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Safe Harbors, Attentiveness and Experimentation: Reflections on the Organization and Curation of 'Poems in Port Cities'

A Conversation between Paul Casey and Cornelia Gräbner

In this conversation / interview on 9th May 2024, Paul Casey, Director of Ó Bhéal, and Cornelia Gräbner reflect on the organizational context within which the event "Poems in Port Cities" was embedded, and on the values and standards of the curation. The organizational and curatorial process builds on a round table conversation organized by Cornelia Gräbner at the Winter Warmer 2021, on "poetry scenes", which featured Paul Casey as well as poetry organizers Dave Ward (Liverpool) and Yolanda Castaño (A Coruna).[1] This conversation articulated a shared understanding of "poetry scenes" as thoughtfully and intentionally created and nurtured cultural spaces, within which poets and poems can flourish and experiment, and

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Paul Casey's poems have recently appeared in *Local Wonders* (Dedalus) and in *The Irish Times*. His second collection *Virtual Tides* was published by Salmon in 2016. It followed *home more or less* (Salmon, 2012), and a chapbook, *it's not all bad* (Heaventree, 2009). His work has been published widely in international journals and anthologies, and has been translated into Romanian, Italian, Chinese and Galician. He edited *A Journey called Home* (Cork City Libraries, 2018), an anthology of poems and stories from immigrant writers in 20 languages, including translations. He teaches creative writing, curates the Unfinished Book of Poetry for teenage writers and he has promoted poetry in his role as director of Ó Bhéal since 2007. **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).

[1] Watch here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb0PhmbQDkI.

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within which "poetry" can be critically appreciated with attentiveness and patience, in dialogue with others and in a cooperative spirit. "Poems in Port Cities" was organized and curated on the basis of this shared understanding, and it was this understanding that enabled the experimental and speculative nature of the event.

In this conversation, Paul situates the event within the context of Ó Bhéal's activities and ethos. Both conversation partners refer back to previous conversations and co-organized activities that fed into the event. The conversation also draws on and develops several mutual interests: the commitment of fostering a culture of listening and of attentiveness through the engagement with poetry;[2] the identification and nurture of social and organizational techniques by which poetry environments are created and sustained; an ongoing exploration of, and reflection on, the poetics that emerge from and within the very specific environment of port cities and their surrounding shorelines;[3] and an appreciation of the importance of mutual trust for the hosting and curation of experimental, genre-breaking events.

Below is a transcription of the conversation, with minor adjustments for the sake of readability.

CG: We are here with Paul Casey, the director the poetry organization Ó Bhéal, based in Cork in Ireland. My name is Cornelia Gräbner, I'm the editor of this special issue, together with Eleanor Rees, and Paul is joining us because the event on which this special issue is based took place as part of the Winter Warmer Festival, which is a yearly festival organized by Ó Bhéal in Cork and online, as a hybrid event for the past few years. So welcome, Paul, and thank you for speaking to us.

To start us off I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about Ó Bhéal itself, and about the different kinds of projects that you do with Ó Bhéal and about the emergence of this event.

PC: Yes, sure. Thanks very much, Cornelia. I'm delighted to be involved. There is a lot to Ó Bhéal now, a lot more than there was when I started Ó Bhéal. It was really created to make a space for all kinds of poets and poetry, to show their work without any kind of genre discrimination, I suppose, or publication discrimination or anything like that. So it was about trying to

[2] See: https://poeticsofresistance.wordpress.com/2019/11/26/a-gathering-of-poetic-voices-in-cork-ireland-the-o-bheal-winter-warmer-festival/
[3] Watch here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PnumwrgZ5U

create a democratic space for poets to share their work, but also to be exposed to new kinds of work.

The majority of Ó Bhéal's work is in creating events, which run all around the year. We've been going for just over 17 years now, and our work kind of culminates in the Winter Warmer poetry festival at the end of November. There we usually have about 30-odd poets, over about 3 days. We also include various other kinds of art, like cross genre and collaborations between poetry and other art forms like music, like film, like theatre, sometimes dance even, and every year there's something new in there that hasn't been there before.

The poetry film side of it comes from a separate strand of Ó Bhéal. We have been promoting poetry films for the past 12-odd years. Now we run an international competition, the Ó Bhéal Poetry Film competition, which brings in entries from about 30 odd countries every year. Up to a 10-minute film can be included. There are submission guidelines for that, and there's a window of about four months for applying to that with your poetry film, and then those get judged and 30 shortlisted films get actually screened at the Winter Warmer Festival. The winner of the competition gets announced at the festival and they get a glass award that gets posted to them.

