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BRUNO LATOUR Redefining the left
PRAGNA PATEL Difficult alliances
REBECCA O'ROURKE Community Writing

TRANSVERSAL POLITICS

■ PLUS Scotland, biographical dilemmas, Eritrea

Soundings

Issue 12

**Transversal
politics**

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The values of community writing

Rebecca O'Rourke
and Lynette Hunter

Rebecca O'Rourke and Lynette Hunter describe the development of community writing in the UK and look at its relationship to transversal politics

Unlike the 'Doing Transversal Politics' Seminar at Gresham in January 1999, which grew out of several years of work with a core group of women, Translating Practices, Translating Words' brought together a range of cultural practitioners who in the main worked in isolation from each other. In bringing this range of writing projects together we wanted to do two things. First, to create the opportunity for the exchange of ideas and experiences between writing projects and activities which, although they may seem (and in many ways are) very different in terms of their focus and audience, have in common their challenge to the way writing is valued by dominant critical approaches in educational institutions. In all these projects, writing and creative activity is valued as a participatory activity. This is in contrast to both functional and consumer based approaches to writing and cultural activity which might otherwise have been the sum total of these people's engagements with words. Second, we wanted to begin a critical debate about the value and purpose of these participatory and productive projects, both individually and as a whole,

as a means of exploring the creative tensions between culture and politics. In this article we sketch the lines of that critical debate. We do so both to provide context for the accounts of situated cultural-political work from practitioners which follow and to pose questions about the relationship between culture and transversal politics.

The article outlines the development of community writing in the UK and then highlights the issues concerning culture and transversal politics which bear on it. We explore these through the framing device of value, asking in turn what are the social, personal, political and aesthetic values of community writing.

A brief history of community writing

Community Writing has been in common usage since the early 1980s to describe forms of writing and publishing, and forms of reading that writing, which exist outside the dominant literary and educational institutions and the relations of reading and writing which they maintain and promote. People who work on literature in these institutions are beginning to recognise the need to learn how to value the writing and oratory that goes on outside the narrow range of this dominant community, and this has been reflected for example in a substantial movement into looking at diaries, journals and autobiographies.

Taking a broad cut through history, we see that whenever literary relations have been institutionalised in a dominant form there have emerged (or continued) traditions of opposition and subversion. Their non-literariness has often been foregrounded and such traditions come down to us as folk, working-class or socialist traditions, or are reformulated as lost canons of women's, lesbian and gay or black writing and writers. In this sense community writing has a long and complex history, but its historical roots are generally identified with the new social movements of the late 1970s (feminism, direct-action community politics, non-labour movement forms of socialism) and their new sites of political intervention, especially neighbourhood. These new political forms were both dependent on and interested in cultural and educational practices as a way of linking political agency with consciousness and ideology.

Community writing retains the polemical sense of the word which Raymond Williams identifies when he talks about community politics: 'distinct not only from national politics but from formal local politics and normally involves various

ls of direct action and direct local organization.¹ It originated with disaffected schoolchildren, adult literacy learners and socially and educationally disadvantaged urban poor who became involved in forms of community education.² It was organised by two distinct poses. First, to represent to and for themselves, as well as to the mainstream, areas of experience and knowledge which were marginalised, and or profoundly misrepresented. Second, to argue with the mainstream the form of the Arts Council, compulsory education system and the media - about definitions of literature and literary value.³ At the same time related, but quite different, challenge to education, writing and publishing in feminism was taking place.⁴ These political engagements with culture throughout the 1970s and 1980s created a series of changes to literature policy and writing in education, both compulsory and post-compulsory, which opened up wider opportunities for participation in writing activities. They were characterised by their emphasis on participation, as opposed to appreciation, and on diversity and inclusivity,

Raymond Williams, 1982, p66.

