



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, University of Canberra

Paul Magee

The Strange Relation of Poetry to Place

Abstract:

The article analyses my interviews with a number of poets whose works seem to subvert space in various ways. I report my surprise in discovering, within those interviews, a tendency for the poets nonetheless to describe themselves and even their actual poems in national terms. C.D. Wright, for instance, referred in her interview to her having “an American ear,” in spite of her work’s seeming deconstruction of any such broad identities. This leads me to a discussion of the interpellative devices of the nation-state that serve to draw poets into ascribing a national identity to themselves and their work in a range of forums, up to and including the international research interview. But even granting the pervasive ideological mechanisms of the nation-state, it seems clear that the poets interviewed are genuinely reporting back on their experience of compositional work and its drivers, when according a role to the nation and/or geographic space they inhabit. The paper draws on developments in contemporary linguistics to suggest that what they are in fact naming is a localised idiom. It is that which serves to launch them into the kinds of spaces Emily Dickinson evoked, when avowing “I dwell in possibility / a fairer house than prose.” That fairer house – poetic possibility itself – is rooted in idiom.

Biographical note:

Paul Magee is Professor of Poetry at the University of Canberra, where he directs the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research. His most recent book is *Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought* (Rowman and Littlefield: London and New York, 2022). Paul’s 3rd book of verse, *The Arranging of Skin*, is forthcoming with Puncher and Wattmann in 2024.

Keywords:

Utopia, place, writing, disappointment, hope, poetry, nation-state, construction grammar, poetic diction

1. No walls

CD Wright's *One Big Self* is a document of Wright's conversations with prisoners in Louisiana and Georgia in 1998. "It might behove us," the poet writes in her introduction, "to see prisoners, among others, as they elect to be seen, in their larger selves" (Wright, 2007a, p.xiv).

Wright was travelling with photographer Deborah Luster at the time. Wright conversed with the prisoners, taking in their words, while Luster created a series of photographs, asking each subject to choose their own pose, including through the use of costume if they wished. Produced as silver emulsion images on aluminium plates, the pictures have an antique, photo-studio appearance that is worlds away from the mugshot, a "looks guilty" genre if ever there was one. The images toured from 2002-2007 and were simultaneously sent back to the prisoners in multiple copies, for distribution among family and friends (Luster, 2003).

The way Wright's text contributes to this project of perceptual emancipation is equally striking. Open most any page of *One Big Self*, and you will find a series of double-spaced single lines hovering uncertainly between verse and prose. A number of these are long enough to extend over the line-break, but many are short and yet others comprise a number of phrases separated by internal indents. There are genuine verses too, though less commonly, plus occasional prose paragraphs. And almost no narration. The effect is of a shifting, scattering of utterances. "Ever'body likes Jackie Collins" is one (Wright, 2007a, p.23). "The last time you was here I had a headful of bees" is another (p.5). On the same page as the "headful of bees" utterance, one reads "I know every word to every song on *Purple Rain* – Willie" (Wright, 2007a, p.5). Here we have dialogue attribution, but it is the exception rather than the rule, in *One Big Self*. The voice of the writing simply seems to shift speakers every line or two, and often to shift context as well. Nor does the occasional attribution give much away. In this case, we have "Willie": who is he? The fact, on the other hand, that some of the lines are clearly from prison guards leads to regular ambiguity. For instance, it is not clear who, guard or fellow prisoner, is saying, "she is *so* sweet. You would not believe she had did all the things they say she did" (p.7). The two-word utterance on the following line is equally hard to attribute: "Don't ask" (p.7). In that case too, we have no idea who is saying it: a guard, a prisoner, it could be Wright's companion, Deborah Luster, it could be Wright herself, speaking to herself inside her own head.

But to get the full effect of the text one needs to realise that the largely unattributed, polyvocal utterances it comprises can equally come from spaces outside the prison. On the same two-page spread as "The men pretty much all have ripped chests" and "Dino's out, he'd like his pictures," we read "Church Marquee: LET'S MEET AT MY HOUSE BEFORE THE GAME" (Wright, 2007a, pp.12-13). This last line is presumably something Wright is seeing on her way to, or from, the prison. Other passages bring in reference to: "the Pecanland mall" (p.24); "the shorn suburb of your intelligence" (p.24); Louisiana bumper stickers (p.25); and current media reports (p.13). The book travels outside, if not quite as much as in. But there's no architecture. It came as a shock for me to realise, some half-way into the volume, that this

book of Wright's is the only work of prison literature I can recall that omits to describe the opening and clanging of gates, omits to describe the walls those gates are attached to, omits to describe any sort of physical edifice at all. There are simply differences and similarities in the way people speak. One assumes walls, of course; but they remain at that level, an assumption. The effect is dizzying. It brings prison voices right out into the open, as part of some conversation a reader might share in. But at the same time, it suggests, in a kind of reverse move, that "inside," "outside," and even "the open," are, as much as anywhere else, places within one's unique – i.e. at once personal and socialised – relation to language. Don't ask.

