

*Medieval Soundings, Modern Movements*  
*Histories and Futures of Translation and*  
*Performance in Caroline Bergvall's Drift*

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Caroline Bergvall's poetry operates at the intersections of translation and performance. Multilingual and multimodal, her work pursues questions of subjectivity and power across time, space and discipline. This chapter follows the tracks of *Drift*, a work that was published as a book of poetry in 2014 but was also produced as a performance that toured Europe from 2013 and artwork first displayed in New York in 2015.

*Drift* is the product of a long-term creative engagement with the Old English poem known as 'The Seafarer'. It is not a translation, or not just a translation, and Bergvall uses the poem and its history as what she calls a 'template for writing' that brings other texts and histories into the orbit of her project and opens up a broader and deeper meditation on the poetics and cultural politics of migration.<sup>1</sup> The project operates in a performative now that brings disparate voices and events into contact, moving across national and linguistic boundaries and what Magreta de Grazia describes as that 'secular divide' between medieval and modern.<sup>2</sup> In the book, the reader encounters visual and verbal poems; words drawn from a variety of medieval and modern languages and none; stories of tourists, refugees and saints; and a reflection on the process of composition.

Bergvall's use of the medieval cultural record to think through modern cultures of movement is counterintuitive. According to Thomas Nail, for instance, writing in his 2015 book *The Figure of the Migrant*, 'the migrant is the political figure of *our time*.'<sup>3</sup> Bergvall, as a multilingual and mobile artist, has been concerned with questions of movement and cultural belonging throughout her career. But in *Drift* she gives particular focus to the question

<sup>1</sup> Caroline Bergvall, *Drift* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2014), 151.

<sup>2</sup> Margreta de Grazia, 'The Modern Divide: From Either Side'. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37 (2007): 453.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 235. Emphasis my own.

of the capaciousness of the concept of ‘our time’. How are the boundaries of that collective, possessive identity formed, in the past and present? And how open are the borders of the present temporal moment? In what circumstances and under what pressures are peoples and cultures said to belong, or not, within ‘our time’? *Drift* attempts to expand the boundaries of the historical present as Bergvall writes a history of the seen and not-seen, the present and the absent, the medieval and the modern, within the now.

‘Drift’ is a word with capacious meanings. Leisurely, peaceful bathing. Uncontrolled, dangerous accumulation. Driving. Driven. It is a word shared between English, Old Frisian, Dutch, Old Norse, Swedish and Danish.<sup>4</sup> As translation, it contains an allusion to the Situationist movement and Guy Debord’s theorisation and practice of the ‘derive’,<sup>5</sup> often translated as ‘drift’. It is a word that speaks eloquently of Bergvall’s interests and practice. As Linda A. Kinnahan observes, Bergvall’s poetry produces encounters with language as an ‘infinitely flexible, layered, and multidimensional medium, in terms of time, space, and form’.<sup>6</sup> Or, as Bergvall put it in her essay on the poetic possibilities of Middle English, it is a word ‘that reaches for the irritated, excitable uncertainties of our embodied spoken lives by working with, taking apart, seeing through the imposed complicities of linguistic networks and cultural scaffolds’.<sup>7</sup> This chapter will trace some of the networks and scaffolds *Drift* relies on and deconstructs, taking a direct route through the published book and using it to frame a discussion of the work’s other sources, interests and iterations.<sup>8</sup> It will pursue the poem’s performances and translations of scholarly and poetic practice to engage the histories the text reveals and the futures it imagines.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Oxford English Dictionary, ‘drift’, in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), [www.oed.com/view/Entry/57712?rskey=lnYgJH&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57712?rskey=lnYgJH&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid).

<sup>5</sup> See Tom McDonagh, ‘Situationist Space’, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, edited by Tom McDonagh (London: The MIT Press, 2002), 241–265.

<sup>6</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan, ‘Interview with Caroline Bergvall’. *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 5 (2011): 233.

<sup>7</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan, ‘Interview with Caroline Bergvall’, in *Meddle English: New and Selected Texts* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2011), 18. On Bergvall’s medieval interests see, for instance, Robert Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 85–91 and Richard Owens, ‘Caroline Bergvall her Shorter Chaucer Tales’. *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 6 (2015): 146–153.

<sup>8</sup> On Bergvall’s ‘iterative poetics’, see Jacob Edmond, “Let’s Do a Gertrude Stein on It”: Caroline Bergvall and Iterative Poetics’. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 3 (2011): 37–50.

<sup>9</sup> My thinking in this chapter has been formed to a large degree by my own collaborative work with Bergvall. Since 2015, alongside my colleague Professor Clare A. Lees, I have worked on a number of projects with her, including public performances, student-focused teaching sessions, research-led workshops and publications. Over the course of this chapter I acknowledge how some of the events on which we have worked together have shaped my ideas. See also the discussion of Bergvall’s work in Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, *The Contemporary Medieval in Practice* (London: University College London Press, 2019), 49–72.

