

A Continuity of Country: Enlivenment in a Live Evocation of Place

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To move to a new place, to shift from country to country or to a new region within a country, is to redefine the self in a relationship, in a lived experience of feet on new ground. In tandem with the idea of ‘a country’ as a politically bounded sovereign state lies the concept of ‘Country’ as a specific environment enmeshing the individual in subjective relationships with place, including other inhabitants. Such relationships do not have rigid boundaries but are themselves shifting spaces, changing through time and experience. As a performing poet and oral storyteller my research is focused on evoking and interpreting such lived experience in a form that suits a range of performance contexts and audiences, which include theatre settings, café-style arts events, arts festivals, lounge-rooms and academic conferences. In each of the shifting performance spaces the written script exists as a template which manifests as a unique, ephemeral artefact in live performance. One of the features of these performances is the continuity of my presence as the author-performer, participating in a continuum of contact from my feet-on-the-ground experiences of Country to their evocation with an audience. As ephemeral artefacts, these performances cannot be reproduced on the page; however, the academic context opens an opportunity for forms of written documentation that can exist in mutualistic interactions with performances: each can be experienced alone but side by side they can enrich and enliven the life of the other. Just as theoretical and philosophical understandings infuse my creative work, in this essay for the Country-themed special issue of the *JASAL* I distil some of the essence of the first phase of the creative work as it relates to the Country it grows from, with examples from a half-hour performance given at the association’s 2013 conference.

My method follows a style of arts practice-led inquiry that is, as Bresler and Latta frame it, ‘a movement of thinking, a medium in which meaning is not applied or imposed but rather manifested’ (15). For Nelson such ‘complementary writing’ does not aim ‘to transpose the artwork from its own medium into that of words’ but to ‘assist in the *articulation and evidencing of the research inquiry* [Nelson’s emphasis]’ (36). Theory is not used as a precursory grounding; instead, as Nelson puts it, this essay reflects ‘*resonances* with other research inquiries expressed in words’ (32). These discussions follow the personal understandings that have grown through encounters with theory and practice as they explore three intertwined branches of my research project: the creative work, my creative practice and the performative, practice-led research methodology.

My creative work, *Wet: an appetite for the tropics* (*Wet*), interprets my experience of living in Far North Queensland’s Wet Tropics area through poetry in live performance, tessellated with a connecting narrative to suit the performance environment. The content is generated from a pool of poems which, although written to work on the page, are transmitted in the performative mode through embodied language to evoke the fleeting welter of trans-sensory impressions encountered in the Wet Tropics. I use photographs and the camera lens as a trope for ways of relating to the natural environment, with the understanding that evoking connections to the environment prepares the ground for a setting aside of the lens and a

growing consciousness of ourselves as beyond simply witnesses of a landscape: as participants in an encompassing ‘panscape.’



The chaotic growth of the wait-a-while palm connects all the layers of the Wet Tropics rainforest

Winding around the branches of my work, like the hooked shoots of the rainforest palm known as ‘wait-a-while,’ is an ecophilosophical orientation I find encapsulated in Andreas Weber’s concept of *Enlivenment*. Weber reconfigures what he understands as an incomplete worldview built on the Enlightenment practices of rational thinking and empirical observation, supplementing it with an understanding of ‘the “empirical subjectivity” of living beings, the “poetic objectivity” of meaningful experiences’ (11) and a ‘biopoetics’ of ‘life-as-meaning’ (29, 65) (as distinct from Cooke’s ‘literary biopoetics,’ based on evolutionary biology (1)). He bases his thesis of *Enlivenment* on new biological and economic findings, arguing that ‘lived experience, embodied meaning, material exchange and subjectivity are key factors that cannot be excluded from a scientific picture of the biosphere and its actors’ (11).

These core principles resonate with my creative work in that the heart of my evocation of place is my experience of life as subjective yet inextricably linked to the massed subjectivities of the biosphere of which I am a part. This is not a purely theoretical or hypothetical view; I literally see this right now—I am looking out at a panorama of the multiplicities of greens in the richly biodiverse Wet Tropics rainforest. The substrate of my project is direct lived experience, drawing on the meaning that is embodied in my physical presence in the landscape and interpreted through a ‘poetic objectivity’ into a communicative material exchange so others may draw meaning from it in turn. If the monsoon clouds had not descended and it was not teeming with rain, I would take my laptop outside so I could breathe the forest directly into this essay. As it is, I have to be content with projecting myself out onto the top of an adjacent candlenut tree, imagining Weber’s parallel vision as he perches in a Davidson’s plum, turning to contemporary biologists and systems thinkers such as Margulis, Varela, Juarrero, Kauffman and Bateson for evidence that ‘humans do not exist at the exterior or edge of “nature”, but are deeply interwoven into the material, mental and emotional exchange processes that all of the more-than-human world participates in’ (19–20).

