

Hélène Frichot's reading of *Situated Writing as Theory and Method* written by Mona Livholt

An approach to situated writing requires that we acknowledge the here and now of our location. There is an ethical demand sheltered in Mona Livholt's feminist argument for a situated writing: that we slow down, and that we learn and teach with more care. Writing as a practice draws attention to different ways of getting at knowledge. Often it is the simple things that count and that should be allowed to loom large: a snow angel, a professor's chair, water. Auto-biography treats life as the relational material wherein the self is constructed and reconstructed and other kinds of intimate relationality sought, a risky endeavor reaching outwards toward collective practices.

**Moving Image: We apologise for the delay. Arriving into Nuremberg Main Station, 12:07, Saturday early afternoon, 23 November 2019.** [video]

I'm on a train right now between Munich and Nuremberg, where I have been living the last three years while travelling between Germany and Sweden for my work with Critical Studies in Architecture, KTH Stockholm. It has been exhausting and near resulted in the breakdown of familial relations, not to mention the breakdown of the body, my body, and the impact, in devastating increments, on environmental milieux. Shortly, with stuffed suitcases and a life in boxes, I return with my family to Australia, that distant place Alice in Wonderland, following an unintentional malapropism, calls the 'Antipathies'. Indeed, as I write, much of the eastern seaboard is aflame, and Melbourne has suffered unseasonably hot days over 40 degrees Celsius. In the conservative newspaper *The Australian*, where alternative facts are the order of the day, irresponsible columnists write of the pollution of minds led to believe in anthropogenic climate emergencies and the insidiousness of carbon pollution.<sup>1</sup> Carbon is black, the writer in question asserts, but do you see black? We are to understand, if you can't see it, it does not exist. Late last night tucked up in a hotel room bed in Munich, I bore televisual witness to the dramatic event of school children at the Pantglas Junior School becoming engulfed by 150,000 tons of coal

waste from the nearby colliery spoil tip. Aberfan, Wales, October 22 1966: 116 children and 28 adults dead. Is that black enough for you?<sup>2</sup> Imagine: that such a position could be enunciated, that such climate denial is being ruminated upon and digested. It fills me with dread and horror.

We cannot extract the idea of resources extraction, rhythms of digging and dumping, from the fact that our worlds have come asunder. The world burns, the world drowns, the damaged world suffers. We extract, we dump, we continue all over...

We could refuse to read the pages, avert our eyes, deny the deniers, and yet this would be to ignore the inescapability of power relations within which we are inextricably caught. Power relations, as Michel Foucault himself insists, are neither good nor bad per se, but about the situation in which relations of power are performed. Power, it's worth remembering, can also be grasped as capacity, a power to act on one's own, and to act collectively. A power to do something, and of course with this comes great responsibility. Power relations are oppressive, and power relations are enabling. When we accept the great bloody mess we have gotten ourselves into, rather than denying it, the obligation falls upon us to act, to change, to reimagine other relational ecologies. To deny our location is untenable, and good luck to those who soothe themselves to sleep with lullaby lies.

When Mona Livholts leads her readers generously into the pedagogical opening pages of *Situated Writing as Theory and Method* power relations play a large role. Power runs through the intersectional matrices of gender, sexed difference, class and race; power is practiced as a differentiating force with varying effects. Power is always situated, and to be situated is always to be situated amidst power relations. Royal Blue cashmere twin set and pearls. Top button buttoned down. To be situated, further, is to acknowledge the privilege (or lack thereof) of location and proximity. Proximity, and the affects it arouses: to affect, and to be affected, draws us, the readers, me, the reader, into the entanglement of thinking-feeling-living and writing. Livolts's kind voice and shaky writing hand leads the way.

There is no use lamenting, there is no use lamenting: This is a refrain that I often think to myself, to help me journey forward. It is so very tempting to complain, but rather than complain, what of speculatively and pragmatically venturing on, opening spaces and times to be shared. 'On the road to writing, where (life) stories unfold.'<sup>3</sup> I hear Cixous here. It is life, a life, an embodied life that Livolts writes with, and yes, the preposition, the positioning, is crucial.

Give me writing or I shall suffocate. I often reflect that writing is akin to breathing, without writing, no life. But then, the writing and what it does, how it passages forth as a journey-form, often leading to unexpected places, cracks us out of our self-obsessed universes of value and demands that we encounter our fellow journey-peoples.

We never arrive at the blank page, as reader or writer, without our baggage. The page is never blank, but crammed full of opinion, cliché and habit, and we must smear it, dirty it, wipe it, rearrange it...I read, I write: it is an intimate circle. Sometimes it is a dog chasing his own tail. Doggedly.

Situated writing (Haraway), diffractive writing (Barad), *écriture féminine* (Cixous), fluid mechanics (Irigaray ): There are companion thinkers circulating through the essays. Companion thinkers can be understood like the practice of companion planting, the art of gardening. To parse the gardeners, for nearly every concept you plant, there is likely to be a beneficial companion who can help nourish the ground of thinking, and chase away the pests.<sup>4</sup> Though I am haunted here by how we define pest, and shouldn't we also engage, even if in agonistic dialogue with the pests too, with enemy thinkers?

Knowledge: This is a pedagogical work, and where occasionally pedagogy slips into the didactic register, still the sense is one of generosity. Here now, hold my hand won't you? Opening up spaces and times, methods and modes of thinking for readers. Livholts argues for writing as a method of enquiry, and means of contributing to vibrant archives of knowledge.