2. Where does poetry take place?

The point of this paper is to think through what Wright and her peers told me about their work's relation to place. I am referring to a series of interviews I conducted as part of the 2013-2016 Australian Research Council-funded project, *Understanding Creative Excellence: A Case-Study in Poetry*, which saw a team of us (Kevin Brophy, Jen Webb and I, with methodological input from Michael A. R. Biggs) asking 75 celebrated Anglophone poets a range of questions on the broad theme of poetic judgement.

I will turn to those interviews shortly but would like to set the stage for that discussion by highlighting something about the nature of the work such poets produce, and, in particular, by highlighting its relation to place. I have already been setting this stage, through my discussion of Wright's *One Big Self*, which presents a set of Georgian and Louisianan prisons with no walls other than our relation to language. Add to that preliminary sketch the fact that *One Big Self* is marketed by its publisher, Copper Canyon Press, as a work of "poetry". From the description above, it should be clear that the work contains as much prose as verse. The fact that we allow the label "poetry" for such shape-shifting work strikes me as pertinent to a discussion of poetry's relation to place.

Consider the related term, "poetic," which I doubt anyone would mind applying to Wright's book. Actually, the word is even more capacious than "poetry," serving to label artworks in a wide variety of media. While it is true that the use of the word "poetic" in relation to non-verse artworks can refer to a certain lyricism, I do not think that that is really what allies Wright's book and, let us say, Louise Bourgeois's sculptures, or Doris Salcedo's gallery and outdoor installations, also often labelled poetic. I want to suggest that the reason "poetic" seems to fit in all three of these cases has to do with a key characteristic of poetry as currently practised: its tendency to undermine space-as-given (a.k.a. place).

Here a comparison with the novel is in order. When Benedict Anderson sought to illustrate the way in which national imagining comprehends space he turned not to poetry, but to the novel – that uniquely modern genre, which emerged in something like its current form in the early 18th century and spread globally from that point (Bakhtin 1984; Watts, 2001; Moretti, 2003). The novel, by Anderson's analysis, plots the concurrent happenings of myriad characters, each ignorant of the precise details of each other's actions for much of the time,

but nonetheless united in their simultaneous existence within a shared, bounded space, be it London, Manila, “the colony,” Germany, a global jet setting scene, or wherever. Anderson illustrates this idea of shared time and space by pointing out that the novel has constant recourse to the word “meanwhile” (1991, p.24). Space-as-given is not in question in such work, no more than the distinct form of modern temporality (the famous “homogenous, empty time”) that binds it – to the contrary, their fixity provide the very framework that allows narrative tension to develop. As such, the novel performs that same “remarkable confidence of community in anonymity that is the hallmark of modern nations” (p.36). “An American,” for instance, “will never meet, or even know the names of, more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow Americans,” and yet he or she has “complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” across the nation (p.26). It is as if they all inhabited the same novel.

Other, more recent commentators – Taussig (1997), Brubaker (2009), Malešević (2011), Davis (2015) – point to an element of forcedness in such national imagining. Do we really feel we have that much in common with millions of others, just because they happen to have the same passport? Siniša Malešević (2011) notes the constant ideological work required to keep such an outrightly imaginary belief-system going: it runs from political speechmaking, civic ceremony and bad jokes, right through to the Dewey decimal system holding the contents our libraries in place. He adds that we scholars are complicit in propping up the nation, too:

When asked at any international meeting where you are from the expectation is that you will name a recognisable distinct geographic and political entity such as “Germany”, “India”, “Nigeria or “Peru.” If you were to say “I have no nation,” your answer would not be taken as a serious response. Instead you would be seen as a joker, a naïve utopian or a nuisance. Alternately, you would be asked further questions to clarify your “real origin.” (2011, p.273)

I will address a closely related sort of interpellation shortly. The point, for now, is that national identifications are inherently fictional, and the type of fiction they most closely resemble is the novelistic one.

Underlining this, note that when we do call a novel “poetic,” it is often as not because the work seems to undermine the givenness of space, whether that space be explicitly coded as national, or otherwise. For instance, take a novel like (is there any like?) Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1967), which is set in the streets Buenos Aires shares with Paris: that is to say, a character will walk down Avenida Corrientes in the Argentine capital and it turns into the Champs-Élysées; and vice versa. Or consider Marguerite Duras’s *The Malady of Death* (1986), which pares geographical setting back to allusions, perhaps symbolic, in the utterances of two characters, predominantly their references to the sound of the nearby sea. These are the kinds of novels we call poetic.

The unsettling of space-as-given (a.k.a. place) is, in sum, one of the key things we expect poetry and poets to do. Here, accordingly, are the final stanzas of Medbh McGuckian's "The Field of Nonduality":

By plucking threads
 from chair covers sprinkled with bees,
 seeing through dry mist
 in native trees
 lanterns of fishing-shacks
 swaying on thin masts

you uncurtained a certain mountain
 from a certain other,
 walked off the edge of the torn map
 on to another. (McGuckian 1998, p.45)

The "you" in question, McGuckian explained to me when I interviewed her in Belfast in early 2015, was Seamus Heaney (McGuckian, 2015). So one poet describes another poet's tendency to step off the map.