Weber's work is essentially a synthesis, drawing on a range of scientific thinkers, theorists and philosophers; however, from these he educes the emergent prospect of expanding 'the deep structural principles in modern culture that have a powerful effect in ordering how we perceive, think and act' (15). The central premise, which acknowledges 'human rationality and agency' but at the same time connects with an understanding of humans as 'embodied subjects' with 'other modes of being such as our psychological and metabolic relationships with the "more than human" world,' is meant as a 'corrective' to 'Enlightenment norms' which prevent us from finding solutions to the sustainability crisis in our planetary ecosystem (15).

In part, Weber uses his Enlivenment position to open discussions on sustainable alternatives to the currently predominant neo-Darwinian and neoliberal 'bioeconomic' rationales for decision-making in economics, politics, education and private lives (12), turning away from the presumption 'that evolution in nature is guided by principles of scarcity, competition and selection of the fittest' (11). Weber details how the working of the natural world '*refutes* many axioms of the bioeconomic worldview [Weber's emphasis]': the biosphere is wasteful rather than efficient, relying on generosity in donation of energy and is a 'steady state economy' that does not grow in terms of biomass; competition alone is not responsible for genetic diversity, rather it 'causes biological monotony'; generally resources in nature are not scarce and any scarcity leads away from creative diversification; and the concept of property cannot be applied to the biosphere—even an individual's body is not a possession in the sense that 'its substance changes permanently and continuously' on the level of matter and energy (27–28).

Weber's economic stance is not so much of direct interest in my work, but there is great relevance in the associated social and cultural understandings. These highlight the strengths of a commons exchange—not just of material goods but of also of meaning—and place symbolic culture at the centre of our species-specific way of dealing with natural systems and forces (17). Weber's alternative bioeconomic model comes from research into the commons which shows that economic activity is 'not just an exchange of objects and money; it is a rich set of ongoing flows and relationships.' This is echoed in the relationship between humans and natural ecosystems:

. . . humans are constantly engaged in ecological exchanges of gifts that not only distribute material goods and services, but also engender a sense of belonging and commitment, and hence feeling and meaning. Seen from this viewpoint, economic exchange cannot meaningfully distinguish between agents and resources as wholly independent entities; they are both entangled with each other. In the same way, land and its inhabitants cannot be wholly separated, they are mutually dependent. In any given habitat, ecological exchange brings with it reciprocal flows of matter, energy and existential relatedness. (Weber 20)

In fact, even on the cellular level, he demonstrates, life *is* meaning. Biologists Maturana and Varela use the term 'autopoeisis' or 'self-creation' to describe the autonomous self-organisational capacity of organisms, which brings into question views of the organism as existing through a series of mechanical processes. For Weber, the cell is a process of 'creation of identity' and 'not only a material unity, but a meaningful self that is producing itself.' Even simple organisms are systems that display intention 'to grow, to unfold, and to make a fuller scope of life' (30). As a performing poet, an organism that engages deeply with the processes of poeisis, of making meaning through symbolic systems of language, paralanguage, gesture,

and the spatial positioning of bodies and material forms in space, I find the idea irresistible that even on a cellular level life is a meaningful production: that the taproot of my expression is a creative imperative from deep in my existence as a biological entity. Weber addresses the poetic Enlivenment position thus:

Poetic objectivity deals with the embodiment of existential sense and meaning in its many non-rational guises. These may be pictorial, gestural or palpable in other ways, such as poems, sculptures and music. Feeling in the sense discussed . . . as subjective experience of meaning and concern (not necessarily consciousness)—is not only a category that is universal among all species, but is also a strong, even defining aspect of poetic experience. We could say that the poetic gesture is the natural expression of the experiences of a poetic-embodied existence. A great work of art seizes us emotionally and by this shows something profound about aliveness. This emotional understanding is a kind of shared existential experience—a poetic objectivity. Such feelings are also evoked by nature itself as countless naturalists, artists, musicians and ordinary people can attest. Natural beings themselves are poetic expressions about aliveness. (56)

My first reading of Weber's essay pulled me up, hooked in these ideas. My pause gave the opportunity to reflect on how Weber's Enlivenment might pull together the idea of 'Country' with *Wet*. In doing this, I am also casting an eye on the application of the ideas of empirical subjectivity and poetic objectivity to my arts practice.

