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Disciplinary Formation, Faculty Pleasures, and Student Risks

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INTERDISCIPLINARITY has clearly become both an embattled site of controversy and a new battle cry. For every colleague who thinks it spells the death of the discipline of English studies, there is another for whom it is the best thing yet for the health of the discipline (as well as of scholars within it). It will prevent clogging of the intellectual arteries, these others assert, and they respond to institutional hesitations or resistances with suspicion and irritation. But those resistances can have complex origins, not all of which are easily traced to innate disciplinary conservatism or intellectual purism. Of course, there are those who worry about the threat that interdisciplinarity might pose to the specificity of both literature and its analysis, to the particularity of literary criticism, to why anyone takes [literary criticism] seriously, as Stanley Fish writes (*Literary Criticism*). In times of budget constraint, even those who are most enthusiastic about crossing disciplinary boundaries (in either research or teaching) might understandably be loath to dismantle existing departmental structures: the humanities are too often seen as dispensable already. (Such a scenario may well be less paranoid than metanoid or whatever the situation is called when it doesn't seem that enemies are everywhere; they really are). Interdisciplinary programs have a long history in North American universities. Even in more flush financial times, when they were easily staffed by borrowing faculty time from established departments, programs like women's studies have often been precariously funded. In harder times like these, different issues have arisen: for instance, some department chairs may well worry that in collaboratively taught courses the institutional credits (for the students taught by members of their departments) will be recorded elsewhere, to the department's detriment. And, of course, some administrators support interdisciplinary endeavors as a way to eliminate expensive departmental structures.

Whatever the institutional enthusiasm or reluctance, there is obviously much interest in interdisciplinarity, either as a program of study or as a methodology or focus of research. As Timothy Austin has written, interdisciplinarity suggests collegiality, flexibility, collaboration, and scholarly breadth the academy's equivalents to parenthood and apple pie (272). Another reason for this popularity (beyond the ideological) is that English studies has broadened its sense of its object of study considerably over recent decades: we still teach literature, of course, but our definition of literary studies has changed to include what we have decided to call theory, and with that shift has come consideration of the social and cultural issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, which a more strictly formalist sense of what constitutes the literary would exclude. And it is obviously hard to talk about things like imperialism in postcolonial studies without moving across disciplines (Yúdice 275). While this syncretism (Patterson 258) was once perceived as threatening by many in English departments, it is now about as close to

common practice as anything else has been since the New Criticism. Of course there is still opposition, and some of us (given our earlier training) still feel a tension between a commitment to the literary and what have been called the political and theoretical agendas of some of these broader perspectives (DeKoven 127), perspectives that have created what some see as metadisciplines complete with potentially innovation-inhibiting codes and cultures (Attridge 285). As Fish has noted, the blurring of existing authoritative disciplinary lines can just as easily create new authorities as destroy old ones: the interdisciplinary impulse finally does not liberate us from the narrow confines of academic ghettos to something more capacious; it merely redomiciles us in enclosures that do not advertise themselves as such (Being Interdisciplinary 18). And there is yet another related cause of resistance to interdisciplinarity: the perception of imperialist ambitions. Those who study and teach in English and American literature departments have sometimes been accused of colonizing, in the name of the Empire of Cultural Studies, disciplines as diverse as philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and legal theory, to name but a few. But for better or (usually) worse, empires have traditionally left their mark on their colonies. Have we really left our mark on these other disciplines? Or have we more often merely visited as tourists and come home with discursive souvenirs?

In other words, what is currently passing for interdisciplinarity in the academy may well be a more modest form of disciplinary tourism that we might call interdiscursivity. One way to understand the difference would be to distinguish two related dimensions of disciplinary training. One might be called a formation: the learning of ways of thinking, ways of seeing (and therefore ways of interpreting) the worlds we experience as well as the worlds we make. This formation takes time and work to come into being; it likely also takes talent and inclination. Part, but only part, of the process of being formed in this way involves learning a discourse, a way of talking about what it is that we are doing. Too often, this subsidiary process is taken and mistaken for full disciplinary training, especially in discussions of interdisciplinarity. To put it bluntly, maybe we can talk the talk of other disciplines but to do truly interdisciplinary work, we also have to be able to walk the walk.

Talking the talk of another discipline is interdiscursivity. It isn't easy to do this either, of course. As many may have learned the hard way, interdiscursivity isn't simply a matter of culling a handy supportive citation from another field to demonstrate breadth of knowledge. Or, in Roland Barthes's terms, It isn't enough to take a subject (a theme) and arrange two or three sciences around it (Research 72). To talk the talk (and have people listen) in other words, to contextualize, historicize, and interpret with any credibility it is necessary to spend a lot of time and effort learning the discourse of another discipline, learning how to formulate and articulate the issues. This kind of undertaking is arduous, and can be dangerous. Our particular and selective focus may often mean that we choose parts of another discipline's discourse that are considered less than central or less than current in their home context. The alternatives to spending time and effort seriously learning a discourse are to take on blind faith the opinions of experts (and thus reinstate specialist authority) or to romanticize amateurism.

