

**The Public Pedagogy of Poetry: The Poetic Diversity Project**

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## Project

### Poetry as public pedagogy:

Poetry is an accessible kind of public pedagogy and public discourse. For the purposes of this project, I define public pedagogy as “the teaching and learning that occurs in digital spaces outside of traditional educational settings.” (Portman-Daley 2013). All life experiences become a type of learning, for better or worse, and my project aimed to explore perspectives on place by inviting participants via social media to share poetry. Once, the real world and the virtual world were distinct, but “The development of social media, mobile technologies, and GPS-based or locative media has shifted that view to one of a world interpenetrated by networked media and continually linked with online social relations.” (Reid, 2010, 196). Through social media, I issued an invitation to explore poetry of place. “Poetry connects us with wonder and mystery. Poetry is a way of knowing and being and becoming,” (Leggo, 2005, 442). The theory behind sharing poetry is about connecting to that sense of wonder in respect to locations that are new to us. Leggo quotes Freire as saying, “the more rooted I am in my location, the more I extend myself to other places so as to become a citizen of the world. No one becomes local from a universal location.” (2005 447) This project then, became an opportunity to ‘see’ new places through the eyes of people who found those places important and to make the connections about being, as “Any poem ostensibly about place is actually an expression of being in, or relative to, a place.” (Gordon, 2014, 41). As a teacher, “what we need to get at first with students is not in fact the place, but the voice, and hence the being that articulates their experience of place to us.” (Gordon 2014 41) Through interactions with participants, I aimed to learn about the significance of places to others

who were interested in sharing, but also to consider the universality of experience that are brought together via social media.

Since May 2010 I have maintained a blog. At first it was quite general, with commentary, recipes, book reviews, the odd original poem, short story, etc, but around 2012 I began to focus on poetry. For the last two years I have posted an original poem each day. To date, I have built up a following of approximately fourteen thousand people, and I routinely receive some interaction with well over a hundred readers each day, whether they just leave a 'like' or take time to make a comment in response to the piece.

Most of the time, unless a poet is performing at coffee house and slams, his or her work goes out to the universe, and he or she does not get much response back. An active blog with a following that provides feedback and comments can result in an interesting and entertaining dialogue. Readers will offer advice, share other poems or songs on a similar theme, ask questions, offer consolation or encouragement. I learn from them; they learn from me. In this internet age, those 'teacher-readers' can be anywhere in the world. According to my blog statistics page, from February 2012 to date, visitors have come to my blog from a hundred and eighty countries (there are one hundred ninety-six countries total). Among the regular readers who are my most regular commenters, one is a retired member of the Welsh peerage, another is a single black woman in New York City, another is a homeless, drug-addicted man in Vancouver. When I started writing poetry as a child, I would never have imagined that my words would travel so far and have such a diverse readership.

I wonder how I can take advantage of this opportunity for my students. Rick Ayers (2010) who arranged poetry slams a decade ago writes that “the real education, the real literacy work, was going on in the public space.” He used the poetry slam experience as a way to get his students engaged with literacy. Kevin Coval (2010) founded the teen poetry festival Louder than a Bomb; he “realized we were meeting and hearing hundreds of young writers from many different sides of the city who were hungry for language and story telling and engaged in the classroom in a new way.” Poetry helped to connect kids with literacy and their lives. Going outside the classroom opened possibilities for his students. “A new generation of writers were digging on literature outside the academy and discovering our favorite writers were alive and fresh.” (Coval, 2010). I ponder ways that I can take my students outside the classroom. We are going to the Word on the Lake Writers’ Festival, and we’re bringing poets and authors to speak to them, but there are infinitely more options for diverse settings of learning.

I wonder how my students can be connected to social media in ways that lead to genuine connections with diverse people in diverse places through poetry. The Poetic Diversity Project which I hosted at <http://shawnbird.com/poetic-diversity-project> during March 1-14, 2015 offered opportunity for anyone who wished to participate to share an original poem (or a link to one) on a theme of place. Over the course of the two weeks, I offered variations on the theme, and posted my own interpretations. I publicized the project on Twitter, Facebook, and on my daily poem posts, encouraging sharing of the link to the site. I welcomed anyone who chose to participate. There were two Americans: a woman in Ohio and a man in Washington State. There was a man from

London, England, and another from Uganda. They offered poetical visions of their places and spaces, and so doing provided a glimpse of their attitudes and experiences.

