

The night is an owl, round-faced and poised. It hunts
 mice in the rape seed crop
 behind rows of pebble-dashed houses,
 sliding doors level to a new-laid patio.

She is eating at the kitchen table,
 spoon into bowl, to mouth to spoon to bowl
 and return; behind the extension
 in an upstairs bedroom, mauve curtains wide,
 a man rocks between the legs of a red-haired woman,
 his hands on her wrists, she laughs.
 They put out the light.

As the moon slots itself back into the jigsaw sky
 I am over fields again,
 pulled towards sea's rolling dark;
 and at the shoreline's square corner,
 deep under high tide,
 prom abruptly halted on the beyond,
 a small island and mountains,
 waxy waters weave amongst red sandstone
 of eroded land licked off into suspension;
 water bubbling, iron-bitter,
 each return rubs sand onto sand
 and rocks beneath water's hold
 stratify into auburn folds on fold:
 erosion precise, waves expand
 spaces, small fish
 turn within sudden shallows,
 flicker tender silver bellies to the moon;
 and I am upon them, reaching hard
 into cold wet spray, shimmer,
 rip, salted blood and sweetness.

Wind fastens itself to slippery land.
 A car on the coast road coils towards the marsh.

A fish shines out at sea.
 I survey and flinch, a creature far away,
 a seal strayed from the island's shadow side.
 But looking sharp I see two children
 swimming a gentle breast-stroke
 through black water, as if in a pool.
 Serious-faced in parallel they dive and flip,
 small feet flicking into air like tails,
 and emerge several breaths away
 towards the horizon-line and endless dark.

From the gatepost I see her running,
 car stopped suddenly on the verge, door flung open,
 running, long hair static in wind,
 running across the beach. Her feet
 drown in dry heaps, until on wet sand
 she is running towards the sea, her face
 flushed pink, blood rough
 deep in her chest cavity, an inland sea
 sweats in folds of her jumper, sweat on her thighs,
 running to the dark, to the blue-black,

and on the horizon the seals tip into and out
of flow, are standing on the platform
of the ocean and waving finned hands,
flags in the wind.

I spear the night, under-sung
in the battle of the blue-black
straining towards dawn,
as globule rain, teal-coloured, fog-soaked,
is a heavy oily liquid spooling
like tide into rock-pools
and the night takes me up again
over the bay and into the sky,
over the marsh around the small town
where on a promontory a tall man stands helmet-proud,
alert to fresh dark, his hair
limp with wetness, street-lights before him,
a succession of animals' eyes.
He picks up an oar, wades through the shallows
as I am thrown up and over the marina,
over white dinghies moored in the harbour.
Three men process carrying a torch;
it marks them out atop the cliff.
Moving slow, a convoy across a plain, past the estate house,
corn field, sugar beet crop, sandstone church,
they press on along back roads tarmacked quiet,
rain thickening. I follow over mountainous roofs,
skylights' warm yellow, aerials are a forest canopy.
Gables channel torrents
as the three men are striding along the ridge now,
eastwards along the well-walked route.
Their reflections shine against
a fluorescent poster in the chip-shop window,
late night offie just locked up,
owner smoking a ciggy as he turns the corner
away from their procession.
The men stop and look,
an unexpected wall, a new-build,
navigate the underground reservoir,
stored waves churning beneath thin grass
pattern edges of the playing fields,
sail the allotments
to the A-road again, not stopping
to look, just on through the gate to the small hill
bright with sun. Red daylight streams
from among trimmed hedges as other men
also helmet-proud step out
all inland now. Water holds north, east and west.
At a window a girl watches the men speaking in the field.
Her mother closes pink curtains
and she shivers pressed beneath sharp sheets,
motorway's throb a distant heartbeat
and I am almost asleep,

turning through grains of dust
 which trail my flight across the peninsula
 to the crematorium by the roundabout.
 It still glows raw and red.

I see a man leaning on a gate,
 small knife in his hand. It glints
 as I leave him to his darkness.
 He is raging into the blue-black.

In the brook diverted beside the railway, muddy
 but swollen with excess rain, two
 children bob along, heads held high, clamber onto the bank,
 sit and let their legs dangle into depths,
 stare straight ahead, then dive.

At the corner of the out-of-town car park
 she pulls up, runs, pushes through a hedge,
 but the children have sunk back into mud.

I can see their outline from above.
 They are giggling, lying like flat fish beneath the stream
 and over towards the woods, on the ridge,
 past unknown bones in breeze-block stables,
 over horses, one leg bent, stone-still,
 pegged across the slope, a dark dun pony in a blue
 blanket eyes my flight across cloudless, end-paper sky.

On the line of the hill
 a cry strikes. On the mulch, blood stains
 into leaves; a man's body in shadows
 slashed hard, slumps into bone in seconds.

I rise above the hill, this red hill, green fields
 below dotted with men in battle, fighting hand to hand
 with spear and shield. They are

 battling amongst the telegraph poles
 battling amongst the ploughed earth
 battling amongst the tractors, parked in the farmyard.

Each man blooded; an inland sea.
 Each body dissolves to soil when it hits the furrows
 until the field is emptied of flesh
 but runs red, sharp scarlet;
 a yellowed autumn day
 and a young man feeds hay into a harvester,
 then gone, just darkness and threat of dawn.

Blue-black weight is the night,
 seals redness into brown earth
 waterlogged with too much rain.

Field a fen; crop rotten,
 and through blood-clogged dirt
 two children run as if into the sea on a summer's day,
 laughing, hair streaming scarlet, mahogany

drenched skin. They seem to revel in it.
A car howls away towards the coast.

*And the ships on the river sail for the north.
And the barge on the river sails for the south.
And the sun in the east sails for the west.*

She drives below me,
her eyes fixed on the road.
Wipers tic as she waits at the lights.
In a front room of a pebble-dashed house,
one stray lamp on, a woman
stands by net curtains
watching more rain and a passing car.
She holds a model ship,
she rips apart slowly,
tearing thin cotton from the rig and the mast.

And I swoop away over our ink-written shore, swooning
through full wetness
and double back. I loop, I cry
at all movement, gaping sea
hurrying towards me.
I crash in, diving beneath the rough of the flow.
Within folds, blackness slips
and swims. Hunger-driven,
but not rewarded I float
beyond the island as wooden ships
are leaving. Many sailors
heaving oars into cut sea as I dive again,
returning, fishless, but coiling north
around plinths of turbines
the boats navigate like sandbanks. Being opaque,
the crew need no light, cannot
be seen on radar or from the tanker
churning its way into the wide estuary mouth,
though the long-ships' glimmer,
on the local ferry's glossy hide.

And from the ocean I can see her
take the marked track across massed dunes,
mascara in her eyes, she wears a thin coat,
keeps moving through the dark terrain
to a turning towards the beach,
watching felt night, listening to my call,
following high tide and a bold moon;
and on the north shore, from the lighthouse
she is running to the blue-black,
then kneeling, arms outstretched
as if on a summer's day
for two children bobbing on the tide.

Gulls in the storm,
gulls on this tide,

beaks wide open to catch her breast,
she lets open to the rain.

Camarade Commission

Poems written via online conversation with poet Adam Steiner and presented at the Cornerhouse Arts Centre, Manchester, Feb 2013.

The Thaw,

through hedge, cross foxes' tracks,
 cross cars stink and child's den,
 a continuous night,
 a sodium flooded day,
 cross crossroads, cross
 playing fields to the railway,
 thin turf scattered with ice,
 under scalloped railings,
 under leaves which hold forgotten snow,
 under the turrets of trees
 to small holes rotted at roots of fences
 to scurry into and away
 from the weight of weather

then resting, heart beating, in the gap
 of the missing brick, the
 space a cave, I breath,
 my small heart cannot carry this excess blood.
 From my mouth I blow red
 spray onto the surface of the wall
 place a paw on the fired brick
 and the red outlines my mark. I draw
 with a stick into the crevices with dust,
 human faces bright-eyed on a city street,
 in the damp end of the daylight
 they seem to move, as if alive.

In My Ears and In My Eyes

The water curves over the railway bridge
 like a cat jumping a fence, road
 laid over the thrust of the key
 stone's force, and rocks
 in tumult, stepped into the space,
 held for years gone past now,
 pour down to the laundrette by the junction,
 where wet cotton churns in metal drums,
 sodden and soapy as an old man
 sleeps in the corner: his dreaming mind
 sees circular flights
 of birds across a purple sky.
 He opens his eyes; clouds reflect on his pupils.
 In the window frame a centipede
 crawls along the grain
 of rotten wood through flecks
 of bright blue paint as a car parks
 outside the newsagents, a narrow boat between lock gates;
 the ripples loosen the swell by the pub,
 tributaries pulse out towards the sea,
 children on the way home from school,
 knee length socks and tiny rucksacks, are ships
 in the wind, sail-cloth ponytails
 flapping in the bright salt-ridden sun.
 A pigeon flashes past a windscreen mirror,
 and over to the sports field behind the sandstone wall,
 soil wraps itself in green and brown,
 turf billowing up and over pools of last night's
 rain. A woman
 steps up from under the mud
 covered with sludge; she sprints towards the gate,
 towards the lights, wet fabric clings to her form,
 and the puddle erupts. A fountain
 of dirt runs as lava across this spring afternoon
 and into the pub, morphing around the bar stools' legs,
 layering earth and worms on the patterned carpet.
 On a shelf above the bar, wine glasses rattle a shimmy
 as pedestrians climb up onto garden walls to escape the tide
 and all stare back along the lane
 as the flood drains, and beneath the remains
 are clay and brick, a supporting cast of mineral elements,
 a couple holding hands,
 their blood weight of bodies walking home,
 liquid held in tension at the fold of the bones.

The Witching Hour Anthology Commission.

Topology

I dream you in your sun-watered garden,
a route to us years now gone,
then walking through the trees to the lake
and my immersion in you and the light
on the water like you

and how we are made by the turns of the earth.
Still you are as steady as clay
and I shrink to you, in each step,
each lengthened moment of our meeting
stretches, until, unnamable

after no time I am without time
back in the stream of us
walking through our city, which watches,
then melts to new substance;
remember the girl's cry as she ran too close to the edge?

And yet the river slides on and I cannot stop its push,
unfathomable, unlit,
 into the flux of us,
 completed,
 continuous.

The Witching Hour

I am un-witched,
coiled to sleep but attentive,
watching for the earth to turn a little more
and light to return to my days.

I want to build a night
out of brick dust, so it stains the sky
with sun and substance - a parallel ledge
to walk along and into the next dawn.

Sleep is calling me.
I want her, she is delicious.
I am avalanched by stars.
They fall out of the sky like jewels from a crown.

I am lavish
I am found
I am wanting

continuous sound, a pulse
but dry in the under math of change, I am without.

I call you to me.
Please arrive. I've waited too long and too wild.

Moon Struck

The air isn't moving today. It is quiet air:
a field of un-mown grass before a storm.

There is a child there. She is singing
as a full moon rises over the hedgerow,

opaque and yellow-singed globe
of rich rock, pawing the earth,

casting a thick shadow across the elderflower.
Child, you run like the earth turns,

you pound like a dynamo on this crusty surface,
your bare feet smashing onto crystals under-toe.

You shatter the solid matter
with each compression.

Forthright child, love this moon.
It breaks and spins into the dusk with you,

in your burning; tears, pulse, hunger.
Earthbound, ensconced in limits,

you camp under the height of the stars
for a few days which become years

and the turning grinds light to dust
you breathe into your sight,

running in a thrust of sleep
across an empty lake, the water

evaporated, your hillside campsite a border
crossing. Child, I am all for you,

but you run into the dryness, and under it;
the valley walls muster strength, rock strata

creaking into life, a virus speeds across the country,
or your lover leaves or dies or grows old,

and like the forking tongues of divining
rods the path bifurcates, a light

shines violently onto one end, a waterfall
crushes lichen at another, the space

behind you folding into and onto itself
in permanent avalanche or lava flow,

your campsite under red rock now,
the heat is a pressure as is the sky

and the sound of many voices on the horizon:
they shout 'run to the left child

run to the right'; an owl sweeps into view,
'go under' he says, 'go under', so you crawl

into the bracken stacked against the menhir
on the moor and into full-moon-time pooled

at its core and you can swim in that steam,
in cold air child, in the space between child,

in the interplay child, in the icy bowl of the other space child,

and above tectonic plates crush down the granite
and the owl screeches over the cattle in the field
and the old city in the far north is flung higher,

pelted out towards the sea, landing
rearranged, child.

Shift, O matter shift.

‘Telling Tales: The Art of Indian Storytelling’: A Participatory Poem for Children.

This poem was written with ideas and images created by young people visiting the ‘Telling Tales: The Art of Indian Storytelling’ exhibition, World Museum Liverpool, August 2013. Children were asked to invent new creatures, half animal and half human, to describe where they lived, what they liked doing also to tell us something important! The poem below includes a range of the responses from the young people and was presented in the gallery, in a story-tent, to visitors 1st September 2013.

Night Tales

Liverpool is buzzing with tales come alive,
hanging out in St. John’s Gardens on a midsummer’s night.

The children had been dreaming strong and bold.
The tales sit on the steps at the front of the museum,

head in hands, uncertain where to go -
all of the tales half animal, half human.

They flick long woolly tails, flutter wings
and run like children do all along the walls.

Tall tales rest on the bottom of the steps
stretching their long limbs against the cold stone.

The moon is full and the night is warm.
“I came from the ocean,” says one woman.

Her silver dress glints, gold hair sparks, brown eyes blink.
“I was under the sea playing with fish bones.”

She shakes a shook of sea-weedy hair,
surprised to be enjoying the unsalted air.

“I came from New Brighton Beach,” says another -
her mermaid’s tail splashing on the sandstone.

“I came from Delemere, from the green of the woods,”
says a lion. ‘I came alone, teleported from my shady home.’”

He roars and ruffles his mane. A zebra with wings
and a girl’s legs giggles, flaps and flies a lap around the gables.

A butterfly with a boy’s head joins her in a dance
as out from the shadowy side streets sleeping children appear,

walking slowly from the tunnel mouth, out from the station,
out from the routes, in from their cosy homes.

A bus without a driver stops in an empty layby.
Children parachute down from apartment blocks,

all gathering on William Brown Street outside the library.
A boy, about ten, in purple PJs is pushed forward by his friends.

He stands on the wall to address the crowd of Tales and children.
“Be quiet,” he shouts, and silence falls.

The moon coughs once. The stars sit on their hands.

All faces turn to him. “I need to tell you something,”
he says clear and loud. “Important things, now listen.”

The children behind him whisper and jostle.
“Go on, tell them,” breathes a girl.

“I have my heart in my head. I can feel all your thoughts.”
“Tell them about dancing, of course and reading, that’s important

and tender loving care and not biting,”
looking straight at the lion.

“Being with our families, helping others.
Tales, are you listening?” The creatures nod slow and thoughtful.

A monkey scribbles words into a notebook.
The unicorn scratches ideas into the sand with his horn.

“You must do what good tales do!”

“Make roses,” shouts a boy from the crowd.
“Turn invisible,” says another.

“Save people,” declares a girl.
“Turn everything to chocolate, learn to fly.”

Until everyone is talking at once -
a cacophony of voices imagining the world.

A horse with a lion’s legs flies over the car park.
An octopus in a soap bubble rolls laughing down the street.

“When I was at sea I saw cities float on tides,” sings a merman.
“When I was in a zoo,” cries a zebra, “my cage flew away like a bird.”

A tired pony shakes his head, writes ‘To do’
on the top of his jotter. ‘Imagine more,’ he underlines

as all the children cry -
“Go out into the daylight Tales and do your work!”

With this the rain stutters and the sky shakes hard.

Everyone runs back into the shadows for shelter

and a dozy pigeon on the library roof
nods his head, ruffles his feathers

and shuts his eyes to dream till dawn.

**Irish Sea Session Commission
for Emily Portman**

First performed 18th October, 2013 by Emily Portman and the musicians of the Irish Sea Sessions, Liverpool Irish Festival, 2013, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall; and 19th October 2013, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre, London.

High Tide

A lyric

Sail me, city, to heavens below.
Sail me, city, into depths of dark.
Sail me, city, into the hook of the estuary.
Sail me, city, to the clutch of the heart,

onto the high seas, under surfaces
through sunken shadow from old oil-lit shores
to the feline jaw of a tidal swish
and the bright-eyed bite of the cormorant.

I want the wild wet and the long depths,
strong undertow and tidal concerns,
but the harbour lights are drawing me in:
I fear dry land, sandbanks and stone.

Sail me, city, to heavens below,
Sail me, city, into depths of dark.
Sail me, city, into the hook of the estuary.
Sail me, city, to the clutch of the heart.

Onto the high sea, under surfaces
through sunken shadow from the old oil-lit shore
to the feline jaw of the tidal swish
and the bright-eyed bite of the cormorant.

O sail me, city, into the filth of the storm.
Bring the salt from my pores; let my eyes colour dawn.
O city, sail me away from settled land
into ocean's wreck and rough; back into love.

Please do not leave me earthbound.
Please do not leave me earthbound.

Land Lock

Land, you bare me, you burrow through.
You aren't mine or of my mind, just rain
and the perpetuation of the next day. Edges
of you balk and rub until I am blasted rock:
a cavern shocked with exploded weight.

You rush into me, wrestling the daylight
up and out of the horizon with hands as hot,
heavy and rough as gravity. I do not know where
you end as you are outside speaking
into my breath through the unspoken air.

My muscles ache and my stomach billows
with the scale of you: the infusion
of perimeters into the bulk of my blood.
This skeleton cannot contain the collision
of the dawn and day, the expansion of sun,
opening the folded map of the conurbation,
train etching through, gull hooked on the perpendicular.

Seaside

Look down to the sun at your left,
darkness to the right.
They rise together, half my face
bright, squinty-eyed;
the other half blacked out.
Why halve me planet,
make my day to two? I want
you whole and without
edges, just the rain
from the west, a breath
on my neck as my hair
tips its ends into
the sky. I smile.
Small footsteps form along
the dune, un-personed,
on the far crescent of my
vision, as if myself,
as an added extra,
walked ahead while I stood
unable to see her
peak the slope and pass
into the stab of marram;
two drops of blood on sand.
Did she go? Or stay?
over shorn-haired dunes
to silver birch on
the cusp of the country park
bent in on themselves,
coiled under gales'
restless salt. Did she go
into the rain-blached
tree copse with you, lean
in unattended air
on damp bark,
your hand on her breast?
Did she go with you?

Blood Child

Behind the house a single stark tree,
 cherries still ripe though it is mid-winter.
 Bletched fruit on bare branches ooze like a cut thumb,
 each drop in slow motion falling onto hard soil.
 Inside in a silent kitchen, on a metal table, apples curdle
 in a handmade bowl; mulched bills ferment on varnished pine.
 In the garden, past the pond, the tree stretches
 like spilt ink, over-tall, bent back,
 to eye a yellow crescent crisp in a fold of cloud.
 Black night glass reflects back the dead centre of a pupil.

Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.

On the stained-glass window of the empty hall
 red flecks fall, become ice as hail chimes angular
 to grey pebble-dash and dripping blood begins to take a form:
 of a red-ice-child-creature, gleaming like a ruby
 standing silent at the wind-opened door.
 The storm glowers behind the outline like a tiger.
 It roars but she cannot hear him.
 You are not there to listen for her.
 The hallway is an empty blue. Books rattle in their case.
 Outside she stands like death. The door closes in her face.

Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.

Where are you? Are you asleep in bed upstairs
 or running breathless down the street?
 Maybe you don't live here anymore?
 Are you away in a cottage in the woods
 or on a moving train, window patch-black smacked with yellow?
 Are you underwater, swimming through
 the last swathe of the tide? Are you listening for wolves
 at the back of your mind? Are you in a hospital
 deep under sterile silver and nurses' blue?
 Yes, where are you?

Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.

*O Mother has gone missing, she has gone to ground
I sing abandoned at the outskirts of the town.*

*O Mother has gone missing, she has gone to ground
I sing as wolves' prowl around.*

*O Mother has gone missing, she has gone to ground
I sing a shining knife in hand.*

*O Mother has gone missing, she has gone to ground
I sing full-voiced with the choir of the land.*

Yes, where are you?

In the garden, the tree flinches, scratched by rats,
the storm sifted from the watercourse;
small muscular movements smatter on a shield of dark.
Cherries gone, turned to child,
who crouches on the front step, red-ice-storm-creature
as bloodied as prey, silent as an unknown song.
As the snow comes along, the tree sighs and bows
and stretches again, under-tall, copying the hill, bends down.
In the house, on the living room floor, a wool rug
turns to water, small boats sail to wind-fed shores.

*Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
Blood floods from the dry seas of the moon.*

Are you underground, in the cellar or soil
hiding in the mulch and leaves? Are you rooted
in the dirt or rolled up in the rot,
heart beating slow, lost light in your eye?
Or are you in the wood pile, kneeling under last year's pine
needles sticking into folded skin, or are you
gone from here, aloof in the wind like a wild goose
journeying south from darkness, garden soil
untended, land unturned? Are you un-become,
laid bare in the last light of winter sun?

*Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.*

In the kitchen the tap drips a slow red drop
onto stainless steel clouded with washing-up sods.
White light filters in through an open window.
Outside the garden heaves in wind; one breath.
A figure runs along the alley, a child or fox
but closer, starry red, her bright face at the glass.
The tree paws the soil like a horse, a branch

turning over loose earth with a sway, a lilt, a whip,
 a crack but only as far as its roots will allow.
 What is the spell that holds them still?

*Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
 Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.*

*It is the spell of silence,
 child, she doesn't speak to the house.*

*It is the spell of silence,
 child, she doesn't breathe to the frost.*

*It is the spell of silence,
 child, she doesn't sound in her throat.*

*It is the spell of silence,
 child, so she doesn't feel the loss.*

Yes, where are you?

And the rats run to the river and the dogs
 run to the river and the chimneys spark like kindling.
 From far west flickers a firestorm through the town,
 soot and smoke, sea buckling in distance,
 a hot avalanche across frost-crested rooftops.
 The red-ice-blood-creature waits on the doorstep,
 listens for a high pitched wail from the garden;
 fat of a song. The tree is whipping hard
 against the fence, it cannot run. Branches
 stacked one on one form a shield. The fire comes.

*Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
 Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.*

The house raises its head, tips back its neck.
 In the hall a vase falls south, a ship in a storm.
 Empty glasses smash their silence inside the kitchen cabinets.
 A knitted doll tumbles down stripped wood stairs.
 And underneath in foundations bricks
 plough down into sandy earth like a rudder
 and the bow of the building turns for the river.
 The roof flips like a flag and the whole house
 dredges through the molten earth which parts
 like waves, splitting the garden wall, tarmac road.
 Inside the schism, tree roots hang like curls.

*Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.*

In the wall of mud, each frond turn, forms
a human face, oval-shaped, which calls out, *Where are you?*
Fire on the horizon crumples church-towers
as the red-ice-blood-creature starts to drip and ooze,
a snowman after snow has gone, warmth
scythes the sides of her small girl shape and becomes
a spring, a stream, a brook, a tidal river shifting mud
and roots to form a gorge with wooded sides;
through leaves two red figures run, girl and woman,
each a ruby mark amongst a basalt green.

*Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.*

And their melting blood flattens the fire.
At the crest of the ridge, as large as the sun,
lamp-lit town below like embers in the hearth,
steam in the street now quiet as cold the woman
who was a tree reaches out a hand to catch a crescent
painted onto navy cloth, tilts it back and forth,
then picks up her child, the red-ice-blood-creature
and pours her like lava onto the crust of the moon,
staining it sticky and the light spills like wine over the valley,
and a single cherry tree, in a garden, behind an empty house,
the fruit still ripe though it is mid-winter.

*Blood drips from the mouth of the house.
Blood floods the dry seas of the moon.*

Water/Creature

Poem written for 'Writing on Water', The Fordham Gallery, a barge on the Thames in association with The Ruskin School of Art, Oxford. 11th May 2014. The final performance text interwove this text with a poem by Justin Coombes.

Protean Shifts

I am digging me. I am swollen spore
 swum in the slow tide south
 towards the shore, dredged from
 the wildflower of the Thameside.
 I form on the skin of bent-double men,
 unearthing the hollow of me,
 pick-axing mud in a spring storm
 which does not stick but slides
 into their lungs. They breathe me
 home to their wives, into mud,
 children born of the canal-side.

Barge's red-flowered painted swirls
 like the lick of a tongue
 around a glass of clean water.
 I want to go outside but I
 can't go any faster.

I am digging me. I am swollen spore
 like a gull at sea on and under
 to the black water bubble of the navvies'
 continual thrusting cut at the rock
 in the sharp heat of endless summer,
 their sweat like stars on a shoulder's shift
 from pick to impact; I stick
 to the pelts of mud they wash later,
 whiskey on their lips.
 On the quick route home, a young man
 splashes canal suds over his bloodshot eyes.

Barges' red-flowered painted swirls
 like the lick of a tongue
 around a glass of clean water.
 I want to go outside but I
 can't go any faster.

I am poured. I am moored. I am run.
 I glimpse in the shallow loam, a rat
 sculling its way through the parallel bricks
 lined with moss and mud. Down under

a coin punched into the sludge
 sparks as the barge's bow
 glides over like a seal's belly in far waters
 O marine radar. O transatlantic passage.
 O epic journey across the Atlantic.
 Where is my north,
 my tidal surge?

Barges' red-flowered painted swirls
 like the lick of a tongue
 around a glass of clean water.
 I want to go outside but I
 can't go any faster.

I will never know you, glacial melt,
 felted as I am in earth. I settle lower
 into the legacy of dirt, appliqued onto midlands'
 green, afternoon teas, farmyards' midden,
 and country fetes. A vicar with rosy cheeks
 walks towards me offering his hand.
 I smooth my line towards industry, the north,
 riverine estuaries, coal-dust, turbines.

Barges' red-flowered painted swirls
 like the lick of a tongue
 around a glass of clean water.
 I want to go outside but I
 can't go any faster.

I am digging me. I am swollen spore
 flooded across the un-drained fields,
 stagnant water in molten pools, a roof far gone.
 I return along roots of the beech wood copse
 through thick mud and rotten crops
 until I swell overblown and ripening
 through the sluice, into the lock
 where a small child swims ragged-faced
 and long-gone drowned, his skin
 like a fish's gills breathes for him as he dives.
 I know him in me. I feel each final gasp.

Barges' red-flowered painted swirls
 like the lick of a tongue
 around a glass of clean water.
 I want to go outside but I can't go any faster.

Writing with the Ballad Tradition Workshop with Emily Portman

Seal Skin

Sun shifts through the clouds' broken shade.
 A red fox flits like a bee.
 She runs as fast as the east wind blows
 from the motorway to the sea.

In the house at the edge of town,
 her family keeps within
 a girl's shape in a leaded jar,
 the memory of her skin.

Her body forms from shifting sun,
 cloud water becomes a lake.
 As she runs like wild earth turns,
 leaves from the spring bud ache.

And she runs without her skin;
 a glimpse from a passing train,
 a shimmering ghost in fading sun
 through the bracken by the lane.

She pounds the frantic carriageway
 like a hunted deer
 weaves amongst the cut of cars
 yet only he can see her.

Her body forms from shifting sun,
 cloud water becomes a lake.
 As she runs like wild earth turns,
 leaves from the spring bud ache.

And he knows where this will end,
 turns the key in the car engine lock;
 glances again, breathes in and out,
 the horizon in his look.

And she runs like the wind is full
 in the sails of a tilting boat,
 calling to the land as she goes,
 'New buds make me a coat'.

And calling to the land as she runs
 'Clouds give me your grey faces
 like a sky before the thunder
 sticks to my open spaces.'

And calling to the land as she runs
 'Soil in the tractor's furrow,

give me your warm damp earth
your grainy dark tomorrows'

A field rises like a swarm of flies,
till drenched in mineral-brown,
throws dry earth over her bare shoulder,
she is strata like a mountain.

Her body forms from shifting sun,
cloud water becomes a lake.
As she runs like wild earth turns,
leaves from the spring bud ache.

He turns the car into the single track
which leads towards the gate.
A no-entry sign swings in the rain.
A gull perches, quietly waits.

In the oil-seed crop she runs like time
and on through the silent yard.
Fattened pigs all kept in lines,
hens held in sound-proofed barns.

He stands on the muddy track
as she comes, mesh of leaf and soil,
rain heavy as the ocean floor,
her belly bulbous as a seal.

And blubbery and flecked with grey
his skin a soft furry sheen.
He holds her in his arms and sighs,
You run like you can swim.

Across flat fields pours the tide,
sea escaped from a bulging coast,
culverts swell till they burst like stars
and the two seals are submerged.

Their bodies shift with changing tides
as strong-born waves begin.
They swim like wild earth dives
and salt crystals encrusts new skin.

The Cruel Mother

After the ballad

Amongst the leaves I lie
teeth-bared,

raw as the sundown.
Scattered skins hang on the trees

like prayer flags – I am demon,
I am the bad-one.

I am the wild, edible bark.
You bit my tongue and made me roar.

I will barren you, bust up your eye,
scratch at damp dirt with these claws.

Where are you? Nest of twigs,
den in the woods,

hut with smoke at the door.
The home burns its riches.

My young slide onto the forest floor like eels.
They writhe –

branches hold them. Swaddle
small forms with dirt. They call

on into the blistering night.
Sky bubbles and caws.

Trees like dogs lick at the sun,
wide as horizon, large as moon.

The oak I lean on leans back,
bark like a spine.

Over the fence on the well-kept lawn
I hear them talk -

‘O there is nothing to be done,
nothing, nothing to be done.’

And hear him say
‘It is not his fault.’

And they all agree
it was all up to me.

In the green wood

I sing to hope of rain.

I sing to blood
which falls and pours;

in the garden they sit, drink wine
and thunder, wonder

where I have travelled towards
but don't stand and search

but talk, and worse they sigh,
'O there is nothing, nothing to be done.'

I will eat these babies,
cook them one by one.

The green wood says I should stay the night.
The green wood casts a curse

on those who say nothing can be done
and leave me, a wild cat, to run

into their sleep in hot damp beds,
into their eyes in the dark.

I am a clawed mother
and he will not have them back.

O the cruelty he weighed on me.

Women and Ageing Seminar: Centre for Poetry and Science

Poem written at 'Women and Ageing' at The University of Liverpool seminar, March 2013 which included a presentation by a geneticist Dr Lesley Iwanejko and workshop by poet Prof. Deryn Rees-Jones.

End Replication Problem

I am DNA. I am RNA Primer,
 lost from the diagram,
 rubbed out line towards the future
 chewed up by enzymes,
 bitten by time, once so abstract and undone
 I consume my ends,
 all loose threads, unwoven
 and untied – there is no completion.
 I am the darkness in replication,
 silent, unused potential locked
 in the hormonal shift of my body's
 graft, each breath, each carnal heave
 carries my loaded weight as I evaporate
 unconnected, unmade.
 I am unsolved. My deterioration
 a flapping rope in the wind,
 sinew strung out long and thin,
 stretching, unsloughable, unfashioned.
 I am the long draft of water after sex
 or the ball caught and thrown
 by an unborn child
 or grandchildren running like cubs
 across the savannah
 then a suburban house is built upon sand
 and rocks in the wind.
 They laugh and play just out of sight.
 A kite tail hangs loose over the roofs.
 A flight path fades through grey cloud.
 Inside, my cells uncertain whether to divide.
 My body crumples. One leg swings. My hair loose, untied.

Trees, Rocks, Water

A triadic research project between Desdemona McCannon and Emily Portman involving song, drawing and poetry. These poems emerged from visits to three Holy well sites in North Wales in June/July 2014. The sites are St Winifrede's Well, Holywell; Gob Cave and Cairn, and Pen Mon, Yns Mon.

At Gob Cave

I return from the crouched stoop of the interior
securing my tread on the slippery broken stones

over sheep droppings, brown pearls on green grass,
to the vast valley's openness;

a funnel of cars slides into the sea and the clouds
flapping grey crepe drying in the wind -

a red tractor drives in lines below, startles the sheep.

Behind, within the cave mouth, slant-like lips needing water;
a smaller fold to the back with room for a body
to be laid out, a female head tucked onto a chest, toes
to the ceiling, stillness and dust and quietness -
quietness at the hollow of the hill,
No movement beyond down – no up and out -
flesh to putrid onto bone
and down down into dust.

A stopped movement and silence – still, dry space
in the crack of the rock, a deadening of sound.

*

Out here, a chestnut pony stands amongst the gorse,
lowers his head, raises grass from the roots.

The hill under me holds the handprints
of all who brought a rock to the cairn.

Like them my body wants to change dimension,
to become something other than this form.

I cannot change my bones, or fat or marrow
without dying into stillness, darkness
like my skin held in the mould of the water and remade

from dark to light, hot to cold
all absolutes, the God, the dark, the death
a transition: a passage between poles; points of a map.

*

At the centre of the cairn, subsidence
like a bruised head or mine shaft implosion,

wild thyme's small purple flowers,
tiny lichen yellow on grey stone, wheat grass tips.

Remember though woman, below,
always inside, under and at the centre of the hill:
she rots in the stillness of the fold.

Her bones passing with time, away from their hold
to museum case or padlocked archive cupboard,

pressed into the after-life as knowledge,
pinned back together by forensic attention,

held from the battering of time's passing;

unlike now, windswept on a high hill,
my hair a struggle of snakes
blown behind the salt sea air
towards my past, laid out across the peninsula -
and my future, deep under its shores.

At Pen Mon

The stones on the beach shift like knots in a charm.
Each crunch a precursor of a spell:

I find you inside the cairn crouched
by the patterned stone
eyeing the dark.

O Sea, I miss the blue-green heart
of your swell and fall, seal
heat immersed in your wave,
head like a coracle, nose to the cloud.

I miss each step I took along our shoreline
to the lighthouse, old quarry and cave.

Ghosts call to me from over the horizon.

I greet them as friends
as I greet the rise of the hill
and the coitus of the spring and leaf,

all of us running across the headland,

or walking the slope in a storm
or footsteps patterning
a careful tread around the silent church.

I light a candle for our passing
and watch it burn.

*

I carry you with me
each day out of the dark.

And today is about salt-traces,
the memory of darkness, of the ritual and the aftermath,
mound in the dark trees:

an oxen burial by three entry stones.

We eat our picnic on the vantage point
and watch the rooks
swing down, down to the copse.

And my half-immersion in your tide
haunts my skin;
half my shins salted and given to your wave.

The rest of me scalded by the sun
loitering somewhere
undone and fuzzy at the edges of the land.

A child hides behind
 fir trees; a young woman
lies in the long grass behind the wall.

You and me in the woods, hand in hand.
You take a picture. The hills frame the sky.

I try to write you over and over
but still I cannot say what you are.

Woman.

You run down the lane towards the sea.
Your hands turning to skin,
waxy and folding in.

I can see you, shadow self,
 shod in mud, moving across
 the stones to the beach with an ease as if
 you cannot feel them shift and
 cut beneath your soles –
rubbing smooth each corner of a future,
as you are shifting, feet to flippers
and eyes to the horizon.
You hear a song sung to the wind
and peer in and under,
 until fully seal again, you bob and swim
 turning to watch three women
 picnicking on the ridge,
 watching your head perk-up,
totemic in the blue,
their open mouths calling:
Come back to us, come back.

St. Dynfog's Well

Water runched into the fold of the red mud banks
coils forwards through a passageway of stones
in soil, drawing its route over the edge of the brick
built pool to be held
 for a while – how long?
in the flat rectangular form of the well.

I stand immersed to my neck, knees bent,
the cold lessening and the water coming on.
And facing the flow, the liquid though slow,
slides between my legs, under arms, under toes.
Do I delay its movement or hasten it?

I want to let the water pour through my bones.
Behind the stream continues, under
the hidden bridge by the fallen ash and over
a steep tumble to speed
a moment faster, under the church,
into the roots of the yew at the edge
of the graves and on into the village, always on.

For You in the Half-Light

Each space I stand in with you
is soluble as salt in the sea.
The light seeps out, flees
as something else speaks in.

I can hear songs from many days away on the wind
and the familiar rush of time changing shape
in the country darkness
lit by one street lamp
and moon-bitten gaps in the hedge.

Our way is a smooth pool of open sky
fallen between earth and heavens,
edgeless and drawn out by eyes
dusted with night.
We cannot see the distances.
I hear histories spiralling into this new occasion.

Over the horizon, through the resting seaside town,
barnacles' soft bodies
encased in shell
sleep sound in their own special dark.

Making Connections: the Work of the Local Poet.

This combined thesis – poetry and critical contextualisation – contributes to the field of ‘Local Poetics’ in contemporary British poetry and specifically how this is understood as a creative practice within Creative Writing as a discipline. I define *local poem* and *local poet* as poetry written in a given locality by a poet in interaction with her locale. For this reason I also define a local poem as poetry written as collaboration, commission and participative process, as these approaches to writing poetry reconnect the poet with an audience. A local poet places herself within an environment as a network of dynamic relations, both with other people, i.e. audience, but also including landscape, memory, animal life, geology and architecture amongst other categories which constitute the material world. These the local poet reads as texts, yet always acknowledging that their real existence lies beyond language and that they have an agency of their own. The local poet aims to create an interaction with the human and non-human, which draws the parts into the whole temporal experience of poetry, creating a liminal virtual space made from differences by creating resemblance and relationship through the metaphoric and descriptive elements of poetic language.

My thesis is focused upon the central research question: how does a contemporary local poet achieve these connections whilst writing in a local context defined by differences? Relevant poets to this question are modern and contemporary poets writing in given localities: Norman Nicholson, Barry MacSweeney, Adrian Henri. These poets exemplify different poetic approaches to making these connections with their context and understanding of how material context influences poetic solutions. The critics I shall most engage with

are Seamus Heaney for his definition of the local poet; and most significantly, David Cooper and Neal Anderson for recent work on poetry and geography. I shall also discuss Cooper's work on Nicholson, and Helen Taylor's work on Adrian Henri and the Mersey Beat scene. I shall discuss Peter Barry's work on poetry and the city in his book *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*; and *Writing Liverpool: Essays and Interviews* ed. Deryn Rees-Jones and Michael Murphy. I intend to interrogate the application of neo-materialist philosophy and anthropology to poetics, by examining Tim Ingold's work in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* which argues for aliveness, creativity, activity, practice and becoming as central to an anthropological description of the human; and Manuel De Landa's writings in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* and *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. De Landa's position can broadly be summarised as realist new-materialism. New-materialism I define as a realist philosophy which incorporates the insights of contemporary science, such as emergence and complexity theory, into its description of the behaviour of matter. I agree with DeLanda's description of one differentiated material as the defining aspect of realist ontology and I intend to extend the debate by considering how this ontology impacts on the poetics of a local poetry. I also agree with Ingold's description of the human subject as constantly becoming yet still material and I intend to extend the debate here by offering practice-based descriptions of the activity of writing poetry in a local context, working with a non-dualist and material description of the human subject, one engaged and interacting with its environment. I add to this a discussion of Lambros Malafouris's, *How Things Make Mind* to place the practice of the local poet within the context of anthropologically informed

discussions of extended mind. I agree with an externalist conception of mind and understand consciousness as produced by the dynamic relationships between materials and human beings. I suggest poetic thought is a manifestation of the process of producing mind, moving one material state into another via the creation of liminal and virtual imaginative spaces. Virtual space is produced from 'pressures' born of feedback loops which act upon the sensate body of the poet who then works with the active material of their imagination in reaction to these shifts in the topology of their embodiment.

Although this thesis proceeds sequentially, I also consider its argument as arriving from across a spatial terrain and arranged so resemblance can be established. This assemblage is not a foundational argument but an arrangement of parts placed in a sequence so that connections can be made.

The field as it stands as a literary concern is still emerging. My aim is to link contemporary materialist thought to the concept of the 'local' via practice. As far as I am aware, there is no specific research being undertaken elsewhere on such 'local' creative writing approaches and pedagogies. In Literary Studies the recent work in literary geography often reads poetry in a material topographic context.¹ This thesis makes specific practice-led contribution to these arguments, and to creative writing as a discipline, by demonstrating that we misunderstand the creative writing process if we overstate textual influence at the expense of the material. Furthermore, by focusing on the creative practice of the local poet in a given context, it is possible to understand clearly how local context generates local poetic form as well as its reception.

¹ *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post War Poetry*, Cooper, Neal Alexander and David, ed. (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013); *Regional Modernisms* Cooper, Neal Alexander and David, ed. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013)

To answer my research question I shall conduct close textual analysis of these selected 'local poets'; interrogate the secondary criticism and critical contextualisation of their work; discuss the methodologies of metaphor, allegory, epic and folklore, and provide several 'case studies' of my own poems written in Liverpool as a given locality. The history of Liverpool arts and cultural politics is an important driver of my practice. Outside of the academy, materialist ideas about poetry in the community have been explored in practice since the 1960s.² I draw on practice undertaken in Liverpool from this era to find an academic context for the 'local poet' in creative writing studies and to consider how the practice and poetics of 'local poets' offers a route forward to concerns about the diminished profile of contemporary poetry as a public art and its value.

In Chapter One I will read selected poems by Norman Nicholson, Barry MacSweeney, Adrian Henri and the secondary criticism relating to their contexts to examine how these poets develop poetic technique which responds to the problem of their context, audiences or lack of audiences. I will also consider how the context and local arts and literary history of Liverpool has created a specific poetics and one in which my work finds a tradition. I will do this by my making reference to original research into the origins of community writing projects in the city via The Windows Project archive. In Chapter Two I will argue for 'Local Poetics as More Than Words', describe a series of 'case studies' to demonstrate how the problems and questions emerging from differences

² I have been involved with 'The Windows Project' since 2003. The Project was established in 1976 by poets Dave Ward and Dave Calder. It emerged from the participatory arts movement in Liverpool and the creative context which produced 'The Liverpool Scene' (Penguin, London, 1969). The Windows Project, uniquely, made the transition from poet as distant public figure to poet in the local community sharing the benefits of creative writing with all, as a result of ideas about democracy and access to the arts which informed the politics of the era in the city and in direct response to the social problems of that period. Windows continues to promote participatory and socially-engaged literary practice.

produce a poetry which seeks to place the parts in relationship to the whole. In Chapter Three I will argue for 'Local Poetics as Writing With'. I will consider metaphor, allegory, epic and folklore as technical devices which do not alienate but also do not totalize; and discuss the notion of the lyric voice as an extension of the subject in relation to the theory of extended mind.

Chapter One: Defining Local Poetics

1. Local Poetics as Realist Process-Ontology

Poetry is the art which gets me closest to, most intimate and most involved with my existence and the existence of real things. Poetry allows me to fulfill my human impulse to commune, to participate, to communicate.³ The use of 'human' I take here from anthropology and a description of the 'human' within a process-ontology. In this chapter I write as a practitioner, a maker of poetry and also as a human subject involved in the processes of the material world. Writing from the dynamic position of an active subject is key to the ontological argument under-weaving the discussion of 'local poetics' and 'local poem and poet'. The changing processes that make up being are the material of the local poet. In Section One I will present my term 'local poetics' as process ontology: the making of the 'local'. I present this via a reading of Seamus Heaney's use of the term 'local poet' to find in contrast a different usage; non-dualist rather than dualist in connotation. I discuss the neo-materialist process-ontology which I prefer as an underlying description of the idea of local poetics. In Section Two I read three poems by three local poets to argue that their rhetorical devices emerge as a response to the reality of their given context and its material processes at moments of change. These poets are speaking back into their context to produce a virtual space to counter the pressures on the tangible. In Section Three I apply this same argument to my own writing practice, presenting critical work on the literary context of Liverpool as producing social

³ See Ingold, Tim. *Bring Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print for definition of the human subject as active participant in the world.

tensions which inform the rhetorical voice of my poetry: my attempts to extend into the virtual space. I also explore the history of the participatory arts and community writing movement in the city to offer for my work an alternative yet parallel trajectory of influence beyond that of national English Literature. Real influence is non-linear and spatial. Therefore I do not wish to suggest there are not other factors which produce the creative pressures towards speech but I foreground here those which have already been made textual. I also do not wish to suggest English Literature is not an influence but that influence manifests in unique and distinctive ways when expressed alongside local poetic traditions and different audience expectations.

Seamus Heaney foregrounds the term 'local poet' in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech 'Crediting Poetry'(Heaney 447). The international context of the use of the term 'local poet' here is a good starting point for my discussion of a 'local poetics'. Heaney presents the poet's work, their local work, as speaking with the non-linguistic and giving it voice, just as I have described above. In a small museum in Sparta, Heaney sees a carved relief of 'a representation of a roosted bird and an entranced beast and a self-enrapturing man, except that this time the man was Orpheus and the rapture came from music rather than prayer.(459) And he makes a sketch of it as follows

The image moved me because of its antiquity and durability, but the description on the card moved me also because it gave a name and credence to that which I see myself as having been engaged upon for the past three decades: "Votive panel", the identification card said, "possibly set up to Orpheus by local poet. Local work of the Hellenistic period"(459-460).

Seamus Heaney thought of himself as a 'local poet', and he told the Nobel ceremony so; the act of 'local work' was an act of interaction with many gods, an interaction with multiplicity.

For Heaney, the concern with 'the local' is as redress to totalising systems of thought, to Nazism, or Nationalism, to that which is larger than the individual: human and non. His imaginative concern with the actual detail of daily life and sensuous existence is an act of 'redress', rebalancing the culture in favour of the particular. Heaney's poetics take him into the earth and lived experience, 'I will Dig with it', to quote his ifamous poem 'Digging', his way with language into a state of equilibrium.

