Exploring Creative Writing

Exploring Creative Writing:

Voices from the Great Writing International Creative Writing Conference

Edited by

Graeme Harper

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8983-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8983-4

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INTRODUCTION

GATHERING IN THE KITCHEN

GRAEME HARPER

The Introduction to that laudably passionate but conservatively titled tome *Editing Techniques and Editorial Practices* (1967), by Albert V. Saltman outlines a situation Saltman refers to as "concurrence", in which writers are brought together around a topic and during the process of writing discover that they agree on many of the key points raised by other writers contributing to the work (though this had been unknown to them prior to writing). This "concurrence", as Saltman refers to it, at first strikes each contributor as alarming, each believing their ideas to be entirely unique and each desiring to draw attention to the newness and distinctiveness of their findings. As one or other of the writers ponders this further – perhaps, Saltman says "while fishing for an eel on the nearby mill stream" (33) or "while stroking a languid house cat" (34) – they form the albeit tentative conclusion that there might be advantages in the concurrence and, suspecting that the weight of belief and argument brought about by the similarity of understanding adds up to what might be considered a movement or a confluence of knowledge, they come around to the notion of progress and it is at that point, Saltman argues, the editor needs to step forth and, as he puts it, "jovially welcome them all into the kitchen." (76).

Saltman's other major works, *Weather and its Foundation* (1975), twice cited in *Nature's Science* as "a fascinating exploration", and *The Unlikely Brontosaurus* (1981), which many regard as a compelling but somewhat unsettling memoir of life with preternaturally heavy teeth, suggests a curious and eclectic mind, from which the idea and ideal of inviting unknown and disparate souls into his home might certainly have emerged. What is often missed, however, is that for much of his Introduction Saltman clearly avoids the second and equally significant definition of "concurrence", the definition that can be summarized as: "a number of things happening at the same time". He does this in fact -- not once referring directly or indirectly to the notion of "a number of things

happening at the same time" -- until over three-quarters of the Introduction are complete. At that point, as if finally the banks of his definitional levy have grown too weak to hold back the torrent of full disclosure, he declares:

> Writers! There are so many writers! Writers writing simultaneously as well as sequentially, so that at any one time in our world, our glorious wordy wonderful world that is, there are a thousand, a thousand-thousand, a hundred thousand-thousand or more writing acts occurring at the very same time. Each unknown to the other, each independent and unattached, each writer at work, each and all unaware of the other's activities. Behold a situation in which words quite literally are filling the air all around us and no one, no critical insight or apparatus anywhere, anytime, for any reason, has come to report how this came about, or why it is occurring in our lifetime. (276)

Something of an outburst. Saltman loses momentum immediately after this, exhausted by the personal outpouring perhaps, and ends his Introduction with a strange note on the difficulties of efficient grocery shopping when forced to live alone.

It is not uncommon for a book's editor to fear that his or her Introduction might produce only a semblance of an exploration of the work at hand, a poor grounding in the contributions that follow. By "grounding" I refer to the anchoring of that which grows in an edited book, though not to tip here toward the overly figurative. Simply, a book's Introduction needs to provide the substance, the "soil", if you can bear the metaphoric tip, in which those chapters following it grow, flourish, bloom.

I seem to be taking on something of Dr. Saltman's gushing. Apologies! Suffice it, a positioning, a situating, something that provides substance beneath the mere surface of a description of what follows in the book. A grounding, that is -- much as we find accomplished by Richard Felder in his Introduction to *Fifty Miles North of Brunei, Twenty Miles East of New Guinea* (1981), an enterprising travel narrative.

Felder was the first Westerner to row to every small island in the beautiful Mergui Archipelago - quite a feat, given that there are well over 800 of them. He later became something of a celebrity on the speaker circuit, at veterans' clubs, adventurers' gatherings, cruisers' parties, mayoral inaugurations, faculty mixers and the like. His Introduction is a skilled gathering of the masses, the inclusive presentation of an entire collection of individual Mergui islanders, each with a voice of their own, each equally recognized, whether he points to the ragged peaks of the island of Minnequo or laments the coldness of the black waters around the island of Werii. Each presents a different language, some almost certainly

dialects of others, though the choice of words suggests a singularity that is rarely seen in mainland countries – the Conouui's referring to the warmth of their island as "patatata", while the Minnequoans speak of "rononeo" and the Tantruins refer to this feeling as "lolo".

Fifty Miles North of Brunei, Twenty Miles East of New Guinea is quite the explorer's delight, and Felder's Introduction is a study in economy and comprehensiveness that stands as an exemplar for us all. Of course, the cartographically equipped will almost immediately question the meaning of his title, given that geographically it refers to an impossibility. Simply, there is nowhere, no place at all, that is both fifty miles north of Brunei and twenty miles east of New Guinea. Not only is there no geographic entity that can exist at both of these locations, if you were to travel to the individual points, fifty miles north of Brunei and then twenty miles east of New Guinea, you would find that there is nothing at either of those individual sites either. Fifty miles north of Brunei places you in such dense jungle that it appears day has become night, and the threat of never finding your way out is considerable. Twenty miles east of New Guinea is in deep open ocean and though logic would suggest that on a clear day you would still see the New Guinean shore in this case a consistent thick sea mist clouds all.

