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*Published in:*  
Modern Ecopoetry

*Publication date:*  
2021

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Yeung, H. (2021). Of Lyric Temporality and Materiality: Alice Oswald's Environmental Poetics. In L. M. Martínez Serrano , & C. M. Gámez Fernández (Eds.), *Modern Ecopoetry : Reading the Palimpsest of the More-Than-Human World* Brill Academic Publishers.

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## Of Lyric Temporality and Materiality: Alice Oswald's Environmental Poetics

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Over the last two decades, British poet Alice Oswald's poetic production has demonstrated a deep engagement with and articulation of the environment, as well as a wide-ranging experimentation with the ways in which we figure and configure voice through poetry, and how we chart poetic time. From *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996) to *Nobody* (2018) we read a poetry whose materiality and temporality, or textual and vocalic spatialization, is complex, and which both draws on and questions our preconceptions about the lyric and narrative, personal and environmental, dimensions of poetry. By examining the way in which landscape is configured through voice and vision in Oswald's work, and by tracing some of the 'songlines' and 'patterns of flow' of her poetry, this essay seeks to reconnect the material and embodied environments of Oswald's work with a poetic vision where lyric form and voice become 'the locus for an experience of linguistic *time*'.<sup>1</sup> A joint material and vocalic analysis of the poetry will show how Oswald's work self-consciously contests its relationship with time, with voice, and with space. Very often, for Oswald, there

[...] is only the water  
talking to us in the voice of amnesia  
asking the same question over and over  
and on his rock that poet shuffles about light-sleeping  
every so often answering back<sup>2</sup>

But who, really, answers? How mimetic is this waterlogged environment? The poet, or the figure of the poet, is a point of contact with but unsettled within the real and poetic environment. Voices (plural) are essential, as is their history, and this is configured in multiple ways. And from the multiple figures of lyric voice,<sup>3</sup> a poetry arises which 'gives

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<sup>1</sup> David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 162. The italics are Nowell Smith's.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Oswald and William Tillyer, *Nobody* (London: 21publishing, 2018), 68.

<sup>3</sup> David Nowell Smith's study *On Voice in Poetry* gives an inexhaustive but useful list: speechsound, voiceprint, style, authenticity, persona, possession, orality... (4).

itself by way of such figures, but [...] is encompassed wholly by none of them',<sup>4</sup> whose form 'is audible in a rhythmic alternation between sound and sense, phonemic flow and lexical segmentation'.<sup>5</sup> Throughout this essay we will see how Oswald's work shows that there can be 'no simple model' for lyric,<sup>6</sup> just as there is no simple model for landscape poetry, nor indeed for the environment.

Looking at Oswald's poetic corpus from afar it is very easy, perhaps all too easy, to place her in a long line of 'poets in a landscape', of pastoral or nature poets, dating as far back as Horace's Bandusian Spring or Vergil's *Eclogia*, and running through the ecological experiments in personhood of Romanticism, to the present.<sup>7</sup> The titles of Oswald's Faber volumes up to 2010 and her collaboration with the artist Jessica Greenman appear to follow this logic of poetic expression of the English landscape: *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996), *Dart* (2002), *Woods, etc.* (2005), *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009), and *Weeds and Wildflowers* (2009). So, too does a past edited collection, *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (2005), in which Oswald's introduction emphasizes the need to maintain the connection between earth to hand, and hand to sky.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, *Memorial* (2011) and *Nobody* (2018) are both book-length poetic interactions with Homer's great war narrative, the *Iliad*, and narrative of return, the *Odyssey*, respectively. Oswald is a poet, a gardener, a Classicist... With these titles, this information, it is both tempting and easy to read her poetry as a series of narratives of being-in-the-landscape, or as attempted anthropomorphic and/or mimetic representations of environment, hinting at the writer's own 'story' or connecting with the perceived subject matter at hand. All of these approaches are easily associated with a biographically-indebted narrative structure of reading; what Gérard Genette would call 'a telling', which gives 'more or less the *illusion of mimesis*'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Multu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 91.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015): 349.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow the term 'poets in a landscape' from Gilbert Highet's influential 1957 study of the same title, whose aim was to 'recall some of the greatest Roman poets, by describing the places they lived [...] evoking the essence of their work' (12), an uncomplicated aim which is continued into the present day in much criticism of poetry, in both biographical and ecocritical molds. See: Gilbert Highet, *Poets in a Landscape* (Hamish Hamilton, 1957 / Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959). An object-oriented antidote, however, which yet someonestrates the importance of landscape and its articulations on and within poetic form may be found in Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Alice Oswald (ed.) *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005): x.

<sup>9</sup> Gérard Genette, 'Mood', in *Narrative Theory* Volume 1. Ed. Mieke Bal. 227. It is useful to bear in mind at this point that Genette's 'telling' has a particularly logical vectoral bent; it is made up of enunciation + reason + narrative trajectory.

