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To cite this article: Bettina Stumm (2015) Displacement, Dialogue, and Literary Dwelling: Reflections on Creative Life Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 30:2, 289-308, DOI: [10.1080/08989575.2015.1082319](https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2015.1082319)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2015.1082319>



Published online: 29 Oct 2015.



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# Displacement, Dialogue, and Literary Dwelling: Reflections on Creative Life Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

By Bettina Stumm

This article examines the capacity of intersubjective and textual dialogue to create a “home-place” for writers who are marginalized and displaced by poverty. Through a close analysis of a literary group called the Thursdays Writing Collective that meets on Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, the author analyzes the writing spaces and the dwelling possibilities of two dialogic practices—witnessing and word-squatting—to foster self-determination and relational connection, as well as to stimulate personal and sociopolitical change.

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*a|b: Auto|Biography Studies* Vol. 30, No. 2, September 2015, pp.289–308  
ISSN 0898-9575 print | ISSN 2151-7290 online © 2015 The Autobiography Society  
<http://www.tandfonline.com>; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2015.1082319>

*The only home is in the text.*

—Asfour, 5

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside has been labeled Canada's poorest postal code, due to its large community of low-income and homeless residents. It gained significant press in the late 1990s with media reports of rampant, visible drug use in the area (S. Boyd 21) and from the "missing women" case—over fifty sex-trade workers who mysteriously disappeared off its streets that decade (Jiwani and Young 897). The Downtown Eastside has continued to be pathologized by the media—with harrowing statistics on drug trade, addiction, homelessness, and mental illness—and represented as a place of "public disorder" requiring significant intervention to regain and regulate its spaces and residents (S. Boyd 21). As a result, Vancouver's general public, and arguably Canadians more broadly, tend to view the Downtown Eastside community with a mix of fear, concern, shock, and criticism. In actuality, however, this neighborhood is a diverse community where people from vastly different backgrounds and experiences "share the place as home" (Davies 12). Its population is made up of low-income and working-class members, indigenous communities, immigrants and refugees, activists and artists, and nuclear and alternative families, as well as non-governmental organizations, small businesses, and urban resource centers (Kraljii Gardiner, "Case Study" 2). Contrary to media depictions and popular assumptions, Downtown Eastside residents describe the area as "a place you could go, where if you were different, you wouldn't be judged" (N. Boyd et al. 39).

A group of resident writers who meet regularly on Thursday afternoons at the Carnegie Community Centre in the heart of the Downtown Eastside can attest to this openness and sense of belonging. Their group, dubbed the Thursdays Writing Collective, runs free, weekly creative-writing classes for members of the neighborhood and has involved over 150 writers of diverse age, class, ethnicity, culture, education, and sexual orientation since its inception in 2008 (Thursdays Writing Collective, "Who We Are").<sup>1</sup> In the last seven years, members have participated in writing sessions, events, festivals, publications, and numerous creative collaborations with other literary and artistic groups in the city ("Who We Are"). In this community they have found a place to go—a space where they can write themselves and be responded to with acceptance and encouragement.

Members of the Collective use various literary practices in writing together, but one of the most common is creative life writing. In creative life writing, writers use fiction and poetry to portray self-experience and to convey imagined selves beyond their experience.<sup>2</sup> In his foreword to *V6A: Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside*, Canadian writer and poet Gary Geddes describes the capacity of such writing to generate a sense of "home" for marginalized and displaced writers. He writes: "Several years ago, I had the pleasure of spending an evening

at the writing workshop at the Carnegie Community Centre, where the love of words and shaping and imagination gave relief, for a time, from the discomforts and disadvantages of living off the radar and being shown as one of Canada's major social embarrassments, to be gawked at, consulted, filmed, then ignored. Language, for the members of that group, was the home-place" (viii). Geddes's reflections have compelled me to ask, what, precisely, is it about language and the creative-writing process that creates "home" for those who experience displacement, marginalization, or homelessness due to poverty? How might creative life writing function as a dwelling place and practice for such writers to inhabit, both individually and collectively? How, in short, does one reside with others in and through writing?

The home of creative life writing, as I see it, does not directly concern the economic and sociopolitical needs that we typically associate with homelessness, particularly those of affordable housing, welfare, healthcare, and safety (Barton and Finley 483). While the homeless population on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is defined largely in these terms, creative life writing in this community engages an alternative and arguably deeper sense of displacement than physical privation, economic lack, or inadequate social support. It addresses the psychological and relational dimensions of being out of place—isolation, disconnection, ignominy, invisibility, and disempowerment—by providing the space and freedom to imagine, determine, create, and recreate oneself on the page within a responsive community. From this perspective, the home of creative life writing can be seen as a literary act of dwelling in the text and in community with others.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, I use the terms "home" and "dwelling" interchangeably in this article to describe a psychic and literary space in which one can assert one's subjectivity as well as a relational space in which one can engage, connect, and belong with others through dialogic interaction (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 64; Fullilove and Fullilove 183; Kozoll et al. 568). This literary act of dwelling—subjectively and relationally—can function as an alternative space for writers to inhabit in contexts of poverty and displacement, particularly when traditional senses of home are experienced as negative, complicated, or absent, but the need to express subjectivity and experience belonging remains acute.

