

Poetic world-writing in a pluriversal world: a provocation to the creative (re)turn in geography

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Introduction

We are creative souls. We have therefore embraced with relish the creative (re)turn in geography (Hawkins, 2013; Hawkins and Straughan, 2015; Marston and de Leeuw, 2013). However, in this paper we want to intervene in debates on this creative (re)turn to question how might creative geographies become more attentive to a pluriversal world perspective (a perspective in which many diverse worlds are valued and belong)? Here we are particularly interested in approaching this question as active creative agents, using self-produced poetry to consider this provocation. Bristow (2015) and Magrane (2015) have provided accounts of the various uses of poetry in geography, while in previous publications we have explored the potentials of poetry to express an affective geopolitics (Madge, 2014), as a form of embodied storytelling (Madge, early view) and as a postcolonial research tool (Eshun and Madge, 2012). In this paper we want to expand these arguments to explore how poetry might provide further fresh insights for the creative (re)turn in geography, particularly whether it might enable creative geographies to become more attentive to a pluriversal world perspective.

Our discussion hinges around two poems. The poems were written by Gabriel and they join a growing body of work by geographer-poets (Acker, 2015; Boyd, 2013; Cresswell, 2013; 2014; de Leeuw, 2012). They are spoken word poems, which emanate from an Akan oral tradition, and focus on the aesthetics of rhythm/repetition, praise and storytelling (see Boadi, 1989; Purvis, 2009). The poems use free verse form in terms of variable tempo and line length and are influenced by a rhythmic beat. In poem 1, the rhythm of the poem comes to life through repetition and performance, while the ‘naming’ of key poets of Africa/African descent, follows the form of Akan praise poetry. In poem 2, a story is woven about the Harmattan wind and here the contours of the English language are expanded through reference to vernacular speech formations¹. As Walcott asserts ‘The English language is

nobody's special property': there is the ability to 'stretch' English beyond its spatial confines of 'Englishness' through the poetic encounter (Ramazani, 2001, pp. 14, 17).

In this paper the poems are not included to 'stand alone' but rather they are employed as a methodological tool to meaningfully contemplate our provocation. Since the poems are not simply about the self, but are also permeated with wider economic, political and social dimensions, they can be utilized both as explicit testimony and also as incitements for broader critical reflection. In bringing together the 'small story' and the 'bigger picture', the poems enable an intermeshing of intimate expression and a wider political exteriority, overcoming critiques of parochialism sometimes associated with the poetic form. In this vein, we use the poems as catalysts for creative critique, as fulcrums to consider broader questions surrounding the creative (re)turn in geography. The argument is in two parts. First we outline our provocation, making the case for pluriversal creative geographies. Second, we critically respond to this provocation by unwrapping some of the (im)possibilities associated with this move, as explored through the frame of poetry.

Making the case for pluriversal creative geographies

Insert Figure 1

The poem in Figure 1 shows that 'poetry is everywhere', being a creative cultural formation that has worldly relevance far beyond the confines of Euro-America. However, although poetry is everywhere, it is everywhere differently, taking varying cultural formations in different places (and among different groups of people within the same place, as noted by the naming of important poets using different poetic formations in Figure 1). Many poetry types are thus specific to particular genres, languages and cultures. Poetic forms vary from the Japanese Haiku, to the English sonnet, to Akan drum poetry, while other poetry styles are

hybrids of diverse languages, cultures and periods, which complicate attempts at classification and definition. Moreover, as the poem in Figure 1 suggests, poetry is chanted for a variety of purposes through a range of voices emanating from many different faiths, academic disciplines and political viewpoints. In asserting that the poetic form has multiple starting points and trajectories, we want to propel creative geographies to become more attentive to, and enable, creativity to flourish from multiple centres. This is important because creativity has many different impetuses, paths and visions across the globe. For example, according to Kaufman and Sternberg (2006), in China creativity is often viewed in terms of how the creative process might contribute to society, while in India the concept of *pratibha* (creative power/intuition/wisdom) is important, whereas in the UK creativity is more often seen as arising from a ‘gifted’ individual (there are many varied permutations within each of these nations too). Thus as a differentially produced, expressed and relevant cultural formation, the poem in Figure 1 gestures towards the need for a more geographically distributed and diverse creative (re)turn in geography. The imperative is all the more urgent given that there is a multiplicity of rich creative formations *already* circulating in the world, emanating from multiple locations.

