

this process of learning into their curriculum. I know from experience that observing, listening, and creating are skills that take lots of practice—Mulcahey reminds me that the time it takes is well worth the effort.

Lori Brink, teaching artist, with a BFA in visual arts, works with students of all ages and is an arts coach with the Perpich Center for Arts Education and Arts for Academic Achievement in Minneapolis Public Schools.

Celebrating Practice

Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds: The Teachers of WritersCorps in Poetry and Prose

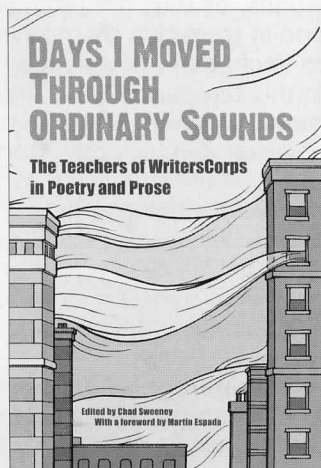
Edited by Chad Sweeney with a foreword by Martin Espada

City Lights Foundation Books, 2009

ISBN: 978-1-931404-10-5
Paperback, \$18.95

Reviewed by **Melissa Borgmann-Kiemde**

I crack this book for the first time and serendipitously find myself staring at the dramatic prose of a teaching artist who kissed me once. To stumble upon this New York fellow's words is at once disarming—turning me pink in my St. Paul, Minnesota apartment—and simultaneously tickles every part of my teacher soul and writer-reviewer self. I marvel: How small is this world? I ask myself: How is this WritersCorps teaching artist's one-time kiss a perfect analogy for my experience reading, engaging with, and being inspired by the whole of this collection? The act of opening and poring over the poetry and prose of this ensemble of National WritersCorps artists is to be



sweetly taken in and kissed by their words, experiences, and artistry.

Editor and seven-year WritersCorps artist Chad Sweeney writes in his introduction to the text:

Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds offers the range of the writing of these teaching artists, and in a parallel gesture, investigates the vision, commitment and practice of those who shared writing with young people in public schools, detention facilities, homeless shelters, and the newly arrived immigrants in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and the Bronx. (9)

For those unfamiliar with WritersCorps, think National Endowment for the Arts meets AmeriCorps. Imagine the brainchild of two former directors from these nationally funded organizations born to serve communities through arts education, with a focus on creating a safe place for young people to discover themselves through writing. Think community activism, public schools, and social service organizations aligned in practice in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Bronx, New York. For this writer, and former Minneapolis Public Schools English teacher who transitioned out of the classroom and claimed the title and role of "teaching artist" there is a deep resonance found in these pages of poetry and prose that appear alongside brief essays by the WritersCorps artists—essays that provide glimpses into the world of teaching in diverse settings.

The book is organized in five sections, each titled with a line of poetry or prose written by one of the contributing authors: "Revolution of the Ordinary," "Dirty and Alive We Cried," "The Only War is the War Against the Imagination," "Birthright," and "The Shapes of Listening." For this reader, the categorizing for each section isn't immediately apparent, but it hardly matters. As each unfolds, it unveils work-of-art after work-of-art with an inspiring or introductory statement from the artist. In these artist statements, I find a home of kindred souls—a community of fellow writers and teaching artists.

As I make my way through this text, I can move from section to section in an orderly fashion, or skip around, like I'm jumping

from one room in a beautiful urban gallery to another. I imagine how other teaching artists might make their way through the rooms of this collection. I see teaching artists from the spoken word poetry community in Minneapolis/St. Paul, the theater teachers and artists that I know, and the Writing Project people I connect with from time to time, all being inspired or convening around such a text as this. This City Lights Foundation publication is the best kind of "book club book" that would inspire local artists in each of our respective communities to come together in collaboration or celebration of their shared artistry and practice and reflect in an "Artist to Artist" kind of way.

I can see the WritersCorps teaching artists' poetry and prose inspiring teaching artists' own writing and thinking assignments. For example, when author Elissa G. Perry reveals why she tells stories, I imagine giving my own students an opportunity to reflect on why they write or perform. Perry states in her introductory essay: "When we know someone's story, it's hard to judge and ridiculous to hate. I tell stories because they have to be told, otherwise they collect and fester in our common gut" (p. 35).

I read these words, and I am back at Minneapolis North High asking the Writing as Performance Arts and Communications students to consider why they write, what they hope for in putting words on paper. I imagine handing them a sheet with Elissa G. Perry's words printed at the top as fodder for their own articulations and invitation to record their own intentional, unfolding, evolving creative writing and performing purposes.

When I read artist JoNelle Toriseva's opening words about the classrooms she taught in, it gave me great pause. She states:

The writers I worked with inspired me—both the other Corps members and the youth I taught at International Studies Academy, Everett Middle School, Newcomer High School and in one of those temporary trailer classrooms parked one block north of Mission and 16th Street. (220)

What is it about Ms. Toriseva's mere naming of the temporary structure she's teaching in that slows my breathing? She, along with the collection of WritersCorp artists published here, is identifying and making visible the conditions of urban education. The setting that she names for creative writing instruction strikes me as a kind of a powerful metaphor for the whole of our work as teaching artists: transitional, temporary; we are not fixed or permanent members in young people's lives. (And thus, we wonder about our potential power inspiring or teaching, right?) And at the same time, there's a parallel nature between this trailer classroom and our students' worlds, as they are often so highly mobile and in transition themselves. I don't mean to imply that our students' lives only unfold in this temporary way; their lives are rooted in where and who they are from, however complex that story might be. But the conditions in which we meet them are often challenging and call us to meet them exactly wherever they are located. The "get it" factor of these teaching artists in this book is powerful, a kind of touchstone for all educators who seek resonance in their teaching resources.

Writer and zine-maker Mahru Elahi, whose informal picture journal appears in the anthology, states, "WritersCorps was a coming home, an affirmation of both my work as a writer and mentor to youth" (p. 118). For this writer/teacher, teaching artist, it's essential to see that communities of artists are convening and connecting with young people in challenging settings and are able to create and produce work that inspires and helps transform and inch forward all participants. It's the best kind of church some of us might hope for or crave in continuing to do our work.

Melissa Borgmann-Kiemde is a writer, teaching artist, and literacy consultant with experience working in diverse K-12 classrooms, university settings and community spaces around the United States and Africa. She recently coauthored *Literacy Tools in the Classroom: Teaching Through Critical Inquiry, Grades 5-12*.