

CHAPTER 11

INTERDISCIPLINING HUMANITIES

A Historical Overview

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ANY chapter on interdisciplinary humanities begs the question of what constitutes the humanities. The US-based National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) definition is widely cited: “The term ‘humanities’ includes, but is not limited to, the study and interpretation of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods.” The NEH definition, however, is only a multidisciplinary sketch. Understanding the nature of interdisciplinary humanities requires tracing a complex set of developments. This overview accounts for their predisciplinary past and interdisciplinary developments over the course of the twentieth century. After presenting a snapshot of two disciplines—art history and music studies—it compares trajectories in two traditionally text-based disciplines—philosophy and literary studies. (Sections 1, 2, and 4 draw on Klein 2005; Section 11.3 draw on Frodeman and Briggie 2016.)

11.1 EARLY WARRANTS

The English word “humanities” derives from a cultural movement in ancient Rome under the heading *humanitas*. The term defined both the goal of Roman culture and the arts or studies most suited to expressing it. In his later writings, Cicero designated poetry, geometry, music, and dialectic as the arts pupils should study to ensure full humanity. Romans also shared the Greek notion that certain texts provided insight into the *res magnae*—the great issues of truth, goodness, beauty, and justice. They conceived of the liberal arts as preprofessional education and compendia of information, not methods for systematizing philosophy or organizing erudition. However, the foundation of Roman *artes liberales* was grammar, understood as study of literature and language. Careful study of texts was thought to convey a kind of normative and well-rounded general education. Following suit, the role model of

the humanist was the orator skilled at influencing public opinion and policy through the rhetorical art of persuasion. Not everyone agreed, though. Aulus Gellius argued those who used Latin correctly, especially Cicero and Marcus Varro, did not give *humanitas* the meaning it was commonly thought to have—the Greek notion of *philanthropa* connoting a friendly spirit and good feeling rather than practical purpose (McKeon; and Crane, in Klein 2005).

Italian humanists were the first to actually be called “humanists.” *Umanista* was Latin slang for scholars and teachers of *studia humanitatis* in Italian universities during the late fifteenth century. In shifting the focus of liberal arts education toward rational analysis of texts, Italian humanists turned away from the scholasticism of dialecticians in newly emerging universities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They also shifted the lens back to classical antiquity, although teachers of grammar and rhetoric emphasized classroom aids over ideal products. The role model of humanists changed in kind, refigured as an *uomo universale*, polymath, *cortegiano*, *bonnete homme*, and scholar-gentleman conversant with a wide range of subjects.

Over ensuing centuries the unity found in classical and humanistic traditions eroded as new subjects emerged. Attempts at unification did not end, however. From the sixteenth century forward efforts appeared in the work of Comenius, Leibnitz, d’Alembert, Kant, Hegel, and von Humboldt. In the seventeenth century, the concept of ages of learning also promoted cultural history as a general framework. Common motifs, themes, and genres fostered synoptic theorizing, the integrative concept of periodization, and practice of interart comparison later dubbed “interdisciplinary arts.” The most direct expression was the early Romantic notion of *Symphilosophie*, which attempted to produce unity in *mythos*. Hegel also emphasized “the truth was the whole” in a philosophic system aimed at integrating all areas of human knowledge (Kockelmans, “Science and Discipline”; Graff; and Vosskamp in Klein 2005).

The origin of interdisciplinarity is dated to several historical points. Michael McKeon (1994) tracks its rudiments to the eighteenth century. During the Enlightenment, subjects were assuming increasingly distinct identities as the material and institutional conditions that gave modern divisions of knowledge a sociopolitical foundation were being put into place. Yet a synthesizing counter-movement was also apparent: The encyclopedists based their thinking on analogy, continuity, causal interconnections, and contextual relations that recognized artistic expression and economic behavior are embedded in a network of social, political, and ethical concerns. Others, including Frodeman (2013), date interdisciplinarity’s origin to the rise of disciplinarity between 1870 and 1910. During that period higher education was reorganized around 20 to 25 disciplines, each with its own department, major, and curriculum.

