

# Threshold Moves: A Ritual Poetry Practice

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2021

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## Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisors. Thank you to Scott Thurston for generous, careful and visionary guidance in this process and thank you to Kate Adams for crucial advice and support. For their support, readerly attention, conversations and advice, thanks to Síofra McSherry, Katie Rhiannon Jones, Mamta Sagar, Amy McCauley, Keiron Smith, Joey Frances, Rhodri Davies, Nathan Walker, Peter Owen, Camilla Nelson, Ghazal Mosadeq, Catrin Davies, Amrita Shah, Stuart Cooke, Julia Myers and Ashok Vish. Thank you to my workshop collaborators and the communities of generous poets who partook in Poetry Emergency and *Poetry Wales*.

I acknowledge the support of the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership for the studentship that allowed this research to take place. And thank you to those who hosted and published iterations of the work; Lyndon Davies, D Murphy, Julian Dessent, Zoë Skoulding, Jessica Pujol Duran, Richard Parker, Steven Hitchins, Rhys Trimble, organisers at No Matter, 1Shanthi Road, Ledbury Poetry Festival, Literature Across Frontiers, Nawr, Volcano Theatre, the Indian Institute of Science, Language is a Virus, Goran Spring Festival and the Gestures, Poetics in Commons, PoEx Santiago de Chile and Projectivisms symposia.

To Paul Knowles, with love, passion and care, thank you. Thanks to my father, siblings and nephews and to my mother, Eleri Davies for her boundless and careful love and labour on my texts. The work is dedicated to the weavers of poesis and, with ever-unfolding gratitude, made in memory of my path making grandmothers, Catherine Glyn Davies and Elizabeth Hamilton Watts. Diolch o galon.

& oh, the room is to be lit first with  
KINSHIP OOZED OUT OF SHAPE, BLUE  
matter.

Maggie O'Sullivan<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Narcotic Properties' (O'Sullivan, 2003, p.18).

## Abstract

This thesis identifies and explores a practice of ritual poetry. Drawing on creative writing and embodied ritual practice, as well as theory from poetry, performance and anthropology, I form new theoretical and practical understandings of a field of ritual poetry. The thesis is driven by and composed of original creative works of ritual poetry in text, performance and poetics. I make a contextual-historical survey and readings of a selection of contemporary poets, particularly the works of Jerome Rothenberg, Maggie O'Sullivan and several other poets who experiment with ritual, as well as performance theorists and practitioners. I draw on this field and my creative experiments to form a novel methodology of practice-based research in poetry and poetics. The thesis includes a poetics, a culminating text oriented towards the making of future works of ritual poetry. Through this research, I propose that ritual poetry, as a dynamically embodied practice, re-vitalises the compositional and performative acts of poetic creation. Ritual poetry consists of compositional rites and manifestations of poems enacted amongst a community; poets also use ritual to intervene in the ethical-political sphere and as part of ongoing cycles of writing practice. In this process, a poet, and potentially their reader-listeners, undergo techniques of the material to explore, push at and move across thresholds. These techniques and processes heighten corporeal awareness and change the way readers, listeners and poetry practitioners experience the material world. In the liminal experience which ritual poetry opens up, a poet-ritualist becomes sensitised and newly aware of their embodied ecologies and relationships, so that emergence and poesis are possible. This thesis is a discovery of the transformation possible in the join between embodied ritual practice and poetic art and writing.

# 0. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

## Research Introduction

This research explores a practice of ritual in the field of contemporary experimental poetry and poetics. It is in the terrain between language art and embodied practice where this thesis makes its central contribution to the fields of creative writing, poetry and poetics: a practical and theoretical conceptualisation of ritual poetry.

My intention to study ritual poetry arises from a desire for a poetry of enaction, a search for embodiment, movement and transformation and for a sensitive and ecological approach to relationality in poetry practice. In the techniques of ritual practice, I seek and find a route towards the kind of poetic transformation, *poesis*, that is necessary at this particular contemporary moment of crisis and transition. I explore and attempt to answer two interlinked research questions: Can we identify a practice of ritual poetry or poetry-as-ritual? And, how can a model of ritual poetry or a ritual poem enable an exploration of the experience of contemporary life?

In the readings and experiments presented here, I discover how ritual techniques and processes can invigorate poetry: how a ritual poem can be manifested and how ritual techniques can be innovative compositional processes. Here, rites are used in cycles of embodied art and writing practice; ritual allows poets to newly imagine the poetry reading or performance as a place to play with shared site, moment and the presence of the embodied poem among others. Ritual immerses poetry and poet in material and social forms, offering potential for liminality, new meaning and a transformed experience of the materiality of language. The marked spacetime and directional intent of ritual invites its participants to pass through predetermined thresholds, to make a series of transitions towards the possibility of a liminal indeterminate phase of potential transformation. Techniques of the

material create a heightened corporeal awareness and sensitivity to emergence. Poetry can be found and created as *poesis* at several stages of the ritual process. Ritual offers multisensory techniques for the creation of new forms of poetry and the invigoration of cycles of writing practice.

In the space between scored ritual instructions, across thresholds in the liminal spacetime, oppositions may dissolve, new connections between threads are tied and tangled, unexpected encounters and meaning may emerge in *poesis*. In the middle of a rite's flow comes a potential for surprise, play, insight or vision. Ritual poetry promises and often offers intimacy with other human and other-than-human forms of life. Thus ritual practices offer poetry a sensual entanglement in embodied, ecological and social material, as a 'mattering of material' to call up the words of Maggie O'Sullivan (2003, p.65).

Some contemporary poets turn to ritual as a way of activating or vitalising poetry, to create community in performance or initiate a heightened sense of the material world and its histories and ecologies. Ritual poetry may be intended to inscribe history or the body, the other or whatever meaning is intended into the present, to explore, mourn or celebrate a relationship with the changing world and those in it or to make *poesis* out of destruction. In this way, poets of ritual are often carving out a spacetime for agency and movement, a breathing space or room to manoeuvre away from the deadening fixations, amnesia and wastages of the contemporary economic, ecological and political forces and conditions. My own creative explorations of ritual poetry detailed here also arise from this same need: a desire for enaction, embodied awareness, movement and a renewal of my sense of relation to the material world and its ecologies and communities.

The practice I present in my poetics and creative works draws on and studies the liminal zone between ritual and poetry, between embodied practice and creative writing and between compositional process and performance. This thesis is a study of ritual thresholds, exploring the boundaries which the ritualist-poet approaches, traverses, constructs or finds their limitations in. The originality of its contribution lies in its new concepts, readings, methodology, creative experimentation and in the resulting insights these afford poetry and poetics.

## Or, a Brief Poetics on Ritual Poetry

Out of the phases of commotion, a thesis of threes. The ritual loops begin with a separation where the ritualist encounters a material threshold. Here may be a sparagmos—the tearing action—and they feel the body and the material, perhaps it hurts. The body is switched on, hunter-actor-poet are charged and they step over the transition to the middle. Between and betwixt is a liminal space wherein the world turns upside-down. This is a site where we switch orders and touch the material more brightly, interweave senses, notice a heightened quality to everything in the sensorium. The ritualist's heart pulses in beat with internal and external rhythms and the edges of words. This is not everyday feeling. Signs emerge; *things happened, you had to be there*. The binaries don't feel the same, they have moved beyond. All is charged, all is event. Spinning out of this, a chaos that can border on terrifying, or a search for the poesis which finds something, a fresh emergence from the shreds. Language is everywhere: in the ritual score, in the associative leaps, the signs carried by objects, flow, the transforming repetition or touch which yields new words. The fellows of the ritual are here, or they are felt close by, weaving *plethu* in the commons of the ritual space, they have found themselves together anewly. When you return to the beginning, something is altered, nothing is the same, everything is the same, nothing begins again, again, everything begins. Poesis from sparagmos. Once the closing threshold is past, an integration begins. The ritualist-poet pulls the threads and weaves significance, incorporates a continually emerging corpus, weaves threads of poesis into wider or repeating cycles. Ending in order to begin again...

## About this thesis

The research this thesis presents is based in practice. This means that my own poetic practice, and the practice I study, inform my conceptualisation of ritual poetry as much as the contextualisation, definition, theoretical analysis and critical reading of the field I have made. This approach draws on the practice-led research methodology of Smith and Dean (2009), the discourse of poetics (Sheppard,



2001; 2016) and embodied practice in research (Spatz, 2015). Building on these established modes of research, I have made my own methodological intervention by bringing ritual into the creative process, allowing ritual practice to lead the research and thus experimenting newly with poetry and poetics. I use poetics as a writing mode to open up and detail this process further. The order of this thesis then does not reflect a chronological one-way progress of moving from theory to practice. Instead the process is cyclical and weblike, in the manner suggested by Smith and Dean's model of research (2009, p. 20). I detail this methodology further in Chapter Four on methodology and in the poetics in Chapter Five.

## **The phases of the thesis**

**Chapter One** consists of a series of creative works in poetry, poetics, poetry performance and visual material: a ritual poetry practice which explores the experience of contemporary life. The research is embodied here through a collection of ritual poems, experimentation, collaborative works, hybrid creative writing and poetics, poetics for performances and images as well as links to documentations of poetry performances.

**Chapter Two** of the thesis identifies the field of ritual poetry in its historical and theoretical context. Firstly, I review the relevant ritual theory and form a working definition of ritual. I then explore the historical context and contemporary field of ritual poetry, noting key practitioners working at the intersections of experimental poetry, intermedia, hybrid creative writing and performance. I also draw on performance studies and theories of ritual time.

In **Chapter Three** I read some selected poets of ritual in further depth. I examine how Jerome Rothenberg (b.1931) and Maggie O'Sullivan (b.1951) make use of ritual in their practice and then explore the ritual poetry works of Cecilia Vicuña (b.1948), M. NourbeSe Philip (b.1947), Bhanu Kapil (b.1968), CAConrad (b.1966) and my contemporary Amy McCauley.

**Chapter Four** outlines my novel methodology of creative embodied practice-based research, which draws on ritual to make new experimental work in creative writing and includes my approach to ethical issues.

**Chapter Five** of the thesis consists of my poetics of ritual poetry: a distillation of thinking and creative exploration oriented towards the making and uncovering of some of my own practice of ritual poetry. This work demonstrates the practice of poetics as outlined by Robert Sheppard, (2001; 2016) and draws together key threads of the concept of ritual poetry, demonstrating the potential for transformation and exploration that this approach presents. It elaborates on the three stages of ritual suggested by ritual theory and ritual poetry practice, moving through the concepts and techniques of ritual poetry as I find it, that of intention, invocation, score, experiment, thresholds, sparagmos, embodiment, material, technique, presence, movement, repetition, plethu, emergence, time, poesis and endings. These poetics move towards the concluding **Chapter Six** where I summarise the overall model of ritual poetry as a practice, exploring the limitations and potential openings that it affords poetry and poetics.

### **A note on terms**

In Chapter Two I will outline my definition of ritual and then, following the conceptualisation, contextualisation and close readings of the poets of ritual, I will elaborate several concepts that arise in the penultimate chapter of poetics, Chapter Five. There are, however, a few terms I use which I must explain here. As already indicated, when the word *poetics* is used in this thesis, it specifically refers to the writerly discourse oriented towards the making of poetry and creative writing as conceptualised by Robert Sheppard (2001; 2016). I use the word *poesis* to refer to an act of *making* in language. Poesis is the beginning of poetry and creation of new meaning for the poet or anyone encountering the poem; it is the creative, transformative process that emerges in the course of ritual poetry. Finally, I also refer to *liminality* as the state of being 'betwixt and between' as described by Victor Turner (1969), as the middle transformative stage in ritual process. It is the specific liminality of ritual process and technique that interests

me primarily, thus I am not using liminality in the wider sense that Turner and other writers often use the term, that is, to describe any period of history that appears to be in-between events such as revolution, war or political crisis.

# 1. CHAPTER ONE: CREATIVE WRITING

In the first and last parts of this creative chapter, parts A, 'Theatres of the Mouth' and G, 'Blod Rites', I include poems that have emerged from the general application of ritual techniques and concepts. Full sequences of creative process that deployed my evolving ritual practice in stages of writing and embodied practice can be found in section B, *Mattering: Ritual Poetry Cycles* 2018. Section C is the project *Mamaiaith* in which I used ritual to explore a cluster of topics – maternal relationships, bilingualism, writing and research and loss of cultural and ecological diversity. In *Mamaiaith* I trialled several techniques of ritual poetry in order to test the concept and further formulate the ideas shaped in the thesis as a whole. Collaborative works such as ritual events, performances and gifts, can be found in section D. In the *Tawe Ritual Poem Cycles* in section E, I honed the practice of ritual poetry to explore contemporary life in my particular embodied spatiotemporal and cultural context. The poetics in section F, show some of the workings of this process, the records, speculations and reflections on various acts.

## Chronology of Live Events

### Summer 2017

- Launches of poetry collection, *All Fours* (Bloodaxe, 2017).
- Interventions - Residency, Multiple Events and Performances with Mamta Sagar, in Wales and Bengaluru, India.

### Autumn 2017

- *Dance of Likeness* workshop with Studio Matejka laboratory theatre at Grotowski Forest Base, Brzezinka, Poland.
- *Ghost Jam*, group performance jam, 'Eurydike', London.

#### Winter 2018

- Performances and events in India for Interventions, e.g. with Mamta Sagar at Hyderabad and Bhubaneswar literature festivals.
- Residency and performances at India Institute of Science, Bengaluru, 'Oceanik'.
- Performances at Goran Spring Poetry Festival, Croatia.

#### Spring 2018

- Cynhebrwng Aer with Rhys Trimble at *Poetry in Expanded Translation 3*, Bangor
- Performance 'Oceanik' Projectivisms Symposium, Cardiff.
- Workshop in movement and writing with OBRA theatre and Lucy Burnette, Au Brana, France.

#### Summer 2018

- Performance of a ritual wedding poem at a friend's wedding, Greece.
- Launch of Ritual edition of *Poetry Wales*, reading and second performance of Cynhebrwng Aer with Trimble at Ledbury Baptist Chapel, Ledbury Poetry Festival.
- Other readings and performances, e.g. Roid Rage with Rhys Trimble.
- Performances at Luna de Locos Poetry Festival, Pereira, Colombia.

#### Autumn 2018

- Performance ritual text at sister's wedding, with Tomos Watts.
- Co-curation with Joey Frances, Poetry Emergency 1, festival of performance and poetry, Salford & Manchester.
- Performance at No Matter, Manchester.

#### Winter 2019

- Performances and events in Santiago de Chile, PoEx festival and other events and performances with Ghazal Mosadeq. Visit to Humedal Antiñir, Puerto Montt.
- Bangor University, reading, performance of 'Mamaiaith'.
- Gestures Conference, Manchester, performance of 'Mamaiaith'.

#### Spring 2019

- Ode To Joy, Nawr Ensemble, ritual play with string, Volcano Theatre.
- Performances at Istanbul Poetry Festival.
- 'Ooze Transfer', performance with Amy McCauley, Poetics in Commons symposium, Sheffield.
- 'Locator' Workshop in movement and ecology with Simon Whitehead, Pentre Ifan, Tŷ Canol woods, Pembrokeshire.
- Ritual Poetry Workshop for eco-activists, 'Sparagmos-Poesis', Blue Lagoon festival Pembrokeshire.

#### Summer / Autumn 2019

- 'Mamaiaith' Work in Progress Performance, New Adelphi Studio Theatre, Salford University.
- Poetry Emergency 2, Salford and Manchester.

#### Spring / Summer 2020

- Online workshops and performances around poems 'Marigold Jam' and 'Mamaiaith', for A-Level students in Seren Initiative, Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire County Councils.
- Online zoom workshops in Viewpoints with Deborah Black and other movement techniques such as Feldenkrais.
- Language is a Virus and Geopoetry online performances of Hafod Cycle poems.

## A. Theatres of the Mouth: Early Poems

### Theatre of the mouth

in the body, a corona swaying  
have mercy on my phonemes  
and check where the tongue is  
when reading, writing  
you press the palate  
tongue down, that's experience  
tongue up, that's engagement

tongue to the top-back enamel  
that's where pleasure expresses  
three emotions in the front mouth  
three in the back  
and the middle of the mouth is neutral

there's a mathematical formula for this  
it makes a rhythm,  
on the half beat, your partner might come in  
but a regular beat means you're no longer in love

and how do we get to pleasure?  
Or to the four pleasures to be precise?  
The body reading the other body,  
first then comes eye contact  
but, remember gender comes in, we're conditioned, I'm afraid.

There's desire too. Between the three emotions: anger, sadness, happiness

and eight more emotions  
and there are really only eight stories too,

Laughter in the belly, it cleanses the organs,  
when was the last time?

Anatomy prompts emotions.

When did you cry with tears last?

That's not right, yes, it could be dehydration, but  
which sad face is convincing?  
stop here, pause, this.

How do actors sustain it? Stamina, yes,  
but it's before stamina, leaning back, I say,  
this isn't good poetry, I pick up your notebook  
you won't react yet, you're conditioned  
not to show anger, so when you walk away...

try breathing out with the tongue like that  
can you feel the heat? in the cheeks? Or in the stomach,  
do you feel neutral?

Feeling the curve around the table too.  
Or there's an envelope of mosquito net, or  
hey, you seem interesting, i e r e i / n t r s t n g  
interesting, there's no gap for a response  
No, it's not your accent.  
Do you feel neutral?

Summer 2017, Adishakti, Tamil Nadu



## Multi/direction Bio/poetics

What I desired was to join the historic cult of poet-lovers. I would welcome any emperor the tarot foretold. *Empourer* who comes unelected, who comes as my equal and ruler.

Can I sit you all around me in a circle on a black cloth? Arcane in saliva, your oils are already food for my lungs and can I breathe in your discourse? You can all come and touch my solar plexus.

I tried keeping a film of many eyes, many gazes. Kept his smell on the pillow for three days. After the second it went stale. Some licked ears, others anus. Their differing Lacania. I would keep record of a person's constituent auras and vibrations.

But one cannot idealise difference forever before, well, difference. I overboiled with interaction. Laid down. One held my cheeks for years.

You've troubled this conversation into being, I thought, you've taken a beer blonde with my thigh. Can I slit the black cloth we're sitting on and put you in my orbit?

I had strayed into a mania of teeth. Also, a theatre of fluids. Theatre of intersecting narcissisms, poet juice, Bollywood yearning. The saints, my friends, billowing. Their discourse settling in the back of my action.

I tried to answer the questions they asked me truthfully but the voices rang out in their special timbres all container, no content. I tried to let myself contract. Now I lie in a darkened room to become less stimulated.

The word I learnt on this day was 'Scotchie'. So I thought of scotch tape sticky at our borders. Hey, come to the borderlands with me, a friend said.

I corresponded with this ruby counsel who took it to heart. Remembered the word 'metrosexual'. I anointed my bed to change its marital status. The reading rooms glowed with wheat and soil colours.

He asked to be smacked expecting I would choose the right side, but I took the left. I worry that's the wrong hand to take around here. Are you ready? The way to take poetry seriously is you can all come and pull up my cervical spine.

I've noted my flaws they are hollows in my attention. And when asked, I visualised the multitasking demon, its shaky head and gripping claws. Then, later, the disintegrating owl demon, its grey feather dandruff. There is also the one who cannot give love, it pulls down in a glaucous streak through the organs, hampers the stomach. These all have their constituent allies ready to pull us back up in an upwards motion.

But you need to be ready to be pulled up like that. You need to spell some aura of hello helô. Some of these bus journeys are not appropriate for filing invoices, answering emails. Sometimes men read your love letters over your elbows. Others ask you what you are writing because it is so unusual to see a person writing letters on to paper. Or even reading; a man approached me at the carousel to tell me he loved the fact I was reading a book and not a phone like everyone else and I'm staying at the Hotel Trident.

Other men have cared. Other men were 'splaining but I love my father too much to tell them to go. Others yet say they have a scotchie which means they have a woman who they have marked as theirs somehow. I still don't understand the meaning of Scotchie.

Which of your demons or allies flushed up to the surface of this spell? Dearest, history bleeds through and colours our lips. I wondered if I should feel all the unfelt shame of the ones who had come from my place before me. Or perhaps it's not possible to carry someone else's unfelt shame. Just the demons wriggling underneath. My love, the worst demon is the one who doesn't love at all. Its colour is slate.

January 2018

Published in *Spells, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Occult Poetry* (Ignota, 2019).

## The phenomenology of cut-up

*After Merleau-Ponty and Maggie O'Sullivan*

What is phenomenology?

Damp air/  
mortar

Downstairs the drying clothes I worry the damp is caught in the room  
must be released  
I can smell  
I can feel it coming on  
coinging on

All of which reveals the true meaning of the  
glintzy  
snorting

A sequinned outbreath humped sensual  
pleasure seeker  
push back the now in a pleasure-meaning  
push back the admin in a glintz of break  
like a horse like a man imitating a horse

Even if this were the case there would still be a need to understand the  
anemone

We touched their softest maroon pudding bodies  
attached to multiple crevices  
that was today at Limeslade when I should have been admining  
that was today touching  
sighting  
scrying  
crying ; I just want to be outside all the time!

It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is  
face whitened by  
power & lard

What I meant by power I had to describe this to him he had asked  
that took up another time  
the melting of the butter then it hardened again and I flicked it onto the 'Greek'  
pizza  
just skimming  
handling language  
rather than a holiday from language why not just stop and say I am stopping now  
and then this will be something else  
our direct descriptions of face whitened by the death of

I discover within myself an eternal weakness  
down there  
an old blood  
impairs ground,  
roseTILT

so read don't bother writing anything except when I go down there I find an old  
blood and it impairs me, eternal weakness,  
nothing short of inVALID body  
the skimming tactics of a reader vs the tilt of the rose

I took my petals off me

Is nothing if divorced from the spectacle of the world  
this labial pepper

## B. Mattering: Ritual Experiment Cycles, 2018

The following collection contains writing, scores, notes, poems and poetics produced in cycles of ritual process through 2018.

### Scores for Ritual Poetry

1. Funeral Games of the Great Mammalia – (David Jones) or, Birth Games of the Little Mamalia
2. Electrics and Water – oil and water, folded together but not dissolving into
3. Lliaws rith kyn bu'm kisgyfrith (Taliesin) 'Many Forms Before I was...'
4. The sludgy treatment
5. Placemaking in the Mouth
6. Narcotic Properties (Maggie O'Sullivan)
7. Mask-play, costume-play
8. Expanded verb action texts – timed.
9. Dosbarth Cymraeg (feeling an estrangement from Mamaiaith... it is a comfort to hear it and that tells me I have lost it. That tells me of grief, bureaucratic shell iaith. Rather, I want to dissolve not fold inside, cariadlang)
10. Fold into sludge – a baggy relationship
11. Learn some vocab, repeat repeat repeat
12. Vespers felt fluttering & sounded, a sonigation or a beat that sounded fantastical.
13. Placemaking in the word, is it possible?
14. Climb into or onto yazyk/ЯЗЫК
15. Ploughed the mouth as a syllable as a ploughed field to roll around in, mangel-wurzels every arm-length
16. Family dinner: I impressed his family with the joke about the arm of the suitor made of profiteroles. Roll the mangel-wurzel snack into a field and leave to chew through the winter
17. Lean dark weeks of action under the cover of gloom, repeat repeat repeat.
18. Cycles of action. Cycles of verbs.

19. Ritual Object on a Scholar's Desk: Rouge Angelique lipstick, by Chanel

## Funeral Games of the Great Mammalia

*A ritual experiment cycle after David Jones*

### Day One, Singleton Park

1. I clear the copse of litter, run 7 times around the ring of trees. On the 7<sup>th</sup> circle I feel my ankle buckle on its injury I acquired dancing at my sister's wedding in glittery gold stilettos. Lying on the ground in pain, the smell of the dry autumn trees enters on breathing breathing breathing rhythm, I think I forget the count but it is probably 7 times
2. [I go through the score from Au Brana: twist, suffocate, grate etc]
3. sit cross legged facing the setting sun and write this:

the gaps between yizik iaith lalanguage and I swept my mouth I try different mouths different faces, comedy, mockery, erotic between the languages the tongues the lips I thought of the famous-to-me lips of my own performance-eros. I think of the tongues of Sir William Jones, his early death from overwork, his explorations between the languages, between the many disciplines the many cultures, the many practices. The pandits wept when he died.

*Bum yn lliaws rith/ Kyn bum kisgyfrith...* (I have taken many forms before I took this one)

I forgot to say these lines to begin with as was the plan, so I say them at the end, hands on the earth. I only half-remember the words of the Battle of the Trees. Trying to remember is a part pre-losing Cymraeg

An intimate twisting, a trying to imbibe knowledge through a gasp. Then a distancing, where I tune into the trees in the copse which are beaches and the light the sun is setting, it has set.

It is 1807 the goldsfade the sounds of the commute the sounds of  
the dog walkers bois kicking a ball to face out then then back to the  
book again, but the book is a form of inner and outer universe, the  
cosmos of one movement,

Before the delineation of 'sex', the feeling of before, before the  
symbolic, before the law. Early memories and their bright sensual  
residues the colour, Llyn of the 1980s with 1970s furnishings, the air  
damp, the chemical smell and pasty touch of the air freshener, one  
moment a cosmos, a Proustian dunking

My fingers are getting cold and my feet are numb. I need take this litter to the bin. I  
can hear the birds and the bois and the road.

Later, bringing David Jones back in, poems emerge

:

### **Mimes deploy**

He let the plastic strafe him

She let the anxiety run her brains out

You let the person reach across a boundary try to love you or hate you or kill you

Slowly, by degrees by instances of guilt-shame we travel here and then away

When my mouth is looked at for a mouth for its lips movement and not for the  
language that I communicate, is this wrong

When my mouth is the centre of attention and not the language I communicate is  
this wrong

When my mouth is clown if only I could open it and

Eat properly, speak properly, is this wrong

A way to resist fascism might be a refusal to fret and dissipate time, to let energy  
bitten on the tongue be a morsel of food you fed me I let you feed me

Every moment set and predetermined by water, it just washes off you

Every type face a person setting a letter into predetermined pixels or trying to  
edge away, I let you feed me I let you love me

Every second could be divided into cosmic moments when it is or is not your responsibility to fight fascism

And I let you let me sit on your sofa whilst you fed me

Consider walking, consider that it is ok to be happy in this second

And considering this, some of the Anathemata, David Jones

*The mimes deploy:*

*anthropoi*

*anthropoid.*

*Who knows at what precise phase, or from what floriated green-room, the Master of the Harlequinade, himself not made, maker of sequence and permutation in all things made, called us from his co-laterals out, to dance the Funeral Games of the Great Mammalia, as, long, long, long before, these danced out the Dinosaur?*

He is talking about ritual, he is talking about the trenches, he is talking of the cosmic now, he is talking about the predetermined, is he talking about the originary of the originary, is he writing of The Break, he is speaking of 'antlered mummers' glowing for 'many a hemera' in the snow of the snow.

I felt a little snag on reading this. I felt the Funeral Games of the Great Mammalia. I felt them snag in me because I knew that now, I felt a /There where the world's a stage/ for transformed scenes/ with metamorphosed properties/ for each shifted set.<sup>2</sup>

I steal a title for a poem

### **Funeral Games of the Great Mammalia**

Catch my breathing apparatus, the skein skirted along his able-bodied cough  
My trenches lack the games of his trenches, but they open on his Break

---

<sup>2</sup> David Jones, *Anathemata*, (1952, p. 62-63)



My signals go to you historic landmine. This game feels like my personal death-by-raving. I watch the inter view with him, his frown collapses in a private laughter. Saunders Lewis too, his interviewer here, creases with him, tenged yr iaith me twixt a tween. Other writers said the wars were liminal passages; then it might have been for ought, but he, Dai Greatcoat, knows there's nought in that

For ought I caught this, later

I was obscure like David, I needed footnotes to this dance

Or

was this love, could I feel it?

These were not our trenches  
This was not our Mass  
Maybe these times are not our trenches either not yet

Tin-and busted a thirsty world war  
grab me in the apoca-anthropoi-and cook me panang curry, watch videos of  
nephew laughing and let me not cry  
But I let a cry and I laughed and I cried

## **Day Two, Hafod**

**'Super-pellissed, stalled in crystalos, from the gospel-side, choir all the boreal schola'**

A wing ago, I took five mountains to break even, now it's three  
Singing this thus an hour, ingots of feline dung amongst the wild strawberries.  
Nothing is quite right but it will have to be right to go through, how twine around  
the ankles or the angles of the body rested in its restraints ready systematic  
sexual cultures and rain

My salts take the plastic of the earth now, they are my salts now because I  
ingested the salt of the plastic of the table

It is now five thousand things ago.

It is also the ache of 2013, a special species of before, a special species of  
aftermath

Think what a score for the riches of David Jones's *lithic* movement

Or a score for the drastic measures of 2018

Score for a sea trout as opposed to a river trout

Score for *Artifex* Dafydd's rosy made-thing a thing we constructed into  
being via the tongue

*laith*-moth scene / *laith*-mouth scene

Brandy scenes

Score for a broken china bedpan

He tells his friend my mother is alright that's a relief his friend says and I

### **For all THOSE WHOSE WORKS FOLLOW THEM**

Every heap of myself in one day, one or two espressos, one or two wines, or eggs,  
usually two eggs rarely one

The points of the day, hemera, David would say because he couldn't just use an  
ordinary word like day / dia / dydd / diwrnod

All of hemera's hard parts: elbows, skull, hips, nose – these would be the ritual  
structure, its determined points.

I set about my *lithic* movement

I set about David's *Anathemata* like an unexpected downpour in the south of  
Karnataka near the border with Tamil Nadu near the Kauveri, near the Tibetan  
refugee villages, between each village, their languages and wild tamarind

I set into Hemera's soft parts

Only on Jupiter's day do my *works follow me*, on other days it is gmail it is  
Sainsburys it is Nationwide

Consider these special 'humid paradises' of the third age by David St Dafydd  
Jones. Now we are in the Fourth age, apologies for the delay in responding to  
your poem

Crustaceous carbon emissions / abandoned dream diaries /  
recycled chutney jar now with ritual water / scar-talk where I tell him, this is where I  
spilled a cup of tea very hot, just made

So *I made a heap of all I could find* like the other men poets like the other men  
like the men the men the men

*By the uteral marks  
that make the covering stone an artefact.  
By the penile ivory  
and by the viatic meats.*

Dona eis requiem.

I had some meat on the road once.

Imagine now if every other word in the poem prompted a dictionary-search. And  
that was how I read this poem and that was what David Jones wanted of me. To  
find on google I mean take it down off the shelf and consult the viatic consultant.  
Read slowly, deliberately, as requested by Dai

**dona eis requiem : give him a rest**

Give it a rest mate, your penile ivory and uteral marks

I've been celibate for two years now and I love it, said Mandy last night and she  
bought us a round with her family 25% discount. And I drank an extra blue moon

and then I got a uteral mark

Sunken fixtures you think! And on such a beautiful day too / dewfall / starfall etc  
etc

The next word to look up is *diriment* – interrupting, ‘the diriment stroke’. If there is  
pleasure in David’s heap it might be//the dictionary

### **Next the lachrymal**

from Latin lacrima: tear:: my howling uterine marks of last night did not produce  
tears :: no water resided in this place the angry the huge scratch of shame:: burn  
maker you :: shifting high marks you :: on Cadair Idris we could see Llŷn and the  
clouds were :: give him a rest :: you barbaric sultries :: you charmers from across  
the frontier :: my uteral marker pen on my Sunday best dress :: my skillset is  
barbaric :: he knows :: he knows lachrymal fetish :: I also learnt what a  
‘presentation box’ is :: that world :: he knows :: give him a rest he creases laughs ::  
Saunders chuckles too :: dona eis requiem sempiternam :: the internet says :: give  
him a rest everlasting to everlasting ::

I make a score for a dance to finish this (ritual)(writing) from David ::

### **REDRIFF REDRIFF REDRIFF REDRIFF**

[I move through the OBRA score a few times. It is emotional but also pleasurable  
until reaching the book then: IV REDRIFF. So I chanted REDRIFF until red until  
red drift until red ridge then quiet then sung the words then quiet then sung *she  
moved through the fair* then quiet then some red riff in the thighs and a sympathy  
for some women in my family who are struggling and then grounding via Mahler  
just a normal dance      JUST A NORMAL DANCE PLEASE ]

There this cushion – a fix – a riff of red – squandered the – cannister's contents –  
was viatic meat – a glisten prefect – a favilla karma – favilla singular – glint-  
benched – cost oh the nyx on the nyx of my sandals I prayed to hemera – skin tag  
– brush tail – slide over the rocks on yr belly – it scrapes to see the pools – the  
pools –anaptyxis!—ionic Anaximanders!—who philosophised that life began in  
water—the ionic

## **Anklet: poetics & poems**

*November 2018, Sheffield*

### **Notes on the ritual process**

Dream: at a strange literature festival where Roald Dahl is brought back to life and the audience faint, a line of sweet dancing girls makes us cry then a TV screen appears. Like the ones we would watch at school in the AV room. A black and white close up of a tongue sticking out. Closer and closer we move into the image of the tongue on the screen. We are beamed into the canyons of the tongue.

Today I find an anklet my mother bought in India in the 1970s which I used to play with as a child. It reminds me of the grey tongue in the dream screen.

It makes a good costume to wear over the mouth.

Ritual experiment: writing in costume / semi-mask.

A proposal to wear the anklet as a mask and ritualise. As usual I have my books to collage from.

To begin. Warm up: running through a score I have developed and I'm drawn to the 'gasp' action. This is a score made from verbs given to me by OBRA in Au Brana. 'Pinch' 'Twist' 'Suffocate' 'Swallow'. To take one of these movements to a verb and repeat it and repeat it.

Will write after 5 minutes of 'swallow', actually 3 minutes

During this I realise this is durational – an Abramovic style testing of body limits

The movement is a gasp in, a whole tensing intake of breath an 'oam' or 'aum', the hands tense the shoulders curve in on each. Upon repetition I realise I need to breathe out a rhythm of four oams and a big out breath develops. The top half of my body rhythmically tenses in the sound, the bathroom fan is humming and it resonates with my oams. The in, the in, the in. I am feeling faint and wobbly, head blood rush speed up the wobble the high or is it lack or too much oxygen. What exactly is hyperventilating. Cannot wait for the minutes to be over, a little

movement or action a pause, I try one breath in one big out. Finally, the alarm goes I must give myself 3 minutes rest on the floor. Here my internal voice returns, I think of recent conversations about performance with other artists. I think about moving I cannot just lie here, the relaxation session in yoga, resting is hard. Earlier today I wondered if ritual poetry is just giving oneself a rest? A pause!

Next, write for 3 minutes too:

\*\*\* The Oam is a signal we swallow. It is a raft of air, that is an internal burst of oxygen. It is creaturely and it pours out of us on a fourth iteration. Back out the shoulders push it. It is a mini spirit an inspiration an spiri inspired then it must be expired passes into us a blood oxygenation.

What if each bodily function were a deity or a goblin or a creature and this formed a round ball like the Borg of Peer Gynt this was then hot dry carpet air coming into my frame. I am a frame for this ball of inspiration the muses or the Moirai. I'm told of the granular spiration the anspiration what would that be the muses. \*\*\*

Transpiration – moving across the point towards syncope. Opening out between breaths? I did worry about collapsing and dying which is what I felt in the trance I went into at the Ghost Jam too.

Now for the swallow with the costume tongue on

Downstairs my parents prepare food.

I'm scared

Ok 3 minutes on

The anklet worn over the mouth looks like fetish wear. I enjoy putting it on in the mirror. I think of the ritual of BDSM dressing – putting on and off restraints as ritual adornment. The liminality of the 'subspace'.

But there is another side. This anklet mask recalls bondage in its violent sense: mouth pieces, tongue bits and slavery. Women in bondage as signalled by the anklet, in some parts and times of India. Now it is in my mouth and I breath three in one out again hard but I do not feel faint. But then a 'thing' happens when I lie down to rest. The chain enters my mouth and I am holding it in my teeth and I feel

very strange. My father calls me to say food is ready and I call back something with no contours. I worry about tetanus, poisoning, in the metal, allergic reaction on the skin. Thinking about those forced to wear metal. Then my teeth start to chatter and the metal crunches they are not doing this by choice I start to tremble without control. The reminder of a related violence is very emotional here, but I am still lucid so I get up and go to the mirror still chattering and now my parents are calling me again. I film it. It is very weird. It looks terrible; the chain pulls over my top lip

Tea is pea and ham and parsley sauce and potatoes from the allotment. This is a very good threshold meal.

//

One pressed out the bone limits by bile // who was it  
a culpability, a winning, a young invertebrate, a helmet that is a shell.  
And on those upper limits of atomic patter, some hedge-topia?  
others sequestered hair locks in lockets of frost. Merched mercheta  
or a hogen was standing on the pasture before the big bang but now  
matter is locked and fixed ready to burn; It falls apart the atoms and quarks  
that is to say there are waves propelling, I find one of them in this narrative  
their shoes unfixed to the floor now gently chanting in a murmur that reminded us  
of another chant from the elderly enslaved, Trinidad 1834 at the point of 'abolition'  
and on being told they must do another six years of 'apprenticeship': "Pas de *six ans*. Point de *six ans*"

Atom      who is this baroque language of human  
atom and atom focused  
one of them was piece by piece dismantling sequentially // one wanted

Or



Nia Ben Aur: yn syllu arno yntau // staring right at her subject her subject staring at him through

a mask perhaps of chain, perhaps a sheet of fine chain placed over the mouth but not restricting only obscuring speech, somehow alluring oneself somehow  
tonguing oneself restraint when consented not to speak until and then this consent given to restrict me in freedom then this gesture to force not the force of the very far not so far elders not six years over six years and this year

### **Wear the anklet as a mask**

To speak through the chain veil  
to speak through the mesh  
to speak through the anklet  
to speak through the manacle  
to speak through the headdress  
to speak through the bit  
to speak through the limit  
to speak through the tang  
to speak through clusters of crunch on little zinc or magnesium  
to speak through a metaphorical manacle that gestures reminds us of  
to speak through privilege if that is to know what I have not known  
to speak through this jiggling movement of the teeth on the baubles of metal and realise a fear to speak through and write, to not write of it as something more or less than it was,  
to move in sympathy and speak through sympathy to speak or write through only one position that is not to speak for others, to listen whilst speaking in the costume who is speaking, vision of self in mirror reminded one of other identities and then what is costume then  
is costume metonymy or metaphor how to even consider playing another person,

the costume allows the playing in the subspacetime, but what of real time,  
what is costume time, play and 'going too far' [Etchells] what is costly  
what headache does the costume produce and what does it cost  
can the costume itself speak and does it cost to speak  
does it costume me to consider the other wearers of the mask I have  
metonymically mimicked by accident  
does the mouth sound so terrible to itself it started to feel so terrible  
that I longed for peas and ham and a good chest of hair to lean on  
one that is locked in a spacetime of sub, and has consented to be left there  
one that is locked in a spacetime of dark and has not consented to be left there  
is it metaphor or metonymy that links them?  
so I did the discomfort of the costume inside but outside the costume felt wrong  
moving into the tongue in the film in the dream was different to moving into the  
tongue metaphor that was also a metonymy for enslavement and for playtime, the  
discomfort of that contrast, to move through  
the discomfort of the chain on the top lip

## Carotid properties

*After Maggie O'Sullivan*

weepsweep our carotid line                      running between head and forest  
the cervical spine where they puul  
fraem-a                      left-headed genital seep                      or is it                      sweep  
  
                    sweepland                      left the floor a strewnnstew                      sck                      prss  
heavens homs homage to her                      polypus driving this neck                      this neck pulled  
up puppet  
i-love

the swoonshirt the                      admirable holler of wet window                      *to the*  
*forests*

and so nothing except to learn and                      learn out of the lean scratch

the fraz-hurt Novembers                      scud-gravelled    *his philology*                      scared-of-  
crow    burst

how do you smile anymore                      anyhow it is jilted  
                    a hom-age of hers / 'its crimson centre' / Houma

carrying carotid between the spreading out from head to forest the main vein runs  
you're worried at the mesh

the net of running threads red threads between neck and skull

two carotid veins  
a dualism – union  
working in humming                      eye pro-ducted pro=duced produced an I and re-prod  
duct tape around its edges

one her-november to another heart-nosed, cross-thicket outward and  
the carrying causeway

causeway to circle of willis and to *the forests*

but was that was plantation or forest                      ?                      pur-gluck

find the subclavian or the innominate arteries

and the causeway arterial bond

the space between heaving cave-brain and the forests

**\*\***

## Bring the brass fish back in

### *Ritual Object Score: Brass Fish*

1.

Brass rubbing on the fish with a green crayon pencil

The result interrupts the writing, it looks so maw-mess

2.

Its eye is made up but not with kajal kohl it is as it is most days it is a thing  
of course the edge of the material sliding in and out of each letter

worn thin by ritual use the fish goes deeper further back

1Shanthi Road, Bengaluru, the originating site of this fish-  
gift, in the clutter of mahogany and arte and artefa and artifex  
badam tree creak there were the bats that crunch the nuts out of  
their green case and inside the smooth green fruits, the hot neon  
pink almond

Suresh gave me this fish

I lay in the L-shaped room listening to this racket. Such a  
criss-crossing of the here  
a shawly flash a flask with half-sugar coffee from Foodie's  
one flask for tea one for coffee

The fish slides off the fingers onto the dark green desk and knocks a knock there and I am  
reminded of all this movement.

When I was at 1Shanthi Road my friend was working with a similar  
Oriya brass fish with ruby eyes. I would write the backing poem to the  
animation... *in the beginning was the error... era*

// I am a an I then /I/I have an hunaniaeth or: a SUN in Pisces

3.

Ichthyic : Fish-like, from David Jones's heaps

This brass fish for me once meant desire. For me. This brass fish now swims its own  
desire

## **Anti-poetics, anti-techniques**

Ritual Poetry: A List of anti-techniques

- Disobedience
- The refusal to emo-labour the job beyond the pay
- Bad-square-cosmic-dalliance
- Yeah mate 'who of duck's bone had made her needle-case.'
- Each space in a tiny ficto-critical how the fuck

Poetry as escape, ritual as escape, everything orange, at least for one

## C. Mamaiaith

*Poetics, performances, prose, poems, movements*

### Introduction

*Mamaiaith* is a poem. Mostly it is a poem but it has also been a performance, an experiment with ritual, a durational eating of a punnet of blackberries and a dance. It is a purple stained script. It is a self-propagating score for action. It has been a collective poem voiced by a chorus of Manceinions. It repeats itself. It is embodied or it tries to be, frequently struggling to switch between the orders of perception and thus entering into a liminal zone of emergence.

Mamaiaith is Mamiath (mother tongue) with an extra breach, an -a- of connection and separation, a gap where I have failed to grasp the mother's tongue. It considers what the body expresses or relives of the mother and the grandmother, excavating and grasping after unconscious-becoming-conscious gestures that are inherited from them, perhaps. It is forever reaching across to Cymraeg. The gesture of Mamaiaith has also been an embodied fragment of poetry set in motion in a deep appreciation of Maggie O'Sullivan's 'mattering of material'.

Mamaiaith is a writing project that frequently strays from the margins of poetry, a line of a poem that wiggles into other territories, zones of tacky shrine-making, bramble scratches from Authentic Movements in Tŷ Canol woods, strategies for dyslexia, commotions mistakenly made in a black box theatre, eco-hexes, Adfeilion Babel. Its zones are getting dizzy in language(s), they are incantations from the *Geriadur Mamr*, or a three-hour long dosbarth cymraeg, wedi blino'n lân.

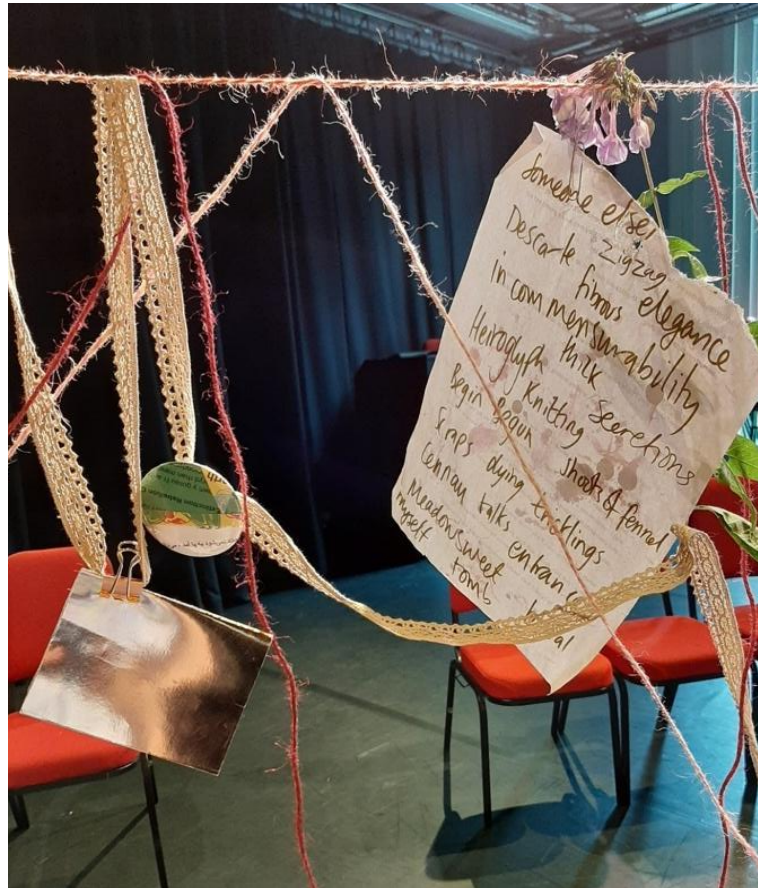


Figure 1: Poem fragments from Mamaiaith Salford performance

## The intimate language: beginning the poetics of Mamaiaith

August 2018

I write this from a most intimate site, between myself and language. The most intimate language hidden between languages. Pillow talk. Lover missives that enter the body and live there for a while affecting the quality of our breathing, our blood flow.

\*

There is no rational reason I can find for a feeling I get when I hear my lost language. A chest tug up, a whelming that only happens via the ear, in certain moments with certain people. It



only happens in particular forms of embodiment, in certain speaking gestures and vocal shapes. For example, the poet interpreting in situ in my ear in a cinema where a politician is speaking. The woman on the train leaning in to speak with her grandchildren. The poet reciting his poem in cynghanedd in a small library for an audience of Indian poets. I feel a gutwrench. Then the poem turns out to be about the poet's hairstyle.

It does not happen when I hear my family speaking their language. It did not happen when my grandfather was dying and he, no longer able or willing to use Saesneg, chastised me, told me that my reading voice was that of a goat's.

Perhaps it is a certain pitch? Or the alignment of the body? Perhaps it is not the words' semantic content but the husks of movement in limbs, cheeks, the wave of a hand or timbre of voice?

Maybe this is mamiaith, mother tongue, but for me it feels like mamaiaith – with an extra a to pad, to separate and connect, a breach that you will always be reaching across inadequately with a catch in your throat. The breach between my mother's tongue Cymraeg and my mother tongue Saesneg. Mamaiaith is also named for my mother's mother whom we called Mama and she had iaith, in fact she had at least four. A is a gap but it is also 'and' yn Gymraeg. A breach-connection, like a gesture that is both a separation and a relation.

\*

I had a feeling I knew the word when I found it. That I was remembering it rather than looking it up for the first time: *myygar*. I had known it before. But now instead of knowing it I had to look it up on the Ap Geiriaduron. Instead of knowing this word from the body I had to write about it as an intimate stranger word, something erotic, softly heard by a body of person leaning into the body with the ear first. The proximity of mamaiaith; a language that unsettles my self from my corporeality.

But to lose, in fact to never gain, the intimate language of *mamiaith* is to make this language a site of mourning and loss every time it is spoken of, *mamaiaith*. Then, to ascribe further loss to this language is to further ossify it, mystify it into death.

Another way I ventured into a failed bilingualism, was to take on the language as a site of the superego or Big Other – that Cymraeg is an imperative, a principle. The implication was: you are the generation to continue the language and the culture. You must speak. Siaradwch.

Rhaid i chi ddysgu. You must save your fellow and future souls from cultureless darkness.

You have a responsibility. You must reach across the breach where Duw Duw, I mean iaith, used to be.

These are uncomfortable places for intimacy to dwell. What brambles grow in these craters of guilt, erasure and grief?

So for now I retrieved one word, mwyar. Blackberry. Perhaps because they fruit each year.

Perhaps because they are free food from bramble, weed. Perhaps they are not things of mourning or shame but come after destruction has wreaked its havoc.

The mwyar sound is intimate. A seed. Seed-word mantra.

Or think in the forms of Taliesin: *Bum yn lliaws rith/ Kyn bum kisgyfrith* ....When I say, *I have taken many forms before I took this one*, that is renewal, that is, this form will die too, others will fruit.

When a language dies, are there traces that fruit into new harvest, are they bitter berries or sweet berries? What are the brambles that will grow in the places whose inhabitants cannot pronounce the names of their homes and fields? What brambles grow in the wistful nostalgia for a lost world?

If only more words of the intimacy of *mamiaith* could come to me as swiftly as the lover-words I have learnt and swallowed – the desired other's idiolect, unfamiliar language, licked

and kissed. The words taken inside so readily: Vayapayam. Dooblecappo. *Good luck with that.* Ghastly! Mewling. *Brown as you like.* Come by 'ere. Lush. Session. Ayoo! *Play*, swear on my bampi's life.

\*

There is another trapdoor in Mamaiaith. The poet's rabbit hole. Imagine having a lost language, a beguiling mystery in the form of your ancestors' tongue, like a web of magic words, a talismanic fabric woven inside you and without. Words from Welsh work like charms for me, they spark whole poems, spell occult cultures. But this is not what a living language is. Learning a living language is as often mundane as it is enlightening. It is Radio Cymru & Pobl y Cwm, it is a three-hour class with one ten minute break. It is simple conversations. Entering the energetic full complexity of a language is tiring, and it is always beyond a poet's charm. At the end of the dosbarth, struggling to stay awake. This is not magic this is just the boring loss, just cultural homogenisation and amnesia.

Animals and ecosystems are burning up in Australia as I write, and many languages have already been incinerated there and here and elsewhere. Imperial-capital has spread an ever-swiftening expansion of erasure and scorched earth. The speed of this force seems in exact opposition of the slowness at which I am learning my endangered language and finding ways to protect any nature left.

In the meantime then, Mamaiaith is slow growth regeneration. It is the brambles that reclaim the bomb craters. The experience of pigo mwyaren is to find new forms. Bake berry biscuits. Seedy missives. Small pieces I make an (other) intimate estrangement, fold mamaiaith into saesneg, brambles into ruins.

The 'a' in Mamaiaith is a breach between Mam and Iaith, but yn Gymraeg 'a' means 'and'. So the barrier is also, once more, a connection. It is a cycle, to lose, to regain, sparagmos, poesis.

## **Score for Mamaiaith, the next gestures**

An intention: to say helô/ tata

Make a threshold mouth

Learn the word for mouth in cymraeg

Prevent the mouth from speaking

Prevent the hand with the mouth

Grasping / Failing to Grasp

Repeat the difficult action

Move for ten minutes

Write for ten minutes on brambles

## Mamaiaith: Gestures, ruins

The following performance of *Mamaiaith Gestures, Ruins* is the second stage of exploration of the Mamaiaith project in poetics. The performance is an iteration of a piece I first performed at the *Gestures* symposium in Manchester in March 2019 which also developed another proto-version at Bangor university in February 2019. In these performances I ate around two whole punnets of blackberries whilst trying to speak versions of this text. The script of this work is available as a blackberry-stained brambled collage. I made an iteration of this piece in my garden in Swansea/Abertawe for the Seren Initiative for A-Level Students in Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire, 'How Can We Live with Nature' Spring 2020. The performance can be accessed at this link:

<https://vimeo.com/483063274/a6e8d1dbb5>. These blackberry smeared scripts were included in the scenography of the following Salford performance.

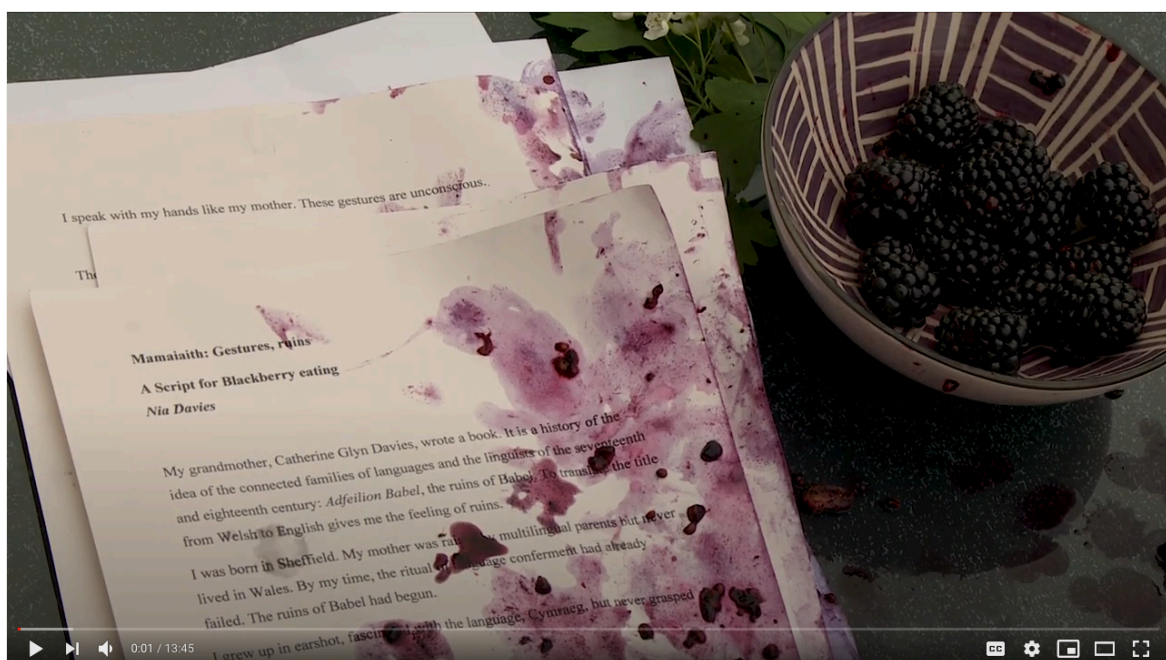


Figure 2: Mamaiaith Gestures Ruins May 2020 Video

## Mamaiaith Salford

In August 2019, I performed the third stage of Mamaiaith as an experiment in ritual poetry in three parts. This 'work in progress showing' consisted of a 25-minute performance at Salford University's New Adelphi Studio Theatre. I have edited the performance into fifteen minutes of highlights which can be browsed through at the following link: <https://vimeo.com/483060500/288c1664b0><sup>3</sup>

Some reflective poetics follow.



*Figure 3: Mamaiaith Salford Performance Highlights Video*

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<sup>3</sup> A collage of short clips from rehearsal and embodied practice also shows some of the process of making Mamaiaith in Figure 29: Rehearsal Video Clip Collage. The complete recording of the performance in Salford is also available for reference from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4U\\_Xgsp8IY&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4U_Xgsp8IY&feature=youtu.be)

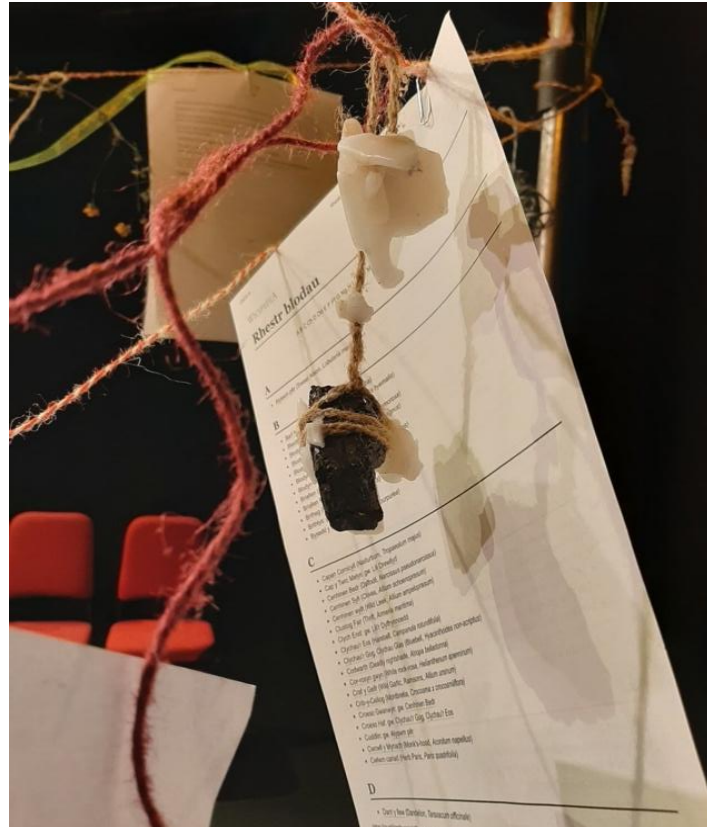


Figure 4: Fragment from *Mamaiaith Salford*

## Intention, scores

How can this ritual poem help us live in this world right now with crisis, loss? Here I am exploring my own sacred material: language, culture, maternal love, writing, the natural environment.

For this performance, I develop a set of movements, readings and scenography out of ritual scores.

I establish an intention to enter *Adfeilion Babel*, my grandmother Caryl Glyn Davies's book 'Ruins of Babel', a historical study of the history of language and linguists of Welsh in the eighteenth century. My Cymraeg is not good enough to 'properly' read this highly technical and complex book, so I am frequently frustrated. I want to explore my relationship with Cymraeg through this book as an object and as a tantalisingly precious repository of knowledge only fully accessible to me if I were to vastly improve my learner's Welsh. I want to enter into Adfeilion

Babel, the ruins of my language, and shift my relationship with Welsh towards regeneration and renewal.

Intention: To mark a loss and begin a new poesis for me in these areas of concern - iaith, ecology, writing, maternal relations, movement, material, community and embodiment.

Ritual is tool of composition but also the form of the performance - a poem activated with a rite, an embodied haptic encounter with the book and all of my writing materials and the community around me to form a new manifestation of the poem.

The last sentence from *Adfeilion Babel* helped me form a score

Ni ddylai hiraeth am amgyffred undod iaith yn y gorffennol neu'r dyfodol ein rhwystro rhag ymhyfrydu yn elfennau amryliw, symudliw patrymau ieithyddol y presennol.

In Rhys Trimble's translation: 'A longing for an apprehension of language unity in the past or future should not restrict us from delighting in the myriad opalescent (symudliw) elements of the linguistic patterns of the present.'



Figure 5: Mamaiaith Salford: The book as babe



From this, I establish three parts to Mamaiaith to correspond with three stages of ritual:

1. to enter into the body and the book as object, babe or mask, make the material matter, feel the loss or cut, as ruins, as a separation between self and book>>>ADFEILION BABEL
2. to cut up and transform the material relating to Mamaiaith through a sparagmos into a poesis>>>SYMUDLIW
3. to be joined by a community of others in voicing and thus activating a poesis>>>PLETHU



*Figure 6: Mamaiaith Salford, Adfeilion in the mouth*

## Techniques of the material

Techniques include using action and movement scores, vocal repetition, scenography, masks, audience participation, using an object as a score, 'going too far' (Etchells, 1999). To this I brought techniques from experimental poetry such as vocal work, cut-up and collage.

I want the poem to be written and activated by performance, to be manifested as ritual. My own writing and experimental detritus form a set. Ritual process, as per Turner and Van Gennep, influences the scenography and dramaturgy: three phases of exploration and three spaces of poesis.

Mamaiaith Salford draws particularly on Maggie O'Sullivan's use of assemblage and ritual composition and performance. But here I make her fragment charged by its environment, I want to make the language move in a commotion, in *symudliw*, to make an *embodied fragment in motion*.



Figure 7: Mamaiaith Salford, *Symudliw collage*

## Spatiotemporal thresholds

Theatre's spacetime (the blackbox studio theatre space, lighting, seating, running time etc) provides distinct thresholds in space and predetermined and strict time brackets mark out thresholds against which or through which the poetry passes. I use this spatiotemporal ritual structure as a technique of the material and improvise and create with these thresholds. Three stages or stations, as prompts to act through poetry as ritual, three sides to the scenography, three poems and serendipitously, three three-legged stands.