## 'Anon am I'

The published volume *Drift* begins with sixteen line drawings. Simultaneously markers of lines of yet-unwritten or already-erased poetry and a series of visual poems, the images prompt the reader to put their expectations aside and attend to the complexity and ambiguity of Bergvall's representations. Following the images, a section called 'Seafarer' begins with a poem entitled 'Song 1', the opening lines of which are intimately related to an Old English poem known as 'The Seafarer'. But Bergvall's text moves in and around the Old English 'Seafarer', sometimes translating, sometimes re-writing:

Let me speak my true journeys own true songs  
 I can make my sorry tale right soggy truth  
 sothgied sodsgate some serious wreca my ship  
 sailing rekkies tell Hu ic how ache wracked from  
 travel gedayswindled oft thrownabout bitterly  
 tested gebanging head keeling at every beating  
 waves What cursed fool grimly beshipped  
 couldnt get signs during many a nightwacko  
 caught between whats gone ok whats coming  
 on crossing too close to the cliffs Blow wind  
 blow, anon am I<sup>10</sup>

The opening line of this poem is a workable translation of the first line of the Old English poem: 'Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wreca' (I can make a true song about myself).<sup>11</sup> From the second line onwards, however, Bergvall re-works some of the sounds and thoughts of the Old English to produce a language that is harder to place or parse. The second line ends with 'soggy truth', which puns on the sound and sense of 'soðgied' (true tales) but resists singular, transparent meaning, a transformation which is confirmed and qualified by the next words in line three: 'sothgied sodsgate some serious wreca my ship'. Again, sounds are repeated and re-worked. The Old English 'wreca', the semantic range of which incorporates vengeance, anger and misery, appears here to mean something akin to the Modern English words 'wreck' or 'wrecking'.<sup>12</sup> In the midst of the line it simultaneously means more and less

<sup>10</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Seafarer', in *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, edited by Bernard J. Muir (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994), 232, line 1. All translations my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>12</sup> See Joseph Bosworth, 'wreca', in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichý (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014), <https://bosworthtoller.com/36617>

than this. Other allusions to Old English words are present too, including ‘wrecca’ (an exile)<sup>13</sup> and ‘wreccan’ (raise up).<sup>14</sup> Similar sounds emerge again in the fourth line as ‘rekkies,’ which puns on the Modern English ‘recce’, derived from ‘reconnaissance’,<sup>15</sup> as well as ‘wrecan.’ Tracking the similarities and differences of this word and its sounds reveals Bergvall’s interest in how language gives form to, and conceals, histories, events and identities.<sup>16</sup>

While Bergvall creates ‘wrecan’ and ‘rekkies’ by bringing Modern English into contact with Old English, three words in lines five, six and eight – ‘gedayswindled’, ‘gebanging’ and ‘nightwacko’ – function by merging Old English and Modern English elements. The first, ‘gedayswindled,’ is a re-working of the Old English word ‘geswincdagum’, which means something like ‘days of struggle’.<sup>17</sup> The meaning of ‘gedayswindled’ is not transparent but it conveys a sense of remembered dissatisfaction through the presence of ‘swindled’ and the use of the Old English prefix ‘ge’, which retains – just, possibly, for some speakers – a sense of past tense in Modern English due to its survival in German. A similar effect is achieved in ‘gebanging’, which conveys not just the sense of an aching head, but the idea that this discomfort has been caused by something in the recent past. The Old English word ‘gebiden’ (bide) occupies a place in the background of the word’s workings, lending form to Bergvall’s inventions.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, ‘nightwacko’ preserves the sound of the Old English ‘nihtwaco’ (nightwatch),<sup>19</sup> but offers a different and slightly obscure meaning.<sup>20</sup> What emerges from this process is an untimely language that refuses to reveal a singular source or meaning as Bergvall leaves the ambiguities of the poem and its text unresolved.

<sup>13</sup> See Bosworth, ‘wrecca’, in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, <https://bosworthtoller.com/36618>

<sup>14</sup> See Bosworth, ‘wreccan’, in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, <https://bosworthtoller.com/36619>

<sup>15</sup> See Oxford English Dictionary, ‘recce’, in *Oxford English Dictionary*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/159389?rskey=63wEgz&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/159389?rskey=63wEgz&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid)

<sup>16</sup> Some of these questions were addressed in ‘Adventures in the Illuminated Sphere’, an event at Whitechapel Gallery, 26 February 2015, which I co-organised with Bergvall and Lees and featured contributions from Margreta Kern, Gillian Overing, Imogen Stidworthy, undergraduate and post-graduate students from the Department of English at King’s College London, and others. See further: [www.whitechapelgallery.org/events/adventures-in-the-illuminated-sphere/](http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/events/adventures-in-the-illuminated-sphere/)

<sup>17</sup> See Bosworth, ‘ge-swinc-dæg’, in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, <https://bosworthtoller.com/16285>

<sup>18</sup> See Bosworth, ‘ge-bidan’, in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, <https://bosworthtoller.com/13666>

<sup>19</sup> See Bosworth, ‘niht-wacu’, in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, <https://bosworthtoller.com/23750>

<sup>20</sup> My thinking regarding Bergvall’s translation practice was developed during a project entitled ‘Sonic illumination: Performance, play and the language of Old English poetry’ that took place at King’s College London in April 2015. Participants included Bergvall, Lees, Tom Chivers, Ewan Forster and Christopher Heighes, Jennifer Neville and students from the English Departments at King’s College London and Royal Holloway, University of London.

