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"Song-Song Stare": Maggie O'Sullivan's Ritual Listening in Poetry and Performance

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from research in the field of creative writing, this poetics essay explores performance and ritual in the work of Maggie O'Sullivan. I focus on sound poetry and listening to explore some of O'Sullivan's ritual techniques of transformation. Following O'Sullivan's 'mattering of material,' I elucidate some of the processes of ritual, embodiment and ecological relation which she makes use of in her poems and performances. I bring concepts from ritual theory and performance studies into play with O'Sullivan's poems and sound texts. Ritual techniques are used by O'Sullivan to transform the material of language and open up a liminal potential of poesis, a making anew in language or a sensual re-enchantment. These ritual techniques include fragmentation and re-composition of language into new material, the use of rhythm and repetition in a poem to create a resonant 'pulsing' and approaches which emphasise the embodied connections between those present in the space of the poem and their ecological interrelation. O'Sullivan makes poetry a medium for transformation where language becomes 'an active physical presence in the world', creating the possibility in performance of a liminal 'space of undiminishment', a poesis which opens our ears to 'other-than-(as well as human)-sentience' (in Olsen 204). The essay asks what new openings might be possible in the field between embodied arts and poetry.

KEY WORDS: Ritual, performance, performance poetry, poetry, poetics, Maggie O'Sullivan, embodied practice, creative writing, experimental poetry, ecopoetics, intermedia, live poetry, embodied methodology, British Avant Garde poetry.

1 Nia Davies is a poet experimenting with embodied practice and performance. She completed practice-based Ph.D. research into ritual poetry in 2021. Her publications include *All fours* (Bloodaxe, 2017), editorship of the journal Poetry Wales (2014 – 2019) as well as several pamphlet and performance projects. *All fours* was shortlisted for the Roland Matthias Prize for Poetry in the Wales Book of the Year poetry category in 2018 and longlisted for the Michael Murphy Memorial Prize for First Collections in 2019. She co-curated Poetry Emergency festivals in 2018 and 2019 and has also worked on several intercultural translation projects such as Literature Across Frontiers and and Cyfnewidfa Lên Cymru/Wales Literature Exchange. She lives in Wales/Cymru. Her second collection of poems will be published by Bloodaxe in 2024.

1. A poesis: O'Sullivan performing in Glasgow

A poetry reading in a packed bar in Glasgow, dark and humid. We are listening to a poet reading on stage and the listening is beginning to feel like dancing. This is poet and artist Maggie O'Sullivan performing in October 2016, in the venue 'Poetry Club' under a railway arch at the end of the symposium Outside-in/Inside-out, a 'Festival of Outside and Subterranean Poetry'.

Reading her poetry from the page, O'Sullivan builds up a rhythm with her voice, clearly sounding the words, phonemes and fragments of language she has assembled in her poems. The style is not untypical of O'Sullivan's performances, some of which you can hear in recorded readings, but I find this one particularly absorbing to listen to. Her poems are choppy with about-turns that surprise a listener with unexpected sounds and images. She emphasises the distinct sonic texture of the language, clearly pronouncing the rhythm of syntax. Sitting on the floor of the mezzanine above, I feel immersed in the poems' sonic and semantic fields. Her reading seems to create a unique sonic and kinaesthetic energy in the room which emerges from the poetry itself and her vocalisation. The meaning gestured to in the poetry is often material, embodied and ecological in nature, although there is no determined or fixed message in these poems but dynamic open-ended pieces to become immersed in. I soon feel I am moving along to the sound text of the poems as if to music.

The room is crowded and includes some of O'Sullivan's fellow travellers in the world of experimental poetry – particularly poets experimenting with embodied, ritual and performative poetry; Jerome Rothenberg and Charles Bernstein are here, for example. Many others seem as rapt as I am, as O'Sullivan enunciates the tumbling shapes of her words and neologisms, sounding the jagged corners and rushes of each piece of language carefully. Her voice seems responsive to us; I am listening so intensely that it feels as if my rhythms are synchronising with the poet's speech. Perhaps this is a form of *resonance* in that we begin to vibrate together in the midst of this altered and altering language.

Poetry readings do not often live up to the potential of such performance. It is all too common for the conditions of these events to interfere with the kind of careful listening poetry

requires. But when a reading is resonant like O'Sullivan's performance here, we will remember the poetry as an encounter of an embodied nature. Such a sensually intensive form of listening might be experienced as pleasure and/or challenge.

I think of this bright and altering moment in poetry and language art as poesis. For me, poesis is the making anew in language, the moment new poetry is created or made possible. There are many routes towards poesis but in my practice and research I am interested in the embodied, relational and enactive techniques that bring poesis about and which O'Sullivan demonstrated so vibrantly in Glasgow in her ritual of listening. In my recent practice-based research in poetry and poetics, I have been drawing on ritual practice, performance studies and anthropology to consider the uses of ritual in poetry.[1] In Glasgow I wondered, if O'Sullivan makes a ritual out of the poetry reading, how does her approach and practice bring about poesis?

2. Poetry of ritual

Such poesis, or any kind of transformational moment in art, is rare and can never be expected or guaranteed to emerge by those who desire it. But, as Ben Spatz and others in performance studies have shown (Spatz, *What a Body*; Spatz, *Blue Sky Body*), techniques of embodiment and performance can be studied in a concerted practice. Thus, I study the techniques of ritual and performance practice and theory in order to understand how poesis may unfold and invigorate writing, reading and performance. My study of ritual poetry is a poetics – in Robert Sheppard's term – a writerly discourse and cycle of practice oriented towards the making of new forms of writing (Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics*).