Weber's concepts of 'empirical subjectivity' and 'poetic objectivity' are not in opposition in the way that objectivity and subjectivity might be considered to be mutually exclusive binaries. The term 'empirical subjectivity' encapsulates his view of what constitutes life. A living being is 'an agent or subject with an intentional point of view' which 'acts out of concern and the experience of meaning.' This is evidenced by the fact that it 'self-produces,' manifesting 'its intentions to maintain itself and grow' and showing 'behaviour that is constantly evaluating influences from the external (and also its own, internal), world' (31). Weber is emphatic that 'poetic objectivity is possible because of empirical *subjectivity* [Weber's emphasis]' (56). The fact that as living beings we are expressions of experience and meaning allows us to communicate how that condition manifests using a poetic objectivity which does not rely on the confirmations or negations of science—our experience is sufficient, it is an 'embodied-empirical proof' (57). To understand why Weber attaches the concept 'poetic' to this type of objectivity, it is necessary to understand what he means by the 'poetic dimension':

The poetical dimension is the world of our feelings, of our social bonds and of everything else that we experience as significant and meaningful. The poetic is therefore part and parcel of our everyday world of social communication, exchanges, and interactions. It is the world of first-person-perspective, which is always there, and always felt and experienced. It is the world that we live in most intimately, and it is ultimately the world for which we conceive and make various policies. (33)

Weber's intention is to 'develop a first-person-science that embraces both empirical subjectivity and poetic objectivity' (51) but in addition these concepts, while implicitly at the heart of arts practices, can also be explored by them in a self-reflexive 'poetic gesture.'

In line with Weber's concerns, the core question of *Wet* is existential. The protagonist is testing her empirical subjectivity by finding out to what degree she is capable of producing her own meaningful experiences—beyond those of biological reproduction. The question for her is: aside from having progeny, in what way am I generating life; how am I enlivened and enlivening the world in turn? Here enlivening is about a shared exchange of meaning, feeling and lived experience. Her creative work pulls together all the competing shifting subjectivities of a person in flux through the history of her life—she tells the audience, 'in all my peripatetic frenzy, I've always been leaving bits of myself behind. But my poems and photos help me to keep it together. They're a record of who I am in the wilderness I wander through.' As Weber says, 'poetic objectivity is about this subjective core self: the existential meaning that any organic being produces from its centre of concern that is its self' (56). The gradually developing answer to the protagonist's central question concerns her relationship to place: changing a psychological and physical wilderness into a landscape by staying still long enough to view it. Within that viewing, she negotiates shifting perspectives and reviews her sense of relation to it—as landscape, environment or 'panscape.' At the same time she is interpreting and communicating this experience through her artwork in an act of poetic objectivity.



The capturing hooks that stop you in your tracks as you 'wait-a-while' to untangle yourself

During this process, in her deepening encounters with the rainforest where the focus turns closer in to her subjective self, she experiences the sense of capture that she has been trying to impose on the landscape in her still photographs.

On and on in the heat of humming
 cicada streams run though this forest,
 moss forest, built on granite,
 tender, delicate skin—fingertips tracing
 through filigree to rock-solid heart,
 'Wait-a-while, wait-a-while,' you urged
 and I'm caught, waiting.

(From 'Rainforest heat' in *Wet: an appetite for the tropics*)

The narrative of *Wet* documents the protagonist's stay in a small town in the Wet Tropics, where she works in a café. Sections of monologue lead into performances of poems about this country and her growing relationship with the World Heritage listed rainforest, sugarcane farms, the rural built environment and the people within it. Here 'country' denotes the Oxford English Dictionary definition 1a: 'a tract or expanse of land of undefined extent; a region, district.' However, the Oxford English Dictionary also tells me that the word 'country' comes from the late Latin *contrāta* which comes from '*contrā* against, opposite, [literally] that which lies opposite or fronting the view, the landscape spread out before one.' The narrative of *Wet* starts from this *contra* position of person to the landscape. Crucially, in terms of Weber's emphasis on lived meaning and experience, the storyline is semi-autobiographical. All the elements of the protagonist's experience of place and environment have their genesis in my continuing experience of the Wet Tropics. It goes back to when I was a new arrival, experiencing the cognitive dissonance of my estrangement from a rain-darkened and cloud-obscured landscape, not quite sure what I was really doing there. For more than a decade previously, I had been living on Crete, in an environment quite different from what I faced 'opposite me' in the tropics: the monsoon season with its relentless rain, the raucous nightly crescendos of frogs and cane toads, the strangled-baby screaming of the curlews and, within months, the threat of my first tropical cyclone.