Slowness. I am taken in particular by the stress on slow writing, an imperative to slow down, which I recognise also in the work of Isabelle Stengers. If we don't slow down, we risk becoming exhausted, when we do slow down, we confront our inherent exhaustion and move within it toward the possibility of creativity. A small glimmer, an indicative ache.

Fiction. The novella form, and what Justy Phillip's calls the fictionella, draws attention to the powers of fiction. That fiction can be a mode of knowledge production fills me with a hope interlaced with anxiety, for storytelling is an art composed to captivate. Again, responsibility. Our scholarly obligations and requirements.

I confess that I am irked by the autobiographical mode, though I grew up an avid reader of Marguerite Duras and accept that writing comes from a combinatorial approach to life's encounters and vicissitudes. Whether that is about one's cats or one's addiction to whiskey, or the acts of infinite care enacted when one's half dead husband returns from the ends of humanity, and his shit must be wiped and his mouth fed with watery soup. Dear Diary, how do we delicately approach this? Perhaps I am afraid of revealing too much? Perhaps she is braver than me, and I am too timid? I hear Livholt's vulnerability where she comes to a conclusion, she calls herself out, or even catches hold of herself. She goes so far as to speak of embarrassment, and embarrassment is close to shame, and shame is the strongest affect, and yet, in opening up this vulnerability, strength is paradoxically secured (Butler). Vulnerability, embarrassment, shame lead Livholts to consider an ethics of change, an ethics of writing the self, writing the other, writing... we are much in need of such an ethics, developed as a practice. Like practicing the scales.

Standing beneath the first storey window of the side path along the south wing of the old, red brick school building, vines clinging to the cyclone fencing to her left, the cool bricks and rough mortar to her right, and the piano is playing, haltingly, above. Tuesday morning lessons, and she is mulling over the word, new found, 'personality' and she thinks to herself, but I have none of that, so where can I get some?

Stories demand to be retold and passed on, stories demand yet other stories, and as readers of Haraway, including me, like to recite: it matters what stories tell stories! The snow angel is too beautiful for me, but looming up are flashes of my smaller boys and their snow joys. The professor's chair irks me, as I have to confess my own burning ambition to get there, and once there, a surprising sense of deflation: was that it? Writing on water, with water, beside the water. Dear Mona, I want to tell of how the salt waters of the Indian Ocean run through the arterial routes and passages that make up a history of my family-body, a complex colonial composition. I must live by the sea, but for the last three years, north, west, south, forget about venturing eastwards: the sea has been over 600km away.

We must take responsibility for the stories we tell. We must acknowledge the responsibility held in such a position of relative power, and how from this position the way must be held wide open for those who follow, especially those who are too often overlooked. We do not own positions of power, power is not embodied as a property, rather we pass fleetingly through positions of power. 'We', yes, I know, it is a problematic pronoun, co-opting agreement. Still, to recognise this precarity. To recognise this damaged world. To recognise our exhausted subjectivities, and to continue to work, but slowly, and with care.

### **The reader's biography**

For some reason when I grew up I never read *The Earthsea Cycle* by Ursula le Guin, where dragons and wizards (mages) abound. Now, a keen reader of Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway, who both touch on Le Guin, I have finally arrived at this reading, which I also attempt to introduce to my children (still working on that). Because of Stengers, I have been reading her collaborator Didier Debaise who offers close readings of A. N. Whitehead. This finally returns me to a long-term relationship with Gilles Deleuze, always there like a kindly grandfather in the background. Readings such as these lead me to emergent spaces and encounters between architectures and philosophies. I am at home in neither disciplinary domain.

### **The writer's description of Creative Ecologies**

Situated Writing as Theory and Method is about situated writing as a creative artistic narrative process that develops over a life time. Situated writing is sensitive to privilege and subordination, diversity, and spatial dimensions, shaped through the diffraction of life writing genres, such as diary and letter writing memory work, poetry and photography. A trilogy of untimely academic novellas, a form of self-portraits, constitutes exemplars of situated writing. A woman's desire to obtain a professor's chair, but her writing is devalued, so she steals a chair and is caught in the story world to become a marginal character. A snow angel project makes inquiries into rural geographical space, university settings and class, gender and whiteness. Writing water shapes a narrative form where academic life, everyday life and mothering, unhomeliness and futures of writing dissolve. The book concludes with questions and concerns to inspire readers' own situated writing.

Weblink for book purchase: <https://www.routledge.com/Situated-Writing-as-Theory-and-Method-The-Untimely-Academic-Novella-1st/Livholts/p/book/9780367276027>

### **The writer's biography.**

I am thinking as I write, that what is most important in my biography, is the way my life is written. The entanglements between sensory perceptions of reading a text or a visual image and the landscape around me is crucial. I grew up in a landscape of coniferous forest, an oat field, a narrow gravel road and lingering nearby the house, and a woodland lake. Cold winters with dry scintillated snow brought a magic silence to this place. I became a reader of that landscape of silence. I used to waterski in a lake with muddy water. This landscape biography shapes how I read and write.

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Charity Edwards, oceanic thinker extraordinaire, for drawing my attention to this dark, dark article, which I reultantly cite as a matter of scholarly responsibility. Ian Plimer, 'Let's Not Pollute Minds with Carbon Fears' The Australian, 22 November 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The scene of the Pantglas Junior School disaster was reconstructed in an episode of The Crown. The Crown. 'Aberfan', The Crown, Episode 3, Season 3, directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, release date 17 November 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Mona Livholts, Situated Writing as Theory and Method, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Amber Kanuckel, '10 Veggies that should grow together' in Famer's Almanac. <https://www.farmersalmanac.com/companion-planting-guide-31301> Accessed 23 November 2019.