

## I'll Meet You On The Bridge

**“Excuse me, are you interested?”<sup>1</sup>**

How do you engage a fifteen year old in a writing project when it's cold, and dark, and they've got other things to do? How do you engage a market stall holder with a writing project when they are running a business, and are more concerned about the recession and the rain, than with rhythm and rhyme? How do you engage a Turkish/Kurdish woman with a writing project when she has limited English (and you have no Turkish), when there's a dance performance to rehearse for, and a meal to cook? Why would you want to, anyway?

**It's got to be perfect! / Hand crafted! / Every bit must engender a savouring / A licking of lips / A gasp of pleasure.<sup>2</sup>**

The *In Between* writing residencies were about specific places and specific communities. Structured in two parts, *Part 1* invited the writers Aoife Mannix, Joseph Coehlo and Yemisi Blake to each develop a residency in partnership with the arts organisation All Change. The aspiration was for *In Between* to be artist-led – to start from the writers' own interests and inspirations, and find a way to develop that into a meaningful participatory project. Each writer worked in a place and with a community that they were particularly interested in. They were asked to use *Part 1* to discover, with their group, what kind of creative work was possible in that context; to open up the possibilities for long-term work to happen, and find a common language in which to communicate.

Yemisi Blake worked with young people in Islington, exploring their relationship to the city and their own identity. Joseph Coehlo worked in Whitecross Street market, engaging with stall holders to create new work. Aoife Mannix worked with a Turkish/Kurdish/Cypriot women's group who have been meeting weekly for over twenty years.

**'I can't read it,' she said, and suddenly she was angry and wanted him to leave.<sup>3</sup>**

Is there a new way to tell the story of what writers can achieve within communities? What role might a writer play in doing just that? What does it mean to be creative and critical? What value might a creative piece, written to address the issues arising out of a participatory project, have?

My role has been as a critical friend to the other *In Between* writers: someone to kick the tyres and ask the questions there's never usually time to ask; someone to look at the three residencies as a whole and try to explore, articulate and share the lessons learnt. I have worked on *In Between* as a writer, first and foremost. My

---

<sup>1</sup> A Biji, Yemisi Blake

<sup>2</sup> The Chef, Joseph Coehlo

<sup>3</sup> The Bridge, Sarah Butler

charge has been not to write a evaluation report, but to respond creatively to the project.

**So much / paper dust a trail of footprints across / all the homes that will never be yours.<sup>4</sup>**

What is the difference between a residency and a project? Intent? Longevity? The dynamic that is set up between a host community and a guest writer?

Suzanne Lee, Artistic Director of All Change says: “if a group is being ‘given’ an artist, it’s different from being given a ‘project’ – it’s saying the artist is special as an individual; they’re coming to get to know you, so you might want to offer them a cup of tea. I think there’s something about that relationship that is more conducive to something special happening. It’s different from saying: ‘you have to be here at this time on this day, there’ll be a tea break in the middle and you’ll get a certificate.’”

A residency implies that the artist will be residing, for a time at least. Perhaps a writer working in a market needs to have a stall? Perhaps a writer working with a group of Turkish/Kurdish women needs to learn Turkish?

Or perhaps it is enough just to care. Yemisi Blake was perhaps the closest of the three writers to his ‘host community’, in terms of age, interests and geography. He talks about how important these connections are to him: “I have a shared experience with them. I care.” Joe is fascinated by the theatre and the performative nature of market places. Aoife’s work addresses issues of home and exile, and she has extensive experience of working with refugee and migrant communities. Through their residencies, each writer came to care deeply about the communities they worked with. It is this care, this commitment, that I would suggest lies at the heart of a successful residency.

**If you only just look<sup>5</sup>**

Asked ‘if you think about your residency as a story, what are the key elements?’, Aoife wrote: “Writer turns up to community centre to run writers’ workshops for Turkish Kurdish Cypriot women’s group. Realises workshop plan useless because most of the women don’t speak much English. Instead learns Turkish dancing, how to cook couscous, gets to know the women and the stories of their lives – discovers how much courage and humour they have in the face of deeply traumatic and disturbing experiences.”

Despite limited resources, each of the *In Between* residencies was designed to allow the writer the time and space to build relationships with their communities, without the structure of a defined workshop/engagement programme, and without a pre-determined outcome.