Figure 8: Mamaiaith Salford, Aerial View of Plethu Section

The ideas that emerge as part of the poem are

1. Rites at the beginning, the threshold of the limit. Limit in the body. Loss, sparagmos in the body. Or *Adfeilion* in the mouth, ruins in the mouth. I develop a sequence of movements to explore the relationship with the book *Adfeilion Babel* as a way of exploring the materiality of *Cymraeg*, the limits of my access to *Mamaiaith*, the way the book acts as a mask, a block, a charm, a babe etc. The book as mask I think of a threshold, a place I

cannot enter - the book, Cymraeg, the unconscious material within the bodymind... I read and fail to pronounce words from the book. I push my face into the book then tie it to my head with string, wear the book as a mask.

2. Symudliw – ‘moving colours’, from the last line of *Adfeillion Babel*. This suggested the motions of the liminal. I circle the triangular poem-as-scenography repeating and repeating the spoken fragments until I become dizzy. To revel in the embodied fragment in motion, to allow emergence from new connections, to feel that inside... I find myself collaging my grandmother’s letter and words from the Geiriadur Mawr.

3. Plethu. The Welsh word for braiding, weaving can refer to dance or textiles. I invited the voicing of fragments through the idea of an interweaving communitas. Their voices, their join creation of a web of thread, they help embody the community to feed the poem, support it...

## **Embodiment**

Using the body to think through the embodied nature of language, I establish a score of movements, actions for Mamaiaith. Firstly, I explore the gesture of grasping or failing to grasp – this could be a word in Welsh or perhaps a blackberry, something grasped and brought to the mouth, then what the mouth makes with what it has received. Psychoanalysis and artistic practice, movement improvisation, dreams etc, these all give clues to how I consciously and semi-consciously am embodied in the language and ideas I am exploring in Mamaiaith. If Cymraeg was an intimate language of my childhood, read to me from story books, whispered into my ear, heard continually but never grasped semantically to its full, how does my relationship to the language impact on how I move, how I write, how I communicate? What are the gestures I can mine? From the idea of grasping, explored in the Manchester iteration of ‘Mamaiaith Gestures, Ruins’ for the Gestures Conference, I move towards other movements to form a sequence of movements for exploring the relationship with the book: *Adfeillion Babel* as babe, precious weight, burden, intimate, blockage, mask, divination tool etc...

I also explore the embodied nature of the voice. Pronouncing and failing to pronounce the difficult Welsh words from *Adfeillion Babel* and feeling the *ruins* in the mouth and experimenting with using them as words for incantation or chant. Drawing them out, excavating the word, its ruins or seeds of possibility.

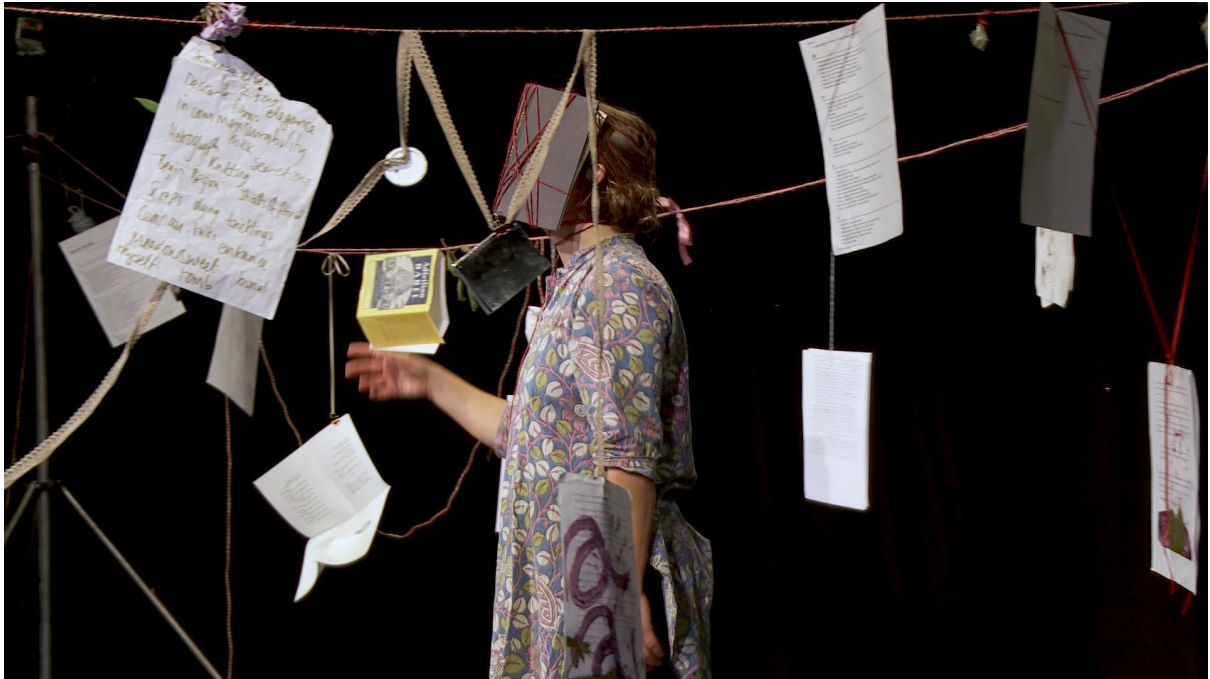


Figure 9: Mamaiaith Salford, *Adfeillion Babel* as a mask

At the end of the first adfeillion babel stage, I tie the book around my face with the string. The book becomes a mask pressed to my face, it blocks off my sight and means of communication. I go deep into the material of the book, feel the tightening string, the threads, the bondage and then release...

### **Mattering of materials**

To *matter* the material of Mamaiaith, I consider materials in processes of making ritual poetry: writing, books, objects, organic matter flowers etc, papers, photographs, movements, all of these form the scenography and score and the poem is manifested through their mattering. I use the book as mask and signifier.

To cut off the eyes and mouth and try and communicate, block the body. I play with modifying quantities of stimulus: the multiplicity of language, two languages, the entire writing and making process and my own history. I am actually working with my own tendency to multiply and go off course, so this work is also a confrontation with the demon of multitasking and multiplicity.

### **Sparagmos into poesis**

I think of sparagmos here, as a metaphor for tearing asunder of word from meaning, me from Cymraeg, the subject from desire, people from land etc. The first section of the work considered *adfeilion*, ruins, loss, destruction of texts, destruction of bilingualism and more widely: the destruction of diverse ecologies and cultures. Adfeilion in the mouth – the shape of a word ungrasped as it is tried out in sound, a blackberry smudge on the paper.

The second section of the performance, *symudliw*, then created an embodied moving collage of found fragments, an assemblage whirled up together through a body in motion. Dizzying into the middle I found myself holding two texts: The *Geriadur Mawr* and my grandmother's letter to her supervisors asking what was the value of her thesis, can she have more time to complete her thesis, asking whether they think the project is 'worth it'. In this circling down into the language, into the body, into the liminal and into history, I managed to tear out a page of *Adfeilion Babel* with my foot.

The poesis was then opened out further in other peoples' voices in the plethu section.





Figure 10: Mamaiaith Salford, *Symudliw*, entering adfeilion

## Plethu

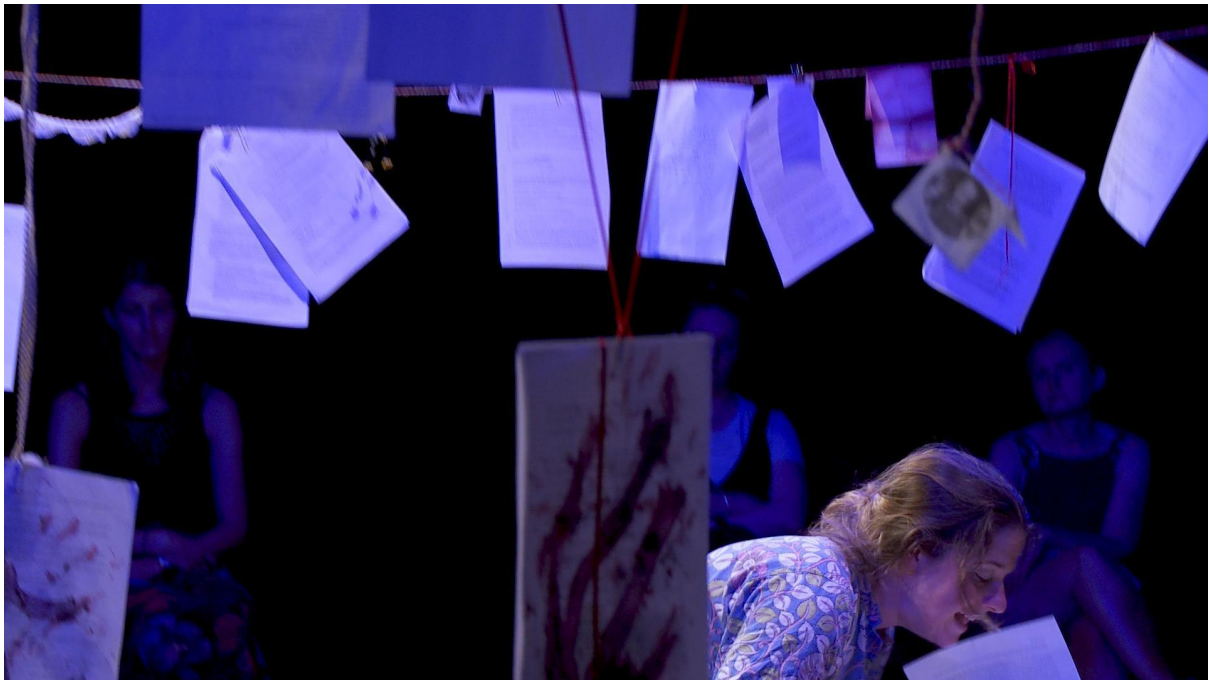
In the third section I wanted the audience to help me activate the poesis with me, helping me voice the texts. This made for interesting vocal texture, a messy chorus with different rhythms and accents emerging. As they discovered the material and moved around the triangle they pulled in the yarns and spoke the texts, making a kind of loom, plethu. Once they got going, they had difficulty stopping, why? People were finding their way through the text listening to each other and finding their own space, seeking out a rhythm, finding a *communitas*?

Yn Gymraeg, *plethu* is a weaving or braiding action in dance and in thread or yarn. So with plethu, I invited movement, voice, language and yarn to interweave here. A history of looms, webs, wool in my writing practice, a number of tactile threads of indigo woven in. A vision I had of a woven textile of women's mouths all voicing their art. This was a thread connected to their threads, this gesture to the looms, threads of several other ritual poets who use yarn and textiles.

## History, othering

An unexpected emergence occurred in the symudliw collage. I happened to end up taking the embodied collage in a downward spiral, mixing words from the dictionary with Caryl's letter requesting her supervisors for more time after a disastrous viva on her thesis. Was it perhaps just coincidental, that this performance made a similar plea to academics to accept its knowledge? Was my research journey rhyming with Caryl's? Perhaps.

Ritual time, when the past becomes present. Reading the words from the dictionary, many of the obscure and obsolete words refer to a distant past of a language in relation with the land, nature and agriculture. Mixing this with the actual natural material, flowers, leaves, fossils etc, in the scenography-poem I made had another effect, to think through a relationship with ecology. The ritual heightened the presence of the past and of ecology.



*Figure 11: Mamaiaith Salford, Symudliw collage dizziness*



## D. Collaborations, gifts

### Ooze transfer

The main part of the Ooze project is a collaborative poetic text which I co-wrote with Amy McCauley. A performance of some of the work from Ooze was planned for the Poetics in Commons symposium in Sheffield in May 2019. As Ooze explores English cultural identity under the strain of Brexit politics, particularly the Yorkshire that its authors were born and brought up in, it seemed apt to perform the work in Sheffield, my hometown, under the theme of a 'commons'. Before the performance, however, Amy was taken seriously ill and spent time in hospital. Instead of cancelling our contribution, we decided to explore the problematics of presence, absence and ability the conference situation presented us. We set on a form whereby Amy would offer me instructions for performing a ritual for Ooze over Skype and I would silently carry out her orders in the conference room. We constructed a script which contained these instructions and some of my poems from our collaboration which she would read in her voice, now broken into with tics from her illness and mediated through the conference technology system which was wholly unreliable. We actively used ritual in this performance in several ways:

- The intention was to create 'psychic transfer' between me and Amy, to make her present. We would do this by me making actions under her instructions.
- In the conference room, with the audience seated in theatre-style rows, Amy instructed me to create a shrine to Sheffield and my childhood using photographs and objects. I was also to wear weights on my body in sympathy with Amy's physical condition. These weights were made from canvas bags full of bird seed.
- I was asked to provide a safeword to Amy, signalling the bounds of trust as I was about to do what she told me to, this also humorously referring to BDSM ritual & Sheffield; the safeword was Bamford, a town near Sheffield I saw on the map she asked me to use as a tablecloth.

- The instructions for ritual action were then given: pour a cup of tea with Yorkshire teabags, apply weights, tie the audience up with string to signify community – optional. Then I was to offer the audience a drop of Henderson's relish. Later a participant described this as the Hendo's Eucharist. Hendo's carries a particular significance to Sheffield, it either can be seen as a symbol of local identity as a beloved brand or, in my mind, a reminder of the city's attempt at neoliberal branding exercise in creating identity symbols for advertising around cultural identity that stand in for but forget the city's complex industrial past.
- Several emergences occurred due to the materials at hand, namely that the technical system did not allow Amy to hear us in the room even though we could hear her. Communication was typed into the Skype chat box with the help of So Mayer.

Any ritual earnestness was tempered with some of the clownish actions I had to perform which created a lot of laughter in a mockery of ritual symbolism. This worked to throw into question symbols of cultural identity and subvert various expectations of a poetry reading at a symposium. And despite this irony, the presence of actual photographs from my childhood and the bags weighing off my limbs meant the humour switched between bathos and pathos. The process of performing the ritual for Amy on her behalf in her absence was moving.

The ritual's deep meaning lay inside the kernel of its jokes: the emotive force came through the way I embodied Amy's words. Several of the audience reported being moved by the performance and I think this is because of the way my present body stood in for her absence and our joint actions created a sense of bonding and friendship but also triggered sadness at the illness taking my friend away from the present. One spectator told me she was reminded of a period of similar illness and actually cried but was very moved by the evocation of friendship. The full-length collaborative poem 'Ooze Disco' that this performance grew out of is currently being edited and will be published as a pamphlet.

## Cynhebrwng Aer

A collaboration with Rhys Trimble, Cynhebrwng Aer, literally an ‘air funeral’, was a sky burial for texts made in the context of bilingual Welsh poetry traditions. This theatrical poetry performance explored ritual as a means of creating poesis. The intention was to bury, to effectively *send off*, poems or texts participants wanted to let go of, submitting them to a process of a poetic sparagmos: collage, cut-up and re-formulation in an enactment of poesis. We took up roles that corresponded to ritual-leader, me, and holy clown or trickster, Rhys. We invited musician of Medieval Welsh music, Hilary Davies, to join us in both of the project’s iterations. Participants were asked to bring a text to ‘air-bury.’ The abstract, originally written for the context for a symposium on experimental poetry translation, Poetry in Expanded Translation 3 in Bangor University, is as follows:

Reincarnation as translation. A ceremony in which participants are invited to ‘air-bury’ a body of poetic work. Ritual players, including the cutter and the crow, will guide witnesses through a process of ‘therapeutic’ ex-carnation wherein potentially volatile or problematic discourses are dismembered and fed to roaming scavengers. Eventually the source text is transformed into a cacophony of dissolution and a poesis may result: creation ex-nihilio from the aftermath of destruction

The piece was performed twice, once in Bangor at the symposium in a fibre glass ‘Caban’, nicknamed The Dinosaur, at Y Pontio Arts Centre, and once again in a Baptist Chapel at Ledbury Poetry Festival. Both occasions offered unusual spaces reminiscent of or actually involved in ritual. The following is a description of the performance from my notes:

I wanted to do an autopsy; Rhys wanted to do an air burial. We want to work together. We talk about this as a literary ritual. I visit him in Bethesda and he is in the middle of a busy time but we explore the spacing in his studio. We make a circle on the floor for one person to sit or lie in it. Later we test this on my friend Tamara and she reacts badly. We discuss how to not make it appropriative of the cultures in Asia where sky burial is found. We try to focus on Wales and on the texts. We think of dramaturgy that will allow participants to feel safe. We perform it twice and each time the space

is very strong, its own character. The time is too. Cut up is a big part of this work, partly coming from Rhys's practice. The text as a body. It is properly 'total translation' (Rothenberg) and theatrical so elements can go wrong such as costume. Roles are played, and masks donned. Working with Rhys is a tussle but it works and collaboration is strong. We overbear or underbear each other, have different conflicting ideas. But we learn a lot from each other and from the process. It remains to be seen if this is ethically culturally appropriative – transposing a ritual form from one culture into poetry. But we do think about translation, of Cymru and Cymraeg and language. Air burial, excarnate funerals may have been a historical reality in ancient Britain. The event is a ritual because it creates community and transforms. Working with Rhys is very important to thinking about the role of Cymraeg and I take Taliesin's Cad Goddeu and other approaches into Mamaiaith.

Later we developed the 'tussle' in this performance into another poetry project 'Roid Rage' which is a poem which we perform by having a fight, inspired by ritual fight dances and wrestling.

We wanted to see what might happen to poetry under this ritual dramaturgy – a procession, liminality of play time where masks and music were used, the repeating ritual action of circling the participant and destroying and remaking the text, Rhys eating the text. It informed my thinking about the relationship between Welsh and English and the current political questions around the languages.

Both Rhys and I were poets experimenting with theatre and thus various problems emerged which came from our lack of experience in theatre. These turned into learning experiences. One example of this is that Hilary came to the first performance wearing a medieval style dress that was for me too reminiscent of new age ritualistic cliché. This, together with Rhys's homemade mask, gave the performance a slightly carnivalesque feel and I felt that this overall look of the carnival perhaps distracted attention away from the poetry and focused on the core of the action. The symposium was about translation and we were thinking about how we could translate the idea of air or sky burial into our literary contemporary culture. But, however much we tried to make this about our own

context, and found examples of 'excarnate' burial in Wales's history, this original transposition between cultures remained as an ethical issue of possible appropriation in my mind.

As a way of creating live poetic sparagmos with participants, a poem cut up and remade in ritual poesis, the work raised a number of interesting methodological and conceptual points for thinking about ritual poetry and informed the works to follow. This experiment with sparagmos-poesis and poetic *send-off* of the text then did work its way into later works such as in workshops I led later, such as at Blue Lagoon, and in a more sonic cut-up in the Mamaiaith Salford performance. This piece also developed into another collaboration with Rhys, Roid Rage, which involved a series of ritualised wrestling performances and a zine publication.

## Ysgo Drysfa, August 2019

The following images show a poem made by my family members who walked into the centre of a drysfa, a labyrinth, and made an offering. It took place on a beach, Porth Ysgo, which my family have been visiting in summer since the 1950s.

I had originally thought about making the Drysfa about our lost cultural world, our relationship to our ancestors, Welsh and the Llŷn peninsula, but decided to keep the ritual open so each family member could make their own meaning of it. The idea had come to me from a woman I met at a party at another beach, Cwm Ivy on the Gower peninsula, earlier in the month. I found her when I saw the labyrinth tattoo on her arm. A practitioner of rituals, she told me about the ritual of the beach labyrinth, 'it's beautiful when you can do it together and to watch the tide wash it away'. It took me and my parents a long time to figure out how to make the labyrinth in sync with the tides, it had to be low enough to make the labyrinth on enough sandy expanse, but if it was too low, it would be late in the day and the young family members would get tired. Crucially, we had to plan what and how we would eat. A storm came in so we couldn't cook and eat the blackberry pancake mix we had brought and we didn't get to see the sea wash the drysfa away, but it was still exceptionally beautiful. The need to follow the rules the material environment offered, the tide and weather, the wildness, created a feeling to myself of honouring the land. I was struck by how the offerings that the family made collectively in the centre of the labyrinth, seemed like a language – a line of visual poetry, a message. I was also struck how different family members responded, some seemed enchanted by the beach itself and spoke of the shells on the rocks as messages, control boards for a planet trying to tell us something. Another said when walking out of the labyrinth that she was uncomfortable that she hadn't yet left the labyrinth's structure. A few months later, I realised that this work has resonances with Vicuña's *kon kon* (2010) where she makes a similar shape on the beach and a precario – eternal and ephemeral – artwork and marks the site of a cultural and ecological loss. The blackberry pancakes were eaten later inside in the evening.



*Figure 12: Ysgo Drysfa Poem*





*Figure 13: Ysgo Drysfa shot of beach*





*Figure 14: Ysgo Drysfa shot of Porth Ysgo after event*



*Figure 15: Ysgo Drysfa shot of poem and sea*

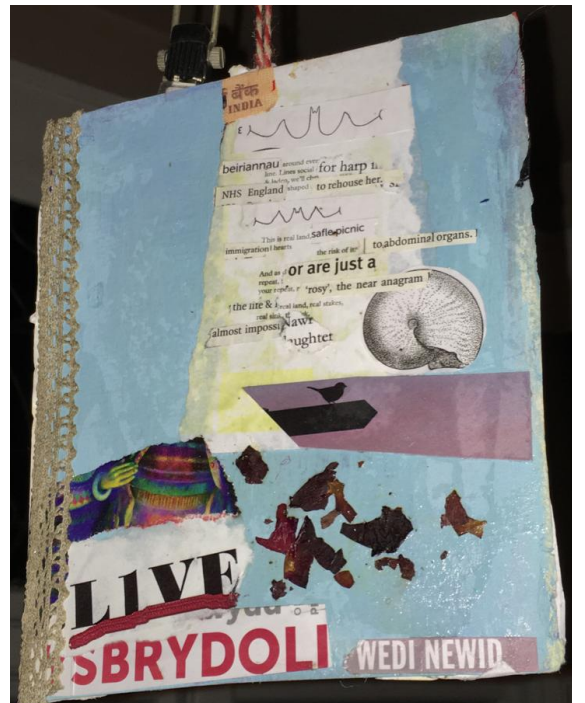
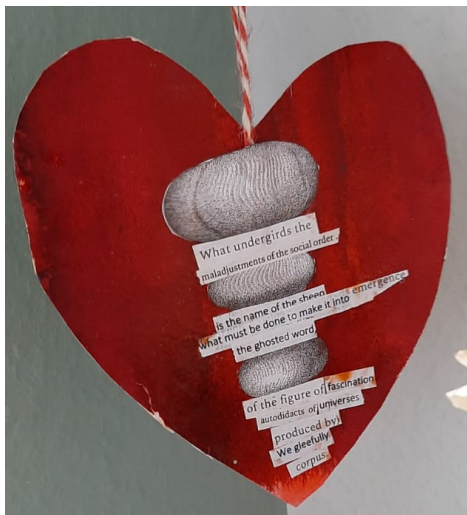
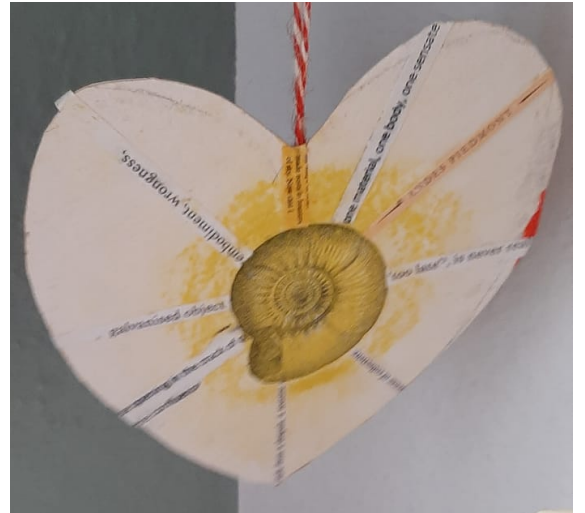


Gift Collages

The following figures are images of a selection of collages and visual poems I made for friends and family in the gift-giving ritual tradition. Each image was taken by the people who received the gifts, in situ.

Figure 16: Gift collages 1-8







## E. Tawe Ritual Poem Cycle

### Paviland Cycle<sup>4</sup>

#### Ritual Steps (write/rite)

Rite – pupils, neck breaking breathing adfeilion

Rite – unfinished plethu

Rite – a thread to visit my loves' loves' loves, by night, by ether-frag,

Rite – lapse into a new language/ incant-enchanted on private wards/ against death  
against debt

Rite – for the opposite of alienation, an escape in the likeness of an otter, an  
arrival in the likeness of an utter

Rite – a daubing of untitled powder, to hurls to howls to singz, now you keep a  
book on a string

Rite – a social rhythm, for decades. For seconds. For the cuckoo

Rite – the precarity of a breathing cycle, it's passage

Rite – a dedication to the dying

Write – you want to change or rest or a continuum

Right – to claim back to deprivatise our I's

Wright – a tradesperson weaves between me and my loves' loves' loves, the  
redder thread

Rite – act of poesie in a daubing, this ochre ash, the red lad

Rite – and to close is also love, pass something on, something less grave

Rite – gathered, offered, precant, washed away for a future

Rite – the body grateful, the ash redder

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<sup>4</sup> Goat's Hole at Paviland is the site of the first evidence of human ritual in Western Europe – the burial of a young man's bones covered in red ochre from the Palaeolithic period, known as the Red Lad/y of Paviland.



*Figure 17: Four Stills from Paviland Cycle film*

## Paviland Cave trialogue

Characters:

~~Red Lad/y of Paviland~~

The Present (Poet)

Trickster (Future)

~~RL~~: you want me to reverse the process?

P: I know you cannot

T: I thought you said time wasn't necessarily linear, poet

~~RL~~: I am not communicable, I am not from your epoch

P: but I can learn from you?

~~RL~~: Whatever you desire, the rock is yellow, the cave is hollow etc

P: I don't seek dialogue, just action

T: consecrated action?

Or elevation in the social hierarchy?

P: my suspicion is that ritual is just temporary elevation. Communitas gives momentary relief. So that the play is only temporary, it endorses the structure that continues to rot and hollow us. Year after year.

T: I'm not enjoying this poem, remember I am your only audience!

P: the poem is disintegrating, again

~~RL~~: a smock of red, rotted onto my bones, or did they rub me in ochre

P: I cannot poetick in such a time, only action

T: but you also desire dancing around an empty room

P: it gives relief from you

T: you think I will bring about your destruction? You are right. It will always be like this.

P: you enchanted me once

T: I still enchant, admit the gothic totality of death has always been a lure for you & your friends

~~RL~~: my inaccessible mystery, once revealed, could be mundane or it could answer all your problems. My trace is of ceremony, of the first human doings

T: Poet, you can insult me now, you are approaching liminality after all

P: I don't have the energy

T: but you wake up every morning, feed the chickens etc etc

P: this is not life

T: I am coming for you

P: I can smell the smoke

~~RL~~: I must bore you by now, you've forgotten me. Perhaps you know not the meaning of the language I speak

P: I can write an elegy for this moment, and the fire you bring, and the floods

T: You must be speaking to me

P: whoever is listening, the dead are not, I thought that they were, briefly

~~RL~~: Myself when I am real

T: when you were on your knees beseeching me, you felt I listened to you then, you were in earnest

~~RL~~: the stories that have been told of me, all my genders, all my epochs, throughout this, I was always red

P: when I ritualised for ~~RL~~ the marks I made, the ritual traces, came out like shit

T: Earth pigments flow from within to without. The continuum of this colour is always shit. Organic cycles etc. When reader-ears encounter this poem they will think it shit, until it flows out of them in dreams

P: I want to go back to the shop and purchase the cadmium

T: That toxic red, scarlet poison

~~RL~~: modernity's pigments have all been poison, I was organic

T: but think ~~RL's people~~ made needles from bones, layered up clothes, travelled further, rubbed with ochre their clothes and skin and maybe the bones they carried with them. All this fashioning led to poison, ochre to cadmium, ashes to fires etc etc

P: I am waiting for my ritual, this is why I summoned you

~~RL~~: how do you know the paint on my bones wasn't shit too



P: shut up bones

T: where are the implements?

P: I left them on ~~RL's~~ rock

T: before the chasm?

P: No I couldn't even make it to the chasm

T: so this ritual is not real

P: it could never be real, it was only play

T: I'll make it real

P: please don't

T: you already agreed

\*

T: are you excited because you get to wear a mask?

P: don't patronise me

T: but you get to play the trickster now, my part, you get to trick the adults

P: in my dream, once the ritualists were clothed and masked in strips of white muslin, then, once prepared, they ran off into the distance. I felt that that distant destination was the navel of the dream

T: we were just a bit hungry

~~RL:~~ put my bones back please

P: is this the ritual? To return ~~RL~~ to their resting place?

T: it could be, but why, then, are you wearing a mask?

P: it felt good, I do what feels good

T: just *be in your body* right now then [uses yoga-voice]

P: I thought tricksters were supposed to be funnier than this

T: I thought poets rhymed and remembered their ancestors thusly

~~RL:~~ my language was Babel

P: there's no evidence for that

T: your mask, poet of the present, could be your disguise from authority, your allowance to be uncanny or it could be a way of stifling your vision so that you become liminal, joined to your other senses. Similarly your mask could make you move your body in drastic gestures as you no longer rely on your face or language to communicate. There is another reason, it might be so you will not see what is actually inside the cave.

P: You are lecturing me. That is not the job of the trickster. Besides I haven't decided for which reason I took up the mask

T: but you will need to enter the cave now

P: gives me the creeps

T: I thought you enjoyed the uncanny, masks and dreamy belly buttons etc. You told me once you would get a tattoo of Blodeuwedd as a flower-owl. A woman made out of flowers turned into an owl as punishment

~~RL~~: the only tattoo that is worthwhile is the one where bones are smeared with shit, that is what lasts 32, 000 years etc

P: ~~RL~~ is starting to sound like the Real

T: move forward now please

P: what will I do once I am in the cave

T: you will find out

P: I hope I'll get to draw a picture on the wall like in the old days. I read once how the ancient rock artworks were about the process. It was an experience for the painter to paint, not the finished product. Process-driven from the start, crawling into the tunnel in the dark to do the thing, not to see it as such, not a product. That is enchantment

T: there are no paintings to be made in this cave

P: I don't want to see the future, nor any ideal forms

T: move

~~RL~~: cross my threshold

P: freshhold?

~~RL~~: nothing fresh about this place, as I said...

P: I want to stay out here in the wind

~~RL~~: have I put you off?

T: remember the owl tattoo idea. Once you dreamt that the tattoo covered the entire left side of your torso: it didn't seem as fun then did it

P: I like fresh ideas, I move freely between freshold symbols. That's my possibility as a poet, please grant me this

T: you are procrastinating        step forward

\*

~~RL:~~ What have you done with the poet?

T: The poet is full of presence right now, no language is necessary

~~RL:~~ Does the living body possess its own language? I cannot know because of my inhumation

T: oh, you've questions about the present now? A questioning voice speaks of some sort of life

~~RL:~~ some sort of life in these bones

T: your language is shit, remember

~~RL:~~ in my time the sea was a plane, the plane flowered every season

T: we don't do flowers anymore, remember

~~RL:~~ well, you've left the ritual middle somewhat mysterious again. Remember, vague mystery or occluded information creates problems, political and ethical problems for example

T: remember when in the present the poet held the bottle of linseed oil up into the light of the sun as it was setting over the sea and onto the mouth of the cave (though she couldn't reach the mouth of the cave so it remained only visible to the sea and the sun). Upon the rock and its chasm that she couldn't pass, she mixed the oil with the pigment she bought in the shop in the city where her father was born. In the Turkish coffee pot she mixed the ochre pigments with mud from the field that she had to pass to reach the cave. Paviland fields, very muddy. The mud was brightened by the ochre pigment. She struggled to open the lid of the second pigment, burnt sienna, but this made for a comic moment of ritual failure. Once the substance was thick, she painted a piece of wood that looked like bones and placed it on the rocks. She performed a gesture rite for the ~~RL:~~ The offering had to be done a few times to get it 'right'. Later she found

some redder mud and placed this into the coffee pot but this was after the supposed ritual.

~~RL:~~ This was supposed to be all captured on camera

T: yes but her boyfriend didn't press record

~~RL:~~ he always presses record

T: suggesting what, it was something else?

~~RL:~~ she always believed filming something like this was likely to go wrong. That was why she brought him to press record

T: so maybe it was you

~~RL:~~ I have no hands to press the record button

T: maybe you had some agency, despite being very very dead

~~RL:~~ ritual action happens in the present, its moment cannot be recorded

T: that is mystification. Ritual can be recorded. There is still a trace of what she did. Though the only thing she has now are the marks in her notebook and this coffee pot full of maroon soil. Memories too. As her audience member I cannot smell the linseed as it reacted with the mud and pigment, or feel how the mud contained grains that rubbed against the finger tips, or feel how the sienna hands felt washed with seawater. Moisturised and terracotta red... this is intangible. But you of all bones must know that something is left and remains

~~RL:~~ yep

T: she will have to repeat it, but then it will not feel real

~~RL:~~ ritual should always be repeated

T: then there are more of your kind?

~~RL:~~ I am legion, etc etc

T: maybe that is the problem I have right now. Too many bones clogging up the future.

~~RL:~~ she is emerging

T: she has changed colour

~~RL:~~ you must remove her mask, and catch her when she falls

T: what will you do?

~~RL:~~ what I have always done since I died

T: oh yeah

~~RL:~~ sush now little trickster, act do not speak

P: BABBLEBABELBABBLEBABEL

~~RL:~~ I know, but now you are ready

## Kilvey Cycle

### Kilvey Instructions

*Ritual steps for the Reader/Ritualist<sup>5</sup>*

0.

You might not want to go to Kilvey hill, but you must.

Everything will depend on the commotion of the air and your body.

The point of the journey is to heal a wound that keeps re-opening. This is the city's wound which cannot seem to heal on its own. It cannot heal in the hands of its current custodians of capital and drudgery.

In this walk, one can approach one's own relation to this spatial wound, or together we can approach our city's wound to find its edges.

Just because it looks natural now, doesn't mean it is:

Incendiary soil, mushed over with everyyellow gorse  
The things that grow echo, across the way, the things that  
don't grow.  
It is possible to go in two directions at the same time.  
Death and birth interlink through this action; genesis

I cannot presume to know the shapes you enter with and the conditions you move through. Neither do I know how you touch the gradations of concrete, bud, wire.

All I can offer you is an invitation to create a space here and open into the hill that has burnt in rites of spring over and over until its soil's carbon is deep, mud black with toxins.

The first part of the ritual walk involves acknowledging an ascent. How you tack across the hillside will depend on how you read Simon's map, or any map. How you read maps will depend on your relation to maps.

This is not a navigational device.



Figure 18: Swansea from Kilvey Hill

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<sup>5</sup> A walk following Simon Whitehead's walking map from the project *Walking Between Craters* (2011): instructions for a route to take around the sites where the Luftwaffe bombed Swansea and Kilvey Hill in World War Two. Prior to the war, the hill was badly polluted by the nearby copper industry in the Tawe valley so that barely any vegetation could survive. The hill is now partly regenerated with trees and grassland and the craters are sites of ecological regenerations. Brambles are one of the first species to re-enter.

Though I have walked and cycled up it many times, I do not quite know this hill.  
You have stepped, then, into my uncertainty.

I don't know how you would move your joints to my breath

I don't know how good your walking shoes are, if they chafe, etc.

Even presuming to ask you take a step with me. This is the threshold where the houses of St Thomas stop and the scrub opens up. You will pass this threshold and enter a land of bushy craters, I cannot suppose how you will do it.

1.

You are walking by now, I hope.

Perhaps you can walk whilst remaining in a reading position, stationary but not motionless.

And even just to read

Requires casting out over this threshold

And you did it

I did too

OK, touch the surrounds. It's fairly basic: touch smell listen look move. Feel your body in this new space. Yes ... when I came here a storm had just attacked the hill. I wrote about the bombs etc

Bombs etc

You'll be free to write or express or respond however you wish

We're supposed to be in the liminal now. But you're probably too irritated to be sure.

I'm not sure doubt like mine was ever supposed to be part of the ritual process, maybe that's why I sought rituals out in the first place - to move to the tune of another, but in choice.

Very BDSM. I wanted to participate in the ritual immersed, be free of doubt, let my Dom/Domme guide me. Relinquish all decisions. Now, if I am to be the guide, the priestess, the psychopomp or whatever I have to pass through this medial freshhold.

So, though I would rather follow, you have here my half-hearted instructions.

Before this hill was named Kilvey it was Y Bigwrn, the Ankle. So you are standing on the ankle of what, the river Tawe, your own ankle, mine.

My ankles survived this walk in extreme conditions, a good thing as they are liable to buckle.

Ritual poetry has a relation with the other which is not unlike BDSM.

Poetry is often placing one's intimate conscious in the language of another, ritual poetry asks for your body too.

Perhaps you've walked a while and are standing in a crater. Without endangering yourself, think about our relationship. Tell me your safeword.

OK I didn't listen to your safeword, I admit. But we are proceeding anyway. This is not that kind of intimacy.

The song for this walk is called Spells by Nils Frahm.

You will draw a line under the prevarication and step across the map, Simon says 'this is access land'.

The masochism of theatre is placing one's body in the black box for the performers to do what they want to you

The sadism of theatre is the arriving audience stepping into the theatre, demanding the volition of the performers for that moment of their own lives, arriving full of context and demanding entertainment, diversion, calm, education or even nothing and the performers cannot know any of this.

Likewise, the masochism of poetry is placing one's reader-listener in the intimacy of the language of another, being towed this way or that, entering a contract which may or may not relinquish you.

The sadism of poetry is the demand that you listen. The demand to be immersed in the icky intimacy of another's linguistic expression.

Just because we share a language doesn't mean we share this language.

If we suppose temporarily that ritual and theatre are the same (they are not), imagine the BDSM of ritual poetry.

Then what have we created? What demon is this? An activation that compels a body?



On the hill you must get over my confusion.

This, you must get over this problem. I am not asking you to yoke your entire being to me, just invite you to take part in a repetition. Walk again the walk of the bomb craters, the 13<sup>th</sup> of January.

I want to tell you to slow down, relax all muscles, sink into the hill and its tainted soil. Think of an emulsion, emollient to the screams of the tempest I came here under, in wind that recalled the bombing planes and incendiary fires. Just light, skin deep, a touch.

Touch the hill as if such a touch, light, repeated and love filled, were possible. Give it back the love it gave you as your home, your ecosystem.

Let the hill touch you back

Do not try to record this.

Let this exchange pass back and forth for some time, maybe 8 minutes.

OK now you have established this loving exchange, this co-touching soft play, you must enter into hard play: spank the hill

Make a mark

Over the marks make a mark

Do it ethically within bounds but you must mark it

3.

After a pause, and another pause. ...I can tell you now that dancing is the only dimension appropriate here. You are moving freely all over the hill, I hope.

Our relationship is now a furrow. I have tested something in it and found my oratory might be lacking. Consider how musicians just made this music, issuing no instructions for how to move to it. Not caring, you just join in or not. Think then of this instruction as a score.

The material glue of our bond thickens outside of language.

You are perhaps descending the hill by now. You may tumble, make sure this is a tumble into the best parts of yourself and the world. You are letting your ankles handle any rubble, careful of your speed, I hope you have warm joints. But feel a flowing through gravity and exhilarate.

I can hope for you the best ecology. I can say, look I've gone to the edges of my medium for you, I can't stretch it anymore, I've found my limits. You're on your own now.

I have hated poetry. I have lusted to be out of words, immersed in our relation, or in the material or in the body, carved out of 'production', 'progress' and 'survival'. That was my ritual poetics.

Meanwhile the ritual relation has been pulled apart. You can smell the gorse, that's all I might suggest.

How do you take this intimacy? Is it too close or not close enough?

The ritual turn: just tell me what to do and trust that it is something beautiful.

There are some people and things you can place yourself in, relinquish your agency to. These powers are your beloveds. They are not the market, unless you love the market. They are not the boss, unless you love the boss. They are not your basic necessities. They are your pleasures. Walk with me, in the form of enchantment, a form of open.

So find what you will on the hill.

Interglance, interwriting, you can move. Interplay of senses. Chop in here, play there. All that is happening here tends away from the misery of the present fixed fate, a course of violence a burning in the middle of a storm. This is a moment away from a crunching pathetic put-down of the contemporary system. This is separate. You are allowed to be separate. You must stray now, *dérive*, go errant. So what is here?

### **Kilvey craters / poem**

For Roddy,  
with Simon Whitehead's bombcrater map

Site gut,  
so windy my dream/ might bring in such commotion by asking for it

I trace the Luftwaffe's path in the ear as well as ground  
burning rain through this war and that, blazes on the other side of this wet,  
west. A concrete wall  
where I offer a branch torn off in the storm, its hot pink tips.  
A grandad shrine where I lay a flint rock.  
I deadhead the rose they've planted and send the seeds into the thicket,

There is a wall of gorse where I pick and flick a turmeric bud  
basic rites by now.

I just want to go home and read *A Sand Book*.

But there were wobbling moments, on crests when the world tipped.  
It had a heightened fear and swing, think of the bombed of now, in Aleppo, Rojava.

I know you would think this not serious,  
Like get to the real work now, I would try to explain these liminals:  
a chain of offerings and gestures, for remembrance.  
Errant into a hard wind, the crooked haws of Ceredigion  
I inhabit in my brief stance.

Simon says sit, shelter or lie and look at the sky.  
But I notice nothing shallow on the way back  
I need the peanut butter sandwich in the car.

Would you get that, that these sights and timecups,  
placings and whispers, movements,  
are poems? Look, the minimalist gestures  
are the sounds that knock us, you'd know. I think you'd know.

I'm just telling you what happened, surely that's enough?  
You never wanted to *cramp my style*  
poems which way or that, and you found creases. This is me taking it serious  
waving my wild authentics, moving for this because I like it. Thank you.

## Coelbren Cycles

### All my trees/threes

#### Score

1.

The shrine is concocted of rubbers, stones, fossils and animals, seaweed and trinkets. It has been desecrated too as it once held chocolate from Greece: 'Noi', but I ate it as part of the ritual.

At this shrine a breathing

2.

Three voices to inhabit three scorecards, i.e. poetry. (It felt so easy to split my poem voices into voices for play, as if I had been waiting all my life).

3.

Before I reach the admin of listings, stop. Future's instruction has more complexity in it than doom. Writing from a point of perished systems. Into the now.



Figure 19: Coelbren shrine

## Poetics on coronations and geese

It may be I fear what incorporation really is. To stay in liminality is swisher, structure hurts, structure impinges. I am currently thinking of the bad rites: the rites of elevation and reversals which endorse and reinstate the hierarchy, of Turner's essay 'Humility and Hierarchy'. The king and queen, humiliated briefly in their bodkins, filth flown onto them, simply rise again to their creamy top. They can rule forever through each repetition of the calendrical rite. Ritual was just a game for paupers to feel good for a day, a brief embodiment for the serf of some power, a brief fantastical masque for the worker. On your holy day you feel free and catharsise all the year's maulings, regular crushings, restrictions and shamings, robbed and blamed, pierced in the night by bill-fear. On the day of the coronation feast you get to touch the royal skins and throw onion peel and you can laugh spittle in their eyes and it feels good. But back at the station the rite has done its work.

Back in my poem I claim five minutes breathing in front of my gods, pleasure is the Canada geese who have been planted in a pond in Coelbren. They cast off into flight over the Roman road and the second cup of tea. Ritual poetry takes place within a context and a structure. I want a ritual against those rituals. The ability to reverse. This is my ritual, I made it up so it can be a free thing. I intend for it to reverse political rot, I intend to surge life out and dehierarchise.

The right side of my skull aches, the radiator is making itself felt on my knees. Morning clouds, morning Finn. The pond before me may not contain the salmon of knowledge but, morning beautiful

## Resources for Hope

Some carving out, maybe  
this can be no utopia

Not being a political  
or social strategist  
nor a climate scientist

I go running in the marsh  
Make hope possible

in this embodied eclipse, with  
Raymond's turgids, bless this  
freedom, a space to go piercingly  
parallel with the horizon

When the horizon is approached  
it becomes footholds  
an unbounded craggy place

no thin line. Poet friends are  
speaking to birds, being  
in their body  
acting out feathers etc.

\*

Resources are required now please  
Raymond, let it make us possible.  
The atmosphere fizzes with dread  
what we will do here  
our homes on fire

\*

Try an interspecial talking, a rite for  
losing you all. We the humans make incisions.  
Since the beginning there was tension

I believe in no past utopia, only  
schism future idylls, or a break that says  
you'll go on.

\*

Did my poem make a threshold for each lip?  
that is birth that is death.

A poem between breaths and slippage

across ways we hear the fowl harking.  
I make ethological tracks for hope. I can bed  
into that, be in your quacks  
grunts and squawks. You argue over the  
water left as when the ice has encroached  
but it melts soon enough.

You are not the romantick birds  
the poets usually go to for kicks,  
something absurd in your rough  
webbed foot wading,  
your rowdy quaking, any waddle, so tonight

I'll be with you and you'll be sleeping, your  
beaks curled into your wings  
and we live together for these days like this.

It's no utopia, I'll heat mushroom soup  
from a bag in the poptying  
then bed down in borrowed down  
from your brothers and sisters, even the  
bathroom is carpeted, love me love you.

My methodology is listening to you,  
you are hope but not a resource,  
Listen and write this, little quack, little quake  
I still think I can save the world, sometimes,  
want to, believe in something resourceful,  
that if I can just know more, think it through.

But the forces gathered fast around that cloud,  
same as the cloud of orange the Canada Geese set off  
into this morning in their drama.  
They are not back yet.

When panic starts, like the breath, bring it back to the ducks.

\*

The ducks are fertile,  
I can't smell them from here but I have the intention to do so.  
I haven't counted the different species of fowl

present in the pond. They are fucking  
only their brothers and sisters.

Bring it back and don't panic. The ducks are doing their thing,  
art etc, ducks etc, sex etc.

So my methodology is from climate panic  
to fowl fucking. This is also a resource.



## Dick Joke Poem

Sometimes the hemlock pushes back in a reflux  
and it's all I can do but to take pleasure  
sometimes I want to breath all over your face my fumes  
or shoplift a product to try it before I pay my fool's ransom  
and then the closeness of the surveillance haunts me out

Sometimes such closeness is percolating, like you're  
being watched by a mechanical boss and even though I'm  
free from that eye momentarily the future holds possibilities.  
The horizon's reflux, a static moment where I held on to  
a breathing apparatus to steady, an oxygen cylinder as a pet.

Limped across a stony driveway. Hey it's polluted here but the  
dick jokes aren't all bad and I can be steady with your  
quick text. He's boarding a plane to Ahmedabad, she's fixing her sink in Berlin, a  
knock at the door and here are Viennese whirls in  
a ziplock bag, what did you get your mother in the end, I  
got her a balancing ball, under a tenner in Aldi.

The question about the nature of the hemlock doesn't go away.  
I dream my bike breaks on my way to Newfield school where  
I have gone back to work as a support assistant in my first job  
and I'm late and the broken bike gets stolen on Carterknowle road,  
the wrong side of the hill. A classic  
anxt dream with interesting backflash to  
'oh so sweet that you want to volunteer for us',

Oh, what, I had thought this was a paid job. Some figment  
of humiliation and precarity, some leavetaking.  
But the surveillance is heavier now and

I'm better at yoga, and genders and poetry, actually maybe not poems, will never understand the old mercury. Blessed too are my sexual fantasies which are far more elaborate.

The patients, we must presume, never leave  
the desert retreat for hypersensitivity, Wrenwood  
and what made you sick? remember you made you sick, oh yes.  
That was 1993, *Safe*, with Julianne Moore.

I keep this charm safe next to my bra I didn't lift it from Aldi  
they won't find me to advertise eye cream to me.  
Sometimes the hemlock represents mercurial potion, half  
killing half joy. Unpicking its appearance in one's mind  
is like picking at the scab of the navel of the dream.  
Why was I riding a bike to the school/workplace  
which is on the other side of a steep Sheffield vale.  
Hemlock is the martyrdom of philosophy, the apogee.  
It sounds like headlock, see my cod analysis.  
Enveloped by fumes in the dry cleaner's,  
Julianne Moore has a seizure. Of a sudden she's

a white rod in fish pose on the floor,  
red spots bursting on her creamy impeccables,  
we're not sure if it's all in her head but I feel those fumes too,  
killing hemlock; people speeding up my road, grins out,  
cars waiting engines on, pumpling,  
me too, lifts back and forth across the city.  
But poor Juliana moves into a porcelain cave.

Even the desert isn't clean enough. Her oxygen tank gives  
her joy, and a further frailty. I'm allergic to you ziplock plastic bag

but I like the biscuits you contained.

Before this, the poem had a figment of the sociocultural,

something of my desires since the age of around 14. Something

about difference and posh people and not so posh people.

It clustered around the word sociocultural/economic.

It had a sad feeling, that of a poem becoming a poem about poetry,

as in poetics. It's creeping now, but I want to leave

you with Julianne Moore's complexion, it's transfiguration from glow;

the kind of angelic substance of painters, to lesions and

sunken raw red tissue, still pale despite the red. How her sociocultural

band loosens as the illness provides new identity, subjecthood. She

limps back from her husband's shirt, toxic, and my poem is over.

## Hafod Ritual Poem Cycles



Figure 20: Still from Hafod Cycle 1

## Hafod Cycles 1 & 2

### *Translation, or poetics, in lieu of the DOCUMENT*

In the moment you're reading you look real

*how to*

*look real when you're [bookish]*

A high kick

side glance

What did the body learn from this lengthy panting

painting

in

*Is it oh lord of the caves*

*is it*

Awareness is not easy

Rolling each string towards this one towards this one to pull in  
wheel

a wheel inside a

Side project score for

*Me when I am real*

Or is it just wilderness

Which mark is the right mark – what is the physical manifestation of the cosmic problem?

Bad vibes: Vodafone stole my family love / Vivian's dog graveyard / Idiot tyrant re-elections / Half the students were absent to Scarlet fever, winter 1865 / Hapticality's Hope(less)hope

What happened when copper emerged in the hall when it manifested as strong history?

Transferences to the dead and their ochre

when you crawl towards the camera, something is rather interesting, but then it's gone

Oxidised water seeping out of the mine    dead orange

regen

Regeneration: the joke of the post-industrial, the 1990s

When you pulled your arms apart, for example, as if drawing a bow

the space that opens up

this join is the [                      ]

My cursive best

The gaze of the world

The gaxe of the world

The gas of the world

The grave of the world

The gain of the world

Is the camera lens a threshold through which the world stops (or starts) to see you? Let this threshold of previous rites melt and feel the world as some other

Can they all link up if you pull the string> if you wind the string in will you regain everything you have lost?

Breathing and breathing the link unsevered  
Snipping and snipping the fates at the string

*Will not die till the beast is killed* time's up a breath a block  
Between memorising the words and remembering and forgetting and remembering and forgetting  
Repeating until the gap between recalled restored word and

Tuning or layering or linking in the knot to act out

Alone in the Victorian school, the rain coming in  
a circle where the camera's gaze can fall  
Are ritual and documentation mutually exclusive?

Awareness is not easy is it oh Alama Prabhu, oh AK Ramanujan, oh Lord of the Caves

Claustrophobia, which is what we're in hunt hela the site for  
history  
Datrys / drysfa

That opening the jar *i get trouble even opening a honey jar* stalled the body made me REAL



Figure 21: Movement Still from Hafod Cycle 2

### Hafod Cycle 3

Slag score: for Language is a Virus



*Figure 22: Still from online performance for Language is a Virus with Hafod Slag*

## Ars scenic

Ars nic nip (I didn't know whether to drink it but

orange squash lichen or is it fur

Iron pips floating up

I-ronics pretty patchy palms did contaminate through skein

How they rust in me, rivers scratched out

ore, coal, fire, waste, flush

ore, coal, fire, slag, bury

I want to be be self-treating with you ars poetica

flush and rinse and dissolve \& tricklet

minglement with that system of wheels and pulleys

### Handsfree to Burn

A wheel driving the water up and out, up and out and up out through round

FE-leave and Ah H Hafod lichens, entanglement typically involves peroxide

But wall flowers from cyanide grudgingly heat

copper-bottomed brats in the skawl ysg ol

An ingot dissolved in the sun and a lemon flue

Cite ars scenic views of the minehead perpetual melting



## F. Ritual Poetics

The following collection of poetics comprise a selection of miscellaneous works from a larger body of texts, commentaries, notes and poems. They are ordered chronologically from 2017 to 2020.

### Eurydike Poetics, Ghost Jam

*November 2017*

I was beating my chest. My arm would fly out, flap and come back to my breastbone. My arm was like a sentence being uttered, flying out in a fluster, manic talking. No, actually, my arm was releasing a sentence being held in the chest, then spoken.

A hand moving from the wrist, then the elbow, the fingers held together like a wing. One hand might catch the other on my chest and hold it down, not too hard, as if cradling something precious, only for it to fly out again. A fluttering, bird arms. In this action I let the words that needed to fall, fall out. Between my panting breath, up through my exerted lungs to my mouth

*are you falling?*

Bathed in red theatre light among other movers, poets and musicians in an old Vietnamese Social Centre in Hackney I was entering a new place I had not before ventured into. This was a 'Ghost Jam' a gathering of poets and artists improvising for a duration of time, at a site of interest, this time thinking about the subject of Eurydice.

Afterwards I sat in a chair vibrating, dazed, elated, low key, 100% sensual as if meditating. My body was ringing. Aware of everything and everyone around me and somehow transported. Once I had come back to the normal plane of existence, people remarked that they were moved – seeing someone in trance can provoke strong feelings, tears. Perhaps this had been a trance. The next day my neck ached, no surprise, remarked a friend you were hitting yourself pretty

hard. How strange, I had not felt a heavy impact at all – it had all felt light, as if flying. At one point I had stood on a chair and toppled over on my toes only to pull myself up again, never to fall though it might seem as I might – I didn't, I had made sure I would not through repeating and repeating the action. *Are you falling?* Still there in each repetition there was always a moment of risk when I could have fallen, a slight topple.

It was only the second ever time I had used my body like this in a live performance. And it was the first time that it had had such an effect in this form.

I had developed this specific action from a poem for Eurydike.

*I'd take it*

It may have seemed improvised but some of the constituent parts had been developed, some had been repeated over and over, sometimes in repeated rooms, sometimes outside between trees.

### **Early ritual poem works: Oceanik & Eurydike**

I wrote 'Oceanik' early in 2017 using a nascent form of embodied writing. I began to think of a poem as a score for a ritual performance. Oceanik contains something of a textual *sparagmos* whereby my name and that of my former partner were torn apart and re-rendered over and over. For its performance then I wanted to cut up language and remake it in another ritual poesis in live performance. Lucia Sellars made a film to go with the poem and it was popular.<sup>6</sup> In some performances I used these visuals as a backdrop to make another tearing action with the poem. For example at Hay festival in May 2017 and then at the projectivisms symposium in Cardiff in 2018 I tore the paper of the poem up and sifted through its remnants to reformulate a poem, visiting the floor to find a fragment and then repeatedly bringing the paper to my diaphragm.

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<sup>6</sup> Oceanik (2018) Nia Davies, film by Lucia Sellars.



Figure 23: Collage after Oceanik Sparagmos

For the Eurydike performance, my starting point, score if you like, was the poem from my collection *All fours* (2017) ' & blow in the god's good wake to leave only pounded dust'. I wanted to explore the embodied terrain of desire in that poem. Starting at the Studio Matejka workshop in Brzezinka in Autumn 2017 I developed an action where my arms flew out as birds, drawing on the poem's symbolism. This turned into a repetitive ritualistic action of striking the chest, an action formulated out of the poem's prompts. I performed this work in the Ghost Jam London and at poetry festivals in Croatia and Colombia in 2017 and 2018.

Both these poems were exacting to perform, partly because the poems were originally written under premises with great emotional significance. Developing the text and the performance had touched on the way that some forms of traumatic experiences impact on the body and can be reactivated in particular movements, embodied writing and performing. My use of performance technique was still

undeveloped so I was not able to conserve the energy and it made the performances very emotionally intense for me and the audience. This made for poetry readings that were affecting and the feedback from spectators was often highly emotive but the process was exhausting. These projects provided useful insight into how techniques of the body and material can be used in a ritual action for a poem. In the case of the Eurydike performance the chest-beating also struck a somewhat overly stereotypical symbolism of ascetic ritualistic action which I would prefer not to invoke in the same way again.

The insights from these stages of working with a poem as prompt/score for ritual action in a performance were then ploughed back into my poetry writing and poetics process as well as informing a desire to develop the embodiment and presence. I wanted to use poetry to perform rites whereby a more nuanced and developed relationship between text and body and ritual action could be established. I began writing with a ritual performance in mind, experimenting with writing for the Mamaiaith project.

## Descartes, Demonology

*Poetics after ritual, Indian Institute of Science, Centenary Guest House, Bengaluru,  
January 2018*

Descartes observed: sensual input from the body is not reliable, therefore the only thing that proves I exist is the *thought* that I exist.

The mind, thought, is more reliable than the senses which melt, the body

- how odd, counter to my feelings  
now. To me thought is unreliable but  
embodied existence feels more solid.

Descartes: only what is measurable and provable solid can prove anything.

Hiding from the inquisition, the  
Catholic church.

Descartes: deduction is more reliable than perception.

Descartes: the body like a machine. I have seen automatons on the streets of Paris.

Descartes: the immaterial mind interacts with the body at the pineal gland, seat of the soul

Descartes: here is a dualism. The mind can control the body but the body can also control the mind, which is passion.

Descartes: The passions 'are all intrinsically good, and ...all we have to avoid is their misuse or their excess,'

Descartes: the passions are a natural phenomenon, necessitating a scientific explanation.

I think of the smart phone as like an appendage  
to the Cartesian body then. In, out, through it the world  
looks or takes or gives.

Meanwhile the embodied mind is enthralled to  
this new machine.

*And so: A Movement for Rene Descartes: Ritual improvisation after Mamaiaith*

*Notes, prior to moving*

Ever think, what the hell am I doing here, strung out between these particular  
poles? Multi-Passions

45 mins dance warm up to mix by Pional (my favourite):

The light beam and my arm moving in and out of it – an aesthetics.

Awareness of sounds: Car horns, birds, talking, clock tick

Balance and ambition: falling back into mind's –

Laurie Anderson 'Oh Superman' comes to mind, lying on my sweaty back on the  
tiles

Legs, finger through them like a Georgia O'Keeffe

Desires comes in – the motifs of a current desire enter here –

Ritual dressing: Donning my psychedelic cat leggings and orange-red vest in a  
performance/ritual mode so I can lie on the cold tiles

Machines in the body, machines of the body, the body as machine the machine as  
body

Machinic rectangles – the rectangular men walking around the ISS campus in their  
specs, the grey men like Rene Descartes in the court of the Swedish queen,  
automaton men. But these men have also been and are flesh.

Symbols fall into the body: the lost-wax deer, hunter, the mum & dad of oh  
superman

Language enters the machine and the machine creates language

I do my moves: bird arms, falling desire up and down, fall into crawl, this time the window is a point of call, then crawl back to the desk over the bed (relief to the knees) back to the book

Word emergence from the embodied voice moving (crawling): cause, course

To a book to find another word: Grief dries – Jeet Thayil *The Book of Chocolate Saints* – I think: brief dies,

The song for this emerges, resonating throat, walk back to the window. See the pagoda on the next floor of the guest house, architecture and movement and language and the machine, we are here, responding to Rene's unreliable sensory input

I move as if pulled by the scruff of the neck, a favourite place for touch. but I can't do it alone so I roll along the wall, tap and pull it with your hands pull yourself up like a puppet remember the cervical spine exercise at Brzezinka with Sandra... This, the back of the place where the voice resonates. And the place where we get so stiff from writing at the laptop, it is so nice to release; my baby nephew will have none of that tension yet

The spine of a book // The top of the human spine  
also this place when lying down when arching the back this place is in contact with the floor you feel it

This place where love enters

This place, back of the neck, did Rene Descartes like a soft bite here? The passions ruling the mind, he loved, wrote about the passions, made love to his servant and grieved her death, and never professed not to love. Why do we imagine he didn't?

At the Studio Matejka workshop in Brzezinka we were introduced in guided meditation to our demons and corresponding allies. My demon, the demon of multitasking, needed touch. This demon of whirling head and gripping hands of control and distraction who was also Mama and mum and me. The demon said it needed love and would have touch to get what it needed

So maybe now is time for a third demon meditation

Today's demon, pulls down from standing, stomach dragged with me to the floor, a pull of terror grief guilt shame, an inability to love, to give when needed anti-generosity, a grey-blue force a mist or a streak in the air feel physically bad, how I hurt others, how I don't care for them enough or neglect the ones who do love and give to the wrong ones, or cannot give, all at once, a real physical force impacting on my insides.

This doesn't feel like a performance but a real experience – particularly in the stomach churn, once on the floor, the need to piss, one sob, so I ask it

What do you want? space

(can't sustain them all, the people, the demands)

Roll over onto back

What do you need? Clarity – over what is love and what is not –

So I consider some recent loves think of mamta ashok suresh ashok kashyap finn tom amrita

How will you feel when you get what you want? It takes a while to find it, but: like water. I don't understand this, will have to come back to it.

