



Place-Based Pedagogy and the Creative Writing Classroom

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Last summer, I traveled to rural Vermont, a land of rolling mountains, small, century-old farms, Victorian houses, and winding roads. My purpose: to attend the Bread Loaf Orion Environmental Writers' Conference, where I had the opportunity to be a student again—to workshop an essay of mine in a group of peers and to attend lectures and panel discussions on the craft of environmental writing and publishing. At all of these events, bookended by morning bird walks and late afternoon hikes in the Green Mountain National Forest, I was surrounded by other writers who cared about environment and about place: working on book collections about bike trips across the country, essays about scientific literacy and superfund cleanups, or memoirs about childhood locations that have since been lost to industrial growth. This was a group of writers who supported environmental initiatives and local communities. A group of writers who explored, with passion and excitement, human-environment interactions from a variety of complex angles, through the lenses of society, culture, class, race, gender, and sexuality. In other words, it served as a perfect test site for my on-going curiosity in the cross-over between place-based pedagogy and creative writing.

As a writing professor who routinely teaches place-based composition courses alongside creative writing courses, and as a writer who explores issues of place, identity, and environment, I am interested in the ways we, as a society, value or don't value place-based writing and on the ways place-based pedagogy might be utilized to create stronger creative writing communities on the local level. I use the term "place-based" rather than "environmental" because "environmental" continues to carry with it the weight of the twentieth century environmental movement, implying work that focuses on wilderness expeditions and environmental destruction. Though ecocritics have been careful to broaden that term, considering "environment" to include built as well as natural environments, the general public continues to assume that environmental writing privileges ecology and biology over cultural concerns. "Place-based writing," as developed within the field of composition, on the other hand, captures work that closely analyzes human-environment interactions within any particular location. An urban center is just as worthy to the place-based writer as a national park, and thus the term encompasses locations and perspectives not stereotypically seen as "environmental." That said, most environmental

literature has historically explored particular places, and could be considered “place-based,” whether it is written for a broad audience or for the people of that place and marketed as “regional,” while all place-based writing, because of its attention to physical environments, can be read as “environmental.” At Bread Loaf, some participants approached their work from a more typically environmental perspective, emphasizing the sciences and what is championed as environmental issues, while others approached their work from a more place-based perspective—taking a look at a location or region and analyzing the issues there to understand larger connections. Nonetheless, we all shared the assumption that nature and culture are inherently intertwined, that there is value in analyzing human-environment interactions, and that our survival and well-being as a species in fact requires us to better appreciate and understand human-environment relationships, whether on local or global scales.

As a result, I was startled and somewhat perplexed by a conversation that occurred midway through the conference during a panel on publishing. A dozen or so attendees and I sat in a circle with the seasoned editor-in-chief of a large, nonprofit literary press that carried a strong environmental list and had built a reputation for its place-based nonfiction. For half an hour or so, we asked basic questions about the submission process and what his press looked for. Then, we began to discuss the publishing industry more broadly. At that point, I asked how he would describe the role of regional or place-based writing in the national literary landscape and how he, as an editor, appraises place-based writing when deciding whether or not to acquire a project and publish it to a national audience.

After a bit of a pause, during which he furrowed his forehead and shifted in his chair, the editor said it is a very difficult time for writers. The book industry is selling fewer and fewer books, and yet there are so many books out there that it is hard to break through the noise—to even, if published, receive publicity. He thinks book publishers should publish fewer books as a result. In other words, though he values regional and place-based writing—and though his press has long championed place-based writing—he is only likely to acquire a manuscript now if the project demonstrates a strong and convincing potential to reach a national audience.

The room grew quiet. Here was an environmental editor—the editor of a prominent environmental publisher no less—and someone we’d expect to act as a proponent of environmental and place-based writing no matter what. Instead, he sat before us, succumbing to the pressures of global capital-consumerism and the need to generate book sales by marketing to as wide an audience as possible.

“What about university presses?” another similarly perplexed conference attendee asked.

