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## The Dreams and Consequences of Literary Geography: *Or, Does Literature End at the Interstate?*

Anthony J. Elia<sup>1</sup>

*Lecture Given at the*

**DALLAS LITERARY FESTIVAL**

Dallas Hall, Southern Methodist University

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What is a writer, let alone a *Dallas writer*? A *Texas Writer*? An *American Writer*? Before we can tether ourselves to the descriptive terms associated with *writer*, it is necessary for us to understand what exactly *a writer* is. Now I am not going to go into the *qualities* of a writer, nor the *qualifications*, how many papers, articles, books, poems, novels, memoirs, or autobiographies a person has written. Rather I want us to look at the very essence of the word “writer” and “writing,” and consider for a moment what its ancient environmental, ecological, and fundamentally earth-bound (or chthonic) connections are and what they mean for us as a sentient species. This *urtext* (or, ground-original) vision of *writing* and *writer* will provide the context for why we continue to consider the locality, the land, the space, and the environment (usually urban-centered) notions of “writing” as thereby tied to distinct parameters and frameworks. The “why” is intentionally connected to our ability to encounter and understand space, just as much as our inability to see beyond a horizon as finite beings of flesh, blood, and bone; even while we have infinite minds that reach beyond the scrubby hills, pine bushes, or dry riverbeds of our state.

“Write” is a word that has physical and kinesthetic properties. It has its origins in language that signifies our desires as human beings to claw into the earth, to make our mark, to be heard, listened to, *read*, and remembered. The action of *writing* then is a concerted effort to dig ourselves back into that earth we came from as beings of earth, mud, and water (indeed, the biblical *‘adam* is earthen, and the traditions of antiquity that we speak of to this day hearken back to our earth-boundedness – like the ancients of Sumer and Mesopotamia did first, needling their styluses into freshly made moist clays, little angles and wedges, symbolic hieroglyphs similar to their Egyptian cousins to the west, to tell stories, to relate to one another, to identify a kingdom, to tally a purchase or order of wheat, write a letter, or even file a legal complaint – 3, 4, or even 5-thousand years ago.

It is no surprise then that the word *write* as we know it today, then, comes from Germanic, Proto-Germanic, and Indo-European meaning any variety of terms that indicate a coarse abrasion made to keep track of something: to tear, scratch, pull, tug, cut. Even the words *scribe*, *scribal*, and *script* come from Sanskrit’s *rikh-* meaning to carve, scratch, or cut. Gothic and Slavonic origins use words that mean “to paint.” But the

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notion is clear: our human selves have from time immemorial attempted to make our mark by doing what we knew best in trying to express ourselves, by taking an implement and putting it to some malleable or mark-able substance that will retain and record our thoughts. Almost as if the ancient biblical introduction to the Gospel of John were an inversion of a more ancient belief on writing: not that *the Word became flesh*, but that in antiquity: *flesh became Word* – thus, the word (small “w”) was an exercise in remembering that the flesh of sentience and human existence would pass, only for the words of the ancients would remain for thousands of years for others of us to be aware of that past and know about them.

As we look throughout history, the history of writing, the history of poetry, the history of literature in all of its formulations, expressions, and debates, we also look at the consideration of those *who did that writing*. And in modern times, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we have so many other aspects to imagine, take into consideration, and wonder about. It is no longer the question of simply what makes a writer, or how we identify a writer, where they come from and such, but what media does writing come in? Up until the 1990s, nearly all writing was done and published on paper. In the late 1980s, a rupture of writing was already under the surface, getting ready to burst through the mantle of the literary establishment; people who wrote, since the 1870s had been using the mechanical means and aid of typewriters over the pencil or pen; now word processors and soon computers would expand this literary magma into a Krakatoa of volcanic change. The internet not only changed writing, but publishing, reading, and the pure engagement with the word – the image of print, the notion of typography and font, the instantaneous malleability of textuality, and democratized information sharing, social media blitzkriegs of the mind, and much, much more.

Were we, then, not simply disengaged from our writing, but from the identity of writing? Did it become much more important to re-engage with the notions of where we locate ourselves, or self-identify who we were (or are) in relation to the places we came from or the places we lived, in making an architecture around the definition of the kind of writer we were/are/or were becoming?

