In this reflective essay, I assimilate ideas about writing, the body and performance as research, conducted alongside archival investigation about natural streams, called spruits, in Johannesburg. The underpinning to the essay is a description of a walking-led performance along the embankment of a spruit, which converges into the gesture of immersing the body in polluted water.

The William Cullen Library in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, specializes in Africana. The university has its own difficult history with both water and gold mining. The university is named after the turbulent (white) water that undercuts local topography, and it has its genesis in a School of Mining. It continues to contribute knowledge to the mining industry, a major culprit of the pollution of local water systems, as described by House (this issue). The library holds an historical archive that provided the underpinning of an investigation of the tributaries and streams in Johannesburg, known locally as “spruits.” This constitutes the basis of the work described in this paper.

In this paper, I describe walking through the city and along its watercourses, in which I consciously engage with the hydrogeology of the region, local history and contemporary social life, through walking, as a committed social and artistic practice. The work emerged as a project of ecological activism through my immersion into the toxic waters of the spruit, the consequence of industrial and domestic waste discharged into the streams. The immersion was originally a solitary act, with my body a metaphor of the body of water, its history and of the nation. The work transformed, however, as others accompanied me on these walks and observed the theatricalization of the risks of pollution.

In this paper, I describe how the research is articulated via experimental writing inspired by the original walks and performances. The writing affords mimesis by tracing the river “furnished by topos of the source” [1], so that various subjectivities allow for interactive performance mechanisms within the text. Building on Christopher Wood’s ideas of “wet” and “dry” [2], I bring together understandings of research, writing and performance. The performance project recurrently draws metaphorically and metaphysically on the engagement of dry and wet, source and trace.

The research practice is part of a strategy in performance and ecological activism. By recreating a water-based performance through writing, the text performs as a “circumvolution” of water that is complex, chaotic and equally productive. The text encircles the action, submersion, reflection, eddying and percussion along the source of wet praxis and tracing against the embankment of dry theory. Following Carl Lavery [3], I draw links between this injunction and my own practice in walking and performing, writing and reflecting as ecological, encoded, and environmentally perceptive and responsive. I reflect on the writing of the performance as a tracing of the performance, before the performance as a source of work is even described.

Research in the William Cullen Library resulted in multiple notebooks on the processes of reflection, in which I interlaced theories about the sources of water in long history, histories of place naming tied to the discovery of gold, and the rapid expansion of settlement around the goldfields and the waterways. But the notes also reflect on the everyday struggles of local populations, the continued haunting of colonial history, intersections of the struggle against apartheid, and the toxicity of the city’s waterways. In the river, deep geological history, colonization, extractive economies and contemporary city governance and its inadequacies collide.

In the second part of the paper, the walk and performance conducted during Watershed are described: two were planned, although only the second proceeded, with four participants accompanying the artist, tracing a spruit through northern middle-class suburban Johannesburg. The performance at the conclusion of the walk involved my transformation into a water rat; dressed in a yellow mask and costume, I entered the polluted water to try and retrieve a waste object thrown into the spruit. As noted, the water is heavily contaminated; it exudes filth, stench, danger, risk, radicalizing calamities, and sadness. The trace is about gesturing existences of a performance by turning moments from geohistorical phenomena and performance, into practice as research moments about water and the body that occur in the text, then the text performs as trace of the performance [4]. The performance as research is thus sustained through the tracing. Performance and research are uncovered and recovered from the source, as a tracing re-encoded in writing.

The ongoing water work is the personal nature of the work, as a resource and as a necessary ecological statement about the everyday.

References and Notes
4. See Benjamin [1].