The editor again paused, as if eager to move past the question. “Well, I admire what they do. They’re different than trade publishing, but they have value and can be a good way to reach regional audiences.”

The atmosphere in the room became subdued, as all the environmental writers at the conference, with book manuscripts and book ideas on issues we’d all agreed were prescient, who’d been celebrating each other’s stories, each other’s beloved places, under the assumption that if we all as citizens have

places we find important, we might as a whole be able to enact global environmental change, struggled against the realities of the publishing industry. What is the role and merit of place-based writing within the broader literary publishing industry? A question that, for me, leads to the related question: is there a place for place-based pedagogy within creative writing?

Creative writing studies, with the recent creation of the Creative Writing Studies Organization and this journal, is just now emerging as a distinct discipline in the United States. Rather than slip discussions of creative writing pedagogy into rhetoric and composition or offer side discussions of creative writing theory at MLA or AWP, the field now has an opportunity to maintain focused dialogue on its history, pedagogy, scholarship, and practice. The possible directions these conversations could take are endless, but one of the most exciting opportunities to me is bringing the pedagogies and philosophies of environmental and place studies in conversation with the pedagogies and philosophies of creative writing, described more broadly. In fact, synthesizing place-based pedagogy with creative writing—creating a place-based creative writing—would help us recognize not only the ways our discipline has been over-influenced by the national publishing industry, but also how creative writing can be better used to develop and sustain human-environment communities.

Thus far, the only scholarship to directly connect environmental studies with creative writing studies is James Engelhardt and Jeremy Schraffenberger’s “Ecological Creative Writing,” published in the recent anthology *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century*. “Ecological Creative Writing,” which works to apply the objectives and practices of ecocriticism, environmental education, and eco-composition to creative writing studies, argues that “in the face of our current and ongoing global environmental crisis, teachers of creative writing should acknowledge and incorporate ecological principles into the design of their classes, because to do otherwise is to ignore the obvious and in turn be indirectly complicit in environmental degradation” (286). By incorporating ecological principles into creative writing classes—largely by asking students to carefully consider the setting of their work as an “interactive participant or guiding force in the narrative” (272) and promoting an “ecological consciousness in which humans are seen as equal members within the community of an ecosystem” (271)—Engelhardt and Schraffenberger further argue that creative writing pedagogy can contribute to students’ ecological understandings and environmental engagement and help them create writing that decenters human concerns, promotes ecological consciousness, avoids eco-nostalgia, and establishes a dynamic exchange between science and art. In order to enact these goals in the classroom, Engelhardt and Schraffenberger encourage creative writing instructors to have their students write ecological vignettes, describe local spaces, research the ecological origin stories of their subjects, and discuss “what it means if an otherwise ‘successful’ piece of writing blindly perpetuates a conventional model of the nonhuman natural world as mechanistic, atomistic, or merely utilitarian” rather than “somehow acknowledge or contend with our inevitable interconnectedness” (286). In other words, the principles of ecology become a part of the class just as much as craft and technique.

Engelhardt and Schraffenberger's work is groundbreaking, and it does an excellent job of opening up the ways that creative writing pedagogy might engage the social and environmental issues of our time. Indeed, their discussion has become even more prescient today, as the current administration denies climate change, threatens funding for the Environmental Protection Agency, and devalues scientific literacy. However, although "Ecological Creative Writing" effectively places ecology, environmentalism, and creative writing in dialogue, and although it achieves a great deal in breadth, the essay can, at times, come off as politically focused—a common critique of ecocomposition. When Engelhardt and Schraffenberger argue that "the only ethical pedagogical choice is to teach creative writing, in whole or in part, with an emphasis on our ecological interconnectedness and interdependence" (287), they call on creative writing instructors to take on ecological and environmental politics with which those instructors may be unfamiliar and to prioritize environmentalism over the many other critical theories the field is currently being pressed to integrate, from feminism to critical race theory. Based on a professor's individual identity and politics, as well as the political environment of the school, this call to action may prove difficult—and ultimately unsuccessful—even if an ecological creative writing acknowledges the ways that, as Schraffenberger goes on to argue in "Our Discipline: An Ecological Creative Writing Manifesto," "social oppression and injustice spring from the same well as environmental oppression and injustice" (5). In other words, by trying to do for creative writing pedagogy what ecocomposition attempted to do for composition, Engelhardt and Schraffenberger have set themselves up for the same array of critiques: the over-politicization of the classroom (Sumner) and the conception of a pedagogy that becomes less about student work and more about the creation of a new generation of environmental activists (Moe). A more nuanced approach to an ecological creative writing, as a result, would benefit from fully engaging place-based composition, a discipline that bears some similarities to ecocomposition but has proven more readily adoptable, in part because it has long explored the difficulties and complexities of getting students to care about environment and "place" in a culture that demands global, transferable skills.