In the seventeen years since, this narrative has developed in my unfolding relationship to place, a slow *volta* in which deepening experience has turned me around to a position no longer opposite a landscape. In this gradual shifting I have become more enlivened to the environment; my empirical subjectivity has become more aligned to the environment of which I feel myself a part. My concerns as an organism are more invested in the place where I live. In this context, I am more aware of nature from Weber's 'enlivening perspective' as a 'relational network between subjects who have individual interests to stay alive, grow and unfold' (12). The poems I perform in *Wet* trace this particular phase of the ongoing process of my autopoiesis or self-creation as a poet. I recognise in the first poem in *Wet* a holding of the landscape more at bay, a concern with aligning the tropical climate in a four-fold seasonal schema around the elements of earth, air, fire and water:

In the time of water

Dragon's-breath mist curled round the mountain
Waterfalling its tongue in a sharp-sprayed fountain
Lying in droplets, in puddles, pools and lakes
Churning and turning the creek as it snakes

Into time of wind

(From 'In the time of water' in *Wet: an appetite for the tropics*)

This was my ordering, rational mind at work within the poetic medium, seeking a form of scientific categorisation and comparison in the face of the only recently discovered. By expressing it in poetry I was reaching out for Weber's 'poetic objectivity' in a meaningful experience, yet written at the early stages of settling in to an area, it indicates an author not fully enlivened to the environment. I had not yet touched deeply into my empirical subjectivity as a being living *within* it. The boundary still existed in me *contra* the landscape.

This is not to make a judgement about the value of one style of poetry over the other, yet in this particular case a more detached stance was a result of not knowing the environment so well. It is possible that, as the expression of meaningful experience, artistic poetic objectivity is a practice that deepens as the experiences that generate the artwork become more personally meaningful. It might be fair to say that in writing about actual rather than imagined natural environments, the more connected the empirical subjectivity, the richer the poetic objectivity. At the same time, as my work develops I am now conscious of an ability to deliberately compose poems that take a detached or more connected stance according to the effect I need to generate. The deeper connection to place exists but I can artistically pull back from it in a playful, self-conscious rendering of opposition to the landscape. Doing this is very much part of the work of *Wet*. Aligned to my aim of evoking feelings of connection to this country, the point is to take the audience into the shifting frames, giving an opportunity for an awareness that different perspectives exist and for the question to arise: how do *I* relate to *my* environment?

This evocation of feelings and meaning is also the work of the *practice* of poetic objectivity. It is an essential part of my poetic craft in the sense that poetic objectivity ‘seeks to understand how expressiveness-in-our-body feels and can be communicated, and elaborated upon’ (Weber 56). This bodily expressiveness is integral to the act of performing the poetry; however, the language also needs to be able to speak for itself. In *Wet*, one of the sought-after effects is the rhetorical descriptive charge of *enargia*, from the Greek for ‘vividness, distinctness,’ ‘a generic term for visually powerful, vivid description which recreates something or someone . . . “before your very eyes”’ (Lanham 64). Lanham also gives a corresponding term, *energia*, from the Greek for ‘activity.’ In a rhetorical sense this glosses as ‘vigor of style’ and is used as ‘a general term for vigor, vividness, energy in description.’ Confusingly, Aristotle also discusses how this makes something vivid by bringing it ‘before your eyes’ (64). These conflicting definitions are resolved by Lanham’s suggestion that ‘it would make sense to use *enargia* as the basic umbrella term for the various special terms for vigorous ocular demonstration, and *energia* as a more general term for vigor and verve, of whatever sort, in expression’ (65). I am not suggesting that it is only through vivid and energetic descriptions that a poet can communicate ‘expressiveness-in-our-body’ but in my own practice there is a correspondence between intensely living an experience and my ability to translate it *enargically*. A deep sensory connection triggers the descriptive response, and although that response comes from all my senses it is the ocular that often takes precedence.



The Wet Tropics monsoon—a sequence of still images to accompany the poem *Subject to flooding in Wet*

I remember clearly the sensation when, after living in the Wet Tropics for some years, I rounded a corner of the road to Daintree and registered in a moment of intense awareness:

shrinking clouds slinking low on
forest floor, valley pools, ridge ramps,
like ectoplasm emanating from
spirit of spirit of spirit of place

(From 'Subject to flooding' in *Wet: an appetite for the tropics*)

In her *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* Brady points out that our dominant senses are sight and sound, where sight is responsible for perceiving formal qualities. 'Ocularcentrism,' she says, 'results in experiencing nature only, consciously at least, through one perspective' (124). However, shifts in this ocular perspective can echo a changing distance between self and environment, concretised in *Wet* by the photojournalistic images taken by the protagonist. In the performance, the projected photographic sequences and the discussions of photography do not begin until after the initial more objective poem. Not until the protagonist makes the shift into noticing her environment in more detail can she start to understand that there are alternative ways of seeing.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the noun 'landscape' originated in the painter's technical term for 'a picture representing natural inland scenery' but more generally the meaning also takes in 'a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view.' Although the view through the camera lens is not the same as through the eye, the framed rectangles of the photographer-poet's record of place equate to a glance from a single point of view. Initially the protagonist's sense was of a separate self who perceives from that single point. In the early phase of her developing relationship to the Wet Tropics environment, she was, at most, still only a shadow of a self.



