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10. Accidental Haiku, or Encouragement, Enlightenment and Raising Aspiration

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In a classroom full of excited seven-year-olds, a sudden interest in haiku is stimulated when a child reads a three-line acrostic poem which, by chance, is just a couple of syllables shy of the magic five-seven-five formation. Thinking on her feet, the researcher quickly explains what haiku is, and everyone starts talking about it and counting their syllables. When someone's poem is shown to have the right combination of lines and syllables, a powerful sense of triumph and achievement animates the children. Does it diminish the art of haiku if a simple explanation of it encourages a group of schoolchildren to search in their own poems for this distinctive way of capturing nature, space, place, feelings and mood? Not when it means that new eagerness to create meaning about landscapes is sparked.

In this essay, I make a case for arts and humanities research that encourages, enlightens and raises aspiration. But who are the beneficiaries of such outcomes? This essay begins from the premise that the traffic is two-way: this is not only a question of what we as academics can do to make a difference to contemporary life, but how we can learn to listen better to what people *want us to do* to identify and take the lead on questions of national and international importance. In this way we can all be motivated and inspired to try harder to understand the world. This requires us to be adaptable, to think on our feet and remember that the complexity of everyday life cannot be captured by a single discipline. When the accidental haiku was made, the researcher thinking on their feet in the classroom of seven-year-olds was a geographer who, through their own interdisciplinary background and by working with a scholar from literary studies, was able to listen to, energize and invigorate the group.

This essay will focus for the most part on a project I coordinated entitled 'Understanding Landscape', which involved writers of all ages and academics from a wide variety of disciplines, to show how a group of writers and academics became involved in producing knowledge together. The Understanding Landscape project was led by academics from geography and English literature. It combined geography's traditional concern with landscape and literature's concern with text. It sought to understand the place of landscape in creative writing and explore the potential for interdisciplinary research. Before I talk about this project, let me first try to explain why I think place and landscape matter as part of people's culture and everyday lives.

Culture is everywhere

Every part of our everyday lives is saturated with the stuff of arts and humanities research, whether we realize it or not. Our every waking moment is filled with objects, people, places, memories, landscapes and ideas that make us who we are. Some of them reach back into the distant past (you could find yourself walking your dog across the rippling furrows of a medieval field system in Warwickshire), some of them are very much in the now (you enjoy the surroundings of a modern extension to an art gallery) and some are a curious mixture of the two (as you listen to Beethoven on your iPod).

As a human geographer, I am most interested in making sense of the many ways in which people use history, memory, place and landscape to forge a sense of belonging. In 1976 a geographer named Ted Relph wrote that 'to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places' (Relph 1976: 1). He was trying to call attention to the ways in which human beings identify what he called 'sense of place'. At the most basic level this refers to the ability to recognize different places and different identities of a place or the unique combination of architecture, topography, flora and fauna, culture, social life and landscape that makes places different from each other and gives them an inimitable character. Relph recognized the profoundly human emotional attachments that people form to places and attempted to show how very personal and individual factors make a difference to people's sense of place. Some geographers would argue that defining a sense of place is more about finding our own identities than anything else. To explain this point, the geographer Nigel Thrift has argued that places 'form a reservoir of meanings which people can draw upon to tell stories about and thereby define themselves' (Thrift 1997: 160). In other words, our sense of place helps us to define who we are and what we think is important. This undoubtedly shapes the way we interact with each other and the world.

One of the most important ways in which a sense of place is created and communicated is through landscape and its representation in words (for example, through poetry, and fictional and non-fictional writing), visual art of all kinds (from fine art, through to postcards, prints, book jackets or posters) and the media (including magazines, television, film and radio). The word 'landscape' is used rather glibly in the English language in a way that ignores its very specific meanings. It often gets conflated with words like region, area, nature, place, scenery (particularly the countryside), topography or environment. Landscape is more often used to refer to a portion of the earth visible by an observer from a particular position or location, and especially that which can be seen in a single view. But landscape is much more than this. Seeing a landscape always involves having an imaginative response to it – whether we are standing in an art gallery, looking at something on television or gazing out over the countryside from a hilltop. This imaginative factor helps to explain why different people have such different responses to places and landscapes. As a geographer I have been working with these ideas

for a long time, but it was only when I started to explore interdisciplinary links with a lecturer in the English Department that I realized that I didn't clearly understand how people use landscape in their creative writing and how their creative writing formed an important part of who they are. Of course, as an avid reader of novels, I have seen how important landscapes and places are to stories like Graham Swift's *Waterland* in which the landscape of the Fens is critical to the development of plot and character, or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. But despite publishing scholarly articles on landscape for fifteen years, I had never had the opportunity to speak to authors about their writing. Equally, research in English literature often focuses on the analysis of the finished novel rather than conversations with the writers about their craft. From my conversations with my colleague arose the Understanding Landscape project, in which we attempted to find out how writers of all ages were developing their sense of place through their own creative writing.

