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Liminally True: Creative Nonfiction as Transformative Thirdspace

A student from twenty years ago who became an accomplished high school English teacher in a challenging urban district wrote to me recently and said: “I miss creative nonfiction. I want to enroll again. I need to write like I used to in that class.” He also tells me that he tells his students—the ones who say they hate writing—about our creative nonfiction course and that one of his fondest memories of college is when the class went out to dinner at a Turkish restaurant and, as he describes it, watched the professor killing it on the dance floor.

I want to propose here a possible way of accounting for the satisfaction that a lot of students and I seem to experience in the creative nonfiction class, and that idea is liminality. It’s natural to talk about liminality with regard to CNF in terms of literary genre that defies easy placement. Sometimes referred to as the fourth genre in literature, the essay and other creative nonfiction forms occupy a liminal space in the world of writing, existing at the interstices of various genres. As has been much discussed, the term itself—creative nonfiction—is paradoxical in several ways, including its definition by what it is *not*, the yoking of the word “creative” with what seems like the opposite of the imaginative, and even the implication that not all composing is, in effect, “creative.” Such generic liminality gives rise to similar institutional ambiguity as attested to in Douglas Hesse’s articles “The Place of Creative Nonfiction” and “Who Owns Creative Nonfiction?” Hesse discusses the way creative nonfiction texts seem to challenge our textual classification systems and raises this point: “Where to put certain books on library and store shelves is metonymic of more complex questions regarding creative nonfiction’s place in English studies” (“Place” 238). The “creative” component of such writing has aligned it with a belletristic tradition and situated it within

creative writing domains and pedagogies, while the “nonfiction” element invokes the expository mode, long the bailiwick of first year writing and advanced composition as well as the researched exploratory often situated in journalism departments. Where to *put* creative nonfiction still remains an active question. Far from a vexed position, however, we can see this interstitial placement between creative and expository writing—this liminality—as powerfully productive, not merely in terms of genre but in terms of method and pedagogy for the writing classroom. It is not the definitions of creative nonfiction that are important to the argument I am making here but instead the liminal space where the juxtapositions meet. Creative nonfiction both bridges *and* frustrates the divide between creative and academic modes; the personal and the scholarly; indeed, it can function as a hinge between the two in a way that reveals the artificiality of these dichotomies. Creative nonfiction’s generativity derives in large part from this liminality, an idea of liminality evoked not only in the anthropologist Victor Turner’s classic notion of the liminal but in more postmodern assertions of the principle, such as urban planner/geographer Edward Soja’s concept of “Thirdspace.”

In their *Writing about Writing* textbook, Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs consider the concept of the liminal in their discussion of threshold concepts for studying writing. They reference the idea of liminality with regard to the learner’s entry into new discursive space:

While learners are struggling with the ideas [of a new discourse], they find themselves in a “*liminal*” space—a space where they move back and forth, start to get a handle on the ideas, then realize they don’t really have a handle on them. Learning in this liminal space can be quite uncomfortable because learners have to examine their previous ideas and experiences and try to understand something that might conflict with those ideas.

But when learners finally do grasp these threshold concepts, the way they see things is changed —*transformed*, likely for good. (6)

In this model of liminality as applied to writing, the novice writer is akin to the cultural initiates that Turner describes in his landmark work on cultural liminality, and the idea of liminality takes on a teleological dimension as a phase that must be worked through to achieve a new, transcendent identity. In this way, liminality with regard to writing and being a writer is configured as a lack, one that eventually must be obviated. The discomfort that Wardle and Downs refer to can be accounted for in Turner's description of the liminal subject as one who is "at once no longer classified and not yet classified" (96). But while this description suggests a state of lack, it also describes potential, one which we might try to cultivate rather than simply resolve, not unlike Keats's concept of negative capability, in which one dwells in uncertainty. (Such tentativeness characterizes the subjectivity often found in the creative nonfiction persona, which the author might use to explore suggestions rather than eristically argue assertions.) As Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergman note, liminality is something that can occur when boundaries are transgressed (23), and we are no longer in fixed territories. It is this aspect in particular that Edward Soja articulates in his extension of the idea of liminality through the notion of Thirdspace that has particularly interesting applicability for creative nonfiction as both genre *and* method. As students practice resisting conclusion in favor of exploration in their writing, they try on the mindset of indeterminacy that invites this place of generative liminality, a liberatory place that can nonetheless be challenging to inhabit.