Felder, questioned about the meaning of his title, was evasive, suggesting that "the meaning is what you make of it", and on other occasions simply that "it means nothing". If when he died, at the age of 61, of what is generally regarded as a combination of alcoholism and exhaustion he did have any greater explanation he took that explanation to his grave. But his Introduction continues to stand today as a wonder, each voice, each individual island, each archipelagian representative as brightly lit and visible as can be, while he rows on to greet the next, and the next, and the next, intrepid perhaps but never more than the avid seafarer, the quiet explorer, the constantly enthusiastic learner.

Ettie Amirmoez suggests in a somewhat similar vein that "you have to like people to write a decent Introduction." (vii). By this she means you have to be "more listener than the speaker at the party". (viii) In the Introduction to her popular collective study of modern Britain, *Our New Land* (2013), later made into the web series, *Whatever, Awkward Tradesmen*, her thirteen contributors depict a nation of the indigenous and the migrated, an amalgam of present liveliness and future possibilities where "real history lives on in its productiveness not in its detachment from so many lived experiences." (89). Amirmoez suggests that possible British future will involve "the final sunsetting of the vestments of ancient privilege in favor of the warm sunrise of a new national egalitarianism."

(213). A sentiment that might gain general support from the young British urban historians in Nathan Broadbent's recently edited *Exhibition Road: from Prince Consort Road to Museum Lane* (2015), if not that each in one way or another suggests that privilege exists not in persons but in the structures in which they must operate. Broadbent's is a close study of the post-war period in London's South Kensington, based on a 2014 national conference held nearby. "The stone of these streets", writes Clare Chesterton of Maudrune College, "encapsulates not the work of the artisans who chiseled and raised the stones but the complacency of the establishment. Nothing moves fast here, the roadways cluster together in protective alliance, the pavements, but for those of the meandering, hung-jawed tourist flow, are strangely empty. Cars pull up, their drivers wait as their passengers alight and, warm in their coats and hats, nevertheless swiftly enter one terrace or another. Here is confidence. Here is proprietorship. Here is power. Though one might look on with distaste as public schoolboys jostle for the front seat in their mother's Range Rover, or wonder which advertising firm the unshaven young men in the Cucinelli sneakers drinking silky flat whites outside Pierre's own, or ponder how few people actually both work and live here, most who work locally boarding the tube home in the early evening for the long rattling haul to somewhere cheaper, you cannot help but admire the audacious clarity of this place, the sheer resoluteness of it, museum butted against the offices of an ancient professional society, foreign embassy actually sitting in sight of a bona fide palace, the bronze nymphs in the wildlife garden, Royal Albert Hall." (57)

It is not uncommon around this part of London, historically explored by Broadbent's contributors, for collections of conference papers to form up and at some time later be published, with the presence here of the great many departments of Imperial College, the nearby Royal Geographical Society, the Royal College of Art, not so far away the Institute of Global Health Innovation, and thereabouts the Royal Institute of Navigation, where no doubt Richard Felder spent some time, poring over archipelagian maps most likely, looking for an island he'd missed along the way, or planning his next speech, to the folksy folks of the Folkestone Adult Learners Centre or to the ever curious members of the Cambridge Scramblers Club. Here collections form in the midst of avid presentation and lively discussion and emerge into the world following invitations and acceptances, drafts and redrafts, with titles as distinctive as their focuses and their covers sometimes bearing more than a little evidence of their contributor's preoccupations.

I'm reminded of the 2014 collection *Phenotypic and Molecular Non-*

oxidative Antimicrobial Fish Gut Inflammation from Dogs whose cover features both a line drawn fish and a well sketched dog, with an erudite Introduction by Sir Morton Stallworth, immediate past President of the European Society of Anthropomorphic Microbiology. "Fear neither the fish nor the dog", he begins valiantly, "should you wish not to fear yourself."

I speculate on what Sir Morton might mean while offering further the edited conference collection *English Musical Instruments: 1066-1666*, which is as melodically introduced as its title suggests. Heather Constable, directing the 2009 conference of the very same name, sings brightly:

> We gathered so wonderfully together I cannot begin to tell you of the joy it was to spend time with such eminent scholars and congenial friends. The week was over far too soon, but the new discoveries will live on. I for one had no idea the gemshorn had made its way to Great Britain quite as early as 1508, believing for some time that its earliest appearance was in the blighted spring of 1511. I was thrilled to learn of this earlier arrival, and subsequently to learn too from Herr Gerthold that it was played in courts and fairs in the year following as far north as Durham and as far west as Whittle-le-Woods. My thoughts on the sacbut were likewise changed, possibly forever, and especially the alto in F, not least by the recital by Marie Confortola, including her delightful rendition of *La Gelosia*, which I have to say is the best I have heard. (3)

These are just a very few examples of gatherings encountered, discoveries announced, ideas explored, debates initiated, investigations considered, new friendships made or established friendships renewed, and all this resulting, subsequently, in articles published in conference collections: *Comparative Studies in Irrationality: Questions with No Answers* (Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Irrationality, 1999); *Convertology: the Inaugural Holomedia Digital Futures Conference (2001); Z Pinch, Inverse Pinch, Zeta Pinch: the Symposium for Advanced Cosmic Physics* (2006); *Entropy, Condensates and Suctions* (2010); *New Readings in Dialogic Divinity* (2011). Each introduced by the editor in a manner benefiting the discipline, the contributors' approaches and topics, and the distinctiveness of the singular conference event.

