

Playing in the water: an exquisite corpse and found river and underwater poems

cultural geographies

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Abstract

This article shares and reflects on *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* – a playful approach to writing and enquiry about rivers and their underwater environments. The *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* was an adaptation of the Surrealist exquisite corpse concept – a collaborative game in which each participant wrote or drew in response to a prompt and kept their contribution concealed until the end, when the full corpse was revealed to all contributors. We consider how our approach to exquisite corpse fostered playful co-creation and community and contributed to better understanding people’s experiences with and intuitive responses to river environments. This article blends academic writing and found poems (existing words or phrases reframed into a poem) from *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse*, in response to calls for more creative and entangled ways to write about the world. We applied this technique, using lines of text by different *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* contributors and reordering lines into poems that illustrated how contributors intertwined notions of humans, rivers, and what lies below the surface. We hope that by sharing our experiences with the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse*, we encourage more playful approaches to geopoetics, to foster conversations across disciplines, as well as within and outside the academy.

Keywords

collage, community, digital media, environment, geopoetics, play, poetry

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The exquisite corpse concept was initially brought about by the Surrealists (*circa* 1920s Europe), who believed that non-competitive play and use of imagination could reveal neglected associations that are unimaginable by one mind alone.¹ The Surrealists also maintained that the creation of exquisite corpses, a series of words or images collectively assembled by a group of people through a game-like sequence, induced a poetic attitude and a commitment to people's spontaneous existence over and against conventions.² Such a poetic attitude to collaboration and creating can allow exploration of complex or unfamiliar topics through wordplay, sound, formal constraints, and aesthetics.³ In the broadest sense, the only overarching rule of exquisite corpse, then and now, is that each person taking part in the game is unaware of what others have contributed until the end. Otherwise, the implementation of exquisite corpse is open to interpretation. What the exquisite corpse produces are traces of the process of creating, along with an artistic result.²

The game-like and artistic features of exquisite corpse made the concept particularly appealing to us for our project, which focuses on dialogue and interactions between self and other to bring what lies below rivers' waters to the surface. To create the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse*, we followed the exquisite corpse concept: each person who responded to our calls to collaborate and co-create the corpse shared lines of words in response to our prompt (*rivers and their underwater environments*) without knowing what other contributors had written. Our approach to the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* deviates from the original exquisite corpse concept because we organized the activity but did not contribute to the corpse text. Traditionally, the prompt for the game comes from an active contributor to the corpse creation, but here, we (the authors) provided the prompt while other people who agreed to contribute made the corpse. We also adapted the exquisite corpse concept for *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* so that the lines and words shared by contributors co-created multiple haiku about rivers and underwater environments. Haiku is traditionally a three-line poem with seventeen syllables (five, seven, and five).⁴ It is a poetic form that one of us previously used in a collaborative writing project, *Conservation Haiku*,⁵ and that we all believed would complement the game qualities of exquisite corpse.

In this article, we reconstruct the creative process of *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* that started with our own interests in collaborating, playing, and experimenting together and with others about rivers. We blend academic writing with found poems from the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* to extend the collaborative geopoetics about rivers. Found poems are the literary equivalent of collage: text collected from other sources such as books, newspapers, blogs, and even other poems are reordered to create a poem.⁶ We use found poems from the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* to exemplify how contributors intertwined notions of humans, rivers, and what lies below the surface and to collage academic writing and poetry as an example of how these forms can interact and foster conversation within and outside the academy.⁷

Our geopoetic practice did not start with the exquisite corpse concept. Instead, in early 2020, we developed in-person immersive experiences that were addressed to all people about rivers and underwater environments in Wales to write and create collaboratively. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic onset in March 2020, we could not host in-person events. In response, we revised and broadened our initial ideas and approach and, in April 2020, set out to work collaboratively with different publics to write about rivers and their underwater environments in different geographic locations through digital means (e.g. social media, email, forums). We decided on *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse*, adopting a playful approach to co-creation to encourage experimentation and self-discovery among contributors to the project, including ourselves, to both inspire and broaden contributions beyond those already comfortable with creative writing or poetry.²

We sent invitations and announcements about the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* to our professional and personal networks – those of an interdisciplinary researcher studying rivers, a