Even more difficult than learning another discourse is achieving a second, new formation. As the French so astutely say, this process is formation as *déformation professionnelle* professional deformation. Once formed in one discipline, a scholar tends to interpret a new one through the filter of the first. Double formation is not impossible, however. For example, in the influential and controversial book *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, Norman Bryson writes in the discourse of art history and from within the discipline of art history, but he does so as a critic formed by literary studies. It is this formation that allows him to interpret differently from art historians; he sees things they may not have seen. For many, that difference makes his work valuable. But it may also make his work suspect to some art historians.

Few of us do truly interdisciplinary work like Not man Bryson's, however. Most of us work within our literary discipline while drawing on the discourses the methodologies and insights, sometimes the texts of other disciplines. To do scholarly work on opera, For instance, I found that I had to learn the discourse of musicology: although I already had considerable practical musical training, I still had to take courses and read extensively in music theory and history. But I know I did so with the eyes (and ears) of a scholar formed by literature who wanted to do research on an art form opera that is arguably as literary and dramatic as it is musical. Peter Brooks has asserted that there are moments when thought processes reach the point where the disciplinary boundary one comes up against no longer makes sense when the internal logic of thinking impels a transgression of borderlines (102). But I think that such a transgression is likely to produce interdiscursivity rather than interdisciplinarity. What marks the formation of someone trained in English literary studies is attention to the workings of textuality and textual effects. We have been taught to attend to the subtleties of writing in English in many genres, over many periods through various modes of reading. And the texts we read need not be strictly verbal: film, television, opera, even visual art texts have proved to be open to our analysis and interpretation. As Catherine Belsey has observed, Our formation is in the broader study of signifying practice : Traditionally we have not only analyzed meanings (philosophy does that too), and we have not only been concerned with social relations (history and sociology are too). Supremely, English departments have attended to the formal properties of texts, their modes of address to readers and the conditions in which they are intelligible (560). What we do when we read a historical document is certainly not what historians do. Our interest in textuality, rhetoric, narrative, or even cultural production is not usually their interest, nor are our tools of analysis and synthesis theirs. We have different rules of admissible evidence, different criteria of proof. Even if we learn the discourse of history, as many of us have, our invocations of its objects and its methods always reflect our literary interest in signification and interpretation.

I have come to believe that true interdisciplinarity in the form of equal and plural formations is rare (because very difficult to achieve) and that the more modest claim to interdiscursive competence is what, in fact, is usually misnamed interdisciplinarity. Bilingual talking the talk is one thing, but it is hard to walk two different disciplinary walks and not trip over one's own two feet. But this raises another question: What if solo walking could be turned into companionable dancing? If it takes two to tango, maybe it takes two (or more) to bring differing formations together to do interdisciplinary work. Feminist research has given us one strong methodological and ideological framework in which to consider collaborative alliances and communities. As many have warned, institutions devalorize such collective research yet implicitly still grant value to the intellectual (and social) move from the solitary, individualist ethos that sees knowledge as a product to a more collaborative sense of the act of knowing as a process (Caplan 52; Lunsford and Ede 5, 73). But were we honest, we'd have to admit to other fears and other obstacles to collaborative work. Working with someone else is never easy. It is always eye-opening; it is (often rewarding in both human and intellectual terms. This kind of work can teach us how to dance the dance with someone else; in other words, it can teach us how to lead (and how to follow), how to give (and how to give in). These are not things most of us do very readily.

The rhetoric of aims and achievements that accompanies the notion of interdisciplinarity these days would seem, in fact, best suited to collaborative work (and perhaps this fact suggests one reason that granting agencies are encouraging team efforts). If the justification and purpose of crossing disciplinary boundaries are to include defamiliarization, fresh insights, skills from one area of expertise enriching another and making up for another's limitations (Torgovnick), then a team of open-minded colleagues from different disciplines might well do better than one person alone. We could learn from one another, collectively resist our individual temptations to disciplinary reductionism, and curb our imperialist appetites for metaphorical transfer from our discipline to another (Gunn 255). Collaboration may be a more effective way to change the object of study, as so many have urged that interdisciplinary studies

must do (Barthes, *Research* 72, *Work* 74; Guillory 265; Gunn 240).