Soja's geographical concept of Thirdspace can be construed as both material and imaginary and can be described not as an uncomfortable intermediary of binaries but rather as a productive, transgressive site, as he says, "a meeting ground, a site of hybridity and *mestizaje*...moving beyond entrenched boundaries, a margin or edge where ties can be severed and also where new ties can be forged...it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practised and fully *LIVED*" ("Expanding" 276). Soja states that his notion of Thirdspace is an elaboration of Henri Lefebvre's theorizations on spatiality and cites several feminist and postcolonial critics, bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa among them, as enacting some of the

essence of Thirdspace in their work (“Expanding” 270-75). Anzaldúa’s borderland epistemology of *mestizaje*, for example, which Soja references in the quote above, captures certain aspects of the feeling he is after in his corrective of geography’s traditional focus on what he calls “First Space” or “Perceived Space” and “Second Space” or “Conceived Space” (“Expanding” 265-66). He describes Anzaldúa’s radical positioning as “being outside and inside at the same time” (“Expanding” 274), articulating a liminality of plenitude rather than lack that allows for not just hybridity but a questioning of both positions. This last point is key in my elaboration of Soja’s applicability to the creative nonfiction classroom. For in addition to his assertion of a logic of inclusivity in which Thirdspace invites thinking that is “both/and” rather than “either/or” (“Journeys” 5), I see a further prospect emanating from Soja’s rationale—what I would call a neither/nor positioning, a deep skepticism that aligns with essayistic thinking and practice. Far from a nihilistic position, it is one that is paradoxically productive, not just in the writing itself but in the way that writing comes alive, is “lived and practiced” in the physical space of the classroom. This possibility sometimes manifests when my students write about family and their placement within it from the perspective of an outsider, as they try the technique Lisa Knopp calls “perhapsing,” by writing an assignment about what happened the day they were born. The imaginative leap required here as well as the research students do by reading newspaper articles from their fateful day positions them in a different relation to their family history than they previously occupied, one where they might, for example, imagine parents as people different from whom the students know, parents who were not yet parents, who were living somewhere else, who were not yet thinking about divorce, etc. The students simultaneously locate that history in a broader context and speculate about events they can never know first-hand. This process of estrangement, of disengaging and re-engaging with their own story, takes on added momentum as they witness other students in the class participate in the same act of reimagination.

While utopian in description, Soja sees Thirdspace as decidedly place-based in enactment, a literal space as much as a concept. Using a geographer’s material groundedness has particular utility in discussing

creative nonfiction because the word geography literally means “earth writing” (Teverson and Upstone 9), a phrase that resonates with the terrain of CNF (pun intended) reliant on what Donaldo Macedo has called (somewhat disparagingly) the “discourse of experience” (18) and a concretized reality. But this groundedness also allows educators to see the space of the CNF classroom itself as a literal meeting ground, one where the writing that is embodied through lived experience as an imaginary Thirdspace parallels the material Thirdspace of the classroom itself, serving as a point where the academic and other lives of our students meet. When a student of Armenian descent describes for the class her participation in an event marking the anniversary of the genocide, I observe the impact on other students who appear to be learning about history in a way markedly different than if this information had been introduced to them through a disinterested text. In its assemblage of both student words and student bodies that accompany their writing, this space has particular potential to serve as a fulcrum of possibility, one that is “open” and “dynamic” rather than “fixed and closed” (Campbell 68) as the various discourses and experiences of student lives that might otherwise remain separate are placed side by side in tensive ways. I find myself wondering if that is perhaps what my beloved student meant when he said, “I need to write like I used to in that class.”

Much scholarship in recent years has taken a geographical turn in its interest in and insistence on the importance of place and the interdependence of locational ecologies. We are never “nowhere”; we are always “somewhere”—physically, psychologically, socially, environmentally—and that “somewhere” affords possibilities and enacts limitations on our thoughts, our actions, our choices and their consequences. It behooves us to understand where we are and its effects on us, how we construct and are constructed by location—and to consider pedagogy in light of our embodied presences in overlapping and relational spaces. As Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh compellingly argue in “Deep Maps: Teaching Rhetorical Engagement through Place-Conscious Education,” it is by exploring our “*relationships to a place*” that we begin “the critical and visionary work of writing *for a place*” (144) and that “Such work ... is

at the very core of rhetorical engagement” (147). They and others offer place-based pedagogy and composing as corrective to a governing metaphor of what Nedra Reynolds refers to as “placelessness,” in which “successful pieces of writing are considered to be those that ‘overcome’ place and time, those that universalize an experience” (258) and, in effect, exist in some kind of fallacious vacuum. While Soja’s perspective undoubtedly is in line with this geographical thinking, I see an interesting contradiction evolving from his Thirdspace trajectory that at first glance might seem at odds with “grounded” earth writing and is connected to the provisional nature of classroom space.