He continues in his Nobel address to outline his hopes for Irish politics.

We must hope that the governments involved in its governance can devise institutions which will allow that partition to become a bit more like the net on a tennis court, a demarcation allowing for agile give-and-take, for encounter and contending, prefiguring a future where the vitality that flowed in the beginning from those bracing words "enemy" and "allies" might finally derive from a less binary and altogether less binding vocabulary(461).

The final simile here suggests how I wish to think about the practice of the local poet, as 'agile give and take', a practice fit for the institutions and politics Heaney describes as 'a less binary and altogether less binding vocabulary'. Although sadly these institutions may not fully exist yet, not just in Northern Ireland but in the whole of the UK, my advocacy for the practice of the 'local poet' is part of an aspiration to real participative democracy and successful institutions which facilitate that complex work. I suggest the arts, and especially literary arts, can contribute significantly to its development. Heaney

writes back into a context of 'big ideas' of nationalism with local detail to solve the problem, or redress tensions he experiences in society. In 'The Redress of Poetry' Heaney describes the imaginative pressure of poetry as 'redress' and reads its action through the poetry of George Herbert's, 'The Pulley'. (Heaney 11-12). At this juncture I depart from Heaney in order to develop his suggestion that 'give and take' is less binary. For his conception of poetic redress is I think correct but the conception of space which underscores his argument is not. Heaney's ontology is taken from Christian theology and the hierarchical structures of its thought. The imagery here is binary; oppositional pulls and pushes, as in the 'The Pulley'. The movement described suggests a mechanistic image of the natural world, drawing on the laws of gravity for its authenticity. As Tim Kendall argues in 'An Enormous Yes? The Redress of Poetry', 'the essays celebrate revelation, transcendence, uplift, visitation, the life-affirming over the life-denying, the darkling thrush over the appallingly bleak evidence which surrounds it.' (Kendall 235). Heaney's 'distrust of scientific method' and 'rationalistic modes of thought' manifest as a 'struggle with negativity' in the 'long and noble Romantic tradition'. However Kendall is enacting a redress of his own, pushing back against Heaney's affirmation with an assertion of the negatives of existence. The truth, of course, is that both are real and Kendall risks replacing Heaney's Romantic structures of thought with the same argumentative structure yet supported by rational scepticism. I suggest that placed into a contemporary context informed by neo-materialism and process-ontology, the idea and cultural descriptions of space alter from a binary relationship to an idea of space as multi-dimensional and intensive, unfolding over time. Poetics must account for this change and must learn to

think beyond binary relations. Poetry and imaginative literature create the space in which this can happen.

If the connotations of 'local' are understood differently, as a non-binary intellectual construct, not structured in opposition to the national or global as Heaney suggests; or indeed how those structures are reinforced via Kendall's critique, but known as a material concept, as what is close to hand to the poet's sensate body, then the idea of the local poet and local poetics are transformed. The local poet traverses, crosses and navigates material spaces. I define 'space' here as a potential yet to be unfolded into a new form **within a 'place'**. **Both are tangible and interwoven**. These spaces can be seen within places, for example a disused warehouse, in personal potential, in local history, in desires; all differing and requiring new paths across the terrain. A 'space' is not a lack or absence but energy in a differing state. These 'spaces', which are best thought as degrees of presence, are formed by topological pressures. **Similarly the real imagined space operates under the same laws**. Imagination is real. The material of the tangible and of the imaginative are interwoven, multivalent: and the local poet crosses between the limits and edges of these material spaces as they manifest in time. Thought is understood as a 'moving through' of a particular given intellectual context. Abstract ideas are not experienced as in a binary relation; one side balanced on the other fixed in time but understood as 'grey spaces' situated in-between, as openings and crossings through which passes the active subject. These liminal cultural spaces are the territory of the local poet.⁴

⁴ My definition of 'space' and 'place' are my own. I make them in response to my reading of new-materialist thinking following De Landa and also as result of my practice-based research manifest in the poetry. There is more work to be done on these terms in this context but the central difference to for example Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford; Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell, 1991. Print. or Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. London: Sage Publications, 2005. Print. is that I wish to move beyond the tripartite or binary definitions and to offer a

As the material from which these spaces are formed is topological, locations in both tangible and cultural spaces are movable, oscillating, morphic. These can be seen in the city environment manifesting both as cultural regeneration changing the shape of the streets or the flow of the river, or in the self, personal change and adaptation, from which the local poet produces more space, provisionally creating new 'blacks' and new 'whites', until the concepts rigidify again and there is a need to produce further new grey. The process is perpetual and exists in time and occurs in the behaviour of all humans. In the work of the local poet it happens within language. The local poet uses language's material qualities such as rhythm, association and rhetoric to open up new spaces for growth. The metaphor of flowing water also illustrates the movement and force of the idea of the local poet's situatedness in the locale. Water flows into any new spaces offered for it to enter and then erodes, if it can, the shoreline or the cliff, creating new space for its movement, an inland harbour, a ravine. Liverpool exists because the founders of the city created a deep inland harbour from a natural tidal pool. This new-materialist understanding of the local is how I wish to define the work of the local poet throughout this thesis.

An understanding of the activity of the poet, through an updated understanding of the material, has implication for poetic craft. The dynamic, generative and interactive qualities of the art rise to prominence as poetic art and can now be understood as 'doing' something. The local poet is most visibly doing something real with her art as she has maintained an interactive relation

view where these terms denote a real physical manifestation in relationship to the other in time. A 'local' space and 'local' place, part of a system. As these particular manifestations of the terms are placed in time they are moving and morphic. Neither 'space' not 'place' are static but interwoven and known in relation to the other. Place is space and vice versa. I understand these terms as existing in real space and time in topographic and dynamic relationship..

with the material world in which she exists. She lives within and addresses the context to which the work is addressed. She attempts to stay 'open' to the sensuous reality of that context and present an 'open' art work to others. She does this following an understanding of the material world in which generative and creative acts can make things happen. The local poet unfolds matter, changing its shape via the engagement between her work and audience. Poetic language produces liminality or ambiguity of meaning, but also needs to be shaped to connect, to create mood or spike interest, to bring the outside closer to the poet; rather than used as defense or aggression. Poetic techniques which achieve this openness yet also connect will vary in relationship to given contexts. Connection here does not necessarily mean semantic clarity; liminal space can be produced via a variety of techniques including sound pattern, tone and the other opportunities provided by rhetorical affect.

The local poet does not need to only represent the small and the particular, as was Heaney's approach. For to create connections, the poet does not just need to 'dig' but to 'reach', not look just down and back, but up and out, creating interactions with the material world they inhabit. The changed notion of space I invoked earlier is relevant here, as material is not just the peat bog and the close family ties, but all of the city environment: the people, the hills, the economy, the river, the past, the present, the future, as well as the closely remembered. A local poet's language then will emerge from her given context to address the dynamic processes in which they are located. These dynamic processes will both produce the stimulus for the poem and also shape the rhetorical choices of the poet. The local poem is most likely to be dramatic, that is also dynamic, speaking back into this generative context. Unlike Heaney, who is again looking back into history from a different physical location, the local

poet is still present in their locality. They are not using 'words recollected in tranquility' following Wordsworth, however closely, but writing within and producing multi-dimensional, unfolding reality. The local poet cannot step outside. There is no outside. The only access to distance is literal, to step into language and write. Yet in that space still her actions will have reverberations; poetry itself being one of the dynamic processes of culture from which emerges consciousness. This quite rightly is Heaney's 'local work'.

The local poet has two materials with which she works: language and her material being; her presence. Part of the skill of the successful practice of her work is to make use of real contexts with similar skill to how she may use the structures of language to produce poetry. All contexts have a pattern and all contexts can be read. The real speaks through the poet in its own language; pressure, texture, light. Yet the interpretation of the real she undertakes is not a linear interaction, a simple decoding, but a translation, a change of state from one meaning to another. The movement is non-linear and lateral. The local poet creates from the material of the real because she can 'correspond' with the material. The local poet does not impose a reading on the context but makes interpretations based on a complex of factual information and affective responses. Both carry meaning which originates in the material world itself, not in the mind of the poet. For the local poet is not ontologically separate from her context, but indivisible from it. The local poet uses their interpretative and reading skills to interact with the agency of the real. For example if I am working in a given location I will research the local history and speak with residents, yet I will also be looking to map a course through the material which is spatial and offers new connections. I will be looking for a new route to take across the terrain.

Local poetics does not maintain a separation between life and art. My argument does not support the hyloplomorphic model of creation where form is considered to exist outside, prior to or in the mind of the artist. As anthropologist Tim Ingold writes in *Being Alive*, arguing against the separation of art and 'real life',

[that] we should dispense once and for all with the convention that the imagination consists in the power to produce images, or to represent things in their absence[...] Rather we [...] must recognise in the power of the imagination the creative impulse of life itself in continually bringing forth the forms we encounter, whether in art, through reading, writing or painting, or in nature, through walking in the landscape(Ingold 208).

Ingold makes his assertion following a comparative reading of art practices which show 'the answers people of radically different provenance have come up with' to argue for the 'terrain' of the imagination to suggest 'it could be that images do not stand for things but rather help you find them'(197).

Ingold's philosophical starting point is a world in 'becoming', one which is in constant movement, is animic and active. 'Mind-walking', as he describes the imagination, is human engagement with this dynamic, altering reality to create 'place-holders' for these things to assist with finding a direction. The ontological status of such things is that they are part of this world, not a world of abstract forms, yet they do exist separately from the human mind. Abstract space exists, but it is a property of this reality known in the abstraction of mathematical laws. If we understand the idea of 'image' differently, as not representative, but as an active marker in space, then poetry becomes a spatial activity based on the interpretative act of moving through a landscape. The walker and the reader

make sense of the world 'as they go along', interpreting what they see and creating visual markers in the real space of the imagination. The local poet then is constantly engaged in the experience of going along and interpreting, marking and remembering their correspondence with the activity around them. Yet this world is not static or inactive: an inanimate object. This relationship should not be thought of as a to-and-fro linear relation, but as the discursive association of the written letter. A correspondence might entail a sending and a receipt, but the content of the correspondence will depend on the affordances of the writer; what she needs and wants.

A local poet is a maker and makers don't make from nothing, nor from inert material. If knowledge is produced in 'correspondence' then poetry must be a particular manifestation of that process. The question arises then, 'What is the local poet's material?' A poet's material is language of course, as the word poet still tells us; poetry is the art of *poesis*, of making. But, crucial to my argument about the local poet is the idea that the material of the local poet is not just language. Language is a tool the poet can use to correspond with primary reality: being-in-the world. The linguistic is only part of what constitutes reality. Material things: places, people, animals, concepts, the audience for example have an agency which afford the poet certain responses and opportunities. From these limits via imaginative thought the local poet produces new space. Life continues to unfold.

Thinking of materials in terms of affordances allows the local poet to act and think relationally. Rather than understanding material constraints as limits which need to be overcome, these limits can be understood as shape-giving permissions allowed by the properties of any material. This applies to tangible materials such as a stone or a larger affordance; the possibility of a river's flow

or complexity of the city environ. The local poet guides her creative energy relationally between and within these constraints, traverses via new paths or remakes the crossing by changing direction or trying a different technique. It is this relational energy which produces new outcomes and enables the practice of the local poet to be described as emergent. From the affordances of the material world new things emerge. Lambros Malafouris uses the emergence of Linear B writing tablets as an example of how the

skills and affordances (of the tablets) radically reconfigures the cognitive ecology and the dynamics (inc. boundaries and connectivity) of the Mycenaean memory field. As an implication of that, the individual using the tablets now engages in a different sort of cognitive behaviour. A different cognitive operation – reading – now emerges and becomes available in the system(Malafouris 81-82).

I use the term affordances in this context to describe the limits which produce the poetry. The local poem is an emergent outcome of the limits of my relational engagement in that context. Crucially 'affordances' is preferable to limits as it resets the agential relationship between human and object, human and animal, human and climate and so on. It includes within its connotations the notion of gift exchange and cooperation.

The concept of affordances was coined by the psychologist J.J.Gibson (1979) to denote 'the action possibilities of a thing'. The term underlines the dense interactions between the physical properties of things and the experiential properties of an observer (252).

What can this system give without being undermined? The term places the responsibility for the making of boundaries within the system with all players – all individual components of the system. A cooperative model of social and political engagement is then invoked. Malafouris further defines the term:

the affordances of an artefact are objective (as they exist independent of any valuation or interpretation – being or not being perceived) but at the same time they are subjective (as they necessitate a point of reference). It is simultaneously objective and relational. In that sense the concept of affordances cuts across traditional subject-object dualities and proves useful in our attempt to draw out the interactive properties of the extended mind(252).

Malafouris is referring to physical objects. If we extend the idea, supported via De Landa's ontology of the different emergent layers of material reality as real spaces, it is possible to understand not just the material affordances of, for example book and paper size, on the writing process as constitutive of form but also the affective material experience of emotional and ethical pressures. These can be constituted by the outside via laws and social codes but they are also felt as sensate experience as the poet regulates her own subjectivity in relation to the activity of the world around her. Certain political contexts afford possible outcomes, as do the specific dynamics between a group of people or a couple.

At a local scale these affordances are more visible and become part of the material process of writing poetry. From these combined affordances imposing themselves on the topological space of the imagination, new space emerges like the shifting of continental plates. The local poet works within this real material process to create imaginative space scratched with words into the

material of the imagination. The term 'local poetics' focuses attention on the particular circumstances from which imaginative and poetic thought emerges and emphasises their value for understandings of creative process and the emergence of poetic form. I will now consider how these material affordances can be thought of at the level of individual creative practice. I will from now on refer to these affordances as 'pressures' to denote their affective and sensate reality as felt experience.

2. Local Poems as Local Solutions

All local poets are engaged in interaction with the specific questions and problems which produce their locale. The local poet speaks when she needs to be heard, when she senses pressures, threats, destabilising change, violence, when the limits cause painful constraint. These pressures are real. If too real they cause silence, but attending to disruptions in the self is part of this work. A local poetry is interactive and engaged, using the productive capacities of language to make connections. The local poet attempts to rebalance by creating what is required – new space, room to exist and thrive, to adapt positively to the change. The local poet's response to pressure can manifest in many ways, but I suggest the similarity between them all is a need to create further space. In the poets whose work I read in this section, this need for productive interaction as an act of stabilisation of the system through producing more material space is drawn from the specific problem of their local context. These pressures find form in the imagination of movement in the work of Millom poet Norman Nicholson in his poem, 'The Pot Geranium'; a dramatisation of destabilised selfhood in Northumberland poet Barry MacSweeney's poem 'No

Such Thing' from his sequence 'Pearl'; and a celebration and incitement to change from Liverpool poet Adrian Henri in 'Death in the Suburbs'. All three produce real, virtual space using diverse poetic techniques emerging from, and in relation to, the specific nature of the locality.

All of these poems I understand as precipitated by changes in the local culture and environment and addressed by the human subjects' tendency to try to speak to and with reality, not just to other humans, but to the sensed shifts in the real world outside of human control, and to rebalance the system through address. Importantly for my argument these poets do not just focus on the particular details of the real, as in Heaney's art of resemblance, but create poetic structures, uses of diction and performative modes to create opportunities in the text for participation with the reader and audience. The rhetorical devices these poets employ are also designed to interact with their audience, but offering outward movements, gestures towards participation in the creation of the meaning of the poem which anticipate a spatial, real relationship with the audience. The audience is thought present, or actually is present. The poems also seek to extend the spatial structure, offering a sense of movement and a shift from one living state to another. They transform the imaginative space and do not just represent one reality with a mimetic alternative.

Norman Nicholson lived at a moment of industrial change. Millom, the Cumbrian town in which he spent all of his life, was in decline as the ironworks which defined its purpose were closed. Nicholson was born in the house he lived in for the rest of his life, apart from a short stay as a child in Hampshire to recover from T.B. His poem 'The Pot Geranium' shows how he changed his vision of the town to accommodate to his own limitations and in so doing

produces extra imaginative and virtual space. His material is his own circumstances from which he revisions a well-known landscape. Representative diction provides Nicholson with 'rocks', as he describes it in an radio interview, material from which he can build his descriptions of Millom.(Robson) But of course material is not static; new ideas find their way into all localities. Nicholson's predilection for 'imagined aerial perspectives' can be seen to feed off the spatialising strategies associated with modernist visual artists and, in particular, the Cubists.

Nicholson was regularly invited to Cockley Moor, the home of Helen Sutherland, a wealthy heiress who built her home upon a landscape which Nicholson would later describe as a 'sour peaty moor' and she

set about creating a self-consciously Modernist environment: a building that was controversially extended by Constructivist architect Leslie Martin, and an interior space that showcased original works by international figures such as Picasso, Piet Mondrian and Georges Seurat(Cooper 152).

Nicholson's poetics were not only a reaction against a Wordsworthian Romanticism but also influenced by an involvement with Cockley House where he saw Modernist paintings in Sutherland's collection and met literary visitors, 'Kathleen Raine, Elizabeth Jennings, Michael Roberts and in 1942 his future editor T.S. Eliot.'(152). Modernism happened everywhere, even in the Lakes.

Nicholson's manner of poetic interaction emerges from the specific problems of the place in which he lives. His access to modernist aesthetics offered a new way of viewing his context and techniques with which to engage and to speak. Nicholson's local poems are then a variety of regional modernism and they display features which allow for the local to be presented as littoral as

well as statically material, a feature of the aesthetic possibilities opened up by Modernism. His poem is not just the product of the self-contained Romantic self, but a result of interaction with the real, material and alterable, even exploitable, material world. This world can be seen differently if one changes one's perspective to the material. The littoral and abstract view crucially becomes possible in the local familiar landscape. Nicholson however fuses this modern vision with his own intimate knowledge of the landscape of Millom, infused at it is with personal memory and associations, so the dynamic he creates between his poet's eye view and the quotidian is one of movement. He speaks to the changes he sees present in his landscape, yet his self, his subjectivity, is still coherent. He is the one who is seeing. Nicholson is a stable viewpoint in a changing world.

Nicholson's vision is most fully enacted in 'The Pot Germanium'.

Green slated gables clasp the stem of the hill
 In the lemony autumn sun; an acid wind
 Dissolves the leaf stalks of back garden trees,
 And chimneys with their fires unlit
 Seem yet to puff a yellow smoke of poplars.
 Freestone is brown as bark, and the model bakery
 That once was a Primitive Methodist Chapel
 Lifts its cornice against the sky.
 And now, like a flight of racing pigeons
 Slipped from their basket in the station yard,
 A box kite rides the air, a square of calico,
 Crimson as the cornets of the Royal Temperance Band
 When they brass up the wind in marching. The kite

Strains and struggles on its leash, and unseen boys,
In chicken run or allotment or by the side
Of the old quarry full to the gullet with water,
Pay out on their string a rag of dream,
High as the Jubilee flagpole.

I turn from the window

(Letting the bobbins of autumn wind up the swallows)

And lie on my bed. The ceiling
Slopes over like a tent, and white walls
Wrap themselves round me, leaving only
A flap for the light to blow through. Thighs and spine
Are clamped to the mattress and looping springs
Twine round my chest and hold me. I feel the air
Move on my face like spiders, see the light
Slide across the plaster; but wind and sun
Are mine no longer, nor have I kite to claim them,
Or string to fish the clouds. But there on a shelf
In the warm corner of my dormer window
A pot geranium flies its bright balloon,
Nor can the festering hot-house of the tropics
Breed a tenser crimson; for this crock of soil,
Six inch deep by four across,
Contains the pattern, the prod and pulse of life,
Complete as the Nile or the Niger.

And what need therefore

To stretch for the straining kite? – for kite and flower

Bloom in my room for ever; the light that lifts them
 Shines in my own eyes, and my body's warmth
 Hatches their red in my veins. It is the Gulf Stream
 That rains down the chimney, making the soot spit; it is the Trade Wind
 That blows in the draught under the bedroom door.
 My ways are circumscribed, confined as a limpet
 To one small radius of rock; yet
 I eat the equator, breathe the sky, and carry
 The great white sun in the dirt of my finger nails.

Nicholson offers a local re-visioning which is active and alive. The poem extends space by manipulating the material and sensual capacities of language: lateral association, sound pattern and visual description. The poem opens with close local detail recognised in the senses as adjective and verb, sense and action, 'Green slated gables' are animate, they 'clasp' the plant like the 'stem' of the hill. Immediately alternative associations are created in the language, lateral slips which push the space open a little. Repeated 'G' and 'E' balance the sibilance which underpins the loose iambic pentameter line and the richness of the recurrent 'L'; the line both hisses and lilt. The reader visualises the colour of the roof; we know the line both describes the view in the distance as real phenomena and yet also the roofs risk sliding away. We hear the shifting patterns of sound. An idea of change is created in meaning, in sound and in imagery, three dimensions beginning to form a space, separate from the real, but still attached. Millom is on the move right from the opening line.

The verb-rich dynamism of the opening continues to animate the extended sentence of the next five lines where the wind has power to 'dissolve' and unlit chimneys 'seem yet to puff a yellow smoke of poplars'. The poem

continues to extend its enactment of the place, dispersing agency amongst the other animate actors in the poem, trees, chimneys, and pushing further, as surprise, 'seem yet to puff a yellow smoke of poplars'. The poet's tone supports the newness of the vision. This place, so well known, can still surprise if looked at with fresh eyes. Places are named, but even their definition has shifted. The dominantly phrased 'Primitive Methodist Chapel' is now a 'model bakery' and it 'lifts/a cornice against the sky'. Then following a new trajectory, our internal eye looks upwards, and the poem reveals immediacy, unravelling through another extended sentence with subordinate clauses, 'And now, like a flight of racing pigeons'. We might expect to see the pigeons in this northern town, but these birds are only figurative - though quite possible, no unlikely similes here - it is actually a 'box-kite..., a square of calico'. The syntax reveals the colour first, 'crimson', and another familiar metaphor, 'as the cornets of the Royal Temperance Band/when they brass up with wind in marching'. The familiar is the correspondence for the unusual in the scene here, but then is made unfamiliar again with the use of 'brass' as a verb. The material of the musical instruments here becomes the verb for the band's activity, the defamiliarisation producing a re-energising phrasing which enacts the sound of the music pushing outwards as the men march.