3. Poets nonetheless embracing place

I have alluded to the things C.D. Wright and other U.S.A.-based poets told me in the course of the 14 interviews that I recorded in my role as one of the three Chief Investigators on the 2013-16 Australian Research Council funded project, *Understanding Creative Excellence: A Case-Study in Poetry*, and I have just mentioned my interview with Medbh McGuckian over in Belfast, as well. Our formal brief was "to interview 75 celebrated English language poets globally to discover the conditions and contexts for their work". One of the things I particularly wanted to know was how the nation figured in the poets' thinking: did they see it as one of the "conditions" – or even just "contexts" – for their work? Even more specifically, would these poets attribute aspects of their own originality to the culture of their nation?

In wanting to ask poets about this matter, I had in mind a tension running alongside and through the trends I have just sketched, which are all about our poetry's predilection for questioning and unsettling its readers' sense of space-as-given. For it is simultaneously and quite contradictorily the case that our literary institutions take poetry's grounding in place, and in particular its grounding in national place, as given. Take the fact that poetry is so often and unproblematically anthologised in national terms: so we have the *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (Murray, 1986), *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* (Kinsella, 2009), the *Best American Poetry* series, published annually since 1988 (Lehmann, 1988), *Contemporary American Poetry*, in eight editions since 1971 (e.g. Poulin and Waters, 2006), *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, now in its tenth edition (Levine et al, 2023), and so on. Even transnational anthologies will tend to indicate the origins and residences of the authors whose works they contain in national terms. Nor is this simply an issue at the

point of anthologisation. One could point to numerous scholarly titles that assume nationality as either condition or context of a poet's work. Consider, too, the simple difficulty of mentioning a poet in a public address or even conversation – say, at one of the academic conferences Malešević evokes – without at some point placing that poet within a given geographical and typically national space: “a Scottish poet,” “an Egyptian poet,” “a poet from Fiji.” Actually, we nationalise poets all the time, up to and including the very same poets whose work we celebrate for its spatially subversive properties.

This was the tension I had in mind. Surely the poets we interviewed could shed some light on it. Here is the question we put to them:

If you were to describe yourself to a journalist or other stranger, would you be happy to identify yourself as any particular sort of poet? (e.g. an American poet, a lyric poet, a philosophical poet...)

My expectation was that the poets would not want to characterise themselves in any of these ways. They would not want to put a category on practices that almost by definition unsettle category. I was wrong, and wrong specifically about the category of nation. Here are some of the responses I received:

C.D. Wright:

I am very much an American poet. My English is American English. My ear is American. I do write a fair amount about Mexico, but it is North America, same land mass. And I feel I am very, very “in the American grain,” as Williams put it. This would be the label I would be most comfortable with. (Wright, 2015a)

Noelle Kocot:

I mean, I am American. I am a poet. It's the truth of the matter. (Kocot, 2013)

C.K. Williams:

Well, of necessity I'd have to be a North American poet – poets are defined to a great degree by their language and their culture. (Williams, C.K., 2016, p.88)

Let me underline how contrary to expectation I found these responses, which are merely a sample. Why would poets so adept at precise and compelling language ally themselves to nationhood and ethnicity, those “vague vernacular terms whose meaning varies considerably over place and time” (Brubaker, 2009, p.27). The sociologist I have just cited, Rogers Brubaker, takes particular aim at the “analytically dubious notion of ‘nations’ as substantial, enduring collectivities,” describing it as a form of “reification” (1996, p.7; p.21). Why would poets buy into such false eternities, poets confessing a debt, as Wright does in the comment above, to William Carlos Williams, the poet who wrote “No ideas / but in things,” and gave

“saxifrage” and “the rocks” as examples of the kinds of things he had in mind (Williams, W.C., 1976, p.133). What space for vague allegiances there?

4. The production of poets as national

It will not have escaped anyone’s attention that the three poets I have just cited are from the United States of America. A chauvinist interpretation of the national tenor of those interview responses immediately suggests itself: the U.S.A., that interpretation would run, is particularly given to expressions of national belonging, and even pride. Maybe poets from other places would be less likely to label themselves in such terms.

The following rough statistics would seem to confirm that reading. I looked at the responses to this question by the twenty “most celebrated” (an admittedly impressionistic measure) of the 75 poets whom I and my colleagues interviewed. The 75 came from a variety of Anglophone countries: Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, the U.K. and the U.S.A. Accordingly, that sample of the twenty “most celebrated” poets crossed national boundaries. As for their responses to the question under discussion, six of the twenty indicated that they would be disinclined to add a national or ethnic ascription (“a British poet,” “a New Zealand poet”) to their label as poet, and five rejected labels altogether. On the other hand, seven of the twenty were prepared to nominate themselves in national terms; and a further two in regional, and ethnic terms, respectively. Let’s break this down a little further, by bringing the provenance of these twenty poets into the picture. There were three U.K.-based poets in my sample of twenty “most celebrated” poets, and only one of these three were prepared to label themselves nationally; likewise there were three Australians in the group of twenty, and again only one of them was prepared to assume a national label. But of the five U.S.A.-based poets in the twenty, a full four responded to our question by labelling themselves in national terms.