### **Poems of Place:**

The first topic explored was quite general. Participants were asked to contribute a ‘Poem of place’ and to share details about their physical environment to demonstrate our diversity and how we come together through our poetry.” I offered,

*The monitor is the only light  
dark room, furniture shadows,  
darkness beyond the windows.  
I am blind to everything but the words  
flowing onto the screen  
My small space, sending visions  
to the world from a small wooden desk,  
on a hillside  
by a lake  
in British Columbia,  
Canada.*

(Bird, 2015a)

My poem reflects Gordon’s (2010) articulation about the experience of place. I am in one physical place, but I am very aware that there is a big world beyond me. It was daunting to post the project and just wait to see who joined me. This reflects my place as a space of faith. I trust that I am safe and that things work out.

Later the same day, my first participant submitted a link. Charlie Mann posted from London, England, linking to his poem, “Wrinkles.”

*The cracked door purrs and  
hums as it is stroked by  
the cold, dark ghosts in  
the night’s wind,*

*Carrying the scents of home*

*from an unfinished mug  
by the window  
through lungs of smoke,*

*Soft walls scrawled with a  
tradition and a heritage  
from farthest lands on  
which I lean like a rock,*

*Beneath the white sheets  
that I mark with  
flames from a golden dragon  
held on the left, or the right,*

*This place is my home,  
my prison, my saving grace –  
My collection of memories,  
sprayed on a furrowed face.*

This poem is intriguing, because his ‘furrowed face’ and ‘soft walls’ are home. His place is his body, not the physical location of his body in the world, but the body itself. There is a particular profundity to this.

Later in the day, Beth Wesson posted her poem “Writing by the Lake,”

*My writing place is a place  
I've always longed to be  
Beside a lake beside a hill  
I've always longed to be  
Behind a desk behind an idea  
Writing life writing love  
A place  
I've always longed to be  
(Wesson, 2015)*

I asked her the history of the final line and she wrote,

“All my favorite childhood memories are of time spent on or near water. I always thought the folks who had homes on our local lake were the luckiest people in the world. You never had to leave! 16 years ago we moved to the foothills of Appalachia in Ohio. Everyday I drove by this lake on my way to work. I finally

asked my husband what we were waiting for? We ended up buying a cottage on the lake. My backyard has a dock and my grandchildren are now the ones making memories of good times on the water and I'm the luckiest person in the world!

(Wesson in Bird, 2015a)

The poem reflects her experience of this place, the longing, the sense of satisfaction and joy in being there. In Beth's poem we see Gordon's (2010) concept of the poem expressing the "being in" the place.

From Washington State Mark Schutter (2015a) submitted "Side by Side – A Poem of Place, for the Poetic Diversity Project." He writes about sitting next to his daughter while each writes.

*Our own places,  
where we sit side by side.  
A table and a desk,  
and yet two chairs  
the only similarity.*

*A window sits between,  
our singular view on the world.  
You are learning  
and growing so much,  
all the while inspiring me.*

*You being home-schooled  
and learning many things.  
Me with my writings  
and moments of idleness,  
that bond us together.*

*Our lives and  
the journey, forever  
an adventure, together.*

He wrote, "I have written about the two spaces where I and my daughter sit and often do our thing! :) I have a table with my laptop and my daughter has a desk where she often

does her school work. We sit side by side facing the wall with a window between us.” (Schutter in Bird, 2015a). Mark connects the very specific place he and his daughter are in physically with the bond they have together. His idleness and his work tie them together in that place, but the reader feels that this is not a momentary flash; this is an on-going vision and experience. This place is about togetherness.

I had posted to Twitter inviting submissions to the project and from Uganda came the link to the poem “#92” by Shawn Davis Kawalya.

