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**Middleton, Rowan ORCID: 0000-0002-5729-0171 (2014)
Connection, disconnection and the self in Alice Oswald's Dart.
Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism, 19 (2). pp. 157-169.
doi:10.1080/14688417.2014.972427**

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2014.972427>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2014.972427>

EPrint URI: <http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/1224>

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This is a peer-reviewed, pre-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published online document:

Middleton, Rowan (2014). Connection, disconnection and the self in Alice Oswald's Dart. Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism, 1-13.

Published in the Journal of Business Ethics, and available online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14688417.2014.972427>

We recommend you cite the published (post-print) version.

The URL for the published version is

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2014.972427>

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Connection, Disconnection and the Self in Alice Oswald's *Dart*

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Connection, Disconnection and the Self in Alice Oswald's *Dart*

This article examines how Alice Oswald's book length poem *Dart* complicates and extends debates about the local and global. Aspects of environmentalism that focus on a physical connection with a local environment have been criticised by those such as Ursula K. Heise and Val Plumwood who argue that such a connection is insufficient and stress the need for a greater understanding of global interconnectedness. Whilst *Dart* has a distinctly local emphasis in that it focusses on the river Dart in Devon and the landscape that it flows through, the poem's envisioning of this specific geographical feature is far from being static or isolated. In addition to combining different spatial and temporal elements, Oswald's poem transcends the physical through its engagement with the river's spiritual and mythological aspects. The 'fragmented' structure used to achieve this is read as a literary example of Claude Lévi-Strauss's 'bricolage' since the idea of bricolage is also relevant in relation to ideas of the self. Michael Leyshon and Jacob Bull's work on 'the bricolage of the here' is used to examine the relationship between place and the identities of *Dart's* characters. This enables the 'local/global' debate to be seen in the context of the relationship between self and world as discussed in the work of Charles Taylor and David Borthwick.

Keywords: Alice Oswald; *Dart*; bricolage; self; Ursula K. Heise; Charles Taylor; interconnected world; connective estrangement

The past decade has seen several critiques of environmentalism's emphasis on 'place' and the 'local'. These include Ursula K. Heise's (2008) argument that a localised 'sense of place' is less important for ecological awareness and environmental ethics than a 'sense of planet' which is based upon an understanding of how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape daily routines (54). Because most of us in the 'developed world' no longer depend upon an embodied understanding of nature for survival, Heise relegates its status to that of a 'hobby' (55). As such, an understanding of global atmospheric change is as valuable as the knowledge of a local plant and how it grows (56). Heise gives the examples of people who 'would not be caught dead in a pair of hiking boots' yet care passionately about issues such as the overuse of pesticides or the extinction of species (56). Other critiques include Val Plumwood's (2008) argument that concentrating on the 'Cosy Corner' of 'one's own place' is hypocritical in the modern world, because it ignores the other 'multiple disregarded places of economic support'. For Timothy Morton, the very idea of 'nature' sets up barriers; consequently, he argues that we need to think big rather than small, 'dislocating' ourselves from the local if we are to come to terms with what he calls 'The Mesh', or the 'interconnectedness of all living and non-living things' (2007, 2010, 27-28). In addition, Morton views the idea of the local as being limited by its associations with 'the here and now, not the there and then' (27).

This article examines how Alice Oswald's book length poem *Dart* (2002) both complicates and extends this debate. Whilst *Dart* has a distinctly local emphasis in that it focusses on the river Dart in Devon and the landscape that it flows through, the poem's envisioning of this specific geographical feature is far from being static or isolated. Links are made between one place and another, both within the watershed of the Dart and with places in other parts of the world. In addition, the poem goes beyond the spatial dimensions of the local by connecting

the 'now' of the river with the 'then' of its past. In addition to combining different spatial and temporal elements, *Dart* transcends the physical through its engagement with the river's spiritual and mythological aspects. Oswald achieves the multi-dimensional quality of her poem through the use of a 'fragmented' structure which shares some of the characteristics of the high modernist novels examined by Heise in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. As such, *Dart* can be understood as a literary example of what Claude Lévi-Strauss refers to as 'bricolage', where meaning is constructed from heterogeneous elements that are found 'to hand'. Since the idea of bricolage is also relevant to ideas of the self, Michael Leyshon and Jacob Bull's (2011) work on 'the bricolage of the here' will be used to examine the relationship between place and the identities of *Dart's* characters. Oswald's use of bricolage as an overarching structure brings together numerous different aspects of the river, yet the fragmented nature of her poem means that it also contains elements of disconnection. This enables the 'local/global' debate to be seen in the context of a discussion regarding the relationship between self and world, something that is explored through Charles Taylor's (2007) ideas of the 'buffered self' and 'enchanted world' and David Borthwick's (2011) 'connective estrangement'.