Yet, ‘lyric is often characterized as language cut off from worldly purpose’,<sup>10</sup> and to draw solely on this mimetic, nature-bound, narrative equivalence would be to underestimate the fundamentally lyric nature of the poetics at hand and the manner in which ideas of ‘nature’ or ‘environmental’ poetry have changed in a critical and cultural lexicon in recent years,<sup>11</sup> foregrounding more readily an interrogation of what Marcella Durand calls the problematic act of ‘defining the relationship of the observer to the observed [in] a poetry linked to its environs’,<sup>12</sup> and questioning any ‘ecomimetic illusion of immediacy’.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, entangled in this ethical problematic, Oswald has claimed that she is *not* a ‘nature poet’,<sup>14</sup> and although the majority of the titles of her volumes, even of discrete poems, draw on elements of landscape, the environments they engage with are already subverted at this titular level: the ‘gap-stone stile’ hosts an unexplained non-anthropocentric phenomenon, or ‘thing’; *Dart* contains no geographical indicator that this is a river, so the alternative meanings of the word are at play; ‘woods’ are annexed by a Latinate gesture towards any possibility of continuation or expansion in ‘etc.’; nature and vocalic phenomena, as well as planetary ethics and address, are connected in *The Thunder Mutters*; the Severn river is not walked, but *sleepwalked*; the botanical book of etchings, *Weeds and Wildflowers*, prioritizing neither one nor the other, problematizes preconceptions of the natural world, taking on a celebratory naturalist’s perception similar to Richard Mabey’s which writes against the cultural, Linnaean, conception wherein ‘plants become weeds when they obstruct our plans, or our tidy maps of the world’.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*: 129.

<sup>11</sup> John Danvers writes against the overtly representational in the academic criticism of Oswald’s poetry, opposing, in his argument, Oswald’s poetic with the ‘highly coloured subjectivity’ of the landscapes of the Romantic poetics. See: John Danvers *Picturing the Mind: Paradox, Indeterminacy and Consciousness in Art and Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004): 204-215. In the first nearly two decades of the new millennium, a series of studies recuperating ‘Lyric’ have emerged, particularly within the American academy, most significant of which are perhaps Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s *Lyric Poetry: The Pleasure and Pain of Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), Robert von Halberg’s *Lyric Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Jonathan Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015), as well as anthologies (*The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), and a special section, ‘The New Lyric Studies’ in *PMLA* 123.1 (2008): 181-234.

<sup>12</sup> Marcella Durand, ‘Spatial Interpretations: Ways of Reading Ecological Poetry’, in *The Eco Language Reader*. Ed. Brenda Iijima. (New York: Nightboat Books, 2010): 201.

<sup>13</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*: 36.

<sup>14</sup> As early as 1996, Oswald has written: ‘I am not a nature poet, though I do write about the special nature of what happens to exist’. See: *PBS Bulletin*, Spring 1996: n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Mabey, *Weeds* (London: Profile Books, 2010): 1.

Oswald's poetry thus articulates a rich spatial presence which is not just of nature or landscape, and which is presented to us in a series of poetic events and ethical problems, which are spatialised through the figure of voice and the figuring of text. As a counterpoint to Genette's 'telling' I would like to pose a definition of lyric poetry, by Jonathan Culler, as a lens through which to more productively read Oswald's poetry -- the 'production of an apparently phenomenal world through the figure of voice'.<sup>16</sup> Oswald's poetry bears distinctive witness to the human and non-human, living and non-living systems of the natural world in a polymorphic, polyrhythmic, polytemporal melange of multi-textured patterns of sound, image, and sense wherein voice serves a mediating function. Looking more closely at the volumes listed above, we see how the poetry, in foregrounding vocal expression whilst also manipulating the white space of the page in order to do so, becomes 'a foundry of sounds',<sup>17</sup> a 'havoc of words not breathless at all',<sup>18</sup> and 'an entirely new structure'.<sup>19</sup> Following this, in Oswald's more recent volumes of poetry, *Memorial* (2011), *Falling Awake* (2016), and *Nobody* (2018), we encounter a translation of 'atmosphere' rather than plot, which is at once 'vocative' and 'invocative',<sup>20</sup> and an extension of the experiments in vocalization and semi-consciousness of *Dart* and *Sleepwalk*, respectively. *Falling Awake*, too, contains the performance sequence 'Tithonus: 46 minutes in the life of the dawn', whose reading begins in darkness, and whose textual presence is structured around a timeline of the English midsummer dawn;<sup>21</sup> *Nobody*'s text fades out, from black, grey, to blank by the end of the long poem, whose language is a counterpoint to a sequence of abstract watercolours by celebrated British landscape artist William Tillyer, and where the trees, stones, fresh- and salt-water soundscapes of previous volumes are again reprised.

In Oswald's poetry we encounter a question of vocalic and textual spatialization, where vocal expression can provide a 'dynamic grammar of orientation'<sup>22</sup> radically unlike the narrative or representational poetry of the 'poets in a landscape' mould, where polyphony refuses any unproblematized instantiation of the lyric 'I', and where concrete materiality - of traditional and innovative poetic forms - makes space unfold in ways which resist a simplified

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Culler, "Changes in the Study of Lyric", in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*. Ed. Chaviva Hosèk and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985): 50.

<sup>17</sup> Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Alice Oswald, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Alice Oswald, *Memorial* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011): 1, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Alice Oswald, *Falling Awake* (London: Cape, 2016): 43-81.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 6.

environmental expression. We are invited not to read but to listen to ourselves reading - to use reading, as Marcella Durand writes, as ‘another form of observation - of exiting the *I* and entering the *you*, the world, the other, even as the *I* is changed through this interaction’;<sup>23</sup> to articulate the shifting, paradoxical, opposition of the lyric ‘I call I call’ with its echo of ‘not I not I’.<sup>24</sup> I would like to put forward in this essay that it is precisely for these reasons that Oswald’s poetry - both long and short-form - resists narrative, presenting us instead with examples of a lyric poesis which follows Jonathan Culler’s phenomenological formulation, above, and which demonstrates to us the ways in which the poetic articulation of the natural world is one of multiple voices and points of view.