'Wish you were here?' Performing *Wet* at the 2013 ASAL Conference. Photo: Lachlan Brown.

Shadows and parts of her body had been captured in the frame of her photographs and she had deleted them as mistakes. However, in time, she alters her view on these intrusions into the ‘proper’ subject of the photograph. Realising that there is meaning in her body’s presence in the landscape, she begins to deliberately place herself in the picture so that in each sequence of photographs there is a metaphorical signature, a self-reflexive visual marker. Here she begins to experience her connection to her surroundings, her environs, and it becomes for her an ‘environment.’



Capturing the self caught on a wait-a-while cane

Ultimately, she questions how far she can actually place herself in the environment. She explores a function of her camera’s software which allows her to place herself somewhere in a continuum with aspects of that environment in ‘panoramic medleys.’



The poet-photographer tests how she might fit in the environment

Yet here she still sees herself as an inserted separate self. What she seeks to represent is the feeling of dissolving barriers, a true continuity of being. She approaches this aim with a panoramic self/environment portrait (a new form of ‘selfie,’ perhaps an ‘enviroselfie’), but still has to work out where she fits in the picture: in the centre or at the fringes.



A series of 360-degree ‘enviro-selfies’

At this point the protagonist realises that the technology only serves to distort her view of herself in relation to the environment. This attempt, like the others, cannot capture how she feels about the Wet Tropics. To sum up this feeling she takes the ‘scape’ from ‘landscape,’ given in the Oxford English Dictionary as a suffix of Germanic origin, indicating ‘creation, creature, constitution, condition,’ and places with the Greek prefix ‘pan’ indicating ‘the whole of the universe’ to give the neologism ‘panscape.’ This is an attempt to encapsulate an experience that parallels Weber’s observation that humans ‘are deeply interwoven into the material, mental and emotional exchange processes that all of the more-than-human world participates in’ (19-20). Her experience has become ‘no longer just viewing a landscape but participating in a panscape, as complex and simple as haiku.’ In the end, as she bends to pick up ripe berries from the wait-a-while, it is through haiku that the question of finding her place is applied to where nature fits in relation to her: inside or outside.

jungle green palm leaves
tangling the understorey
burst from canopies

whips of hooks and barbs
forcing flight to wait-a-while
grasp the windblown leaf

too small for focus
shiny brown milmarr seed disks
pixelate the path

after the tart pulp
 spitting seeds the forest floor
 gulp! it grows inside.

(The haiku quartet in *Wet: an appetite for the tropics*)

In terms of empirical subjectivity and poetic objectivity, the protagonist's questions raise the issue of whether a move away from a solely rational objectivity actually creates a self-centred worldview. Weber indicates that 'the standpoint of poetic objectivity does not mean to propose an entirely individualistic or solipsistic worldview.' Instead he argues that the subjective and objective perspectives complement each other, saying that 'we must come to terms with the reality of incompatibility—or paradox—in everyday life. As living organisms we have to learn to experience and to describe the world "from the inside" . . . while also treat[ing] it as an external physical reality that exists "outside" of us' (34).

The self-incorporation of the protagonist/poet in her photographs signals a diachronic continuity of presence, acting as a conduit between 'that' time and place of actually being in the environment and 'this' time and place of the live performance in which the original experience is re-created, elaborated on and communicated. *Wet* is as much about the liveness of the performance as it is about the feeling and meaning expressed in its component parts of scripted monologue, poems and composed photographic sequences. Using a written script as its template, it can be seen as a work of literature; however, the performance is more than the script, it is live, oral and enacted in space. Based on these essential qualities I use the term 'live oral-spatial literature' for this type of performance—including both performed poetry and dynamic oral storytelling in its rubric. Each individual performance is a publication, a making public of a work of live oral-spatial literature. As Novak shows in her work on live poetry, the components of such performances include the performer and the audience (62). Given their necessary co-presence, the features of each performance depend on variables implicit in the participation of audience members as individuals, the dynamics of the audience as a group, the performer's interactions with the audience and the degree of extemporisation (not just in terms of deviations from the words in a written script but in movement, gesture and vocalisation) by the performer. Like a living being, each performance is unique and ephemeral.