Understanding landscape

In our project, we wanted to get inside the writing process rather than doing what a lot of academics do, which is to just study the finished novel. We wanted to ask writers how and why they write, where they do their writing, what sorts of stories they liked to tell, whether they appear in their own stories (perhaps as themselves or as other characters), how important place is to their stories and how they write about landscape. We were also interested in the nature of inspiration. Where does it come from? How does it happen? How does a writer capture it and then work it into their writing? We wanted to try to glimpse not only inspiration, and hear about the work of drafting and redrafting, but learn about all the messiness in between, including the possibility that the story is never finished and lies in a drawer somewhere. We were curious about how writers respond to existing literary conventions and how they use or perhaps avoid using them.

The project was based in Cornwall, a landscape that has often been written about in a very specific ways over the years, building up a set of specific images – high cliffs, wild seas, sandy beaches, fishing villages – which can almost be plucked straight off the shelf. We need only think of Winston Graham's *Poldark* novels as an example. In light of this, we wanted to ask writers how they managed to write in a place that had already been written about a great deal but was paradoxically still very popular with writers. Finally, we were interested in whether we could find some new approaches to understanding landscape and working with writers that combined the different academic disciplines with lay and non-academic interpretations. All this meant that we were not really interested in published fiction or even writing that was finished. Contrary to Daphne Du Maurier's assertion that writers should be read and not seen or heard, we were interested in talking to writers about their writing and reading some of their work, whether

finished or not. In sum, we were interested in the imaginative processes of summoning landscape into being through the creative medium of fictional writing.

The project involved thirty writers, aged from seven to over seventy, and the value of the Understanding Landscape project to the participants (non-academics and academics) was both tangible and intangible. We made a difference to contemporary life by affirming to individuals the importance of their writing and creative effort in their own lives, and in their communities of practice. We were in turn affirmed by their response and willingness to participate. In the next section I sketch out some of our experiences during the research.

Events

The project centred on engaging writers through a number of events which included walking through different landscapes including coast and woodland, taking boat trips and working in classrooms to seek out and understand the writers' spaces of inspiration. We developed a set of questions for use in informal interviews to structure the conversations we would have. Our first event was with students from a local further education college and took the form of a walk and discussion at Porthcurno beach with three female A-level students (two were seventeen years old and one was nineteen years old) from the college and their tutor.¹

We walked from the car park at Porthcurno up the cliff path to a spot beyond the Minack Theatre, with wide views of the sea and beach. Each student had been writing since they were very young and produced a mixture of stories and poetry mostly as a hobby, though they each had aspirations to have their work published. They clearly noted the place of landscape in their writing, pointing to its importance as a setting for action, or as a indicator of mood and emotion. These were often fictitious landscapes, and they rarely found themselves incorporating what they understood to be real landscapes in their work. Much of the discussion centred on the extent to which Cornwall was 'overwritten' by which they meant that their attempts to write about Cornwall were frustrated by the sheer quantity of imagery that already exists.

These themes were also picked up in our second event with three adult writers from the Writing Centre, a local resource for creative writers. One male and two female writers volunteered for the walk along a section of the Cornish coast path near Falmouth. Our volunteers were a fifty-six-year-old woman pursuing a PhD in creative writing whose work she described as life writing; a thirty-four-year-old male novelist who described his occupation as 'literary practitioner' because he uses his knowledge of writing and literature to support others through the Writing Centre; and a forty-year-old woman, professionally employed, who writes poetry, musings and fiction in her spare time. Unlike the young people, this group of adults had not been writing very long – about ten years – but all identified literature as an

important part of their adult lives. These writers were either unpublished and wrote purely for pleasure or had been published in small local pamphlets or collections.