But what form to give this complex lyric production? It is certainly not a narrative form, in the mimetic mould of Genette, or according to Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s formulation of narrative as a “verbal act consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened”.<sup>25</sup> This, in spite of the fact that many of Oswald’s poems begin with an invocative figure, or even a ballad-like address, foregrounding above all the ‘telling’ of a tale. Indeed, the use of conventional or received poetic form and address persists across Oswald’s *oeuvre*, but is more often than not rendered complex and polyvocal through the use of paratext (see: ‘Tree Ballad’, in *Woods etc.*, the productive use of marginalia in *Dart*, the time-line of ‘Tithonus’, even the images of *Weeds and Wild-Flowers* and *Nobody*), or made into a self-conscious voicing between human, animal, and natural world mediated through the devices of the received convention (see: the ballad-prayer ‘Seabird’s Blessing’, in *Woods etc.*, the mirror-sonnet ‘Two Voices’, in *Falling Awake*, or *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*’s co-existence as poem and play). The phenomenal world of Oswald’s poetry is rich, and eschews the linear simplicity of narrative, which means the poem acts as a repository for theme or metaphor which supports narrative progression, either of the ‘tale telling’ or of the monolithic lyric ‘I’. Instead, in Oswald’s poetry we encounter a complexity of textual and vocalic innovation, as well as a dedicated engagement with classical precedent and nature-ethics; combined, these are the structural principles which support the ‘telling’ aspect of the poetry; its thematic, vocalic, lyric, and metaphorical progressions. Some of this complexity is latent in the poet’s own description of her book-length poem, *Dart*, as the poet draws on the discourses of map-making, of oral history, and of community engagement with the land in the tradition of

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<sup>23</sup> Durand: 201.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Oswald, *Falling Awake*: 7, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, ‘Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories’ in Bal (ed.) *Narrative Theory* v.2: 111.

aboriginal song-lines, in describing the work as a ‘soundmap [...] a songline from source to sea’,<sup>26</sup> and obliquely answered by the single, unpunctuated, line which occupies the sixteenth page of *Nobody*: ‘How does it start the sea has endless beginnings’.<sup>27</sup> And it is such a complexity of dialogic and topological resonance that we see inform both discrete poems and link poems across the breadth of Oswald’s work.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, many if not all of Oswald’s poems create dialogue and work in dialogue with each other. This resonance and response is not only created through speech patterns of call-and-response, but also in textual variations across works. Resonances occur within poems and across volumes: voices, images, conversations, and structures repeat and build upon each other. The poems ‘River’ and ‘Psalm to Sing in a Canoe’ from *Woods etc.* contain a germ of the form of *Dart*, just as *Dart*’s ‘sleepwalker’ anticipates the dreamscape of *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, the meditative naming of *Memorial*, and the ordering principles of *Falling Awake*. *Woods etc.* contains a sequence of stone poems which demonstrate the differing vocalic and narrative principles that Oswald’s poetry combines: the pure vocalization and originary poetic inspiration of song (‘Song of a Stone’), the I-questioning tale-telling nature of ballad and history (‘Autobiography of a Stone’), and the world of physical action and interaction (‘The Stone Skimmer’). This sequence is built out of *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*’s central stone-poems (‘The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile’, and ‘When a Stone was Wrecking his Country’), both of which are concerned with the ethics of human engagement with the environment and experiment with giving voice to the non-human, as well as carrying with them echoes of the dreams of *Dart*’s ‘stonewaller’ and the structure and way of reading *Dart* itself: ‘the whole earth tipping, the hills shifting up and down, shedding stones as if everything’s a kind of water’.<sup>29</sup> Aspects of this intentionally blurred estuarine perspective, and the differing perspectives of *Woods*’s stone sequence are repeated, echoed, and elaborated in later volumes - the ‘several registers’ of *Sleepwalk on the Severn*;<sup>30</sup> the stony death of Amphimachos in *Memorial*; the ‘dried up’ river-language of ‘Dunt’ (*Falling Awake*). ‘The Melon Grower’ (*The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*) and ‘Head of a Dandelion’ (*Woods etc.*) anticipate *Weeds and Wildflowers*. ‘Tree Ghosts’ (*Woods etc.*) and *Dart*’s

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<sup>26</sup> *Dart*: vii.

<sup>27</sup> Alice Oswald and William Tillyer, *Nobody*: 16.

<sup>28</sup> I have written more overtly on the spatial logic of dialogism and its ‘complex feedback loop’, with particular attention to Oswald’s poetry in a chapter on Oswald in *Spatial Engagement with Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> *Dart*: 34.

<sup>30</sup> *Sleepwalk*: 1.

concrete 'swimmer' section demonstrate a structural play the (im)permanence of inscription which works towards two oppositional conclusions in the solidity of the naming and memory-work of *Memorial*, and the literal textual fade, or vanishing, at the end of 'Tithonus' and *Nobody* bold and frequent use of completely blank pages. Every poem in a different way vocalises the question and questions the idea of being, asking 'who's this', and giving the answer 'I am',<sup>31</sup> where the 'I' is ever multiple, ever questioned.

On top of this dialogic activity, this call-and-response of multiple voices, we have layered the topological feeling of the poems. As each poem vocalises the idea or question of being, it also attempts to demonstrate a possible location of this being. Both *Dart* and *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* take as their broad structural models the topology of the rivers themselves. But equally both these long poems, and the shorter poems in *Woods etc.* present us with a moment, or sequence of moments of vision and voice that, rather than being representational, manipulate text and landscape to create a vocalic utterance which occupies a lyric, rather than a narrative, present. Where, in 'traditional narrative', or even in many 'traditional' readings of the lyric poem (as dramatic monologue or narrative utterance), the enunciating *I* is a singular cardinal point, representing stability and indicating the singular means by and through which the poem may be navigated, in Oswald's poetry the first person pronoun is at best contested, and in the most part split and multiple. The *I* (indicating both emplacement and point of utterance) of Oswald's poems gives way and at the same time occurs alongside its homonym *eye*, our real and metaphorical organ of poetic vision. This *I/eye* is both fragmented and multiple; it is affective and 'kaleidoscopic',<sup>32</sup> following and vocalising the poem's 'soundmap' or 'songline'.<sup>33</sup> The *I/eye* indicates at once the 'foregrounding of language in its material dimensions' and the lyric present's 'effects of voice and presence',<sup>34</sup> mediating 'the phonemic system and the sense system'.<sup>35</sup>

Dialogic activity and topological feeling are intertwined in the structural principles that underlie Oswald's poetic. These structural principles are interlinked, and combine in poetry the figures of voice, vision, and landscape that are so important for Oswald, which are akin to Paul Celan's construction of the poetic act as comprised of dialogue, attention, and

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is with these questions - between walker and landscape - that *Dart* opens.