I define ritual as an embodied, material and relational process of enaction; ritual is enacted with the intention of creating new meaning. I follow Ronald L Grimes's idea of ritualisation as that which "transpires as animated persons enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places" (*Beginnings* 60). Following Victor Turner's theory of the rites of passage, ritual is often thought of as a process that involves movement in relation to thresholds:

1 My research is in the field of creative writing and the doctoral thesis (2021) that I draw on in this essay is primarily practice-based research (Smith and Dean, *Practice-led Research*) using poetry, embodied practice (Spatz, *What a Body Can Do*; *Blue Sky Body*) and poetics (Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics*) as well as literary study as my methods. My study of O'Sullivan's ritual poetry then has been primarily an exercise in creative practice and poetics, researching the technique that structures poetry practice (as in Spatz, *What a Body Can Do*).

the passing of zones in space and time to mark change (Turner 95-96). Such thresholds might be spatiotemporal boundaries or thresholds relating to that which is yet to have been done, such as pushing an embodied action beyond its previous limits. For example, a ritual may test or pass a pain barrier, play with the limits of materiality or be a rite of passage to mark cyclical events or important transitions. In Grimes's creative sense of ritualisation, any event, process or idea can be made into a ritual with intention and ritual process. It follows then that a poetry of ritual is full of diverse manifestations; I have observed and experimented myself with many different ritual techniques.

In this essay I want to focus on the techniques of ritual related to sound and listening in live performance of poetry, as in O'Sullivan's performance in 2016. In O'Sullivan's most resonant readings language itself becomes a medium of generative poesis. Her poetry performances invite listeners to become newly aware of our embodied ecological lives through the poetry itself and together as listeners we enact an iteration of the poem's life cycle.

3. 'Undiminishment': Fields of Ecological Poetry

Born to an Irish family in Lincolnshire in 1951, O'Sullivan was active on the Avant Garde poetry scene in London in the earlier part of her life, attending and collaborating with the Writers Forum of Bob Cobbing and other experimental networks, before moving to West Yorkshire where she still lives and works.[2]

The landscapes of the northern moorland environment and its inhabitants are everywhere in her later poems, with concerns for the other-than-human, ecological and environment central from the beginning of her work. In an interview with Redell Olsen, O'Sullivan states this: "the celebration of the transformative, merciful intelligences and energies of animals is in all my work" (in Olsen 204). O'Sullivan's poetry often seeks to undo the binaries of human/animal and other hierarchies, writing in the same interview that the 'exploitation and violation of other-than-human beings underpins our society and is embedded at every level in our h/arming hierarchies' (204).

2 Active across several media including visual art and sculptural assemblage, O'Sullivan's publications include *In the House of the Shaman* (1996), *red shifts* (2001), *Palace of Reptiles* (2003), *Body of Work* (2006), *WATERFALLS* (2009), *murmur – tasks of mourning* (2011) and most recently *courtship of lapwings* (2021). She is the editor of *Out of Everywhere: an anthology of contemporary linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America and the UK* (1996). *The Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan* from 2011 collects essays by contemporaries on her work and includes interviews. Several recordings of performances are collected on the PennSound website: http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/OSullivan.php.

It is possible then to see O'Sullivan as part of a field of ecopoetics. The term is contested, but I want to talk here about *ecology* as this wide field of interrelation between organisms in the natural world which includes the human. Ecopoetics is described by Jonathan Skinner, in a conversation with Harriet Tarlo on definitions, as a field which aims to "broaden our imagination of the work of poetry to the scale of the earth"; where we are "rethinking home and place in an expanded field, in the turbulent space of a world-ecology" (Skinner and Tarlo 67). Tarlo's work on the field of "radical landscape poetry," which is different but related and overlapping with ecopoetics, foregrounds an experimental poetry where "there is a poetic displacement of the anthropocentric view" (Tarlo 19). In this poetry, language is the experimental medium to explore concern and care for the whole ecosystem's flourishing. O'Sullivan's poetry, for example, brings forth that which is silenced or erased in an ecology. Tarlo writes that in "O'Sullivan's work, it is possible to see nature moving from its position as resource or thing in order to become an agent in the production of knowledge, a position traditionally denied it" (Tarlo 19).

I would argue that one of the ways that O'Sullivan makes ecology or nature an 'agent in the production of knowledge' is to use techniques such as performance and ritual to bring the listener-readers into closer embodied contact with that natural "knowledge". O'Sullivan replies to Olsen's question about the 'place' of the page as a "place of transformation". I would understand this to also include the place of performance, listening, or the sound text of the spoken poem as an expanded idea of the page. Such a *place* for O'Sullivan is

> a place of damage, savagery, pain, silence: also a place of salvage, retrieval and recovery. A place of existence, journeying. A sacred space of undiminishment. Of dream. Of ritual. Of magic. Also a "re-constituting-as-being-heard" in the sense that as we hear, we also are heard in an intertwining of potential exchange of hearing-(being)-heard of other-than-(as well as human)-sentience (in Olsen 204).

So ritual is a conscious part of her approach to the poem as a "sacred space of undiminishment" involving the "intertwining of potential exchange" with the "other-than-(as well as human)-sentience" of the world (204).

4. 'Muscular activity' Fields of Ritual poetry

O'Sullivan draws on a history of poets experimenting with ritual, performance, sound and other media.[3] In experiments in the 1960s and 1970s, poets brought language art into contact with other media such as performance. Dick Higgins's 'Intermedia' in 1966, for example, is indicative of how, in the 1960s, poets had begun experimenting across media. The work of the British Avant Garde which O'Sullivan emerged within, (Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying*), was connected with other poetry scenes involved in performance and ritual such as European sound poetry scenes, North American poetries related to LANGUAGE poetry and Latin American arts, most notably in Chile where performance is still central to contemporary poetry and poetics (Bernstein; Pujol-Duran).