Naturally, material conditions and a place of permanence are also significant factors in being able to write. However, for many displaced writers, "home" becomes associated with "things like culture or community more than with place itself" (Gunnars 102). For instance, as Deborah Keahey observes in *Making It Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature*, in Canadian immigrant cultures home is not necessarily "singular or locatable," but constructed and flexible in language (3). "Literature," she writes, "takes on a performative homemaking function, and poets (and novelists, and dramatists [and I would add life writers]) become literary homemakers" (4).<sup>4</sup> For Canadian indigenous communities, conceptions of home become more fraught and tenuous: home has been severed not only from place, but also from culture, language, and identity through colonial

assimilation and destruction. Given that a large proportion of Downtown Eastside residents are indigenous, it is not surprising that one significant goal of creative life writing at the Carnegie is to provide textual space and a safe, affirmative environment for writers to be and belong—a place where identity, community, and culture can be explored and reclaimed (at least partially) through the writing process. Literary dwelling, then, not only takes on a performative function, but also has generative or regenerative potential in this context. While experiences of dislocation, poverty, or homelessness heighten the significance and the complexities of literary homemaking, creative life writing remains one significant way to find space, coherence, and stability to locate oneself, dwell in language, and communicate oneself to others.

In my research on the Thursdays Writing Collective I have found that creative life writing does indeed function as a literary act of dwelling: members of the Collective make spaces for themselves on the page through the writing process, write themselves in ways that challenge stereotypes of dislocation, and describe themselves as finding a place to be and belong in community with other writers. In light of this research, I argue that the intersubjective space and dialogic act of writing itself—its context, community, and creative process—are significant components in making creative life writing a home-place for writers displaced by poverty. In doing so, I examine the Collective's writing space at the Carnegie and explore the homemaking capacity of two dialogic practices encouraged within the Collective: "witnessing" and "word-squatting." Witnessing can be seen as the dialogic basis for subjectivity itself; it refers to the address-ability and response-ability required to establish one's subjectivity with others, particularly in the face of trauma and marginalization (Oliver, *Witnessing* 17). Word-squatting is an act of textual occupation that fosters self-determination through reciprocal dialogue with the text as well as with its writer(s), readers, and the larger community. Together, these dialogic practices—affirmed in and through literary dwelling—have psychic, political, and practical implications for writers experiencing displacement and marginalization on the Downtown Eastside. Witnessing and word-squatting promote agency and responsibility, that not only open spaces for self-expression and collaboration with others, but also motivate personal and sociopolitical change.

### **The Environment of Dwelling: Place, Time, Community**

On a sunny Thursday afternoon in May, I parked my car a few blocks from the Carnegie Community Centre and wove my way somewhat anxiously down Hastings Street, through crowds of people congregated on the sidewalks selling wares, dancing to nearby music, shouting to each other, and leaning against sagging storefronts. I had volunteered on the Downtown Eastside for three years and had come to know, as friends, a number of people who struggled with

poverty and homelessness there. And yet, perhaps due to my own economic stability or hyperawareness of difference, I still felt out of place every time I ventured through the neighborhood. Despite my anxiety, I was deeply interested in the various creative ventures going on in the Downtown Eastside and had read *V6A: Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside* with enthusiasm, appreciating the rich and varied tapestry of stories about the community threaded through the anthology. I wondered about the lives of its writers, how their stories had come together, and what benefits creative life writing might have for them personally. When I discovered that Elee Kraljii Gardiner, one of the editors of the anthology, had been running a weekly writing group for members of the community through the Carnegie Centre, I decided to visit the group personally to see what they were about.

The Carnegie itself is a city-run community center geared toward the particular needs of the Downtown Eastside residents it serves. While it offers social, educational, cultural, and recreational activities onsite like the other community centers in the city, it also provides specific programs to assist low-income adults, a cafeteria that serves inexpensive meals, and many free services with the annual membership of one dollar (“Carnegie Community Centre”).<sup>5</sup> The only stipulation is that residents are drug- and alcohol-free to make use of the space and the activities, programs, and services provided therein. Given these parameters, the kinds of writers who attend the Thursdays Writing Collective tend to be low-income, high-functioning residents of the Downtown Eastside.