PLACE-BASED PEDAGOGY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Place-based composition, like ecocomposition, emerged primarily in response to environmental concerns. However, unlike ecocomposition, which was initially closely linked with ecocriticism and whose ideological goal could be described as "to save the earth," place-based composition's goal is to save communities—and by doing so, advocate a society more predisposed to caring about its environment(s). In this, place-based composition grows out of "place-based education." Coined in 1997 by environmental educator Paul Theobald, "place-based education" saw globalization as a threat to the local places in which individuals learned and wrote. Early place-based educators argued that the educational system, in response to globalization, had begun to emphasize state and national

standards to a degree that overshadowed local knowledge and threatened local cultures. This inability to care about their localities, place-based advocates such as David Orr continue to argue, is what has led to environmental degradation:

We should worry a good bit less about whether our progeny will be able to compete as a 'world-class workforce' and a great deal more about whether they will know how to live sustainably on the earth. [...] The world does not need more rootless symbolic analysts. It needs instead hundreds of thousands of young people equipped with the vision, moral stamina, and intellectual depth necessary to rebuild neighborhoods, towns, and communities around the planet. (148; 164)

In response, place-based education strives to reintegrate the local community with the educational system and the classroom. As David Sobel explains in his seminal *Place-Based Education*, proponents believe that hands-on, place-specific learning experience "increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens"—processes that will ultimately lead to "community vitality and environmental quality" (7). Although place-based education was initially associated with primary and secondary science education, it didn't take long for compositionists and language arts instructors to also integrate its goals and motives into their pedagogies.

Robert Brooke is among the most prominent place-based compositionists, and his work for the Nebraska Writing Project and the Rural Institute has done much to establish place-based composition as a noteworthy and respectable field. By forwarding place-based composition on a national level, Brooke has helped the movement receive recognition not just in rural areas, but urban as well. As Brooke argues in *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*:

Learning and writing and citizenship are richer when they are tied to and flow from local culture. Local communities, regions, and histories are the places where we shape our individual lives, and their economic and political and aesthetic issues are every bit as complex as the same issues on national and international scale. Save for the few of us who become senators and CEOs and *National Geographic* reporters, it is at the local level where we are most able to act, and at the local level where we are most able to affect and improve community. If education in general, and writing education in particular, is to become more relevant, to become a real force for improving the societies in which we live, then it must become more closely linked to the local, to the spheres of action and influence which most of us experience. (Brooke 4-5)

This sense of local communities as a rich site for inquiry—one that can help prepare students to be better citizens—is a prominent thread across the place-based pedagogies that have emerged in writing classrooms. Indeed, the sense that students can use their local experiences to practice the kind of writing they will do in the future is largely what has helped place-based composition spread out of rural secondary and postsecondary classrooms and into universities across the United States.

Today, place-based assignments can include profiles of community members, portraits of locations, as well as problem-solution essays based on local issues.