That the “excessive national pride” reading of these ratios was most likely the wrong one was pointed out when I presented some of this material at the University of Michigan in late 2014. Discomfort was just as likely to be the cause. What is more, I was most likely responsible for eliciting it! We only have to look critically at the interview transcripts for this to become apparent. Here is how Rae Armantrout addressed the matter:

INTERVIEWER

What about national or regional labels? Are you happy with that sort of thing? For instance, are you happy to be termed an American poet?

ARMANTROUT

Well, I guess I have to be an American poet. I think that my work is very American, in that it references a lot of contemporary American culture. The thing is that American culture has been widely exported. So a lot of these references can be understood elsewhere.

INTERVIEWER

Californian references, in particular.

ARMANTROUT

Yes. It is the benefit of empire. . . But, you know, I am kind of a mockingbird, I pick up what is around me. Do you have mockingbirds in Australia?

INTERVIEWER

I don't know, but I know what they are.

ARMANTROUT

I am a mimic. I pick up a lot of stuff, and it is the stuff around me. It could be stuff I read, or it could be stuff I hear in the media. Often it has to do with American politics and culture.

So I guess I would have to say I am an American poet. And I have mostly read American poets. They have been my influences. I do not say that with any particular pride. It is just a fact. (Armantrout, 2014)

Armantrout has a laconic way of saying it: "Yes. It is the benefit of empire." But nationality is clearly something she feels no choice but to acknowledge ("I do not say that with any particular pride. It is just a fact."). Maxine Chernoff, who also lives in California, responded in similarly bald terms to the question of whether she would be happy with a national moniker. She started by mentioning that the poets she reads are largely from the U.S.A. She then added:

I also think that I am an American poet because I feel in some ways responsible for the issues that are facing everybody, having been caused in many ways by our country's incursions everywhere, and for the corporate world we live in. I am an American. But I am not particularly happy about that being the fact. (Chernoff, 2014)

Again, nationality is a fact that demands acknowledgement, however ugly.

The conclusion seems clear: for a poet from the U.S.A. to refuse an international invitation to identify as a national could easily be seen as an attempt to deny one's complicity in empire.

Actually, a closer look at that Armantrout interview shows what a hand the interviewer (i.e. me) had in forcing the issue. When quoting Armantrout immediately above, I actually cited the second of her responses to the question about categorisation. Here is how that exchange began, some five minutes prior to then:

INTERVIEWER

Would you be happy to describe yourself as any particular sort of poet? Is there any particular label you would be prepared to accept?

ARMANTROUT

I am going to answer that, even though I do not tend to like labels as I find them limiting. I am certainly not an epic poet. In terms of huge categories like that, I suppose I am a lyric poet. But lyric has been defined in so many different ways [...] (Armantrout, 2014)

Those who know Armantrout's radically pared-back verse will recognise how droll "I am certainly not an epic poet" is. I have left in ellipsis the discussion that followed: in brief, Armantrout proceeded to consider the possibility that she be called a "lyric poet." If that label was to do service for her work, it would need, she pointed out, to incorporate her sometime recourse to pastiche. I asked at that point whether she was referring to an ironic component in her writing and this led to further nuancing. The discussion might well have petered out at that point. That was when I returned to the fray, this time leading with the prospect of a national moniker. What followed was the exchange cited above.

Actually, it was only when I repeated the question that Noelle Kocot nominated herself in national, American terms, as well. Her initial response was: "I wouldn't slap a label on it, saying that I'm this kind of poet or that kind of poet. I'm just a garden-variety poet." I responded, "But again, that's not a label you'd particularly want, is it?" She replied "I wouldn't mind," adding that she wouldn't mind being called "An American poet" either, as per the comments cited above (Kocot, 2013).

These revelations are somewhat embarrassing to me as a researcher. I do not cite them out of any desire to personalise the matter. To the contrary, it seems to me that there is a continuum between the way my follow-up questions served unwittingly to Americanise my interview subjects, in the course of our Australian-American exchanges over in the United States, and that international conference scenario we have seen Malešević (2011, 273) describe ("When asked at any international meeting where you are from, the expectation is..."). Benedict Anderson himself put travel encounters high on the list of the things that formed subjects as national – at least as far as the genesis of the nation goes (1991, pp.47-61). As for the present, who, among those travelling internationally – think of your very first trip – has not found themselves developing more nationality in the process?

We are looking at the question why a set of artists whose work so often engages in the critique of space-as-given should nonetheless be frequently categorised and discussed in national terms. I tabled some examples, where poets from the U.S.A. were prepared to label themselves in these terms, from my international research interviews. We have now seen reasons to be wary of such "data." Some poets might be embarrassed into responding that way, given the sheer fact of empire. Yet poets from the U.S.A. were not the only ones to respond in national terms when posed a question about what labels they would be happy with. The embarrassment thesis explains something in the preponderance of U.S.A. respondents who characterised their practice nationally, but it doesn't explain the albeit fewer poets from

other countries who did so, too. Nor can we put the latter group's responses down solely to the interpellative effects of an international research encounter. I will turn to an interview with an Australian-based poet that cannot be explained in either of these ways, shortly. But it will be worth noting, even prior to tabling that evidence, that there are numerous forces pushing poets to think of themselves in national terms.