That's the poetry film side of it, which is also promoted in our regular events because we start our regular events by showing poetry films from the archive of all our competitions, and that gets people to come in a little earlier. It fills up seats before the actual poetry side of the events begin.

Most of our regular events have got four parts and start with the poetry films. Then we have a writing challenge, called the Five Word Challenge, which warms things up. Anyone who wants to can write a poem based on five random words that are thrown out by the audience. The winner then gets a few books and a free drink from the bar, and that kind of settles everyone's nerves, I think, especially if people haven't been there before.

After that, we have our guest poets. We always have at least two featured guests.They can be from anywhere in the world. We've had poets from all around. We've had over one thousand guest poets since we began, from literally every continent and from many, many countries.

You mentioned the hybrid model. We've moved hybrid since the pandemic and that allows us to include poets who we can't afford to bring out, fly them out, or more well-known poets. All you have to do then is pay them a fee for reading for 20 minutes online. We'll usually have one of the guest poets in person, at least one in person, so that there is someone physical there to see if you're coming out, because some people don't want to go to a hybrid event. If they can just tune in online and see the poets from home,

why should they have to go out and see someone online? So that's why we have to mix it. We have to make sure that there's both the online and the in-person and also, that there's an interactive element so that people can tune in from wherever they are in the world via Zoom, and actually take part in the Five Word Challenge.

Then there's an open mic at the end of the night, always after the guest poets. The future guests and anyone who is there is welcome to take part in that.

So most of what we do is centered around these events. We've got two international competitions. The one I mentioned is the poetry film competition. The second is the Five Words International Poetry Competition, which culminates at our anniversary event every April. The winners read at that event and they also get the awards, the prize money for that competition.

In terms of other projects that Ó Bhéal is involved in, the Unfinished Book of Poetry is quite a big one. That's where we work with secondary schools every year. We work with five different schools every year, with Cork City Schools that are within the city bounds. I coordinate a series of workshops for each school, so each school undergoes about nine workshops. It's usually about twelve to fourteen students from the transition year age group, so that would be about between age 14 and 15, over a four-and-a-half month period and I get a seasoned, well established published poets to go in and run a workshop in as exciting a way as possible, as diverse a way as possible. They really are a fantastic group of tutors that I work with. They go into each school, and they help the young people develop the poems over the four and a half months period, to edit them, to gather them and get them into me, and then I curate *The Unfinished Book*. That's the latest one right there. There is actually a digital version of this book on our website, so if you go into the 'unfinished book' at Ó Bhéal you'll be able to actually see the book in PDF form there as well.

So that's most of what we do. There are other, smaller projects; for example, we're involved with particular organizations throughout the year. For our event in January, we are part of the First Fortnight Festival. This is to do with mental health, especially in in the in the deep winter weeks, the darkest time of the year. That seems to be very popular.

Every February we work with the students from the University undergoing the Masters in Creative Writing, so we showcase their work. And in April, we have our anniversary events and in June, we're part of the Cork Harbor Festival. For that event, the challenge for me every year is to find poets who write about the sea or about maritime related themes, and to try

and make that as interesting an event as possible. It's a great festival, and it's great to be part of that. It's always an exciting one.

And yes, we've got twin City collaborations because Cork has got six Twin Cities and Ó Bhéal works with two of them, Coventry and San Francisco. We often send poets there, and they send poets to us.

That's the taste of it. There is more, but that would be most of it.

CG: So, you're working across a range of different ages, and with people in very different situations in their lives as well, don't you?

PC: Yes, absolutely. I've worked with a lot of elderly people, even during Biltema, the Irish Summer Festival during the month of May, which focuses on the elderly. For many years, I would take poetry into elderly homes and share poems with older people. We work with most age groups. Poetry is a universal language, it's supposed to be, anyway.

CG: And each age group finds their own joy and pleasure and challenge in it, don't they?

PC: Yes, absolutely.

CG: I wanted to move on to the Winter Warmer. You mentioned that is probably the largest event that Ó Bhéal organizes during the year, and it usually happens in November, just before winter starts, so that one can warm up emotionally.

One of the things that I've noticed about the Winter Warmer during the times that I've attended is the variety of different formats. You've already mentioned that briefly earlier on. Could you say a little bit more about that? You've got poetry in different languages, you've got different media, you've got people from different places. It's quite an experimental and wide-ranging festival, isn't it?