The appreciation that different nations, societies, groups and individuals might have diverse views of creativity, or have varied ways of being creative in the world, requires that we are receptive to the idea of multiple creative ontologies (see Hunt, 2014). Furthermore, different groups may have diverse ways of knowing creativity, asking different questions of it and transmitting and expressing it in varied ways, signifying the need to validate polycentric creative epistemologies (see Harding, 2011). By acknowledging and valuing that there are multiple ways of conceptualising creative knowledge, we can start to appreciate that world is made up of manifold, heterogeneous, dynamic ways of being and knowing creativity. This is a vision of a pluriversal creative world, in which many worlds belong (see Sundberg, 2014, p.

34). Here space is made for multiple expressions of creativity which are legitimated on their own terms while also recognizing that creative knowledges everywhere are partial, emerging and situated (see Johnson and Madge, 2016, p. 87).

The broader question then remains, how might the creative (re)turn in geography make this move towards pluriversal creative geographies?

The (im)possibilities of moving towards pluriversal creative geographies

Insert Figure 2

Initially we consider three potentials of poetry to articulate pluriversal creative geographies. First, poetry can be used to express diverse everyday worlds. It can focus on important themes of ordinary geographical lived experience, presenting strong associations with place (Lorimer, 2008). The poem in Figure 2, for example, voices Gabriel's reaction to the arrival of the Harmattan wind in Accra and expresses commonplace responses to the changing season: the wind makes children late for school, it makes driving hazardous and shoes dirty owing to its thick dust. In expressing the mundane reality of living with the Harmattan in Accra, the poem carves out a space for 'other' stories from 'other' places, reimagining the centre from which geography is actually lived.

Second, since some poetic forms can evoke an emotive sensibility and embodied presence (Bristow, 2015), poetry can potentially induce empathy and promote understanding beyond direct experienceⁱⁱ. For example, in Figure 2 the poem articulates the intensely corporeal response that the dry Harmattan provokes, such as chapped lips and bleeding noses, while the subtle emotions involved in the changing seasons are also noted with dry lips making 'the

weather fall more in love with it'. Often such emotions are harnessed through multiple sensory registers in poetry which can allow for a 'visceral resonance' (Sherry and Schouten, 2002, p.218). It is not just through the content of poetry that this emotive engagement can be achieved, however, but through poetic *form* too. The application of rhyme, repetition and alliteration can concretize emotions, feelings and moods, producing distinctive world-writing that is evocative, engaging and compassionate (Eshun and Madge, 2012, p.1411). So through its emotive and embodied nature, poetry has the capacity to 'show' another person how it is to feel or experience something beyond their specific world perspective.

Third, as the poem in Figure 1 notes, 'poetry just loves being relevant', and is able to weave together politics and culture to respond contingently to significant global issues. Patke (2006), for example, outlines how experimentation with language in the poetic form can be a form of resistance and a mode for reshaping cultural selfhood for marginalized groups. Thus since poetry can 'drum in the midst of adversity' it has potential to insert an incisive political edge to the creative (re)turnⁱⁱⁱ. This politicality can range from the corporeal and personal evoked in the poem in Figure 2, to the geopolitical and institutional, as scribed in the poem in Figure 1. Indeed, amongst many communities in many places, poetry can act as a site of (circumscribed) agency, so it is not only through its content, but also through its *performance*, that poetry can instil a political sensibility and invoke civil action and communality. Moreover, since poetry can employ visionary projections, it can encourage fresh political ideas, transgressing boundaries of geographical understanding and enabling a more shape-shifting approach, which can open up the imagination to a pluriversal sensibility. The poem in Figure 1 attempts to do just this, portraying a vision of poetic world-writing that might transcend self, country and academic discipline.

However, while it is clear that poetry has capacity in making moves towards pluriversal creative geographies, this is not a simple and straightforward process and we finally want to

note some of the complexities that may be involved. Poetry does not simply offer an innocent, benign way of enacting pluriversal creative geographies. Issues abound, including the ability of the poetic form to translate across cultural difference, the capacity of poetry to evoke empathetic understanding of the unknown and the challenges of poetic forms which ‘write’ the world in particular ways, especially through choice of particular languages. For example, we have made some brief attempts at ‘translating’ the meaning of the poem in Figure 2, but without that translation, how possible would it be to understand the ordinary everyday impacts of the Harmattan for those with no experience of this dry, dusty wind that emanates from the Sahara? Such translation is rarely simple and may involve transcultural dialogue that is time-consuming and weighed down with practical issues which can impede easy communication: the production of this paper, for instance, has involved dialogue between UK and Ghana via crackling phone lines, intermittent emails and disjointed daily working rhythms.

