

Chapter 28. Living Adjacent and Approaching Askew: Pathways for Building a Research Agenda

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After decades of researching and teaching with primary materials, I've found that positionality (including relationships to community stakeholders, group memberships, personal history, networking, serendipity, and location) provides the origin for nearly every project I take on. For example, I've studied the organizational strategies of Georgia women's marches (from the perspective of an invested community archivist and scholar who regularly teaches with the expansive women's collections housed on my campus); complicated the reputation of Susannah Wesley, the "Methodist Madonna" (blending my positions as a feminist recovery scholar and chapter leader of United Methodist Women); researched Scottish rhetoric (as a likely Ulster descendant); and produced course designs, public scholarship, and feminist publications surrounding girl-detective Nancy Drew (stemming from my childhood interest in this series).

Like contributors to Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan's *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process* (Southern Illinois UP, 2008), I have long explored ways in which archives and historical research becomes enlivened when connected to the researcher's positionality. I am particularly interested in how the backstory of a project provides new avenues for exploring cultural, political, and colonial histories, along with ethical considerations required when the researcher is only marginally connected to communities of study. While I often disclose my positionality in presentations and published articles on a wide variety of topics, I welcome the opportunity provided in this volume to delve deeper into these experiences, to highlight the liminal spaces I occupy within and preconceived notions I bring to positionality-inspired investigations, as a participant-witness and archival researcher.

Below, I explore my (sometimes) conflicting emotions while engaged in research stemming from the personal and demonstrate ways that rapprochement can occur when community lore meets archival investigation. I also show how unexpected project (re)sources might arise from the researcher's perspective, experiences, relationships, and plain old good luck. Throughout these sections, I weave in examples that demonstrate how considering a researcher's position can help find opportunities to expand our list of professional deliverables, enrich our teaching, and build a research agenda by snowballing project ideas from inception and curiosity to dissemination. I've also found that I enjoy writing and

teaching more when one activity feeds another, and that blurring distinctions between my parallel personal and professional lives can be exciting and fun when I use positionality as a heuristic to determine new research areas.

Unexpected Projects

Recently, I investigated the abiding legacy between two long-time partners, stemming from a small act of kindness. Following their forced migration during the US 1830s Trail of Tears, the Choctaw Nation donated \$170 in 1847 (\$6,719.60 in 2026) to address Irish poverty resulting from the potato famine. This partnership expanded as the collaborators celebrated the initial gift and built a living partnership that is ongoing, 179 years later. While this project may appeal to readers interested in rhetorical history, indigenous and Irish studies, and cultural relationships, the global partnership grounded in two specific communities resonates personally with me, as a settler scholar only tangentially connected to both communities.

My personal connections to this topic guided my research and attitudes about this project. I was reared in Mississippi at the origin point of the 19th-century evacuation of the Choctaw Nation from their lands, and my county includes many Ulster descendants. I grew up a fifteen-minute drive from the sacred, spiritual, and political Nanih Waiya tribal mound (source of Choctaw creation stories) and even edited my high school yearbook titled *Nanih Waiya* (a HS that Choctaw students didn't attend). Furthermore, the local Golden Moon and Silver Star Casino owned by the Choctaw community encompasses the Dancing Rabbit Golf Club and Inn, a name serving as an ever-present reminder of the contentious Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (stipulating that the Mississippi Choctaw people cede lands to the US government in exchange for holdings west of the Mississippi River). Longitudinal repercussions of this legislation played out in racial relationships in my home county against the shift of wealth associated with the advent of the casino-resort, specifically for Choctaw families who elected to remain in Mississippi. In addition to growing up alongside the Choctaw community, I am a long-time researcher of British rhetorical history. These unique relationships piqued my interests on multiple fronts and allowed me to step back and examine the dynamics of my hometown while simultaneously expanding my academic purview.

