


2022

A View from Somewhere: Situating the Public Problem in Creative Writing Workshops

Erika Luckert

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, eluckert2@huskers.unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Luckert, Erika (2022) "A View from Somewhere: Situating the Public Problem in Creative Writing Workshops," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*. Vol. 27 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol27/iss1/8>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

A View from Somewhere: Situating the Public Problem in Creative Writing Workshops

Erika Luckert

Abstract: *This essay is an effort to better situate the creative writing workshop in the diverse perspectives of its participants, by drawing on parallels between critiques of the writing workshop and critiques of the idealized public sphere. Habermas's idealized public sphere has been critiqued for privileging dominant identities, much as creative writing workshops have been critiqued for privileging white writers like me. In this essay, I begin by listening to the critiques and testimony of BIPOC writers, which reveal that workshops are hegemonic spaces that reproduce and magnify racist, sexist, and classist systems. By reading these testimonies in conversation with critiques of the public sphere, I underscore the structural nature of this problem: when issues of race and culture are ignored in writing workshops, not only do we fail to achieve the ideal of an equitable space, we actively reinforce the power imbalances that we insist on overlooking. If, instead of trying to create a culturally neutral space, we welcome the complex identities of our students into our workshops, many parts of our pedagogy may need to change. To begin this work, I use Donna Haraway's theory of situated knowledge to consider how we might workshop not with a pseudo-objective view, but with a "view from somewhere" instead. I suggest ways that author's notes and workshop letters may be used to practice a more situated workshop, where participants reflect on their own positionings and learn to be accountable for the feedback they give.*

I cannot think of any space in which I have learned more about writing, and about myself as a writer, than I have in writing workshops.

In my first creative writing workshop in college, the desks stretched in a horseshoe shape around the room so we could all see each other as we gave feedback on each other's writing. It was my only class that semester where every single student spoke, and the atmosphere was invigorating.

I loved workshops—so much so that I went on to pursue an MFA in creative writing. I loved sitting in a room talking with other writers; I loved reading the drafts of my peers and, around a seminar table, grasping for the words that could describe what it was that their writing did, and could do. As I talked my way through my peers' writing, I developed a vocabulary that would help me to better describe my own.

I loved listening too—even in workshops where the silence of the writer was not required, I would refrain from speech—a rare thing for me as a student who always thrived through active participation. Instead of speaking, I would fill the margins of my drafts with notes, sifting through the different opinions of my peers, working my way towards a fuller understanding of what I wanted my revisions to be.

In my thesis workshop, where six of us sat around the table for hours, sometimes workshoping past midnight, I relished those moments when our discussion, often

meandering, veered towards consensus—that sense that we had solved something, arrived at the perfect revision, understood a piece of writing more completely.

I gained so much from workshops that even when I finished my MFA, even as I began to teach workshops myself, I kept at it—meeting with fellow writers in their living rooms, their kitchens, whatever corners of our small apartments could accommodate a handful of writers and their words.

I loved workshops, but as Matthew Salesses points out, what made workshops effective learning spaces for me are what can make them harmful spaces for others: “So many of the advantages workshop offers break down when a writer is in the workshop minority” (“Who’s at the Center”). For me, a white, third-generation college student accustomed to speaking frequently in class, it was a new and productive educational experience to remain silent while my work was discussed. Over the years, I learned to jockey my way into male-dominated classroom conversations, interrupting, countering, and crafting authority in ways I learned from my own professor father at the dinner table. Listening during workshop was a valuable change for me. For a student who is often sidelined in classroom environments, though, it’s easy to see how the workshop’s “gag” rule could become an act of silencing that devalues the writer’s authority over their own work rather than a productive exercise in listening (Kearns 794). As Salesses puts it, “The person who thinks she is in charge of her story is made to listen to other people telling her what her story is or should be” (“Who’s at the Center”). Under these circumstances, the consensus of a workshop that I relished as a student might, to someone else, feel less thrilling and more like dismissal of an alternate view.

A workshop may feel impressively equitable, even ideal to a student in my position—after all, what other pedagogy has such active participation from all students? But problems arise when we fail to acknowledge and address the power structures at play. Salesses reminds us that “the workshop is incredibly persuasive, as power usually is” (“Who’s at the Center”), but the powerful benefits for students like me can be harmful for queer students, students of color, or others in the minority. This is a problem that BIPOC writers have been talking about for years, but that those of us in the workshop majority—white, cis, abled, moneyed writers and teachers of writing—have not adequately recognized or addressed. It’s a problem of power, which is always unequally distributed, and the way that power influences what each student can say and learn. This, of course, is not a problem unique to the workshop space. It is, however, a problem that is uniquely critical to address in these contexts, where many of our basic pedagogical habits and assumptions make it easier to sideline or even ignore the dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture.

Many of these pedagogical habits and assumptions are rooted in the workshop’s American history and the students it was made to serve in the early 1950s: predominantly white, male students returning to school on the GI Bill (Bennett). Though centered in a U.S. context, this history is influential enough that it shaped the workshops of my undergraduate education in Canada. In the Afterword of Anna Leahy’s *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, Graeme Harper and Stephanie Vanderslice consider some of the differences among workshop traditions in different anglophone creative writing contexts, suggesting that we have a great deal to gain by mutual understanding and cooperation on a more global scale. With that in mind, I focus here on

the North American workshops that have informed my own writing and teaching, contexts where, as Vanderslice notes, there is a need for the writing workshop to “respond to the educational landscape in which it currently exists instead of the one in which it was conceived over half a century ago” (30). We need to consider a much more diverse educational landscape: the students we are teaching now.