It wasn't until nearly a century after the death of Shakespeare that the notions of identity and writing took on the significance it does today. In fact, most scholars believe that the idea of “authorship” much “like “ownership” or “professorship” reflects an appropriate and necessary connection between authors and their texts,” (Lisa Ede, *see “The Concept of Authorship,”* dating *authorship* to around 1710). Not only does the author become more visible, the author takes possession of their work, as owners, like that of property. And this is not a coincidence then that it is a time of global growth and need, the expansion of empires, the development of illicit and slave trade, the increase in warfare, the evolution of gunpowder and weapons, the tensions over property *ownership* and individual rights, the dismantling of divinely appointed kingship, and the reliance on the human mind as king (or queen or lord) above all. With the rise of ownership of writing, of authorship, so too came the rise of plagiarism: a word that though has come to mean

“steal” – as in “steal one’s work” – actually comes from the word in Latin *plagiare*, which means “to kidnap.” To plagiarize is to kidnap – to take something, to plunder it and make and represent it as your own. Thereby, the object of writing, the objects of literature, poetry, memoir, letters, texts themselves, have become imbued with the commodification of our environments and worlds. Before this commodification, it was a form of flattery, even an expectation and mark of distinction that authors (named and unnamed) would borrow from one another, from colleagues, contemporaries, and ancestors in antiquity. But as a commodification of attachments and ownership seeped into our worlds, when everything became transactional in the rising capital landscape, so too did writing, so too did the ownership and propriety of writing, and so too then did that demand an identifiable human actor with a name.

Laying down our roots in spaces of occupancy, of spaces of home and family and community, all express our inner needs and desires for the space in and of our identities. This is something much older than writing, or much older than the identification of an author with the ownership of writing – this is simply a human, and perhaps even an instinctual behavior of animate objects: to be attached to home, however that is defined.

The idea of the often-described *Diaspora writer* is one that knows this all too well. We see this in individuals like Salman Rushdie who parallels the space of the subcontinent with the subconscious of *spacelessness* – the vacuity of owning or belonging to somewhere, but instead being untethered like that freed balloon of helium spinning away mercilessly into the heavens – ultimately never knowing what true home is, because that of our dreams and memories in youth are never the realities and disappointments of our present.

Closer to our homes here, more than a century and a half ago, there was ostensibly a *Dallas writer* who was part of a “French socialist experiment” south of the Trinity River before the American Civil War. Victor Considerant and a breakaway group of socialists from Paris settled in the southern marshes of what is now West Dallas in the 1850s. They wrote of being in Dallas, they wrote of gender and personal equalities, they wrote in French, and then then left. What distinguishes those historic passages with the experiences I’ve had as an American abroad, working, studying, and writing – living those three years in Jerusalem, one year in Rome or six months in Nairobi or three weeks in Shanghai? What does this speak of the traveler then? Of course, we will all now opine over the meaning of our own identities and agency with questions like: *were you a tourist, a student, an expat? Did you have free will to come and go? Were you a refugee? What language did you write in? How did you come to view yourself? Etc.* Indeed, we know these are all relevant and valid questions to consider. A tourist in Dallas for a week from Berlin, is ostensibly a German writer visiting Dallas; a refugee from a war-torn country who has lived and raised a family in Dallas for a year or twenty and writes a memoir earns the badge of connection, community recognition, and some ineffable merit, assumed as a mantle bestowed quietly in the night: *you too are a Dallas writer now.*

Much of what we contend with today *as writers* has its more immediate roots in the issues of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – namely statehood and nationalism. The late political scientist and theorist in nationalism studies, Benedict Anderson, posited the idea that we live in a world designed and enacted by *imagined communities* – these collectives of humanity that have some particular similarity in their identity, whether or not we know who those other unnamed people or masses are, they still have something that bonds us to them. In the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, this manifested itself as *nationalism* and helped to undergird the *realpolitik* and conglomeration of disparate, often similar (but not the same) groups of people, ethnicities, and language groups, who would eventually develop into a macro-identity that often proved volatile and explosive. And to this day, we see that these attempts at aggregation and classification of peoples has disastrous and long term global effects. This is not to say that *all* expressions of the national identity are problematic, but their expressions have often produced ill-effect and internal tensions within those artificial borders.