The final line, 'Anon am I', which becomes the refrain of this group of poems, merges the speakers of the Old English poem and Bergvall's own texts by punning on contemporary and antiquated meanings of 'anon'. The phrase creates a collective 'I'. To use Richard Schechner's words, it is an 'I' in which 'multiple selves co-exist in an unresolved dialectical tension.'<sup>21</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) gives the primary contemporary meaning of 'anon' as an abbreviation of 'anonymous', but it also supplies a range of supplementary meanings, some of which are antiquated but remain present in Modern English. The most immediate of these alternative meanings is, as the *OED* describes, an expression of 'soon, in a short time, in a little while'. In Bergvall's use, then, this transforms the meaning of her refrain from, 'I am anonymous', to something like, 'soon I will become'. Another, more obscure, meaning of 'anon' is derived from Old English and described by the *OED* as 'in (or into) one body, company, or mass; in one; together; in one accord; in unity'.<sup>22</sup> The *OED* cites the Old English poem known as *Christ III* as evidence: 'teonleg somod þryþum bærneð þreo eal on an grimme togædre'<sup>23</sup> (the flame will burn the three together all at once, fiercely and forcefully). These meanings speak of the formation and disintegration of the self, across space and time. This interest is confirmed by the manner in which Bergvall brings other names, narratives and events into the trajectory of her poems, as the second sequence of poems in the book, entitled 'North', re-works elements of the *Vinland Sagas*, the stories of the Norse settlements in Greenland and North America, before weaving in the story of Ohthere of Hålogaland.<sup>24</sup> This is a narrative of northern exploration given by a visitor to King Alfred's court in ninth-century Wessex and interpolated into the so-called Alfredian translation of Orosius's *History against the Pagans*.<sup>25</sup> Bergvall uses his Norwegian name, Ottar, but draws on the Old English text, offering a micro-history of early medieval movement and encounter.

Bergvall's method in 'The Seafarer' poems fits what Marjorie Perloff identified, in an analysis of Bergvall's earlier performance, 'About Face' as a 'desire

<sup>21</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 6.

<sup>22</sup> See Oxford English Dictionary, 'anon', in *Oxford English Dictionary*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/8053?rskey=8RhJgU&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/8053?rskey=8RhJgU&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid)

<sup>23</sup> 'Christ in Judgment', in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 85, lines 102–104,

<sup>24</sup> See Gísli Sigurþsson, ed., *The Vinland Sagas: The Icelandic Sagas about the First Documented Voyages across the North Atlantic*, trans. Keneva Kunz (London: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> See Malcolm Godden, ed. and trans., *An Old English History of the World: An Anglo-Saxon Rewriting of Orosius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

to decompose words so that their phonemic, morphemic and paragrammatic properties emerge'.<sup>26</sup> As the section progresses, the decomposition becomes more explicit. Here is the thirteenth poem in the sequence, titled 'Hafville 2':

Then the wind ddrope and they were beset by w inds from then  
 orth and fog for manyd ays they did not know where they were  
 sailing Thef air wind f ailed and they wholly l ost their reck their  
 reckoning did not not know from what direction D riven here and  
 there The f og was sodense that they l ost all ss ense of dirrrtion and  
 l ost thr course at sea There was much fog and the w inds were light  
 and unf and unfavourable They driftedf ar and wide on the high sea  
 Mo stof those onboard completely l ost l ost l ost their reckoning Th  
 ec rew had no idea in which direction they were ststeering A thick  
 fo g which d i d n o t l ift for days The sh ip was driven off course tol  
 and They were ossted about astea for a longt time and f iled tor each  
 their destination We mbarkt and sailed but a fog so th but a fog so  
 th but a fog so th th th th thik k overed us that we could scarcely see  
 the poop or the prow of the boa t<sup>27</sup>

In these lines Bergvall's language fragments and re-forms. She excavates the difference between what is seen and what is sounded. As the opening line unfolds, the reader is forced to perform the diminishing drive of the wind as they are slowed down by the extra 'd' in 'ddrop' but then the wind picks up again and cleaves the word 'w inds' in two. The 'sodense' 'f og', which causes the seafarers to lose 'all ss ense of dirrrtion' causes the reader to struggle, too. In this poem the travellers are a group – a 'they' – whereas in others they are an 'I' or 'we'.

Lyn Hejinian suggests that 'in writing that is propelled by sonic associations [...] or what one might call musicality, the result may, paradoxically, be a form of realism, giving the poem's language material reality, palpability, presence, and worldliness'.<sup>28</sup> Throughout *Drift*, Bergvall's language work produces a sense of construction and deconstruction that is both physical and linguistic, internal and performed. One of the effects of this is a partial dissolution of the boundaries of the historical subject. De-centred subjectivity is even more pronounced in *Drift*'s performance and installation than in the published text. In performance, Bergvall stands in front of a screen of graphics by Thomas Köppel. Words and symbols, medieval and modern, float and surge, streaming in currents, in patterns the viewer can't

<sup>26</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall', *Textual Practice* 18 (2004): 41.