As I walked into the historical building and wound my way up two well-worn flights of marble stairs encircled by stained-glass windows, the commotion of the street dropped behind me and I was able to gather myself. Following the signs, I opened the door to a third-floor room and took in the writing space. It was a cheery classroom—clean, quiet, and cool. Chalkboards covered three of its walls and a dozen or so people sat around a large table with paper and pens in hand, chatting with each other or pondering the writing prompt on the board: “Start by kissing the hand you write with.” “Come on in. We’re happy to have you,” Elee welcomed warmly. “We’re just getting started on the writing prompt.” A few people looked over and smiled while others made space for me at the table. I sat down with relief and looked around at the group with a mixed sense of awkwardness and anticipation.

A number of concrete factors make it possible to write oneself creatively with others. In *The Psychology of Writing*, Roland T. Kellogg observes that “the room, time of day, or ritual selected for working may enable or even induce intense concentration or a favorable motivational or emotional state” for writing (186). These factors become a physical and temporal home base that provides the consistency, comfort, and routine indispensable to the writing process. Perhaps the most tangible sense of home that the Thursdays Writing Collective offers its writers is a stable, consistent time and an inviting space at the Carnegie to meet and write. Writers can count on it in their otherwise insecure and

complicated lives. “When I see the effort people make to get to Thursdays, I’m staggered,” Kraljii Gardiner notes in an interview with *Geist* magazine. “Many people are swimming against a wicked rip tide, dealing with mental illness or dressing the scars of having been silenced, or battling bureaucracy for necessities.... For some writers there’s no peace and quiet for thinking until the two-hour block we have on Thursdays” (Kraljii Gardiner, “Poets”). The two-hour block, then, is a literal and mental space to collect oneself and one’s thoughts—a temporary but consistent “room of one’s own” in which to dwell, so to speak.

This “room of one’s own” is not a solitary dwelling but a collective space, one rooted in a community mutually concerned with the craft of writing. Kraljii Gardiner observes the immediate bond that forms between participants around the table, and the respect and delicacy they show for each other’s work. “Community grows quickly among writers when we write and then read together to an audience,” she asserts (“Poets”), and she describes the process more fully in an interview with *Room* magazine: “We come in the door, there is a writing prompt on the blackboard, and we all just start writing. And once we’ve all had a chance to write for about ten minutes, that’s when we put our pens down and look up and say, ‘All right, who wants to read?’ And then what happens is synchronicity. One person will be writing about this, and someone will say, ‘I was writing about that too!’ ‘My piece has to follow hers.’ ‘Can I read after that guy?’ And there becomes this beautiful chain” (“Interview”).

Colin Beiers, a regular participant in the Collective from 2011 to 2012, concurs. Every time he sits down to write with the group “he’s totally alarmed that he’s going to be the only one who thinks a certain thing, or conversely that he’s going to write the same thing that everybody else does. And what delights him is that there is such individualism, but there’s also a common thread” (“Interview”). As he describes it, “I think that writing in a collective simultaneously affirms your belonging [and] allows you to be wholly yourself” (“Interview”). Literary dwelling, then, depends not only on a consistent time and quiet place conducive to reflection and writing, but also on a safe and freeing environment in which to imagine and craft oneself within a supportive and responsive community.

### **Intersubjective Dwelling: Witnessing as Dialogue**

But how precisely does such literary dwelling function? What makes it possible and potentially transformative? Beyond facilitating a time and place in which to dwell with others who share a common dedication to writing, Kraljii Gardiner encourages the dialogic practices of witnessing and word-squatting to create personal space and relational connection, which, by extension, can cultivate a sense of home in participants. Witnessing is an intersubjective mode of being with others in and through language, a mode that is fundamentally dialogic. As

Kelly Oliver describes in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, witnessing is the ability to address and respond to others, which functions as the relational basis for one's subjectivity or selfhood (15). Victims who have been othered or objectified by oppression, marginalization, or displacement "can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as [a] speaking subject," to say "I" to others and regain a sense of agency through articulating or voicing themselves (7). The ability to address oneself to others is perhaps the most obvious way we can be said to dwell in language, since our very sense of self depends on it.

Voicing oneself or giving testimony to one's story is also the most common way we talk about regaining subjectivity in trauma and resistance scholarship. Witnesses testify to their personal or collective experiences of "colonialism, revolution, solidarity, dislocation, and / or exile" in a struggle to resist silence, assert their agency, and situate themselves as spokespersons for others (DeShazer 9). In this struggle, writers are particularly concerned with the sociopolitical dimensions of witnessing: raising political consciousness, taking action through language, and building community with others who are suffering (Gardner 17). By voicing their trauma in a public forum, witnesses confront the systems of power that have resulted in their oppression and displacement, a confrontation that, ethically speaking, requires a response. In effect, their writing is a dialogic way to create space in which to be and belong, speak and be heard, voice oneself and be responded to.