While I don't belong to either of these communities, I have long lived alongside one group (as an observer) and studied the other from the related perspective of researching countries that would eventually become part of the United Kingdom (as a scholar). I felt some trepidation as I began this project as an outsider, particularly since as an archivist/primary researcher I understand the ramifications, ethical concerns, and pitfalls of writing about communities to which one doesn't belong. Serendipitously, an opportunity to address these issues arose from another personal connection, allowing me to flesh out my initial hometown community

experiences and tangential scholarship. I found an opportunity to participate in a writing group that specifically recruited participants from my university. I presented an early version of this study at Emory University's "Europe and Beyond Seminar Series," an interdisciplinary, international, and intercollegiate 10-month colloquium opened to a broad swath of scholars, students, and public professionals. This group provided valuable feedback regarding the approach I was taking and suggested additional scholarship for improving the scope and reach of this inquiry. In road testing my hybrid research methods and findings with scholars squarely located in Irish and Native American disciplines, I articulated my concerns about working outside my primary research fields and my position as a non-community member. The Emory project participants helped me to negotiate those pathways indirectly as I considered their advice for including my stance and position in the essay and broadening my background reading before submitting this work for publication.

Positionality and Project Resources

I've found that my memberships and familiarity with local communities suggests not only new topics to research but also corollary resources, especially as an archival researcher. When my now-adult children were small, we went on an annual family vacation to St. Simons Island (a group trip to Epworth by the Sea: A Conference, Retreat & Vacation Center). We swam, ate, and biked all over the island, but for all the years we attended with members of our church congregation, I never bothered going to the library on campus until the year I just couldn't take the beach anymore (as a redhead with blue eyes). Hiding from the sun, I wandered into the little museum and discovered that the Arthur J. Moore special collections housed John Wesley's diaries and journals from his time in Georgia. Over the next few years, I researched, presented, and published works about this remarkable stash of 18th-century artifacts and materials. While I've had other lucky archival finds over the years, this opportunity came specifically from a community membership and recurring experience—one that I (finally) recognized and grabbed.

Similarly, I discovered a treasure trove of feminist archives at MOMA, all because I have limited capacity for shuffling through museums with my art historian daughter. I love museums, but I can spend only so many consecutive hours art gazing; however, I am stalwart when it comes to investigating archives and visiting special collections, and I can tenaciously sift through boxes for days. In preparation for our visit to NYC museums, I planned half-day side trips to take a load off and pleurably dive into museum archives while my daughter studied art at her own pace. While researching MOMA's history, I became fascinated by the founder's wife, Margaret Scolari Barr, and her collaborations with the WWII Emergency Relief Fund. After talking with the archivist, I began photographing resources and gathering materials to expand my initial research into other

holdings. I wouldn't have undertaken this research if I didn't learn from my daughter and then merge her interests with my own to seek out local archives. Furthermore, I crafted this piece for a feature in *Peitho*, one that specifically called for shorter articles that introduce (not fully explore) novel archival holdings; the specifications of this feature seemed doable to me as an administrator who had limited time to start new projects. Blurring the professional and the personal yet again revealed unexpected research pathways.

In another unforeseen series of events, I've partnered with my childhood literary friend Nancy Drew on adventures that are ongoing. As a child in Mississippi (with only homegrown amusements), books were my steady companions. I read voraciously, saving my money for the next installment of the yellow-bound mysteries, annotating each volume in my horrid handwriting, and wishing I could have similar adventures with my two best friends. Fast forward, I grew up and moved past Carolyn Keene and Stratemeyer Syndicate series to find scarier, bigger, literary thrillers. Little did I know that I would eventually embark on new adventures with Nancy. As my long-time friend Beth Battles was organizing a SAMLA session on detective fiction (long after I had moved from lit studies to rhet/comp, from girl detective stories to 19th-century feminist fiction), she convinced me to revisit Nancy, just this once, and a love was rekindled. I dug deep into ND feminist theory, product licensing, Wildred Wirt's archival papers, and pedagogical approaches for introducing ND to new audiences. I designed a rhet/comp course surrounding what I came to learn was a multi-faceted and complicated Nancy, blending my personal, research, and teaching interests and obligations. In turn, many of the students in the course expanded the ND assignments to include young adult and children's series they had read along the way. In writing our positionality statements for the course and sharing them with one another—the first assignment listed on the syllabus, we began collectively to understand ways to harness our personal interests, curiosities, and even friendships (positionality) in ways that led to unique course projects, research to deliver at conferences, and in some cases published documents.