<sup>27</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 330.

understand.<sup>29</sup> Bergvall's voice modulates between song and speech, whisper and call. Ingar Zach's percussion provides punctuation, otherworldly echoes and repetitions, and a non-human sense of scale.

In the installation of *Drift* at Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, a performance entitled 'Hafville (submerged voice)' presented text close to the published poems 'Hafville 5' and 'Hafville 6'.<sup>30</sup> In these texts repeated 't's fill two-and-a-half continuous pages before fragmented language reforms: 't go / t go off / t go off course / t go off course hafville' (42). In Bergvall's performance of these lines the multiple 't's are registered as something akin to the ticking of a clock. It is possible to detect her drawing of air. The voice becomes more and less than a tool. A means of giving body to sound, but also a way to mark the limits of signification.

As Gwendolen Muren writes, 'the poems of *Drift* have their most complete realisation in this intersection of page and performance: embodied and visualised in human pulp, the written work's struggle between fluidity and focus, between dispersed and singular subjectivity, becomes palpable'.<sup>31</sup> This struggle is caught in the short phrase 'Anon am I.' This is both a lament and a statement of privilege. It is an invocation of the loss of self and a recognition that, for some, that loss is only temporary, only a performance that might, in the future, come to an end. But it also recognises that performance, and a sense of anonymity, can lie at the centre of an 'I'. This is one of the tensions at the centre of *Drift*: a recognition that the historical currents that give shape to some identities subsume others. The Old English 'Seafarer' is both a source and a sounding board for this insight.

### Medieval Soundings

The Old English poem called 'The Seafarer' survives in a manuscript commonly known as the Exeter Book. It is not known precisely when or by whom the poem was composed. It is generally agreed that the anthology was made c. 965–975 and that the texts themselves circulated for some time before this. The poem records a first-person account of a journey at sea. The speaker pursues 'wræccan lastum'<sup>32</sup> (paths of exile) before finding comfort in the Christian faith. The pains of distance are captured in the poem by the

<sup>29</sup> A short clip of the performance is available to view online. Caroline Bergvall, 'DRIFT excerpt 1 2013,' Vimeo video, 2:28, 12 November 2013, <https://vimeo.com/79202631>

<sup>30</sup> This performance is available online. Caroline Bergvall, 'Hafville (submerged voice),' Soundcloud audio, 5:27, 24 February 2015, <https://soundcloud.com/carolinebergvall/hafville>

<sup>31</sup> Gwendolen Muren, 'Review of *Drift* by Caroline Bergvall'. *Chicago Review* 59 (2015): 278.

<sup>32</sup> 'Seafarer', in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 233, line 15.

recitation of a list of absent pleasures that encodes a history of performance and identity. The speaker tells us that, for the seafarer, there is:

Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge ne to hringþege  
 ne to wife wyn ne to worulde hyht  
 ne ymbe owiht elles nefne ymb yða gewearc;  
 ac a hafað longunge se þe on lagu fundað.<sup>33</sup>

(Not for him the sound of the harp nor the giving of rings  
 nor the pleasures of women nor the glory of the world  
 nor anything at all apart from the rolling waves;  
 but he will always have a longing, he who journeys on the waves.)

These lines not only record socially privileged forms of masculine behaviour (poetic performance, gift giving and spending time with women) that the poem seems to value but also contain a micro-history of the text's engagement with performance. The reference to the 'hearpan' (harp) is an acknowledgement of the poem's own performance history.

It is generally accepted that it is likely that the Old English poems that survive in manuscripts circulated orally – probably before and possibly at the same time as they were copied and read in manuscripts. There are a few scenes in the Old English poetic record that seem to offer a direct depiction of poetic performance. In *Beowulf*, for instance, there are a number of moments that seem to depict public poetic performance of a highly culturally valued kind. The poem tells us that as part of festivities 'Scop hwilum sang' (a poet sometimes sang).<sup>34</sup> In another scene, at a heightened moment in the poem, the morning after Beowulf's fight with Grendel, the poem tells us that stories are told as part of the celebrations:

	cyninges þegn,
guma gilphlæden,	gidda gemyndig,
sē ðe eal fela	ealdgesegena
worn gemunde,	word oþer fand
sōðe gebunden <sup>35</sup>	

(a thane of the king's, a man laden with words, skilled at recalling songs,  
 remembering scores of ancient stories, devised new words and cast a tale.)

Later in the same celebrations 'Hroþgares scop'<sup>36</sup> (Hrothgar's poet) tells another story in honour of the hero. Other Old English poems seem to

<sup>33</sup> 'Seafarer', in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 233, lines 44–47.

<sup>34</sup> *Klaeber's Beowulf: Fourth Edition*, edited by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 19, line 496. All further references given in text by line number.

<sup>35</sup> *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 31, lines 867–871.