Jerome Rothenberg's poetry, assemblages and ideas were 'key' to O'Sullivan (Palace 68). Rothenberg's "ethnopoetic", and then "omnipoetic", collections, such as *Technicians of the Sacred* (1967), *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972) and *Symposium of the Whole* (1983) are assemblages and studies of ritual poetry with many rich examples of ritual texts as poems drawn from a wide variety of eras and cultures. Rothenberg describes a turn in poetry towards "ritual models" and performance in a 1977 talk:

> Nearly a century after Dada,[4] a wide range of artists have been making deliberate and increasing use of ritual models for performance, [this] has swept up arts like painting, sculpture, poetry (if those terms still apply) long separated from their origins in performance … [JR's elision] The performance/ritual impulse seems clear throughout: in "happenings" and related event pieces (particularly those that involve participatory performance), in meditative works (often on an explicitly mantric model), in earthworks (derived from monumental American Indian structures), in dreamworks that play off trance and ecstasy, in bodyworks (including acts of self-mutilation and endurance that seem to test the model), in a range of healing events as literal explorations of the shamanic premise, in animal; language pieces related to the new ethology, etc (*Eye* 208).

3 For example in her poetics 'Riverunning Realisations' (Palace) and in interviews (Thurston; Olsen) she has stated connections and inspirations as Kurt Schwitters, Charles Bernstein, Jerome Rothenberg, Bob Cobbing, and Cecilia Vicuña.

4 To avoid confusion, I would note that this talk was originally made in 1977 but Rothenberg reprinted and edited it for *Eye of Witness* in 2013, almost a century after Dada.

Rothenberg here describes works which move between media, are continuous with performance traditions and often involve altered states of perception or transformation. Such ritual poetries blur the boundaries between subject and object or art or life or between audience and performer and emphasise embodiment, relation to the earth and animals, as a 'new ethology' (Rothenberg, *Eye* 208).

As Rothenberg mentions above and elsewhere (Rothenberg and Rothenberg, Symposium of the Whole), poets have been experimenting with ritual and performance since the beginning of recorded history,[5] but the turn to ritual and performance in the 1960s and 1970s was notably active. At this time, we also see ritual in the laboratory theatre of directors such as Jerzy Grotoski, Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba as well as in new works of performance art, movement and dance. German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichter has termed this burst of activity the *second performative turn* (Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*; Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power*).[6] Performers experimented with ritual spacetime, sound, smell, movement, rhythm, audience provocation, liveness, bodily mortification and pain and unusual use of materials and reversals. They enacted thrilling re-imaginings and alterations of the traditional theatre models of the proscenium and narrative drama. Their techniques brought to the fore of the spectators' attention their own embodiment and agency, as well as their role in the generation of the performance (*Transformative Power*). Fischer-Lichte's history of performances that use ritual techniques allow her to identify processes of what she terms the *autopoetic feedback loop* and the *re-enchantment of the world*. These are concepts I will return to in thinking about O'Sullivan's poetry.

At the centre of these turns to "ritual models" in a poetry context in the UK was Bob Cobbing (1920-2002), who was important to O'Sullivan's development as a poet and artist. In "Some Statements on Sound Poetry", Cobbing describes a sound poetry reading with group voicing:

> Communication is primarily a muscular activity. It is potentially stronger than everyday speech, richer than those monotonous seeming printed words on the page....
>
> Say 'soma haoma'. Dull. Say it dwelling on the quality of the sounds. Better. Let it say itself

5 The temple hymns of Enheduanna (fl. 23rd Century BC) in ancient Sumer and the poets composing drama for the Theatre of Dionysus in ancient Athens are some of the earliest records of poetry and also rituals. Historical uses of ritual then reoccur through all periods of the history of poetry. Movements which included interest in ritual, such as Romantic and Modernist poetries, have not been the focus of my study which focuses on contemporary lineages.

6 According to Fischer-Lichte, a first 'performative turn' took place in the first decades of the twentieth century when artists also drew on ritual culture, (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*).

> through you. Let it sing itself through you. The vowels have their pitch, the phrase has potential rhythms. You do it with the whole of you, muscular movement, voice, lungs, limbs. Poetry is a physical thing. The body is liberated. Bodies join in song and movement. A ritual ensues.

My research has been a process of understanding how this ritual ensues and how poets bring about this poesis.

5. Ritual poems: 'Narcotic Properties' and 'Theoretical Economies'

I want to look closely at how "a ritual ensues" (Cobbing) in O'Sullivan's poems. I cannot refer to the poems O'Sullivan read in Glasgow as a recording was not reproduced, but I can show some of these qualities of O'Sullivan's work on the page through reading aloud and listening to recordings of readings.[7] Two poems in her collection *Palace of Reptiles* (2003), "Theoretical Economies" and "Narcotic Properties" seem to involve fragments of a ritual for example.

We can think of the poems as closely interlinked, in fact they have been merged together in error in the 2003 collection *Palace of Reptiles* with parts of their order confused (Email Correspondence). I first noticed in 2018 that a recording of these poems, made at Willowdale, Ontario The Gig in 2003 was different from the published poem which comes alongside "Theoretical Economies" in *Palace of Reptiles*. Upon enquiry with O'Sullivan and Scott Thurston we discovered that the two poems had been mixed up in error in the publication and O'Sullivan had not noticed this until this point (Email correspondence).

