The Vitality of the Author

By Elen Caldecott

In October 2021, when I return to campus, none of the undergraduates I'll teach will have had sustained, in-person workshopping before. None of the three cohorts will have experienced pre-Covid university life.

This sobering fact has made me reflect on what it means to be physically present in a space when we talk about our writing. How it feels to walk into a classroom, to choose a chair, to be part of a group, as we share our words with each other.

My thinking has been guided by two new books and one old essay.

In this article, I set out my response to these three texts and how they led me to conceptualize the *vitality of the author.* This will shape my teaching as I help this wonderful, traumatized, excited, frightened group of students get used to the old ways of doing things.

Many of you will have read *Craft in the Real World* by Matthew Salesses and *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* by Felicia Rose Chavez. Both were published in 2021. They contain, in different ways, exhortations for teachers of Creative Writing to understand how a student's lived experience will affect not just their writing, but also their response to traditional teaching methods – namely, the workshop. This is not a book review, so I am not going to evaluate these books at all – only to say that, if you have *not* read them, then pop them on your tbr pile forthwith. I will say that the traditional workshop model has received criticism in these pages (Mimpriss 2002, Tondeur 2014) and elsewhere in the past, and these books provide yet more reasons to reengage with that debate.

Traditionally with the workshop model, the writer shares a piece of work with their peers, and sits silent, as the piece is discussed or annotated. Of course, there is variation within that approach, with some tutors offering writers the chance to introduce the piece, or respond to the critique afterwards, but – for the most part – the writer doesn't speak. The writer's job is to listen while the other students 'kick the tyres' of the piece.

Chavez and Salesses both warn us that we risk kicking the tyres of a piece without first understanding what type of vehicle it is. The writer's silence can leave the workshop group with critical misunderstandings. Chavez expands on Liz Lerman's 'Critical Response Process' while Salesses explores the idea that there are multiplicities of crafts and writing traditions underserved by the traditional workshop model. Both writers point out that the student's lived experience will affect their work and traditional workshopping leaves little space for the student's voice.

I said, in my introduction, that I was going to discuss two new books and one old essay. The title of this piece might well have alerted you to which old essay. As I thought of us all, returning to campus in an embodied way, and having read Chavez and Salesses on the significance of the writer's lived-experience, I was led to re-read Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author.* I was curious to see whether this seminal essay of literary criticism might have something to offer on the enforced silence of the workshop model. Moreover, the essay is so short, and so engagingly written that a re-read was too tempting.

The Death of the Author sets out the idea that each piece of writing is an assemblage of reimagined quotations, a collage made of all the texts that have gone before. The intentions of the author, the 'genius' of the 'Author-God' are of little significance, "there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the **reader**, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (1977: 148, my emphasis).

This mirrors the traditional workshop model, where the group serve as attentive 'first-readers' enunciating their understanding of the writing, while its author sits and listens.

Barthes goes on to posit the idea that a text is produced not by an 'author' but by a 'scriptor' who is "born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now"* (1977: 145).

For Barthes, as with our traditional workshop model, the author's context – their lived experience – matters little, because the text exists *here and now,* with the reader.

Having written a lot of books by now, I smiled wryly at the idea that I *enunciate* a text. What a neat and tidy verb to describe the chaos of my early drafts. Did each of the drafts create a new scriptor, I wondered? Was I being trailed by a bevy of ghostly versions of myself, each given form every time I created a file with a new draft number?

No.

Each draft of a book is so closely connected to previous iterations; paragraphs and phrases are switched in-and-out-and-in-again so often that any clear delineation between drafts is impossible. It just is not tidy. The *death of the author* is not a metaphor that expresses what it feels like, in my body, as I write (I cannot, and would not, comment on the usefulness of the metaphor for literary criticism, that is well above my pay grade!)

Instead, it seems to me that the Creative Writing classroom is a place in which we should acknowledge the *vitality of the author.* The writer's active presence is *vital*.

Vital, in the sense that the work only exists because the writer makes it exist. Vital in the sense that the writer has lived and brings their history and cultural background into the classroom. Vital in the sense that the work is alive (or 'a live') document; it is an unfinished work-in-progress, subject to the author's decision-making.

In October the students will be, for maybe the first time, people in a room, with active texts. My job will be to facilitate a community that can nurture both the writing and the writers.

Chavez has this to say about the workshop community: they are, "collaborators... helping a fellow author to fulfill their artistic vision, the product of which may or may not be intended for them" (2021: 106). She goes on to say that this community is "centred on trust rather than transaction" (2021: 134).

How much harder than usual it will be for students who have lived through a global pandemic to relax into communities of trust when they finally find themselves on campus. Many of them have never caught the eye of a classmate, shared a secret giggle, touched the arm of a peer in gratitude or to offer support. Many of them have had their cameras off as they've attended lessons, or have experienced those lessons asynchronously. First-years haven't been able to lounge-about with second-years, picking up tidbits of advice. Second-years haven't witnessed the frenetic activity of final-

year students and so gain an insight into their own future. In short, they have experienced only disembodied learning.

So.

My workshop space is going to look a little different next year, in order to facilitate this shift to physical closeness and the embodied author.

Our welcome sessions will be playful. They will be physical. We'll throw beanbags to remember each other's names; we'll scribble ideas and doodles and images on paper; we'll tear magazines and glue them onto card; we'll pass around real books, and the room will smell of newly bought stationery and dust motes.

I will start with low-risk workshopping. In the early weeks of term, I'll invite students to read pieces aloud – or have their friends read it – and the only comment they'll get will be a round of applause. When we do look at written pieces, the writer will be asked to introduce it to the group as best they can, to present their mood-board, or notebook, or inspirations in the weeks leading up to their first critique.

Before anyone gets their red pen out, we'll discuss open questions, generative questions, productive questions and how to frame them. And, when the critique is given, the author will be allowed to interrupt the flow of the conversation, to ask questions of their own.

These students, more than any we have ever taught before, will need space and time to play, to dream, to become a community with a shared goal.

And to do that everyone's voice will be vital.

Bibliography

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