<sup>36</sup> *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. Fulk, Bjork and Niles, 37, line 1066.



confirm the high-status, masculine nature of poetic performance. The poem known as *Deor* tells the story of a man who claims that ‘ic hwile wæs Heodeninga scop, / dryhtne dyre’ (for a while I was the bard of the Hedeningas, / dear to my lord),<sup>37</sup> while the speaker of the poem known as *Widsith* appears to be some kind of travelling performer, or ‘gleeman’ (minstrel),<sup>38</sup> and is described as ‘se þe monna mæst mægþa ofer eorþan, / folca geondferde’ (he who had travelled furthest across the earth / among peoples).<sup>39</sup>

As these extracts suggest, poetry and its performance are bound up with ideas of masculinity in these early medieval texts. This connection rationalises the movement in ‘The Seafarer’ from the ‘hearpan’ (harp) to the ‘wife wyn’ (pleasures of women) as both activities share an interest in the proper performance of masculine identities. This fascination with masculinity is threaded through the most famous translation of ‘The Seafarer’, a text that stands in the shadows of Bergvall’s work, which is Ezra Pound’s hyper-archaic translation that was first published in 1911.<sup>40</sup> His strident work privileged sound over sense and moved between literal and figurative translations, rendering, to take just a few examples, ‘siþas secgan’<sup>41</sup> (tell of journeys) as ‘journey’s jargon’;<sup>42</sup> ‘bitre breostceare’<sup>43</sup> (bitter heart-care) as ‘bitter breast-cares’;<sup>44</sup> ‘burgum’<sup>45</sup> (cities) as ‘burghers.’<sup>46</sup> Pound’s bombastic transformations were often unencumbered by literal sense and grammatical rigour and attempted to reach back through Old English to produce a sense of deep-rooted and continuing masculine community. His verse is fascinated by what Chris Jones calls ‘muscular vigour’.<sup>47</sup> His translation concludes without the final movement of the Old English

<sup>37</sup> ‘Deor’, in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 284, lines 36–37.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Widsith’, in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 246, line 136.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Widsith’, 241, lines 2–3. See further Emily V. Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 16–19.

<sup>40</sup> Pound’s ‘Seafarer’ was first published in *The New Age* 10 (1911): 107. I have taken the text of the poem from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2005), 12–15. On Pound’s translation see Chris Jones, *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17–67 and Fred C. Robinson, ‘“The Might of the North”: Pound’s Anglo-Saxon Studies and *The Seafarer*’ and ‘Ezra Pound and the Old English Translation Tradition’, in *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English* (London: Blackwell, 1993), 259–274 and 275–303.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Seafarer’, in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 233, line 2.

<sup>42</sup> Pound, ‘Seafarer’, in Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy, eds., *Norton Anthology*, 12, line 2.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Seafarer’, in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 233, line 4.

<sup>44</sup> Pound, ‘Seafarer’, in Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy, eds., *Norton Anthology*, 13, line 4.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Seafarer’, in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 233, line 28.

<sup>46</sup> Pound, ‘Seafarer’, in Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy, eds., *Norton Anthology*, 13, line 28.

<sup>47</sup> Jones, *Strange Likeness*, 35.

source text, which finds comfort in Christianity. Instead, Pound's version ends with the hope that 'though he strew the grave with gold, / His born brothers, their buried bodies / Be an unlikely treasure hoard'.<sup>48</sup> Where Pound appears to read the past in terms of similarity, Bergvall insists the meanings of medieval culture might be transformed to give form to other identities. Language and cultural history move in both directions in her text, opening up and changing past and the present.

### Modern Movements

Bergvall's lines and their historical intertexts are written over in the next sections of the book, which present a short series of grainy images before a new section begins, entitled 'Report'. The new section begins with a short paragraph:

On March 27 2011 a ~10 m rubber boat overloaded with 72 migrants departed the port of Gargash adjacent to the Medina of Tripoli, Libya. This vessel was bound for Lampedusa Island, Italy 160 nm (nautical miles) to the north northwest.<sup>49</sup>

This introduces the second movement of the text. Bergvall's source material is the case of the so-called 'left-to-die boat'. After seventy-two migrants were forced into a boat by Libyan soldiers in Tripoli and set course for Lampedusa, the boat was allowed to drift across the Mediterranean Sea for fourteen days, under the gaze of the NATO naval blockade of Libya and numerous other military and commercial ships. After they ran out of fuel and lost their satellite phone, the passengers in the boat were washed up again on Libya's coast, although only eleven survived the journey and two died shortly after.

'Report' is based on the work of Forensic Architecture, a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London, that describes itself as an interdisciplinary team of investigators that includes 'architects, software developers, filmmakers, investigative journalists, artists, scientists and lawyers'.<sup>50</sup> Their work uses surveillance technologies to interrogate acts of violence, often carried out by governmental actors. In the case of the 'left-to-die boat', Forensic Architecture's work was able to piece together the movements of the vessel, its proximity to and engagement with governmental and commercial boats and planes, and some of the

<sup>48</sup> Pound, 'Seafarer', in Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy, eds., *Norton Anthology*, 14–15, lines 97–99.

