



Feelings of Difference and Sameness

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Review of

Moore, Marshall, and Sam Meekings, eds. *The Place and the Writer: International Intersections of Teacher Lore and Creative Writing Pedagogy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021. 272 pages.

The *Place and the Writer*, edited by Marshall Moore and Sam Meekings, is an exciting addition to the Research in Creative Writing series (Bloomsbury Academic) and to wider international research in Creative Writing Studies.

Starting from Paul Engle’s landmark essay “The Writer and the Place,” the editors set out to explore how the concept of place—understood and interpreted broadly—affects writing practice and pedagogies of creative writing, exploring themes such as adapting the workshop to local contexts, questioning one’s identity as L2/SL writers, and looking at the classroom as the place in which creative writing is taught.

In the preface, Marshall Moore and Sam Meekings introduce themselves as ‘expatriate scholars and practitioners’ and reflect on having to reassess their own identities after working and teaching abroad, as “both [their] international experiences led [them] to consider the complicated relationship between practice and place” (ix). The latter is at the core of most contributions in this volume, along with what appears to be a more general conversation on teacher lore, which, as argued by Graeme Harper in his foreword, is “knowledge that is in condition of personal, embodied and yet often anagogic exchange” with universal elements and “commonalities of practices, ideals and beliefs” which should be observed to “recognize the strength and significance of our human kinship in and through creative writing” (xxiv-xxvi).

I have identified five strands emerging from the international contributions featured in this volume: teacher lore, literary canon and cultural context, language and identity, the creative writing classroom, and best practice. Each of these areas is further divided into subthemes recurring in several chapters.

Feelings of Difference and Sameness

The first topic discussed at length by several authors is teacher lore: what it is, what models or teaching approaches are out there, and what should teachers do. Harper's and Stephanie Vanderslice's contributions are both valid attempts at providing updated definitions of lore in order to demystify it and to approach "our colleagues across borders not with assumptions but with questions, with curiosity, and with respect" (Vanderslice 9).

So it is only fair that international colleagues provide their own definition of lore, contextualizing it to their country's literary culture and observing its most dominant teaching approaches.

Hanna Sieja-Skrzypulec, for example, points out that teachers in Polish creative writing courses play the role of mentors and that they display two tendencies: they either share their own experience and creative method, or they present strategies "stemming from formalistic and structuralist thought and narrative grammar, thorough analyses of popular literature and current trends prevalent in publishing markets—a model which is common for literary instructors" (Sieja-Skrzypulec 152). Triantafyllos Kotopoulos, Sophie Iakovidou and Iordanis Koumasidis, on the other hand, stress that "the very concept of lore is quite different in Greek as the comparative term *paràdosi* covers two different, yet coexistent meanings: 1) the tradition of written texts, which comprises the canon of a certain national literature; and 2) what is being taught in a classroom (a selected part of the canon)" (Kotopoulos, Iakovidou and Koumasidis 159). So trying to explain lore without dealing with canon first would be a fruitless endeavour.

The second strand considers literary canon and general context, connecting the notion of place to history and culture, as we learn about the circumstances in which creative writing programmes were established in several countries.

Dai Fan and Li Ling, for example, offer a reflection on Chinese students' perceived lack of critical thinking by contextualising some of the behaviours exhibited by students during the creative writing workshop, such as lack of response, silence, embarrassment and respect for authority (Dai and Li 34).

Ross Gibson, on the other hand, seems to have documented the opposite tendency, stating that he is always "struck by the absence of Confucian gravitas or professorial prestige accorded to instructors in Australia." Australian students, he explains, are less likely to be daunted by individual authority figures as "authority tends to get distributed across networks of people, places, and times" due to the country's inherited intersectional culture (Gibson 96).

Many other contributors offer connections between geography, culture and literary tradition. Nora Ekström relates current creative writing pedagogies in Finland to history and a tradition of creative writing guidebooks to reiterate Mullally and Maguire's point that "without memory you

cannot imagine” (Ekström 60). Similarly, Kotopoulos, Iakovidou and Koumasidis argue that traditional teaching can be “enriched through the combination of theoretical training and literary knowledge with creative writing” (162). By offering a complete overview of classical and contemporary literature, creative writing courses in Greece can “avoid the (frequent) dedication of students solely to their personal genre or period preferences or, even worse, to those preferred by their instructor” (Kotopoulos, Iakovidou and Koumasidis 162).