*I take place, with the grass,  
Besides the low hills  
& tall trees.  
As wind passes me by,  
the trees whistle sweetly,  
Heavy tonnes of heat,  
On my back.  
As it shines heavily  
From the sky,  
Making paper seem brighter,  
I barely can see the lines,  
My mind goes to work.  
Imaginations with no end,  
Poems with no titles,  
Formed.  
(Kawalya, 2015b)*

I am struck by the similarity in tone to my poem of place, because of the contrasts. Whereas I am writing from the dark, in Uganda another Shawn is weighed by ‘heavy tonnes of heat’ that ‘shines heavily’ on him. Whereas I write beneath the glow of a computer screen, the other Shawn’s African sun makes ‘paper seem brighter’ so he ‘barely can see the lines’. In both poems, the endless imaginations reach out through the internet and poems are created.

The final poem in this general category came from a blogger called ericlv2. I came across his poem while scanning the Wordpress Reader and specifically invited him

to participate in the project and to tell me about the place he was writing from. He responded, “I am honored to put this link here - I hope it adds to the conversation! I comes from a place of imagination, memory, and empathy...” (Bird, 2015a) He has offered no further communication, so I do not know where in the world he is physically, or what his real name is. From the language, I suspect his first language is not English, but his words stand by themselves and reflect a powerful narrative,

*Little Red Pill- Day 11*

*There is a house on Lockhart Street,  
with two blue window panes.  
Where my love and I would pass the days,  
and listen to the rain.  
Listening to the world outside,  
as the clouds poured out their tears,  
and we'd ask each other questions:  
our hopes, our dreams, our fears.  
There is a cozy path,  
with roses on the sides.  
Where the green of the forest shines bright,  
and heaven's mystery hides.  
We walked that path so often,  
it became our second home.  
It was just a dirty trail,  
whenever I walked it alone.  
There is a plate and cup,  
you hold on to them so tight.  
When you've got new news,  
or I start to pick a fight.  
We got them from my grandma Jean,  
she was happy I found someone.  
She doesn't know that we yell,  
Or that you asked for your freedom.  
There is a little dog,  
who bark we can hear across the street,  
I told you I would love you forever,  
and you said the same to me.  
The dog started off that night,  
when you told me you were through.  
The piercing shrill of canine screams,  
matched my every move.*

*There is a sturdy wooden chair,  
where we used to rock back and forth,  
I know that we can work this out,  
please don't say you want a divorce.  
Sit with me a little while,  
in this rocking chair.  
Let our bodies move as one,  
and pretend the pain's not there.  
There is a boat my brother bought,  
he uses to get away.  
Come with me on that boat,  
so nobody has to stay.  
Once we've escaped this world,  
and all its jagged truths,  
we'll be surrounded by the sea shore sounds,  
and captivated by blue.  
There is this tiny red pill,  
my doctor said I could take.  
She said it help my with my thoughts,  
even when I am awake.  
I'll take the pill- I swear,  
I'll start to flush them down.  
Can we escape on that boat,  
so I don't have to drown?  
There is a set of tail lights,  
on brighter than the other.  
Nothing I could say or do,  
to keep you from another.  
Now one pill has turned to two,  
and two has turned to four,  
Please turn those tail lights back around  
before I take four more.  
(ericlv2, 2015)*

Ericlv2 (2015) has crafted both image and emotion in this poem. Gordon's (2010) state of being is powerfully expressed here. The place where the voice is, the yearning for escape, the desire to hold on, all of these assail the reader and we experience his emotional place and his physical space in ways that draw the reader into the pain of his dissolving relationship.

Ellie (2015) contributed a poem called "Place" to the project,

*A comforting trench with ample options,  
 a place to search for new horizons;  
 where fears are set in motion,  
 and dreams would fill with poisons.  
 At times your mind attests realization,  
 and your lodge fills with your burden.  
 Fairly, it is a dire sensation,  
 and yourself must you pardon.  
 With a shawl on the ground,  
 and the flow of many lives, in your mind  
 if you haste you won't be found,  
 Say, do you want to be refined?  
 The hidden sores tend to welcome  
 in the place, you are burnout  
 on the edge of the tears, your hope is beckoned -  
 in the place, the truth you flout.*

This poem offers paradoxical images that seem to reflect a voice of turmoil. Ellie has contrasted unexpected images like fears in motion and dreams filled with poisons. It is interesting that she chose the positive word ‘dream’ instead of the negative ‘nightmare’ to be full of poison; it adds to the menace. Awkward phrases like “yourself must you pardon,” “if you haste you won’t be found,” and “hope is beckoned” intensify the tension as language is garbled to reflect the state of mind. Place in Ellie’s poem is unpleasant, like a bad drug trip or psychosis and the reader spins with this sensation.