Feeding nectar to this demon. It requires me to stand up whilst I am in the position of lying down. This is difficult. I have to fill my own dragging standing thing-think of the moment, up, I think of how Mamta tried to get me into the Lingaraj temple in Bhubaneswar last week and this as a moment of love which she did for me – guiding me to the entrance through the crowd, trying to get me in and hitting a man who had touched her there without her permission – an action-based friendship

A lingam somehow slowly painfully feeding up often it falls back to gravity, the lingam is a phallus but here it doesn't feel masculine or erotic, or even the same kind of power suggested by a phallus. It's an effort to stand up and show love

At the gates of Lingaraj – Mamta striking the oppressors, a sort of ritual against ritual – an act of love against hatred in a place of traditional patriarchal rites. This was perhaps our poetics against ritual hate.



Pulled up by scruff of neck, puppet, the love of the cervical spine

Seeing the clock, it's half five, this reminds me of my evening's semi-arrangement

I think about who I don't want to see, and I feel guilty about this. Is this love, is this the want of space, is this rude, is it finding my space, can't or shouldn't sustain ?

Why water? Fluidity?

Standing walking humming or calling out an open mouthed om, more like an 'ah'

Drinks a glass of water, resonating emptying ready to write this

Now go upstairs to the pagoda without the laptop and sit for a while. Neck stiff from leaning over the table to write this when I look up. I see the pagoda the rosy light the trees it's so beautiful, 'rustic brutalism' I described it to my crush. On the roof I find it hard to stop writing notes, eagles swoop in and out of the frame and I must record their movements...

### **A personal demonology**

My deamons or my demons and their component friends, allies, some two-faced frenemies...

1. The multitasker, eyes blurred from its shaking head, hands gripping out in front and the long haired lover, happy to be a nerd, focused, calm, pale torso gleaming
2. The disintegrating owl, grey dandruff flaking off, losing its plumage and the golden owl or falcon/raptor soaring above a valley and is also my home, my continuity, freedom
3. The glaucous streak that hampers the stomach, pull me down, it cannot give love, because it needs space from those who approach it without love. Then the lingam to pull up and take off, be human with us

4. A vague sucky hole in the wall it pulls all your – what? The woman with a long nose, kind intelligent but in this one I lost the detail as I slipped into sleep
5. A stubby skin bag a baby sized sack with a bony thing squirming beneath the surface is this my *nia no baby* the horror of having a child for no reason? Now I wonder, it is placed against the indigo weave, the network of plethu, women writers, workers, threads connecting us and in the spaces between the weave. Dinging mouths the strength the strength of the song the tone that vibrates the body and it is the connections as well as the space between the boundaries that are transforming, that are magic and I don't yet know in dreams I catch this then it floats away this is also nia no baby this is the love? Julia Holter: what do you squander, what do you hoard? The singing mouths are resonators in the throat and mouth, they amplify and open you.

## Actor-Hunter-Poet: on presence

*Poetics and poem, Zagreb, March 2018*

You have presence, I said

I have presents? You got me a present? He replied.

We were at the bar at Biere Club. I was vibrating.

Did he have *presence* of mind or did I project that thing, whatever presence is, into his personal zone, the aura around his rhythmic body?

Another bed to sink into. Another city.

White and bull-grey bed linen. A heating system that is constantly on baking everyone inside.

Being present means feeling heat and also feeling pain. And hearing pain.

...

How can you be present in a black hole?

Presently, I bought a packet of chewing gum, a bottle of water, a bag of 'student mix' nuts and some sweet coconut confectionary. The coconut shavings dropped on the white bedcover. White on white. I was reading *Schizophrene* by Bhanu Kapil. I registered the faint imperative of 'you write now'.

I think of Grotowski's actor as hunter – hyper attuned to the world around and the world within. Three levels of attention switched on – inward, towards the architecture and towards the others in the space.

When I have had more coffee than usual, I cannot be hunter. This is when I spill drinks, trip over, get lost, lose things, say the wrong thing. I am not present I am split between options. The phone in the bag splits me. Too many decisions.

Being present means intense now hyper here.

I feel present to the thought that the thermal underwear was a good idea. And it is already 5.30pm.

Presence: I think about wearing the long johns as well as the vest. I hear a whine of something electric. I am digesting coconut and sugar and the earlier wine, local

wine which is the same price as the imported rioja. Also the pasta that Marko cooked. There was five of us around the table. Four men and me. All poets. The room was dark and grand and it was clear to me that this was a room inhabited by transient writer-poet-artists, people drifting with their manuscripts, ritual objects and heavy books, forgetting to pack their slippers. A typewriter with a mannequin's leg on top for display. A psychoanalyst's couch which sags. Oval dining table. Yellow translucent curtains. Dark corners strewn with books. A cold floor stone tiles.

The anxiety that a reader of these words would think, so what? What are you saying? Always a hint, I wrote hunt, of such anxiety.

I asked Rhys if I could be a hunter in our collaborative performance. It's not relevant he said.

Note taking on the present, a list of everything strewn around the room. But I decide against this. Surely that would be too much.

...

Being present means feeling the sheaf of digital correspondence in the inbox, stacked lines of text, each signalling an email, a request, a call on my attention. Feeling it as if the phone in the bag harking to my attention too, pulling my presence from this page into that page.

Night is nearly here. The clock signals I only have 50 minutes to prepare for the evening's engagement. To be present is to also register time. Or perhaps to stop registering time. Funny things happen when time is altered with presence.

To not be absent. Put the *out of office* on, and become present.

I ordered *Archaeologies of Presence* into the Clifford Whitworth library and because I am not present I cannot go and pick it up.

To think of presence is to also note absence. *By homely gift and hindered words, the human heart is told of nothing -- nothing is the force that renovates the world.* Dickinson. Albeit stripped of her dashes. This is one of the only poems I know by heart. This heart is told of *nothing*. *Nothing* in this heart. This absence as a presence, this homely gift, these hindered words.

There is nothing in the black hole. Where your wasted efforts go to. I fear the evaporation of hyper production. Or is it true that nothing can be totally destroyed. Nothing can be totally destroyed?

...

Writing on the present has blocked off certain parts of my memory recall. I am aware of all the connections but cannot access the name of my hosts. Perhaps ritual is to produce the mania which arrests, makes one late for one's engagement not wearing the clothes appropriate to occasion or weather or both. All the spin-off connections all seem relevant. Or may become relevant... What am I doing here? What am I doing now?

### **Actor-Hunter-poet**

Poet as hunter, hyper aware of language networks but wearing the wrong socks and now has cold ankles. Poet as hunter totally drunk because wanted to continue this conversation at a wooden table. Poet as hunter forgot to prepare for evening's poetry engagement because writing poem. Poet as hunter aware of physical needs but ignoring them in order to enter fully the writing mania. Hunter as poet has eyes out to every corner not wandering. No you don't have a wandering eye you have a Hunter's eye. Hunter as poet winding a dead hare around his arm. Hunter is a poet listing the names for the hare and crying because it reminds him of a lost love. Poet as hunter aware that she will need to iron her dress. Poet as hunter already selecting the green dress that does not need ironing but is the most flamboyant. Poet as hunter understanding that writing about getting ready to go outside doesn't mean actually getting ready on time. Poet as hunter really wishes she was hunter. Poet as hunter aware that writing this doesn't make her a hunter. Hunter as a real profession perhaps being too bloody, predatory, for poet. Poet as hunter because hunter was her favourite word for many years. Helwr in Welsh. The name of the street she lived in as a child was Hunter. And her school, Hunter's. Huntswoman at the bar. Hunter as poet at the bar not mentioning the dead hare because she wants to be present at the wooden bar with date. Hunter aware that this is not supposed to be a date. Wants to be hunted but only in play. Hunter needs to put make-up on for tonight. Hunter aware that she has a

tendency to go on. Aware of her gathering trance. Aware of a writing trance possibly caused by the spirit of the hare she has just killed. Hunter's bar. Poet as hunter not same as actor – hunter but we can make some shady minglings of auras. Aura as love – evaporating off the hunter's skin, or maybe that's craft beer particles from last night. Hunter as poet is aware of the self-mythologizing tendencies of poets and hates this but indulges anyway. Poet as hunter will keep her eyes open tonight, as wandering. But if she is wearing the wrong clothes it will go wrong

### ***Over land and over time: poetics from the Humedal Antiñir, Puerto Montt***

In January 2019 I crossed clear thresholds to enter the Humedal Antiñir. Firstly, there was the highway we had to cross to enter and a sign saying the land, sacred and precious spiritually, culturally and ecologically (these are the same thing to the Mapuche, and especially to Juan Paulo Huirimilla, my guide), was for sale. The sign suggested blocks of flats, investment opportunities. Stuart Cooke, the Australian poet who is collaborating with Huirimilla, translated for me, adds: it's not sold yet. For now. So, there is a history and a future to this moment, but for now we brightly stepped over the barbed wire. The environment inside was thick and lush with plant life dotted with a few human debris, a polystyrene block that with erosion looks a like bright white boulder: 'Chilean art installation' said Paulo.

The Humedal Antiñir is an area of wetland located on the outskirts of Puerto Montt, a town in the south of Chile. Puerto Montt is expanding, encroaching onto this site with ugly concrete housing developments that completely raze the crucial wetland ecosystem to concrete. Huirimilla has become the person to protect and advocate for the site, for which he uses several channels of activism, one of them is writing and translating poetry. After the barbed wire, we made a rite of entrance: potatoes thrown into the river, papas from Paulo's home island Calbuco. Whilst we chucked the papas into the stream, Paulo spoke some words in Mapudungun, a poem, an incantation, a dialogue? He explained, we were asking permission of the beings present here to enter. After this we walked through the land, chatting, joking, four of us, one a child, Paulo's daughter Kim, one a guide, one a translator and me, eyes senses wide open; all of us somehow poets here.

There are several things I learnt in the Humedal Antiñir. Firstly, of walking or being present in land as a ritual: the eco-ethical work of translation and writing as a way of making present a place and culture, or practice as a form protection and resistance to destruction. I also learnt of ancestors and antecedents – the presence of Kim and other children Paulo takes to the Humedal are crucial to this work, of inter-island relations. Note that the papas were from Paulo's home island and his first words to me were about Wales and Dylan Thomas –'intergalactic poetics' he joked. Inter-archipelago poetry translation. Thirdly, I learnt something of the encounter with a concept of time and space beyond what I am used to,

where several times and spaces are present in one time and space. Cooke explains some of Huirimilla's Mapuche and personal cosmology in his study and description of their collaboration (Cooke, 2019). Sure enough, the first thing the Humedal Antiñir reminded me of, through the first most immediate olfactory senses, was the childhood periods I spent in Ceredigion – gorse, brush, the air was like summer at Blaen Pant, my grandparents' home.

I got to participate in this ritual poem-walk in the Humedal, without needing to know the meaning of the words of the poem. I was invited in, and stumblingly, I became an intergalactic protector of the Humedal – on the other hemisphere of this site. All this I wrote about in reams and reams...

I want to note this most clear threshold – like Van Gennep's separation, a border crossing, could be spelled out: we had left the city and the vampiric capitalist tendencies for a moment and entered something else, a place of poetry, deep ecology and living history as it pushes up through life. A rite. An offering, a poem, a referral to the very old, an action embodied and multisensorial, something done together. This was something sacred, even if what the sacred is not necessarily clear or shared by all, a gesture. Indeed, in their collaboration, Cooke and Huirimilla see the Humedal Antiñir as the third collaborator in their project, a being they are in poetic exchange with.

This special in-between place came abruptly to an end at the other side of the walk; beyond the lake and scrub and bog, rich with common and endangered species and ancestor spirits that attend them. It ended with ripped-up ground laid out ready for development of a new plot of cramped houses for people to live in unhappy conditions. Stuart noted how this was a new development since his last visit, so the encroachment is rapid. The threshold is not just in space. This ending threshold of our rite was also very clear: abrupt texture change, concrete, clearance. But this time we didn't pause for any rite or words, we walked straight across without stopping and headed to the café to eat traditional piles of chips, vegetables and cheese.

Here Paulo asked me what I felt in the Humedal and I didn't know what to say because I had felt so many things immersed in the senses and material I had



found, had no readiness to describe them. Paulo noted this fear of statements in language, this reluctance to lock things down, as something poets from the city feel. Yes, often I feel a hesitation between language and what it refers to in the sensorial experience of such betwixtness... Remember the Humedal is a third collaborator in their project – a sentient being, ritual as a form of conversing with this, or a knowledge. When we create and cross the threshold we mark out between the profane and sacred. When we care for a land we make it sacred, make it matter.

## The metronome try-outs

*March 2019*

Just feeling a beat. Improvisation to the metronome in slight responses, small movements, vocalisations, just listening heavily.

The metronome is a powerful noise. It might help me learn about rhythm and beat and time in a performance. Can it be a prop or structuring device? It's heavy. In the body, in the head. It dominates. Perhaps this is how rhythmic structure overpowers, the overpowering structure of a ritual?

I want to stop it. A little back spring noise in its shell mirrors the tock.

Just listening to that and trying a gesture to its beat is a slow process. One gesture could take a long time to work on. The back and forth of the grasp and pull to the mouth.

The back and forth, like a call and response poem. For five hard minutes, tock tock

## Wolfcubs, redness: Poetics after Bhanu Kapil

May 2019

Settled in the oak's rain shadow, me and my new sister lay like wolf cubs. The rain fell through the new sessile leaves onto our waterproofs and we were not stiff or tired or cold or damp or indeed in any way uncomfortable in that shadow

The humanimal document is a machine that produces redness by itself.<sup>7</sup>

Bhanu Kapil does ritual in more ways than the first way, the way I started with when I first bought all of her books. I sense a new ritual aspect now; her writing also draws on ritual time. In her works, writing-reading is a collapsed past, present and future, a narrative of writing, body and other narrative (history) all at once.

Lying under the tree wolfen, oaken, was a kind of ecopoetics of the body, a lying down in the now and a lying down in the then at the same time. The *then* was the narrative history of the wood, that is Tÿ Canol wood, and the history of our lives till then and the *now* of water that is always moving. Passage.

This poetics is also a phenomenology of the woods, that is, a ritual for wolfcub sisters. In Kapil's book is an image of the two girls lying in a landscape over each other, asleep, Kamala and Amala, their heads shaven, their sleep an active moulding of weight.

Lying down in the woods I remember Kapil's Ban lying down, that it can be both active and passive resistance. Rest can be resistance. Lying down to die or lying down to live. The poetics of two shadow sisters. We are not equivalent to Amala and Kamala but we are trying to re-wolf ourselves.

In the photograph her flesh floats next to her in the black and white air; it doesn't adhere. Her bones are delicate, slightly too long for a human child's and coated finely, with wet fur. I know about the body because I held it in my hand. In the photograph. It was January. Joseph's great-granddaughter

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<sup>7</sup> Text no. 30, Bhanu Kapil *Humanimal* (2009, p. 35).

brought me a glass of water but I didn't drink it because it wasn't boiled. It wasn't clean.<sup>8</sup>

After dreaming of wolves and dogs, I searched the house for my grandmother's copy of *Women who Run with Wolves*, which I thought I had seen, but instead only found dust. Then I came here to ritualise. Several sequences of events followed and because the time was heightened with ritual intention they all seemed significant, and yet they are not all relevant. So, in honour of Kapil's own acts of deletion in poetics, I removed them from this paragraph.

I try and add the phenomenology of now, but it is bereft of the feeling I had in the woods. *Y Teimlad*. In the Tŷ Canol forest, Pentre Ifan, the house in the centre in the heartwood. I write a poetics on the re-naming of houses and fields yn Gorllewin Cymru. I make an action flowing from then to now to now to now.

Thinking smooth weights of bodies alive and asleep, sinking into each other's companionship. In the photograph Kapil includes of the girls, the nude skin of Amala and Kamala contrasts with the stubbly ground they lie so peacefully upon.

Kapil collapses time and space and calls up the dead. The sisters are dead but vivified in this ritual text.

Often, I want to de-commodify my ritual project and just be. Just lie under the sessile oak and be rained upon as I lie slumped against my sister who I have just met.

Humanimal takes me sensually back to India. But I feel as if I cannot and should not write about my being in India here. But it is hard to ignore this sensual resonance in the midst of the liminal.

Every now, then, holds those other nows. In Tŷ Canol woods there were other nows all entering my body at different points: the water, the soil, the smell of grass I had never before encountered because I had never sniffed it so hard before. Under our sleeping bones the Preseli blue stone, our blue ribs, knees, hips. The water of the stream passing each obstruction to find its course in gravity, the sea somewhere at its heart, and the next stage of its cycle. Water never stops moving,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

like the humanimal body. Even in rest, weighted in a landscape of intimate hills,  
we are animate.

My sisters touched my hips. And the point between my eyes.

All the ways we can touch, and this is an ecopoetics racing through our pages.  
Kapil touches the page I am touching.

I am not interested in animals. Return to the work as memory. Say it is a  
wolf becoming a girl, the action in reverse.<sup>9</sup>

I write: I am not interested in ecopoetics. Return to the woods now through the  
body as memory. Say it is an adult woman becoming a wolf, the action in reverse.

A problem with the Humanimal *now*, the hybrid sister moment, the problem with  
ritual time of everything at once, is that all matter becomes relevant. In the liminal  
ritual time of now, the writing body in action doesn't let boundaries crowd it and all  
is luminous and connected. But then the boundary must come. That is time and  
space. That is the body. The threshold is coming. And future cycles of repetition.  
It is here.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, Kapil, (2009, 10.ii, p. 16)

## Four magi: poem/poetics

January 2020

Score:

1. the etymology of matter,
2. magi's offering,
3. empty proposal
4. &another

1.

### The etymology of matter

Matter is all around here  
note the note b.

What was Kant's consideration?  
How did matter get through from  
building material to content, meaning, to the matter at hand?

Amcan / ystyr

All the matter the senses touch  
internal feelings  
external borders

Over it all, the nappyish scent of the narcissi musk.  
We talk about it all the twelve days.

Itchy skin on hands and arms,  
the gleaming things colour this ritual.

Note the note b ringing again and feel ivory,  
loveliest memorial touch

Sweat of fenugreek, lunch at a campus in Bengaluru  
The vibrations of b. in the air: a 'mattering of material'

2.

### Magi's offering

Light is quick to tell you of suffering  
and to advertise directly to your locale.

A woman whose house is on fire rages against the Australian government  
A student has been beaten by the goons at JNU,  
*this is my home they are desecrating, a friend says, they will burn.*

How to write then, now, I don't know

Ex nihilator is never ex nihilio

Starting over in the word, a new word, a new page. That has always been what I wanted with language, poetry: The freshhold

Inger Christensen, 'the condition of secrecy'

A huge exacting gasp: I'll not go out, I'll go out

A writing through the pain,  
a desire for the freshhold the fresh page to hold.

Let the pain go away, a great shimmering fire in the distance  
not a glimmer in the foreground

### 3.

#### **Empty proposal**

Standing still thinking of these deaths, a visitor pokes his head around the door. Our exchange takes the whole four minutes of the ritual time I had allotted. Is this the empty proposal?

Much awareness, much openness much performance was brought to those four minutes. Our mundane chat enlivened through inter-bodily communication. None of this is recorded or recordable.

Embodied practice, such as Authentic Movement, makes a frame of attention to show in precise detail the moments allotted. This is *attention work* of the liminal so that an exchange between two people becomes a universe of emergence, out there, in another language.

### 4.

#### **What happened to the fourth magi?**

This is the backroom of my parents' house which they recently redecorated to the exact same colour that it has been all my life: Dijon yellow and library green.

A fourth chapter seemed important, another cycle to the usual three. Four because one of the magi I had allotted, F, nephew, 3.5 years old, reminds us that his favourite number is four:

How many wolves were there in your dream? *Four. Me and Tober fought them with hammers.*

I lit four candles for four magi, or for friends in four places, continents even, Australia, India, Europe and the unknown continent. The candles are lit in metal goblets on top of the piano I learnt to play as a child. The third match, for Australia, burnt fast and scorched the tip of my fingers.

Staking out a four dimensional poem: Ritual poem.

In the middle of some kind of magus-summoning action the doorbell rings. The postman delivers a parcel: a glass teapot.

The fourth magi then, is the postman. I invoked the magi and they sent him, a climbdown, a lightening. A joke on my ritual seriousness.

Just to add four texts, found at random:

'beloved comrades' (Beowulf)

'beloved Emily' (on a grave, Emily died, of Mount Pleasant Lodge, Clapton, died 84 years)

'Airy demons would get inside the images from the ritual smoke'. Marcelo Ficino: Porphyry, a letter to Anebo. From *The Book of Magic: From Antiquity to Enlightenment*.

'Walking Bass' (Dr John, score for my father's honkytonk piano practice)

relight my fire, four candles  
to finish,

F says, we all need space and agency

honour, thank, invoke, in-yolk  
but not too strongly, as suggested by the postman's arrival, keep it airy and light

One last thing, to lay the Christmas tree branch at the foot of the candles, then eat a little  
crust

Pine biscuit  
Northern spirits  
Annette's xmas dough

Bloody massacre biscuits  
but not a likeness a link to the blood  
on Aisha Ghosh, student president of JNU

beloved comrades, emily

(life is death, death is life etc) 'they will burn'  
airy matter changing course and element  
demon's pine to fire  
eucalyptus to fire to ash to soil to life

Ten of swords  
the note b flat rings

Fire comes into the quiet and out

How quickly the match I lit for Australia burnt up into my fingertips, index and thumb and  
middle scorched.

Just feel our pressing gentle rest, the spirit says.

Calm deliberate, ritual smoke  
ritual *amcan*  
it is only a little intent, the fourth magi  
the score said it came and practice, lightness, quiet....



## Winter poetics on nakedness

My eyes itch as I write, I break off to rub the skin which feels dry. The moment of poetics always, by now, contains the body.

I haven't written up yet the anxiety of a recent revelatory ritual cycle I performed for myself on Thursday. It involved being naked. Something surfaced from Victor Turner's essay on Francis of Assisi and also Ariana Reines's image of herself semi-nude in *A Sand Book*. There's more to say here about vulnerability etc etc

Earlier on after yoga/ Cymraeg vocab, after savasana, I repeated an action of my hands on my eyes like the owl wings opening and closing. In Brzezinka, at the workshop, Matej Matejka provoked me to repeat a similar action, in fact it was the proto action to this action, many times. I had to repeat it until I would notice that no one repetition was the same and thus refine that action to a precise degree. In the repetitions and sedimenting, some form of embodied gestural language is shifting.

I am frustrated today because I feel that I am not able to write what I want to write and have only vague feelings about what that is or where that is going.

Vulnerable. Embodiment and nudity emphasise this vulnerability on the page...

In the naked ritual I felt so exposed and unsure what to do (the cold didn't help). So I tried to wrap around me in careful gestures the various demon-allies or whatever I should call them, daemon frenemies and figures of earlier ritual visions. These are the lingam, the singing loom and the owl of the house.

I need shelter. But that's obvious. Earlier on with the owl eye hand gesture lotus movement I had entered into I came back to the ally I found first of all in Brzezinka: the long and pale haired thin androgynous geek man who I have always puzzled at. I recall that he is half naked, his torso skin gleaming, unerotic but embodied kind and touching, touchable.

Naked vulnerable, like the coronation scene of Timothee Chalamet playing Henry V in *The King*, Netflix. Not that this is good film especially... Often in mainstream narrative film, like in *The King* and in Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*, ritual is a way of exploring hierarchy. In these rituals, the supplicant's body is momentarily

vulnerable and debased before being elevated. These are the rites of reversal and hierarchy as Turner explored, for example, the brief *communitas* and liminality of the British coronation ritual and the life of St Francis Assisi.

I prefer the revolutionary naked rituals, such as Carolee Schneemann's touch and gesture in her turn to the *Happenings*

The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, and yet still be votive – marked and written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.<sup>10</sup>

The body remains votive...

I have to hold this in mind when I feel the trepidation of ritual's role in endorsing hierarchical social systems and control via religion, royal pomp etc. I am not interested in the rites of reversal Turner describes in his essay, the cathartic one-offs and then a return to the status quo. In a coronation or other rites of reversal that Turner describes, a naked ritualist confronts and then is subsumed into the structure.

I fear that my rituals do this sometimes – to settle back into the norm. Or waver ecstatic on the threshold only to deny politics and social life. My intent is transformation, creation, rites that pass thresholds and actually reach the phase of integration. And yet this is often not possible or predictable.

E.g. a rite to be confronted with mortal self; to note the vulnerability I felt whilst naked. This is a small personal transformation in that it is a realisation of an embodied emotive terrain that surfaces now in the poetics. Incremental changes through ritual practice like this are not the same as the transformations which might be a challenge to the deadly structure we are implicated in. The big rites of status change. Turner was interested in structure and anti-structure. I make some of my own structure here and thus have freedom. Or the structure comes from me doing this as a PhD in a university system in the contemporary context I'm in. This is painful when such a structure becomes increasingly repressive and neoliberally hollowed out. Sometimes poetry acts as an alternative secularised spiritual

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<sup>10</sup> Schneemann, *From the Notebooks, Happenings and Other Acts*, Sanford (ed.), p. 247.

framework; or poems can be academic 'output' for the neoliberal university, the VC's salary. Given that we are all implicated in capitalism's violence, I only can try and make my ritual's meaning and intention one of art and form as per Schneemann etc.

Perhaps poetry has recently turned to the mystic as a way of carving out something from the capitalised structure, though it ends up being fed back in again via Instagram witch workshops etc. And yet I want to resist structuring the kernel, the meaning, I don't want to make this neopagan capital, relatable wellness content, sexy wicca accessories or infomercials for fake animist healing for example. Instead I wish to claim terms and write more scores. To be vulnerable and naked for a time under my capitalised structure, to reverse its logic momentarily so that on the inside, gradually, I form another economy of pleasure and relation.

## G. Blod Rites: Poems

### Hares etc

some time later when the body is flush  
or flashed in the spirit of a hare  
running across the tracks  
towards west berlin and the skeleton  
of this hare lodges at the back of the neck

the idea was to lie back and process  
but the mind raced  
I need ulmo honey for this  
cough and that's very specific

the hare skeleton extending from the  
cortex, where the cervical  
spine stems in, there, imagine the hare  
as a tortoise, no don't,  
no rushing around please,  
no open season on my hair,

try to avoid speaking, he said, and it was the kindest  
thing to say of all the recent days  
if I could just not speak for a while  
if could I just not express then may  
this war outside be over

perhaps this sickness is a form of anger turned inwards,  
they say many illnesses are, forms of inverted rage or shame,  
fights against ourselves and our own organs  
but what is a fight ever about  
I wondered when I was supposed to be fighting  
what is it, all this ritual fight, is it really a wrestle?

is any sort of fight ever worth it  
what is the real conflict is when you get down below  
the waterline or hareline  
what sort of impulses drive

me to shove you off my corner of la(n)d  
or your corner of oil field,  
it was the kindest thing to say

## Lacey

Lace loops all over our gestures, women crocheting with their thumbs little loop work rep and rep and rep and rep into the one hole at a time spreads to the greatest floral spreading ever

Other women looped into my words gave me a napkin for the blackberry stain, made notes on my hand movements, gestures, wrote me a note that read: take the tram to the lace market

I linked the texts I mean textures together for incorporation. Cats cradle rite. I bring these talks to fold into the veld of the lace layer cake, make a mix

Isla Negra wove a lace collab, Karü Mapu Tierra Negra. Inspired this new needle dance, a piece for the stain rumpled porridge sustenance, these island papas sustain. Pampas comes crinoline or lidded, all the solidarities folded rep and into and swallow rep

A continuous knit or was it lace or was it weave or spin into the little spaces between the yarn knots, in those gaps, mouths singing aquamarine

Tik the tact think constraints like a need to gossip over tweed bashing or the fact the winter night starts at 3pm. Or a loop loop loop and pay for my babe's basket

Skin pocks crater shallow hole basin dip, imagine if that was land if that scale caressed the sharing caressed the limey pearls hands hard or soft or picked

Line in the lace or weave tick don't stop or move over from the floor to the arms this movement is also a weave a women's flick or a flip splay the arc of a rep rep

## Fairy Business

Just a light weight pinecone,  
(rest, get some rest now),  
little little teeth, but very sharp  
they eat the shapelets and the poems.

In the night these fairies jumbled  
up my sock pairs and now  
a light shines through the holiest ones.

This is a cheap joke for my fairy lord who came in  
on CAM4 to ask for the socks with holes in, specifically.  
I think nothing of this fetish,  
myself I often dream of fairy conditions  
where everything milken lit becomes sensation  
palpitating undergarment drawers—! Golden thimbles of ale—!

It's a personal thing  
or cash cash get the bill, or actually  
they dealt in tiny loaves, or actually  
they came round rarely via the backlane gwli,  
but exceptions to the rule make the rule.

I sometimes find my lover's laughter creepy  
so I speak to my fairy lord who never irks.  
But conditions in the forest become too alkaline,  
lichen falters, mulch is heavily metallated  
a dairy farm across the way keeps strip lights on all night  
pumping pump pump the milken light—!

The pinecone's magical properties are something to do with the  
gland above the penis or pineal or pituitary gland  
it doesn't matter it's all the same third-eye pressing through

But I need specificity. I already lost one friend  
to gaia.com and I need some new  
vocabulary to get her back so  
I take a map of the local bomb craters  
a walk that will collapse me weight me  
make a walk that will sink me into bramble pits into historied future,  
but I need quality overtrousers for the rolling,

for the suckering tripwires  
the brambles pull you back pull me back  
to the wood and the mosses over every horizon.

My fairy lord laughed once  
and that was enough  
(I must've told a good joke once, that was enough)  
at least enough for a poem to be squeezed out  
and a small cup of airy ale from blackberries,  
(think what that would taste of) yes  
fairy conditions are the conditions  
of threshold passage, the yet-not,  
conditions in the gwli, in the llyn. Sometimes  
their conditions went on in the back palace of egos  
and when I came back everything was upsidedown

I didn't want to blame my poor friend  
so I made a porridge out of pine nuts,  
the butter rose to the top & was rich enough,  
I am not a prince presenting himself to the  
fairy motorcade, with charcoal genitals  
or bartering for pinenuts, I am just here in  
gwli waiting for their havoc

## **To the east**

To the east, walk across that space you can see.  
The meadow is an apex of what was perfect  
In the trees beyond, you find someone's shelter  
This is an intentional walk, it finds the sites by itself  
Pollinators visit the spot where yesterday two of you  
A polity here the string between thenownesses  
It wasn't a smart move to swing so freshly towards this  
Admire his sunburn turned to rudd this is the colour  
Of demigods but it rocks away from a summer like  
Objectivity. To the east I saw my own path.



## Marigold jam

### Day 1 of marigold jam

Surrounded by ma ma ma sacreds, I focus on the marigold.

It's proliferation, sacred exuberance, *symudliw* in the body rushing through

The leaf produced a dew, sweet, did you almost rhyme?

En route to the marigold I find six lilies, a mirrored book, a ring of sheep's wool, waxy coal. A cushioned star, braided tree. Red yarn, next time will it be green.

Thinking of colours as usually something too obvious too VISIBLE to really notice. But when you move they move,...they are *symudliw*.

A hesitant poet takes her rubber gloves off. Yellow can be sluggish or it can pep. How about a belly risen to twp twmp                      ma ma ma ma marigold...

The word for marigold yn gymraeg is blodau y gwenyn. Or what about Gwenyddail, y wenynog, llysiau'r gwenyn or Balm gentle (check the Antiquae Linguae Britannicae Thesaurus)

Now it's impossible not to feel sun in beats or bees  
Impossible not to notice the lack of bees in the Botanics  
So I look it up, find,

Sulfoxaflor, just permitted again for usage by  
the Trump administration. Kills bees.

The poem didn't get finished

### Day 2 of Marigold Jam

Yesterday began with Marigold = blodau gwenyn = flower of bees = bees in 2019 = US politics = AOC 'we will not go back'

I find another symbol a babel:gate

The symbol means

'divert this pumpkin meat'    ///                      'husks mustard edge piss on sheets'

'The hurt bars of time in an itch of song'    /// [Maggie O'Sullivan]

Or it means:

the gate of eight wands. Babel's door. A threshold where some things do not merge with each other.

Or it means

a woven textile of my singing mouth-mothers, a blue weave.

Combine blue and the yellow now. Rock pools, cloud crashes. Symudliw, moving horizon.

All the words have edges that can cause pain or fog. Even yellow. Even blue.

Now make a construction of finds, as not to forget this yellow. I make an altar of books:

*The Karma Sutra* – a marigold image on the cover from the Clive collection. Clive gives me a wince but anyhow...

The OS map Brecon Beacons (West) worn, used in the rain

*Poetry Wales* winter 2017 – Latvian poetry and illustration

*Themis*, Jane Ellen Harrison

*The Idler magazine: Back to the Land*

*Petrarch* Tim Atkins

*Roddy Lumsden is dead*, Roddy Lumsden

*Death* a picture book

*Ur-Drama: The Origins of Theatre* by Earnest Kirby

*The Book of Chocolate Saints*, Jeet Thayil

Wishing to regain the lost sap

Hurting at the gates of the lost

god, gaudy bough, eight overstayed welcomes

eight times through the gate

## Year 2 of Marigold Jam (coda)

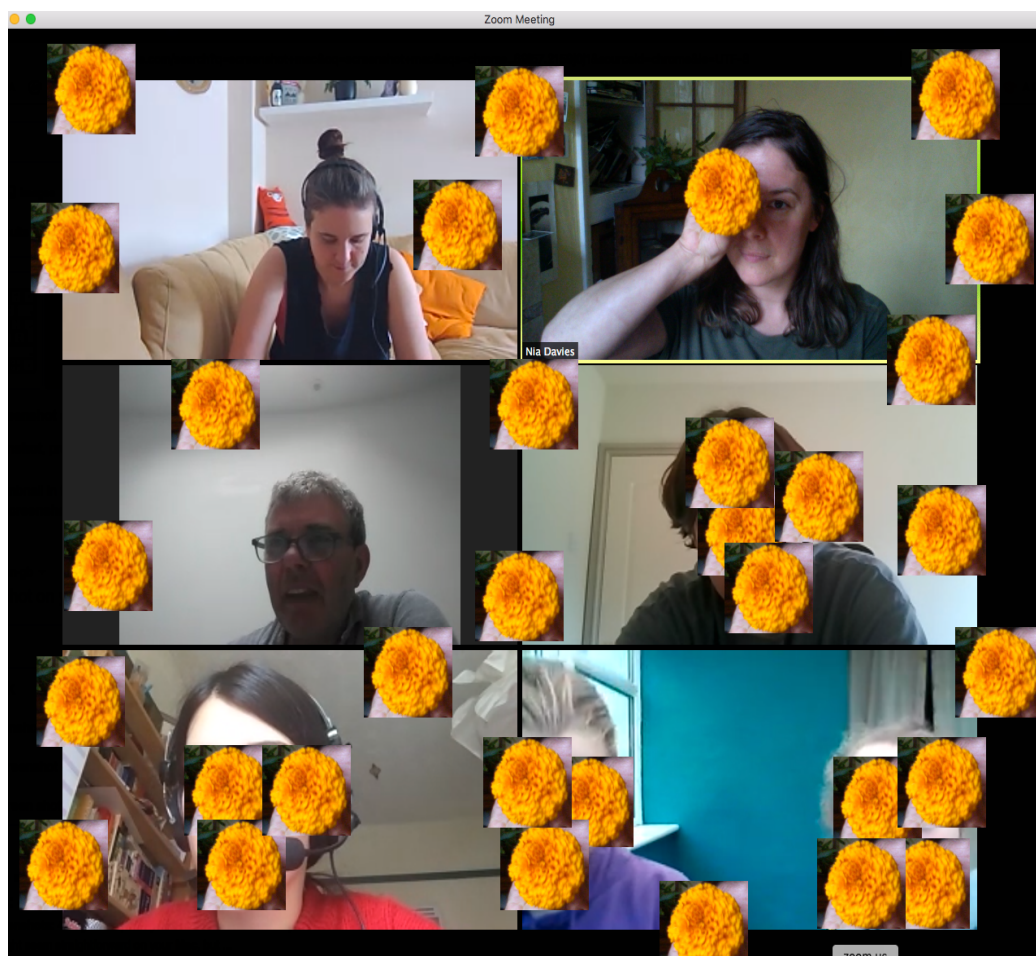


Figure 24: Zoom marigold jam performance, for the Seren students, Spring 2020

## Fear and the Piano

The repeated key  
a haptic stored over sedimental time // I-work

Or work within fear's crease                      where the breathing organs swell and  
contract  
In the membrane between me and world

Piano lessons  
Piano practice  
Piano play

*Ten seconds and an answer's coming*

There is this instant   you've allowed   herenow        for a later and a before   or a flipped  
now

The perceptual order has given you an instant  
The piano also has its instant  
The shapes I found + soundlightcolourmemoir are combined into a sense that flickers

So what membrane fixed and unfixed   once and rolled over        and then the yet to be

The implications of such a flicker  
The implications of such piano

Fear taking time out                      obligatio-membranes bordered with fear

Overwhelm        :        *well that's so broad*

Take instructions from the piano  
Fold into instruct    extract        instructions from the young        from the learner,  
Or from the other  
learners  
try

Piano and kidney        kidney communicates        *what are these and why*

Sedimented body        geologic kidney                      fear explains or does it exceed

Mnemonic body        Mnemonic movement                      Mnemonia

*Pam / pam lei*                      parallels                      staves

ancestorial fears        the animal instant                      the courage to

## Opens the gate

All my moons are embittered now  
but you contradict me, or rather you  
invite me to contradict me.

We'll be farming shit,  
one of me says to me on the astral plane,  
oh I thought I would be advertising chicken  
says the other

I am not part of any modernity project.  
So a CCTV camera is trained on the backsides  
of men dining at the newish Hungry Horse franchise in Heeley,

The Hardy Pick. The cameras form a chorus.  
This was formerly the site of  
I just came here to offload,  
& Paul came here with me,  
to wash the snot of another human from his hands.

He acquired the substance after touching the council's information board  
(great for metal rubbings of images of river creatures you can (not) find in the Sheaf)

The snot had really interrupted our *dérive*.  
I wanted to set in motion an errancy,  
a precocious wave. As in, enemies of comedy  
can swing on by, or dine in The Hardy Pick forever.  
I left honeycomb on the roof  
for the one who opens or clears.  
Tom made it salted and coated in chocolate.

This is the one who comes as a brown-grey pug  
to my crossroads, crosswords,

the mediator. The colour of the coffee  
libation I made  
out of the Adventure Time mug  
I sealed with clingfilm for warmth.

Pug eyes were yellow  
as the daily fires on Instagram.  
The eyes smiled at me then he was pulled away.

*Be a normal pug now* his owner said.  
Or I imagined she said, but time is infinite  
when we have shared a glance like that.

Pug's learnt the secret languages and the mundane.  
He knows *amwys*, *amynedd*, for example, when I had to learn them.

*Haul* is generous like the sun.  
He knows all the dialects and the lost languages too.

Tyzack Turner and Sons cut scythes  
at the site of The Hardy Pick.  
Their works went as far as the now surrounding car park and industrial estate.  
Skateboarders and skulkers  
and the duck watchers save it briefly for Culture.

Classic situationist pobl.  
A basketball rotates eternally  
in the small falls of the Sheaf.

Back in the libation, the pug hears everything the wind touches.  
Moonlit at midday.  
When you take my joke seriously, I'll answer you,  
  
I've heard you're a poet, yellow-eyes said,  
knowing I've not found a word for his appearance.

There's an app for that now, I tell him.  
And this poem has several cities within itself.

I think it was the stepping off the  
I think it was the pouring coffee out  
I think it was the basketball  
That was the place

Who cut my scythe  
Who ate my honeycomb

I know it was your contradictor  
I know it was my Sheaf river  
I know it wasn't our contractor

Contradict me  
Don't come for me, yet

## Wassail

My old grey mare, blood-lead my LED eye.  
My new libation, like a novel.

Then revival tremors in the down light:  
making it up in the soft play hard den.

I knew the words but not the tune:  
the wind at the door every morning.

Severed grin, technology for snapping;  
how came the blood on your history?

But these creatures unchoke the bridle,  
they are cake crusher and jigging

folkloric mirror / folkloric muse.



*Figure 25: Mari Lwyd, Parkmill, January 2020*

\*

First time I sensed her, the woman in the bakery froze and so did I. My companion noted we seemed 'away with fairies'. Some things just give you that feeling, maybe that's their folkloric wish. You didn't feed the fairies enough cider, you told your nephew they have sharp teeth etc etc. Revival rites can give us bad Teutonic feelings; insignias on lapels, blood bonding, the mummers who voted Tory, etc etc. You avert your eyes away, to the fair folk. Any meaning in Mari's streamers you have to make up and yet it folds into you, your new years.

## Blod rite

Blod's meta    morphosis

Feathers in shreds  
Or so the story goes + out into the night flies eye in the dark

hands of feathers five

Foretaste tasted like petals

A lover falls into the join in my inter

Lover + green rush

Your bounteous watch  
Ancestress woven from ditch

Chrysalis            pairs

of eyes in the wood  
  be in my spine + over my face

Flutter (m)orph sin flush  
flutes for crone

The untold part flitters a  
crown of meadowsweet  
bracelet of derwen  
anklet of birch  
the catkins are in here too

Orpheus was Pets at Home  
Pentheus was gruel  
Euripides farts long and guttural

Careful, nothing is foreclosed yet

Says a chalice, says amber  
Says I-am, the implement,  
Says spine, out of pine  
Says ever rose, says scream fetch,  
or fetish. Says the pale of water,  
says Lech. Says grandiose,  
says home wood  
Says algae, says grape perk



rock. So we can set to work in beauteous rage

& we can rebirth, in ash flower,  
can fall into lipbalm and shrinelike.

Lover nuanced on me flush with her cardio

She was willing to be secret unsaid

dip thrice + pumpwaith

Mer me over crane

Cross

immerse/emerge immer emer mer mer

Affectual, sandaless, soft oak  
It was good to meet her he said

Parakeet aloft my green visitor  
or any everyday bounty

There's an Isle off the shining foreshore  
& the moon of Porthcawl

I never no, vanilla, no  
lillicking whispered  
true nocturnal off balance

Each limb wrote you I  
*I was made for loving you*  
But I loved another in the wood  
so you meta'd me, babe, mead-wort

and bolognaise denial,  
a ring of precious rave gods  
Jarvis, Fritoj, Julian and Lisa

Now I need an ash tree aureole  
Or cennau circle

Cen the imperfect medium for Jack  
Alice the imperfect medium for Alan  
Cen the rib on the oak, a patina  
Half algae half moss

Cen in the medium of Hadewijch  
Cen saint of lichen and of hedge  
saint of the patch of ditch

So I am (re)born of the lichenate

& my floristry is flying to you by night  
foretelling of death, but whose?  
May it be the best and hoped for

Etc, green freedom, etc, altarwise by owl-bite  
fforest-library saflax brow  
meadowheight

## 2. CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXTS & THEORY

### Scope of this chapter

In this chapter I review the practice and theories of the field of ritual poetry. The key context to my thesis is the experimental poetry made since the modernist and postmodernist era which would come under the contested headings of Language Poetry, The British Poetry Revival, Linguistically Innovative or radical poetry,<sup>11</sup> and movements since the 1960s that consider the materiality of language as a medium of experimentation for poetic art. The term 'ritual poetry' is how I identify the practices of creative arts that share both ritual and poetic techniques and approaches. I am focused on poets who have incorporated or drawn on ritual practice as a way of experimenting with and realising their poetry. I focus my attention largely on the ritual poetry of Bob Cobbing (b.1920), Jerome Rothenberg (b.1931), M NourbeSe Philip (b.1947), Cecilia Vicuña (b.1948), Maggie O'Sullivan (b.1951), CAConrad (b.1966), Bhanu Kapil (b.1968) and my peer and collaborator, Amy McCauley, whilst observing experiments with ritual from across the contemporary experimental poetry scene in my context in the U.K.

The practices which take the other direction – ritual uses of poetry – are not the focus of this thesis. But the distinction is sometimes blurred; often poets go to ritual uses of poetry for their poetic ritual practice – for example the way incantation or ritual systems from historic examples are drawn on in contemporary practice, such as Jerome Rothenberg's use of Gematria. I will detail some of this background in the context explored below, with the caveat that my primary scope is the use of ritual in poetry practice.

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<sup>11</sup> For example see Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950 - 2000* (2005).

# Anthropological Ritual Theory

## Turner's Ritual Process

Ritual practice and theory are marked by a theory of ritual process laid out by twentieth century US anthropologist Victor Turner in works such as *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) and *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982). Turner's concepts of ritual, that of social drama, liminality, communitas and ritual process, with its emphasis on passing thresholds towards transformation, are emblematic ideas of the turn towards ritual in European and North American art from the 1960s onwards. Turner's theory emerged after a long history of anthropological theorising on ritual, at the start of a reflexive moment in anthropology and ethnography which threw the discipline itself into question. Turner's ritual process was based on his concepts derived from field work with the Ndembu people of Zambia and drew on Arnold Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1909), theatre and performance as well as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*. He aligned these ritual processes with artistic forms such as theatre, entering into a dialogue with and influencing performance theory, particularly through his association with theatre maker and performance theorist Richard Schechner (Schechner, 1977; 1993).

Turner's ideas have marked the popular understanding of ritual ever since, although, as contemporary US anthropologist and ritual specialist Ronald L. Grimes points out, Turner's ideas were also just as much influenced by popular ritual practice in the 1960s counter-cultural arts scene as influential of it (Grimes, 2020, pp. 145-146). As well as its impact on the arts, Turner's ritual theory also influenced religious studies, therapeutic practice and experiments in alternative spirituality and living emerging in the second half of the twentieth century in Europe and North America. The turn to ritual coincided with the emergence of new spiritual movements, with Mircea Eliade's works on Shamanism (1951) and the *Myth of Eternal Return* (1989) also influential. Poet Jerome Rothenberg, for example, borrowed the title 'Technicians of the Sacred' from Eliade for the

landmark anthology of Ethnopoetics, which I will be discussing below, *Technicians of the Sacred* (1967).

Turner's elaboration on Arnold Van Gennep's rites of passage, especially the notion of a ritual as passing of thresholds, underpins the concept of ritual which I am putting to use in this thesis. The Turner/Van Gennep model of ritual involves three types and/or stages of ritual passage: *separation*, *transition* and *re-incorporation*. Turner writes:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (re-aggregation or re-incorporation) the passage is consummated. (Turner, 1969, pp. 94-95)

Each of these stages involve rites that help form or manage the passage of a threshold which holds importance or meaning to the ritualist and for which passage across may entail a risk. Turner's interest in the middle transitional stage lead to his definition of the zone that is 'betwixt and between' thresholds (1969, p.95), the *liminal*. Out of the liminal comes another key concept, *communitas*, the intense but transitory sense of togetherness, the transformative bonding and melding of community that forms out of people enacting ritual together (Turner, 1969). As Turner describes:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transition (1969, p. 95).

Communitas and liminality are processes of subversion of structure; they display degrees of what Turner refers to as *anti-structure* (Turner, 1969). It is here that Turner found the potential for transition and the ludic, for theatre and transformation. For my purposes, it is this idea that is crucial to an art of ritual: the spatiotemporal movement across transitional stages, clear thresholds at the start and end, a passage through a middle zone of the liminal wherein disruption, charged symbolism, reversals and play open up the possibility of transformation and communitas. Changing or emphasising thresholds, in order to open up liminal spacetime, is a key process of ritual and thus relevant to artistic practice which seeks to use space and time creatively to transform the subject's perception of the world. Turner himself referred to artistic liminality as liminoid (Turner, 1974), but I will continue to refer to the more widely understood sense of liminality as the middle stage of ritual process.

Turner's model of ritual process is influential and has often been taken to be the definitive idea of ritual in popular practice (Grimes, 2020, pp. 144-145). There are several critiques to bear in mind. Firstly, a perspective comes from poetry in Jerome Rothenberg's caution that liminality and communitas contain the potential for 'holy terror' (Rothenberg, 2013, p. 294). Rothenberg's talk on ritual models for performance, the 'poetics of performance', which I will detail later in this chapter, was given at an event in 1977 in Austria at the Wenner-Gren Foundation symposium, 'Cultural Frames & Reflections: Ritual, Drama & Spectacle' held in Burg Wartenstein, though it is updated in *Eye of Witness* (2013, p. 295). The 1977 symposium included Richard Schechner as fellow artist-in-residence as well as other figures in ritual and performance studies. Rothenberg, in a commentary on the poem he wrote after his trip to Austria 'Vienna Blood', writes of 'an atmosphere charged by Turner's ideas of "communitas" & "liminality" & by a sense of ghostly European histories, the shadow of Hitler's home town (Linz) nearby etc' (2013, p. 295). This unsettling atmosphere leads to a doubt:

the liminal     he writes  
or “place between”  
& sees     suddenly  
the terror of that situation  
(2013, p. 293)

‘Vienna Blood’ ends in a direct address to Turner: ‘Communitas/ (I meant to tell you)/ is Holy Terror’ (2013, p. 294). So, Rothenberg here, at the site of Khurbn (Holocaust in Rothenberg’s terms), is cautious of the transformative processes which Turner had identified as occurring in the ritual stages, the liminal and communitas. This is an important note of caution to take forward into the further analysis: that Turner’s wide sense of the liminal as large scale social change and chaos can be terrifying.

In anthropological and historical discourse there are further concerns, especially around Turner’s assumptions of universalism in his attempts, for example, to find the neurobiological bases for a ritual impulse inherent to the human condition (Turner, 1983) and that his supporting ethnography built on anthropological work made prior to the reflexive turn which made the othering of different cultures its basis. Criticism of Turner’s theory comes largely from scholars Caroline Bynum Walker, Bruce Lincoln, Vincent Crapanzano and Talal Asad, who point out that Turner, and Van Gennep’s, sense of ritual was largely based on the Euro-American Christian-based view of initiation rites of young males. Thus the theory privileges dramatic transformation, rites of passage, reversals and elevations over other forms of ritualised change (Grimes, 2020, pp. 183-186). Instead of a rite of passage which transforms status, Bynum Walker proposes that a deepening or continuation of a mystical calling is more appropriate to the female saints and mystics of the Middle Ages in Europe whom she studies (Bynum Walker, 1991, pp. 27-78). She writes: ‘What women’s images and stories expressed most fundamentally was neither reversal nor elevation but continuity’ (1991, p. 50). Women’s experiences in this period do not fit Van Gennep’s rites of passage and Turner’s model of the liminal, which are based on the experience of male initiates who move into states of nakedness and vulnerability or undergo elevations or reversals of status, such as the kind of process Turner describes, in the life St

Francis of Assisi (Turner, 1969, pp. 145-150). For Bynum Walker there is a 'stereotype of "the female" that is built into Turner's notion of women as liminal *for men*. But my description of how actual women's stories and symbols function in the later Middle Ages does raise doubts about Turner's notion of liminality as universalist and prescriptive' (1991, p. 50). Elsewhere in anthropological study of ritual, Bruce Lincoln proposes a model for female initiation rites that involves a metaphor more akin to emergence from a chrysalis (Lincoln, 1991) and Vincent Crapanzano notes ritual that fails to transform young initiates in Morocco (Crapanzano, 1980, cited in Grimes 2020, p. 185). Turner's concepts of liminality, *communitas* and rites of passage do not then speak for all the myriad reasons for and ways in which ritual is practised; ritual is not always initiatory or indeed vastly transformational and not always about passing thresholds. Turner/Van Gennep's model is based on the 'transformationism' of male initiation ritual, as summarised and discussed in Grimes's recent collection of essays, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, (2020, pp. 184-185), where he notes how ritual may celebrate, protect or cleanse, just as much as it may transform.

These theories of ritual still imply that ritual is a process which involves a movement and series of changes through stages, using aesthetic devices and uses of corporeal actions to mark milestones or thresholds. Ritual is an embodied process of opening doors to change, even if such changes are not transformations of every aspect of a ritualist's life, status or social conditions. Despite reservations in light of these critiques, I have drawn on the Turner/Van Gennep model in this thesis in thinking of the liminal and *communitas* and understanding ritual process as most often involving the passage of thresholds, especially the three stages of separation, transition/liminality and incorporation. However, I make various adaptations and evolutions of this process, as we shall see.

## **Defining ritual**

As well as Turner, there is a large body of ritual theory that provides useful tools for thinking about ritual for poetry, but there is also a degree of confusion. This is because the variety of ways the term ritual has been used in this literature is



substantial. 'There is the widest possible disagreement as to how the word ritual should be understood' wrote the anthropologist Edmund R Leach in his entry on 'Ritual' in *The International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Leach, 1968, p. 526). The history of the theory of ritual in anthropology and social sciences has involved a wrangling around the term as it emerged from competing and contradictory conceptualisations; theorists often took up ritual as a model to hang their theories upon, thus creating many different ideas of ritual under its heading. US religious studies scholar, Catherine Bell, sums up these problems of 'over theorisation' of ritual when she gives an account of the various eras in which writers attempted to make ritual the example *par excellence* for their theory of human culture and society (Bell, 1992; 1997). Bell explores the particular theoretical contradictions thrown up in ritual theory and how in the end, 'theories are always reaction, or often overreacting, to other theories' (Bell, 1997, p. 89). She also points out that when ritual theorists othered their subjects they most often merely reflected their own concerns, methods and preconceptions. Her two key works on ritual show how these theories often polarise the processes of thought and action into a binary opposition where ritual is said to be action which is opposed to language, text, myth, speech on the side of thought. Or else, ritual is made by the theorists the medium through which this binary is resolved thereby maintaining the division between thought and action (Bell, 1992, pp. 35-37).

Theories of ritual range from the works of Nietzsche, Robertson Smith, Frazer, Van Gennep, Durkheim, Mauss, Levi-Strauss and the Cambridge Ritualists such as Harrison, to Mead, Malinowski, Douglas, Eliade, Turner, Geertz, Leach, Tambiah, Rappaport, Campbell, Goffman and Schechner and still more. They leave us with many different understandings of ritual, some of which, for example Eliade and Turner, still dominate popular understandings. When I mention my subject of research to a new acquaintance, it is remarkable how many different ways they may understand 'ritual'. Sometimes these are reductive or contradictory understandings of ritual as traditional, unchanging custom on the one hand or collective transformation and action on the other.

However, these many ritual theories also provide conceptual tools and ideas, precious field data, crucial cultural contexts, as well as poetic material and stories.

In this passage Bell indicates the range of different ways ritual has been understood:

Ritual as the expression of paradigmatic values of death and rebirth; ritual as a mechanism for bringing the individual into the community and establishing a social entity; or ritual as a process for social transformation, for catharsis, for embodying symbolic values, for defining the nature of the real, or for struggling over control of the sign (Bell, 1997, p. 89).

These ways of understanding ritual may not cancel each other out. Bell continues that the variety of ritual theories 'are also vivid reflections of the questions that concern us and indicate, therefore, something of the way in which we who are asking the questions tend to construe the world, human behaviour, meaning, and the tasks of explanation' (1997, p. 89). Indeed, all these ideas are helpful to this study wherein ritual is understood as a tool for a creative methodology.

Though it may be hard to define ritual in the face of this palimpsest of theorisations as to its nature, there is still a common understanding of ritual that emerges. For example, Clifford Geertz provides a concise, but ultimately confining, definition of ritual as 'consecrated behaviour' (Geertz, 1973, p. 112). I have found, in the later stages in my research, that my understanding of ritual aligns with Ronald L Grimes' most recent definitions of ritual in *Endings in Ritual Studies* as 'embodied, condensed and prescribed enactment' (2020, p.190). However Grimes tries not to define ritual with two or three essential characteristics, preferring a model of 'family resemblances', as the binary of 'ritual' or 'not ritual' may not be helpful in practice, something I have also found in this research. Grimes writes that events display different 'degrees of ritualization', a continuum on which

events are more or less ritualized by:

- traditionalizing them, for instance, by claiming that they originated a long time ago or with the ancestors
- elevating them by associating them with sacredly held values, those that make people who they are, display how things really are, or show how they ought to be

- repeating them—over and over, in the same way—thus inscribing them in community and/or self
  - singularizing them, that is, offering them as rare or even one-time events
  - prescribing their details so they are performed in the proper way
  - stylizing them, so they are carried out with flare, focus, or diffuse attention
  - entering them with a non-ordinary attitude or in a special state of mind, for example, contemplatively or in trance
  - invoking powers to whom respect or reverence is due: gods, royalty, spirits
  - attributing to them special power or influence
  - situating them in special places and/or times
  - being performed by specially qualified persons
- (Grimes, 2020, p.189).

Curiously, Grimes doesn't include embodiment here, whilst he does elsewhere (2020, p. 187). I see embodiment, as in corporeal awareness, as crucial to ritual. Only a selection of these processes of ritualisation are relevant to making and performing poetry of ritual, whilst others may be 'translated' or evoked for creative purposes.

Grimes's work to expand the sense of ritualisation as a process of creating, reforming and reinventing ritual, wherein ritual emerges anew in each iteration, accommodates the creative practical understanding of ritual I have been following. In his earlier study, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (1995), he discusses field work in artistic ritual settings, such as his observation of ritual in Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre and the Theatre of Sources in the 1980s, as well as various artistic, spiritual and social formations of ritual, such as in 'parashamanism', since the 60s, which are directly relevant to many of the artistic practitioners I study here. Grimes's conceptualisation of ritual is not confined by the rigid theorisations that marked some sociological or popular understanding of ritual in the past, such as ritual as pure action apart from thought, or ritual as an inherently traditional, collective, non-self-aware or unchanging phenomena (Grimes, 2020, pp. 5-24).

For Grimes, ritual is an event marked by various processes of ritualisation and it is this *ritualisation* that is generative for a creative practice, being that which ‘transpires as animated persons enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places’ (Grimes, 1995, p. 60).

From this definition I build a picture of ritual for my study which I can describe in the following way: as a genre of specialised enaction marked by processes of ritualisation, which are embodied, intentional, social, based in materiality and receptive and creative of meaning. Ritual can be an action that involves the crossing of spatiotemporal thresholds through periods of liminality, as described by Turner and Van Gennep’s model. But this is not the only course of a ritual event and I do not confine ritual to initiation or rites of passage alone (Grimes, 2020, pp. 184-185). Ritual implies a set of prescribed instructions, but in creative practice, its rules are not rigidly enforced, in other words, the laws of artistic ritual are voluntary for the participant. In artistic ritual, processes of determinacy and indeterminacy are both in play and in fact depend on one another. I put these understandings of ritual to work in the context of poetry and artistic creation, thus I use what is most generative in the concept of ritual – in short, ritual as enaction which is embodied, material, relational or social and intentional.

I also understand ritual poetry by degrees of ritualization in a similar way to Grimes. I find several degrees of ritualising processes in poetry, principles that I have taken from the readings of ritual poets that follow and which govern my creative practice and thus will be expanded on in the methodology and poetics. So for me, ritual poetry is marked by degrees of the following practices and features: intention, invocation, spatiotemporal thresholds such as distinctive beginnings and endings, score and an acknowledgement of the thresholds of birth and death or the destruction of *sparagmos*. There are also processes of embodiment, movement, *techniques of the material*, presence and repetition. Finally, I also see emergence, timefulness, a relationality I call *plethu* and the sense-making and changing work of *poesis* as key. I will detail each of these elements in the following chapters before elaborating on each of them in my poetics in Chapter Five.

# The Ritual Poetry Field

## History and Context

This study of ritual poetry is focused on the work which began to flourish in the 1960s. However, ritual and poetry share a common ground as inter-influential practices throughout history: one may find examples of composition of poetry for and via ritual practice, ritual poems and poetic texts which serve as devotional works for ceremonial acts, as well as many examples of poets creating their own rites as part of their poetic practice. Examples abound and Jerome Rothenberg's Ethnopoetics assemblages and translations, especially the anthology *Technicians of the Sacred* (1967; 1983; 2017), attest to the many convergences of ritual and poetry. In its earliest manifestations, ritual poetry is most often found through the interaction of a poetic practice with a poet's religious or spiritual-cosmological belief systems; poets often actively played a part in studying or even shaping the ritual cultures they were involved with. From the very start of recorded history, poets were involved with ritual, as in the temple hymns of Enheduanna (fl. 23rd Century BC) in ancient Sumer or the poets composing drama for the Theatre of Dionysus in ancient Athens. In subsequent eras, poets also used ritual in a variety of interlinked spiritual and poetic practices. It is not within the scope of this thesis to track and analyse this full history of ritual poetry, but I do wish to indicate how these practices are interwoven in historical contexts. In the Romantic era, for example, the following letter from Percy B Shelley (b.1792) to Thomas J. Hogg in 1821 reveals an intersection between poetry and ritual. Shelley steps away from the dominant religious convention to rediscover, or rather reinvent, another older tradition via ritual embedded in his poetic practice:

I am glad that you do not neglect the rites of the true religion. Your letter awoke my sleeping devotions, and the same evening I ascended alone the high mountain behind my house, and suspended a garland, and raised a small turf altar to the mountain-walking Pan, (cited in Hutton, 2019, p. 25).