Given Heise's points about contemporary society in the 'developed world', and its decreasing numbers needed to work on the land, *Dart* is notable for its numerous evocations of characters' physical connection with a local environment. This can partly be explained by the fact that the Dart flows through a predominantly rural area close to the sea, where many people are still engaged in what might be termed 'outdoor work'. These include a pair of 'crabbers' who relate in visceral detail their experiences aboard the large boats that operated out of Dartmouth known as 'supercrabbers'. They describe how they lifted crab pots that weighed as much as washing machines, and had to 'walk a thousand miles to stand upright'

(46) during storms, a phrase which presumably refers to the movements required to keep one's balance in the wind and rain on a rocking boat. Despite the physical interactions involved in their work, the way in which the crabs are referred to in purely financial terms indicates a lack of respect: 'it was like crabs were a free commodity, we could go on pulling them from the sea year after year, it was like a trap for cash.' (47) This appears to support Heise and her critique of the assumption that an embodied connection to nature is the only way to create 'affective attachment and ecological commitment' (45). Yet the situation is complicated by Oswald's nuanced and humane treatment of the crabbers. The bluntness of their remarks about the sea being a trap for cash demonstrates an awareness of the damage that they carried out, an awareness gained through hard experience in the economic situation in which they found themselves. John Parham (2012) notes the sympathy that Oswald extends towards them through her description of their current state of impoverishment and damaged bodies after ten years crabbing, having left school at the age of fifteen (123). Parham sees their descriptions of sunrise at sea and interactions with dolphins as profoundly deep ecological because they display an appreciation of the beauty of nature and a sense of it as essential for human fulfilment (125). Whether or not this appreciation leads to the kind of 'ecological commitment' Heise might have had in mind, it is clear that the crabbers' embodied connection to nature and place has resulted in affective attachment.

Another perspective on 'outdoor work' in *Dart* is offered by the forester in the passage below:

and here I am coop-felling in the valley, felling small sections to give the forest some structure. When the chainsaw cuts out the place starts up again. It's Spring, you can work in a wood and feel the earth turning (11)

Although the forester's contact with the woods is in part mediated by the technological interface of a chainsaw, his understanding and appreciation of the forest, its sounds and

seasonal rhythms appears to guide his activities, such as when he describes how he stops felling during the nesting season (11). The way he talks about giving the forest some 'structure' or leaving a particular tree to fill out a space and provide habitats for different species gives his sensory connection with the woods qualities that might be associated with a conductor or teacher, through the way he makes certain adjustments to help different aspects of the wood to flourish. The forester's responsibility in this regard is matched by a greater autonomy in his work than those employed on the supercrabbers. Interestingly, his description of the wood in springtime indicates sensitivity to the way in which cycles that take place on a planetary scale affect a specific place. This can be read in terms of Gary Snyder's view that a 'place' is not static but fluid, through the way in which it passes through space and time (1990, 27). For the forester, his connection to a specific place is not only reliant upon an immediate embodied understanding of what is currently present within it, but also a more 'abstract' understanding of how his interventions will affect its future 'course'.

In addition to characters whose livelihood links them directly to the natural world, *Dart* contains numerous depictions of people who make a connection in their leisure time. One passage features 'medics, milkmen, policemen, millionaires, cheering themselves up with the ratchet and swish of their lines' (7), with the onomatopoeia at the end of the line emphasising the importance of the physical nature of their actions. Another passage describes 'hundreds of people hot from town with their snorkels / dinghies minnows jars briefs bikinis / all slowly methodically swimming rid of their jobs' (24). Because so many of us in industrialised countries do not need to develop embodied relationships with nature for our survival, Heise relegates our efforts in this direction to the category of 'hobbies' (55). Yet Oswald's poem demonstrates that it is precisely because of our less directly connected lifestyle that leisure activities like swimming in the river take on such an important role in our wellbeing and