But what does it look like for the workshop to respond to more diverse populations? In D.G. Myer’s 1996 history of creative writing, the question of responding to diverse students barely even makes it into the afterward, where he describes the “dilemma” as he sees it: “if the pronouncement of literary verdicts is really the social campaign to assign dominant status to a particular perspective, then any writing teacher who praises and faults student effort is surreptitiously trying to silence young ethnic writers in his [sic] class” (177). The history of creative writing that Myers tells is inherently white and predominantly male, bearing little resemblance to the contexts where I began teaching as a young woman poet and educator in New York City’s public schools and colleges. Myers’ response to the “dilemma” is not only inherently defeatist, absolving the (naturally, white male) teacher of responsibility, it also trivializes the experience of writers who may feel silenced in a writing workshop. In Tim Mayers’ 2014 *Rewriting Craft*, minoritized writers in the workshop garner slightly more acknowledgement, but he stops his inquiry with the question: “Where, precisely, does one draw the lines between students’ poems and their lives? Is it possible to do so in harmful or detrimental ways?” (146).

The short answer to Mayers’ question is yes. But a more thorough answer is that creative writing teachers and facilitators need to listen to BIPOC writers’ testimonials that describe the damaging or dangerous ways workshops have functioned. As a student and teacher who has thrived in these environments, it’s a problem I need to reckon with. It’s a problem all of us who rely on workshop pedagogy, regardless of genre, need to understand. Any time we gather a group of writers in a room, any time student writing is discussed by a group of peers, it’s a problem that we become responsible for. Taking responsibility and responding to the current educational landscape means understanding the ways writing workshops are connected to structural systems of inequality. Philip Gross suggests that “a workshop is a small world, which reflects and refracts worlds outside” (61). In this “small world,” I see reflections and refractions of the idealized public sphere as proposed by Jürgen Habermas, widely critiqued for its privileging of dominant identities, much as the workshop has been critiqued for privileging white students like me. This essay, then, is an effort to understand the parallels between critiques of the writing workshop and critiques of the idealized public sphere, and to use that understanding to remake a workshop responsive to the perspectives of its diverse participants.

Critiques of the Writing Workshop

While in many places I discuss, through critical discourse and my own experiences, the inequities in the writing workshop in terms of race, it is important to note that these injustices—like any experience of power—are intersectional. Junot Díaz’s much-cited essay, “MFA vs. POC,” drew public attention to the question of race in the writing workshop, and yet, reports by women of his misogyny and allegations of his sexual misconduct (Rivera; Alter, Bromwich, and Cave) remind us to interrogate the many ways

that power may be used and abused in our workshops. What Díaz calls “the standard problem of MFA programs” might also be described as the standard problem of the university institution: “that shit was *too white*.” In his essay, Díaz addresses two audiences: one who experiences this whiteness, and one that is unaware: “Some of you understand completely. And some of you ask: *Too white . . . how?*”

A chorus of other writers explain. In the November 2016 issue of *Acentos Review*, a special feature gave voice to the workshop experiences of Latinx writers in MFA programs. A student from Arizona writes, “when you are introduced to your cohort/ you start to see how colored you are/ contrasted against this background.” From New Jersey, a student writes, “I wonder about the social class of my writing and readers.” Another writes, “Everyone liked the story about the queer women, but didn’t comment on their brown skin. These stories, my MFA says, are not for everyone.” A Vermont Student describes “Cautiously picking workshops to minimize micro-aggressions,/ Insisting POC limit rant time about comments by other student or faculty so we can/ talk about our craft.” Another in Texas writes, “you fear your implication in our pain, and so you deny it exists, and divorce your responsibility because to do so is easiest” (“Our MFA Experiences”).

Many critiques of whiteness in the workshop, or accounts of the harm experienced by minority writers, come in the form of testimonial, of story. And so, even as they move us, they may seem too easy to dismiss—*that’s not how it was in the workshops I took*, or, *that’s not how it is in the workshops I teach*, I might tell myself. The work of scholars like Amy Robillard and Aja Martinez, though, remind me of the power that stories hold to expose the intersectional oppressions that are built into the very structures of our departments and classrooms. Martinez explains the critical role these stories play: “experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (3), (i.e., practices like the writing workshop). As we listen to the experiences of writers of color in the workshop, then, it’s also important we hear the echoes of these stories in our own pedagogies. We need to consider the ways that our workshops are constructed to allow for, and even invite, these harmful experiences. To Díaz’s description of the problem with the writing workshop—that shit was *too white*—I make this vital addendum which we must address to produce change: *This shit is structural*.

Salesses asks that we “think about the way in which the workshop mirrors the minority experience in real life” (“Who’s at the Center”), while Díaz describes how his workshop “reproduced exactly the dominant culture’s blind spots and assumptions around race and racism.” While we may like to think of our workshops as safe spaces for nurturing creativity, or as pre-publication “test audiences,” grappling with oppression in the workshop means understanding how such classes reproduce, mirror, and even magnify systemic racism, sexism, and classism. If a workshop reproduces structural racism, then we need to make counter-hegemonic choices that resist this. How do we stop replicating oppression and instead reconstruct a more equitable space? While our inclination as teachers may be to try and keep power dynamics out of our workshops, or to construct a neutral space for discussion, this pseudo-objectivity can mask dangerous and hegemonic pedagogies and prevent us from making ethical changes in our practice.

Critiquing the Workshop as an Idealized Public Sphere

To understand what is so dangerous about constructing workshops this way, it is useful to consider, as Rosa Eberly does, the parallels between writing classrooms and the idealized public sphere (171-172). The public sphere, proposed by Habermas, describes an idealized space in which private people discuss issues that concern them collectively. It is characterized by three institutional principals: first, a disregard of status in favor of “the parity of ‘common humanity’”; second, a “domain of ‘common concern,’” which forms the basis of the collective discussion; and third, a level of inclusivity and accessibility that allows everyone to participate (Habermas 36-37). As Eberly points out, “this model of public sphere can fit writing classrooms rather well” (171-172), and it may be especially illuminating in how well it fits the writing workshop, where we purportedly aim for an inclusive environment in which differences in power and status are “set aside” so that everyone might participate in the discussion of a topic of common concern: the writing itself. When put this way, the workshop, like Habermas’s public sphere sounds ideal. But as public sphere theorists have pointed out, there is a profound flaw in this idealized construction.