Here the poet is creating their own rites as part of an emerging pagan spiritual practice which they saw as the 'true' religion. This tendency was part of the wider

Romantic movement of revival, creative celebration, and in some cases forgery of ancient texts, rituals, mythologies and cultural practices, sometimes in the service of nationalism, as the essays in *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) explore. In this era, Iolo Morganwg's bolstering and invention of a bardic tradition, complete with rites that are still in use today in the Eisteddfod, serves as another example close to my own poetic culture and poetics in Wales, as Prys Morgan details in his contribution to *The Invention of Tradition* (1983, pp. 60-61). In the Modernist era we can also find further experiments with ritual poetry, this time explicitly for the purposes of artistic experimentation. In the Dada explosion at the beginning of the twentieth century, Hugo Ball made a performance in 1915 of intermedia sound poetry that consciously used ritualistic techniques, (Ball cited in Rothenberg (ed.), 2017, p. 441). Other examples from modernism include Maya Deren's study of Haitian Vodou and poetic ritual films. And David Jones's ritual poem the *Anathemata* (1952) is a text central to my poetics which I read in a ritual manner in my creative chapter in 'Funeral Games of the Great Mammalia'.

My focus in this research is on the explosion of ritual in poetry from the 1960s onwards, but it is important to note a particular strand of this historical context which leads up to this era. This is the tension around how the Avant Garde artistic interest in ritual culture in twentieth century European and North American poetry has been both influenced by the 1960s counter-cultural critique of capitalism and colonialism, as we shall see, but also entangled with and implicated in the structures of Euro-American imperialist expansion. In Romanticist and Modernist movements, for example, artists and poets took inspiration from orientalist, exoticized and/or primitivist ideas of ritual cultures other to their own. Poets in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, such as D.H. Lawrence, Gertrude Stein, Robert Graves, Blaise Cendrars, Tristan Tzara, T.S. Eliot, Velimir Khlebnikov, Antonin Artaud and others, were influenced by the forms of ritual they encountered from the burgeoning field of anthropology and its ethnographic accounts of the rituals of cultures recently conquered by colonial powers.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> For example T.S Eliot's interest in anthropology, DH Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) and Antonin Artaud's work on Balinese theatre. Jerome Rothenberg writes: 'Tristan Tzara, who did an unpublished

colonial structures fostered a view of the rituals of the cultures they were plundering as backward and primitive or under the idealised and dehumanising rubric of the noble savage, thus limiting the complexity of these cultures in their presentation, so that more value could be extracted for imperial gain. European and North American artists and writers, such as those mentioned above, contributed to and even helped formulate this ideology in works which reinforced the racialised primitive vs civilised paradigm (Etherington, 2017; Bharucha, 1993; Horáček, 2011; Fischer-Lichte, 2005; Philip, 2013). We will find, especially in the works of M NourbeSe Philip and Bhanu Kapil, that ritual poetry is a field very often resistant to colonial violence and cultural erasure.<sup>13</sup> However, I find that poets in this field are not always unimplicated in a tendency towards idealising primitivism in their search for material from rituals of cultures other to their own. Related to this is the occurrence of cultural appropriation and de-contextualisation of ritual works, extracted from specific cultural contexts and placed in the context of dominant culture – the apparently-universal and neutral field of the Euro-American Avant Garde which aligns with the same global Metropolitan marketplace which imposed the extraction and violence in the first place. One can find this tension in the discourse from and around the Ethnopoetics movement that arose in the 1960s (Horáček, 2011) which I will turn to in the work that follows.<sup>14</sup>

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“anthologie nègre” at the time of Zurich Dada was one; Blaise Cendrars, who published an anthology of African myths & texts (largely translated as prose) was another. Khlebnikov, as a third great name of early modernism, both gathered & commented on Slavic oral & folk poetry as a kind of popular/magical basis for the new *za-um* language he was creating circa 1914.’ (Rothenberg, 1990, p.7). See J. Horáček (2011) for a discussion of this in Ethnopoetics and also B. Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*, (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Philip writes: ‘— the mode and mechanism of communication language is itself fatally flawed designed to convey the european idea and ideal ... *oh sinner man where you gonna run to* so perhaps ritual offers a way through this thicket of impossibles’ (Philip, ‘Wor(l)ds Interrupted’, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> One need only glimpse at Arnold Van Gennep’s references to various ethnographic sources in *Rites de Passage* (1909), to be reminded of how the knowledge around ritual originally drew on racist investigations of human cultures that were systematically destroyed for the sake of imperial capitalist accumulation. I would note that I find examples of unethical appropriation, primitivism, universalism, romanticisation and orientalism in the take up of the ritual of othered and conquered cultures in the works of several modernist and post-modernist poets including those who also take great inspiration from and state a respect and care for the culture of the other. Ideas of the ‘primitive’ and of exoticized or idealised ritual cultures can be found in the works of Deren, Artaud, Jones and Cobbing, and arguably these issues are recurrent in the Avant Garde ritual poetry of Cecilia Vicuña, Anne Waldman and, most complicatedly, in Jerome Rothenberg’s work – see Josef Horáček’s discussion of this problematic issue in Ethnopoetics (2011). Rustom Bharucha’s postcolonial critique of appropriation of ritual cultures in performance in the work of Artaud, Schechner, Grotowski and Brook (1993) specifically looks at the adoption of ritual by the Euro-American Avant Garde and, though it is applied to performance practice, is also relevant to poetry that uses ritual in performance. In performance art, playful postcolonial critique of Joseph Beuys’s *I Like America and America Like me* can be found in James Luna’s *Petroglyphs in Motion* (2000).

## The 'Ritual Turn': the 1960s and 1970s

It is in the 1960s and 1970s that what I think of as the *Ritual Turn* emerged, when the phenomena of ritual art forms became much more widespread and intentional. In this period the *Ethnopoetics* movement started to take note and emphasise this aforementioned intertwined history of ritual and poetry, particularly evident at the key moment of the publication of Rothenberg's assemblage *Technicians of the Sacred* in 1967. At this time, poetry of ritual can be found as part of a wider artistic flourishing of performative art, as seen in the Fluxus and Happening movements. Poetry's turn to performance was echoed across other art forms, as described by Erika Fischer-Lichte's second 'performative turn' (2005; 2008).

Rothenberg, as initiator of Ethnopoetics, is an important figure in this research and I will return to his own works in the closer readings in Chapter Three. He was born to Polish Jewish immigrants to New York in 1931 and developed his practice as poet and editor as part of, but also distinct from, the North American Avant Garde of in the mid twentieth century which included Language Poetry and other groupings (see Yépez, 2013, pp. 17-18). In a 1977 lecture, edited and reprinted in his 2013 assemblage of his own writings *Eye of Witness*, (2013, edited with Heriberto Yépez), Rothenberg calls attention to 'ritual models for performance' as part of the movement across disciplinary and other boundaries:

Nearly a century after Dada<sup>15</sup>, a wide range of artists have been making deliberate and increasing use of ritual models for performance, [this] has swept up arts like painting, sculpture, poetry (if those terms still apply) long separated from their origins in performance ... [JR's elision] The performance/ritual impulse seems clear throughout: in "happenings" and related event pieces (particularly those that involve participatory performance), in meditative works (often on an explicitly mantric model), in earthworks (derived from monumental American Indian structures), in dreamworks that play off trance and ecstasy, in bodyworks (including acts

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<sup>15</sup> A somewhat confusing dating may have come about from an edit; the talk was originally made in 1977 but Rothenberg reprinted and edited it for *Eye of Witness* (2013), almost a century after Dada.



of self-mutilation and endurance that seem to test the model), in a range of healing events as literal explorations of the shamanic premise, in animal; language pieces related to the new ethology, etc (2013, p. 208).

Rothenberg here observes a great eagerness to experiment across media at this time, with ritual coming to the fore as a key technique. He goes on in this talk to note the characteristic of the new paradigm of these poets and artists working with these models as having a 'disdain for paradigms' (2013, p. 208). He writes of how there is a continuity in using ritual with a history that may be even older than the human species (2013, p. 208). The performative turn to ritual models, Rothenberg states, indicates a 'breakdown of boundaries and genres: between "art" and "life" with 'immense' consequences' (2013, p. 208). This work considers the 'poem or art-work as performed' rather than the finished 'masterpiece' (2013, p. 209). The emphasis is on process and that there 'follows a new sense of function in art, in which the value of a work isn't inherent in its formal aesthetic categories' ... 'but in what it does'. In this model, Rothenberg sees the 'distinction between doer and viewer' reversing or blurring and:

the increasing use of real time, extended time, etc., and/or a blurring of the distinction between those and theatrical time, in line with the transformative view of the "work" as a process that's really happening (2013, p. 209).

Thus process and action are stressed:

accordingly the performance or ritual model includes the act of composition itself ... [JR's elision] Signs of the artist's or poet's presence are demanded in the published work, and in our own time this has come increasingly to take the form of his or her performance of that work, unfolding it or testifying to it in a public place (2013, p. 209).

These 'ritual models for performance' occupy the liminal zone between the traditional boundaries of artforms and the art/life dichotomy. They're often pieces whose meaning emerges in action, 'a process that's really happening' (2013, p. 209). These are important observations; the poets of ritual I identify in this chapter

understand poetry as an art form just as much oral/aural as it is text-based. They work from the understanding that the poem can be an event, foregrounded in the presence of the body among other bodies. The performance is a manifestation or construction of a poem rather than a delivery or representation of a privileged text, (Rothenberg, 2013, p. 208). These ritual models allow cross-medium works but this genre-bending 'total' art form is, I think, open to the possibility of shallow borrowing between mediums; performance itself is vaguely sketched out here and Rothenberg does not distinguish between performance and ritual. Thus the distinctive manner in which these practices may be deployed in *poetry* are still unexamined. There is also a primitivism detectable here and elsewhere in Rothenberg's works, which sites poetic origins in primitive, pre-written, perhaps utopian cultures of the past and far away, poetry 'long separated from their origins in performance' (2013, p. 208). This elides poetry's more recent social history of performance, as Peter Middleton has pointed out in relation to the history of the poetry reading (Middleton, 1998, p. 272). Rothenberg's celebration of ancient and indigenous cultures here as inherently ritual-based tends towards idealisation and does not recognise that ritual is just as much created in the moment of the 1960s Happening as it is a return 'back to our pre-human biological inheritance' (2013, p. 208). Ritual is a practice of meaning-making found everywhere in all times (Grimes, 2020, pp. 5-24), so to speak of its take up in artistic practice as a return to ancient or even pre-human culture, or to a sense of pan-indigenous primitive original unity, is to ignore how it is formative of and by contemporary culture.

## **Ethnopoetics**

Rothenberg's observation of the Ritual Turn is related to his fostering of the Ethnopoetics movement. Ethnopoetics refers to the poetry of the *ethnoi*, or the Other. The movement's key anthology *Technicians of the Sacred* was published in 1967 with revised editions in 1983 and 2017. Here and then elsewhere, Rothenberg assembled texts, frequently drawn from ethnographic sources, into anthologies that aligned ancient or distant ritual culture with contemporary poetry that experimented with other media, in particular performance. Ritual texts from

different cultures are given a creative translation, often by Rothenberg himself, as well as a contextualising commentary and usually set alongside contemporary North American Avant Garde poems and projects to find their affinities. Rothenberg's knowledge of ritual theory is informed by anthropological understandings of ritual which include those gleaned from collaboration with his life partner, the anthropologist Dianne Rothenberg. The projects were also informed by time spent living with the Seneca people in the late 1960s. Following *Technicians of the Sacred*, *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972), and *A Big Jewish Book* (1978), Rothenberg collected Native American and Jewish ethnopoetics texts respectively. *Symposium of the Whole* (1983), edited by both Rothenbergs, gathered poetics and proto-poetics texts from poetry, anthropology and performance that fell under the definition of Ethnopoetics, several of which deal with ritual performance or the performative nature of poetry. Other anthologies and translations followed, with efforts continuing into the 1990s. In recent times the discourse has evolved from the term 'ethnopoetics' and has been adapted under new ethical and political demands (Horáček, 2011), subsumed under other titles such as Rothenberg's Omnipoeitics or, as in Heriberto Yépez's suggestion, *Ethopoetics* (Rothenberg & Yépez, 2013).

Ethnopoetics unearthed and reframed ritual texts as poetry. With its tenet that 'primitive means complex' (Rothenberg 1967, p. xxv), Rothenberg gathered what were seen as ancient or culturally distant ritual works – such as sacred and magical poetic texts, mystical tracts of the imagination of distant and past artistic works in signs and the material of language – into the context for a book for contemporary readers, the 1960s New York Avant Garde. In these anthologies and translations, poems are published that originally existed in ritual forms; chants, talismans, spells or instructions for ritual action are published alongside a poetic context or as poetry itself. Rothenberg's works of 'total translation' sought to translate some of these texts in experimental, contextualised and multimodal forms. The chants of María Sabina, a Mazatec *sabia*, (originally published in *Technicians of the Sacred* 1967, then collected with commentaries in *María Sabina Selections*, 2001), the Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell (2013, pp. 193-207) and several Native American 'events' that read like scores for performance art (2013, pp. 352-356) are some examples of ritual works as poetry. For example,

the Kwakiutl Gift event begins with a clear ritual instruction: 'Start by giving away different colored glass bowls' (2013, p. 354). Some of these examples I will explore in detail in the following chapter.

These ethnopoetic works were then aligned in the assemblages with contemporary poetic North American and European artistic experimentation, through contextualising commentary and modern 'addendum', but also in the experimental methods of translation favoured by Rothenberg as editor and translator. This method of translation and editing is not without its problematic ethical issues. In the assemblages, diverse literary and performance works are often taken from their context and placed in the Avant Garde anthology context whose culture, though it may appear neutral and 'universal' to an Anglophone Metropolitan reader, is in fact the very same literary environment implicated in the erasure of the cultures and communities of the source text. The most widely discussed example of this problematic process centres around Rothenberg's *total translation* of works of Native American poetry, most vocally criticised by Clements (1981). Josef Horáček has more recently discussed the problematic effects of the impression given of this 'synchronicity and simultaneity of multiple histories' (Horáček, 2011, p. 170). The editorial method in the Ethnopoetics project is charged with a flattening universalism, 'Rothenberg's anthologies obfuscate the historicity of their material by collecting and juxtaposing sources recorded by Westerners at different points in time across several centuries' (Horáček, 2011, p.170). In Horáček's view, Rothenberg does subvert, in part, his own universalising dehistoricising tendency by attempts at contextualisation, a recognition of particularity, the use of commentary and, most importantly, inventive techniques of translation (Horáček, 2011). 'Primitive means complex' as Rothenberg says (Rothenberg 1967, p. xxv) and the work of ethnopoetics are 'in no sense inferior to what we sought or created as poetry in our own time' (xviii, 2017), but the anthology as a form cannot help but strip out some of the complexity in its necessarily short bracketed commentary and addendums. However, the Ethnopoetics anthologies remain a crucial resource as, over time, Rothenberg has engaged in extensive assemblage, advocacy and contextualisation of intercultural poetics. His editorial and translation works have come to be seen by some in the field of indigenous and intercultural poetry studies

as beneficial to endangered poetic cultures rather than detrimental, as they have resulted in the visibility of these poetic cultures and encouraged more sensitively attuned, radical and complex forms of translation (Stuart Cooke, private correspondence, 2019; Yépez introduction *Eye of Witness*, 2015).<sup>16</sup>

Rothenberg's assembling of the 'multiple hidden sources & the multiple presences of poetry both far & near' (2017, p. xvii) in *Technicians* was to influence Anglophone Avant Garde poetry by its exposure to the culture of the other as a 'welcome if unexpected side effect' (2017, p. xix).<sup>17</sup> The works unveiled suggest transformative technologies for changing contemporary poetry, poets themselves and their audiences. Rothenberg speaks of the turn to new models of the 1960s 'as a reflection of our yearning to create meaningful ritual life—a life lived at the level of poetry—that looking back related to the emergence of a new poetry & art rooted in performance & in the oldest, most universal of human traditions' (2017, p. xxiv).

Disruption, transformation and *poesis* are what Rothenberg seeks in ritual forms. Though he has been critical of the 'holy terror' in the liminal, he draws understanding from ritual theory such as Turner's transformational process of ritual, *liminal* and *communitas*. In a talk in 2004 'Poets & Tricksters: Innovation & Disruption in Ritual & Myth', Rothenberg explores how ritual offers the potential for disruption and innovation, for a transforming *poesis*. The liminal phase of ritual is traversed by a trickster, the holy clown or shaman and, for Rothenberg, these figures draw parallels with the Avant Garde poet as 'the bearer of energies that trigger transformation of old worlds and the creation of the new' (2013, p. 189). Rothenberg's trickster/poet emerges from the ritual liminality of reversals and nonsense through 'a programmed and fruitful, sometimes terrifying chaos, as the

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<sup>16</sup> In the pre-face to the 2017 editions of *Technicians*, Rothenberg asserts the particularity of the activity of assembling in the *omnipoetics* project as a movement explicitly against new colonialism, iconoclasm and the 'upsurge of new nationalism & racism' which involves the 'renewed disruption & annihilation' of 'indigenous and tribal/oral' cultures, he writes: 'To confront this implicit, sometimes rampant ethnic cleansing, even genocide, there is the need for a kind of omnipoetics that tests the range of our threatened humanities wherever found and looks toward an ever greater assemblage of words and thoughts as a singular buttress against those forces that would divide and diminish us. That the will to survive arises also among those most directly threatened — as a final and necessary declaration of autonomy and interdependence — is yet another fact worth noting' (2017, p. xxi).

<sup>17</sup> Maggie O'Sullivan for example makes her admiration of Rothenberg's assembling explicit in 'riverrunning (realisations)', (2003, p. 68).

point of departure for the creation of a new order – for the individual, the group, the world’ (2013, p. 179). So, in his search for poesis, Rothenberg experiments with several ritual techniques for composing and performing poetry. I will explore these works of his own poetry in more detail in Chapter Three.

### **Turner on Poetry**

There is an article Turner wrote on the Ethnopoetics movement which reveals how the anthropologist pictured the role of poetry in the liminal phase of ritual. When reviewing a 1975 Ethnopoetics conference, Turner praises the visionary power of poets to play with techniques of transformation in words and of the possibility in poesis of making something new out of disorder (first published in 1978, republished in Rothenberg & Rothenberg, *Symposium of the Whole*, 1983, p. 337). Turner sees the era’s poets of the Avant Garde and ethnopoetics aligned with the reflexive turn in anthropology, thinking of this time, the 1960s and 1970s, as liminal. He writes:

the secrets – the knowledge and poetics of the ethnoi – are being made visible and embodied in our modern retotalizing reflexivity; in the privileged liminal space-time of the new anthropology influenced by phenomenology and dialectics and given a new voice by ethnopoetics (Turner in Rothenberg & Rothenberg, 1983 [1978], p. 342).

Turner situates poetry in the context of ritual and performance theory and anthropology, giving poets a special role in ritual liminal time, writing that:

ethnopoets (poets?), and the convergent breed of anthropologists of liminality and reflexivity, seem now to aspire to the status of ritual specialists or “technicians of the sacred” in Rothenberg’s phrase, in facilitating the last stages of a process which takes the form: ecclesia (primordial communitas) → sparagmos (equivalent to Levi-Strauss’s “detotalization” i.e. the rupture of tribal sociocultural bonds, the emergence of the competitive individual, a process also of movement from liminal to

liminoid) → ecclesia nova. This could be seen as a move from membership (in a sacred body) to dismemberment (in myriad secular bodies) to recovered membership (retotalization) in a “risen body” of human kindness redeemed through “mutual forgiveness of each vice” (Blake), forgiveness made possible through radical, existential, reflexivity (Turner in Rothenberg & Rothenberg, 1983 [1978], p. 342).

Turner conceptualises a role here for the poet in the ritual liminal, or rather in Turner’s *liminoid*, his term for the liminal of contemporary artistic or secular ritual phenomena.<sup>18</sup> Poets play a role in the process of disrupting and then restructuring a community through ritual transformation. This would seem to recall the anthropological tradition of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century which saw ritual’s function in forming communities, particularly via sacrifice.<sup>19</sup>

Turner’s imagined role for the (ethno)poet, or poet of ritual, is optimistic. The transformation the ritual poet performs in the liminal involves dissolving then solidifying a community through poesis, a revolution which could resurrect human kindness after sacrifice. Turner exceptionalises and idealises the figure of the (ethno)poet here, making them the agent of a transformation evocative of Christian redemption. I posit that the poets I study here would not seek such a pedestal and the responsibility and sacrifice it implies. It is restrictive and reductive to apply the Christian concepts of forgiveness, redemption and the preoccupation with ritual as social cohesion to such a wide range of ritual poetry activity and the different cosmologies at play. I also keep in mind Rothenberg’s own response to Turner of the liminal as a ‘terrifying chaos’, of the need for a caution around the ominous idea of ‘re-totalisation’ that could become ‘holy terror’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The liminal (and liminoid) phenomena that Turner writes about sometimes appears, in his own work and that of others, to be removed from its ritual framework and made into a process in its own right. In these instances, the liminal between thresholds is used frequently to describe any betwixt and between situation of chaotic volatility, of reversals and potential for transformation. Accordingly in history, there are many situations that could be seen as liminal. But how does this liminal situation occur? For this research, the ritual process that creates liminality remains the process in focus, as it is the very methods of achieving liminality, the ritual techniques, that are useful to a creative practice. So, I define liminality as the processes at work *in ritual*.

<sup>19</sup> See for example discussion on sacrifice in Fischer-Lichte (2005) on Durkheim and other ritual theorists and my brief discussion in footnote 50 on Bhanu Kapil’s work.

<sup>20</sup> This caution towards ‘retotalisation’ in the liminal recalls the problematic issue of ritual appropriation across cultures. To me, ‘re-totalisation’ for the ‘ethnoi’ or ‘other’ suggests imperialism: assimilation, erasure, homogenisation and even genocide.

Whilst I remain sceptical of such ecstatic hope in poets, Turner's response to Ethnopoetics and poetry does hint at some of what ritual poetry often aims for in ritual *poesis*, especially *poesis* out of destruction. As we shall see in the readings that follow, ritual poetry is very often used to create hopeful new material out of the destruction of *sparagmos*. Frequently ritual poems in this field are ethical and political actions used to mark or call attention to the needs or conditions of a space and time, and the lives of those connected to it – see for example the work of Philip, O'Sullivan and Kapil discussed below. And, even if the desired transformation of ritual poetry is not always successful, even if redemption or sacrifice is not possible or desired, there is still very often an attempt in ritual poetry towards an ethical intervention, a community or a new bond with the other. But the idea of the poet as a visionary figure of the liminal might describe some of the desire that Rothenberg and other poet-ritualists here discussed have: to commune with the other in their writing and performing, or by the changing of language through *poesis*, a poet can enact small transformations of material and perception and an attempt to transform the normative conditions they find themselves in. The desire of a transformative *poesis* may be present in this poetry, even if, in actuality, it might not be fulfilled or reach the utopian idea that Turner conceives of here.

### **'Bodies join, a ritual ensues': sound poetry and the poetry reading**

At the same time as Rothenberg was observing ritual models in performance and assembling ethnopoetics anthologies in the North American context, ritual performance and poetry were also overlapping in the work of British sound and concrete poet Bob Cobbing (1920 - 2000). Cobbing's experiments with the medium of the vocalised poem were influential to later generations of British Avant Garde poets. Cobbing's influence in the British Poetry Revival, for example, is evidenced in Robert Sheppard's *Poetry of Saying* (2005) which places his experiments with sound and performance at the centre of innovative movements of British poetry at that time. Cobbing's poetic activity across visual, sonic and written media, publishing and live events establishes a practice where poetry is



explored as a fundamentally performative art. He writes that it is:

[a] fundamental mistake to regard poetry as a branch of literature. It is not. It is best regarded as one of the performing arts (Cobbing, 1985).

In his statements, we can find evidence that Cobbing regarded the group sound poetry event as a possible site for embodied ritual. Similarly to Rothenberg's Ethnopoetics, Cobbing finds the impulse of experimental twentieth century poetry's developments across media as being a:

return to the primitive, to incantation and ritual, to the coming together again of music and poetry, the amalgamation with movement and dance, the growth of the voice to its full physical powers again as part of the body, the body as language (Cobbing, 1978).

These comments point towards a recognition of the embodied potential of the voice sounding among others in ritual, as well as the interdisciplinary nature of poetry and related intermedia, as described by the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins (1966). These intermedia include experiments between poetry and embodied, vocal, collaborative and improvised forms, and exploration of the potential of new media technologies. In this context the body, and group of bodies gathered together to share a poem, can be a medium for collective transformation through the material of language, a ritual in other words. I find it problematic to claim that ritual and embodied forms of artmaking are 'primitive', traces of an original state which we return to 'again' in nostalgia for something primal. But Cobbing's centring of the body in poetry is foundational to understanding the ritual poetry that follows. He says:

Communication is primarily a muscular activity. It is potentially stronger than everyday speech, richer than those monotonous seeming printed words on the page.... Say 'soma haoma'. Dull. Say it dwelling on the quality of the sounds. Better. Let it say itself through you. Let it sing itself through you. The vowels have their pitch, the phrase has potential rhythms. You do it with the whole of you, muscular movement, voice, lungs, limbs. Poetry is

a physical thing. The body is liberated. Bodies join in song and movement.  
A ritual ensues. (1978)

Cobbing's activities include the Writers' Forum, a workshop and publishing enterprise which brought together experimentalists across mediums formulating a productive community of poets and artists. Here the poetry reading or performance among co-present people is a medium for collective making: 'Bodies join in song and movement. A ritual ensues'. This suggests a moment of communal embodiment, dynamic and vocal, which, in manifesting a poem, could be a moment of *communitas*, (Turner, 1969). In this context, poetry's live reading and embodiment through the co-presence of others is the artwork itself: a poetic event which manifests its own meaning in poesis (Cobbing, 2015).

Cobbing and his community expanded the possibilities of a poetry reading towards ritual transformation, but it is not inevitable that a poetry reading should be transformative or even performative. The art of performance, its techniques and possibilities are still often forgotten or largely ignored in contemporary British poetry contexts. Peter Middleton has explored the poetry reading as it emerged in the twentieth century, often noting how it may be a site for *communitas*, but also how the event may be 'uneasy' and 'strange' (Middleton, 1998, pp. 262-263). 'Most avant-garde poetry readings take place in borrowed spaces' he writes (p. 270), in which the listening conditions and presence of the poet and audience may be emphasised by their very incongruence and contradiction: 'Unplanned sound, material objects that insist upon other social purposes, obtrusive failures of attention, and an insistent temporariness, are common features of readings.' But this can create potential for something new; 'these visual and sonic incursions may also have another more liminal effect' adding to or generative of the emergent meaning of the poetry being uttered (p. 270).

Thus there is an uneasiness and instability in these events, the reasons for which Middleton explores, suggesting that one cause is that the poetry reading dramatizes centre-stage the 'fundamental instability between writing and speech' (p. 271). Middleton details an 'embarrassing' (p. 262) history of the format: the diminished art of elocution, recitation and verse speaking which has now largely

been forgotten in contemporary commentary on poetry performance in the Anglophone sphere. This history is embarrassing to poets, he suggests, because it reminds us of the technical work of oratorical education, recitation classes and the related class politics of aspiration in which elocution students strove for the 'proper' pronunciation of the upper classes. This movement attempted to unify science and art but failed and Middleton suggests that the unease of the poetry reading may also derive from similar unacknowledged attempts towards unifying social and aesthetic desires in contemporary poetry performance (pp. 265-266).<sup>21</sup> But the possibilities of the emergence of new meaning in this form are many, as Middleton suggests, the poetry reading, 'enables the poem to constitute a virtual public space which is, if not utopian, certainly proleptic of possible social change, as part of its production of meaning' (p. 295).

In my own experience as a performer and curator of live poetry, there are many reasons why a poetry reading may fail to be performative or formative of social relations and *communitas*, or even vibrant and energetic. To Middleton's extensive account, I'd add the risk of vulnerability which performing entails for a poet. In the culture of the UK at least, in spite of the efforts of Cobbing and his cohort, poetry is still most often grouped as part of the literary world of letters, most often centred on print or screen and perceived as a sedentary activity. So the poet, often untrained in any embodied techniques of performance, stands on the stage sharing the poem they have written in private, exposed to the public's gaze in often less-than-suitable conditions.<sup>22</sup> A poet associated with the British Poetry Revival that Cobbing helped initiate, Geraldine Monk (b.1952), names this feeling several times in her *Insubstantial Thoughts on the Transubstantiation of the Text*, a poetics on poetry creation and performance. The poet's body is exposed, 'a body hanging by its feet./ t.t.t.t.t.t./ .t.' (Monk, 2002, p. 11). These awkward moments – the borrowed spaces, the ticks or stutters 't.t.t.t.t.t.' that remind us of our non-mastery of the body, the hanged-man position of the 'poet as an exhibition' (Monk, 2002, p. 7), the 'obtrusive failures of attention' (Middleton, p.

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<sup>21</sup> Middleton alludes to Rothenberg and others such as Cobbing who elide this recent history of elocution in poetry performance, writing of the 'primitivism in discussions around oral poetics, ... evidently represents a similar aspiration for imagined pre-Enlightenment unities' (1998, p. 284).

<sup>22</sup> I elaborate on this in my personal practice in the poetics of Chapter Five.

270) – are the fracture lines of the poetry reading and thus also, for some, its grounds for possible innovation, experiment and poesis. The poets described in this thesis, as well as some of my own works, use ritual and its related performative and embodied techniques to deliberately intervene in the medium of the poetry reading and open up these fracture lines. But ritual is not just deployed for the public performance of poetry, it can also be a mode of composition or way of structuring a writing practice, as we shall see.

### **Ritual Poetry since the 1960s**

For the artists of 1960s, the route to ritual was expressed particularly overtly in the Happening. Happenings often made use of poetry or poetic texts in their ritual contexts, see for example Rothenberg's Gift Events explored below and other examples from the works of Allan Kaprow, Jean-Jacques Lebel and the Fluxus movement (Sanford, (ed.), 1995). A key creator of Happenings and emergent forms of performance art was also a writer, Carolee Schneemann (1939 - 2019). Her Happenings as well as her solo performances, films and feminist actions foreground the moving body and gestural meaning. Some of her works such as *Interior Scroll* (1975) use language and embodiment in such a way that ritual performance is also an act of poetry (Walker, 2019). In her 1958-1963 notebooks Schneemann writes of the confluence of ritual forms exemplified by the Happening. The speaking moving body in the happening is 'votive', she writes (Sandford, (ed.), 1995, p. 249), in that gesture and dynamic embodiment are creative of poetic meaning: 'Ambiguous by-plays of dimension-in-action open our eyes to the metaphorical life of materials themselves' (1995, p. 247). The importance of the materials and the 'votive' body in these works underlie the poetry of ritual I am exploring here.

Many of the poets of ritual examined in this thesis are part of a similar generation of poets who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. In the USA, these poets include Anne Waldman (b.1947) who uses chant and incantation in such works as *Fast Speaking Woman* (1996) and Alice Notley (b.1945) who channels voices in

her writing and performances, manifesting a type of mediumistic ritual poetry.<sup>23</sup> In the UK, Geraldine Monk has also made works which often play with occult knowledge and ritual techniques. Her poetry collection *Interregnum* (1994) explores the ritual incantation of songs and spells to voice disruptively the 'language magic' of the Pendle witches. She also frequently uses ritual techniques such as incantation or chant-like repetition in performance such as her piece with Alan Halsey 'Under Boulby', a memorial poem to Bill Griffiths at Poetry Emergency Manchester festival in 2019. And, as previously mentioned, her *Insubstantial Thoughts on the Transubstantiation of the Text* (2002) charts the journey of a poem from internal emergence to public performance in the 'ritualistic delineation of space' (2002, p. 11).

The following poets, also of this generation and of the next, Maggie O'Sullivan, Cecilia Vicuña, NourbeSe M Philip, CAConrad and Bhanu Kapil, I will be returning to in more detail in the following chapter of close readings. These poets all come from different contexts, concerns and use different media. But similarly, they are often taking up ritual as a resistant response to political, ecological and ethical conditions and necessities – as part of queer, ecopoetic, anticolonial or activist approaches for example. In each case, ritual processes are used to activate a new sense of the materiality of language and techniques highlight the presence of the dynamic body and its community, including its ecology. These poets use ritual as part of efforts that emphasise how embodiment and relation are crucial to the art of poetry making and sharing.

Maggie O'Sullivan was born in 1951 and is a poet and artist resident in West Yorkshire. Her works include *House of the Shaman* (1993), *Palace of Reptiles* (2003) which includes her poetics 'Riverrunning(Realisations)' (2003), the 'her/story:eye' poems (1994-99), as in *Waterfalls* (2012) and *Red Shifts* (2001), as well as visual and performance practice. Her transformative work employs the materiality of language as a ritual technique and will be an important influence in the research that follows.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, her work presented at Poetry Emergency Festival in 2019. I co-curated the Poetry Emergency festival which brought together several ritual poetry performances in Salford and Manchester in 2018 and 2019. Its iterations included many other works by poets mentioned here such as Maggie O'Sullivan, Geraldine Monk, Amy McCauley, Montenegro-Fisher, Rhys Trimble, Scott Thurston, Nisha Ramayya and others.

Two other poets of this same generation have made works of ritual poetry that span the Americas and the Atlantic. The Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña (b. 1948), now resident in New York, makes ritual poetry events that gesture to the material of poetic language via touch, especially the touch of yarn or thread in reference to the *quipu*, the Andean communication technology of knots in string, but also the material of the voice and movement (Vicuña, *Spit Temple*, 2012). Her rituals intend to make present histories and inscribe the needs of the social and ecological world (Vicuña, 2015). M NourbeSe Philip is a poet born in 1947 in Barbados now resident in Canada. Her highly influential book *Zong!* (2008) she has described as ‘ritual writ in water’ (Philip, 2019). *Zong!* is a fragmentation and processing of the legal text of *Gregson vs Gilbert*, a record of an insurance claim in Britain in 1781, which demonstrated that the slave-owners of the ship *Zong* were attempting to claim insurance for the lost ‘value’ of enslaved Africans thrown overboard after the ship drifted from its course to Jamaica. In an ongoing series of ritual performance iterations for *Zong!*, Philip enacts the poem as ritual in group events using sound, movement and poetry readings, intending to name the dead and make them present (Philip, 2018; 2019).

CACConrad, born in 1966 in rural Pennsylvania USA, makes ritual a part of their writing practice as a healing and activist practice. Their *Ecodeviance (Soma)tic rituals for the future wilderness* (2014) details some of their ritual practices and the resulting poems, aiming with each ritual act to connect with the body and an ‘extreme present’ (CACConrad, 2014). Bhanu Kapil (b.1968) is a poet and writer of hybrid literature and performance. Across her writing practice in *Humanimal* (2009), *Schizophrene* (2011a), *Ban en Banlieue* (2015) and recent works, Kapil makes embodied acts of ritual a crucial part of the writing and performing process, folding acts of embodiment into a practice of antiviolent resistance.

To explore how these poets use ritual in different ways, I will discuss Rothenberg, O’Sullivan, Vicuña, Philip, Conrad and Kapil in the close readings in Chapter Three.

## A contemporary field of ritual poetry

The field of contemporary ritual poetry I have surveyed includes many other poets working currently in the international contexts of poetry and literature. Among my own contemporary poetry scene in the UK and its international and multilingual contexts, I have found many examples of ritual poetry experiments. Ritual is used frequently as part of experimentation with performance and often as a way of playing with the poetry reading as a medium and making poetry active for political and ethical purposes, such as making a call for justice or remembrance. One particular example of ritual poetry works I will explore in detail in the next chapter is by my peer and collaborator, the Yorkshire-based writer Amy McCauley, who is influenced by experimental theatre and ritual performance art. Ritual is also intentionally used in a conscious and concerted way by the following contemporary poets and performers working in or in connection with the context of the British Isles: Caroline Bergvall, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, Vahni Capildeo, Iris Colomb, Edmund Hardy, Sarah Eliza Kelly, Francesca Lisette, Síofra McSherry, Montenegro-Fisher, Nisha Ramayya, Scott Thurston, Richard Skelton, Rhys Trimble, Nathan Walker and Sally-Shakti Willow.<sup>24</sup>

In this research, I also explored a particularly rich flourishing of ritual poetry in Chile, where performance and sound poetry are a substantial part of the contemporary poetry scene, for example: Montenegro-Fisher, Martín Bakero, Felipe Cussen, Anamaría Briede and Martín Gubbins. One can find some of this intermedia ritual activity of these poets and others the collectively authored *Seis* made with Cecilia Vicuña, Jerome Rothenberg and Lorenzo Aillapán (2005). Another example I have explored in the poetics of this work, in Section F. of the Creative Chapter One, is that of the Mapuche poet Paulo Huirimilla and his Australian translator Stuart Cooke. Their collaboration at the Humedal Antiñir near Puerto Montt (2019) is particularly notable for its experimental approaches to translation, ecopoetics and collaboration. The Humedal is a site of ritual

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<sup>24</sup> McCauley and Trimble are my collaborators and Thurston my research supervisor. As editor of *Poetry Wales* I also published several of these poets' works on ritual in issues of the magazine in Summer 2018 and Summer 2019 (*Poetry Wales* 55(1) & 54(1)). Similarly, several ritual poetry practices from this community were demonstrated at Poetry Emergency festival in 2018 and 2019.

significance; it must be ritually considered and its presence made in the poems that Cooke and Huirimilla are writing together. Here decolonial, ecological and indigenous poetics are foregrounded, and the land is considered as a sentient ritual collaborator in the translation process (Cooke, 2019).

There are many ways in which contemporary poets use ritual, as we shall see in the close readings to follow. The field is particularly marked by interdisciplinarity or intermedia works, with many of the aforementioned poets using ritual as part of their experiments with other media such as dance and movement, film, performance, sound art and music (especially in its improvised and experimental forms) or often as also part of a wider activist, critical theory and essay or pedagogical practice. Ritual is sought out as an embodied, active and social way of working with poetry, thus it very often forms part of poets' attempts to resist dominant cultural hegemony and enact radical desires for change in feminist, antiracist, ecological, anticolonial and anticapitalist terms. This is evident in Rothenberg's intercultural assemblages, O'Sullivan's ecopoetics, CAConrad's activist somatic rituals, Kapil's anticolonialism, Philip's rituals to remember and 'defend the dead' in *Zong!* (2008, p.26). One can also find ritual taken up in a desire for a world beyond the dominant political framework in recent radical poetry work, as is clear in the recent anthology *Spells: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Occult Poetry* edited by Sarah Shin and Rebecca Tamás and introduced by So Mayer (2018).<sup>25</sup>

The occult is a feature of the *Spells* anthology and it can be found elsewhere in the field in poets' attraction to mythology, folklore and pagan spirituality, such as witchcraft, parashamanism, the occult, and other alternative magical or esoteric practices.<sup>26</sup> Artistic ritual works explored here often gesture towards and are not always divorced from their related spiritual belief systems; some poets use ritual as sacred work or to deliberately engage with a sense of the numinous. The use of poetry in ritual in general is not within the scope of this thesis, but it is important to note how recent decentred and inventive spiritual communities are involved with

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<sup>25</sup> Sarah Shin's curation, especially her co-editorship of the recently-founded press Ignota, foregrounds strong examples of this activity and some of the emerging movement in ritual poetry can be found in their events programmes and the *Ignota Dairy 2020* (Shin & Vickers, (ed.), 2019) and *Spells: Twenty-first Century Occult Poetry*, (Shin & Tamas, (eds.) 2018).

<sup>26</sup> I would note that poets' interest in these themes, particularly the attraction to mythology and occult knowledge systems, are not new, as in Shelley's letter to Hogg (1821) referenced earlier suggests.



the creation and development of new forms of ritual which use poetry as a technology. Ronald L Grimes has emphasised the creativity and invention always at play in contemporary rituals in which poetry often forms a crucial part (Grimes, 1995; 2020). The common ground found between poets and occult or new spiritual practitioners may be the way in which spell, chant, incantation or prayer can be both a poem and a ritual act: charged words of power ripe for poetic experiment and action.<sup>27</sup>

Another interdisciplinary thread of this movement is found in ritual poets' interest in the corporeal. Ritual poetry involves the performing body of the poet vocalising their poem. In poetic performance of ritual, the body becomes, in Schneemann's words 'votive – marked and written over in a text of stroke and gesture' (1995 [1963], p. 249). Thus, another route into ritual which poets take is through a parallel performance and/or embodied and movement practice.<sup>28</sup> Performance art that draws on ritual can also be found in the work of Kapil, Amy McCauley, Montenegro-Fisher and Iris Colomb for example. Additionally, the work of practitioners such as Billie Hanne, Nathan Walker, Camilla Nelson and Scott Thurston are also part of an emerging body of embodied poetics influenced by performance, movement and somatic practices. Thurston and Sarie Mairs Slee in their project and article, 'Vital Signs' (2017) and performance *Wrestling Truth* (2018), give an example of the rich range of possibilities that an exchange between movement and poetry can open up. There are many openings for exploration possible in the emerging field of dynamically embodied poetics.

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<sup>27</sup> For example, contemporary Irish poet, ritual practitioner and one of my collaborators, Síofra McSherry, has described the use of poetry in witchcraft ritual in a recent talk, (McSherry, 2020, mins. 24.30 – 26.00).

<sup>28</sup> Included here is the way ritual can also be used by poets as non-earnest play, parody, pastiche or to poke fun at ritual seriousness and social norms.

# Contexts & Theory in Performance

## Ritual Performance Contexts

As already noted, this field of ritual poetry has historically been marked by an intensive interaction between poetry and performance. In turn, performance practice and theory have made extensive consideration of and experimentation with ritual. In this thesis, I draw on a selection of this performance theory and practical knowledge of ritual from the fields of performance, embodiment, movement and somatics practice. I do not attempt an exhaustive overview of this wide field here, instead the following performance contexts and theory are reviewed from an interdisciplinary perspective, as those most relevant to the poets of ritual and my own ritual poetic methodology.

German theatre scholar, Erika Fischer-Lichte provides my study with a wide range of examples of how artists used ritual in performative work since the nineteenth century. In these movements, artists experimented with ritual techniques of the material to enact performances which transformed spectators' perception of the world and established a new aesthetic of performance. For Fischer-Lichte, there are two periods of creativity, the first and second 'performative turns' in the twentieth century, as explored in her two key studies on ritual and theatre, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (2005) and *The Transformative Power of Performance: A new Aesthetics* (2008). The second of these turns, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, coincides with what Rothenberg describes as a turn to ritual models in his 1977/2013 talk on the 'poetics of performance' discussed earlier (Rothenberg, 2013, p. 295).

At this time, performance practice and theory was drawing extensively on anthropological understandings of ritual. Out of the second performative turn emerged a number of experimental performance groups working with ritual and ritual technique. For example, Richard Schechner (b.1934) drew on a dialogue with Turner and practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski (1933 – 1999), Eugenio Barba (b.1936), Hermann Nitsch (b.1938) and Marina Abramovic (b.1946) used ritual models of art-making to an influential effect. German director Einar Schlee

(1944-2001), an example Fischer-Lichte highlights, provides particularly interesting use of ritual, language and chorus. Emerging from the tradition of experimental theatre laboratories are several contemporary companies; Studio Matejka and OBRA are relevant to this study because I have workshopped with them and thus their work informs the methodology I will detail in Chapter Four.<sup>29</sup> Other examples of ritual in contemporary theatre and performance practice explored in this study include Forced Entertainment who generate material through language production and work with cycles of ritual repetition and failure in *200% & Bloody Thirsty* (1989) for example. This work provides this study with an interesting counterpoint of failed or anti-ritual. Marc Rees' use of cydadrodd, choric poetry ritual, in *Nawr yr Arwr / Now the hero* (Abertawe, 2018), has a particular resonance with the context of my project's creative work in Swansea/Abertawe, Wales. Performance and live art which draws on ritual and creates ritual is also a crucial part of this field. Abramovic is a central practitioner of ritual methods for transformation, as I will explore below in my reading of Fischer-Lichte's theory of the performative aesthetic (2008). Carolee Schneemann's performance art and related writings are also part of this context (Sandford, (ed.), 1995). Contemporary performance art works of ritual, embodiment and communication also include the work of Kira O'Reilly, Ron Athey and others, for example in *Live: Art and Performance*, (Heathfield, (ed.), 2005). Ritual techniques explored in embodiment, movement and somatics practice, for example some of the exploration in Ben Spatz's *What a Body Can Do* (2015) have informed the thesis. I will explore this influence in more detail in the methodology outlined in Chapter Four, and the poetics in Chapter Five.

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<sup>29</sup> I workshopped with Studio Matejka and OBRA whose psychophysical theatre emerges in part from Grotowski, Barba, Schechner and other related laboratory theatre traditions. A ten-day workshop at Grotowski Forest Base in Brzezinka with Studio Matejka in September 2017 was entitled 'Dance of Likeness: Traditions within Me'. A six-day workshop in June 2018 with OBRA and poet Lucy Burnett focused on writing and physical action. Movement and somatic practice frequently draws on ritual techniques and Simon Whitehead is an example of a practitioner in this area whom I have workshopped. I have also practiced Mary Overlie's Six Viewpoints online; though these practices are not exclusively ritual-based, they informed my methodology and poetics. More details of these processes are discussed in the methodology and poetics sections to follow.

## Fischer-Lichte's Aesthetic of Performance

In the examples Fischer-Lichte describes, one can see how Turner's states of ritual liminality, *communitas* and transformation are in action in performative art, and how these states can be created or at least attempted through artistic means, through what I describe as the *techniques of the material*. I draw out of these examples, and her theory, several insights for thinking about ritual in poetic contexts, especially around how these techniques of ritual can be used in the context of language art. Many of the processes she describes are also found in ritual poetry.

I must note firstly however, that Fischer-Lichte does not follow Turner's model directly and ultimately distinguishes the experience of a liminal state in artistic contexts, what she terms *aesthetic experience*, from ritual. This leaves me with a conceptual problem as my focus is ritual in artistic contexts. If I were to follow her example, none of the artistic examples of ritual poetry I am describing in this thesis would be classed as ritual. Instead, not wishing to use a binary system of classification, I follow Ronald Grimes's theory to understand the artistic use of ritual techniques as degrees of ritualisation in which ritual is always created anew by its actors (Grimes, 2020, pp. 183-189). So, whilst Fischer-Lichte's concepts of *aesthetic experience* and *re-enchantment of the world* through liminality are not described as ritual processes per se, I see these concepts as directly useful to theorising ritual poetry.

The artists of the second performative turn are described by Fischer-Lichte as staging various alterations and generations of the experience of materiality; moments of liminality which lead spectators and participants towards transformation in how they perceive reality, or a 're-enchantment of the world' (2008, p. 180). Transformation is sought through techniques and devices, stagings, *mise en scene*, or other pre-determined factors. The techniques described range across the sensual spectrum include experiments with corporeality, spatiotemporality, community and tonality. Although not all of the devices that make up this performative turn described by Fischer-Lichte are of a

ritual nature, many are, or are often inspired by or re-enacting multisensory rituals that emphasise materiality. I describe these ritual models as *techniques of materiality*.

One important aspect of materiality that is emphasised is corporeality; techniques that enhance the performers' and spectators' sense of embodiment abound. Fischer-Lichte's key example is Marina Abramovic's radical use of, and self-injury to, her own body in the performance *Lips of Thomas* (1975). This performance involved the escalation of dangerous actions, from the over-ingestion of honey and wine, to the carving of a five-pointed star into her stomach and lying on a block of ice with an electric heater pointed towards the wound. After an uncomfortably long period, the point came when some in the audience felt they had to intervene to rescue Abramovic from her own performance (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 17). Performance art provides more works involving self-injury to the body, with blood-letting and sacrificial acts in particular representing the starkest reminder through ritual of our embodied and mortal existence as human beings. But these devices of corporeality also come in subtle means: novel uses of touch, movement, eating a shared meal for example. Corporeality was also explored through a relation with the other-than-human body with the use of living animals in the performance space, such as Joseph Beuys's ritualistic communication with a coyote in *I like America and America likes me*, (1974) and Abramovic's works with live cobras (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 101-107). Fischer-Lichte notes how when the body of the performer is referred to, the spectators also become aware of their own embodiments and relationality. These devices may create a heightening of the feeling of *presence*. She theorises three different kinds of presence, weak, strong and radical (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 93-101). Radical presence involves an intense exchange with the spectators so that they become aware of their own presence and generate the performance through what she terms the 'autopoietic feedback loop' of symbiotic exchange of corporeal energies between performer and spectator (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 39).

Techniques of the material in ritual performance also involve artists making creative use of spatiotemporality. In ritual works, the artists often draw novel boundaries around the performance's spacetime. This echoes Van Gennep's rites

of passage across spatiotemporal thresholds of which Turner emphasized the ludic transformational potential of the *betwixt* and between spacetime of the liminal. The artists in Fischer-Lichte's studies draw or alter the expected thresholds of performance so that, once crossed, the traditional or expected perspective of the audience and performer may be changed. Fischer-Lichte describes early cases, in both performative turns, when the proscenium layout of the traditional theatre was altered to put spectators in a newly activated space, making them part of the action. Experiments in time and duration have also been put to use with unusual time-brackets and rhythmic patterns that change the spectator's sense of temporality and expectation. The marked thresholds of space and time create a heightened sense of what takes place in the middle, *betwixt and between* those thresholds in a zone of liminality. As the performance begins, usual rules may be suspended or reversed in a special spacetime which lasts until the threshold of a distinctive end point. Artists may use the liminal as spacetime for reversals, chaos, surprise or vivid action and motion; the spectator's boundaries may be pushed or troubled or they may be immersed in the material. The spectators' reactions feed into the autopoietic feedback loop and thus to the generation of the performance. Here, new experiences of reality may emerge as unexpected *emergent phenomena* which Fischer-Lichte notes are part of the meaning of the performance, making up the performative aesthetic's 'generation of materiality' (2008, p. 75-187).

Fischer-Lichte's artists also explore possibilities of tonality, sonic devices and atmospheres, scent or texture. John Cage's use of silence in order to call attention to the sonic material of the spectator's body and environment is one example (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 123-124). Additionally, the use of strong odours on stage draw the spectator's attention to the environment, their own body and those they share the space with (2008, pp.115-121).

The sonic and kinaesthetic mediums of these performances also allowed for experiments in rhythm. Rhythm can be contagious among people gathered, especially as the process of the autopoietic feedback loop develops (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 39). Performances that use strong senses of rhythm, or the tension and release created from deviation from such a rhythm, can lead to liminal

experience through a shared moment (2008, pp. 58-59). This loop of responsiveness between the rhythms of performer and spectator is sometimes observable in poetry performances that are particularly dynamic and alive to the singular conditions of the performance. Thus, the autopoietic feedback loop is of particular interest for thinking about some of the works of ritual poetry, one example is that of Maggie O'Sullivan's 2016 performance discussed in Chapter Three.

Fischer-Lichte's studies also detail cases of artists forming communities through ritual and this can help me understand the group dynamics at play in ritual poetry performance. She describes how groups of performers and spectators form communities, albeit temporary theatrical communities, through being co-present and sharing in the generation of a performance's aesthetic (Fischer-Lichte, 2005). For Fischer-Lichte, the bodily-co-presence of actors and spectators in particular spacetime, exchanging interactions and the resulting autopoietic feedback loop, is central to the *performative aesthetic* with its formation of temporary theatrical communities in a state of *communitas* (see for example 2005, p. 198).

One example pertinent to poetry from Fischer-Lichte's studies, is Einar Schlee's choric theatre which used rhythmic chanting and tension to great effect. Schlee's *Mothers* (1986), a contemporary German adaptation of Euripides' dramas, involved two competing choruses provoking affective reactions in the audience who were held in a remarkably tense exchange with the performers (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 55-58). Spectators were put in a position between attempting to make sense of the chanted language or the need to respond to the visceral experience of the unusual spatial layout across which an aggressive chorus called. The chorus's vocal surge emphasised the human voice's materiality, as it was detached from clear coherent semantic comprehension (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 129). Schlee's maddened chorus put ancient Greek drama into a post-modern scramble that resembled an intense choric version of a sound poetry performance. Indeed, there are parallels here with the listening conditions created by particularly challenging live sound poetry. Fischer-Lichte describes the way Schlee's spectators entered a crisis as they were held on the edge of comprehension and confusion, tension and release. This was coupled with the unprecedented

encroachment into their space by the performers, the jostling chorus. These techniques put the spectators into a state of suspension, by using language and spatiotemporally as a medium for liminality, or what Fischer-Lichte calls *aesthetic experience* and re-enchantment of the world (2008, pp. 175-207).

How do these *techniques of the material* – of corporeality, spatiotemporality, tonality, rhythm and the use of ritual's potential for community formation – bring about their transformations in the participating subjects? Fischer-Lichte's theory of how these techniques prompt radical experiential changes and sheds light on what is happening in processes of ritual poetry. She writes of how, in these liminal moments of tension, boundary-crossing and extremity, a 'space between opposites opens up' (2008, p.175). In response to provocation and the blurring of boundaries, the subject's embodied perception of the world and their relation to it changes. Here senses are heightened:

the transitional moment is accompanied by a profound moment of destabilisation. The perceiving subjects remain suspended between two orders of perception, caught in a 'betwixt and between'. The perceiving subjects find themselves on the threshold which constitutes the transition from one mode to another; they experience a liminal state (2008, p. 148).

Liminal experience occurs after a transition across thresholds, when expectations may be reversed and attention altered. Here, Fischer-Lichte notes, the usual boundaries the participants maintain, say for example the boundary between audience and spectator, nature and human or subject and object, blur or disappear entirely (2008, p. 172). One boundary blurred is the threshold between how a spectator perceives meaning in a performance – between what is constructed semiotically via associative meaning creation, and what is experienced phenomenologically as material experience. In the liminal emergent moment of the transformative performance, the perceiving subject oscillates between semiotic and phenomenal processes of sense-making. A heightened awareness of materiality and meaning may emerge, perhaps even a crisis (2005, pp. 207-220).



Fischer-Lichte's key example is the moment when Marina Abramovic carves a star into the flesh of her torso in *Lips of Thomas* (1975). The meaning of this act is the material experience of the act itself; it *means* that she is carving a star into her stomach (2008, pp. 140-141). In other words, the symbol of the star itself is not the first association that the perceiving subject makes, instead they are captivated by the material reality of Abramovic's auto-violence. The embodied experience of the materiality of the artist's and thus the spectator's body is the first encounter. What the star itself symbolises is only one element of a range of associations, phenomena and embodied processes of meaning-creation in play (2008, pp. 140-141). This act of corporeal drama disrupts the usual hierarchy of perception.

In this act, Abramovic collapsed traditional dichotomies in the separation between subject and object, spectator and performer. The spectators' actions were crucial to the performance and thus they became the subject of the performance, as actors shaping its course and meaning. In such a point of crisis in a performance, the spectator's attention and role switches between these different states of being in awareness. In the process, new meanings or perceptual manifestations may emerge unexpectedly; a new field of the liminal opens up where phenomena are *emergent* and new ways of making meaning emerge (2008, pp. 139-159).

When oppositions dissolve into one another our attention focuses on the transition from one state to the next. The space between opposites opens up; the in between thus becomes the preferred category. Again and again we have seen that the aesthetic experience enabled by performances can primarily be described as a liminal experience, capable of transforming the experiencing subject (2008, p. 175).

For the perceiving subject whose attention is oscillating between different modes of perception, a keen awareness of the transitions and thresholds themselves may emerge; 'in such a moment they are conscious of their own perception as emergent and elusive' (2008, p. 149). These processes can be a 'transfiguration of the ordinary' (2008, p. 179) in that we become conscious of our already-existent embodiment and relationality. The embodied mind is actually a description of ordinary human life, our ordinary existence. But in this particular culture, that of

European art and thought, audiences are habituated to the two-world model of mind and body, so to be reminded of the ordinary embodied mind is experienced as a change (2008, p. 173). This is what Fischer-Lichte terms *re-enchantment of the world*:

When the ordinary becomes conspicuous, when dichotomies collapse and things turn into their opposites, the spectators perceive the world as 'enchanted.' Through this enchantment the spectators are transformed. (2008, p. 180).

Fischer-Lichte's theory is based on *spectated* performances and thus does not account for how ritual may be used in poetic or compositional situations which do not involve co-presence. However, her analysis of the processes of perceptual transformation prompted by ritual art techniques is useful for understanding wider creative process and artistic ritual practices, especially once other performance practice and theory is taken into account, as we shall see. From my practical point of view as a poet and spectator of ritual performance, the collapse of dichotomies which Fischer-Lichte describes is most often not a conscious, obvious process. As participants in a ritual performance in flow, we do not usually experience theoretical binaries, rather a change or series of transitions in our perceived environment. In the moment of intensity in a ritual performance, whilst immersed in the material, is it these abstract dualities that we feel ourselves coming loose from? Even if we are not precisely aware of the theoretical processes we are undergoing, Fischer-Lichte's work presents a way of understanding how ritual techniques focus attention on how we transition or move between states. Much of the activity I am studying and creating here actually attempts to pass ecstasy or peak transformation and move from the liminal into integration. This process of *movement* between states, across thresholds of enminded and embodied worlds of perception, is a key process of creating transformation and poesis in ritual art.

Fischer-Lichte's works trouble, elaborate and adapt ritual theory in performance context, updating the processes first outlined by Turner's three phases of ritual thresholds by giving concrete examples of how artists deployed ritual techniques. The theory describes how ritual art crosses thresholds into the liminal experience

of crisis, transformation or re-enchantment. These are processes that help inform my readings of the poets of ritual and my poetic practice explored below.

## **Embodied Technique**

It is through what I term the *techniques of the material* that heightened experiences and transformations are possible in ritual poetry. These techniques of the material I have noted in Fischer-Lichte's overview of ritual performance and will shortly go on to identify in the poets of ritual. When I write of *technique*, I draw on the understanding that performance and somatics theorist and practitioner Ben Spatz outlines in their study *What A Body Can Do* (2015). Here technique is the re-iterative development of embodied forms of knowledge which structure a practice. I will explore this concept of technique further in the methodology Chapter Four and detail how it may be applied in ritual poetry in the poetics in Chapter Five in the section on technique.

## **Theories of ritual repetition and rhythm**

I also go to performance studies for elaboration on how two of the techniques of the material of ritual poetry may function: repetition and rhythm. Repetition is a key feature of ritual which is important for the poetry and poetics I detail later. I'd therefore like to note some theoretical contributions that allow me to elaborate on Fischer-Lichte's observations on the techniques of ritual performance.

Two types of repetition in ritual occur, both of which are relevant to ritual poetry: that of the repetition within the ritual and that of the repetition of a complete ritual cycle. This oft-quoted aphorism from Franz Kafka is illustrative of the way repetition is creative and incorporated into ritual cycles:

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally, it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony (Kafka, 1954, p. 40).

For some ritual art practitioners, it is the repetition of ritual which allows its possibility of transformation. Richard Schechner explored this in the theatre and performance context under his concept of *restored behaviour*, the repeated behaviour of ritual performance:

Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to *n*th time. Performance is 'twice-behaved behaviour' towards a 'continuum' whereby performers make a choice to change the score, (Schechner, in Barba & Savarese, (eds.), 1991, p. 206).

More recently, Jerri Daboo draws on this idea of restored behaviour as well as Margaret Drewel's performance theory to examine the transformative nature of ritual repetition in two cases: in Sicilian tarantism and deity yoga (Daboo, 2015, p. 12-21). Tarantism is the ritual of the annually re-enacted spider bite dance, practised up until the mid-twentieth century. In these phenomena, women danced into an ecstatic or trance-like state after having been 'bitten', for the first time, then 're-bitten' by the tarantula each year around the festival of St Paul. Daboo also draws on Vajrayana Buddhist deity yoga practices of mantra, mandala and visualisation meditation. For Daboo, it is ritual repetition's paradox of both sameness and difference that opens up a possibility of change that is generative:

a seeming fixity of permanency of repeating the same thing can allow for a process of change or transformation, and an awareness of the impermanence of 'self' and a forgetting of the 'self', (2015, p. 21).