There will be nothing like that here! Here, now, I simply invite you to read on. Enter the kitchen. With thanks to Mr Saltman's lyricism! Enter! Come in! The reader belongs in here too. Come into the kitchen. Stand firm here on the earth floor. Smell the soil! Smell the aromas! Taste the tastes! Come in. . . . The contributors and contributions for *Exploring Creative Writing: Voices from the Great Writing International Creative*

Writing Conference were chosen simply as examples of those heard at the Great Writing International Creative Writing Conference at Imperial College, London, over the past few years. There were many others. But these examples give something of the flavor of the explorations undertaken. There are many things happening at once here. With some thoughts, some ideas, some purported discoveries, you might concur. With some you might not. That's at least one keen purpose of an exploration.

The Great Writing International Creative Writing Conference happens each year. In 2017 the conference will celebrate its 20th year.

References

1. I would record here
2. The bibliographic
3. Details of the books mentioned,
4. Above,
5. Those laudable edited collections.
6. Point the reader directly
7. Toward their location,
8. In relation to borrowing or purchase.
9. Except to do so
10. Would falsify the academic record.
11. After all,
12. None of them actually
13. Exist.

CHAPTER ONE

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF CREATIVE WRITING

EMILIA KARJULA

Abstract

In this chapter I look at how ethnography as a research method can be applied to creative writing and its research. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork I am conducting with a group of writers for my doctoral research, which investigates creative writing as a form of ritual and play. According to anthropologist Victor Turner (1992), both ritual and play are connected to the subjunctive mood of culture, that is the what-if, as-if level of reality, where fixed meanings are in flux. This approach underlies my entire chapter: I look for possibilities rather than certainties. First I introduce the group I study and give a brief overview of ethnography and the concept of the subjunctive mood. I then look at how the subjunctive mood emerges in the writing group and how the space they gather in can be thought of as an active participant. Here I employ Graeme Harper´s (2013) concept of the creative writing habitat and Jane Bennett´s (2010) thoughts on the agency of objects. In the final section of the chapter I shift my focus from observing the group to the practise of creative writing inspired by ethnography, turning to James Clifford´s (1981) concept of ethnographic surrealism, and consequently turning it on its head. I conclude with a writing exercise and some final remarks.

Keywords: ethnography, fieldwork, research methods, subjunctivity, surrealism, writing groups

Introducing the Group

> "We might think of the ordinary state of perception as a building that is our home for most of our waking hours. It surrounds us, protects us, but also confines us. The solid building does not even have any windows, so that

> the illusion arises that there is nothing beyond its walls. That is not the case, however. We regularly escape when we dream, to what we might think of as another building next door, which is equally ours. It contains a number of separate rooms, of which that of our dreams is only one." (Goodman 1988, 31.)

Comparing consciousness to a building may not be a new idea, but I have always found it´s spatiality quite attractive. It seems to make room for countless alternative ways of inhabiting the world. Perhaps one of these "separate rooms" of the mind could be where we go when we write?

In the case of my doctoral research, the physical aspect of this "separate room" would be a studio space with black walls, a white screen and little else. It is a space where creative writers gather once a month, to write, to talk, and to engage in activities that at first glance may seem to have little to do with writing. For now, the space has been set up for a writing session with objects. In the middle of the room stands a table covered with various things: a ram´s horn, a sheet of fabric, a rose-patterned tin box, an apple. The writers begin adding things of their own: sunglasses, a key ring adorned with a dinosaur made of plastic. They work slowly, adding, moving and removing objects in silence, building up an installation of seemingly random things. And then they begin to write.

Now and again someone walks back to the installation and makes a change. The fabric is rolled into a nest, the apple put inside it, the box opened and its contents emptied: many-coloured shells are spread all over the place, then made into a path. The writers have been instructed to allow every shift in the installation to influence their text in whatever way they like. They keep writing and moving the objects about until the fabric is covering the entire installation, which is interpreted as a signal to end the session.

The studio has become what Graeme Harper (2013) has called a creative writing habitat. This particular habitat is, for lack of a better word, a strange one. It is home to writerly rituals, fleeting moments of seeming telepathy, a lot of laughter, and an ethnographer, participating and observing. The habitat is not just a space where writing happens; it also participates in the writing. In it, an apple is not just an apple; it can be a main character of a story or the main course of a ritual meal.

The description above relates to the group I work with. I assembled the group for the purposes of my research project. Thus the conceptual framework has not arisen from our collective work, but rather from the combination of my scholarly background and individual writing practices: my research attempts to draw out the subjunctive mood for closer examination (cf. Turner 1979). However, the form our meetings take is

always dictated by how the participants choose to respond to my suggestions.