**When day light is still crawling / And the last breath of night can be felt / He sprinkles chillies and masalas / On the day’s curries.<sup>6</sup>**

---

<sup>4</sup> As If... Aoife Mannix

<sup>5</sup> All Manner of Books, Joseph Coehlo

To really engage with communities and places, to build relationships, to understand the context and the characters fully enough to really affect change, writers need time. We measure out artists' days for funding applications. We turn time into money and squeeze it into budgets. We make claims for the power and the possibilities created by artistic engagement, because, as Suzanne Lee says: "we have an utter conviction of the transformative power of the arts, because we've seen it and we've done it and it happens, and as arts practitioners we've felt it". And yet so often we end up slicing off a day or two to keep the budget 'reasonable'. We split a project into two parts to increase our chances of getting funding. We need to create stronger arguments for adequate resources, for time and flexibility, and a willingness to embrace the unknown.

### **You stand accused of losing your own address<sup>7</sup>**

Is it realistic to ask a writer to become part of a community?

Is it possible for them to do so?

What happens when they leave?

How can we create enough time, enough space, for a writer to truly be 'in residence'?

Where is the space for failure?

What about the writing?

### **I'm words to blank pages / I'm wet ink to new ideas<sup>8</sup>**

Joe describes how a writer: "has to listen, and listen well, and be sensitive to what is heard, because if that sensitivity is lost then the writing will be weak and lacking an essential element of truth."

Of the poems that sit alongside the more 'verbatim' stories of the women she worked with, Aoife says: "The poems are not in fact just about the women; they are also about me and the effect that working with them had on me. Far from attempting to be objective, the text is the result of a creative process that has been profoundly personal."

Yemisi Blake has created a small book, inspired by the Chinese Biji form (a collection of images, quotes, thoughts and texts), which addresses both his experience of engaging young people with creative projects, and the young people themselves – their culture, their language, their own explorations of what it means to exist in the world.

My own residency has challenged me to bridge the gap between my creative and my critical writing: to find a new way of talking about participatory writing practice.

This relationship between the writer's art and their processes of engagement and participation is essential for a residency to achieve its potential. It is back, again, to the concept of caring, and also of reciprocity. If a writer is brought in solely as a

---

<sup>6</sup> Spiced At Dawn, Joseph Coehlo

<sup>7</sup> Survivor..., Aoife Mannix

<sup>8</sup> A Biji, Yemisi Blake

facilitator, without sharing their own work, without taking risks, without making themselves vulnerable, a residency cannot go as far, or achieve as much, as it might.

### **He holds the market's memories / Tatoed across his skin**<sup>9</sup>

The idea of place was central to *In Between*, and each residency has explored how the people involved (participants and writers) relate to their surroundings; how they navigate and make their mark on London. *In Between* has also been concerned with the relationship between words and place, in how reading and writing can be spatial practices. In creating their books, Yemisi and Aoife have been concerned with how the texts are positioned, and how their position might influence their reading. Joe's residency involved spending time walking the market, and creating texts able to exist within that space.

In my own residency, I have considered how the story and 'essay' might sit together in a publication so they are able to 'speak' to and influence each other. I have used lines from the three writers' residencies, and my own creative piece, within this essay in order to open up questions and ideas for the reader, rather than trying to shut down an argument or a point. I have also been concerned with the relationship between text, community and place – interested in how the physical places the writers have worked in have influenced their methods of working, the texts they have created, and the people they have engaged with. When a residency focuses on a specific, localised community, an understanding of the community's relationship to their environment is key if the writer is to meaningfully connect with them.

### **Hood up, head down. Walk Walk Walk**<sup>10</sup>

Can we insert a budget line for 'walking'?

### **I live with her but I have no money. I can't go anywhere.**<sup>11</sup>

The book Aoife created through her residency addresses stories of domestic violence, struggles with language, and finding a sense of identity in a new country. The book highlights the relationship between language and mobility: many of the women she worked with have felt unable to move far from their domestic spaces because of their lack of English. This theme strongly influenced the fiction I wrote as a result of my residency. It is an issue that is closely linked to the idea of currency, another reoccurring theme throughout the project. Having the right kind of currency (money, language, credibility) allows you freedom of movement. A lack, or the wrong kind, of currency can trap and confine you.