<sup>32</sup> See Julia Kristeva, 'Is there such a thing as European Culture?', British Academy, London. (24 May 2010).

<sup>33</sup> *Dart*: vii

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Culler, 'Why Lyric', n.p.

<sup>35</sup> Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pleasure and Pain of Words*: 91.



perception.<sup>36</sup> The first of these structural principles can be found in Oswald's short preface to *Dart*, in her glancing reference to the aboriginal tradition of the songline. John Danvers writes that *Dart* demonstrates 'the same resonance for names and naming, for finding the right word, for crafting a song that has the intonation and music of the landscape, [... of] any indigenous people who give voice to a particular place, articulating the intelligences that inhabit the locality, picturing the mindscape that is immanent in landscape'.<sup>37</sup> This is true of *Dart*'s emphasis on oral history as a structuring principle,<sup>38</sup> but the indigenous tradition that Oswald draws on in *Dart* has a more specific formal borrowing. Also known as 'dreaming-tracks', 'footprints of the ancestors', or 'the ways of the law', 'songlines' are an aboriginal tradition of interlinked poetry, song, walking, travel, and landscape. Seasonally undertaken by different individuals in different directions, 'songlines' are a ritualistic re-enactment of variant aboriginal creation myths. Bruce Chatwin writes that 'Aboriginal Creation Myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in *Dreamtime*, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes – and so singing the world into existence',<sup>39</sup> and in fact this practise of vocalic landscaping occurs even to the present day. Thus, we can draw an analogue between the songline tradition and Oswald's figures (and voices) of water, stone, and the moon, which, given voice(s) in the poetry call into being their human and non-human inhabitants. The songline tradition is in many ways rewritten in *Dart*'s history of composition. Through the poet's own walking and collecting of voices, names, and landmarks, from the landscape of the river Dart.<sup>40</sup> *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*'s and Tithonus's dreamscapes are born from the enunciated and enunciating space of the aboriginal songlines's dreamtime; *Memorial* and *Nobody* from voices that haunt both riverbank and the Homeric past.

The 'songline' not only calls its population into being, but also represents the space between given sites, thus functioning as a poetic (or vocalic) alternative to the map or compass. Parts of songlines (rhythms, names, images) may be shared between members of different tribes or from different areas. The songline is a fluid and changeable rather than static and historical

<sup>36</sup> See Paul Celan, 'Der Meridian', trans. Jerry Glenn, *Chicago Review* 29.3 (1978): 29- 40.

<sup>37</sup> John Danvers, *Picturing Mind: Paradox, Indeterminacy, and Consciousness in Art and Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006): 206-7

<sup>38</sup> The poem has as one paratext a long list of people, or voices, to whom Oswald is indebted for their 'significant contributions' to the poem (*Dart*: v).

<sup>39</sup> Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Penguin, 1987): 2.

<sup>40</sup> See Oswald's preface to *Dart*: "This poem is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart. Over the past two years I've been recording conversations with people who know the river. [...] [However] these do not refer to real people or even fixed fictions. All voices should be read as the river's mutterings".

tradition. There is no narrative to a songline, rather, it is a calling into being, a demonstration of the landscape as voice. Geometrically represented, songlines look like “an interlocking network of lines”,<sup>41</sup> but practically they create meaningful boundaries, landmarks, and intersections vocally rather than geographically. Space, in the songline tradition, is a system of verbal exchange rather than of graphic representation.<sup>42</sup> Thus we find an analogue for Oswald’s topologies of voice, vision, and landscape which is built out of the complex figure of voice rather than from a desire for representation or narrativization, and which constantly questions the ideas and the representations of being:

why is this jostling procession of waters,  
its many strands overclambering one another, so many word-marks, momentary traces  
in the wind-script of the world’s voices  
why is it [...]

why is this flickering water  
with its blinks and side-long looks with its language of oaks  
and clicking of slatey brooks  
why is this river not ever  
able to leave until it’s over?<sup>43</sup>

The second structural principle which I wish to align with Oswald’s poetic is that of patterns of flow, and in particular, the flow patterns that are delineated, investigated, and explained in Theodor Schwenk’s ecosystemic book of 1965 *Sensitive Chaos*. Schwenk writes of the formation of any living being as ‘a multitude of sources, sinks and currents [which] work together to create the living form. This interplay is like the diversity of an orchestra with its instruments, that have their entries and their rests and are moulded into a *single* ‘body of sound’ by an invisible conductor’.<sup>44</sup> As with the aboriginal songlines, we can see that Oswald has chosen another poetic model which links sound and space, and which is multiple in its

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<sup>41</sup> Chatwin, *The Songlines*: 62.

<sup>42</sup> For a fuller discussion of the politics of these two variant concepts of space (the graphic and graphemic), see Graham Huggan, *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies*, (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2008): 63-64.

<sup>43</sup> *Dart*: 42-43.