As Pascale Casanova pointed out, the emergent 18th century “belief that the frontiers of literary space coincided with national borders” (2005, p.78) has become more than belief in the centuries since: it is instantiated in a whole series of practices. For instance, arts grants tend to involve poets competing at state and national levels, and the same can be said of the bulk of prizes. A case in point, the Pulitzers which both C.K. Williams and Armantrout received are only open to U.S.A. nationals. Likewise, magazines tend to take a state, regional or national remit, as instanced by the fact that my interview with C.D. Wright (2015a) was published in *American Poetry Review*, which is not only national in name, but very largely in distribution, too. What is more, such magazines overwhelmingly review national authors. These must be among the reasons the poets we interviewed tended to know (or know of) most of the other poets we were interviewing, whenever those poets fell within their national silos, but only some of the names beyond. Recall Armantrout's “And I have mostly read American poets.”

One can find a similar set of nationally-contoured literary institutions and practices in most any other jurisdiction. Pascale Casanova's work focusses on the “world literary space,” though she sees that in turn as fully troped around the nation, or rather, around “national literary spaces” (2005, p.79, fn12). Her interest is in how writers from formerly colonised cultures work at “the accumulation of national literary resources required to enter the world space and compete inside it” (p.81), for prizes, grants and reviews, but most notably for the Nobel Prize that will show their country's literature has finally “arrived” (p.74). To gauge the national coding of that competition, an Australian like me only has to compare the frequency with which Patrick White's status as Australia's first Nobel Laureate for literature is noted, as opposed, say, to his status as one of the first openly gay laureates for literature. Which is not to say that the literary work has to take on nationalist tones to succeed there. What is particularly useful in Casanova's approach, it seems to me, is her insistence that the literary is a distinct field to the political. In fact she criticises historicism for the unconvincing way it tries to collapse the two (pp.71-2; see too, Rancière, 1994, pp.66-69). Writers do not vie with each other in the sorts of agonistic institutions sketched above (prizes, grants, reviews) “for national (or nationalist) reasons, but instead for strictly literary stakes” (p.79 fn2). Those “strictly literary stakes” involve the struggle to be regarded as best author, which might include for authoring a work as confounding of place as Wright's *One Big Self*. Which is to say, the nationalness or otherwise of the contents, inspiration behind, or even effects of a literary work is by and large irrelevant to the kinds of agonistic structures Casanova analyses. Yet by the same token, those structures form authors as national agents. It happens regardless of the content, subversive or otherwise, of what they write.

As such, we can ally Casanova's institution-based characterisation of "national literary spaces" to those more recent theorists of national identity cited above. For where earlier thinkers like Anderson (1991) and Ernst Gellner (1983) tended to treat nations, "[o]nce formed. . . as static, substantial entities" (Brubaker, 2009, p.30), a new generation of scholars has argued that "the pervasiveness" of national sentiment "is rooted in the continuous production and maintenance of imagery, practices, discourse and institutions that sustain this ideology" (Malešević, 2011, p.286). What occurred in the decades between these two generations of thinkers, Mike Davis points out, was the outbreak of so-called "ethnic" conflicts in the former Eastern block, conflicts that "did not so much erupt from below as they were stirred up from the top down by intense fear-mongering in the warlord-controlled media" (Davis, 2015, p.49, fn15). Rogers Brubaker accordingly argues that we should "focus on nation as a category of practice, nationhood as an institutionalized cultural and political form, and nationness as a contingent event or happening" (1996, p.21). That focus has only gathered in importance in recent decades, with global moves towards "a blurring of the distinctions between security and policing on the one hand and militarization and war-making on the other" (Jones, 2016, p.38), as political leaders make capital from their "determination" to exclude non-nationals through rapidly thrown-up fences, in the attempt to appear so much the more national than the next politician – they're making it up as they go, making "us" up in the process.

It is important to point to a certain staginess in the operation of the far gentler mechanisms Casanova has in mind, too. Writers may well be repeatedly interpellated as national players through grants, prizes and publication. But do those nationally-contoured, agonistic mechanisms really succeed in forming them as Canadian, British, Australian and so forth? "Prestige," Casanova writes, with typically Bourdieusian reductivism, "is the quintessential form power takes in the literary universe" (p.83). Actually, the arbitrariness and even irrelevance of prizes and grants was a frequent theme in the interviews. A scepticism towards reviews was particularly common, for all the centrality one might imagine them to hold for a culture supposedly geared around the struggle for prestige. None of the poets I interviewed had ever received a published review that induced them to rethink what they were doing. As G.C. Waldrep put it, reviews tend to be "puffy" (Waldrep, 2013). I told C.K. Williams of my surprise that poets in the U.S.A. seemed to find their critical culture so lacking in bite. I had assumed that in a country with such a comparatively large reading public, I would find something much more robust than what I was used to in Australia. Williams replied:

But the world of poetry is a small world. I've been thinking about this lately. What a strange phenomenon it is: this limited group of people through history who become committed to poetry, to this one odd way of using language that the rest of the people around them very rarely connect to. Yet the poets keep reproducing ourselves over the generations. I've thought that if there were the slightest blip in the continuity, poetry might just end. I mean, what does it do? Who reads it? We bemoan the fact that most of the people who read poetry are poets, but by my age you learn we shouldn't complain, we should be grateful for the readers we have, who tend to be passionately devoted. If you want more readers, you do something else.

