

Wandering around the edges of the arts and humanities

Why is some writing difficult?

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Abstract: Writing sometimes involves wandering. This writing seeks to say and show what it is to write wandering around the edges of the arts and humanities. It also concerns why some writing is difficult, and thence writing on some of those difficulties. These problematics are wandered around, by several rounds – some images invoked by edge-wandering; registering particular significant individuals; how particular places persist in understandings of wandering; disciplines and methodologies, including reflecting on spatiality and locationality; interdisciplinarity and academia; transnational wanderings across writing genres; and relations of art, humanities, science and politics, understood as personal, work, political and theoretical.

Keywords: edges, humanities, interdisciplinarity, location, writing

As someone who spends rather much time (on) writing, I have found it more than usually difficult to decide what to write about here and now. I think there may be several reasons for this: not just what to write, but how to write? Not to write too long or too short. And, perhaps above all, not to just take something already half-written off the peg. It is also partly that being neither a Humanities nor an Art Studies scholar, I feel on the edge of much of these things. At the same time, I want to speak to some of the many and diverse issues that Rosemarie Buikema has engaged with over the years, such as representation, locationality, interdisciplinarity, and of course gender, feminism and politics.

The arts and humanities conjure up such a mixed picture for me – a vast and multiple set of arenas, of creative works, studies, classics, traditions, contemporary productions and happenings, cultural artefacts, things, performances,

interpretations, galleries, museums, famous names... and so it goes on. But despite that long list, in saying the arts and humanities, I particularly think of fine art, literature, and some kinds of music – areas that I feel some academic disconnect from – but not so much, say, history or cultural studies, with which I feel more at home. So, I have decided to write about, say and show, the experience and phenomenon of being – or feeling – on the edges of the arts and humanities. Thus, this is also partly about the sometime difficulty of writing – in this case, in relation to my, at times, ambivalent relation to the arts and humanities. And that also includes my ambivalent relation to that previous use of the word ‘ambivalent’.

This particular challenge of writing in part in relation to some of the questions that have concerned Rosemarie Buikema is, for me, intimately mixed up with what it is to be a classed, gendered, raced, ‘non-humanities’ person on or around those edges of the arts and humanities. To even begin to write on how to relate to the arts and humanities soon pushes me back to my working-class cultural upbringing, where the few books in the house were thrillers, Agatha Christie-style, and a couple of paradoxically small encyclopaedias. I am still a little scared of the more or less confident, and clever, analyses of literary sources that emerge with apparent ease along with so many cross-references, intertextualities, and allusions from the humanities. To give just one example, in writing about *Possession* (Byatt, 1990), Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2004) state: “Byatt is a reader’s writer: the deepest understanding of her fictions depends on a prior knowledge of a large body of earlier literature, especially that of the Victorians” (139). So, with some trepidation, here, almost, goes. I can even read of Lucy Snowe in *Villette* (Brontë, 2004) (as I have been recently reading) and imagine myself entering the house of Madame Beck late at night...

And I say all this even having worked, from time to time, over many years, on, for example, film, representation, writing, advertisements, pop culture, television, the digital world, mass media, and even a tiny bit on art and literature. In fact, when I moved house in 1996, one thing I discovered was that I had all these many books about art, humanities, literature, culture, media, music, film, and so on – that I had hardly put together as a collective corpus of reading. I had defined them as separate exceptional items that happened to be of interest at certain points in time, but somewhat away from primary academic concerns. Also, at last, as a final word of introduction, I should make clear that this is not any plea for seeking sympathy – it is a kind of scientific endeavour, and in fact the whole of this text is an introduction... about writing.

Edge-wandering

Whatever way, I still feel on the edges of all that, of these powerful things. Writing on wandering, some images come to mind. Around the edges of the arts and

humanities I wander, not as a heroic sovereign individual or lonely archetype, not lost, pioneering or courting danger, but rather doing some harmless edgework.¹ For some reason, I even feel compelled to mention that, as a 14-year-old follower of pop music, around 1961, one of my favourite performers was Dion, including his song, *The Wanderer*, with such immortal final lines as:

Oh yeah I'm the type of guy that likes to roam around
I'm never in one place I roam from town to town
And when I find myself a-fallin' for some girl
I hop right into that car of mine and ride around the world (...)

