

Event as Portal: The Non-Human Irresistible in Poems from Port Cities[†]

Cornelia Gräbner and Eleanor Rees

Most poetry events are considered discrete units, book-ended by a beginning and an end. They are also often conceptualized and received as the completion of a creative process: the poet has completed a piece of work, often in writing, and it is now sharing it with an audience. In this special issue we address a poetry event that had different characteristics, in its conception, its execution, and its aftermath and that should be considered a “constellation” of different actors, as well as a portal which connects a

[†] Introduction to Special Issue on The Non-Human Irresistible: The Poetics of Portals, Ports and Shorelines, from Cork and Merseyside.

Cornelia Gräbner is a Senior Lecturer in Hispanic Studies and Comparative Literature at Lancaster University. She received a PhD from the University of Amsterdam for a dissertation on the performance of poetry and political commitment. She has published on the poetry performance and resistance literature in Europe and the Americas, including the edited collection *Performing Poetry: Body, Place and Rhythm in the Poetry Performance* (with Arturo Casas) and co-edited special issues on “The Poetics of Resistance,” “Poetry in Public Spaces,” and most recently, a special issue of *Critical Comparative Studies* on “Against the Grain: Dissent, Opposition and La parola contraria in Literature, Politics and the Arts” (with Joost de Bloois and Jim Hicks). **Eleanor Rees** lives on the Wirral peninsula on Merseyside, UK. She is a poet, senior lecturer in Creative Writing at Liverpool Hope University, has extensively worked as a poet in communities with The Windows Project, and regularly gives public readings at festivals and literary events. In her PhD thesis ‘Making Connections: The Work of the Local Poet’ (Exeter, 2014) she explored the relationship between the poet, place, and community. Her poetry collections include *Portents and Portals: New and Selected Poems* (Guillemot Press, 2024), *Tam Lin of the Winter Park* (Guillemot Press, 2022), *The Well at Winter Solstice* (Salt, 2019, Northern Writers’ Award 2018), *Blood Child* (Pavilion, 2015), *Eliza and the Bear* (Salt, 2009) and *Andraste’s Hair* (Salt, 2007, shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, UK, and the Irish Glen Dimplex New Writers’ Award). A collection of essays *Eyes in the Wood: Encounters with Poiesis* (collected theoretical and lyric essays) is forthcoming from Broken Sleep, 2025. Her pamphlet collection *Feeding Fire* (Spout, 2001) received an Eric Gregory Award in 2002. Selections of Eleanor’s poems have been translated and published in pamphlets and anthologies in French, Spanish, German, Lithuanian, Slovak and Romanian.

human social realm with the more-than-human/natural world. Our purpose is firstly to document the occasion itself, billed as “Poems from Port Cities” and run at the Ó Bhéal Winter Warmer festival 2022; secondly, to reflect on this recital-conversation, with a view to offering different innovative approaches to how poets, curators and audiences approach poetry events, and to conceptualize these event-external processes as parts of the event; and thirdly, to propose a critical approach to poetry events that conceives of them as co-constructed constellations for the integration of critical and philosophical thought with poetic language and perceptiveness. This, we hope, will be received as a proposal and a call for what we will call speculative poetry events; events that integrate poetry and thought, poems and critical interventions, and that practice a conversational rather than presentational or representational approach and is replicable by other cultural practitioners, organizations and funders.