relationship with the natural world. Whether leisure activities such as this form part of a wider ecological commitment clearly depends upon the outlook of each individual concerned. One of the fishermen says 'I've paid fifty pounds to fish here and I fish like hell' (11), an attitude that corroborates Heise's argument that an embodied connection with one's local environment does not automatically lead to affective attachment and ecological commitment. Whilst Heise's example about people who care passionately about issues such as the overuse of pesticides but may not be keen on hiking is valid, it is also true that for some people, an embodied connection to the local does form an important part of a broader commitment that encompasses a more abstract understanding of global ecological issues. People are complex, and may exhibit a variety of practices, attitudes and orientations, something that is reflected in the diverse range of characters found in *Dart*.

The manner in which Oswald pieces together so many different voices and perspectives has some similarities with the high-modernist structures of collage and montage that Heise identifies in the work of John Brunner and David Brin. Heise describes how Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* is based upon a fragmented structure that incorporates elements such as advertisements, statistical data, news bulletins, conversations at parties and television images (76). This diversity of perspectives means that the two characters who might be considered protagonists are subordinated by the novel's broader portrayal of a world challenged by a growing population (76). Similarly, the structure of Brin's novel *Earth* incorporates fragments such as letters, legal texts and online newsgroup discussions in order to encompass a range of characters and episodes (81). Heise sees these structures as some of the aesthetic forms most suited to engaging with the current state of global interconnectedness, due to their ability to switch from one genre, perspective and location to another (77). In both of these novels, electronic technologies form a key role in 'remapping' global space (90). Elsewhere,

Heise examines John Klima's installation artwork *Earth* which allowed viewers to zoom in and out of topographical data that was projected onto a three dimensional model of the earth (66). Other people could also view and zoom into the images and data via the internet, prefiguring Google Earth, which Heise sees as a model for how literature might also encompass multiple scales and locations (67).

Heise argues that Brin and Brunner transpose a literary structure originally employed to portray the heterogeneous nature of the modern metropolis to a global scale in order to engage with issues surrounding population growth (77). By contrast, Oswald transfers modernist fragmentation to a predominantly rural location. Instead of experimenting with the structural possibilities afforded by electronic communication and information technology, Oswald bases her structure on a river. It might be argued that this would mark *Dart* out as limited in scope, or localist in a backward looking way, yet the fluid nature of the river complicates ideas of the 'local' as static or isolated. The connections that a river makes between the *here* of the area it flows through and the *there* of other places in the world enable it to be seen as the epitome of the 'connectivity and heterogeneity of place' (Braun in Bull 2009, 454). This is particularly evident in Oswald's references to the tributaries of the Dart and the different places they flow through (10-11). A sewage worker refers to the 'metabolism of the whole South West' (30), a metaphor which emphasises connectivity through a process whose constant activity is necessary for sustaining life. The theme of transformation inherent in the metaphor recurs throughout the poem, often in the context of the different forms that water takes, such as in the passage at the beginning where the area around the Dart's source is described as a 'rain-coloured wilderness', framing the river as a stage in the water cycle (1). When talking about the river's salmon in another part of the poem, a poacher says 'But there aren't many more these days. They get caught off Greenland

in the monofilaments' (41), demonstrating how the river's connectedness leaves it vulnerable to activities that take place in other parts of the world. Heise's call for greater understanding of the global nature of many environmental issues is clearly appropriate for a world crisscrossed by trade, transportation and information networks and where environmental problems span borders and continents. Yet Oswald's poem demonstrates that the 'local' should not be left behind in this context. By employing similar structures to Brin and Brunner, Oswald creates a soundscape of a geographical feature and its 'locality' that is not isolationist, but 'glocal' in the way it encompasses connections with other places and the wider world.