<sup>44</sup> Theodor Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*. Trans. Olive Whicher and Johanna Wrigley (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1965): 65.

singularity. *Dart* in particular (perhaps this is simply a virtue of its being Oswald's longest work) borrows heavily from Schwenk's book *Sensitive Chaos*. Schwenk's 'voice' (glossed on *Dart* as 'Theodor Schwenke' (*sic.*)) may be found amongst the voices that comprise *Dart*, in one place marginally acknowledged, and in others not. But Schwenk's philosophy, that *all* nature is subject to the theories of flow, may be found to create in Oswald's poetry as much a structural pattern as do the aboriginal songlines, as well as contributing (as we can see above) a voice.

Schwenk writes, "the creation of form in any living substance is only thinkable if at one and the same place manifold movements can flow into, over, and through one another".<sup>45</sup> Another structural link between the topological and the vocalic. Form is created out of the convergence of multiplicity; flow, like the songlines of the aboriginal tribes, creates a network of crossing patterns, of "many strands overclambering one another".<sup>46</sup> And for Schwenk, the same flow patterns that can be traced in the movement of water and air (what he calls the world's flowing forms), also helps sculpt the very form of our vocal cords and influences the movement of air and fluid through the human voice box, and through that, human (and indeed animal) vocal production, and even thought.<sup>47</sup> Thus the vocalic and formal elements of the poetry may be linked. And indeed, what more appropriate formal progenitor for Oswald's polyrhythmic, polyvocal, and multitextual poetic than Schwenk's theorization of flow patterns?

By building upon the three interlinked concepts (dialogue – landscape – flow), and the songline and flow pattern models that bridge them, it is more easy, perhaps, to see how and why Alice Oswald's poetry eschews narrative, in favour of a materially articulate lyric form and sentiment. Dialogue – Landscape – Flow are thus a means by which we can read the foregrounding in Oswald's poetry of the multiple and phenomenal aspects of voice, vision,

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<sup>45</sup> Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos*: 37.

<sup>46</sup> *Dart*: 42

<sup>47</sup> For the formation of the vocal chords through flow patterns, see Schwenk pp. 126-132. Equally, with regard to the relationship of flow patterns to thought, Schwenk writes of 'streaming wisdom', where "the activity of thinking is essentially an expression of flowing movement [...] water and this spiritual activity of the human being belong together; the nature of one is the picture of the other" (97). This relationship is more complicated than simple metaphor due to its embodied as well as its linguistic reciprocity. And the language of this relationship is carried over into more recent thought, and even that directly concerning lyric poetry. See, for instance, the quotation from Blasing in the first paragraph of this essay.

and address, and find these things intimately connected to the ideas of poetry and of being.<sup>48</sup> But it is the very nature of these things as presented to us in Oswald's poetry through which the formal innovation, too, occurs. The ideas of voice worked through in Oswald's poetry hinge on the multifaceted nature of the varied and variable enunciating I/eyes of the poem, and it is through this (or these) I/eye(s) that voice and vision, or dialogue, landscape, and flow, are mediated. The fluctuating nature of this I/eye is also a major means by which Oswald's poetry resists categorisation as simply narrative utterance or poetry *of* landscape. This resistance takes places as much in the space of the page as it does in the voiced poem, and in privileging textual representation, vision, voice, and event over description and narrative, Oswald's poetry works against more traditional formulations of the lyric poem as dramatic monologue or narrative art.<sup>49</sup> And it is by tracing the development of the 'figure of voice' in Oswald's poetry (or, to rephrase this, by following the poetry's songline), that we may come to recognise the matter in which this distinctive poetic is composed, and engage affectively with the 'apparently phenomenal world' that it creates.<sup>50</sup>

*Dart* begins not with the introduction of a distinctive subject but with a general sense of movement within a landscape. A set of questions is posed, formed out of a reaction to visual phenomena. This creates a verbal exchange, and so we encounter at once voice and vision, landscape and dialogue:

Who's this moving alive over the moor? An old man seeking and finding a difficulty

Has he remembered his compass his spare socks

does he fully intend going over his knees off the military track from Okehampton?

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<sup>48</sup>Paul Celan, in "The Meridian" makes a similar tripartite link between being and poetry. Poetry, for Celan, is the manifestation of being, and occurs through the feeling of one's existence through the abilities to die, to relate to, and to perceive. The poetic act is an inherently non-narrative lyric one, and is comprised of dialogue, attention, and perception, and poetic art 'consists of perceiving not representing'. See Paul Celan, "The Meridian", trans. Jerry Glenn, *Chicago Review* 29.3 (1978): 29-40.

<sup>49</sup> See Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983): 10. Culler is still insistent on recuperating the lyric from such readings, calling, in 2010, for 'a capacious understanding of the lyric tradition which is not restricted either to the idea of a decontextualized expression of subjectivity [...] nor to the model of the dramatic monologue with a speaker whose situation, attitude, and goals we should novelistically reconstruct' ('Why Lyric?', School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell U (12 Jul. 2009), <cornell.edu/video/index.cfu?videoID=619>).

<sup>50</sup> Culler, "Changes in the Study of Lyric": 50.

keeping his course through the swamp spaces and pulling the distance around his  
shoulders

and if it rains, if it thunders suddenly where will he shelter looking round  
and all that lies to hand is his own bones?

tussocks, minute flies, wind, wings, roots

He consults his map. A huge rain-coloured wilderness. This must be the stones, the  
sudden movement,  
the sound of frogs singing in the new year.  
Who's this issuing from the earth?