Poems in Port Cities: Poetry from Liverpool and Cork organized for the Ó Bhéal Winter Warmer poetry festival in November 2022 as a hybrid event. It was conceptualized by Eleanor Rees and Cornelia Gräbner, curated by Cornelia Gräbner, sponsored by the research project Poetry and Politics II, and it included contributions from the poets Eleanor Rees, Greg Quiery, Mary Noonan, and Matthew Geden. “Poems in Port Cities” emerged from a process that had been started the previous year, with two events conceptualized and curated by Cornelia Gräbner and sponsored by Poetry and Politics II: one a round-table debate on practices of organizing and nurturing poetry scenes in Cork, Liverpool and A Coruña,¹ the second a showcase of poems and poets that emerged from these “poetry scenes.”² These events had been preceded by conversations between Cornelia Gräbner and Paul Casey, and they led to a series of informal conversations between Cornelia Gräbner and Eleanor Rees. Reflecting on the 2021 showcase, we realized that all these poems featured participants that were not audible within a lyrical framing of the poetry event that focused on the human voice: the more-than-human inhabitants of port cities, including animals, plants, the elements. Poetry readings or recitals focus by necessity on the human voice, so the question of how to create a poetry event that engaged with all these sounds, voices and vibrations – a necessarily speculative poetry event that moves towards the cosmopolitical, as Cornelia Gräbner argues in her contribution to this issue – turned out to be an engaging and welcome challenge.

¹ Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb0PhmbQDkI>

² Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PnumwrgZ5U>

In taking on this challenge, we first turned towards the reflective, analytical and intellectual. Critical philosophy and theory compel us to question our established practices, including the way in which we create, recite and present poetry, and run poetry readings, recitals and performances. We therefore decided to create an event that added a layer of critical reflection and self-reflection to the conventional sharing of poetry, through the selection of the poems as well as by asking poets to participate in a conversation to follow upon the recital. We firstly invited a group of four poets to critically think about their own poems, by asking them to select poems from their own work that referred to, or emerged from the experience of, port cities and surrounding shorelines. Thus, the four invited poets had to reflect on work they had previously written, moving away from lyrical self-expression and towards a reflection on their own spatial and experiential situatedness, and considering vibrational presences in their poems that they might so far have taken for granted. The poets were asked to submit their selection of their work to Cornelia Gräbner who, as moderator and curator of the event, created a list of themes based on this selection and to be addressed in the conversation-discussion and sent this list to the poets prior to the event itself. The event then consisted of the readings, moderated by Cornelia Gräbner with reflective comments on the overall themes after each poet's reading and the conversation-discussion between the four poets around the themes previously identified. This set-up is informed by the conviction that poets are public intellectuals as well as creators, and that thought and poetry, and poetry and politics, can be fruitfully intertwined.

It is also informed by a predilection for speculative thinking, experimentality, and adventure. None of us knew how this event was going to turn out. The poets knew each other only cursorily, if they had met at all, and they had not worked with each other before. Eleanor Rees had been part of the conception of the event; Greg Quiery, Mary Noonan and Matthew Geden were invited by Paul Casey and Cornelia Gräbner based on their work and experience, a process that Paul and Cornelia reflect on in the conversation-interview that is included in this special issue. The invitation to the event proposed an intellectual engagement that went far beyond the clearly boundaried time and space of the occasion itself. It demanded from the moderator / curator an ability to create a confluence, to hold a space, and to allow space within while also holding and directing a conversation-discussion that might go off into unexpected directions, and any responsible festival director would have needed to trust a curator or moderator to do just this.

The speculative and adventurous unfolded in an environment of trust. Few directors of poetry festivals would have been willing to take a leap into the speculative and experimental, as Paul Casey did. Due to her previous contact with the Ó Bhéal-trained poetry community, Cornelia was also certain that if any festival audience was going to be able to stick with potentially unpredictable poetic-intellectual dynamics *and* enjoy them, it was going to be the audience at the Winter Warmer.

The adventure went well. The experiment succeeded.

And because it did, we can now account for and reflect on the various components that constellated this experimental and speculative event in this special issue. We also build on, respond to, and develop the outcome of the experiment. We do so by way of this introductory essay, which responds to and explicates the conversations that preceded the event; by way of a recorded conversation between Paul Casey and Cornelia Gräbner, which reflects on its organizational and curatorial aspects, as well as the socially and culturally reproductive labor involved in the creation of a poetry event; by including a recording of the event itself; and by way of four lyrical essays, written by the participating poets after the event, in response to it.