By considering geographical places, a conversation on language and identity is almost inevitable and makes for the third major area explored in this volume.

Authors address several issues, starting from what would appear a very basic one: what language are students choosing to write? Bronwyn Law-Viljoen’s and Phillipa Yaa de Villiers’s students in South African creative writing seminars spend a considerable amount of time looking for their individual voice by making language decisions, which are determined not only by the “speaker’s proficiency and breadth of vocabulary,” but also by a “perceived need to be ‘correct’” in speaking and writing if English is not their mother tongue (Law-Viljoen’s and de Villiers 25).

In his “Protagonizing the L2: the Case for ‘Life Writing’ in Creative Writing (SL) Contexts”, Dan Disney addresses two main questions: “how to feel like ourselves in a language we do not quite feel at home in?” and “how to speak with (or into) a voice in a new language” (45). Furthermore, he is committed to explore “which pedagogical benefits (if any) are conferred in learning to write creatively in a second language” in the context of interdisciplinary and trans-genred life-writing at Sogang University. Disney ultimately campaigns for more attention to the results students deliver, “[t]o wit: the many linguistic advances, developments in expressivity, gains in intra-, inter-, and extra-personal skills (all gearing toward catharsis, competence, confidence, and ultimately humanization) [...]” (Disney 55).

I also found particularly interesting the case study presented by Rúnar Vignisson, who told of a Polish-speaking student wanting to write in “perfect Icelandic” rather than take on the role of immigrant writer

fearing that what she has to offer will be devalued, not taken seriously, what with the animosity immigrants sometimes suffer in this day and age all over the world. She may not want to appear an imperfect writer or individual, writing like a child. She may want to keep her dignity by presenting herself as a fully assimilated Icelander instead of being marginalized (Vignisson, 2021: 221).

Vignisson recognises that, despite this student’s writing not being faultless, with her strong desire to write about Icelandic nature and its extensive vocabulary, she “heads for the core of

Icelandic identity” while providing a novel point of view as “[h]er eye sometimes lingers on things that the Icelander may find too commonplace to notice, making her perspective an invaluable asset” (221).

Migrating from the idea of place as a composite of geography, language and identity, authors in *The Place and the Writer* zoom in to explore the physical place in which creative writing courses are held: the classroom and, by extension, the workshop or the activities featured in this environment.

Bernardo Bueno identifies that, just as writers have their own voices, so do creative writing programmes:

Some focus on teaching and research; others are famous for their writing workshops; some have a reputation for giving birth to prize-winning authors; others are connected to the Humanities, Literature or Language departments or, sometimes, to the Arts. Every program has their own group of writer-teachers, or teacher-writers, each with their own voice and experience, and, collectively, all these elements (the university, department or program ethos, the library, the program history, the alumni and their reputations, and so on) give each program their unique identity. (203)

Creative writing classes are also made unique by deliberate attempts at defamiliarizing the classroom environment: James Shea mentions several defamiliarizing strategies used by the tutors he has observed, such as avoiding PowerPoints, playing music, sitting in a circle, or using bags of props to teach sensory perception and observation (191-196); while Lania Knight argues that sometimes “campus is not the place to stimulate discussion” and has taken her students to the pub, an environment which British students “associate [...] with being sociable and with which they [are] already familiar” and which releases them “from the expectation of being a ‘student’ on campus” (179). Knight’s is also an attempt to dismantle any barriers between students and teacher, questioning the hierarchies and social dynamics at play in the classroom, as also proposed by Sieja-Skrzy-pulec, who puts an emphasis on decreasing the distance between student and mentor, recognizing that “all the parties present in the room are on the same journey known, namely that of developing their writing” (155).

Looking at what happens in the classroom other than the writing activity, Dai and Li introduce the idea of workshops as “places for healing”. They state that “[a]lmost every semester, more than one student would cry during a workshop” and tell the anecdote of a student who cried after submitting a piece based on personal experience and who then revealed that she was crying not because she was sad, but because of the attention and warm responses she received from her peers (37).

Holly Thompson also finds that her Japanese students “may gain mental health benefits from the

opportunity to process complex emotions through a safe space of crafting fiction and poetry amid supportive peers” and can “probe their own identity and relationship to the world” once again reinforcing the connection between language and identity (120-121).