The manner in which Oswald pieces together the different 'fragments' of her poem corresponds to her use of the river as an overarching structure. Each voice 'flows' into the next, as the poem follows the course of the river from its source on Dartmoor to where it joins the sea. Sometimes the transitions have a thematic link, such as when the mill worker describes how the wool is twisted like the river, which is followed by a quotation from the water researcher Theodore Schwenke in which he discusses the spiralling forms of moving water (20). Oswald often provides a little note in the margins to let the reader know who is speaking, as in this transition from the voice of a naturalist to an 'eel-watcher':

Going through holes, I love that, the last thing through here was an otter

(two places I've seen eels, bright whips of flow
like stopper waves the rivercurve slides through
trampling around at first you just make out
the elver movement of the running sunlight

by the bridge, an eel watcher

If there were no marginal note, one would be hard pushed to detect a difference from the sense alone, although the 'voices' are clearly distinguished stylistically by the shift from free

verse to heroic couplets with imperfect rhyme. Despite the fluidity afforded by the use of the river as an organising structure, there is no clear sense of an overarching narrative in the traditional sense, other than the physical passage from the source of the river to its mouth. The ‘mini’ narrative related by each voice is quickly succeeded by that of the next. Paradoxically, a metaphor for the poem’s assembly of this flowing panorama of voices is provided by the stonewaller, whose work involves dealing with hard objects with clearly defined edges.

I’ve made barns, sheds, chicken houses, goose huts, whatever I require, just putting two and two together, having a boat and a bit of space that needs squaring; which is how everything goes with me, because you see I’m a gatherer, an amateur, a scavenger, a comber, my whole style’s a stone wall, just wedging together what happens to be lying about at the time. (33)

Seen through this metaphor, the poem’s voices become a collection of found elements that Oswald has pieced together. There is a strong similarity between Oswald’s stonewaller and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s bricoleur, a person who does odd jobs by piecing together what is to hand:

Consider him at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem. ([1962] 1974, 18)

Lévi-Strauss originally used the idea of bricolage to describe the ‘mythical thought’ of indigenous peoples, an activity reliant on drawing on what is ‘to hand’ in the local environment in order to develop processes of classification, which leads to plants and animals being named, attributed with medicinal properties or given totemic associations. Regarding the use of bricolage in other contexts than mythical thought, Lévi-Strauss says that the ‘intermittent fashion for “collages”, originating when craftsmanship was dying, could not for its part be anything but the transposition of “bricolage” into the realms of contemplation’

(30). Lévi-Strauss seems to suggest that forming an artistic work simply by fitting together other 'ready-made' artistic components lacks the skill of the mythic thinker who constructs systems of meaning from direct observation of the characteristics of plants or animals. A similar criticism has been levelled at *Dart* by Charles Bennett (2004):

All too often, sections of these pages remain prosaic. [...] There are some fine passages, but the desire of Oswald to stay true to her material (and to retain the authentic utterance of those she interviewed over the course of two years assembling material for her poem), creates an overwhelming sense that these voices are simply being quoted: that in honouring individual veracity she has sacrificed a larger truth of genuine poetic utterance (231).

The manner in which Oswald has gathered already existent material can be viewed as a form of 'recycling'. Bennett's criticism is therefore that these existing materials have not been sufficiently re-moulded or transformed into something new. In this situation, it is worth distinguishing between different kinds of recycling; a fleece made from recycled material will contain little evidence of the plastic bottles that it was created from, whilst a shack made by a bricoleur from old doors and car tyres may well contain more recognisable elements of the materials' previous incarnations, despite possible alterations, such as an old door being shortened or painted a different colour. In Oswald's case, many sections contain the kind of language that someone might have spoken in an interview, yet it is also clear that she is not quoting verbatim, and has altered her raw material, such as when the bailiff says: 'which is where the law comes in - I know all the articles, I hide in the bushes with my diploma' (9). Such a quirky embellishment offers a new perspective on the bailiff, his character and way of working. The manner in which Oswald has edited and worked on her raw material is such that it is difficult to find sections that can be truly characterised as prosaic, although the kind of section Bennett might have in mind is exemplified by the following, where an employee of a woollen mill says 'we dye in pressure vessels, 600 different shades, it's skilled work, a machine with criss-cross motion makes up the hanks and we hang them in the dye-house' (20). Even here, the speech is compressed and there is a strong sense of activity evoked

through the phrase 'criss-cross motion', with its alliterative 'c's combined with the 'k's in 'makes up the hanks' suggestive of the speed and sound of the machine. Whilst it may not conform to what some might expect to see in a poem, the similarities with ordinary speech in passages such as this enable Oswald to differentiate between the diverse aspects that make up her bricolage, as demonstrated in the following passage in which the words are first spoken by a forester, then a water nymph:

And that tree'll stand getting slowly thicker and taller, taking care of its surroundings,
full of birds and moss and cavities where bats'll roost and fly out when you work into
dusk

woodman working into twilight
you should see me in the moonlight
comb my cataract of hair,
at work all night on my desire (12)

The transition from the forester's 'prose-like' speech to the water nymph's musical use of alliteration, rhyme and rhythm differentiates between two different forms of being and their perspectives on the world. In this manner, Oswald's usage of different literary styles forms part of her effort to assemble her bricolage of the river in all its many aspects.

