

Creative Writing on Place and Nature

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Abstract

This PhD by Publication (Route 2) brings together a series of three books of which I am the sole author, and which share common ground in terms of theme and preoccupation. I seek to demonstrate how these three publications have contributed to the existing body of work in creative writing about place and nature, and specifically how they might be seen to address three key research questions.

The submission includes my two most recent poetry collections, *Tilt* (2007) and *Sleeping Keys* (2013), both of which are characterised by an awareness of place and an acute attention to the natural world. These two collections explore two very different kinds of location: the poems in *Tilt* are mostly situated in the wide open spaces of the coast, whereas those in *Sleeping Keys* are largely located indoors, in the rooms of houses, occupied or abandoned.

The third item in the submission is *Strands: A Year of Discoveries on the Beach* (2012), a book of essays or meditations which collectively describe a year's walking on the wild estuarial beaches between Formby and Southport, charting the changing character of place through different weathers and seasons. This text might be classified as 'creative non-fiction' or 'narrative non-fiction' (neither of these terms is entirely uncontroversial or clearly defined).

These three books have achieved a large and international readership. They are recognised by critics and by other writers as examples of the recent renaissance

in creative writing on place, landscape, nature and environment. All three contribute to current discourses about 'the new nature writing', which have been particularly significant and audible over the past seven years. More broadly, all three contribute to 'place writing', which is not limited to the natural world but engages in more diverse ways with notions of place and space and our human interactions with them.

I will therefore consider my work and its contribution to these two distinct but overlapping disciplines. Both are of course international, but for the purposes of this commentary I am considering them within a British context.

Introduction

In this Analytical Commentary, I shall begin by offering a definition of 'place writing' and 'nature writing', summarising some recent developments in these fields, before going on to indicate how my own publications are situated in, and contribute to, the existing body of literature. I shall confine the account to prose non-fiction and poetry, the two disciplines to which my own publications belong, and consider my publications in relation to the field to which they contribute: creative writing on place and nature.

Throughout this commentary, I shall address three key research questions to which my own work responds:

1. What distinguishes 'the new nature writing', and what is it about the present moment which makes it possible? Has our burgeoning environmental awareness over the past thirty years changed the character of the relationship human beings perceive between themselves and the world around them? What kind of vocabulary do we use to articulate the relationship? In our collective conversations, do we identify ourselves as belonging to nature, or standing apart from it?

2. What is the role of creative writing in responding to place? Place and space are documented in texts of all kinds, in different ways and for different purposes. In this context, I shall consider the specific contribution made by writers of

poetry and creative non-fiction. What are the features of creative texts which lend them the capacity to engender an understanding of place?

3. How does creative writing relate to other kinds of text? Poetry and creative non-fiction about place and nature inevitably draws on material written by and for scientists, historians, geographers, biographers and others. What responsibility does the creative writer have to these sources, and how are its complexities negotiated in the making of creative work? Can place play a role in intertextuality? What is the relationship with literary criticism, in particular the development of ecocriticism?

In responding to these questions, the account that follows necessarily places my own work in dialogue with that of others, both creative and critical, in order to assess its contribution within the context of the current state of the field.

Place Writing

Henri Lefebvre has said that 'any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about'.¹ Space and place are inherent in all writing, but there is a category of text which takes place as its theme. Creative writing about place may be enjoying a renaissance; or it may be more accurate to say that readers and critics are more attuned to the significance of place than they were twenty years

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 15.

ago. The 'spatial turn', as it is applied to literary studies, suggests new ways of reading texts for their geographical meanings, and it may be these practices or approaches which have brought the subject into focus.

These developments can be seen within a broader context of technological and political change. Satellite navigation and the Global Positioning System have become accessible to the general public, and programmes such as Google Earth allow anyone with an internet connection to explore detailed images of the surface of the globe. It is possible, as Amy Liptrot describes, to sit on a train somewhere in England and use a smartphone to look at fields, crops and fence-posts on her native Orkney Islands: to 'have a God's-eye view and spin the globe on the screen with my fingers like a marble'.² At the same time, a more global view of trade, human rights, war and terrorism might be said to have affected our sense of our own locatedness, heightening the awareness that even a small town or village 'derives its sense of place through its relations with a multitude of elsewheres'.³

According to the writer and curator Gareth Evans, place writing is 'a sub-genre of travel writing that subverts it by being about staying put, rather than moving'.⁴

This is too restrictive to act as a definition – place writers do travel – but it does

² Amy Liptrot, 'Orkney, Scotland', *Elsewhere: A Journal of Place*, 2 (2015), 12-18 (p.12).

³ Neal Alexander, "'Where Lives Converge": Peter Riley and the Poetics of Place', in *Poetry & Geography: Space & Place in Post-war Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 134-147 (p. 136).

⁴ 'Rising Ground: Place Writing Now', *London Review Bookshop* (2014) <<http://www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/events/past/2014/11/rising-ground-place-writing-now>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

point usefully to what characterises recent work in this field, particularly in prose non-fiction texts. The focus is often local rather than exotic, and there is a sustained attention to specific location, which may be rural or urban (the suburban is less thoroughly represented). Where there is movement through space, it is often on a small scale. Peter Davidson's book of essays *Distance and Memory* (2013) repeatedly moves out from and returns to a remote house in northern Scotland; Adam Thorpe's *On Silbury Hill* (2014) takes the form of an extended meditation on a single well-known but mysterious landscape feature; Madeleine Bunting's *The Plot* (2009) is a study of one acre of England over time; and *Holloway* (2012) by Robert MacFarlane and Dan Richards explores one ancient path in Dorset. Other books represent a sequence of linked encounters with places, framed as a single journey: *To the River* (2011) by Olivia Laing chronicles a walk along the length of the River Ouse from source to sea; and *The Old Ways* (2012) by Robert Macfarlane has the subtitle *A Journey on Foot*. These books might be placed in the genre of travel writing, but by pausing along the way to pay close attention to individual locations and their human significance – the subtle ways in which we are shaped by the landscapes through which we move – they too make a contribution to place writing as a sub-genre.

Place remains a fundamental concern for poets, a phenomenon which is the subject of several recent critical texts, each with its own emphases in terms of constituency of poets and theoretical interest. The focus of the essays in *Poetry & Geography: Space & Place in Post-war Poetry* (2013) is on contemporary and late twentieth century British poets, and on the ways in which poetry and

geography converge and intersect. Editors Neal Alexander and David Cooper acknowledge a diversity of approaches amongst these poets, while at the same time identifying three points of convergence: toponymy; the spatial practices of walking, witnessing and mapping; and a blurring of the boundaries between material landscapes, language and poetic form. Ian Davidson and Zoe Skoulding's *Placing Poetry* (2013) is preoccupied with change as much as stability, and movement between places as much as people or things within them, and the role of creative writing in the making of place, rather than in examining or analysing it. Writing about the American poet George Oppen, Davidson remarks that 'the term "placing" not only further destabilises the relationships between space and place, but also introduces some friction into the slippery notion of mobility. It forces the cars, skittering down the new roads, at a speed that turns the local landscape into consumable scenery, to rub against the grain of a locality that contains its own histories'.⁵

The approaches and methods discussed in these two critical volumes point to the first of the research questions posed at the start of this Introduction: What is the role of creative writing in responding to place? Lefebvre refers to space 'in literary texts', but of course place and space are present in texts of all kinds, from guidebooks to textbooks to scientific papers. Poets and writers frequently draw from those same wells, but they may make very different use of the material they draw up. Some characteristics of creative texts, such as lyricism, metaphor,

⁵ Ian Davidson, 'Introduction', in *Placing Poetry*, ed. by Ian Davidson and Zoe Skoulding (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), p. 13.

ellipsis and the elision of fact and fiction give them a capacity to realise a sense of place and make it vivid and immersive for the reader. In *The Star Factory*, Ciaran Carson uses sources such as The Belfast Street Directory of 1948 and *Belfast: A Pocket History* to open up a series of explorations of his home city, in writing so observant and physically engaged that it transforms or transcends the original material:

Here and there, scattered throughout the maze of factories, mills, barracks, schools, the filing-systems of terraced houses, are glints and gleams of water: mill-dams, reservoirs, ponds, sinks, and sluices, all fed by the little rivers springing from the Antrim Hills: the Forth River, the Mile Water, the Clowney Water, the Falls Water. Without this water, there would be no Belfast as we know it, since its industries were impossible without it. Wandering at ground level within the dense urban fabric of brick walls, in the valleys of shadow cast by the tall factories with their blanked-out windows, it was beautiful to get, through the iron rails of a locked factory gate, a glimpse of a wind-rippled mill-dam on which drifted a flotilla of swans. All of Belfast murmurs with innumerable rills, subterranean and otherwise, like the Farset River that ran below the yard of St Gall's School in Waterville Street.⁶

The lyricism, the naming and listing, the quality of attention in the writing is what evokes the city for the reader. Similarly, in *Other People's Countries*, Patrick McGuinness uses precise observation and telling detail to evoke the small Belgian town of Bouillon as he remembers it from childhood:

The cafés and cigarette- and souvenir-shops were the same: a counter or a bar with the owner or landlord sitting on the customer side smoking,

⁶ Ciaran Carson, *The Star Factory* (London: Granta, 1997), p. 45.

eating, reading the papers, until someone came in. At that point they would stop being a person living in their house and become a tradesperson or a shopkeeper – a *commerçant* – but only for the duration of the transaction. Even the butchers lived at the back of the shop, their immaculate living room flanked by a fridge room and a hoseable chopping room. (I always tried to pay the exact money, so as not to receive the bloody change, usually streaked with meaty pulp.)⁷

Writers in this field are concerned not just with topography but with the complex interactions between place and human experience. Some draw on ideas and approaches found in cultural geography, or in psychogeography, such as ‘deep mapping’, an attempt

to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place.⁸

Both Carson and McGuinness might be said to be deep mappers. Others write more directly out of the psychogeographic tradition. Iain Sinclair has been particularly influential, especially on writers of urban place, and not least in focusing attention on the politics of place. He probes parts of the city which are generally out of bounds or out of view, often exploring and interrogating the gap between the way things are meant to be and the way they are. In a recent essay

⁷ Patrick McGuinness, *Other People's Countries* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014), p. 5.