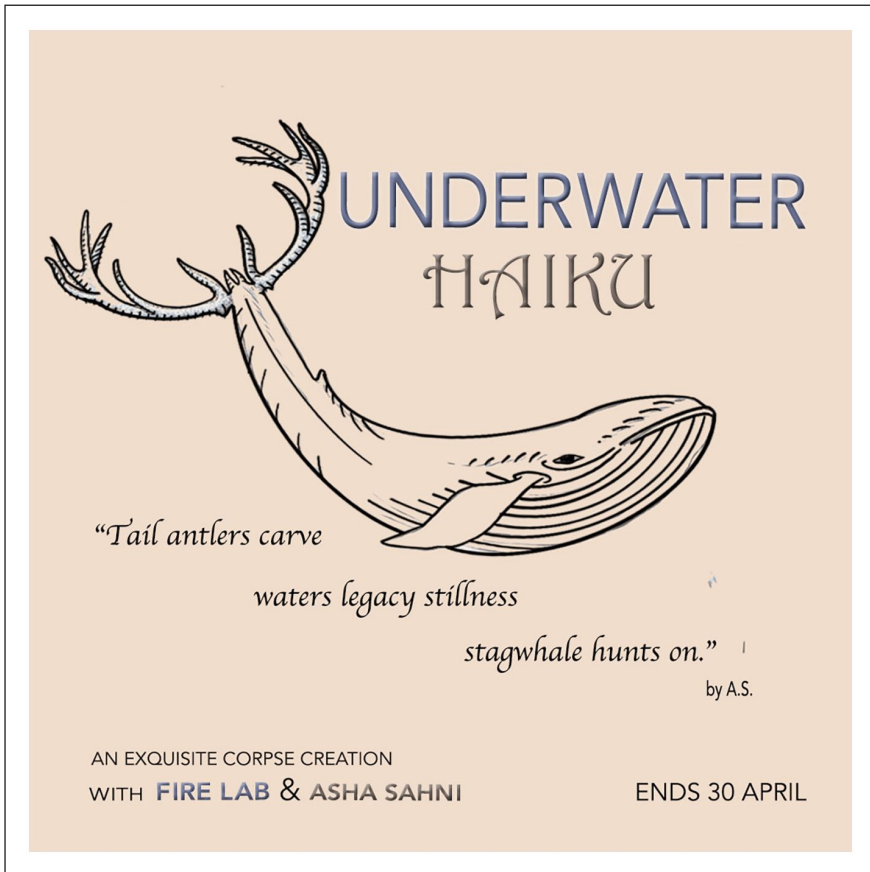


Figure 1. Stagwhale and Haiku.

visual designer, and a poet – via emails, posts to national and international creative writing listservs, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and personal communications. We designed digital collages of hybrid creatures and haiku to accompany our invitations and reminders for people to contribute their words (Figure 1). We included the digital collages and haiku to stimulate people’s imagination through existing connections, experiences, or knowledge they might hold for land and marine dwelling fauna that they were more likely to encounter, either physically or through different media, than of river-dwelling fauna alone.

Contributions to the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* were made online via two Google Forms (one for those with visual impairment). We provided a single text prompt on the Google Forms – “*rivers and their underwater environments*” – and invited people to submit a single series of words formed of five or seven syllables in response to the prompt. In keeping with the exquisite corpse concept, contributors were unable to see others’ contributions. The Google Forms also included a description of the broader *Underwater Haiku* project, what we were asking contributors to do and commit to with regards to the project, participation details, and information about our collaborative team and research interests (Figure 2). The Google Forms were open five days for contributions to the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse*, and we encouraged contributions in any language, alongside an English language translation, so that we could understand the words that were shared.



The Project

Underwater Haiku is a collaborative poetry initiative with activities from 2020-2022 that are focused on writing haiku about underwater environments. Poetry has a history of being collaborative, and through this Exquisite Corpse creation, we will explore co-creation of poetry, and people's relationships and experiences with rivers, particularly underwater environments.

What we need from you

For this *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse*, we invite participants to contribute a series of words forming 5 or 7 syllables that come to mind with the prompt, 'rivers and their underwater environments'. On the form below, we invite you to contribute words in your preferred language and alphabet and ask that you provide an English translation alongside your contribution.

Exquisite Corpse Commitment

Words shared by you as well as respective haiku that emerge from the collaboration will be published, integrated in related artworks, and considered data for our research. As a thank you for participating in the creation of this Exquisite Corpse, you will receive a digital artwork presenting the creation in its raw and intriguing form.

Participation Details

If you have read and understood the information about our collaboration and study set out above, and agree to the following statements:

1. I am 18 years old or older.
2. I understand that my name and email address may be looked at by Dr Januchowski-Hartley or Dr Giannoulatou at Swansea University where it is relevant to my taking part in the Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse.
3. I agree to participate in this collaboration and study.
4. I understand that my name will be published with the haiku and any research related publications or presentations unless I indicate my preference to remain anonymous.

please provide your consent to participate in this collaboration and study by either entering your name and email address, or entering 'anonymous', in the form below.

More Information

FIRE Lab – Freshwater Interdisciplinary Research and Engagement Lab – are based at Swansea University and Asha Sahni is a poet and writing for wellbeing practitioner. To find out more about our research and engagement, please visit firelaboratory.uk. If you would like more information about this project contact Dr Stephanie Januchowski-Hartley at s.r.januchowski@swansea.ac.uk.

Future Activities

Where applicable, we will keep in touch about our research, publications, and upcoming events related to *Underwater Haiku* via the email that you provide.



Figure 2. Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse description.