One of the most promising benefits of this kind of place-based pedagogy is, as compositionists have begun to recognize, the ways integrating academic study with local environments can help demystify the university and facilitate a greater sense of agency—goals that most composition programs share, whether or not they are environmentally focused. In fact, facilitating student ownership has become a key goal for place-based educators, many of which recognize the “de-placing” nature of the educational system. Eric Ball and Alicia Lai, in “Place-Based Pedagogy for the Arts and Humanities,” argue that the educational system privileges a (trans)national agenda that ignores and does actual harm to local areas. It encourages displacement, thus weakening local communities from which students come and in which instructors teach. In order to offset this bias, Ball and Lai encourage educators to become more “accountable” to the local communities in which they teach—to “listen to and empower the locals” (282). Jonathan Mauk, in a similar manner, has argued that when academic life divides from student’s lives, students lose investment in their courses (202). Mauk advocates assignments that blur academic/nonacademic borders by asking students to write about their nonacademic lives, and also asking them to recognize the ways in which their non-academic associates are “resources” or “experts” in their own right. Thus, he works to validate student experience and integrate academic thinking with that experience.

Derek Owens offers a particularly useful and influential example of how to integrate place-based pedagogy into the classroom. Like Ball, Lai, and Mauk, Owens recognizes the absence of the local in academia: “The local places that students and staff and faculty go home to after leaving the university behind remain largely invisible, supposedly unrelated to the activity of the academy, despite mission statement rhetoric about serving community and helping students become responsible citizens” (70). In response, Owens has planned writing courses that center on where students live and work. His reasons for doing so summarize the goals of place-based pedagogy well:

I do this because students can speak with authority about how their neighborhoods make them feel, because students are genuinely interested in learning about each other’s communities (partly because it alleviates some of the anonymity college students typically feel, especially at a predominantly commuter campus like mine), and because an awareness of sustainability cannot exist without developing an awareness of the conditions and limitations of one’s immediate environment. (36-37)

In order to help facilitate such an awareness beyond his classroom, Owens even provides a detailed syllabus in his monograph *Composition and Sustainability*. With multiple assignment sequences and options for oral history and service learning projects, Owens’ syllabus offers a vivid account of how sustainability and community can be integrated in a writing-centered composition course, and I’ve used many of his ideas when creating a place-based composition course that I have successfully, and with much enjoyment, taught for a number of years now, in Nebraska, upstate New York, and Arkansas.

APPLYING PLACE-BASED PEDAGOGY TO CREATIVE WRITING STUDIES

Despite place-based pedagogy’s productive application to composition, however, fully integrating place-based pedagogy into the creative writing classroom reveals a number of deep-seated disciplinary challenges. On a basic level, the connection should be obvious. We often teach students in intro-level classes—and even later—to “write what they know.” We want them, whether in creative nonfiction, poetry, or fiction, to use their own experiences and perceptions to craft their narratives and art. We strive to teach them to be careful observers of the world, and often these observations begin at the local level: their hometowns, their campuses, their dorms or houses or bedrooms. We ask poetry students to write about the seasons and about weather. In the creative writing classroom, we sometimes write outside, and we discuss how to create vivid settings. Most textbooks, in fact, have at least a chapter entirely devoted to “setting,” and as Engelhardt and Schraffenberger acknowledge in “Ecological Creative Writing,” it seems an easy jump to also discuss the ways that the social and cultural features of a certain setting, along with its environmental features, affect, and are affected by, the characters. In many ways, these activities and questions, which ask students to place their narrators/characters in a setting, are no different than some of the place-based assignments I teach in my composition courses when I ask students to consider how their homeplace has (or hasn’t) shaped their identity, when I ask them to write a profile of someone familiar with the same place, when I bring in writing about issues their regions are facing, or when I assign a research-driven essay about a topic grounded in their hometowns and states.