Much of the discussion centred on the meaning of craft in writing, exploring in particular how literary conventions inform the direction a piece of writing takes. We talked extensively about the importance of the notebook as a tool for writers to jot down thoughts and ideas on the spot, noting particularly that the male writer's book was a multifunctional tool with many different sections of coloured paper. We discussed the place of the notebook in the creative process, and talked about how it provides access to thoughts and ideas that are at risk of being lost. The notebooks prompted many interesting questions about the nature of inspiration and the way landscape forms part of the writing process. None of the writers did any significant amount of writing outdoors, but returned to their desks and studies to produce the finished piece, working through several drafts as they did so. We also discussed the extent to which aspects of themselves appear in their writing. The writer who produced life writing called attention to a distinction between work which is semi-autobiographical and that which is reflective, rejecting the former as a description of her own output. She preferred to think of her work as outward looking.

Later we also caught up with another member of the Writing Centre, a forty-nine-year-old working with a local theatre group who started writing letters home when she lived abroad and now writes short stories. During our walk with her in a woodland near Falmouth we discussed the way in which foreign landscapes initially provided the inspiration for writing. Standing looking out over a still quarry pond shaded by trees, we talked about the temptation to respond to landscape through conventional narrative forms (in which, for example, a quarry pond becomes the site of a mysterious event). Finally, we explored the place of the self in writing, focusing on the example of a local writer who used writing to manage and understand her grief after the sudden death of her partner.

Upon meeting the writers of the Truro Writers' Group for a walk along a river near Truro, one of the group declared, 'We're Cornish! We possess the landscape.' This set the tone of the discussion which continued over lunch and at a later meeting of the group in Truro. Apart from one twenty-year-old female member who worked at a riding stable, the group is composed of retired people who write for pleasure and who speak in a humble and modest way about their writing. They share their writing with the group but once a year produce an anthology of their best writing, which is self-published. Of the retired people, three women described themselves as sixty-plus and the four men ranged in age from fifty-five to over seventy. They wrote an eclectic mixture of poetry and short stories with historical and contemporary themes. In discussion with this group, who shared the writing that was produced as a result of the walk, several interesting themes emerged. One member, a man of fifty-five with strongly held religious beliefs,

asserted that 'being in this landscape [along the river] feeds something in the soul. It feeds the soul being in the hills'. Exploring the issue of how aspects of the self emerge in creative writing, the same writer noted that 'things that fascinate you about life fascinate you in your writing'. Another male member of the group admitted that his writing, which often featured roguish characters in historical contexts, gave him the 'freedom that we all want to have but can't have'. Another member of the group who suffered a serious head injury several years ago suggested that putting his feelings and experiences into words reduced the sense of isolation he felt as a result of his injuries. Working with this group of writers also gave us insights into how generic forms are subverted or resisted in their writing. They would take conventional situations and use the very everydayness of the setting as a counterpoint to an unexpected twist in the tale.

Working in collaboration with Sense of Place, a curriculum development organization, we organized three events with local schools. This collaboration was highly significant in the research, giving us the basis of a comparative approach with the creative endeavours of young people and adult writers. The events – two boat trips and a woodland walk – gave the curriculum new relevance and excitement for staff and students alike.

During two boat trips on the Fal with pupils from two different schools we noted the influence of fairy tales and fantasy on the children's imaginations. There was also a significant gendered element with girls inventing stories with fairies, goblins and plenty of fantasy, and boys inventing stories about treasure and pirates. All the children understood the concept of landscape or setting being important to the action. One boy of seven said, perceptively, 'you have to have action to stimulate the reader'. Notwithstanding this observation, the children sometimes found it hard to think of a story that could take place in the familiar surroundings of the river Fal. One boy of eight said that he was of the view that books like *Harry Potter* and magic stories belonged in 'far away places'. Another boy of seven identified an island that does not appear on any map as somewhere that an adventure would happen involving maps, clues and buried treasure. When he was asked if that kind of adventure could happen in Cornwall, he said no because there were too many people around! Asking children, in terms they can understand, how they work out aspects of themselves in their writing is quite tricky, but elicited interesting responses. One boy told us that he had used his creative writing to work out what to do if he was being bullied.