But it is a strange phenomenon, that there always seems to be this group of people who want to do a certain weird thing with language and experience, that almost no-one else connects to. (Williams, C.K., 2016, pp.95-96)

Sure, poetry's institutions are largely national in remit. But why regard that "weird thing" people do with "language and experience" as national in any but the most superficial ways?

5. An American ear

And yet poets keep pointing to some residual element of geo-political identification in their work and self-conception. Take Brook Emery, who works in Sydney, down near the sea. Emery hated the idea of identifying his poetry in national terms. Not that he was particularly focussed on the nation in this regard. His initial response to our question about categorical labels was, "I would be quite comfortable to say I am a lyric poet, and a philosophical poet" (Emery 2014). I am embarrassed to admit that I, yet again, returned to the fray:

INTERVIEWER

What about a national identifier? "An Australian poet"? Would that mean anything to you?

EMERY

No. I despise the whole idea of nationalism, although I recognise where it came from. I was a history teacher for twenty years. I strongly dislike it. I find the idea of pushing Australianism and Australian literature distasteful. It is like you have an inferiority complex, so you have to project it. I suppose you could also say that I am still stuck with humanism. (Emery 2014)

Clearly this response is worlds apart from the things I heard from the U.S.A. poets cited above. Only Emery's reflections did not end there:

That said, once when I was reading in India, Kevin Brophy asked me, "I wonder what the Indians make of this really Australian stuff?" I realised that my work is about place. I live here. The patterns of my language are from here. The vernacular I use is Australian. I write about the sea a lot because that is the place I spend a lot of time. If I lived in the middle of the Surry Hills, I may well be writing about café society or something. (Emery, 2014)

Again we have an instance of the way international exchanges ("once when I was reading in India") can serve to make one national. On the other hand, Emery's references are not to some vague "chimera of national identity" (Malešević, 2011), but to patterns of language use and habit. What is more, those patterns are local. They are so localised as to lead Emery to wonder whether he might not be writing a different poetry if living in a different suburb of the very same city! Yet he himself approaches that specificity in terms of the word "Australian" ("I wonder what the Indians make of this really Australian stuff"). That poets see themselves as engaging in a specific, contingently-localised, form of mimesis emerged

from comments in other interviews too, including the U.S.A. ones (e.g. Kocot, 2013). One can see how a national moniker could come to stand for that.

In other words, Emery's response may be closer to Wright's, Kocot's and C.K. Williams's responses to the question of national identification than at first blush seemed. To recap, Wright answered in terms that at once exceeded the nation-state, including Mexico as the terrain of her identification as "an American poet" ("it is North America, same land mass"), as much as the U.S.A. itself; but she also put the thing firmly in terms of localised linguistic practices: "My English is American English. My ear is American" (2015a). Kocot saw her Americanness as the simple "truth of the matter" (Kocot, 2013). While Williams insisted that "poets are to a great extent defined by their language and culture" (2016, p.88). I hasten to add that, even though Wright made reference to the North American "land mass," the focus of her comments on composition in the interview was overwhelmingly to do with language: how one hears it, acquires and works with it. Which is true of all the poets interviewed. The place they have in mind is a pre-eminently linguistic one.

And it's strange. The very phrase in which Wright describes the Americanness of her linguistic practices is actually quite an odd one. "My ear is American." There is something colloquial about the phrase, but something unusual too. Actually, none of these poets quite speak the common tongue. This is often the case in their interviews, and much more so in their poems. To focus again on Wright, a reviewer in the *New Yorker* described her diction as "as eerie as a tin whistle" (Anon., 2002). This was in reference to phrases like

Chlorophyll world. July. Great Goblets of magnolia light. (2007b, 193)

or

When I handed Franklin his prints, his face broke.
Damn, he said to no one, *I done got old*. (2007a, 6)

or

I pass the tree often, at the end of a head-jammed-up-in-a-shitstorm but
sluggish run and
hunker under the canopy to breathe. (2015b)

Could this be the strangest thing of all? That our interviews show poets like Wright claiming local provenance for their utterance of phrases ("his face broke") that are never actually said there? What *does* "an American ear" hear? Recall, in like fashion, C.K. Williams referring to the work of poets as this "odd way of using language that the rest of the people around them very rarely connect to." Why would Williams in that same interview claim, as we also saw, that "poets are defined to a great degree by their language and their culture"?

How can poets be "odd" to, and yet simultaneously "defined" by, the local tongue?

