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Contemporary British Place Writing: Towards a Definition

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Introduction: Contemporary British Writing and Place

Place, in contemporary British literature, is everywhere. It is evident in the emergence of independent publishers such as Little Toller, Longbarrow Press, Penned in the Margins, and Uniform Books: presses with radically differing creative agendas and aesthetics that share a commitment to new writing that explores the topographies and texturalities of particular locations. It is similarly evident in the proliferation of online fora and magazines, including *Caught by the River* and *Elsewhere: A Journal of Place*, that act as digital meeting-points for writers and readers interested in the literary articulation of geographical experiences and imaginaries. The preoccupation is also manifest in the cultural pages of the national newspapers as, during an age in which the journalistic space afforded to literary writing has been ever shrinking, there has been an exponential growth in the number of articles and reviews examining the literature of place. Central to much of this activity has been the work of Robert Macfarlane: a writer whose creative-critical practices are threaded through with the knowledge that 'placeless events are inconceivable, in that everything that happens must happen somewhere' (2011: 113). Perhaps more than anyone, Macfarlane, through a long-standing imaginative excavation of named landscapes and their cultural representation, has both captured and created the sense that, in British literary culture, we are living in a period of place.

Feeding off this wider cultural context, this chapter's principal interest is the term 'place writing' itself: a collocation that has increasingly entered creative and critical literary discourse (Smith, 2013); but a label that has yet to receive substantial scholarly scrutiny. Immediately, critical questions proliferate. Some relate to the reader's identification of place writing as a mode of literary

expression. What are the cardinal characteristics of such work? Is place writing associated with a particular literary form or is it applied as a generic category? Further questions inevitably relate to content. What are the dominant thematic tropes in contemporary place writing? How do writers use literary forms and language to reconfigure and/or reinscribe extant understandings of place and placelessness? The exploration of these questions can be particularised by turning to *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and its Meanings* (2010) and *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People* (2018): two field-defining collections that feature writers as prominent and various as Kathleen Jamie, Richard Mabey, Helen Macdonald, Macfarlane, Alice Oswald, Iain Sinclair and Marina Warner. This chapter proposes that these twin publications provide influential snapshots of contemporary British place writing. By extension, in focusing on the forms and themes that emerge from these collections, this chapter moves towards a critical definition of a term that has crept into the cultural consciousness, and literary critical lexicon, in Britain over the first two decades of this century.

Collecting Place Writing: Two Landmark Publications

In 2010-11, Artevents co-ordinated 'The Re-Enchantment': a national project that sought 'to interrogate the various meanings of "place" in the twenty-first century' (2010). As part of this project, Artevents published *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*: a collection of new writing, edited by Gareth Evans and Di Robson, in which eleven contributors were invited to reflect 'on specific locations from across the diverse landscapes of the British Isles, and on the potential for "re-enchantment"' (2010). In publishing work by a heterogeneous range of voices – including Jay Griffiths, Jane Rendell, and Ken Worpole, as well as Jamie, Macfarlane, and Sinclair – the co-editors implicitly challenge the borders between extant strands of cultural categorisation as the disparate work of psychogeographers, nature writers, architectural historians and landscape poets are gathered together in one textual space. In framing this heterogeneity, the co-editors eschew a conventional introduction in favour of a three-sentence note, on the front cover, that

proffers the creative content as phenomenological panacea: 'Here are paths, offered like an open hand, towards a new way of being in the world' for 'the multiple alienations of modern society' (2010). The result is the creation of a literary map of England, Scotland, and Wales – stretching from the Isle of Lewis to the port city of Aberdeen, from Ystrad Fflur in Cardiganshire to Upper Clapton in London – in which the contributions are unified by a collective concern with 'the importance of "place" to creative possibility in life and art' (2010). In turning to 'place' as their cardinal term, Evans and Robson also destabilise imaginatively entrenched distinctions between the urban and the rural to demonstrate – both intratextually across the collection and within individual contributions – the complex messiness of contemporary geographies and their 'meanings'.