⁸ Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 64-65.

he contrasts the Shangri-La swimming pool on the 52nd floor of the Shard in central London with the closed-down swimming baths at Haggerston in Hackney:

Haggerston Baths, this prime specimen of Edwardian baroque, is suffering, windows sealed with black panels, points of potential access lurid with razor wire and surveillance cameras. Warnings have been placed in half a dozen languages. The furnace-bright orange of the brickwork, in its pomp like the confident colour of London Overground, is dirty, dulled by neglect. The swagger of heraldic carvings – lions and unicorns above the separate entrances for males and females – is diminished. Between a set of twinned Ionic columns there is still a recessed central loggia from which dignitaries can acknowledge the cheers of the crowd. But no crowds are coming. Purple fuses of buddleia burst through the protective fence on the mockingly named SWIMMERS LANE (PRIVATE ROAD).⁹

Psychogeographic ideas and approaches are taken and adapted for rural settings by the writer and poet Zoe Skoulding, who uses maps of different cities to disorientate herself in rural places. It can be a way of defamiliarising the rural, or disrupting the pastoral; it suggests ways of thinking about landscape which are not subject to Romantic cliché. Her poem 'Preselis with Brussels Street Map' locates the reader simultaneously in upland West Wales and the cosmopolitan city centre of Brussels.¹⁰

The insistence on looking elsewhere, in forbidden or unapproved directions, is an approach to place writing which manifests in many different ways in different

⁹ Iain Sinclair, 'Swimming on the 52nd Floor', *London Review of Books*, 37.18 (2015), 37-39 (p. 38).

¹⁰ Zoe Skoulding, *Remains of a Future City* (Bridgend: Seren, 2008), p. 50.

kinds of text. *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* (2011), by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, represents a decisive recent intervention, in that it redirects attention away from the pastoral and towards the places 'where urban and rural negotiate and renegotiate their borders',¹¹ celebrating them 'as places of possibility, mystery, beauty'.¹² The authors are quick to acknowledge that they are not the first to write about such places: the term 'edgelands' was first coined by the geographer Marion Shoard,¹³ and urban edges are the subject of Richard Mabey's book *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973). But the ambition of *Edgelands* – the breadth and depth of its explorations and the intensity of observation and the lyricism of the writing – helped carve out a new space for other books of place, including my own. Indeed, the use of coastal imagery in *Edgelands* helps establish a sense of kinship with *Strands*: Farley and Roberts write of the 'constantly shifting sands of edgelands', and characterise them as 'a complex landscape, a debatable zone, constantly reinventing themselves as economic and social tides come in and out'.¹⁴

Place writing, then, might be seen to incorporate elements of autobiography, archaeology, history, folklore, science, art, sociology and spirituality. Many of its texts are hybrid in one way or another: some, like *Other*

¹¹ Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), p. 5.

¹² Farley and Roberts, *Edgelands*, p. 6.

¹³ Marion Shoard, 'Edgelands', in *Remaking the Landscape*, ed. by Jennifer Jenkins (London: Profile Books, 2002), pp. 117-45 (p. 118).

¹⁴ Farley and Roberts, *Edgelands*, p. 6.

People's Countries, combine poetry and prose, some, like *The Star Factory*, merge autobiography and oral history. Others resist definition simply as 'fiction' or 'non-fiction', such as *Rings of Saturn* (1998) by W.G. Sebald, in which the narrator may or may not be Sebald himself, and the journey may or may not be a literal one. Sebald is a highly influential figure in the field of place writing, partly for stylistic reasons but also because of this characteristic capacity to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, or to deploy the two in such a way that an ambiguous third space is created in which the reader encounters a different kind of truth.

In discussion of the role of place in poetry, editorial and scholarly attention has often looked first to poets who are predominantly associated with particular locations. A sense of place famously saturates the work of some of the best-known poets, from the moors and deep valleys of the Pennines in Ted Hughes's work to the flat and 'isolate' quality Philip Larkin perceived in his adopted hometown of Hull.¹⁵ Amongst contemporary British and Irish poets with specific geographical associations are Roy Fisher (Birmingham), Jen Hadfield (Shetland), Kevin Crossley-Holland (coastal Suffolk), Maurice Riordan (rural Ireland) and Katrina Porteous (Northumberland). These connections, where they exist, are clearly important in reading and contextualising the poet's work. Porteous, for instance, returns repeatedly to questions of rural community and identity, changes in traditional patterns of employment such as fishing and agriculture, and a consequent loss of distinctive local language; and these concerns are

¹⁵ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 188.

always rooted in a deep understanding of Northumbrian landscape, history and culture.

However, sense of place in poetry is often less direct and more diffuse than simply 'writing about' somewhere; many more poets are closely engaged with place than a simple mapping exercise might suggest. For some poets, including myself, that kind of geographical rootedness – even if we possessed it – would represent a claim or compromise which we would want to resist. Like Jo Shapcott, I see myself as 'a different kind of writer, for whom place and language are less certain, and for whom shifting territories are the norm'.¹⁶ The landscape, the character or the spirit of the place often informs the work without necessarily being the subject of it. In my own work, place is a slippery and shifting element, often mythologised, as George Szirtes has noted: '[Sprackland] has the gift of transforming ordinary landscapes through an oblique, disorientating vision. Her work offers a wholly personal and original perception of the otherness of the world.'¹⁷

The publication of *Tilt* marked an important development in my practice as a writer, bringing an enhanced awareness of the role of place in my work. My previous book *Hard Water* (2003) [not included in this submission], addressed themes of home, belonging and exile, and contained a sequence called 'No

¹⁶ Jo Shapcott, 'Confounding Geography', in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*, ed. by Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Newcastle, 2002), pp. 113-18 (p. 115).

¹⁷ Jean Sprackland, *Strands: A Year of Discoveries on the Beach* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), jacket copy.

Man's Land', the result of a collaboration with the photographer David Walker exploring the A580 or East Lancashire Road.¹⁸ The writing of this sequence represented a sustained immersion in place, and the beginnings of an intense interest in the unobserved, unrecognised spaces which have become central to much of my writing since. Neal Alexander and David Cooper note Ken Worpole's argument that there is 'an urgent need to interpret and value contemporary landscapes anew, especially those that resist traditional categories of taste and approbation', and suggest that poets are making such a response:

In recent years, several poets have attempted to meet this challenge, through a critical and imaginative re-appraisal of non-places, edgelands and the waste spaces of modernity. Simon Armitage, for one, has suggested that the motorway service station might be perceived as 'a destination its own right'; and in *Edgelands: Journeys into England's true Wilderness* (2011), the poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts invest out-of-town business and retail parks, urban wastelands and power stations with human meaning, significance and history. Jean Sprackland's 'No Man's Land' combines elements of both these impulses, forming part of a whole sequence on the central reservation of the East Lancashire Road, Britain's first intercity highway linking the cities of Liverpool and Manchester [...] Sprackland's lyrical pedestrianism enacts a spatial practice that is literally out of place, defamiliarising the edgelands of everyday life in an attempt to feel, know and reinterpret their elusive meanings.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jean Sprackland, *Hard Water* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), pp. 49-53.

¹⁹ Neal Alexander and David Cooper, eds., *Poetry & Geography: Space & Place in Post-war Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 11.

While it is clearly evident in all forms of art, defamiliarisation might be seen as one of the key functions of poetry. In his 1917 essay 'Art as Technique', Victor Shklovsky recognised the particular role defamiliarisation or *ostranenie* plays in poetry, where it works against the 'automatisation' of perception, by slowing and prolonging it as an aesthetic end in itself:

In studying poetic speech in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words, and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words, we find everywhere the artistic trademark - that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created 'artistically' so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception.²⁰

Like Sinclair in the derelict baths at Haggerston, or Farley and Roberts in the business park and the sewage farm, I wanted to look at the central reservation precisely because it was not the approved direction, and was not generally deemed worthy of attention; indeed it might be considered too ordinary and too uninteresting to qualify as a *place* at all. Defamiliarising it was a way of breaking through the anaesthetic to 'recover the sensation of life'.²¹

²⁰ Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3-23 (p. 22).

²¹ Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 22.

If *Hard Water* represents the beginning of 'locatedness' in my work, the sense of place is more tangible still in *Tilt*, and again the practice of pedestrianism was key. Many of the poems have as their setting or backdrop the beaches and sand-dunes where I walked several times a week; many of them in fact began there, forming in my head as I walked. The status of these sites is an ambiguous one: beaches can certainly be said to belong to 'traditional categories of taste and approbation', but the experience of walking on an urban beach is an edgelands experience, complete with litter, pollution and the legacies of human industry. It is in this interlocking, with all its attendant notions of 'natural' and 'manmade', 'spoilt' and 'unspoilt', where my interest in this particular place was situated right from the start.

Out of my intimacy with this place emerged the idea of a different kind of book, in which I could explore that same landscape in a more expansive and discursive way, drawing connections and tracing narratives which needed more space than the poems could provide. The result was *Strands: A Year of Discoveries on the Beach*. One of the specific contributions made by this book was close attention to a particular landscape under-represented in place writing: the north-west coast, which does not fit the stereotypes of the English seaside and can at first glance look empty and featureless. By exploring it throughout the year I was able to document the way the seasons, weather events and tidal patterns affect its topography and the range of objects to be found cast up on its beaches.

Sleeping Keys is also intensely concerned with place, but represents a new direction in my work, in that many of the poems are located in interior spaces.

My ambition was to extend the same quality of attention to these spaces, which tend to be so intensely familiar that they have become almost invisible. I was interested, too, in interrogating attitudes towards 'the domestic' in poetry, especially the poetry of women. I wanted to reclaim the kitchens, staircases, bedrooms and hallways as geographical spaces which could be revisited in the memory or the imagination, explored and mapped, rather than mere vessels for their historical and emotional associations.

Nature Writing

Closely allied to 'place writing' is another, equally contested, term: 'the new nature writing'. The term is significant because it inaugurates or recognises a shift away from an insistence on a particular kind of 'expertise', allowing multiple cross-disciplinary perspectives which include poetry and creative non-fiction.