<sup>49</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 71.

<sup>50</sup> Text taken from Forensic Architecture, at [www.forensic-architecture.org/about/agency](http://www.forensic-architecture.org/about/agency)

experience of the people on the boat. 'Report' is not Bergvall's account of or response to Forensic Architecture's work; instead, it is an insertion of their work in to her project.<sup>51</sup> She uses their language and the 'Report' is their report. This means that the language of the survivors is recorded and, in performance, spoken by Bergvall. This is another act of writing that speaks to Bergvall's earlier work. In the project titled *Via*, for example, Bergvall printed forty-seven English translations of the opening tercet of Dante's *Inferno* as text and installation.<sup>52</sup> As Brian Reed writes of that project, in the 'Report' section of *Drift*, she 'lets herself dwindle to what one might call a content provider, a cut-and-paste language processor, and a rote reciter of others' words'.<sup>53</sup> This is not an unproblematic position to assume when the words spoken document such an extreme experience, and come from people who have been systematically mistreated and exploited. The power axis between speaker and poet is so imbalanced the appropriation is provocative. Indeed, some critics have chastised Bergvall for her use of the case.<sup>54</sup>

The possibility of exploitation is hard to ignore. But for Bergvall to produce a work on seafaring without acknowledging the death and despair that defines so many contemporary maritime journeys would be distasteful. She acknowledges the extremes of twenty-first century seafaring later in the text:

These days travelling great distances by sea is mainly done for luxurious leisure, or as a last resort. It is the last option. How many overfilled open boats fleeing war zones and political oppression have resorted to dangerous, clandestine crossings of the Mediterranean Sea, of the Sicily Channel, of the Aegean Sea, of the Caribbean Sea, of the Red Sea, of the Gulf of Thailand, of the South China Sea.<sup>55</sup>

The story of the 'left-to-die boat' could never not be cruel and it is impossible to give the story of the death of sixty-four migrants the attention it requires without the possibility of exploitation. Yet for Bergvall to write about the cultures of the seas of Europe without writing about such stories would be negligent and unethical. In her attempt to produce a politically

<sup>51</sup> See further 'The Left-to-Die in a Boat'. Forensic Architecture, accessed 13 January 2022, [www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/](http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/)

<sup>52</sup> See Caroline Bergvall, *Fig* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2005), 63–71. See further Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form*, 85–86.

<sup>53</sup> Brian Reed, *Phenomenal Reading: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 86.

<sup>54</sup> See for instance, Dana Levin, 'Get Lost,' *Boston Review*, 3 February 2015, <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/dana-levin-caroline-bergvall-drift-get-lost>

<sup>55</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 148.

and ethically engaged account of the maritime cultures of Europe, Bergvall had to risk accusations of unethical and distasteful instrumentalization of the migrants' story. The cruelty of the 'left-to-die boat' is not Bergvall's. Or at least not just Bergvall's, in the sense that the event was allowed to unfold under the watchful gaze of international peacekeepers, government organisations acting in the name of their European citizens, it belongs to all those who would call themselves European.

Some of the complexities of Bergvall's use of the 'left-to-die boat' can be further drawn out through Rebecca Schneider's work on re-enactment. Schneider's work, like Bergvall's, is interested in the perception of time and 'artworks and re-enactment events that question temporal singularity'.<sup>56</sup> Schneider's study of the temporalities of performance, *Performing Remains*, uses American Civil War enactors as its central case study. This means that throughout her study what she delicately terms 'questions of the Confederacy' hang in the background.<sup>57</sup> While Schneider is clear about how her own political commitments do not align with those of the Confederacy or its belated supporters, nevertheless the possibility of her work engages racist thinking in the past and present.<sup>58</sup> As in Bergvall's work the relation between violence and its representation is unresolvable.

In field notes made during her research, which Schneider includes as part of her book, she gives an account of witnessing a Civil War battle re-enactment and acknowledges the problematic absence of non-white participants:

Maybe twenty minutes in, a horse without a rider gallops out the woods and heads toward the ambulance. We can hear gunshot and muffled yelling. We see puffs of smoke.

I don't know quite what I'm seeing, I think. That's not true, I tell myself: I'm seeing puffs of smoke. Again I don't feel like a spectator (there's nothing to see), but am I a witness to the nothing I see? What I'm witnessing is a mystery to me. Whatever it is, I can't see it. This event, it's very clear, is not given for me or to me, nor does it concern my ability to see. It is taking place elsewhere. I am a witness *to* the elsewhere of the event, and is that, in part, the reality that is touched here?? Elsewhere goes on, here and now?

I begin to stare at a woman in front of me. I could reach out and touch her but I do not. I am riveted by her large handbag. The bag has the words, over and over again in faux Louis Vuitton style: Cherokee Cherokee Cherokee Cherokee Cherokee Cherokee Cherokee Cherokee.

<sup>56</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 19.

<sup>57</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 9.