Eight years later, another anthology, *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People*, edited by Tim Dee, featured the work of 31 writers and artists. There is some contributor crossover as writings by Mabey and Worpole feature in both books. There's also a shared spatial breadth as Dee's collection 'is a book of writing about places' with 'the personal geographies' coming 'from as many acres as people' (2018: 1). As with *Towards Re-Enchantment*, it is explicitly place – in all of its knotty and contradictory 'meanings' – that provides the experiential and imaginative foundations for Dee's volume. In contrast to *Towards Re-Enchantment*, however, *Ground Work* is prefaced by a relatively expansive and poetically polemical Introduction in which Dee examines how places are 'anthropogenic creations called into being by the meeting of humans and their environment' (2018: 1). Saliently, Dee uses the compound 'place-writing' to refer to both earlier work and the new work that he has brought together. Dee doesn't trace the lineage of this term nor does he self-reflexively interrogate his own use of the label. Yet, through this absence of editorial contextualisation, he implicitly assumes that the reader will share his understanding of what place writing (hyphenated or not) might be and do. Given that this particular collocation does not feature in the brief

prefatory note to *Towards Re-Enchantment*, Dee's confident use of the term suggests that, by 2018, the label place writing – a label that can be retrospectively applied to the collection edited by Evans and Robson - had flowed into the literary mainstream.

Dee uses his Introduction to identify some of the 'cultural, ecological or spiritual' (Evans and Robson, 2010) preoccupations of the contemporary British place writer. Throughout, Dee's language is distinctly Heideggerian as he contends that place writing carries the capacity to remind the reader of 'the *place-ness* of place' in an age in which 'most of the time most of us are *unplaced*' (2018: 1-3). Dee perceives place writing as a creative counter to the spatial abstractions of late-capitalist, neo-liberal globalisation: a world in which 'specificities have been dulled, local habitations and names globalised, the instress or haecceity of every street or field driven from common memory' (2018: 3). In other words, place writing can highlight and celebrate what the environmental charity, Common Ground, refers to as '*local* distinctiveness': 'the diverse, local and intimate connections that people have had, and might yet have, with the landscape that surrounds them' (2018: 11). Moreover, such literary work can offer an imaginative antidote to how the practice of everyday life increasingly unfolds within 'untextured places': 'the unmuddy world of the depthless screen and the sealed space' (2018: 3). Place writing, therefore, reminds the reader of the embodied situatedness of what it means to-be-in-the-world; by extension, it opens up 'the potential', for both writer and reader, of quotidian 're-enchantment' (Evans and Robson, 2010).

A series of issues and questions, however, are raised by the framings in both books, some overtly relating to the politics of place. Back in 2010, Evans and Robson's prefatory reference to 'our sense of belonging' might have seemed urgently apposite for the Anthropocene; but, almost a decade and a schismatic referendum later, that 'our' also feels problematically exclusionary. Dee's persistent emphasis on the re-thickening of the phenomenological experience of place may be

founded upon the admirable environmental principles that underpin the work of Common Ground. Yet he is also vulnerable to the critique that he is offering an intrinsically nostalgic vision of place – and conception of place writing – that is predicated on both a reactionary rejection of the affordances of digital technologies and a reductive and elitist critique of 'non-places' (2018: 2). Dee appears closed to the possibility that digital technologies might potentially enrich an understanding of place; and he remains wedded to an analysis that denies that 'airports … offices, hospitals, supermarkets' (2018: 2) might also be experienced as places of attachment and meaning (see chapter by Bissell, this book). Other issues and questions are of a more literary nature. Most significantly, within the context of this chapter, it remains unclear – from reading both the prefatory note to *Towards Re-Enchantment* and Dee's Introduction – as to what literary form(s) place writing takes.

Creative Non-Fiction: Place, Prose, and the Authorial 'I'

Creative non-fiction, as a literary form, remains surprisingly under-theorised. According to Lee Gutkind, creative non-fictional writing is necessarily predicated on the telling of truths and, as a result, ought to be 'as accurate as the most meticulous reportage': 'names, dates, places, descriptions, quotations may not be created or altered for any reason, at any time' (1997: 10). Crucially, for Gutkind, what elevates creative non-fiction above documentary journalism is the imaginative space that it allows for the articulation of subjective thought: 'More often than not, writers turn to the creative nonfiction genre because they feel passionately about a person, *place* [my italics], subject, or issue and have no interest or intention of maintaining a balanced or objective tone or viewpoint' (1997: 12). In short, creative non-fiction is characterised by the unapologetic presence of the authorial self.