The *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* attracted 106 contributors from Europe, Africa, Australia, Asia, and North America. Most lines submitted by contributors were in English, but



Figure 3. Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse collaged with Octowl.

there were also contributions in French, Greek, Japanese, Marathi, and Spanish. We compiled lines submitted by contributors – in some instances, people had written more than a single line, and we selected the first line that was either five or seven syllables to include in the corpse. We did so to ensure that the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* text complied with our project description and that each person contributed a single line to the corpse. The *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* text was presented in the order that contributors submitted to it (in Latin alphabet for readability) and collaged with the *Octowl* digital drawing (Figure 3). This first digital artwork bearing an inscription of the complete *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* text was distributed to contributors and the broader public via our social media accounts and the *Underwater Haiku* project webpage.⁸

The *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* is central to a digital artwork, *Underwater Words I & II*,⁹ based on ideas of collective thinking and examining the notion of underwater from different perspectives. The artwork is a digital diptych and consists of two independent videos sharing one screen. The two videos are complementary: one presents the written words of the original

Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse combined with audio of a found poem from the corpse, and the other is its reverse with the found poem written and the original words spoken. Both videos include a series of visual and audio fragments connected to underwater environments.

In keeping with our playful approach, we present found poems alongside prose in this article to exemplify how contributors intertwined notions of humans, rivers, and what lies below the surface. In reading the corpse, we encountered vivid underwater imagery shared by contributors.

pebbles hide silver
 in the depths of pollution
 caddis larvae lurk
 promise breathing gills
 entwined among dancing reeds
 tadpoles will evolve

This found haiku reveals an intertwining of human and nature conveyed both within and across contributors' lines. Rivers and other freshwater ecosystems support billions of people and are home to an extraordinary diversity of life.¹⁰ Our dependencies on freshwater ecosystems for food production and security, drinking water, and transport all drive changes in these ecosystems, such as those caused by pollutants,¹¹ that have consequences for both people and nature. At the same time, as reflected in the lines shared by contributors, life continues within and alongside these rivers, even as we pollute, channelize, and dam these habitats.

The *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* captured an element of possibility and perhaps hope that life will continue and evolve in face of human disturbances. The act of reflecting on our surrounding environments, while neither fully pristine nor fully defined by human presence, can help us tap into the agency of landscapes, encountering a sense of wonder wherever we might be.¹²

Rivers' energetic, connecting, and shaping nature was also conveyed, perhaps in part because of the playful approach used to conjure words in the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse*.

subterranean trickle
 pebbles are liquid braids, stones, turbid churn
 two rivers torrent
 rushing eddies carve new homes
 distil life flowing seawards

These lines shared by contributors highlight the value of wordplay for approaching complex topics, such as geological or hydrological processes that operate at spatial and temporal scales beyond the day-to-day or immediate observation. With this second found poem, we have taken individual human-environment relationships shared by contributors and mapped a shared aesthetic that evokes water's continuous movement through Earth's hydrologic cycle.¹³

The nonhuman animals represented in the *Underwater Haiku Exquisite Corpse* spanned insects, fishes, amphibians, and birds. Contributors gave a view into the rich lexicon about fishes (e.g. gobies, blennies, eels, carp, minnows, trout), also reflecting the diversity of geographic locations and experiences from or about which they were writing. Imagery and imagination entangled nonhuman bodies, movements, and interactions above and below water.

Andrea Corpolongo, Helen Whitehead, Doryn Herbst, Tom Burgess, Elvire Roberts, Susan Harrow, Tom Richardson, Sarah Rowland Jones, Roger Hare, Ronne Randall, Lytisha Tunbridge, Jose V (pipo) Roces-Diaz, Robert Catt, Davina Lee, Fleur Beckwith, Kenjiro Van Malder, Hilary Williams, Gwen Katz, WordFiendess, Holly English, Beth Steger, Helen Larson, aMan Bloom, Sukhmani Mantel, Steve Lockett, James, Jami West, Rob Henley, M a Marvan, Jacqui Stearn, Michael Manson, Nina Marvan, Susan J. Tweit, Fraser Januchowski-Hartley, Natasha Bojanowski, Kherlen Shinebayar, Sarah Erskine, Tara Sahni, Linda Sawdy, Frankie Sahni, Andreas Tsanakas, Naresh Sahni, Claire Collison, Rachel Hale, Diana Humphrey, Anna Powell, Heather Moorhouse, Stephen Burrough, Colette Mills, Kate Pawsey, Justine Gillan.

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Ethical approval

The right to conduct research with human subjects was granted by Swansea University's College of Science Human Ethics Approval #STAFF_BIOL_85188_100220090502_2 (2 March 2020).

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Notes

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Author biographies

Stephanie R Januchowski-Hartley is an environmental scientist interested in rivers and people's relationships with these environments.

Ioanna D Giannoulatou is a visual designer interested in interdisciplinary environments. Her current work focuses on science communication and engagement through the arts.

Asha Sahni is a poet interested in exploring dreams through writing of haiku.