To understand this, I consider further Reynolds’ idea of “placelessness.” Her criticism in “Cultural Geographies and Images of Place” is contextualized in response to a specific analysis of a Harvard University video, *Shaped by Writing*, that features professors and students at the university extolling the virtues of writing and its instruction at Harvard. Reynolds’ critique is incisive in identifying a belletristic assumption in the video’s conception, one that relies on a traditional and privileged place of the liberal arts education and that in some ways belies the more interesting scholarship on rhetoric that places writing in active, meaningful contexts. Instead the video portrays writing as a “universal experience” steeped in the “values of a liberal arts education” practiced by graduates who are “products of one of the world’s finest institutions of higher learning” (257). Further, this somewhat romanticized vision of writing and its role in intellectual development seems to ignore and exclude very different realities of non-elite institutions and writing located outside academic contexts. To be sure Reynolds’ methodology of place, which relies on cultural geography’s understanding of “how places reproduce the identities and power structures of those who occupy them” (252), gives her great insight into the video’s shortcomings.

But is it possible that in our attempts to compensate for the fallacy of an ungrounded epistemology, we unnecessarily limit the role of the imagined that Soja’s Thirdspace seems to invite and re-envision? Is it possible to see potential rather than deficit in a notion of space temporarily unmoored from its place-based constraints to create a provisional, ludic geography of realized imagination? Place-

based theories, such as Brook and McIntosh's deployment of William Least Heat-Moon's "deep maps," allow for the abstraction of the psychological and the imagined, what Soja terms Second, or Conceived, Space. But it is the liminality of Soja's Thirdspace that asks us to think in terms of a carnivalesque collision of the imagined and real, as we might see in a classroom space that invites students to imagine and re-present lived experience safe in the assumption that it is a test, a try-on, not necessarily tied to lasting expectations or changes but something to exist within the transient classroom sphere.

Some have seen the practice of creative nonfiction as aligned with expressivism and writing to learn (see Bourelle), thus emphasizing the teaching of such writing as exploratory method (rather than product or craft), one that fosters the development of subjectivity. While the nature of personal writing itself may produce this effect, the classroom, where such writing is shared, contains the heightened potential for transgressive interloping. But it is not a space completely given over to the personal discourse of student lives as those might be practiced with families or friends. In fact, it is because the creative nonfiction class violates the terms of both those spaces—the academic and, let's call it "civilian," life—that I see a "critical thirding" (Soja, "Journeys" 5) occurring. When a student, for example, writes of a gendered double-standard she sees enacted in her family with regard to policing sexual behavior, her bravery in disclosing for class her family secret is not only a betrayal of a family code where she exposes an unsavory domestic truth. It is also an incursion into what constitutes academic protocol when she presents the problem as a personal, embodied reality rather than an abstract concept. But in writing the word "violate" above, I realize, in the time of "me too," that it is not a nice-sounding term. Don't I mean to say something more pleasant and positive, happier, like merging or hybridity, or talk about the way the class serves as a bridge between different worlds, etc.? Those nice sounding, community-oriented words. I don't mean to disparage or exclude the possibility of community at all, but I see that I want the violence, the edge, of the sister word violate, because it is that "nastiness" (another contemporary expression associated with female

empowerment) that brings Thirdspace into play as a transgressive space, one that is not a “better” place per se, but which, in its provisional assemblage, allows us to call into question the tenets of those first and second spaces that bifurcate our lives. The creative nonfiction classroom is both a conceived space, but also a real space, assuming you are not teaching an on-line course, yet there is something Brigadoon-like about it in its performativity. It comes in and out of existence—for those times each week when the scheduled violation occurs.