Nonetheless, there remains a large disconnect between students’ local environments and creative writing as a discipline, especially, it seems, when we begin to talk about publishing and when we consider the quality of the literature we use as models for our students to produce. In the workshop setting, I, like most of my colleagues, discuss a student’s work, what it accomplishes, what themes it explores, and how it utilizes craft to develop those themes. My students and I find ways that the piece could be stronger—that the piece could be more effective. And here, I know I draw on larger expectations for “quality literary writing,” expectations that are well-founded and useful, especially on the level of craft. Yes, students should avoid abstractions. Yes, their main characters should have complex personalities. Yes, a plot requires some sort of conflict and change. Yes, a personal essay needs to reach beyond the narrator’s individual experience into some larger insight. Yes, the dialogue needs to mimic human patterns of speech. Nearly all creative writing instructors would agree that these are crucial and worthy points of discussion in the creative writing classroom.

And yet, we as a discipline also can’t ignore that there are larger, underlying assumptions behind the particular traits we choose to focus on as indicators of “strong writing,” and that the value we place on those traits, and how they manifest themselves, is very much linked to assumptions about society, class, politics, race, gender, sexuality, and—part of it all—place. Where are students from? Who are they writing to?

Who is their audience? Who is the “best” audience? Should they strive, as ambitious writers, for a larger, “wider” audience? Or can a creative writing class benefit from workshoping a poem or story the student writer intends to share with only a few local readers?

Perhaps even more telling: when I discuss publishing with my intermediate and advanced students, I often talk in terms of tiers. There are different tiers of journals, I say, and you will want to be aware of this when sending out work. The lower tier, comprised of undergraduate literary journals and smaller regional journals, is easiest to get into. The middle tier is a little more competitive. And the highest tier—*The New Yorker*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Poetry*, etc.—is going to be very difficult to break into. I tell them this as a way to encourage realistic expectations. I’d hate to see them, emerging writers, only submit to the most competitive journals and become quickly discouraged. I also tell them this because it reflects the way I was taught to approach publication. As an undergraduate, I was told to focus on the lower tier and start with my campus’s in-house literary journal. Once I became a graduate student, I was encouraged to become more ambitious: to submit to the most prestigious journals and then, once I received rejections, work my way down.

I tell them this because, in many ways, it remains engrained in the field. Almost any how-to guide to submitting to literary journals, whether published in *Poets & Writers*, *The Writers Chronicle*, or one of the many writing blogs in production, uses the word “tiers.” So does the university system. My university’s guidelines for tenure place a clear value distinction between publications in national and international journals versus publications in regional journals. The same goes for conference presentations. Tenure guidelines privilege international and national conferences over regional or local conferences. Furthermore, in discussions of book publication, I continually hear comments like the one the editor at Bread Loaf made last summer. We should strive for the Big Five, New York-based publishers first. Then prominent independents. Then university presses. Then the smaller presses. In other words: the broader the audience, the higher the quality and the prestige. Thus, to be considered successful literary writers, I and my students—especially my graduate students—should aim for *Glimmer Train* and *Poetry*. Not *Arkansas Life* or the local newspapers. Though these publications have merit, they don’t “count” as much toward the discipline’s evaluation of our creative production.

To be clear: place-based writing, of course, often appears in *The New Yorker*, *The Georgia Review*, *Glimmer Train*, and *Poetry*. The reputations of these journals do not mean that they exchange the fascinating intricacies of human-environment relations for displaced, ungrounded philosophizing on global, cosmopolitan lifestyles. Or that these journals are not concerned about environmental issues. Or that these journals work to harm local, undervalued regions. Some excellent, influential work on place and environment has been published in *The New Yorker* and *The Georgia Review*. As an editor for , an online literary journal that focuses on place and environment yet has a staff spread across the country and endeavors to reach a wide, international audience, I am well-aware of the benefits of and need for global conversations, for audiences that span bioregions and boundaries, for a nationwide and global literary community.