Nancy Fraser explains it this way: “declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so” (60). While the deliberative arena that she describes is much larger than a classroom, this premise applies equally to the smaller space of a writing workshop. As Salesses and Díaz suggest, a writing workshop is not separate or safe from the power imbalances of our larger society. Just like the public sphere Fraser describes, we may intend our workshops to be “open and admissible to all” (59), but simply arranging the desks in a horseshoe shape, and giving each student time to speak, as I experienced in my first undergraduate workshop, is not enough to create parity. That vision—of everyone sitting in a circle, on equal footing—while often constructive can also reinforce a false view: that we all come to the workshop from the same position, and with the same amount of power, or that power can be neutralized by mere intent and arrangement. But ignoring race and culture and leaving identity at the door in attempts to depoliticize our classes and make them safe not only fails to achieve the ideal of a space “open and admissible to all” it actively reinforces those power imbalances that we insist on overlooking. As Fraser reminds us, “bracketing” inequalities “does not foster participatory parity,”—instead, it “works to the advantage of dominant groups in society, and to the disadvantage of subordinates” (64).

The attempt to “bracket inequalities” is closely linked to another fundamental feature of the idealized public sphere for Fraser. It’s worth considering her critique in full, for every instance of the words “public sphere” in Fraser’s critique, we might equally read the word “workshop”:

The misplaced faith in the efficacy of bracketing suggests another flaw.... This conception assumes that a public sphere is or can be a space of zero degree culture, so utterly bereft of any specific ethos as to accommodate with perfect neutrality and equal ease interventions expressive of any and every cultural ethos. But this assumption is counterfactual, and not for reasons that are mere-

ly accidental. In stratified societies, unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles. The result is the development of powerful informal pressures that marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups. (64)

In a writing workshop, those unequally valued cultural styles become what Rosalie Morales Kearns refers to as “implicit aesthetic norms” (797), unspoken yet influential ideas of what a poem or a story should be. In my MFA workshops, I relished those moments when we all came to agree on a revision to a poem—but Kearns asks me to consider what implicit aesthetic norms we enforced in order to reach that point of consensus: “When people have an aesthetic expectation that they have not examined or articulated but nevertheless use in judging others’ works, they do not have to explore the implications of their historically and culturally specific expectations; rather, they can believe that their judgements merely reflect universal standards of what constitutes good art” (798). Felicia Rose Chavez puts it more sharply: such people “wield bias as a weapon, mistaking ego for objectivity” (134). In other words, just as in the idealized public sphere that Fraser critiques, these unarticulated, normalized cultural styles can act as an oppressive force in the workshop. As in the idealized public sphere, these dominant styles or norms in classrooms are often denied through the universalizing impulse Fraser identifies. The result of pretending neutrality is the further marginalization of those we would claim to accommodate. The workshop Díaz describes was effectively race-blind: “we never explored our racial identities or how they impacted our writing—at all.” Octavio Pimental, Charise Pimental, and John Dean explain how “the myth of the race-neutral writing classroom” is based on logics of colorblindness and meritocracy which “usually translates into classroom practices that build upon and bestow neutral [white] students’ cultural, linguistic, and racial knowledge.”

Even without any explicit mention of identity or race, Tim Mayers echoes this experience: “nearly all the creative writing courses I have taken have focused so sharply on the student text as to obscure any questions about whether, and how, the individual student text might fit into a larger textual network.” This focus on the text as isolated from author and context is rooted in the ideas of the New Critics. In the U.S. in the late 1930s, at the same time as the Iowa workshop was forming, New Criticism was taking hold in English Studies, and the feeling among the New Critics, many of whom were poets too, was that creative writing and this form of criticism went hand in hand (Myers 132-133). The idea that we should treat writing “objectively,” discussing only the text, without consideration of its histories, identities, or culture, has persisted in English Studies and influenced creative writing workshops. The result is the obscuring of race, identity, and social context that contributes to experiences such as the one described below:

Situación: You are an artist. You create from la vida. Life is being Chican@, a poly-identity; you write to make sense of this & heal & heal others, hopefully. You cannot stop thinking in stories, meanwhile seeing the master story give praise to the white artists. You still ask yourself why these artists rally against diversity like you’re taking away their favorite toy. You ask your mamá, why does history repeat itself? You don’t want to forget.

My MFA says they can't wait until I write stories for non-Latinos. ("Our MFA Experiences")

Fraser emphasizes that "these pressures are amplified, rather than mitigated" (64) by a system which presumes to create a space of zero culture, which presumes that inequalities and even identity can be tidily bracketed away. We should be wary of an impulse to neutralize culture—for this Chican@ student who understands their writing as created from their own poly-identity, efforts to bracket inequalities become a "rally against diversity." As Noor Naga and Robert McGill put it, "when the cultural backgrounds of workshop participants are taken for granted, members of minority groups are liable to be further marginalized" (71).

From Public Sphere to Pedagogy

When we permit the complex identities of our students into our workshops, our pedagogies need to change. In "Negotiating Cultural Difference in Creative Writing Workshops," Noor and McGill, a creative writing student and workshop instructor, respectively, write about what that looked like in their class at the University of Toronto. They focus on several "axioms" of creative writing pedagogy that they believe should be reconsidered to better serve diverse writers. The adage "show don't tell" assumes a common cultural repertoire where a reader makes meaning from the "shown," while "find your voice" is advice that always comes "in relation to culturally dominant models of speaking." Through dialogue, Noor and McGill "consider how creative writing pedagogy might avoid replicating problematic social dynamics," especially where, "in the face of oppression and marginalization, the axioms of creative writing courses can be daunting for many writers" (70). I don't pretend that workshop is a monolithic method or that problems always manifest in the same way. But Naga and McGill show us one way of beginning the work of unravelling the writing workshop to reveal damaging effects of individual actions and pedagogical assumptions.