PC: It is. We always wanted the flavor of the festival. When I say "we", I mean there's a board of us. There are thirteen of us, and we sit and we discuss what the Winter Warmer is going to look like every year, and new ideas. It's easier when you've got a lot of creative minds in a room suggesting different possibilities, because we like to include new things in the Winter Warmer every year.

There is a kind of loose template structure to it, which gets repeated. We would have mostly poetry readings that would be in sets of three for

many years, and we've moved that to sets of two now, with the odd set of three. Where there is a set of three, we usually bring in a musician, because poetry and music work so well together and we also don't want to overload people with poetry. We want to keep it diverse, not keep the tone similar in any way, and that's why we go for the variety, especially of genre breaking form.

[There is] everything from experimental works, including sort of acoustic-related poetry to concrete-related poetry, where we can actually project the visual versions of those poems, and people can enjoy hearing and seeing at the same time. Sometimes poets want poetry films to be included in their reading, and we can include that as well.

We mentioned languages. We've often had up to ten languages in the same festival. Usually it's about four or five different languages, and there are a number of ways in which poets like to present their translation. Sometimes poets prefer to just read in both languages. Some poets prefer to only read in their native language, and for us to project English translations on the overhead projector, which we can do as well.

We're fairly flexible when it comes to how we use the media. We like the poets who are presenting to feel comfortable, to know that what they want to present is presented in the way [in which] they want it presented, so that they can really engage with the poetry without having to worry about any technical issues, as much as possible.

We've recently been outreaching to different smaller poetry groups, and sometimes will include Slam. A couple of festivals ago we included the final All-Ireland Poetry Slam, so that was a big event. There were people from all around the country coming to that.

In terms of outreach, as I mentioned, there are about five or six smaller poetry groups that exist around the city and in satellite towns near to Cork, and we like to include them in the festival as well. We like to showcase what else is going on around, so that there can be some kind of lateral support system.

There's no space for competition in our business. We all want to support each other and help everyone to grow and to create more choices for writers, to work hard and share it, and for them to experience other kinds of poetry as well.

CG: That cooperative spirit is for me something that really stands out; a communal spirit. And having attended many of the hybrid meetings, I've also noticed how welcome people who attend online feel, at the Winter

Warmer and also, at the poetry events that you that you organize regularly. We have spoken about this before.

What I was also impressed with at the Winter Warmer is that culture of attentiveness and of listening that is very special to the Winter Warmer, and that is related to that sense of collaboration and of cooperation. I don't know if you want to say a little bit more about that. How do you do that magic? How do you create it?

PC: Yes, thank you. Certainly a culture of listening is something that we've always been about. Since Ó Bhéal began we wanted to develop a culture of listening, to curate to it, to cultivate in younger writers especially the patience to listen, even if you don't understand what's going on, so that people are always learning and always taking on board other ideas without getting too locked into their own worlds. A lot of writers and poets suffer from that: they walk into a room, they want to read a poem, and they don't hear anything until they read their own poem. They just can't because there's too much going on inside their own heads, you know?

The culture of listening was there from the very beginning of Ó Bhéal, and to help that happen, what I thought would be a good idea was to create an ego-resilient platform. By that I mean that there isn't one personality or two personalities that are associated with the platform. I think that the great downfall of so many poetry events is that there are particular individuals and egos. That eventually gets to even the very best of them, they [people] can't avoid becoming jaded to some extent when it's the same person event after event after event introducing. Then it is *their* personality, the same small talk, you know. And my thought for that was to create or to cultivate a culture of MC's, a culture of comperes, a culture of emceeing. Of how to emcee well and respectfully, and a culture in which they would all learn from each other. We've been going for seventeen years, and at the moment we have at least a dozen ready and able and experienced MC's. Every time there's an event, the character of the event is different. It's a different person, but they know exactly what's going on and that goes a long way to transmitting the sense of inclusivity, the sense of democracy. And I think that is really what helps to cultivate the need for respectful listening.

There are so many factors that go into listening. But creating the environment in which that is the ideal outcome for people is respectful silence. You know, I love walking into a reading, just before you come, when you think there's no-one in the room, but you come into the room and it's absolutely packed. Everyone is just so quiet you could hang on every word of the reader, and the readers really appreciate that, because it means that all

the work they've put into their lines of poetry is really being taken on board. They're being considered, they're being chewed over, they're being read. Poets really feel that their work is being properly listened to. Whether it's good or not is up to individuals to decide, but it's given a good chance to be properly digested.