Perhaps this confusion is not surprising given that these poems correspond to dispersed art works. That is, at the time of writing, the materials for O'Sullivan's art and assemblages were yet to be unpacked after a move to the countryside.[8] The poems seem to gesture to specific works and processes of making but it's not determined if these are imagined works, already-made or yet-to-be made pieces. The image on the cover of *Palace of Reptiles* does seem to correspond to some of the

7 See PennSound's Maggie O'Sullivan webpage for a collection of recorded readings n.d. Web. http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/OSullivan.php Accessed 1 Oct 2022.

8 In the introduction to a reading of "Theoretical economies" at Willowdale Ontario in 2003, O'Sullivan speaks about this: Pennsound "Maggie O'Sullivan" http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/OSullivan.php Accessed 1 Oct 2021.

materials mentioned in these poems. 'Theoretical Economies' and "Narcotic Properties" are thus steeped in a process of making across media. "Narcotic Properties" begins:

> PLACE A SMALL PALE-CREAM BOWL (TO SIGNIFY
>
> abundance)
>
> (Palace 15)

Lead animals are to be laid out, cleaned carefully and placed without overcrowding; a preparing of space typical to ritual. The list of these animals forms a chant or litany for a section of the poem and a momentum is built up, accelerating briefly, before breaking off. A ritual seems present here, but this is not a clear description of an intentional passage of thresholds, where one might move through the "rites of passage," as ritual theorists such as Victor Turner lay out.[9] Following Arnold Van Gennep (1909), Turner described rites of passage in which ritualists would pass through distinct phases for the sake of transformation. In this theory, a preparatory separation is the first phase, followed by a crossing of thresholds into a spacetime of transition where normal rules are reversed or suspended and a ludic state of play, playfulness and inversion brings about *liminality*, a spacetime "betwixt and between" (Turner 95). These rites of passage would be followed by a closure threshold and a re-incorporation into the community as a person with a changed status. Turner coined the term *communitas* for the intense feeling of bonding that emerges from people enacting together in the liminal (Turner 94-95).

There are poets who use or play with such spatiotemporal thresholds of ritual in their work, for example, the performances and writings of NourbeSe M Philip's 2008 *Zong!* and or Bhanu Kapil's rituals of borders and sites of violence in *Ban en Banlieue* in 2015. However, in these poems, O'Sullivan's movement is not a linear crossing of thresholds through separation, liminality and re-incorporation. "Theoretical Economies" and "Narcotic Properties" instead seem to enter into the liminal chaos of the upside-down world of fragmentation: "middles-a, haunts-a, tops-a, folds-a"

9 Theories of ritual can be found across a wide range of cultural and anthropological studies, from the works of Nietzsche, Robertson Smith, Frazer, Van Gennep, Durkheim, Mauss, Levi-Strauss and the Cambridge Ritualists such as Harrison, to Mead, Malinowski, Douglas, Eliade, Turner, Geertz, Leach, Tambiah, Rappaport, Campbell, Goffman and Schechner and more. For a discussion of the 'over-theorisation' of ritual theory see Catherine Bell's two studies (Ritual Theory; Ritual Perspectives) and for a recent summary of these debates see Grimes (Endings). Fischer-Lichte's 2005 discussion of this theoretical history is also useful for studies in an artistic context (Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual).

(16). There is no neat re-incorporation back into the shared meaning of a community as in Turner's rites of passage. Perhaps these poems are processes in line with "ritualisation" (Grimes, *Beginnings; Endings*), a process that is not yet complete, may be turned on its head, or played with in an ongoing cyclical creative process.

So, instructions for action are given but fragmented. Animal energies are invoked and lingual chaos opened up: "Unfixed/ Song-Song Stare…" (20). Despite the flurry of movement, care is given to the materials mentioned. The poem instructs, "WASH THESE LEAD ANIMALS WITH songerings-a-rung, a-chant, a roughly/ unsway /& stirs" (16). More instructions ensue – to dry the animals carefully and later to "throw talk over the lead animals" (17). Whether these imperatives *are* instructions, intentions or suggestions, notes to self, or half-torn directives of a ritual, O'Sullivan leaves open.

Later, the poem suggests lighting a match to a blood stain at the centre of a white cloth which then crumples and implodes. It is not specified where this blood springs from and this uncertainty charges the poem with the presence of a wounded body,

> WATCH AS THE STAIN IGNITES AND
>
> SPREADS EVER MORE OUTWARD TO THE EDGES OF THE WHITE CLOTH
>
> (17)

The ritual letting of blood and fire lighting are common tropes of ritual. Substances like these, as well as earth and other material and bodily interventions, were often used by artists in the 1960s and 1970s in the performative turn such as in the works of Ana Mendieta, Marina Abramovic, Hermann Nitsch and Joseph Beuys (Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power*). Beuys was an influence on O'Sullivan (in Thurston 247). Fire, blood and earth also recalls Rothenberg's description of artistic 'ritual models' (*Eye* 208). These substances and methods draw attention to the materiality of the body, earth and relationality, bringing corporeality and community, and sometimes mortality, to the fore of the spectators' awareness (Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power*).

In O'Sullivan's poems here, fire, blood and bodily matter, including animal body, animate the text. These, as well as other ritual acts of cleansing, preparing, naming and 'throwing talk over' the

animals, remain enigmatic as to any clear symbolic meaning and are often broken off or stranded in the commotion of the liminal. Snatches of action, chant or rhythm and song fly in and out of the poem's soundscape. We are brought up close to the body, to listen to the sounds of animals in flight, with hints of violence perceptible.

Sound is a crucial part of the sensual field of the poems. In recordings of O'Sullivan's readings, the following part comes fast as a clatter of hooves:

SOLSTITIAL, STRUCK-NINE

(whatll wattle wambs

wha

white

whe

who)

(*Palace* 21)

It's as if the animals have kicked up particles of material into the air in a dust cloud of language that is yet to settle. The end of "Theoretical Economies" in the publication, but what should have been the end of "Narcotic Properties", reads:

RED

BEES

APART

owl-sha

conks clays-under splashing. Abundance. weeps.'