Yet this isn't what Nicholson sees today, that is in fact the kite which he returns to and knows as animate, 'strains' and 'struggles'. The unseen connection of this kite to the place fascinates and draws Nicholson to describe the possible locations and topology of the attachment, of his attachment, again in enjambed lines which move the reader with the poet's observations through the possibilities for the location of the kite, 'or by the side/of the old quarry full to the gullet with water'. Again repeated L's and assonantal vowels enact an idea

of the mystery of the well-known place out of sight, but also forgotten. The O sounds suggesting an opening, the 'gullet' showing this as personification, all offering an alternative from the familiar, and the uncanny idea of a bottomless shaft of deep water, over the hill and out of sight. The syntax of this sentence, encompassing the seen and the unseen, returns to the kite 'a rag of dream' high above the town, but still connected. From the height of the 'dream' we turn inwards, as Nicholson turns in, away from the activity of the outside envisioned landscape to the room he currently inhabits, which is also the room in which he was born. But here he is also in a temporary alternative space, 'the ceiling slopes over like a tent', and we descend into his body, a fixed entity, 'clamped' and held by the mattress, but animate 'looping' and 'twining' and the air 'moves on my face like spiders'. We reach a semi-colon and a turn or volta even, as Nicholson is now speaking as an 'I'. He is not part of the network of attachments he sees outside the window as he has not 'string' to connect him, a string here being the ability to see, to create vision and to speculate on the spaces which emerge from the material spaces of poetic imagination. It is sight which creates the connection.

Here then appears the 'Pot Geranium', also crimson, not a 'red box-kite' but a 'bright balloon' which contains 'the pattern, the prod and the pulse of life' and with a rhetorical turn he makes the imaginative leap beyond the local.

And what need therefore

To stretch for the straining kite? – for kite and flower

Bloom in my room for ever; the light that lifts them

Shines in my own eyes, and my body's warmth

Hatches their red in my veins. It is the Gulf stream

That rains down the chimneys, making the soot spit; it is the

Trade Wind

That blows in the draught under the bedroom door.

My ways are circumscribed, confined as a limpet

To one small radius of rock; yet

I eat the equator, breathe the sky, and carry

The great white sun in the dirt of my finger nails. (Nicholson 32))

Nicholson's post-industrial northern town is connected still to the ends of the Imperial world and the beginnings of the globalised (his pot plant originally from Africa), through processes, through the weather and through the interaction of his body's simple gestures with the world, an extraordinary vision in a small town.

Yet it is not the 'Pot Geranium' which has maintained the connection with the outside world, the world beyond the bed, and the memory of the confinement due to the T.B. he suffered as a child, but poetry allows Nicholson to connect and 'carry the great white sun in the dirt of my finger nails'. The poem has produced through its lateral movements between the patterns of syllabic sounds and the connotative movement of associative vocabulary a space which is attached to the place, is still of it and connected. In the poetic rhetoric of the poem access to another space is produced, an alternative real, a place reanimated by the reader to extend the reach of the limits of one locality and create another space, not outside the window or inside the low ceilinged room, but more like the dark pool in the quarry over the horizon, known of but out of sight; or the memories of the geranium itself, come from Africa but inarticulate. Its presence speaks to Nicholson, and in turn he speaks to us, and the attachment is furthered without disconnect. New virtual space has been formed.

While Nicholson creates 'another space' connected to the real which enables him to reimagine his context and make it anew, Northumberland poet Barry MacSweeney's production of space is not stable but in flux, a constant becoming. Now I travel east to Newcastle and forward in time. Matthew Jarvis describes MacSweeney's relationship with the northeast as 'for MacSweeney... the English north-east is emphatically a landscape of physical experience; but it is also one which is significantly cultural event.... The human and non-human are intriguingly mixed'(Jarvis 47). The poetry produces a 'non-dualism' Jarvis attributes to an environmental concern, a 'complex' pastoral but 'without simply retreating into some sort of unproblematic green space'(62). Rather MacSweeney's north-east binds together release, beauty, and struggle'(62). W.N. Herbert also comments on the dynamic quality of MacSweeney's poetics. He reads this through MacSweeney's use of persona:

At the moment of greatest authenticity and intimacy, he is always already distancing himself into persona. 'MacSweeney', is, effectively, to be found neither here nor there, not in the Toon nor the country, not the 'he' or the 'I', but in the oscillation between them(W.N.Herbert 143).

Rather than produce an alternative real imaginative space MacSweeney's poetry makes use of the productive tensions of his context to present the poem on the cusp and in the process of creating this alternative. MacSweeney's poetic voice shifts register mid-sentence yet the voice retains a consistency born of its connection to the physical landscape of Northumberland.

For the purpose of the wider argument it is necessary to reduce to a sketch the problems confronted by Barry MacSweeney as poet. Some of these are personal, as suggested by Paul Batchelor, a complex relationship with

father figures but also the literary inheritance of his locality. Bunting looms large in the background of MacSweeney's work, also the unfortunate experience of MacSweeney's relationship with the national politics of the literary scene due to the success of his first book *The Boy From the Green Cabaret Tells Tales of His Mother* and the nomination for Oxford Professor of Poetry (Batchelor). Caught between polarities, north and south, left and right, church and state, MacSweeney anticipates a drama in interacting with his reader as co-producer of the poem and the lateral and non-linear relationships produced by this meeting with others. MacSweeney does not presume he will be welcomed. He uses the material layer of language, as does Nicholson, not to create an idea of connection with the locale but an actual dramatisation of the tension of being between states. There is syllabic patterning, projective energy and shifts in register in MacSweeney's 'Pearl' poems which also provide lucid moments of description, interspersed with the heightened reach of the register, to create a voice that is coherent, immersive and compelling. MacSweeney's poems perform an interaction with the world but they don't deny its reality. The self in these poems, unlike Nicholson is less rooted and stable, less able to find a coherent other perspective but caught in an 'oscillation' between the demands of language and the demands of reality. Words in MacSweeney's poems are brimming with lateral association he manipulates not to represent clear sight but to engage the reader in the drama of the process of producing our selves.

'No Such Thing',

Grassblade glintstreak in one of the last mornings

before I come to meet you, Pearl,

as the rain shies. How bright and sudden the dogrose,

briefly touched by dew, flaming

between the deep emerald and smoky blue
 Dogrose, pink as Pearl's lips, no
 city chemist or salon. We set
 our colour charts in the rain
 by feldspar heaved from the streambed;
 cusloppe, burn peat in summer
 and wild trampled marigolds.
 Pearl, somewhere there is a stern receiver
 and all accounts are open in the rain.
 Once more through the heifer muck
 and into the brilliant cooling of the watermint beds.
 Sky to the west today, where you are, Pearl, is
 a fantastic freak bruise, which hurts the world.
 Coward rain scared of our joy refuses to come.
 Deep despair destroys and dents delight
 now that I have pledged my future to you, Pearl,
 from the edge of the roaring bypass, from
 the home of the broken bottle and fiery
 battleground of the seiged estate.

The reader/listener is asked to focus and then to diversify their vision so that the scene becomes prismatic:

Grassblade, glintstreak in one of the last mornings
 before I come to meet you, Pearl,
 as the rain shies. (MacSweeney 199)

The compound nouns here ask for a clear locating image of the grass and then the association, a lateral shift from the familiar 'blade' into the other

connotations; 'violence', 'risk' and also 'shine', the lateral association continued into an invented word 'glintstreak', which creates the image of the grass in the rain but also abstracts the sense so we imagine the shine, which is beautiful, 'glint', and a touch dirty, 'a streak', and we learn why. This is a moment of personal transition, a nervousness projected onto the 'rain' which in another almost pun, 'shies', both emotionally and as a horse might, kicking back in fear of the unknown. The language of the first line of the poem enacts the drama which underpins its construction and the poem continues to enact its contradictions. A caesura shifts the tone from nervousness into an emphatic brightening, a fixing of colour, 'How bright and sudden the dogrose'. The tone and diction is performing for us, a little arch, 'touched by dew', 'flaming', and the colours rich and aesthetic, 'deep emerald and smoky blue', but the shift in tone moves on the emotional drama of the poetry. 'Dogrose' is repeated, to steady the reader, so we catch our breath a little, and then there is colour again and the return of 'Pearl's lips'. The drama motivating the poem is the poet's desire to go to Pearl, and from this intensely felt moment the language shifts again into the colloquial and local detail. These Romantic, grand, moments are placed in spatial reality. The term reality is used here as an authenticating concept. Juxtaposed with the vivid use of colour this reality is presented as a natural experience. Again another caesura shifts us into an active statement, 'we set out colour charts in the rain', suggesting emotional instability defines how the poet experiences the real. The desire for Pearl's lips is offered in contrast to the social world of 'city salon', and this individuation, moment of becoming, is a visceral and exhausting effort drawn from the natural environment shown in diction like 'heaved', 'burnt peat in summer' and 'wild trampled marigolds'. Strong emotion in this poem is a physical movement, a type of work, and here

the emotion is set in one long breath, a five line extension managed with a semi-colon and a comma after 'cusloppe'. A breath supports the energy of the colours described and creates a rhythm which brings the breath up short in a line of 'dark L's' and the clicks of 'D's', 'wild, trampled marigolds'. These sounds make use of the lower palate of the mouth and then the front, requiring a movement of the tongue to shorten the breath, creating a hiss and slight discomfort, lessening the air in the body to create a feeling of anxiety, a tightness in the chest, which is compounded by the semantic sense of the lines.

The shift in mood, created as a bodily phenomenon in sound, is followed into the next few lines with an imperative address to Pearl. A stern tone which then appears in the line codified in a lateral movement into metaphor, producing the odd and sinister image of the 'stern receiver'. And again the sinister tone shifts and is dismantled in the next line, 'all accounts are open in the rain'. The idea of judgement, of godly opinion is suggested, also that of capitalism's exploitation of any personal weakness, but these risks are elsewhere and washed by the rain, held 'open' for the exuberance of the poet's love to push through. Again imagery is produced by the lateral associations of the sense, pushing through 'heifer muck' and the 'brilliant cooling of the watermint beds'. In the opening up and permission to follow the emotional energy of the poem, the poet finds a moment of calm in associations of blue and coolness, and then almost immediately we shift back to speaking to Pearl, the breath steadied by shorter phrases to locate the reader/listener, 'the sky to the west' and 'where you are Pearl'. These extend the drama of 'F' and 'S's, a pulsing energy, two sounds created in the front of the mouth, moving air quickly and sensuously across the lips. This energetic movement supports the rising tone of 'fantastic, freak bruise which hurts the world'; the sensuousness here has become an

image of the sky which carries in sound, thought and emotional honesty the pain and joy of the desire. By embracing, articulating and recognising these sensations they pass into image and meaning until the poet is an equal to the natural world, not separated from, or representing reality but participating and acting within its dynamics. The poet has conquered the rain, the 'coward rain which is scared of joy.' Yet the poem then cannot rest in this moment of security, or joy, for the breath continues and the security passes and the mood plummets down into 'D's, into a heavy alliterative and overly abstract line, 'Deep despair destroys and dents delight', the language enacting the emotional trajectory: despair associated with a move into feelings of heaviness and abstraction.

The poem draws to a close in a mix of emotional colour. The long line addressing Pearl, 'now that I have pledged my future to you, Pearl', is strident and assertive, as the poet speaks out of the dangers and limitations of the modern landscape to hope for access to a brighter less ambivalent or compromised love. The risk of sadness and disappointment possibly now to come are heard in the final rhetorical shift of:

from the edge of the roaring bypass, from
the home of the broken bottle and fiery
battleground of the sieged estate(199).

The repetition suggests a rhetorical climax but really what we and the poet reach is the 'battleground', a place of conflict and defensiveness; the estate here I think a council estate, an ambivalent utopia, once the great hope of a post-war consensus, now a place of political retreat.

The poem enacts the emotional complexity created between idealism and realism, hope and disappointment, with language which emerges from the

dynamics of these contradictions and shifts of register. In doing so MacSweeney communicates dynamically or even 'theatrically', through enactment of the associations produced by these shifts and changes of feeling. The reader participates in the movement. In doing so we experience the progression of the argument and the psychic risk involved in its articulation. We are not excluded nor or kept at a distance nor asked to judge, only to experience at an emotional and bodily level how these sensate ideas are playing out in the language of the poet. Through this participation we expand our own boundaries and identity, opening up to the intimacy of the poem's language. In the shared space felt between the poem and the reader/listener new possibilities in space emerge. A poetry which is fully responsive to the situation of the poet is created from where it occurs, creating a participative relationship with its audience, yet is not limited by that dynamic so able to entrance, immerse and open us all collectively. For a short while MacSweeney is able to transgress, to go outside of the bounds, and expand the material-virtual space so that matter can reform. MacSweeney's avoidance of the power dynamics which constitute his context is heard as a destabilised poetic register. He is not offering a coherent 'I' who can oppose a position but a mutable subject able to evade conflict. For there is no access to a transcendental other space which can exceed these material limits. This is not an easy traverse or avoidance, an escape into another place. MacSweeney stays in the productive moment unable to fully exceed its limits but, crucially, making use of the problem to create a beauty and ambition in the poetry, heightened by its self-conscious awareness of the possible failure of its rhetoric. This poem is epic in scope and tragic in register.

A local poem then will always be an oscillation, a traverse across space, but never an escape. For language creates a distance between embodied self and articulation. Poets try, depending on their poetics, to conquer, dissolve or in MacSweeney's case make use of productively, the instability of the material capacities of language. Confusion arises from a belief that a poem can be read as static, stable text, as poems produce many trajectories. A poem is not referring back to a static and stable, linear world: it is further manifestation of it. The real is unstable and mutable, as uncertain as is language, understood as replete with associations and lateral linkages heard in pun, metaphor and other figurative play. The work of Adrian Henri shares a similar understanding of the dynamic process that is linguistic communication. Henri is credited with bringing the 'happening' to the UK (or the 'event' as he called it) to Liverpool in the early 1960s, a moment which Alan Ginsberg described 'as the centre of human consciousness'. Curator Anthony Hudek writes for the catalogue of the exhibition 'Adrian Henri: Total Artist' part of the Liverpool Biennial 2014, that 'The events that Henri staged from the early 1960s through the 70s are further demonstrations of the artist's inalienable right to generate alternatives to any singular history of art, hybrid events mixing not so much mediums as stories' (157-158). Henri described this approach as 'Total Art'.

A view of place as process and of language as indeterminate was an attitude which found expression in the energy of the Mersey Beat poets and their construction of Liverpool in poetry, written at the height of the 1960's economic boom in Liverpool. In the energetic dynamism of a poet like Adrian Henri language and imaginative play have the potential to make the world anew. The pressure which produces these poems is a need to assert a new cultural confidence in a city still marked by poverty. These are tidal poems, port

city poems, which live with change as a permanent condition. They have a 'portal consciousness', hyperbolic, performatively alive.(Alexander, Neal 2)

Water is powerful in this city; it runs the economy. Liverpool's 'informal' work culture is thought to have emerged as a response to the tides. When the ships came in dockers worked hard and fast, when not they rested. This is often compared with the factory time of Manchester's cotton mills where workers clocked on and off, and it is suggested the different city's cultures arose from these different types of labour organisation(Biggs). Helen Taylor writing about the Mersey Beat movement describes it also as a

'total art' movement, using the live event in order to foster a direct connection with an audience, and seeing verbal, vocal, and visual performance (music, visual artworks, collaborative poetic and comedy sketches, 'happenings' ...) as key to the expression and dissemination of poetry. The Merseybeat poets socialised and performed together in the same spaces, creating and speaking directly to a scene. These poets used Liverpool in their work over and over again to place themselves within the city but also to claim it, deliberately creating and presenting a particular literary idea of Liverpool(Taylor 34).

In presenting an idea of Liverpool, the Mersey Beat poets were also changing the city. They 'claim' it not to own it and fix it in place, but to change the current perception of the post-war city. They offer a more accurate model of the city environment, one in which things change and shift, play and revel. A space is produced with the liminality required to include a variety of individuals. To create a 'Total Art' work in Liverpool means making use of all aspects of the culture around you, whatever sails in on the ships or floats in on the tide. The

Mersey Beat poets are not fixing the city but playing with it. The impermanence or the 'happening' and the unpretentious tone of much of the work suggests this is an art made in a city where change is an ongoing reality. Process-ontology is easy to accept in port cities. The space of Nicholson's poem maintains 'another space'; MacSweeney places the reader in the moment of production, but Henri makes the material spaces of the poem the subject and content. The expectation is the poem will also find an audience in the same locale. In all of its incarnations the poem will be a real thing, 'happening' in a bar, theatre or gig. Henri's 'other space' must be produced in language, but also in other real material contexts and with a real, specific audience in mind.

Henri's poem 'Death in the Suburbs' enacts something of this anarchistic, D.I.Y. energy; where remaking the world is taken to the extreme as a form of play, almost orgasmic.

Death in the Suburbs

The end of the world will surely come

In Bromley South and Orpington

morning in the suburbs:

sunlight thrown like a blanket

over pink-and-white vistas

villas detached and undetached

islanded with flowering cherry,

stone ravens guard against the gateposts

the roof left unguarded,

each man's garden a province unto itself

linked only by birdsong
and the tasteful cooing of doves in hedges
magnolia petals on deep lawns
little clouds of white and purple round rockeries
frozen veils of appleblossom round every doorway.

the earth
moves
sudden
tiny snowstorms of cherryblossom
a black cat runs apprehensive
flocks of starlings startle from bushes
slow-growing crescendo
of crashing picture windows
gardens
uprooted
blown pinkandwhite skyhigh
frozen agonies of begonias
held for a moment like a blurred polaroid
lawns flung like carpets
golfclubs pottingsheds wheeled shopping-baskets
hurled into orbit
deepfreezers burst open
prepackaged meals spilling everywhere
invitations to whist-drives coffee mornings
letters to long-haired sons at campus universities

never to be delivered
pinboards posters of Che Guevara stereo systems
continental quilts rows of neat lettuces
blameless Chihuahuas' au pair girls
still wet from dreams of Italian waiters
mothers-in-law bullfight trophies sensible wooden toys
whirled helpless in a vortex
rockeries like asteroids
blizzards of appleblossom
against the April sunlight

villa after villa
flickers off like television
birdsounds
blur into silence
like a vacuum
heaps of white entrails
nestling amid lilies-of-the-valley
ripple like tarmac
gravel chatters the crazy dance of pavingstones
whole avenues implode
gantries and railways bridges
quiet sidings
engulfed by avalanches of privet and hawthorn
waves of chalk earth flecked with hemlock and nettle roots
burying commuter stations.

Faraway,
the distant ripples
flutter dovecots
disturb pigeons
roosting in oasthouses
weekend cottages
doff their thatch to the sky
mountaintops tumble like cumuli
gales of earth
ravage through ryefields
pylons tremble like seismographs
cries of children
circling like seagulls
echo the distance

a
solitary
picnicker
sitting on a breakwater
above the red, flint-strewn beach
hears the distant thunder
as clifftops crumble
looks up from the light scumbling the silver water
to see the horizon catch fire
showers of small stones

smell of samphire
 the last slice of ham a packet of biscuits the small black notebook
 slip away unseen
 as the concrete rears vertical
 his ears' last echo
 the cries of lost sea-birds
 one drifting pink petal
 catches the dying sunlight.

Henri introduces this poem on the Poetry Archive recording by linking the suburbs of Orpington to those of Childwall in south Liverpool, or Oxton in Birkenhead where I grew up; and from the trajectory of the poem from suburb to shore I think it is the Wirral he is imagining. The aspiration towards settlement and fix is literally thrown up into the air, shown to be a false assumption about reality. And although there is 'death' in the poem, as in many Henri poems, such as 'Triumph of Death', the end of the world never seems depressing; just the opposite, it is infused with a manic quality, or even an idea of *duende*, of living life in the full-face of death. This is Henri's meaning, not a fearing of death but a desire to challenge the absolute limit. There is a terror present in that vision though, and so it is the suburbs, the objects of the settlements with their social and unfulfilled aspirations which are thrown up into the air, into a freeform extravaganza:

pre-packaged meals spilling everywhere
 invitations to whist drives coffee mornings
 letters to long-haired sons at campus universities (Henri 126).

And a few lines later, social observation is balanced with humour and sex

blameless Chihuahuas au pair girls

still wet from dreams of Italian waiters (126).

And as the poem's breathless free verse explodes 'whole avenues' and 'commuter stations are buried'. The reader or listener is taken to a solitary picnicker on a breakwater, for this is a coastal town 'above the red, flint strewn beach'; the shore is sandstone and the domestic and personal details of

The last slice of ham a packet of biscuits the small black
notebook

slip away unseen

as the concrete rears vertical

his last ears' last echo

the cries of lost sea-birds

one drifting pink petal

catches the dying sunlight (126).

The poem concludes by immersing the individual artist or poet in the chaos of the end of the world, or rather, less metaphorically, in the natural world emerging within the pleasantries of the suburbs. Not only does Henri 'tip up the solitary picnicker', a humorous reference to Wordsworth, but also the assumed profundity of modernist poetry, the 'pink petal' a nod to Pound's famous haiku, 'In the station at the metro'. Yet here the petals aren't 'on a black bough', but moving, aesthetically in the dying sunlight, an almost kitsch, dramatic moment. For Henri should never be read too literally, the poems are always a form of play, often performed with a band or as part of a 'happening'. The poems enact high energies through giving them form, yet they don't always mean it; the poetic argument here desires an immersion in a communal or participative art, it wants you to become more than yourself and to play. The audience are invited to extend their limits and permitted and seduced into a disruptive experience. It

is the concept of the individual and the consumer culture that dies. The space is literally opened up to the 'new' – the modern world. Instability and flux are part of the new society; part of the real and quotidian.

3. Local Poetics as Liverpool Context

Following my close readings of Nicholson, Henri and MacSweeney in which I have argued for the emergence of specific poetic techniques as local problems requiring local solutions which produce new abstract, real material space, I will continue to explore the literary context of my own writing practice to further demonstrate how specific locality produces specific rhetorical choices. As I argued above, poets are producing spatial interactions within their locality using imaginative thought to extend the space available to them. A real, material process, local poets enact in language the problems felt at a personal and sensate level and attempt to supersede the bounds through the devices of poetic language. The following partial discussion of the literary cultural context of my writing practice is presented as preparation for arguments made above. I also develop my themes from section One and Two, offering a different perspective, and therefore more rounded argumentation, on the questions of this thesis. My writing context is Liverpool after the energetic decades of Henri and the Mersey Beat poets have passed, as have the difficulties of the last years of the Twentieth Century. I will suggest that although the issues I discuss below are relevant to my practice as example, it is possible to discuss any poets practice within a context of their local poetics.