Pupils from one of these schools followed up their boat trip by a classroom session and a performance of choral poetry inspired by the trip. In the classroom session, three groups of pupils were interviewed. The children had been instructed by their teacher to think about how to convey a sense of place through sound, so their parents or others reading the poems could imagine what it was like to be on the river or in Falmouth town. The children therefore focused on onomatopoeia ('sound effect' words such as 'splash' and 'slip'),

alliteration (words beginning with the same sound) and dramatic imagery (e.g. 'houses looking like they would tumble into the water'). In the choral performance, the children read their poems out loud, using various effects, e.g. varying the volume of their voices, switching from speaking in groups to individuals and exaggerating sounds such as using sibilance ('ssss' and 'ssssh' sounds) for added effect, to convey the sense of landscape. The performances ranged from self-assured to shy, but all were extremely creative! Both the classroom session and the choral performance suggested the ways in which even child writers are socialized into understanding the conventions of literary form in depicting landscape, demonstrating the way in which the creative process interacts with conventional expectations from a young age.

Our final event with school children entailed a walk through woodland near Falmouth with pupils aged 7–10. Unlike the previous events with children, this outing was not a formal part of a curriculum unit organized by Sense of Place. Instead, with the help of the head teacher, we developed a new group exercise to be used along with the existing interview schedule. This group exercise, conducted as we sat on the river quay on the edge of the woods, entailed choosing five words or phrases that described what the children had seen on their walk in the wood, followed by five words or phrases that described what they could feel, hear and smell. They were also asked to touch things like rocks, shells, sand, wood, trees, bark and plants. In small groups they were asked to plan a story. They had to decide who their characters would be, what they would be like and what would happen to them. They were also asked to think about whether place was important to the story. This produced some intriguing plans which once again tended to be derived from popular fairy tales or magical stories (in particular *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*).

Raising our game

A key argument of this essay is that academics should always be open to the possibility that their assumptions will be challenged. This can happen in many ways, for instance through new and interesting conversations across traditional disciplinary divides, but equally much can be achieved by bringing together academics and research volunteers from the public.

In the Understanding Landscape project, we introduced adult writers and academics to each other at a workshop in which writers showed us that we have far to go in understanding the creative process. The aim of this event was to bring together academics and the writers with whom we had worked in our writers' events. Several adult writers from our groups of research volunteers attended, as did a representative from a group of poets in Somerset.

The session was organized around small group discussions. Each group contained a mixture of academics and writers who discussed a series of themes that resonated with the broad themes that we believe are central to the understanding of landscape through the creative writing process:

1. Creative processes, e.g. where does inspiration come from? Does inspiration come from the landscape and place that you find yourself in or the opportunity to reflect and contemplate in a quiet place? Does the notebook become the source of information and inspiration later on in the writing process? What literary forms does your writing take? Do some forms require more drafting or 'processing' than others?
2. Influence of landscape and place, e.g. is place and setting important to the plot or characters or action of a piece of writing? How is place invoked? How does a place work its way into your writing? Do you have a preconceived notion of place before you come to write about it? If so, where does this come from? Do you find yourself inadvertently writing in a particular style or drawing on popular motifs or metaphors in your writing (e.g. Cornwall as a wild place)?
3. Auto-ethnography, e.g. how do aspects of yourself or your life experience enter your writing? Do you sometimes write accounts which deal with some aspect of your own life but which are fictionalized? Have you ever tried to write about writing?
4. Methodology, e.g. what methods are effective in understanding more about how writers write, the influence of landscape and place and the creative process? How do we understand the process by which established or canonical writers write? What can practising creative writers teach us about this process?

The small group discussion produced a lively debate on the nature of inspiration vis-à-vis landscape. This discussion was intriguing for the geographers present as these issues had not been fully thought through in that discipline. We saw the potential for a lay understanding to change thinking within an academic discipline. There was also a debate about the socially constructed nature of landscape which explored the notion that our view of landscape is not natural, elemental or organic but a product of social milieu and context. Although this was an argument familiar to geographers, academics from other disciplines felt that this discussion gave them significant new insights into how landscape forms part of social identity. Debates moved on to the purpose or role of the notebook as a means of somehow capturing the moment of inspiration in the landscape, with responses ranging from a negative view of notebooks as they act as a lightning conductor, stripping the 'flash' of inspiration of its power, to those who noted that notebooks helped fallible memories to work! There was some recognition and concern that language is a very limiting mode of expression. Some writers argued that language keeps writers separate from the essence of what is seen and felt. This affirmed our interest in focusing on the joint importance of both the text and the writing process.