Umm, oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!! Here and now, this particular wanderer, around the edges of arts and humanities, is someone, something, much less certain, a little lost, and certainly not about to hop into any car.

People

In contradiction, there are a series of ways of wandering through, if not forward. When I try and focus on the arts and humanities, and my relations to them, I quickly come to think of particular significant individual people I have worked with, who have a background in those traditions and locate themselves in the arts and humanities. For example, and in some approximate order of meeting, there are Antonio Melechi (Manchester, then Bradford), Owen Heathcote (Bradford), Hans Wessels (Helsinki), Elżbieta H. Oleksy (Łódź), Irina Novikova (Latvia), Nina Lykke (Linköping), Rosemarie Buikema (Utrecht), amongst others. These personal encounters have been especially important, for me at least, in shifting from a narrower social science 'base' to some elusive broadening of understandings. Also, maybe oddly, these individuals are to me individuals, not part of a group – and the initial encounters have been spaced out, roughly every four or five years over the last 35 years or so. And while certainly without wishing to impose a label on another, I see Buikema as someone who has also had many intellectual and political wanderings, far and wide, over her long career – not least, from my perspective, the wanderings to South Africa, where, at the University of Western Cape *From Boys to Men: Masculinities and Risk* conference, we first met in January 2005 (Shefer et al., 2007).

1 See, for example, Lyng (2004), on edgework, often itself strongly gendered.

Places

Then, there are places, specific places of significance that suggest or persist in understandings of these wanderings. As it happens, these very days I am more than fortunate enough to convince myself in gaining some inspiration and positivity in beginning this writing while sitting in Oxenhope in West Yorkshire in England. The village is the next one to Haworth, where the Brontës and some of their family lived, and so Oxenhope is the one that is not 'touristified'. I know the area rather well.

It soon becomes clear how damp, dank, wild, raw, and airy this area is, with the scudding clouds and all of that, with the land, climate, weather, landscape, and some people mixed into it, in a limited and subordinate way. From my kitchen window, I can see the hamlet between the two villages; from the attic bedroom, I can see much more along the Worth Valley, more hamlet clusters, and then The Moors. It is so easy to be seduced into gloomy romanticism of the past in these parts – but they *are* special and particular, in their geography, geomorphology, history, and of course literature – including that of the bleak beauty of the moors:

1801 – I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's Heaven – and Mr Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. (Brontë, 2012, 3)

This bleak beauty of the moors enveloped, first, from the late 16th century, the many domestic handlooms, in combination with farming, and then, from the late 18th century, the many early small local factory mills, by the mid-19th century as many as over twenty for a population of less than 3000. Meanwhile, nine miles away was and is Bradford, the one-time wool capital of the world, a city in relative decline from its powerhouse days since the 1870s. And in an odd and personal way, all this inhabits us and this writing. The harshness is worth it. It bears so many histories, gendered histories, some catalogued in fiction, some in historical recording.²

2 To take one gendered historical note, "(...) the transition from domestic handloom weaving and woolcombing to factory production (...) created a climax in the mid-nineteenth century and (...) brought a revolutionary increase in female employment, especially of young women, and a sharp increase in the status of the female sex in *working class* families. Men kept the 'top' jobs but females became major wage-earners in most families. The survival of small farms, often combined with mill work or quarrying for the farmer, maintained a sense of male independence, but this was not often real and most farming families depended on the 'mixed economy' for their survival and relative prosperity (...)" (Hindley, 2020, 92).

A very different example of the place of place is from back in 2002 when, to my surprise, I was invited to give one of the keynotes at the University of Łódź *Representing Gender in Cultures* conference.³ I wrote a few years later:

(...) entering that conference, I was immediately struck I was entering a new world and a new phase of life. It was not only that there I found myself one of the relatively few researchers coming from a social science rather than a humanities and visual culture perspective, but that was certainly one reason. It was also that this was very much a Polish and “Eastern and Central European”, post-Soviet, post-socialist conference, and I and a few other “Northern and Western Europeans” were the outsiders, the Others. I had been to Łódź, previously for “European” “EU” meetings, but this was different; this was now returning on a different, and in some ways a more disconnected, less clearly founded basis. It reminded me of what it is like being a stranger on arriving in Finland... (Hearn, 2012, 144)

...and entering a new land, and society and culture. From the very beginning, that conference and this place left a deep mark – a kind of turning point in taking the humanities more to heart. Places, whether regions, cities, landscapes, neighbourhoods, even rooms, can be an embodiment of feeling.