Drawing upon these definitions, it becomes evident that, in situating *Towards Re-Enchantment* and *Ground Work* as field-shaping collections, creative non-fictional prose lies at the centre of contemporary British place writing. In bringing together writers from a suite of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, the collections present the reader with both a disparate range of topographies and disciplinary approaches. Worpole, for example, weaves personal reflection, literary criticism, and a professional knowledge of the European Landscape Convention, to think about the aesthetics of 'the Essex coastal landscape' (2010). Tim Ingold, on the other hand, implicitly draws upon anthropological thought to reflect upon 'somewhere in northern Karelia' (2018: 132). Many of the creative non-fictional contributions, however, share formal characteristics in that the dominant mode is the prose essay that draws upon the author's personal experience of how 'places work on us' as well as 'what places might look like to themselves' (Dee, 2018: 1). They are writings, to apply Gutkind's terms, that present the reader with a subjective account of the truth of place.

The overarching effect is an emphasis on authenticity in terms of both the sincerity of the writerly voice and the veracity of the 'placial' (Casey 2002: 351) experiences that are subjected to literary narration. When Griffiths writes about the grave of Dafydd dap Gwilym, therefore, the reader is not encouraged to disbelieve that the author felt the rain on her skin as she entered the Ystrad Fflur graveyard in which the poet is buried (Griffiths 2010). Perhaps inevitably, in articulating first-hand 'meetings of people and world' (Dee, 2018: 7), many of the contributions in both books offer neo-Romantic reflections – almost invariably made through the prism of a named place – on the entanglements of memory and the geographies of the everyday. In 'Tekels Park', for instance, Macdonald attempts to catch sight of her childhood home – 'a place that draws me because it exists neither wholly in the past, nor in the present, but is caught in a space in between' (2018: 155) - as she drives along the M3 motorway in Surrey. In exploring the imbrications of self and location,

such creative non-fiction writers address twin site-specific questions posed by Macfarlane: 'firstly, what do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else? And then, vainly, what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?' (2012: 27).

Many of the autobiographical writers included in both collections aren't demonstrably preoccupied with expanding the formal properties and possibilities of place writing. Connected with this, there is a tendency for these writers, in privileging the documentation of actual geographical experiences, to refrain from straying too far into the worlds of the imagined and the unmappable. Clearly, they are invariably concerned with how literary language can be pushed and pulled to encapsulate encounters with place; but, at the same time, the preponderance of autobiographical accounts raises questions regarding the extent to which radical creative experimentation underpins such writing. It's important to note that there are exceptions to these dominant tropes. Peter Davidson, for example, begins by highlighting the imagined territories opened up by archival objects as he contemplates 'a place which I have never seen and which I know by heart': a coloured drawing that 'John Aubrey (1626-97) made of his family house, grounds and farmlands at Easton Piers, near Kington St Michael in Wiltshire' (2018: 71). Alternatively, David Matless eschews the first-person in creating a difficult-to-define prose essay, set on the Norfolk coast, that thinks about the 'Anthroposcenic': the landscape 'emblematic of processes marking the Anthroposcene' (2018: 185). Even here, though, Matless's fragmented landscape descriptions are interlaced with gnomic memories of being-in-place: 'Holidays at East Runton; forty years ago, with predictions of a new ice age' (2018: 187). Ultimately, then, both *Towards Re-Enchantment* and *Ground Work* project the overriding sense that the prose exploration of the authorial self-in-place is *the* dominant and defining mode of contemporary place writing.

Poetry: Place, Quiet Lyrics, & Radical Landscapes

In spite of the dominance of prose non-fiction, the editors of both collections also afford space to the poetry of place. Most of the poems they include are lyrics. The term 'lyric' is notoriously slippery but there 'are certain consistent features in definitions': 'it is characterised by brevity, deploys a first-person speaker or persona, involves performance, and is an outlet for personal emotion' (Brewster, 2009: 1). *Towards Re-Enchantment* opens with 'Tillydrone Motte': a fifty-line lyric in which Robin Robertson revisits a childhood landscape of Seaton Park, Aberdeen. On the surface, 'Tillydrone Motte' is a poem of nostalgia: an imaginative return to the 'fifteen years' that the poet spent 'here on this highest edge,/ this hill, in this park; my garden/ spread out for me two hundred feet below,/ the Don coursing through it, out towards the sea' (2010: 9). It is a poem that laments the loss of the deep, embodied knowledge of place generated through childhood play. This Romantic nostalgia, though, is undercut by a self-awareness forged out of the experience and knowledge – both geographical and personal - that the poet has accrued during the intervening years. Other poems within the two collections similarly situate the authorial self-in-place. In 'Hevenyssh', Lavinia Greenlaw's first-person speaker meditates on the large sky and liquid landscape at Holkham on the north Norfolk coast: 'There is no place as airy and dilute/ as level or simple' (2010: 105). *Ground Work*, on the other hand, contains 'Waders': a long poem by the former Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion. Consisting of ten sonnets, the poem's place is the speaker's childhood home and the text's overriding tone is elegiac as, through a series of objects, the poet-speaker imaginatively reconstructs 'the former glories of the house' (2018: 193).