So where does the value sit in these kinds of project? What currency are we using? As a writer-in-residence, how do you 'sell' what you do; how do you create work and engagement that is meaningful and has value? What transaction are you

---

<sup>9</sup> The Man with the Disks, Joseph Coehlo

<sup>10</sup> A Biji, Yemisi Blake

<sup>11</sup> Papers, Aoife Mannix from conversation with project participant,

making? What are you offering, and what are you asking for in return? Trust? Time? Ideas? Money?

### **His boxed sets of knowledge / Must be haggled for** <sup>12</sup>

Where do you draw the line between art and marketing?

Who draws it?

How does collaboration and negotiation work?

What happens if you don't agree?

Can you write by committee?

Who owns the end product?

### **All manner of books / If you only just look / There are chapters that hook** <sup>13</sup>

Artists make things. Writers write. The end product makes sense of the process. Suzanne Lee talks about All Change's commitment to production values and high quality end products: "We talk about giving people a voice, and in order for that to happen, someone has to listen, someone has to see. The package something comes in affects how it's received."

Joseph Coehlo created new poetry and images for nine stallholders in Whitecross Street Market. The stall holders were thrilled. 'He came here and took my picture and he wrote a poem about me. Now I have a piece of art about my stall. How can I not be happy?' one stallholder responded. They have been adopted by the stallholders – turned into business cards and put onto websites. They have entered the currency of the market.

As part of my own residency I have been reading current thinkers who are addressing themes of place, art and participation. I was struck by a passage in Jane Rendell's book, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, where she discusses Luce Irigaray's proposition of the term 'I Love to you' rather than 'I Love You'. Rendell argues that the preposition 'to' makes a 'space' in between 'I' and 'you', and creates a new social order of relations, where both the 'I' and the 'you' are related as subjects, rather than as subject and object. I would suggest that we can consider the texts created during the *In Between* residencies (particularly in their physical form as book or postcard) as 'prepositions', as well as products that make sense of a process. They have created a space in between the writer and the community that has opened up the opportunity for change, conversation and understanding.

### **They send stories through space you can't see.** <sup>14</sup>

And the writing? Aoife says: "I hope through my poems to allow people to really consider, from an emotional as well as an intellectual point of view, what these women have had to face in their lives." Yemisi wants his texts and images to put the young people he has been working with in context, and invite readers to think about a stereotyped group in a new way. For Joe, the project allowed him to explore the

---

<sup>12</sup> The Man with the Disks, Joseph Coehlo

<sup>13</sup> All Manner of Books, Joseph Coehlo

<sup>14</sup> A Biji, Yemisi Blake

relationship between text and image, and find ways to celebrate and recognise the individuals who make up Whitecross Street market. For me, the chance to think deeply, creatively and critically about the issues arising from each of the residencies has been a remarkable and challenging opportunity, which has stretched and developed my own practice. My aspiration is that the texts I have created will tell the story of the *In Between* projects in a new way, and will also, through their existence, make an argument for more creative forms of critique and evaluation – a process of peer examination and questioning that can add a valuable layer to participatory projects.

---

***Lyrics form armour, no marks or scars***<sup>15</sup>

*What makes a story?*

“Characters growing. Environment changing. Lessons being learned.” (Joe)

“A story is a journey that the teller takes you on” (Aoife)

“Words. In orders that are new.” (Yemisi)

**you wonder if tomorrow is an art form, / a kind of dance you haven't learnt the steps to, / or just another box you don't know whether / you're supposed to tick because you are / that round peg in a square hole, a foreigner, / a horoscope nobody wants to read.**<sup>16</sup>

How can we talk about what we do? Is it just an act of intuition? An endless translation between the languages of funders, local authorities, businesses, and communities? Is a writer a translator of the world? Could a short story stand in for an evaluation report, or would it have to sit alongside? Which would be valued more?

***Sometimes she lay on her bed and whispered into her pillows***<sup>17</sup>

When Aoife's work was translated into Turkish, she discovered that the Turkish word for 'home' was the same as the Turkish word for 'house'.