The Dart, lying low in darkness calls out Who is it? trying to summon itself by speaking  
...<sup>51</sup>

In spite of the subject-matter of the dialogue, the voices at play in the first four verse paragraphs of *Dart* are geographically displaced. But as this opening section moves on, the marginalia indicates that our un-placed voices occur at the indeterminate source of the Dart, on Dartmoor (“the source of the Dart – Cranmere Pool on Dartmoor, seven miles from then nearest road’ (alongside the verse paragraph beginning ‘and if it rains, if it thunders”)<sup>52</sup>). But as the topological indicators become stable, as the river itself it is finally named in the main body of the poem, the number of voices increase, as does the indeterminacy of voice. *Dart* demonstrates the search and discovery of ‘a difficulty’ that the old man character in these first lines articulates. In this ‘difficulty’ landscape, map, walker and voices blur between each other; the pronouns used are not indicative of a single, but of multiple subjects.

Engaged in a reciprocal conversation, both parties using the first person pronoun, the bounds between the speech of the walker and the landscape is blurred, and at the same time the two voices also become entwined in the space that the poem is mapping. Not only does the walker ‘[pull] the distance’ of the moor around his shoulders as if a cape, but he also keeps the Dart ‘folded in [his] mack pocket’. As the bog, or the boggy source of the river, passively becomes

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<sup>51</sup> *Dart*: 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Dart*: 1.

a constituent part of the walker's being, it also is endowed with voice and action. The walker will not let go of the Dart, and neither will the source of the Dart let go of the walker's physical presence of affective engagement with the landscape: 'I won't let go of man [...] wanting his heart'. At the same time as the walker and the Dart become entwined in thought and action, a space of difference is created between them. This difference is the source of the river, a 'secret buried in the reeds at the beginning of sound', 'trying to summon itself by speaking', and answers to the later question that mirrors the one that opens the poem: 'Who's this issuing from the earth?'. Answering this question of emplacement, we see the landscape of the Dart's source called up through *Dart's* sustained visual and aural observation of the progress through the landscape.<sup>53</sup>

The question and its answer, 'who's this...' also marks the establishment of a feeling of maintenance of width and progression in the poem, which is perpetuated by the prose conversation between river and walker about walking. While the river is haunted by man's 'horrible keep-time', walking for the walker is less metronomic, 'all I know... what I love'.<sup>54</sup> Walking provides a rhythmic stability apart from the 'keep-time' of the pocket watch, and, at the same time, the poem's form mirrors this thematic exposition of the rhythm of the walker *contra* and with the rhythm of the river. But in order to create the 'phenomenal world' that Culler writes of in relation to the lyric poem, the form of the poem, too, must mirror these walking / flowing rhythms. As *Dart* progresses, the rhythms of questioning provide a certain rhythmic structure. So, too, does the repetition of the first person pronoun. Recurring at different places in the line space, the 'I' always carries with it a certain amount of insistence, and marks time in the poem, as well as the space on the page.

I've done all the walks the Two Moors Way, the Tors, this long winding line the Dart

this secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound I won't let go of man

[...]

at the centre of his own noise,

clomping the silence in pieces and I

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<sup>53</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are from *Dart*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Dart*, 2

I don't know, all I know is walking<sup>55</sup>

The 'I' marks rhythm rather than a distinctive and singular subject matter. The blurring of the boundaries of subject-object relations is something that characterizes Oswald's poetry, something which makes her poetic voice distinctive (in this instance, these relations are between the walker and the source of the river Dart). Whereas early criticism of Oswald's poetry has read this blurring, and the resultant vocal multiplicity, as a *lack* of distinctive 'voice',<sup>56</sup> it is precisely this apparent lack which animates the poems at hand. Formal innovation and the question of being are interlinked. Indeed, it is interesting to see how the often disembodied question 'who's this', and its answering 'I am', repeats throughout Oswald's oeuvre, giving form as well as a theme and counterpoint within the macro- and micro-structures of the poetry, through these rhythmical repetitions.<sup>57</sup> The call-and-response relationship, in turn, animates the lyric landscape of Oswald's verse. The very idea of landscape, Rachael Ziady DeLue writes, links the question of form and being; 'landscape' as a concept marks an anthropocentric complicity within the environment, and at the same time blurs the subject-object relations in a similar way as we see operates in Oswald's poetry:

The landscape is always "for us," since we construct it; but it seems to me that one of the things that a phenomenological reading allows us is to break down the subject-object relation, to break down the idea of landscape as a view. It is about lived experience, rather than "me-it," or self and other. That is one of the things the phenomenological has to offer: landscape as a thing that we live within.<sup>58</sup>

Dialogue, as we have seen, links the landscape to the question of being. And to return momentarily to the songline tradition, here, too there can be observed a concept of landscape as 'a thing that we live within', where subject-object relations are blurred. For one of Chatwin's main sources on the songline tradition, 'A song [...] was both map and direction-

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<sup>55</sup> *Dart* 1-2

<sup>56</sup> For instance, Charles Bennett criticizes the poem due to this lack of narratorial presence / stability, stating 'the voice which is absent is the voice we most need to hear: Oswald's own' ('Current Literature 2002: New Writing: Poetry' *English Studies* 85.3 (2002), 231).

<sup>57</sup> For the former, see in particular *Dart*, the poem's opening is 'who's this moving alive over the moor' (*Dart*, 1); for the latter, see in particular *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, who's use (placing and enunciation) of the first person pronoun prefigures both the 'I' play in *Dart* and the voices of *Weeds and Wildflowers*.