If we examine how the idealized public sphere is reflected in our workshops, we might reconsider how we conceive of "The Reader." In "'The Reader' vs. POC," Salesses notes that in workshop when we refer to "The Reader," we often mean "someone with a standard set of expectations." The result, Salesses argues, is "singular perspective." The singular perspective of "The Reader" may be every bit as flawed as the idealized conception of a singular public, in that both deny the multiplicity of identities and perspectives in a group of people. Salesses writes, "the way 'the reader' is discussed makes the reader white (and cis and straight and, often, male)" ("The Reader vs. POC"). It is under these circumstances that "deliberation can serve as a mask for domination" (Fraser 64). Or, as Salesses explains, "When the group critiques a piece of writing from the position of a single normative reader, when it claims that art speaks to 'universal' truths as if truth is not cultural, it demands that difference, individual difference, be erased or exaggerated." In my composition classes, I often find myself writing in the margins of a student draft—*who is we?* or *which people?* When I ask my composition students to consider their intended audience for an essay, they often begin with an assumption of universality: *people in general?* they might suggest. And yet, even in writing this essay, I have caught

myself in the same patterns, writing “we” where I mean “I,” assuming that you, my reader, have an experience of the world that mirrors my own. This singular, normative perspective of the reader is part of the problem of erasure embedded in the very assumptions workshops are constructed on. How then, as teachers, do we begin to deconstruct the whiteness of the writing workshop, and even reconstruct a more equitable model?

Mayers suggests we turn to other pedagogical options: “activities that, as a supplement to workshops, would allow for sustained reflection on the very enterprise of creative writing as it relates to larger social, political, and rhetorical trends” (148). While supplemental activities can bring identity and culture into the room and help students to position their writing in social and political contexts, this alone is likely insufficient to address the complexity of students responding to one another’s work. Naga and McGill look for ways to reclaim the workshop, suggesting that “the inevitable multiplicity of backgrounds and cultural expertise among students and instructors alike is an impetus for authority sharing and dialogue about difference” (71). While they offer examples of what that dialogue might look like, the workshop they describe remains largely the same in its basic construction. And as Audre Lorde teaches us, when we use only the existing tools, tools that are racist and patriarchal in origin, then “only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible” (101).

Matthew Salesses aims to invert our existing tools, reversing the conventional workshop model which centers the workshopers who speak and give feedback. He aims to “teach the workshop to resist the very rules it sets itself,” and constructs a workshop where, instead of giving suggestions, the workshopers ask questions of the writer, centering the writer’s authority. While I can see the potential value in this approach, as someone teaching now in a predominantly white institution in the Midwest, I wonder what the consequences of Salesses’ model might be when the writer being centered is white, cis, and male. Does this model leave room for BIPOC readers to voice concern over stereotypes in a text, or even racist content? Salesses’ model resists centering “The Reader” by centering the writer instead, and if I conceive of a workshop in terms of “The Reader” and the writer, in terms of workshopers and workshoppee, then Salesses’ inversions seem like the only possible change. But what if I consider the identities that my students hold in a workshop as more fluid or complex—as being *always* both readers and writers whose cultured, gendered, raced, and classed experiences enter into the way that they interact with any text, whether their own or that of a peer?

By recalling that the workshop mirrors the problems Fraser and others have critiqued in the public sphere, I can see other avenues for reconstruction. Fraser suggests that while “participatory parity” may be an impossible ideal in settings (like a writing workshop) where power is unequally distributed, we may nonetheless move towards this goal if we model our interactions not on a single comprehensive public, but on a multiplicity of competing publics. Fraser’s vision of multiple publics is overlapping and intersectional, much like the identities that assemble in a writing workshop. Can we change the single normative reader into a multiplicity of readers instead? How might our workshops change as a result? To imagine an answer to this question, I turn to Donna Haraway’s theory of feminist objectivity often cited in critique of the Habermasian public sphere. Haraway’s theory suggests that, rather than centering or decentering the writer and their readers, we should *situate* them. She argues that objectivity can only happen

in specific embodied ways: “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (583). In other words, there is no “universal” or “neutral” or zero culture view that might give us an objective evaluation of a piece of writing. Rather, the way that we approach any question, any poem, or story, or essay draft, is from our own situated perspective. We can achieve a more conscious subjectivity by making the partial nature of our perspectives explicit.

The problem with “The Reader” is the claim of “standard” or “normative” views that a monolithic reader implies. As Haraway might describe it, “The Reader” is a “god trick,” a means “of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally” (583), thus absolving oneself of responsibility as a situated individual. Similarly, constructing workshops as zero culture spaces is an attempt to be nowhere, to efface the complex dynamics of culture and power. Guided by Haraway, we might conceive of the workshop instead as an assembly of readers, each with their own partial perspective. As Chavez describes it, “Your valuable insights spring not from immovable truth, but from biased perspective; your body, culture, class, and privilege influence your knowledge construction” (116). The goal of situating knowledge is not to limit our own views of a piece of writing or to make our perspectives unchangeable. Rather, Haraway suggests that a situated approach would “allow us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (583), to “interrogate positionings and be accountable” (586). Applied to the workshop, Haraway’s theory of situated knowledge prompts us not to construct our workshops as an idealized and ultimately hegemonic public sphere, but to map the situated perspectives of each individual in a workshop room—whether reader or writer (and in a workshop, are we not always both?). How might we workshop in a situated way with a “view from somewhere”?