Ironically, since they include the oldest subjects, the humanities were last to assume modern disciplinary form. Between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, physics, biology, and chemistry began assuming separate identities, even while still subsumed under the broad category of natural philosophy. Modern use of the term “humanities” is built on distinctions between sciences and humanities and between fact and value foreign to ancient thinking. In fact, the first use of the term “natural science” did not occur until 1834. In the late nineteenth century, the humanities constituted a disparate group of fields, the “least worldly leavings” in the university with the exception of the portion in divinity schools. Interests in “personality” and “society” once explained by myth, theology, and philosophy were relocated to the social sciences and, as they branched off from the broad field of moral

philosophy, the remaining and most abstract part—“intellectual philosophy”—was composed of logic, epistemology, and metaphysics. By 1900 “humanities” designated a range of culture-based studies, including literature, philosophy, art history, and often general history. The discipline of history grew rapidly as an independent domain absorbing aspects of politics and economics with a past dimension. Its ambiguous identity as a member of the social sciences or humanities stems from association with moral philosophy and literary inquiry. Art and music lagged behind in departmental formations, but by 1920 were well established at most universities and colleges (Garber; and Kuklick, “Professionalization,” in Klein 2005).

Philology was the first major scholarly paradigm in the modern family of humanities disciplines. As was the case with classical study, it implied a larger cultural vision, an *Altertumswissenschaft* aspiring to a total view of civilization with command of its languages and a method capable of integrating disciplines. However, philological science was privileged over a comprehensive and speculative view of culture. Academic theologians also adopted philology as a professionalized method for understanding the Bible, with mastery of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew considered key to comprehending sacred texts. At the same time, Matthew Arnold’s model of the social function of literary studies asserted a counter-vision of the organic wholeness of human nature, anchored in a canon of great works that was neither systematic philosophy nor narrow grammatical or literary study. It was a general education encompassing polite literature, Greek science, mathematics, and poetry, and writings of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Shakespeare, and Goethe. Arnold located human powers of intellect and knowledge, beauty, social life, conduct, and manners in the generality of the species and the interrelations of those powers (Crane; and Graff in Klein 2005).

In the early twentieth century a group Laurence Veysey called the “culture camp” of humanities also asserted a competing vision. They extolled the Renaissance ideal of *litterae humaniores*, the social and moral purpose of education, spiritual idealism, and a conception of culture as process rather than a set of research products (1979, pp. 53–54). Nonetheless, as James Stone (1969) explained, even with counter-visions of the humanities, the disciplining of humanities continued to reinforce segmentation of research and education. As experts developed esoteric investigations in specialized domains, the notion of a shared culture diminished. Decentralization and fragmentation of education hastened. Older unified fields of inquiry began decomposing under centrifugal forces of differentiation. Older unitary principles of the university eroded, and new unifying hypotheses were foreshortened. The general education movement that arose in the opening decades of the century reinscribed a holistic vision of culture, but competing historical- and problem-focused models emerged as well. Over the course of the century a plurality of other developments became aligned with the concept of interdisciplinarity. Although the dominant trend in higher education and research over the twentieth century was the growth of specialization, over the latter half of the century these developments challenged its primacy.

11.2 TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

Early interdisciplinary developments associated with the humanities date to the 1930s and 1940s, in the philosophy of science (the Vienna Circle), comparative literature, and American studies. In the late 1960s and early 1970s new fields emerged, including black studies,

women's studies, ethnic studies, environmental studies, and urban studies. The importation of European philosophy and literary theories into scholarship in North America also moved beyond older positivist paradigms in multiple disciplines, along with social and political turns in scholarship, structuralism and language-based psychoanalysis, neo-Marxist criticism, and widening interest in feminist theory and semiotics. Further into the 1980s, an array of practices lumped under the umbrella term "poststructuralism" gained influence, including new historicism, and cultural and postcolonial critique. By the 1990s, multiculturalism was a major theme, and many believed the humanities were evolving into cultural studies. Increasing attention was also paid to the contexts of aesthetic works and responses of readers, viewers, and listeners. The concept of culture expanded from a narrow focus on elite forms to a broader anthropological notion of culture. Calls for a reinvigorated "public humanities" aimed to restore the close link between the humanities and public life in the Roman era, albeit on contemporary ground.

Interdisciplinarity was implicated at every turn. Each movement differed in some way, but together they fostered a new generalism that countered both the modern system of disciplinarity and the culture camp's vision of humanities. The new generalism was not a unified paradigm. It was a cross-fertilizing synergism in the form of loosely shared methods, concepts, and theories about language, culture, and history. A new rhetoric of interdisciplinarity developed in kind. "Plurality" and "heterogeneity" replaced "unity" and "universality," "interrogation" supplanted "synthesis" and "holism," and new "anti-," "post-," and "de-disciplinary" formulations emerged. In the late 1990s the term "transdisciplinarity" also began appearing in association with new theoretical paradigms in cultural studies and critique. In Canadian studies, for instance, Jill Vickers associated the label with movements that reject disciplinarity and its epistemologies in whole or in part, and in some cases generate self-knowledge, including women's studies, Native/Aboriginal studies and cultural studies, communications studies, regional studies, Northern (or Circumpolar) studies, urban studies, and environmental studies (1997, pp. 22, 41).