Nowhere, at any Civil War re-enactment I have attended so far, has the issue of 'Indian Removal' or 'Trail of Tears' – a veritable entr'acte for the Civil War itself – been anywhere recounted. Except here, on this faux European knock-off, among the detrital ghosts from the future. Who more properly owns the twitching inconsolable after-effects? The actors or the onlookers? And who is on which side of what? Where are the secessionists? Where the union? Which are the terrorists? Which the terrorized?

I begin to feel dizzy, and literally sick.<sup>59</sup>

It is worthwhile comparing Schneider's thoughts here with another account of a visit to a Civil War battlefield. This is what Ta-Nehisi Coates writes of one of his trips to Gettysburg, when he reflected on the history and continuing meanings of the Civil War from the farm of Abraham Brain, a black man whose property overlooked part of the battlefield:

Standing there, a century and a half later, I thought of one of Faulkner's characters famously recalling how this failure [the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg] tantalized the minds of all 'Southern' boys – 'It's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun...' All of Faulkner's Southern boys were white. But I, standing on the farm of a black man who fled with his family to stay free of the South, saw Pickett's soldiers charging through history, in wild pursuit of their strange birthright – the right to beat, rape, rob, and pillage the black body. That is all of what was 'in the balance,' the nostalgic moment's corrupt and unspeakable core.<sup>60</sup>

For Schneider it is the absence of violence that prompts an affective and somatic charge; for Coates it is the threat of continuing violence. Their different responses are conditioned by the different ways in which their bodies are positioned within the narratives of the past.<sup>61</sup> While the temporalities of re-enactment may be open and changeable, the narratives of race that define the American Civil War are closed and resolute.

Coates's reference to Faulkner's work is also worth thinking through. The scene he has in mind is from the 1948 novel *Intruder in the Dust*:

It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago. For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the

<sup>59</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 59.

<sup>60</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015), 102.

<sup>61</sup> My phrasing here is borrowed from Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225, where Hall writes of 'the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past'.

furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armistead and Wilcox look grave yet it's going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think This time. Maybe this time with all this much to lose than all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble, the cast made two years ago; or to anyone who ever sailed a skiff under a quilt sail, the moment in 1492 when somebody thought This is it: the absolute edge of no return, to turn back now and make home or sail irrevocably on and either find land or plunge over the world's roaring rim.<sup>62</sup>

In Faulkner's invocation of '1492' we meet that secular divide between medieval and modern again. For Faulkner, unlike Bergvall, historical change is absolute. Even though his most famous meditation on historical events claims that 'the past is never dead. It's not even past', in the passage above it appears to be unchangeable.<sup>63</sup> In Bergvall's work, however, the past is open. Open to re-interpretation. Open to appropriation. A space of progressive cultural potential as well as histories of suffering. A resource. But she is alert to how different bodies are affected by the tides of history.

A quarter of a century before Faulkner published *Intruder in the Dust*, Alain Locke offered another meditation on the meanings of the medieval/modern divide in the United States. Writing on the mass black migration from the southern states of America, Locke described it as 'a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern'.<sup>64</sup> The power of Locke's statement resides in part in his use of the term medieval to signify the uncivilised cultures of the southern states, but he offers a broader and deeper insight as he suggests that people can move between temporal environments.<sup>65</sup> As *Drift* demonstrates, sometimes the

<sup>62</sup> William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 194–195.

<sup>63</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (London: Vintage, 2015), 85.

<sup>64</sup> Alain Locke, 'The New Negro', in *The New Negro: Voices of Harlem*, edited by Alain Locke, with an introduction by Arnold Ramparsad (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), 6. I owe this reference to Cord J. Whitaker's paper, 'Touching the Past in the Harlem Middle Ages', delivered at *Touching the Past Again*, George Washington University, 3 March 2018.

<sup>65</sup> On the temporal, spatial and racial meanings of 'the medieval' see Kathleen Davis, 'Time Behind the Veil: The Media, the Middle Ages, and Orientalism Now', in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 105–122.

boundary between the medieval and the modern is the boundary between the abject and the subject.<sup>66</sup> But as both Locke and Bergvall suggest, these boundaries are relational, in flux, even as they are violently enforced.

Locke's thinking engages with the kind of 'peculiar temporal inversion' that Forensic Architecture uncover. For example, they explain of their work with the United States' drone programme, that:

According to US executive regulations, targeted assassinations cannot be justified as retributions for crimes that individuals have perpetrated in the past – this is the role of the judiciary and requires habeas corpus, the presentation of evidence, and a fair trial – but rather can be employed only in a predictive manner in order to stop 'imminent attacks' that otherwise would be committed in the future. Gradually, the category of imminence has become elastic and its applicability has been pushed back in time, losing its sense of immediacy.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, the 'seafarers' of the 'left-to-die boat' were rendered un-immediate, beyond the here and now, when boats, planes and helicopters observed but did not save them. In its use of Forensic Architecture's work on the 'left-to-die boat', *Drift* asks its readers to reorient their perceptions of imminence to reveal new ways of imagining the meanings of the presence of the immediate, how we share time with others, who may be near or far to us, in time or space. This concern with what Eyal Weizman terms the 'threshold of detectability' brings together the judicial, the territorial and the cultural.<sup>68</sup> Like Weizman, Bergvall recognises that this threshold is not stable but situated in time and space, intersecting with cultural ideals and preoccupations. Bergvall asks her readers to consider who lives below the textual record, what kind of violence sustains that threshold and how the threshold might be moved.