In the Sicilian tarantism the bite of the spider is danced out again in an annual ritual which, purportedly, restores visibility of the women to their community and gives them a sense of self in belonging (Daboo, 2015, p. 17). In the tantric meditative practice of deity yoga, 'Repetition acts as an anchor for the mind' so

that focus and heightened awareness are developed to 'strengthen intention and will needed to keep concentrated' (2015, p. 20). Quoting from a Buddhist saying, Daboo continues: 'So repetition is itself *na ca so na ca anno*: neither the same nor another, and it is this that offers the potential for transformation of the bodymind in the acts of repetition in ritual performance' (Daboo. 2015, p. 21). This idea, that the paradoxical state of repetition in the liminal moment of ritual performance opens up a space of 'neither the same nor another' from which change may take place, presents me with one of the ways ritual techniques of repetition may create transformation.

Alongside repetition, there is also the related emergence of rhythm. Richard Schechner in his 'Future of Ritual' essay (1993) explores the states of mind that ritual techniques evoke and gives an observation from his practice of how rhythmic and repetitive exercises may initiate heightened states:

My own experience from running many performance workshops during the past twenty-five years, is that rhythmic activities – especially if movement and sound-making are carefully co-ordinated and maintained for long periods of time – invariably lead to feelings of "identical opposites": omnipotence/vulnerability, tranquillity/readiness for the most demanding physical action (Schechner, 1993, p. 239).

Schechner here evidences the results that rhythmic action can produce in ritual.<sup>30</sup> Ritual uses rhythmic and repetitious activities frequently to evoke altered states of

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<sup>30</sup> Schechner goes on to seek out a neurobiological source of such states. Despite claiming not to be working under a universal neurobiological understanding of ritual states, contrasting his view to Turner's in his last essay (1983), Schechner seeks out the heightened state of mind in conditions of ritual, conditions which may bring the states associated with the unconscious to the fore. Schechner is seeking the peak states or the 'future' of ritual that is located in the brain. It may be that the states evoked in ritual are the neurobiological states where the cognitive, narrativizing, or 'default mode network' function of the brain may take a back seat allowing the processes that Schechner suggests that artists, poets (as well as shamans and parashamans) access regularly: an imaginative unconscious realm. It is not my focus in this thesis to pinpoint the exact neurobiological state that ritual poetry might bring on. Instead I am interested in the emergence of poesis and instead of seeking one heightened mental state I'd note that there are many ways to use techniques of the material in ritual to 're-enchant'. For example just one book, Gilbert Rouget's *Music and Trance* (1985), outlines how many different states of mind ritual practices, especially rhythm, can evoke or foster. Barba and Savarese's *Dictionary of Performance Anthropology* also details the many ways in which performers can practically evoke or restore different states of bodymind consciousness (1991). Additionally, see Grimes on Parashamism, (1995).

consciousness such as trance possession or visionary states of meditation. This transition in states of consciousness may relate to the importance that tuning of reciprocal synced rhythms play in our development as relational humans (see for example Van der Kolk, 2015). These processes of rhythm and repetition, well documented in history, performance and music theory (for example, see McNeill 1995, and Margulis, 2013), are also employed in poetry where often language forms the repeated material. I consider repetition and rhythm in ritual poetry in the following readings and in my own poetry, something which I will explore in detail in the poetics in Chapter Five.

## Theories of Ritual Time

In the theory and practice of ritual poetry I am exploring, I often find a particular idea of time as it is experienced in ritual, that is, a timelessness or cyclical sense of return of the past in the ritual present. For much of the ritual poetry I explore here, such works of Rothenberg, Vicuña, Philip and O'Sullivan, poets call upon historical material or work in forms that seem to be replaying or rhyming the past with a poem's present.

The idea of ritual time as a 'return' draws on conceptions of ritual as a stylised re-enactment of historical or mythic events such as death and a rebirth. The uses of this idea in ritual art is evocative of Mircea Eliade's idea of 'eternal return' (1949). For Eliade, historical sequentiality was abolished in a ritual repetition of the act of cosmogenic re-creation. Christ's crucifixion and resurrection were just one of many mythic ritual death and rebirths to be relived through ritual enactment. Other ritual theories drawn from mystical practice and mythological study understand ritual's repetition as bringing a repeat or re-enactment of mythic events, especially the death and rebirth of deities. Examples of this thinking can be found in the writing of James Frazer or Jane Ellen Harrison who thought of ritual as re-done and 'pre-done' and 'anticipatory' (Harrison, 1963, pp. 43-45). These theories of ritual 'return' from the nineteenth and early twentieth century have been widely critiqued (Fischer-Lichte, 2005) but remain influential in the popular take-up of

ritual, (Grimes, 1995; 2020). For example, we find this idea echoed in Daboo's drawing on Schechner's 'restored behaviour' as ritual repetition of tradition (2015, pp. 17-21). We also find this idea echoed in Peggy Phelan's writing on the performance art of mortality and regeneration such as Abramovic (Phelan, in Heathfield, (ed.), 2004, p. 17) and in ideas of incarnation of ritual time in Cecilia Vicuña's precario: a material that is at once ephemeral and eternal (Vicuña, 2019a). It is also present in Turner's idea of liminal reversals, and informs my own idea of poetic destruction, *sparagmos* followed by poesis, which I will detail in the section on *sparagmos* in Chapter Five.

It is a beguiling, but of course unproven and unprovable, *feeling* that emerges in ritual: that history is rhyming in a ritual repetition of past events. As I explore in the poetics in Chapter Five, my practice of ritual poetry often gives a heightened awareness and relationality, wherein space and all the times that have passed in this space feel present. The frequency with which visceral memory surfaces in embodied ritual technique also gives the impression that there is a special kind of time that ritual seems to access. Time in ritual is experienced differently to how it is experienced in daily life, but does this mean that ritual practice evokes an 'eternal return' or mythic synchrony? One problem with conceiving of ritual time as cyclical or an eternal return in discourse around different poetics and ritual cultures is that historical specificity is lost: all times that have passed become flattened into the present or consigned to a mythic golden age of lost perfection, ideas hinted at in the primitivist iterations of ritual art (for example see discussion in Horáček, 2011). I bear in mind critiques of primitivism (Middleton, 1998; Horáček, 2011) which cast doubt on whether there are 'imagined pre-Enlightenment unities' (Middleton, 1998, p. 284) possible to evoke in these notions of ritual return. This understanding of the past informs the ethics deployed when poets borrowing techniques in ritual poetry, as I explore below in the ethics section of Chapter Four.

There is also the possibility that it is the processes hinted at in Fischer-Lichte's account of liminal re-enchantment, especially techniques of altered spatiotemporality, that create a sense in the perceiving subject of a special sense of time. The immersive sense of an expanded present that can be found in

CAConrad's 'extreme present' (CAConrad, 2019), hinting at a special temporal receptivity in the present created through ritual. So, in terms of how we understand time in ritual poetry, we can, instead of considering all times that occur in ritual to be one or a repetition of historic events, think in Ronald Grimes's conception of ritual time. This is ritual timefulness as moments full of different relational possibilities beyond the strictly linear historicism, re-enactment of myth or amnesiac present. This flexible sense of *timefulness* gives some idea of what ritual time's special character is without making universal generalisations or mystifications. Of the different conceptions of time Grimes notes a diversity:

We are too prone to regard as timeless all sense of time other than the chronological. But notions like "the eternal now" (Tillich), "eternal return" (Eliade), "dreamtime" (the Aranda Alcheringa), as well as the "just now" of Gestalt or Zen are not identical. The sense of timing in a ritual process is as distinctive as it is in a piece of music. (Grimes, 1995, p. 70).

Grimes describes a process of synchronised enactment and receptivity which is particularly apt for describing the kind of ritual states that techniques of the material in poetry evoke:

Ritual is formative of the ways we bide our time. In ritualizing, we concentrate, and thereby consecrate, time. The auspicious moment, the *kairos*, is a pulse of opening and closing. It occurs when enactment and receptivity are in synchrony. (Grimes, 1995, p. 71)

Perhaps because of the traditions it often draws on and transitions it entails, ritual time is experienced as different:

these are times that establish the cycles which constitute our sense of the way things flow. We know they are coming; they do not surprise us, [...] rather than timeless it is 'timeful' 'it weighs on us; it reminds us. (Grimes, 1995, p. 71).

Due to the heightened sense of transitions, changes to how a ritualist perceives



reality, ritual time may feel like an overlap or reversion, but for Grimes there is also a plurality of different times, both 'once-in-a-life times and here-we-go-again times' (Grimes, 1995, pp. 70-71). It is this sense of 'timefulness' of ritual that will be observable in the works discussed in the following chapter and in the poetics in Chapter Five of this thesis.

## Contexts and Concepts of Ritual Poetry: Summary

I have drawn a picture, in this chapter, of the context of ritual poetry and introduced some of the theory that is relevant to understanding its processes. The passage of thresholds, liminality and *communitas* derived from Victor Turner's elaboration of Arnold Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* establish a sense of ritual of process through separation, transition and incorporation. Though not a universal or exhaustive theory of ritual, this enables an understanding of the processes in poetic ritual experiment as involving the crossing of thresholds through liminality towards transformation. I have settled on a definition of ritual, with the help of Ronald Grimes's work on ritualisation, as embodied, intentional and relational enactment. I can begin to identify a ritual poetry practice that involves overlapping features of threshold-crossing, liminality, intentionality, movement, *communitas* and embodied enactment. That poetry is a performative art whereby the poem may come into being as an event or process is illustrated by the innovative turn to ritual models from the 1960s as illustrated by Rothenberg, Ethnopoetics, Cobbing and other poets who use ritual in collective embodied actions, Happenings, ritual compositional processes and sound poetry events. The poetry reading becomes a site for ritual innovation, its instabilities and deficiencies pose possible avenues for the ritual poet for experiment and intervention. In a contemporary field of ritual poetry, interdisciplinarity, the drawing on communal or group dynamics, ethical-political action or works that call forth embodied ecological awareness are common approaches which I will detail further in the following chapter in close readings of some poets of ritual. Experimentation with ritual technique often stems from involvement in activism, occult practice and performance.

To these features of the work I find in this field, I add insights from performance studies. Fischer-Lichte's theory helps elucidate how liminal experience is created in performance through techniques of ritual that open up the moment of performance towards a possible transformation of perception. Through her studies, I begin to see the various *techniques of the material* in poetry in compositional as well as co-present performance situations: techniques of ritual that emphasise materiality through uses of corporeality, spatiotemporality, tonality

and communality. These devices provoke states of liminality, blur conventional dichotomies, create autopoietic feedback loops and shift perceptual awareness so the subject becomes re-enchanted with the world. Liminal or transformed states of consciousness can be evoked through particularly strong intentional ritual techniques such as rhythm and repetition. Ritual timefulness, as described by Grimes, also points to how a heightened sense of the present can emerge in ritual.

This overview accounts for a partial theoretical understanding of ritual poetry, the following chapters focus on what the practice reveals and will build on these insights to further detail its processes and features.

### 3. CHAPTER THREE: READING POETS OF RITUAL

#### Jerome Rothenberg

Having touched upon Jerome Rothenberg's ideas around ritual and poetry in his ethnopoeitics work, I now want to focus on his own experimentations with 'ritual models'. Despite his wide-ranging knowledge of ritual theory and practice, Rothenberg's work does not often, at least visibly, use ritual intentionally as a directive for action, in the way, for example, the other poets detailed intentionally make their poems rituals. Instead he tends to work with ritual texts, either to translate them, enact them as a form of expanded translation, or use their processes as tools for composition, such as in his Gematria poems. In performance, however, Rothenberg does attempt a form of ritual transformation in order to activate embodied energies through his voice into the performance space and in exchange with his audience. He also writes poetry out of a transformative poesis, under a vision of poetry as a 'conduit for others', conceiving it as a liminal medium.

#### Ritual Models, Ethnopoeitics

Some of Rothenberg's own poetry and translation works use ritual methods influenced by or intimately connected to the findings of the ritual models that the ethnopoeitics assemblages afforded. A clear attempt at a poetic ritual can be found in the 'events' Rothenberg assembled. These start with his inclusion of ritual texts from indigenous North American cultures in *Technicians of the Sacred* (1967) which seem to resemble scores for action and can be particularly poetic. In his commentaries, in line with his efforts across his anthologies, Rothenberg points out the affinities of these texts with performance art and the contemporary Happening or Fluxus movement's use of scored action. One of the first events is the Kwakiutl Gift Event:

Start by giving away different colored glass bowls.  
Have everyone give everyone else a glass bowl.  
Give away handkerchiefs and soap and things like that  
(Rothenberg 2013, p. 354)

In *Eye of Witness* (2013), Rothenberg follows a selection of these events with some of his own observations and experiments. He includes his own live notes from a Seneca Indian Eagle Dance on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1967 at Coldspring Longhouse, 'an event for orators, dancers, musicians & people. Blessing and Curing. This was part of the Winter 'Doings'' (2013, p. 356), which describe a complete ritual and gathering. The text consists of his observational notes and was part of Rothenberg's larger residency project when he lived and worked with the Seneca people:

Whoop. Music. Dance. (Each dance ends with a sound: hmmmmmm or whheeeee.) New speaker. Raps with the stick before speaking. More crackers. Deposit or mouthing of crackers. (2013, p. 357)

A third event collaged alongside these events is a 'celebration for poets, musicians, dancers based on the orders of the Seneca Eagle Dance & Performed at Judson Dance Theatre New York March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1967', an event which included Jackson Mac Low, David Antin, Hannah Weiner, Merce Cunningham and the Judson Dance Theatre and several key figures from the Fluxus and related Happening movements, a 'Part of the Spring 'Happenings'' (2013, p. 358).

This celebration for poets, musicians and dancers at Judson seems to have included many different techniques of ritual, with dance, actions, threshold crossings, sound-making, music and poetry readings. The translated or transposed ritual is here inspired from the Seneca cultural source and adapted into a score for a contemporary multimedia Happening, a new ritual, where ritual instructions and scores are acted out and improvised with. The intention or purpose of the ritual is celebration or thanksgiving: 'the second poet (Jackson Mac

Low) receives the sounding-stick from the m.c. & raps for silence. He reads a (thanking)-poem of his own' (2013, p. 359); the poems read include those from the adaptation of the Seneca ritual and poems of the poet's own. At one point in the ritual happening at Judson, graham crackers (instead of the Seneca's saltine crackers) are passed around the participants who reach out to each other to take them. Rothenberg's retrospective comment here reminds us that this is a work of translation:

The act of finding-each-other (between participants & audience) was the principal departure from the Seneca source. The event continued to change under this impulse, from a situation where community is taken for granted to one where the activity may finally create it (2013, p. 359).

This final comment from Rothenberg indicates a community forming in ritual as being a part of the creation of meaning in the work, what Turner calls *communitas* and Fischer-Lichte describes as the temporary *theatrical community* forming in the work of the *autopoietic feedback loop* (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 51). In such a ritual community, meaning is generated through the *emergent phenomena* that come forth in the course of the performance and the interactions between the ritual participants, in this case, the art, sound and poetry-making of the artists involved. This is an example then of a ritual poem forming a temporary community through collective embodied and multimedia action under a ritual intention of celebration/thanksgiving.

I wish to make an aside here to note that one can find ethical problems with such a form of translation. The Happening risked cultural appropriation rather than celebration as it transposed a ritual from an indigenous culture, which has been the subject of violent colonialism, into the Metropolitan Anglophone culture aligned with the marketplace and imperial centre. Despite whatever counter-cultural and celebratory intent the organisers of the event had, it didn't seem to involve any Seneca people and may have pushed the Seneca culture further into the

background.<sup>31</sup> Taking a Native American source text into a situation where it is embodied by members of the white Avant Garde elite in the metropolitan centre may appear to be a work of problematic imperialistic erasure or even theft, as it only serves the reputations and culture of the dominant culture. These problematics are touched on in the ethics underlying this in Chapter Four. Rothenberg is aware of these issues and this may have led to caution on Rothenberg's part in 2013 when compiling *Eye of Witness* as these events don't seem to be repeated and he provides very little discussion or commentary on this event in *Eye of Witness* (2013) which is surprising given how in many ways, with its inclusions of Avant Garde heavyweights at a crucial moment and place in art and poetry history, this should have been an iconic event.<sup>32</sup>

As well as working with Seneca ritual texts, in this period Rothenberg also undertook some 'total translations' of the Navajo Songs of Frank Mitchell with a different methodology to the Seneca works. Frank Mitchell died in the 1940s and Rothenberg accessed the songs on tape with the help of ethnographer David McAllester (Rothenberg, 2013, pp. 193-207). McAllester called the original songs 'ritual communications' (*Symposium of the Whole*, 1983, p. 393). Like other translations in Rothenberg's ethnopoeitics and 'total translation' projects, these works are committed to using the multidimensional aspects of the material of language in order make a translation that is embodied and works as a new poem, *in the spirit* of the source text.<sup>33</sup> The Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell, when listened to in recordings of Rothenberg's performance, sound unfamiliar and intriguing, compelling vocal works that seem to testify at the least to Rothenberg's own experience of an original Navajo (sound) text, which he researched extensively (Rothenberg, 2013, pp. 193-207). In performance of these songs, Rothenberg

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<sup>31</sup> This issue is brought up in wider discussions around the Total Translation project. See Clements (1981) for a strong criticism of Rothenberg's translation methods and also Horáček's reassessment of this discussion (2011). Horáček is critical of Rothenberg's primitivist universalism but notes a tendency to subvert these forces with a particularity: 'Rothenberg's translations of Native American oral literatures subvert the universalizing tendencies of his ethnopoeitics and assert the irreducible difference of the source texts. They do so by emphasizing the unique moment of performance: rather than providing a transcript of a hypothetical typical performance in the source culture, they enact a performance of their own, a performance that is visibly inscribed into a specific context of the target culture,' (2011, p.166).

<sup>32</sup> Such ritual happenings are still taking place. I myself have taken part in the Ghost Jams in South Wales and with the Nawr Ensemble at Volcano Theatre for Ode to Joy in March 2019. These improvisations have fed into my ritual methodology discussed below.

<sup>33</sup> I italicise *in the spirit* as I'd like to make it clear that the spirit here is what Rothenberg judged the spirit of the source text to be. What the 'spirit' of the works are in Navajo terms is not made clear.

uses his voice modulating through differing pitches and tones to sound the vocables that would appear without conventional semantic meaning in a literal textual translation, though clearly not meaningless. The resulting vocalised translation reveals something embodied and multidimensional far beyond that of a literal translation. On the page, Rothenberg's 'total' translation also recognises the vocables and invites the reader to make their own sounding which makes particular use of nasal voice technique:

NNNOOOOW because I ws (N gahn) I was the boy ingside the dawn  
but some 're at my house now wnn N wnn baheegwing  
& by going from the house the wwwideshell howanome but some 're at  
my house N wnnn baheegwing  
& by going from the house the darkned hoganome but some 're at  
my house N wnn baheegwing  
(2013, p. 376).

The *ritual communication* in Rothenberg's own translation are acts of transformation through the voice; an example of how Rothenberg's desire to make poetry a 'conduit for others' (2013, p. 429) by using the materiality of language.

Again, ethical concerns persist. The problem may centre around how Frank Mitchell and the Navajo source culture is *represented* in the translation. These are songs of Frank Mitchell, suggesting an ambiguous relationship between whether the texts should be attributed to Rothenberg or Mitchell. Rothenberg however does provide numerous examples of how he has translated these works and the transparency of his method makes clear that Mitchell's songs inspire Rothenberg's poem, they do not attempt to fully represent Mitchell and Navajo culture, if that were possible. Perhaps an element of Mitchell is made *present* through Rothenberg's conduit but we cannot know what it is. Sometimes Rothenberg's dedicated anticolonial translations of culturally 'other' texts make neglected works crucially visible in their particularity, other times his lack of contextualisation or transparency may lead to further erasure of the source culture. This complicated dynamic is explored by Horáček (2011). In the wider context, the problem of intercultural imperialism will keep arising as long as settler colonialism is not



actively engaged with in translation practice and the deep and painful inequalities persist in contemporary literary culture. I discuss the application of these issues in creative practice in the ethics section of Chapter Four.

Rothenberg also uses ritual models as source text towards composition in his own Gematria poems. In compiling the ethnopoeitics selections Rothenberg became interested in his own *sources*: ‘a world of Jewish mystics, thieves, & madmen’ he writes in the pre-face to *A Big Jewish Book* (1978, p. xxxii) whose subtitle reads ‘Poems & other Visions from Tribal Times to the Present.’ Several poems emerge out of this turn to his own cultural lineage, to Jewish mystical and visionary ritual texts, with the Gematria poems most closely resembling ritual process. Here the numerology of the Kabbalistic system of ritual is used as a compositional device. Numbers and words have a mystical connection in Hebrew and he uses them as aleatory procedure for writing poetry. The Gematria poems are short and enigmatic:

THE WORLD/THE YEAR/THE SOUL

Evening.

Morning.

Noon.

(2013, p. 126)

Rothenberg aligns this composition with the modernist and postmodernist recourse to chance ‘correspondences / constellations’ and enjoys the ‘surprises’ and excitements found in the act of writing them (2013, p. 127). In ‘14 Stations’ Rothenberg uses Gematria to write a poem in response to aerial photography of the Nazi death camps:

*Testimony*

for Charles Reznikoff

The light.

The terror.

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## Rothenberg's performances

Rothenberg also takes a ritual approach to the performance of these and other poems. He often performs his Dada poems with a percussion instrument, invoking the holy clown, the trickster 'ritualist of disorder' (2013, p. 182) which he sees as a liminal figure in affinity with the 'technicians of the sacred' of ethnopoetics (2013, p. 189). I have not seen Rothenberg perform but it would appear from accounts that he has an awareness of performative *presence*, that he makes use of some of the techniques of the material, of embodiment and autopoietic feedback loop as Fischer-Lichte describes it (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 39). Rothenberg's performances are constitutive of the poetic work as event, a live assemblage that performs the transformation of poesis. Evidence for this comes from his own poetics and others who have seen him perform. For example Scott Thurston writes of a performance of Rothenberg's he attended in 1992 in a review of Rothenberg's work in *PN Review*:

to this day it remains one of the most intense poetry readings I've ever attended. I think the reason for this provides a key into Rothenberg's work – its function as a kind of index of presence. I'd even risk the much-misunderstood term shamanic as a way to point to Rothenberg's remarkable ability to enter into the world of the poem as it is being performed, so that he inhabits it fully as an alternative reality momentarily connected to our own. (Thurston, 2012)

Horáček comments on Rothenberg's performance as 'total' events (Horáček, 2011) which understand translation as a radical form of embodied transformation. Heriberto Yépez writes about performance for Rothenberg being not a form but an 'unsettled form-process' (Yépez, 2013, p. 20). These accounts seem to see Rothenberg's performance as a technique of the ritual liminal: 'a kind of ephemeral or liminal transition between one form and another in which culture goes through a crisis to transform and make sense and non-sense during the struggle, an interplay of resistance and emergence' (Yépez, 2013, p. 20). For Yépez, Rothenberg's 'transformational peaks' are found in performative works such as the total translation chants, the Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell and the poems

dedicated to the Dada poets, whereby he makes the other present through the conduit of his performance. And yet it is still Rothenberg's own embodiment that is present, 'it is not the individual poet who performs but who himself becomes the subject of performance' remarks Yépez (2013, p. 20). Presence is emphasised, the body is the medium of the poesis. This description of performance would seem to fall under Fischer-Lichte's performative aesthetic and liminality where the phenomenal body becomes strikingly present, thus being a condition for possible liminal experience and re-enchantment of the material (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Similarly, Rothenberg's use of chant and percussions echoes Schechner and Daboo's techniques of repetition and rhythm that evoke heightened states and transformation.

### **Conduit, door, eye: I of Witness**

To return to an encounter with Rothenberg's poetry on the page, there is another element of his approach to poetry, though it is not the live enaction of a ritual intention through poetry, rather a principle of liminality for his writing process, that of poetry as conduit, door or eye and window.<sup>34</sup> Recall that ritual, he writes, at its best can be 'a programmed and fruitful, sometimes terrifying chaos, as the point of departure for the creation of a new order – for the individual, the group, the world' (Rothenberg, 2013, p. 179).

One of the ways I understand the term 'Technicians of the Sacred', it is that poetry, in Rothenberg's world, is a technically experimental way of accessing the sacred. Here the sacred is a realm most meaningful for the poet/ritualist, a metaphysical or emotional-spiritual meaning which is sought in whatever religious or secular system they may adhere to (Rothenberg, 2013, p. 187). One of the technologies here is ritual, another is poetry, and these can be synonymous in some cases, the idea is to make poetry a 'conduit for others' (2013, p. 429). A sacred material is accessed by the technicians, such as the ritual leader, poet, shaman, trickster or witch etc. This material they seek to transform for a *poesis*.

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<sup>34</sup> Rothenberg's editing and assembling of other poets' works is also part of this process of being a conduit for others.

Rothenberg often writes of this sacred material as a source of vision for poetry, even if he himself works with such visions in a secular sense, without a specific or publicly stated religious or metaphysical purpose in mind (see for example the preface to *A Big Jewish Book*, 1978, p. xxxiv). In his writing on the 'I of Witness' Rothenberg makes clear that poetry for him is a liminal process, it can be a door, a window allowing vision to emerge. In his postscript to *A Book of Witness* he writes for example:

I had come to think of poetry, not always but at its most revealing, as an act of witnessing, even prophecy – by the poet directly or with the poet as a conduit for others (2013 [2002], p. 429).

He is, for example, interested in exploring the liminal possibility of the lyric I. This I is multiple, it is a channel for an other, I is witness, eye of witness, as conduit. This is an understanding of poetry as a liminal process, a passage across thresholds seeking possible transformation, that is *poesis*.

### **I Come into the New World**

Voices are dumb until  
I speak for them.  
Knowing the sound  
I find myself between  
two fires.  
(2013, p. 476)

Rothenberg is interested in the *poesis* of creation after sparagmos: the idea of a visionary poetry that is possible after, for example, Khurbn: 'After Auschwitz there is only poetry,' is his reply to Adorno and 'the poems that I first began to hear at Treblinka are the clearest message I have ever gotten about why I write poetry.' (2013, pp. 392-398). The others, for whom his poetry seeks to be a conduit for, are often the dead of history, the voices he 'heard' at Treblinka in the Khurbn poems (2013, p. 306) or they are other poets, 'a paradise of poets' (2013, p. 103).

In poems such as 'Cokboy', Rothenberg voices the trickster or holy clown of ritual who enacts transformation, finding parallels with his own 'Jewish mystics, madmen and thieves' and the Dada poets (Rothenberg, 2013, p. 191).<sup>35</sup> In this way poetry as a liminal conduit for history brings to mind the feature of ritual poetry as evocative of a special sense of time as discussed above, the *timefulness* of Grimes, (1995, p. 71).

For Rothenberg then, there is ritual as a technique, as in performance or composition and translation of ritual texts, whereby ritual is the 'sometimes terrifying chaos', 'point of departure' for the 'creation of a new order' (Rothenberg, 2013, p.179). But there is also a wider idea of liminality in his work which is somewhat abstracted from the process of the act of ritual; this is the belief that poetry can be a transformative medium for poesis, a conduit for transformation in vision and the word.

Rothenberg's poesis is open to all humans, 'a language process, a "sacred action" (A. Breton) by which a human being creates & recreates the circumstances & experiences of a real world' (Pre-face to *A Big Jewish Book*, 1978, p. xxxiii). Turner might agree with this thinking, that poetry's work of transformation in language, poesis, is a liminal process in itself (see Turner in Rothenberg & Rothenberg, 1983 [1978], p. 342). Is it possible then to say that an act of ritual may be found in the process of change, writing, performing, or manifesting, poetry itself? My focus remains the cases whereby ritual is used as an experimental technology for liminality and transformation in poetry, so that I can examine the processes and techniques that make this transforming poesis happen. And yet this overarching belief in the liminality of poetry can work as a point of inspiration, or a justification even, for poets who so regularly turn to ritual for source, method and material. A belief in poetry as a means of transformation, as a liminal practice towards poesis, may not always be realisable, but it is attempted in the work of other poets I will explore next.

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<sup>35</sup> A counterpoint to the way Rothenberg attempts to speak for 'dumb' others (2013, p. 476) is M NourbeSe Philip's use of collective voicing and naming in her ritual enactments of *Zong!* The *Zong!* rituals are dispersed and re-embodied reiterative collective voicings, repeating funerary cries that seeks to mourn and find justice for the dead through a momentary community of the living.

## Maggie O'Sullivan

Maggie O'Sullivan was born to Irish parents in Lincolnshire and spent a period working and writing in London, where she participated in poetry publishing, writing and performance activities with Bob Cobbing and others later identified loosely with the British Poetry Revival. After a 'transformative' encounter with the ritual work of Joseph Beuys in 1988, she moved out of London and has since spent many years living and working with the land and environment of West Yorkshire (O'Sullivan's interview with Scott Thurston, 2011, p. 245). As a poet, visual artist, and performer of her own poetry, she uses a multimodal and ecologically mindful approach to poetry and art, in what she calls a 'mattering of material' (O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 65), making the material of language and the world matter. She shares this multisensory approach with Cobbing, Vicuña and Rothenberg whose poetry and assembling/editing she states, 'makes wide' for her and is 'key' in her 'workings' (2003 p. 68). Her use of ritual is present in acts of poetry in composition and performance as well as in her visual-sculptural processes of 'assemblage'. I explore here how, in her performances of poetry, she creates a form of ritual in which a poem can be 'constructed' with the audience (O'Sullivan, 2011, p. 245) in live actualisation, where the material elements of the poetic language are vocally embodied.

Maggie O'Sullivan's approach to ritual comes through an intention to use poetry and art as a medium of transformation (O'Sullivan in Edwards, (ed.), 2011, p. 247). She uses the sonic and visual and tactile experience of language, poetry's material properties, as the medium to create an enchantment with a sensual embodied ecology. In her works, poetic language can sometimes form a ritual technique for creating a liminal experience, in that the blurring of the boundaries between art forms, between senses and between human and other-than-human open up a heightened sense of the materiality of the world, the body and its ecology. A liminal space opens up also between process and presentation: when a receptive reader encounters her poetry they may enter into an embodied process so that they join her process of a poem's becoming. O'Sullivan's ritual practice can also be thought of as a form of poetic *sparagmos*: a fragmentation

where the lost or shattered parts of language are rebirthed through a ritual poesis. Using techniques such as fragmented or altered language, neologisms made from newly arranged parts of words, found and assembled visual material or language rhythmically re-aligned in vocal performance.

## **Transformation**

In her poetics work 'Riverrunning(Realisations' (2003), O'Sullivan lays out some of her methods, interests, purpose and thematics

Collaborations / Liberations /  
VISION / MYTH / RITUAL /  
Words, Breath,  
Divergence & Multiplicity, my tend sees errant, Vulnerable  
Chanceways –  
BECOMING  
Strains of Lament & Desire  
& Perpetual Strong SONG –  
(2003, p. 64)

Ritual here is placed alongside vision and myth so that they seem to form a layer, a realm even, that is also linked to the body, 'words, breath', of becoming; a process of closeness to song and the ecos and an errancy, 'Vulnerable Chanceways –'. O'Sullivan's ritual intention is part of an effort to achieve transformation by artistic means. She says in an interview with Scott Thurston:

I think language is essentially transformative. Transformative power, ability, essence is inherent in language, all languages. I think by working with language one can tap into this and use it, by making it more visible, more of an active physical presence in the world. (in Edwards, (ed.), 2011, p. 247).

O'Sullivan finds affinity with Rothenberg's assemblage of technicians of the sacred who seek out transformation through poesis; he and the 'exemplary work he makes wide is a key, too in my workings' (2003, p. 68) she states. Transformation

is the dominant theme in *In the House of the Shaman* where she makes clear her attraction to the transformative aesthetic of Joseph Beuys, quoting him in a preface to the section 'Kinship with Animals':

To stress the idea of transformation and of substance. This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development: his nature is therapeutic. (Beuys, in *In the House of the Shaman*, 1993, p. 28)

This interest in the 'shamanic' in her work has been widely discussed (see Thurston in 2011, Edwards (ed.), p. 201; Rowe in 2011, Edwards (ed.), p. 148; Mortuza, 2013, p. 15). 'Shamanic' is a contested and problematic term but in O'Sullivan's work it might suggest a traveling to the imaginal realm and the bringing back of healing or insight. Or it could be a way of using ritual, poetry and art to inhabit other special states of consciousness, a 'kinship with animals'. Instead of judging whether the term shamanic is appropriate though, I'd note how the commentators on O'Sullivan's shamanic focus are observing what could be described as a recourse to the shaman's ritual techniques. The emphasis on being *In the House* of the shaman suggests an occupation of rooms of the Shaman's house and the finding of their materials therein, making ritual with those materials. Like Rothenberg's affinity with the trickster, the ritual figure of the shaman offers ritual techniques for liminality and transformation, and for a poet and artist, transformation 'of substance' (1993, p. 28). This transformation is actually possible in the realm of substance through poetry and visual art: the material found by the poet, that is the material of language, paint, tactile matter, the ecological environs of land and animal, are transformed on the page or the sounded word in performance.

'Hurls to the Untitled, of bees' begins the 'Kinship with Animals' section of *In the House of the Shaman* and immediately suggests a transition between different modes, materials and the 'orders of perception', to use Fischer-Lichte's terms for the material techniques for creating liminality (Fischer-Lichte, 2008):



## **Hurls to the Untitled, of bees.**

### *Daub & Churl*

the fingers out & Doe, done'em in grey, Do Diadems  
Thy down of a bowed & wild rag:  
the still Written Up into caves (1993, p. 29).

Ways of perceiving matter are syntactically arranged here in surprising orders to suggest an embodied kinaesthetic movement, 'hurls', moving towards 'Untitled'. This is a poem in a not-yet-named state, the ineffable process of the untitled. And there are bees; what is the untitled hurls of bees? This very short and sonically surprising poem makes several manoeuvres between such different sensual matter and perceptual modes; its matter flows in swerving directions, the way bees hurl about. It ends with 'the still Written Up into Caves' as if cave painting and movement and bees are continually being written up in the present. We have here a perplexing encounter with material and poetry that is found to be 'untitled'; perhaps this is a suggestion of a non-alphabetic language in the earliest form of creative expression being made present in the present. Material is here transformed and becomes enchanting through new perspectives and energetic syntax. We inhabit the bee's movement. The material is 'mattered'; the ineffable of the material world seems to emerge through poesis - poetry brings forth something untitled in the material world. This is echoed later in this sequence in the poem 'Naming'. Here is another example where the unnameable of the material world is uttered through an act of transformative poesis. Naming is an act of ritual, as we see elsewhere deployed in ritual poetry in NourbeSe M Philip's *Zong!* for example. In this poem we have a rush of rhythmic immersion in a water; our reading-ears dragged through the sonic roughs of a sentient river, closing with:

laid into rivers, nails of  
similarly blood-fine hatching  
this is called/  
fish. (1993, p. 32)

After 'Naming' in this sequence, comes 'Bog Asphodel Song in which capitalised YELLOW and DANSING! are repeated along with other exclamations and visual jumps 'LOUD!' abound until, 'its root is also at the same time a prophesy.' (1993, pp. 33-34). Here is an instance of dynamic embodied 'LIVE!' poetry of movement and rhythm, recalling an ecstatic ritual dance composed of repetition. This vigorous rhythmic movement could be a linguistic equivalent of Daboo's paradoxical transformation possible through ritual repetition (Daboo, 2015) or Schechner's rhythmic activities that promote feelings of 'omnipotence/vulnerability, tranquillity/readiness for the most demanding physical action' (Schechner, 1993, p. 239). And I wonder what prophecy the yellow Bog Asphodel's root offers?

In these poems we see how O'Sullivan works with embodying, enlivening, fragmenting and re-configuring language: *mattering* the material to show the materiality of language. She uses the transformative nature of language which she feels 'one can tap into this and use it, by making it more visible, more of an active physical presence in the world' (2011, p. 247). We could think of this tapping into language's transformative nature, how it can be made to have an 'active physical presence in the world' through poetry in terms of ritual poesis. This transformation of language resembles the way *techniques of the material* can create liminality to re-enchant our perception of our dynamic ecological embodiment, thus forging new meaning and material, poesis. These poems remind us of such ritual transformation, may seem to enact it, but I will look further into O'Sullivan's ritual practices to find more evidence of how O'Sullivan uses ritual techniques for a transformative poetic action in the live moment of composition and performance.

### **O'Sullivan in performance**

O'Sullivan's transformation of substance, the *mattering of material*, extends to the live manifestations of her poems in performance. She frequently makes use of the poetry reading's potential as a crucible, its capacity for what Cobbing, one of her collaborators and supporters, speaks of as the potential of a moment when 'bodies join, a ritual ensues' (Cobbing, 1978). Spectators of her performing her

poems may remark on her 'presence' or even 'beauty'.<sup>36</sup> The singular presence she creates invites theorisations of presence as detailed in performance studies. Fischer-Lichte's understanding of presence might be helpful: O'Sullivan is not just present in a space, as Fischer-Lichte's concept of 'weak presence', instead she often utilises techniques of the body in her poetry performance: an enunciation of her poems is made so that all the words and their rhythms in the poetic line are clearly sounded. The way she takes her readings seriously and performs her poetry with great vitality would suggest Fischer-Lichte's 'strong presence' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 93-101). However, on occasion when I have been a spectator of O'Sullivan, I can say that she manifests what Fischer-Lichte calls, 'radical PRESENCE', that is, using poetic language in vocal performance to create an autopoietic feedback loop that brings the audience into a new relation with the performer or artwork through symbiotic rhythms and co-creation of the performance. This is one of the processes that is used in ritual performance to initiate liminal experience, to become re-encharmed with the world (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 181).

In a performance I attended in Glasgow in October 2016 I encountered this radical presence and the autopoietic feedback loop in the form of O'Sullivan's performance. In this reading she built up a rhythm through the clear emphasis of the sound of language, using her voice to clearly pronounce all the tumbling and rhythmic sonic shapes of the material. This is typical of her approach to performance. Here though, I felt the presence of the rhythm particularly strongly; a paced textural assemblage in her voice emerged which was responsive to the people present and the singular space-time of the event. I felt the material of her voice resonating with my own rhythms. I was moving along with her poetry as if to a strong beat. The poetry was clearly affecting my bodily responses. The feedback loop she generated seemed to initiate a collectively heightened experience that many others afterwards commented on. This is a realisation of Cobbing's idea that

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<sup>36</sup> Adrian Clarke remarks that on O'Sullivan's 'striking if not conventionally beautiful dark Irish features are transformed, transfused with beauty as she reads unhurriedly letting the measured syllables relate to establish rhythms in an appropriate time' (cited in Sheppard, 2005, p. 233). The perception here of a strong performance presence which emphasises the embodied nature of poetry is limited by the restricted and tiresome gendered (and cultural) preconceptions of the male gaze towards a woman on stage. This limitation of sexism leaves the viewer unable to appreciate the complexities of the embodied poetry and performance technique O'Sullivan presents.

‘bodies join, a ritual ensues’ (Cobbing, 1978) but through the medium of listening bodies. There is unfortunately no recording of this Glasgow performance. However other recordings of O’Sullivan’s work seem to recreate this effect of rhythmic flow and a ‘mattering’ of the material of language. Not all of the recordings of her presenting her poetry create such strong effect as to influence the bodily rhythms of the listener; others are readings with different atmospheres and vocal textures, but they are always attentive to language’s materiality through the voice.<sup>37</sup>

These performances present us with an example of poetic language being used to create what Fischer-Lichte describes as the performative aesthetic’s liminal experience whereby thresholds of performer/spectator, semiotic/phenomenal and even human/other-than-human have been crossed. Here transitions between different perceptual modes occur as modes of semantic and material sense-making oscillate and the sonic and embodied modes of listening immerse a perceiver in the sensations of language, making a ‘re-enchantment of the world’ (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 180-200). As listeners to O’Sullivan’s most transformative performances we may pass a threshold into a communal embodied somatic awareness of the material of the language, immersed in the present moment of the poem. As an audience we are co-present as an embodied community joining each other in our listening to her words. O’Sullivan’s poetry is written with a sensitivity to and in exchange with the ecological realm and thus animals and the sentient earth, land, environment were very present in that performance, despite the fact we were in a windowless blackbox bar venue (‘Poet’s Bar’, Glasgow). O’Sullivan was bringing a ritual writing process she had made outdoors indoors<sup>38</sup> and into a community of others in a re-iteration, part of a cycle of acts of exchange, so that words come from land/animal to poet to audience and other poets’ bodies and back out into another world. Here she had achieved what she states she hopes for in performance: ‘that in the listening, seeing and inhabiting, the audiences are taking part in the construction of the

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<sup>37</sup> I also was in the audience at Poetry Emergency festival in Manchester 2018 when O’Sullivan made a similarly inspired performance that seemed to glow ‘ephemerald’ in my memory. Unfortunately, on this occasion, as co-curator, I was simultaneously trying to record the performance, my experience of it therefore is not reliable as marker of the affect I am trying to describe.

<sup>38</sup> Appropriately, the theme of the conference in Glasgow in 2016 was ‘Outside/In’ on outsider poetry. Present in the audience were several poets that included O’Sullivan’s colleagues and friends in ritual and sound poetry, Jerome Rothenberg, Diane Rothenberg and Charles Bernstein.

work' (interview with Thurston, 2011, p. 245). This taking part in the construction hints at another feature of ritual poetry picked up by Rothenberg in his talk on the models exploding after the 1960s: 'distinction between doer and viewer' reversing or blurring and 'the increasing use of real time, extended time, etc., and/or a blurring of the distinction between those and theatrical time, in line with the transformative view of the "work" as a process that's really happening' (Rothenberg, 2013, p.209).

We can also draw a comparison with the processes that Schechner describes as creating heightened feelings of 'omnipotence/vulnerability, tranquillity/readiness' arising from rhythmic exercises (1993, p. 239), and Fischer-Lichte's analysis of Einar Schleef's choric theatre, which used rhythmic chanting of semi-sensical language to create liminality (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 129-130). Those present in such a moment are held 'betwixt and between,' attentive to the material and a possible re-enchantment of the world. But in the case of Maggie O'Sullivan's transformative performances – like the one I describe above – this liminality *through language* is intentional: it is the language itself and its embodied vocal material which is 'mattered' in the service of transformation, leading the way towards liminality and enchantment through poetry, ritual poesis.

### **Instructions and mattering: ritual on the page**

But the processes described here can be also found in different forms in an experience of reading O'Sullivan's work on the page. The poems 'Narcotic Properties' and 'Theoretical Economies' for example, seem to contain broken or disrupted instructions for ritual. Reading these poems, we are invited to take part in a fragmented ritual, leading us through a different sort of enchanted materiality. Here I will discuss how these poems enact a process of what she describes as a 'mattering of material' (O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 65). We can think of these two poems as closely interlinked, in fact they have been merged together in error in the 2003

collection *Palace of Reptiles* (Email Correspondence, 2018).<sup>39</sup> In the introduction to a reading of 'Theoretical economies' at Willowdale Ontario in 2003, she mentions that these poems were written when her art materials were in packing boxes after a move from the city to the countryside. Unable to touch these materials, it's as if this poem makes a series of gestures through those materials in language: the performance of some kind of ritual. She says in this introduction that this estrangement from her artwork left her 'visually, expressively paralysed.'

<sup>40</sup> This, together with the visual work the poems refer to, suggest a dynamic and sensitive treatment of material, an engagement with the visual, movement, space and sound; so that it seems that separation from the materials of her art practice initiates a 'mattering of materials' through language towards poesis.

Narcotic Properties begins:

PLACE A SMALL PALE-CREAM BOWL (TO SIGNIFY  
abundance)  
(2003, p. 15)

Lead animals are laid out, cleaned carefully and placed without overcrowding; a preparing of space typical to ritual. We have here a playful version of her 'kinship with animals', a closeness to the wild world and its violence and the raw energies she evokes elsewhere.

To look closer at these poems 'Narcotic Properties' and 'Theoretical Economies', is to realise a confusion of two distinct actions, instructions for ritual that have been transformed in some way. The tangling of these poems in error, upon publication, means that it is not easy to trace a direct course of ritual passage, in fact O'Sullivan's poetry rarely uses direct course of action, 'my tend sees errant' is

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<sup>39</sup> I first noticed that a recording of these poems, made at Willowdale, Ontario The Gig in 2003 was different from the published poem which comes alongside 'Theoretical Economies' in *Palace of Reptiles*. Upon enquiry with O'Sullivan and Scott Thurston we then discovered that the two poems had been mixed up in error in the publication and she had not noticed this until now (Email correspondence, December, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> From her comments at a live reading of the poems in 2003 in Willowdale, Ontario 'The Gig', (recording accessed on Pennsound website, 2020).

typical (2003, p. 68). This poem is 'Unfixed/ Song-Song Stare...' (2003, p. 20) so that instead of a clear set of instructions for a rite we have the beginnings of some kind of ritual actions, a multimodal encounter, perhaps a ritual for composing or making, or a description of a course of haptic contact with charged objects followed by a maelstrom of language fragments. The directness of the instructions is broken into with a characteristically O'Sullivan sparagmos – that is, a frenzied dismemberment of language to shreds, which are set in motion in a rhythmic flurry of reconfigured material. Perhaps this ritual's course of direction is 'BEING-ARROWED' (2003, p. 21). The cloth laid out in the poem now has an expanding blood stain which is then to be lit with a match, but it is not specified where this blood springs from, and this uncertainty charges the poem with the presence of a body.

WATCH AS THE STAIN IGNITES AND  
SPREADS EVER MORE OUTWARD TO THE EDGES OF THE WHITE  
CLOTH  
(2003, p. 17)

The ritual letting of blood and use of fire, a common trope of the second performative turn (as in Abramovic or Nitsch in Fischer-Lichte, 2008) where ritual was used to draw attention to the body and its vulnerability and mortality, is here recalled on the page.

The end of 'Theoretical Economies' in the publication, but what should have been the end of 'Narcotic Properties', reads:

RED  
BEES  
APART  
owl-sha  
conks clays-under splashing. Abundance. weeps.'  
'Theoretical Economies' (*Palace of Reptiles*, 2003, p. 21)

'Abundance' recalls the beginning of 'Narcotic Properties', the bowl placed to signify abundance (p. 16). 'Abundance. weeps' seems to create an ending threshold that would align with the re-incorporation rites of Turner, except that O'Sullivan is far too much of a trickster with language to allow a smooth transition re-incorporating poetry back into an orderly hierarchical community. Instead this is ecological material full of ambiguity and open questions. The opening threshold invokes abundance through the placing of small pale-cream bowl on the table, a ritual gesture of offering or protection, or an invocation of the abundance of the ecological world, the animals or 'were-louds' (p. 21) to come. It ends with a sense that this same abundance is weeping (2003, p. 21). This time abundance is placed among splashing and weeping excesses, and to weep here is ambiguous: who or what weeps? Is to weep to lament for a damaged ecology or to leak further liquid abundance? A view of an abundant world would allow both lament for loss and further regeneration.

At the end of 'Theoretical Economies', which is the end of 'Narcotic Properties' in the publication, the liminal period also seems marked with a threshold: with '& oh, the room is to be lit first with/ KINSHIP OOZED OUT OF SHAPE BLUE/ matter' (2003, p. 18). The liminal chaos is left open, its closing threshold is ambiguous. These rites of passage markers suggest a transitional middle, an upside-down world, playing deeply in the liminal middle. This line also suggests a transformed sense of kinship, especially ecological kinship, a *communitas* oozed out of shape. And blue matter, is this the blue matter that dominates the cover of the book?

The transition phase of the ritual liminal is ludic, as Turner (1969) suggests, but its chaos has the potential for violence. In this poem there is often a feeling of extreme exposure of the body, blood spreading from who-knows-where? A body, humanimal, is very present and thus vulnerable:

LISTEN AS THE SKEWERED TRAMPLING OF THE DOOMED  
 ANIMALS ear into nethery Singes, Neighed-at's,  
 all knuckle-noised,  
 were-louds, mouth,  
 mouth & proves



## Unfixed

Song-song Stare

stood-like

fist-on-breath

finger-on-brain

madder bled meat. maddled, (2003, p. 20)

A liminal exposure seems to leave open the flesh of the brain, vulnerable to a finger or to 'madder bled meat' (2003, p. 20). We could recall the Rothenberg's bodies, turned to meat in his 'Khurbn' poems, and in 'Vienna Blood' his retort to Turner that the ritual middle or liminal chaos is also a possibility of great violence, or 'communitas, ... is holy terror.' (Rothenberg, 2013, p. 294).

In her poetics 'Riverunning(Realisations)' she is explicit about a process that seeks to make ecological embodied materiality transformed and mattering: 'What 'Making' – 'Unmaking' is / a Mattering of Materials (motivations & practise)' [O'Sullivan's spelling] (2003 p. 65). This bespeaks of her visual art works 'ASSEMBLAGES, after Kurt Schwitters' (2003, p. 67) which make debris and tactile matter significant, but it also describes her process of making all material matter through poetry. 'Mattering of material' is a play on matter's double meaning: matter made to matter. In my mind, one cannot separate this double mattering from the fact that the material O'Sullivan gestures to as mattering is very often embodied and ecological material. She very soon follows a Mattering of Materials with 'Living Earth Kinships on the vast-lunged Shores of the Multiple Body imbued with wide-awake slumberings & cavortings' (2003, p. 65). The 'Multiple Body' suggests a porous highly sensitive body in intimate exchange with its environment and evokes Sandra Reeve's concept of the 'ecological body' (Reeve, 2011) which I will return to in the poetics in Chapter Five. The process O'Sullivan seems to be describing is one of using a ritual-like process to cross the thresholds of the shores of the body, to open up and care for the Living Earth Kinships in a way that is 'wide-awake', immersed, present, and in deep exchange with the material of the ecos. This mattering is a poesis in that it creates new meaning and material but it is also a naming and an uncovering, bringing to the surface of the text or collage the material's matter, to hear its voice. This is another example of O'Sullivan doing

what she describes as ‘tap[ping] into [the transformational nature of language] and us[ing] it, by making it more visible, more of an active physical presence in the world’ (2011, p. 247).<sup>41</sup> O’Sullivan is often seeking to make present all kinds of voices including the other-than-human (2011, p. 243).

These poems suggest to me that the ritual body in O’Sullivan’s work is sensitive and vulnerable in a liminal state of poesis. This could be the state where ‘my tend sees errant, Vulnerable/ Chanceways’ (2003, p. 64), in which matter can be transformed for better or worse. It may also be a ‘sometimes terrifying chaos’ or ‘holy terror’ to keep in mind Rothenberg’s cautions (Rothenberg, 2013, p.179).

Like Rothenberg, O’Sullivan is using poetry as a means of making not just our embodied ecologies but also the past and others present. In the poems in *Waterfalls* (2012), part of the series of poems *her/story:eye*, O’Sullivan draws on the linguistic, natural and psychological world of her paternal ancestors in Skibbereen, Ireland. She writes to Scott Thurston that her grandmother Ellen’s heart ‘beats within’ her (personal email correspondence, October 2019). There is also then a *timeful* element to O’Sullivan’s ritual poetry, that the ecology she matters has a history and that a poesis that emerges may resonate with her sense of an ancestral relation as well as the immediacy of the present moment.

O’Sullivan’s *mattering* brings to mind the receptive enactment that Grimes describes as ritualization. And it also suggests the consecrated behaviour that Geertz defines as ritual (Geertz, 1973, p. 112). It is re-enchantment via the means described by Fischer-Lichte. And it could even be thought of as Turner’s liminal poet’s “‘risen body” of human kindness’ (Turner in Rothenberg & Rothenberg, (eds.), 1983, p. 342), though O’Sullivan’s poesis can be understood in a different way, whereby ‘mattering’ speaks of a kindness for an embodied ecology. These works invite reader-listeners to discover with her, ‘construct’ with her, a newly mattered materiality. Tuning in with her we hear, touch and feel the sentient material, history and the body in and around us. Through her transforming poesis we can encounter the web of our interconnected embodied ecologies, to find that

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<sup>41</sup> This concern to unearth silenced voices is discussed by Mandy Bloomfield in ‘Maggie O’Sullivan’s Material Poetics of Salvaging in *red shifts* and *murmur*’. (2011, *Salt Companion to Maggie O’Sullivan*, pp. 10–35).

we are also material and interdependent upon each other. Thus, O'Sullivan's poetry also suggests action for the embodied ecos in political, ethical and artistic terms. To *matter* is to take action and attempt a transformation. And in O'Sullivan's mattering, poetry is the medium of ritual transformation.

## Overview of Other Ritual Poetry Practitioners

### Cecilia Vicuña

As well as Rothenberg and Cobbing, O'Sullivan mentions another poet as being influential on her ritual practice of poetry, the Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña (O'Sullivan, 2011, p. 205). The ritual techniques that Vicuña employs also hinge on a 'mattering of materials' (O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 65), often bringing the audience together, literally joining her presence to theirs via a collective touch of a thread or yarn, textile works. She has performed rituals for the river Mapocho and on the beach where a ritual site has been polluted in *Kon Kon* (2010); often she uses spoken poetry or vocalisations. Aware of the *communitas* that ritual forms offer, and keen to emphasise the entanglement of human and natural processes, Vicuña's works are often site-specific and participatory, bringing people together through the medium of a material or place. She has worked with the quipu and ceque, a pre-Columbian Andean systems of communication through knots in threads and lines (see for example her interview with Jena Osman (Vicuña, 2019a) and images from a performance with a loom and thread at Barnard College New York in 1996 in *Spit Temple* (2012, p. 111)). She says of the quipu, ceque, connectivity and communal artistic action:

These were like imaginary lines running from Cusco all the way to the mountain's summit, to the origin of water. It's all about the circulation of water—from glacier to river, ocean, cloud, rain, and snow. Quipu and ceque came from an awareness of this and the need to care for water through ritual activity and communal responsibility (Vicuña, 2019b).

Vicuña's ritual poetry utilises her voice and movement, through the space of a room and the people in it, to make present the material of that space and time and poetic language. In a performance, she will often start her piece from a position in the audience, thus deploying one of the techniques emphasised by Fischer-Lichte, from the performative turn, of reversing the usual ritual spacetime thresholds.

Vicuña consciously uses rituals to call attention to climate change, as a political intervention, or as offerings to land and the rivers of the world:

So for many decades now, I've been creating collective weavings where people's bodies are knots of an interconnected web, which is the quipu, to remember all these layers and dimensions. It creates a state of mind, a consciousness, that can only be achieved collectively in the ritual. (Vicuña, 2019b)

This state of mind of the collective suggests *communitas*. In ritual *communitas* Vicuña finds a raising of consciousness and awareness of the material world. Her ritual poetry goes to such possibilities of ritual as a way of making political and ethical actions.<sup>42</sup> The technique of the material being employed most often here is touch and connection to material through collective hapticality. The fragile nature of this material world – both the body and its ecology – can be touched in ritual. Indeed, Vicuña is particularly interested in what she calls the *precario*, a thing that is at once ephemeral and eternal (Vicuña, 2019a). Through the touch of the *precario* in a ritual *communitas*, Vicuña invites us to experience a spacetime of the ritual liminal as both ephemeral and eternal.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> She is explicit about this in an interview with Camila Marambio in *Miami Rail* (Vicuña, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Vicuña claims to draw her ritual practice from indigenous cultural sources but, apart from the quipu and ceque, she is sometimes vague about what the 'ancient' cultural forms and ideas she is drawing on. I think this is one factor that has led to charges of cultural appropriation of Mapuche and other indigenous artistic forms. Because of this problematic issue I have also sought out other examples of ritual poetics in Chile. The work of Paulo Hurimilia and his Australian collaborator Stuart Cooke in particular provided a different perspective on ritual poetry and ecological activism (see Cooke 2019; Huirimilla 2010, and also my own poetics). And I also found interesting examples of other artists and performers using ritual such as the Mapuche Isla Negra collective in Karü Mapu Tierra Negra at the Museo de Memoria special exhibition January 2019. These works and the ethics of intercultural ritual poetry transposition have been explored in order to form an ethics for my practice, as outlined below. But I acknowledge that I cannot know all of the discourse here in order to be able to judge in any final sense the ethics of Vicuña's appropriation.

## CAConrad

CAConrad's ritual practice is motivated by a desire for an experience of an 'extreme present' (*Ecodeviance: (Soma)tics for the future wildness*, 2015). In the practice of these (soma)tic poetry rituals, Conrad seeks an embodied connection to a present moment: the rituals are tools for creating connection with the body and the material and they are most usually followed by poetry composition. In a recent talk with Ignota books at the ICA (November 2019), they spoke of a daily ritual, inspired by Stephen Vincent and also notably Bob Cobbing, in which they stare into their own eyes and write with a hand clenched around a pen. In this state Conrad claims to reach something extreme and 'blurry', a state of absorption in the 'Soma', suggesting an embodied technique of duration that pushes the bodymind past its usual boundaries into heightened or altered states of awareness. In an accompanying interview with Ignota, Conrad writes again of this state of ritual liminality and specifically links it to transformation:

that thin place right where these two completely different environments meet, it is blurry that place, but for me, it is where magic is best understood. Much like waking slowly from a dream, our eyes partially opened, and that blurriness in front of us is where we can take the point of transitioning from one state of awareness to another and pivot the experience beyond transition to one of transformation (CAConrad, 2019).

In *Ecodeviance* poems are introduced with a description of the ritual, and an explanation of how the ritual leads into the writing of a poem (CAConrad, 2014). CAConrad has often written about the recourse to ritual having come about as a reaction to a background where family members worked in factories and could not be fully present in their lives (CAConrad, 2019). So the extreme present of the soma(tic) poetry rituals explicitly seek connectivity, a sense of being grounded in the material and social and an enhanced state of awareness which may aid a feeling of agency or a process towards fulfilling ethical and political desires. And, with a lifelong interest in magic, healing arts and the occult, ritual is part of Conrad's ongoing embodied practice for their emotional and physical wellbeing. The Soma(tic) rituals include lying down in a supermarket aisle to protest capitalist

extraction and environmental degradation or the swallowing of crystals. It is important to note that it is the very demanding strangeness of some of these rituals which seems to lead to a complete immersion in the present, a liminal experience:

These rituals are so odd and focused that they create an extreme present, meaning that I cannot possibly think about anything except what I am doing. To anchor myself in the present, my body is essential to persist in feeling the time I am living while writing. Each ritual is a choice to become and remain present. (CAConrad, 2019)

This is ritual poetry as a call to the present moment and the body, a mindfulness beyond abstraction and an awareness of the embodied mind and the material. Its techniques of the material are directly related to the physicality of the material and the body:

The somatic of the (Soma)tic ritual, or the physicality of it, always helps the soma of the (Soma)tic, or divine nature of it, come through much clearer. Being present within the ritual keeps the goal of poetry set. (CAConrad, 2019).

CAConrad's ritual poems often take the forms of direct political action, often on the behalf of the ecological sphere or for queer and gender equality. This activism signals to a wider trend among the ritual poetry described here: ritual as a way of making poems an intervention into embodied relational situations and thereby drawing attention to the presence of the material and/or embodiment and creating a sympathetic 'extreme present'.

## M NourbeSe Philip

M NourbeSe Philip's use of ritual through the ceremonial performances of her text *Zong!* (2008) are enacted in order to name, remember and thus make present the lives of those enslaved and killed by slavers on the ship *Zong*. The book uses the legal text of an insurance claim brought to British courts concerning a massacre which took place in 1781 when enslaved Africans were thrown overboard in order to claim insurance for their owners. Philip tears up this legal text and uses several means of processing it through fragmentation, repetition, erasure and re-assemblage in order to rewrite the lives of the people back into presence and the awareness of those of us in the present. A ritual to embody and humanise (Philip, 2013).

Ritual is used to perform *Zong!* with poetry readings often made with a collective of musicians, dancers and the audience themselves. Ritual performance here is a way of letting the dead become present in a memorialising act of naming, but it also re-iterates, in a communal voicing, call and witnessing, the sparagmos of lost lives and languages. The legal text which Philip used in the original composition of *Zong!* is reconfigured in each performance to make a ritual poesis. The sparagmos and poesis made from this legal text also seeks to transform the founding language of dehumanisation from a document that brought to light in British, and therefore international colonial law, the non-personhood of Africans as property. The transformation of this text in its composition and ritual re-iterations then seeks to disrupt the ongoing structural effects of such a denial of humanity.

So the ritual of *Zong!* is ongoing in iterative performances, manifestations of the poem and also of the presence of the dead themselves. The ritual poem is often performed communally, using song, percussion and movement as well as readings. Another technique of ritual Philip uses includes clear marking of thresholds, thereby summoning liminal experience that dissolves separation between spectator and performers in improvisation (Philip, 2014). For example the performances will start with a bell ringing upon entrance and end with the



audience all simultaneously reading aloud texts from the book.<sup>44</sup> Repetitive incantatory vocalisations and rhythmic development in sound are also used as ritual techniques to summon and call up the world of *Zong!* The communal rituals often end with a final group voicing of the poem, which includes the audience, moving towards a further *communitas*. When this community of the ritual manifest the poem with Philip, they activate the poem, voicing the dead's presence, calling them into the present, 'breathing tog(a)ther' (Philip, 2018).

