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Cross-Disciplinary Mobility and the Public Writer

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Abstract

Who is the public? For a scholar, the public is anyone outside of one's discipline. This is true within academia or without, but cross-disciplinarity as an individual means of academic scholarship tends not to be an explicit part of conversations about how to practice public humanities. This essay critically reflects on how we think about cross-disciplinary scholarship in relationship to public writing and centers mobility as a core tenet of both.

Keywords: cross-disciplinary; engagement; humanities; music; public writing

In 2016, I had been a PhD student in English Literature for five years and a freelance music critic for four of those years. My arts writing often directly overlapped with teaching and research, and the crossover culminated in previewing the world premiere of “A Proust Sonata” for the *Houston Chronicle* that year.¹ Presented by Da Camera of Houston, a pioneering producer of chamber music and jazz in the city, “A Proust Sonata” takes inspiration from both the biographical details of Marcel Proust's later life and the fictional elements of his seven-volume work *À la recherche du temps perdu* or *In Search of Lost Time*. It does so by merging multiple media – music, visual art, and text – with a small cast that included two actors, a tenor, a violinist, a pianist, and a string quartet at its 2016 premiere. Enlisting a critic to cover such a production ideally meant finding a cross-disciplinary scholar who could render a multimedia adaptation of a famously inaccessible literary work legible to the public in 800 words.

Learning how to write across disciplines was more instrumental in becoming a public writer than any one area of expertise that I developed as an academic. I initially began reviewing performances because my research focused on intersections of twentieth-century literature and opera, and affording opera tickets on my graduate stipend was a stretch. My advisor sagely encouraged me to pitch reviews to a few local editors, and with the generous help of another active critic, I was able to secure a few clippings. Once I had an established gig, I found the shorter reviews I was publishing (ranging from 800 to as few as 200 words) to be essential exercises in working out the more complex, long-form ideas I was trying to articulate in my dissertation. This was especially true as it related to finding a common vocabulary between

¹ Boyd 2016.

musicology and literary study: For my project to succeed, I had to find ways to make concepts legible – and relevant – to a new audience while remaining recognizable in my home discipline.

I found that public writing provided a sense of immediacy and applicability that is rare in the otherwise siloed existences scholars often lead – the work keeps us sharp in the same way that teaching asks us to reconsider and elucidate the importance of whatever expertise we are trying to pass on. The summer before I covered “A Proust Sonata,” I had fallen into a surprise last-minute job teaching a seminar dedicated to Proust, and I read all seven volumes of *In Search of Lost Time* in translation alongside select criticism in a month. Throughout the semester, I was able to move more slowly through the material, and discussions with students deepened my initial passage through prose where conventional conceptions of passing time cease to have meaning. Transfixed, I decided to refocus one of my dissertation chapters on Proust and musical rhythm. And so by the time of *Da Camera*’s world premiere the following spring, I had read Proust’s famously dense magnum opus twice in its entirety, built a syllabus around it, taught a course on it, and was editing a cross-disciplinary dissertation chapter about it. In turn, the academic groundwork I’d done helped enrich the scope of my interview with *Da Camera*’s artistic director, Sarah Rothenberg, who conceived of “A Proust Sonata” and performed in its premiere. When I spoke with her about her multimedia creative process, our conversation arrived at a collegial inquiry into why Proust’s life and work made for a valuable new artistic endeavor today. Her argument for Proust’s relevance across the arts is something I still think about when teaching less accessible work, and in condensing our conversation into a preview about the world premiere, I was compelled to crystallize half-formed ideas that were meandering aimlessly in my dissertation chapter. The process was productive from start to finish for me as a developing public writer and cross-disciplinary scholar.

The public humanities function across disciplines, meaning that it welcomes scholars from history and literature departments alike, but cross-disciplinarity as it exists in academia tends not to be an explicit part of conversations about how to practice public engagement. As crisis after crisis has been declared in the humanities, the public humanities have increasingly become a priority for scholars to define and participate in as a presumed means of survival. The public humanities have historically been represented and promoted by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the 56 states and territorial humanities councils, which have long worked to demonstrate and make accessible the many vital benefits of the humanities to the public.² While public writing is a natural avenue for scholars to join this effort, it has been less clear how scholars would engage, how the work would be recognized in their field, and indeed, if they should even engage at all.³ How is public writing weighted in a tenure file, for example? And as Feisal Mohamed cautions in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, there are issues of academic freedom and politics around the recognition and reward for a person’s public profile.⁴ To shape the future of the humanities – to establish the humanities as a public good – is to practice a kind of cross-disciplinarity that has been ongoing in separate but equally important areas of scholarly conversation.

In recent decades, both the public humanities and cross-disciplinarity have battled successfully to become more than fringe aspects of academia. The rise of cross-disciplinary work in particular has bred new academic centers, journals, graduate programs, curriculum

² Zainaldin 2013, 28–50.

³ Standards differ in the UK, however, where “enterprise and external engagement” is an academic promotion criterion. See, for example, University College London’s “Building a Case for Academic Promotion.”