In 2008 an issue of *Granta* was published entitled 'The New Nature Writing'. The title reflected a resurgence of interest in contemporary nature writing, and the emergence of a new generation of writers in the field. It captured a sense that although nature writing was as old as writing itself, there was something different in the way writers were now approaching the subject. The editor was interested 'less in what might be called old nature writing – by which I mean the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer – than in writers who approached their subject in heterodox and experimental ways'. Articulating what these ways might be, he identified 'voice-driven, narratives told in the first

person, for the writer to be present in the story, if sometimes only bashfully', and maintained that 'the best new nature writing is also an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue'.²²

A glance at the list of writers featured might suggest that this sort of work was no longer the exclusive preserve of the traditional 'expert' – the trained scientist, natural historian or geographer – but was territory writers from different backgrounds were entering, bringing other kinds of experience. The list includes poets (Paul Farley, Seamus Heaney, Kathleen Jamie, Sean O'Brien), novelists and short story writers (Anthony Doerr, Niall Griffiths, Benjamin Kunkel, Lydia Peelle) alongside essayists and writers of non-fiction, including several with well-established reputations as nature writers (Mark Cocker, Roger Deakin, Richard Mabey, Robert Macfarlane). On the other hand, it could be said with hindsight to be less alert to another significant development: the arrival of women writers in an area which has traditionally been populated almost exclusively by men (only two of the nineteen writers featured in the issue are women). Not only are some of the most highly acclaimed nature books of recent years by women, such as *Dart* (2002) by Alice Oswald, *Otter Country* (2012) by Miriam Darlington, *Field Notes from a Hidden City* (2013) by Esther Woolfson, *H is for Hawk* (2014) by Helen Macdonald, and *The Fish Ladder* (2015) by Katharine Norbury; but the past few years has also seen the rediscovery or championing of women writers of the past, such as Nan Shepherd, Rachel Carson, Flora Thompson and Dorothy Wordsworth.

²² Jason Cowley, 'Editor's Letter', *Granta*, 102 (2008), 7-12 (p. 10).

It might be possible to dismiss the whole phenomenon of the new nature writing as a marketing success story which has little or nothing to do with actual innovation. Much contemporary nature writing owes a debt to one tradition or another, whether it's the American post-transcendental movement, looking back via Annie Dillard to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau; or the British post-Romantic tradition and the natural history writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: John Clare, Richard Jefferies, Gilbert White. White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789) is one of the canonical texts which continue to exert a powerful influence. He was an expert amateur, a clergyman with a passionate interest in the wildlife in his parish in Hampshire which covered just a few thousand acres. However, it is not simply expertise but insatiable curiosity which characterises his work, along with an eye for detail which makes for a rich and textured reading experience. His observations often tell us something not only about the creature in question but also about Selborne itself, and the living conditions of its people. Writing about swifts, he provides a glimpse of the low-roofed cottages where they nest:

They frequent in this village several abject cottages; yet a succession still haunts the same unlikely roofs: a good proof this that the same birds return to the same spots. As they must stoop very low to get up under these humble eaves, cats lie in wait, and sometimes catch them on the wing.²³

²³ Gilbert White, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (London: Methuen & Co., 1901), p. 150.

There is a matrix represented here – place, wildlife and humanity in relationship with one another – which is characteristic too of much of the new nature writing. The same could be said of the focus on the ordinary and the close-at-hand, the finding of meaning ‘not in the rare and exotic but in our common, unremarkable encounters with the natural world, and in combining both scientific, scholarly observation of nature with carefully crafted, discursive writing’.²⁴

What, then, really differentiates the ‘new’ from the ‘old’? An emerging body of critical work attempts to find answers to this question. One distinguishing feature might be eclecticism; the new nature writing incorporates ‘experiential and cultural accounts of the natural environment and living organisms, drawing upon autobiographical and travel narratives, art, literature and folklore as well as the many branches of natural history’.²⁵ But it’s the relationship with ecological crisis which is most frequently cited: ‘Nature writing, in terms of the interface between the human and the natural that it seeks to depict and the interface that it represents between the world and the page, is both made urgent, and to some extent, remade by the awareness of ecological threat’.²⁶

The shift from ‘nature writing’ to ‘the new nature writing’ may be seen to correspond with the rise of ecocriticism since the late 1970s, when the term was

²⁴ Joe Moran, ‘A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing’, *Literature & History*, 23 (2014), 49-63 (p. 59).

²⁵ Stephen E Hunt, ‘The Emergence of Psychoecology: The New Nature Writings of Roger Deakin, Mark Cocker, Robert Macfarlane and Richard Mabey’, *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 10 (2009), 70-77 (p. 71).

²⁶ Deborah Lilley, ‘Kathleen Jamie: Rethinking the Externality and Idealisation of Nature’, *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 17 (2013), 16-26 (p. 18).

first coined by William Rueckert.²⁷ Ecocritical discourse has brought into mainstream debate questions about what we mean by 'nature', and how we see ourselves in relation to it; this has meant a re-reading of familiar texts, as Peter Barry puts it, 'with a new alertness to this dimension, a dimension which has perhaps always hovered about the text, but without ever receiving our full attention before'.²⁸ This same alertness is present amongst creative writers as well as critics. Perhaps the best-known in the new wave of nature writers is Robert Macfarlane, whose book *The Wild Places* (2007) is a search for genuine wildness on the crowded and built islands of the United Kingdom. He finds it, but not always in the expected places or on a large scale; it may be elusive in the Cumbrian fells, but it is there in the grykes of the Burren. His conclusion that 'the human and the wild cannot be partitioned' is a key idea which recurs again and again in contemporary nature writing.²⁹ It is present in *Four Fields* (2013) by Tim Dee, which investigates what humans have made of wild spaces by enclosing, draining and cultivating them, and how our lives have depended on them since. It is central, too, to Kathleen Jamie's work: in *Findings* (2005) she situates the personal and domestic life within the landscape. 'Between the laundry and the fetching kids from school, that's how birds enter my life', she notes, prompting questions about where 'nature' begins and ends.³⁰

²⁷ William Rueckert, 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism', *Iowa Review*, 9.1 (1978), pp. 71-86.

²⁸ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 258.

²⁹ Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2007), p. 125.

³⁰ Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (London: Sort Of Books, 2005), p. 39.

This question about the meaning of 'nature' infuses the ecocritical thinking of the past twenty-five years. Jonathan Bate's book *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) represented a reassessment of the nineteenth century Romantic movement, and the identification of a thread of environmentalism from Wordsworth's own writing through the work of later poets such as John Ruskin, William Morris and Edward Thomas. There's a similar process of re-reading at work in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) by Laurence Buell, whose definition of ecocriticism as 'study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis' has become one of its foundation stones.³¹

Ecocritics have sought to differentiate their approach from that of other literary theorists, with particular reference to the question of what is meant by the word 'nature'. In *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (1995), Terry Gifford insists that nature must be regarded as primary and real rather than as an anthropomorphic social construct as some theorists have maintained, asserting that 'there has to be a nature to be called "nature"'.³² Kate Soper's book *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (1995) is equally uncompromising on this question: 'In short, it is not language which has a hole in

³¹ Laurence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 430.

³² Terry Gifford, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 15.

its ozone layer; and the real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier'.³³

The broader discourse is delineated by Laurence Coupe in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000): 'We are not only concerned with the status of the referent and the need to do it justice, in the sense of taking it seriously as something more than linguistic; we are also concerned with the larger question of justice, of the rights of our fellow creatures, of forests and rivers, and ultimately of the biosphere itself'.³⁴ Questions of this kind are, of course, at the heart of a great deal of recent nature writing, including my own. Some critics, though, have questioned how genuine the engagement is between the new nature writing and nature itself. A combative piece by Stephen Poole accused its practitioners of a tendency towards escapism and misplaced nostalgia at the expense of genuine engagement:

Nature writers do tend to whitewash the non-human world as a place of eternal sun-dappled peace and harmony, only ever the innocent victim of human depredation... always somehow forgetting that nature has exterminated countless members of her own realm through volcanic eruption, tsunamis, or natural climate variation, not to mention the

³³ Kate Soper, *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 151.

³⁴ Laurence Coupe, *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

hideously gruesome day-in, day-out business of parts of nature killing and eating other parts.³⁵

Mark Cocker, himself a practitioner, has expressed a different concern:

The real danger is that nature writing becomes a literature of consolation that distracts us from the truth of our fallen countryside, or – just as bad – that it becomes a space for us to talk to ourselves about ourselves, with nature relegated to the background as an attractive green wash.³⁶

Others, however, have seen the potential for interesting new approaches to emerge out of the ruins of the old. Tim Dee acknowledges that, in the climate of crisis, writing about the natural world can no longer be the straightforward enterprise it once was, but suggests that this may offer the opportunity for renewal:

DDT, extinctions and Ted Hughes's gory poems saw off the nice in the 1970s while nature itself – under the human heel – has been pushed, bloodied, shrunken and ruined to the front of the stage ever since. There, even enfeebled, it has called up new descriptions and fresh thoughts.³⁷

Joe Moran similarly defends the idea that writing can play a role in responding to the challenges we face:

³⁵ Stephen Poole, 'Is Our Love of Nature Writing Bourgeois Escapism?', *The Guardian*, 6 July 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/06/nature-writing-revival>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

³⁶ Mark Cocker, 'Death of the Naturalist: Why is the "New Nature Writing" So Tame?', *New Statesman*, 17 June 2015 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/death-naturalist-why-new-nature-writing-so-tame>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

³⁷ Tim Dee, 'Super Natural: The Rise of the New Nature Writing', *The National*, 22 August 2013 <<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/super-natural-the-rise-of-the-new-nature-writing>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

In response to the question of what literature can do in the face of climate change and the unsustainable voraciousness of global capital, all these writers have concluded that using the human tools of language and meaning-making to relate to the natural world increases our attentiveness to it and potential for caring for it.³⁸

In this context, poets continue to write about nature, using techniques of close observation, image-making and lyricism to draw attention both to the richness of the natural world and to its perilous condition. The pastoral tradition in poetry reaches back as far as Ancient Greece, but the contemporary approach to nature is conditioned by a recognition of the multiple ecological crises confronting us now; rather than retreating into nostalgia, poetry has responded to the challenge of ‘using the human tools of language’ to generate ‘new descriptions and fresh thoughts’. A series of themed anthologies have emerged in recent years: *Wild Reckoning* (2004) brought together poems of past and present to mark the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*; for *The Thunder Mutters* (2005), Alice Oswald selected 101 poems which map the border between the personal and natural worlds; *Shattering: Ecopoems* (2008) aims to ‘show the full range of ecopoetry, from the wilderness poetry of ancient China to 21st-century native American poetry’³⁹; and *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (2011) shifted the focus onto the ‘new wave’ of ecopoetics. There are many single poet collections exploring the natural world and our place within it, but *Goose Music* (2008) is notable in being co-authored

³⁸ Moran, ‘A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing’, p. 61.