Situating the Writing Workshop

Scholars in composition studies help me imagine what a situated critique, or a situated workshop, might be. Charles Lesh sees possibilities for workshops to be “permeable and potentially responsive to [students’] identities and rhetorical needs inside and outside of the classroom” (96). Deborah Britzman discusses the way in which reading practices can produce normativity, and proposes an alternative—thinking of reading practices (and I might add, workshoping practices) “as problems of opening identifications, of working the capacity to imagine oneself differently precisely with respect to how one encounters another, and in how one encounters the self” (297). When I think of what it might mean to workshop with a view from somewhere, I rifle back through my own workshop experiences, looking for moments which feel more (or less) situated to me. As Haraway teaches me, this partial view—this view from my own position—may still be valuable, if I can acknowledge its limitations.

I think of my small group of MFA classmates who gathered, for many years after graduation, in kitchens, in living rooms, often, for lack of furniture, sitting on the floor. The feedback that I got in that workshop was so valuable to me in part because it was, if not explicitly, certainly implicitly situated—it was situated by my knowledge of each person in the room, as writers, as friends. They weren’t “the reader”—they were Michael, Tyler, and Alex. I knew their writing, where they grew up, what books they were read-

ing, what beer they would order at the neighborhood bar. I knew, too, what their tendencies were in responding to a poem—I could count on Michael to help me unravel an image, on Tyler to probe for strangeness in syntax, on Alex to search a tightly crafted poem for its emotional, vulnerable core. And they knew enough about me, and my writing, to approach my work in a way that felt attuned to my needs.

In our classrooms, we don't have the benefit of that accrued knowledge to situate workshop critique—our students don't know each other's aesthetic priorities or feedback tendencies. They may not even know their own. Indeed, in a recent composition course, my students expressed trepidation around precisely this challenge. In that class, I assigned writing groups of three to four students who would work together for a full semester, hoping that this would help them build some of that valuable situatedness and rapport. Near the beginning of the semester, we read "The Thursday Night Writing Group," a multi-voiced essay describing the influence of a years-long writing workshop on its members (Beckstead et al.). I chose the piece because I heard in it echoes of my own workshop experiences—I wanted to give my students a glimpse of what a group of writers could do together. Reading the essay, my students admired the levels of accrued knowledge that the writers in that group had about each other—one of the members writes, "over time the group came to sense the type of responses I needed throughout the process" (192). But my students wondered how they would manage such familiarity themselves. One student reflected, "I am hoping that our small writing groups are going to be able to achieve this in the short time we have together. I am worried writing groups will only give positive feedback instead of constructive criticism at first for fear of hurting someone's feelings."

Here, it is worth noting that the only type of response this student can imagine is constructive criticism—a form of response that is inherently embedded in most workshop structures. Constructive criticism, though it may take different forms, carries the insinuation of objectivity: a nice way to correct a person, to set them on the right aesthetic path. But if our goal is not objectivity, but situatedness, then other forms of response might become valuable. Joy Castro, for example, uses Peter Elbow's technique of "pointing," asking every student in the workshop to read striking lines or phrases without any critique or commentary at all. Another of Elbow's techniques, "movies of a reader's mind," might be more situated—asking each workshop member to describe what happens inside their head as they read a draft (Elbow and Belanoff 44). And yet, given the pervasiveness of the idea of "the reader," this approach may need adaptation to emphasize the value of multiple readers, of multiple movies and minds. Although Salesses' models are mostly centered on some form of critique, he does probe more divergent possibilities too—using scissors and tape, drawing, or mapping the piece of writing (*Craft in the Real World* 137-138).

I return, though, to my student's other concern—"the short time we have together." In many of the early composition classes that I taught, I only found time for students to workshop or exchange peer feedback between one and three times in a semester—a short time indeed. Even in a creative writing class, where students often spend more time workshopping than in a composition course, a 15-week semester limits the accrual of situated knowledge that I experienced in my post-MFA workshop. Simply trusting that

our students will “get to know each other” as a semester unfolds may not be enough. What might we do? To answer, I turn again to my own situated experiences.

Situating Writing with Author’s Notes

In that post-MFA workshop, when we decided, after months of workshopping packets of poems, to turn our attention to our full-length manuscripts, we changed our method. We needed some way to signal to each other where we stood, where our manuscripts stood, so that we could offer useful critique on such substantial projects. Up until that point, we had given each other no context for our work—simply sending each other a file with a handful of poems. But when we sent our full manuscripts to each other, we included an extra page at the beginning, a letter addressed to the group.

Dearest Poets,

Here it is, my manuscript that I have been at times toiling over, and at times leaving fallow. I’ve been in a cycle for a while now of revisiting it roughly every four months, and at that juncture, making a few changes to order and sometimes cutting or adding a couple poems. This to say that there have been many changes, but small and slow ones spread over a long time. It’s been a long while since I’ve had anyone else read this (besides contest judges), so I’m especially interested to hear how it reads as a collection, what the arcs or threads are that hold it together, and what the experience of reading it is in this form. What does the current order do to you as a reader? Are there places that feel less inevitable/that might need to be shifted?

As for the poems themselves, many of them will be familiar, though there are a few that I think have never seen workshop. I think the manuscript is about the size and length that I want it to be, but if there are poems that are clear weaklings and I should give up, please tell me. I don’t have other poems on file that feel like they belong in this manuscript (much of what I’ve been writing lately feels separate from this project), but if there are gaps, or a style/type of poem that you think might help the balance – more of a particular color/texture/tone, I’d love to know that too so that I can think about writing to fill that gap.

Mostly, I’m grateful for your reading this, and helping me to find its form.

By this point, many of us were composition teachers, too, and so the move to include an author’s note felt natural, even though it broke with workshop tradition in a number of ways. We understood that we wanted to be able to shape each other’s responses to our work, that this in fact was part of what we gathered together in workshop to do.

Reading back over my author’s note, I see a number of situating moves. I’ve told my peers where I am in my writing process, what other feedback I’ve gotten, and what questions I have for them as readers. Those questions are posed to suggest I expect a range of responses—they are even, perhaps, posed because they are the type of questions that wouldn’t lead to consensus but rather to descriptive response. I’ve also made clear what type of prescriptive feedback I’m open to, and what type I’m unlikely to consider.

