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Where and How We Might Teach Hybrid:
A Pedagogical Review of
Kazim Ali's *Silver Road*

Like many who undergo formal creative writing training, I was instructed in my first classes to “read as a writer.” This meant keeping in mind my creative intentions during the act of reading. It meant learning to map the moves another writer made so I could emulate them in my own work. Reading as a writer meant becoming a scavenger or a collector, perhaps. It meant reading with a motive: learning from models that use the writing fundamentals I’d learned in class such as image, metaphor, plot, and the poetic line.

I read like this for my first ten years as a writer, but by the time I reached the final year of my MFA program, I began to understand that rules were meant to be broken. It was no longer about imitating but answering an invitation. Reading as a writer began to mean remixing, reprising, repurposing, and riffing. I understood that most anything we read gives us an invitation to begin a metaphorical correspondence, or to write a protest song, or, for that matter, a new song with very different instruments than the text we’re indirectly responding to. It was not transcribing or transposing but answering. This understanding was heightened by my study of hybrid writing that breaks the rules of genre.

I wonder if my process of 1) *imitation*, then 2) *departure from imitation* can be accelerated or remixed if we teach hybrid texts to undergraduates. Hybrid texts, especially those in proximity to creative nonfiction, are malleable in the hands of teachers and tend to be relevant across multiple academic areas. A hybrid text works in any number of classes. Reading *Silver Road* got me thinking not only about the rhizomatic possibilities of my own writing, but my own teaching. I read hybrid works regularly, but *Silver*

Road reached me differently because it feels both scholarly and associative, intertextual and self-referential, and because of the way it uses research. All of these sources gather and sing together in the same way disparate sources do within a poem. I wonder what using hybrid texts teaches us about teaching.

Kazim Ali's *Silver Road* (2018) is a book that speaks to me deeply in its somatic approach, border-crossing formal and thematic considerations, and its profound treatment of "home." The text breathes between lineation and prose. The story draws in astronomy, poetry, history, literature, and geography. I was drawn to write a review of *Silver Road*, but I wondered what would happen if I pushed against that genre boundary, too. I wondered what would happen if I tried to develop an understanding of the book through pedagogical analysis and drove with it on a meandering road trip through the classification system of academic disciplines. In other words, I wanted to ask, *How might this book be taught?*

The most obvious home for this book in an academic creative writing course is a graduate seminar on hybrid forms or lyric essay. This is where I first encountered such works myself. Students come to a hybrid forms class expecting to see, for instance, both lineation and prose in a single book, which *Silver Road* delivers. The publisher, Tupelo Press, presents the titles of each section in three fonts. Travelogues begin each of the eight movements, which are each composed of multiple sections, and within which readers will find both lineation and prose. Visual observations may be the first hybridity students identify in *Silver Road*, but students in a hybrid forms course are there to analyze additional ways in which the hybridity extends. Hybridities of earth, sky, and cosmos; gradations of sound and silence; and overlapping ontologies offer a richness to writer-readers and invite us to make our own works more multidimensional.

In a course that doesn't necessarily have "hybrid" in its title, *Silver Road* offers a model for how research-driven nonfiction can also serve as memoir. Ali writes, "Mapped my way to myself, mapped my body and its weaknesses. Mapped the city up and down, by walking and then by driving... A city moves through time" (88). On the following page, he becomes more analytic—and yet improvisational—as he writes, "A start of a reading list for a course on cities" including texts by Gertrude Stein and Etel Adnan.

The book is not research-driven in a linear way. Rather, it is research-driven in an associative way where Ali's research questions open up laterally instead of closing in. *Silver Road* contains enough narrative to be a gateway, in a creative nonfiction class, for nonfiction writers who fear the lyric. But it also welcomes poets who don't feel comfortable with prose into the world of creative nonfiction. The book welcomes both kinds of single-genre writers to move against the grain of their previous work.

In a more general creative nonfiction course, this book encourages students to bring all of themselves into their work. The book includes close readings and literary analysis of works by authors like CA Conrad and Jorie Graham as well as narrative memoir about Ali's childhood experiences in Manitoba. Ali travels across genres of creative nonfiction and across understandings of existence. He writes, "To walk in the world is to find oneself in a body without papers, not a citizen of anything but breath. And to be oneself is to be alone, to be one and no other..." (3). "Home" serves as a keyword or subject file description for this book, which is especially exciting because Ali queers conventional understandings of home. He writes, "In the houses of my extended family I sometimes wonder who I am... My queerness does not make me a two-spirited person or make available to me any particular magic. It only reveals better that latent quality of loneliness or aloneness shared by any mortal thing. I have come to believe that this sense of alienation is what opened the door for me to poetry" (7).