(21)

"Abundance" recalls the beginning of 'Narcotic Properties', the bowl placed to signify abundance (16). "Abundance. weeps" seems to mourn for an other-than-human voice, a cry for the "HIDDENFULS UNHEARD" (18). We are listening in to unheard parts of animal language and the sounds of the "were-loud" ecosystem (21). Perhaps this is a mourning ritual. But some energy or particles of these creatures might linger in the air to be reassembled and transformed anew from

lifeless lead into another material. That is, some of what is "gone" (21) might remain as traces for the next cycle of poesis.

We are being invited to consider our animal kin. The final line suggests this as a transformed sense of kinship: "KINSHIP OOZED OUT OF SHAPE BLUE/ matter" (Palace 18). Perhaps we are moving into *communitas*: the transition phase of the ritual liminal that Turner wrote theorised (Turner 96). But this liminal chaos has an edge, it is not only the playful ludic world of reversals of Turner's theory wherein the ritualist is safely returned to their community with a changed status. In a poem "Vienna Blood", Jerome Rothenberg once directly cautioned Turner about the chaos possible in the liminal: "Communitas/ (I meant to tell you)/ is Holy Terror" (*Eye* 294). This resonates with O'Sullivan's poems as the liminal zone she has created here feels risky, perhaps because of violent imagery of wounding and pain. Bones and flesh feel exposed and sensitive; something living is undergoing destruction, animals coldly being taken apart and dispersed into a violent market:

> (& so the BONES go on in silence, violated often)
> BY DEALS
> DISPERSING SKULLS INTO
> BASKETS. ADDITIONS. ORPHANS. CARCASSES.'
> (*Palace* 17)

Recall that blood is spreading from who-knows-where. A body, humanimal, is very present and vulnerable:

> LISTEN AS THE SKEWERED TRAMPLING OF THE DOOMED
> ANIMALS ear into nethery Singes, Neighed-at's,
> all knuckle-noised,
> were-louds, mouth,
> mouth & proves
> Unfixed
> Song-Song Stare
> stood-like

fist-on-breath

finger-on-brain

madder bled meat. maddled,

(20)

An exposure seems to leave open the flesh of the brain, vulnerable to a finger or to 'madder bled meat' (20). The liminal of fragments in commotion is dangerous and subject to transformation, poesis.

6. In the Loop(s) of Performance: Poetics of Transformation

Although in these poems there is no neat re-incorporation from the liminal stage back into a stable community of shared symbolic meaning, as in Turner's rites of passage (95-97), I might suggest that O'Sullivan's liminal fragmentation is a creative poesis. As in much of her poetry, new words and utterly original combinations of language and sounds are made from recombining fragments of language and traces of destruction. In the liminal process, language is made unfamiliar, volatile but also malleable, transformed and possibly transforming.

Transformation is O'Sullivan's intention, as explored in *In the House of the Shaman* (1993). And in a poetics work 'Riverunning(Realisations' (2003), O'Sullivan lists some of her methods, interests, purpose and thematics. A 'mattering of material,' is a principle that is important to her (*Palace* 65):

Collaborations / Liberations /

VISION / MYTH / RITUAL /

Words, Breath,

Divergence & Multiplicity, my tend sees errant, Vulnerable

Chanceways –

BECOMING

Strains of Lament & Desire

& Perpetual Strong SONG –

(*Palace* 64)

Ritual here is placed alongside vision and myth, this is linked to the body, "words, breath", processes of "perpetual" becoming. O'Sullivan is conscious that her work is close to song and there is a less-definable errancy suggested too, of 'Vulnerable Chanceways –'. In an interview with Scott Thurston, O'Sullivan touches on her intentions around transformation, hinting at what a 'mattering of material' might be:

> I think language is essentially transformative. Transformative power, ability, essence is inherent in language, all languages. I think by working with language one can tap into this and use it, by making it more visible, more of an active physical presence in the world. (in Thurston 247).

O'Sullivan seeks to transform all kinds of material, paralleling in language the way her influence Joseph Beuys worked with materials such as fat and felt (see O'Sullivan's *In the House of the Shaman*). O'Sullivan's is a transformation of language and its material so that words and sounds can become an "active physical presence in the world" (247).[10] Performance is one way to transform language through the embodiment of sharing spoken words among listeners. In performance the speaking poeticking body of the poet and her listeners, as well as the "other-than-(as well as human)-sentience" (in Olsen 204) in the poetry are the material made to matter. The reading event becomes a poesis, an activation of the poem's lifecycle so that "in the listening, seeing and inhabiting, the audiences are taking part in the construction of the work" (in Thurston 245).

In a performance like the one in Glasgow, O'Sullivan's *mattering* took the form of sounding and resonance. Here the contagion of theatre spread among the poets and those co-present, a loop of sympathetic rhythms between listener and poet emerged. It would be impossible to know the responses of every person in the room, but this loop of exchange seemed to correspond with Fischer-Lichte's description the 'autopoietic feedback loop' in performance (*Transformative Power* 39). In this autopoietic loop the audience's reactions to the performer's presence, their embodied techniques and performance devices, activate and bring into existence the performance. The performer responds in turn to the reactions of the spectators (*Transformative Power* 39) in

10 I need to leave aside for another discussion the other sense and side that 'mattering of material' has in O'Sullivan's work: that of making the haptic material matter, wherein she engages with visual, sculptural assemblages and book making. In this essay I focus on the sonic side of the sensual spectrum.

an exchange of corporeal energies. The performer might use vivid techniques to encourage this feedback loop to emerge. An example of the autopoetic feedback loop is the intervention of the performers among the audience, such as Einar Schleef's competing choruses of chaos in *Mothers* (Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power* 55-58), John Cage's use of silence, Marina Abramovic's use of self-injury to provoke the spectators into action, or when live animals were introduced on stage in the works of Abramovic and Joseph Beuys (*Transformative Power* 122-125; 12-23; 101-107). We can also find O'Sullivan blurring the boundary between audience and performer in the resonance created in Glasgow and in other performances.[11] This is part of her intention to co-compose the poem with the audience, so that our listening becomes an activating force, with audiences involved "in the construction of the work" (in Thurston 245).