It's easy for me to imagine, looking back at this piece of writing, how this could become an assignment for my creative writing students. *When you send us your poems, include an author's note that tells us...*

While author's notes are a commonly used tool in composition classes, they are often positioned as a means of communication between the student and teacher, a sort of commentary on the draft that a teacher is about to grade. In fact, in one of the earliest publications referencing this strategy, it is called a "student-teacher memo" (Sommers). In the case of a workshop where the note is intended to situate the draft, then the note must be addressed not to the facilitator, but to the group of peers.

Any practiced participant in creative writing workshops will notice that an author's note works against one of the most commonly held tenets of a creative writing workshop: the silence of the writer. Not only is the writer traditionally asked not to speak during workshop discussion, they are asked not to preface their work or provide commentary in any way. Even in composition, Elbow echoes this common approach, urging writers to "bite your tongue" (101). One purported purpose of the writer's silence is to prevent them from somehow "spoiling" the reader's objective perspective on the work. If we accept, however, that the notion of a singular, objective reader's view is a "god trick," (Haraway 581), an impossibility that enforces inequality in our classrooms, then this argument for the writer's silence loses its footing. As Haraway suggests, there is no singular objective reading, only multiple partial perspectives that gain value by their situatedness. Indeed, I would argue that it is this assembly of multiple perspectives that gives workshops their enduring worth. The writer's silence not only presumes a singular objective reader, it also implies a sameness among a workshop's writers. Why would a writer need to speak if everyone in a workshop seeks the same sort of feedback, or has the same goals for their writing? If, though, we admit the diverse identities and situations of our students into the workshop space, then we need to account for the different priorities that our students have in their writing.

Instead of worrying about a writer's speech spoiling the readers' "objective" views, we might consider the ways a writer's direction can situate work for the diverse readers in a workshop, each with their own approach and positionality. An author's note is a way of giving the writer voice, of insisting that their own contexts for their work—racial, cultural, gendered, situated in intersecting ways—matter. Contextualizing and situating your own work is not automatic or easy; it is a learned skill. When I reread the author's note I wrote, I also see the things that I chose not to say. I didn't explain how I had decided to sequence the poems, because I wanted to know how someone else would describe that organization. I didn't ask the most burning question I had, *is this good enough?* because I knew it would only encourage my friends to reassure me instead of offering the critique that I desired. Over many years in workshops, I've learned to consider what I do and do not say, and how to ask for feedback that will be useful to me. If we ask our students to write an author's note to accompany their writing, we will need to help them consider the choices within it, and allow them opportunities to try situating their work in different ways.

Situating Feedback in Workshop Letters

When I moved away from New York, I left that post-MFA workshop behind, and I missed the feedback that had become so valuable to me. The first workshop that I took part in here in Nebraska felt like a big risk—suddenly, I was in a room full of people who knew nothing about my poems, and close to nothing about me. Would my poems still matter to them? Would their feedback still matter to me? This, I realize, is the position that our students are in every semester when they enter a new workshop.

When I brought my manuscript to this new group of peers, even though it wasn't asked for, I included an author's note in an attempt to offer some situating context to these new readers. The most valuable feedback I received in reply was feedback that was situated too. Feedback that told me something not only about their reaction to the work, but about where they were coming from as readers. Two of my peers opened their letters with a reference to their own grief, explaining how that impacted their reading of my work:

“since I am so much in grief, it was difficult for me to read with a critical eye. Before I jump into the few critiques I do have to offer, I just want to say thank you, truly.”

“I am currently still deep in the throes of grief related to suicide, so while I found this manuscript hard to read on a personal level, I also found it beautiful and healing.... With all of that in mind, I tried to be as critical as possible while also taking care of myself.”

Reading their notes, I was moved, not simply by the compliment, but by the way they made visible their personal point of connection to my poems. I realized that, for all of the many workshops these poems had seen, I'd never been told what it was like to read my manuscript—a manuscript about grief—from the position of someone grieving. It is little wonder, really, given that we were always taught that workshop was supposed to be impersonal, objective, focused on the writing instead of the writer. Feedback like this, as personal and partial a perspective as it offered, did something important for me, and for a manuscript I had been toiling over for years: it reminded me *why* I was writing it. I realized that, like my composition student, I hadn't known to ask for anything outside of constructive criticism. I hadn't known to ask for the subjectivity of my readers—I was so used to cultivating a distance from my work that I was missing something I needed just as much: closeness and vulnerability.

Other peers situated their responses to my manuscript by explaining how they approached it in the context of their own poetic expectations, making explicit those types of “implicit aesthetic norms” that Kearns describes:

“I've read a lot of books about grief, but this book doesn't feel like it's so much about grief as it *is* grief.”

“Project books have felt trendy the last few years, perhaps because they're easy to say compelling things about on Twitter or to explicate in book reviews, and reading for contests you see a lot of books that seem like a good idea for a

short series of poems that has just been hammered into the ground. Yet [this manuscript] feels to me like it could only have emerged organically through the kind of patient labor so many of the poems describe, the daily contemplation, meditation, invention.”

The simple act of making these expectations visible helped me in reading the rest of the feedback in each letter. I understood that the first reader was viewing my manuscript in conversation with other books they had read about grief, and that the second reader was viewing it in relation to other project books—this helped me situate their responses, and make use of them, regardless of whether I considered my manuscript to be a project book, a grief book, or something else.