Perhaps surprisingly, these sociopolitical dimensions of witnessing are not taken up in ways we might expect by the Thursdays Writing Collective, despite its context of displacement and marginalization. Kraljii Gardiner notes that while poverty, abuse, and prejudice systematically silence some members of the Downtown Eastside, the writers who attend the Collective show "no hesitancy about sharing their writing," nor is there any "agonizing over 'voice'" ("Poets"). Previous facilitator Anne Hopkinson agrees: "They're fearless," she observes. "They'll say exactly what they want to say" (qtd. in Elias). Thursdays, as Kraljii Gardiner sees it, are not about "How do I find my voice?" or "Who am I and what do I want to write about?" (qtd. in Elias). Rather, the creative-writing process itself is a mode of "self-determination, a survival tactic, and a method of defining reality," in which writers assert the voices they have already found in belonging to this community or claim the voices they have always had but were discouraged from using (Kraljii-Gardiner, "Case Study" 3).

In the communal space of writing, members of the Collective find the acceptance and freedom to express their multiple senses of self and resist being limited to one particular self-concept or identity marker. For instance, one member, Antonette Rea, confessed she was tired of being "the transgendered voice" on behalf of the Downtown Eastside and wanted to write about other things: "I am more than my gender," she insisted, and she has begun to assert herself freely in other ways. Creative life writing in community has the potential to shift writers from "a sense of fixity or 'stuckness' in one or more dominant self-concepts," as



Celia Hunt observes, and to develop “a more reflexive relationship between different aspects of themselves” (“Therapeutic” 232). Hunt argues that this shift toward a more fluid and flexible self-experience “brings with it an increased ability to think and to act” (232). From this perspective, witnessing through creative life writing develops “mental agency” and “psychic movement”—the ability to see and affirm oneself beyond one’s dominant self-conceptions or markers of identity, and to think and act differently as a result (232).

Statements like Antonette’s also challenge the notion that witnessing is fundamentally a sociopolitical activity: marginalized subjects testify to their trauma and in doing so assert their voice and identity, promote recognition and restitution, and become agents of sociopolitical change. While testimonies of trauma do have sociopolitical intentions or implications,<sup>6</sup> witnessing can also have self-reflective, regenerative, or relational purposes. As a case in point, witnessing in the context of the Collective is not principally about testifying to one’s trauma or one’s identity as marginalized or displaced. The main purpose in writing together on Thursdays is to write for its own sake—to find joy in the process and to rejuvenate and nurture one’s life through it with others. As Jan Tse, another member of the Collective, quipped during a writing session, “I come here and write to escape my life out there.” While writers are free to explore their experiences of displacement in and through their writing, many of them (like Jan) also write outside it. Because writers are not defined solely by their displacement but also by their belonging, they can resist being reduced to that particular identity marker, reconstitute themselves alternatively in their writing, and respond positively to each other’s self-expressions. In this context of witnessing, identity politics becomes secondary to imagination—a form of dwelling “here” that can take one beyond one’s life “out there,” at least for two hours a week.

As a result, the dialogic nature of witnessing in the Collective does not revolve around writers’ ability to address others (as a means to reclaim agency and voice), but focuses equally on their address-ability and response-ability in the creative-writing process. While the Collective encourages writers to address others through their work, it also fosters spaces for writers to respond to each other’s work. In fact, on the Collective’s website, witnessing is described precisely as “a powerful response” to the craft of other writers (Thursdays Writing Collective, “Editing”). While trained editors who work one-on-one with Thursday writers sometimes inhabit this respondent position, it is most often inhabited by other members of the Collective. On a weekly basis, each member reads out loud what he or she has written in response to the writing prompt and the group discusses each piece, responding to each other with commentary and encouragement. Kraljii Gardiner comments on this process: “We’ve got people who are elementary school dropouts and people who are post-doctoral fellows who have many published titles behind their names.... What’s really great to see is that the *responses* they give to each other are very adept on a craft level, and they’re just as valid coming from either person” (qtd. in Elias; emphasis

added). Inhabiting this responsive position with and for others is critical. Not only does it neutralize the potential power-hierarchies between respondents that could form within the group—all members' responses are equally valid on the craft level—but it also empowers members who are used to being treated as dependent beneficiaries on the Downtown Eastside (receiving aid from well-meaning individuals and institutions) to assert their sense of responsibility for each other. In the literary space of the Collective, power dynamics shift from hierarchical to egalitarian: each writer is equally in a position to be generous and response-able to the other writers. In practice, of course, members reveal varying degrees of generosity and responsibility for each other, both in the Carnegie and on the streets outside. However, the Collective provides a concentrated space and intentional opportunities for reciprocal response that work to foster mutual dialogue and responsible relationships in creative community.