When discussing indigenous peoples' usage of bricolage in the context of classification of plants or animals, Lévi-Strauss makes it clear that such processes are not precursors to modern science; instead, they represent a 'finished and coherent' means of understanding the world in their own right (13). Where mythical thought is reliant on faculties of 'perception and the imagination', scientific thought is removed from them; where science is 'supremely abstract', mythical thought is 'supremely concrete' (15, 269). Yet despite drawing these distinctions, Lévi-Strauss argues that many early developments such as plant classification and breeding, or using plant poisons for hunting, war or ritual required a 'genuinely scientific attitude' involving methodical observation and experimentation (14). In *Dart*, references to

the water nymph and the King of the Oakwoods are juxtaposed with activities reliant on modern science and technology such as water abstraction and sewage treatment. Links between myth and science, the concrete and the abstract as well as imagination and perception are sometimes evident in a single character, such as the naturalist.

Although naturalists are often engaged in gathering quantitative data, such as recording where and when they saw a particular species, Oswald brings out some of the qualitative aspects of this particular naturalist's activities, with her enthusiasm for the concrete experience of field work indicated by the way in which she is 'excited' by the 'wetness' of different grasses (5). The naturalist also uses poetic turns of phrase, referring to the 'lovesongs' of frogs, and describing their spawn as 'water's sperm' (5). The strongly sexual character of the language here suggests that the water is a living force, capable of renewal. The theme of transformation is also evident in her description of an eel that eats its way out of a heron's belly (5), an act reminiscent of 'The Cauldron of Awen', where Ceridwen transforms herself into a hen to eat Gwion, (who has taken the form of a grain of wheat) before giving birth to the bard Taliesin (Hamilton and Eddy 2008, 127). The way in which the naturalist offers such a variety of emotional, sensory, symbolic and abstract responses to the world around her indicates that a person is capable of encompassing numerous different outlooks to assemble a 'bricolage' of responses to a given situation. Another character who offers combines different modes of understanding is the stonewaller:

You get upriver stones and downriver stones. [...] Every beach has its own species, I can read them, volcanic, sedimentary, red sandstone, they all nest in the Dart, but it's the rock that settles in layers and then flakes and cracks that gives me my flat walling stone (33)

Lévi-Strauss describes mythical thought as a 'speculative organization and exploitation of the sensible world in sensible terms' (16). Whilst the passage may not lead to the same degree of

totemic association as some of Lévi-Strauss's examples, the stonewaller's practical knowledge nonetheless allows him to elaborate a classification system based upon the local characteristics of 'upriver stones' and 'downriver stones' (33). Yet he combines this system with terms employed by modern geology based on an understanding of the stones' development.

Aside from systems of classification, another way of looking at the sensory experiences in the accounts of place and livelihood in *Dart* is to view them in the context of identity formation. Parham notes that, for the human inhabitants of *Dart*, identity is 'constructed around their material relation to the river' (125). For the stonewaller, the haphazard way of working with what is to hand is portrayed as part of his personal 'style': 'I'm a gatherer, an amateur, a scavenger, a comber' (Oswald 2002, 33). His current inability to perform this identity affects him emotionally; he explains that his 'agitated state' is due to the fact that the boat he uses to collect stones is 'off the river' and unable to be used (33-34). The stonewaller's predicament recalls Leyshon and Bull's concept of a 'bricolage of the here', where identity is assembled through the creation of stories that are based upon memories and emotional responses to place (160, 164). Leyshon and Bull employ the 'bricolage of the here' in their study of young people in two English villages, using interviews and video diaries filmed by participants. One participant divides the village into two: 'the wealthy people on the hill and us down below' (173). She describes how the 'people who run the village hall' restrict where she can play, leaving only a corner of the cricket pitch, some trees near her home and the playground (173). In addition, she avoids playing in other areas, such as the woods, because she fears that this would get her parents into trouble (173). The way in which her sensory understanding of her local environment gained through play conflicts with her awareness of its social and spatial boundaries reinforces her marginal identity.