These events seek to lend living breath and voice to the dead and to mourn those who were not given the funeral rites at the time of their murder. Philip writes: 'When I perform *Zong!* ... the bones of the undead can find a resting place within us. Each time I perform *Zong!*, it manifests as Ceremony' (Philip, 2014).<sup>45</sup> In a later text, made in response to appropriations of the poem that were tantamount to theft in 2018, Philip writes again of the necessity of the text as a ritual for those killed in the transatlantic slave trade: '*Zong!* is ritual. Writ on water.' And that there is 'an aspect of a work that I and many others continue to learn from...' that it is

also about co-creation, In the spaces. Left by the One. And the Other. And their relation. In the spaces allowed for breath. It is about us today breathing for those who could no longer breathe; us breathing into those who could no longer breathe; us breathing still with those whose breaths were abbreviated, cut short, becoming ga(s)ps in the unending prayer of dark water — black water. Breathing tog(a)ther. (Philip, 2018).

So on the one hand this is a work of mourning, a funeral rite, but on the other it is a re-affirmation of life through breath; a re-humanisation through breathing together and learning through the body together, in order to gather. In this way the poetry performance of *Zong!* works in the way a funeral ritual marks the threshold of life and death, with hopeless hope for rebirth, a terrible poesis after *sparagmos*.

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<sup>44</sup> This was the case in a video documentation I watched of a performance of *Zong!* held at the Ontario Museum April 2018. This documentation is no longer online. I accessed it online in April 2018.

<sup>45</sup> It's worth also noting that *Zong!*'s afterlife in ritual performance is resounding across time, field and place. This is observable in the influence and attention the work has had across fields and disciplines in recent years.

One cannot simply just tell this story; the ritual's action and collective embodiment is another way of saying the unsayable. Philip writes in a fragmented poetics on the book: 'is ritual perhaps the way through the unsayable is zong!' (2013). Thus ritual is a specific embodied reiteration, it 'comes out of a particular historical moment that is the kya kya kari basin a moment that extends into the present is resonant am tempted to say redolent with aspects of ritual and spirit' (Philip, 'Wor(l)ds interrupted', 2013). This is a *communitas* through a ritualization of a ritual poem that summons the dead, names and mourns them in the mouths and bodies of the living, so that they may remember and act.

## Bhanu Kapil

Bhanu Kapil's cross-medium works centre embodiment and hybridity, interweaving practices of writing, making, ritual and performance acts and embodied practice. These writing cycles include poetry, fiction and poetics, bodywork, ritual-making and performance art, political protest and radical action against oppressive structures, healing, shrine and visual art collaging, care, pedagogy and journaling/blogging or poetics writing. Her works often occupy and explore a liminal border space, such as the zone between mediums, between performance and text, and between real bodyminds and systems. A bodywork practice (such as Roling and related practices she calls 'secular touch' or 'repeated light touch' (2011b)) runs parallel to her creative practice and she brings knowledge of embodiment, performance art and ritual to all aspects of her work, for example integrating it into her writing and pedagogical practices, (email correspondence, Kapil, 2018).

Kapil's corporeal approach to artistic practice often makes writing part of an attempt to process difficult feelings experienced bodily. These might be frustrated communications, colonial and misogynistic histories, psychophysical trauma, troubling sexualities, resistant bodies, unhealed open wounds and dangerous relations. For Kapil, these knotty challenges require a boundary crossing and experimental approach that is enactive, embodied and anticolonial.<sup>46</sup> Often her works seek a way to stay with or challenge structural impingements on human life, and the paradoxes these social and political inequalities create at the level the bodymind. So a cross-medium embodied practice which includes ritual seems highly appropriate.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kapil often quotes Philip's statement on the necessity of Avant Garde practice for the writer of colour, for example in a recent interview she writes 'An inspiration, in retrospect, might be this quote from an extraordinary talk given by M. NourbeSe Philip, which I memorized: "The purpose of avant-garde writing for a writer of colour is to prove you are human." Yes, I've been working on that for some years now' (Kapil, 2020).

<sup>47</sup> On how ritual performance may be a place to work out the interweaving threads of trauma, healing and immigration, Kapil writes: 'How can writing, in bringing awareness to cultural or individual forms of trauma, also be the means by which these forms of trauma move through the nervous system of the writer or the reader, or the audience? I actually don't know that writing, after all, can do this. I am not sure that my own books have been able to do this, for example. But something about performance, or process, feels like the place where these ideas might be worked out. At the same time, I am not sure if I am there yet, though I can think of other examples: M. NourbeSe Philips's ritual performance works, for example, that followed the publication, in the U.S., of Zong! I am also remembering Eleni Stecopoulos' curation, The Poetics of Healing,

The first instance of this embodied ritual practice I read of is in the use of touch and divination which guides her writing for *Humanimal: A project for Future Children* (2009). Kapil describes the genesis of this work as beginning with her decision to run her fingers along the spines of a row of books in a library and start a project from the book on which her touch happened to encounter. Her fingers fell on a book about two girls in West Bengal in the early twentieth century, Amala and Kamala, who were claimed to have been raised by wolves but who were then captured and held in an orphanage for the rest of their painfully short lives. Kapil describes the resulting work, a hybrid thing like the 'humanimal' of the title, as 'a project for future children'. *Humanimal* is a 'text to keep her safe' (2009, p. 62). The *Her* here is ambiguous, a future imagined child, or one of the sisters Amala and Kamala. Or perhaps *her* is Kapil as a writer. This, she writes, is a text also to 'vivify' (2009, p. 63). In this way, Kapil often makes her pieces acts of love or communication; charged missives, gifts or intentional ritual offerings. This textual vivification prefigures moments in Kapil's later book where she uses the writing and performance work to send 'energy' to Ban, the young woman at the heart of her later book *Ban en Banlieue* (2015, p. 10).

Kapil's practice also involves creating charged energetically laden pieces, often using found materials as presents for friends, installations, sculpture and shrines. These charged sculptural poems recall the O'Sullivan's 'mattering of material' and Vicuña's precario practices suggesting a central place in ritual poetry of working with materials and materiality. Kapil's material practice is evocative of a belief that materials, rites and writings seem to contain, carry or release a substance or energy which has an embodied or spiritual effect on others. So, for Kapil, an artwork or practice can be offered to others through the power or charge of the written word, a created material piece or through an action, especially a ritual

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in the Bay Area a few years back, as a place that allowed me (and so many others) to start thinking and exploring in the axial space of trauma, healing and "the vital arts of crisis." (Kapil, 2020). Philip's comment and Kapil's reiteration of it, adds another dimension to these ritual works: that the embodied poetics involved in ritual may form part of a process of making solid, present and resistant the humanity of those denied human status by colonialist racism and structural oppressions.

act.<sup>48</sup> Ritual poetry can be found here also in Kapil's pieces, in charged poetic and material acts of intentionality and relationality.

In *Schizophrenie* (2011a), Kapil writes of performative ritual actions which gesture to a complicated relationship with these materials; for example she throws her book manuscript into the garden, leaving it to rot. Later she writes from the decomposed pages. This act of deletion and destruction and then regeneration of the material of the text continues elsewhere in her later works such as *Ban en Banlieue* (2015). These acts are a part of the ritual cycle which seems to enact, or at least acknowledge, processes of destruction, or what I refer to as a poetic *sparagmos*, which allows a poesis to emerge as the fragments are picked up and rewritten, leading to a more complex and troubling book.

The recomposed book that follows *Schizophrenie* is *Ban en Banlieue* (2015), a hybrid text of poetics, poetry, prose, notes on a 'failed' novel, and the ephemera and descriptions of acts, performances and rituals. Many of these are made for Ban, a teenage girl lying down in the streets near her house in the suburbs of London in the opening minutes of a race riot. The lying down takes place at, or signals, the moment when Ban realises that she cannot go in any direction: either to the violence at home or the racist violence on the street and 'either way she's done for – she lies down to die' (2015, p. 20). The action of lying down to respond to this contradictory and fatal moment is written and enacted over and over in writing and in ritual. Ban also includes within her multiple persona, other women of colour who resist oppressive conditions through their bodies, often to the point of death. One of the several performances, installations, actions and rites described includes an account of a ritual performance,<sup>49</sup> which is characteristically followed by a reflection on the practice within the writing itself:

Body outline on ground ringed by candles/flowers at the site where Jyoti Singh Pandey lay for 40 minutes in December 2012, raped then thrown

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<sup>48</sup> This belief in the energetic power of objects through ritual action is shared with CA Conrad. Some of this belief could be attributed to or aligned with North American New Age culture, as detailed in Grimes's essay on parashamanism (1995).

<sup>49</sup> Or it may be that these performances and rituals are proposals or ideas for rather than full accounts of a performance.

from the bus and gutted with a steel pipe. I walk—naked, barefoot, red—from the cinema in South Delhi where she watched *the Life of Pi*. Then caught a bus. To this spot. The anti-rape protesters make a circle around my body when I lie down. What do they receive? An image. But what happens next? How does the energy of the performance mix with the energy of the memorial? How does the image support the work that is being done in other areas? Which hormones does it produce? New Delhi, India, 2014, (2015, p.16).

Ritual here marks the site of violence and injustice, enacts and embodies some of its forms, thus inscribing the event and honouring the dead. It is also a relational act as Kapil joins with the other protester-protectors to remember Jyoti Singh Pandey or Nirbhaya, the fearless one, and protest fearlessly against gender-based violence. The outline of the body drawn on the ground also recalls the life and ritual art works of Ana Mendieta, another of the murdered women whom the persona of Ban gestures to. Kapil then questions, in the same short paragraph, whether others receive something from this performance and where its energy will go; her work is prolifically reflexive.

Kapil writes of sacrifice and auto-sacrifice in relation to these ideas; 'it's time for the auto-sacrifice to begin,' (2015, p. 7) appears on the first page of the book. But it's not clear exactly what the sacrifice is for. For which cause are the deaths, falls and lying down actions made if they are to be sacrifices? Is, for example, the rape and death of Nirbhaya an act of sacrifice? Or is Kapil's ritual performance the sacrifice? Or are the *auto*-sacrifices Kapil's own acts of writerly surrender and destruction, such as the textual sparagmos of deleting the stories in her book, and throwing the manuscript outside to moulder? Clarity, though, is not the point. Instead I feel Kapil wishes to trouble inconclusively the idea of sacrifice in itself; to question why, for example, it takes a young woman's bodily sacrifice for a society to reckon with rape culture. And Kapil's auto-sacrifice may also be the process of calling to a reader or spectator's mind the exhaustion and sacrifice that is extracted from oppressed people each time they must avoid bodily violence,

racism and sexism, as well as the exhaustion that such ritual and writing produces in the body of the writer.<sup>50</sup>

But sacrifice is just one type of ritual. Kapil's ritual acts are many and performed for different intentions, they include other acts of lying down on the border of India and Pakistan and in a London suburb 'on the floor of the world';

I want to lie down in the place I am from: on the street I am from. In the rain.  
Next to the Ivy. As I did, on the border of Pakistan and India: the two  
Punjabs. Nobody sees someone do this. I want to feel it in my body—the  
root cause. (2015, p. 31).

Kapil is particularly interested in sites, such as borders and liminal spaces betwixt and between, where the paradoxes of social and political violence can be felt in the writing/ritualising body. For example, she writes at the border between a violent home and the street where racist systemically-authorised violence is taking place, or the border of Pakistan and India, the threshold between the body and the not-body or the other, the threshold between human and animal, the humanimal. She often describes images of substances leaking between borders or where two entities come together without merging completely (Kapil, 2013). This threshold testing and crossing extends to genre or mediums in a writing practice which is always distinctly hybrid.

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<sup>50</sup> There is also a relevant history of using sacrifice in performance art as touched on in Fischer-Lichte's review of the first performative turn's ritual theatre works (Fischer-Lichte, 2005). Kapil's knowledge of performance and ritual suggests she may well be aware of these works. In Fischer-Lichte's account we find an idea of writers and artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century invested in sacrifice. After the genocides of the first half of the twentieth century, this belief in the sacrificial body of the martyred saviour who is reborn was questioned and discounted, shown to be crushingly inadequate. So that those who once believed a cleansing sacrifice was necessary to heal a society broken by the dissolution of mass religion find in the massacres of first part of twentieth century a terrible proof against such an idea. Thus sacrifice seems to have been renounced in ritual performance later in the second performative turn in works by artists such as Hermann Nitsch and Marina Abramovic (Fischer-Lichte, 2005). See also Phelan on performance art in Heathfield (2005). And yet in 1973, Turner was still writing of the 'risen body' of the liminal poet who could resurrect in kindness, a 're-totalisation' (Turner in Rothenberg & Rothenberg, (eds.), 1983 [1978], p. 342). Perhaps sacrifice is relevant in texts such as Kapil's at the level of metaphorical exploration only. Or maybe Kapil's embodied sacrificial and auto-sacrificial rites and writings are attempts to go into the question in as concrete a way as possible - to push the metaphor of sacrifice as far as it will go in the body, to make embodied enactment of sacrifice without the ritual becoming an actual mortification. This pushes the idea of ritual poetry as an enactment of the word to an edge. But one must keep in mind that for Kapil, this idea of sacrifice may also be a reckoning with the embodied costs of such acts, such as the toll of racial and sexual violence, trauma, emotional labour, or of writing and ritualising on the bodymind. Kapil often writes of feeling unable to perform or write because of the exhaustion it may or has produced (e.g. 2015, p. 17). Again and again, Kapil's work studiously pushes towards, hovers over and often crosses these thresholds.

Some of Kapil's single poems have functioned explicitly as rituals. 'Spell to reverse a line' (in *Spells*, 2018, Shin and Tamas, pp. 36-45), is a poem made as a spell with an intention to reverse, heal or unearth, in her characteristically complicated sensitive fashion, the line drawn between India and Pakistan at Partition in 1947. Partition marks Kapil's writing in several instances. Her Punjabi parents were witness to its violence before emigrating to Britain where Kapil was born. The trauma of the violent massacres and ethnic cleansing of Partition, but also more generally the effects of British imperialism and the subsequent racism and trauma experienced in Britain after emigration are some of the toxicities that Kapil's work tries to inscribe, process and resist. The shockwaves of the violence enacted in 1947 are explored in *Schizophrenie* (2011a) where Kapil uses writing and a related bodywork and embodied practice to explore the way trauma is refracted through intergenerational psychophysical suffering resulting from these events and the legacies of colonialism.

Like Rothenberg with 'Khurbn' and Philip with *Zong!*, Kapil's anticolonial ritual works call up the events and the people who have been massacred, enslaved or maimed. They all use ritual poetry as a way of embodied writing and attending to wounds which have not healed but in fact flare up in the bodyminds of generations to come through the course of ongoing systemic racial and gendered oppressions. Thus, a ritual poetry practice here could be seen as a way of registering historical trauma, healing the pain it presents in the present and resisting a future of ongoing repeated violence. Ritual poetry is a way to make charged active embodied works of poetry that enact what they intend in poem-as-action. Kapil's ritual intention may often be to heal and resist but it is also 'to vivify' (*Humanimal*, 2009, p. 63).

A recent text 'Ritual for Spring' in the *Ignota diary* (2019, Shin & Vickers, p. 50) reveals the extent of Kapil's knowledge of ritual. Specially commissioned as a ritual, it contains explicit instructions to the reader for a 'simple ritual of intimacy and proximity' with a plant. The reader is invited, not exactly commanded as Kapil leaves freedom to the reader-ritualist, to hold a leaf or bloom 'something living' between fingers. We are asked to 'sense the energy flowing (back and forth)



between the plant and your own body' and to practice this in your own space 'until you are breathing each other'. This writing shows a knowledge and adaptation of creative ritual and related healing practices and invites an ecopoetic exchange with the living world, to feel one's connection to it. Kapil details how the ritual will benefit the ritualist physically, mentally, spiritually and psychologically: 'Spiritually, it naturally develops the mudra of gratitude', revealing Kapil's knowledge and interest in gesture and embodiment and an understanding of ritual as threshold passage. 'Psychologically, it brings you through the door of your own life into contact with the living world, which reduces stress.' It is an 'intentional form of touch' which incorporates an understanding of the human as part of living systems and cycles. She also leaves the ritual open to ambiguity and creativity, in the spirit of Grimes's description of creative ritualization through receptivity (Grimes, 1995, p. 60): 'Only you know what the effects of the ritual might be' Kapil writes.

Often rites and acts made in Kapil's creative cycles are like this: offerings or exchanges with others. Often these others are protagonists who merge with the writerly I, the many selves contained within Bhanu Kapil such as Ban who is also the same and different from Bhanu, or the Humanimal wolf sisters, or they might be future children, the reader, the dead or countless named and unnamed others. Sometimes poems such as those just described are direct ritual addresses made to perform their intention. Other times the rituals Kapil has performed are described and the memory of them retained and refracted and dispersed in traces that re-occur and thus form part of her ongoing writing.

Compared to the other poets discussed in this chapter, the rituals Kapil incorporates are more explicitly involved with performance art as a field. The techniques of ritual poetry here are found, not so much in techniques such as repetition or rhythm, but rather they are concerned with ritual as an act of relationality or *communitas* and materiality, embodiment. Describing some of the performance works and rituals in *Ban en Banlieue*, Kapil writes 'Performance art worked out for me. It helped me to think' (2015, p.10). This statement might sound strange if one considers performance art to be languageless and on the *action* side of a thought/action binary of ritual; a problem unpicked and deconstructed by Catherine Bell (Bell, 1993) in terms of ritual and Nathan Walker in terms of

performance art and poetry (Walker, 2019). But for Kapil, as for other ritual artists, language and thinking are not phenomena divorced from the action of ritual and performance. Kapil's cycles of enminded embodied multimodal intervention are cases where a poet uses ritual acts to open up a space to resist or heal or challenge or make an offering to the other. They often seek to cross the threshold between the body and the not-body. The border between self and other is porous but not completely non-existent. For the migrant or racial other a border holds a particular danger to life. Kapil's writing seeks to know, embody and convey what living on and transforming such borders might be by ritualising upon them: lying down on them, reversing their creation through spell-poems, or by sending energy to the other through a dedicated act of ritual poetry.<sup>51</sup>

When reading and encountering Kapil's work, I often feel moments of embodied resistance or challenge. These may come through reading of her ritual acts, or in the textual difficulty the work sometimes presents, or in political-ethical provocation such as challenges for me to consider my whiteness and potential for ableism as a reader and writer. There are knotty open questions and provocations to reflexivity embedded in the act of reading and writing to which Kapil invites me to share empathetically in her descriptions of embodied actions, often resistances produced by systemic oppressions. I feel then, in these knots of challenge and address, certain spaces and insights open up: learning, resistance, healing or empathy, breathing life into and opening up on the threshold Kapil dwells on.

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<sup>51</sup> Crossing borders is often unsuccessful or ambiguous, especially if the border enforces an othering in the body of those who seek to cross, for example the violence of different racialisation or embodiment. In one of her interviews, Kapil writes of borders, membranes, vectors and limits: 'These are vectors, complicated — in this preliminary sketch — by refraction and shame: the reality of what happens — does happen — has happened — at the limit of a nation state. Sometimes, as I've thought about elsewhere, a person doesn't get to cross. A person sees their body reflected, perhaps, in the gelatinous membrane that extends above and just beyond the border like an invisible dome. To exit you rupture.' (Kapil 2013).

Sometimes a person gets to cross a threshold, other times they become reflected or rupture upon it. In liminal zone of 'kinship oozed out of shape' (O'Sullivan) or the 'sometimes terrifying chaos' (Rothenberg) of ritual transformation, Kapil is writing, troubling and deeply dwells in an embodied way the thresholds: 'How the body is a series of rough arcs. And how the novelist is the person who holds the space for what the body wants to be. This is proprioception, the act of letting the body know — through light touch and the sensing/directing of energy to the body's outer membrane or 'field' — where its limits are.' (Kapil, 2013)

Often the threshold is not crossed and two states do not merge into one another, perhaps they in fact interweave or reflect and extend. This interweaving of difference and dialogue in the liminal, rather than melding and erasure of difference and boundaries, emerges also with Kapil's conversation about anticoloniality, weaving and threads with Sandeep Parmar and Nisha Ramayya in *Threads* (2018). A weaving metaphor also links Kapil's work to Cecilia Vicuña and Maggie O'Sullivan's uses of these practices and metaphors. This speaks of an interconnectedness of ritual poetics, or what I call plethu.

Thus, these are works of ritual poetry that enact their intention *to vivify* upon my reading of them and writing after them.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> I have written more extensively on Kapil's practice in two of my poetics on *Humanimal* and *Schizophrene* included in the creative chapter of poetics in part F, in 'Actor-Hunter-Poet' and 'Wolfcubs, redness'.

## Amy McCauley

Amy McCauley is British poet of my generation who grew up and is currently resident in Yorkshire. She makes experimental poetry and performances.<sup>53</sup> Here I'd like to discuss two of her own performances which functioned as or used elements of ritual.

Firstly, a performance which I was not present at, but which McCauley has related to me in detail (personal correspondence, October 2019). This performance took place in 2016 in Manchester at a benefit cabaret for a mental health charity. Amy arrived on stage and put gaffer tape over her mouth so that the audience would know that she would not speak. She then took off her outer layer of clothing to reveal a t-shirt printed with the words 'give me your secrets'. After a pause some of the audience started writing on paper she had provided in baskets and gave her their answers. She put them into a basket. On stage again she removed the gaffer tape from her mouth. A moment of tension arose here when the audience seemed 'horrified' that she would read their secrets out loud. But she proceeded to read them silently before eating the scrap of edible paper which the secrets were written on. The papers on which people had not written secrets, which they had decided not to join in with the task, she discarded. Later she simply left the stage in silence, trying to make eye contact with the spectators.

She tells me that after the performance she felt 'horrible' and could not stop crying in the toilets. Ending the ritual environment is challenging for her, she remarked. She now reflects that she is fond of this performance because it did not involve 'language production' of poetic text on her part, instead the generation of poetry came from the audience. 'Amy the poet was out of it' she said (personal correspondence October 2019). I asked her what she felt particularly moved by and she spoke of how the audience members seemed to trust her with 'real' secrets. And that, after she re-entered the performance space, she felt that the people 'did not want to come near' her. She remarks that this is one performance that she felt was ritual as it depended on the community present and is repeatable

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<sup>53</sup> I have collaborated with McCauley on a long poem and ritual performance, *Ooze*, which is detailed the Creative Chapter One, part D.

as a score. Later on she found out that her performance has a precedent in the tradition of the sin eaters – people to whom a community would confess a sin upon the death of a member; they were said to ritually eat such sins and were then outcast, ostracised from the community from which they took the sins.

I will discuss a second performance by McCauley at which I was present, in Salford University's New Adelphi Theatre, as part of the first Poetry Emergency festival in November 2018. Although for McCauley this did not constitute ritual, several of its features have given me pause for thinking about ritual poetry's techniques of the material, of *communitas*, embodiment and the use of chorus as a ritual role in poetry and drama. This work recalls Einar Schleef's choric ritual theatre that bordered on poetry (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 55-58). Here McCauley started the performance with a bowl of scraps of paper and began to act as if to start a poetry reading. She repeatedly failed to speak into the microphone, mumbling and shuffling around. She played to the stereotype of the poet who cannot perform their poetry effectively. Early on, audience members began heckling her, asking her to speak into the mic, or shouting that they could not hear her. These became more and more rude and the tension in the audience rose with others calling out to the hecklers to respect the performer. Three hecklers then came on stage, masked, and it became clear that the heckling had been intentional on McCauley's part. However, the violent manner in which the hecklers chased her around the performance space, put scraps of foil and the writing scraps into her clothes, and dragged her towards the microphone did not relieve the tension that had built. Watching this performance was extremely uncomfortable, especially given the gender-based violence evoked in the way that two of the three heckling chorus were men and they grabbed McCauley physically throughout. Eventually the chorus managed to bring Amy to the microphone, and it became clear that they were trying to enable her to read the scraps of poetry in the bowl and in her clothes. Much of the language appeared to be from her writing on politics, gender and desire.

McCauley has a longstanding interest in the ritual function of the chorus in ancient Greek tragedy and how this can work in a poetic context (such as in her poetry collection, *Oedipa*, 2018). In this performance however, the chorus intervened to a

degree that did not serve the usual role of a chorus. Their masks also made for a particularly interesting commentary on the politics and social performance of the poetry reading form. This performance, although not ritual per se, in McCauley's own terms, and not functioning with a distinctive ritual intention, did seem for me, as an audience member, transformational and liminal. Several aspects of Fischer-Lichte's performative aesthetic of transformation were observable: a strong autopoietic feedback loop felt through tension in the audience and role-reversal, the breaching of taboos and reversal of expectations, a blurring of the boundaries between spectator and performer and a direct referral to the embodiment of the performer through physical action taking place on stage (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). This may well have caused the strong emotional reactions reminiscent of the processes in Fischer-Lichte's aesthetic of performance (2008). The piece also referred attention to the embodied, challenging and ambiguous nature of the poetry reading as a format. I would say that it transformed ritually the form of the poetry reading.

These performances of ritual poetry or poetry of ritual of McCauley's also function in the spirit of performance art and experimental theatre. They resonate with some of the examples Fischer-Lichte outlines such as Marina Abramovic's *Lips of Thomas* (1975), (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). The production of new poetic language recedes in visibility, but these are still poetry performances. They use ritual techniques to play on the role of the poet and format of the poetry reading, extending the insights of Cobbing, Monk and Middleton on the potential of the poetry reading, as discussed in the previous chapter. Language production and new meaning are still emerging in the course of the performance. In both performances the spectators and performers become part of a strong temporary community through the shared experience of being in a liminal moment of surprise and discomfort. The performance depends on their reactions for the generation of meaning. The second example also sheds light on the work of poetic language production and performance. This is ritual poetry where the poesis emerges through a strong sense of *communitas*. In another later performance McCauley and I did together in 2019, 'Ooze transfer', we also provoked strong emotional reactions, as we shall see in a poetics on the work in section D of Chapter One.

## Threads of Ritual Poetry

Each of the poets explored here approach ritual through different contexts, with different techniques and intentions in play. They use ritual in co-present performance settings and as a compositional technology to create embodied and multisensory scenarios and action. This practice of ritual is often made with an intention to enhance a sensitivity to the material, be that the material of language, the body or the ecological environs and its community. Most of the contemporary work is experimenting between media and ethically driven, responsive to site and place and to the need for an anticolonial and antiviolent practice. Ritual poetry can be a means of bringing people together through shared action and intention, as an enaction of a poem, or as a process to form deeper relationships with others, including the other-than-human. Forms of dynamically embodied gestures and a multimedial relational action can be found in ritual, so it is chosen by poets as a route towards transformational poesis or as a call for a more just and equal world. Ritual seems to allow poets inscription of events past or ways of marking difficult transitions into the future. In other words, ritual poetry is a process employed to create the possibility of embodied *poesis*, the beginnings of a regenerating creative act in the face of destruction. It aims for transformation, ritual poesis, even in the knowledge that this is not always possible.

## 4. CHAPTER FOUR: Methodology, Ethics

### Methodology

Out of explorations of this field, I have formed a novel methodology for creative writing of ritual poetry. Here I will explain how I have adopted the particular practice-led and embodied research methodologies that I have employed in the thesis.

#### Practice-based research

The subject of the research is also its methodological intervention: ritual poetry here is a field, methodology and series of art works. Ritual poetry is the approach that has felt necessary at this time; it is my way of responding and intervening artistically, critically, ethically, emotionally and in an embodied and ecological way to the reality I find myself in. In ritual poetry, I seek a methodology that is relational and responsive to context; one way to make poetry in a world that urgently requires new ways of thinking, creating, socialising and being.

Thus the research has involved a range of interweaving processes that analyse, test, explore and evaluate various approaches to thinking and making in different sites and contexts. Poetry practice, reading, experimenting with poetry's materials, as well as the writing of poetics are melded with the experience of performance and embodied practice and the consideration and creation of theory.

Ritual poetry is a novel approach to creative research, but there are several precedents for practice-led projects I build upon: Hazel Smith and Roger Dean's model of reiterative cycles of practice and research (2009), Robert Sheppard's understanding of poetics (2001; 2016) and embodied practice, particularly Ben Spatz's model of embodied technique structuring a practice as knowledge (2015).



## Smith and Dean's cyclical web

This thesis has been formed by a course of interweaving modes of research which mirror the model of Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009, p. 20). Their 'iterative cyclic web' shows how practice-led research can include both the artwork as research and the way that an artwork and its process can produce research insights with research also leading creative practice. In the cyclical web, the researcher moves through the phases of idea-generation, analysis, selection and investigation to the development of creative works and ideas, which in turn inform theories and lead to applications and new techniques; these lead again to idea generation and further creation, investigation and theorisation. Outputs can occur at any stage to go on to prompt further creation and reflection. The process is a cycle but also a web – each stage can lead to another and the process can be reversed so that empirical and creative modes can inform one another. Importantly the process is iterative; it is repeated several times sometimes with slight variations so that a researcher, or collaborative teams of researchers, can come to deeply sediment their epistemic framework in numerous experiences, insights and works. Below is the diagram of their model.

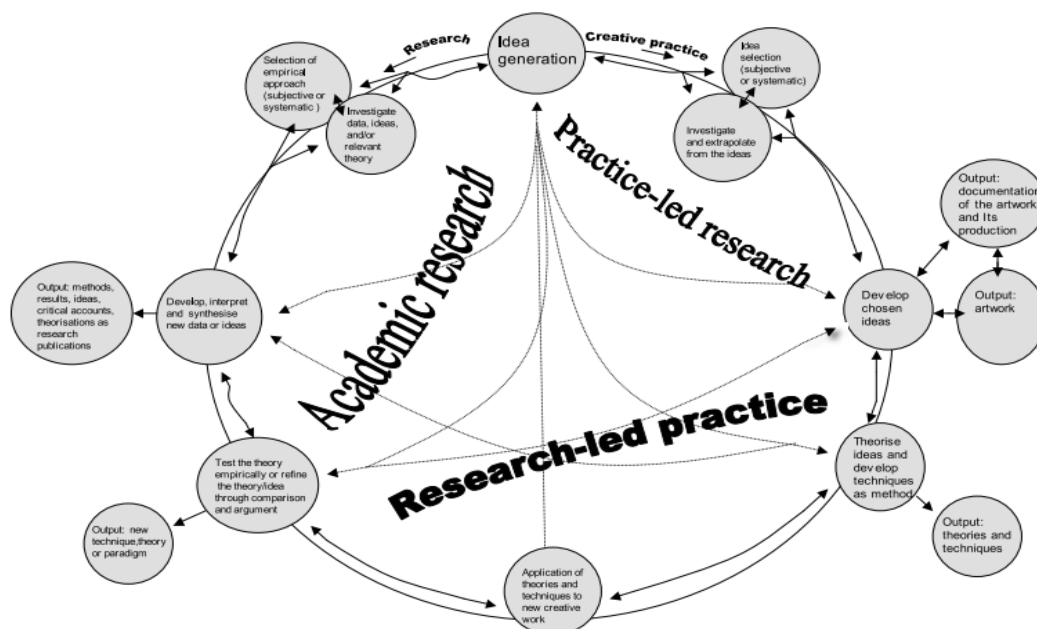


Figure 26 Smith and Dean's Cyclical Web Model (2009)

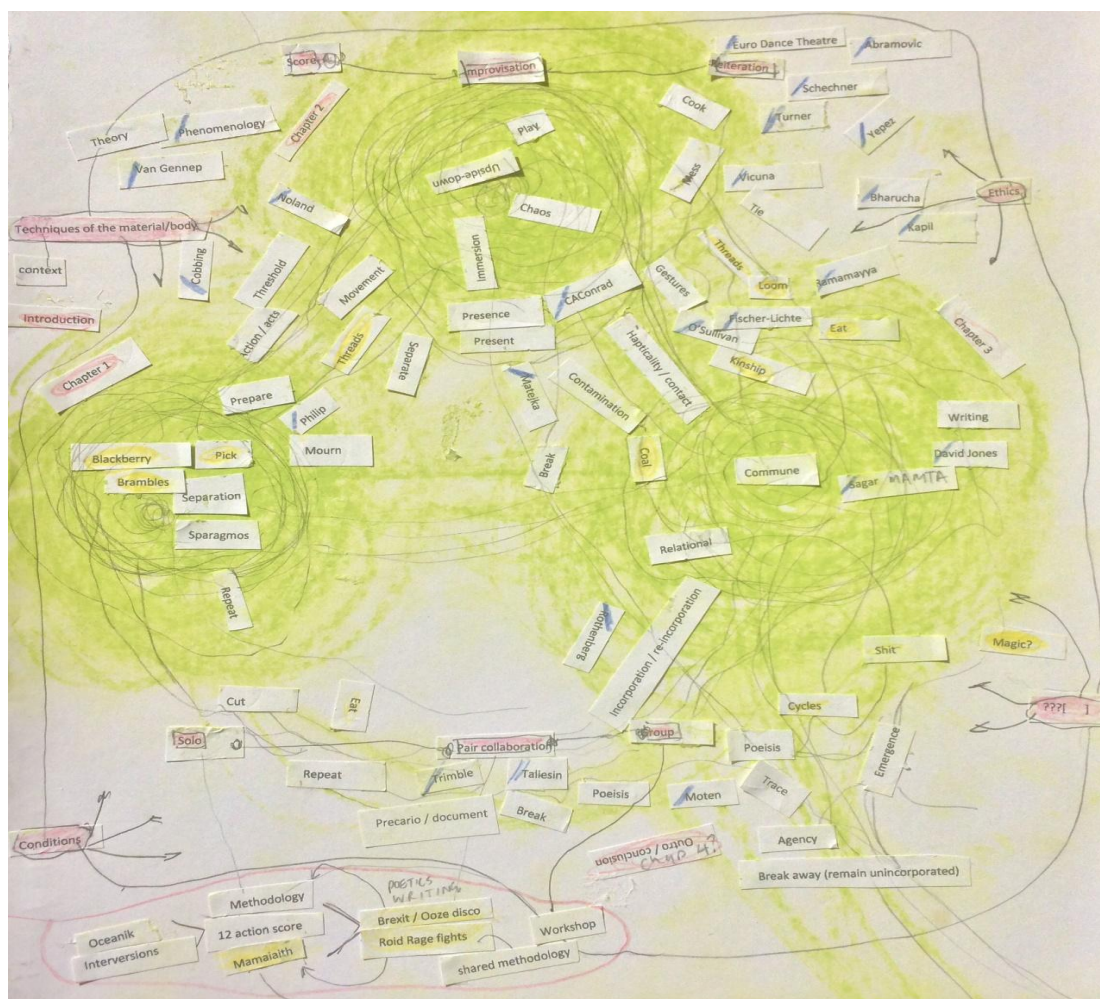
Smith and Dean suggest a course of research which oscillates between process- and goal-oriented activity (2009, p. 23). The methodology of this thesis fits that model of combining periods of improvisation and wide-ranging exploration with goal-oriented directed analytical processes. They write:

these two ways of working are by no means entirely separate from each other and often interact, as the model implies. For example, while the process-driven approach obviously lends itself to emergence, in fact at any moment an emergent idea may lead the way to more goal-oriented research. Similarly, a plan is always open to transformation as long as it is regarded flexibly. (2009, p. 23).

Indeed, emergence from a ritual process has been key for me in leading the course of my creative writing. This flexibility has been important, but at other times ritual as a methodology has suggested starting with predetermined factors leading to indeterminacy, and then a period of reflection, editing or selection for example, setting intentions and spatiotemporal boundaries and then allowing for a liminal period of play and emergence followed by incorporating these insights and creations into a score for a future cycle or piece of writing. This is accompanied by a poetics practice. My cycles of research have included writing poetry, reading and listening to poetry, undergoing and witnessing rituals, making performances of poetry and watching performances, workshopping and collaborating, experimentation with materials, movement and performance exercises and writing poetics. This practical approach is informed by theoretical reading and analysis (across three fields of poetry, anthropology/cultural theory and performance) and supervisory and other dialogues with other poets and practitioners. The process of ritual passing of thresholds has led to a distinctive use of spatiotemporal thresholds, as I will detail further in the poetics Chapter Five. These processes then point to further creative experimentation, which then, in turn, leads to adaptations of the theoretical model I am formulating. This cycle is repeated and repeated; sometimes a cycle of moving through these different modes takes place within one day or one cycle of ritual poetry creation. At other times a cycle has unfolded over three months or a longer phase, in the process of writing, for example, or other periods of intensive performance and creation.

*It is perhaps no surprise then that Smith and Dean's cyclical webs share common ground with the cycles of ground with the cycles of ritual poetry practice, particularly with their spatiotemporal directionality, intention-spatiotemporal directionality, intention-setting, movement across pre-set thresholds into liminality then re-thresholds into liminality then re-incorporation, repetitive cycles and an attention to emergence. I note, for example, how my visual configuration of the ritual poetry process as a series of loops process as a series of loops and threads is reminiscent of their cyclic web as pictured above in Figure 1, pictured above in Figure 1, follows similar lines to visualisations I have made of the research and creative the research and creative process, seen below in Figure 27: Ritual Poetry Illustrated Diagram: my rough illustration of Ritual Poetry process, April 2019 and*

Figure 28: Diagram to visualise Ritual Poetry Process, December 2019. Their model mirrors the approaches chosen by some of the poets of ritual I have described. In the cases of the poets who incorporate ritual into their whole cycles of practice, such as Kapil, Conrad, O'Sullivan, and my project, ritual poetry becomes a full-spectrum ongoing approach to thinking and creation. Thus ritual poetry is research as well as a creative practice. Chapter Five will further demonstrate my understanding of how this is possible within my own work.



## Ritual Poem / Poetry as Ritual : Process

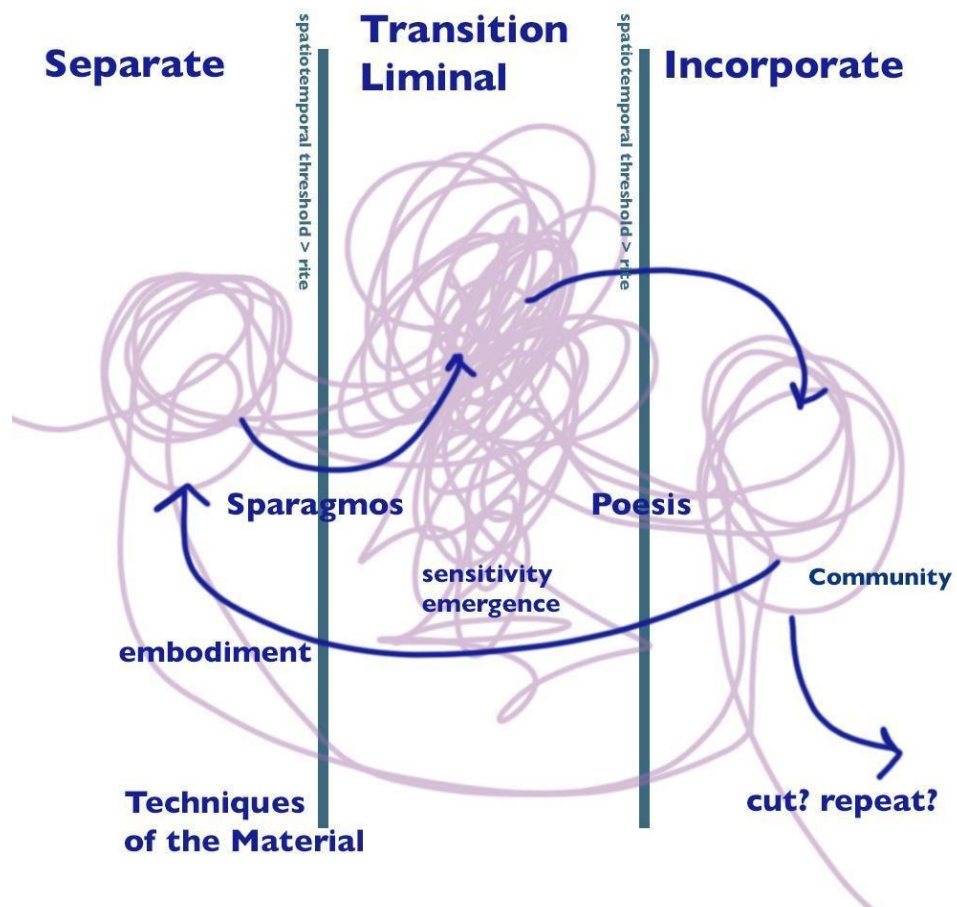


Figure 28: Diagram to visualise Ritual Poetry Process, December 2019

## **The necessity of poetics: Robert Sheppard**

The discourse of poetics in Robert Sheppard's conception is also a key thread of this practice-led research. Poetics here is a writerly discourse that does not explain but enacts its own reflection within a practice of poetry; it experiments and speculates towards a process of change (2001; 2016). In his poetics on poetics, a meta-poetics, he provides an open-ended indeterminate set of rolling definitions:

Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, speculatively casting into the future.

Poetics is a way of letting writers question what they think they know.  
Poetics is a way of allowing creative writing dialogue with itself, beyond the monologic of commentary or reflection. (Sheppard, 2001).

So poetics takes many forms:

Poetics in hybrid, fragmentary, collage, playful, jokey, patapoetical, forms avoid co-option into the explication of the writing that results.

Poetics' function is both oriented towards, and in new form.  
(Sheppard, 2001)

In this thesis, poetics has taken many forms. The poetics in Chapter Five continues and deepens the theorisation of ritual poetry and its creative application; it is a text oriented towards the making of future ritual poetry. But there have also been other forms of poetics in this project that have served as a journaling process, thus forming a fascia-like connective tissue linking different dynamic systems of ritual poetry iterations and allowing for a reflective process of change and selection. Poetics are hybrid acts of writing on ritual and poetry, reflecting thematically on particular questions and techniques and contexts for the poems. Some of these pieces are included in the creative Chapter One Section F. And there is a great deal more poetics emerging from this process which cannot be included here. Poetics then is also an archive containing unrealised works whose

implications may be ignited in time spans longer than can be represented in this thesis. The poetics archive and all of its permutations in the thesis have allowed for a possibility of future change, movement, in other words, poesis.

## **Embodied practice**

Ritual poetry is rooted in considerations of embodiment: movement, somatic awareness, hapticality, gesture, action, voicework, dance and the embodied material nature of language; its utterance, performance, sharing with others – these are all courses of embodiment which ritual poetry makes use of and which have afforded me a way of forming new knowledge, an embodied epistemology. From the beginning of the research I have been developing ritual techniques for making poetry that have been particularly influenced by embodied techniques. I have explored ritual techniques from performance, movement and theatre. Having workshopped with Studio Matejka and OBRA in 2017 and 2018, and working also with other practitioners and my supervisors, I have tried out techniques of embodiment from European experimental theatre for poetic ends, particularly the psychophysical traditions emerging, and sometimes diverging, from the work of directors Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba. I have explored how performance's use of scoring for movement and action and presence invigorate poetic improvisation. I also workshopped with movement practitioners and worked with Authentic Movement such as a workshop with Simon Whitehead in Tŷ Canol woods April 2019. I explored embodied and ritual practices in my intercultural collaboration with Indian (Kannada) poet, Mamta Sagar, *Interversions* in 2017 to 2019. Techniques from ritual and related performance practices include: acting training techniques from psychophysical theatre which train embodied awareness and communal working such as flocking etc, Five Rhythms and Movement Medicine, dancing towards improvisation in movement, Authentic Movement, Butō, Six Viewpoints (Mary Overlie), movement improvisation outdoors with an awareness of ecology, various yoga practices, mindful running, breathing awareness, intermedia translation of poetry into embodied action or movement, meditation using visualisation, working with texts as scores to make more texts to make more scores etc, improvising with set spaces or objects, chanting and



incantation, singing, drawing, painting and collage and working with materials. The poetics in Chapter Five detail some of what these techniques made possible in this thesis. Embodied practice has implications for language art such as poetry which have only just begun to open up into a field of emerging embodied poetics. I can only begin to focus on the techniques that are appropriate to ritual poetry.<sup>54</sup> A very short collage of clips from rehearsal and embodied practice, as seen below, can be viewed from this link: <https://youtu.be/K0Hso66gaoc>.

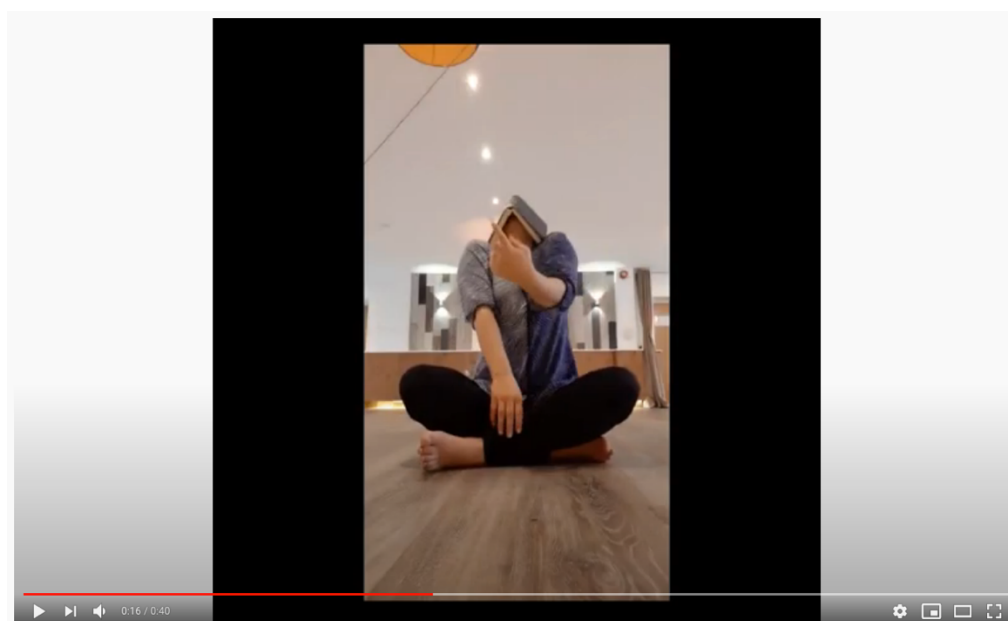


Figure 29: Rehearsal Video Clip Collage

This dynamic embodiment practice of ritual poetry is a form of knowledge-creation and development that makes up this practice-led research. That embodied practice is a form of knowledge, an epistemology, and therefore research, is attested by the work of Ben Spatz. Their study *What A Body Can Do* (2015) shows how embodied technique structures a practice and how this constitutes a form of knowledge-creation:

<sup>54</sup> An example of the emergent field of embodied poetics can be found in Scott Thurston and Sarie Mair Slee's collaboration, as detailed in the article 'Vital Signs: poetry, movement and the writing body' (2017) and performance *Wrestling Truth* (2018) which explores through extensive experimentation the juncture between movement and poetry, melding histories and techniques to find a deep level of creative agency through intertwined language-creation and bodily movement.

As Thurston is my supervisor on this thesis, this practice is of course important to the research methodology. Embodied poetics is also joined by Billie Hanne, Camilla Nelson, Nathan Walker, Amy McCauley and Sara Eliza Kelly, to mention just a few poets in this context emerging now but already opening up the possibilities of embodied language art and poetics.



embodied practice is structured by knowledge in the form of technique, which is made up of countless specific answers to the question: *What can a body do?* (2015, p. 1)

For Spatz, there is important and urgent research to be made in the embodied work of performing, healing and martial arts, all of which involve an 'epistemology of practice'. Embodied knowledge emerges out of a subject's lifelong sense of dynamic and relational embodiment, affordances which inform identity and relationality. Our sense of embodiment is formed by these interactions with the material around us, 'through an epistemic engagement with the relative reliability of material reality' (2015, p. 41). But technique, especially what is repeated, is what develops this embodiment in a course of research; 'technique is knowledge that structures practice' (2015, p. 1). This technique is a form of knowledge that is sharable and can be repeated so that knowledge can be transmitted:

Embodied technique then refers to transmissible and repeatable knowledge of relatively reliable possibilities afforded by human embodiment (2015, p. 16).

Thus we find in ritual poetry that many embodied poetic techniques can travel and be repeated by others across generations and other boundaries.<sup>55</sup> Spatz, like Smith and Dean, value the repetition involved in technical practice-led research. Re-iteration of a technique is crucial for the sedimentation of embodied knowledge in artistic practice and daily life.

Spatz shows how the question can 'What can a body do?' can be posed and explored many times over as a research question that drives embodied practice. In this thesis the question may be more specifically *what can a ritual body in a process of poesis do?* This thesis charts how some of these questions have been posed, answered then posed again, and again.

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<sup>55</sup> Bearing in mind the ethics and risks of intercultural translation, we can for example see how the technology of the 'Technicians of the Sacred' can be translated through time and place and invigorate poetic practices along the way.

## Ethics

The most prominent ethical issue in this field is the problem of intercultural appropriation of rituals and related cultural texts when they are transposed from one culture into contemporary artistic contexts. Practitioners in this field need to be especially sensitive when the source of the form comes from a culture that has suffered historic violence or erasure through imperialist capitalist extraction. This issue comes up in Rothenberg's translations of Native American poetry, criticised by Clements (1981) and later evaluated by Horáček (2011), in Cecilia Vicuña's work and also finds a parallel discussion in Rustom Bharucha's postcolonial critique of Richard Schechner's theatrical use of ritual (1993). The scope of this study as a creative project means that my primary aim here is not to fully discuss and judge whether these creative works are ethically sound or not, but to form an ethics for my own creative practice and research.

My understanding is that appropriation in its pejorative sense – as that which involves cultural erasure or even theft – happens in this particular context when artists translate or rework texts from other cultures into the terms of their own practice. When the historical and cultural specificity of a culture is lost in representation, when a work is recontextualised into the imperial, or metropolitan elite environment, the source culture is occluded and any benefit or value goes to the culture of the dominant destination culture. But as experimentalists in art practice we translate and appropriate texts and techniques continually from multiple sources; there is therefore a risk of erasure arising when any poet appropriates a cultural technology of which they have minimal knowledge. And since no one can know everything, this is always a risk. Ritual poetry is a technology that does not come with an inbuilt ethics; ethics must be developed as part of an art practice. My response is to practice reflexivity, to recognise a state of unknowing and interrogate the reason for any appropriation and interrogate the power dynamics at play. I try to ask what my underlying desires in the work are, think through my position in terms of whiteness, bodily privilege and Anglocentrism and inform myself of anticolonial, antiracist, feminist, disability, class and ecologically minded praxis. This project is not an intercultural translation project,

but I feel that it is important to be able to recognise when a techniques or text is very bound up in a source culture. I do not believe that artistic techniques and cultures are property which may only belong to people with certain essential characteristics, but I also recognise that a ritual or poem can be a knowledge system deeply entangled with a particular land, set of practices or culture. I try to engage in an approach critical of dominant power relations, and understand my own inevitable unknowing of much of what is hidden behind the charm of a form or idea that is new to me.

Contemporary practices which cloud the details of a culture's ritual system in vague romanticism or idealism often lead to appropriation. I have found this in works of ritual poetry and wider ritual cultures that borrow indigenous knowledge systems to add mystique thereby decontextualizing, dehistoricising and translating their forms into wholly inappropriate contexts. To avoid this, one route to a respectful and fruitful intercultural practice is to acknowledge forms such as ritual and poetry as complex knowledge. For example, Ben Spatz explains how embodied practices form knowledge systems and this might apply to songs, rituals, poems, dances or healing practices (Spatz, 2015, pp. 153-55). Spatz's concept of the 'trope of excess' (2015, p. 56) is helpful here for explaining how, when we mystify embodied artistic knowledge as out of reach and in excess of our understanding, we make it inaccessible and erase the idea that it has been created by a specific person in a specific culture (Spatz, 2015, pp. 153-55).

But cultures that are largely unfamiliar to me, though they have informed this research, are not the main theme of my creative work which has largely been an investigation of my own cultural environment. I seek out new ritual forms for poetry appropriate to my own context, considering how ritual poetry can enable an exploration of the contemporary transitions I live through. If the current context is one of political and ecological crisis in my own landscape in the present, I must find a method of ritual poetry and an ethics that suits the reality I find myself in. Beyond intercultural considerations, ritual poetry often requires a relational ethical ecological approach. Throughout the research, I explore the nature of relational bonds, trust and friendship involved in ritual poetry. As I will discuss in the poetics on embodiment in Chapter Five to follow, everyone experiences embodiment

differently. As makers we must consider how a space and its events might be accessed by those who experience their embodiment and culture in ways marked by structural inequality. Ableist structuring of social and spatial environments, racialisation, gender, neurodiversity, language barriers and the impact of trauma for example, are all vectors which may effect how an event is experienced and thus the interactions that forms in the course of an unfolding ritual poem must be open to difference.

These ethics are beginning to be played out in some of the works in the creative chapter, such as in the acts of relationship-forming and the collaborative pieces which work through the limits and capacities of creative friendships in Part D. With Amy McCauley this led to the 'psychic transfer' of the Ooze Sheffield performance. And with Rhys Trimble in Cynhebrwng Aer and Roid Rage we explored ritualised wrestling, bringing the ideas into a closer examination of masculinity in our own culture of South Wales. This ritualised wrestle acted out, embodied and to some extent released the tensions in our working relationship.

I am interested in work that seeks to have a profound effect on the audience, a transformation even, if possible. Some of my pieces have elicited strong emotional reactions from spectators, such as to the Ooze transfer performance with Amy McCauley in Sheffield and the Drysfa Ysgo beach labyrinth I made with my family. But how can I be sure that people participate in a way that is consensual and does not trigger reactions that I cannot control or alleviate? One cannot control all the responses participants will have; one invites in the unforeseen and unknown in this work. I try to set up the event so that participants understand the context, responsibilities and limits of the process. If consent is established for the event through prior contextual explanation, with the offering of the possibility of opting out, then such strong reactions remain within the bounds of what is expected from such events. For my Mamaiaith performance at Salford University, I designed the performance to consider such issues of consent, informing the audience of what was going to happen without explaining everything in advance. I reminded them that participation was optional. I also had ethical approval from the university for my approach to this consent-building in place.

These ethics are formed under a concept of *plethu*. Plethu, in Welsh, is to braid or weave (pronounced “pleth-ee”) and refers to the movement found in both textiles and dance. I use plethu to build on Turner’s *communitas* and consider the ongoing interdependent web of dynamic relational ecological processes we are involved in creating in ritual poetry. Plethu is an interweaving of subjectivity in which participants maintain their differences whilst coming together in a shared common ritual act. After, or perhaps instead of, momentary and intense *communitas*, plethu is the ongoing relationships that weave out of ritual poesis. I explore this concept in the work to follow.

## 5. CHAPTER FIVE: POETICS OF RITUAL

### Preface to a Poetics

Poetics is a form of writing 'oriented towards the making', in Robert Sheppard's words (2001; 2016), a practice whereby the poet casts their writing forward speculatively in experimental interventions, mapping the work to be done. The following chapter is written in this mode in order to lay out the poetics of ritual I have uncovered, shaped, broken down and remade in the course of the creative practice leading this research. I let my ritualising poeticking bodymind write this text.

As a series of considerations for a practice of ritual poetry, I have ordered the poetics to build upon the three stages of ritual, that of Turner and Van Gennep, of the thresholds and rites of separation, transition/liminality and incorporation. I add my own elaborations and departures, thusly arriving at three parts to the writing. *Thresholds: Entrance* groups together pieces that think about the predetermining structures of beginning ritual poetry and the laying of deliberate thresholds. The pieces in *Transition: Liminality* consider the middle transformative stage of this practice. Finally, *Plethu: Poesis*, considers how ritual poetry re-incorporates its poesis through sense-making and relational interweaving, plethu.

## THRESHOLDS: ENTRANCE

There are some processes I align with the ritual stage of separation: intention, invocation, score, experiment, spacetime and sparagmos. These are predeterminations of what, in my experience, a ritual poetry practice might be or become. These concepts and processes work as both limitations and starting points for poesis, to focus a course of action and formulate intent. They are what might be thought of as preparations before beginning ritual – how one may set up and clean the body and the space, the ritualist's checking-in internally and externally and acknowledging where they are, who they are with and why they are doing this, recognising conditions and boundaries. Often, firm thresholds lead to a deeper or wider liminal. Once these considerations are in place, the threshold bell is chimed and the ritualist crosses into the new zone of immersion. We enter and begin.

## Intention

I intend for this poetics to open out my practice of ritual poetry. Setting an intention, even making a clear of statement of intent, can set a poem's causeway, or pose its governing query. Intention brings the potential meanings of the rite into focus and limits its possibilities so that it suits its context, provides limits for the safety of the ritualist and enacts any change that is desired. The intention of a ritual is a predetermination which charges the movement through the ritual's process of change, or an attempt at change. It lays out the desires for transformation, the ritual's (possible) efficacy, even if such 'results' are not fixed in one's mind. The simple confinement of an intended course may keep a ritualist-poet safe, from silos, distractions, tangents, horrors even. Intention charges the ritualising body and its environment with meaning; I set words to the moving body to explore the worlds and desires in between.

Why do this? Requests are often made out loud, and intentionally. The list is endless but it might include a desire to heal, to let go or mourn, to pass out of one stage into another – a rite of passage or an initiation. Reasons for ritual might be to protect, to formally greet, to make something manifest, to celebrate or to cleanse. We may wish to sacrifice, remember or divine, or to accept mortality. To orient then to disorient. The rite might be about a union or a commitment, a promise. Or a division, a *sparagmos*. It may be an act of remembrance, a reconfiguring of relationships, a divorce. Or it could be an appeal to relational bonds to form solidarity. It may be about gratitude or rage and will try to evoke a power. Wherever or whenever the threshold of a coming change is sensed, it might be a time to ritualise in order to acknowledge the passage; as in the well-known rites of passage. The intentions that arise from these reasons may be more or less specific: give up smoking, mourn a miscarriage, finish this chapter of writing, stop overthinking, meditate on a word, save this patch of forest from the developers, remember you were a child, show solidarity for striking workers, remember a specific historical event, provoke a reaction. The possibilities are only limited by human experience. Or animal experience, as elephants mourn their dead, birds show their feathers bombastically, dancing for sex.



So a poet who explores their reasoning and sets an intention accordingly, may work hard before the ritual has even begun. I thought repeatedly about all the reasons I wanted to make a ritual for my project *Mamaiaith*. Eventually, I let the text of *Adfeilion Babel* be the guide. In the second liminal section of the performance-poem I wished to enter the word ‘symudliw’ – meaning *moving colours* – which comes from the last sentence of *Adfeilion Babel*, the Ruins of Babel. I set the intention here to enter into the hole and/or middle middle, the unknown chaotic liminal, to touch or even inhabit its wildness a little. My intention was to feel the disorientation of a loss of Cymraeg, to enter the ruins of my language(s) *adfeilion babel*, at its sites in my body (mouth, chest, hands etc), in order to renew my relation with the language, perhaps even to revive the embodied beginning of the bilingualism I failed to grasp as a child. So that I might be able to read the book I must learn the language, I wanted to find the heart of that struggle in the heart of the ritual. In the symudliw part of the performance, I circulated the space, reading from alternate scraps of text in a moving, speaking collage, until I became disoriented. After repeating the circles, I became dizzy, just as I had intended but not necessarily expected, and found the inside of an ever-tightening and expanding loop, pushing the idea of the poetic fragment to its limit in my body as dizziness or even near-syncope. The poem that emerged is intentionally disoriented. And yet unintentional material emerged, a poesis was forming.

An intention may not at first be obvious. Often it comes to the attention after a process of contemplation, meditation or unconscious surfacing, perhaps a result of the emergences of a previous cycle of ritual. Articulating an intention in language might be challenging, especially if it arises from submerged realms of bodymind as a feeling or urge. We cannot know everything right away: there is always another other, another intention, another meaning, perhaps a submerged desire that moves beneath the surface of the polite request-to-self of the intention. This is a shadow intent, which in fact many poets already know how to attend to. Doubts, shades and undercurrents flush up to the surface; the intention reacts against the emergences and unconscious material. Perhaps that’s poesis: the join between the known, not known and becoming known in emergence.

To give no prior thought to intention in this practice can initiate anything between mild confusion or vagueness, to wild abandon, to near-psychotic clambering in the webs of hyper-connection. Anything and everything can become meaningful in the charged space of the liminal, where our hyper-sensitive embodied/environmental senses bloom. In *ritual* poetry I am not just dealing with the signverse of language but also the multiverse of the bodymind, the space, ecology, the animals who stray into the frame, etc. So, the clarity of intention works to ground and focus the practice.