Indeed, the tension between local and global perspectives has long been a part of place-based and ecocritical dialogue. In her book *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*, the prominent ecocritic Ursula Heise critiques the “insistence on individuals’ and communities’ need to reconnect to local places” and argues that by “denying that a global perspective might yield useful insights and solutions,” environmentalists disconnect themselves from the political and economic realities of their time (38-39). Instead, Heise the emergence of new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place” (9): “If a knowledge of one’s local place has value because it is a gateway to understanding global connectedness at various levels, then nonlocal types of knowledge and concern that also facilitate such an understanding should be similarly valuable” (56). Heise’s critique of an overreliance on place-based thinking and place-based environmentalism has helped place-based pedagogy broaden its discussion and see the local/global tension as more than just a binary—as evidenced by Gregory Garrard’s essay “Problems and Prospects in Ecocritical Pedagogy,” which calls for a more nuanced exploration of the field’s commitment to what he calls “lococentrism.”

Amidst such dialogue, creative writing studies should be wary of impulsively appropriating a place-based devotion to the local. Place-based pedagogy, in a simplistic form, is not going to solve today’s complex, global environmental issues, nor will place-based pedagogy, on its own, serve those undergraduate and graduate creative writing students who truly do strive for national and international success. But teaching undergraduate and MFA students how to recognize and effectively participate in local literary communities, while simultaneously teaching them how to succeed professionally at national levels, can only better serve the many and diverse needs of the students that make up any creative writing classroom. In other words, the need for global conversations about environment and writing—or the curating of writers with national ambitions—does not negate the need for local communities and local literary conversations as well.

My question, then, is what does it mean for creative writing studies when place-based compositionist Robert Brooke says that, it is at the local level, that most undergraduate students have the most agency as writers—it is at the local level where our undergraduate students are most likely to stay involved as literary citizens—and yet, we, in the creative writing classroom, often continue to overlook and perhaps even undervalue local sites of creative writing and local venues for publication? What messages are we giving our students—many of whom will likely not attend MFA programs, especially out of state? Or get published in national literary journals? Or—if they are already MFA students—publish a book by one of the Big Five publishers in New York?

Place-based composition, in many ways, emerged because educators recognized that the writing, the subject matter, and the writing lifestyles of students in undervalued regions were being overshadowed and often misaligned by a culture that placed a great deal of emphasis on global, transferable skills and standardized tests—skills and tests that, as we have learned, tend to cater to the urban and suburban privileged. I would argue that the same trend is occurring in the creative writing classroom. Many of our teaching tactics and assumptions, especially about the writing and publications we most esteem,

remain affected by this idea of the literary elite—a literary elite that, as the VIDA counts and exposés on diversity in publishing have revealed, is often white, male, and privileged. Female-identifying writers are continually underrepresented in today’s publications—in 2015, for instance, only 29% of the *Times Literary Supplement* focused on work by women writers (VIDA)—and 79% of the publishing industry’s employees are white (Deahl). Changing both of these statistics has proven challenging and generated significant discussion in the publishing industry, revealing multiple barriers caused by institutional sexism and racism. When the Big Five publishers hire most of their staff from Columbia or NYU, as the *Publishers Weekly* article “Why Publishing is So White” discusses, it is difficult to change the system and curate other voices. In terms of place, it is similarly difficult to curate other voices when the Big Five publishers and the majority of literary agents are based on the east coast. In fact, many university presses have begun building regional lists in large part because of the Big Five’s regional bias. Citing the way “commercial publishing has concentrated ever more densely in New York City,” Willis Regier of the University of Illinois Press has called university presses “the only remaining book publishers within a region and the sole venues available for authors who write on regional topics” (Bartlett 6). Nonetheless, the prestige of being published by a Big Five press as opposed to a smaller independent or university press continues to cloud literary publishing and creative writing as a whole. The result: though we ask students to “write what they know,” we do not always value what they know, and we do not always value the venues that would value what they know.