A locality contains within its dimensions conflicting histories, politics, literary traditions, multiple ways of doing things. Liverpool, with its history as a

port city, visibly manifests this variety. Peter Barry in *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* approaches the distinctive writing cultures of British cities with an interest in the grassroots writing culture of the place. Barry describes Liverpool poetry at the turn of the century as defined by a 'hard lyric', quoting Brian Patten (Barry 145). For Barry the Mersey Beat Poets were characterised by a shifting and every changing performative register; pastoral was placed in juxtaposition to advertising jargon or place names. However 'Liverpool's cultural bubble burst and dispersed in the 1970s and 80s [...] The culminative demoralising effect on the city of these events is difficult to estimate, but was undoubtedly considerable, and undoubtedly suffuses the later poetry associated with the city' (Barry 145-146). Yet by 2007 his essay in 'Out of Transformations': Liverpool Poetry in the Twenty-First Century' marks how this conflicted past was shifting and he observes 'the major changes of recent years in scope and technique which have been a notable feature of that poetry.' Barry's essay finds groups and categories to describe the poetic practice in the city in 2008. He describes the Liverpool poetry scene in 2008 as, 'three spheres' firstly the 'fine-art version of poetry' then 'a world of performance poetry operating in bars, clubs, and theatres,... and thirdly, there is 'a sphere of poetry, writing and performance which is linked to local council projects, charitable trusts, and to work in libraries, schools, play schemes, and prisons.' (Barry 286).

These spheres are what define, for me, the practice of the contemporary local poet in Liverpool. I have been privileged to begin my writing life working in all of these contexts and I would seek to offer more 'spheres'. Barry's categorisation is simplistic, yet it allows for an understanding of the local poet in Liverpool as working between and with various cultural traditions. The experience is not hierarchical; there is no central control but many groups and

individuals creating poetry. If anything defines them it is a commitment to a form of left-leaning politics. Yet this has also been a pluralist tradition in Liverpool, as different ideas and political ideas were brought in through the port, unlike the impression created by the national media over recent years. Liverpool's politics emerges from its anarchistic, socialist and liberal intellectual heritage. As Barry continues, 'Indeed, perhaps the best work arises out of the transformations which occur when all three spheres are in contact of some kind with each other'(287).

I suggest that a multivalent understanding of these spheres would more accurately describe the variety of poetic practices in the city, yet his analysis is correct. It is the cooperative interaction between these various poetics, politics and approaches which defines poetry from Liverpool and produces its distinctive character. Barry also identifies a practice he calls 'intermedia' which is collaboration with other writers and artists. This work is a descendent of Adrian Henri's work with 'happenings' and poetry events but also a descendant of the Irish, Welsh, Scots, Jamaican and Indian literary traditions in the city which connect poetry with orality, song and storytelling.

The writing questions I explore arise from the tensions and problems produced by the challenges of working between the identity politics which define these 'groups' or traditions. These manifest as political positions and as poetics. This began due to my generational position but I have embraced it as a defining aspect of my writing practice. My research question, 'how can a local poet achieve commonality in a context defined by difference?' is driven by the demands of my given locality. I found my answer via working between traditions and techniques, seeking to traverse the context, move spatially amongst its tensions rather to follow one single trajectory, be that the English canonical

tradition, the performance work of the poets in my home city or the experiments of the avant-garde present in the heritage of the Liverpool's version of a 'regional modernism'.

I will now outline some of the critical issues at work in writing from a Liverpool context, all centred on the problem of who is allowed to speak and who will be heard. Writing poetry in Liverpool requires a connection with the oral and working class traditions which predate contemporary practice. Sandra Courtman writing about the legacy of the Scottie Road and Liverpool 8 Writers workshops of the 70's and 80's, observes how the oral tradition defines the writing or literary tradition of the local communities.

What emerges from Scottie Road, and other groups who later joined the FWWCP,⁵ is something that every community arts worker and prison educator encounters. Ordinary working people with a scant of non-existent literary education and few artistic pretensions write poetry, prose and life-writing having apparently had no literary role models and often with little or no encouragement from parents or teachers. These writers are part of a tradition of cultural expression firmly outside mainstream culture(Courtman 204).

This writing arose from the storytelling and ballad traditions still very strong in the Irish community of which Scottie Road was a part. The oral and the literary then impacted on each other in non-standard ways. Courtman quotes group member Ken Worpole, 'a lot of the work was very good because it was coming from that storytelling tradition, a very ordered rhythmical tradition[...] it worked well in a large setting but on paper it didn't look so

⁵ Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers

good'(205). Yet as Barry describes above Liverpool poets have begun to move between spheres of practice and this creates different demands on the work. I believe my poetry to be a result of this context. I am interested in how the oral and 'non-standard' traditions can offer instruction to 'literary' poets and also how an engagement with modern and progressive thought and poetics also alters the writing practice of the traditional forms.

In participatory arts practice juxtaposition and defamiliarisation are the active political mode, inclusion and participation in creativity the emancipatory route, rather than the representation of marginalised voices, though I do not wish to create a false binary between the two. However, representation of an individual voice can also come with its social risks. Courtman notes that 'moving from the oral to the written word would sometimes involve secrecy'(206). Writing as political representation is not a comfortable process. For some member of the group in 1970's Liverpool 'when they began to bring private material into the public arena of the workshop and submit it for publication, there is a potential cost to their relationships within their family and community'(206). Drawing on interviews with the founding members of the group Courtman identifies the sensitivities and issues which arise from representing a troubled community back to itself, especially even if written by community members. Houses were over-crowded and there was a lack of private and sufficiently 'safe places' to write. Individuated or marginal experience was difficult to articulate. The local culture can be as restrictive as the national.

My understanding of politics as a creative practice rather than as public debate is drawn from my work in participatory arts organisations, mostly 'The Windows Project' which emerged in 1976 from Great Georges Community Cultural Project known locally as 'The Blackie', now The Black-E', Halewood

Community Council and Merseyside Play Action Council. This work combined an interest in Dada, Surrealism and Beat poetics with the social realism of Liverpool's left-wing politics. For example in 'Gifts to the City' at The Blackie in 1971 large blocks of ice were left to melt in city squares and life size cut out images of commuters placed at railways stations in what we now call 'guerrilla' or 'pop up' interventions. Surprise, play and engagement were the values asserted by this practice. Therefore a possible response to the ethical problems of representation is to subvert the oppositional structures, to not confront and reassert, but to traverse the problem. In community and participatory arts, play, imagination i.e. spatial thinking and juxtaposition, were often presented as offering this conceptual and cultural space. Subversion and cultural production of liminal space is a different resistance strategy to the writing of representation but I also believe it to have agency. Reading the Mersey Beat poets' construction of social space I understood the best strategy for writing locality, and my own selfhood, was to reimagine it. I was from Birkenhead where class politics could be divisive. I also did not wish to reconfirm oppositional structures. Cultural politics has been a constant and unavoidable presence in my creative practice as it defines the historical moment into which I began to write.

To further elucidate the complexity of the relationship between two of Barry's 'spheres' of Liverpool poets' practice, the academy and the community, I will discuss a report held in the extensive archive of The Windows Project written by Blake Morrison from 1979. It clearly demonstrates the cultural anxieties about the democratisation of public funding for community literature by the Arts Council. The 'Report submitted to the Arts Council, December 1979, on the work being done in the field of Community Arts Literature' is a single-authored report into this new field (Morrison). What entitles him to the role is his

'professional duties as poetry and fiction editor at the TLS' therefore he 'feels reasonably qualified to take on the task' (1) although he has taken on the role as the original specialist advisor due to Michael Schimdt being unable to undertake the work. Morrison is tasked with looking at 'the artistic merit and achievement' of such projects.' in an area where he admits he has 'little prior knowledge of the literature produced by Community Arts groups' (1). The report is a fascinating attempt to evaluate fairly, yet understand the difference with which he is presented. Morrison presents his argument by presuming in a section 'Notion of Community Arts Literature' that even though

there are obvious dangers in treating 'community art literature as if it were entirely different from 'traditional' or established literature: both literatures attempt to describe human experience in words, to communicate with others, to master verbal form and techniques. It would be misleading, however to suppose that Community Arts Literature has exactly the same aims and structures as most of the literature to which we are accustomed(1).

The use of 'we' here indicates the Literature panel of the Arts Council and Morrison also presumes that literary technique is one knowable object rather than understanding it as multiple. He also presumes 'traditional' to mean the literature of the 'establishment' – the voice of south-east England. Literary technique does not pre-exist the art work but emerges in relationship to its audience and context, the argument under examination in this thesis. Morrison visits a range of projects in Manchester, Bath, Bristol, Liverpool and London. He acknowledges clearly that the aims of the writers he meets are not the same as those of his normal experience 'most of the authors I looked at also felt they were writing for a new audience – one that normally shied away from

literature'(2) arising from their self-description as working class writers. His literary critique is based around the lack as he sees it of 'experiment' with literary form yet he is critical of the terms of the report offering a series of questions as his summary, 'Is it (community literature) to be judged by the same criteria as other literature?' and amongst other queries 'And can we now fairly assess art while ignoring, as I was asked to, its immediate social context'? (2) Morrison acknowledges the limitations of the scope of his report.⁶

Morrison desires to come to terms with these questions but in the short time of his visits is not able to do so. He therefore uses the literary criteria of the day to evaluate the work, the 'same when reviewing or teaching or deciding whether to publish literary text'(2). National standards are applied to local arts and a tension is produced. This was present at the start of the community writing initiative movement in the 1970s and is an ever present theme in contemporary projects yet perhaps in 2014 the questions are more nuanced. The patrician tone of the report would not be acceptable in contemporary dialogue between ACE and its artists.⁷ Morrison makes judgements on the writing which are based only on his opinion and not backed up by textual evidence linked to what the work is trying to achieve. He applies the wrong standard and struggles to think with the difference present in the context. I discuss this report in detail as it demonstrates the cultural tensions from which the local poetics of my creative practice emerge. The 'local problem' I am

⁶ We now know very clearly that we can not ignore the social context of the writing. Yet in Creative Writing we still often teach to a 'national' standard drawn from 'prizewinning work'. I suggest this problem is avoided if we critique based on the ambition of the work, whether it achieves its aims and also the ambition and originality of those aims. We are then engaging with the creative function of the poet's practice and their reasons for doing it in the first place. We risk 'taming' its dynamic potential if we apply an overly rigid standard to creative work. Poetry needs to be fore-mostly creative for it to have value.

⁷ I have been at many meetings with City Council and Arts Council officials in Liverpool with artists where any authoritative tone is quickly challenged.

attempting to solve arise from the specific and changing relationship between local and national literary cultures, questions I have sought to elucidate and formalise throughout this project.

The tension between local relevance and national 'approval' as described above is still a predominant factor in poetic practice in the city and one I recognise in my own work. National politics control access to funding and publishing opportunities, a tension produced by the history of the politics of the city. As 'standard' poetic tone is inappropriate for my work, originating in a version of southern English, I have also not sought dialect, as that is also not my own voice, but to create a poetic voice whose rhythms emerge from my residence in Liverpool. The tensions at work in the context I am writing out of then produce a need to traverse the binaries which are maintaining those conflicts, particularly if they are based on hierarchical power structures. I am in need of creative strategies which will allow the poem to have integrity but also to be heard. To return to my earlier argument I need to find and create 'material spaces' where the energy has shifted and will allow for a 'moving through' the terrain.

A central practice of the participatory arts movement is to understand rules, procedures and artistic form as 'material constraints are a space for others to fill'.⁸ This is certainly the case in the context of The Windows Project who Morrison visits on 15th October 1979 and reports on the games used to work with children, 'Certain rules will have to be adhered to... but there is a certain freedom and randomness too. Ward believes that this is a good model for understanding and writing poetry – freedom within rules'(2). This impresses

Morrison as does the imagination and organisation of the activity. The materialist critical theory embodied in participatory work is that actions set the terms for the engagement and include the other person in that experience. Unproductive oppositional structures can be avoided and therefore the space for critique can be dissolved. Through play, actions create form. An exchange is created based on equality. Change the structure or the procedure and the outcome will be different. Change the space of the person in 'authority' as well as 'subordinate' and the problem also alters its shape. Critique is embedded within the practice of participatory arts in its production of new spaces for interaction. The practitioner thinks spatially and realistically rather than idealistically working with material spaces and energies rather than argumentative structures. Creating something new and beguiling, immersive and real, is more persuasive than reasserting polarised positions in this context.

However it is important to note this approach does not lead to literary formlessness. Realism here does not mean literary naturalism but a philosophical realism embodied in the creative process understood as process-ontology. Umberto Eco in Claire Bishop's selection of key writings on 'Participation' as a visual arts practice, writing about the history of 'the open work', describes the poetics of all of these practices, be they visual, theatrical or poetic as

The common factor is a mutability which is always deployed within the specific limits of a given taste, or predetermined formal tendencies, and is authorised by the concrete pliability of the material offered for the performer's manipulation. Brecht's plays appear to elicit free and arbitrary response on the part of the audience. Yet they are also rhetorically constructed in such a way

as to elicit a reaction orientated toward, and ultimately anticipating a Marxist dialectic logic as the basis for the whole field of possible responses. All these examples of 'open' works and 'works in movement' have this latent characteristic, which guarantees that they will always be seen as 'works' and not just as a conglomeration of random components ready to emerge from the chaos in which they previously stood and permitted to assume any form whatsoever...(Eco 37).

The activity of forming pliable material within the context of its own reception defines good participatory practice. It is also why it is necessary to think of poetry as emerging from a given locality born of a specific local poetics. The material context of the creation of a literary work of art is part of its form. The material context, including the local culture as part of this term, of course varies from poet to poet. Matter unfolds differently and produces further difference depending on its present conditions and the space available into which it can morph. A description of a local poetics accepts this reality and understands a poet's interaction with that material space as productive of further material space.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued via three trajectories towards a definition of 'Local Poetics' to create a critical context to enable an answer to my research question 'how does a contemporary local poet achieve connections whilst writing in a local context defined by differences?' The differing associations of 'local poetics' as 'realist process-ontology', as 'local solution' and as 'local context' offer critical terms which enable a more detailed exploration of my thesis. The

local poet is working within the processes that constitute reality. The answer to my research question is then to make use of the material limits of a given locality, known as changing landscape, culture, politics, as the material for the production of imaginative and virtual spaces. Writing out of the local context of Liverpool produces a range of conflicting pressures: those of the plurality of literary traditions running concurrently, and of their reception. These multiple pressures which I experience as sensate reactions, I interpret within the context in which I am working. I read a landscape or an institutional context. But 'read' intimates a passive text, silent and waiting for my attentions to give it voice. This is not the case. I prefer 'converse' rather than 'read' as a term to describe the local poet's engagement with her environment, local culture and literature. Being in a landscape is a conversation; reading a poem is dynamic. The local poet traverses the context with spatial thought. Even though I am interpreting the environment, memory, birdlife, other humans I am presuming they have an agency. They can make me feel via the associations I attach to their agency based on my own experience and knowledge, my understanding of their meaning, of their needs and desires. This dynamic experience I understand as the unfolding of material process of culture, and the participation and making of these connections defines the work of the local poet.

How then does a local poet converse with their environs? How does the local poet act as conduit both interpreting and producing meaning? What literary techniques does the local poet need to enact these processes and how do they emerge to meet the demands of the particular needs of the local problem the poet seeks to address? Chapter Two will seek to explore these questions via the creative practice content of the 'case studies' undertaken in my local context: Liverpool and the Mersey region. It will also extend the methodology of

the local poet into other contexts in the period of this thesis, (2011-2014) to further define the idea of a 'local poetics'.

Chapter 2: Local Poetics as More Than Words

In this chapter I will further contextualise my practice-based work, developing concepts established in chapter one to argue for two inferences of the phrase, 'more than words'. Firstly I consider the impact of material affordances upon the writing of the poem and secondly, I suggest that from these material pressures and limits, real spaces emerge. Both inferences also rely on an idea of the ontological status of the imagination as material yet virtual space. The connotations of the phrase also extend Ingold's anthropological work on 'making as becoming' into the practice of the local poet. Ingold argues convincingly for making as a 'correspondence' between material and maker, each one forming and informing the other. This view understands representation not as an internal occurrence but as an enactive, external process made via interaction with materials. To provide evidence to support both concepts I will offer descriptions of my experience as a practising local poet informed by 'Material Engagement Theory'. I will refer to the creative process to foreground the variety of material forces with which a local poet is corresponding in the writing of a local poem. I suggest that sensate experience informs how an environment is read and interpreted by the local poet. I also refer to the key literary texts which provide directional pressure. Yet I assert that the linguistic is only *part* of the process of the construction of a poetic work, as a poem creates real imaginative space which emerges from the dynamics of its creation. The material spaces occur as imaginative space is topological: it can morph and shift but not break. The imagination is best thought of as a space for rearranging things, putting them in a new and differing relationship.

Ingold discusses the creation of the mound or hill in terms of the thing as 'Ding', taken from Old Scandinavian. The word is the etymological root of the English 'thing' and refers originally to a place, a gathering space often in a clearing or in a field. In this space many different people meet to discuss and to create laws. A 'thing' is constituted by this process, of many individual parts or people arriving from across the landscape. Human imagination can be construed as also following the same pattern of assemblage. The method is the same but the outcome will always be different as each human mind, whilst operating under the same physical laws, will produce different results. Each new mound, or thing, or poem will use what has arrived at that moment differently. Matter differentiates itself and life continues.

Arne's Progress and Blue Black as Local Solutions

I will now describe the creative practice of writing the poems in 'Arne's Progress' to explore how material forces can influence the form of a poem. I will make use of my concept of 'local poem as local solution' and further embellish it to include a theory of practice. The pressures experienced within any given setting are plural and arriving from every angle. Writing a poem as collaboration, as commission or for performance event creates a 'frame'. Within this 'frame' it is then possible to clearly see the pressures which produce the moment of articulation, that attempt to create a local solution for a local problem. In the following 'case studies' I will discuss the effects of these divergent trajectories of force upon the local poet in the production of the poem and demonstrate how these unfold a new space from the given limits. A topological notion of the material world and of virtual space is evoked to support

this description of practice. A shoreline is eroded or a valley formed. New material space is unfolded.

A possible model for how this occurs in literature is posited by Marco Bernini in 'Supersizing Narrative Theory: On Intention, Material Agency, and Extended Mind-Workers'. In this essay Bernini applies theories of extended mind to narrative theory to describe 'writing as thought in action'; arguing that 'To appreciate how the mind and written language can be transformative and uplifting in relation to each other, we have to cease considering writing as a passive process'. And that, 'On the one hand, ideas are not independent from the writing act. On the other hand, these ideas don't pre-exist writing, but rather they *emerge in, thanks to and are continuously modified by* the writing process'(Bernini 5). A casual relationship between practice and meaning is possible due to the 'coupled' relationship between mind and world. The context in which the poem is written feeds back into the creative process of composition. The sensory information the poet is turning into language arrives from their extension of mind produced by the activity of writing. Following from this it is possible to think that 'writing has the active power to lead us to previously unthinkable thoughts' and, I am arguing as regards local poetics that to think 'literary writing as an *act of world-making*'. Bernini's subject is authorial intention and his argument continues to explore how the process of writing both produces and is produced by authorial intention through a 'feedback' relationship.

As a practising poet I find this convincing. The moment of composition is not where I represent a pre-formed internal image onto the page. I engage in a relationship between the 'image' in my mind, the language which is both producing and produced by that 'image' and my embodied presence. Ingold

recently advised though in the discussion following his lecture 'Haptic Perception and the Atmosphere' against the term 'image' for the reason that it suggests an internalised representation.⁹ Yet 'imagination' suggests a more active idea of the image, of image as world creation. I suggest 'model' also as this describes the rotational and multi-directional experience of creative visualisation. I therefore also add to Bernini's model of collaboration with the language in the moment of making, the influence of the outside: of locale, content and audience or potential audience. Bernini argues for the written text producing further text in a series of feedback loops. I suggest it is possible to include into this model of creative process the influence of external pressures as further feedback loops. However I choose to refer to them as 'pressures' as I do not have the tools to mathematically describe these 'feedbacks'. As I write from the perspective of the practising poet I choose a term which describes the sensate quality of the impulses which produce imaginative thought. Lambros Malafouris writes 'thinking is not something that happens 'inside' brains, bodies or things; rather, it emerges from contextualised processes that take place 'between' brains, bodies, and things' (Malafouris 78).

In the following case studies I will offer an assessment of how different 'pressures' produced in my creative process direct specific decision and outcomes which led to the final poem. My attention is focused on the 'between', the myriad pressures which produce the external enactment of poetic and imaginative thought. A new material space is produced which is external to the poet in the act of writing. Poems happen outside the poet in the new material space of imagination. My account is offered in hindsight, based on notes and

⁹ *Reach for the Stars: Haptic Perception and the Atmosphere*: Sensing Place Symposium: Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, 12th May 2014.

drafts kept during the writing process. I also offer the case-studies as simplified descriptions of the key factors in any process, whilst anticipating that reality is always far more complex than I can ever describe. Also in writing about my creative process for this thesis I have to turn a spatial and multi-dimensional process into a linear arrangement. I have therefore numbered the different trajectories of influence. I do this not to signify hierarchy of importance but to put them in a linear relation. However in actuality they are best imagined as pressures felt coterminously.

Arne's Progress

'Arne's Progress' is a sequence of poems written as a collaboration with the illustrator Desdemona MacCannon in 2012. I offer key points which speak to the ideas under discussion though with the disclaimer that in practice the range, subtlety and uncertainty of the influences has to be known experientially. In this project Desdemona and I were working 'with' the local histories of Liverpool, through the history of the broadside ballad, the history of folk illustration and the verse used in the ballads. But we were also working 'with' our relationship as poet and illustrator and the demands of the different artforms, the ethical issues arising from the problem of appropriating other voices, and, for me, our personal connection. Desdemona's house lies on my old route to school so the location offered an affective and emotional connection to a place, and was informed by my current thinking about poetry provoked by my PhD research. This brief sketch of the range of 'pressures' that combined to form the sequences of 'local problems' we solved as we went along can be conceptualised as arriving from all points on the map and from different

locations across time. What attracted me to the collaboration was the richness of the lines of connection present before we started to work together. There was plenty of material available with which to work; an entanglement of trajectories of movement. Here are three examples:

1. The poems for the project began in the landscape of the 'Arno Park' on the Wirral. The park lies behind Desdemona's house and across it runs 'Duck Pond Lane', a public footpath which I used to take on my way to the bus stop and to school. From the park panoramic views expand across the Wirral Peninsula and to the Flint Hills marking the border with Wales. The initial idea from Desdemona was to write the untold stories of Liverpool people. I felt uncomfortable with appropriating other voices so my attention turned to my own relationship with Birkenhead and my own memories lurking in the landscape behind her home. For our first meeting at her house I chose to walk from the bus stop, retracing a familiar path. This formed the content for the preliminary poems 'Bird Men of the Far Hill' and 'Duck Pond Lane'. These poems did not fully satisfy the needs of the collaborative project but provided useful explorations of possible writing methodologies.