There are clear correspondences between creative non-fictional prose and such loco-specific lyrical poetries. As with much contemporary creative non-fiction, the readers of such poems of place aren't dissuaded from eliding the authorial self with the first-person speaker; and in both types of writing, there's an inclination to root the literary text within an unambiguously verifiable, mappable world. There are thematic cross-fertilisations too in terms of the shared – and largely topophilic -

concerns with memory, nostalgia, and the intimate spaces of childhood. It's not coincidental that a number of contemporary writers of place – including Kathleen Jamie, Jean Sprackland, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts - have oscillated between poetry and non-fictional prose when writing about personal geographies. Through a reading of both *Towards Re-Enchantment* and *Ground Work*, therefore, it appears uncontentious to assert that geographically focused contemporary lyric poetry can also be categorised as place writing.

There's a need, however, to look beyond the lyric. In spite of the diversity of their chosen places, Robertson, Greenlaw, and Motion share a commitment to traditional poetic forms: a commitment that's ordinarily associated with the poetic 'mainstream' in Britain and Ireland (Alexander and Cooper, 2013: 2). In contrast, Elisabeth Bletsoe – whose 'Votives to St Wite' is included in *Towards Re-Enchantment* – is a poet whose work 'flouts the categorisations of contemporary British literature, particularly those related to nature writing, ecopoetics, ecofeminism, L=A=N=G-U=A=G=E poetry, experimentalism and the avant-garde' (Ryan 2018: 82). 'Votives to St Wite' encapsulates the 'palpable eclecticism' (ibid: 82) of Bletsoe's practice: a long poem, written in neo-Modernist free verse, that ventriloquises the spirit of the saint of Whitchurch Canonicorum in Dorset. 'The result', according to Jeremy Hooker, 'is a wonderful poetic embodiment, in which St Wite is "wedded" to the place, an incarnate spirit present in the total ecology, natural and geological, and in language – words of her own time, and words of now' (2010).

This psychogeographic 'verbal palimpsest' (Hooker, 2011) offers an alternative version and vision of the contemporary place poem by eschewing the convention of the stable autobiographical 'I'. Blestoe's poem draws attention to how the term place writing needs to afford space for the polyphonic poetic geographies of the imagination as well as the embodied geographies of authentic experience. At the same time, the shifting temporalities of the poem indicate how contemporary

place writing can think about a site's histories that stretch far beyond the 'imprisoned' (Bletsoe, 2010: 87) temporality of an author's own lifetime. By extension, through the imagining of a deeper past, Bletsoe circumnavigates the problem of nostalgia evident in Dee's later editorial framing of place writing. In short, the inclusion of 'Votives to St Wite' in *Towards Re-Enchantment* underlines that the term place writing needs to incorporate formally experimental 'radical landscape poetry' (Tarlo, 2011) as well as the traditional loco-lyric.

Images and Texts: Place, Writing, & the Visual Arts

The definition of place writing is further elasticised through visual artistic practices. Each contribution to *Towards Re-Enchantment* is prefaced by a black-and-white image. Some are reproductions of paintings: the opening lines of 'Votive to St Wite', for example, appear opposite the reproduction of a painting, 'Cloud Piercing: Chartmouth', by Frances Hatch (2010: 82). Primarily, though, these visual paratexts are grainy black-and-white photographs – some taken by the authors themselves - of the place that provides the geographical focus for the literary writing that follows. On the surface, the photographic images visually signify the truthfulness, to return to Gutkind's cardinal term, of the creative non-fictional text; the photographs reassure the reader that the writer has documented a material, experienced place.

Crucially, however, the practice also carries visual echoes of the work of W. G. Sebald: a writer whose spectral influence hovers over much contemporary creative non-fictional place writing; and who simultaneously reinforced and subverted the way that 'photographs have generally been regarded as a mode of documentation and continue to carry this denotation' (Furst, 2006: 220). There's a clear distinction to be made: whereas Sebald – in *The Rings of Saturn*, for instance – 'intersperses' (Furst, 2006: 220) photographs within the main body of his work, the images included within *Towards Re-Enchantment* uniformly sit outside the textual frames. Yet, by sharing