Chris Searle and Ken Worpole were both school teachers in London's East End who responded to the lack of relevant and meaningful reading books for their students by encouraging them to write and print their own. Ken Worpole went on to found Centreprise Publishing Project, one of the founder-members of the Federation of Worker-Writers and Community Publishers (FW/WCP). Jane Mace, Sue Gardener, Patricia Duffin and Stella Fitzpatrick were all active in the radical literacy movement of the 1970s and founder members of *Write First Time*, a national magazine produced by and for adult literacy students. Scotland Road and Liverpool 8 Writers, also founding members of the FW/WCP, developed from Liverpool University's innovative community education projects. See K. Worpole and D. Morley (eds) *The Republic of Letters* (1982); and J. Thompson, *Adult Education for a Change* (1980).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the FW/WCP was engaged in a series of arguments with the Arts Council about its funding policy for literature. This was partly an argument about accountability - how and for whom the money was spent - but it was also an argument about value and definition. On many occasions during this period there were attempts by the Literature Director to divert applications to the then newly established Community Arts Panel. These were always resisted by the FW/WCP which was seeking to challenge the elite definitions of literature and literary value which held sway in the Arts Council at that time.

The two movements share many similar features and several women worked with and for both movements but there were significant differences. Here it is most relevant to note the extent to which feminism was able to develop a commercial base for feminist initiatives in writing and publishing. Commercial publication and distribution on this scale has never been an option for working-class and community writing and publishing.

and their interest in the process as well as the product of writing. The term community writing is an umbrella for the many different forms of engagement with writing and publishing these changes reflect, and several of the projects which took part in the seminar identify with the term. However, as noted earlier, apart from those writing projects which are members of networking organisations (such as the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FW/WCP), the Association for the Literary Arts in Personal Development (LAPIDUS), the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) or the Voluntary Arts Network (VAN) there are few opportunities for members to learn from and about each other's existence. The winter 1998-9 edition of the FW/WCP's magazine *Federation* contains a proposal to change its name to The Federation of Community Writers and Publishers. Debates about the organisation's identity, in relation to feminism and socialism, have been contentious in the past. Though not of direct concern here, the inclusion of feminism alerts us to how the practices of community writing are and have been gendered.

Gendering community writing

Although feminism has been extremely successful in promoting contemporary and historical traditions of women's writing within education and publishing, it has been less successful in establishing networks which sustain women's writing at the level of the workshop, the community or region. Existing networks for community writing and writing development have many active, and often feminist, women and several women-only groups, but these are rarely organised solely on the basis of gender. MAMA, who contributed to the seminar and to this edition of the journal, came together on the basis of both gender and race and several women's writing groups which have formed as part of arts and health initiatives draw their membership from mental health system users and survivors. Gender issues are further complicated as some women-only groups have opened sessions or activities to men only to find they do not attend them.

The various writing networks referred to above are all gendered and racialised but none of them give especial importance to gender or other forms of separatism. There may be an element of gender-blindness at work in some cases but it is important to recognise that for some organisations this is a conscious political

tegy.⁵ Throughout the early 1980s the FWWCP engaged in a series of bitter debates about whether women's groups met the terms of membership. These were complex arguments, as they needed to be, which confronted the generally accepted middle-class bias of the UK women's movement in the 1970s and the patriarchal attitudes and chauvinism of the male working class and its labour movement. The debates continued long after their apparent resolution, when men and women were admitted as full members in 1982, and were the first ever painful and far-reaching explorations in the light of the new identity politics of race, sexuality and disability. Male and female members of the FWWCP today seek to respect and positively embrace difference of all kinds, including gender. Planning the seminar we discovered we held different assumptions about who it was for. The decision to restrict the conference to women was amicable, between ourselves and in the different community writing organisations we were in contact with, but was not without its contradictions. We included one project's disappointment at not being able to send its newly appointed male Family Literacy worker for the Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities and the importance to several contributors of stressing not only that they worked with men and women but that in certain situations the realities they shared with men mattered more to them than the differences. We also highlight the difficulty with which gender issues can be seen as distinct and separate within community writing and they raise a question, too big to do more than flag here, about the scope for trans-gender transversal politics.

Personal or social value?