Additionally, even where such transcultural dialogue is possible, empathy and understanding of unknown/different/distant worlds is never guaranteed and involves emotional labour to glimpse the world through another’s perspective. Indeed, moving towards more pluriversal creative geographies involves adopting a malleable sensibility that is cautious and open, that refuses ‘to allow the taken-for-granted to be granted’ (Ahmed, 2004, p.182). This opening of one’s being to a pluriversal world, which identifies and validates multiple ontologies and polycentric epistemologies, is not easy to realize and must be carefully worked towards through everyday practices and relations. These may be wrought with tricky, contradictory and potentially refuted interactions and complex emotional investments because the production of knowledge is never ‘innocent’, even in the creative form - it is always entwined with differentiated relations of power (Johnson and Madge, 2016, p.88).

So questions remain, such as who is able to speak through the poetic form, and who is left out, silenced or not heard even when they do speak- which languages, voices, places,

people? For example, if Gabriel had written his poem in Fante or another Akan dialect, would it be published in this journal? If he wanted to express his words through drum poetry or through adinkra symbols, would this be possible and might it reach a wider audience? Thus enacting pluriversal creative geographies will inevitably have to entail an awareness of the complex politics of production that bring (certain) creative worlds into being. This may involve grappling with the production of creative work to acknowledge the limitations of ‘speaking for others’ and being mindful of the risks of appropriation of creative knowledge, while always being open to new ways of thinking about and understanding the world through the creative lens. Indeed, as we have noted previously (see Eshun and Madge, 2012, p. 1421), diverse poetic forms are all very well, but if they cannot be heard or understood, or the conditions, power relations and institutions in which they are produced remain unaltered, advocating for pluriversal creative geographies might become little more than ‘getting a bit of the other’. This might have the distinct possibility of reinforcing, rather than subverting, the kinds of power dynamics, rehearsals of otherness and exclusion that we so hope a pluriversal perspective might move towards redressing. There is thus a need to move beyond simplistic calls for ‘inclusion’ of pluriversal worlds to also reflect the mirror back to unravel how ‘we’ (intellectual communities and the institutions we embody) are all implicated in upholding and perpetuating certain visions of creative geographies, albeit to varying degrees of complicity.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we would argue that the creative (re)turn in geography has the potential to animate cultural geography, prising it open to a pluriversal perspective in which many worlds belong. In particular, poetry can help convey the complexities and emotions of various lived experiences across diverse worlds, thus being a means of relocating creative geographies based on multiple ontologies and polycentric epistemologies. However, although we are

attracted to the use of poetry, we are making a careful appeal for its adoption since poetry cannot automatically convey this pluriversal vision and issues of translation, language and power relations abound. We would appeal to those creating creative geographies to constantly trouble over the production of their own knowledge creations, while also opening their being to a pluriversal sensibility. In this paper we have explored how poetry might enable this move towards such a pluriversal sensibility, in which the diverse creative soul of geography can flourish, in all its varied manifestations.

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Notes

ⁱ As such, the form of the poems might present a challenge to Anglo-poetic convention. It is pertinent to consider the problem of converting dynamic oral performance poems with rhythms, storytelling and repetition into static, fixed, written text. One cannot assume that writing is merely a visual substitute for speech (Barnett, 2006, p.7) and much may get lost in translation. Hence our inclusion of a YouTube video

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ji0s8xcEeWM>), so readers can listen to the poems in performance, which we believe brings them ‘to life’. This issue opens up debate about the evaluation of the aesthetic form, which we do not have space to engage with here but as Tyner et al. (2015, p.12) usefully remind us, creative interventions are best viewed as a form of power, an educational practice subject to wider social, political and economic contestations.

ⁱⁱ It must be acknowledged that not all poetry relies on emotivity or an ‘embodied’ presence, such as language poetry, experimental poetry or modernist poetry.

ⁱⁱⁱ That said, poetry can also be repressive, being used in many different places to promulgate the nationalist and colonialist project (Tyner et al., 2015; Eshun and Madge, 2012).

Acknowledgements

Clare and Gabriel would like to thank George Revill and Parvati Raghuram for their encouragement and support in writing the paper and the reviewers for their incisive and thought-provoking comments. Clare revised the paper during a period of study leave, and she would like to acknowledge the support given by the University of Leicester in granting Academic Study Leave.