The group members have all participated in different creative writing classes and groups, either at the university or at other institutions. Some aim for publication, some do not, and some have already published. Participants´ age varies from around 20 to 60. Women are a majority. Our meetings echo the ritual pattern of separation, liminality and incorporation suggested by classical ritual theory (van Gennep [1909] 1960), or the performance-oriented structure of warm-up, workshop and cooling down proposed by performance theorist Richard Schechner (1987). We begin with doing something that takes us out of the business as usual-mode of life and roots us into the writing moment at hand. The warm ups feature writing exercises often applied from surrealist parlour games: experiments in automatic writing, chance-led wordplay, echopoems, aimless wandering – or building installations. We have also experimented with yoga, breathing and guided relaxation exercises, dance and movement. The purpose of these exercises is to function as opening rituals that assist the writers in stepping into a free-flowing, focused writing mood. This is followed by individual writing time.

The meetings conclude with a discussion during which we often read our work aloud. The texts we come up with are not the main concern, and we do not offer in-depth critical feedback: rather the spotlight is on the process and flow of the writing itself, what makes it work, how it works, and why, sometimes, it doesn´t work at all.

Ethnography, Creative Writing and the Subjunctive

The word ethnography refers to both the research method, consisting of participant observation, interviewing, taking field notes, and other forms of documentation, and the written outcome of the research. Both as a method and as a text, ethnography has gone through several crises. For example postmodern, postcolonial and feminist critiques have shaked and shaped the discipline (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Madison 2004; Visweswaran 1994). Experiments have been made and biases, at least to some extent, acknowledged.

Creative writing and ethnography have always been closely related, even if their relationship has not been acknowledged. Researchers like folklorist / author Zora Neale Hurston have utilized their fieldwork in their fiction. The postmodern turn of the 1980´s brought the questions of textual styles and strategies to the fore. Clifford Geertz (1988), for example, analysed the literary tactics of classic anthropologists. Studies in

autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis 2002) have shown how the researcher´s personal experiences, told in a literary style, can shed new light to wider social and cultural contexts. I believe it is safe to say that writing an ethnography is always telling a story, one that is meant to convince the reader that the author has really "been there", on the field, involved in the daily lives of the people studied, experiencing their realities first hand.

Given this importance of the researcher personal involvement, and her/his close proximity to the object of study, it is no wonder that artistic or practice-based research has also discovered ethnography (Haveri 2012). Another common interest is the search for alternative modes of representing research results. In the case of creative writing, the links between ethnography and artistic research are all the more fascinating. An ethnographer produces her field in and by writing. So are field notes creative writing? Can they be?

In the group, I combine two roles: that of the observer / researcher, and that of the participant, a creative writer among other creative writers. In my fieldwork method of participant observation, notes about what my informants are doing mix and mingle with the fictional texts I am writing with them. The ethnography I am doing thus seems to need a new vocabulary, one that is able to include the subjunctive, the playful, the *what-if*.

The subjunctive, according to anthropologist Victor Turner (1992), is the mood of human culture, which encompasses the special world of ritual, festival, play, imagination and myth. Its counterpart is the indicative, the everyday order of facts and linear history. To ensure safe passage between these worlds, rituals are required. They give form to the transition and guide the traveller back to the everyday.

Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2004), in her study of women´s writing groups, has addressed the subjunctive mood more directly form a writer´s point of view. She approaches it through the intrinsic openness of language and text. Writing in the subjunctive, the writer can tell her own story in a new way, reinterpret her experiences by experimenting with alternative structures, plots, and endings, and thus find or strengthen a new sense of self. What Turner´s and Luce-Kapler´s views have in common is the condition of shared consent: in order to be a part of a subjunctive mood or moment we need to accept that we are playing by different rules, and give ourselves leave to write or act differently.

In the group, our opening rituals mark the boundary between the ordinary reality and the special reality of creative work. The presence of various, often symbolic, objects and other ways to arrange or inhabit the

space supports the transition. I will now turn to some of the ways the subjunctive turns up in our meetings (see also Karjula 2015).

Transmission of Strangeness

The "field" of ethnography can be seen as a written construct as well as a physical place (Fingerroos 2003). In my research, constructing the field is a series of very concrete acts committed in writing as well as building and decorating the physical sets for writing: moving tables, gathering objects.

Harper (2013, 56) describes the creative writing habitat as the place where the writer is "most likely to be found". Habitats are made, created in and by acts of habitation that transform the space specifically suited for writing. The relationship between the writer and the space is reciprocal; both affect and influence each other. (Harper 2013.) I want to pay attention here to the subtle ways this relationship unfolds, how writers, texts and elements of the space come together in our group meetings.

As mentioned before, the space where our group usually meets is somewhat bleak, not necessarily the kind of room all the writers would individually choose to work in. However, it becomes a creative writing habitat by our collaborative acts; our rituals and scenarios, our writings and discussions. When we are writing together, gathered in a semicircle, concentrating on our own work, something seems to ripple through the group. The atmosphere changes, becomes more intense, as if something was charging itself up. This has often taken the form of an experience of transmission without words. We frequently seem to read each other´s minds during the writing, write about similar subjects, or seamlessly continue each other´s drawings in an exquisite corpse. Subjects, themes, details ripple through. That people writing in the same space end up producing similar texts is no surprise. What is interesting is how we talk about the experience; freely using terms like telepathy in a tone that can be both playful and serious at the same time (cf. Hänninen 2009).