As far as we have distinguished community writing and orality from hegemonic writing on the basis of its concern with participation, diversity and inclusivity, these do not explain why, and to whom, it continues to be useful and valuable. In the sections which follow we argue that it widens the base of those participating in mainstream culture, contributes to a more equitable or representative common culture, and returns culture, and its role in the creation of meaning and identity, to a more broadly defined social location than it often

Our knowledge of these organisations is not equal and this will be reflected in our comments. Rebecca is a member of FWWCP, NAWE and LAPIDUS but her different levels of involvement with each will affect her practical understanding of how they operate in relation to this issue.

inhabits. Our choice of the word 'useful' is deliberate, signalling a break with values of scarcity or exchange more traditionally associated with artistic activity. Community writing and orality is also distinctive for another reason, which bears on the broader relationships between culture and politics raised here: namely the way in which models of cultural production are so often individualistic in their focus and the challenge to this of co-operative and communal forms of artistic practice. But community writing does not just widen the pool of potential participants in mainstream cultural forms, and nor are its purposes limited to the literary or aesthetic. The way in which it encourages participation, builds individual and social confidence, and communicates across as well as within specific cultural situations, provides a model of how individuals become empowered and active within groups. This can then be extended to other areas of social and political activity.

In the accounts which follow we see that the content of particular writing, story telling or theatre activities makes a direct contribution to raising awareness about or validating the experience of specific social and cultural groups. But almost as important as the articulation and communication of this often hidden or marginalised knowledge is the accompanying process (which is always both an individual and a social act) of learning how to define and communicate these meanings in the broader social context of learning that power is intricately bound up with defining and communicating meanings. It is the interdependence of social, political and personal factors within this process which supports our claim that such uses of writing and orality are emancipatory. Sonia Linden, talking about the Write to Life writing residency at the Medical Foundation, explained that a life experienced as incoherent achieved coherence through the process of remembering, talking and writing (with or without a scribe) which the project made available. She stressed its cathartic value, noting that the writing was often concerned with details which had not been shared with others: 'Family are the last people they want to burden with these dark memories'.

The content of Nasrin's account of torture in Iran was profoundly personal, yet the context in which it took place was clearly social and political. The act of writing it down generated two very different kinds of value. For Nasrin, the experience released her from it in a very immediate way: it stopped the nightmares; it also achieved the aim she had first brought to the Write to Life

ect, that of raising awareness about the political regime under which she suffered. For her, and for those of us listening to the account, there was no conflict between personal, social or political value, as their interrelatedness was it. But in some contexts there can be conflict between social and personal values.

We referred earlier to the way artistic practice can sit uncomfortably with politics because of the different relation each has to the individual and the group. This is heightened when therapeutic values and purposes are introduced. The stress on individual solutions to individual problems within therapeutic practices can lead to a situation where determination is obscured and social conflicts are experienced as personal problems. It is not inevitable that the use of writing and literacy in arts for health, personal development and therapeutic contexts does so. In fact, work in the area of bibliotherapy in Canada and Australia often does from precisely this challenge to such individualism and has worked in as such as domestic violence, homelessness and chemical dependency which phrase the social dimension of these experiences. Bibliotherapy takes seriously the idea that we 'write ourselves into existence'. It works with the premise that writing and reading help us to sort out events in our lives, understand and move past their destructive and diminishing patterns. In doing it recognises - and works with the resulting knowledge - that the self we write into existence is a social self.

Elia Hunt and Urmilla Sinha, both active in LAPIDUS, provided an account of how writing empowers. Writing is of enormous value in generating the insights and confidence which sustain struggle for change in the material world. Their account of the writing process, recognised and affirmed by other writers present, is in many ways a paradigm of transversal politics. They described a series of writing techniques (switching from 1st to 3rd person narration, transposing people and events and the accurate recall of geographical places and their emotional resonance) which allowed both writer and reader to move beyond the surface details of experience and enter interior. The refinement of this technique allows writers to imaginatively

inhabit and create empathy with the experience of others. The writers' creed - to show not tell - becomes in this context a powerful political and therapeutic tool. The social uses of community writing and orality are, then, varied and powerful, but within our culture it is impossible to talk about writing for very long without coming up against questions of literary value.

Decentering literary value

The seminar brought together women who shared uses of writing and orality which both explored identity within the group and communicated with people who identified differently. So what they are engaged in is 'translation' - sometimes literally between languages, sometimes from oral to printed words, or from one tradition of reading or community of readers to another. Translation always involves producing something different without erasing the things that are 'difficult' about it. It also demands that we find words which will enable those who read what is written to value it, both within their terms and ours, however different these two things might be.

