

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

Vol. 1 No.1

INTRODUCING THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM II.

2026

SWITCHING TRACKS: CRITIQUING GATEKEEPING IN
DISCIPLINARY PRACTICE.

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Abstract

This is the second paper introducing the Geohumanities Platform. This platform is a venture which seeks to explore interests in the combined worlds of Place / Literature / Augmented realities / Theatre / Fiction / Originality / Reality / and Media, broadly conceived. As stated in the first of this three paper series, explicating our interest in the Geohumanities reminds us afresh of our 'situatedness' as researchers. Our position in relation to structures of power, society, and geography remain integral to the work of both creatives and academics (see for example Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997, then Simandan, 2019), yet – as we have seen in Paper I – our situatedness in relation to disciplinary working practices is sometimes taken for granted. Our home disciplines anchor many of our interests, yet in some cases they also limit some of the trajectories we would like to explore. We have seen in Paper I how modes of practice (e.g. writing and citation convention) encourage siloed activity, effectively narrowing our questions, silencing viable modes of communication, and disconnecting some audiences from our work. Continuing to draw on insights from the first meeting of the Geohumanities Platform in 2025, in this second paper we reflect in greater detail on the ways in which we contribute to our disciplinary situations, 'gatekeeping' (b)orders through practices of writing, editorialising, and review. We do so in order to continue a critique-through-praxis of the politics, priorities, and philosophies of academic disciplines, and attempt to harness energy to move towards new practices. As we will see in this series, to congregate on the Geohumanities Platform is to use whatever agency we have as 'gatekeepers of knowledge' (after Lazaric et al, 2008) to identify new futures – creating new 'situations' in which to do and explore research.

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

Introduction

To paraphrase Vareberg et al (2006: 1), “the rigor and validity” of disciplines is “ensured” through our roles as ‘gatekeepers of knowledge’. As editors, authors, and reviewers we reinforce a reality that suggests that disciplines are, and should be, the “cornerstone[s] of sound scholarship” (ibid.). Yet as we have seen in Paper I, the impulse of the geohumanities is to ask questions and frame problems in ways that cut beyond established cornerstones of inquiry. Reflecting the sentiments of Abusaada & Elshater (2026: 1¹), we recognise that our fields:

“increasingly require flexible, diverse, and adaptive forms of knowledge to address complex [contemporary] challenges,”

yet we are also aware how our disciplines do not always provide the necessary frameworks with which to engage with this situation; as Abusaada & Elshater sum up, our:

“primary evaluation mechanism—peer review in scholarly journals—remains constrained by restrictive gatekeeping practices...”(ibid.).

In this paper we share our experiences of contributing as gatekeepers to our disciplines in relation to peer review – as writers, editors, and reviewers. We identify the diversity and range of problems related to each aspect of this process in order to establish the case to de- then re-situate our work as gatekeepers on the Geohumanities Platform in Paper III.

Gatekeeping knowledge.

Those congregating on the Geohumanities Platform have a variety of experiences as gatekeepers of knowledge; as writers, reviewers, as well as past and present editors of journals. In this latter gatekeeping role the necessity to control the ‘flow’ of submissions

¹ Abusaada and Elshater were referring directly to planning research in this instance, but their insights could apply to a range of modern disciplines.

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

coming to any journal or collection, going out to review, and being cleared for publication, was key. This 'gatekeeping' role often supported papers survive the process and be ready for publication²; in others it involved diverting papers due to the mismatch between the quantity being submitted, and the number of editions that could be slated. Editors were wary of publishing a run of papers using a similar method or concept - exposing their readership to the risk of 'death by ____' - rather than offering a balanced range of subject or method in any particular volume. In such cases, any paper which did not survive this gatekeeping process may not have been because it failed to offer any significant insight into its chosen field, but due to wider issues beyond its control; as one participant put it, it was important to recognise that the selection process is, "not purely meritocratic, because it just isn't".

As editors, colleagues are also as in the invidious position of identifying and convincing appropriate referees to donate their time to peer review papers that are deemed potentially appropriate for publication. Their ability to do so was key, as Yu, Liang, and Xie identify:

"The peer review system's supply-demand is critical for the sustainability of the entire scientific ecosystem" (2025: 1547).