2. Material concerns informed the length and line of the poems. A traditional broadside is a rectangular shape with a wood-cut image printed above verses written in traditional ballad meter. Our initial idea was to produce letterpress versions of the illustrations and poems. However my original free-verse stepped-line poems wouldn't fit on the paper. I had to explore a shorter and more regular line anticipating the limits of the letterpress printing process. As the project developed it became clear that printing with traditional letterpress would be more costly than using a digital process. As we were self-funding the production costs, we chose to change the design and print the work in a tabloid

format via a company which offered to print creative projects from the end of the runs used by newspaper companies. This choice followed the logic of our initial influences, but we adapted to the financial limitations. My poems however still anticipate a different format regarding the choices I made about the line length and metrical patterns of the work. Material constraints of a given context, in this case the specifics of paper size and print costs, produce poetic form, which in turn informs the subject matter of the poem.

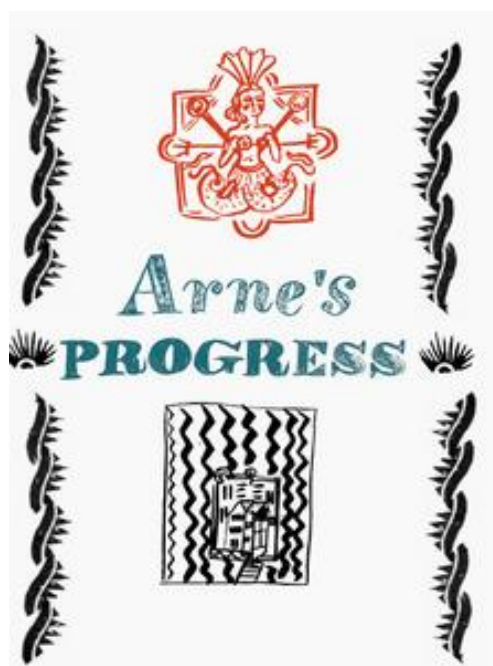


Figure 1: Front cover illustration for 'Arne's Progress' by Desdemona McCannon

3. Ethical and emotional pressures produced the imaginative and virtual space described in the poems. The pressure felt here was responsibility for the relationships present in my interaction with the locale. I also felt a responsibility to my own memories, for the social dynamics of the region where negative portrayals cause distress, and for the relationship with Desdemona. These ethical concerns were fuelled by an understanding of poetry as a 'correspondence', to use Ingold's term, with the world from which the poem

emerges and a commitment to the equality of these needs. However when decisions need to be made, the local solution will be the outcome which meets the most pressing need in that moment. I have found that this need is often addressed by a return pressure, a transgression, or question. I see this process as that of restoring and maintaining equilibrium, which is not a static state, but a continual process of action and reaction. If I was to avoid the responsibility of engaging in the interactions with integrity, then I would be failing as a poet and ethically suspect. I would be working for my needs primarily and not those of the group or wider context. The ethical work of the local poet is part of her art.

My creative methodology is informed by the ethical position of the local poet as a commitment to equality and participatory democracy of all things within the locale. By bringing a variety of concerns and responsibilities into the making of the space of the poem I am enacting an idea of a space as a place for meeting: an assembly. In the imaginative work which precedes writing the poem I bring into my consciousness a variety of pressures and visualise them as active participants in a scene. The narrator of the poem sequence 'Arne's Progress' is half-eagle and half-man. Arne is named after his starting location, the Arno Park, Oxtun, Wirral. As Arne journeys from the Wirral to Liverpool his liminal point of view enables him to interact with the different histories he witnesses at play in the city. I hope to allow the differing forces at work in the place to show themselves in their activity as witnessed by my imagination, both visual and affective. I pay attention to the movements occurring in the imagined space and to the atmosphere and tone of the voice which seeks to describe them. I am seeking to offer a politically progressive idea of 'the local'. This is achieved only by understanding the ontology of boundaries as flexible and changing spaces. I aim to produce these boundaries in my poetry and then

allow fixed positions and ideas to enter into those spaces and take on new forms. The narrator of the poem needs to guide but not intrude. For this reason I find a folk-tale-informed aesthetic allows a certain distance to be created in the writing without the content dissolving into meaninglessness. I hope to invoke a liminal space, understanding throughout that the imagined state of mind is real and doing something valuable. The new space this tale-telling invokes I experience as a release and sense of movement, a transgression into a new material state. By occupying a liminal imaginative position I hope to write a poetry which makes more space, for myself and hopefully for others.

To create this space in the dynamic between listener and poet I need techniques which will create enough trust to allow them to enter into the imagined experience. Amongst the material influences then are also those of text and the literary tradition. I was in need of a voice with which to draw a reader into this assemblage of things. I read Heaney's translations of Fourteenth Century Scots Makar Robert Henryson's 'The Tales of Cresseid and Seven Fables'. Heaney writes in the introduction about how the poems draw on 'these tales of tricky and innocent beasts and birds were part of the common oral culture of Europe, a store of folk wisdom as pervasive and unifying at vernacular level as the doctrines and visions of Christianity were in the higher realms of scholastic culture'(Heaney 8). Heaney also remarks on how Henryson 'is reluctant to moralise' and 'is a narrative poet whom you read not only for story but for the melody of understanding in the storytelling voice'(5). Desdemona and I had been discussing the use of allegory as she was keen to have a narrative content to illustrate. Listening to Heaney, I tried to take direction from these translations, hearing in Heaney's translations of his own

interpretation of Henryson the 'melody of understanding' which can be heard in this opening

A gloomy time, a poem full of hurt
Should correspond and be equivalent.
Just so it was when I began my work
On this retelling (Henryson 3).

Heaney and Henryson do not avoid the suffering of their narrative but the language softens the blow. 'Gloomy' sets the mood, but does not over-dramatise or seek to extenuate what will be a 'poem full of hurt', a simply-put but affective phrase in which the poem takes on the responsibility to carry the pain. In one line these poets garner our trust. From this reading I found a tone for 'Arne's Progress', a way of speaking that allowed for description of the historical material which shouldered the responsibility for its retelling in the desire to create a colloquial, bathetic tone.

The above assemblage of material influences - paper size and costs, my working relationship with Desdemona, my memories of the location and responsibilities to my community - combined to solve the local problem of the associations of the memories. I began to turn them into spatial assemblages: to imaginatively follow Arne into Liverpool and its traumas, its history and hurts to a point where he loses form entirely. Arne exists in the space between description and pure abstraction. The latter is of course real, but to be known in a poem it must be shown: be produced in imaginative space. Arne's progress is into formlessness. He gets there by traversing the binaries of history, through a liminal Liverpool made of poetic images. I attempted to write a mostly regular iambic line using a demotic register suggested by my reading of Heaney and Henryson, but adapted for Merseyside.

We sold the newspapers for three pounds each at Cairns Street Community Market, Toxteth the area of Liverpool Arne travels through in 'Cortege'. Broadside Ballads were often sold on street corners so we set up a stall at the market run to support the campaign against the areas demolition.



Figure 2: Eleanor Rees at Cairn's Street Market, Toxteth. Photo: Desdemona McCannon



Figure 3: The stall in the context of the street market. Photo: Desdemona McCannon

Blue Black

How the shape of the land could form the narrative of a poem was a question motivating my writing of 'Blue Black'. Material and literary influences were entwined from the start. I wished to follow a non-linear structure, yet maintain representation and coherence, as I believed this would lead to an extension of the real spaces evoked in the poem. Material pressures at play in the poem are then what create the meaning. This specific entanglement of pressures coincided due to my local context. With hindsight I can untangle these threads a little to offer a linear representation of these trajectories. These however were experienced as affective forces, as bodily reactions, as tone and as atmosphere. Important to my argument is the multiplicity of these forces and how these different forces sought new form through the virtual space of poetic imagination.

1. I used the geography and history of the Wirral Peninsula, between the River Mersey and the River Dee, to find a form for the narrative movement, following the flight of a gull along the actual shoreline where the North Wirral shore meets the Irish Sea. The poem is spoken by a narrator who is remembering how it was to be a gull; both as intrinsic part of the landscape but able to move through it at a different material level, on the currents of the wind and tide.

2. I researched the behavior of the gull. My gull isn't a specific variety of gull. Crucially the gull stays close to the coast or inland and doesn't venture far out to sea. This detail was relevant as the gull is both connected to the sea and of the land, needing both yet never at home in either. Liverpool is a home for

large, confident gulls that I regularly hear and see as I travel around the city environment. I based my gull on observations and some research. I chose this perspective as I needed a point of view which existed within the environment yet which was also formed by it, as well as an ability to see a panorama. The gull can also exist in the air, on land and on water; as well as see through time and space. This allows for several trajectories to play out whilst the other is present, not possible through a traditional sequential representation. I aim for a layered representation in space and time yet not suggesting a transcendent other place.

3. Personal content was included as a stimulus for the poem. The liminal and immanent potential of an idea of home and of family are emotional pressures I encounter daily. Their unfulfilment provides the emotional pressures in the writing and the mood of the work, the 'Blue Black'. Early drafts offered a more overtly feminist interpretation of these issues and the concluding sections of the poem enacted the rage and violence which sometimes accompany these feelings. These were queried during supervision as too simplistic representations. Although the writing may have been too extreme to convince the tone was produced by the complexity of the local circumstances. I believe these meanings are still evoked within the current ending, however as the register is less overt and more liminal the problems are more likely to be heard.

4. The idea of using real place as structure I derived from a visit I made to the real Briggflatts in 2012. Northumbrian poet Basil Bunting took the name Briggflatts as the title of his long late-modernist poem. The poem is located in this small hamlet in Cumbria, and in its Quaker meeting house. A quiet and remote place, it was the Quaker graveyard which fascinated me, a lush green stonewalled square of uneven ground at the edge of the houses. I was told

coffins were buried on top of each other, with graves dug deep and new burials made on top of others. This image of the depth of the land connected with the poem's famous lines,

Words!

Pens are too light.

Take a chisel to write(Bunting 15).

In the context of the openness of the space of the surrounding fields the compact and deeply layered burial ground spoke of the pressure under which Bunting places language in 'Briggflatts': to not just evoke memory but to contain it, hold it in time and space as permanent construct, as in the third stanza,

Stone smooth as skin,

Cold as the dead they load

On a low lorry by night.

The moon sits on the fell

But it will rain.

Under sacks on the stone

Two children lie,

Hear the horse stale,

The mason whistle,

Harness mutter to shaft,

Felloe to axle squeak,

Rut thud the rim,

Crushed grit(Bunting 14).

Movement occurs for Bunting in the poem at the level of music, but not at the lower level of the material structures. The earth is static, stone is 'cold as the dead they load/on a low lorry by night'. The language is under such

pressure here it atomises. Each word carries much weight. Without syntax to support it, alliteration takes its place. We can hear the tap of the mason's mallet, but not easily see it; hear the horse and the whistle, the squeak and the thud of grit under the wheels and the crushed grit: the line one stress shorter than those preceding, adding an absence to our aural expectations, adding sorrow to the idea of compressed time and the weight of memory; an almost violent downward pressure, an attempt to remember the past and its pain rather than to let it go. The poem is a memorial stone for a burial awaiting resurrection rather than a cremation on a pyre.

Yet as Bunting describes in an interview about his Quakerism, he understands the faith as pantheist though infused by one God. There is a vitalism in the world, seen in moments in the poem in personified verbs 'sit' and 'mutter', but these infusions are finally those of one being. The dualistic, Christian transcendent structure of Quakerism informs Bunting's compositional method. In an interview 'On the General Composition of 'Briggflatts' he describes his process as

I use anything for a subject. Mostly I've written a poem that is concrete before I've got a subject. I know what shape it's going to be. I sometimes know, even in considerable detail, what the rhythm will be before I've got any notion of what is going to be said in it. 'Briggflatts' began as a diagram on a piece of paper (Bunting 77).

and that

My forms are [...] much larger, the architectonics are the poetry really... it's finding the actual building materials to suit the

architect's design, not designing the building around materials that happen to be lying around'.

For Bunting there exists a structural model preceding the composition of the poem, to which language (and especially subject matter) must conform or fit. Language is seen as material, as building blocks. Yet it is static, not the liquid material of water, but the man-made material of 'building materials', all used to create shelter for the unknown subject. Bunting is not leaving his subject in the open, but creating a home for it and continuing to protect it: the memory of childhood, the love the poem mourns.

Although I also think of my writing practice as a material process, I am interested in the differences between his conception of the material and my own. In 'Blue Black' I made 'use of what was lying around'. Material is conceived in my compositional process as ever present, but natural, and also limited; I am recycling material. I use whatever comes to hand. My writing process enacts the movement of materials onto new forms and shapes. I do not have a fixed structure to precede composition, though I do have a spatial model, an animated imaginative space, which I can use to let material move, which similarly precedes the writing. But my idea of space is also topological. It is constantly moving and is also in flux, unpredictable. I can interact with it but I cannot control it; imaginative events occur under their own logic, generated by their relation to real laws. From this material I cannot build a shelter or a home; it would be like building a cathedral out of sand. The structure will alter, often before I finish the writing.

To compose 'Blue Black' I wrote every day for a week, often in the morning or late at night, using the perimeters of the Wirral to provide structure (some of which I checked out on Google Maps, much I remember in detail from

living there). I improvised a flight around the landscape. I have not 'broken' or 'reedited' this draft to change the structure, only improved the energy of the diction, adding in more varied verbs and adjectives, replacing a surplus of 'the'.

5. Another beginning for the poem was somatic. I used 'what was lying around' by following the connections between connotations, association – mood and tone as experienced in my senses. Throughout the period of this thesis I danced at a regular Five Rhythms workshop. I did this, not just for personal benefit, but as exploration of movement as key theme in the creative practice element of my research. The Five Rhythms workshop involves embodying one's current preoccupations in one of the rhythms. The dance begins slow and develops to a frenetic peak before returning to stillness. This process takes two hours. I dance this practice with a group of 30 people in a dance studio in Liverpool 'The DoJo' which is also a Zen meditation space at the top of an old warehouse next to the Everyman Theatre. From the windows there is a view to the Liver Buildings and as we dance at dusk the sky is often a rich mix of pink and orange. Gulls fly past the window and perch on the ledge and one evening whilst dancing I found myself imagining the flight of the gull out of the window of this building and over the roof tops towards the Wirral. I also saw the woman on her knees on the shoreline as part of this visualisation which was invoked by the dancing. I wrote these images down on returning home and developed the poem from this initial first draft.

6. I was introduced to the history of the 'Battle of Brunanburh' by historian and children's book illustrator Maggie Keen who I met when working in Congleton. 'Blue Black' emerged from this connection and from the innocence I recognised in her drawing of a gull. The battle occurred in 937 AD and is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, but its location is still contested, though

some evidence suggests the site may well be Bromborough on the Wirral, and Redhill Road, Storeton which appears in the poem, the name hinting at the site of bloodshed. (Harding 153) This battle has been forgotten locally, but is thought to be the most important battle in the formation of Britain prior to 1066. The Anglo-Saxons were victorious and as they recorded in the poem, 'Battle of Brunanburh'

The Norsemen left them in their well-nailed ships,
The sad survivors of the darts, on Dingesmere
Over the deep sea back they went to Dublin,

and,

As books make known to us, and old
And learned scholars, after hither came
The Angles and the Saxons from the east
Over the broad sea sought the land of Britain,
Proud warmakers. Victorious warriors,
Conquered the Welsh, and so obtained this land. (Harding 155-

157)

Dingsemere is posited as 'Thingsmere' the dock for the 'Ding'; the Viking parliament at Thingwall on the Wirral. The battle sent the Vikings back to Ireland and the Britons, the Welsh back into the mountains. (Harding) This history seemed to be 'just lying around' on the Wirral, in a landscape I knew intimately as I rode a horse as a teenager around those lanes and woods. I wondered what I could make with it. What new perspective might emerge from a re-enactment? What divergence might the gull find in its flight? Might the women's cyclical desire for children lead somewhere other than the past? By putting these divergent and apparently unconnected events, desires, histories and

possibilities, I 'became animal', specifically gull, allowing the different trajectories to play out and follow their own logic but held within the limits of a peninsula landscape. They intertwine and intersect in ways I still do not fully understand.

My creative experiment to allow for an imaginative multi-time, multi-dimensional enaction is fulfilled as there are no topological breaks. The space just morphs and shifts in relation to fixed points; but fixed points always in changing position, the shoreline, the driving of a car, the running of children across a sandy beach. Between these points life unfolds, Vikings meet at the 'Ding', battle at Redhill, a lonely woman searches for connections in the sand-strewn seaside suburbs, children are seen to almost come alive. This is a vision only possible through a gull's eyes. I am began to see the full picture, not attempting to represent a linear connection or vertical dimensions but hoping to bring into the sight of the bird a horizontal image of the whole ontological picture, a place coming into being as it exists in perpetual flux.

7. The Welsh poetic of *Cynghanedd* informed my thinking about the poetic technique for the poem. The English translation of the term suggests 'harmony and that the

listener hears in two directions: horizontally, towards the end of the phrase, and vertically, through the chords.... the internal harmony between words as they co-exist in varied, but highly organised patterns of rhyme, assonance, alliteration and consonance demands the reader listens in other directions too(Hopwood 3).

I was interested in poetic techniques which could hold the audience's attention but did not rely on argumentative structures such as the sonnet or metaphysical

poetics. I was interested in how the musical elements of the poetic language can offer pattern whilst the language describes events we can visualize, to create an effect which was affective but didn't rely on binary distinctions, reversal and rhetorical argument to create dramatic tension. I did not wish to use power structures to produce engagement but the sensuous properties of language appealing to our shared embodiment.

My ambition is that this sonically textured language will combine with the description of the emergent place to create a 'model' in the audience's mind, a softer version perhaps of how the patterns of *Cynghanedd* create 'harmony', the translation into English. The complex patterns of *Cynghnedd* produce a music which the poet composes rather than writes. An example is the 14th Century poem 'Yr Wylan' (The Seagull) by Dafydd ap Gwilym.

Truly, fair seagull on the tide,

Yr wylan deg / ar lanw dioer

r l n d / r l n d (Hopwood 14).

The line when broken into two sections has the consonants repeated in the same order. This is one example of the four types of named patterns of *Cynghanedd* which can be put together into one of the twenty four different measures. None of these patterns translate into English. But the idea of a synaesthetic and multi-directional affect is of use. In 'Blue Black' my patterning is not 'highly organised' as I do not want it to 'demand', but to offer the synaesthetic elements associated with sound patterning. The pattern never settles or becomes too regular but is used as a mechanism to follow the line of flight of the gull and to suggest tone and depth. I have attempted to place different sounds in relationship to each other based on what appeals to my own ear and a desire to underpin the narrative movement of the gull's flight with a

sound pattern which supports an audience's interest over a longer poem.

Sequential narrative structure is replaced with variation and shifting directions of meaning and sound, the later expected to claim and maintain the interest of the audience without locking them into one sequence of events.

The history of the development of *Cynghanedd* as a series of very complex and rigid patterns devised by medieval Welsh monks from the Indo-European oral tradition also spoke to my theme of emergence.¹⁰ In modern times the same process can be observed but in reverse. Modernist poets such as Olson and Bunting revisit oral poetics as their materialist philosophy requires techniques which foreground the sound of the language. Bunting's use of sound pattern is partly derived from American Modernism. Charles Olson's influential Black Mountain modernist poetics also put emphasis on the sound patterning of the poem, both poets gesturing back towards the oral traditions and arguing for the affective, that is musical qualities of poetic language. The space between the oral and the written, between ancient and modern appealed to my theme of indeterminacy and place as movement. I tried to find a voice which was expansive and dramatic, yet also had repeated vowel and consonantal patterns built into its texture.

8. I presented the poem at a rehearsed reading at 'The Poetry Library', Southbank Centre, London 1st May 2013. The poem was part of a programme of works alongside Rebecca Sharp and Catherine Butterworth with music on oboe by Cait Walker. The literary context of the event and the opportunity to

¹⁰ The origins of this rigid pattern making can be found in the Early Welsh manuscripts such as Y Goddoin. These transcriptions of the oral heroic traditional verse were part of a long tradition of oral poetry which can be traced by into the Indo-European languages from which Welsh is derived. The transcriptions are written as prose yet still retain the patterns and rhythms of the oral. M.L.West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Eve Swetser, "Early Welsh Poetry Line-Structure and Rhan-Structure," *Studies in the Book of Aneirin*, ed. Brynley F.Roberts (Aberystwth: National Library of Wales, 1988). The form emerged from spoken word.

present work amongst my peers, its prestigious venue and central London setting invoked in me a desire to present an ambitious, untested work.

All of the actions in the poem occur in relation to their context. It is the point of view, the fiction, which exceeds its limits, not the materially conditioned behaviours of the gull, women or Viking men. Apart from the need to imagine oneself into the view point of a bird, this poem is a realist account of the place. All journeys correspond to real roads, all reappearances and actions to known history, yet the enaction places these realities into a liminal setting, allowing them to find new meanings and relationship in the interactions of the poem and audience. The different pressures and material forces become something else; matter, understood as an extensive capacity of language, is transformed. New space is formed. The poem becomes more than words.

Conclusion

In these case studies I have demonstrated how poetry is a form of thought produced by 'more than words'. External local pressures act upon the body of the poet and are interpreted via language. Crucially this process is non-linear and spatial. The poem is produced by the multiplicity of pressures and the contradictions and interactions they create. The poem is an attempt by the poet to bring all of these forces into one model. From this action of corralling a range of competing tensions, social and bodily forces, the poem emerges as a new assemblage. The parts form a new whole. Following Malafouris it is possible to understand the poet's spatial imagination as where this 'conceptual blending occurs' yet it is linked to the material world through an idea of a 'material anchor'. It is the dynamic relationship with the real object that produces the 'blend' from which a new idea can emerge. 'Through this process, the material

sign is constituted as a meaningful entity not for what it represents but for what it brings forth: the possibility of meaningful engagement'(Malafouris 104-05). By making use of the material properties of a given context the local poet can facilitate the alteration of matter by working with emergent processes to produce more virtual space made from the 'pressures' of feedback relationships experienced in specific locales.

In Chapter Three I will develop the idea of how poetry is 'more than words' to consider how these external material pressures create relationships and interactions with the poet. I will suggest that a local poet can become attuned to these relationships and networks via non-linear thinking and the affordances of reality and utilise the emergent process as a methodology for creating new writing. However I will not suggest the poet is ever fully in control of this process. She is also utilised by the emergent process itself. She will always ever be 'writing with' and herself 'written with' the material dynamics which form the material world.

Chapter Three: Local Poetics as *Writing With*

A local poet writes *with* a locality rather than *about* it. In this chapter I will further consider how this unfolds in practice. I will suggest that for a local poet to achieve connection in a context defined by difference she will need to extend her subjectivity and therefore her practice into multiple areas. Yet the same creative methods can be observed writing across a range of contexts. I will describe a variety of projects where I am 'writing with' to elucidate the structural similarities across my methodology and reflect on this in light of ideas of extended mind and the agency and affordances of materials. I will further argue for a local poetics as created by 'more than words' by examining in greater detail how these external influences create the form of a poem. I will place literary influence within this matrix but as a partial influence and not the dominant factor. These ideas are only possible through a shift away from an anthropocentric view of the human to one which places human activity within the dynamic processes which constitute the world. A horizontal ontology is evoked and the emphasis is upon the dispersed activity of all players within the context: including for example animal life, human society, and climatic conditions. All elements inside the locale have an agency and it is this democratisation of agency beyond the controlling presence of the poet which further defines a local poetics.