Most of us take words for granted. Human beings spend an immense amount of time training young people in the use of words from a very early age, not only in education but in our daily interactions as we learn how to ask questions, respond to grief or talk out our anger, as well as simply how to be kind. We go on learning about words in this way all our lives, and so can forget that it's a highly skilled craft. It is often easier to see this when something jars, perhaps when an English speaker, for example, listens to someone from another English-language society speaking in a way they don't understand or feel to be 'correct'. Language is not a neutral medium, but reproduces and reflects its own relations of difference and power in ways which make it a social and political weapon as well as a social and political tool. In Britain we have systematic ways of attributing value to words: good and bad words, good and bad books, good and bad writers and readers. The standards against which words are measured have largely been devised and maintained by people in privileged positions and their standards represent their concerns and issues. These are as much a community of writing and writers as any other. In questioning the dominance of their value system, and the writing it relates to, we are not denying that the work, its writers or its readers exhibit the value ascribed to it. What we question is the effect on all writing and writers of a

process which operates as if its values were absolute and universal.

Words written down become 'literature' if they have value. Listen to that phrase: if they have value. As if value were a fixed thing to be discovered like a seam of gold in a mine. You can only think of value in that way if you are sure your own standards for life are, or should be, the same as everyone else's. But is there a fixed and absolute definition of what is good and therefore valuable? We do not think so. We think that value is something we make. It is negotiated over and woven into our lives as we ask: valuable to whom, for what reasons, under what circumstances? Deciding on this kind of value is more difficult.

Why do we need to do so? Words, above all else, bring us together yet at the same time mark out our difference - without them we cannot have a democracy. This is why the areas of emancipatory writing and orality with which we are concerned here - life-writing, bibliotherapy, literacy, English as a second (or third, or fourth) language, oral history, community writing and theatre projects - are so important. Yet traditional literary value requires distance between our personal lives and our art, as if it were bad manners to talk about ourselves. In aesthetics, value is frequently associated with 'beauty' and 'rarity', as if something really well-made could only be made by a few people. As more and more people have the chance to work on words they do what all artists do, they write from experience. Excluding these voices from literary value means society denies itself the wealth of experience, the precious environments of existence and economies of survival, that these voices have so painstakingly worked out.

The voices provide a context for each other; the web of differences they share helps us untangle the complexity of the lives that are being told. MAMA's book *Shells on a Woven Cord*, like so many other community writing publications and projects, sweeps away the invisibility and silence that has surrounded their culture by the sheer volume of the collection, story after story putting into place a lost piece of life that needs valuing. Writer after writer gives testimony to the fact that they are writing not only or even primarily for themselves, but for their communities. And so it is with each community writing project where each individual adds their density and weight to the collective whole so that these diaries, letters, stories, poems and autobiographies demonstrate the variability of self, the questioning and ambiguity of identity, in which the speaking voice not only asks the reader, but also itself, what is trustworthy and what is of value.

Theatre and Reconciliation

Gerri Moriarty and Jane Plastow

Gerri Moriarty writes about community theatre in Northern Ireland, and Jane Plastow writes about the Eritrea Community-Based Theatre Project.

Working in Northern Ireland

Gerri Moriarty

These are personal reflections from the writer, based mainly on work with Dock Ward Community Theatre Group (North Belfast) and Ballybeen Community Theatre Group (East Belfast).

It is 1991. I am standing in the rain, in the dark, under a road bridge in the New Lodge, North Belfast. I am waiting with about 40 other people, aged between 10 and 65, mostly Catholic, some Protestant. We are waiting for the police and army to defuse a suspect car bomb. We are waiting to go to rehearsals for a community play ...

It is two weeks later. St. Kevin's Church Hall is packed to capacity, with an audience waiting to watch the history of their area unfold on stage. As the lights go down, shooting starts in the streets outside. The cast and the audience carry on their journey together ...

It is 1992. The Dock Ward Community Theatre group are devising a play on contemporary themes, exploring what the conflict has meant to them. A young man comes up to talk to me after a workshop. He says, 'All of us have different ideas about