CG: It was in part due to that kind of culture of attentiveness and of listening that I approached you with these events that we organized about poems and port cities, and I've been I've been reflecting on that. There is the one that we are speaking about in this special issue, but also two events that we organized in the previous year, which we are mentioning in the special issue and which are linked but aren't the topic of it.

Part of my thinking especially behind the event *Poems and Port Cities*, which had a fairly substantial discussion attached to it, was that I wanted to create a speculative, or explorative event, an event in which poets also feature as thinkers, in this case about a particular space which is shared between Liverpool and Cork: shorelines and ports; that is, the actual port cities and the shorelines that surround them and into which the port cities often just kind of stretch out, that they extend into.

For me, that opportunity to organize that speculative poetry event was a very unusual opportunity. I don't think that so many festival organizers or curators would have necessarily welcomed such an event because it is an event which thinks about poets as intellectuals and as thinkers or, as Joan Retallack put it, as "radical epistemologists."

I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about your thinking about this, about this event and about this idea of having poets as poets, of course, but also as thinkers and as public intellectuals who again, aren't competing with each other but are coming together to think about and to find the language for situations which are important to our present moment.

PC: Yes, sure. Well, I found it a very exciting prospect ever since you suggested it, I must say, poets as thinkers but also, within the context of port cities. When I think of Cork as a port city – and I don't often think of Cork in those terms, but when I do, I realize that the port really is the lifeblood of Cork. It supports the city, it has been its whole lifeblood; for centuries there has been trade coming in and out of the city and the English market.

It's all centered there, and that is really the business of life, of the port city as a portal: a portal to the world, a portal to trade, a portal to anywhere in the world, you know, in the same way an airport is, but in a much more visceral way. An airport to me is like writing a poem on a computer, whereas

a port for me is like writing a poem on paper with a pen, because you've got the smell of the sea, you've got the sounds of the people, it's very busy, it's exciting. It's full of bustle and of life, and the sense of possibility is always just around the corner with a port city. A lot of port cities have that in common, that a port is a gateway to the Unknown, to the rest of the world. This is very exciting. It's about journeys and traveling, and even just the smell of the sea as well. It's much different to sitting in an airport.

I do love airports too, of course, but there's just infinitely more excitement in the port city. And for poets it's a smorgasbord of possibility in terms of all the different smells and the senses. It's an enormous sort of bouquet of potential to focus in on, and to write about. Perhaps there's too much choice sometimes for a poet in that kind of environment, and it is hard to focus, but it's one that poetic minds usually are very strongly drawn to. [So are] all minds which are less inclined to break things down into a structural view, or into a logical view or a rational view, but who have a view more akin to a holistic, human, experiential sense of what it is to live in those kinds of environments, and who wonder how they connect with other similar environments. Poets are the ideal people for doing that. Artists are, and poets, because they can express [verbally] what they're thinking. Most artists have to really rely on their own form to express fully what it is that they're feeling. A musician would do best with their instrument, or with their voice. But with poets it's with words, so they are ideal for this kind of event.

Also, from a creative standpoint it really opens up a new possibility in terms of seeing new potential, things that we haven't thought about before. When you put creative people together in a room and get them to look at something, poets in particular usually come up with some pretty amazing ideas.

CG: And the port city, of course, is not only about going away, which is one of its most exciting aspects. Of course, we also have histories of migration in our event. Greg Quiery, who himself came from County Down to Liverpool, mentioned that Cork and Liverpool have been linked to each other because of trade, but also because of the migratory movements in the past. Port cities are also havens for people who are travelling, who stop over, who stay, and who sometimes end up staying for a very long time. And they [port cities] are also welcoming spaces where even the people who don't travel, constantly encounter those who do travel.

PC: Absolutely. I remember Greg talking about that, that Liverpool was

one of the main stops for Irish emigrants from Cork, all throughout the 20th century. And there were masses of emigration here because there was just no work in Ireland. Most of the population went to England, and then America and Australia and Canada and other English-speaking countries mainly. But most of them ended up in England, and particularly in and around Liverpool and Manchester. Even down to Birmingham, Coventry, and London of course. With the huge Irish population that exists in Liverpool there would already be family connections there, preexisting the later migrations, so it's a particularly strong connection between Liverpool and Cork. We didn't have to struggle to find anything in common.