For some, the task of finding reviewers is made easier by calling upon those colleagues who are currently active in publishing in the immediate or closely adjacent fields. Such requests call directly upon a kind of *quit pro quo* transaction – tacitly reminding the authors that a journal has published their work, and it is now beholden on them to respond positively to any polite request to 'hold the gate open' for others. Following their extensive study of peer

² As participants (as authors) at the first Geohumanities Platform event stated:

"Quite often, we put a paper in a paper which is, perhaps, not great, but it's okay. And sometimes you do get it sent it back with really useful advice, and there's a bit of a ping-pong going on".

"Actually for the author, if not the referee, it can be a really useful process."

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

review in science, Yu, Liang, and Xie recognise this reliance on the *quit pro quo*, observing that:

“when scholars’ research activities increase, there is also an increased tendency [to call] on their review activities” (ibid.).

The consequence of this transactional arrangement is the heightened possibility that a particular approach, set of methods or concepts – perhaps favoured by the initial authors and reviewers – has the opportunity to gather momentum, and in turn has the potential to develop into convention (a point we will return to below).

Adopting the term ‘service’ in relation to recruiting and delivering peer review is not incidental. Peer review, if done properly, takes significant time; however, in the currency of research (be it academic or artistic), peer review is both not paid or workloaded in any meaningful way – it is a ‘service’ (see Vareberg et al, 2026). Despite it being a key cornerstone of academic rigour, peer review is labour given free to journals on the tacit understanding that the existing publishing model is the best way of maintaining academic standards, metricising quality, and supporting the industry (although this understanding is under considerable scrutiny, see for example, Abizadeh, 2024). Peer review is also rarely rewarded through ‘softer’ esteem factors adopted by academic institutions (i.e. valued in terms of a wider contribution as academic ‘citizens’), nor is it made public to those who receive it. As a consequence, peer review is fundamentally reliant on a sense of hidden and voluntary community service for its continued success – yet as we will see, the experience of being involved does little to encourage or strengthen a meaningful sense of community goodwill.

As authors, colleagues are often disappointed by the time the peer review system takes. In popular journals, it can often take up to a year for an author to receive a response from editors, and this can be multiplied if numerous drafts are required to satisfy the reviewing system. This system is particularly problematic for scholars working beyond or before

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

disciplines; in their comprehensive assessment of this situation in particular Zhang and Wang (2024:1):

“uncover[ed] a robust positive association between a paper’s interdisciplinary level and the duration of the peer review process. This relationship persists across diverse fields, journals with various impacts, and articles with different citation impacts. [Furthermore] referees generally pose more inquiries toward interdisciplinary endeavors [and therefore] scientists submitting interdisciplinary manuscripts may inherently require additional time to adequately address the detailed comments and questions posed by referees”.

Colleagues in all fields often felt that the review process raises ‘detailed comments and questions’ that are not always constructive. For example, some reviewers do not engage with the paper on its own terms and instead use their own disciplinary specialisms, or the guidelines of the journal,³ as tools to regulate acceptance. As a consequence, receiving peer review can be a debilitating and obstructive process:

“I think you would feel less vulnerable to the bad experiences of peer review if the rest of academia was a bit more open about it, yeah, helping to talk about the horrors! I’ve had some rejections so many times. I remember my mentor, well when I first started, I got a rejection from a journal, it wasn’t particularly supportive, and then, a few years later, he was talking about, when they were in my position, they got rejection, and then didn’t write at all for two years.”

From the perspective of those on the Geohumanities Platform, the ‘horrors’ of peer review are concentrated in the phenomenon which came to be known as ‘The Third Reviewer’. The Third Reviewer refers to one of three peer reviewers who takes the minority position in relation to the overall merit of a paper. In such cases, two reviewers appreciate the paper,

³ Indeed, many journals increasingly corral reviewer insights at least in part into closed survey questions, using likert or numbered scales to ‘judge’ a paper on specific sets of disciplinary or journal criteria.

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

and may offer constructive suggestions to contextualise or improve it, and in general recommend it for publication. The Third Reviewer does not: they see fundamental problems with the paper, problems the other reviewers do not recognise (and it is assumed the editor did not either else it may not have been tabled for external review). The phenomenon of The Third Reviewer is complete when the editor informs the author that in order for publication to be recommended the weaknesses identified by the outlier must be directly engaged with. Through doing so, the paper is now in a catch-22 position with respect to the journal – it can only be published if it is substantively changed, but in doing so risks renewed critique from those reviewers who are convinced of its merit in its original form. As one participant outlined:

“what I get frustrated by is if you generally have three reviews, and it's the third reviewer that is a problem, so the third reviewer gets the big T and the big R, Third Reviewer! The first two love it, the third reviewer says 'no', and the subtext I'm reading into this is they are saying: 'well, if I had written this paper, I wouldn't have written it like that'. Well, that's not the point is it? (but I would say that, wouldn't I, because I'm the author of the paper). Now the editor is going, 'the Third Reviewer is the only one I'm focussing on'. So it seems like the editors are almost going, 'ignore', 'ignore' to the first two reviewers, and therefore ignoring the time they invested in engaging with the paper - and is just focusing on this one, because - why?, I don't know. So it just becomes a really inhumane exercise of going: in order to progress in this journal you need to do what the Third Reviewer says, even if it changes the original paper so much that it's not the paper you were going to write, and which the first two reviewers were more than happy with. So the power of the editor and the Third Reviewer is significant, and often unaccountable”.

The phenomenon of the Third Reviewer has the consequence of eroding the goodwill and resolve of the author (as noted in the example of the mentor above), but also has the potential to do so for the remaining reviewers too (in those cases where a journal reports to them the outcome of the peer review process, and which may not align with their own

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

judgements). Indeed, for some authors the experience of this phenomenon changes the way they engage with the submission process with their next papers. As some congregating on the Geohumanities Platform recounted:

“I know colleagues who have said, ‘I’m going to put this paper into review now, because they’ll tell me what I need to do to make it publishable’. In other words, ‘Let’s not put in the finished paper, let’s just chuck it in now’. Which in a way is understandable, if it’s going to be taken apart by the Third Reviewer!”

“I think with the editorial process there’s so many things going on. People do just ‘put stuff in’ which really should be picked out and rejected before review by an editor”.

In such cases, reviewers in turn can be further alienated from this community of practice because they feel they are expected to add value to papers which arguably should be provided by the authors themselves:

“Sometimes you get stuff to referee and you wonder, ‘how is this even coming out to a review?’ Both editor and author are asking me to do a lot of work in critiquing and working up the weaknesses of this paper – if I was in another discipline I could legitimately qualify as a co-author if I make as many suggestions as spring to mind. So [the question arises]: am I being asked to do something that may arguably fall beyond what a reviewer is supposed to do? Is this fair?”

Adding value through critique (either constructively or otherwise) highlights the power of gatekeeping. Through writing, reviewing, and editing, researchers operate within the disciplining routines of journals, and come to learn how citation (see Paper I), journal guidelines, reviewer strategy, and editorial practice, come to determine who and what is published (and perhaps more importantly, what is not). Abusaada and Elshater (2026: 5)

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

observe that this process leads to a subtle but significant change in how peer review 'gatekeeps' the cornerstones of disciplinary research; as they note:

"The core question often becomes 'Does this conform?'... rather than 'What does this reveal or imagine?'".

In the context of contemporary disciplines, which reward citation conformity (see Paper I) and the establishment of writing convention (as we will see in Paper III), this paper has argued that the process of peer review can also have the effect of silo-ing research practice and contributing to the establishment of strong, but artificially narrow, subject areas. In its current form gatekeeping encourages researchers to split their identities as authors, reviewers, and editors. As authors, researchers are forced to align their research interests with journal guidelines in order to be accepted to review; as reviewers, researchers have to judge the ability of the paper to meet specific journal criteria, or alternatively are tempted to agree with the paper's conformity to their own preferred disciplinary trajectory; and as editors, researchers have to channel the flow of papers so editions are published. This situation is experienced by many operating within conventional disciplines, but is perhaps most keenly felt by those operating before or beyond them. As Abusaada and Elshater conclude, for such interdisciplinary work, the "...scholarly standards meant to promote knowledge exchange [therefore] often become sites of exclusion" (2026: 5).

It is clear that establishing a space to do things differently for interdisciplinary work – including the Geohumanities – is a necessary step. In order to construct a more positive dialogue within the review process – with greater accountability, more timely engagement, and more constructive suggestion – there is a need to de- and re-situate gatekeepers in their various roles as author, reviewer, and editor. It is necessary to foster the possibilities of working beyond narrow disciplinary interests, and explore creative tensions and insights from doing so. In the words of Dawney,

THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

“how do we give value to each other’s ideas, take the time to chew them over and push them further, rather than scan them before filling in yet another Microsoft form? [...] Can we, within the confines of [...] academia’s baroque and ever-tightening structures, create spaces where discipline-changing and discipline making ideas can happen?” (2025: 183)

The Geohumanities Platform is an experiment to create such a space, and its emergence is discussed in the third and final paper of the series.

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THE GEOHUMANITIES PLATFORM

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