Similar themes are evident in Oswald's depiction of a poacher, although his embodied relationship with his local environment involves transgressing boundaries rather than being restricted by them. He relates how he accidentally touched the foot of a bailiff who was standing above his hiding place and the time he nearly caught a pleasure boat 'with full disco' in one of his nets when fishing at night (38, 40). Leyshon and Bull argue that a person needs to assemble their spontaneous memories into a coherent 'memory-image' in order to create a coherent sense of self (163). By telling such stories, the poacher presents an identity characterised by risk-taking, pushing at the physical and social boundaries of a particular place and 'getting away with it'. At the same time, this is tempered by an awareness of the dangers of transgressing these boundaries, with the poacher describing how a fellow poacher lost his life when their overladen boat sank between the wharf and the steamer quay (38 and 41).

It might be argued that the idea of a 'bricolage of the here' is overly restrictive, with the identity of a person dependent upon their relationship with one particular place. Plumwood argues that a 'singular idealised special place consciously identified with self or soul', can create false consciousness for those who live in the Global North, overlooking the other places upon which we depend for economic support, particularly in the South, which take on the status of 'shadow places' (2008). Identifying only with 'one's own place' can result in 'literary rhapsodies' about 'nice times' in 'nice places' that ignore the places that are less 'nice' (Plumwood, 2008). Whilst *Dart* contains several lyrical passages that evoke the beauty of the river, these are not ecstatic or overblown in their praise, and are balanced by descriptions of less conventional sites of beauty, such as a milk factory. The full extent of the Dart region's impact on places in the South is something that is not fully explored in *Dart*,

although arguably this falls beyond the scope of the poem, which clearly sets out to focus on one particular river. Within this remit, *Dart* does engage with instances where economic activity results in the transferral of an environmental impact through global trade. A worker at Buckfast Woolen Mills describes how the process of cleaning sheep's wool sends detergent, grease and sheep droppings into the river and upsets the fishermen, presumably because of the adverse effect on the river's fish (18-19). A little later on, the worker describes how their red pure wool carpets are used for Japanese weddings (20). This transferral of an environmental impact between two 'developed' countries adds another dimension to Plumwood's theory, but nevertheless corresponds to the idea that contemporary economic relations can cause damage to 'shadow' places which is hidden from the consumers' awareness. To counter this false consciousness of place, Plumwood calls for the development of 'multiple place consciousness' in order to overcome the negative aspects of market regimes which are reliant upon the production of 'anonymous' commodities in distant and 'unaccountable' places (2008).

Linking *Dart's* fragmented structure to the course of the river enables Oswald to create a literary example of multiple place consciousness through the way in which the poem examines how the effect of actions in one place affect another. A sewage worker describes how his plant deals with the input from the local sewers as well as the fat from the Unigate milk factory: 'I fork the screenings out – a stink-mass of loopaper and whathaveyou, rags, cottonbuds, you name it. I measure the intake through a flume and if there's too much, I waste it off down the stormflow, it's not my problem.' (30) Modern sewage and water systems mean that most of us in the North do not need to think about the places that receive our waste and the processes it goes through. Even within the watershed of the Dart, the poem reveals 'shadow places' and the transferral of environmental impacts. Leyshon and Bull

move towards multiple place consciousness through their use of Owain Jones's idea of 'hybrid landscapes with other places' (161). This allows them to elaborate how their participants construct their identities from their relationships with other places as well as the one that they currently inhabit. They describe how one of the participants in their study created her 'bricolage of the here' from 'memory images' obtained from visits to the local town and watching MTV, as well as multiple places in the village where she lives (173).