³⁹ Neil Astley, ed., *Earth Shattering: ecopoems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), jacket copy.

by two poets with backgrounds in ecology, Andy Brown and John Burnside, and its response to 'questions of how we might dwell on the earth in these times of great environmental change' is informed by that dual understanding and expertise.⁴⁰

Summary

Having given an overview of the existing body of place and nature writing, I now return briefly to the three research questions at the start of this Introduction and make the following observations:

While it shares many of its characteristics with earlier work in the same tradition, the new nature writing makes a response to current environmental crisis and to an increased awareness of environmental issues. The rise of ecocriticism, and discourses about the relationship between the human and the non-human world, influence and interact with creative writing in this field. Meanwhile, technological and political developments are influencing a new wave of creative writing about place. While place and space are present in texts of all kinds, poetry and creative non-fiction are capable of making a distinctive contribution by calling on a range of creative techniques to defamiliarise places, and to put specific locations on the literary map. These works often draw on other kinds of text, synthesising or re-interpreting material and making it accessible to a different audience.

⁴⁰ Andy Brown and John Burnside, *Goose Music* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008), jacket copy.

Contribution to knowledge

In the previous section I gave a summary of current practice in the field of place writing and nature writing, and recent developments in creative and critical work which have shaped the debate around them. In this section I intend to demonstrate that my own work, both poetry and prose, makes a coherent and significant contribution to the growing body of work in this dynamic and contested field; and specifically how it generates from, and responds to, the research questions with which I began. I shall do this by reference to the texts, along with my own commentary on their relevance and impact. Further evidence is provided by reference to the critical and scholarly response, and to a number of concomitant factors, such as reviews, literary awards, invitations to speak on the subject, and the commissioning of new work.

The three books which make up this submission are separate and discrete works, written over a period of eight years; but the connective tissue between them is their preoccupation with place and nature. When *Tilt* won the Costa Poetry Award 2007, the judges' citation praised its 'taut, powerful poems which balance the anxieties of experience against the possibility of the miraculous'.⁴¹ In this book, both the anxieties and the miraculous are generally located in the natural world. The title refers, amongst several interwoven meanings, to the axial tilt of the earth, and its connection with issues of climate change; it is this meaning

⁴¹ 'Costa Book Awards 2007', *Guardian*
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/costa2007/0,,2214033,00.html>> [accessed 4 April 2016].

which drives the title poem. The entire book is infused throughout with an awareness of environmental fragility, though these concerns are always viewed obliquely.

Strands represents a further development of these themes. On publication, it was immediately recognised by reviewers and critics as belonging to the growing body of literature known as ‘the new nature writing’, and in a sense it was located there from the very earliest days, when I received a Roger Deakin Award from the Society of Authors to support me in writing it. This award was highly significant for me, not only as welcome financial assistance but also as recognition of a familial relationship between my own work and Deakin’s, especially *Waterlog* (1999).

If my subject in *Strands* is nature at the margins of nature, and the interface between humanity and nature, that liminality is more apparent still in *Sleeping Keys*. The book opens with a chimney being cleared, signalling that this is a book which explores inner and outer worlds, its poems circling around images of chimneys, doors and windows. They enter and exit other interior spaces, too: a chapel, a beehive, a stone shrine. In each case, there is interplay between the built space and the ‘natural’ life around or within it.

Tilt

Tilt was published in 2007, and was the winner of the Costa Poetry Award. This collection represented a development in the themes and preoccupations in my

work. The acute awareness of place in the new poems arose naturally out of my own deepening relationship with a particular stretch of the north-west coast, which I had come to know intimately by walking it repeatedly over a period of twenty years. The association between walking and poetry has been recognised since the Romantic period, and a succession of poets – John Clare, William Wordsworth, Edward Thomas, Robert Frost – have described the experience of poems beginning to take shape in their minds as they walked, an experience Rebecca Solnit has chronicled and contextualised in her book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2001). This same phenomenon is key to my own work, as some critics have noted: '[Sprackland] is, she says, "an ordinary walker". But, one should add, no ordinary writer. It could be said of her, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau said of himself, "my mind only works with my legs"'⁴².

Many of the poems originated during these walks, and without any conscious intention on my part became 'located' in the landscape in which they began. The opening section of the title poem at the heart of the collection is a case in point:

When the wind collapses at last
 the sand glitters with oil
 like the fine mist of blood
 a dying man would breathe
 onto his friend's face and shirt.

It's this freak weather.

⁴² John Sutherland: 'Into the wild', *Financial Times*, 26 May 2012
 <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/b1522c72-a4c1-11e1-9a94-00144feabdc0.html>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

For five days and five nights the storm
 hacked the steel legs, mauled the derricks.
 The pipes flailed and shuddered.
 Nothing the men could do
 but play blackjack and drink the rig dry.⁴³

The location for this poem is the windblown shore at Ainsdale, from where there is a view of the Lennox oil and gas platform in the Irish Sea. The same place provided the setting for 'His Feet', the opening poem of another sequence, 'Miracles', which retells and subverts Biblical miracle stories, such as the wedding at Cana, the casting out of demons, and Christ walking on water:

The sea was bucking and snapping
 but his feet made a road across it.
 [...]
 I was ready to throw myself in, I'd have drowned
 just to kiss those feet. But I was too late.
 No one there but a surfer
 walking the high sandbank
 a hundred yards out from shore.⁴⁴

The poem relocates the famous scene, imagining it played out at my local beach, with its shallow tides and sandbanks, and introducing elements of ambiguity, doubt and longing which are present but veiled in a reading of the source text.

There is a close connection here with the work of Pauline Stainer, particularly in her collection *Crossing the Snowline*. Several of the poems in this volume share

⁴³ Jean Sprackland, *Tilt* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 7.

⁴⁴ Sprackland, *Tilt*, p. 22.

something of this re-placing. ‘River landscape to Emmaus’, for instance, takes a story from the Gospel of Luke, locating it in a recognisably English rural setting:

Three men walking,
 dippers working the water,
 the river
 writing its monograph
 on mosses.⁴⁵

In both Stainer’s work and my own, there is a hermeneutic element, with place as the vehicle for the re-interpretation of the original narrative.

One of the ways in which poetry could be said to play a distinctive role in responding to place is by its exceptional capacity to privilege the *sense* of place. Paradoxically, this is sometimes made possible by fictionalising or mythologising the actual details. Other locations feature in this book, ranging from a wood to a fish shop, a mountaintop to a motorway service station. In each case I have a clear and specific sense of place – the wood is one I explored when I was spending some time in Longsleddale in Cumbria, and the service station is Forton Services on the M6 near Lancaster – but these are private connections; I do not share them with the reader, and they do not matter to the poem. In the process of writing I relinquish fidelity to the original location, allowing it to become less fixed, to take on different characteristics, sometimes to become an archetypal wood or service station rather than an actual one.

⁴⁵ Pauline Stainer, *Crossing the Snowline* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), p. 15.

Nevertheless, the original identification with place is crucial to the making of the poem. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the place provokes the poem. I mean this not in the traditional sense of being inspired by landscape – this is an idea which seems to imply a requirement for the place to be picturesque, which is certainly not important to me – but rather in the sense that a kind of sensitivity to place can trigger the making of a poem. The sensitivity seems to be to the atmosphere or ‘spirit’ of a place, as it manifests itself to the senses in the sound of traffic, the smell of earth, the quality of light and so on. This is what Neal Alexander means when he suggests that ‘the richness and suggestiveness of contemporary poetic representations of place often resides in what Bertrand Westphal calls their “polysensoriality”’⁴⁶.

Sometimes the place itself becomes the subject. ‘Ice on the Beach’, for instance, is essentially an observational piece in which I look closely at an extraordinary phenomenon and attempt to articulate the strangeness of the experience through the use of metaphor. The ice is ‘One single sheet of sprung light’, and ‘Striking it with a stick raises | a shocked note, a white bruise under the skin’.⁴⁷ In this case the relationship between the poem and the place is a fairly direct one, and anyone who knows my work might recognise the location as the Mersey estuary.

⁴⁶ Neal Alexander, ‘Contemporary Poetry and the Senses of Place’, *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, 2 (2014), p. 9.

⁴⁷ Sprackland, *Tilt*, p. 3.

An even more explicit relationship is visible in 'The Birkdale Nightingale'. The subject of this poem is the natterjack toad, an endangered species which survives only in a few sites in Britain. The place I have in mind is specifically named in the title, which takes the form of a local nickname for the natterjack. The poem identifies the habitat as 'a wet slack between dunes', and the boardwalk and coast road also help to locate the reader.⁴⁸ Given all these cues, the poem could hardly be more firmly attached to the place which brought it into being. But ultimately, the poem transcends the place. The final lines focus attention on the mating of the toads, a changeless ritual which is not limited to any particular location or species, which is repeated everywhere, in populations of all kinds, and is essential for survival and continuity:

Still, when he calls her and climbs her
 they are well designed. The nuptial pads on his thighs
 velcro him to her back. She steadies beneath him.

The puddle brims with moonlight.
 Everything leads to this.

Deryn Rees-Jones has remarked on the ecological foundations of this poem, beyond the particular circumstances in which it was written:

One of the 'everything's' that the poem might lead us to without knowledge of this specific context is the irony of the image of these creatures mating in their decline. What is important is that, without being

⁴⁸ Sprackland, *Tilt*, p. 42.

preachy, the poem is actually rooted in a historical narrative of a species' decline and human attempts to remedy it.⁴⁹

Elsewhere, the original place which provoked me into writing has been transformed and mythologised in the process. The sequence 'Three Lakes' really describes three encounters with the same lake, one where I swam many times one summer in Ireland.⁵⁰ The actual lake is in a remote rural location, and is a clean (if cold) place to swim. But the process of making of the poems has rendered the lake itself unrecognisable: through my imagination it has acquired a jetty, and a road on which it can be approached by car; an old fridge has been dumped in it. It is still a lake, but it is no longer the real lake which could be visited and recognised. In the act of writing, the place is shuffled, altered, reinvented. It is part of the raw material I start with, but I feel no need to preserve its original identity.

While other kinds of place do occur in *Tilt*, the book returns again and again to its core location: the coast. It is a landscape which reflects the liminal nature of the themes explored in these poems: fragility, loss of balance, disorientation, slippage and collapse. Nothing is fixed, and there is no solid ground, either literally on the shore, at the mercy of winds and tides, or metaphorically, in the 'world in free-fall'⁵¹ evoked in the poems. This applies both to the physical world we move about in, and the world of personal relationships. The movement back

⁴⁹ Deryn Rees-Jones, 'Liquid language', *The Guardian*, 20 October 2007.

⁵⁰ Sprackland, *Tilt*, p. 44.

⁵¹ Sprackland, *Tilt*, jacket copy.

and forth between the interior and the exterior, the small-scale and the global, provides variety in terms of voice and imagery and allows me to articulate familiar truths in unexpected ways.