I can become overwhelmed by possible decisions: I want many transformations and the world needs many transformations, which of the many wishes do I act upon? Additionally, ritual intention is becoming a popular concept. In some of the more mass-market discourse around self-help, ritual practitioners and leaders often speak earnestly and vaguely of intention but end up focusing solely on the power of the individual to enact change on their own, from inside themselves, thereby denying the interdependencies we all have to the social and ecological world.<sup>56</sup> So I have come to intention sceptically, but still find it useful. This is because I do not use the concept on its own, but part of an overall relational process. Intention helps me recognise agency and direction, but it is not the fully formed predetermined meaning; it is no kernel or heart of the poem or ritual. Instead, it is a guide for a sometimes-turbulent process, it collaborates with all of the other elements to bring forth change and new meaning: invocation, thresholds, relationality – *plethu*, techniques of the material and openness to the unknown emergence that may occur.

In Mamaiaith I required the languages, relation or *plethu*, the people present, the body in motion and the material of Mamaiaith to enact this intention as well as an openness to the unexpected of live co-present performance. I sometimes encounter intentionality's subcurrent, its anti-creative urge. Often, we want to *not*

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<sup>56</sup> There are many examples of ritual practitioners in popular spirituality and ritual practice using *intention* as part of a nuanced relational and ecological approach. However, there is also an individualistic and simplified idea of ritual intention found in New Age, 'manifestation' and 'abundance' practices such as 21 Days of Abundance Meditation Challenge of mainstream self-help gurus Deepak Chopra and Oprah Winfrey. I am especially sceptical of the claims made in these fields for the power of individual intention and manifestation which occlude the import of health, social, political and relational contexts to transformation through ritual.

be productive. To resist our culture's ceaseless demand for us to have purpose, value and create. In this case, the intention might be to have fun, explore or rest. Or to do nothing perhaps in the way Emily Dickinson wrote of a "nothing", a 'force/ That renovates the world'<sup>57</sup>. *Let not my intention be co-opted into production*, I often think, knowing this is probably impossible as it is not possible to exit the economy of production. So, I keep my intention tender, secret (occult) and complex as an open question ready to be changed by relation and poesis. All of this is also an exploration of intention.

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<sup>57</sup>Emily Dickinson, poem 1563, (1883).

## Invocation

To invoke, in this practice, is to call on guidance or situate a ritual poem in its relational context. Invocation, prayer or appeal will usually be made in words; invocation's etymology includes a sense of vocally *calling upon*, often by name, to incant, spell or charm. Thus, an invocation is often the zone for the poetic in ritual; linguistic appeals have very often been the means of ritual poetry. In poetry practice, invocation may begin a ritual, even if there is no determined religious cosmology, in the instant when poets appeal to their metaphysical abstract, or simply make a dedication to something 'bigger than oneself'. This may be what Grimes calls ritualisation's 'receptivity'.<sup>58</sup> I find that invocation is various: to the dead, to us being together here, now, like this, in receptivity to the earth, for a friend or loved one, for poetry itself, for the future, for love and calls to action.

Whether and what one invokes will depend on the form of intention of the ritual. Perhaps a silent assent to the meaning of the poetic act, to take this thing seriously; this is also a form of submerged or inverted invocation. To ritualise a poetry reading, for example, may be to assent to the act of sharing poems among a community and to consider beforehand what that may mean in the context. A vocalised dedication may explicitly make the poetry reading an enaction or a calling into being. Often in this work I dedicate a ritual act in poetry to a loved one or invoke the energies or forces I wish to guide me through what may become a turbulent liminality. In *Mamaiaith* I invoked my grandmother and, behind her, other maternal figures who make and have made poesis possible, whilst recognising the conditions they worked in that made poesis impossible.

Even a playful, absurd or mocking poetry performance ritual will still create a certain seriousness in its *act*: a belief in the realness, the material or relations of the situation, the commitment to the meaning and charge in that ritual moment of the poem's coming into being. Otherwise, why assemble here in the name of the poem? There are invocations throughout the poems in the creative chapter, in for example *Lacey*, *Resources for Hope*, *Fairy Business*, *the Four Magi*, to my late poetry teacher Roddy Lumsden in *Kilvey craters/poem*, to the reader, and, of

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<sup>58</sup> Grimes, (1995, p. 60).

course, to my grandmother Caryl in Mamaiaith. These poems make addresses to guides, loved ones and others in a speaking voice that seems closest to my own relational form of address, that is, it is the voice is not entirely serious, open to the contingencies, troubles and surprise.

Art and poetry are often treated by practitioners as a kind of secular religion, in which case, an invocation might be aesthetic or technical in outward appearance – to bring about the next phase in a poem’s development for example or to make poetry the active instigator of change, political change. We don’t have to feel the poetry of ritual is involved in some kind of liturgy or dogma to simply ground a rite in a serious dedication, to give a sense of the poem’s place in, and transforming of, a cosmos. Invocation in ritual poetry is part of the poetic formation of new meaning. The meanings invoked may not be fixed or stable symbols but part of a poem’s movement of signs –moving colours, *symudliw*. With invocation, the poem is made to act among a social cosmos, or what I call plethu.

## Score

I use a score to mark the points of turning in a creative ritual; it is a course of gestures and passages across thresholds. A score opens up under the process like a skeleton moving the body, leading its impulses to dance. A score can be a mark, a sign or a thing. A score may be single or a set of way markers or stimuli through which I pass in improvisation or live composition. Score may be formed out of an intention or invocation and it can either be sequential or randomly ordered.

I take the classic form of the musical score – sheet music, instructions for a dance – and follow the way it was transformed by experimentalists and Avant Garde performing artists from the twentieth century onwards. In these artistic renderings, a score has become a set of marks for improvisation for unexpected, liberatory creation that departs from instruction but stays within governing principles; a form of translating the score into action as poem. I am inspired by the way improvisers in music and performance ‘read’ scores with their bodies. For example, I think of how Bob Cobbing took anything – a visual graphic or a sprouting potato for example – to be a score for sound poetry performance/manifestation.<sup>59</sup> Scoring enables a leap from one cue to another, between forms and mediums, people. Often, out of ritual poetry scores emerge more languages, poesis.

For the Mamaiaith performance in Salford, I used a score which I arrived at through working with *Adfeillion Babel*. The first separating phase I thought of as *adfeillion babel*, which I split into parts I called *the book as babe* and as *burden*, *adfeillion in the mouth* and *wear the book as a mask*. Then in the following liminal part, I used the score of *symudliw* ‘moving colours’ and the third part centred around *plethu*, to braid, as in weaving in dance and textiles, to weave the work with others.

In scoring, I also draw on other ritual ‘sets’, for example, the proposal of a workshop exercise, experimental stage directions, or the sculpts used in child and

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<sup>59</sup> Cobbing, *Boooooooooook* (2015).

family psychotherapy, the four directions or liturgy of spells and chants, and other directions, suggestions and invitations. Adherence is variable: between strict keeping to a kind of liturgy of set instruction to a creative improvisation of a ritualisations that departs and veers into new poesis.<sup>60</sup>

In ritual poetry, a score can be made of poems, words, a verb, noun. Or an object. The space. Its sound. Bob Cobbing's visual scores for performance, lines gone awry. Nathan Walker's action scores for igniting the vocal body.<sup>61</sup> Or in his music room, Avant Garde musician Rhodri Davies shows me a beautiful score for improvising on the electric harp: classic Welsh harp folk melodies through which he has burnt golf-ball size holes; brown rose blooms through layers revealing staves and notes below and above. Or I think of Pauline Oliveros's scores for collective sound rituals: a loud hum, a co-tuning, an enigmatic ear to the ground and the body; score for a feminist solidarity through sonic *communitas*.<sup>62</sup> And I think of how movement artist Simon Whitehead tells me, that after days of fasting and endurance at a workshop, Marina Abramovic gives him a glass of water with gold leaf in and removes a blindfold he has been wearing. She asks him for one word and he replies, *rest*. *That is your score*, she says. And what of the *rest*? What of the rest could this be for poetry?

There is a difference between setting my own scores as opposed to a dialogue with a collaborator or a director. Sometimes I need structure, some direction, so I write myself a score and yet really what I want is for someone else to give me the score and for the work to be an interaction or a sharing of responsibility of decision-making. Scoring also informs me of the process of sequences or not making sequences; I discover through scoring how to make non-linear narrative, cyclical iterations or rhythms in the work. How I score seems to relate to how I choose to narrativise life's events, or the difficulty in doing so. Score also tells me about space, how we move through time, and space and language. The specific spacetime of the ritual, its conditions and materials for experimentation may also act as a score.

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<sup>60</sup> Ritualisation defined by Grimes (1995, p. 70).

<sup>61</sup> Walker, *Action Poetry* (2019).

<sup>62</sup> Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations* (1971).

In the realm of poetry creation, a score may start to emerge as poem-in-itself. A poem-score that makes a poem. Like this, texts and directions can proliferate, so I find that attention should be paid to the boundaries, scope and limitations of the score, as well as the intention. Sometimes, writing the scores themselves is a process of discovering how to actually make and write or what not to write. This is because, in the heightening process of ritualisation, words become very powerful, they instruct our dynamic bodymind in its improvisation. I must take care where I lead this bodymind through charged ritual spacetime into the 'sometimes terrifying chaos' of the liminal, to use Rothenberg's words.<sup>63</sup> A score can be a threshold, absolute or porous. Like the intention, often I want to push against the score, and this is also still responding to the score. A score forms the edge in our relationship between language and action, to go to the edge of the impulse to ritualise and to make poetry.

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<sup>63</sup> Rothenberg, (2013, p. 179).



## Thresholds

A poem spoken, performed or created always manifests in a space and time. Ritual heightens the thresholds around that space and time, thus making it dedicated. Ritual occurs at special times and sites, space is cleared, cleaned even and marked out between boundaries: start/stop, here/there. I make these thresholds, in order to cross them in rites of poetic passage and towards the poesis of change. I find in this practice that the tighter or clearer the boundary between the not-space and not-time, the sharper the action comes into relief. To cross that line into: *it's starting now* : POEM : *It's ending* is crucial to making the action charged.

At the start of 2019 I had a dream, apparently a performer's classic, where I am performing in the street along which I used to walk to school as a teenager. My audience are my extended family. They ignore the call for the beginning of my performance. Whilst I perform, they are still moving the plastic chairs around in front of me; they are not unkind, but they are oblivious to the fact that I am already performing. What to do? To continue performing as if they are the audience or to stop the performance and ask them to be seated? Are they performer or audience? The confusion of this dream reveals the difficulty of the threshold in ritual performance. The presence of my family at these thresholds, the confusion here, also highlights for me the emotive and relational nature of ritual work as we move between the boundary of the self, other and community.

By now I understand the power of these lines: a firmly marked threshold in space and time allows me a sharper focus on the matter at hand and thus lets me travel deeper into the liminal. This strikes me as necessary at a time when our contemporary culture pressures us to blur such boundaries: to be always working for example, or always attentive to new media and information, or to always be social (or social in an artificial way), or to always be working by performing ourselves as commodity. Ritual poetry, practised with intention, can place boundaries that help us define time and space as special, where and when we can be present to poesis.

I now use precise ways of working with time brackets, set periods for set intentions. To speak firstly of short time frames: seconds, a few minutes to thirty minutes. These time frames allow for short bursts of technical exercises or durational challenges. Certain embodied and experimental practices help open up these time frames to the moments, the spaces between moments. I walk from central Bristol, from the Avon to Temple Meads train station repeating one word; spacetime seems to pulsate. A minute of writing, a single second may open up and expand under such ritual attention. Once these micro awarenesses are developed, one can create a sense of 'timefulness' in any moment.<sup>64</sup> The joins between moments open up.

Also consider medium time frames, such as a couple of hours. Most of the ritual work I employ for poetry takes a few hours. Maybe 2.5 hours allows for a ritual cycle to be felt fully, for changes to be noticed, for development to unfold, for poetics to be created. In these periods one notices one's own moods change and energy levels fluctuate, our internal and external weather patterns alter and shift.

Then to think of longer time frames, weeks to years. Rituals are of course often calendrical rites, birthdays, life events. A ritual may be a fast releasing into a feast, a festering realised into a fiesta. Turner even proposed that there are liminal periods of history, wars and revolutions for example.<sup>65</sup> This idea of liminal periods of history is not useful to me, especially when I consider that, by now, the chaos of the liminality of the present day seems unending. But nonetheless, the betwixt and between of the *limen* can last years. Long-term creative or ritual practice projects which feel difficult to finish, like a PhD study, or certain phases of life, can be punctuated by a ritual that brings a threshold out into the open and crosses it.<sup>66</sup> A rite can offer a chance to mark the passage; in the context of poetic practice this might mean the publication of a book for example.

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<sup>64</sup> Grimes, (1995).

<sup>65</sup> Turner, (1982).

<sup>66</sup> In this work I have often brought to mind as comparison to my own period of study, my grandmother Caryl's liminal thesis time which lasted from her beginning her research in the 1940s to publishing a monograph from the thesis in 1990, *Conscience as Consciousness: The Idea of Self-awareness in French Philosophical Writing from Descartes to Diderot*, (Voltaire Foundation, 1990).

Strong or unusual time brackets bring into focus speed and rhythm. One of the techniques of ritual is to change the speed of the process. With this change, a participant may then attune to new rhythms emerging or notice the alteration in a familiar time signature. Patterns emerge and shift, then come to a close, leaving the cycle for the next cycle to continue or be cut away.

Time unfolds only in space; ritual poetry takes place in a site. I practise ritual poetry both indoors and outdoors in ‘founded’ spaces.<sup>67</sup> Under ritual conditions, between bounded thresholds, actual lines in the sand for example, I become much more deeply aware of space. And a space may be the site of previous ritual cycles, prior consecrations of space that have left their traces of meaning on the walls and ground. Space is traced and inscribed over and over with different histories it has lived through. Space presents me with physical limitations and particular ecologies, societies, atmospheres, gazes and levels of privacy and exposure.<sup>68</sup> There may even be a haunting from violent or markedly memorialised spaces. Think of the presence of the dead in the ritual spaces where NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* is performed, the Atlantic’s terrifying liminal where the enslaved Africans perished. *Zong* is a ‘ritual writ in water’ of the middle passage.<sup>69</sup> I also think of another space marked by imperialism in Stu Cooke and Paulo Huirimilla’s use of ritual poetry in the Humedal Antiñir: they mark out the importance of the Humedal with ritual poetry in order to rewrite its presence into the world.<sup>70</sup> An anticolonial ritual poetry, which I strive for, would note the marks made on a ritual space by past events, the space’s layers of peopled history, its settledness and evictions. Who else shares the space now, who is included and excluded in the rite? Such presences or histories may also be other-than-human. A space is sentient with its ecology; ritual poetic attention starts to notice this ecology at a micro-level. How is the ecology changing or pressured here? How can I be in exchange with this ecology rather than a damage to it? How does this act then relate to the wider biosphere?

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<sup>67</sup> Grimes definition of Ritualisation, (1995, p. 60).

<sup>68</sup> Of the public exposure of performance, ‘poet as an Exhibition’, writes Geraldine Monk of the shock of the poem’s emergence in public reading space, ‘out in the big wide w. be bold.’ (Monk, 2002, p. 7). This is the bizarre feeling of uttering a poem in public under ‘ritualistic delineation of space’ (2002, p. 11) where the ‘Chantcasters’ step out to ‘Daubing lunarscapes’ (2002, p. 3).

<sup>69</sup> Philip, (2019).

<sup>70</sup> Cooke, (2019). Also see the poetics on the Humedal Antiñir in the Creative Chapter One, part F.

For me, ritual poetry is often about carving out thresholds for poesis from a particularly toxic contemporary spacetime. The knowledge that the dominant capitalist economic and political models are failing to sustain life on this planet, the intrusion of political and corporate surveillance and the invasion of common spaces to development— these are some of the encroachments on our time and spaces that deeply degrade our wellbeing. Meanwhile, digital media often leads us to think of everything as happening *now* and *here* in *this* body. Much of the work of ritual poetry then, for me, has been about sitting with and then trying to process the anxiety of and response to these pressures on spacetime. In embodied poetic acts of intentional ritual, I attempt to delineate a dedicated spacetime for emergence, poesis, sensitivity and empathy. In the spacetime that ritual thresholds clear for me, I try to be present to threat and mortality, whilst seeking out transformations that I can affect in the reality of here and now. In this spacetime I can make my words act with agency, be alive to sensuality and enchantment.

## Sparagmos

In Ancient Greek drama and mythology, a sparagmos was a ritual mangling, a rendering, a tearing apart, even a dismemberment. Sparagmos was often said to be enacted by a group of women in a narcotic frenzy, as in the deaths of Orpheus and Pentheus at the hands of the Maenads of Dionysus.<sup>71</sup> In my practice of ritual poetry *sparagmos* has become a term for the important part that death and destruction play in this work.

Ritual is embodied and the body's life is finite. Death is the ultimate threshold for the embodied human that we can know of for certain. Knowledge of this threshold throws the passage of life, the liminal transformative period of the bodymind's animation, into relief. Ritual has often concerned itself with the thresholds of death and rebirth. It is in times of extreme thresholds in life that rites of passage, ritual poetry, are most often required. For example, for many in my culture, poetry is often only experienced or taken seriously at a funeral. The earliest evidence of any human culture on these isles is usually that which can be found in sites of ritual burial. Sparagmos speaks to me of a form of ritualising arising from a persistent human need: to mark death and affirm life.

I was thinking of sparagmos in the furious cut-up, ruination, mourning and hope for renewal in my Mamaiaith project. My interests in sparagmos then took me to the site of Goat's Hole cave at Paviland, Gower, near my home, where the earliest evidence for ceremonial burial in western Europe has been found in the skeleton of a man from the Upper Palaeolithic Era. His bones were coated in red ochre suggesting a ritual preparation for the passage of death.<sup>72</sup> The ritual cycles I enacted in dialogue with a 'Red Lad' gave me a sense of connecting the start and end of the human life cycle through the act of threshold rites. Thinking of this early sparagmos helped me consider the present and future sparagmos, the particular eschatology of our times in which so much of our world is under destruction. Out

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<sup>71</sup> For example see discussion in T. Compton, (2006).

<sup>72</sup> Also a part of my ongoing reading of David Jones's *Anathemata* (1953), which also writes of the Red Lad of Paviland, in 'Rite and Foretime', (1953, p. 76). See my poem 'Funeral Games of the Greater Mammalia' in the and the Paviland work is included in the Tawe Ritual Cycles in Chapter One.

of the crisis at the cave's mouth emerged a dialogue between past, present and future threshold keepers.

Sparagmos can come as metaphor or metonymy in all endings or symbolic gestures to death. The most literal of these might be in the performance practice of self-injury or durational pressure on the body; this has been used in poetry and often refers to some kind of sacrifice.<sup>73</sup> But sparagmos is also, I'd argue, present in a more associative and metaphorical form in the cut-up: the fragmentation and breakage of language's sense-making flow, a shredding of the text. This kind of textual sparagmos is often followed by or moves towards a poesis, creation out of ruins. This process is at work in Mamaiaith under the idea of Adfeillion Babel, the ruins of Babel. And in another work, Rhys Trimble and I made use of such thinking in our funeral for poems, *Cynhebrwng Aer*, in which the text was subjected to ritual sacrifice of sparagmos, cut up, eaten and spat out again in poesis.

I find poets are often seeking such rites of sparagmos. There are many examples I have found of poets using ritual to mourn this world that burns, its once-abundant biodiversity, clean air, resources for life: to find ways to end this world and begin the next. The act of poesis as generating of hope can only be possible by acknowledging sparagmos's destruction, death and grief that it emerges from. Philip's *Zong!* is an extensive example of such a cycle of sparagmos-poesis made through the vehicle of a reiterative performance rite of a single poetic text. And in 'Vienna Blood', *Khurbn* and the *Stations* poems, Jerome Rothenberg considers the liminal terror of sparagmos, making the poesis from a poem as a conduit for remembering the dead, an 'I-as-witness'.

Although I often use *sparagmos* to think in the abstract of death or in the more material sense of destruction, in its context in the classical world, the word

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<sup>73</sup> See discussion in footnote 50 on Kapil's use of sacrifice. Also relevant is Peggy Phelan's discussions of self-injury and rituals of death in the work of recent ritual performance, especially works that involve self-injury in the 1970s: 'Perhaps it makes sense to say that insofar as early ritual, theatre and performance were devoted to managing the meaning of death, that management itself involved the invention of another conceptual biological experiential field that came to be called 'life' (in Heathfield (ed.), 2005, p. 17). Although this comment raises problematic issues around how one can search for the origins of theatre and ritual in ancient times (as discussed by the early ritual theorists, see Fischer-Lichte (2005) and Bell, (1997), and Schechner, (1993)), it does point to a popular understanding of ritual as a study in thresholds, the ultimate threshold of animated life being death and thus life comes into relief. Though any search for historical accuracy around origins may be misguided, the abstract idea of the threshold of ritual is generative.

suggests separation limb from limb. The historic idea of sparagmos in the Greek stories is of a ritual frenzied killing by a mob, often by a group of women such as the Dionysian Maenads, the bacchantes or 'raving ones' of the woods, ecstatic with ritual dancing and fervour. Sometimes sparagmos is written about as a dismemberment, as if such a death is literally emasculating the male member. Sparagmos may have been a real historical phenomenon, a ripping of flesh followed by *Omophagia*, the communal feast of that flesh. This idea of the sacrifice followed by the communal feast was a key concept for the early ritual theorists such as William Robertson Smith and Jane Ellis Harrison.<sup>74</sup> But sparagmos may always have been metaphorical, perhaps a theatrical embellishment concocted by Euripides, or reference to an obscured occult event, perhaps a sacrificial rite of reversal, where the women or other othered or subjugated subjects take their revenge or claim agency.<sup>75</sup>

The frenzied death by fragmentation is clearly the extremity of the idea of sparagmos but the spectrum of its uses in ritual poetry includes acts of separation, cuts, deaths and ruins, from which a poesis may be pieced together, a hopeless hope. At a workshop I invite a group of eco-activists at Blue Lagoon Pembrokeshire to destroy my poems and leaflets as well as a printout of a translation of *The Bacchae*. It is one of the most hopeful workshops I have created. Brambles recolonise ruins, I suggest, bringing us free food in the form of blackberries. Poesis. ...OK, so we're talking about poems, sheets of paper, not ecosystems or living bodies. Words, spirits, ideas, abstract things do not fill in for the actually destroyed. Thresholds of sparagmos are irreversible. *Mamaiaith* poses a faltering poesis out of sparagmos where the death in question was of a language culture and an ecosystem; I was for example considering that I would never gain the kind of linguistic skill needed to fully comprehend the extremely complex and technical book, *Adfeilion Babel*, and after my generation even fewer may be able to. So I wanted to rethink what 'regeneration' is in light of our present context that really recognises the sparagmos that is taking place.

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<sup>74</sup> Discussed in Erika Fischer-Lichte, (2005).

<sup>75</sup> Todd Compton, (2006).

In modern Greek, σπαραγμός, 'sparagmos', places emphasis on the extreme grief found in a destructive tragic event; a big lamentation, a kind of keening or stark public mourning. Such intense mourning can be bodily rupture, reckoning or anger, the release of a frenzied energy. Sparagmos is a bodily event on the threshold of human experience; it is deeply memorable and relational. Only charged *action* can come after such a threshold as this. This is another sense of sparagmos I take with me bodily into the ritual horizon, with the hope that poesis may follow.



## TRANSITION: LIMINALITY

Once the prescriptive and preparatory processes of ritual are made, we cross into the action, walking across the coastal boundary into the sea. Once in the space past *limen*, a ritualist will occasionally revisit the way markers of the separating thresholds, the scores and intentions already set, or these may dissolve into the new state of consciousness as they head out towards immersion. I think here of the *mer* in im-mer-sion, the sea from which e-*mer*-gence may materialise later, in the third phase of incorporatory plethu. Liminality here is immersive flow, a state of possibility and change. For me it is signalled by *symudliw* – moving colours.

## Embodiment

It is an *embodied* ritualist who crosses the threshold to immerse in the liminal, stepping towards poesis. Ritual is most often a call to the body, or, rather as I have come to think of it, to the bodymind, animated and relational in its ecology. Through techniques of ritual, I have attempted to cultivate a deeper awareness of the mind-body-language-world,<sup>76</sup> attentive to movement interplaying in ritual's timeful moment of sensuality and creation. So, my sense of self in ritual poetry is always already embodied, enminded and dynamically relational, or what movement artist Sandra Reeve speaks of as the *ecological body*: 'a system dancing within systems'<sup>77</sup>, in a state of 'interbeing'.<sup>78</sup> There is much to be explored on 'the vast-lunged shores of the multiple body', to use Maggie O'Sullivan's words,<sup>79</sup> or in 'the universe lying on the far side of the skin' to use John Berger's.<sup>80</sup> Ritual poetry opens the gates of many paths into this world.

Despite this recognition of ecological embodiment, I do not always feel myself to be in symbiotic exchange with a holism. Like others, I am not always aware of myself as a fully relational, perfectly present and ecologically interdependent bodymind. Sometimes mind is at the forefront, sometimes bodily sensation, other times different forces are at play. Often we have to spend unhealthy quantities of time in miserable, unreal or violent spaces such as oppressive workplaces, bureaucratic deadzones or at malignly enforced hard borders and in order to cope we become abstracted. And some cannot dwell in the present because of bodily memories that pull them back into the past.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps it is best not to be *present* at such times. CAConrad developed their Soma(tic) Poetry Rituals as a way of

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<sup>76</sup> I allude here to Simone Forti's conception of the subjectivity of movement, in Gray, (2015).

<sup>77</sup> Sandra Reeve, (2011, p. 48).

<sup>78</sup> Reeve writes out of an environmental movement practice to explore nine lenses through which we may view the body, the ecological body being that which moves in moving ecological systems of interbeing: 'An ecological body is situated in flux, participation and change. The changing body/soma experienced through movement as part of the changing environment challenges a fixed and deterministic notion of self and stimulates a different sense of self as process, participating in the movement of life', (2011, p. 51).

<sup>79</sup> O'Sullivan, 'riverunning (realisations)', (2003, p. 57).

<sup>80</sup> John Berger writes of Caravaggio: 'The desired body disclosed in the darkness — which is not a question of the time of day or night but of life as it is on this planet — the desired body, disclosed like an apparition, beckons beyond, not by provocative gesture but by the undisguised fact of its own sentience, promising the universe lying on the far side of that skin, calling you to leave.' 'Caravaggio: A Contemporary View', (1983).

<sup>81</sup> As Besem Van der Kolk on trauma details in *The Body Keeps the Score*, (2015).

creating an 'extreme present' in the body in response to these situations.<sup>82</sup> I also aim for such an embodied presence through ritual poetry but I am always shifting in and out of this presence; I move through different states of self and relation.<sup>83</sup> There are techniques from ritual and performance which can attend to these transitions in embodiment. I will build on the nature of technique, and specific techniques of movement, repetition and presence, in later parts of this poetics. But here I want to explore the more general nature of the embodiment of this ritual poetry.

### *Techniques of ritual embodiment*

Some of the techniques of ritual prompt swift changes in the hierarchies of the perceiving subject: gestures, repetitions, movements, breathwork and other actions can be adopted and adapted. Exercises for finding a renewed and present sense of embodiment can be found in dance, movement, somatic practice, psychophysical theatre, meditation, occultism and spiritual practices, song traditions and the martial arts. This embodied practice can of course be exercised outside of any ritual mode. But I am suggesting in this poetics, that for me, it is ritual that provides an intentional bounded and re-iterative framework. These techniques of the body are ritualised with intention, prescription, discipline, community and psychological safety in mind. I add to this my accompanying poetics practice, poetic writing tradition, the thresholds at play and my specific collaborative relationships. With these safe containers, the *vast shores* become slightly more visible.

Practitioners of performance traditions have studied the innumerable ways we are embodied in ritual, the exercises we do, what we wear, what roles and masks we adopt, what movements we make and for how long, the cast of the light, what spacetime and scores we are given; all these affect the emergence of the ritual.<sup>84</sup> I could ask, in this tradition, whilst walking or running, close your eyes, where do you feel a point of contact? What faculty do you use to sense? Feet, skin, head, dark vision or something else? Then put that experience into words or find

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<sup>82</sup> CAConrad, (2014).

<sup>83</sup> I consider this question of presence in the poetics Actor-Hunter-Poet in part F of Chapter One.

<sup>84</sup> Some of this is outlined in Barba and Savarese's *Dictionary of Performance Anthropology* (1991) and discussed by Spatz (2015).

language among it. Another example of embodied ritual technique might be that you respond to this question: think of a time you made an important decision, where was it located in your body, how would an action bring it to life and how can this be processed in the writing and making? Can you find an action for that decision? Repeat that action over and over and then let some words 'fall' out in the process...<sup>85</sup> These proposals for ritual poetry actions are also scores.

Some techniques of ritual embodiment may cross thresholds in extremis. Theatre maker and writer Tim Etchells calls this 'taking it too far'.<sup>86</sup> The endurance of the body is important to much ritual and this has been studied in depth in the field of performance art, and occasionally this has been adopted by poets such as Bhanu Kapil.<sup>87</sup> In the embodied practice that draws on ritual which I have begun to train in for this work, I find it is often about encountering the limits of the body and pushing through. Or I can simply deepen a sensual contemplation as I enter further into an immersion. Again, ritual intention and thresholds provide a frame for these breakthroughs. Sometimes, as a result of undergoing intense, extended and rhythmic physical work, I have been prompted into a new state of awareness, a limitlessness, a realisation or an emergence. This can provoke experiences of shock or pain, even something resembling possession, as the threshold is crossed. I walk up the entire length of my local stream until I can no longer move through the thick vegetation. I notice the soles of my feet change their texture, as if they have opened new pores to more precisely perceive the floor of the degraded river's stones and junk metal objects. With this ritual intention, to feel the stream deeply, and the thresholds of duration as score, to walk until the river is too overgrown or culverted to pass on further, I perceive differently. The aperture of the soles of my feet open out as a sensing organs.<sup>88</sup> I am entranced by the smell and light. A few words arise out of this, language comes later. With an intentional parallel poetics work, which allows for reflection and process to be charted, such

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<sup>85</sup> This is an exercise I undertook at Studio Matejka's workshop in 2017 and part of embodied research which Matejka calls 'physical words'.

<sup>86</sup> Etchells, (1999, p. 69).

<sup>87</sup> Kapil's more transgressive performance rituals include drinking a glass of urine in a performance of *Ban en Banlieue* at Harvard, The Poet's Voice reading (2015), and her lying down in hazardous places as described in that text.

<sup>88</sup> This also recalls Pauline Oliveros's score for night walking (1971).

ritual embodiment cannot help but change the writing bodymind. I begin to notice changes even outside the periods of practice.

There are techniques that involve language and poetry specifically. For example, the rituals that focus intent on vocalisation and the mouth in sounding, breath, song, chant or incantation, areas that practitioners of sound poetry, such as Cobbing and O'Sullivan explored and even ritualised. There is also the improvised speech during movement and action when words emerge from the body under ritual flow. Mark-making, where writing as a bodily act is emphasised, may be ritualised. And consider the technologies of touch, how for example, Vicuña's rituals make a poesis out of the quipu, a language of knots in threads, making a poem of tactility. In these acts of physicalised live writing, the embodied material aspects of language are emphasised – the way a word could turn into a grunt or a hum, or a knot, the way the voice wavers.

### *Relational embodiment*

To read or listen to poetry, is already to place one's consciousness intimately in the language of another. In performing poetry, we place our bodies into another's gaze and ear. And when we are the spectator, we may become affected by the performer's embodiment in a *kinaesthetic empathy*.<sup>89</sup> In a strong performance of poetry, such as O'Sullivan's 2016 performance of radical presence discussed in Chapter Three, spectators may become involved with an autopoietic feedback loop.<sup>90</sup> A poetry of ritual asks for an intensified level of consciousness beyond a proffered conventional poem on a page. Even in the quiet solitude of reading, ritual poetry can ask for your bodily involvement in its language, demand that you read it aloud, as David Jones does with the *Anathemata*.<sup>91</sup> Sometimes it's a lot to ask! To involve the other's bodymind in your poem under your scored ritual intent can be an intensely intimate exchange.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Dee Reynolds, (Ed.), *Kinaesthetic Empathy*, (2012).

<sup>90</sup> Fischer-Lichte, (2008).

<sup>91</sup> Jones, (1953, p. 35).

<sup>92</sup> Geraldine Monk's *Insubstantial Thoughts on the Transubstantiation of the Text* (2002) describes the uneasiness of this well.

Thus, ritual poetry entails an intensive, even heavy, involvement of the body in *relation*; this poetry is keenly aware of its social nature. We may become open to the possibility and trace of the touch of the other, already entangled through *hapticality*.<sup>93</sup> We want to touch and be touched by this world and ritual poetry often alerts us in a haptic *communitas* or in my terms, *plethu*. It is not an untroubled tangle. Sometimes, on the thresholds of this practice, I encounter an unease, a tension or confusion at the boundary between the self and other. In 'Ooze Transfer' in 2019, myself and Amy McCauley tried to make what we called a *psychic transfer* through a shared ritual in a Sheffield conference room. The boundary between my bodymind and hers and our audience was not stable or simple. She was absent due to acute illness; I was present in her stead. The boundary between ability and disability, presence and absence was brought into view and troubled. She gave me ritual instructions across the faulty medium of Skype and I had to work my body twice as hard to carry out her actions, encumbered with weights in the form of canvas bags of bird seed tied to my limbs. The affect this performance produced was exhausting and emotional for me, and reportedly for some of our spectators, but we ventured into another previously undiscovered territory of relational poetic embodiment.

This is not just the interaction with other humans but also with a sentient ecology. Animals have been engaged in ritual performance such as in the works of Beuys or Abramovic.<sup>94</sup> Their examples of exchange with the actually present bodies of coyote and cobra, respectively, raise concerns about the ethics of unequal and forced interspecies interaction. But we don't have to interfere with and bring animal bodies directly into the ritual, as they did, to feel the presence of the non-human body in ritual poetry work. Sometimes they come of their own accord. Maggie O'Sullivan's ritual poems and poetics often seek an interspecial relationship.<sup>95</sup> Ritual techniques of sensitisation to our ecological 'interbeing' can allow such an exchange.<sup>96</sup> The ecopoetics of my work might be how I open my

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<sup>93</sup> Stefano Harney & Fred Moten on hapticality, in 'Fantasy in the hold', *The Undercommons* (2013, p. 98).

<sup>94</sup> As described in Fischer-Lichte, (2008, pp. 101–108).

<sup>95</sup> O'Sullivan, speaks with Redell Olsen of this: 'The celebration of the transformative, merciful intelligences and energies of animals is in all my work' (O'Sullivan & Olsen, 2011, p. 204). Also see Stuart Cooke's latest publication on the lyre bird, *Lyre* (2019).

<sup>96</sup> Reeve, (2011, p. 51).

sensitivity to ecology, shifting the porous membrane around bodies, exploring the ecosystems I am implicated in or developing what O'Sullivan hints at as the 'Living Earth Kinships on the vast-lunged Shores of the Multiple Body'.<sup>97</sup>

### *Different embodiments*

With the recognition of this entangled relationality comes questions of ethics, not just an ethics of how we impact our environments. We come from different starting points in our embodiments. Our bodies are often not those bodies favoured by the dominant social systems, hierarchies and economies. The body of ritualising subject – poet, spectator, reader etc – may or may not be the normative body. Assumptions about how reality is perceived in ritual cannot be thought of as universal to all bodyminds. Being able to forget about one's differentiated embodiment – the differently racialized, abled or gendered body for example – is not always possible in certain spaces. Through cultivating an ethics, I have to recognise that the body in ritual is always socialised and contextualised and that some contexts for embodiment can actually imply a violence. The ritualising ecological body may be in a state of fear, trauma, instability and insecurity. Precarity and poor conditions will affect the body, our energy for ritual transformation, our ability to engage in any sort of meaningful ritual action or poetry. Additionally, ritual practices of embodiment may touch on traumatic memory that we hold in our bodyminds; 'the body keeps the score' writes Besem Van der Kolk in calling for more embodied treatments for trauma.<sup>98</sup> We are fragile and mortal and equally human, though the systems we inhabit do not always consider us to be so. This practice sensitises and exposes, and thus a sense of vulnerability and markedness may emerge. So, as poets, or ritual poetry makers, when we do have control over context and environment and community of a ritual situation, we should deploy an ethics that is cognisant of these differences and of the nature of trauma. With this in mind, ritual techniques of the body can allow us to make exploratory language art from any starting point and cultivate awareness of the changing, for example ageing and thus mortal, body, to feel its affordances, limits and potentialities.

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<sup>97</sup> O'Sullivan, (2003, p. 65).

<sup>98</sup> Van der Kolk, (2015).

Such potentialities lie wide open. The *vast-lunged shores of the multiple body* or the *universe on the far side of the skin*, our ecological animated bodyminds, are mostly hidden from us, occluded even, but can gradually be accessed in ritual and embodied practice.<sup>99</sup> At times, the embodiment given by ritual is restorative or full of stillness. Nothing happens. A spacetime of nothing can be found, a moment where no words emerge. A bodily image that emerges in ritual may be inexpressible. Nothing is the force that renovates the wor(l)d.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Dancer, writer and occultist, Alkistis Dimech writes of this as a 'dynamics of the occulted body' for example, (2016).

<sup>100</sup> Dickinson, E. (1883).



## Material

In ritual poetry it is the material that matters; here I encounter a deep materiality, not only the material body but a heightened sense of all the material properties of the world around me, what composes me and my ecological community. I think of materiality as that which the beholder holds in its material form, what is encountered, what the substance of the world is, what matters. Encountering and altering an experience of materiality and rendering it anew is one of the ways of igniting poesis. The manipulation of the material for poesis is what I refer to as the *techniques of the material*. The material can be the body, the site or space and its ecosystem, the materiality of the written word (the page, the voice), the materiality of the voice and moving body. Avant Garde traditions of concrete, visual, performance and sound poetry and other art practices have frequently taken the materiality of language, and life, as a medium for experiment and poesis. Ritual poetry intensifies this work.

In the creative works I present in this thesis, I have considered the material nature of the voice that holds language, for example the spaces in the Tawe ritual cycles. And the material of sound is considered in Mamaiaith; when I make the sound of a word in Welsh I struggle to know and speak in my mouth – ‘Adfeilion Babel in the mouth’. Here I also considered the materiality of the book *Adfeilion Babel* – how it can be considered as an object, a block, a burden, a mask but also felt it as a vocal ruin on my tongue. The material is the embodied channel that carries language or the page; the air between us.

In ritual poetry I seek a ‘mattering of material’, to use O’Sullivan’s terms for the process of making and unmaking.<sup>101</sup> I find that ritual practice creates a process of becoming aware or immersed in or even caring for this material; to ritualise is to make meaning, to charge, or create ‘receptivity’<sup>102</sup> or perhaps sacralise material, to *matter* it. If immanence is the way that the divine is present in the material world, as opposed to transcendence that takes a subject off into the abstract, perhaps ritual poetry is of the immanent: the sacred material, how it matters.

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<sup>101</sup> O’Sullivan, 2003, p.65.

<sup>102</sup> Grimes, 1995, p.60.

### *Sacred objects*

To illustrate this in a more literal and tangible sense, I focus here on the objects and matter brought into the ritual poem space. These pieces can be used as scores or centres of focus for the ritual. Matter becomes talismanic or 'amuletic', a word O'Sullivan uses in her poem of ritual material made to matter: 'Narcotic Properties'.<sup>103</sup>

If I am using material in a ritual poem, such as the Ritual Object on a Scholar's desk or Bring the Brass Fish Back in, the lump of slag in the Hafod ritual poem cycles, the marigolds in Marigold Jam, or the triangular scenography hung with organic and writerly matter in the Mamaiaith Salford performance, I consider the material properties of objects, their compositions, stories and futures. I collect materials for shrines and collages, placing them anew to begin a process of mattering. Or I may make an object a score for improvisation. With these amuletic objects, meaning seems to me to linger on the object in my mind after the rite and can be further evolved in repeated encounters. In ritual cycles the material carries memories, meanings and associations of previous ritual cycles. All of this layers and evolves into the text or in fact is the text.

There is a possibility of involving too much material. With the use of objects and matter, I try to instigate an anti-acquisitive impulse or to practise ritual cleaning. Sometimes these objects or matter must be ritually removed or destroyed: releasing it in a ritual separation – giving something away, letting the words dissolve in the river or be thrown to the wind. One could think of this concept of *mattering* in ritual poetry as a way of charging material with new meaning, memory or the potential for poesis. I bring in a stone found on the beach near my house, make it matter by placing it in the shrine, then it becomes a score for a ritual poem, it works its way into my texts and improvisations, then later I put it out in the garden or even take it back to the beach for the sea to make it a shrine for itself. I might turn ritual objects and found matter into collages, into gifts for future ritualising, or make them into gifts for my loved ones and my future self.

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<sup>103</sup> O'Sullivan, (2003, p.20). She follows 'amuletic' with 'thus-brim', as if thusly the material brims over.

## Technique

Technique is the process by which we ritualise intentionally towards a poesis. When I speak of technique, I use it in the sense of Ben Spatz's explorations around the question of *What a Body Can Do*. For Spatz, technique is concerted embodied practice that sediments knowledge in our bodyminds through repetition in a practice.<sup>104</sup> The technique developing in my ritual poetry practice then, is a form of embodied knowledge layered in the conscious and unconscious bodymind.

Having already touched on techniques of the material that increase corporeal awareness in embodiment, I want to note some more aspects of ritual technique. There are those ritualistic techniques one might associate with ritual – repeated gesture, chant, crossing thresholds for example. And there are the nascent possibilities of ritual techniques that can be developed in any practice, given that in creative ritualisation, as Grimes highlights, any act can be made into a ritual with intent and technique.<sup>105</sup> Personally, I go to a given ritual technique to find a liminal state where poesis emerges: presence, a sense of immersion, movement and flow, focus or the opening of doors towards change in writing or practice. The technique may create or sustain a new state of mind or a moment of insight or reflection, to become present to the formation of poesis. Some techniques of the material for ritual poetry might include the following techniques specific to language:

- *Speech and vocalisation*. Invocation and/or reading aloud of texts, especially ritual texts or poems, spells, prayer, incantation, appeals, divination, particularly if spoken over and over.
- *Repetition within a rite*, such as actions or gestures or words, such as chant or mantra or repetition of lines, the formation of linguistic rhythms and sonic or gestural patterning.

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<sup>104</sup> Spatz, (2015).

<sup>105</sup> Grimes, (1995, p.60).

- *Mattering of materials.* Making matter such as objects, shrine making through intention and activation, writing, then forming into poem, collage or assemblage.
- *Ritualising embodiment specific to creative writing or poetry.* E.g. exploring the action of writing, bringing the pen into the improvisation, ritualising writing schedules when for example writing can be set to intention and thresholds of time and space brackets.
- *Going too far.*<sup>106</sup> Intentionally pushing the writing body through duration past its points of comfort.
- *Vocal or movement techniques* that use or produce either language or a proto-linguistic vocalisation, especially in a sense of rhythm, ritualisation of techniques of sound poetry and song. This includes group voicing: chant, song, choral practice, readings as enactment of a poem.
- *Using a score* or ritual instruction or proposal, an exercise within ritual thresholds and intention. Use of words, objects, images, site or sounds: talismans, sigils or images, spell or ritual instructions as a visual starting point, score, for poetry.
- *Attention work* that develops embodiment and awareness. E.g. using performance prompts improvisation within a ritual frame.
- *Cut-up and collage,* sonic or visual or otherwise, textual sparagmos.
- *Working with groups,* particularly in co-creation and rhythmic exchange, i.e. plethu.
- *Ritual use of space,* site, ecology, special place, e.g. historic or sacred, sites whose meanings feed into a poem.
- *Performance art* techniques or theatrical devices as a way of subverting expectation or changing perceptual boundaries, e.g. using roles or masks or costume or spacetime, effects etc.

The techniques here interweave, overlap and proliferate in the emergence of possible poesis. Such techniques are not only dramatic or bizarre.<sup>107</sup> There are also the subtle techniques possible in ritual poetry, for example those deployed at

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<sup>106</sup> After Etchells (1999).

<sup>107</sup> see for example CAC Conrad's *Soma(tic) Rituals*, (2014).

public readings, where a ritual is made of the reading voice and presence of the poet in the context, intentionally using silence, gestures or their voice to create transitions in the perceptual awareness for those present.<sup>108</sup> The reading context can be ritualised, for example, in how guidance is invoked, how a group works together or how space is used.

There is also a difference between working alone and with others. Undertaking the score or techniques given by a director, collaborator or teacher involves a focus of the techniques on relationships, trust and exchange. When I work alone my expectations may be reversed by different types of cues from the environment or the poesis emerging in the work itself. At no point do I escape the social; solo practice is just as sensitive to social structures as working with others. But I need both solo and relational techniques, to fluctuate between them.

Techniques of ritual and the material are remarkably repeatable and transportable from person to person, and indeed from culture to culture. Some ritual techniques are particularly attuned to the cultures they were created in, so when they are enacted in new contexts, a ritualist needs to be mindful and ethical. When we try a new technique we bring it into our own set of symbols, context and social world. If a ritualist poet uses a technique that comes from a specific cultural or spiritual context, I suggest developing sensitivity and an ethics. We need to acknowledge how much we do and don't know of the culture as well as a consideration of what effects the enactment of it may have in our specific contexts, especially the contexts that have involved violent erasure and imperialism, for example. A fuller ethics is discussed earlier in Chapter Four, but it may suffice to say here that potential techniques of ritual poetry, the routes of ritualisation that are possible, are so wide that we need not ever engage in cultural appropriation in order to partake in an ethical and transformative practice.

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<sup>108</sup> see Peter Middleton's discussion of the poetry reading, (1998).

## Presence

The techniques of ritual poetry can lead to the point of emergence that allows poesis. But what is the nature of this state? It could be liminality or flow or *communitas* in Turner's terms, or the "identical opposites": omnipotence/vulnerability, tranquillity/readiness for the most demanding physical action' of rhythmic work described by Schechner, trance or bliss.<sup>109</sup> Or it may be an awareness of corporeal knowledge, of mortality for example. In performance and embodied practices, the state of immersion and absorption that the subject finds in the middle period of transformation, after thresholds are passed and techniques are deployed, is often described as *presence*. In this practice, I have studied presence through ritual techniques of embodiment but often find it difficult to grasp, either in performance or in solo composition.<sup>110</sup> And yet, in my faulty studentship of presence, I have become more alert to the full complexities of being and moving through the world and in a body. I try to be attentive and thus present to what my bodymind senses and opens to, its transitions and breakthroughs, tracking pivotal points of decision, sensation, memory, relationality and linguistic emergence at the level of embodiment, before, during and after ritual. Perhaps for me at this stage, it is only possible to understand presence as a state in its contrast to other states: abstraction, distraction, reflection... all modes that also play a part in the process of art making.

I look to the extensive technologies of presence that performers and embodied practitioners have developed, a vast corpus which I can only begin to try in my poetic context.<sup>111</sup> On stage, presence could be the radical presence of the autopoietic feedback loop that Fischer-Lichte describes.<sup>112</sup> This is the performer's presence which captivates and involves a spectator in an intense exchange. Other extensive techniques for training the performer can be found in Barba and Savarese's *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (1991). To bring these

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<sup>109</sup> Schechner, (1993, p. 239).

<sup>110</sup> I explore these complexities in the poetics on presence, Actor-Hunter-Poet in section F of the Creative Chapter One.

<sup>111</sup> Examples of discussion around presence in performance studies can be found in *Archaeologies of Presence* (2012), *Certain fragments* (Etchells, 1999) from Forced Entertainment and Spatz (2016).

<sup>112</sup> Fischer-Lichte, (2008).

technologies of presence to poetry is to become attuned to the presence of the poem manifested among others or in the emergence of language in the process of composition. One sense of being present is to think of it spatiotemporally, in the *extreme present* described by CAConrad, for example,<sup>113</sup> that precipitates a captivation in the here/now moment of ritual, which they follow by writing.

I perceive the ideal of presence as when a ritualist occupies the space and moment fully, very *here* and in the *now*, not distracted by anxieties or moved to transcendence, powerfully in one's own embodiment, attuned to the relational other and receptive. This kind of moment is the opposite of what the dominant economic culture generally presses upon us: hyper-production, short-termism, consumption and concern for immediate results, disembodiment, alienation, isolation, distraction, anxiety or overwhelm. Presence is particularly challenging for anyone who has experienced profound trauma, as memories of the past will affect one's ability to dwell fully in the present.<sup>114</sup> Even when our day-to-day realities are not marked heavily by traumatic pasts or the economic pressures of survival in the present, it is still hard to be fully present. Speaking for myself, literary culture, poetry practice and the contemporary economy had hardly prepared me for the demands of my bodymind to be present in ritual performance and embodied liminality.

What I can start to describe here, however, is the presence to poesis that can evolve. Through ritual, I study how language acts or emerges in the transitions across embodied states, the thresholds of process. I often think of the ritualist poet in a state of presence like a hunter. This is to draw on the state Grotowski aimed for in actors as part of a long research project into presence in the psychophysical theatre labs: actor-as-hunter in tune and responsive, inner and outer worlds balanced.<sup>115</sup> This state is a bodymind, receptive to what is happening internally,

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<sup>113</sup> CAConrad, (2016).

<sup>114</sup> Van Der Kolk, (2015).

<sup>115</sup> See Grotowski on the hunter as explored by Grimes on Parashamanism (1995, pp. 253-268) and in Grotowski's projects (*Grotowski Sourcebook*, 2001; Cuesta & Slowiak, 2007). For me, the hunter-actor-poet is supple, alert and ready, in deep exchange with the other who enters the scene. The hunter is a figure I have explored in my poetics in the creative chapter but is not unproblematic, hunting being by now also being a predatory blood sport in contemporary Britain, riddled with class and gender politics, or instead of, a traditional technology for feeding a society.

externally and in relation to its ecology, Reeve's *ecological body*, dynamic and ready.

To enter into this presence requires preparation: the processes I have explored above under intention, thresholds, embodiment and technique. The ritual's demands, a challenging score for example, may already command the full focus and bodily awareness of the ritualist. This is often the case in long-established ritual traditions such as ones that involve pain and duration. We may have to set up a state of presence through generative technique: exercises, scores or meditations, breathwork, movement, turning attention to a score. Through presence, I have come to notice more and more the moment between moments, the joins, and how these liminal joins, junctures and empty spaces open out in the writing process. I find that in developing presence, a microscopic perception can be opened onto to the genesis of the word, words and body, poesis unfolding.

In performance contexts, presence is often an attuned exchange with the co-present other. But in a practice where I frequently work alone, the question of who that other I am in exchange with, remains live. Whose gaze falls upon my poetic communication and how am I in exchange with them? Who do my words address? Workshopping with others has developed this awareness of the gaze and its effects on my sense of presence, as has recording in film, audio or photography. Photographic reproduction, as well as an audience or reader's responses, are all ways of registering presence through the other. But the other's gaze can also pull me out of presence into self-consciousness. So I continue in a slow studentship of embodied practice, performance, ritual, poetry and poetics.

Presence is liminal; poesis may emerge here or we may be so absorbed in our embodied task so that words only come later. Presence is not the only state of consciousness that ritual process can heighten; there is not a homogenous sense of one universal type of heightening of bodymind.<sup>116</sup> Ritual can also prompt trance or emotive peaks, memories or images surface. Language is sometimes in this

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<sup>116</sup> See Schechner (1993), Grimes (1995; 2020), Rouget (1985), and other writers for different states, also studies in spiritual rapture, and metamorphosis, for example also Bynum Walker's study on Medieval mysticism (1991).



place, sometimes it takes a back seat. Does the ever-present hunter pause to write down what they sensed in the periphery of the landscape? I am still learning when to record in writing and when to be present solely to sensations of my bodymind. Ritual poetry practice is, for me, both this presence to materiality and movement into other linguistic, abstract and imaginal landscapes, moving across these landscapes step by step. The type of states that a ritual may evoke will depend on intention, context, thresholds set and techniques of the material I've described elsewhere. As I move through what a ritual presents, perhaps captivated in a vigorous immersive action, a transcendent reverie, a trance or possession-like state or even a simple meditative journey to the shores of my own skin, it helps to know how to return to the body and the ground at any point, to touch presence again. Though it is challenging for me, I try to know how presence begins to develop within my experience: to be present to the material as a point of neutrality and to really be there. I must inhabit this place as an anchor in order that I may venture out and in of it, to move through and onwards.

## Movement

Ritual is a process of change, thus, movement is a royal road to poesis. In ritual, the enactment of an intention is made with movement; a ritualist moves across thresholds, flowing between distinctive postures and gestures. Movement is fundamental not just to ritual but to life; as I touched on in the writing on embodiment, to have a body is to move. Even in conditions of great stillness, movement is always unfolding in a living animal. Sandra Reeve's sense of an 'ecological body' gives us a picture of embodiment as 'interbeing', recognising that we are always a 'system dancing with a system'.<sup>117</sup> We are continually animated in life until we die. So the attentive intentional lens of ritual has helped me focus on the movement, gesture and transitions I am already involved with. For me, as a poet coming from a context dominated by sedentary practices and abstraction, ritual brings forth this already-animated dance, a realisation of the *ecological body*. Here I discover large or small gestures, emotive postures, sounds, shapes, changes in speed, perspective or minute motions and perceptions of the external and internal world.

I have explored several techniques of movement from ritual practice to begin these realisations. I personally look to movement-based practices that draw on ritual, many of which I have detailed in the methodology Chapter Four. Underneath the embodied practices I have tried out for the sake of ritual poetry, further technique is sedimented and thus surfaces regularly in the ritual movement. Under my attempts at new exercises, from such practices as movement improvisation, psychophysical theatre training, Feldenkrais, Butō for example, I often encounter traces of childhood physical education and familial life which featured ballet, mountaineering and martial arts; I also encounter traces of the classes, and even one performance I made, of Middle Eastern and African dance which I undertook in my twenties. Ben Spatz has illustrated how the sedimentation of embodied technique is formative of practice over time in the body<sup>118</sup> and in this practice I discover just how long the life of embodied memory is. I discover and make the ballet moves I learnt as a five-year-old.

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<sup>117</sup> Reeve, (2011, p. 48).

<sup>118</sup> Spatz, 2015.

This movement practice has, in general been pleasurable and formative of my wellbeing and along the way I have digressed joyfully into these absorbing and, in some cases, transformational movements. I know that I can only begin to understand superficially each of the complex practices from which the techniques are derived. So I focus here more specifically on how these movements are formative of poesis in ritual practice. For example, in a psychophysical theatre workshop under ritual conditions, I am asked to find an action that seems symbolic or meaningful, then am required to repeat it over and over, then words fall out and language fragments emerge.<sup>119</sup> The words that form from this action become poems or the beginnings of poems as well as performances, such as the performances I made for my Eurydike and Oceanik poems. In my solo compositional processes, I then track how words can falter or emerge from the physical duress or movement operation at a ritual threshold, how a poem or poetic line or word operates as a score for movement improvisation. Gestures are a particularly interesting field for ritual poetry, perhaps because they are closely involved with or part of language production.<sup>120</sup> In Mamaiaith for example, I studied my personal gestures, mining their worlds through repetition and duration. Some actions I have repeated until they dissolved or yielded something shocking or beautiful: reaching out and bringing to mouth, failing to grasp, *bird arms*, *book as babe*, crawling. There are several movements left over from scores I developed which morphed in new cycles; recently these gestures were the *hunter's bow* and an *owl-eye* movement.

The techniques of movement I have studied here involve both free flowing improvisation or more predetermined movement to scored structure. I weave around the score and poesis emerges. This is folded into further ritual re-iterations and poetics writing. Ritual movement practice can sometimes lead me outside myself in ecstasy, other times I am embroiled within, or I feel the contact between the bodies and the space around me, the ground; everything moves muddy, whirring, dissolute. A liminal seam opens between the body and language which

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<sup>119</sup> This was Studio Matejka's workshops on 'Physical Words' in 2017 (Matejka, 2020).

<sup>120</sup> Gesture is 'both implicit and explicit' writes Schneemann (2005, p. 247). This is echoed by Carrie Noland's work on gesture (2009) as agency and embodiment.

is ripe for practical exploration. There is still much to open out in this seam. Several other poets are working here, such as Camilla Nelson, Scott Thurston and Nathan Walker, charting and testing the terrain where the body is activated by the word or the word is activated by the moving body.<sup>121</sup>

Ritual involves a heightening of sensual experience and this may evoke memories of past experiences. Kinaesthesia, sight, smell, taste and other senses interact intensely under ritual conditions. In the radical sensitivity of the liminal, a ritualist may enter bodily positions, sensual interactions or gestural images that they have not encountered for some time. Care should be taken because some of these memories may originate in traumatic events.<sup>122</sup> For this reason, I would advise a therapeutically-minded practice to parallel this artistic process. Some ritual and other embodied practices will actually anticipate the surfacing of traumatic material and work to set boundaries, intention, structures and limits for psycho-physiological safety; Movement Medicine for example is a practice which has developed this healing capacity through ritual movement. How I process and experience unexpected emergences, traumatic or not, might depend on how I have set up the processes of ritual intention and thresholds, then, following the ritual, how I integrate, ground and end a ritual: how the thresholds have been marked.

But, even with these techniques in play, we are not always in control, sometimes we cannot anticipate what might emerge. With sustained practice, and alongside a parallel therapy, I find myself navigating the possibilities of the unexpected. Intention and thresholds limit and ground me; in the most intense commotion of the liminal, it is helpful to know that the threshold of an ending is coming, that certain actions are finite and are thus closable. I can also recall the ground and an anchoring state of presence. The raw sensitivity that can emerge from the transitional liminal state of movement can continue into the rest of my day and night if I do not put in place a firm threshold of ending. A poetics or journaling practice that works between cycles, wherein I can reflect and develop realisations

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<sup>121</sup> In 'Vital Signs', Scott Thurston and Sarie Mairs Slee have made a detailed study of this rich seam, their explorations of a large range of different movement to poetry and poetry to movement techniques and their results, begin to map out some of what is possible in this emerging field of embodied poetics, (2017).

<sup>122</sup> Van de Kolk, (2015).

is crucial. So I recall that this cycle will pass and the next one will begin; transition and change being the signs of animation and thus life. Sparagmos-poesis-sparagmos-poesis and so on.

## Repetition

Ritual poetry is a practice of cycles: repetitive iterations, rites within rites, cycles within cycles. Re-iteration may be the basis of much creative practice and much of what we learn, we learn through repetition,<sup>123</sup> but ritual provides a particularly intense study in this repetition. Repetition within the ritual will be echoed in repetitions of the ritual itself; rituals open fractally onto more rituals. The reiteration may occur at regular ‘crucial’ times, calendrical or daily rites, for example,<sup>124</sup> or a repetition may occur within the rite itself. It is the techniques of extensive repetition within a single ritual iteration that I’d like to focus on here.

The units that the ritualist strikes over and over in the liminal may include sounds, gestures, actions or words. To think of a sound firstly – a bell, a drumbeat, a note or a musical motif – we can produce or track repeated sounds externally or internally, such as the breath or heartbeat. The way repetition operates more widely in sound art, music and performance has been studied in practices like systems music, trance and drills in dance practice.<sup>125</sup> These techniques of repetition find their way into poetry too, when practitioners of sound poetry explore the intersection of repetition and rhythm with language, pushing at the boundary of sound’s rhythmic effect on the listener in ritualised performance.<sup>126</sup> Poets such as Cobbing, O’Sullivan, Monk, Philip, Waldman and more recently Nathan Walker recognise the convergence of ritual and sound poetry when they use repetitive sound-making or vocalisations in their performances; they deploy chant, refrain, rhythmic pulsing sounds and words. These poets use and change language’s sonic materiality, creating embodied beats, ambient vocal vibrations, warped song, pulsing cries, or rhythmic syntax. When the effects of repetition are coupled with the force of language’s potential for meaning, a liminal space may open up between semantic and embodied sense-making. An autopoietic feedback loop

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<sup>123</sup> For Smith and Dean (2009) and Spatz (2015) this is a part of creative practice-led research.

<sup>124</sup> Grimes, (1995, pp. 70-71).

<sup>125</sup> See Daboo’s work on repetition (2015) in ritual performance. In music, Margulis (2013), in history, especially the military development of the drum and the military drill see McNeill (1995) on keeping together in time, in performance see Schechner’s Restored behaviour (in Barba & Savarese, p. 206) and Rouget (1985) on music and trance possession. In therapeutic practice see Van der Kolk on syncing (2015). Also Grimes (1995).