Sebald's preoccupation with the difficult-to-discern, caption-free image, the editors of *Towards Re-Enchantment* implicitly raise readerly doubts about the 'realism' of place writing (Furst 2006: 220). The image that prefaces Mabey's 'On the virtues of dis-enchantment', for instance, seemingly has three constituent parts - a cloudscape; a thin strip of land; and seawater – and, as the reader moves into the prose essay, it becomes apparent that the facing image is of the flat, littoral landscape of East Anglia (Mabey, 2010). The photograph, however, doesn't securely anchor the reader in this liminal lowland. Instead, the image, as in Sebald's work, both creates a sense of documentary realism and unsettles the reader: the dark horizontal line across the middle of the photograph appears to be land, but the absence of any discernible topographical features leads to hermeneutic uncertainty; the reflection of the clouds in the water ambiguates the distinction between sky and sea. The photograph serves more than a merely illustrative function by opening up the possibilities of uncertainty and the uncanny experience of place. By extension, its presence destabilises and undermines the implied veracity of contemporary place writing through the visualisation of the strange and difficult-to-define. The image prompts the reader to remain alert to uncertainties and instabilities within the main text that follows: qualities that emerge as key to Mabey's autobiographical reflections on East Anglia as a landscape that '*floats* on water' (2010: 29).

Dee, in *Ground Work*, displays even greater editorial openness towards visual practices. The contributions by Dexter Pretley and Greg Poole both feature pencil sketches of natural phenomena – birds and beetles, flora and fauna – encountered in their respective home topographies of the Northumberland fishing village of Craster (Pretley, 2018) and the city of Bristol (Poole, 2018). *Ground Work* also contains 'Childhood ground abiding places': a bringing together of text and a photographic image by the artist, Richard Long. On the left-hand page appears a fourteen-line poem, reproduced in Long's signature font of Gill Sans, remembering key sites from the artist's past: 'The cliff ledge den/ The look-out tree/ The bicycle racing track in the

wood' (2018: 138). Imaginatively, the reader is situated in Robin Robertson territory as Long recalls the days and public places of childhood play. Opposite this poetic text, however, is a difficult-to-discern photographic image that consumes the entire page. Instead of providing a photographic representation of, say, the 'look-out tree', Long adopts his characteristic method of looking down and photographing the textured landscape at his feet (2018: 139). The resultant image is of a cracked, scarred pavement of rock. It's possible that this image is of the 'place where we dug some quartz with hammers' (2018: 138). Long deliberately resists a literalist yoking of text and photograph, however, and through this visual abstraction, invites the reader to think about the childhood experience of place as a pre-toponymised site of near-at-hand phenomenological encounter. If Long's early work challenges conventional understandings of what ought to be displayed within the environmentally controlled spaces of the gallery, Dee, by including Long's practice in *Ground Work* – alongside work by Pretley and Poole - implicitly questions the cultural assumption that the term place writing should only be applied to texts published in conventional literary forms.

Fiction: Place, Narrative Strategies, & Imagined Geographies

Although this chapter is edging towards a definition of place writing, there remains a need to address a key issue: the relationship between place writing and narrative fiction. Since the publication of his first book of creative non-fiction, *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), Macfarlane has repeatedly acknowledged his imaginative indebtedness to writers of fiction: 'I have learned much myself as a writer – at the levels of the image, sentence and chapter – from the techniques of novelists' (2015). Crucially, the convergences extend to textual content as well as literary stylistics. That's to say, in spite of Gutkind's insistence that non-fiction ought to be rooted in fact, the suggestion that the writing of creative non-fiction allows for 'a *different* [my italics] level of truth'

(1997: 10) also opens up the potential for textual elements that swerve away from real-world geographies or the authenticable personal experience of place.

The possibilities of the fictional, embedded within the frame of non-fiction, can be illustrated by moving beyond the two collections and towards *Common Ground*: a book in which Rob Cowen documents his obsession with an edgeland on the outskirts of the Yorkshire town of Harrogate following his relocation from London. *Common Ground* offers a deep mapping of a bounded plot in the 'no man's land between town and country' (2015: 3): a 'patch of earth' that Cowen comes to recognise as 'a place of transformation' (ibid: 8). Unsurprisingly, Cowen interweaves this excavation of place with autobiographical reflections and more particularly, recounts the efforts of home-making ahead of the arrival of his first child. Unusually, though, Cowen's text – in exploring the 'fusions of human and place' (ibid: 205) – clearly oscillates between creative non-fictional and fictional modes. Most memorably, Cowen's use of the first-person becomes destabilised, in the chapter 'The union of opposites', as the narration is taken over by 'John Joseph Longthorne, born right here in Harrogate in 1945' (ibid: 99). Cowen concocts a personal history for this character – a man who habitually sits in the corner of Cafè Nero in the centre of town – and imagines Longthorne's own deep engagement with the edgeland that provides the geographical focus for the text. As a result, *Common Ground* is a book that posits that a sense of place is constituted through a knotty synthesis of the real and the fictional, the experienced and the imagined. By extension, the act of fiction-making 'augments' the author's own embodied and 'instinctive' (Cowen 2015: 205) sense of place.