While today we may say that Europe has a few dozen languages, depending on how you *define a language*, one might argue that there were at one time *hundreds if not thousands* of languages, determined by regions, towns, mountains, and rivers. My own father, a product of a small Sicilian village, buttressed by the sea to the south and rugged hills and impassible valleys to the north has long said that he barely understood the language or dialect of his neighboring towns. But that brings us to the old joke: *what's the difference between a language and a dialect? A language is a "dialect with an army."* There are many truths in such a statement.

In a place like Dallas, and specifically in Texas, the notion of our contemporary association and designation of being a "Dallas" or "Texas" writer comes with the registration of our late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century awareness of our space – including all the trappings of what "Texas" as a place and idea stir up in the popular imagination, in the media, and among the populace: cowboys (and cowgirls), steak, BBQ, ranches, big hats, big attitudes, big hair, big churches, big wallets, big buildings, big burgers, big everything, a "can-do" mentality, an irrepressible spirit of guns, sugar, conservative politics, and independence. These are changing somewhat, especially in the more progressive cities, but the "Don't Mess With Texas" style of perception (which was actually an anti-litter campaign from the 1980s, and NOT an old timey tradition!) must also be couched in the older legacy of Texas as an independent republic – one which came into being not necessarily for its hardscrabble determination of good-ol'-fashioned hard work and perseverance and survival (which did exist), but because of political ruptures and determination to break away from a Catholic country where slavery was officially illegal, and local incursions of capital seekers sought to find their own way to exploit the human race.

The legacy of any place has its spots – some are larger and more profoundly deplorable than others. But much should still be measured in the hopeful future of how we identify ourselves in the program of identification with our spaces and places, within the real and imagined

environments of everything from our living rooms and kitchens to the interior of our souls. The formation of nations more than a century and a half ago – whether of Texas, Germany, Italy, or Japan – after the demise of royal kingships, led to renewed interest and understanding of who the human is in the landscape of writing.

I hearken back to the days of my wanderlust and roaming the Mediterranean in my 20s; of the ethnic heartland my father was born into on the island of Sicily in the 1940s – and of the time I visited two decades ago the adjacent realms of that Mediterranean space. Four hundred miles to the northwest of Sicily, I traveled by ferry to that other island Sardinia, more wild and fierce in its elements, geology, and mountains, jagged like panther jaws, but beautiful, heroic, and raw in its aesthetic presence. Its people quietly keeping to themselves, though helpful in guiding me to the appropriate bus stop or train station and serving up a modest meal of orecchiette and boar meat, I found myself in an ancient space with local proclivities and motions of deliberate living; into a town where the inhabitants paid respect to their literary giant by painting lines from her novels on the bare walls of their homes, down small alleys and major thoroughfares to the piazza.

I made a pilgrimage to that town of Nuoro, a place with its own flavor of language, a dialect to some. I went to pay homage to Grazia Deledda, the first Italian woman (and second woman after the Swede Selma Lagerlöf) to win a Nobel Prize in Literature; her works were real, intense, and abrading against the truths of struggle and hardship in these ancient mountains, replete with tension, family strife, suffering, and death – like her last novel *Church of the Solitude*, describing the secret life of a woman dying of breast cancer, while envisioning the needs of her space, her home, her community, her land. Deledda wrote the autobiographical volume just before she herself died of breast cancer and was encrypted in that very *Chapel of the Solitude* on the hillside of Nuoro – her place, her landed-ness was here in Nuoro, in Sardinia, in Italy. Where she is interred is only 90 miles from Garibaldi's grave, on the small island on Caprera in northeastern Sardinia. The patriot who unified Italy – apparently with the help of one of my ancestors on my father's side who was one of the *Spedizione dei mille*, or thousand redshirts who liberated Italy of its tyrannous king – is in a family cemetery not far from where my ferryboat landed. Yet, I chose to undertake a different pilgrimage, to pay homage to the woman who by many accounts was Italy's greatest writer. It was for me an attachment to some literary legacy, of which I felt connected to; and even though I had nothing attaching me to the island of Sardinia or its land, its mountains, or its people, she was a patron saint of literary refuge and struggle, providing me shelter and support as a spiritual and literary great-grandmother from a century earlier. She was more profoundly significant in my mind than that of a military hero, with whom I had a more familial connection, but little emotional or spiritual bondedness (and whose grave *I did not visit*).