Through live performance, I can relate to Weber's Enlivenment model as it takes my perspective from one of describing, mirroring, or echoing life through art to one of connecting to it directly, subject to subject, living bodies to living bodies. Metaphorically at least, the performance of a work of live oral-spatial literature can be viewed in itself as a living organism having its own empirical subjectivity. The comparison of a work of art to a living organism is reminiscent of the Romantic poets' interest in organic, living form. Denise Gigante characterises the Romantic 'vitalism' as the poet's quest, aligned with natural philosophers and life scientists, to 'account for a mysterious power buried deep within the structures of nature' (5), assuming that this was a power that could be taken on by the poet. As Gigante explains, Coleridge suggested that the production of organic form in poetry is innate, claiming that 'Nature provides the model for the artistic genius, whose products are formal expressions of a power that was purposive but not necessarily intentional' (5). Today such claims of innate 'artistic genius' seem hollow and self-important, with an implied devaluing of the learned, shaped skills of the artist. However, experientially I can understand the attraction of such ideas to the Romantic poets. For me, in performance, there is at times a strong feeling of connection to a force which somatically registers as both internal and

external; this *is* enlivening and could be described as a centred sense of a connected vitality which is something other than the rush of adrenaline from the ‘risk’ of performing live. It is a quality for me to consider further in my reflections on my practice; however, for now I can best sum it up as a property that emerges as a product of the performance situation, which includes the practised skill of the poet-performer but also many other factors such as the co-presence of the audience. The emergence of this quality in performance is not about reaching some perfected ideal state or definitive form, certainly not in live oral-spatial literature which, even when rehearsed, is not seen as being at a fixed point of development to be reproduced verbatim at each performance. The enlivening quality I experience is about action and interaction. Concurring with Jayne Fenton Keane’s reference to ‘poetry as a living organism *in exchange with the world*’ [my italics] (1), here I apply Weber’s traits of a living organism (31) as they connect to each live performance.

The work is in effect being composed as it unfolds in performance, thus it ‘manifests its intentions to maintain itself and grow.’ It is not a play written by a playwright who then hands it over to actors to perform; the author is the performer, the work is composed live according to a range of variables as it ‘self-produces.’ In this way it meets Weber’s criterion that ‘every organism is to a certain degree autonomous. It creates its identity and uses matter for this creation’ (31). Although a work of live oral-spatial literature may be based on the template of a written script, this is not necessarily sacrosanct. Consistent with one of Richard Schechner’s ‘Six Axioms of Environmental Theater,’ ‘[t]he text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no verbal text at all’ (xli). I choose to take a middle ground between unscripted performance and strict adherence to a text. The autonomy and creative ‘embodied freedom’ (Weber 31) of the performance is in the possibilities for extemporisation of words and movement. I allow a degree of play within the protagonist’s monologue but because of their concentrated form, my preference is to perform the poetic texts as written on the page. However, invariably in the rehearsal stage I edit the written poetic text as, during the multiple repetitions needed to memorise the words, I experience my performance developing bodily in a non-analytical process, albeit shaped by years of experience and practice, towards an amended version which is directly linked to its live acoustic and gestural expression. Jayne Fenton Keane frames such embodied experience as a poem’s ‘potential to incarnate its unsayable qualities through the device of [her] body’ (272), noting that ‘if the poem in performance is to be given life as a sensate organism it must be permitted to contain a sense of self as text, and a self designated by the body experienced through embodiment’ (61).

In-the-moment changes are not made so much at the whim of the performer but in direct and meaningful response to internal and external influences on the performance. According to Weber, the organism ‘shows behaviour that is constantly evaluating influences from the external (and also its own, internal) world’ (31): the performer and the audience, as components of its inner world, are constantly evaluating each other and their behaviour shifts according to what the other is doing. In live oral-spatial literature there is no ‘fourth wall’ as in the type of drama where the performer acts as if there is no audience there. There are no dazzling bright lights on the performer; she is able to see and therefore interact with the audience members, even if this is only to the extent of making direct eye contact. Factors in the external world are also evaluated by the component parts of the performance. Novak employs Genette’s concept of ‘paratext’ to show that elements of the event in which the actual live performed text is presented are significant in influencing the meaning of the text. These include ad libis by the performer before they deliver the text proper and the introduction by the MC (138–41). For example, before the ASAL conference performance of *Wet*, this

paratext included a light-hearted exchange with the audience as I set up the scene. For me, this set a tone for the performance which was engaged even before it had ‘properly begun.’

