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Conference report: Material Poetics: Drafting, Duration, Form

Ellie McDougall, PhD Student, School of Humanities, University of Westminster, e.mcdougall@westminster.ac.uk

This is a short review of a one-day research conference that took place on November 5th, 2025, at Senate House, University of London. The conference was titled 'Material Poetics: Drafting, Duration, Form'. I summarise key papers from the day and draw out thematic interests from across the panels, including engagements with textuality, handwriting, literary form, manuscripts, drafts, and the cultural capacities of the material text.

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The papers presented at 'Material Poetics: Drafting, Duration, Form' offered provocative responses to the conference's opening query: how might poetic practice and criticism foreground materiality? Posed by organisers Sara O'Brien (Royal Holloway), Serafina Lee (Royal Holloway), and Max Shirley (University of Westminster) during their welcoming remarks, this frame proved an opportunity for panellists to respond to the possibilities and the constraints of material engagements with poetics. Ranging from attention to the etchings of process (manuscripts, ink-splashes, handwriting, typos, tears) to engagements with the cultural context that shape creative-critical textual practice, the papers taken together exemplified the oscillation between theory and praxis that Rachel Blau DuPlessis (who was of recurring interest throughout the conference) describes as inherent to poetics.[1] As such, the conference was one of self-reflexivity. It invited us to reflect on the feedback loop between theorising and making, to test, stretch, and even obscure the lenses through which we encounter texts in our criticism and in the world, in order that we might discover new ways of doing poetics not constrained by established epistemological modes.

The conference took place at Senate House, University of London, jointly supported by Techne (AHRC) and the Poetics Research Centre at Royal Holloway. It brought together an impressive number of scholars and artists working in and with material poetics from across the globe. 'We see represented in this symposium a wide range of approaches to research and practice,' Lee remarked at the beginning of the day, and indeed the variety of methods represented was both a particular strength of this conference and an exciting indicator of the diversity of approaches in the study of poetics today. Much credit is due to the organisers' curation of panels, which helped make the day a fresh, lively contribution to long-standing dialogues on materiality and contemporary poetics.

Panel 3b, 'Reading as Process', perhaps best embodied this diverse range of approaches. The panel was chaired by Robert Hampson (Royal Holloway) and included papers from Jo Hamill (Leeds Beckett University), Joseph Shafer (University of Marburg), and Ilsa Colsell (Independent Artist and Researcher, Glasgow). Hamill opened the discussion with her presentation 'Gutter Words: writing through reading, listening through looking', which introduced us to the project that she has worked on for the last fourteen years. Hamill explained how her work as a graphic designer (she also describes herself as a 'graphic artist') led her to *Gutter Words*, a '14-year obsession

[1] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'On Poetics: pleasures, polemics, practices, stakes', in *Inciting Poetics: Thinking and Writing Poetry*, ed. by Jeanne Heuving and Tyrone Williams (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019), pp. 13-38 (p. 13)

with reading *Ulysses*', in which she retyped the novel in its entirety using her own personal copy, and systematically erased Joyce's words, leaving only the words closest to the gutter of the page.[2] 'I am not a Joyce scholar,' she made clear, instead stressing her interest in the multifarious linguistic occurrences of written texts. *Gutter Words* is a different way of getting into an established text, of testing and stretching it to see what lies within. Hammil is attuned to the ways in which both the body and the text occupy a sculptural space that can be ruptured. In her words, the project is a way of 'freeing language from the page', of doing something messy and intimate to it. *Gutter Words* was published as a book in 2019 and is now a permanent exhibition at the James Joyce Centre in Dublin.

Shafer furthered this idea of unmooring language in his reading of Barbara Guest's collection *Rocks on a Platter* (1999). Titled 'The Surface of Appearances in Barbara Guest', Shafer's paper drew on French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Rancière to consider the material manifestations of *Rocks*; what Shafer terms Guest's 'manifesto for form'. He posed to the audience the value of Rancière's resistance to Derrida's now-famous assertation that 'there is no outside-text', offering instead Rancière's intertwining of outside material reality with that 'matter' inside the frame of the text itself.[3] Shafer argued that by using Rancière's articulation of form and aesthetics, we can read *Rocks* as a text that is freed from the constraints of its matter, where 'appearances' are themselves material realities. Such a careful critical reading anticipates Shafer's monograph, *Appearing Beside Text: Uprisings of In-difference in Post-1945 American Poetry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2026). Shafer's paper – weighty with theorists – was complemented by Colsell's practise-based presentation, 'Translating the Archive: Edwin Morgan's Scrapbooks'. Colsell introduced us to a project she has been working on for several years, which began with visiting the archives of Scottish poet Edwin Morgan to view his scrapbooks. Unable to take photos inside the archive, Colsell instead made sketches afterwards of the layouts she viewed, which she then visually translates into collages using cut-outs from magazines. Colsell offered each member of the audience a photocopied zine of these collages to look at and handle, which brought a wonderfully tactile dimension to the translation between material mediums that she discussed. 'You always leave an archive empty-handed,' she remarked, 'save what you have in your mind.' Handling the zine was a way to get that bit closer to the

[2] The James Joyce Centre, 'Gutter Words: Art Exhibition by Jo Hamill, https://jamesjoyce.ie/events/gutter-words/, [accessed 25 November 2025]

[3] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 163.

'unmediated and intimate' connection to a material object that Colsell believes is one of the great strengths of archival work.