Lastly, contributors not only recognised some of the dynamics of the creative writing classroom, but offer some valid best practice, the final theme across all contributions.

In their creative writing in English seminar, Law-Viljoen and de Villiers are proud to see that students are encouraged to explore “the sometimes untapped potential of the language resources open to them for the writing of their stories and essays” and “to write in an English that is inflected, flexible, colorful, contaminated, in creative discourse with the other jostling language cousins” (29).

Bueno suggests that writers should be encouraged to “value local culture and literature; in particular, myths, legends, traditions, and folklore” and to read national authors, especially if they are writing genre (209). He also proposes a pedagogy which values the critical essay as an assignment which has “the untapped potential to interface with literary theory in a unique way,” praising its “blend of subjectivity and objectivity” and how it allows students to experiment (209).

Critical thinking and reading, as well as writing, are promoted by several other contributors: Disney argues that classes that “mobilize students’ criticality [...] and knowledge of canonicity [...] augment genuinely novel, creatively literate original writing” (46) and that “critically attuned readers may also become well-versed readers of self and others” (48); Maria Taylor associates critical thinking to self-reflection by suggesting a number of ways in which self-reflective practices can provide insight, making students “notice crucial patterns in their own work that are common to other writers” and participate “in a form of dialog with other writers” (132); Ekström recognises that “[a]n appreciation of local literary history and lore are [...] an integral part of a ‘critical pedagogy’ of (creative) writing” (164) and that if students become “better readers of literary texts, they will become more thoughtful, critical citizens” (165).

The arguments and ideas expressed in this volume are incredibly relevant to this time when Creative Writing Studies is turning its attention to how creative writing is taught and practised internationally. Furthermore, this anthology could have a ripple effect on international academia and serve as an invaluable collection of best practice for contexts in which creative writing is only just starting to establish itself as an academic discipline, e.g., Italy, Spain and Latin America, which were not featured in this volume (with the exception of Bernardo Bueno’s case study for Brazil).

With regards to the geographical scope of the contributions, the editors’ recognize in their foreword that in this volume “certain parts of the world—the Kachruvian ‘inner circle’ Anglo-sphere countries, Europe, and East Asia—are better represented [...] than others” and proceed to

justify some of the gaps and limitations of this research. This is a welcome premise to understand the contributions that made this edition of *The Place and the Writer*, which also calls for more than just a re-edited volume, but hopefully, a volume 2 comprising of more case studies exploring creative writing in SL, ESL and in languages other than English.

In a collection such as this one, I expected a diverse array of contributions and I was not disappointed: authors presented their case studies following different methodologies and including evidence ranging from students' coursework to interviews with tutors and personal observation. This variety of scholarly styles is as inspiring as some of the ideas the articles advance.

Perhaps, the only article which stands out for deviating slightly from the volume's emerging themes is Jonathan Taylor's "Scenes of Judgement: Genre and Narrative Form in Literary Memoir." This is probably because Taylor's contribution focuses more on practice than pedagogy, contextualising writing memoirs within the British tradition of autobiographical writing. Taylor's contribution is nonetheless valuable and it clarifies aspects of the genre or form such as the "wave-like formation, moving from scene to judgment to scene" (80), the "ironic and, sometimes even humorous distance between mature narrator and narrated self" (82), intertextuality (88), and the fact that "sophisticated memoirs do not provide simple triumphs, straightforward answers, closed endings; and their judgments are usually presented as contingent, provisional, uncertain, ambivalent, ironic" (90).

While this contribution perhaps does not present a straightforward link to the volume's most common themes, squeezed among other considerations on writing memoir is this reflection:

Personally, I think memoir-writing classes should always problematize the notion of so-called "universal" values that a narrator might share with all readers. In terms of their ostensible content and form, memoirs are necessarily context-bound, linguistically, temporally, socially, geographically specific. [...] These differences in readerly experience would affect both the narrative scenes and the moments of judgment. In that sense, it is not the case that these sections respectively elicit feelings of difference and sameness, in any kind of monolithic way. Rather, feelings of difference and sameness, sympathy and empathy, alienation and identification are also experienced on a moment-to-moment, sentence-by-sentence basis within a text [...].

Reading this volume as an international and independent researcher looking at creative writing pedagogies in non-anglophone academia has certainly evoked for me similar "feelings of difference and sameness, sympathy and empathy, alienation and identification," and I can only hope for more.