Some paratext can be seen as external, or at least on the fringes of the world of the live oral-spatial text. For example, in a conference context, these external influences can include contacts between the performer and audience members prior to the performance. During performance these influences will be evaluated and re-evaluated by the participants and may change their behaviour. This applies as much to performers, who, while keeping a level of focus on their performance, can have a simultaneous discerning awareness of the entire context and are likely to be processing complex evaluations which affect their behaviour. The beginning and ending of the performance can also be seen as rather permeable boundaries—my interactions with audience members often begin before the performance and continue on afterwards. My performance practice shares this openness to participation with Schechner’s *Environmental Theater*. As he notes, these types of communications are multi-faceted, ‘[t]he performance space is living—messages are being sent continuously through many channels’ (71).

This direct participation is a manifestation of the material embodiment of an organism. It ‘shows or expresses the conditions under which the life process takes place’ (Weber 31). Like a live theatre performance, communication within a work of live oral-spatial literature is trans-sensory; it is transmitted through a range of senses in a broad spectrum of interactions which involve the complex network of participation. All aspects of communication rely on embodiment. The meaning of the performer’s spoken words shift constantly as her stance, gestures and broader movements in space shift. In her definition of live poetry, Novak puts the focus on the ‘oral verbalisation of the poetic text’ (62). She acknowledges the effect of body communication but says that ‘the audiotext will undoubtedly be the focus of a “close reading” of live poetry’ (145). However, in my practice of live oral-spatial literature, the embodied action is an integral component of the meaning-making within the physical spatiality of the performance and does not simply extend the meaning of an oral text—the text is inherently both oral and spatial, hence oral-spatial. The live performance expresses its life process as it unfolds diachronically through the interactions of bodies in space—in this sense the performer and audience members can be seen, for the duration of the performance, as cells of a multicellular organism.

Both the spatiality of the performance and the external influences on *Wet* include its direct relationship to the environment of the Wet Tropics. Both the literal and symbolic meanings not only refer to ‘the environment’ generically but more importantly, to a particular environment and hence to human relationships with specific places. My aim has been to layer meanings like the storeys of the rainforest, which are not discrete habitats but interlinked and inseparable. As an arts practitioner, my focus is on Weber’s other quality of the organism (31) ‘acting out of concern and the experience of meaning’ as ‘an agent or a subject with an intentional point of view.’ As a project, *Wet* is about and directed to the Wet Tropics environment. This stance is most concentrated in the poems, which aim to actively and intensively hold open the space for making meaning. Referencing the work of Muller-Zettleman, Novak notes that ‘what poetry lacks in epic breadth it makes up for in the depth and density of its semantic structure, a network of correlations in which every word carries its weight towards the meaning-making process’ (61). Having said that, it is by no means language alone which is open to this meaning-making process—the performance as a whole is geared towards a more tangential transfer of meaning which emerges in the moment as a combination of all the factors involved. Taken as a whole I would suggest that there is the

potential in such a performance for an awareness to manifest of the ‘basic shared poetic condition, because it shows in a non-textual and non-algorithmical manner the principles of living creativity’ (Weber 31).

Presenting this style of performance in academic contexts such as conferences is not just about a change of pace or a sharing of new creative work. My positioning of my arts practice as live oral-spatial literature, in a zone between written literature and dramatic performance, justifies its inclusion in conferences directed to the study of literature. In composing the script for this initial stage of *Wet*, I had initially intended to sandwich sections of performance with exegetical discussion but instead I challenged myself to create a performance that was not only a creative ‘artefact’ but also a form of research reporting, using the space where research methodology and creative mode intersect. Brad Haseman distinguishes this category of *performative* research by ‘the way it chooses to express its findings’ (5). While quantitative research deals with numeric data and qualitative research deals mainly with discursive prose (7), performative research utilises ‘symbolic forms other than in the words of discursive text’ so that it ‘occurs as rich, presentational forms’ (5). Although *Wet*, an artefact-as-research, can stand alone at a conference, it maintains its integrity side by side with discursive critical commentary such as this essay.