Responsivity and responsibility are critical aspects of witnessing, as fundamental as address-ability for (re)establishing one's subjectivity in relation to others, especially in contexts of marginalization or dislocation. As Oliver writes in *The Colonization of Psychic Space*:

Responsivity is both the prerequisite for subjectivity and one of its definitive features. Subjectivity is constituted through response, responsiveness, or response-ability and not the other way around. We do not respond because we are subjects; rather, it is responsiveness and relationality that make subjectivity and psychic life possible. In this sense, response-ability precedes and constitutes subjectivity, which is why, following Levinas, I argue that the structure of subjectivity is fundamentally ethical. We are, by virtue of our ability to respond to others, and therefore we have a primary obligation to our founding possibility, response-ability itself. (xviii)

Since one's ability to address others and one's ability to respond to others are damaged in the marginalization and trauma of displacement, witnessing is meant to restore both sides of one's dialogic subjectivity. However, as Oliver suggests here and elsewhere in her scholarship, witnessing is meant not simply to reclaim subjectivity, but to reconstitute it ethically, in responsibility toward others. Subjectivity, from her perspective, is expressed and embodied in ethical response-ability.

Notably, Oliver draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas here, who describes witnessing as both an expression of subjectivity and an ethical orientation toward others, epitomized in the response "here I am" (*Ethics* 97). For Levinas, "here I am" is a radical reconstitution of subjectivity *otherwise* than being-for-oneself, as well as an ethical posture of existential generosity and responsibility for others (100). In a play on the double meaning of the German *es gibt* ("being" and "giving"), "being" is rendered as "giving oneself" (*Otherwise* 146; "Truth" 102). "Here I am" thus signifies a posture of "being given"—a sacrifice of being for others in which one's subjectivity is defined as being subject to others. The

witness, ethically speaking, wholly inhabits this position of ethical responsibility in response to those who are suffering and, in doing so, inverts the self-other hierarchy in which selves take priority over others. In short, responsibility is an others-first ethic expressed through dialogic response.

Given the hyperbolic nature of Levinas's vision of ethical response and the limitations it has for reciprocal interactions, it is helpful to consider Paul Ricoeur's description of "here I am" alongside it, since he offers a more concrete application for our specific context. Ricoeur represents "here I am" as a responsive speech act and an ontological stance, one that affirms one's presence, openness, commitment, and constancy in relation to others: I am here, inhabiting this space and this language with you. You can trust me (*Oneself* 167, 352).<sup>7</sup> In this way, he imbues Levinas's vision of ethical responsibility and subjectivity (as subjected to others) with responsive action, self-assertion, and commitment to being with and for others. Moreover, he challenges the self-other dichotomy in Levinas's framework to suggest that every person can take the position of a responsible witness; we are all selves (whether powerful or marginalized), variously called and enabled to inhabit positions of response and responsibility for each other.

I find Ricoeur's postulation useful for understanding witnessing in the context of the Collective because he describes—through "here I am"—an ethical and dialogic dwelling of subjectivity rooted in relational commitment, reciprocity, mutuality, and trust. It is precisely these dimensions of "here I am" that have the potential to develop in literary community. Within a group context, active response-ability is mutual: all members inhabit the position of response in relation to each other. The ability and willingness of Thursdays Writing Collective writers to share their work and respond to each other functions to reinstate their subjectivity (both in a literary and literal sense) and develop their trust in each other through the active and consistent presence of being there with and for each other. As Kraljii Gardiner puts it, "trust allows for the 'existential necessity' of dialogue and permits [each member] to accept feedback and reach creatively" ("Case Study" 4). Arguably, presence and trust in the context of mutual relationships help to make literary dwelling possible. Over time, the intersubjective dialogue of witnessing can create a space where stability, trust, dignity, connection, and ethical responsibility can be built through an ongoing experience of belonging. As I see it, intersubjective witnessing has the potential to deal imaginatively and generatively with the traumatic effects of displacement and to stimulate personal transformation in contexts where political change is uncertain or unlikely.