One of the writers, Katja, has described it like this: "Does something kind of attract those repeated themes to come out, there is something to it, how they just pop up… is it because we are in the same state/space, that something kind of condenses."[1] In Finnish, the same word, *tila*, is used for both to mental state and physical space, which highlights the involvement of space (cf. O´Grady 2012).

Interestingly, also physical proximity between writers can sometimes make it easier for a subject or theme to "leap" into another writer´s text. Again, a playful/serious tone was used: in our very first meeting, both Ulla and Johan, two writers not previously acquainted with each other, ended

up writing about death. In the final discussion they made the conclusion that the theme had "caught up with" Ulla, because she had been sitting next to Johan.

Transmission has been studied from very different viewpoints (e.g. Brennan 2014, Douglas [1966] 2003). The fixed boundaries of the human psyche have been questioned, among others, by so called anti-individualist theories of affect (see Koivunen 2009), suggesting a porous subjectivity with no fixed, identifiable core. Here it is also interesting to evoke political theorist Jane Bennett´s (2010) views on the agency or vitality of matter. For her posthumanist thought, the distinctions between human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic are not fixed and stable. Everything possesses *thing-power*; power to influence, to affect. As an example of this, Bennett (2010, 4–5) describes her encounter with a pile of debris on a summer morning. A glove, a mat of pollen, a dead rat, a bottle cap and a stick of wood gathered on a storm drain suddenly appeared particular, specific, then altered in her perception as "debris and thing". In a similar way, unexpected details may become meaningful in the writing process, if the writer is prepared or willing to perceive them.

Things – like the various little objects in the installation I described in the beginning of this chapter– can take on a form of agency and influence our texts and us even as we manipulate and influence them. Interpreted with Bennett, object-bodies, writer-bodies and text-bodies settle into a temporary assemblage, in which they affect each other, enhancing some connections and playing down others. Writing experiments with other objects have produced more examples of thing-power. For example, in an exercise featuring Tarot-cards, some writers felt uneasy because the cards seemed to "force" their story in a direction they would "never" ordinarily take. Objects have the power to challenge the writer into unexplored areas. The habitat becomes a subjunctive space in the acts – rituals, games, movements – that the writers commit there. In the subjunctive, relationships between space, objects, writers and texts are opened up, allowed to mix and merge. Texts are born from contacts between writers, space, and the objects involved.

What I find relevant about experiences of transmission is that they make it possible for writers to be very open in discussing their creative processes and texts. Rather than explaining the experiences away as intense group dynamics, I want to allow them to feel a little strange, as this seems to support the group. These experiences and interpretations have also changed the way the space feels like. Entering it now, I am struck by an atmosphere of anticipation. It may well be that simply stepping into the studio has become an opening ritual in itself, one that is directing the

writers to behave and write in a certain way. Of course, it is precisely here that the darker side comes in to view. Valorising strangeness could easily turn into a form of pressure, a negative suggestivity.

That is why I believe the element of playfulness is so crucial to what we do, even though play in itself is not without its risks (cf. O´Grady 2012, 90). However, it is this playfulness in mind that I now turn to surrealism and its unexpected connections to ethnography.

Surrealist´s Guide to Ethnography

In his article "On Ethnographic Surrealism", anthropologist James Clifford (1988) traces the common genesis of surrealism and professional ethnography. Rather than approaching either as a clearly definable movement or tradition, Clifford sees them as activities and cultural mind sets, aesthetic styles and attitudes that were both strongly affected by the trauma of the 1st world war, as well as colonialism and its critique of the time. Literary Surrealism and academic ethnography developed in close proximity in Paris in between the wars: academic / authors like Georges Bataille or Michel Leiris had an active role in both the artistic and scholarly scenes. For example, Surrealist publications like *Documents* edited by Bataille from 1929 to 1930 effortlessly combined anthropological and surrealist content in a spirit of collage. The two emerging practices were both fascinated by foreign cultures, the more exotic the better, and shared a profound relativism: in light of accumulating ethnographic data, existing cultural norms and habits could always be compared to norms and habits of other cultures, and thus exposed as local and historical rather than eternal and universal.

An interesting connection between surrealism and ethnographic fieldwork can be located in the effort to make the familiar strange (cf. Ybema and Kamsteeg 2009). Even when studying her own culture, the fieldworker is treading on unfamiliar ground, becoming something like the surrealist object - a thing misplaced (see Pérez 2010, 117). It is precisely the juxtaposition of unexpected or foreign elements – at the core of surrealist activities and language games – that interests me as a metaphor and a form of practice for creative work and artistic research alike. For me, loosely following Breton´s (1996 [1924]) ideas, the surrealist writing/living mode is an attempt to make a fruitful, wholesome connection between the conscious and the unconscious mind.