In the moment of the autopoiesis, spectators and participants are made keenly aware of embodiment and the materiality of the world around them. For Fischer-Lichte, the emergence of an autopoietic feedback loop may open up a liminal spacetime where usual boundaries have been blurred or erased. For example, the boundaries between audience and performer, subject and object or human and animal may be redrawn as the audience comes to feel themselves part of the performance, as embodied and animal (*Tranformative Power* 175). The spectators become then aware of their corporeal existence: of mortality and of their place among other bodies, or of their agency as part of the event, and of ecological relation; perhaps they find themselves re-enchanted. Sometimes these interventions are more subtle than bloody and dramatic: the simple reversal of expectations, or introduction of surprise, silence, a slightly altered gesture or release of fragrance can be enough to generate a change in the audience's expectation and perceptual experience. Such subtle gestures and vocal fluctuations are common to a poetry reading.

7. "Song-Song stare": Rhythm and Repetition

In the cavernous Poetry Club in Glasgow in 2016, O'Sullivan stood stationary on stage and read her poems from paper, but her use of the rhythm and patterning of language in her vocalisation created a dynamism we could follow. Swerving syntax and surprising rhythmic patterning, fragments of song and even perhaps an emergent beat or incantatory pulse via

11 As in a performance of 'murmur', November 6th 2003, as described by O'Sullivan in her interview with Olsen, 211-212.

repetition, all created a heightened and energetic sound text. This extract of O'Sullivan's from Narcotic properties noted earlier is typical:

SOLSTITIAL, STRUCK-NINE

(whatll wattle wambs

wha

white

whe

who)

(Palace 21)

Following syntax that is fragmented and multidirectional, listeners to this performance might experience a build-up of tension in expectation, followed by release. Rhythm emerges then deviates, followed by a return. Another rhythmic work in *In The House of the Shaman* (1993), "Another Weather System", reads "*when your animal is brought back*" and includes a repeated refrain of "you/ too",

you

too

stiffen swoop on ridge

you

too

topple turn hills many more turns

you

too

the Beasts do the rain not the Birds do another

you

too

call the pulsing home.

(17)

These elements of "pulsing," this world of ridge, hills, beast, bird, listening human are called "home" through a pulse. In such incantatory or pulsing poetry, repetition or rhythm can lead listeners to surprise or alteration in perceptions; we move along and our listening bodies start to follow a beat, to dance even. This is a liminal moment of poesis, or Fischer-Lichte's "re-enchantment of the world" in response to the performative aesthetic (Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual; Transformative Power*).[12] Performers and theatre makers, such as those described by Fischer-Lichte, are aware of how rhythmic patterns of bodies moving and speaking can bring about altered states in their participants. In a laboratory theatre setting, performance practitioners often use rhythmic embodied exercises that are known to bring on new states of perception and emergent psycho-physical conditions. For example, performance theorist and practitioner, Richard Schechner describes the heightened feelings of "omnipotence/vulnerability, tranquillity/readiness" arising from sustaining certain laboratory theatre exercises (Shechner 239).[13] Other writers in performance studies have examined the trance states possible in synchronised rhythmic and repetitious work (Daboo; McNeil).

So, what happens when poets use language to create similar transformations through ritual rhythm, repetition and the semantic possibility of poetry? We might find this rhythmic poetics in incantation, in the ritualised reading aloud of texts as speech act, in praise, song and songlike intonation, spells, call and response, refrain and so on. Perhaps the "narcotic properties" of O'Sullivan's poems come from the chanting and music of language: "WASH THESE LEAD ANIMALS WITH songerings-a-rung, a-chant, a roughly/ unsway /& stirs" (Palace 16). Chants are a particular technique of the poetry of ritual and Cobbing's group chant of "soma haoma" wherefrom, he says, a "ritual ensues" (Cobbing) is emblematic.[14]

12 Fischer-Lichte's picture of German theatre director Einar Schleef's choric theatre in the 1970s and 1980s gives us a theatrical example parallel to challenging or musical sound poetry. In *Mothers* (1986) Schleef used two choruses who chanted rhythmic semi-sensical language in competition in increasingly chaotic confrontation with each other and the audience. Semantic and sensual meaning were confused in the spectator leading to experience of liminality, what Fischer-Lichte describes as "re-enchantment of the world" (*Transformative Power* 55-58, 129-130).

13 For example, I myself trained in workshops in this tradition. Especially relevant are the experimental practices that emerged after Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner, Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba and others.

14 As well as O'Sullivan and Cobbing, several contemporary poets play with the voice's rhythmic potential for changing embodied states. Geraldine Monk's books and performances explore this, see *Interregnum* (1994) and her poetics *Insubstantial Thoughts on the Transubstantiation of the Text* (2002). Poet, researcher and performance artist Nathan Walker has a body of work in this field using embodiment, chant and "semantic satiation" which brings up many possibilities for radical new thinking in performance, poetry and poetics (see Walker, "Carrying in the Mouth").