Our tendency to devalue, or at least overlook, local sites of creative writing and non-academic career paths can be seen in our struggle to substantiate the worth of our MFA programs. Though broad, multi-program studies about the successes of MFA students do not exist, it is no secret that only a small percentage of MFA students become what the industry considers “successful writers.” In “Degrees of Value: What Happens After the MFA Program,” Michael Bourne informally surveys his own MFA cohort from San Francisco State University, acknowledging that only one student had attained the kind of prestige they had all dreamed of: multiple book publications and a career purely built on writing. Though the rest very much still considered themselves writers, some were still trying to publish that first book, and many admitted that their writing, now, was on the sidelines rather than the central focus of their careers. In “Why Writers Love to Hate the M.F.A.,” published in *The New York Times*, Cecilia Capuzzi Simon makes a broader case for this same observation, describing the ways that the homogenizing effect of some workshop models, the intense competition for publication in journals, many of which struggle to attract readers, and the fact that an MFA will not often result in increased job earnings—or even lead to a job—have called the very merit and utility of the degree into question. Indeed, when it comes to careers, the most recent AWP Job Report highlights the unsustainability of the field, illustrating how academic jobs are decreasing while adjuncts are increasing. There are fewer job opportunities in academia than previous years; nonetheless, creative writing degree-granting programs continue to rise, both at the associates, bachelors, masters, and doctoral levels (Tucker).

In response to these trends, Michael Bourne argues that it’s time to stop seeing MFA programs as a service to emerging writers, but rather a subsidy system that supports the creative work of the writers who teach in those programs (“The Social Value,” 92). In other words, we already know that something is amiss at the graduate level; the system is not sustainable.

Of course, academic jobs and the publication of books are not the only reasons why one would promote the teaching of creative writing. Creative writing programs have long recognized that very few of their undergraduates will financially support themselves as literary writers, and that their programs’ worth lies not in the creation of future poets and novelists, but in the nurturing of graduates who love words, have a facility with language, are equipped to take criticism and revise their writing, and will find satisfaction working in the numerous other occupations available to them: editing, publishing, technical writing, web content development, social media and book publicity, and teaching. Many undergraduate programs also recognize the importance of curating literary citizens—a reading public who will support reading and readership on both local and global levels. Nonetheless, the focus of most creative writing classrooms remains the same: study writers, learn from their work, write one’s own drafts, share those drafts, workshop in small groups or as a class, and discuss sending that work out. Thus, we continue to support a system that spurs national competition for publication at the exact same time that the publishing industry is being pressured to focus primarily on books that will sell to large audiences. “There’s too much noise; we need to publish less,” the editor at the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers’ Conference said, and on the national level, he very well may be right. This vision of ourselves as cogs in a consumerist-capitalist publishing industry is enough to make me return to that library classroom in Vermont, remember the eager eyes of my peers, and feel a great deal of despair. If we continue to see national/international publication as the hallmark of success in creative writing—if that is what the discipline as a whole values—it is impossible not to deem the industry as cutthroat and elitist, and any program’s mission to promote literary citizenship as misleading and insincere. However, this, I would argue, is exactly where place-based creative writing has the most to offer, and where creative writing studies, as a result, has the opportunity to shift our understanding of the discipline in a healthier direction.

That said, countering these narratives and developing an approach to creative writing that recognizes and values the local is not easy—even for me, someone who otherwise embraces place-based pedagogy. I currently teach at the University of Central Arkansas, an institution that in many ways offers the ideal setting for a place-based creative writing. The University of Central Arkansas draws heavily from the surrounding region. Eight-five percent of its students are from Arkansas, and most intend to stay in Arkansas following their graduation. Cultivating a creative environment that openly values local and regional communities would serve the student population well, and I made that my goal when I first accepted the job. Nonetheless, my attempts that first year of enacting such a pedagogy revealed many of my own biases, oversights, and misconceptions about the role of “place” in creative writing. Although I purposefully diversified my reading assignments to include a variety of races and genders and to even include writers who have lived in Arkansas, I failed to assign an essay that