How does this relate to ethnography? As already mentioned, ethnographers produce their fields in and by writing. Taking extensive notes is how reliable data are produced: if it is not in your notes, it did not

happen (see Dewalt and Dewalt 2002, 141). Ethnographic fieldnotes should aim to be focused but all-compassing, objective and rich in detail, always trying to reach the understanding of the people studied. Anyone who tries writing down what a person or a group of people are doing quickly finds out how hard it is to avoid jumping into interpretations, not letting your personal biases and associations filter through. Perhaps it is the speed of writing that triggers all these unwanted, seemingly irrelevant notions? On empirical grounds, however, writing fieldnotes and engaging in automatic writing seem to have definite similarities even though these may not be commonly acknowledged in fieldwork manuals.

In so many ways, ethnography is about *looking at* and *looking away* at the same time. Personally I am beginning to be more and more convinced that ethnography actually happens *on the corner of your eye*. Looking at the "informant", trying to grasp what s/he´s doing – still writing away, but notice how still she is, one leg gracefully thrown over the other. She looks so orderly, almost business-like, deep in concentration. I hesitate to turn the page of my notebook, fearing the sound will distract her. And still I must look away, to commit my observations on paper, and I cannot know what the writing woman I was just observing will do while I´m not looking, and I cannot be sure if it´s not precisely that which could have provided some vital clue to my reading. So, I must observe some more, write some more notes, face the limits of my senses, the limits of my perception, the limits of my ability to interpret another´s doings – or even my own.

However, ethnography can also be a source of inspiration, a frame of mind that can be very useful to the writer. If we accept Clifford´s claim and see surrealism as an ethnographic pursuit, and if we choose to accept that ethnographic writing has elements that can trigger our inner surrealist, what happens if the two are consciously brought together? My suggestion is surrealist ethnography, in which the perceptible, indicative world and the subjunctive world of dreams, illusions, and imaginary friends are set side by side, as equals, in writing.

To support my misreading of Clifford, I have chosen to re-read another authority, Finnish ethnologist Bo Lönnqvist. "To anthropologize fantasy is […] an unknown field in the history of our discipline", he writes (Lönnqvist 2006, 7).[2] True to surrealist text editing principles, I have taken the words entirely out of context, and chosen to read them for my own aims. What if Lönnqvist means we should do our fantasy work like anthropologists, fantasy here referring to creative work operating on a fantastic or imaginary field?[3]

For a writer, surrealist ethnography can at its most practical level mean a method that many writers already use: open-minded gathering of material or data, and then rearranging it into literary form of some kind, material or data understood here as widely as possible. These stages do not line up in a linear order, but, as in research, the gathering and analysis of data are partly intermingled. Both these stages are ethnographic in attitude, and can help the writer to sharpen her observations and pay more attention to the details of her made-up, what-if world. You can write your world into being by observing it carefully.

To give some concreteness to the idea, I present a writing exercise. It has been developed for prose with distinct characters. You can try adapting it to other genres as well, for example by replacing "character" with "idea" or "mood". This exercise can also be done with Bennett in mind. To promote a more inclusive, less human-centered world-view, Bennett offers "careful anthropomorphism" as a possibility to see life and agency where we are used to seeing only mute, mindless matter. She proposes an attitude of *flattening* differences between human and nonhuman actors. "We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of "talented" and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self)." (Bennett 2010, 98.) What happens, if we look at our characters or milieus as swarming, vibrant materiality?

The Writer as an Ethnographer

Place your characters in a situation that you imagine to be familiar and everyday-like for them. You are observing them from behind a tree, an umbrella, a newspaper or some other visual obstruction. Describe the milieu, the characters and their doings in as much detail as possible. What do they look like, how do they move, what do they sound like and how do they use their space? Write this for ten minutes without lifting your pen from the paper or your fingers form your keyboard. Please note that the object you are hiding behind may have its say before the exercise is over.

Then come forward and let your characters notice you. Continue describing what you see, hear, taste. If any entities are curious about you, let them ask questions and make sure to answer them. You can also ask them questions. Try to get through to their truth and be prepared that it will be different from yours. Write for another ten minutes without lifting your pen from the paper or your fingers from your keyboard.

Now change your position: sit differently, stand up, move around. Write ten minutes from the point of view of a character that you would like to know more about. Describe how the character sees you as you are

observing him or her, and how s/he sees the other characters and the situation.

After the exercise take a walk and let your thoughts brew.

When looking for material, the surrealist ethnographer can of course make use of the more traditional fields of ethnography: museums, archives, gatherings of people anywhere. The field can also be constructed in dreams, in writing, on the desk or in the armchair. What makes this activity surrealist in attitude is that there is no profound difference or hierarchy between these fields. We can here evoke Breton, for whom the new reality or surreality was all about daytime- and dream reality coming together. This also makes an interesting comparison with Bennett´s new materialist ideas of subjects as assemblages of ever-shifting particles.

Conclusion

In the light of my research so far, the boundaries between the writer and space, the writer and other writers, are not clear and stable, and neither are the boundaries of the writer´s inner space (conscious / unconscious), as studies in creativity and alternate states of consciousness have also suggested (Whish-Wilson 2009). However, I want to highlight that the subjunctive is not (only) about moving from one reality to the next one and gaping in awe of the miraculous. Thresholds between worlds can be found everywhere, not just in dramatic ritual settings. The subjunctive mood is not, at least not always, an enclosure; or a house, garden or even an ocean you can enter or sink into and then leave behind. It can be a moment that comes and goes almost unnoticed. All in all, it is a place full of relationships, of connections forming and dissolving.