‘Disciplines’ and methodologies

Following the place of place, people, and their social and material worlds, and places, and their gatherings, occupation or emptinesses, feed into what have come to be known, rather appropriately, as *disciplines – and their methodologies*. Different academic disciplines not only approach and apprehend different *things*, but they value those things and various aspects of and interpretive relations to them differently. So, shifting only a little further from specific places, it is a small step to reflect more broadly on spatiality and locationality. So much of art, and the humanities more generally, seems to me, from my obviously limited place, to be about spatiality, locationality, spatial and locational context, in fact about the disciplines of geography and even, dare I say, geomorphology. And there is much of that especially in visual art: think of all those landscapes on canvases, and rooms in which art is displayed. Those disciplines of geography, geomorphology – and even geology – seem to be frequent missing links between disciplines, as grasped in, say, literary geography – as well as in the links between the arts, humanities, science,

3 In retrospect perhaps appropriately, I called the presentation *Surprise, surprise, men are gendered too: Critical studies on men and the politics of representation* (Hearn, 2004).

and politics more broadly. This is not to condone disciplinary separations – after all, the anti-correlationists, ‘believing’ there is a material world beyond the human senses, have a lot going for them.

In my own slightly peculiar disciplinary case, I have shifted from Geography to Urban Planning, Sociology, Organisation Studies, Social Policy, Gender Studies, and most recently I am sitting occasionally back in Human Geography (as if it ever went away). So, in some contrast, the arts and humanities seem to me, to comprise both some quite specific and specialist disciplines and, sometimes at the same time, attempts or missions to transcend disciplines entirely, all-encompassing. I think that is partly what scares me, that they can be morbidly technical, as in some linguistic analyses, and also about (literally) anything whatsoever – all, again paradoxically, is representation and/or beyond representation (Buikema, 2009).

Some of this disciplinary landscape is to do with how different disciplines relate to ‘their own’ methodology or their specific menu of legitimated methodologies. Many social sciences, perhaps most obviously some versions of psychology, if you could call that a *social* science, and some sociologies, are a bit obsessed with methodologies as a ‘solution’ to political challenges. The arts and humanities generally seem to me more relaxed about all of that – and in many ways comforting. This is even if it is sometimes a bit of a mystery how the conclusions are drawn – and to repeat that is partly what scares me about the arts and humanities, in wandering around, in being *about anything and everything*. Methodologies may provide a different comfort.

Interdisciplinarity and academia

With disciplines noted, another, perhaps obvious, way to approach the wandering around the edges is by writing on *interdisciplinarity* or better still writing *interdisciplinarily* – as an artistic, scientific, political, and indeed personal intervention. It should first be said that, though appealing, interdisciplinarity is not necessarily radical – not at all new. I remember studying Organisation Studies back in 1973-1974, and having to write a compulsory long essay on interdisciplinarity with the task of bringing together various social sciences, and theory and practice. It was all the rage then, the coming thing – yet not embedded in what I would call criticality, deconstruction, feminism, anti-racism, or decolonising.

Writing interdisciplinarily, and *writing interdisciplinarity*, means going across the boundaries of academic disciplines. Interdisciplinarity can problematise a disciplinary focus, and, with that, disciplinary cores and peripheries. Sometimes it means treading towards transdisciplinarity, as with transdisciplinary gender studies or gender studies as a post-disciplinary discipline (Lykke, 2004) – perhaps not unique, but certainly distinctive. It suggests, in the context of this writing at least,

some openness, if not willingness, to go into *other* disciplines that are unfamiliar and even antagonistic to previously or currently held disciplinary frames. Above all, doing interdisciplinarity involves not knowing, rather than knowing. It probably also means being accurate or striving towards some version of accuracy, whether in artistic production, their analysis, the social sciences, and other sciences more generally, in line, colour, feeling, acts, words, observations. To put it too simply, accuracy overrides knowing.

And such moves themselves then move the writing onto (re)writing the *organizational life* of academia, science, universities, and their inhabitants. Disciplinarity or interdisciplinarity may be discouraged or encouraged by local university departments or units, which are themselves distinct from *being in a* cosmopolitan discipline or inter-discipline, not to mention how all this works so differently across countries. In January 2022, I initiated moving my Swedish academic base from a Gender Studies unit (though not leaving the wider university Centre for Feminist Social Studies) to a Human Geography/*kulturgeografi* unit in the same university. While it is one of the best things I have done, organisationally, I remain, seek to remain, 'totally', bodily-materially-discursively, in Feminist Gender Studies transnationally.