I will conclude on this question, shifting disciplinary focus in the process. The fact is that developments in linguistics over the last five decades have begun to offer us something of an answer. The key point is that language is starting to appear a far more local phenomenon than previously imagined. The implications of that reorientation on the philosophy of poetry are only starting to be worked out, but some suggestive conclusions can be drawn. The first thing to note is that the idea of essential, i.e. cross-linguistically valid, grammatical categories (noun, adjective, relative clause, passive voice etc.) has come under increasing scrutiny. Anna Siewerska, for instance, surveys a range of distinct languages, commenting, “The analysis of the various constructions referred to in the literature as PASSIVE leads to the conclusion that there is not even one single property which all these constructions have in common” (qtd in Croft, 2020, p.147). At the same time, it has been realised that numerous words and phrases traditionally regarded as part of language’s vocabulary actually behave much more like grammatical markers. Take the expression *He wended his way through the crowd*. There are numerous *way* expressions like this in current usage, e.g. “Annabelle *wormed her way* into the circle around Keziah”; “A skier *carves his way* down a pristine slope of powder” (Bybee, 2010, p.87). Multiple verbs of motion can do service in such expressions, and numerous different nouns can be used for the entity that some path is being cut through, as well, including quite abstract ones, e.g. “Joe cheated his way through law school” (Hilpert, 2021, p.92). But the word that absolutely cannot be changed here is *way*. To say **He wended his path through the crowd* simply sounds wrong. Ditto **Annabelle wormed her trail into the circle around Keziah*. *Way* is non-negotiable, and in this regard is in fact little different to a verb ending, a case marker, or any other traditionally grammatical parts of speech. Joan Bybee goes so far as to describe the *way* in this construction as “a grammatical morpheme” (2010, p.3), a far cry from the older conceptions of idiom as fixed and irregular.

Partially-fixed expressions like *Noun phrase + verb of motion + pronominal adjective + way + preposition + noun phrase* (e.g. *He wended his way through the crowd*) have come to be known as “constructions,” and to serve as the very model for regularity in language. Joan Bybee and Clay Beckner’s broadly representative definition brings this to the fore. For them, constructions are “conventionalised sequences of morphemes or words that contain a position that can be filled by more than one item” (2009, 39.4.4) Another example of a construction would be *He drove her crazy*. You can drive someone *nuts, up the wall, insane, bananas* and so forth, but you really cannot, Martin Hilpert notes, “**drive someone happy* or **drive someone sane*” (Hilpert, 2021, p.18). The fact that the concept of construction can contract down to the constituent parts of words (for a further example take what Hilpert calls the “V-ment construction,” as in *punishment, shipment, achievement* and so forth, but not “**emailment*” (Hilpert 2021, p.121)), or out to the kinds of “form-meaning pairings” we label in English “the passive” (e.g. *The armadillo was hit by a car*), has led construction grammarians to argue that the term has sufficient purchase to replace the age-old distinction between grammar and vocabulary. Again, what we used to think of as irregular, locally specific and idiomatic, has become the very model of what a language is.

Consider the clear historicity and even geographical specificity of the *drive crazy* construction to get a sense of why this is a valuable move, and in particular why construction

grammar might help us to address the question motivating this writing. The massive corpora of spoken and written language that have accreted over these same decades have meanwhile amply demonstrated just how conventionalised, if historically labile, the contents of any construction's open slots in fact are – again, you can have *punishment, shipment and achievement*, but not *emailment* (Hilpert, 2021, p.121; see too, Hoey, 2004). Those corpora also show that departing from the expected word or phrasing for the sake of humour, joy or accuracy is a phenomenon in all walks of life (Carter, 2004). We are closing in on the place of poetry.

To get there, note what construction grammars – and, relatedly, linguistic corpora – have started to reveal about the multiplicity of any language. Michael Hoey: “There is not, I claim, a single grammar to the language (indeed there is not a single language), but a multiplicity of overlapping grammars’ (2005, p.47). There will be commonalities at broader levels, but it is nonetheless the case that a person who grows up speaking English in the U.S.A. will exercise a markedly different set of constructions to one growing up speaking it in South Africa. The tenor of a phrase like *wig out* – which can also be heard as *flake out, zonk out, zone out, bliss out, flip out*, and so on (“X out, to go into an unusual mental state” (Audring and Booij, 2016, p.633) – will remind us that the individual growing up in California will not even necessarily share the same set of constructions as one raised in Arkansas. And one generation of Arkansians might be very differently placed to the next, as well. Or is that Arkansawyers? No one is sure (Simpson, 2022). Not only is it “constructions all the way down” (Goldberg, 2006, p.18), but all those massive networks of convention are locally contoured, overlapping and ever changing.

As for the poets, I can only gesture at an adequate theory here (see the fuller discussion in Magee, 2022, pp.201-228) but the truth would seem to be something like the following. When coming up with phrases like “his face broke” (Wright, 2007a, p.6) or “you uncurtained a certain mountain / from a certain other” (McGuckian, 1998, p.45), poets are working at the border between the highly restricted way any construction is actually, conventionally used, and that far, far greater field constituted by all the possible ways it *could* be used. For we might well find distinct meanings for otherwise unsaid words like “*Ungreen,” “*Unawake” and “*Unspecial,” all the same (Hilpert, 2021, p.17). “I dwell in possibility / a fairer house than prose” (Dickinson, 1998, p.215). **Driving us sane*, indeed. One needs to be alert to what the restricted, idiomatic set offers for exceeding it, in relation to the open slots of each and every construction. Poets belong to a linguistic culture inasmuch as they keep discovering ways to find an innate foreignness there. That focus on the foreign is simultaneously what drives them back to the local, for all its constraints.