In the writing of this book, one of my intentions was to explore some aspects of the one of the characteristics of nature texts identified by Buell: a preoccupation with both outer and inner landscapes, or a 'dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation'.⁵² The inner and the outer landscape are both equally important, especially in the title poem, 'Tilt'. Ecocritical questions about the status of 'nature', as a real thing and as a social and linguistic construct, provide me with a series of different filters to place over the lens. The poem is in six parts, each offering a glimpse of an unfolding catastrophe, whose exact nature is never quite spelled out. In each part, the perspective is different and as a result the understanding of the catastrophe is differently coloured. In 'I', the drops of spilt oil are an early warning; they appear to the human eye like blood, signifying mortal injury. But in 'II', it is migrating birds which sense the catastrophe long before people do. 'III' is in the voice of a scientist, at first reassuring but eventually conceding the extent of the disaster and the scale of the potential repercussions. In 'IV' the environmental is elided with the personal: the melting of ice with the dissolution of self in the sexual moment. 'V' shows the population caught off-guard by a tsunami, and by the time we arrive at 'VI' humans are absent altogether, and it is the zoo animals, abandoned by their keeper, who suffer the consequences. By shifting the human position like this, I was able to

⁵² Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 92.

imagine my subject from different angles, and to explore not only the surface narrative of environmental crisis but also the ways in which we conceptualise and describe it.

Dealing with environmental themes in poetry is fraught with risk: it is difficult to navigate an honest way through this territory without sacrificing subtlety, becoming stern and didactic, or simply preaching to the converted. Yet to excise these issues, which preoccupy us all, was not a feasible option. I had to find my own way of engaging with what interested me most: the collision between the political and the personal, the role language and imagery have to play in our human response. In this way, *Tilt* contributes to the ecocritical discourse about the way we position ourselves in relation to the world around us: sometimes standing apart from it, sometimes finding belonging and identification within it.

Strands: A Year of Discoveries on the Beach

Strands, my first book of prose non-fiction, was published in 2012 and won the Portico Prize for Non-Fiction.

If place is important as an agent in bringing the poems in *Tilt* into being, and as a setting for the narratives they carry, it moves centre-stage in *Strands*. Like Olivia Laing's *To the River* and Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways*, this is place writing which does involve travel. However, the travel is repetitive and small-scale: I simply walk the same few miles of coast between Formby Point and Southport Pier, over and over again, as I had been doing several times a week for years. The

book therefore draws on my long relationship with this place, during the course of which I elected to become, in the words of one critic, 'its caretaker- interpreter, a travel writer who keeps taking the same walk on an endlessly shifting part of the earth'.⁵³

Strands contributes in a number of different ways to the body of work known as place writing. It takes a specific and little-known place as its subject and exposes it to close attention over a sustained period; it aims to capture something of the spirit or character of that place, as manifested to the senses; it investigates meaning and context by engaging with research in a range of disciplines; it enters into a dialogue with other texts in this field. It offers a direct exploration of the creative-critical nexus that typifies the new nature writing as a form which celebrates the crossing of disciplinary boundaries.

I decided to write about a single year of walking, which allowed me to chart the changing nature of a particular landscape through different seasons and weathers. I wanted to capture the dramatic variations in the *genius loci*, many of which are driven by the calendar. I tried to reflect its moods, from high summer, when the beach is populated with walkers, picnickers and kites, to a day of record-breaking temperatures in December 2010, when the beach is covered in snow a foot deep and 'the world has collapsed to two dimensions [...] stripped of colour, movement and sound'.⁵⁴ This structure automatically provided a

⁵³ Iain Bamforth: 'Nature writing', *The Times Literary Supplement* (8 June 2012), p. 26.

⁵⁴ Sprackland, *Strands*, p. 179.

changing repertoire of objects to write about, and the objects were the starting-points for investigative journeys.

By taking a calendrical approach, I was contributing to a long tradition that includes some books now recognised as key environmental texts, including Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), which charts four seasons of life on the shore of Walden Pond in Massachusetts; and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), a collection of essays situated in Sauk County, Wisconsin. In the case of *Strands*, however, the landscape is a more liminal and ambiguous one. Its status is neither rural nor urban, and as Richard Kerridge has noted this ambiguity provides ways of exploring multiple issues which are both local and global in significance:

The book is in the nature writing tradition of the almanac – the yearbook of meditations upon local sights. But this is an example of ‘the new nature writing’, concerned with the disorderly and dirty ‘edgelands’ between human society and the natural wild, rather than with wilderness as separate space. A beach near a big city is a good example. The characteristic feature of this genre is that a single familiar object, near at hand, prompts questions about its origin that take us right across the world and into philosophy, history, politics, and science.⁵⁵

Liminality is a recurring theme in *Strands*. I wanted to capture the experience of walking along an edge, a threshold between ocean and land, and of random and unpredictable encounters with objects which end up there. The finds are a mix of things carried ashore on the tide and things brought from inland. As a result, the

⁵⁵ Richard Kerridge, ‘Ecocritical approaches to literary form and genre’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 361-75 (p. 375).

strandline is full of surprising juxtapositions: the natural and the manmade, the domestic and the industrial, the local tangled up with the exotic. Writing about the mysterious find of two identical messages in bottles, I note the scale of this heterogeneity:

They were locals, compared with much of what lies around them today: a fruit basket from Thailand; a Korean flask, with its mystery contents still sealed inside; an empty packet of Mirage lime mixed tobacco from India; a French condom wrapper. The whole world comes to this beach. The tideline is an open book in a babble of different languages: an account of what the world desires, and then wishes to be rid of.⁵⁶

The miscellaneous nature of my finds is a highly distinctive feature of this place, and places like it: coastlines, which occupy ‘a frontier not only between water and solid ground, but also between the wild and the domestic’.⁵⁷ I chose the title of the book to reflect this: the word ‘strand’ is a versatile one which I use not only to denote the shoreline but also to suggest two other meanings: the driving aground of a ship or a sea creature, and the single element threaded or twisted together with others.

Along with its liminality, I was conscious of the particular dynamism of the coastal landscape: its exposure to elemental forces, its material volatility. All coastal landscapes are changeable, but this one is exceptionally mobile. It is completely devoid of rocks, so its three elements are sand, water and air. As a

⁵⁶ Sprackland, *Strands*, p. 196.

⁵⁷ Joe Moran, ‘We Do Like to Be Beside’, *The Guardian* (19 August 2008) <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/aug/19/1>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

result it is always in flux, 'a shape-shifting place, in league with the wind and the moon and other forces of unimaginable power and energy'.⁵⁸ Colossal volumes of sand can be moved very quickly from one place to another by the sea or the wind, transforming the actual topography of the shore, so that it never looks quite the same twice. This changeability is in fact its primary characteristic, its fascination for me as a walker and observer as well as a writer, and the real subject of the book. Writing in a different context, Seamus Heaney argued that it is 'to the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity',⁵⁹ but in a place like this the land is far from stable, and continuity is a more ambiguous and contradictory concept. Zoe Skoulding's method of walking the Welsh mountains with a map of Brussels in order to defamiliarise the landscape would be unnecessary here: the landscape defamiliarises itself.

When the sands shift, they cover some things and uncover others. In the opening chapter, 'The Star of Hope', I write about the phenomenon in which old shipwrecks rise up every so often in the intertidal zone, take the air for a few days, and then sink back down into the sand. The theme recurs in 'Denatured', with the re-emergence of spent tobacco waste dumped in the sand dunes; in 'Queen's Cup', where I find a china teacup lost from a Cunard liner in the 1950s; and perhaps most dramatically in 'Time Travel', with the 'ephemeral archaeology' represented by the footprints of prehistoric people and animals,

⁵⁸ Sprackland, *Strands*, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 149.

preserved in the Holocene mud and exposed briefly at low tide. These are all manifestations of the sense of place unique to this particular shore: 'It's all about change, shift, ambiguity. It reinvents itself. It has a talent for concealment and revelation. Things turn up here; things go missing'.⁶⁰ This observation has significant implications of this for a real understanding of coastal landscape and ecology, and exemplifies the 'dual accountability' proposed by Buell.

Strands grew out of an engagement with place which was already in evidence not only in *Tilt*, but also in the collection of poems which preceded it, *Hard Water*, which contains the poems 'Fibre Optics' and 'Seacoal', both early expressions of the same coastal landscape, as well as pieces with other equally strong connections to place. As I acknowledged in the Preface:

It has become, as places can, an inner as well as an outer landscape, one I carry around in my head and explore in my imagination even when I'm far from home [...] it has seeped into my poems, as the backdrop for apocalyptic storms and miraculous walking on water, for journeys along the seabed and hauntings in the sand dunes.⁶¹

The longer form of the prose book affords an opportunity to work in a more discursive and exploratory way, to direct the spotlight of my attention on this place and to record what I found there. In this regard *Strands* looks to other texts which document specific locales, notably Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

⁶⁰ Sprackland, *Strands*, p. xi.

⁶¹ Sprackland, *Strands*, p. xi.

(1974), which focuses on a similarly obscure and uncelebrated place; or to Alice Oswald's book-length poem on the River Dart in Devon.⁶²

The north-west coast of England is not much celebrated in literature, and the prospect of working on a more or less blank canvas was an exciting one. One of my intentions in looking closely at a place which is not well-known, and is sometimes regarded as featureless and empty, was to celebrate it nonetheless, and to mark it on the conceptual map. In this context, it is interesting to find *Strands* itself marked on a website called 'Wild Britain map':

'Wild Britain map' seeks to geographically plot and depict the natural history of Britain in all its strands. It covers wildlife hotspots, landscape art, wild places, fossil finds, extinctions and introductions, literature and the travels of past and present naturalists and writers, scientific discoveries and ephemera all things wild. It draws on the writings of figures ranging from Gilbert White, Charles Darwin and George Orwell through to Kathleen Jamie and Robert Macfarlane. It looks at our pre-historical, historical and cultural relationship with wildlife and the land.⁶³

The pin which marks *Strands* on 'Wild Britain map' leads to a page about the book:

The poet explores her local beach for a year before leaving for London, weaving a tale of shipwrecks, natterjack toads, neolithic footprints, jellyfish and strandline findings [...] a celebration of beachcombing which turns up everything from mermaid's purses to buried cars'.⁶⁴

⁶² Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

⁶³ Wild Britain Map <<https://wildbritainmap.co.uk>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

⁶⁴ Wild Britain Map.

Tellingly, it is one of only four pins on the Lancashire coast, the remaining three marking the presence of sand lizards, red squirrels and ancient footprints. It may have its 'wildlife hotspots', but it is not an area which has been much noticed by writers.