### **Philosophy of Place:**

On March 3 I introduced the next component of the theme to be explored. I asked, “Does your moral/political/social/educational philosophy come from your sense of place (your birth place? a special place of change? your current place?) How does setting impact your philosophy?” (Bird, 2015a) My poem reflects the philosophy behind my desire to become an exchange student and led me to a transformative year in Finland:

*Where I grew up*

*all the faces were variations of my own  
Snow White, Cinderella,  
assorted Prince Charmings  
interchangeable  
My experiences with other cultures were  
Princess Tiger Lily, Little Black Sambo,  
Emperor's Nightingale.  
But somehow I knew the world was bigger  
and I wanted to wrap my tongue  
around other languages  
entwine new vowels  
between rhythmic syllables and  
see inside minds that  
offered something  
more.  
Offered something  
more.  
Offered something  
not better  
not worse  
just different  
Because different is worth noticing  
because different means to the same end  
speak to a journey with different views  
a different beauty  
a different way  
of being human,  
offers something  
more.*

(Bird, 2015a)

For me, part of my philosophy was impacted by a desire to explore new languages, cultures, and places. As a teen, I was drawn to anyone from 'away' like the neighbour's visiting relatives from Haiti and my Quebecois grandfather, both of whom I forced to teach me French words, to the new Girl Guide from England, to my East Indian friend who escaped Idi Amin's Uganda, and my Jewish friend who'd escaped from Soviet Russia. I wanted to know about their food, their language, their lives. When I was sixteen I met an exchange student from New Zealand. As a result, I was inspired to apply to become a Rotary Exchange Student. My year abroad taught me about being Canadian,

about listening, about communicating without words. I added a second poem to the example for the philosophy component of the project to reflect this experience.

*There*

*Midnight sun  
your bright glow  
matches my summer soul.  
Midday night  
your sky indigo  
I hibernate and am made whole  
Northern land  
that journey long ago  
taught me a heart has many homes.*

(Bird 2015b)

I discovered a great deal about myself as a result of re-locating my perspective physically and emotionally, but the fundamental message is reflected in the last line, “a heart has many homes.” We may reflect place, but like Charlie Mann’s poem “Wrinkles” (2014a) our bodies are the essential habitation, and a body can be anywhere.

In response to my poem “Where I grew up” (2015a), Charlie Mann wrote on the blog, “a few months back I wrote something quite similar to your poem about Finland. It’s quite a bit darker and about an industrial port city on the south coast called Portsmouth, but nonetheless drawing on a transformation in place and thought.” (Mann in Bird, 2015a)

*The Staircase by the Sea*

*I have been here before.  
I remember the cold splinters  
beneath bare feet,  
The crumbling plastered walls,*

*The desk where I sat and  
exposed myself to darkness and  
medicated with spent cigarettes,  
This box where I stopped*

*to carve an oath into my arms.  
I remember the promises  
I made to myself, never*

*(except I did, thrice.)  
Here in this opened cell  
I was branded and scarred,  
Reborn and disfigured,*

*Pushed to the bottom of  
the red velvet staircase.  
(Mann, 2014b)*

The contrast between the cold splinters of the first stanza and the red velvet of the final stanza makes the reader pause. Does the persona come from poverty and aspire to wealth? There is a lot of violence and ruin reflected in this poem: crumbling, medicating, carving, being branded, scarred, disfigured, pushed. The persona was up, and pushed down and disfigured during rebirth. I am intrigued with the contrasting images of the fourth stanza, “Here in this opened cell / I was branded and scarred / reborn and disfigured.” There paradox of open cell and birth/ruin suggest a philosophy created by violence, but determined despite difficulty to rise on the promises made to self, even though they’ve been broken. I envision a battered man at the bottom of the staircase, breathing heavily, and trying to force himself to regain his footing to start climbing again. To me, this poem reflects a philosophy of struggle for a goal.