Workshop letters are commonplace in creative writing workshops, so commonplace that sometimes we may forget to consider what work we want them to do. They are evidence of our students’ preparation for a workshop, or a way for students to give individual feedback before the groupthink of workshop discussion kicks in. Reflecting on the workshop letters I’ve received, I wonder how we might better use those letters as a second point of opportunity to, as Haraway says, “interrogate positionings and be accountable” (586). If an author’s note allows the writer to situate their draft and the way we approach it, then a workshop letter allows each reader to situate themselves in relation to the writing. It’s an opportunity for us to “become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway 583), to make explicit our partial perspective. These are difficult things to do, and especially difficult to do live, in a dynamic workshop discussion. Integrating these ideas into the workshop letter allows more time for reflection and practice, for students to consider what type of reader they are or want to be. But because the workshop letter is so commonplace, we may need to do more to guide the assignment to encourage students’ reflection on their own perspectives, and situate their feedback as coming *from somewhere*.

When I think of the workshop letters I’ve written and received, almost all of them follow roughly the same expected formula. Begin with descriptive feedback, move to prescriptive suggestions. Or, begin with praise, move to critique. In assigning workshop letters to my students, unsurprisingly, I’ve carried forward this pattern. Indeed, I think there’s a lot to value in it. But what would a workshop letter look like if the first direction was *begin with a view from somewhere*? I’d need to revise my assignment language to guide my students there:

Workshop Letter Assignment, 1st Revision*

**italics* indicate new assignment language, ~~strikethroughs~~ indicate cuts to old assignment language

Compose a letter to the writer. Begin with Dear _____, and then continue.

In the first part of your letter, ~~describe the piece as you understand it.~~ *tell the writer where you're coming from as a reader. What perspectives, interests, or expectations are you bringing to their work?* You might talk about your experience reading the piece., ~~and offer a summary. What is the piece about? What happens? What words would you use to describe it? How does it make you feel?~~

In the second part of your letter, offer some praise. Talk about ~~what is working well,~~ or what you enjoyed as a reader, and why. Be as specific as possible – you might include quotes or point to specific passages or features of the piece.

Finally, finish your letter with a question or two that might help the writer continue working on this piece. As a reader, what do you remain curious about? Is there something that leaves you confused? Where are you left wondering? Is there something they might expand?

This revision is both imperfect and untested, but I want to pay attention to the language I needed to shift. First, I decided that I needed to ask explicitly about the expectations a reader was bringing to the work—I wanted to open space for the type of personally situated feedback that I received on my manuscript. Second, I decided to remove the ubiquitous workshop phrase: what is working well? I realized that it might invite students to pretend a sort of objective authority or knowledge of what “working” looks like. As Mary Ann Cain writes, “what works’ is defined by an unassumed, often unarticulated understanding of the social that tends to reproduce itself along dominant images of gender, race, class, and other underrepresented identities” (222). It’s worth noting that these are small changes of language, and they may not be enough to encourage students—especially those with considerable workshop experience—to shift beyond the habit of pretending objectivity in their responses to each other’s work.

I find myself dissatisfied, too, with my lack of revisions in the final paragraph, and especially to the direction to offer “a question or two that might help the writer continue working on this piece.” Why should a student be guessing what might help their peer, when they could read an author’s note that would guide them? Perhaps the most impactful revision, then, would be to frame this workshop letter not as a response to the writing, but as a response to the writer. If students write author’s notes that situate their work and pose questions to open space for multiple perspectives, then the workshop letter need only be a thoughtful and thorough reply to the author’s note. In my composition classes, this is already the approach I take, and so this second revision borrows some language from those assignments:

Workshop Letter Assignment, 2nd Revision

Compose a letter to the writer in response to their author's note. Begin with Dear _____, and then continue.

In the first part of your letter, tell the writer where you're coming from as a reader. What perspectives, interests, or expectations are you bringing to their work? You might talk about your experience reading the piece. What words would you use to describe it? How does it make you feel?

In the second part of your letter, respond to the questions and concerns that the writer outlined in their author's note. Be as specific as possible – you might include quotes or point to specific passages or features of the piece. Even if they didn't ask for it directly, you will likely want to offer some praise. Talk about what you enjoyed as a reader, and why.

Just as an author's note requires practice to become valuable, so too does a workshop letter—I've found it useful, early in a class, to give feedback not on student's creative work, but on the workshop letters they offer to each other. It may also be useful to frame a class discussion around the opening paragraphs of students' letters, allowing them to notice and appreciate differences among their situated views and to map how their partial perspectives contribute to the workshop, rather than looking for ways to arrive at consensus.

Practicing a Partial View

While I've discussed the value of authors' notes and workshop letters from the writer's position, I want to consider them from the position of a reader responding too. A few months after that first Nebraska workshop, I joined a small peer writing group. One member, another poet, asked me for feedback on some of his poems. Despite my years of workshoping experience, I felt hesitant. His work dealt with his personal experience as an adopted child, a trans person, a parent, and someone from the American south. If you mapped our situated perspectives, beyond the fact that we had both wound up in Lincoln, Nebraska for graduate school, we couldn't have been further apart. What could I have to offer to his work? When I opened his document, I was grateful to see that he had included small author's notes with each poem—questions, concerns, scraps of information to situate me. *I'm curious about the structure of this poem. What will make this poem stand out more? What is the relationship you see between the "she" and the "me"? Is the start dead weight? Can this poem be saved?* With these questions in hand, I felt much more confident in my own response, and what's more, I understood why he was bringing the poems to me, why he wanted an outside eye, a partial vision different from his own.

Our students are often in this spot—wondering if they have feedback worth offering, or fearful that they will stumble in responding to someone they've only just met. We can provide opportunities for them to approach that process more responsibly, by emphasizing their situated positions. When my composition student worried that writing groups would play it safe and stick to compliments, she was recognizing a common

trend in creative writing workshops too. If instead we teach our students to ask for the kind of feedback they want, and to respond in a way that takes responsibility for their own partial view, then not only are we resisting that damaging assumption of a dominant reader, we are teaching them to be reflective about and ultimately accountable for the feedback that they give. But author's notes and workshop letters are both practices assigned outside of class that students write in preparation for entering the risky space of a workshop. Can notes and letters solve dynamic problems that happen live, in every conversation among students?