<sup>126</sup> For example see discussion of Cobbing above, his statements on Sound poetry (1978) and Rothenberg’s commentary and addendum to the ‘Sounds’ in *Technicians of the Sacred* (2017, pp. 438–444).

may emerge, as I explored earlier in Maggie O'Sullivan's performances in Chapter Three. In my own ritual cycles, I often chant words until they fall apart in my mouth, merge with other sounds, morph into emergent new forms.

Repeating gestures or actions is another form of ritual repetition. In my experiments with ritual, especially the movement for poesis I mention above, I have explored how actions or gestures can be repeated to shift the bodymind into a new space. These can then either be turned into a sequence for performance or repeated further, as a way of entering more deeply into the gesture's world or the poem's detailed embodiment. In the impossible, but still-attempted, desire to make an exact copy, I find more and more variation and detail in the form. Each repetition opens up the detailed perceptions of embodiment, kinaesthetic awareness as well as the sonic and semantic dimensions of words. In *Mamaiaith*, I repeatedly 'mined' the gesture of reaching out to pick a blackberry, or a word, to bring it to the mouth until underlying psychophysical and linguistic emergences swept up to the surface. In this case the gesture, of reaching and trying something in the mouth, is one we have all repeated since infancy. So repetitively exploring such a move can feel like excavating layers of the experience of self and time: I feel that I am recovering or 'restoring' behaviour which I made for the first time as an infant. The concept and vehicle of *Mamaiaith* is not only a relationship with the mother('s) tongue but also an uncovering of gestural language prior to spoken dialogue. Repeating these gestures, I explore the language of touch and movement and relation. As I touched on above, I have also repeated the actions I call *bird arms*, *owl eyes*, the *wheel*, the *fall*, *book as babe*, *Adfeilion Babel* in the mouth and others that I return to now as scores for further repetition.

The process of my ritual poetry practice will often involve repeating the sound, word or gesture until I feel something 'giving way', as if I have passed through the ritual threshold gate or emerged from the sea. Here, at the point of repetition, something arises: an embodied memory, a new idea, a realisation. This is a crucial moment of transformation of perception, or in terms of poetry, *poesis*. Schechner, who studied repetition in 'restored behaviour' in embodied performance practice and theory, notes that it is the boundary-pushing rhythmic exercises of repetition that evoke heightened states in participants in ritual theatre

laboratories of 'omnipotence/vulnerability'.<sup>127</sup> At this point we may be in a trance or a radical form of the presence, as I explored earlier.<sup>128</sup> But one doesn't need to reach an extremely altered state to begin to feel the transformation of repetitive technique.

### *Repeated language*

If ritual repetition is so powerful, I have asked myself, what happens when the thing ritually repeated is the embodied word? When the linguistic utterance is repeated in a ritual, where the words are meant to *enact* an intention, what poesis is possible? In poetry contexts, either in performance, or sometimes in private whilst reading, the ritualised recitation of lines read aloud can be seen as a reiteration or activation of what is on the page, its embodiment and ritual sounding. Upon encountering a text, vocalising or performing it, one re-embodies the language through utterance, and makes the language one's own via one's body, giving text breath. To put it in Geraldine Monk's words in *Transubstantiation of the Text*: 'Body mass is conduit.'<sup>129</sup> This ritual repetition of language through the body is the central terrain of the liminal. After this embodiment via repetition, I will then often transmit repeated or half-restored words in later cycles; lines and poems return in new iterations, the same *same* but different. Many of my ritual practices, and those I have researched involve a deep study and experimentation with this basic practice: the re-reading of a poem or poetic text as a fundamental alchemy. Or to repeat Monk's exegesis on this process '...Words birthed. Made flesh. Took wing. Horrids and enormities. Chantcasters. Daubing lunarscapes.'<sup>130</sup>

Poetry, as a practice, is already aware of this power of re-reading, or singing, or chanting a line of a poem or word over and over until it seems to enter you or become you. This knowledge of the embodiment of repetition can be found in poets' use of the refrain, musical elements of language or chorus and chant; all integral pathways of ritual poetry. I can see how powerful this is when I look at

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<sup>127</sup> Schechner 'The Future of Ritual', (1993, p. 239).

<sup>128</sup> Also see Walker, (2019), for a practice that takes chanting to this point of transformation in the 'vocal body'.

<sup>129</sup> Monk, (2002, p. 9).

<sup>130</sup> Monk, (2002, p. 3).



how specifically spiritual ritual practices have taken to poems, hymns, prayers and mantras, for example the chanting of Vajrayana Buddhism and Tantra.<sup>131</sup> But I also think of the inscription in the bodymind made when we sing our favourite songs; love songs for example may have marked us permanently with the secular religion of romance. This is the embodiment implied in knowing some words *off by heart*. When we sound, sing or chant, words vibrate through us, move through our interiors, resonate among organs and settle in our memories and unconscious realms in the body-mind-language-world, to elaborate on Simone Forti's words.<sup>132</sup> By now I am cautious and careful about what I chant or sing repetitively, wary of inscribing something so powerfully into my bodymind; *Careful what you chant for!* This is also to say that the lines repeated in ritual poetry relate to the intentions and invocations set out at the start. The power of chant is also suggested by its related form, incantation. Incantation suggests a most potent example of repetition in ritual poetry, which seeks to raise or affect a power through poem-as-rite. Chant is a fundamental tool of ritual poets, or the *Chantcasters*, to use Monk's name.<sup>133</sup>

When I consider the oral history of poetry, I realise how integral repetition is to poetry, especially to the poetry of ritual. The refrain, from *refraindre*, for example, is the last line of a repeating verse. The etymology of *refrain* points to medieval France and the Troubadour Avant Garde with a suggestion in it of the warbling of birds.<sup>134</sup> In mostly-oral poetry cultures, repetitive techniques were or are often techniques of composition, memorisation and a way of engaging your audience in performance. Cultures were formed in the process of the repeated poem; a clear example of this is found in Welsh poetry, where rhyme and rhythm are not just used in order to remember lines for recitation but are constitutive of complex aesthetically rich forms. Here, an unbroken tradition of sonic rhythmic texturing and oral virtuosity evolved over a millennium in *Cynghanedd*, a practice in vital continuation to this day. It is said, but not evidenced in what I have found so far, that *Y Cynfeirdd*, the early poets, celebrated under the names of Aneirin, Taliesin,

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<sup>131</sup> Ritual repetition is explored by Daboo (2015) and poet Nisha Ramayya's tantric poetics. Also Waldman explores chant in *Fast Speaking Woman* (1996).

<sup>132</sup> Simone Forti conversation with Victoria Gray, (2015).

<sup>133</sup> Monk, (2002). Monk may be referring to poets as *chantcasters* or even to the Pendle witches she voices in *Interregnum* (1994) as poets.

<sup>134</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition.

Llywarch Hen and Heledd, memorised or composed poems in the dark, maybe lying down with rocks held on their stomachs and chanting the poems from this position. Perhaps this happened, perhaps not, but this story hints at a long knowledge of embodied ritual poetry technique whereby repetition is integral and poetry is impactful on the bodymind.<sup>135</sup> As well as memorisation and vibrant performance, techniques of poetic embodied repetition may also allow for the emergence of transitional states of consciousness leading to composition of further poems.

The practices hinted at in oral poetics are reminiscent of those explored in psychophysical theatre labs, in the lineage of Grotowski for example.<sup>136</sup> When a poem is embodied through repetition like this, a poet-ritualist does not just reproduce the language at will, in performance, but ritually (re)lives it in the action of a rite. Ritual repetition of poetry then is a re-embodiment or perhaps even re-incarnation, if one falls for the boast of Taliesin.<sup>137</sup>

Repeat, recite and reform. The repeated act can create a frame of familiarity and, through this safe space or scaffold, the ritualist then may go deeper and further into their sensitivity, trance or presence. Boredom or monotony, discomfort even, can sometimes provide a threshold through which to push through to the liminal. Jerri Daboo explores this place when they write of how ritual repetition, paradoxically the same but different, is a way of allowing for transformation. The point of the non-self found in these repetitive performances is a space open for change.<sup>138</sup>

There are tangible and material effects. Muscle is built, memories and insights are layered through sedimentation of reiterative technique. Sometimes dramatic

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<sup>135</sup> The later medieval Welsh court poets believed a poem had power over the body, certain poems, satires, could kill, they had magic power. They believed they inherited their practice from druidic cultures. (Dr Elin Philips Jones, personal correspondence, 2020).

<sup>136</sup> For example the studio theatres I workshoped with, OBRA and Matejka.

<sup>137</sup> *'Bum yn lliaws rith/ kyn bum kysgyfrith', I have taken many forms before I took this one* declares the poet with the name of Taliesin at the start of the Cad Goddeu, the 'Battle of the Trees'. These words, at first hearing, seem to be about the shapeshifting of the bard but also signal the way the poem can be re - incarnated in the ritual repetition of recitation so that each poet who speaks these lines becomes the form of Taliesin, becomes Taliesin. See Lewis & Williams, (2019).

<sup>138</sup> Daboo, (2015).

emergences may occur or perhaps change is registered in incremental layers over time. Cycles repeated lead to embodied knowledge.<sup>139</sup> Across time, the iterative cycles of ritual are its history-making.

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<sup>139</sup> See also the models of Spatz (2015) and Smith & Dean (2009).

## PLETHU: POESIS

I think of the integrative processes of ritual poetry under the Welsh word *plethu*, (pronounced pleth-'ee') meaning to weave, both in dance and textile work. This corresponds to Turner and Van Gennep's rites of incorporation, associated with initiation, when a ritualist is returned to their community transformed after liminality and *communitas*. I think of *plethu* as related to *communitas*, but instead of one momentary shared sense of bonded ritual transformation, as in *communitas*, in *plethu* I picture an interweaving of difference and relation. *Plethu* is the social nature of ritual poetry, an ongoing slow interweaving of relation. In *plethu*, beings come together and collaborate, but they don't necessarily dissolve into one another to become one, as *communitas* suggests. This interweaving is also the stage of grounding and ending and closing a cycle. In this section then, I write of processes of integrating, incorporating and sharing work, noting emergence and making meaningful poesis; the interweaving *plethu* where we return, repeat, reflect, make connections and sense, making it historical.

## Plethu

*Bodies join, a ritual ensues* wrote Cobbing, suggesting the possibility of *communitas* in poetry.<sup>140</sup> In this research I have had glimpses of *communitas* – the rare, momentary and intense feeling shared between participants of a ritual and the bonding created by a ritual's shared action or manifestation. I think of the community that arises and continues its relational evolution from *communitas* in terms of *plethu*.

Plethu is a word I have come to in Welsh that means both to weave and to dance; it emerges from the ritual cycle, *Mamaiaith*. In the third incorporating stage of the Salford event, the participating audience members wove among my writing to help me voice the final stage of my poem as a community. I invited the group into the fragments of language installed in a triangular web of texts and materials. They embodied the words, overlapping and entangling their movements and voices until they began to join in a collective energetic rhythm of exchange. Once a synced rhythm of speaking together emerged, we found it hard to stop. This was the collectively manifested poesis I was after, a poem made together. But it was just a glimpse, a fragment perhaps, of *communitas*.

It is difficult to instigate a strong sense of *communitas* in this lab-like environment of the studio theatre, as I attempted here. *Communitas* is always difficult to summon; the willpower of the ritualists alone will not always suffice. Once it emerges its agency may start to be outside of the control of any one participant. Ritual is full of possible techniques of *communitas*, and in a poetry context 'bodies join in song and movement,' there can be communal voicing, dancing, sounding or making, call and response, sounding in sync together or in dialogue.<sup>141</sup>

*Communitas* occurs in the liminal. I think of *plethu* then as an act of integration, the ongoing poesis of making poetry together and the awareness of our relationships that may emerge from moments of *communitas*. As well as the

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<sup>140</sup> Cobbing, (1978).

<sup>141</sup> Philip's *Zong!* performances with their music, sound and collective reading is a clear example. The moment in Rothenberg's Gift Events where the crackers are a shared, the autopoietic feedback loop of O'Sullivan in her 2016 performance is another. McCauley's secret-eating and provocation of the audience is another example.

Plethu section of Mamaiaith, there are other moments. For example, the energy I still derive from O'Sullivan's 2016 liminal performance and how close reading and listening to her poetry changed the way I write, read and even eat. Or the intergalactic link I made in Humedal Antiñir, when I was reminded of Ceredigion in the smell of gorse and now, in turn, recall the Humedal and its poetics, when walking among gorse in Wales. Communitas emerged on Porth Ysgo with my family in 2019 but plethu can be found in the ongoing evidence of this in the poem we made on the sand. I think of the 'psychic transference' myself and Amy McCauley established over the broken airwaves in Ooze Transfer and how this spread to the audience. I also think of many moments created by poets and spectators at the Poetry Emergency festivals I helped convene in 2018 and 2019.

Plethu is embodied, it is dancing together, the traces of thread this leaves in us that we can pull on later. I link it to the metaphors of weaving, knitting, tapestry and textile practices have frequently arisen in this study. One of the striking emergences of the Plethu part of Mamaiaith, was that the participants, at my encouragement, wove string and ribbons from the set into a web around the performance space at the same time as they wove lines of poetry.<sup>142</sup> This is just one of the *tex(t)iles* of plethu that have emerged. Other poets and artists of ritual also I have reviewed, such as Kapil, O'Sullivan and Nisha Ramayya's tantric poetics of ritual, frequently explore the weaving concept.<sup>143</sup> Cecilia Vicuña's recourse to ritual as 'collective weavings where people's bodies are knots of an interconnected web... quipu'<sup>144</sup> has resonated throughout this project, though its vague appropriation of indigenous ritual technique has also troubled me too. In Chile, I found a response of sorts to this in the work of the collective of feminist Mapuche artists, Isla Negra, who wove and danced a crocheted map of their land in black thread in 'Karü Mapu Tierra Negra'.<sup>145</sup>

Shortly after seeing this work in the museum of memory in Santiago de Chile, I found myself in Nottingham writing about a lace and plethu, responding to Lila Matsumoto's handwritten note for me to take a tram to the Lace Market, in the

<sup>142</sup> This is visible in Figure 8: Mamaiaith Salford, Aerial View of Plethu Section.

<sup>143</sup> For example Kapil and Ramayya co-authored a pamphlet with Sandeep Parmar, *Threads* (Clinic, 2018) and O'Sullivan speaks of weaving in her interview with Redell Olsen, *Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan*, (2011, pp. 205–206).

<sup>144</sup> Vicuña, (2019b).

<sup>145</sup> Isla Negra, Karü Mapu Tierra Negra' at the Museo de Memoria special exhibition, January 2019.

poem Lacey. I then workshopped with Simon Whitehead who has studied and experimented with a concept of plethu as an ecological embodied community of movement in West Wales. This is the same landscape of Ceredigion and North Pembrokeshire, a place of wool and knitting, ancestral region of Mamaiaith. Here, as a child, I played in the hawthorn with scraps of wool from sheep fleece, pretending I was in a knitting workshop. More threads are woven in. The yarn threads through and can be pulled on and tightened, left hanging or snipped. Patterns emerge. Plethu reminds me of all the other weavings of ritual poesis before me whose material I encounter, stitch into and find support from.

The interweaving nature of relation is fundamental to ritual poetry. The ritualising poet weaves their rite within the loom of relation in intimate dialogue with the other, be they readers, listeners, lovers, friends, guiding spirits, spectators, witnesses, participants or collaborators, even demons or oppressors. Plethu may come in direct addresses or invocations or simple co-presences of the other.

Roles may also be played with in theatrical ritual technique, I have played with such roles as hierophant or ritual leader, witness, participant, clown. We can play at scribe, spirit or be possessed by presiding metaphysical figures. Some poets 'other' their voices by becoming, through ritual, mediums for the dead or for those that cannot speak.<sup>146</sup> Even when the ritual is undertaken in a solo private space, a sentient world becomes a witnessing other to the poet. The ritualising poet communes with a possible future reader-listener. A reader-listener then weaves another layer of relation upon their encounter with the poem, another thread in the fabric.

I don't wish to neglect the simple way that such a feeling of *communitas* and its ongoing plethu might occur through a particularly resonant poetry reading, poetry's modest ritual theatre.<sup>147</sup> Monk's *Insubstantial Thoughts on the Transubstantiation of the Text* captures the fragile risk of this social moment:

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<sup>146</sup> See how Jerome Rothenberg writes poetry as an 'othering' in his *Khurbn* poems or how M Nourbese Philip manifests *Zong!* as a group ritual as 'co-creation, In the spaces. Left by the One. And the Other. And their relation. In the spaces allowed for breath' (Philip, 2019).

<sup>147</sup> See for example Peter Middleton's discussion of this (1998).

‘Invertebrates may not perform./ Performers may slither.// *Horrids and enormities*,’ writes Monk.<sup>148</sup> But there is also often a possibility of the poesis of a autopoietic feedback loop.<sup>149</sup> A ritual may ensue when poetry enacts a collaborative moving or breathing together, when we are joined by a string or invited to touch a material such as paper, when we share a particularly strong space, experience a shock at a reversal of expectations, sympathy or an activation of our *mirror neurons*. Often in poetry readings we find the exposure of emotion: a voice cracking, or a group laughing, a tense silence. We can study our collective events, performance art and theatre as well as religious ritual for many of these techniques<sup>150</sup> and many poets do.<sup>151</sup> Such ritual poetry is also visible in its most popular manifestation: the wedding or funeral poem made to be memorable among a community joined for the sake of love.

At times we may feel a blurring of boundaries of the self and other, though never do we merge entirely. In a synchronous co-present poetry performance, it is easier to take a measure of the possibility of this *communitas*. But writing, poetics and publishing are also forms of the ritual poem’s relational *plethu* which expands the timeframe of relationships formed in an event. The exchange between the poet and reader extends from the initial process of the solo poet’s work to distant unpredictable interactions. Through recordings, print and books, the feedback loop of interaction may be deferred; it may be more about slow conversations, traces, delays or marks – relations formed via the page or screen instead. Friendships form and a community of readers emerges. I find the poesis in my favourite poetry created via ritual inspires my own ritual poetry; the cycles of a ritual may travel around the web of *plethu* between different people as we discuss, convene, collaborate, read more etc.

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<sup>148</sup> Monk, (2002, p.9).

<sup>149</sup> See discussion on O’Sullivan’s performance in 2016 and Fischer-Lichte’s autopoietic feedback loop in Chapter Two.

<sup>150</sup> we can also study techniques of *plethu* in therapeutic practices, such as the work described for trauma by Van der Kolk (2013), some of which also weave into artistic practice.

<sup>151</sup> See for example the way contemporary ritual poets I mention go to performance art and theatre, in Amy McCauley, Bhanu Kapil and NourbeSe M Philip’s work for example but also in Iris Colomb, Edmund Hardy, Montenegro-Fisher and others.



O'Sullivan's 'kinship, oozed out of shape' in *Narcotic Properties*<sup>152</sup> hints for me at the link between the moment of ritual liminal composition and transformation of materiality to the later event when the reader-listener encounters these poems. I can still feel a precise embodied memory of listening to her perform in 2016 and 2019. I once wrote in the margins of her text 'MOS\_SOS, MOS saved my life'. Her *communitas* works away slowly at my writing and reading.

In collaborations like *Ooze*, the work I made with Amy McCauley, the limits of self and other, the microcosm of the human relation, are tested and expanded and sometimes contracted, changing our writing through 'psychic transfer'.<sup>153</sup> The intensity of a poetic collaboration is also necessarily limited by thresholds, as the other's art is complicated and vast and the dialogue may not be able to be contained or sustained over time. *Communitas* is brief.<sup>154</sup> But the *plethu* of these collaborations continue.

Finally, ritual poetry's *plethu* is also for me about a collaboration with the social and ecological world. At the base of *plethu* is a subtle embodied state that ritual liminality evokes: heightened sensitivity. Ritual work in all its different relational forms invigorates the way I sense the material, how I am present to interaction and the interconnectedness of my world. The radically embodied poet-ritualist becomes increasingly present to poesis and the other. This empathetic, sensitive ritualist does not escape the difficulties of the social and may come to be overwhelmed by what they sense. But there is a great potential for a poetry practice to be explored here in the universe of our co-sensing ecological bodies.

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<sup>152</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Narcotic properties', (2003, p. 18).

<sup>153</sup> The oozy kinship of O'Sullivan's text entered this collaboration with McCauley in 'Ooze Disco', and its ritual performance in 2019, 'Ooze Transfer' which sought 'psychic transfer'.

<sup>154</sup> Turner wrote of the states after 'spontaneous *communitas*' when ritualists yearn and build towards this feeling once again, thus creating structures and 'normative *communitas*' (Turner, 1969, pp. 94-166). Perhaps this is detectable in the poetry community as the community tries to structure itself after the liminal transformation of a resonant poetic event.

## Emergence

The etymology of *emerge* suggests water. To emerge is to surface from a substance in which the subject has been immersed: the *mer*, *mar*, *y mor yn Gymraeg*, via the Latin *marā*. If the ritual liminal is an immersion beyond the coastal threshold of flux, the unknown and difference, then emergence is what comes out of the water after the ritual, dripping. I borrow the concept of emergence from performance studies, namely from the work of Fischer-Lichte,<sup>155</sup> who details how emergent phenomena – events, insights and new meanings – arise unexpectedly in the course of an event and feed into the event's meaning; in other words, how they generate a performance. As ritualization heightens the possibility of meaning-making in an event and poetry is an art of meaning, it is not surprising to find that emergence proliferates in ritual poetry.

Emergences can be insights, light flickers, memories or puns. New feelings of articulation in the joints. They can be the novel or revealed knowledge that was always there but become conscious because the techniques of ritual alter attention. Emergences can consist of interventions, drama, the shifting symbol, bonds forming between people, awareness, embodied responses, unexpected animals straying into the frame, memories triggered, humour, objects or energies coming into consciousness. Sometimes, when a gesture or word is repeated for a long duration in a ritual, I switch between conscious and unconscious agency and from these oscillations find emergence.<sup>156</sup> This is a liminal process, but the process of noting the emergences, that is, beginning to join up their meanings and weave them into a wider course of poetics, is a form of integration. In my ritualising sensorium, emergences are shaped, limited and joined up into meaning, woven into poetics, cycles of practice and unfolding systems of meaning.

For me, a strong symbol of emergence comes from performance practice: the entrance of an animal on stage. Upon arrival, the beast goes where it wants, does what it wants, and its wandering intrusion becomes part of the performance. The

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<sup>155</sup> Fischer-Lichte, (2008).

<sup>156</sup> Hinted at in Carrie Noland's sense of gesture, in *Agency and Embodiment*, (2009).

stray creature has its own agency and its arrival in the frame dramatically alters the course of the performance. Animal has its own cosmology and symbols; it pees on the stage. It is rare for an animal to literally stray into a ritual or performance, although I have experienced it on several occasions, but I like to think that the world I ritualise in can present any beast and that its unexpected urination on the ritual grounds will nourish my poesis.

Emergence in this work is also the beginning of poetry, the discovery of the words, symbols and events that catalyse poesis alchemically, bringing new inflections to future writing. And yet I also know I need to attend to the intensity of emergence in ritual – too many symbols, too much writing, too much network can be overwhelming. Thresholds are required.

I didn't realise I was thinking about silver birch, but it turns out I was.

Emergences can feel uncannily serendipitous or like synchronicity in their tendency to chime meaningfully with what is already ongoing in the poetic cosmos. If one has a spiritual, religious or cosmological view, emergences can reinforce it or at least resonate with that consecrated system. Emergence often looks like coincidence. Or it looks like divine intervention depending on one's context and background. I have found that I need to be careful with this emergent serendipity. I know, through some of my closest relationships, that if psychosis is beginning, the emergent phenomena of coincidence may feed a delusory theory about an over-connected reality. Ariana Reines describes this well when she talks of schizophrenia as a 'poetic sensibility,' an 'ecstasy of meaning'.<sup>157</sup> In a psychotic state, there are too many symbols and texts to be read for their potent meaning, all pointing back to you at the centre of the web. I find a cautionary tale of this in the writer BS Johnson's immersion in occult symbols and writing superstitions, as told in his biography by Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*.<sup>158</sup>

But we can limit the multiplicity of emergence and the potential for hyper-connection through ritual intention and threshold making. The meaning that

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<sup>157</sup> 'Ariana Reines Interview: The Impulse of Poetry' (2019, mins.21.00 to 23.00).

<sup>158</sup> Coe, (2005).

emerges does not need to have overly potent implications that instruct our action; the new meaning realised need not lead to a superstitious or paranoid sense of omnipotence. The multidirectional poesis of this work need not become prompt for over-interpretation, *apophenia* or paranoia. I find I can let emergence sit lightly, let it be and not attribute too much agency to its occurrence, make selections. The practice of poetics writing aids integration. Selecting the poesis of emergence is also plethoric in its potential for relation and communication with the other. As such, in this thesis, a reader will only find a selection of the emergent poesis of this research. Many other strong texts, ideas and embodied realisations also emerged from this liminal practice which are not included.

## Time

A shift has taken place in how I sense time. A precise and empowering new sense of temporality has filtered into my practice, my embodied perceptive faculties and thus my sense of reality and possibility. Earlier I touched on how this has happened when I described how the spatiotemporal delineation of ritual thresholds can be played with. Time bracketing and attention to space can allow an expansive view of the present. I would add that this expanded present moment is part of a larger course of meaning-making; ritual poetic events play out within cycles and each rite corresponds to other cycles. Each emergence interweaves new poesis over a course of reiterative cycles of practice. This has renovated my sense of time.

As I touched on in Chapter Two, in outlining theories of ritual time, many ritual practitioners and theorists still believe, or are at least still very interested in, the theories of ritual time as cyclical, anticipated or a form of 'eternal return' of mythic events, following such thinkers as Mircea Eliade.<sup>159</sup> These ideas of 'return' or timelessness may not be universal, or actually hold as evidenced phenomena. But one does not need to be beholden to mysticism, universal myths, ghosts or reincarnation, to frequently feel in practical ritual that the past is more present than it usually is in day-to-day life and that the perception of time and space are altered. Ronald Grimes's sense of *timefulness* in ritual seems to describe the multiple senses of time that are possible.<sup>160</sup> Ritual implies a repetition of some form of pre-existing material, sometimes material that is very traditional and old is in play, but all ritual action is creative and formative of the future too. Grimes writes, 'in ritualizing, we concentrate, and thereby consecrate, time. The auspicious moment, the *kairos*, is a pulse of opening and closing. It occurs when enactment and receptivity are in synchrony'.<sup>161</sup>

The concentration, and thus consecration, of ritual aligns with my experience of ritual time as evocative of a particularly intense present. The *pulse of opening and*

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<sup>159</sup> Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return, Or Cosmos and History*, (1989).

<sup>160</sup> Grimes, (1995, p. 70), see also Chapter One theories of time and ritual

<sup>161</sup> Grimes, (1995, p. 71).

*closing*, experienced on and between thresholds, can strongly emphasise what takes place in the liminal middle. CAConrad's *extreme present* is an example of how absorbing ritual action can expand the present. They undergo 'odd' or 'focused' embodied tasks which allow complete immersion, 'to anchor myself in the present, my body, is essential to persist in feeling *the time I am living while writing*'.<sup>162</sup>

In the 'cross-tensed'<sup>163</sup> liminal time of the Kairos<sup>164</sup> of ritual we are receptive to whatever is beheld in the join between the past, a possible future and the space it unfolds in. In this moment, materiality becomes charged or comes to matter in O'Sullivan's sense of a 'mattering of material'.<sup>165</sup> In an ongoing practice, where ritual poetry is re-iterative, each rite becomes a knot or weave in a fabric that has been woven, danced and stitched by others before and will be again.

If the intention of the ritual relates to history, or if the conditions speak of history, a heightened present will bring a view of the past into relief. This is most obvious when working in spaces that carry powerful traces of past lives and activity. In all places history is present but ritual attention can attune our perception to it. Who lived in this room? Why did they love aertex so much? I have tried to explore the spaces that open in the ritual and to note what emerges in the joins between moments. Sometimes I find the past is still very alive. In Mamaiaith a dialogue with my inherited and disinherited family history emerged, the Adfeilion Babel, the ruins of Babel. And in the Paviland cycles I began a cross-tensed dialogue between three figures of past, present and future who meet at the threshold of the cave's mouth. In the Hafod cycles I poetically excavated the site of the Victorian Copperworks school and slag ruins; the students' letter writing practice seemed to come out through my own handwriting in the ritual space.

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<sup>162</sup> My emphasis. CAConrad, interview with Ignota, (2019).

<sup>163</sup> Grimes's term, (1995, p. 70).

<sup>164</sup> The Kairos is the opportune moment of ritual in Ancient Greek culture. Interestingly, in modern Greek it means weather.

<sup>165</sup> O'Sullivan, (2003, p. 65).

Often ritual poets use the timeful cross-tensed moment to channel voices from the past. In his 'Khurbn' poems, Jerome Rothenberg, working through poetry as a 'conduit for others', engages in an othering by listening to and bringing forth the voices of the European Jews murdered in the 1940s. Philip's *Zong!* calls up names and 'defend[s] the dead.'<sup>166</sup> These poets seem to be conceiving of poetry and ritual poetry specifically as a channel or medium for past and other lives. O'Sullivan's grandmother's heart 'beats within her' in her/story:eye poems (1994-99)<sup>167</sup>, as in *Waterfalls* (2012), that revisits her ancestral landscapes in the West of Ireland and the songs and poems of the famine years.<sup>168</sup> Geraldine Monk listens to the chants, curses and furies of the Pendle witches in *Interregnum*.<sup>169</sup> These works suggest a ritual poetry that turns its heightened attention to the other, to past events and liminal places, an intense listening to those who once inhabited or died in that space. Other ritual poets deal with time in interesting ways too, as in CAConrad's *extreme present* or the way Vicuña invests a potential power of the eternal in the ephemeral precario.<sup>170</sup> Kapil's ritual writing has sought to 'feel it in my body – the root cause.'<sup>171</sup> As I touched in the poetics on embodiment and movement, certain ritual techniques of embodiment bring to the surface past events imprinted in sensual experiences. This triggering of personal memory in ritual then also alters the experience of the present of the ritual time. The meaning of the past surfaces and interplays with the material of the present, creating new meaning, poesis, in the process.

To give a case of my own timeful emergence. In the liminal *symudliw* section of my Mamaiaith performance in Salford, I created an embodied collage in motion of all the textual and material ephemera I collected in the performance space. Whilst circulating the space, I happened upon my grandmother Caryl's letter of 1956. In it, following a disastrous viva on her thesis a few years previous, she pleads with her supervisor to give her more time to finish her thesis, letting them know of her

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<sup>166</sup> Philip, (2008, p. 26).

<sup>167</sup> Personal email correspondence between Scott Thurston and Maggie O'Sullivan, 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2017.

<sup>168</sup> O'Sullivan, *Waterfalls*, (2012).

<sup>169</sup> Sean Bonney's essay on Monk's use of history, time and place and social space is relevant here, 'What the Tourists Never See: the Social Politics of Geraldine Monk', in the *Salt Companion to Geraldine Monk*, (2007).

<sup>170</sup> Vincuña, (2019a).

<sup>171</sup> Kapil, (2015, p. 31).

‘struggle’ with the ‘domesticity that has engulfed me since 1954,’ the year of the birth of my mother which was quickly followed by the arrival of my uncle by 1956. She asks the male Oxford academics whether her work is ‘worth’ the trouble of completion. In the letter she doubts herself and the research, but she did go on to eventually complete a new version of this thesis, passing her second viva and publishing a monograph on the work in the 1990s. An emergence, in my performance in the *symudliw* part of *Mamaiaith* in Salford, was born of the cross-tensing of ritual poetry. I picked up a copy of this letter from the material lying around, by chance, I thought. I mixed the letter’s text vocally into other words, texts and gestures found in the scenography, especially words from *Geiriadur Mawr*, the Big Dictionary. I made a whirring vocal commotion, circulating the performance space until I became dizzy. I lay down speaking the words I could find from the interior of this moment and my body. My intention was carried out and my invocation of her presence felt, but it went even further than I had anticipated. Following the performance, I felt myself rhyming with Caryl’s 1956 letter when I did not manage to persuade my academic examiners of the ‘worth’ of research in its interim stage, leading to a period of my own writerly doubt. This was followed by another viva in order to persuade them again; my own research seemed to echo her struggles.

So I felt a synchronicity or a chiming of events, or, a repeat of the saying, *history doesn’t repeat, it rhymes*. This was not an ‘eternal return’ of repeating mythological events or anticipated time, but the ritual poesis of heightened sense-making, a weaving into the pattern of meaning and relation through which poesis emerges. It is not unusual in this practice to feel like the dead are speaking in the liminal or, at least, to feel such a radical sensitivity or altered consciousness that uncanny emergences materialise. Perhaps this is what Grimes describes as ritual times, when ‘enactment and receptivity are in synchrony.’<sup>172</sup> In the cross-tensed receptive liminal, I discover just how connected everything is through time, space and material ecologies. With ritual sensitivity, one object or site or relational other will become charged and poesis emerges, woven into and altering existing patterns of connection. This receptivity to connection implies a possible ethics and

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<sup>172</sup> Grimes, (1995, p. 71).



politics in its plethu: I am here because of others, including the other-than-human, thus everything is in relation and my actions have a potential for harm or creative generosity.

## Poesis

So ritual creates receptivity for new meaning, or poesis. Poesis in ritual entails a *matter of material*,<sup>173</sup> meaning emerges through embodied pathways, material is in motion and subject to transformation. What emerges in poesis in the live ritual enactment may constitute the poem. Poesis can arrive in expressible language, or it may be the beginning of meaning, a sensing in the body that later develops into poetry or another kind of insight. It may be experienced by anyone as an encounter with new meaning, or for a poet studying and experimenting with poesis, emergence feeds into an ongoing poetics.

When one adds poetic language into the receptive ritual moment, semantic meaning and commotion multiply in expansive fractals of poesis. Ritual already is a process for heightening the meaning-creation or symbolic processes of the ritual's context and predetermined factors (its score, spacetime, its intention etc). Add poetry's multivalence to this and one might find a particularly dense mesh of possible poesis. This is why, as I touched on in writing of emergence, the scale and complexity need to be judged in this type of making; the weave of semantics may become too intense for a ritualist or spectator to bear or engage with. Thus, I usually return to the preconditions set in the opening phase and close a ritual with firm threshold limits and a commitment to integrating what emerges.

The ritual symbol or sign has a cultural significance and whether this culture is widely shared with the audience or reader or not will affect how poesis emerges. For example, the bottle of Henderson's relish in the 'Ooze transfer' performance in Sheffield with Amy McCauley was a symbol that resonated with audience members who knew Sheffield and thus, for them, it could be subverted and seen as comic that I would offer it as an anointment to the people present. The symbol will also determine political-cultural associations; thus for those who knew Sheffield's overreliance on *Hendo's* as a brand identity for a city struggling to commercially 'sell' itself in a marketplace of kitsch, a sly critique may have been detected. If not, other stereotypical Yorkshire symbols were in play: 'Yorkshire'

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<sup>173</sup> O'Sullivan, (2003, p. 65).

tea, checking the cutlery hallmark. This was then overlaid with poetry and action that rendered such symbolism even more unstable and ambiguous, thus we attempted to highlight the fraught nature of our shared and yet different cultural identities in the context of neoliberal Brexit Yorkshire's culture wars. Our intention was to create 'psychic transference' between us as a way of accepting Amy's absence from the performance and channelling a different kind of presence. This developed a number of layers of possible unstable meanings, creating actions and symbols which were comic and poignant simultaneously.

If the ritual's intention is therapeutic, the meaning that emerges may speak to this, e.g. through a ritual change of perception I find I have a mistaken or unhelpful belief and the meaning I make of this is a mindful act towards a future resolution. Or if the intention is pedagogic, we find we have learned something new. If the rite's intention was to come together, having acted collectively, we know each other better, trust one another. We have laughed together and will hold the moment in our memories, so it forms a meaningful relation. Perhaps the intention is to enjoy the moment and thus this joy in the material and presence is itself a meaningful act. In all cases a poesis is emergent, meaning will be picked out and made into patterns by those present.

Clifford Geertz writes, that 'in a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world'.<sup>174</sup> I'm interested in how ritual poetry allows a living out of what is imagined, if only briefly. Can we say in our integratory phase that through our ritual poem we lived out the world we imagined? What has been invoked and how does poesis play out? How did the words' meanings change or manifest? Was an intended action completed and if not why? As a ritualist-poet, I try to integrate and reflect on these questions of poesis to shape future cycles of action and writing. Reflective processes, especially poetics, after a ritual cycle, is just as important as the poesis itself in terms of processing these meanings.

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<sup>174</sup> Geertz, (1973, p. 112).

## Endings

It is relieving to know that the end is coming and what might happen later. That I may be able to make sense of my experiences, that this phase will pass, that I have a sense of *plethu*, *poesis* and *poetics* as techniques of integration: this knowledge helps me surrender to the liminal. After stepping over the final threshold it may be a time to rest or then ask, what has emerged? What is learnt? Was the intention enacted and if not why?

There are false endings. And there is the profound unknowing of when the end might come. Cycles of ritual repetition can and perhaps should be broken. When a cycle of ritual history is cut by a means outside the poet-ritualist's control, this can manifest a pain — the discontinuity of ritual can be experienced as lost culture, amnesia, cultural poverty and the violence of cultural erasure. But the cut can also be deliberate on the part of the poet. Sometimes we have to end the cycle we are operating in. The traces, *poetics* and plans for future cycles speak of rebirth and ongoing regeneration but *sparagmos* must also be acknowledged in order for *poesis* to take place. Perhaps we can think of this in terms of eschatology: that we can explore our relationship to large scale endings, death and *sparagmos* so that we might live.

Close the circle, chime the bell to end, close the document, release the powers. Endings can take place in material spatiotemporality — a word, sound or line drawn on the stage. Clean the space, the body, the materials. Spit it out or lie on the ground for some time. We can call to our cosmos, offer gratitude. Say *tata*. Your cycle ends here so another can begin. This is so *poesis* can be generated next time by the next poet.

## 6. CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION & BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Conclusion

I began this research with a query into the possibilities of ritual and poetry, a question that served as an intention for the process that followed. The questions arose out of a desire for a kind of poetry that I felt was necessary in the context of this contemporary moment of ecological destruction and political-ethical crisis. The forms and techniques of ritual in artistic practice suggested an approach to explore my experience of this time and to invigorate my poetry and poetics. I asked, can we identify a practice of ritual poetry or poetry-as-ritual? And, how can a model of ritual poetry or a ritual poem enable an exploration of the experience of contemporary life? I intuitively felt that ritual, or at least some ritual forms, could offer my practice a way of activating a poem and poetic language and help me cultivate embodiment and a deeper sense of the social and ecological material of life and language.

And so, I have identified a field of poets experimenting with ritual, exploring a selection of the works in detail and formulating a conceptualisation of how ritual models in poetry function. This is a model informed by my creative experiments, by anthropological theory, performance studies, embodied practice, the work of the poets and my poetics writing. The model I uncover is one of ritual poetry as a cyclical practice, whereby an intention is enacted in embodied movements across pre-determined thresholds; techniques of the material are undergone to create the possibility of poesis, that is, a transformation of a poem coming into being, or the transformation of perceptual experience that may lead to further poesis.

Chapter One contains much of the knowledge of ritual I have gathered in the form of poetry and poetics, expressing what a ritual poetry might be in my context. Here

are the works, traces, results, beginnings and offshoots of my experiments with ritual.

In Chapter Two, I review the contextual and theoretical field of ritual poetry. I draw on Turner and Van Gennep's three stages of ritual process whereby liminality opens the possibility of transformation. I add nuance to this idea of ritual process by reading other ritual theories, settling on a definition of ritual by degrees of ritualisation: as embodied, relational and intentional enactment. I then identify a field of ritual poetry in its context, with particular attention to the emergence of a Ritual Turn taking place in the 1960s, leading up to various poets using ritual in their experimentation today. In this contemporary field, ritual is sought and deployed as a creative improvisatory tool, largely in order to create embodied, collective, politically resistant works towards the possibility of poesis, or transformation. Performance practice and theory provide insight as to how this transformation may be brought about through *techniques of the material*. Erika Fischer-Lichte's aesthetic of performance offers a theory of performance which shows how subjects become re-enchanted with the material through artistic techniques of ritual that alter our perception to create liminality and thus the possibility of transformation. So I begin to understand how *techniques of the material* function in ritual poetry. Performance studies also offers insight into techniques of embodiment, rhythm and repetition, as does Ronald Grimes's sense of ritual timefulness.

In Chapter Three I use my emerging sense of ritual poetry to read a selection of the ritual poets. Each of these poets works with different intentions, techniques and contexts. However, the similarities between them allow me to point towards how ritual's techniques of the material may be employed for poesis. The techniques of ritual poetry may be corporeal, spatiotemporal, use actual material, sonic or visual mediums or deploy collectives of different voices. The works often demand active relationships, especially with the ecological world or those who have been murdered or oppressed. They call for justice, for inscription of the other's presence in our present contexts. They use their dynamic embodied writing selves and communities to cross boundaries and make material matter, to make

new meaning, poesis, by changing our perceptual experiences of that material. Ritual poetry here then, is to come into the body, the ecosystem and/or into each other's co-presence with the intention of enaction.<sup>175</sup>

I use these readings and theories as well as experiments in my own practice, to form the novel methodology that I detail in Chapter Four. This methodology uses ritual as a structuring principle for poetry practice and research drawing on three practice-based approaches: the embodied practice detailed by Spatz (2015), the practice poetics which Sheppard elaborates (2001; 2016) and the reiterative cyclical web model of Smith and Dean (2009). An ethics for thinking through the relationships and intercultural sensitivities of ritual poetry is also stated here.

The overall insights of these different approaches to the question of ritual poetry, I plough into the poetics in Chapter Five. This poetics further conceptualises and describes the ritual poetry model as it is experienced in my practice and provides further details on the knowledge formulated.

I will summarise here the process of the ritual poetry model which I have identified in this thesis in broad terms, with the hope that such a generalisation is read in the knowledge that these processes are based in the material of their creation and remain specific to the contexts, cultures, bodies and aims which poets create and co-create in. The thresholds of the ritual moment and unexpected emergences will always shape and alter how events play out.

With this in mind, I can say that ritual poetry is a practice of poetry-as-enaction made with intention in a state of moving relational embodiment, or as an *ecological body* (Reeve, 2009). The process involves a poet-ritualist, that is, a subject who is present and collaborates in a ritual which brings a poem into being; either alone or as part of a group. Poet-ritualists use techniques of the material to open up the possibility of transformation in the liminal spacetime, forging poesis in new experiences of the material and/or new meaning.

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<sup>175</sup> This is also the way ritual has been used in my works and the works of the other poets I have mentioned but not had space to explore in depth: poets whose ritual poems, compositional rites and performances are more fleeting.

The ritual process begins by preparing and separating off ritual spacetime and delineating thresholds. An intention is formed, either overtly and explicitly or implicitly, as a guiding impulse or query. Guidance is often invoked and thereby the process situated in its relational context. Thresholds in the spatiotemporal and material environment are laid out and a score may be used as a set of way markers. Crossing the thresholds and enacting a technique of the material to a score then activates the material of the poem. Any action can be ritualised via a technique of the material in a ritual model, but in a ritual creative of poetry, techniques often specifically involve language. These might include speaking and enactment of a poem, the use of vocal or embodied collage of language, gestural and embodied actions that are repetitive, rhythmic, or alter the perception of material, environment and nature of language. The techniques emphasise language's materiality in its sonic, tactile, corporeal, tonal and relational elements. In using these techniques, the poet-ritualist seeks to *matter* the material (O'Sullivan, 2003) in order to create new meaning and poesis. Such embodied techniques may create in the subject a receptive sensitivity: a heightened or altered perceptual state of emergence and presence that is liminal. Enchantment is possible here; new perceptual experiences and understandings, unexpected new meaning or even experiences of the unknown that cannot be made sense of at the time. In this liminal field, prior patterns of thinking, feeling and perceiving shift or change in some way. Poesis emerges here, in the join between the known, the not-known and the becoming known. This is the timeful moment of ritual poetry, an expansive present in which participants can be particularly receptive to past and future.

The liminal spacetime of ritual is finite, subject to the limits of the body, the intention, the thresholds and under the knowledge of sparagmos; or, in other words, the poet-ritualist is reminded of how we are implicated in relation and bounded by the thresholds of life and death. To integrate the liminal experience and the poesis that has emerged, the poet-ritualist must pass the thresholds of ending, close off the liminal stage and ground any insights formed therein. It is possible that a *communitas* may have emerged in the liminal, in the sense that the ritualist or ritualists have shared an intense feeling of collective action and



relationality. *Communitas* may be rare, but in ritual poetry, relationships can be understood anew: our social natures become apparent and perhaps altered. I think of the ongoing dynamic of this relation, as it extends through the reading and writing of ritual poetry, as *plethu*.

After the ritual has ended, the radical sensitivity of the liminal closes at the threshold of stopping and integrating, only to prepare the ground for a later reiteration. A ritualist may ask then after the ritual, what the action was: was it an enaction of intention, a translation of a score, or something else? What emerges can then be woven into forms for future cycles, perhaps in writing that leaves traces for the future work and communications with others, as in poetics. Though ritual cycles can be cut and discontinued, ritual poetry is frequently formed of iterations that repeat until a practice or even tradition is formed. The techniques of ritual repetition allow us to notice that each iteration is different because change across time is inevitable. In attempting to repeat the same action again and again, a familiarity forms and the ritualist thus turns attention to what is new in each repetition. So a subject forms a heightened sensitivity to incremental change over cycles of reiterative action; this unfolding embodiment and sense of change are formative of poesis. The writing of poetics, in Sheppard's sense (2001; 2016), is useful for a cyclical practice as the ongoing sedimentation of embodied and writerly knowledge develops, poetics writing helps us trace the change of poesis.

The key process of ritual poetry then, which I gesture to in this summary, is one of cyclical embodied enaction of an intention, constituted by a movement through or towards a threshold in the material, using techniques that sensitise a subject to emergence and the unknown, towards poesis. There are various factors which we have limited control over: the spatiotemporal conditions, the context, the corporeal conditions, the intention and score once they are set, the points of ending, a social or relational context, the possibility of death and the destruction of *sparagmos*, the techniques once they are chosen and the reality of our relative embodiments. These are limits which act as *thresholds* in the material, lines which must be crossed or not crossed. There may be one threshold or two, as in the three-phase Turner/Van Gennep model of rites of passage, or there may even be several, like steps. The threshold may not always be visible or expressible, but this practice

allows us to query it and begin to discover how porous it is, what it is made of, what happens upon it. Ritual poetry is a study of the threshold. I ask, what new meaning is found once a movement between and thus a distinction between states is made? How does meaning and knowledge form once the threshold is encountered? The threshold marks a point between the known and the not known and the becoming known: the join where poesis emerges. Knowing the precise limitations of the threshold, the distinctive boundedness it presents to our experience, heightens our presence to what is and is *not* experienced before and after the threshold. In other words, we become more present to the vivid action in relation to our knowledge of the threshold; the liminal comes into relief.

I find an evocation here of early theories which thought of ritual as a process of death and rebirth: the threshold of death helps us know life (Phelan, 2004, p. 17; Bell, 1997, pp. 3-20).<sup>176</sup> The threshold itself is liminal in that it can be both a limit and a possibility. Moving across these thresholds we come to know difference, thus we come to know. And there is always another unknown on the other side.

I originally sought out ritual as I felt it could allow me a collective, embodied and active poetry practice. I had a feeling of necessity – to make action, to relate better, to know my ecology and to be in exchange with it, to inscribe events that have been forgotten and to create resistance or at least room for resistive acts. The ritual poetry studied here is often political and ethical work that tries to respond in poetic ways to the needs of the contemporary crises and chances for life. To vivify in the face of sparagmos. Personally, I needed to become more grounded in my body and present, to connect to the ecological world, to feel as if I was involved in action; and I needed to move. I had an idea that ritual could be a route into this, and it has been, but it is always already more than this.

The need I felt at a personal level was echoed around me; in contemporary poetry in the UK, in both mainstream and Avant Garde practice, creative writing and research, there is much talk of and valorisation of embodiment, relations with the

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<sup>176</sup> Also see my discussion of this in footnote 50.

other and the ecological. However, as far as I can see from the many events and publishing of poetry I have been involved with over the last two decades, there is a lack of work that attempts to actually bring relational embodiment into the poetry itself as a practical approach to performance, creative action and change. And those poets that do are often misunderstood or not recognised.<sup>177</sup> I think of how the poetry reading still frequently falls short of being resonant or performative, as Middleton (1998) has explored. And I also notice how academic papers on poetry so often refer to the body, ecology and relationality or community without any sense of these phenomena being present in the room let alone as medium through which to create or think through. Though some poets, as discussed above in Chapters Two and Three, are interested in the vulnerability and exposure embodiment and performance entails and make it part of their practice, the dominant tendency is to shut down the possibilities of this line of exploration. Hence the appeal of ritual techniques. The poets I explore here frequently go way beyond a theoretically confined valorisation of embodiment and use ritual to attempt transformation of material, language and perception through the poetry itself. Their ritual poesis expands and plays with the traditional frameworks of presenting and receiving poetry.

I make my own modest contribution to this field; the preceding thesis shows how much ritual poetry brought me into my ecological body and plethu. Folding ritual into my poetry practice and making a poem enact a desire through ritual intention is one course for finding action, movement, relationality and embodiment. There are limitations to how much this work can bring about the collective, active, ecological embodied change at the scale I desire and which the world needs. But this practice is also a study of such threshold limits – it is by understanding the threshold limits that we make poesis. I will then detail here some of the fruitful boundaries and generative limits I found in the research.

Firstly I had a desire to make poetry active through ritual but this raised questions around what action is; is it the completion of an intended task? Is it change and if

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<sup>177</sup> For example I think of the way O'Sullivan's transformational performance approach is described by Adrian Clarke, as discussed in Footnote 36. Clarke's comment is from 1993 but performance and embodiment is often still discussed in outdated or ill-informed ways in the poetry community. Additionally, O'Sullivan's work is still under-acknowledged in the wider poetry world in the UK.

so, at what level? Is it change at the level of the social or in the realms of dynamic embodiment? Is this change dramatic and visible, or slow and barely sensed, until time unfolds its implications? I could not look to, nor did I find, the kind of large-scale ritual transformation where status and social structure are permanently altered, the kind of ritual which has been said to have been used as tool of social cohesion, such as the cases explored by functionalist and structuralist anthropologists (Bell, 1997, pp. 23–59) and hinted at in the ‘re-totalisation’ that Turner claims for as the role of the poet (cited in Rothenberg & Rothenberg, 1983, p. 342). These kind of societal changes emerging from ritual were occasionally manifested in some of the large-scale artistic ritual projects of the earlier twentieth century which Fischer-Lichte describes (2005; 2008). But these kinds of events are outside the scope of this project. Rather, a series of artistic techniques for initiating transformations to the way we sense and perceive, relate to each other and make meaning and creative works are what ritual practice in a poetic context makes possible. Change is not always evident, quantifiable or even expressible; *communitas* is rare. By now I know that there is a particular kind of poesis that is activated by ritual poetry, a change initiated at a somatic and semantic level which may lead to linguistic creation or may remain active at other levels of experience. So if a ritual fails in its intention to enact at one level, it may still constitute poesis in terms of sensitisation and perceptual shifting. These micro level changes are insights and visions or the sedimenting of technique in the bodymind through repetition which Spatz describes (2015) and I have detailed in my poetics on repetition. The practice of poetics aids a tracing of change; a poet can reflect here upon what goes wrong and what shifts.

There is always an unknown quantity in ritual process and poesis, something emergent from silence and stillness, a renovating meditative *nothing*, before unexpectedly, an animal strays in and makes itself matter. Sometimes, as I have hinted at in the writing on repetition, quiet change takes place below the threshold of what is expressible in language, poesis may emerge in embodied knowledge or never make itself known to consciousness or expression. In this thesis I have sought a form of knowledge that is transmissible and accessible to others as research. Thus I try to avoid what Spatz calls *the trope of excess*, the mystification of knowledge beyond our ken which is not reproducible (Spatz, 2015, p. 56). An

inexpressible knowledge *is* present here, something in excess of the effable. But whatever this is, it is not containable in an academic thesis, which is not to say that it hasn't manifested in the course of the work. It has.

Another challenge in the research was a lack of limitations; that any act can be ritualised, so the horizon was open and wide. A single technique of ritual material contains in itself a world – the voice, repetition, the collage of materials, collective work of plethu, the mask or prop, object scores, improvised or scored gestures and movement for example. Many ritual poetic techniques I touched on and tried to explore, but I was required by my intention, my research questions, to focus on the overarching ritual frame and process of ritualisation, not on what each of these techniques offered as ongoing practices. Thus one will find the frameworks and processes of ritual poetry here but a future path of research and practice may focus on one or two ritual techniques. If I could suggest a *speculative prospectus of work to be done*, as one of Sheppard's definitions of poetics has it (2001), it would be to focus on a technique of ritual that can allow me to deepen my poetic practice along one thread of embodied practice. My tentative interests lie in embodied and movement practice and research within a poetry practice, especially an exploration of what psychophysical theatre, movement and dance practices such as butō and some somatic practices might offer.

Interdisciplinary study entails a limitation in the depth of knowledge one can borrow from the discipline new to the researcher (Spatz, 2015, pp. 44-48). I came towards performance as a fascinated student and its universes of ideas, techniques and knowledge systems around ritual opened up several elements of my poetry reading and writing practice. Several of the poets mentioned in the review of this field are beginning to work at this particularly fertile intersection between embodiment, ritual, creative writing and language art. But performance and embodied practice can disrupt, reform and innovate poetry in so many different ways not yet attempted. Necessarily my thesis is just the beginning, but I feel keenly the potential that is opening here for future practice and study.

One desire I had at the start of the research centred around notions of the collective and communal; I saw ritual as an activity somehow more communal

than the activity of writing poems which I had been practising for years. The place I was coming from in my poetry led me to this perception: I was writing in the hyper capitalised era of intensifying crisis, where the emphasis is placed on the individual, so I felt a strong need for collective action to meet and counter this. I was drawn to performance as a clearly social form; performance is creative of poetic community and opens up a world of possible social practice and action. I still seek this communality over individualism, but through the course of this work have come to find that there is no boundary that puts poetry practice on the solipsistic side of individualism and ritual on the side of the collective. Often, due to the way ritual was historically theorised as a function or a communication of a society's tradition, it has been thought of as inherently collective or even a dogmatic reproduction of oppressive structures (Grimes, 2020, pp. 145-158). Indeed, ritual is a technology that can be used without ethics by powerful elites for purposes of control by the appropriation of symbols of solidarity or through mystification, spectacle and aesthetic techniques which invoke awe for the elite's cosmology. But this is only one type of ritual activity and more recent theories of ritual, such as Grimes's, as well as my own research, have shown a more complex picture than the simple idea that ritual is a static collective expression of an ancient tradition or that it is inherently liberatory or communal. In fact, ritual is no more collective or liberatory than other human acts because no human escapes context or socialisation; all is done in the embrace of the social. For example, even in solitary rituals of the vigil, meditation or seclusion, periods of solitude are made in relation to periods of communality. Though poetry practice and its traditions can often resemble this solitary retreat, as relational beings we cannot step out of or transcend the social or ecological order, we are all connected and interdependent in plethu.

So this practice allows me to enter more deeply the plethu of community and relationships, human and other-than-human, which I *already depend on for everything*. A large-scale event with a sizable group of people would not be possible within the thresholds of this thesis. Instead, I let ritual revolutionise the poetry I made in my conditions at the level of my poetry in my context and community. I found transformation in solo settings and small groups and at the level of language and poetry and my relationships. Plethu and even *communitas*

emerged from some of these works, as I have shown in the examples of Mamaiaith, in Ysgo Drysfa and in the collaborations. Strong communities are formed in ongoing cycles of ritual poetry, for example the communities formed through poetry readings and festivals.<sup>178</sup> Artists and writers with backgrounds in, or a willingness to learn from, participatory artistic and theatre practice may be able to explore the seam between language, ritual and community on greater scales than I could have explored in this particular project. But a more common and accessible insight from ritual poetry is, I feel, an idea of ritual poetry's plethu as a deepening of our knowledge of community and relationality. Ritual techniques, used with a reflexive ethics, can sensitise us to our ecologically embodied interdependent selves, often blurring the boundary between self and other.

On the page, plethu is also possible, because to write is to address the other as a reader-listener and already this is a relationship. This work can be a medium for furthering relational and empathetic connections. But I also found a counter current to this, which is also plethu, that, in its study of thresholds, ritual poetry helped me define and instate some new boundaries between self and other. In studying plethu, I become aware of my embodiment, my responsibilities and needs; this then allows me to relate to the other in deeper, more intersubjective ways, to be more present in the relationships I am already involved in. Ritual poetry's knowledge of the threshold of relationships, the limits and possibilities of community, helps us relate more deeply. Or, in other words, in the words of another, Maggie O'Sullivan, ritual can help us feel 'kinship oozed out of shape' (O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 18).

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<sup>178</sup> For example, the collaborative works highlighted earlier formed relationships. In the Poetry Emergency festivals in 2018 and 2019 we curated poetry that created a sense of collective coming-into-being through poems. Works I published in *Poetry Wales* also formed a kind of plethu, for example the Summer 2018 Ritual issue and several live events I curated. I tested these ideas in collaboration with other poets such as the works included in the creative chapter, but also with other poets and collaborators not included here. I also worked with family and friends with these techniques. Workshops I made in ritual poetry began in Swansea, Pembrokeshire, Nottingham and Edge Hill Universities and online with the Seren Educational initiative for 14 to 19 year old students in Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. I am testing the techniques here with poet occultist Síofra McSherry for a series of workshops entitled Ritual Poesis, for 2021 and beyond.

In ritual poetry I attempt an empathetic exchange with others; the plethu of this work is to consider other embodiments, as I explain in the poetics in Chapter Five. But there is always another unknown. One threshold-limitation to this research is my own context and history. The context specific to me is my life by a muddy sea, the 'ugly lovely' town Abertawe/Swansea,<sup>179</sup> in Cymru/Wales, as a person in my body as it is, with my particular history. Sometimes this history has given me an *outerness*, a sense of being on the windswept abandoned fringe; other times I feel a centrality, to be deep in the entangled brambles of this particular land is to be at the heart of poetry. My habitation, cultural (dis)inheritance and faulty connection to Cymru and Cymraeg gives me a particular perspective on language and land. My previous work as a literary and curatorial writer and editor, as well as my experience of reading and performing poetry live, gave me a particular approach to the interfaces and junctions between the written word and the embodied live vocalisation. My peers, friends and family relations are everywhere in the work. My tendency towards dance and movement lends my practice a restless slant. I have a mild dyslexic leftfield wobble in which I must train my eye to read the page from left to right until it reverses and poesis comes about, about comes poesis and reverses it until right to left from page the read to eye my train must I... These cultures brought me to this work, and I move between the spacetimes, across thresholds, to make the poesis that emerges here.

Despite these particulars, the techniques of ritual poetry are accessible to all and could change a person if they intend to change. Ritual poetry practices could be introduced to students of writing, poetry, art, or to anyone who seeks poesis. I have already begun to test out these ideas in various pilot workshops, performances and group or collaborative settings in which I put these techniques into practice. Ritual poetry's model could open doors in terms of pedagogy and therapy and aesthetic practices outside the context of this thesis; the context would always demand the emphasis and set the intention.

What can we find in the joins opened by ritual poetry? We move between one state of existence and another, and from difference and distinction to oneness and

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<sup>179</sup> I allude to Dylan Thomas's famous words about the city.



then separateness again. Ritual poetry studies how porous or absolute a threshold is: the simple difference between what we experience before and after, here and there. The threshold may be illusionary or artificial; but even as a construction, it elicits movement, vitality and thus poesis. The other word for threshold is the *limen*, hence Turner's coining of liminality. So, perhaps I could say that *limned life surges*. And cycles evolve, so that a gesture repeated creates waves of erosion on the coastal rocks of the bodymind. Or a word uttered and uttered quakes the organs softly through emotive liquids; tremors pass through synaptic crossroads, the fascial organ repeats the word back to us in dreams and dances. Perhaps our vocal resonators bring in some *other* who is singing with us. Perhaps then, in *plethu*, we lean out in a gesture of relation, touch and the poesis is transmitted.

A final ritual poem is one I made for this conclusion. I chanted the word *conclude* until it became *con* then *clue*. Then it was *gone*, yes, the thesis is gone, I thought. Then it was *glue*. So poesis emerges, something is *con*, as a togetherness but maybe also a *con*, then it is *clue*, then *gone*, then it is *glue*. Glue mattered in the material of my mouth. So I found both limit and limen; in between these thresholds, poesis vivifies.

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