Interest in the text's relation to the body was one of the recurring themes of the conference. Several of the practise-based presentations fruitfully took up this idea, and it emerged in a particularly rich way during one of the final panels, 'Between Form and Body'. Jessa Mockridge (Kingston University) presented her paper by means of a captioned video from which she read aloud. Her paper, titled 'A high vis jacket with the sun shining on the shiny bits: Captioning my Artist Video with Feedback from Collective Text', was made up of Mockridge's own captioning work – which includes captions for all sonic noise, not just speech – alongside feedback she has received from captioners and access workers asked to review her work. Influenced by crip theory, Mockridge's film was a way for her to 'queer metadata', to bring captions to the fore rather than relegating them to the background of a film.[4] In her words, a queer approach to caption-work such as this can help 'destabilise hierarchies in audio-visual media', thus rendering captioning a practice that can intervene in the 'power dynamics' between media and the bodies that it interpellates.

Sarah Hayden (University of Southampton) followed with her paper 'clotted in-betweens' – a quote taken from her long-form poem *as if [...] wearing anklesocks* (2024). The poem was produced as a response to artist Sarah Browne's 2024 moving image piece, *Buttercup*. Hayden read the poem aloud from flashcards (designed by Rose Nordin), and the audience were each handed a bright yellow bibliography for the poem, bursting with no less than thirty-eight citations. Ranging in sources that include Robert Burns' 'To a Mouse' (1785), Barthes' *Image/Music/Text* (1977), and an article from the journal *Language Sciences* titled 'Multimodal Dairy Cow-Human Interaction in an Intensive Farming Context', Hayden's poem was both critically laden and playfully adept in handling the 'material, corporeal entanglements' of its subject. This was reminiscent of a paper delivered earlier in the day by Kiah Endelman Music (Glasgow School of Art), who was interested in Rachel Blau DuPlessis's 'midrashic' textuality. Drawing on the Jewish term for speculative modes of interpretation ('midrash'), Music argued that DuPlessi's poems foreground materiality in order to write outside of culturally inherited forms that limit the possibilities of texts. Much like the biblical exegesis it is rooted in, midrashic writing like DuPlessis's rejects the singular text as sacred or divine, resisting continuity and resolution in favour of what Music described as 'living in textuality'. Residing with the text is a way to be attuned, she made clear, to

[4] Mockridge here quotes: Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 198.

the material demands of poetic practice and criticism, which always suggests our own body as much as it suggests the words on the page.

An interest in the bodily relationship to the practice of writing also manifested throughout the conference in the form of attention to handwritten gestures. Tom Bailey (Royal Holloway) started the day off with his paper ‘‘Ugly, like my adolescence’: On Handwriting, Shame and (Im)personality’. Bailey is interested in the different affects involved in composing lyric poetry, and particularly in this paper in the potential shame of handwriting. ‘Your handwriting might expose something about you that you don’t want to be exposed,’ he remarked. Handwriting can make you can object to be observed, inviting viewers to draw conclusions on the person behind the pen. As such, certain poets (Anne Sexton was the primary example in this paper) move towards what Bailey terms ‘compositional depersonalisation’ to try and escape observation. In using a typewriter or, say, a computer, a poet performs a kind of ‘ventriloquism’ by which a button is pressed and a letter appears elsewhere. This is unlike with handwriting, Bailey argues, which demands an intimate, near-touching interspace between the hand and the page.

Cole Swensen, one of the conference’s keynote speakers, picked up this attention to handwriting in her address. She posed the following query: what might handwriting tell us beyond the subject? Swensen rooted this question in the trails of inscription found in Anne-Marie Albiach’s manuscripts and notebooks. A splash of water here, and an underline or strikethrough there, are gestures that invite us to read the construction of the page. We can feel the author represented in each handwritten gesture; as Swensen puts it, inscriptions are a rendition of a mind witnessing itself and its own development. As such, texts that draw our attention to their material construction always enforce the humanity of writing for Swensen. Handwriting in these terms is a ‘visual demonstration’ of ‘the human urge to connect and communicate’ through writing.

Jeanne Heuving’s keynote – ‘Mediums and Materialities in Initiatory Works: Cecilia Vicuña, Rachel DuPlessis and Bhanu Kapil’– followed Swensen’s paper in a rewarding way. While Heuving ran out of time before getting to the work of Bhanu Kapil, what she did manage to cover with the first two poets was, as expected, a fertile and robust commentary on material poetics. Heuving focused on what she called the ‘initiatory works’ of Vicuña and DuPlessis: works that foreground their own incompletion and resist the wholeness of the finished text. Material poems of this kind resist the commodification of the sign by disrupting the seemingly smooth process of meaning that flows between reader and text. By attending to the resistant texture of the poem, she argued, we stand to gain a deeper understanding of the ways materiality filters and inflects our thoughts, perceptions and expression of poetics. It is not that materiality

is itself the goal of experimental poetics (matter for matter's sake, perhaps), but that by focusing on such materiality we are able to break down the objectification of poetics that threatens to restrict our engagement with it. We must always be wary, Heuving warns, not to 'make a theology of the signifier'.

Heuving ended her address by inviting us to think about: on whom does language act? This question – relevant to so many of the papers presented on the day – served as a fitting reminder that it is only through careful attention to the social texture of language, that we might hope to draw out the true potential of a poetics that intensifies the matter or materiality of language. Heuving's address taken together with the rest of the panels at 'Material Poetics' paints a landscape of contemporary poetic study that is vibrant, pulsing, and as interested in its own inquiry as it is in the objects of its study. It is an exciting picture of the current direction of poetics in the UK and beyond, one that is foregrounded by attention to materiality and its cultural, political, and social capacities.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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