Although *Common Ground* merges non-fictional and fictional modes and strategies, the book ostensibly remains rooted in the literary articulation of first-hand placial experience. However, could texts that are explicitly presented to the reader as works of fiction also be labelled as place

writing? Neither *Towards Re-Enchantment* nor *Ground Work* contain any overtly fictionalised contributions; and as a result, the editors of both collections implicitly exclude fiction from their otherwise catholic presentations of the contemporary literary landscape. This impulse to distinguish between non-fictional and fictional responses to place is understandable in going some way to ensuring the autobiographical and material groundedness of place writing. Ultimately, though, the division is problematically artificial. Bletsoe's experimental poetics highlight the imaginative possibilities of giving voice to people from a place's deep past; and the Sebaldian preoccupation with difficult-to-make-out photographic images similarly contributes to the erosion of the unpoliceable border between fact and fiction. In addition, *Common Ground* exemplifies the potential for the place writer to embed fictional writing within the textual framework of the non-fictional. Given these textual uncertainties and instabilities, it seems reasonable that the term place writing could be applied to *any* kind of writing – including texts that are unambiguously packaged as works of fiction - that places place at its centre.

Scores of contemporary British novels could be used as illustrative models of fiction-as-place-writing: texts in which the narrative events could only ever unfold in the named locations in which they are set; literary works in which place itself emerges as a key agent. An example is provided by Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012): a novel whose title foregrounds the imaginative primacy of the suburban geographies of Willesden, London. *NW* maps out, through a range of narrative experimentations, the complicatedly coalescing lives of four locals. In giving a voice to each of these characters, Smith's polyphonic text explores how creative strategies can be used to encapsulate the dizzying multiplicity of contemporary (sub)urban experience. At the same time, Smith maps out place itself as *NW* is a novel that's as concerned with the particularities of Willesden – a suburb that is simultaneously singular and unremarkable - as it is with the characters whose lives are shaped by its streets and estates. The literary effect is the fictionalised reimagining

of a real place that reinforces Doreen Massey's influential assertion – generated through her own autoethnographic account of nearby Kilburn High Road - that 'the specificity of place [...] derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations' (1994: 156). Smith's novel captures the 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005: 151) of contemporary Willesden; and, as a result, the literary work offers a counter to Dee's anxiety (2018: 3) that globalisation necessarily leads to a diminishing of the particularities of place. Ultimately, *NW* calls attention to the ways that fiction can explore how places 'remain stubbornly *there*, itchy, palpable, determining' (Dee 2018: 7).

Conclusion: Towards a Definition of Place Writing

The consideration of fiction leads back to a question posed at the beginning of this chapter: does place writing refer to particular literary forms or does it denote a literary genre? In revisiting this question, it's instructive to turn to the analogous label of 'life writing': a term, like place writing, that's variously used both with and without hyphenation. As Zachary Leader puts it: '"Life-writing" is a generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed' (2015: 1). According to Leader, these writings straightforwardly include 'memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries'; but, saliently, he suggests that life writing can also refer to both 'autobiographical' and 'biographical fiction' (ibid). Leader further complicates the genre by proposing that life writing includes a range of non-literary texts: 'letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings (*narratio* first existed not as a literary but as a legal term), marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms (including blogs, tweets, Facebook entries)' (ibid). Scholars of place writing, in attempting to map out the emerging field of critical study, should adopt a similarly pluralistic approach when defining the *genre*. Place writing, as with life writing, ought to allow for

both creative non-fictional texts, overtly fictional texts, and texts in which fact and fiction are imbricated. It should also allow for a heterogeneous range of non-literary texts in which place provides a central point of interest. Contemporary place writing, then, includes the varied forms of poetry, fiction, memoirs, text-based art, tweets and digital notebooks, to name a few. Ultimately, place writing is a helpfully broad critical label that can capture the rich heterogeneity of contemporary texts – across a range of forms - that think deeply, and complicatedly, about place and its meanings.

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