This means writing variously across material-discursive 'substances'. The enduring relationality of the matter of knowledge, as material-discursive or material-discursive, spans spatiality, environment, the planet, bodies, reproduction, nature, and interconnections of humans and things. It might be labelled deconstructive materialism – a phrase that I have worked with for a long time and which I think, and I hope not over-presumptively, fits well with much of Buikema's own work. It is strange how many academics 'discover' geography and spatiality, but everyone in Geography knows at least that we live on a planet. And, along with this move, I come to realise even more concretely and somewhat surprisingly the importance of the arts and humanities, and how moving across borders can bring some moving across writings. Going to and back from Belgium made a difference, at least for the Brontës (Lonoff, 1997), and not least intellectually (Garcia, 2021).

Writings, wandering cross-genres

Wandering back to the central business of writing, (re)writing, re-reworking, in and across (inter)disciplines, reaffirms spatiality, locationality, geography, geomorphology, geopolitics, and arts and humanities – with transnational wanderings, both geographically and across writing genres. This perhaps becomes most obvious in (re)writing (and reading) disruptions, crises, and transitions, as in the heavy legacies and current practices of (post)imperialisms and (post)colonialisms. I started an interest in decolonising in Africa, especially apartheid South Africa,

in the 1960s, and was even tutored at university by a white, liberal South African. He was supportive, very straight, and liked sport, well rugby. I had to read out my handwritten essay, usually once a week, and so by speaking to him, after writing, I 'learnt' a version of academic writing. Then much later came post-apartheid, and first visiting RSA in 1997, and learning there, IRL *face-to-face*, with contradictions and cross-genres everywhere (Hearn and Ratele, 2023) – and more recently perhaps even some postcolonial gothic?

Just as with (re)writing Europe, as with Irina Novikova and colleagues (2003), Europeans – whoever they are – can often learn more from non-Europeans than vice versa, so many Western and Northern Europeans can learn more from Central and Eastern Europe. The biography, autobiographical, autoethnographic, and fraught memory work mingle so obviously there with the facts of life. To move towards this may be assisted by rethinking/rewriting across genres, redoing representations across writing and further modes, and working post-paradigms – as is also necessary in (re)writing men and masculinities.

A little on relations of art, humanities, science and politics: four activities

And a further way to approach these wanderings around the edges of the arts and humanities is in relation to, and in interconnections with, science and politics more broadly. There are so many possible links here – art of/as politics; science of/as art; art of/as science;⁴ and so on – it is hard to know how and where to draw the lines. At the very least, the arts, humanities, science and politics are human activities, done mostly by the person or persons (putting to one side, AI as artist, and the rest) and their personal actions. Whatever you think of the streamed telling of Lucy Snowe's personal miseries-mysteries and 'life-machine' (Brontë, 2004, 195), *Villette* is simultaneously theoretical, even oddly sociological.

But while different feminisms have invoked, in different ways, the call that the personal is the political, in addition the personal is political is *work is theoretical*. And these four activities – the personal, the work (in the broadest sense), the political, the theoretical – tend to be located in particular social sites (personal life, places of work, political forums, academia), but they also recur in and across all arenas – and in times and spaces. This also applies to the arts and humanities. Similarly, writing on these wandering, as in *Villette's* 'The Long Vacation' (Brontë, 2004, 185), is personal, work, political, and theoretical – and just one more small thing, this writing is partly about me, but it's not. The ambiguity, the double, is

4 See Arefin et al. (2014), Ghani (2016), and Illingworth (2015) for interesting examples on art as science.

built-in: something that physicists and indigenous people know, but more widely is often forgotten.

So, what are the ingredients needed to make something art, or science, or politics? What would be needed to make this writing here count as art or to be located within the humanities? Art, science, and politics *all demand or desire* creativity, thoroughness, and hope; art and science aspire to accuracy; and all need work and commitment. Is this writing categorisable or to be categorised as art, politics, or science, none or some of them, or all? Though you may or may not agree, this piece is a little about art, science and politics. Am I slowly liquefying into the humanities? Or remembering.

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