### **Textual Dwelling: Word-Squatting as Dialogue**

The second practice, word-squatting, is a literary technique of textual dwelling that was introduced to the Collective by local writer and musician Michael Turner (Kraljii Gardiner, Introduction 11). "Wordsquat" echoes the locally

well-known “Woodsquat” in Vancouver, a three-month occupation of the then abandoned Woodward’s Department Store by residents of the Downtown Eastside and housing advocates in the fall of 2002 (12). Their goal was to have the site made into social housing. Like squatters who settle on unoccupied, abandoned, or uncultivated land without authorization in order to claim it as their own (“Squatter”), word-squatters locate themselves in or write their way into textual spaces that can be deemed exclusionary or inhospitable—published texts and documents that represent traditional modes of power and authority—as a way to talk back or take back language as their own (Miller). Kraljii Gardiner explains the practice as follows: “word squatting is a... word by word... deconstruction of a text [that] can be done by mimicking the syntax of a piece in its grammar and syllabic count, or by inserting [one’s] own words in the text as substitutions or even co-authorial commentary” (“Case Study” 7). It can also include blacking out certain words in a text and reading what is left behind. “Squatting in a text,” she explains, “literally [subverts] a piece by inhabiting [and manipulating] its lines” (6) and contributes to a writer’s sense of inclusion, empowerment, and group cohesion, especially when all the writers in the room are working with the same stanza or paragraph (7).<sup>8</sup>

This practice of textual dwelling through writing in, on, and into texts can be seen as another form of dialogic response that creates alternative spaces for creative possibility and textual empowerment (Thursdays Writing Collective, “Stanza”). As I mentioned earlier, disenfranchised members of the Collective are often situated in positions of addressing themselves to others—asking for help or assistance—and depending on the responses of others, whether in the form of social services or goodwill. As an entreaty or plea for response, this voice of address is self-effacing and subservient rather than self-determining or empowering. In this case, the ability to respond to others has more positive potential than the ability to address oneself to others. Word-squatters have the opportunity to respond to another’s words, to challenge the fixity of a published text—“No, that’s not how it goes”—or to offer an alternative version—“Or it could go like this.” They occupy textual spaces (in lieu of the social, political, or economic spaces closed off to them) with response-ability and, in doing so, challenge the author-ity of others and invert the dialogic hierarchy in which they normally function.

The Stanza Project is one of the ways that the Thursdays Writing Collective has exercised this responsive practice of word-squatting; in fact, this literary project is based on the practice. Undertaken by the Collective in 2012 (and published as an anthology in 2013), the Stanza Project focuses on an exploration of space and home by means of textual squatting—“stanza,” of course, signifying “a section of verse” in poetry as well as “a room” in Italian (Miller). Working in collaboration with Dutch architect Mark Proosten, the Collective spent nearly a year exploring the topic of space—shelter, housing, indoor-outdoor space, accessibility, and home—by writing on, into, and about Proosten’s architectural

designs, blueprints, images, and models, which he sent from the Netherlands (Kraljii Gardiner, “Stanza” 42). They included themselves in spaces where they would normally be excluded, and sent their writings and “invaded architectural drawings” back to Proosten. Proosten, who often “uses literature to inform his architectural practice,” responded by using their “squatted-in” drawings to inspire new buildings and architectural designs (42). In this way, the project was textually dialogic: Collective writers determined themselves, dwelled in, and responded to Proosten’s work, while he engaged with and responded to their occupancy. Creativity was mutually sparked in this collaborative process, challenging the power hierarchies that would normally exist between architects and squatters, authoritative blueprints and marginalia, so as to build something entirely new together.

Word-squatting has profound side effects, both psychological and relational. If displacement is a form of marginalization that can lead to isolation, self-effacement, or despair, then making room for oneself in a text in response to and conjunction with others can contribute to a literary and psychic experience of inclusion, self-determination, and hopefulness. Clinical psychologists and psychoanalysts have long held that speaking and writing oneself with others contributes to mental health, particularly in dealing with trauma. Articulating or writing one’s experiences in a structured form or coherent narrative is fruitful for reformulating identity, making meaning, and integrating trauma into one’s larger story and sense of self (Bonanno and Kaltman 191; Laub 70–71).<sup>9</sup> Oral or written articulation of the trauma can be a form of “intimate revolt,” to borrow a term from Julia Kristeva (12)—a way of sublimating that which has been experienced as unrepresentable or meaningless into a signifying system like language through creative processes.<sup>10</sup> In contexts of displacement, where political change is slow or ineffectual and its authority difficult to locate and thus to challenge or resist, writing one’s story can give meaning to one’s life and one’s symbolic systems, as well as situate oneself back into the social order (Oliver, “Revolt” 409–10).

Word-squatting can be seen as an expression of intimate revolt, wherein squatters situate themselves in a dominant narrative, challenge its authority with alternative authorship, restructure its frameworks, and create new meaning. These imaginative and creative responses empower members with alternative modes of being, acting, and living in the world. As Kraljii Gardiner observes of the Collective, “participants credit writing together with contributing to their mental health stability, encouraging them to find stable housing and [even] saving their lives” (“Case Study” 7). At the same time, however, she notes that writing in the Collective is not meant as therapy (5). As she sees it, members are there to write creatively first and foremost, not to air grievances, reform themselves, or work through their suffering. While not intended to be therapeutic, practices like word-squatting enact the hope that things can change and that one can make change happen. Through word-squatting, writers take a position of active response to a text, talking back to it and talking about it with others.