One character in *Dart* whose memories of places do not appear to lead to a coherent identity is the 'rememberer'. His memories of the two sisters who used to row the plums across the river run on into scenes of a man reading a book in the bows of a sinking ship and a bomb that hit another boat piloted by the rememberer's father (45-46). These are juxtaposed with a memory of 'seven crusader ships' sailing on the dawn wind (45). Perhaps the rememberer is growing old and losing the ability to accurately recall and assemble memories into a coherent narrative. Or maybe his personal memory is merging with a collective one. The title 'rememberer' sounds like a surreal official post for a person who holds and re-tells the 'memories' of a particular community or place. In this broader sense, one could see the process in which Oswald pieces together the memories of events that have taken place along the Dart as an assembly of a sense of 'storied-place'. By creating her vision of the Dart's identity in this manner, Oswald overcomes Morton's conception of the local as being limited to the 'here and now'. Leyshon and Bull describe how identity is derived from the interplay between the material and the remembered, overlaying the 'here and now' with the 'there' and 'then' (176). As such, Oswald depicts the river as a place where the past and present brush alongside each other, such as in this line that relates to a contemporary swimmer who has dived into the river: 'Who's this beside him? Twenty knights at arms / capsized in full metal getting over the creeks' (23).

The way in which the rememberer holds and retells collective memories across the generations links him to the mythical dimension of *Dart*. This dimension is evident right from the beginning, with the character of the old man, who is on one level an elderly fellow with a heart condition out for a hike, yet at the same time the archetypal ‘old man’ of the Dart itself, ‘seeking and finding a difficulty’ as he moves tentatively forward across the moors (1). By the end of the poem, the Dart comes under the stewardship of Proteus, the ‘old man of the sea’, whose ability to change shape is symbolic of water’s ‘many selves’ as it takes on different forms in different places (48). Along the way, the poem encounters figures that include the water nymph, the King of the Oakwoods and Jan Coo. Jan Coo is described as a cowherd who drowned in the river, and now ‘haunts’ the Dart, taking on the shape of a leaf or stone at will (4). Such a figure appears to be deeply connected to the watershed of the Dart and its cultural identity, yet Oswald’s poem is fluid enough to accommodate other myths that complicate ideas of the local as being static or fixed. In addition to the reference to Proteus, another example is the passage that relates a legend that Brutus and a ‘gang of exiled Trojans’ (31). After thirty days at sea, they sailed up the Dart under the guidance of a goddess to become ‘kings / of the green island of England’ (31-32), a narrative that allows Oswald to acknowledge the mobility of people and myth as well as the local distinctiveness characterised by the figure of Jan Coo.

By including such figures in her portrayal of the river, Oswald not only crosses temporal boundaries but also transcends the physical. As such, the poem contains elements of what Charles Taylor refers to as ‘the enchanted world’ (2007, 25-26). Taylor argues that the pre-modern self was a porous one, inhabiting a world filled with spiritual entities, which Taylor argues was divided into hierarchies of benevolence and malevolence:

The bad ones include Satan, of course, but beside him, the world was full of a host of demons, threatening from all sides: demons and spirits of the forest, and wilderness, but also those which can threaten us in our everyday lives (32).

Dart contains a passage in which a canoeist describes being trapped by a fence in a flood, at which point the following voice takes over from that of the canoeist:

come falleth in my push-you where it hurts
and let me rough you under, be a laugh
and breathe me please in whole inhale (15)

The voice could be interpreted as the kind of threatening spirit that Taylor refers to, with its unusual word choice and syntax contributing to its menacing character. Rivers are dangerous, and Oswald's treatment reflects this. Yet this 'threatening' aspect is only one of the poem's many and varied depictions of the enchanted world. Proteus, for example, is ascribed a protective quality through his epithet 'the shepherd of the seals' (48). Jan Coo is described as 'the groom of the Dart' (4), allowing him to be seen both as 'husband' to the river as well as a 'groom' in the sense of someone who takes care of horses, or in this case, the river. Whilst the water nymph's flirtatiousness might be read as an enticement to the woodman to join her in the manner of Hylas, who was abducted by enamoured nymphs, she also urges him to:

notice this, next time you pause
to drink a flask and file the saws

the Combestone and the Broadstone
standing in a sunbeam gown,
the O brook and the Rowbrook
starlit everywhere you look (12-13)

The water nymph's call to admire the beauty of one of the Dart's tributaries might be considered 'flirtatious' in the way she aims to encourage the woodman to notice and appreciate the water's beauty. Elsewhere, *Dart* includes 'prayer-like' appeals to both Christ and the King of the Oakwoods (24, 13). The understanding of 'nature spirits' or 'spirits of place' as solely malevolent in Taylor's depiction of the pre-modern world is no doubt the result of a monotheism that had no room for pantheistic understandings of nature. The picture

of forests and wildernesses full of threatening spirits and demons creates a sense that nature as a whole is something to be feared and overcome in an adversarial manner. In line with *Dart's* emphasis on multiplicity rather than singularity, Oswald's more nuanced and complex vision of 'the enchanted world' offers a step forward in this regard.