In what follows in this unconventionally structured introductory essay, we will elucidate the thinking that informed the preparation and conceptualization of the event through the concept of the seedbed, especially the interest in the interplay between the human and the more-than-human in poetry from port cities, and the interest in different genres of poetry events.

Seedbed, One: Of Ports, Shores, and Poetries

When the narrator of Benjamin Myer's novel *The Offing* first catches sight of Robin Hood's Bay, he observes, "...how the sea served to remind of the finite existence of solid matter, and that the only true boundaries are not trenches and shelters and check-points, but those between rock and sea" (Myers 6). The "boundaries" between rock and sea are transitory spaces; are portals, where one element meets another and transitions into it. Water laps at rocks, grinding them down and taking their particles to different places. Water floods land, only to then release it back onto the dry. The wind plays with and rhythms these material transitionings.

Humans are tiny like a grain of sand when it comes to the force and extension of the elements. But we do like to travel on the water, along the shore or from shore to shore, leaving behind what we know and arriving at new, unknown places where we can re-invent ourselves, find ourselves, or delight in what we have only just discovered and do not yet know. Port cities

– human constructs which are perched on these boundaries – are nodal points in an intensified encounter between the elemental and the social. Docks, pontoons, jetties, sluices and harbor walls mark boundaries between land and water; boundaries which are almost always spaces of transition, rather than hard borders. Port cities are battered by storms and refreshed by a breeze, a relationship to air which immediately affects water. Socially, they are spaces in which languages and identities mix and merge. In creating this confluence, port cities are the loci of spatially actualized meetings of the social and the elemental. This confluence, we discovered during a poetry event at the Ó Bhéal Winter Warmer Festival in 2021, creates an inspirational force that marks and characterizes many poems created in port cities.

There is another side to ports and port cities; one that is linked to control and manipulation, destruction and imposition, extraction and exploitation, the slave economy, capitalist extractivism, neo-colonial projects like the Panama Canal and the rampant capitalism of free ports. While Eleanor and Cornelia were conversationally exploring the presence of the more-than-human in port cities, Cornelia was also involved in another series of conversations, with Greg Quiery. These conversations were sparked by the publication of Greg's collection *Oglet* and by a visit of a representative of the organization Maderas del Pueblo Sureste A.C., based in Mexico,³ to Manchester and Liverpool. In collaboration with the Liverpool Social Centre, meetings were organized with campaign groups like Save Oglet Shore⁴ and Save Rimrose Valley,⁵ as well as a public event. These encounters and conversations focused on how ports and shorelines are the objects of desire of capitalist managerialism, which often works hand in hand with, and at the service of, extractivism and exploitation.

Seedbed, Two: The Non-Human Irresistible

For Eleanor, the agency of the more-than-human was what drew her to the project. New materialist thought conceptualizes the non-human as an agential participant in human culture, in this case poetry, by collapsing the traditional boundary between culture and nature. Instead, the relation is thought as a continuum existing at multiple concurrent speeds, times and spaces. Importantly for our work here a new conception of the human subject is emerging which expands the liberal human subject to include the more-than-human in the constitution of the subject. Human subjectivity

³ <https://maderasdelpueblo.org/>

⁴ <https://speke8.wixsite.com/oglet>

⁵ <https://www.saverimrosevalley.org/>

here is then a vibration or voice resonance and idea which questions boundaries and understands agency as a ripple or fractal relation rather than a linear cause and effect. As the posthuman philosopher Rosi Braidotti writes the “The neo-materialist, posthuman turn positions terrestrial, planetary and cosmic forces, as well as naturalized “others” – animals, plants and the technological apparatus – as serious agents and co constructors of collective thinking and knowing.” (Braidotti 2024, xiv)