**When he left, he handed the paper to her like it was something precious. She sat all evening, with the two pieces of paper on her lap, trying to know what they said.**<sup>18</sup>

“For many of the stories, we were a group of women sitting around a large table drinking coffee. I was asking questions in English which were then roughly translated into Turkish, answered mainly in Turkish by the woman telling the story with perhaps the odd sentence in English, and then roughly translated back into English by a number of women in the group. In other cases, one woman told me the story in Turkish while another simultaneously translated it. Even in instances where the stories were told to me in English, they were not told in formal settings. A

---

<sup>15</sup> A Biji, Yemisi Blake

<sup>16</sup> Fortune Telling, Aoife Mannix

<sup>17</sup> The Bridge, Sarah Butler

<sup>18</sup> The Bridge, Sarah Butler

number were told to me while we were cooking Turkish dishes in the kitchen or in between breaks in the Turkish dancing lessons.” (Aoife)

Aoife had to find a way of working with a group of women, many of whom she did not share a language with. The method she followed involved immersing herself in their activities – learning Turkish dancing, attending cooking demonstrations – and forging relationships with the women which enabled the kind of group storytelling and sharing she describes above. The texts were translated into Turkish so they could be shared with the women at an informal event, where they were very positively received. Aoife says, “for me as a writer, it was hugely important to have the approval of the people I had been writing about.”

Gul, the leader of the group, said that the women were happy to be able to share their stories. ‘We couldn’t share them before,’ she said, ‘because of the language.’

**Çıkış yolunu bulmak, eğer İngilizce bilmiyorsanız daha da zor olabiliyor. İngilizce bilmediğim için havaalanından çıkmakta nasıl zorlandığımı hiç unutamam.<sup>19</sup>**

The language we speak affects how we operate in and move through the world. It dictates which doors we can see and which of those we see we can walk through. *In Between* was about finding ways to bridge gaps: of understanding, culture, occupation, experience. It was about caring enough to create new work that in turn people cared about. It was about making new spaces to operate in and finding new words to describe.

**Then he gets up and walks away / without another word. / You want to thank him / for making you feel // perhaps it will all be alright.<sup>20</sup>**

*In Between Part 1* gave three writers the opportunity to explore what it means to be in-residence in a community, and a fourth writer – myself – the chance to facilitate that thinking and find a way to articulate and share the ideas, issues and lessons of the project. Over the course of my work on *In Between*, I have returned, again and again, to two pairs of words: translation and transaction; community and communication.

The preposition ‘trans’ comes from the Latin: ‘across, over’. The *In Between* writers have had to find ways to bridge the space between languages – Turkish to English, arts speak to market speak, young people’s slang to everyday English – and to find out which transactions are valid within the communities and the places they have been working in. Each residency has held the idea of community at its heart, and the writers’ ability to forge paths of connection and communication with those

---

<sup>19</sup> *It’s all so confusing if you don’t have the language. I’ve never forgotten how I couldn’t even leave the airport because I had no English.* Aoife Mannix, from conversation with project participant, translated by Sevinc Aslan

<sup>20</sup> Beautiful... Aoife Mannix

communities has resulted in residencies which have achieved remarkable successes with limited resources.

**'it's as if we were never here'**<sup>21</sup>

A residency suggests a relationship between host and guest, and between the artist and the physical space or locality of their residency. The longer the artist can stay, and the more connected they can become to that place and that community, the more opportunities – for conversation, experimentation, new work, and positive change on all sides – can be discovered and acted upon. So much of any residency or project – its successes, frustrations and surprises – depends on individual personalities and circumstance, but it is clear there are strong themes to consider: time, space, flexibility, trust, belief, and the need to find a common language and a common currency that can be accessed by everyone involved.

**'I'll meet you on the bridge,' he said, and she knew right away which one he meant. It stretched across the river just half a mile from her house: a green metal bridge that looked like it might snap in two, though it had been standing for hundreds of years.**<sup>22</sup>

Where is 'in between'? Who is 'in between'? What is 'in between'? In the early nineteenth century, an in-between was someone who intervened, presumably to resolve an issue; to make a difference; to create change.

I propose that community-based arts projects might take the time to consider the idea of 'in between' – to think about how we might fashion a new space in which artists and communities can connect, share and create. That space might be a physical space, but it might equally be an idea, an atmosphere, or a text. I like to think that this new, imaginative, space could be more than just meeting in the middle, more than just a string of compromises and straightforward translations. I see it as a hard-won space that might take months, even years to create, but is in fact a beginning rather than an end. A spring board. A starting point. A space to play.

© Sarah Butler, 2010

---

<sup>21</sup> As If... Aoife Mannix

<sup>22</sup> The Bridge, Sarah Butler