<sup>58</sup> Rachael Ziady DeLue *et al.*, *The Art Seminar 6 Landscape Theory*, 104.

finder. Providing you knew the song, you could always find your way across the country'.<sup>59</sup> As Schwenk writes, 'the nature of one is the picture of the other'.<sup>60</sup>

The poems of *Weeds and Wildflowers* demonstrate this mixture of voice and vision, the blurring of subject and object relations. Each poem in the volume has a corresponding etching, but the correspondence between poem and etching is not always directly shown: we have to seek out and find the correspondences, as, very often, Greenman's etchings will have a thematic, rather than botanical, correspondence to Oswald's poetry. The etchings and the poems have separate indexes in the back of the volume, perhaps indicating the complexity of their relationship, as Oswald sees it: 'two separate books [...] shuffled together' (*Weeds*, iii), of which the experience of reading generates 'a slightly unsettling pleasure' (*Weeds*, iii). Oswald writes, too, in her preface to *Weeds*, that 'what connects [the poems and the etchings] is their contention that flowers are recognisably ourselves elsewhere' (*Weeds*, iii); the poems of the volume, too, link to the mapmaking process that we have seen addressed and subverted in *Dart* as the various prefaces to the volume also quote Aime Cesaire: 'the map of spring must forever be redrawn' (*Weeds*, i). And Greenman, too, writes of the volume's composition in relation to the etching making process, that 'the mirror-image aspect has some relevance to my relationship with Alice and her poems; varied but exact' (*Weeds*, iv).

The poem 'Narcissus' represents the 'unsettling pleasure' of formal play on a more overtly poetic, linguistic, level. In the space of the volume, the poem is given to us twice, recto and verso, its first form as standard printing, its second from an etching by Jessica Greenman.<sup>61</sup> However, the manner in which 'Narcissus' is presented in the volume, twice, means that it works in dialogue with itself and its mythical (and botanical) subject matter. This is the only poem in the volume that has a textual rather than visual counterpart, thus complicating the already established ekphrastic relationship between the originary flower, image and text, vision and articulation.<sup>62</sup> The connection between the two presentations of the poem has, as

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<sup>59</sup> Chatwin, *The Songlines*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos*, 97.

<sup>61</sup> See Alice Oswald and Jessica Greenman, *Weeds and Wildflowers* (London: Faber, 2009), 26-27.

<sup>62</sup> I follow Murray Greenman's expansion of the term *ekphrasis*, which liberates the term from simple description, instead encompassing any (particularly poetic) writing which aspires to create a sort of plastic spatiality in both form and theme; a concern with 'our attraction and resistance to the natural sign' (See *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 64). In this instance, the ekphrastic relationship works in many directions: between Oswald and the flower, Greenman and the flower, and between Oswald's and Greenman's work. Theories of ekphrasis and poetry are a useful side note as they



Greenman writes, a ‘mirror-image aspect’, and the relationship between the two ‘varied but exact’ (*Weeds*, iv); ‘the nature of one is the picture of the other’.<sup>63</sup> And again the same questions of being rise to the surface. Like ‘Narcissus’, ‘Snowdrop’ presents etching and poem on corresponding recto and verso leaves. However, the correspondence between etching and poem bears more resemblance to the others shown in the volume. The final stanza of the poem blurs being and naming in its poetic approach to the snowdrop, complicating the simplicity of the vocalic, anthropomorphosied, characterization that takes up the preceding two stanzas:

Yes, she’s no more now than a drop of snow  
on a green stem – her name is now her calling.  
Her mind is just a frozen melting glow  
of water swollen to the point of falling,  
which maybe has no meaning. There’s no telling.  
But what beauty, what a mighty power  
of patience intact is now in flower.<sup>64</sup>

The corresponding etching quotes from Oswald’s poem, and the main matter of the etching is, rather than simply the snowdrop, a vase of flowers containing snowdrops alongside some of the other flowers represented in the volume (the violet, daisy, cowslip), beside a window which exposes the view of an outside landscape. The etching, too, breaks the lines of the Oswald poem that it quotes: ‘But what a beauty, what mighty power / of patience kept intact is now in flower’ (*Weeds*, 49), becomes ‘But what a beauty / What a mighty power / Of patience kept intact / Is now in flower’ (*Weeds*, 48). And so, Oswald’s poems and Greenman’s etchings taken both separately and together suggest a view and voice of a flower that, however formally conservative, subverts any sort of traditional representation and expectation.

There is a care taken in naming in Oswald and Greenman’s collaboration which, akin to the importance of naming which John Danvers recognizes in *Dart*, can be seen to prefigure of the intense catalogues of names in *Memorial* and *Nobody*, and which is unconventional.

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often look, in the poetic work of art, towards the means in which this work moves away from its formally prescribed temporal and spatial constraints.

<sup>63</sup> Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos*: 97.

<sup>64</sup> *Weeds and Wildflowers*: 49

Oswald's naming is also an act of blurring subject-object relations, and represents an imaginative 'lived experience', rather than a 'me – it' relationship. As Oswald writes, 'the plants come right up to the edges of their names and then beyond them' (*Weeds*, iii). The 'name' of the snowdrop is 'now her calling': by which she can be recognized and recognize herself; a marker by which, in the mould of the songline tradition, can represent the object whilst also calling it into being, creating its subjectivity. The static conventions of poetry, too, are contravened when the etching and poem are read alongside each other, as different line-breaks are given in each representation of the poem. In spite of its initial formal conservatism, therefore, Oswald's 'Snowdrop', like so many of the other poems in *Weeds and Wildflowers*, may be seen on closer inspection to present an unstable textuality. Indeed, the poems of *Weeds*, *Woods etc.*, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, and *Dart*, all seem to revel in this textual instability. Typographical innovation and error are indistinguishable.<sup>65</sup> This sort of apparently randomized formal intricacy may, as hinted above, be traced throughout Oswald's *oeuvre*. We may see this in the play and positioning of the first person pronoun (or its absence from otherwise grammatically coherent moments), or rhyming resonance. The 'I' in *Dart*, which is a significant vowel-based or apostrophic sound patterning in the poem, has a counterpoint. Beside the repetition of this textual representation of being, is woven its opposite: the 'ooo' of the Dart's ghostly Jan Coo. An 'ooo' which represents both the moment of pure enunciation, or sound without text, and also nothing at all. The present absence of the first person pronoun, combined with the intimations of silence and enunciation in the intricate spacings and repetitions of 'ooo', provides *Dart* with what is perhaps its most concrete section.