Recognizing the agency and vitality of more-than-human participant broadens the cultural understanding of how poetry comes to be written in a given place and time and also clarifies the role of the poet as a mediator of an expanded understanding of materiality through an expanded human subjectivity. Poetry becomes an encounter with the more-than-human as well as an encounter with other human voices. Yet the encounter with human social contexts will always be political. Existing in multiple times and spaces, these politics are not those of sameness, but of difference, recognizable as the multiple resonances present in the poetry reading or in the poem itself. In practice, the subject can be known in moments of disruption, when the resonance meets alterity, when the boundaries shift or alter as in the erosion of a seabed or the emergence of differences within a conversation. As a poet and thinker, Eleanor tries to attune to these moments of complex relation and use them as moments to enlarge the subject through spatial imagination into productive response. A recurrent and ongoing query which emerged from the project was how to understand the role of boundaries (understood as geographic and cultural) as both protective of the human subject in the face of capitalist extraction but also as productive of social change.

We explored this resonant space during conversations in the city of Liverpool and in New Brighton on the Wirral Peninsula, looking out at the Mersey’s docks, ferries and flows. In the context of a port city, the impact of globalized capital is visible at every turn including universities and cultural “industries,” and the situatedness informed the ways in which we conversationally developed our thought. Cornelia’s understanding of comparative literatures and politics enabled her to understand the similarities and differences between the status and value of poetry in multiple languages and cultures. Eleanor was inspired by the value given to poetry in Latin America and Cornelia was concerned with the marginal status of poetry in British culture in comparison. Although we both desired to step outside of the flows of capital, our conversation as academic and poet were framed by an understanding of the forces at play in our own subject positions as academic and poet employed in UK universities. We acknowledged a desire to create

cultural spaces which exist outside or parallel to the existing power structures but that this impulse is itself a result of our entanglement as poet and intellectual within the capitalization of these capacities. As Rosi Braidotti puts it,

Yet that same critique (new materialism) is also reactive, reflecting the epistemic accelerationism so constitutive of advanced capitalism – that is, a knowledge economy based on apprehending and capitalising upon the informational power of living matter itself, most notably its immanent qualities, self-organising capacity, and potential. Capital value today is constituted by the scientific and economic comprehension of all that lives. (Braidotti 2024, xii)

The collaborative, dialogic, conversational method of our thinking is an attempt to resist capture without falling into reactive patterns. It is certainly a method seen in new materialist research practices, and it is also a crucial element of a social practice of poetry, one which Joan Retallack highlights in her essay “What is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need It?”, which features in Cornelia Gräbner’s essay “Knowing Poetically.” The conversation as method and springboard is thus shared by several approaches that meet in this project – the New Materialism of the European New Humanities, the Historical Materialism that shaped social understandings of poetry in Latin American Studies and is now transformed by its encounter with indigenous cosmologies – and, because of its relationship to time and space, resists the strict, disciplinary temporalities imposed by current neoliberal managerial academic practice.

Seedbed, Three: Poetry, the Social, and the Cosmopolitical

While Eleanor and Cornelia were reflecting on the relationship between the more-than-human and the poetic, another series of conversations and events unfolded, between Cornelia Gräbner and Liverpool-based poet Greg Quiery, in the context of an activist event on the resistance against the expansion of what Keller Easterling has termed “infrastructure space” (Easterling 2014) and its destruction of spaces that do not function according to its managerial logic. Liverpool Social Centre Collective hosted a visit of a representative of the Mexican grassroots initiative Maderas del Pueblo Mexico to Liverpool, and organized meetings with local campaigns and grassroots groups Save Oglet Shore, Save Rimrose Valley, and Squash. Just prior, Greg had published his collection *Oglet*, which poeticizes the social and natural worlds that are meant to be disappeared under the plans of Liverpool city council, and denounces the mentality that drives the