One of the distinctive features of *Strands* is the way it brings together the ecology of the place and the human interventions made there, making connections and assessing the complex relationships between them. The pattern of accretion and erosion on that stretch of coast has been affected by a programme of dredging in the Mersey estuary designed to ease the passage of large ships, including the Cunard liners which played such an important role in the trade and culture of Liverpool and the surrounding area. Partly as a result of this dredging, the nineteenth-century asparagus boom in Formby came to an abrupt and catastrophic end when the dunes were breached and the land flooded by changes in tidal conditions. The old asparagus beds then provided a site for the dumping of waste from the tobacco industry; and fifty years later, in the current period of rapid erosion, the tobacco waste is being exposed and is interfering with the natural process of rolling back and renewal which has always ensured the survival of the duneland ecosystem. There is a chain of interconnected events here, all of which have left visible traces in the landscape, and I was able to make a unique contribution by tracing their stories and showing that they are all *strands* in the same fabric.

A key difference between *Tilt* and *Strands* – both in my practice as a writer and in the texts which emerged as a result – lies in their different relationships with

other kinds of text. Though a poem like 'The Birkdale Nightingale' required me to read some material on the natterjack toad – its life cycle, habitat and species decline – *Strands* demanded much more in the way of engagement with sources. In order to understand the complex issues I encountered, and to write with authority about them, it was necessary for me to carry out extensive research in a range of disciplines, including history, archaeology, the sciences and geology.

With the majority of my finds, I was presented with this imperative almost immediately. Before I could make sense of the resurgence in growth of samphire at Southport, for instance, I needed to understand controversial issues in coastal management and pesticide use; and to write convincingly about the find of a sea mouse required me to grasp concepts of iridescence and fibre-optic technology. Typically I used a mix of methods, including reading, visiting archives and talking to experts in the field. Following these trails of research, and incorporating my findings into the writing, was part of the 'mapping' I wanted to do with this book, to provide a rich and multi-layered representation of place. In the past, narrative non-fiction written by poets has sometimes been vulnerable to accusations of empty lyricism, and I was determined that *Strands* should not be open to this criticism: I wanted to contribute a book which was both lyrical and substantial. I was aware of a responsibility towards these sources, to get the detail right, to represent complex information accurately, and to make abstract and theoretical ideas available in a different way and for a different audience by locating them in the experience of place. It was a responsibility I saw discharged in other place and nature books as diverse as Rachel Carson's *Under the Sea Wind* (1941),

where the behaviour of eel, fox and heron is brought vividly to life, and *Rodinsky's Room* (1999) by Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair, a true-life detective story built on the texts and other material found in an abandoned room in the East End of London.

Strands engages with a range of environmental issues which affect coastal landscapes and ecologies. It would have been impossible to walk on that shore, or on any shore for that matter, without encountering litter and pollution, most notably in the form of large quantities of plastic; it seemed an essential part of my task to investigate the significance of this, by finding out about the life cycle of plastic, the way it breaks down in the ocean and enters the food chain, its effects on seabirds and marine life, and its capacity to act as a 'sponge', absorbing toxic chemicals. I learnt too about the effects of climate change on jellyfish populations and behaviour, and about interventions which have altered the ecological balance, such as sand extraction, tipping, and dredging of the estuary.

To confront environmental issues is to step into sensitive and controversial territory. On the one hand, there is the risk of alienating the reader by becoming preachy and shrill; on the other, the danger of being perceived as insufficiently committed to the cause. For Richard Kerridge, the very structure of *Strands* militates against its effectiveness in challenging the status quo:

Strands is otherwise admirable in ecocritical terms, but the episodic structure – the way each chapter frames a particular walk without narrative continuities, consequences – enables us to turn away too easily,

and return to normality after the space for reflection afforded by an afternoon walk or an hour of reading. For literature to be more profoundly disruptive than this is a lot to ask. Perhaps it is an unrealistic demand, but it is one ecocritics must make, if they are to begin to leave the condition of not really believing what they know.⁶⁵

The suggestion here is that critics have a role in influencing creative writers; that rather than confining itself to readings of existing texts ecocriticism can and should make 'demands' of new writing too. The relationship between creative work and literary criticism can be complex and ambivalent – writers are often uneasy about having their processes examined and their writing labelled or pigeonholed – and the writer's own purpose and remit might be significantly different from that proposed by the critic. While ecological concerns are threaded throughout *Strands*, and are frequently foregrounded, it is a portrait of a place rather than a call-to-arms. Change and transformation are its themes, and the episodic structure a way of representing them.

The scientific, social and political dimensions of the discourse around nature and environment are infinitely complex and controversial, and my research in these areas was always accompanied by the knowledge that my own grasp of them would only be partial. There is no neat scientific consensus on how to interpret the changing swarm behaviour of jellyfish in the Irish Sea, nor of what action could or should be taken in response. Likewise the potential effects of pharmaceutical residues on marine wildlife are not definitively understood, and

⁶⁵ Kerridge, 'Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre', p. 375.

the issue has to be seen within a wider context of human disease, medicine and prescription which resists simple analysis.

It was nevertheless essential to engage closely with these ideas in order to write with integrity about the place I knew so well. My first-hand encounters with the vestiges of lost trade, industry and agricultural enterprise – sand-winning, tobacco dumping, an asparagus boom fed by ‘night soil’ brought by train from Liverpool – could only be understood through a process of research, which revealed the complex and powerful roles they played in shaping the landscape and the fortunes of the people who lived there. But research needed to be balanced against immediacy; my primary approach to my subject was one of direct, first-hand observation. In the Preface, I set out my intention to act ‘not as a naturalist, a historian or a geologist, but as an ordinary walker [...] to cut through the blur of familiarity, and explore this place as if for the first time’.⁶⁶ In this respect I was positioning myself within the new tradition, in which nature is a subject available to writers whether or not they are ‘qualified’, and which does not necessarily privilege expertise over all else. My mode was curiosity, and the ‘discoveries’ signalled in the title were intended to be shared with the reader, rather than handed down to them. This can be recognised as characteristic of much new nature writing: for instance, when Kathleen Jamie writes about a crane in flight – ‘like a brittle flying stick’, moving ‘not with heavy, confident

⁶⁶ Sprackland, *Strands*, p. xiii.

wing-beats, but more... shivery' – it is the quality of observation which strikes the reader first, the exactness and surprise of it.⁶⁷ Knowledge is vital but secondary.

A noticeable phenomenon within the new nature writing is that a number of its prose texts are written by poets, perhaps because, as Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts observe, 'poets have always been attracted by the overlooked, the telling details, the captured moment'.⁶⁸ The question of genre in relation to contemporary writing on place is explored by Daniel Weston, who considers the structure of *Strands* and its relationship with other disciplines, particularly poetry:

The text's response to the multiple intersecting narratives of the beach is a structure and format that treats individual chapters – each dwelling on and expanding narratives out of a found object from the beach – as discrete essays while simultaneously offering the means to suture them together. The text, in short, is episodic [...] just as Sprackland's text enters into dialogue with but also plays off the travel text, she also writes in a form that departs from novelistic conventions. The narrative of *Strands* is perhaps less like that of extended prose fiction than it is akin to the collection of poetry where themes, phrases and motifs are revived and establish chimes across the run of poems, whilst each might also be reads alone and outside of this context. It is no coincidence, then, that Sprackland is a practising poet. Indeed, the narrative of place that

⁶⁷ Jamie, *Findings*, p.41.

⁶⁸ Farley and Roberts, *Edgelands*, p. 6.

emerges out of a writer's grounding in that mode releases an innovative model of prose poetics.⁶⁹

This movement of poets into prose can be seen as possessing a particular potency of its own. Engagement with place and nature, Miriam Darlington claims, 'when recounted in the aesthetic framework of richly evocative, aesthetically affecting or sonorous language', can create what she describes as a 'seismic' effect on the reader:

In creating a literary form that is emotionally and imaginatively accessible and within which images of the natural world are revealed and resound in recognisable framework, ecoseismology knits itself into the fabric of the cultural subtext of ecological crisis, producing something self-conscious and deliberate, connected to romantic roots, perhaps, but also thoroughly modern in its concerns. This wave of writings is aware of its own irony, its own implication in the problem. It aims to return the reader to his or her senses, as Thoreau put it in his essay 'Walking', by employing captured moments of deep listening, of immersion in the wild or of animal encounter, and integrating those with moments of enlightenment, like the 'spots of time' that Wordsworth experienced. These contemporary 'lit spaces' as John Burnside has called them, do the work of poetry, translating experience into something which is engaged, provoking, alert, fluid and resonant with crisis.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Daniel Weston, 'Plots: The Narratives of Place in Contemporary Nature Writing', in *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life: Memory, Place and the Senses*, ed. by Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell and Robert Hudson (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), pp. 173-85 (p. 178).

⁷⁰ Darlington, 'Ecoseismology: Writing the Wild in Crisis' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2014), p. 43.

My practice as a poet has always involved paying intense and sustained attention, and making connective leaps between things in the form of metaphor. I used these same modes in *Strands*, deliberately making no distinction between the 'beautiful' and the 'ugly, or between the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary'. The Preface makes explicit reference to this: 'Some of my finds may be real surprises, and others more predictable; but I shall pick them up and hold them to the light regardless'.⁷¹

Sleeping Keys

My fourth collection of poems, *Sleeping Keys*, was published in 2013, and was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. Coming a year after *Strands*, it represented further innovation in my work on place and nature. The new dimension here is the way in which I have expanded these concepts to include interior spaces as well as exterior ones. Thresholds, doorways and windows are recurring motifs, and there is interplay between the indoors and the outdoor life which surrounds it. This inside/outside binary is one which occurs repeatedly in ecopoetics. There are birds making their homes in the rafters in Kathleen Jamie's poem 'The Swallow's Nest';⁷² an unoccupied house 'filling with scats | and the dreams of mice' in John Burnside's 'Animals';⁷³ and in Seamus Heaney's *St Kevin*

⁷¹ Sprackland, *Strands*, p. xiii.

⁷² Kathleen Jamie, *The Tree House* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 16.

⁷³ John Burnside, *The Light Trap* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 18.

and the Blackbird the saint is contained within his cell but with his arm stretched out through the window, and the eggs are contained within his hand.⁷⁴ In *Sleeping Keys*, walls and roofs become porous, and life leaks back and forth between the two. Here the same dichotomy suggests a softening or collapse of boundaries between the 'safe' spaces of intimate relationship and family, and the wild, volatile and endless space beyond.