Mark Schutter (2015b) responded to this prompt as well. He wrote,

Growing up in the high desert landscape of Southern Idaho, I have always been drawn to the land. From the deserts to the mountains, the river canyons to the rolling hills, each has and still does call to me to be explored. They are lands of unexpected dangers and infinite beauty. I love the land of Idaho, Oregon and

Washington. This has always been my home, and yes I am a cowboy, just check out my avatar. :) Living my entire life here has shaped my views on life, to be self-reliant and independent, sometimes to a fault. My moral, political, educational and social views have definitely been shaped by this land.

The poem "My Lonely Soul" depicts a philosophy of solitary, yet satisfying life,

*The lonely cliffs  
The endless expanse  
Land as vast as the sky  
Beckons to be crossed*

*Alone  
On horseback  
From  
Sunrise and sunset*

*From arid deserts  
And forest groves  
I disappear into the wild  
As it calls my name*

*Wandering  
Through days  
Exploring  
A life fulfilled*

(Schutter, 2015b)

This poem has a rambling feel to it, almost like the rhythm of a horse's slow sauntering. This voice does not demand, does not feel down-trodden, does not fear disappearing in the vast expanse he is crossing. I have the sense that this perfectly reflects Tolkein's poetic declaration that "Not all who wander are lost." (Poem Hunter, 2004).

**Sharing Space:**

On March 8 I proposed an exploration of the challenges and joys of a place that is shared with someone else, prompted by my self-analysis of irritation,

*I am offended by this object.  
In my messy,  
but perfectly coordinated, kitchen  
you have filled the clear soap dispenser  
with acid yellow dish detergent,  
instead of clear or white  
as is the aesthetic choice.  
It glares at me:  
caution colour  
screaming incongruity.  
It hurts my eyes;  
it seers my sensibility.  
But you are proud  
of your helpfulness,  
and this is your house, too.  
Perhaps if I squint,  
it will be invisible?  
(Bird, 2015a,c)*

Of course, sharing space means compromises, and our experience of shared space varies. I posted this poem separately in its own link (Bird, 2015c), and received comments from amused married people. The annoyance clearly articulated with a tongue in cheek exasperation struck a chord with the readers. This contrasts dramatically with Charlie Mann's contribution to the theme of sharing space.

When he left the link for his poem, Charlie Mann wrote, "I had a crack at writing something for 'sharing spaces'. It's a bit dark, and I could blame that on my excessive consumption of Sylvia Plath, but really it's just me." (Mann in Bird, 2015a)

*Down to the Waterline*  
  
*I felt the sea winds  
on her breath,  
Calling out the open window  
  
and down the rows*

*above the far off  
rumbling ships.*

*Mourning light spilled  
like blood  
across the dark, blue walls*

*into stinging eyes  
looking up from the floor.  
Another day, they said.*

*Another day trapped  
in this room  
Filled with desire as it is,*

*Lined with the beasts of burden  
and all attention centred  
on that single point*

*by the wall.  
I felt the sea winds  
on her breath,*

*Calling out the open window,  
not to me.*

*(Mann, 2015c)*

A space shared with beasts of burden and desire. This time, ‘she’ calls out the open window, is she seeking escape from the persona sharing the poem? This situation feels like captivity, unlike the gentle humour of the former poem and the final gentle contribution of Mark Schutter.