Taylor argues that in the enchanted world, meaning existed outside of humans, and often impinged upon them: 'the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not at all clearly drawn' (34 and 32). Examples included both demonic possession and being filled with the Holy Spirit (36). This 'porous self' of the pre-modern era was eventually superseded by a 'bounded' or 'buffered' self, where the only locus of thoughts, feelings and spiritual élan is the mind (30). Taylor admits that this development is in many ways an admirable one:

Part of the self-consciousness of modern anthropocentrism is this sense of achievement, of having won through to this invulnerability out of an earlier state of captivity in an enchanted world. (301)

Yet in addition to the opportunities offered by the buffered self, Taylor highlights certain negative attributes:

But it can also be lived as a limit, a prison, making us blind or insensitive to whatever lies beyond this ordered human world and its instrumental-rational projects. The sense can easily arise that we are missing something, cut off from something, that we are living behind a screen. (302)

As ever, the situation in *Dart* is complex and varied. An 'eel-watcher' says 'I watch badgers, I trespass, don't say anything, I've seen waternymphs, I've seen tiny creatures flying, trapped, intermarrying, invisible' (7). Such 'trespassing' can refer to crossing the boundaries of the buffered self as much as it does to walking on someone else's land. Apart from the 'eel-watcher', many of the other characters in *Dart* are oblivious to the aspects of the enchanted world that Oswald depicts as part of their surroundings. Even the forester fails to notice the water nymph, although it might be argued that it is his caring relationship with the woods that has attracted her to him. In contrast to most of the characters' lack of conscious

engagement with the enchanted world, the aspects of the river that are dependent upon modern science and technology, such as the sewage works or the water abstraction site, have a much stronger hold on the human characters through depictions of employees who are actively involved in operating them. Exploring the position of the enchanted world in contemporary society is by no means limited to *Dart*. Jeremy Hooker's ([1974] 2006) *Soliloquies of a Chalk Giant* depicts a fertility god whose virility is weakened by people's lack of engagement with the landscape. Michael Farley's (1983) 'oak king' mourns the lack of seasonal ritual in *At the Year's Root*. In Borthwick's article on the poetry of Robin Robertson, Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside, he focusses on elements of folk tradition and supernatural phenomena in their work (135). Borthwick argues that their references to a 'lost communal culture' foreground a form of 'connective estrangement', where 'connection to nature is often expressed through its apparent failure: in terms of estrangement, loss, or the inability to found a relationship with the non-human world' (135-136).

In *Dart*, the theme of connective estrangement is not only evident in the instances where aspects of the enchanted world are marginalised, but also in some of the passages that relate the local to the global. For example, the Japanese purchasers of wool carpets are connected to the river through the woolen mill's use of the water's special qualities in the dying process, as well as through the discharge that is released after washing wool that is 'greasy with blue paint, shitty and sweaty with droppings' (19). A connection has undoubtedly been formed, but more work needs to be done to establish a beneficial relationship between the Japanese customers and the river. In *Dart*, such 'connective estrangement' is found not only in some of the interaction or lack of interaction between humans and nature, but is also embedded in the structure itself. Whilst Oswald's bricolage of the river allows her to create a multi-dimensional vision of place by drawing connections between the local and the global, the

present and the past, the spiritual and the material, the scientific and the mythic, the fragmentary manner in which these sections are assembled also emphasises disconnection, with the poem switching from one anonymous voice to another.

Taylor uses the term ‘nova effect’ to refer to the ‘ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options’ available to people after the old sense of belonging to the ‘larger ensembles of state, church, even denomination – has further loosened’ (299-300). Borthwick laments the ‘lost communal culture’ of the folk tradition that connected people to nature (135). Faced with this situation, the human characters in *Dart* are left with the challenge of creating their own bricolages of the here, to find their own identities through their relationships to the river and the world, or ‘worlds’, beyond.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

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