The CNF class is particularly positioned to be this kind of authorizing class that can and should foster texts and lives by tapping into not just the communal, which is vitally important, but also the liminal that puts us in a place of wonderment about where we are and how we live. In Lucille McCarthy’s composition classic “A Stranger in Strange Lands,” in which she follows a student progressing through the writing assignments of his various college classes, she discusses the reaction of students to the workshopping community that was created in a composition class, making the observation that “... an important social function [must have been] ... served by these students’ work with each other” evidenced “by their clear memory, a year and a half later, both of their essays and of each others’ reactions to them” (255). This is no small thing, this important social function, when I consider that many of my students tell me they barely remember what happens in their classes as a whole from week to week, let alone semester to semester. But my hope is that the nature of the CNF workshop can take us even further, in terms of investment, insight, and self-efficacy, by mining the perspectival changes of creative nonfiction. By inhabiting the liminal irony of the creative nonfiction space, students may become not just “mature” writers—those “able to satisfy ... [their] own purposes with a wide range of audiences” (McCarthy 261)—but aware beings who appreciate the ecological range of their enmeshed existences.

As I mention above, in describing the potentialities of Thirdspace, Soja says that it opens up the possibility to “At least *temporarily*, set aside the demands to make an either/or choice and contemplate

instead the possibility of a both/and also logic” (“Journeys” 5, my emphasis). If we add, as I suggest, the possibility of neither/nor logic too, then we have that which allows for something different to occur when all other avenues have been excluding a particular epistemological orientation to an idea. The CNF class also has the power to take lived experience out of its home contexts and render that experience strange and secular, new and exciting, to leave it not just as it is, but to make it a world to be explored and created. This of course is the nature of the genre itself, but in creating a place where there is a real embodied audience to hear our words, the classroom changes the performance from an interaction with the anonymous audience that many creative (and other) writers have internalized to a vital one that will identify our stories with our actual selves, our embodied selves, that will not disappear once we read the last word of the text but that will remain stubbornly, obtrusively *there*. Does/can this happen with workshop pedagogy for any genre of writing? Yes. But I think this dynamic takes on particular saliency when we have identified and performed our words as “true.” When students read their stories of love, betrayal, success, death, loss, family conflict, or the “tea cup” dramas of realism, romance, parties, getting drunk, favorite pets, these experiences are released from the claustrophobic constraints of domesticity and familiarity to be constructed, not as transcendent or universal, but as artifacts of our human narrative. The sharing that changes them from private to public necessarily changes their meaning and significance for the teller when students hear how their stories, whether similar or different, exist in concert with the life experiences of others. When a student reads her essay about her mentally and physically abusive boyfriend, this violence is no longer just a social issue without referent, and neither is it just one individual story. It becomes both those things, as it lives in the classroom.

Soja’s “both/and” logic as opposed to “either/or” that he sees as a feature of Thirdspace suggests that thirthing is in some ways about eliminating or re-seeing binaries. But perhaps more than that, it is about providing a means for negotiating the pathology of dichotomy. And Thirdspace will do this by unveiling,

allowing us to see first and second spaces in new ways. It, Thirdspace, doesn't transcend as much as it reveals (Miley 67). This disruptive thing will take existing structures and bring them together paradoxically through dislocation. This is the kind of disruption described by scholars of intersectionality, such as Jen Soriano, who, in "Multiplicity from the Margins: The Expansive Truth of Intersectional Form," writes of "intersectional form" that rejects "homogenous truth in favor of a more complex reality ... for the sake of conveying and even modeling new ways of being in the world." The student who brings her story of patriarchal family oppression into the classroom changes for the moment not only the way she sees her family story but the way we see the "objective" classroom for that period of time, what counts as academic. It is precisely because Thirdspace may be temporary, elusive—akin to a traveling show that sets up and breaks down—and free from the burden of definitive change that it can open up possibility. (The student perhaps is only beginning to question the values of her family or see their relationship differently. She is not willing to make some kind of permanent break or change with all she has known.)