But I am not an Italian, Sicilian, or even expatriate writer – I am an American. I was born in New York, upstate no less, and have lived around the world, and have for the last four years resided in Dallas, Texas. And

while I do often joke about “being Italian” by family ancestry, it is interesting that the “Italian” element of my background is far more prominent than the loose confederation of my German, Irish, and Alsatian ancestry—of which I’ve never given a thought to being any significant descriptors.

There is much that could be unpacked in this statement, but I have often wondered if in that rumination on how we associate with *space* and *place* there is something about the formation of the landscape?—For clarity here, *space* means physical geography; while *place* constitutes the identification of that geography with meaning, like what articulates and gives rise to how we understand our presence to that soil beneath our feet, especially with memories and popular perceptions, and collective consciousness.

As for that vestigial association of *place* in my own mind as an Italian-American, and specifically, Sicilian-American, there is a notion of the role of those *places* as both peninsula (Italy) and island (Sicily): there is an island-ness to my identity that I do not often address or speak of that comes from my father. There is also a liquidity in what I understand of the space that was occupied by him, by his living near the sea as a child, or emigrating on a ship across the Atlantic, or coming to live near cities with ports, or retiring to a seaside resort town in Florida. His relationship with water and ocean views may have been informed by boredom at sea and the disinterest in swimming, despite living close to the ocean all his life. In contrast to my mother, who was a lifeguard and is an avid boater—though, in that respect too, the landscape in which I was raised in the Hudson Valley, and the family homestead of my mother’s family had tremendous impact on my literary mind—grass fields, abundant play space, woods, rivulets, glens, streams, waterfalls, and a huge river—all of this is till imprinted in the depths of my writing soul.

But the ideas of our attachments to water, rivers, the sea, and homes that were informed and defined by the lifegiving element were never foreclosed on. Curiously, as I get older, the question of my relation to the sea is coupled with a similar relation to the desert—living in a place like Texas informs me as a person who reflects on the realities of nature, the surfeit and abundance or the scarcity and limitedness of our most precious of resources. The adventure of the self through the landscapes of our souls—at least for me—are treks into the *landedness* of Italy, Sicily, the Mediterranean, and now the American Southwest. I envision the dryness of that ancient island space—even now more than twenty years since I’ve traveled there—tinged and enlaced with medieval church bells and piazzas or town squares and the pale or vibrant colorful flesh tones of rock and stone that would radiate at sundown. My imagined community of people and place are of memories, but also of the present, of my Dallas, my Texas—which in its own ways is a peculiar mirror of the Mediterranean, living in constant tension between water scarcity and dry earth.

In the world of hyphenation, the notions of ethnicity are subconsciously woven into the descriptors of place but are not always of that identity after

all – as we refer judiciously or not to the locality of the state, of the empiric national identity, or in lesser degrees to our localness, we face questions of what our notion of “writing” and “writer” are in relation to place. For it depends where we write from AND from where we are viewed and perceived...like the ideas of a “Southern writer” or a “New Orleans writer” or an “Alabama writer” or even a “Texas writer.” Outside of the United States, the idea of locality becomes diluted like weak lemonade, the localize writer is often considered simply “an American writer,” which by face value means “it’s simply easier for the public to call *so and so* by their nationality than by their locality. In that same context in the US, we almost never articulate “a Northern writer” or a “white writer” or a “capitalist writer” (in contrast to a Marxist writer), because what lies underneath are the assumptions of class and power and privilege which have normalized certain categories and forced the public into distinctions beyond our *landedness*, our spaces and places of meaning and living. Where this has become problematic, of course, is in the brilliant works of writers like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Octavia Butler, whose writings are so profound and meaningful, because they emit the radiant flow of magnificent poetic language to describe the horrors of forced detachedness of one’s space, one’s land, one’s connection to the earth, an extracted-ness that pushed the humanity of Africa into new spaces of earth through enforced enslavement and labor.