destructive implementation of those infrastructural imaginaries are implemented for the profit of companies and the vanity of managers, as distinct to those infrastructures that have at heart the improvement of the lives of local and global populations. These conversations, and the publication of Greg's collection *Oglet*, emphasized that especially in port cities, the joyful and nurturing interplay between the human and the more-than-human, and the wellbeing of all forms of organic and spiritual life, is under acute threat from managerially constructed infrastructure space. The collective nature of the resistance to the managerial mentality and to the concrete projects in which it expresses itself, draws on ethical principles that are broadly shared by those who have the disposition to engage in the labor of social and cultural reproduction that nurtures poetry events and poetry scenes. Paul Casey articulates these principles in the conversation-interview, when he outlines how Ó Bhéal exercises the commitment to cultural democracy, by including the experiences and viewpoints of diverse groups, by creating what he calls an "ego-resistant platform," by fostering a culture of listening as well as speech, and by bringing together collectives of people who share a set of principles.

This approach of activating poetry within a field of social forces also informed the actual preparation for the Cork event. Before it, poets were invited to send a list of poems with a thought prompt that emphasized the collective nature of the encounter:

The themes of the event revolve around the ways in which, in your poems, you explore the relationship between the human and the non-human, specifically in settings or inspired by port cities and the surrounding landscapes. This could be rivers, shorelines, marshland, to give just a few examples. The event is a collaborative event, so the poems of each of you will relate to some aspects of the overall themes more than to others. Not only does this not matter, it will moreover enrich the event as collaborative events are made by the resonance of the various collaborators with each other. (Email 2nd November 2022)

After receiving the poems, Cornelia identified a list of themes that ran through them and that poets were invited to think about for the conversation:

- Ports and shorelines as portals / transitioning spaces. This can be transition between time periods (evoking people who have cohabited with that same seashore or sea at different times), the solid and the fluid (physically as in the transition between land and water, or metaphorically in terms of what can be comprehended, what is

unknowable, what can be sensed), and human/animal (especially birds)/plants/geology/topography

- Human activity in relation to the sea or rivers, especially buildings; mostly this is a gentle cohabitation or imbrication, except for the infrastructural impositions in Greg's poems;
- Sensation and perception;
- The non-human irresistible;
- A constant and multi-faceted – sometimes almost ethical -- reflection on how to *be*, how to conduct one's own existence in relation to the sea/river.

These preparatory prompts, in conjunction with the live ones offered as part of the moderation during the event, informed the conversation that followed the poetry reading. In her article "Knowing Poetically," Cornelia Gräbner develops an analytical response to *Poems in Port Cities* as a completed event and proposes to read it as a new poetry event genre, a "speculative poetry event."

The Aftermath: Reflections and Proposals

We could have ended when the Winter Warmer event was over, when the audience at the Winter Warmer moved on to the next element of the program, and when the online audience had logged off. Instead, we decided to invite a joined reflection that would be sparked and inspired by the topics we had touched on and tentatively explored during the conversation. The dynamics and insights within our encounter had opened a new way of thinking about the relationship between poetry and place, between poetry and philosophy, between poetic language and subjectivity. These we wanted to explore further, and we wanted to do it in the two modes that we had placed in dialogue during the event: the critical-reflective-poetic, and the critical-analytical-philosophical. We therefore decided to invite a series of pieces that would bring together these two strands and that respond to the "seed-beds" identified above: lyric essays by the participating poets, asking them to build on the experience of the readings and of the conversation; a conversation piece / interview between Paul Casey and Cornelia Gräbner, on the reproductive labor and the thoughtfulness involved in setting up and running of poetry events; and an analytical piece by Cornelia Gräbner in which she reads *Poems in Port Cities* as an example of a "speculative poetry event."