was actually set in Arkansas. The reason: I couldn't find one in the anthologies I most often used. In addition, though each year my department runs "Arkatexts," a week-long celebration of Arkansas writers, I was dismayed to discover that many of our most recent guest readers had, admittedly, moved to Arkansas from other states to teach at the local colleges and neither wrote about place nor considered themselves Arkansans. Similarly, though I worked hard to establish connections with literary editors in the state, and to invite those editors into my classes as guest speakers, I could not name all of the literary journals housed in Arkansas—a fact that put me at a disadvantage when recommending publication venues to my students. In my courses' workshops, when we discussed the intended or ideal audiences of my students' pieces, I continued to catch myself describing audience in terms of race, gender, sexuality, philosophy, political stance, and aesthetic expectations rather than geography or bioregion. And perhaps most telling: although my goal as a creative writing instructor was to help my students be stronger literary writers, when I envisioned literary writing, I envisioned the placeless world of *Submittable* and "universal themes." I envisioned the academic, migratory, literary world I grew into as a professional—not the local libraries and coffee shops my students grew up visiting, nor the local libraries and coffee shops some of my students frequented after graduating with a bachelor's degree. In other words, I had not actually prioritized "place" in my teaching.

Today, I am working to change that. I have made a very conscious effort to diversify my reading lists not only in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality, but also place and publication venue. In my advanced courses, I assign at least one book by an Arkansas writer—or one book where Arkansas's cultural and environmental issues are heavily featured—and I assign books published by national presses as well as books published by independent and university presses. In my intermediate courses, I teach at least a few shorter pieces from Arkansas journals, and we discuss how different publication venues serve different audiences and readers. When I require my students to attend at least two literary events a semester, I emphasize the variety of events that can fulfill this requirement: the nationally recognized writer the department has brought in, the open mic organized by the campus's undergraduate literary journal, or the book launch organized by a local independent press. These initiatives take effort on my part. Because I am still relatively new to Arkansas, I do not know the literary landscape as well as I should. In addition, I must check my own biases when I discuss publishing and professional goals. I must make sure to applaud the student who obtains an internship at the local advertising agency just as much as the student who is accepted into a nationally recognized MFA program. But I am confident in the worth of this work. By paying more attention to my students and the literary and physical landscapes that surround them, by thinking more about the literary experiences they have access to in their lives, by better merging those opportunities—here in Arkansas—with what I can teach them of the national publishing landscape, I am better serving my own students as well as the discipline as a whole—I am better enacting my belief that the stories of their communities, influenced by the environmental and cultural needs of their regions, have merit in our literate society and are worth cultivating.

My efforts are not perfect—nor are they complete—but they are important steps toward the development of a place-based creative writing pedagogy.

As creative writing studies grows as a discipline, then, I'd like to see us continue to challenge the assumption that the nationally recognized, published, and prize-winning literature represents an ideal for which our students should all strive. I'd like to see us take what we can from place-based composition and use it to think about how to best support our undergraduate and graduate students, how to best serve and support literary communities—whether they are on the university, local, state, or national level—and how to honestly, truly, value each of those communities and sub-communities for the important, affirming, necessary work that they do, both in promoting a reading public and engaging and manifesting intertwined cultural, societal, and environmental issues.

I'd like us to recognize that *The New Yorker* and *Arkansas Life* are different kinds of publications, but that one isn't better than the other. That each is respected. I'd like to see us assign place-conscious writing, including regional writing written for local audiences, and discuss this writing in the classroom with just as much professional respect as we would discuss the latest Pulitzer-prize winning book. I would like to see us place national writing organizations and regional writing organizations on an equal playing field, free of elitism, and recognize that creating and nurturing a culture where a student might be encouraged to read at an open mic night, or, in the decades that follow their graduation, participate in a writing group at a local church, is just as necessary and nurturing to creative writing studies as a culture where a student is encouraged to attend an MFA program and publish a book. A sustainable literary culture, a richer literary culture, would gain much from such a place-based creative writing pedagogy. And maybe by better valuing local literary cultures, and local sites of creative thought, and the kind of writing that stems from and speaks to those communities, we, as a discipline, can also contribute to the ongoing project of making this world, these communities, and this planet, more livable and more adaptable, more capable of adjusting to—and sustaining us through—the kinds of environmental and societal changes that the future will bring.

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