The honest answer is: no. But they can reconstruct our thinking as readers and writers (and indeed, as teachers) entering that workshop space. Both author's notes and workshop letters help writers and readers communicate. They give the writer a voice, and the writing a context, instead of presenting writing as race-neutral, in a zero-culture space. And they ask each person to respond to that writer and that context—not as a neutral or objective reader, but as another situated individual, someone writing from somewhere, who is responsible for their readings too. As such, I think they may be a valuable first step for my teaching.

These communications also serve a reflective purpose. Sandra Giles discusses the ways author's notes can help students reflect on and develop the intentions and aims of their writing. This type of thinking, according to Kathleen Yancey and Jane Smith, can also be a “method for assigning both responsibility and authority to a learner” (qtd. in Giles 198). In this way, an author's note gives the writer the authority and agency that both Salesses and Kearns advocate for. And it allows a writer the reflective space not always available in the quick dynamics of a workshop conversation. Workshop letters, which we may think of as simply a means of giving feedback, also encourage reflection. Writing a workshop letter where you are asked to describe your own perspectives, interests, or expectations in approaching a draft requires taking time to consider what those expectations are, and to take responsibility for them. To borrow Britzman's words, writing a workshop letter might be a moment “to imagine oneself differently precisely with respect to how one encounters another” (297). In a workshop tradition that imagines the reader and the writer—indeed, the public—as white, cis, straight, and male, these notes and letters might offer one way to rewrite how we imagine and encounter each other—and by extension, each other's writing.

Works Cited

- “Our MFA Experiences.” *The Acentos Review*, November 2016, https://www.acentosreview.com/November_2016/our-mfa-experiences.html
- Alter, Alexandra, Jonah Engel Bromwich, and Damien Cave. “The Writer Zinzi Clemmons Accuses Junot Díaz of Forcibly Kissing Her.” *New York Times*, 14 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/books/junot-Díaz-accusations.html>
- Beckstead, Linda, Kate Brooke, Robert Brooke, Kathryn Christensen, Dale Jacobs, Heidi LM Jacobs, Carol McDaniels, and Joan Ratcliff. “The Thursday Night Writing Group: Crossing Institutional Lines.” *Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom*, edited by Beverly J. Moss, Nels P. Highberg, and Melissa Nicolas, IWCA Press, 2004, pp. 187-205.

- Bennett, Eric. *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing During the Cold War*. University of Iowa Press, 2015.
- Britzman, Deborah P. "Queer Pedagogy and Its Strange Techniques." *Counterpoints*, vol. 367, 2012, pp. 292–308.
- Cain, Mary Ann. "A Space of Radical Openness': Re-Visioning the Creative Writing Workshop." Donnelly, pp. 216-229.
- Castro, Joy. "Racial and Ethnic Justice in the Creative Writing Course." *GulfCoast*, Fall 2015. <https://gulfcoastmag.org/online/fall-2015/racial-and-ethnic-justice-in-the-creative-writing-course/>
- Chavez, Felicia Rose. *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*. Haymarket Books, 2021.
- Díaz, Junot. "MFA vs. POC." *The New Yorker*, 30 April 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc>
- Donnelly, Dianne, editor. *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?*, Multilingual Matters, 2010.
- Eberly, Rosa A. "From Writers, Audiences, and Communities to Publics: Writing Classrooms as Protopublic Spaces." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1999, pp. 165–78.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing without Teachers*. Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Elbow, Peter and Pat Belanoff. *Sharing and Responding*. Random House, 1989.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, vol. 26, no. 25/26, 1990, p. 56-80.
- Gross, Philip. "Small Worlds: What Works in Workshops If and When They Do?" Donnelly, pp. 52-62.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere : an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. 1st MIT Press pbk., MIT Press, 1991.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–99.
- Harper, Graeme and Stephanie Vanderslice. "The Reason It Is; The Rhyme It Isn't." *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, edited by Anna Leahy, Multilingual Matters, 2005, pp. 205-214.
- Kearns, Rosalie Morales. "Voice of Authority: Theorizing Creative Writing Pedagogy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2009, pp. 790–807.
- Lesh, Charles N. "Writing Workshops in the Public Turn." *Composition Studies*, vol. 2, no. 156, 2019, pp. 87–107.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. 1984. Penguin Books, 2020.
- Martinez, Aja. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. SWR, 2020.
- Mayers, Tim. *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014.
- Myers, David G. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Prentice Hall, 1996.
- Naga, Noor, and Robert McGill. "Negotiating Cultural Difference in Creative Writing Workshops." *Pedagogy*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2018, pp. 69–86.
- Pimental, Octavio, Charise Pimental, and John Dean. "The Myth of the Colorblind Writing Classroom: White Instructors Confront White Privilege in their Classrooms." *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, edited by

- Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young, University Press of Colorado, 2017, pp. 109-122.
- Rivera, Alisa. "On Junot Díaz, From a Survivor." *The Rumpus*, 15 May 2018, <https://therumpus.net/2018/05/enough-on-junot-díaz-from-a-survivor/>
- Robillard, Amy. "From Isolated Stories to a Collective: Speaking Out About Misogyny in English Departments." *Peitho*, vol 23, no. 2, 2021.
- Salesses, Matthew. *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*. Catapult, 2021.
- . "'The Reader' vs. POC: Time to Rethink the Creative Writing Workshop." *Gulf Coast*, Fall, 2015. <https://gulfcoastmag.org/online/fall-2015/the-reader-vs-poc/>
- . "Who's at the Center of Workshop and Who Should Be?" *Pleiades Literature in Context*. <https://pleiadesmag.com/whos-at-the-center-of-workshop-and-who-should-be-part-1/>
- Sommers, Jeffrey. "Behind the Paper: Using the Student-Teacher Memo." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1988, pp. 77-80.
- Vanderslice, Stephanie. "Once More to the Workshop: A Myth Caught in Time." Donnelly, pp 30-36.