Mark captures the brevity of life experience with his poem on sharing space. Again, his focus is on his daughter and his place as father when he writes,

*Here we sit,  
in our little house.  
I’m trying to think  
as the ideas come and go.  
The light glares from the screen and  
I hope the story will unfold.  
Then I hear the excited screams*

*of your laughter,  
from the other room.*

*“I can hear you!”  
My thoughts are derailed.  
This novel will not write itself!*

*Then silence,  
and it makes me think.  
“What in the world is going on now?”*

*The words are fleeting,  
the moments too few.  
Our house is filled with joy.  
And too soon you’ll be gone,  
so laugh and scream  
to your heart’s content.  
I would not ever trade  
being your daddy or  
have it any other way.  
(Schutter, 2015c)*

The quiet moment of a writer immersed in his created world is jarred back to reality by laughter. Initial frustration leads to reflection. Schutter is demonstrating that “transformative learning can be effectively promoted by giving attention to poetry and poetic knowing and poetic living.” (Leggo, 2005, 454). Such transformative reflection is the power of poetry, and the point of this project. When we can express and share our place in the world with others we bring diverse people in diverse settings together.

### **Dream place**

The final component of the project was posted on March 11 and invited poems on either a dream place or dreaming place. I opened up the options to be either literal or figurative by referring to how my ex-sister-in-law was struggling to design their new

house, but had a dream that revealed the elusive floor plan. My poem revisits a recurring dream of my youth:

*I leapt from the ottoman and flew  
encircling the living room ceiling  
and wished for you.  
I flew through secret tunnels connecting  
French Provincial furniture and  
searched for you.  
I dropped onto the ottoman,  
climbed down to the floor  
I dreamed of you  
some more.*

(Bird, 2015a)

This living room was in our house in Calgary's Lake Bonavista neighbourhood, where we lived when I was seven to twelve years old. I revisited this room in dreams regularly for about thirty years. Dream places can inspire us, they can reveal us, or they can taunt us with elucidation that seems to hover just out of reach.

The final contribution to the project came from Charlie Mann, the only participant beyond myself to contribute a poem for each sub-theme. Charlie submitted this poem about his favourite place, Berlin,

*Westkreuz bis Ostkreuz*

*Miles of concrete spill out,  
Resting heavy on the marshes.*

*Here my fingers caressed the sky,  
Loving its soft angelic face,*

*Verse soaring with the birds  
pas (sic) tower block windows,*

*Dreams spilling as a flood from  
the pipes draining a drenched earth,*

*Heart rattling like the rails  
marking my reluctant sleep*

*as they click in an orderly queue  
through fresh October nights,*

*Body following soul following feet  
from West to East*

*at the spot where they met,  
Still painted with my name;*

*Miles of concrete spill out  
resting heavy on the marshes,*

*Here my dreams caressed my soul.  
(Mann, 2015d)*

The other three poems Charlie submitted for this project were dark, but despite the ‘miles of concrete’ this depiction of Berlin seems joyful. The title translates ‘West cross to East cross.’ I wonder if the fresh October nights allude to the Russian October Revolution or the civil unrest in Germany in October 1989 that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November? Where East and West met, his name is painted. This intersection of ideologies marked by paint gives a little of the gravity of “X marks the spot” on a treasure map. The imagery in the repeated lines “Miles of concrete spill out / resting heavy on the marshes,” followed first by “Here my fingers caressed the sky” and then by “Here my dreams caressed my soul” highlights the importance of the place as symbol of hope and dream.

### **Conclusion**

In his article “The heart of pedagogy” Carl Leggo (2005) concludes that “the heart of pedagogy is revitalized and sustained by poetic knowing, being and becoming. Poetry engages us with language, nurtures the inner life, acknowledge the particular and local,

encourages us to listen to our hearts, fosters flexibility and trust, and invites creativity and creative living.” Each of these components was reflected in the Poetic Diversity Project. While it was contained within a brief window of time, it was open to the world, and the poems submitted engaged the readers with the language, revealed something of the inner life of the poet, and nurtured contemplation in our own. The poems celebrated individual, local experiences, but in so doing, provided a universal context. They gave us a chance to hear our own hearts respond to others, provided an opportunity to consider other ways, and each poet gave a trust when she or he provided a link to her or his work. The views explored by the poets demonstrated a commitment to creative living and an encouragement for each of us to explore our own creativity. The participants came from diverse locations across the globe and reflected diverse experiences, but for two weeks we met on the internet and learned something from one another. Such is the power of the public pedagogy of poetry.

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