Having the space and the ability to inhabit and change a text in this way can help to generate the self-confidence and determination needed to begin changing parts of one's own life and story that seem fixed, stuck, or determined by others—to black out certain words, to rewrite lines, to make new meaning, and to create spaces for oneself in the world.

### **Sociopolitical Dialogue: Witnessing and Word-Squatting in the Community**

The practices of witnessing and word-squatting common to the Thursdays Writing Collective have led to public readings, literary involvement in the community, and the publication of chapbooks and anthologies that address and encourage engagement and response from a wider audience. The Stanza Project, for instance, began as a word-squat and intersubjective dialogue with Mark Proosten, but gained momentum within the larger Vancouver community, producing an exhibition at the University of British Columbia's Liu Institute for Global Issues and a free public writing workshop, connecting University of British Columbia students and faculty with the Collective in creative collaboration (Kraljii Gardiner, "Stanza" 42). It was then published as an anthology, *The Stanza Project*, combining word- and image-squatting, poetry, stream-of-consciousness prose, and short narratives about space, place, and home by a diverse range of writers associated with the Collective.

Projects like this make spaces in language for writers to inhabit, share these spaces with others through collaborative practices and exhibitions, connect with members of the larger community, and open further opportunities for dialogue. In its published form, *The Stanza Project* provides space for members of the Collective to inhabit the printed page and share their lives in an established public forum. A published anthology also invites readers to dwell with writers in their texts and respond to them. As Kraljii Gardiner asserts in the introduction to *V6A*, "A text, given its effects on both writer and reader, can create a space for response and discussion of the forces shaping a community" (Asfour and Kraljii Gardiner 6). A collaborative narrative project like this, then, functions not only as a literary dwelling for writers to reside in print, but also as one that opens up to the larger community and invites readers in to dwell and dialogue (Gardner 72). The challenge here, of course, is that response to a text is not the same as face-to-face engagement in a collaborative community. Mutual dialogue can still ensue, but it is mediated and limited by textual representation. Combining both oral and written form, however, such projects have the potential to create hospitable and mutual dwelling spaces for members of the Downtown Eastside, the surrounding community, and engaged readership to come together and participate in meaningful dialogue with one another.

Opening such spaces can also help readers and community members who have little connection with the Downtown Eastside to begin to recognize residents beyond their stereotypes—homeless, poor, high, or mentally ill—and witness them as writers who are creative, articulate, and engaged. In doing so, community interactions can begin to shift from simply “responding to needs” to connecting equally as people. One-sided response, even with the best of intentions, cannot lead to mutual interactions. Nor can “taking responsibility for others” in their displacement replace genuine engagement or create spaces of belonging. Ventures like the Stanza Project, then, take significant steps toward developing reciprocal dialogue between members of the Collective and fellow writers, readers, and community members. They resist a framework of unilateral address and response that often occurs between displaced and placed communities, and instead generate spaces that invite mutual and egalitarian interactions.

Through intersubjective and mutual dialogue, collaborative literary projects enact social and political resistance, but perhaps not in ways we might imagine. To return to the Stanza Project, for instance, we see how cross-community literary collaboration can challenge Vancouver’s geographical dichotomies of space that separate the Downtown Eastside from other parts of the city, as well as its socioeconomic judgments about “the disadvantaged” on the Downtown Eastside. In effect, such projects demonstrate that one’s social or economic position does not dictate one’s literary talent. Given the right conditions, all writers are equally advantaged and can work together to create spaces of literary and relational dwelling where status is not a criterion for self-expression or belonging. As an anthology, *The Stanza Project* also resists power hierarchies and sociopolitical identity markers of displacement as the basis for subjectivity and witnessing. In the anthology, no writer’s work is privileged above the others; each one belongs to the whole. Because writers are not defined solely by their displacement but also by their belonging (in the Collective, in the anthology, in the community, on the page), they can reconstitute and witness themselves alternatively in their writing. Such creative self-determination does not directly summon new policies, economic stability, social status, or permanent housing, but it does have political import nonetheless. It resists reductive formulations and power dynamics of displacement with concrete and literary practices of relational belonging, reciprocal dialogue, and textual dwelling.