In the Poetry Club in Glasgow, were we in Schechner's "omnipotence/vulnerability, tranquillity/" or Fischer-Lichte's "re-enchantment of the world" (*Transformative Power*)? Were we high on the poesis of O'Sullivan's "narcotic properties"? I won't suggest that everyone reacts the same in these moments. Listening to "all the noises in the abruptly thousands" (*Palace* 18) in O'Sullivan's poems might instead be troubling or sensually flattening if it is experienced as overwhelming to a spectator. Perhaps other listeners are hungry or uncomfortable. And yet at the very least, there was a feeling in Glasgow in 2016 that this was a special performance – most I have spoken to who were present shared this feeling.[15] Certainly O'Sullivan managed to *matter* the material and bring us into a poetry that is an "active physical presence in the world" (in Thurston 247). A liminal state of poesis, or "omnipotence/vulnerability" (Schechner 239) or whatever one calls an emergent moment of alteration, was made possible by O'Sullivan's techniques of embodiment, performance and ritual.

O'Sullivan is not just using embodied elements of ritual technique to bring her audience along with her and change their perceptions. As well as devices such as rhythm, repetition, resonant vocalisation and occasional moving among the audience, there is also the transformation of meaning possible. She has a turbulent semantic field of the poetry as her medium so that associations, meaning and images conjured are in play with alteration to perception and embodied response. Poetry is a medium of re-enchantment in O'Sullivan's performances and ritual works.

8. Weaving relation

Communities are formed like this – in the act of sharing in ritual poesis. The collective moment where we listen and react, enter into a feedback loop, could be called a moment of communitas in Turner's terms (Turner 96). Communitas is rare and any community created among poets and listeners is temporary, contingent on the shared experience of listening. In Glasgow I felt as if we were held in this moment of relation as bodies co-present and receptive to O'Sullivan's poetry and its evocation of the "other-than-(as well as human)-sentience" (*Palace* 65).

15 Ellen Dillon in her review of the conference described O'Sullivan's performance as "spell-binding shamanism" (Dillon). This follows other commentary on O'Sullivan's work as being somehow in relation to what is termed the "shamanic" (in *The Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan* see Thurston 201; Rowe 148 and in Mortuza 15). O'Sullivan explores this in *In The House of the Shaman* (1993). I have tended to focus on the *techniques of ritual* in O'Sullivan's work which might be often associated with the broad concept of shamanism, rather than enter into debate on the complex and problematic term *shamanism*.

After the reading any communitas disperses. And yet with the memory of intensive shared experience of poetry, there is an ongoing relation of reading, writing, listening and being together in poetry which continues to be woven. In my research and practice I call the ongoing relational process between ritual poetry experiences 'plethu', after a Welsh word for braiding and weaving. For me the *plethu* here is that I remember this event in Glasgow and try to write about and after it; strong moments of poesis have an ongoing life.

O'Sullivan's practice is cyclical and involves reiterative acts of poesis whereby the performance is a way to activate a poem in its cycle of life, with audiences "taking part in the construction of the work" in performance (in Thurston 245). Ritual practice as a series of cycles is also found in other poets who use ritual such as Bhanu Kapil and C.A. Conrad. These poets make ritual and embodied practice part of ongoing research and the practical project of writing and living. Each repetition of composition or performance in a ritual cycle returns the ritualist-poet to the material. These cycles are ritualisations in "the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places" (Grimes, *Beginnings* 60). Every return to the site brings new knowledge of the site. And within each rite, there may be further instances of repetition, such as chant and rhythm, considered use of time brackets or spatial thresholds. Each repetition in ritual practice opens up a new awareness of the dimensions of a word, or a sound, or space, to bring forth its material nature, its connections to other parts of an ecology, to the listener's emotions, bodies, the site, history, sensual qualities and so forth. No wonder chant and rhythmic sound poetry are common uses of ritual in poetry performance. There is a potential in the liminal space opened up by these reiterative sound texts and ritual techniques which can lead to a poesis, to "call the pulsing home" (*In the House* 17).

9. 'Strains of Lament & Desire': Care and ethics

But, there is also "finger-on-brain/ madder bled meat. Maddled …" an exposure – the sensitivity of bodies vulnerable to the commotion of the liminal. This is poetry where "Vulnerable Chanceways" (*Palace* 64) are opened up in ritual and we may move beyond our usual thresholds of logic, sense-making and comfort. In my research I have found that ritual poetry for both audience and poet can sometimes involve an intensity in the form of vigorous action; performance uses

bodily energies, exhaustion is possible. Rothenberg's thought that "Communitas/ (I meant to tell you)/ is Holy Terror" (*Eye* 294) is pertinent to the chaos and raw change and flux of the liminal. If sensitised to the imperilled "other-than-(as well as human)-sentience," the implications of our role in our environment becomes apparent, we might be reminded of mortality and ecological destruction. Such exposing liminality should be opened and closed carefully and ethically; a clear end point for the performance means a ritualising poet can move off the stage, be relieved of intensity and re-incorporate the meaning of the ritual's poesis. I have found in this research that ritual practice is often a study of spatiotemporal thresholds.[16]

O'Sullivan's work invites a care and ethics. In the same way, many of her fellow poets working with ritual and performance such as Kapil, C.A. Conrad, Rothenberg, NourbeSe M Philip, Ceclia Vicuña and others are also inviting care and ethics through ritual methods and ecopoetics.[17] Ritual and performance is often the route chosen by poets to bring about ethical and political action. This might be in part because in ritual conditions, participants' attention is drawn to the materiality, to communality and relation, embodiment and ecology. A re-enchantment of the world around us might prompt care for that environment and even action, although an audience or reader's reactions can never be predetermined or predicted. In artistic settings, ritual techniques of transformation are methods of invitation and suggestion, and a ritualist-poet can never be certain or pre-empt what a response might be in an audience or reader.