We asked poets to write a lyric essay in response to the event to create a mode of writing which situated the poets in their context and did not ask for generalized or overly abstract responses to the themes. The lyric essay foregrounds subjective ways of knowing in contrast to the conventions of the academic essay or the critical analytic essay. By allowing a first-person voice to lead a prose essay and to write speculatively around a theme, the relation to poetry is kept alive resonant and lively, and there is no risk of offering a reductive or deterministic account of a living creative practice. This is an emerging approach to research mostly found in creative practice-based arts and humanities, for example in the idea and practice of creative criticism in *Creative Criticism* (Benson and Connors, 2014). The essay is returned to its original literary purpose as a form of speculation and exploration. The term 'essay' is returned to a verb again and not a static noun. By valuing such writing, we try to avoid the capture of thought and interiority as cultural capital and instead, offer its vibrancy to readers as recognition of the living processes which inform creative thought and poetic expression.

All four essays included here take a lyric approach to writing about their relationship to the port city and to poetry as well as the reading itself. In *Oglet*, Quierly situates his reflections in the landscape of the threatened shoreline itself, beginning with lines from Hopkins which value diversity, the experience of silence and contemplation; a connections with the non-material however that is conceived and a desire to protect the diversity of the edgelands resonates as a desire to also protect precious spaces within human subjectivity. As he writes, "It is the culture of conservation, of those who would preserve rather than destroy. It is a culture that expresses the fierce attachment people feel, the commitment to the survival of Oglet and every living thing that thrives along that shore." Matthew Geden in "The Steam Rising" also connects his experience of poetry to a resonate sense of history, one which does not pass but continues to reverberate in the subjectivity of those that live as he begins, "I live in a town of ghosts. Kinsale, a harbor town on the rocky Cork coast, is a place with a complex history reflecting numerous changes of fortune over the centuries. "He also communes with the traditions of Irish poetry; by having coffee with Derek Mahon and reading poets as friends; as a conversation with voices which resonate across time. This non-linear sense of time he suggests is part of the experience of the landscape, "Ports are portals, places of transportation between worlds in many senses, not just the physical tangible spaces, but also the imaginative, the spiritual more abstract aspects of our lives. Histories shape not only the geography of a place, but also the mental landscape of the people, the superstitions and the unexplained sounds and shapes that

shift in the night." Mary Noonan in "Water, Dreams and Poetry" also describes the haunting which is poetry. Noonan's essay looks across the water into Europe reflecting on poetry in relation to psychoanalysis and the phenomenology of Bachelard. Noonan's reflections also consider the creation of subjectivity as a relationship to childhood, to readers, and literary culture and to her husband, the poet Matthew Sweeney whose work also draws on the logic of dreams. As Noonan concludes, "Poetry is the art of origins and endings, and water may be its primary medium." Eleanor Rees considers the experience of deciding on the poems for the reading and her experience of the zoom and online medium. Although the poems emerge from places in her locality, the reading is again a series of decisions and judgements made to produce a coherent subject and intellectual experience, even though the form of the poet, her body, is only present in the room as light and data. For Rees, this is a concern, but also a creative and communicative challenge. It is also an approach to poetry which resonates with the Welsh influence on the cultural context in which she writes, an understanding of poetry both ancient and modern; a mixture of times and places. In all the essays, poets are involved in the activity of producing subjectivity which is complex, an interiority made in relation to the external world, a habitat, or the more resonant, Welsh "cynefin," a term which translates as habitat into English but carries more complex meanings, suggesting our entanglement in layers of relationships, a place which exists and has a material presence as pattern, image and form, is as real as a road bridge or a dockland infrastructure, and needs to be nurtured, protected and celebrated like wildflowers as an inner life, a nuanced, folded and non-transparent subjectivity also under threat from ideas of selfhood too easily available for consumption and extraction.

Hopefully the work gathered in this special issue illuminates the multiple elements that make up a poetry event: the reproductive labor carried out by organizers, the preparation by curators, the writing and selection of poems to be included, the participation in the event itself, the curation or compering during the event, the reflection and analysis in its aftermath. Moreover, we hope that *Poems in Port Cities* will set a precedent for many more speculative poetry events to be organized; events that are a platform for poets to act as "radical epistemologists," as Joan Retallack puts it in an essay quoted in "Knowing Poetically."

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