While I am not familiar with how widespread the inclusion of such performative research artefacts is in Australian conferences, Robson does document a precedent from 2009 when ‘artist and doctoral candidate Dawn Albinger . . . *performed* her 2009 ADSA conference paper [Robson’s emphasis],’ describing this as ‘one of the more exciting developments in academia’ (130). Given my previous blended delivery of performance and theory at early-childhood and school sector conferences, my choice of a composite format did not seem to be extraordinary. Neither did I propose this presentation format from a political rationale, unlike Albinger who talked of the feminist practitioner’s experience of ‘stultifying asphyxiation or amputation if she loses her connection with her own body of knowledge’ and used her performance ‘as a kind of manifesto for “the way the author, as a practice-led researcher, can enter, re-enter, reiterate and transform the violent self-effacement that can characterise the practitioner’s engagement with theory”’ (Robson 130–31). Although I would not, in my experience, characterise such ‘self-effacement’ as violent, it certainly does exist in expectations of a more objective, distancing academic voice. Nelson has found that it has not been easy to achieve acceptance of practice-as-research for doctoral qualifications because of a context ‘in which positivism and “the scientific method” have lingered in informing a dominant understanding of academic research and the criteria for knowledge, even though many innovative scientists have moved far away from this nineteenth-century paradigm’ (26). In my reading of Weber’s essay, it is partly his intent to effect, ‘through the process of enlivenment,’ the ‘significant liberation’ of not needing to hold theory and practice apart. As he says, ‘the two can be constructively conflated, freeing us to build what can actually be built and to avoid chasing after totalistic, utopian theories’ (41). The Enlivenment paradigm resonates with my offering of a performative conference paper as an expression of research findings. This essay, in all its empirical subjectivity, is also offered in a poetic objectivity which complements and enriches more objective discourses.

In my creative practice, I am not interested in staking out any moral high ground (partly because I have very bad acrophobia—I have no idea what induced me to get up that tree at the beginning). Yet I do want to pose well-informed questions which are answered in part by the protagonist in my dramatic work, leaving enough gaps for others to make their own meaning. I would be fooling myself, though, if I did not admit that the form of the questions can be

leading; I do have a place I would like the audience to turn to, just as Weber has his motivations in championing particular scientific viewpoints. There is certainly room for subjective meaning-making. This essay, like *Wet*, does not reach an objective proof or a pat ending. When the protagonist closes her interaction with the audience with the quartet of haiku, her future is left symbolically open-ended. This sense of an ongoing, connected and living process is consistent with the growing alignment of her empirical subjectivity with her awareness of the ecosystems of which she is a part. There is no neat and definitive ‘closure’; the inquiry continues its rambling climb through its ecosystem, accepting, as ‘the biocentrism of Enlivenment perspective recognises, as a matter of theory, the unavoidable messes, shortcomings and efficiency drains that are an inescapable part of biological and human reality’ (Weber 19).

Within such tangled shoots of living experience, Weber identifies a vital vein of academic inquiry: ‘It was once considered the highest exercise of human cognition and sentience to explore what life means, to debate which relationships create and maintain it, and to ask how to live it.’ However, he claims that ‘for at least the past century’ discourse around these ‘ancient, crucial dimensions of life’ has been relegated to ‘some obscure graveyard of intellectual history’ (16). I cannot agree with this claim from the perspective of the humanities and creative arts, for within these disciplines there are those who *are* involved in questioning what life means and how to live it. The call to enlivenment in his essay actually affirms the place of these disciplines in countering the trend elsewhere to exclude ‘such talk about life, its meanings, its dimensions and the inner tensions between living agents and their relationships’ (16). The continuance of these discussions in a variety of forms, including live oral-spatial literature, while recognising empirical subjectivity and poetic objectivity as valid viewpoints, is vital. As Weber states, without them ‘we have lost the most important reference point to act[ing] in a wise and sustainable manner’ (16).

What I have been seeking through my creative project is an enlivened poetic response to my environment, which flows over, charged with its own meaning in an expression of poetic objectivity. In the deepening experience, I increasingly feel my own empirical subjectivity as a living being meshing with the beyond-me: experiencing myself as a participant in a panscape. Far from being an elevated mystic state, I experience this as a being-with that is very much earthed to the ground. Fortunately, I must say, because, perhaps as an invoked illustration of what I am trying to express, right now my body is literally alive and tingling with an energy, some kind of ionic response to a fast approaching wet season storm, which means I had better switch my laptop to battery before a power surge strikes.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to my doctoral supervisor, Adjunct Professor Stephen Torre of James Cook University, for his advice.

Thanks to Dr Lachlan Brown of Charles Sturt University for permission to use the photograph of *Wet* being performed at the 2013 ASAL Conference. The script of *Wet: an appetite for the tropics*, as performed at the Conference, was developed under the 2013 JUTE Theatre Company’s *Enter Stage Write* program in Cairns, with the expert guidance of dramaturge Peter Matheson. This support and mentoring continues through the selective 2014 program as I develop an extended version of the performance.

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