Ritual and play are two sides or interconnected qualities of the subjunctive mood (cf. Henricks 2006; Turner 1992). In the context of my research, and in the light of my fieldwork, I see ritual as form which we willingly inhabit or align ourselves to, individually and collectively. Our group is of course performing something fundamentally different from culturally sanctioned rites of passage, seasonal celebrations or state ceremonies. The ritual form is functional on a more individual scale: it helps us activate forces that have the potential to support our writing, whether these forces come from the individual writer´s personal inner space or the stimuli offered by the outer space. Play, on the other hand, follows the rhythm of rules and freedom. Once the frame has been set up, the way is open for the unexpected to flow.

I am well aware of the dangers of talking about creative writing as something so special it becomes almost otherworldly. But if looking at

creative writing as a ritual, or a means of communicating with hidden parts of your psyche, helps to see our writing as something important; that it deserves the time, the place and the energy because it is special, the risk is well worth taking.

As for the group, it will be interesting to observe if and when we reach the limits of open transmission. Will the subjunctive mood we have conjured up become an obstacle to writing? For pedagogical purposes, the observation that writing groups tend to produce similar texts (cf. Mayers 2010, 96) even when the focus is on process rather than outcome, may be worth further consideration.

What surrealist observations and Bennett´s "strategic anthropomorphism" both speak about is the importance of remaining alert, as ethnographers and/or creative writers, to that which is happening at the corner of our eye, that which may be looking back at us. Adopting a surrealist/ethnographic attitude to writing, to objects, to other entities, can open up new possibilities for perceiving ourselves and our surroundings. I find Bennett´s thought useful in highlighting that the process – however imaginary or playful – is also fundamentally material. Remembering this can make it easier to be respectful – it matters what and how we write.

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Notes

[1] I use pseudonyms for all my informants. The recorded interviews will be archived in the collections of Archives of the School of History, Culture and Arts, University of Turku.

[2] The original sentence in its entirety is "Fantasian antropologisointi on – eräitä kulttuuri-ilmiöitä lukuun ottamatta – tuntematon kenttä oppialamme historiassa". "To anthropologise fantasy is – apart from some cultural phenomena – an unknown field in the history of our discipline." Translated by the author.

[3] I am fully aware that I am here mixing and merging various levels of the term "fantasy".

CHAPTER TWO

ART OF BEING: WHY THE INTER-ARTS MATTER FOR WRITERS

CINDY SHEARER

Abstract

How do writers benefit from engaging artists across the disciplines? How does exposure to other arts and artists provide the opportunity for writers to take in and be with in their art-making in new ways? How can inter-arts conversation open writers to possibility within their work? In this article, I explore these questions by reflecting on my inter-arts relationship with Alonzo King, Artistic Director of Lines Ballet in San Francisco [See http://www.linesballet.org.], and I share how my conversations with Alonzo have shifted my perspectives and expanded my views (and skill set) as writer and teacher. I also provide some inter-arts exercises that have been beneficial to students, and I inquire into how inter-arts exposure offers us the chance to contemplate (1) how other arts may apply to our work and (2) what it means to be an artist and bring our art to the world.

Keywords: inter-arts, art-making, Alonzo King, creative writers, being

1. Observing and Reflecting

The Art of Fervor: Tapping the Creative Source

"How can I contribute more?" I noticed right away that Alonzo King, Artistic Director of LINES Ballet, didn't ask the dancers "How can you contribute more?" The difference between the two questions was subtle but sharp—Alonzo's approach is to ask the dancers to ask themselves.

I was lucky to be at Thursday rehearsal in Studio Five in the LINES

Dancer Center just two weeks before the San Francisco opening of Scheherazade. From my folding chair, I leaned into the space across the room from where the dancers stood in a circle around Alonzo. Then in a voice less like a directive and more like an invitation, Alonzo asked them to give more to each moment—by not being tired or hungry, distracted or overwhelmed—but by bringing more to the characters at the core of their movements. All looked right at him as he spoke.

It didn't surprise me that Alonzo focused on the inner performance rather than the physical one. In my conversations with him, he's avoided the labels offered to him such as choreographer or director. Instead, he identifies as an artist—sure that all artists tap into and draw from the same creative sources whatever their mediums. Artists always have the chance to bring themselves all the way into their work, he believes, to not hold back, not resist. In every moment, to make a maximum contribution.

"If your character is not your temperament," he told one dancer, "then you'll have to overdo the moments." What I understood him to mean was that this dancer will have to overreach to find the right tone or expression for his movements. If he doesn't overreach, he won't be able to get far enough outside himself to find the genuineness of the character within.

The lesson applies widely to art-making. To make art beyond ourselves, we have to reach within and beyond ourselves. Deep within to find the clarity necessary to communicate a moment or feeling, an action or process. Beyond ourselves to feel and experience the contrasts necessary to locate a character within us or the character of what we want to convey.

