



## THE INNER INTERDISCIPLINARITY: COMPLEXITY, WRITING, AND CHAOS NAVIGATION

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Last spring, I transcribed a page of *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* by Rebecca Solnit and taped it above my typewriter. In the passage, Solnit relays a conversation she had with a friend, who told her about “a Hawaiian biologist he met who discovers new species by getting intentionally lost in the rainforest.” This image of Solnit’s mythic biologist presents an interesting negotiation of a purposeful task and a deliberate quest for defamiliarization: how is it that you find something when you are not sure what it is that you are looking for?

I do not take the persistence of this dilemma as a sign of failure, but its appearance rarely comes without a hint of anxiety. One thing I’ve found that gives me a vantage over all this uncertainty is writing. As a believer in the importance of letting complicated things remain complicated, I value the ways that writing allows me to navigate the discomfort of effort. It becomes a compass or key of sorts.

Studying in an interdisciplinary manner undoubtedly contributes to the frequent need to re-orient myself to what I am doing. I have spent a lot of time worrying that I was ultimately going to have to pick one field of study over the others, because that’s what it meant to grow up. The further I got along in school, the more the tensions within myself increased. The thoughts and feelings I had about my place within the world were beginning to blur my academic plan, and my next step felt illegible.

I signed up for a full-time creative writing program so I could bring everything that I was working with to the table, and have the space to consider why my future seemed like a series of infinite contradictions. It was a total divergence from the reasons I had heretofore articulated to myself about why I was in school; it felt luxurious, selfish, and terrifying.

It turned out that this wasn’t any more or less “practical” than the other options, and it did not limit me from other pursuits. But it did ask me to relate to myself and my aspirations in a different way

than any of the other academic programs I had taken thus far. I knew I would be asked to draw something from within myself—to compose something new out of the vastness that alternated between feeling like too much to deal with and an empty void. Only through the practice of writing, which I both feared and craved, was I able to unearth the narratives I was silently feeding myself. I was invited to open up desires that I had foreclosed without articulation.

In the middle of the quarter, my teacher introduced us to metacognitive writing: writing that explores one's own learning or thinking processes. We answered questions about what we were struggling with, what skills we wanted to develop further, and how our writing had changed. I had never been asked why I was doing what I was doing and where I hoped to go with it.

The potential obscurity of the word *metacognitive* doesn't adequately reflect its simplicity. We might see metacognitive writing as an extension of the brainstorming or the drafting stage, though it can be utilized at any point of a writing process. I set a timer for ten or twenty minutes to carve out space for these kinds of questions: What am I trying to do? What am I having trouble with? What would help me? In what ways am I doing well? What are the doubts that are holding me back?

While clarifying my ideas, metacognitive writing also makes space to listen to, and draw upon, my own inner resources that might be otherwise inaudible. It never clutters, and it never fails to identify steps that I can take. Shifting into the state of mind where I can begin to examine my thoughts and feelings about a project tends to reveal that which is hidden in plain sight. The spontaneous composition of these questions often begins to unwind the overwhelm before I even begin to answer them.

The questions I pose to myself change, but the process of stepping outside what I am immediately grappling with gives me the distance to look out at the terrain I am uniquely crossing. It helps me guide myself through my own process, and helps me to learn from myself. This kind of orientation makes me comfortable with, and enthusiastic about, willing myself to get lost over and over.

Knowing that I can always pick up the tool of metacognitive writing helps me to trust that in such moments I will have other options besides either giving up or falling back upon a predetermined trajectory. The practice allows me to keep moving, so that the challenges and contradictions can be a site of emergence rather than an endpoint. It does not numb the confusion with false answers, but lets the questions come to light. In other words, it recognizes the importance of process, not just outcome.

Metacognitive writing is applicable not only to the realm of writing, but to other fields of inquiry. I believe it to be particularly relevant to my peers who feel similarly pulled between different spheres of study and conflicting identities, regardless of what form their work will ultimately take. Different fields of study have unique vantage points which assume their own forms of validity. Inside of myself, all of these different ways of knowing need not compete: I straddle the worlds and bring each of their forms of knowledge to bear upon each other. But my inner experience is always capable of holding complexity that my surroundings might not be structured for.

That creative practices are treated as luxuries, or only something to be developed seriously by those who pursue them professionally, can be seen in the budgets of learning institutions. Perhaps this accounts for my previous sense that writing is auxiliary to “real” work, rather than an indispensable tool for navigating the complexity of the present. Is writing a discipline, or is it a way of proceeding? When so much of the communication we do is with ourselves, deciphering the stories we tell ourselves shouldn’t be seen as secondary to academic writing, as they often show up implicitly in what we do and how we do it.

I often feel most inspired when I am trying to hold together unbearable tensions, when I am at the edge of piecing together elements that might not initially appear to be related. I have always been pulled in many directions and felt this to be a handicap, yet armed with the tool of writing for myself, I see the potential for clarity amidst so much contradiction. To limit ourselves to the task at hand is not necessarily to be more disciplined and attentive, but to accept an already limited scope of engagement—limited by our preconceptions and a fixed notion of our intentions. For me, fear and uncertainty influenced the academic choices I made, but not in a way that was satisfying or even more “productive” than what I chose for myself once I was able to identify what my fears even were.

Developing the tool of writing has changed the way I relate to complexity— the impossible interdisciplinarity that I contain. This is not because writing provides ready answers, or because the fabricated identity of “writer” resolves the fractured world I inhabit. Rather, it lets that chaos be legible, and sometimes even delightful; I become aware of the nuances of pressure as well as unanticipated spaces of lightness. Writing is something tangible I can do to begin stretching seemingly disparate pieces of myself into an acknowledgement of cohesion. It gives me a form through which to discover resonance in the external world that I might never have found otherwise.