Whatever the (very real) institutional risks for young, untenured faculty members undertaking collaborative work in an academy that still values (thanks to its dominant Romantic-capitalist ideology) the labor of the individual, these risks may in the end look minor compared with those involved in doing solo work that is either interdiscursive or genuinely interdisciplinary. If graduate school is the crucible of identity formation that it is said to be a place where one's personal and professional identities come together then what happens when the cultural capital one has acquired is not strictly speaking disciplinary? The March 1996 *PMLA* Forum on interdisciplinarity offers one disturbing answer to this question: it is hard to get a job in institutions with traditionally defined departments. As I know from experience, even a PhD in comparative literature may be viewed as suspect by an English department hiring committee. But what happens to those whose degree or thesis is explicitly in more than one discipline, not just in more than one literary tradition? Well, some, like Jonathan Boyarin, end up in law school, and others recall with some bitterness, as Ed Cohen does, the job interviews in which they were made to understand that they had been improperly disciplined (289). As David Graver warns, interdisciplinary work is more safely pursued from the safety of a tenured position than out in the wilderness of the job market (308). The message that these interdisciplinarily trained young scholars seem to have been getting is that their formation lacks either the craft aspects or the literary content of a discipline, no matter how fine a theoretical purchase they may have on issues or debates. Discipline-specific formation still seems to be a major criterion for hiring.

What kind of double message, then, are we giving our students, both undergraduate and graduate, when we create interdisciplinary programs in which we may genuinely enjoy teaching precisely because of their boundary-pushing challenges? While some of us sincerely praise the intellectual breadth and flexibility of such courses, others can be heard lamenting that undergrads in such programs have been given material to study but few useful tools of analysis (D. Boyarin 291). Many of us, though, have a kind of divided loyalty: we want to teach in these exciting undergrad programs yet to retain our disciplinary orientation for the training of graduate students in English. But we may soon find ourselves wondering where these English graduate students are going to come from, especially if undergraduate interdisciplinary programs proliferate. And what kind of formation will today's undergraduates have if they do find their way to grad school and want to study English? It seems safe to assume that it won't be the one most of us have. What will we do then?

And what about our tendency to encourage bright graduate students to take on interdisciplinary or interdiscursive thesis topics? The risks of inexperience and amateurism are great for any of us who undertake such work, but perhaps they are even greater for younger scholars. As Giles Gunn warns, To bring two or more disciplines into significant interaction with one another requires considerable mastery of the subtleties and particularities of each, together with sufficient imagination and tact, ingenuity and persuasiveness, to convince others of the utility of their linkage (239). It could well be argued that Jacques Derrida had to be the seriously disciplined scholar he is one with a classical philosophical formation before he could deconstruct Western metaphysics. Not everyone who wants to do border-crossing work is as well formed in literary terms as, say, Stephen Greenblatt yet I would wager that many a grad student today would like to be a Stephen Greenblatt, though perhaps few fully understand the kind of finely tuned disciplinary reflexes (Robinson 278) necessary even to come close to his accomplishments. In short, in our enthusiasm for and pleasure in interdisciplinarity, are we being fair to our students? Or are we risking cheating them of a firm disciplinary formation that might enable them to do convincing interdiscursive or even interdisciplinary work later on the same formation that might also enable them to get a job in an English department?

Alan Liu has called interdisciplinarity the most seriously underthought critical, pedagogical, and institutional concept in the modern academy (743). Considering the difference between interdisciplinarity and what I have been calling interdiscursivity might be one place to start in attempting to think through these issues of disciplinary definition and pedagogical responsibility. Another area of consideration might be the intellectual and institutional benefits both personal and scholarly of collaborative research and teaching. I cannot agree fully with those who assert that working across disciplinary borders (in any form) is simply an interdisciplinary nostalgia for subversion (Liu 754) or a leftist assault on the entire edifice of hierarchy and power reflected and sustained by disciplinary divisions (Fish, *Being Interdisciplinary* 17). Some intellectual problems simply do not belong to a single discipline. Issues such as sexuality and gender, for example, which can be approached radically differently from various disciplinary points of view, cannot be claimed or owned by any one discipline. Nor (to come at the question from a different angle) should a complex art form like opera be studied only by musicologists whose formation often leads them to pay scant attention to dramatic staging or even to the literary text that the music is written to accompany. But if I am going to argue that a specifically literary formation is useful in dealing with these often neglected aspects, then I am also implicitly validating paradoxically, in the name of interdiscursivity, if not of interdisciplinarity that specialist disciplinary formation. To do boundary-transgressing work of any kind, we may need a grounded formation in the first place. If so, we must ask if we are being fair to our students, especially to those who may want to do this kind of work too, if in the name of interdisciplinarity we are in fact depriving them of such a formation. Because we take our responsibilities to our students seriously, we need to think through more carefully both the pleasures we take in interdisciplinary work and the risks this work may entail for our students.

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