

What is Place Writing?

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Placeless events are inconceivable, in that everything that happens must happen somewhere, and so history issues from geography in the same way that water issues from a spring: unpredictably but site-specifically. (Macfarlane, 2010: 113)

It is a sense of place, an understanding of its 'character', which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognize that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place. (Massey 1994: 177)

Place, in contemporary literary culture, is everywhere. This imaginative preoccupation with place is evident on the shelves of our bookshops and in the review pages of our broadsheet newspapers. It is evident in the programmes of our literature festivals and in the schedules for BBC Radio Four. It is similarly evident in the publications of lecturers in the Manchester Writing School here at Manchester Metropolitan University. Over recent years, these publications have included folk horror imaginings of the Lancashire uplands and reflections on the diasporic experience of Ugandans in Manchester, accounts of out-of-town edgelands in the West Midlands and meditations on North London graveyards. At the same time, place – as both a concept and a lived experience – has been preoccupying many human geographers after a period in which many scholarly conversations were dominated by questions of ‘space’ (Edensor et al 2020). Place, then, is on the imaginative and academic agenda. What is more, both creative practitioners and critical thinkers (and those who have feet in both camps) are alert to the fact that to think and to write about place is to think and to write about emplacement and displacement, placedness and placelessness, material and digital environments. It is also to think and to write about the future diminution of the places we might call ‘home’.

The reasons for this return to place are complicatedly various: from the anxiety regarding the meaning of place within the context of late-capitalist globalisation to the apocalyptic fear generated by the climate emergency. One of the principal aims of the Centre for Place Writing is to open up space for the interrogation of the intersecting reasons behind this widespread return to place. The Centre is simultaneously committed to examining how the relationship between the local and the

global is (re)configured in contemporary creative and conceptual writings. In this short essay, though, we are interested in addressing a more fundamental question: just what *is* place writing?

In thinking about this question, a key publication, we would argue, is *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*: a collection of new writing, edited by Gareth Evans and Di Robson, in which eleven contributors were invited to reflect ‘on specific locations from across the diverse landscapes of the British Isles, and on the potential for “re-enchantment”’ (2010: n.p.). In publishing writing by a wide range of voices – including Kathleen Jamie, Jay Griffiths, Robert Macfarlane, Jane Rendell, Iain Sinclair and Ken Worpole – the co-editors bring together the work of psychogeographers and ‘new nature’ writers, architectural historians and landscape poets. The result is the creation of a literary map of England, Scotland, and Wales – stretching from the Isle of Lewis to the port city of Aberdeen, from Ystrad Fflur in Cardiganshire to Upper Clapton in London – in which the contributions are unified by a concern with ‘the importance of “place” to creative possibility in life and art’ (Evans and Robson, 2010: n.p.). Place writing, as showcased by Evans and Robson, is characterised by an attentiveness to the textural particularities of specific sites: an attentiveness that is often generated through the embodied experience of walking-through-place. By extension, place writing invites readers to find ways of (re)connecting with the material landscape. As the co-editors put it: ‘Here are paths, offered like an open hand, towards a new way of being in the world’ for ‘the multiple alienations of modern society’ (2010: n.p.). Evans and Robson do not explicitly use the collocation ‘place writing’; but, looking back, we believe that their collection played a pivotal role in the subsequent emergence of this term during the 2010s.

A key question remains, however: what are the literary forms of the genre of contemporary place writing? Creative non-fiction emerges as the dominant form within *Towards Re-Enchantment*. According to Lee Gutkind, creative non-fiction is necessarily predicated on the telling of truths and, as a result, ought to be ‘as accurate as the most meticulous reportage’: ‘names, dates, places, descriptions, quotations may not be created or altered for any reason, at any time’ (1997: 10). Creative non-fictional place writing, therefore, is founded upon the (apparent) presentation of fact; it offers an authentic and accurate portrait of what it means to be-in-the-world. For Gutkind, what elevates creative non-fiction above documentary journalism is the imaginative space that it allows for the articulation of subjective thought: ‘More often than not, writers turn to the creative nonfiction genre because they feel passionately about a person, *place* [our italics], subject, or issue and have no interest or intention of maintaining a balanced or objective tone or viewpoint’ (1997: 12). By extension, then, creative non-fictional place writing is often characterised by the clear and unapologetic presence of the authorial ‘I’. As a field-defining publication, *Towards Re-Enchantment* posits that creative non-fiction is the most dominant literary form in contemporary place writing.

We argue that, a decade on, this remains the case and the label ‘place writing’ does its most vital work when applied to creative non-fictional writings that resist conventional categorisation. We are referring to hybrid prose texts that braid a range of different literary genres – including nature writing and memoir, travel writing and quest biography, to name just a few – in the textual mapping of particular places. Common to many of these immersive observational writings is the presence of grainy black-and-white photographs that authenticate the authorial experience.