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## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Elee Kraljii Gardiner for her insights and encouragement on this article, and to the Thursdays Writing Collective for welcoming me into their writing community and sharing their stories and thoughts with me. A

special thanks to Antonette Rea and Jan Tse for allowing me to publish their remarks. I am also deeply grateful that Elee was able to share this article with John Asfour—co-editor of *V6A: Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside*, inaugural writer in residence at Joy Kogawa House, and honorary member of the Collective—the week before he passed away. Elee remarked to me and posted on the Thursdays Writing Collective website that, as they read through the article together, John “had a chance to relish the fact that his work has made a real, definable difference in changing attitudes about writers from the margins.” This article is dedicated to him in recognition of the difference he has made for writers on the Downtown Eastside.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. Thursdays Writing Collective is not preceded by the definite article “the” in its common rendering. However, for the sake of flow and clarity, I precede it with “the” in this article.
2. I borrow the term “creative life writing” from Celia Hunt, who also describes this form of fictional and poetic self-expression with the term “fictional autobiography.” While the terms “fictional autobiography” and “creative life writing” could be used interchangeably, I use the latter in this article to signify a wider range of self-expression than “autobiography” conveys. For further discussion on this literary form and its various contexts, see Hunt’s “Therapeutic Effects of Writing Fictional Autobiography” and *Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing*.
3. I draw here on Martin Heidegger’s “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” where he describes “dwelling” not as the buildings that house and shelter us, but as a fundamental human way of being in the world that includes preserving freedom, peace, and care. Dwelling, in short, is ontological, a way of being: “the old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin*, *du bist* mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we as humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling” (Heidegger 145). Given this definition and recognizing the fraught terminology of “home” in displacement and resistance literature, I tend to use the term “dwelling” throughout this article to convey the experience of ontological, textual, and relational habitation in creative life writing (both in its community and its literary processes).



4. Perhaps this performativity is what Theodor Adorno had in mind in his own context of war-torn Europe when he writes, “In his text, the writer sets up house. Just as he trundles papers, books, pencils, documents untidily from room to room, he creates the same disorder in his thoughts. They become pieces of furniture that he sinks into, content or irritable. He strokes them affectionately, wears them out, mixes them up, re-arranges, ruins them. For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live” (87).
5. Since its inception, the Carnegie has been a center for culture and education in the community. It was originally constructed as Vancouver’s main public library and museum, completed in 1903 with money donated by Andrew Carnegie. In the 1950s, the building fell into disrepair and, in 1968, it was condemned as “derelict” by mayor Tom Campbell, who wanted to see it torn down and “a modern highrise office building or hotel [built] in its place” (N. Boyd et al. 11–12). However, community-poverty activists from the Downtown Eastside Residents Association challenged Vancouver’s city council to turn it into a public space for local residents, and it reopened in the 1980s as the Carnegie Community Centre.
6. I think specifically of the sociopolitical dimensions of witnessing and testimony explored in Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith’s *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, Gillian Whitlock’s *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, James Dawes’ *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*, and Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly’s recent collection, *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights*, to name just a few.
7. Ricoeur also poses “here I am” as an alternative sense of dwelling in the world to Heidegger’s *Dasein*, one that is rooted in responsibility and relationship. Ricoeur takes Heidegger’s sense of dwelling and shifts it from an ontology *without* ethics to an ontology *with* ethics (“Life Stories” 167). For Ricoeur, *Dasein* is thrown into existence passively and without choice—a state of being that does not bode well for choosing ethical action or responsibility for others (*Oneself* 349). Alternatively, “here I am” is an orientation of being that is potent, active, capable, and relational: “being-with, being-faithful, being-in-accompaniment with one’s community or people” (“Life Stories” 166). This ontology extends being-in-the-world to being-with-others in an active and responsive way, which reinterprets dwelling as an ethical orientation.
8. Notably, Turner’s work with the concept continues on its own terms while the Collective has developed word-squatting to suit its creative purposes.
9. Ongoing studies in the field by such researchers as Geoff Lowe, James Pennebaker, and Joshua Smyth and Stephen Lepore reiterate these claims

with experimental studies, showing that the health benefits of writing not only include a greater sense of mental well-being and ability to deal with trauma, but can also contribute to an improved immune function and other physical benefits.

10. Kristeva defines trauma as that which is unrepresentable and meaningless as a result of being unable to symbolize or assimilate it in the social order. As Oliver notes of Kristeva's work, "Entering the social order requires assimilating its authority through a revolt by which the individual makes meaning his or her own" ("Revolt" 410). Literature and psychoanalysis (as symbolic systems) are two primary domains of revolt, giving individuals "a sense of inclusion in meaning making and in the social that supports creative activities and the sublimation of drives" (410). Without revolt and the resulting feeling of inclusion, individuals struggle to make or find meaning. Revolt, from this perspective, is necessary for human happiness and freedom (410).

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