⁴ Mohamed 2021.

development, and first-year writing programs, but a humanities scholar stepping outside their discipline has not always been met warmly. In the epilogue to *Situating Opera*, Herbert Lindenberger, a literary scholar and founder of Stanford University's comparative literature program, writes about his struggle to demonstrate the value of literature to opera.⁵ He shares that his first book on the topic of opera studies, *Opera: The Extravagant Art*, almost wasn't published because his attempts to pitch it as a literary project failed.⁶ A press eventually accepted it as a musicological project, but that meant it needed to be peer-reviewed by musicologists.⁷ The reports were not favorable. *Opera: The Extravagant Art* relies on Bakhtin, Foucault, and Barthes, among other deconstructionists, in an argument about opera across disciplines; Lindenberger surmises that these models "must have aroused suspicion and hostility."⁸ Lindenberger concludes that "interdisciplinary work is hampered by the differing rules and conventions within the individual disciplines" as well as what he calls "guild mentality" that "treats those who invade a new territory as poachers who need to be deported back to their own domains."⁹ While work remains in building camaraderie and respect among disciplines, similar projects have seen a much warmer reception in recent years. As the call for cross-disciplinary collaborations in the humanities has grown louder as a possible remedy to (and sometimes consequence of) falling enrollments and a shrinking academic job market, public writing, a mode of engaging and demonstrating relevance to broader audiences, has become integral in the effort to connect.

Cross-disciplinary writing is, in fact, a form of public writing because the public is anyone outside a scholar's discipline. A scholar who has successfully ventured beyond their department knows how to shape an idea, so that it is clear and relevant to a particular audience. This is true whether you are talking to those within the academy or without, and the better you become at it, the wider reach your research will have. Consequently, mobility is a core tenet of cross-disciplinary and public writing. Both take ideas to new audiences. And engaging new audiences means expanding your career possibilities, your research portfolio, and, most importantly, your own critical sphere of thinking. The career I've had has, like many humanities graduates, been unconventional given job market realities, but because I learned to speak to audiences outside of my discipline, I was able to hold a tenure-track position in my field as well as work in national nonprofits, higher education administration, and secondary education. Today, I manage a diverse portfolio of strategic initiatives focused on engagement, equity, and entrepreneurship in a college comprising five departments, none of which include my home discipline. My work continues to be critically informed by cross-disciplinary skills that I developed as a graduate student – ways of listening to others, finding common stakes, and connecting my research to theirs collaboratively.

This mobile engagement should act as an exchange, not a one-way jettison. If we admit that we have something to learn from people with different kinds of expertise and possibly different stakes, we can in turn strengthen our specialization. Comparatists, tasked with being experts in multiple disciplines, are perhaps best equipped to point out how cross-disciplinary fluency among specialists engenders enriched archives and cross-industry writing. Such writing pivots on discernment bred from expertise. Taking an idea from an 8,000-word peer-reviewed article to a 500-word op-ed requires a writer to prioritize,

⁵ Lindenberger 2010, 263–79.

⁶ Lindenberger 1984, 2010, 272–73.

⁷ Lindenberger 2010, 272–73.

⁸ Lindenberger 2010, 272–73.

⁹ Lindenberger 2010, 273–74.

reconsider, and clarify the most essential parts of an argument. Similarly, taking an idea from philosophy and drawing from theatre, musicology, technology, and critical race theory to bring together an essay, as Fred Moten does in his close reading of Jessye Norman's 1993 recording of *Erwartung* for example, demand highly specialized disciplinary skill at its core.¹⁰ From that foundation, it takes another acquired expertise to make connections. Cross-disciplinary scholars must develop the authority to enter a new critical conversation by familiarizing themselves with a foreign archive, learning how to craft a relevant intervention in the ongoing dialogue, and finding a common vocabulary to speak across disciplinary divides. It requires flexibility, humility, and amity. The same skills apply to public writing, where scholars' drafts will likely be edited by nonscholars and subject to different norms and criticisms. The exchange ideally results in adapting and evolving ways of thinking where everyone benefits – but even when it does not, we can learn something from the attempt.

Ultimately, becoming a cross-disciplinary public scholar relies on the very tenets of the humanities: the human. Networking helps, but my professional career would not have been possible without the generosity of fellow critics as well as professors and graduate students in the school of music who read my work, corrected misrepresentations, directed me to applicable archives, and collaborated on projects; more critically, I would not have even begun this work were it not for advisors who encouraged thinking outside disciplinary limits. The future of the humanities relies on this work within academia and without, across disciplines and audiences, and vitally functions as a mode of practicing equity and promoting diversity in its many forms. An idea developed in isolation has no meaning beyond us if we are unable to articulate why it might matter to someone else.

Sydney Boyd joined Cornell University's College of Architecture, Art, and Planning and the Cornell Council for the Arts as program manager in Fall 2024. Before joining Cornell, she served as Assistant Professor of Writing at Wells College, as Assistant Director for Academic Affairs at NYU Washington, DC, and as an editor at the Federation of State Humanities Councils, where she hosted the podcast *Making Meaning: Why Humanities Matter*. Her scholarship studies how music shapes narrative temporalities in 20th-century literature with articles published in *Contemporary Literature* and *Arizona Quarterly*. As an arts critic, she has published articles on opera, classical music, dance, visual art, and film in *Houstonia Magazine*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Bachtrack*, *ArtsJournal*, and the *Washington Classical Review*. She holds a PhD and MA in English from Rice University.

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¹⁰ Moten 2004.

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