With all of these things in mind, it has made me have to reflect on not simply the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual understandings of writing places, but what I would call the *liturgical* framing of our beings as writers and attachments to place and *landedness*. By liturgical ties to the land and our literary landscapes, that means that we are to commit to a steady and studied participation, reverence, and spiritual practice and care of spaces we call our own, while searching and meditating on those spaces that we no longer occupy, or that we no longer have access to for one reason or another. But through the consistent and mindful repetition of this practice, we can articulate our own liturgical consciousness – the construction of our identities of place, and our identities of without place, coming together in the beautiful sacrament of ourselves as human beings.

Among the questions of space, place, and identity in naming the *location* of writers is the necessary discussion of power. We often claim our attachments to place and locality based on the inherent, though also perhaps unintentional or unaware attractions we have toward gradations of power. The Central Asia writer Chinghiz Aitmatov was born in Kyrgyzstan (a developing county), wrote in Russian (a military power), and lived in Germany (a global economic leader). He is often claimed by various factions as a particular “Central Asian writer,” and yet his work is full of tensions about tribal and clan-based familial structures, commitments to ethnic distinctions in Central Asia, belief in Islamic practices, and tensions with Soviet identity. So then where does one place him within this sphere of competing interests, especially in light of the question of both economic and political power?



Similarly, the notions of religious belief and connections to land emerge with writers like Naguib Mahfouz in Egypt, Saul Bellow in Chicago, and Eva Hoffmann in New York—Hoffmann, was a Jewish girl in Poland during WWII, who emigrated to the United States and became a brilliant writer and memoirist, writing in English, and now lives in London. Her multivalent experience and understanding of language and place—fragmented as memories of the Holocaust in Poland, graduate school in America, and living in England—are examples of the complexity of self-identification with place *and* that which is put upon writers as “belonging.” For Hoffmann, it was not so much to be called a Jewish or Polish or Polish-American writer, but a *New York intellectual and writer*. Somehow, in the grand scheme of global designations of writerly authority, the power, connection, and meaning emoted from “New York” as the grand central of universal intellectualism meant more than any other adjective. There is much less cache and power in an “Orlando writer” or a “Denton writer” or even “Skokie writer” than say a “Miami writer,” “Austin writer,” or “Chicago writer,” in part because of size, power, wealth, and distinction—we must admit that within our contexts and prescriptions, *writing* and *being writers* has become a business in itself, and summarily imbued with a capitalism of capitulation, confidence, and persuasion.

The regional writer of San Francisco or LA has his or her own trappings and meanings tied to wealth in the movie industry as well as the type of craft employed there—they are seen as script writers for pilots, shows, or commercials, whereas in New York it is for novels, poetry, plays, and operas; of course this is not *completely* true—strictly, we too write novels and operas and poetry in Dallas or Fort Worth or even Mesquite, Weatherford, or Possum Kingdom—it does really exist!—but not to the degree that its done in New York.

With all of this mind, then, how do the physical articulations of the land play into how we are defined as writers (or even musicians, composers, and poets)? Writers like Donald Harrington, VS Naipaul, Derek Walcott, Edward Abbey, Nadine Gordimer, and Sia Figiel are tied to their locations, reflecting the cultural and natural landscapes of rural Arkansas, diasporic Trinidad, Methodist Saint Lucia, the Utah desert, apartheid South Africa, and the oceanic spaces of the south Pacific and specifically Samoa, respectively. Even the characters in writers like Philip Roth and Saul Bellow exemplified the spatiality of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American city—NYC is a place of cramped acoustical, physical, and cubical space, a surrounding of intense physical sharing and limited elbow room, where buildings are like cavern walls. These and many other writers tied to their locations communicate and perfect the notion of both **the space of nature** *and* **the nature of space**—the mountains, rivers, streams, fields, and open spaces in contrast to the skyscrapers, highways, overpasses, traffic lanes, bridges, and tunnels. All of these things in one way or another, in implicit and explicit forms, beget our identity as writers of a place—even if we do not readily acknowledge it. These things are part of what we imagine when we speak those words: a New York writer, a Chicago writer, a London writer, a Nairobi writer, a Delhi writer, a Dallas writer.