References

Unpublished Interviews:

Armantrout, Rae. Interview with the author. November 11, 2014. San Diego, California.

Chernoff, Maxine. Interview with the author. November 17, 2014. San Francisco, California.

Emery, Brook. Interview with the author. October 25, 2014. Sydney, New South Wales.

Kocot, Noelle. Interview with the author. July 13, 2013. Elizabeth, New Jersey.

McGuckian, Medbh. Interview with the author. Emails. February 11th, 2015-April 14th, 2015. Belfast, Northern Ireland and Canberra, Australian Capital Territory.

Waldrep, G. C. Interview with the author. July 9, 2013. Bucknell, Pennsylvania.

Books and Articles:

Anon. (2002). Briefly Noted. Steal Away by C.D. Wright (Copper Canyon, 2002). *The New Yorker*, September 2.

Anderson, B. R. O. G. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. and extended ed.). Verso.

Audring, J. and Booij, G. (2016). Cooperation and Coercion. *Linguistics*, 54 (4), 617-37. DOI: 10.1515/ling-2016-0012

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. Ed. and trans. C. Emery & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Brubaker, R. (1996). *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

– . (2009). Ethnicity, race and nationalism. *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (28), 21-42. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115916

Bybee, J. L. (2010). *Language, Usage and Cognition*. Cambridge University Press.

Bybee, J. L. and Beckner, C. (2009). Usage-based theory. In B. Heine and H. Narrog (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*. Oxford University Press.

Carter, R. (2004). *Language and Creativity: The Art of Common Talk*. Routledge.

Casanova, P. (2005). Literature as a world. *New Left Review* 31, 71-90.

Cortázar, J. (1967). [*Rayuela*.] *Hopscotch*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. Collins, Harvill Press.

Croft, W. (2020). *Ten Lectures on Construction Grammar and Typology*. Brill.

Davis, M. (2015). Marx's lost theory: the politics of nationalism in 1848. *New Left Review*, 93, 45-66.

Dickinson, E. (1998). 466. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by R.W. Franklin (p.215). Cambridge (M.A.): Bellknap Press.

Duras, M. (1986). *The Malady of Death* (1st Grove Press ed.). Grove Press.

- Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and Nationalism*. Cornell University Press.
- Goldberg, A. (2006). *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford University Press.
- Hilpert, M. (2021). *Ten Lectures on Diachronic Construction Grammar*. Brill.
- Hoey, M. (2005). *Lexical Priming: A New Theory of Words and Language*. Routledge.
- Jones, Reece. (2016). *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*. Verso.
- Kinsella, J. (2009). *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry*. Penguin Books.
- Lehman, D. (1988). *The Best American Poetry*. Collier Books: Scribner Poetry.
- Levine, R. S., Avilez, G., Elliott, M. A., Gustafson, S. M., Hungerford, A., & Siraganian, L. (2022). *The Norton Anthology of American literature* (Tenth edition. ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Luster, D. (2003). The Reappearance of those who have gone. Introduction to Luster, D. and Wright, C.D. (2003). *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (pp.12-15). Twin Palms Publishing.
- Magee, P. (2022). *Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought*. Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Malešević, S. (2011). The Chimera of national identity. *Nations and Nationalism* 17 (2), 272-90. DOI: 10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00479.x
- McGuckian, M. (1998). The field of non-duality. In *Shelmalier* (p.45). Gallery Press.
- Moretti, F. (2003). Graphs, maps and trees – I. Abstract models for literary history. *New Left Review* 24 (Nov./Dec.), 67-93.
- Murray, L. A. (1986). *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*. Oxford University Press.
- Poulin, A., & Waters, M. (2006). *Contemporary American poetry* (8th ed.). Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Rancière, J. (1994). *The Names of History: on the Poetics of Knowledge*. Translated by H. Melehy. University of Minnesota Press.
- Simpson, E.C. (2022). Arkansans versus Arkansawyers. *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Central Arkansas Library System. Website.
<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/arkansans-versus-arkansawyers-6438/>
- Watt, I. (2001). *The rise of the novel: studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Williams, C.K. (2016). Interview. *Salmagundi 190/191* (Spring-Summer), 86-105.

Williams, W.C. (1976). A Sort of Song. In C. Tomlinson (ed.), *Selected Poems*. Penguin. 133.

Wright, C. D. (2007a). *One Big Self: An Investigation*. Copper Canyon Press.

– . (2007b). Deepstep come shining. In *Like Something Flying Backwards: New and Selected Poems* (pp. 191-248). Bloodaxe.

– . (2015a). An Interview with C. D. Wright by Paul Magee. *American Poetry Review* 44, no. 6 (November/December 2015). <https://aprweb.org/poems/an-interview-with-c-d-wright-by-paul-magee>

– . (2015b). Tree of obscurity. *American Poetry Review*, 44 (6 November/December), 21.