The ostensible domesticity of the book – in particular the focus on the house and its relationship with lived experience – led some reviewers to make comparisons with the work of Philip Larkin. According to Kate Kellaway, the book is 'a perfect companion piece to [the work] of Philip Larkin... One cannot read her without thinking of his "Home is So Sad" and "Days"'.⁷⁵ But the comparison only goes so far; my work is more concerned with investigating the fabric of a house, and what it might be said to hold of the life which went on within its walls. As Sean O'Brien puts it, 'where Larkin offers an evocative snapshot, Sprackland maps every inch of the lost domain.'⁷⁶

For the poems in *Sleeping Keys* to operate like a map, they needed to enter the smaller and more peripheral spaces of the house – cupboards, porches, windowsills, drains – as well as its living rooms. 'Opening a Chimney' also opens the book. A room which has been enclosed for many years is transformed; the

⁷⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), pp. 20-21.

⁷⁵ Kate Kellaway, 'Grace Notes from the Home Front', *The Observer* (29 September 2013), Books, p. 43.

⁷⁶ Sean O'Brien, 'Flowers that Thrive in Salt', *The Guardian* (30 November 2013), Review, p. 14.

cleared chimney amplifies sound and provides a conduit through which exchanges of various kinds can take place:

Now the closed room is elemental.
Still air quivers with freshness.
The wind makes skittering incursions,

throws down hailstones
racketing into the grate
accurate as coins in a chute.

For years it was shut and intimate.
It forgot the outdoor sounds,
the smell of sky.

Now something falls, soft as a thought –
a clod of soot, or the bones of an old nest –
and the dreaming house stirs.⁷⁷

This sets the stage for much of what follows: poems which offer scenes from within a house, sometimes occupied, sometimes abandoned by the family who lived there, sometimes haunted in ambiguous ways. As Suzi Feay notes, ‘we begin with a house chimney and a china ornament, but already there is something sinister being enacted beneath the familiar’.⁷⁸ The poems explore notions of home and how it can be found, made, lost, rejected or longed for. ‘We

⁷⁷ Jean Sprackland, *Sleeping Keys* (London: Cape, 2013), p. 1.

⁷⁸ Suzi Feay, ‘Verses to be Savoured, Long After the Thrills have Faded’, *The Independent on Sunday* (22 September 2013), *Books*, p. 18.

has not reached here, and venerable spiders
keep the faith.⁸⁰

As the collection unfolds, a number of surrogates for the house are introduced: smaller, house-like spaces, which must be guarded or invaded, which self-destruct or must be destroyed. A beehive is ransacked by a death's-head hawkmoth; a tropical fish-tank breaks apart and spills its contents; and a bird's nest is torn from the gutter and smashed on the ground. In 'Homemaking', a zoo exhibits a row of cages containing mice tunnelling through loaves of bread:

They ate their way in, and made it home.
They went on eating, and the structure
collapsed into crumbs around them.
The loaf was replaced, and the work began again.
[...]

Here in the kitchen I stand with the knife in one hand
and the loaf in the other, remembering
that ruined street of bread houses,
their desperate smell under the high-watt bulbs.⁸¹

Here the connection between the human house and the surrogate is made explicit, and each space is seen contained within another, like Russian dolls: the bread house within the cage, the cage within the row or 'street' of similar cages, the memory of them held within the moment in the kitchen of the actual house.

⁸⁰ Sprackland, *Sleeping Keys*, p. 18.

⁸¹ Sprackland, *Sleeping Keys*, p. 3.

Sleeping Keys shares some of its concerns with the work of other poets who bring together the internal and the external, the domestic and the public. Jo Shapcott, Deryn Rees-Jones and Anne Carson all situate the metaphysical within the domestic. Vicki Feaver, whose work has been described as ‘not so much domestic as domestic gothic’,⁸² writes poems which begin innocuously in kitchens and school halls, or with flowers or bedsheets, but which seethe with violence, sexuality or both at once; and in the work of Sharon Olds, domestic spaces are never safe, and the longing for escape is present even at moments of domestic contentment.

In *Sleeping Keys*, poems of interior spaces are interspersed with a series of six short pieces, each titled ‘Letter Home’. I conceived of these both as actual letters, pushed through the letterbox of the empty house and piling up on the mat unread; and as ethereal despatches from places of emotional exile: places or states in which the individual is far from home, lost and longing to return. Like the poems in *Tilt*, these arose from specific real locations, which through the process of writing were complicated, transformed and mythologised. One has its roots in a visit I made to a village in Latvia with a harbour full of rotting fishing boats, and captures something of the sense of loss and disorientation I perceived there; another in a prison I visited in the north of England, a space I describe as so closed that the outside world has become a kind of dream which can only be glimpsed through books in the library.

⁸² Vicki Feaver, *The Handless Maiden* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), jacket copy.

At the heart of this collection is 'Last Resort', a poem in four parts which takes as its subject the last week of my mother's life. In this piece, indoors and outdoors are juxtaposed again and again. Most of its narrative is situated in a hospital, a labyrinthine world which in turn contains hundreds of smaller spaces. But it begins elsewhere: in the Borneo jungle, vast and seething with life, the original source of the microbes which were developed into the high-strength antibiotic Vancomycin. A missionary scrapes a soil sample from the jungle floor to be sent for analysis in the closed space of the city laboratory: the outside taken inside. This place is referred to again in the third part of the poem, when the reader is transferred to the hospital ward:

Two floors down, in a room as deep
and remote as the deep jungle clearing,
a new front has opened in the long microbial war

and that front is my mother.
On one side, bilateral pneumonia.
The old man's friend. The coup de grace.

On the other, the antibiotic drip
delivering its metered dose of 08565:
the wonder drug, the drug of last resort.

Into the shut-up place of the body it comes
bringing the distant memory of soil and spoor [...] ⁸³

⁸³ Sprackland, *Sleeping Keys*, p. 26.

The second part of the poem is equally acutely aware of space and place. Here the narrative is located in the hospital lift, like the body a 'shut-up place', which is momentarily transfigured by the arrival of a man carrying a hawk, abruptly introducing elements of 'fierceness and freshness':

Into the airless lift where I stand like a dead thing,
she brings the scent of November, her feathers still damp
with the floodlit air where she circled just now
over the flat roofs, the chimneys and vents,
the maintenance routes and air ambulance landing pad:
all the great sprawling body of the hospital.⁸⁴

The final part of the poem is located in a space which is divided by a curtain: the living on one side, the dying on the other. The dying can hear life continuing on the other side: the sounds of voices and medical instruments:

Who would have thought death could be present here,
in the same room as life? I mistook them for opposites.⁸⁵

Sleeping Keys represents an extension and an evolution in the engagement with the natural world seen in *Tilt* and *Strands*. A thread of continuity is apparent in 'Sea Holly', which takes the reader back to the same shoreline encountered in so much of my previous work, and builds on detailed observation of a coastal species:

The flowers I chose were fierce and electric.
Where I come from, they thrust up through sand.

⁸⁴ Sprackland, *Sleeping Keys*, p. 25.

⁸⁵ Sprackland, *Sleeping Keys*, p. 27.

Spring tides and salt winds blitz them
but they blaze in the storm like blue torches.

On warm days, painted ladies glut on their nectar
and the candied root was once an aphrodisiac,
but the head of sweetness wears a steel collar,
a star of bracts sharp enough to draw blood.⁸⁶

Elsewhere there is often a dynamic relationship or exchange between the enclosed space and the life which surrounds it: the moth which can disguise itself as a bee in order to enter the hive; the wasps which visit the shrine to drink from the spring.

Environmental concerns are subtler and less explicit in this book, but do find their way into the work. 'The Birds of the Air', for instance, revisits a longstanding preoccupation with the ambiguous question of naming, something I explored at greater length in *Strands* in relation to endangered species of shark. This preoccupation with names and naming is shared with other poets, especially in the context of ecopoetics and new nature writing. Names are of course beautiful and evocative; they are also critical to human survival. When in the poem 'Discard' John Burnside lists 'Orange Peel, Fly Agaric, Dead Man's Eyes',⁸⁷ the reader encounters not only the timeless and fundamental human instinct for metaphor, and a detailed and intimate knowledge of the natural world, but also the absolute imperative to recognise and distinguish one species of fungus from

⁸⁶ Sprackland, *Sleeping Keys*, p. 49.

⁸⁷ John Burnside, *All One Breath* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014), p. 50.

another. This has always been so; but in a contemporary context the naming of species takes on an urgency, or an elegiac quality. Pauline Stainer's poem 'Miraculous draught of fishes' is a dazzling list of names which makes explicit the 'miracle' of species diversity, and what we stand to lose:

Black surgeonfish
ghost pipefish
Arabian angelfish
sabre squirrelfish
speckled sandperch
spangled emperor
eyeshadow cardinalfish
sulphur damselfish
yellowflank damselfish
whitebelly damselfish
glass fish
Egyptian starfish
redmesh starfish
crown of thorns starfish
hovering goby⁸⁸

There is a responsibility to name, but at the same time there is an acknowledgement that the act of naming is inevitably limited, anthropocentric and distorting. This tension, captured here in an extract from 'Taxonomy', informs much of Burnside's work:

Once we are close enough to give them names
we cannot help but treat them as our own,
these animals;

⁸⁸ Pauline Stainer, *Crossing the Snowline* (Tartet: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), p. 13.

though they are far from us, and rapt
 in other frequencies,
 like waves, or stars,

we speak as if they understood the words,
 as if this fondness
 were the only language.⁸⁹

My poem 'The Birds of the Air' is informed by a similar sense of tension and equivocation: naming, which can be a way of valuing, can also be an act of appropriation:

I'm vague about their names –
 laziness, yes, but also a wish
 to keep them free. Isn't it enough
 to foul their brooks and field
 and flay the high trees with our floodlights
 without this last assault of language?⁹⁰

Summary

In this section I have given an account of how the publications which comprise this submission make a coherent and significant contribution to creative writing on place and nature. My work, both poetry and prose, is alert to questions of place and space, and committed to refocusing attention on overlooked or undervalued landscapes and locations. In their different ways, all three texts contribute to 'the new nature writing'. *Tilt* and *Strands* are intensely preoccupied with issues of environmental degradation and crisis, and with ways of articulating

⁸⁹ John Burnside, *The Light Trap* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 8.

⁹⁰ Sprackland, *Sleeping Keys*, p. 28.

and interpreting the human position in relation to the world around us. Both draw extensively on other kinds of text, balancing responsibility to these sources with the immediacy of observation.

Impact

All three of the books in this submission have gained significant critical attention, in the form of reviews and articles in the national press.