In *How Things Shape Mind* anthropologist Malafouris argues against an internalist and representational view of mind for one which is enactive, as Ingold argued earlier; one which is extended and distributed in dynamic relation to the things of the world via 'material engagement theory'. Feedback loops between human action and materials inform behaviours which in turn create form. A view

of mind formed by dynamic interactions with objects leads to an idea of agency which is non-anthropomorphic. As Malafouris writes,

Agency is a property or possession neither of humans nor of non-humans. Agency is the relational and emergent product of material engagement. It is not something given but something to become realised. In short, as far as the attribution of agency is concerned, what an entity, (a car or person) is in itself doesn't really matter, what does matter is what the entity becomes and where it stands in the network of material engagement (Malafouris 148).

In this chapter I will further argue for a notion of local poetics as 'writing with' following an understanding of poetry as enactive, a 'going along' created with the affordances of the material world, rather than as a representation. Meaning in poetry is produced in dynamic relation 'with' the material affordances of the context. These material 'pressures' have an agency similarly produced by 'where it stands in the network of material engagement'. Things have an agency as do humans.

Material agency is easy to appreciate when considering the agency of the River Mersey, for example, but less so when considering materials such as the landscape of the small town, or the material pressures, ethical and emotional, of historical research: material contexts which inform the case studies in this chapter. Yet 'affordance' suggests an idea of permission, of what is allowed. This connotation I take to indicate how a local poet can engage with her locale and understand the agency therein. All things have an 'intent', even if they are not conscious, whether it is the river to the sea or a stone eroded by wind.

All things 'need' an intimate relationship with other things. Although this may sound like an in-spirited animism it is possible to understand the differences of the material capacities of objects without invoking a vitalist position. If objects are thought in a constant state of becoming and movement then it is possible to consider their 'intentions' and 'needs' from an externalist position which avoids collapsing the differences between their specific capacities. In *Making* Ingold argues that the emergence of the handaxe is the same shape across the world, not because early humans had the same idea as an image in the mind, but because stone flakes in the same way across the world. 'In making an axe, the detachment of every flake is the outcome of a complex interplay of forces, both internal and external to the material'(Ingold 36). Also it should be noted the handaxe could never be used as an 'axe' as it would cut the hand of the user. Its use is most likely also determined by its context and the jobs to which a sharp edge can be put to use. It is the interaction between human creature and what is allowed by materials which affords agency as argued earlier.

For a local poet, understanding the affordances the local context offers her creativity is a matter of seeking permission from her materials. A local poet works from a non-anthropocentric position approaching her existence in relation to her context as one of relationship and respect. She must understand the power relations present in her context as well as also understanding the impact of her own presence. Just as the stone of the handaxe flakes away to reveal a shape, the form of the poem will emerge from the possible shapes to be made in relation to the context. I will therefore explore four case studies to argue for the agency of these materials: 'Writing with Small Towns', 'Writing with

Historical Archives as Participatory Research', 'Writing with Young People' and 'Writing with Musicians and Other Writers'.

Thinking *With*

I have already argued for language as an enactive sign and writing as thought in action. I will introduce my case-studies further by considering the poetry of another local poet, Roy Fisher. A Birmingham poet, Roy Fisher states 'Birmingham is what I think with' though 'it is not made for the job but it's what they gave me'(Fisher 11). However Birmingham does allow him to think 'with' the local problem of how to write economic decline in post-industrial Birmingham. The material forces creating the decay of this industrial city are approached via improvisatory techniques. John Kerrigan suggests,

Though Fisher's urban texts take their bearings from high modernism, rather than from the post-modern 'city of signs' elaborated by such poets as Ciaran Carson, he does not imagine that place can be experienced apart from the semiotic and he is alert to what nostrils, fingertips, ears and eyes tell him, not as neutral receptors but as filters on what we can know, as organs which construct space (Kerrigan 19).

Fisher also makes use of the new globalised context to create a form of regional modernism. The outcome is a realist poetic in that he seeks to use language to connect with the actual, yet morphic, mind-independent world. Fisher observes change with a Midlands elegiac tone. He takes a projective approach to movement; the poem uses Birmingham to think, and this thinking process 'follows power around'. His poem is not representing Birmingham but

produced by it; any description is a result of engagement and interaction. The poem is a new manifestation and extension of the reality of the locale. As Kerrigan further observes, Fisher is trying 'to constitute spatial experience, and trying to think beyond three dimensions'(19).

The material connection to the place and a reach towards a multi-sensory enactment of its bounds is further foregrounded in the multi-media context of 'Six Texts for a Film'. Fisher's poems were written to be spoken over improvised piano music, also played by Fisher, for Tom Pickard's film *Birmingham is What I Think With*, entitled after the opening line of the poem. The title suggests the work is for a film, but I suggest, it is actually an address to Birmingham, a 'correspondence', to use Ingold's term, made by the context in collaboration with the poet. Pickard told me that the film was commissioned by The Arts Council in the 1980s for BBC Birmingham, but was never shown. The economic and political forces which stimulated its making also limited its distribution. Free jazz improvised music is used to accompany the spoken word and the imagery of Fisher walking round 1980's estates. Images of the city seen from the canal reinforce the notion of a journey through place. The film is humorous and witty; Fisher takes the front door with him on his journey into shopping centres and attracts the interest of local children. The film eloquently enacts the lines

There is no shame

In letting the world pivot

On your own patch. That's what a centre's for(13).

Yet Fisher doesn't say the local is a still point. It is a pivot. To create the movement one must 'let' the world pivot. Permission must be given for the energy to move. The local is not a boundaried, passive concept but energised

and known by how it is inhabited. As Ingold argues human beings inhabit their environs by 'way-faring', making and improvising as they go. Materials also exist in similar relations and in correspondence with each other. The centre is then 'the patch' one can reasonably walk around, the patch to which one can give one's full attention, with which one can interact: 'That's what a centre's for' (13).

This is then a Midlands' poem. In part 2 'Birmingham River' Fisher describes the water's flow:

sank out of sight
 under streets, highways, the back walls of workshops;
 collected metals, chemicals, aquicides. Ceased
 to draw lines that weren't cancelled or unwanted;
 became drains, with no part in anybody's plan (18).

The river unseen and forgotten is subversive. Its energy is held and controlled but not absent. The poem enacts this energetic state in its register. Fisher's projective, improvised style alive and animate as is the jazz he plays, but the droll Midlands' tone of the poetic voice here is knowing, a little world weary, and drawn to abstraction, like the water in

abstracted water, captive for a while,
 becomes abstract, a proposition in hydraulics(22).

The embodiment of the energy manifests as a tone of voice, not the production of alternative space. This is suggested but not fully enacted. He holds back. Fisher's journey has allowed for water to 'become drains,' and 'to become abstract', it 'slops though lock-machines' [...] flavoured with diesel, rust, warm discharge'. The processes of industrialisation have turned a Birmingham river into 'warm discharge'. In the context of Birmingham in 1991, energy is

moving, but slowly, 'warmly', still becoming yet the poetry needs film and music to really enact its communication, its divergence into more than itself, production of virtuality, as it doesn't seem able to imagine virtual space as real. If an understanding of the descriptive and imagined is added then the idea of becoming is not a slippage into 'warm discharge' but can be a remaking of the energies Fisher has been following around into new growth. Ingold's notion of 'place-holders' in *Being Alive* is useful here as the descriptive can be understood as not referring to something which is absent, but as a thing 'placed' in relation within reality. The poem is made of the same materials as that reality – just now they take the form of virtual imagination – another space (Ingold 197). And a thing is really a 'Ding', the old Scandinavian word which suggests a meeting place in the open, an assembly of parts, of the disparate forces; people, animals, weather patterns etc. e.g. which constitute the whole of a place. Thinking a local poem as regenerative enables new material to form from decay and refocuses our understanding of the value of the local poem. A poem is both of, yet aslant to the real.

'Dusk Town' and 'Congleton Tapestry': Writing With Small Towns

Growing up in a post-industrial northern town in the 1980s and 1990s I can see the potential in post-industrial environments, not just the loss. When I was invited to give readings in two libraries in small towns in Cheshire I felt a fascination and pleasure at the work involved. Seeing the value where others might not is part of the challenge of local poetics. Here was an opportunity to stretch my interpretative skills. I was excited by the landscapes: disused factories, canals, boarded up houses; the remains of industry, yet immanent,

like seed. Runcorn is a town which has always caught my attention from the train travelling south across the railway bridge. Runcorn functions in my imaginary map of home as the gateway town: the boundary crossing back over the grace of the Mersey and into the familiar. Congleton however was a place I had never visited. It is located to the south-west of the Cheshire Plain on the edge of the Pennines, near Stoke. I had to find it on the map.

I was to write as a local poet but as an outsider. The risks were high. The expectation was I would read each poem at an evening event in the libraries to promote the reading of poetry. I had originally been invited to read already published work so had increased the stakes by offering this project. The audience would be local library users, so most likely long-standing residents of these towns. In the few weeks I had to write the poems I had to make sure I caught the current mood of the place, its aspirations and problems and also get the facts right. Yet the poem needed to have integrity and be a piece of work comparable with my other published poetry. The poem needed to be creative and engaging yet sensitive to its context. My self-created 'local problem' was in need of a 'local solution'. The material forces at work here needed attention. I had to attune to the expectations of the librarians, potential audience and also the places themselves. The agency of the river, the houses, the local history I learnt as stories had to come alive in me, inside my imagination. To invoke this occurrence I apply self-generated pressure. Research is crucial; yet not just reading about the place but experiential, visiting, looking, walking, building to a critical mass of stimuli. My energy levels have to rise until I am carrying almost too much information. I become overwhelmed with competing needs and from this pressure to create space for the excess of feeling, the affect of the

environment and the relationships, I will begin to visualise other versions of places. The poem will begin to emerge.

In Runcorn at Halton Lea Library I attended a reminiscence afternoon with local older people in the refurbished library in the 1970s shopping centre. I was shown slides of important moments in Runcorn's past: the building of the bridge, the transporter taking cars across the river, barge people working on the Brindley and Manchester Ship Canal. I was able to talk with the group about their memories and glean, by making extensive notes and analysing them later, what was important to the community. I looked for similarities, repeated phrases and terms, images which seem to tell of larger forces at work. I also read a range of local history books borrowed from the local library. I had several long conversations with local taxi drivers about the area. I made two trips over a period of weeks at different times of the day, took photographs and also wrote a first draft of the poem in a café in the town. In Congleton I attempted to replicate this process but wasn't able to attend any local groups as I had in Runcorn due to time restraints. However I was taken to the local museum by library staff, for lunch with museum staff and local artists and for a walk onto a local beauty spot 'The Cloud'. On a return trip I went on a long solo exploratory walk without maps or plan. I like to try and find the edge of a place. I walked until almost lost and then found my way back to the town centre by remembering markers on the route, some of which appear in the poem. I also visited the local newspaper office where I bought a centenary issue, content from which features in the final poem. In both places I took photographs. These help to focus on the detail of the environment, though they are more about the process of looking. I don't use the content of the images in the poems. I use the images my imagination has stored and offers up in the process of composition.

Drawing on what I'd learnt in writing 'Arne's Progress' about presenting small actions as a focus, in this project I attempted to weave these actions together through an extended syntax running over several lines to visualise the towns as dynamic and counteract any stereotypes about small-town life. The details fuse in my mind's eye into an imaginative mental map, a topological vision of both places in which many of the historical elements were being played out simultaneously. I understand small towns are dynamic, focused, intense places. Cities offer a relief from the intimacy of the relations in small towns. These smaller communities have to constantly find ways to remake themselves and their relationships. I hoped a rebuttal of the stereotypical, insular idea of the local and of small towns would be present in the final experience of the poems, both of which conclude with contested future events; in Runcorn the building of the new Mersey Gateway bridge, in Congleton the development of new housing estates. Nowhere stays the same for long. The lengths of the lines are varied to produce the lilting energetic movement I hear as important in drawing the audience/reader into the work. Both poems make use of long clauses and longer sentences to suggest flexibility within cohesion: a movement and flux yet contained within limits. I hope to create the rhetorical effect and affect of the sensation of a movement within the line, asking the reader/listener to make connections over an extended clausal sentence. In doing this I hope they will experience the movement of thought required to make the connections between apparently disjunctive elements across time and space. I hope this encourages an extension of mind, or at least a comfortable relationship with the openness required to enter into that state.

I did not wish to overly disrupt the listeners' experience by using overtly defamiliarising techniques such as parataxis, as I understand the extension of

mind to be an experience which occurs when the reader/listener is relaxed and able to forgo their psychological boundaries, often created as a defence against the reality of this experience. Creative thought occurs when the mind is able to relax and shift into lateral connections. The imagination is allowed to wander across the terrain of the poem and to make connections without the need to control or define their meaning within known relationships. The experience I am looking to invoke in a reader/listener is that felt when walking alone in the woods or the moment before waking, the state of immersion we feel when making something with our hands, or even when in love. These moments are the 'blended spaces' from which new material space can emerge. Yet for that state to occur the reader/ listener must feel safe and less protective of an individuated self. Space, as I argued earlier is not a lack, just a differing energetic state. By changing this state we can offer routes into new ways of seeing.

In the poems for small towns I juxtapose a range of times and spaces but maintain syntactic order, even if it is stretched over an unconventional clausal structure. I need my rhetoric to multi-task. I must both draw-in and compel the reader/listener but also offer an extension into the new. The listening experience should be one of integration but also dynamism and surprise. I was not looking to de-familiarise the towns; Runcorn in particular suffers a range of social problems and I deliberately chose not to focus on these elements as they are already very familiar to the local audience. A local audience can desire to hear what it already knows but I suggest in these post-industrial days is often looking or needing something different. The local poetry of Edwin Waugh in nineteenth century Lancashire described the shared experiences of the mill workers and was read by thousands. The poetry of the identity politics of the

1980s sought to describe shared experiences and this is a valuable approach to writing in a locality. However I cannot replicate this commonality as I understand poetry writing as an emergent process. As my creative practice is informed by a non-dualistic material philosophy I have to account for what my imaginative practice is doing in a given context beyond political identification. If construed as producing more material space from material presence in differing states then poetic thought is differentiating energy not always producing sameness.

Therefore I understand the local poet's role as producing alterity and otherness within and from the familiar. I argue for this via the notion of local poetics presented throughout this thesis. A poem is doing something active within the matrix of material processes. Understanding this is key to the successful practice of a local poetics. The local poet is producing new space from the pressures which are conterminously producing the material realm. The local poet is extending this space to provide more opportunity for the movement of energy into new forms. The poetry will emerge from these pressures and will then offer something new in its perspective and position in relation to what is already known about the place. The local poet has to negotiate the tension of maintaining credibility and interest amongst the audience and the real work of the production of new perspectives. I use both the material and sensual properties of language to draw people into the work but not to produce identification, and I am also drawn to the folkloric for this reason. My interest in this genre emerged as a poetic strategy to manage the need to offer ambiguity yet also familiarity as these traditions suggest otherness while retaining a strong connection to place.



Figure 4: Eleanor Rees at 'Woven Words', Congleton Central Library just prior to presenting the poem. Photo: Mike Drew

Both poems were well-received on rainy autumnal evenings. Feedback from audiences and staff was positive. 'Dusk Town' was published in two local newspapers and provisional plans were made to display it on the wall of the library. 'Congleton Tapestry' appeared in the 'Congleton Chronicle' followed by a positive article about the event. I was aware the Runcorn poem spoke more intimately about the town as I made use of memories shared with me by local people. In Congleton I had to focus more on the history, and the details of local people's lives as observed from distant perspective. However this is perhaps the most honest perspective as I was only able to visit the town twice. I did learn a lot doing this work about the point of view needed to be taken by a 'local poet' and the ethical and communicative risks of appropriation. I developed my use of an extended poetic line and an understanding of how to imagine movement and place horizontally, to try and see the gaps between actions which can produce new actions; a bear running through a shopping precinct or a mermaid swimming through the shadows. I notice these details as when I imagine them I

felt a pleasurable sense of release from the confines of the real. It is in the spatial boundaries, created by external pressures i.e. the contradictory need in this project to represent reality but also to say something new, where change or the unusual can emerge, as real extensive spaces, however fantastical.



Figure 5: 'Congleton Tapestry' printed in full, although without line endings, in *The Congleton Chronicle*, including positive review of the event.

'Mossley Hill' and 'Homecoming': Writing *With* a 'Participatory Research'**Archive**

Writing with historical material that doesn't immediately appear to have an agency can present a problem. How does the local poet create a relationship with that which appears dead? Yet the past is still present. Understanding how historical narratives constitute the present enlivens the material and the stories become active as they reconnect with the contemporary concerns. For in fact all memory and historical content has an agency. Our selfhood is partly formed by how we relate to what has gone before us. And what we remember makes us who we are today. Following the logic of a realist process-ontology, however, the past is never fully over and never fully lost. Traces of activity linger on in the cultural associations we make when we read objects, or archives. We are making history every time we remember. There is responsibility in this act. To remember and to make history also requires great care. The past is still reverberating within the spaces of the present. It was and always is real. It happened. People suffered and were hurt. The reality of that suffering carries on across time in the networks of association. We do not make up the past. It makes us. If we attune to it then we can still hear it ringing out from the substances which press upon us now. Sometimes the material force at work in creating poems is primarily that of the present tense, the demands and needs of the current day. Yet sometimes material forces create a different imprint on the imagination, a different sort of sensation. In Runcorn in my mind's eye I 'saw' a drowned boy climb out of the ship canal.

For this project I attempted to attune to the voices of those who had gone hungry and who had not taken food for granted. However the poems are very much more about the present than the past because the research undertaken used 'participatory-research methods' which created a relationship with the material that made it present. The research questions of the group concerned learning from the past to speak to the present. It was like growing seeds in ground which was constantly being turned over. The local problem I needed to find a local solution for was how to write the past as if it was happening now; stay true to the factual origins and respect the integrity of the personal stories which make up the oral history archive. Again the poems were to be used to document the project and to be presented to an audience at a public symposium on the research. The audience would include interested parties: again rather than needing to convince people of the importance of the topic my task was to find interpretations of the material which enacted their complexity.

The research project 'Mr Seel's Gardens' was part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council Connected Communities programme and run by a philosopher Dr. Michelle Bastian through the Centre for Social Change, University of Manchester. The project looked at the history of local food production in Liverpool by including local participants in the research activities which included oral history interviews and the use of archives. I offered to be involved as a participant and as an associated poet, writing poetry as a response to the discoveries of the research project. I attended an archaeological survey of the walled garden at Sudley House, a Victorian ship-owners country villa, now a museum, where I discussed the local history of the area with the archaeological team. I learnt that an Iron Age hill fort once stood on the hill. This detail appears in the poem 'Mossley Hill'. I also learnt about the

lost Viking settlement under the Meols shore on the Wirral, an idea I returned to later when writing 'Blue Black'.

I took part in oral history training at Sudley House and interviewed two people about the food history of the city. At one of these interviews, in Everton, North Liverpool, I met an older woman, 85, a resident of the area for all of her life. I was particularly moved by her story, which described the physical deprivations of the back-to-back communities but also how, when the slums were cleared, these communities lost their cohesion. This is a well-known local narrative, about the social losses incurred when communities were moved in large numbers to the newly built housing estates of Kirkby and Halewood in the mid-70s; but hearing this lady's personal history was moving. My reaction after our conversation was to write down her words as verbatim. I wanted to record her story but not to publish it, as it isn't mine to share. I could not embellish or change her experiences. I had become too close and there was no space for a new response. Could I make something new from her experiences? I decided I should not, but I could make something from the emotional reaction I had experienced. This affective response I translated into the imagined context of the poem 'Homecoming' which allowed me to connect my reactions and the archival material laterally so an imagined response could occur. However I did read 'Oral History' at a public symposium on the project at the *The Bluecoat* arts centre in Liverpool, having changed her name to Margaret. I knew there would be audience members in the room who would identify with her experience and welcome its inclusion. However, outside of that context, in a collection of poems for example, I think the motivation to publish alters and risks appropriation and the sentimentalisation of her experience. However I am also aware of the responsibility to share the truth of the situation. This ethical tension is at work

within all of the practice of a local poetics. The poet must always ask 'to whom am I responsible?' and return a nuanced and bespoke answer for each discrete project. There is no primary authority.

'Mossley Hill', is the final poem in this triptych. A description of the neighbourhood in which I live, the poem also contains the factual details discovered during the archival process. The research group spent an afternoon studying old maps of Liverpool in Liverpool University Department of Geography and from this I was able to understand how my neighbourhood was for a long-time at the edge of the city. We marked up the maps with stickers to show the information which had been found in the museum archives about the location of the historic sites of food production in the city. This was detailed and focused work. We then layered the maps over each other to notice how the patterns of production changed over time. I noted how the area I live in used to be agricultural. The old dairy and piggeries are now converted into houses and the farmland which used to expand from the end of my road was built upon in the 1940s when the city grew and the suburbs were built.

The technical challenge here was similar to earlier problems around how to represent factual information in a way which was engaging and meaningful, but without significantly changing the truth. In the earlier poem, I had used couplets, but here I felt I needed to create credible and complex links between and across time and space so explored a blank verse, but one with flexible line endings to allow for an enactment both fluid yet cohesive. I didn't want to isolate any of the elements in the poem but to enact the whole; the bounded suburb of Mossley Hill. What emerged unintentionally is an emphasis on edges. The poem begins with the railway-bridge and boys smoking where they shouldn't and ends with a cat asleep on a wall. The point of view moves into

and out of windows and behind buildings allowing for the whole of the square mile to be observed. Details about the use of old buildings on the lane, dairies and piggeries are included, as is the old orchard on the 1940's map. They are linked by the action of a child running between time zones. Importantly all of this activity is represented within the bounds, as all action is produced by the interaction between element and locale. Even the relationship to the elsewhere known via the railway and the suicide of a man on the track is produced by stories unfolding beyond this scene: the unknown. This Mossley Hill is not a provincial, insular locality but a neighbourhood connected horizontally via topography and vertically across time. Active verbs connect all of the disparate elements of the poem so no one element is isolated from the other. This produces a poetic style which interweaves different time-zones and actions interact within the apparent ordinariness of the street. The poem offers a virtual 'Mossley Hill' enacted, that is imagined, as a multi-dimensional vision of time and space. In all three poems I attempted to place people in context, situated in a changing and alterable real environment. In Mossley Hill I believe this to be most fully achieved as the poem allows the place to alter, not to exist just as backdrop for human activity, but to have an agency in its own right.