Interdisciplinary Venues for Growing a Research Agenda and Disseminating Findings

Once I began researching and writing about topics that held personal interest for me (rather than just working within traditionally accepted parameters of rhetoric and composition scholarship), I found that (1) I was never at a loss for something to research and write about and (2) I had many more venues for disseminating my research. Like most academics, I found that over the course of my career, these two issues had occasionally served as obstacles as I tried to create a research agenda (once I had exhausted projects from my dissertation as a beginning Assistant Professor, as I sought promotion from overworked/stalled Associate Professor/WPA to promotion to Full, and again as I recently stepped down from

decades of service and returned to classroom/research full time). By focusing on subjects that I already understood, that stemmed from communities to which I belonged, or that resonated with my personal curiosities, establishing a research trajectory became much easier. I also knew from award-winning and highly acclaimed research such as Beverly Moss's investigations into African American preaching and Wendy Sharer's explorations of suffrage organizations (both projects grounded in familial associations) that studies connected to researcher positionality could also garner critical academic acclaim.

As a spiritual and academic woman, for decades I have taught classes in my church, served as education chair of my congregation, and designed original curriculum for limited studies; however, more recently, I have begun trying out ideas for scholarly research projects (particularly feminist studies) on fellow United Methodist Women (UMW)—those committed to “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors” philosophies. These explorations often begin as extensions of UMW issues and figures but quickly morph into academic projects. For example, I led a study of Susannah Wesley at my church but expanded that study of Wesley's diaries and letters into an examination of Wesley as a precursor to bluestocking intellectuals and female preachers for presentations and publications. While I like to keep my parallel lives separate and experienced a bit of trepidation as I began sharing my academic research with my church colleagues, those CV lines likely would not have materialized if I had not first talked about my ideas with non-academic groups that I belonged to.

The mix of scholarly and spiritual conversations and feedback helped me to seamlessly blend academic and religious dissemination paths. Most recently, I designed a UMW study based on “Lessons from Proverbs and Barbie,” a project that I am now thinking about expanding around feminist and social circulation theories for academic readers. Writing for dual audiences helps me to expand both the scope of my work and target publications available for publishing this research. Likewise, I road-tested my early inquiry into the Choctaw-Irish partnership with the UMW Circle. These smart women posed insightful questions into the origins of the initial gift, suggested scenarios about how the Choctaw citizens might have learned of the plight of Irish during the famine, and queried the (religious) infrastructure necessary to get the funds to Ireland in the 19th century. In both projects, pitching this work to women's group audiences early in the process helped me determine research directions and provided additional CV and institutional annual report entries, including community teaching and service items.

Coauthoring with current and former students, blending our positionalities and emerging interests, also leads to hybrid methodologies and new places to pitch projects. Collaborating with Women and Gender Studies colleagues, as well as archivist friends, has led to publications in interdisciplinary feminist journals and collections, invitations to speak at women's conferences and archival events, and opportunities to write blog posts for feminist organizations—opportunities

that I likely would not have pursued solo. These partnerships encourage me to get out of my comfort zone by providing an experienced guide who understands the parameters of other disciplines' methods and publishing practices, and those collaborators in turn disseminate their work within my field with us taking turns as lead authors and project managers.

Final Thoughts

Am I a religion scholar, an art historian, an indigenous studies expert, a children's lit specialist, a library archivist, or a labor activist? Absolutely not! Does publishing in these areas make me a fraud, a poacher, a Dodo bird? On occasion, I think maybe. However, by blending positionality and scholarship, learning from my students (and my friends and children), and writing about the communities I observe, join, and am born into, I've not only avoided burnout but also wake up excited about new projects that I am taking on (after 40 years of teaching). If we clarify our stance and focus on situated storytelling that privileges experiences of stakeholders, then we can bridge research methods and positionality in ways that encourage ethical adjacent and askew research trajectories. My experiences writing from personal positions while foregrounding the communities and individuals I've researched have proved fruitful throughout my career. During times of personal stress (giving birth with no maternity leave, overwhelming fatigue from serving as an administrator for 22 years) and professional urgency (finishing my dissertation while having a baby and outrunning a narrow window of graduate funding, repeatedly trying to beat the tenure/promotion clock), I've relied upon group memberships, friends, and colleagues to discover research avenues and sustain intellectual projects. Positionality (along with a heavy dose of serendipity) suggests unique ventures, ones I tackle from an individual perspective. That stance coupled with primary and archival research provides new ideas for teaching and research, ones that help avoid burnout and contribute to an ever-shifting research profile.