Creative non-fiction has emerged as the most prevalent – and most commercially popular – form in contemporary place writing. Saliently, though, Evans and Robson also afford textual space to the poetry of place: from first-person lyrics that reflect on the embodied experience of being-in-place to ‘radical landscape poetry’ (Tarlo 2011) that eschews the use of the autobiographical ‘I’ to allow the different voices of place to emerge. Place, of course, has long been integral to the practice of many poets; and we believe that poetry that is particularly attuned to the senses of place – work that the geographer-poet, Tim Cresswell, describes as ‘topo-poetics’ (2015) – can also be meaningfully categorised as place writing.

Our own definition of place writing, however, moves beyond the forms of creative non-fiction and poetry that are gathered in *Towards Re-Enchantment*. That is to say, our pluralistic understanding of place writing also allows for fiction. Since the publication of his first book of creative non-fiction, *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), Macfarlane has repeatedly acknowledged his imaginative indebtedness to writers of fiction: ‘I have learned much myself as a writer – at the levels of the image, sentence and chapter – from the techniques of novelists’ (2015). Crucially, the convergences extend to textual content as well as literary stylistics. In spite of Gutkind’s insistence that non-fiction ought to be rooted in fact, the suggestion that the writing of creative non-fiction allows for ‘a *different* [my italics] level of truth’ (1997: 10) also opens up the potential for textual elements that swerve away from real-world geographies or the authenticable personal experience of place. The *creativity* of non-fictional place writing, therefore, allows for the articulation of the imagined. Here, it is worth noting that the seminal work of W. G. Sebald – a writer who had a profound influence on both the *Towards Re-Enchantment* project and contemporary place writing more generally – frequently, and playfully, occupies a space somewhere between the forms of fiction and non-fiction. According to Sebald’s last editor, Simon Prosser, *The Rings of Saturn* is ‘full of fictional devices: the emptying out of landscapes, the repetition of images, the elision of characters, the defamiliarizing of the real and the invention of details’ (2011: 10). We go further still, however, by arguing that place writing, as a genre, should incorporate unambiguously fictional texts that place place – real and/or imagined – at their creative centre; novels and novellas, short stories and flash

fictions, in which place transcends the status of mere setting to play an active and agential role in the unfolding of narratives.

Yet we don't want to stop there. According to Zachary Leader: "Life-writing" is a generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed' (2015: 1). According to Leader, these writings straightforwardly include 'memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries'; but he also suggests that life writing can also refer to both 'autobiographical' and 'biographical fiction' (2015: 1). Leader further complicates the genre by proposing that life writing includes a range of non-literary texts: 'letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings (*narratio* first existed not as a literary but as a legal term), marginalia, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms (including blogs, tweets, Facebook entries)' (2015: 1). Our own understanding of place writing – a genre that often overlaps and intersects with life writing – is similarly broad. It allows for screenplays and radio essays, literary journalism and text-based artwork, alongside countless other textual forms.

In articulating this pluralistic definition of place writing, however, we hope to stimulate creative and critical debate. At the same time, we are extremely mindful that, as *the* Centre for Place Writing, we can play an integral role in further complicating and enriching the understanding of contemporary place writing. For example, we are alert to the fact that much of the place writing that we celebrate is associated with the intimate deep mapping of particular locations. To return to terms used at the beginning of this short essay, however, there is a need for place writing – and its literary critical reception – to be similarly preoccupied with articulations of displacement; there is a vital need to consider narratives of deracination and placelessness as well as those of emplacement and enchantment. It is imperative to robustly critique those thinkers who may seek to elide discussion of place with nationalistic discourse; and, connected with this, it is absolutely vital to ensure the centrality of the work of BAME writers and critics who have, to date, remained problematically marginalised in too many representations and discussions of contemporary place writing. It is similarly essential to ensure that the voices of disabled, queer and working-class creative and critical writers are all given due prominence as we chart new directions for the genre.

In thinking about place, we are influenced by the work of the late human geographer, Doreen Massey - who grew up in Wythenshawe, south Manchester – and her argument that 'the specificity of place [. . .] derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations' (1994: 156). We are interested in what Massey famously referred to as the complex, and often uncomfortable, 'throwntogetherness' of place (2005: 151). By extension,

we believe that place *writing* is a helpfully broad label that captures the rich heterogeneity of contemporary texts – across a range of forms - that think deeply, and complicatedly, about place and its meanings. This pluralism is foundational to our work - the teaching and the research, the events and the projects - within the Centre for Place Writing.

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Some of the ideas articulated in this short essay are explored in greater detail in the following:

Cooper, D. (2020) 'Contemporary British Place Writing: Towards a Definition', in T. Edensor et al, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Place*. London: Routledge.

Lichtenstein, R. (2020) 'Contemporary British Place Writing: Origins, Definitions, New Directions', unpublished doctoral thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University.