Silver Road is in conversation with Matsuo Basho's *Narrow Road to the Interior*, and these collections could be taught alongside one another in a poetry course. Ali incorporates the gestures and feel of the haibun form, the moves between exhale and inhale, and the transfers between lineation and prose, though he tends to work in longer segments. *Silver Road* and Ali's other work encourage us to rethink what a poem is and what a poem could be. To teach a poetry class that pushes against the very definition of poetry invites students to branch out in their writing. This is appealing to me because one of the biggest challenges I have as a poetry teacher is that many student poets tend towards writing in the form of a safe,

single stanza that protects itself against associative risks. Much of my pedagogy is devoted to finding ways to help student poets feel safer in taking bigger creative risks.

Silver Road also lends itself to a variety of special topics humanities courses with titles like Writing About Place, Travelogues, Stories of Cities and Home, Eco Literature, Poetry in Urban Studies, Queer Literatures of Religion, etc. STEM majors can use *Silver Road* as an opportunity to practice new ways to write about the sciences. Ali writes of the part of his childhood spent in the far north, looking at the sky,

Now some theoretical physicists are positing that everything in the universe may be a simulation, programmed by some intelligence, not even real. The idea sounds hyper-modern, like a real-life version of *The Matrix*, but something like this was spelled out in the Vedas thousands of years ago, and in more or less the same terms that the physicists are using now. You would wonder about the same thing had you had a chance to stare into the dark of Nothing and see what I saw those cold evenings thirty-some years ago.” (20-21)

Silver Road could lead to fruitful discussions about the obligation of scientists to the public (an obligation that is mirrored by creative writers) and of the obsessiveness of scientists (also mirrored by creative writers). “Like physicists,” Ali writes, “Dickinson obsessed about time and eternity” (21). Later, he writes, “...I might have learned that poetry uses some of the same institutions and techniques as math does, and that the physicists who are trying to explain the nature of the material universe are essentially dreaming, and they’re using similar strategies as poets and philosophers” (97). When student writers can see themselves as scientists, and student scientists can see themselves as writers, students may adopt a growth mindset and decide that they can be good at multiple things at the same time. It’s the same style of permission that many of us writers celebrated when we encountered hybrid work for the first time. “Oh!” I remember thinking as a graduate student, “I’m not *just* a poet. I can write anything I want.” Such a celebration is a gift of books like this.

When I read *Silver Road*, I am reminded of the joy of lateral movement of the lyric essay, of *zuihitsu*, of hybrid forms, and also of the joy of somatic association that happens during stretching and breath work. I know that many yoga teachers incorporate writing into their instruction (in Miami, I attended a queer and trans yoga class once a month that ended with the teachers reading a poem by a trans or queer writer, a poem that was in conversation with our movements). I wonder what it looks like for an institutional creative writing class to incorporate accessible movement into its pedagogy. When we think of “multimodal,” how far can we go? The closet I’ve come to this is teaching an ecopoetry class in which we regularly ventured outside. What kind of movement is possible inside of the classroom, and how might we use movement to inform the writing process? Ali’s writing provides one roadmap for this kind of somatic hybridity.

If I continue to think about incorporating *Silver Road* into my pedagogy, I consider teaching this book in a first-year writing course as a way of revivifying how we teach about genre. What do students learn from genres that don’t play by the rules of genre conventions? What do students learn from a text that travels? *Silver Road* might be called a “challenging” text, especially for readers who have not read other contemporary hybrid works. But first-year writing students served by this “challenge” learn how to find their way into it, just as they will have to find their way into a scholarly journal article. The short narrative passages in *Silver Road* serve as doors into the text, doors that first-year students can practice opening.

When I began teaching six years ago, I started asking myself a new question whenever I was reading: *How might this book be taught?* It’s another kind of analysis that helps me understand texts in new ways as I consider *How is this text constructed and where could it be broken up into smaller readings?*, *What questions could I ask about this text?*, and *What do I want to learn from other readers about this text?* Opening up these lines of inquiry as a reader invigorates me. When we read Ali and other hybridists as writing teachers, we are invited to facilitate inclusive, expansive, interdisciplinary classroom spaces in which we, too, may encounter new possibilities for our own creative practices.