As a technology ritual does not come with an in-built ethics. In the wider cultural context that extends beyond contemporary poetry, I have found examples of ritual aesthetics, including poems, used as indoctrination or marketing devices, to endorse oppressive hierarchies and obfuscate power.[18] I have also found examples of primitivist art movements using idealised ritual tropes as

16 Peggy Phelan's discussions of self-injury in the work of ritual performance art is pertinent to thinking of ritual as a study in thresholds, including the ultimate threshold for animals, death, and thus life. Although we cannot know for certain the origins of ritual, Phelan's point about ritual as a study of the life/death threshold remains relevant to the ritual poetry I am researching. "Perhaps it makes sense to say that insofar as early ritual, theatre and performance were devoted to managing the meaning of death, that management itself involved the invention of another conceptual biological experiential field that came to be called 'life'" (Phelan 17).

17 And several poets use ritual as part of therapeutic and activist practice, for example Kapil's *Schizophrene* (2011) a work of healing through ritual writing practice; CAConrad's rituals are made as activisms but also to heal and change life for the better in *Ecodeviance (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (2014).

18 The words spoken at the coronation ritual of the British monarch, or new age cult marketing programme's 'poetic' buzzwords, for example, do not leave me re-enchanted with the world.

mystification or to commodify and de-humanise the cultures of others.[19] As poets and readers we have to develop ethics for the use of our embodied techniques. I am interested in an ethical and political poetry practice which critiques, re-invents and thrives in the face of the contemporary moment of systemic damage and alienation. O'Sullivan's embodied poetry, for example, provokes in me a more intense practice of listening to the language of the "other-than-(as well as human)-sentience" and I begin to care for the inhabitants of my environment when engaging with her poetry. In making my own ritual poetry, my ethics now involves thinking of who is present or absent in the space of poesis, how different bodies may be welcomed or excluded in the spacetime of poetry.[20] O'Sullivan brings to the fore the "were-louds" and the silenced (*Palace* 21). How can we listen with all of our bodies to this poesis and how does what we hear change us?

10. Kinship: openings and conclusions

In summary, O'Sullivan's performances and poetry use ritual to transform the reader-listeners' perception of materiality and activate the poem with the audience. The ritual techniques O'Sullivan uses include the fragmentation and transformation of language into new material as well as play with rhythm and repetition to create a resonant pulsing in performance or in the ears of the reader. She also responds to those co-present in the space of the poem, emphasising the connections between listeners and our ecological interrelationality. She uses ritual and performance to transform the material of language and open up the liminal potential of transforming poesis or re-enchantment. What this poesis creates for the reader-listener, or indeed the poet who attempts these ritual methods, is not fixed or predetermined; transformation is not predictable. But in its broadest sense, ritual poesis involves change and new poetry or material. O'Sullivan's ritual poetry is

19 One need only glimpse at Arnold Van Gennep's references to various ethnographic sources in *Rites de Passage* (1909), to be reminded of how much the research into ritual originally drew on racist investigations of human cultures that were systematically destroyed for the sake of imperial capitalist accumulation. Rustom Bharucha's postcolonial critique of appropriation of ritual cultures in performance in the work of Artaud, Schechner, Grotowski and Brook specifically looks at the adoption of ritual by the Euro-American Avant Garde and, though it is applied to performance practice, is also relevant to poetry that uses ritual in performance. In performance art, playful postcolonial critique of Joseph Beuys's *I Like America and America Likes Me* can be found in James Luna's *Petroglyphs in Motion* (2000). In poetry, one can find the modernist era several examples of primitivism through themes of ritual, for example T.S Eliot's writing on anthropology, DH Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) and Antonin Artaud's ideas of Balinese theatre. See Etherington and see Horáček for a discussion of primitivism in Rothenberg's ethnopoetics assemblages and translations. Fischer-Lichte's 2005 history of the first performative turn provides several relevant discussions of artistic ritual with varying political intent (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*).

20 In *Blue Sky Body: Thresholds for Embodied Research*, Ben Spatz asks how a decolonial embodied practice that considers different embodiments and care could be the future performance studies, something that we can also consider as poets working in an embodied relational medium (*Blue Sky Body*).

an invitation to care, form ethics or action for the embodied ecologies she makes matter. Poetry here is a medium for transformation where language becomes "an active physical presence in the world", a poesis which opens our ears to "other-than-(as well as human)-sentience." In a time of demand for radical ecological care, relationality and embodiment in the face of alienating destruction of world crises, O'Sullivan's work gives us multiple approaches to the transformation of poesis though embodied listening and ritual, opening up a liminal "space of undiminishment" (in Olsen 204).

My research into ritual poetry shows that there is much more to know and create between the knowledge traditions of embodied arts and poetry and poetics. This has been largely a practical investigation in creative writing, as a poetics oriented to the creation of new forms. Whole studies of single methodologies could be made on single embodied techniques are used in poetry and what these can tell us. For example, we might experiment with any one of the following techniques: chant, masks, delineation of thresholds in spacetime, chant, staging, land art, poets' theatre, protest, somatic sensing, scores, objects, my list goes on.

I want to know what poets and their reader-listeners can do together with this poesis and embodied knowledge in an era of destruction. When we listen with more of our embodied selves, and begin to dance in poesis, and resonate with the "other-than-(as well as human)-sentience" (in Olsen 204), what might we find? I'll be returning to the poem we can dance to together. But "& oh, the room is to be lit first with/ KINSHIP OOZED OUT OF SHAPE BLUE/ matter," (*Palace* 18).

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