One of Italy's most famous and avant-garde writers, Italo Calvino (1923-1985) was born in Cuba—his parents were Italian, his father from Sanremo, his mother from Sassari in Sardinia. Calvino was taken back to Italy at the age of two and grew up in Liguria. In his adult life, he wrote some of the most provocative literature—writings that questioned the very essence of what it meant to write a novel, to tell a story, and to understand the formulae of a narrative. His two later novels *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) present us with imaginary stories about imaginary places—chimerical urbanity, the city life of a new place which ultimately reflects the city or cities you know best from your youth, your home—even those you newly encounter. In a fictional discussion between the 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongol ruler Kublai Khan and Italian traveler Marco Polo, we note that the poetic devise of stories describing something new and intriguing, is in fact done through Polo's own imagination of his home. It's as if we write about something today, through the lens of our own comfortable and known homelands. This makes us consider whether those who grew up near the sea or the mountains or within the confines of densely packed cities or wilderness habitats have a particularity to their approach to writing that is informed by their physical spaces—distinct from those living out on an open plain or a tundra or desert.

Is urban writing like island writing or mountain writing because it is maintained and sustained by geographic limits of slopes, peaks, shorelines and city limits? Does writing in fact end at the interstate? How much is a writer a Dallas writer if they live in Lake Highlands, Garland, Frisco, Denton, Celina, or Sherman and why does the Red River at the northern extreme just above Sherman, by dint of the administrative fate of state boundaries determine if I'm a Texas writer or an Oklahoma writer? Who decides?

If we look on a global scale and think about mountains, islands, and deserts, they all present us with a variety of oasis identities—oases in the sense that they are distinct units of human confluent activity that provide a rough outline that then affords an alignment between and among an imagined community and a particular space: and that on those borders there is a certain undetermined grey area that is porous, liquid, fluent, beautiful and evolving. Perhaps then, this is why it is less important to be a Texas or New Mexico writer living 100 yards across a state line, and more significant to simply be identified as a Southwest writer.

For Mark Twain, the river was the identity; for John Muir it was the Mountains; for Herman Melville it was the sea; for Saul Bellow it was the city; for others it was the massiveness of space—like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, it was the immense size of Russia and its indomitable mysticism; for Dickens it was the struggle for humanity and equality in an unfair world in the space of an industrial London; for Zola it was the underbelly of a rotting Paris; for Angelou it was Stamps, Arkansas and then America and then Africa in contrast and relief. All people have places, even while not all places have people. But in this formula, there is a constant need for discernment.

## CONCLUSION

We are writers of spatial identity, among other identities, because we feel comfort and familiarity in these identities, but also do battle with how we are objectified as writers by others – even if in the deepest corridors of my heart I reserve a private table for my Italian-American identity, few if any people, including readers of what I write, will immediately or deliberately say “Italian American writer” – in fact, it may manifest itself more like “the librarian who likes to write...” or “that guy at Bridwell who writes newsletters.” Our identities and identifications are complex, misunderstood, messy narratives of our most human concatenations – from the turbulent to the sublime, the quotidian to the eternal. Who knows what I am, we are, because we ourselves are continually seeking. Let the papers tell me I’m a this or a that, from an island or a city, writing from the other side of the interstate in Garland or in an apartment adjacent to that giant eyeball in downtown Dallas. My entrenchment in this place has only a certain layer of particularity and meaning – because Dallas is a big city with more than a trace of power, but entrenched dynamics of capital that undergirds and lifts us somehow as part of this guild of *Dallas writers* and *writing*. My hometown of 4,000 locals in upstate NY does not carry the same weight; nor does the ethno-insular immigrant experience of my father and grandparents’ generations of being a *Ragusa writer* – or even Sicilian writer – for I am not, despite my blood. I have more to do with my own proclivities of the deserts of Terlingua, Texas in the cradle of Big Bend than the craggy mountain desert-scape of Chiaramonte or Comiso in Sicily – as much as I have affinities for those ancestral places. But then again, this is all personal to each and every one of us. Something that no one can tell us, but ourselves.

There is nothing wrong with or inauthentic with saying “I am a *mountain writer* who lives in a city; I am an urban *writer* who lives in the rural hills of Arkansas; or a *Dallas writer* from New York. We simply need to navigate those ancient territories with the newfound states of our mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical landscapes, and make treaties with ourselves, as we come forward into the world in which we represent ourselves. It’s a process, and perhaps a process that has no definitive conclusion.