Finally, the discussion turned to the question of how academics could usefully research writers and their practices. It was suggested that a sustained

and long-term engagement between academics and writers would yield a better understanding of the nuances, complexities and contradictions of the writing process. However, the writers argued that they might not welcome such scrutiny because, if the creative process is laid bare, the mystique of it would be lost and they might not be able to capture it again. We knew little about the creative process when we started the research, but our writers made us ask new, more searching questions about what goes on in a writer's head, in their craft, on the piece of paper. We wanted to talk about the creative process with our writers, but they were often reluctant to put into words a process that eluded explanation, for fear of diminishing it. We quickly realized that each individual has a set of rituals that attend their writing that they did not want to disclose. This forces us to think more carefully about whether traditional research methods are appropriate or if methodological innovation will help academics and research volunteers to communicate better.

Thus, as writers humbled us as academics, and challenged our claims to knowledge, our aspirations were raised and we thought more carefully about the questions we needed to ask. We sought to make a space for our research volunteers, allowing them to make knowledge about themselves, challenging and perhaps overturning our scholarly expectations about identity, place, meaning and belonging in the process. Having created a safe and respectful research environment in which writers were encouraged to talk about and practise their writing, we were rewarded with rich textual and sometimes very private accounts. These demonstrated to us a heightened awareness of sense of place, and a clearly articulated sense of belonging.

The lifecycle of ideas

The commitment to research that is relevant and interesting for lots of people and not just the scholarly community has changed the lifecycle of ideas. In the past this lifecycle might have been characterized by research which was developed in an academic department and disseminated to other academics through conferences and scholarly publications. It is easy to imagine that academics have the monopoly on producing ideas for research that are funded by organizations like the Arts & Humanities Research Council. But shifts in the way that research funding is distributed and accounted for have rightly encouraged a change in this lifecycle. It is increasingly the case that ideas are developed collaboratively in partnership between universities, voluntary organizations, charitable trusts, government and businesses. If the stuff of arts and humanities research can be found in every aspect of everyday life, as I argue above, it would be counter-intuitive for ideas to emerge only from one group of people working in universities and for the results to be useful only to academic audiences.

Our collaboration with the curriculum development organization, Sense of Place, helped us to assess our expectations of working with children and

also ensured that the research was embedded in part of the curriculum. We were encouraged to use a recently developed curriculum module on rivers, designed to help the exploration of different writing styles by children, as a vehicle for our contact with children. This approach enabled us to work collaboratively with school teachers rather than making new demands on their time and resources. We also benefited from an insight into how the literacy curriculum develops in children an understanding of generic forms such as fairy tale and fantasy. The teaching of generic forms and conventions quickly seeps into children's understanding of writing as a craft. In one school we took a slightly different approach, where the head teacher identified children to take part in the research from the gifted and talented programme for literacy from across three-year group in the school. In both cases, the input of experts changed the design and conduct of the research in positive ways. It also emphasized to us how collaborative research has the power to enable the participants and researchers to share ideas, negotiate different styles of research, choose spaces of encounter and facilitate change that makes a positive contribution to the lives of those involved.

Crucial to my argument is that the Understanding Landscape project enhanced the lives of the researchers as well as the research volunteers who took part. You might ask whether a project of this scale – just a year long with thirty writers – is significant enough to make a difference. In response I would point to the many projects of this scale which cumulatively result in new exhibitions, displays and performances, and thereby get people involved in thinking, learning and talking about the complexities of modern life and their place in it.

Although the Understanding Landscape project was small and relatively localized, it speaks to much greater concerns of the twenty-first century, because having a sense of place contributes to belonging, identity and citizenship. However, people's attachment to and understanding of different landscapes is not always easy to tease out through methods that treat people as subjects of research rather than co-producers of knowledge. Scholars in the arts and humanities have the methodological and conceptual tools to encounter, engage and inspire people but will not succeed in this unless there is a lifecycle of ideas in which dialogue and exchange between academics and others is paramount. The project highlights some important lessons about what a collaborative and inclusive relationship between people in research can achieve. But we must constantly evolve, whilst both managing and meeting people's expectations of what we can achieve together. In sum, in order to produce more innovative and meaningful research of value to the wider community, we must be alive to the possibilities that emerge from the conversations that we have along the way – including accidental haiku.

Note

- 1 Names have not been used to preserve anonymity.

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