Alonzo's approach speaks to the value for artists, as learners and professionals, in training and practice, to speak across the disciplines to each other. "I want to see change," Alonzo said. Then looking at two of his dancers went on, "I need to see the character within your movements." He talked about how for a character to work both clarity and contrast must be visible. He might have been teaching a fiction writing class.

"We need fervor." The dancers looked again intently into his face. "Does that make sense?" He asked this several times during the afternoon—did they get the meaning? He knows they need to understand the meaning of what he is asking, of the opportunity offered them through dance, in order to achieve it.

After rehearsal, I looked up *fervor*. Not surprisingly it means two somewhat-related things: (1) warmth or glow—a radiating heat, and (2) intense heat—intensity and heat. Its meanings come from the Latin *fervor* meaning "heat" and *fervere* to "glow, boil." Fervor heats from within and moves out.

Fervor is the artist's path to clarity and contrast. Clarity radiates out,

obliterating any line or space between the person and the character, the story and the performance, the dancer and the dance. Contrast is conflict. An intense heat within stories, characters and our layers of being that unsettle us and require us to act. Fervor manifests art, taking us beyond the process of contribution to the act of commitment. With fervor, we contribute all we can.

Alonzo asked the dancers to give more and when they did, he acknowledged what he saw. "There—that intensity," or "you had it when you started," he said. As the dancers moved across the floor, I could hear him say, "Stay with it. Stay with it. Don't relax."

"It brings me joy to see people change. It gives me hope for myself," he said as he returned to his chair. 5, 6, 7, the music started again and so did dance. "Stay with it. Stay with it," I thought to myself. "Don't relax."

I wrote "The Art of Fervor" as a blog for the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) where I teach. I had taken my students in MFA Interdisciplinary Arts Workshop to work with Alonzo King. I wanted them to see how making an investment in looking at and into the work of Alonzo and his dancers could make a deep impression on their art. I wanted them to see that exposure to what other artists do matters for them as artists. So I put myself in the role of observer and listener—I let myself step into the experience--and offered back what the experience offered me. I wanted students to hear what I was making of what I saw and how it landed in me and to encourage them to do the same. I also hoped they might experience my blog as being in conversation with Alonzo's work—so they got not just exposure to another art, but one example of how being reflective about art-making and inquiry on that reflection can lead to insight for the artist. I hoped the experience would engender questions and desire for inquiry in them. Later, they'd write their own blogs.

Watching Alonzo at work with his artists told me what matters to him—and this evoked in me an inquiry into what matters to me. Embedded in the blog are the questions that his work and way of talking about art raise in me. I explore and interpret what they offer me.

My work with Alonzo has helped me to build on a life-long curiosity about the visual and performing arts and to get more clarity about how the chance to be with another art can help us to see and reflect, take in the art, and more fully be in our own art-making. In "The Art of Fervor," I learned something about character. Alonzo's way of talking about character through movement encouraged me to think about clarity and contrast and how it can be articulated by writers. The reflection also led me to the concept of fervor and gave me the chance to develop my own understanding of it—and it opened up deeper conversation inside me about

what it means to be a committed artist.

Since I wrote "The Art of Fervor," I've taken other students to Alonzo's studio and have sat on a folding chair at his rehearsals on my own to listen to what Alonzo says about art-making. I've continued to be influenced by him. I've written other pieces about his work—and am including some of them here.

I've benefitted from (1) exposure to Alonzo's art and perspectives, (2) the ways that I inquire into, reflect on, and use what he says, and (3) what arises in me as I listen to him and watch the dance. Exposure has brought me new information in subtle and beautiful ways. I remember Alonzo showing us movement by movement how to construct a dance. One of the early gestures involved putting our fists through a solid wall. Alonzo, his body still but energized, imagined the wall—and its messy, muddy texture. Then he took his right hand and quietly turned and turned it until I felt like I could see wet, pasty dirt dripping off his arm and his hand boring steadily through the wall. Alonzo's deep imagining transcended his body and made the wall—and the gesture—feel real.

Reflection offered me the chance to take in new perspectives and play with ways to also use them in my work. I saw through Alonzo's presence how the body provides a vantage point—a way of enacting what we want to create—and how any artist can use it to test out or tangibly envision what we are hoping to make. I saw the power of belief in making the movements—and letting belief infuse what is being made. I also felt invited—asked--to bring a new depth of imagining to my work.

My students and I got to see inside the making of another art and consider what applies to us—but more importantly it exposed us to the perspective or stance that grounds Alonzo's ---and by being willing to learn from it, we expanded, opened up our own artistic processes. We got to ask: If I see what shapes another art and why, what can apply to me? What I can do with the thoughts, ideas, feelings, experiences that are evoked inside me when I watch the art and listen to what is said about it?

The work I've done with Alonzo over several years has taught me that whenever I am observing and reflecting on how art is being is made, I am also getting the chance to reflect on what it means to be an artist and how to bring our art to the world. Seeing into the process of art-making asks us to also see into who makes the art and what it is. Forms of art may differ but being an artist is not bounded by form—so all art offers us something to take in and learn from. Perhaps the inter-arts conversation is fundamentally about how to be in art and what it means to be an artist. The beauty is that the opportunity for learning from each other as artists is around us all the time--every time we are exposed to art and are willing to