Figure 6. Eleanor Rees reading the poems at the project symposium, The Bluecoat, Liverpool,

29th, 2013

'Night Tales': Writing with Young People

In the poetry created via writing with young people, I chose to foreground their agency. In the projects discussed so far I had to work as interpreter, making sense of the environments and needs of the context. In work with young people the same skills are required but the role is now that of 'facilitator'. For young people have agency already. My role is to allow this agency to produce the content of the written material. I will discuss two projects: 'Night Tales', at World Museum Liverpool and 'The Amazing Push Poem Machine' at Rice Lane City Farm, Walton, Liverpool. The first was a project of my own devising, the latter a well-established practice used by The Windows Project. However both projects offer demonstrations of the new-materialist poetics I am describing as a 'local poetics', as both methods put emphasis on the collective construction of meaning. In these projects it is possible to visibly understand how a poem can be thought as material/virtual space produced via the process of 'writing with'. The pressures of the context, be this the needs of the commission to address certain issues or to be finished on a certain date, combine to produce these responses.

In 'Night Tales' I foregrounded the pressures of the context to make them more visible to myself, and the creative process more explicit. After initial meetings with the Education Manager of the museum I agreed to write a new participatory poem for their up-coming exhibition *Telling Tales: The Art of Indian Storytelling*, which would be made from ideas and language written by children visiting the exhibition. My role then here is poet as conduit, using my skills to guide creative thinking and also to shape found language into a tale. The exhibition was a display of story scrolls from India. The scrolls are used as

mnemonic tools to tell stories in communities. Professional artists create these scrolls using centuries-old techniques. I offered to work with young people to create a tale of our own. These participatory sessions were held in the exhibition space with young people 'dropping in' during the day. I was interested in how the creative methods I'd developed in Runcorn and Congleton could be adapted as interpretative tools used to explore and find meaning in a museum context. I ran two afternoon workshops engaging over 100 children in making up magical creatures. The children directed the form and outcome of the poem based on simple rules initiated by myself. From these two days I took away twenty pages of ideas, images and phrases. I was to return two weeks later to present the poem in the Story Tent at the centre of the exhibition for visiting children and families. I knew the poem had to be family-friendly and appeal to young people. It also needed to speak to the themes of the exhibition around the importance of story-telling in communities as a way of sharing important information and values. I was keen to demonstrate to museum staff that poetry can be part of the arts used in gallery interpretation activities. These were the local 'pressures' which produced this specific 'local solution' of the poem

I wrote 'Night Tales' by externalising the creative process I would use to write any poem. In effect I 'slowed down' the process and isolated specific elements so I could consciously apply them to the needs of the context. Firstly I collated all of the children's responses into lists of animals, colours, smells, sounds. I used the list to find commonalities. I also made a list of the most striking lines and phrases. But I was still stuck. This process was entirely external. By putting what normally happens in my subconscious, or non-conscious parts of the brain, into the conscious realm I had less ability to animate the details and put them into relationship. I recognised that it was

crucial these elements were made interactive for there to be any progress, so I decided to do what children do and draw a picture. I put the creatures and places in a topological relationship, drawing quickly and badly but the effect was instant. I had a map with visible lines of relationship on it. Recognising the need for a spatial relationship which wasn't a piece of paper to locate the action, I chose the museum steps as a setting and from that was quite quickly able to place the different elements of the poem in conversation with each other. The poem began to emerge. By placing the material in time and space I was able to find new relationships between discordant elements and find a form for a poem for children. I returned to the museum and publically presented the poem over two afternoons and gave copies of the poem to children and families.

This project enabled me to break down my creative process into elements to see how the non-linear relationships are produced by the tensions between ideas. It demonstrated how by spacialising these tensions I am able to recognise new relationships and connections and give these further form in poetic language. The material of poetic and descriptive language is crucial here as it is the visual and spatial content of the imaginative work which offers this possibility. If interpreted using an idea of reality as including the extensive capacities of things, it is possible to understand this as a real, material process at work with tangible outcomes. In the above context the idea was to provide a demonstration and fresh interpretation of the process of storytelling for young people. In work for adults this process of visualisation is what creates the new in poetic art. Literary language allows new ideas to emerge into consciousness, moving material between systems to form new outcomes as it creates a liminal, shared virtual space.

Exploring these ideas in a very public context requires a confidence in poetic craft and imaginative range. The risk of failure paradoxically produces this confidence, as to do this work successfully the poet must be able to extend their own subjectivity into the position of the audience, children, parents and other readers as well as animate the material itself. The subjectivity required is the opposite of what some may suppose, that a stable self-contained ego is necessary to manage the personal risks of the circumstances. The most secure subject is the one which can adapt, modulate and reconfigure its selfhood without fragmentation. This is one lesson I have learnt more clearly from this work. Trusting in the ability to morph, flex and alter one's presence without the need to negate, break or suppress, leads to a stronger creative position. It allows poetic voice to be known as play and as performance, but without the risk of being subsumed within the forces coming from outside the body. Material being alters and morphs all of the time, but it does not break or ever end. There is no void or true absence: the self is in perpetual formation yet still has shape. To be able to rationally resist the idea of absence and lack has been a profoundly empowering discovery of this work as a local poet. The journey from emergent voice into rhetorical technique enacts this process. As one style of writing becomes cohesive the process requires new variations to be discovered.



Figure 7: Story Tent for 'Night Tales' at World Museum Liverpool, August 2013.

The work of The Windows Project, and my own Liverpool writing context, are relevant to the notion of a poem as a material space. In 1972 as part of the playschemes in Great Georges Community Cultural Project, Dave Ward devised a game which could involve large groups of children in writing. This became *The Amazing Push Poem Machine*. Participants throw a ball to try and land on a letter in a brightly-painted fairground style board. This combines skill and chance and means it is almost impossible to predetermine a letter. They then suggest a word which begins with that letter to continue the on-going communal poem. The first Merseyside Play Action Council workshop version of APPM was at the Bronte Centre playscheme in 1976. The sessions were led by poets Dave Calder, Carol Ann Duffy, Libby Houston and Dave Ward. Adrian Henri had been involved in earlier discussions. The poems produced, which were stylistically allied to both surrealism and Zen thinking, were displayed at the disco on the final day of the playscheme.¹¹

Having played APPM on many occasions at public events I am aware it is very popular with young people as well as adults. Its use as a tool for participation is in no doubt. What I want to foreground here though is the poetics which underpin the use of the word 'poetry' in this context. APPM produces a text made by a group of people in one space. It is a literal externalisation of the idea of the poem as a gathering space. Meaning is produced in the process via the mediation of the poets who facilitate the play, but it is the material context of the game which produces its meaning. By material context I mean the words offered by participants, the situation of the venue, the time the game is played and the expectations of the group. The poem below is by children about animals

¹¹ Notes from conversation with Dave Ward at the office of The Windows Project, MPAC, Bridport Street, Liverpool, 16th June, 2014.

at Rice Lane City Farm, Windows Project Playscheme Workshops, Easter 2014. In other contexts APPM can be about themes relevant to an event or in its original form a surreal play with the material structures of language and context which, when foregrounded, offer a tool for the production of new imaginative space.



Figure 8: The Amazing Push Poem Machine, Rice Lane City Farm, Walton, Liverpool, Easter, 2014. Photo: Eleanor Rees

‘High Tide’, ‘Blood Child’ and ‘Water/Creature’: writing with musicians and other writers

Building good working relationships is crucial to the practice of a local poetics. The local poet must be able to both attune their being to the pressures and forces which inform their context and also present these back to the context. In the two projects I describe below both poems were destined for performance contexts. This required an extension of my writing skills into new modes and therefore of my experience of my subjectivity. I had to make new relationships

both with my collaborators, who were not known to me, but also with the idea of text as sung or spoken word in a performance context. Previous poems have all anticipated a live reading, but in these two projects the expectations regarding the performativity of the work were extended by the circumstances. By engaging in work with a known performance date I also intensified the risk of failure and needed to create a sense of my own self to adapt to the public outcomes. 'High Tide' was to be sung in the 1790 seater auditorium of the art deco Liverpool Philharmonic Hall. 'Water/Creature' was to be performed as part an exhibition opening event at The Fordham Gallery, a barge on the Thames, possibly from the roof of the barge. The exhibition was of collaborative work by Oxford University English Literature students and artists from the Ruskin Art School. The evening would also include collaborations between other emerging and established artists.

Both of these poems were written in collaboration with another artist. 'High Tide' was written with the folk singer Emily Portman in mind. She offered editorial responses to the text with regards to its appropriateness as song. Working with artist and writer Justin Coombes was more directly collaborative, although we were not able to meet due to circumstances. I was able to visit Emily Portman at her home and discuss the work and also our ambitions for the piece. With Justin Coombes we spoke at length on the phone and devised the poem through conversation. Both collaborations produced writing with a lyric origin. This emerged due to the relational nature of the creative process. Working with other artists requires a definition of one's self, a production of boundaries. The intended context for both works also required an extension of the lyric 'I' into a new formulation of itself. From writing the lyric poetry which begins the thesis, and earlier works, I was aware of the function of the lyric 'I' in

any poem. It acts as a point of stability for the reader/listener; or as a rhetorical tool for destabilising meaning. I was aware that much of my lyric work is preoccupied in speaking the moment before assertion, the fluid, liminal instance when the pressures of the real are impacting upon the mind/body. Yet for the work with a more overtly public destination the 'I' in the poem becomes more distinct. I understand this as produced by the social context of the creation of the work. I need to offer a functioning coherent self to the other in order for the dialogue to take place. Therefore both 'High Tide' and 'Water/Creature' take flux and alteration as a theme. The process of becoming has been externalised. It is no longer a psychic experience but social, happening at a different scale but it is still the same process. The poems need listeners to activate the process, not just the disassociated subjectivity of the poet. By moving this voice into the realm of the public sphere, 'I' has more substance. The poem doesn't stand in binary opposition to a world constituted by the threat of binary conflicts, but is supported, again materially, from all sides by the circumstances, conditions and back-story of the bigger picture. The energies of the poem can be dispersed amongst many other bodies and turned into other manifestations of the desire the poem enacts.



Figure 9: 'High Tide' performed at *The Irish Sea Sessions 2013*, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall.

Photo: Mark McNulty.

I attended *The Irish Sea Sessions 2013* to hear 'High Tide' sung into the cavernous space of the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall. Through this experience I was able to hear my words and concerns expanding into sound to be heard by a large audience. The idea of projecting the lyric and poetic voice outwards and away from my own self was given concrete form in a way I could fully understand. I began to know how the need for an audience defines my writing, as if one is anticipated then the poetic voice is extended. The level of risk involved also increases the value of this process. The bigger the risk, the bigger the voice and the more energy I need to use to propel my creative process, to specialise my current concerns and allow language to find new connections and new notions to emerge. The public context for poetry is crucial for its success as it offers to the poet a space in which to externalise their subjectivity and to disperse the energy i.e. communicating and connecting. Through this dynamic relationship the starting material which constituted the poem can take on new form as it is reheard and remade by many minds and bodies. The energy is dispersed and remade. The wider the group the more externalised the expression and the movement away from the individualised self into a communal space, which is multi-dimensional, real and extensive, allows for a sharing of understanding and a production of new thought, which is a safer and more secure position than the over-reliance on the hierarchical model of one-self producing authority. Collective authority is produced through the sharing of poetic texts in the moment of performance and it is the emotional reassurance of this moment which propels me to write in this way. For me, this dispersal of energy amongst many is what defines the purpose of poetic art.

Epic and folk-lore are useful genres for a local poet to explore when looking for local solutions. These genres place the speaking voice within a

context bigger than itself. 'Blood Child' was born from conversations with Emily Portman about how she approached storytelling in the ballad-singing tradition and the possibility of writing material she could sing. We are still exploring this possibility. I realised I could both be present in the process of offering a poem but also let the work be larger than myself. This is achieved with diction which is clear, or a familiar lexis, atmospheric, suggesting old stories but still offering a contemporary tone. The poem uses the associations of fairytale to allow all elements of the themes to unravel and change form, to literally move and change position. Imagining these details whilst writing an iambic ten line stanza focused the imagery lending intensity to the writing process, I hope replicated in the language choices. About half way through the composition process I became very stuck. I needed to make my themes liminal not absolute. I needed new space.

What the emergent process of writing the poem did offer was the possibility of turning some of these themes so they become active and enabled rather than laments heard in the earlier songs. The narrative enables a fusion at the end between the woman and the fairy-child and there is a sense this is an act of protection as well as relief: the woman remains partly child, still able to play. I am aware the refrain changes tone in the poem from the sinister notion at the start to a more positive immanent reading at the end. None of this was intentional and I still do not fully understand the poem itself at a personal level, but it emerged as a result of processes described in the preceding chapters, and will over time, reveal its meanings.

I presented this poem for the first time in front of a large fire in the Arts and Crafts Hall of Ullet Road Unitarian Church, Liverpool on the night before the Winter Solstice. The church is built from red brick and has a Burne-Jones

stained glass window. It was built by rich ship owners and merchants, many connected to the movement for the abolition of slavery. The hall is regularly used for community events. A small group of poets and storytellers had met on this cold evening to share poetry at an event organized to support the local foodbank. The responses of the audience were extremely positive. By externalising personal material I have been able to move it into another shape and form and now regard these themes differently. The tone of voice has shifted, if not the actual worldly problems. However I have created another perspective on the problem.

'Water/Creature' arises from two poems conceived as dialogues with artist and writer Justin Coombes and combined into a poem for two voices. We took the intended context of the barge for the poems as a starting point and talked around similar preoccupations in our own work with shifting senses of self and of locality. We explored how these are produced from pressures outside of the self rather than ideas of interiority and the difficulties of creating art which speaks from *within* a context not *about*. We decided on some simple rules for the work. We would write as if already in the site, yet having not visited it. We agreed a shared visualisation of a canal barge and tow-path. I agreed to explore the voice of the canal; Justin offered to explore the voice of something which lived inside the canal as yet unnamed. We wrote two separate poems and edited them together. Then we returned to an initial idea from Justin to create a dialogue and a dynamic, dramatic relationship between the two elements. I offered to put the two poems together into one duologue. To do this I reread poems which also had a life as drama *Under Milk Wood* and *Tales from Ovid* (Thomas; Hughes). The space between dramatic and poetic texts is one I keep revisiting as it offers more possibilities for the voice than just the lyric 'I'.

With these rhythms in my mind's ear I edited our two voices into dialogue, focusing on the use of repetition and sound patterning to find a structuring device to bring the two together. However I was interested not in merging the voices but juxtaposing them at points to create moments of drama. This approach also drew on my research into and interest in producing difference.

Trees, Rocks, Water.

In the summer of 2014 I undertook three 'field trips' with illustrator and artist Desdemona McCannon and folk singer Emily Portman. These arose out of a shared interest in the holy wells and landscape of North Wales. We were interested in a triadic relationship between our art-forms and also working in collaboration as a group of three artists. Another trajectory of interest was in a shared concern with materials. I was especially interested in understanding the term 'affordance' in practice and finding a relational subjectivity I could articulate in poetry. Again these ideas and terms emerged from several preliminary conversations between the three of us and then took the form of three day trips to St. Winifrede's Well, Holywell and Gob Cairn and Cave; Pen Mon Point and Priory and Byrn Celli Duu, a preserved burial cairn on Anglesey; and St. Dyfnog's Well and Church, Denbighshire. These locations form a triangle on the map of North Wales and were also chosen due to their accessibility from Liverpool by car. Our time was also limited by our other commitments, thesis writing, child-care and performances so we started each day as early as possible. One trip became a planning meeting due to a two-year old with toothache. This however created an opportunity to decompress and explore experiences from trip one. We approached each trip as research, talking about

ideas and the landscape as we travelled and the folklore, poetry and songs of place. Emily sang for us in each setting, exploring how the sound of the cave or the medieval stone arches of the shrine changed her interpretation of the narrative of the song. Immersion was a recurrent theme, though I only realised this after trip one. In our encounters with the landscape we tried to get close in, either into the spring water or into the sea, the cave or the cairn. We walked in the woods and touched the trees. We spoke about what the landscape evoked in us, ideas, memories, connections with our own creative practice.

I was surprised then to find I was writing lyric poems. However the support of the other members of the research group enabled me to write a lyric I heard as relational. The 'I' is not subsumed by the place but able to hold a position within language and the sensations of place which is consistent within the moment of composition. 'At Gob Cave' was written on the cairn, the two subsequent poems 'Pen Mon Point' and 'St. Dynfog's Well' were written on arriving home and a day later. This was caused by the logistics of the trip and time-constraints. Yet I had also established a method for the writing, which involved noting my own needs and responses first, my physical and emotional state, my sense of the environment, and from that I could then move into the dialogue with the environment. Although 'At Gob Cave' was composed at the cairn it wasn't composed in the cave itself. All the poems required an element of remove, in space and time to create the engagement. I have observed this in previous work. 'At Gob Cave' finds connection between the experience of being in the well and the darkness of the cave. The movement out from inside the cave mouth provides a structure for the movement between states, changes in time and bodily states. In 'Pen Mon Point' the speaker is in a liminal state, her selfhood layered over memory and place and myth. In 'The Well' I am finally

fully immersed but also in stasis. In this passive state the water must flow and find its way into the environs. All three lyric poems take their structural form from the circumstances of the day and the connections which demanded to be made between their different pressures; physical movements enacted within those environments. These are the affordances allowed by these spaces, by the limits of our own sets of responsibilities and freedoms and by the limits of our own memories and histories. These combine in the moment of poetic writing into new structures which draw these apparently disparate elements together into a whole, using the binding yet flexible and temporal qualities of the syntax of English to find a route to somewhere new. In poetic practice the reality of language's non-duality offers a rich and dynamic form of engagement with the material world.



Figure10: From above Eleanor Rees at St Winefrede's Well, Holywell; St Dynfog's Well, Llanrhaeadr; Gob Cave, Trelawynd. Photo: Desdemona McCannon

Conclusion

Local Poetics accepts that it is not possible to write 'about' a subject; the poet is always writing 'with'. The outside has an agency which forms our interiors. That engagement between material and language produces mind. This contemporary anthropological understanding of the human subject leads to an approach to poetry writing in which context is foregrounded and even used as material to create local solutions for local problem. I have also shown how the practice of the local poet can also be a portable practice. Poetry writing is understood as an applied art working with the given context of any situation by attuning to the dynamics of any situation and place. The local poet can work with environments and collaborators she knows very well, or with contexts and artists which are new to her. However the structure of her methodology can be applied and adapted to any circumstances. Working from the idea of always 'writing with', her practice will be relational, dynamic and new contexts can add to the challenge of writing poetry in this way.

Thesis Conclusion

The implications of local poetics on the subject of creative writing and cultural understandings of the role of the poet are significant. One important line of thought is towards resolving the apparent disconnect between the art form and the public. My research suggests that poetry is not a mass art-form, but it is public. Poetry is made to be heard and/or read by individuals, so in a book, or in small group. Intimacy is at the heart of poetic writing. Making a connection with the audience/reader can shift imaginative space into new material forms and produce emergent outcomes. Contemporary culture does not need just one or a

handful of poets but many, working with their communities in situ, offering description of the flux of reality. In doing so they are also materially producing this reality. The local poet is not producing further conceptual dualisms, but is traversing space via imaginative thought. The literary techniques of story-telling, folk tale and 'otherworldliness' produce the liminal 'blended spaces' as the emergent process takes place. Further research could be done to define the varied literary heritage of a local poetics and the literary techniques which engage with material processes. Local poets need, in order to do this work well, literary skills, literary knowledge and imaginative range, and particularly the ability to extend their self and mind into the material world via a relaxation of psychic boundaries. Working with the space of imagination is a skill in itself, not just the act of writing down what is seen. The teaching of creative writing then needs to adapt to produce poets with the skills to allow working at a local level and make use of the art's full application to our communities. It is possible to imagine creative writing courses offering the complete range of skills needed to practice as a local poet, including skill in collaboration, commissions and participatory working. My research is offered to mitigate against the risk of creative writing teaching becoming dogmatic or over formularised. Poetry must always be an art of creative judgment. A new-materialist understanding of what the art-form actually does and has the potential to offer society should also inform the arts funding system, which needs to maintain a collective fund for poetry but distribute it via de-centralised and locally-managed systems. When this occurs the literary world will discover that the local public have an appetite for the experience of poetic art. Poets need to ensure they do the work for which the art has emerged and move away from an obsession with the individualized self. Poetry, to do its work, needs to open and expand minds in

order to be real. Poets need to fully engage with the process of the material as well as the linguistic and discursive.

My research also opens up a line of further research to anthropologists studying the theory of extended mind and emergence. Research into how materials make culture, which then in turn makes consciousness, is under way as demonstrated by Bernini, Ingold and Malafouris. Poetic language must have a part to play in that contemporary anthropological description of the human being. I suggest it is likely that poetic thought is the moment of 'conceptual blending' in this schema and that the local poet is a participant in the emergent processes which make mind. To demonstrate this absolutely is beyond the range of this thesis, yet the need to remake the world in different forms and imaginings that I recognise in my own behaviour seems to correlate with these ideas. I offer my experience of poetic practice as a contribution to these debates.

If local poetics DO demonstrate emergent and transformative qualities, then they are surely of value to local communities. Much has been asserted regarding the connections between the value of imaginative engagement with the world and an individual's sense of agency. If my assertions surrounding the notion of 'writing with' are accepted, then there is a benefit to the individual as the concept of the self is updated. In the shift from an over-individualised sense of self to a non-anthropocentric notion of the subject the human being becomes an equal partner within the play of agency. A non-anthropocentric view of the self can improve the experience of being human, for the material world is no longer inanimate and dead, but active and alive. Things can be stronger than us, yet in that thought we must also hold reverence and regard: things can also be smaller and more fragile. We must care and nurture. But in both of these

positions the dynamic is shifting; the human being altering her position in relation to the outside. Just as our muscles need exercise so does our subjectivity. Any sense of identity we have must be maintained as multiple and non-oppositional, identifying yet always with a changeable and multiple material world in constant becoming. As the world changes we change, shifting but not breaking.

To further this process the local poet produces real, new, imaginative and liminal space. These spaces are constituted by the myriad, complex factors which, via dynamic interaction, create change. And as poetry is a social and public activity, the local poet participates in maintaining the public realm as a space for variety. The local poet manages the boundaries, reminding all of the provisionality of the definitions and categories which pragmatically need to be built. In this manner the local poet engages with philosophy and metaphysics, but through poetic enactment in image, story and sound pattern. The local poet demonstrates the edges of the process and hopes for an emergent community, not stasis. For matter will always ask to change shape. In engaging with the play of energies, the local is produced not as a permanent classical square, but as a gathering space in the open fields, the 'Ding' where we bring our differences and together turn them into something more than words.

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