What this means in the context of a college curriculum is that not every course can or should be this kind of space where the imaginary and the real collide. But providing curricular apertures through courses like creative nonfiction that juxtapose disparate discourses can serve to help students re-see other parts of their curriculum and other parts of their lives and perhaps contribute to the transformation of both. While the satisfaction of bonding over intellectual discussion may not always be apparent to all of our students, the sharing of represented lived experience can sometimes scaffold that connection. As one of my CNF students explained with regard to her experience of sharing her work and hearing the stories of others, "we were more than just a class; friendships were formed there based on the stories we told." James Engelhardt and Jeremy Schraffenberger, in "Ecological Creative Writing," identify this as a potential of creative writing classes generally in the way they can create zones the authors call "ecotones," those "transitional areas" or "'between' places" that foment "dynamic tension" (272-73). Engelhardt and Schraffenberger extoll the advantageous positioning of such courses as trickster-like, able to "traverse

seemingly rigid disciplinary boundaries” (274). This is by way of saying, then, that such courses are not luxuries but rather essential, strategic components of critical development based ultimately on fostering that cornerstone: agency. Students may come to see their education not just as something to be endured or apart from them or, worse, “done” to them, as so many of my students seem to imply, but as something meaningful in which they are active participants.

In their book *The Meaningful Writing Project*, Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner discuss the ways in which students might experience writing as agentive. They write, “[a]gency is strengthened by offering experiences that get students to notice they have the capacity to direct energies for themselves, in and beyond classrooms” (53). We typically understand this in terms of assignments and classes inviting connections between what students see as their academic work and what they see as their lives—such as creating literacy narratives or service learning projects—or, as *The Meaningful Writing Project* suggests, assignments that connect students to future and past selves, or as applying writing to real-world problems, or even seeking outside publication of work. Indeed, this sounds right, and certainly the creative nonfiction class can and does participate in the project of fostering this kind of agency. But I want to suggest that viewed through the lens of Thirdspace, the CNF class might do something else, too. Rather than synthesizing the different, CNF understood as Thirdspace, disrupts and elucidates the normalized. This is a different kind of agency, one that students might not realize they even want—until they do.

Recently I asked my students to practice place-based composing, using Derek Owens’s foray into such writing as inspiration. In his book *Composition and Sustainability*, Owens writes about living on Long Island, NY, an apt example for my students who are well-acquainted with the communities he references and the problems he identifies. Despite what almost seems like a begrudging acknowledgement of his privileged middle-class position, he presents an overwhelmingly negative view of his habitat, the “sea of suburban sprawl,” a view that my students seem both to agree with and resent him for expressing. Owens is very thorough in cataloguing the natural, historical, and social dimensions of his environment, and he

observes that the lack of authentic “public commons, of meeting places, of coffee shops or bookstores, or independent movie theaters or parks” (46) produces a dysfunction felt most acutely by the young and old.

Owens’s piece led my students to take on, with a new-found sense of irony, the ersatz “meeting places” passing for a public sphere that gobble up the suburban sprawl they and I call home. One student wrote about her favorite Starbucks with a now jaded perspective, seeing its dystopic dimensions as evidence of disconnection and isolation even as the chain tries to project intimacy and creative/intellectual community. She describes a world where sugar and caffeine are dispensed in an assembly line fashion to keep the alienated and disaffected functioning. And yet she confesses to being no different, to craving her macchiato that she has been drinking since she was a little girl. Another student revisits with fresh eyes the annual car show she has been attending since adolescence, describing as tawdry and banal that which is meant to celebrate elegance and affluence. She wonders, then, what this says about her, that she will continue to attend this event with her family as part of their yearly tradition that has shaped her life. As the students discuss together these and other narratives, considering what it means to call Long Island home, they call into question the lives they lead and create a momentary space, suspended, free from the immediate constraints of first and second spaces, a “contracontextual space” that allows them to temporarily break the sutures of normalizing discourse (see Anderson 66-77) and to create essayistic worlds where the terms of such discourse can be examined.

When I think of my beloved student’s image of his dancing professor and his rendering of me that has taken on a second life with new students I will never even know—let’s call them my grandchildren—I find it to be not just an apt image of joy (although it is that) but a metaphor of eccentricity that captures some of the edge I am after here: the violation of space and dislocation where something that shouldn’t be is—the belly dancing body of a text-bound English professor amidst a group of students who have tested their definitions of what it means to be friends, students, colleagues, who in many ways now know each other better than they know their families, or at least differently, who now return to families and

friends different people than they were, who bring some of that new self to those places (students tell me sometimes about how they read their essay to family members brought to tears by their revelations), who go back to their classes with a perspective of school that is a bit more wry, wise, ironic but also joyful and invested in themselves and the work they might do. That, I think is an ideal, a “conceived” space, but an essential one, a brass ring worth striving for.

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