And yes, absolutely, I do like to see a harbor as somewhere which offers sanctuary, a place which offers a breathing space for poets and artists – who need that as well. That's what I feel Ó Bhéal and other poetry organizations are; they're like harbors. Cork's city motto, which comes with the coat of arms of the city, is 'A Safe Harbor for Ships,' 'Statio bene fide carinis,' in Latin. That's Cork's motto, and I feel that Ó Bhéal could have a motto like that: A Safe Harbor for Poets. And so the parallels are perfect.

CG: I just wanted to come back to something that I heard in what you said, which is about the imagination. From the ways in which you were evoking the port cities or harbors – they are wonderful for the imagination, aren't they? Because of the importance of the senses, because of the wide skies, because of the sea. One can let the imagination run free. Port cities and the shorelines around them invite that, and in academia, in more theoretical or critical thinking, that often gets blocked off, or gets demeaned, and one is invited to not engage so much with the imagination. Whereas if we think of poets as radical epistemologists, we would have to bring the imagination back in, wouldn't we?

PC: We should, and all the universities should bring the imagination space straight back in. Look, I also love this with the port city: There is the choice to turn left and to be with people and to spend time with them, and then there is the choice to turn right and walk along the beach and be by oneself with nature. All of these possibilities are in the same space, which is very attractive for people in general, but particularly for creatives, because we all need time alone and we all need time with people as well. I think we're fortunate, we're very lucky.

CG: I wanted to come back to one detail, from the context of the organization of the event. We put together four poets who didn't really know each

other very well. Greg Quiery and Eleanor Rees had met briefly and knew *of* each other but didn't really know each other. I think Mary Noonan and Matthew Geden had also met before but hadn't worked together in in any way.

I invited Greg and Eleanor, and then I asked you for a recommendation of two poets from Cork or the surrounding shoreline areas, and you recommended Mary and Matthew. We've never reflected about this process, nor spoken about why we invited those four.

I just trusted your judgment. I didn't know their work. I thought, if Paul suggests them, then I'm sure that it's the right choice, and it was very exciting for me because it meant I got to know their work. I was just wondering if you could expand a little bit on why you invited those two.

PC: Sure. Well, aside from them being fantastic poets who I admire very much. We're so lucky in Cork with the sheer volume of quality writers, poets in particular. There are so many of them here that I could have literally put all their names into a hat and taken the first two names out of that hat and said these two, and it would have been just as interesting in a different way.

I didn't have to worry too much about the curation. Obviously, there's gender, but also, I was going to look for someone with a bit more experience. International experience, as in being able to speak to relationships of distance and of what is far and away, so to speak, of what's at home and abroad. And so I was looking for a couple of poets with a bit more experience, and Mary and Matthew just came to mind very, very quickly. Also, they have poems about the sea and about ports. They also, of course, both have an academic background as well, so they would be able to balance, if you like, between those different worlds, and create something interesting with Eleanor and Greg, which they did. I think it worked out really well.

CG: Yes, and they were all very open to combining these different modes of thinking and different modes of observation. And there were fantastic resonances amongst the four, which I hadn't anticipated, and which emerged during the ways in which they introduced their poems in the live event.

That, too, was something that I was reflecting on afterwards: the live event. You spoke previously about compering, but [I was also thinking] about the ways in which poets introduce their work, often on the spur of the moment. It's just not something you can get in a book of poetry, is it? And that changes the dynamic of the poems, would you agree with that?

PC: Look, I think a poem is different every time it's read, and every time it's listened to, and I also think, like many do, that the reader or the listener completes the poem. It's something that is proposed by the writer, received by the listener, and then completed in the imagination of the listener in their digestion of it. They complete the poem.

So the poem is different every time, and when you're reading it from a page, you certainly have very, very little sense of who the person is behind the poem. You're just relying on the words, and that is a rich and beautiful experience in itself. But as you say, once you've got the poet within a context of discussion and then bring the poems into that, it offers new dimensions to the listener and to the reader that they would not have access to. Absolutely, it's a much richer experience.

And I love to have conversations around the works whenever possible, but then some poets get carried away with that. You give them twenty minutes reading time and they spend five minutes introducing their first poem and you think, are we going to hear any poetry here? There's a balance to be had. But it's important to have these platforms where it's not just a reading, where we're not just there to listen to the poetry, but we're there to learn about the decisions made by the poet and who they are, why they're writing about this. It can be a lot more fruitful than just reading or listening to the poems. I think we should have more events like it.