I steered through rapids like a canoe,  
 digging my hands in, keeping just ahead of the pace of the river, thinking God I'm  
 going fast enough already, what am I, spelling the shapes of the letters with legs and  
 arms?

S SSS W

Slooshing the Water open and MMM

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<sup>65</sup> *Viz.* the moment in *Dart's* marginalia where 'Schwenke [sic.]' is cited (*Dart*, 20), which occurs in all editions of the poem. This sort of blending of apparent mistake and innovation can then be seen in the manner in which Schwenk is quoted, or misquoted throughout the poem.

for it Meeting shut behind me

The swimmer spells out in the water, just as the letters spell out in the space of the page, his action. He SW-Ms in the textual and paratextual space of the Dart and of *Dart*. More significant in this section of *Dart* than the punctuating hints towards representation and alphabetical play (S SSS = Slooshing, W = Water, M = Meeting), and the repetition of *Dart*'s foundational question ('what am I'), is the lack of an 'I'. The swimmer's action is without personality; is wholly given to his river-bound task, and like the many other enunciations that make up the body of *Dart*, the personality-endowing first person pronoun blends into the vocalic body of the river itself; the following section of the poem shifts from a first-person to third-person description, as the swimmer dives underwater into 'a deep soft-bottomed silence'. It is perhaps pertinent, therefore, that this swimmer section comes directly after the 'silence' that is central to the structure of the poem. Just as the echoings of Jan Coo's 'ooo' mark the bounds between meaning and nonsense, sound and silence, in the poem, so too does the SW-Mming of the swimmer.

Indeed, Oswald herself writes of the importance of silence in language: 'The metrical meaning of language includes its silences.'<sup>66</sup> Silence is as much a foundational part of Oswald's poetic as voice. But this does not preclude the dialogue, or singing of things, that we have also seen to be so foundationally important to Oswald's poetic. Silence implies the periphery of vision, the marginal or parenthesized, the elements which make up the landscape that are not inscribed in the conventional map. And, indeed, silence forms an important concrete element of the forms Oswald's poetry adopts. As early on as *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* Oswald has been concerned to address not only the primary matter at hand, but also what appears in peripheral vision or thought.

And Annual Meadow Grass, quite of her own accord,  
between the dry-stone spread out emerald.

(I was delighted by her initiative  
and praised the dry-stone for being contrary.)

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<sup>66</sup> 'Alice Oswald on Poetry and Performance', *The Times Online* (Feb. 26, 2010) <[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article7039491.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article7039491.ece)>. See also, on the subject of the importance of silence (and the notation of silence) in poetry, Oswald's introduction to her *Selected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (London: Faber, 2008).

What I did do (I am a gap)  
was lean these elbows on a wall  
and sat on my hunkers pervading the boulders.

My pose became the pass across two kingdoms,  
before behind antiphonal, my cavity the chord.

And I certainly intended  
anyone to be almost  
abstracted on a gap-stone between fields.<sup>67</sup>

Parentheses and sub-clauses function in a poetic moment of textual play which is characteristic of Oswald's poetry. As with the flower-voices of *Weeds and Wildflowers*, this poem is not simply a case of anthropomorphosis. Rather, it is a giving voice to an object from our peripheral vision, which, like the voices that make up the songlines of *Dart*, or the objects which comprise the vocalic landscape of the aboriginal songline, is at once 'a map and a direction-finder'.<sup>68</sup> And again we see both textual and vocalic play between each element of dialogue – landscape – flow. There is attention paid explicitly to the formation of the landscape, movement through this landscape, and the placing of this voice, as well as to the act of voicing itself ('my cavity the chord'). This attention to the margins recurs in Oswald's poetry at both thematic and formal levels as Oswald seeks to give graphic and graphemic representations of the phenomena to which her poetry gives birth. Indeed, the marginal approach to the phenomenal world helps structure *Dart* (see in particular the marginal indications of voice), and gives the voice-poem *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* stage directions as well as vocalic utterance. A similar attention to the marginal or peripheral can be seen, too, in *Woods etc.*'s 'Marginalia at the Edge of Evening', and the ballad 'Tree Ghosts'. The latter poem contains footnotes that are as much a part of the poem as the poem itself, as well as in the many explicitly dialogic question-and-answer forms that are a foundational part of Oswald's poetic. In reading Oswald, it is undeniable that there is an important connection to be made between landscape and voice, whereby voice does more than sing *of* the landscape. What we are instead presented with are poems which are constructed out of structural, even

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<sup>67</sup> *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Chatwin, *The Songlines*, 13.

formal, principles (dialogism, the songline, flow patterns) which are less to do with narrative than they are to do with the very articulation of and questioning of the nature of being. Voice is at once embodied and disembodied, ‘the locus for an experience of linguistic *time*’,<sup>69</sup> which precipitates self-conscious articulation and questioning. This articulation and questioning is in both its materiality and its temporal existence aligned back with the landscape, and complicated by the contested nature of the landscape itself, which is ‘both our subject and the thing in which we exist’.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry: The Work of Animation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 162.

<sup>70</sup> Rachael Ziady DeLue, ‘Elusive Landscapes and Shifting Grounds’ in DeLue and Elkins (eds.) *The Art Seminar 6: Landscape Theory* (London: Routledge, 2008): 10.

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