Together, they have generated opportunities in print and broadcast media to speak to a broader audience about my work and its themes. In June 2012, *Strands* was adapted for BBC Radio 4, recorded on location and broadcast as *Book of the Week*, a very high-profile feature with an average audience reach of 3.25 million listeners across the five days.⁹¹ I have been interviewed on BBC Radio for *The Verb*⁹² and *Woman's Hour*⁹³.

I have received numerous invitations to read and to take part in discussions on place and nature writing. A selected list of these events includes a Nature Writing programme at Edinburgh Book Festival, with Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane and Richard Mabey⁹⁴; 'The Narratives of Nature' at Durham Book Festival, with

⁹¹ Book of the Week <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01jggkw>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

⁹² The Verb <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01j29f8>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

⁹³ Woman's Hour <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01gtd9f>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

⁹⁴ Doug Johnstone, 'Authors Exploring Nature Writing at the 2012 Edinburgh Book Festival', *The List* <<https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/43207-authors-exploring-nature-writing-at-the-2012-edinburgh-book-festival>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

Ruth Padel⁹⁵; ‘Writers and the Natural World’ at Bristol Festival of Ideas, with fellow nature writers John Burnside, Tim Dee, Paul Farley and Ruth Padel;⁹⁶ ‘Writing in the Wild’ at Birmingham Literature Festival, with Tim Dee and Andrew Fusek Peters;⁹⁷ and ‘Sensing Place’ on the Humanities in Public programme at Manchester Metropolitan University, with Sean Borodale, Deryn Rees-Jones and Michael Symmons Roberts.⁹⁸ I have appeared at most major UK literary festivals, and at festivals in Tartu, Buenos Aires, Malmo and Barcelona.

Together, these three publications have also brought opportunities for public engagement outside the literary context, giving me a voice in public debate about nature and the environment. In 2013 the Council for the Protection of Rural England invited me to take part, with Tim Dee and Sir Andrew Motion, in a panel event on rural and coastal landscapes and their importance in literature. In 2014 I was commissioned to write a chapter on beachcombing for *The National Trust Book of the Coast*, alongside pieces by Mark Cocker and Christopher Somerville.⁹⁹ This major publication marks fifty years of the National Trust’s Neptune Coastline Campaign, and celebrates the beaches, coves, estuaries and

⁹⁵ ‘Narratives of Nature’ <<https://soundcloud.com/new-writing-north/the-narratives-of-nature-ruth>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

⁹⁶ ‘Writers and the Natural World’ <<http://www.ideasfestival.co.uk/events/writers-natural-world>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

⁹⁷ ‘Writing in the Wild’ <<http://www.birminghamliteraturefestival.org/event/writing-in-the-wild>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

⁹⁸ ‘Sensing Place’ <<http://www.hssr.mmu.ac.uk/hip/past-events/sensing-place/poetry-gala/>> [accessed 2 November 2015].

⁹⁹ *The National Trust Book of the Coast*, ed. by Clare Gogerty (London: National Trust Books, 2015).

islands of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, focusing especially on shoreline owned and managed by the National Trust.

My work on the north-west coast has influenced the work of other writers and artists. In autumn 2015, I was commissioned to write a foreword to the catalogue for a mixed media exhibition staged at the Atkinson Art Gallery in Southport. The exhibition, *Ghosts of the Restless Shore*, was based on a series of walks made along the Sefton Coast by a group of artists and a natural historian.¹⁰⁰ Poet Jake Campbell, photographer Tim Collier, visual artists Mike Collier and Sam Wiehl and sound artist Rob Strachan worked separately and together to make new work about space, place and memory on the same stretch of coast I walked and wrote about in *Strands*.

In addition, there is growing scholarly and pedagogic interest in my work. My books feature on the reading lists of several undergraduate and postgraduate creative writing programmes, and has fed my own practice in teaching and curriculum design at MMU: In spring 2015, I worked with my colleague David Cooper to design and run a three-day CPD course in place writing, interdisciplinary and involving guest lectures from colleagues in other departments.¹⁰¹ Building on the success of this course, I am currently leading on

¹⁰⁰ 'Ghosts of the Restless Shore' < <http://www.theatkinson.co.uk/events/ghosts-of-the-restless-shore> > [accessed 2 November 2015]

¹⁰¹ MMU English department short courses
<http://www2.mmu.ac.uk/english/courses/short/creative/#d.en.12133> [accessed 2 November 2015].

the introduction of a new Place Writing route through the MFA in Creative Writing, which will open in September 2016.

Conclusion

In this Analytical Commentary, I have identified and described the co-existing and overlapping fields of place and nature writing, and have given a critical account of the significant and coherent contribution to these fields made by the three publications in this submission: *Tilt*, *Strands*, and *Sleeping Keys*. I will conclude by considering the character and extent of this contribution in relation to the three key research questions I posed in the Introduction to this commentary:

1. What distinguishes ‘the new nature writing’, and what is it about the present moment which makes it possible?

The recent renaissance in creative writing on place, landscape, nature and environment is informed by growing awareness of environmental crisis, and an acceptance of a range of other, non-specialist voices in a field which had previously been the preserve of traditional experts. The rise of ecocriticism has helped shape discourse about ‘the new nature writing’ and create a climate in which these more heterogeneous texts are valued. *Strands* makes a significant contribution to this movement, emerging from the perspective both of an ordinary walker and lay observer, and of a woman.

By exploring a liminal place which is in a constant state of change, I was able to observe first-hand and with unusual urgency the signs of such pressing

environmental issues as climate change, pollution and species loss. Observation led to research, and to an exploration of some fundamental ecocritical questions: 'justice, of the rights of our fellow creatures, of forests and rivers, and ultimately of the biosphere itself'.¹⁰² My work in *Strands* is innovative in exploring and exposing the connections between my different finds, natural and man-made, and demonstrating again and again the interdependence of human and other species.

In my poems I inhabited a variety of perspectives and deployed different kinds of language in order to explore questions about our human position in relation to the world around us, and how we perceive and describe that position. Outer and inner worlds are brought into dynamic relationship, and the personal and the political come into collision. In *Strands* I confront these questions again, considering the ways in which decisions about the exploitation and management of coastal landscapes have changed over time and in response to political and economic pressures.

2. What is the role of creative writing in responding to place?

Poetry and creative non-fiction have the capacity to document and realise place and space in distinctive and specific ways. By employing creative techniques of close observation, imagery and lyricism in my work, I have been able to defamiliarise well-known aspects of landscape and refocus attention on

¹⁰² Coupe, *The Green Studies Reader*, p. 4.

overlooked and marginalised places and spaces. In my poetry, the technique of fictionalising or mythologising of specific places has allowed me to convey a richly-textured sense of place.

Both *Tilt* and *Strands* broke new ground by putting a specific place on the literary map. Until then, both the particular landscape I described and documented (a section of the Lancashire shore) and the *type* of landscape it represents (the urban and suburban coast) were virtually absent from the literature. The work in *Tilt* and *Strands* is concerned not only with the ecology of this landscape but also with the multiple ways in which people have interacted with it over time, from the prehistoric hunter-gatherers who left their footprints there to the tobacco firms which used the sand-dunes as a place to dump waste material, and the oil companies with their offshore drilling. By looking at these aspects together and representing them as one complex whole – the coastal ecology along with the lines of trade and industry – I have made a unique contribution to the field of place writing.

In *Sleeping Keys*, I expanded the definition of place writing to include interior as well as exterior spaces, the 'domestic' as well as the 'elsewhere'. By juxtaposing these elements, and placing them in tension, I was able simultaneously to work on the large and the small scale, and to move between global and local, personal and universal.

3. How does creative writing relate to other kinds of text?

Most creative writing in this field interacts with and responds to other kinds of text. *Strands* is particularly ambitious in this respect, interpreting and synthesising an unusually broad range of source material, including science, history, geography and biography, and making abstract and theoretical ideas available in a different way and for a different audience by locating them in the physical experience of place. Honouring my responsibility to this material, negotiating its complexities, and balancing it with the immediacy of observation were crucial to the achievement of this book.

Intertextuality is important in my work, particularly my poetry. Some of the poems in *Tilt* take a hermeneutic approach, with place playing a central role in re-casting and re-interpreting narratives which are simultaneously mysterious and intensely familiar.

In conclusion, the work contained in these three publications, both poetry and prose, is characterised by an awareness of place and an acute attention to the natural world, and represents a significant intervention in the fields of place and nature writing. It has reached a large readership, has influenced other writers and artists in the field, and has generated opportunities for me to participate in public debate about place and environment.

Future directions

I continue to research and write poetry and prose about place and nature, and I have plans for new publications in the immediate and the medium term. My current and forthcoming work is concentrated on three principal projects:

These Silent Mansions

I am currently working on a book which is just as intensely preoccupied with place as *Strands*, but approaches the subject from a different angle. *These Silent Mansions*, which is under contract with Jonathan Cape for publication in 2017, is about a series of English graveyards and the stories they tell about the places where they are situated. In this work I am exploring space in four dimensions, investigating what a place remembers of its past and what has been erased.

Extensive research has been necessary to enable me to piece together forgotten pieces of history. It will be a book about place, time, memory, and myth, and also about nature: graveyards have become a last sanctuary not only for the dead but for threatened plant and animal species, and are among the most biodiverse sites we have left.

Mid Lands

I have just begun research which I hope will become a collection of essays about the Midlands. I am returning to the landscapes and towns where I grew up, thinking about what shaped the region and what, if anything, makes it distinctive. It can be an equivocal and even an invisible region: appearing to lack

borders and boundaries, landmarks and character, and to occupy a 'middling' position, neither one thing nor the other. In the classic north/south dichotomy, what can the Midlands mean? An early outcome from this research will be a programme for BBC Radio 4 on the brewing industry in my hometown of Burton-on-Trent, commissioned for broadcast in late 2016.

Poetry

Since the publication of *Sleeping Keys* in 2013, I have been writing and publishing new work, including a sequence of poems about getting lost, two of which were recently published in *London Review of Books*.¹⁰³ For this sequence I am working from notebooks kept while I was travelling in various parts of the world: for one of these two poems, the notes which provided the source were made in a country until recently behind the 'iron curtain'; for the other, they were made when I was in the Amazonian rainforest. The distance created by the lapse of time between taking the notes and making the poem made for ellipses and elisions in my own memory which allowed the places to be altered and mythologised, to escape their specificity.

¹⁰³ Jean Sprackland, 'Tourism' and 'lost/lust', *London Review of Books*, 37 (2015), 22.

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