### 'Language Started Shaking'

Following 'Report', the reader encounters a series of ten abstract images that resemble stargazing maps. After the images comes a new series of poems, 'Shake', which again draw on medieval sources, in this case the Old Norse 'Hávamál', a verse collection of wisdom and advice. Bergvall's

<sup>66</sup> The relationships between performance, environment and translation were the focus of a series of three workshops Lees and I organised in the summer of 2016, structured around contributions from Forster and Heighes, Laura Ferrarello and Bergvall.

<sup>67</sup> Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 31.

<sup>68</sup> Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*, 31–32.

five-line poems, like the source text, are concerned with relations with others, the transience of life and the social meanings of movement and travel.<sup>69</sup> Following fourteen short poems a series of drawings brings the section to a close. These drawings are hand-renderings of the letter ‘þ’ (thorn), an archaic and obscure relic of the written languages of the medieval north.

In the next section of the book, ‘Log’, Bergvall provides an account of her working process and unlocks, to a degree, some of the ambiguities of the text. She explains the line drawings which open the published text,<sup>70</sup> her use of ‘The Seafarer’, her encounter with the story of the ‘left-to-die boat’ and her decision to incorporate it into her work,<sup>71</sup> the paradoxes and tensions of her subject, and the obscure images, which are revealed to be magnified surveillance images of the boat.<sup>72</sup> The ‘Log’ is both a record of Bergvall’s work and a partial map of it. It provides glimpses into the everyday labour of such work. The reader is told of Bergvall’s struggles with the ‘largely incomprehensible’ Old English (130), how a domestic disaster threatened to de-rail her work,<sup>73</sup> of the exhaustion she feels after a day’s rehearsal<sup>74</sup> and the ‘blankness’ of the writer’s struggles.<sup>75</sup> It insists on the presence of the author’s own lived experience within the work as it invites the reader to join in the navigation of this strange territory and re-imagine the textual and spatial journeys that give form to the modern subject.

The final two sections of the book continue to reflect on processes of making and unmaking. The penultimate text, ‘NOÞING’, is a meditation on the materiality of the body and language, working and re-working a discovery and rediscovery of ‘some þing’ that proves elusive: ‘catch yourself look down but no theres no þing there’.<sup>76</sup> Bergvall’s play here is on the wide semantic range of the Old English word ‘þing’ which gives us the Modern English word ‘thing’, but in Old English could signify either a material or immaterial object, such as a ‘thing that is done’, ‘a circumstance’ or ‘a meeting’.<sup>77</sup> The short poem circles around these meanings as it moves from Modern English to Old English and, as a result, the meanings of the text solidify and disperse.

<sup>69</sup> See further David A. H. Evans ed., *Hávamál* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986).

<sup>70</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 146.

<sup>71</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 134.

<sup>72</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 157.

<sup>73</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 141–142.

<sup>74</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 129.

<sup>75</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 144.

<sup>76</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 171.

<sup>77</sup> See Bosworth, ‘þing’, in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, <https://bosworthtoller.com/31866>



The final section of the book draws the reader's attention tightly to the single graph 'þ', which is named 'thorn'. Bergvall locates the letter in linguistic, cultural and her own family history, from its use across northern Europe in the earlier Middle Ages to its redundancy in the age of the letterpress. She reads its 'success and ultimate demise' as a reflection of 'the contingencies and accidents of writing': 'it is a mysterious and tantalizing marker of the completely buried inscriptive and syntactical realities at the root of the English that we live within. It functions as an indice, a compressed reminder of the slow and radical overhaul towards greater simplification, mechanization and spelling chaos to which the language in both spoken and written modes would be submitted.'<sup>78</sup> The section and the book end with a description of the bodily pressures of producing the sound signified by 'þ'/'th', 'an unvoiced fricative [...] one of the most specific and difficult [sounds] of the language'. Bergvall notes that 'among late learners of the language [...] it remains a vexing and more or less chronic obstruction'.<sup>79</sup>

Who are those 'late learners of the language'? What other 'chronic obstructions' might they have faced? How have their bodies been positioned by the linguistic and cultural tides that swirl around those things we call 'English' and 'Europe'? What stories of migration give shape to, or discount, their experience? When – or where – is their now? Or then?

These are the question I am left with as I leave *Drift* behind. Its great historical, geographic and linguistic expanse is situated, finally, precisely, in the body of an unknown language learner, in their everyday experiences of translation and performance, trying to give voice to unfamiliar sounds. In that moment the medieval and modern histories and movements Bergvall invokes are left open as sites of cultural potential, of new means of initiating contact and belonging, of new ways of knowing the self and others. But the fragility of this possibility is recognised. *Drift* does not imagine that the ideological weight of the past is escapable, but it asks its readers to work towards a world in which it might be navigable, translated and given new voice.

<sup>78</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 180.

<sup>79</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, 180–181.