Two disciplines—art history and music—provide introductory snapshots of discipline-based trajectories of interdisciplinary influence. Tanya Augsberg presents a fuller account of interdisciplinary arts in this volume. In art history, word-and-image studies treating artworks as texts were influential in the 1980s, while critical studies of culture opened larger questions of representation and interpretation. The "new art history" that emerged over the latter half of the twentieth century enlarged the canon to include new stylistic movements and neglected groups. The boundary between high and low or popular art also eroded and new hybrid genres emerged. Scholarship changed in kind. Selma Kraft (1989) identified two drivers of change. One—from the social sciences—accentuated production and use, focusing on political, cultural, social, and economic conditions of artistic production and its reception. The other—closer to the humanities—drew on critical, semiotic, and deconstructionist approaches, especially from literary theory and philosophy. Scholars also incorporated insights from Marxism, political theory, sociology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis (pp. 65–66). Other disciplines and fields increasingly claimed stakes in analyzing and interpreting visual materials as well, fostering a widening field of "visual culture" studies across disciplines and interdisciplinary fields.

The discipline of music provides a fuller illustration. Like art history, it was a borrower from the start, depending on art history for the paradigm of style history and on literary studies for paleographic and philological principles. Synoptic theorizing and the generalist

tradition furnished a holistic model of moral, social, and religious development. Musicology was the first major basis for a formal intellectual discipline and, along with ethnomusicology, was regarded as a “humanistic” discipline rather than an “art” of composition or performance. The German *Musikwissenschaft*, which developed in the late nineteenth century, emphasized positivist historiography and stylistic evolution. The object of study was an autonomous work, and the concept of tonality central. In the positivistic paradigm of the late 1950s and early 1960s, empirically grounded facts and historicism were prioritized. Both musicology and music theory also claimed explication of musical works as their disciplinary turf (Trietler; McCreless; Kerman; and Kassabian in Klein 2005).

Positivistic musicology came under scrutiny in the mid-1960s and music theory in the late 1980s. Scholarship expanded as scholars developed greater historical and cultural awareness. Borrowing from other cultures and genres became a major compositional practice, and new hybrid genres such as performance art and multimedia forms challenged traditional boundaries. Marxists critiqued essentialist binaries, including separations of serious and popular music. Poststructuralist critics linked notions of truth with systems of power, calling into question the master narrative of tonality. Postmodernist questions about the validity of universalizing stimulated interest in local, everyday, variable, and contingent aspects of music making. Deconstructive analysis unveiled operations of power related to gender, race, and class and the ways music constructs social identities and spaces. And, with advances in technology, scientific subdisciplines such as acoustics, physiology, psychology, and computing expanded (Shepherd; Kassabian; and McCreless in Klein 2005). Fear of distorting the discipline continues, and historical musicology remains a dominant approach. Yet it is harder to speak in the singular anymore. “Musics,” Philip Bohlman concluded, are proliferating and multiplying, along with their meanings (1992a, 1992b).

Two additional examples flesh out a fuller picture of interdisciplinary trajectories, focusing on the oldest of humanities disciplines—philosophy and literary studies.

11.3 PHILOSOPHY

Viewing Western philosophy from the perspective of (inter, trans) disciplinarity unsettles the standard categories of philosophic thought.¹ Histories of philosophy frame their accounts in different ways. They tell the story in terms of periods, ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary, or as a quarrel between ancients and moderns, with “postmodernity” somewhat awkwardly tacked on at the end. Or they tell it in terms of great thinkers: Descartes (or Machiavelli) as the pivot between ancient and modern thought; Frege (or Husserl) as having inaugurated twentieth-century thinking; Wittgenstein (or Heidegger) as the greatest thinker of the twentieth century. Philosophy is divided conventionally into core areas: in the analytic tradition, in terms of metaphysics and epistemology and the philosophy of language; in the continental tradition, in terms of phenomenology, existentialism, and poststructuralism. In recent decades the canon has also been reread in terms of gender and racial categories as a

¹ Parts of this account appear in Frodeman and Briggie (2016), *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of 21st Century Philosophy*.

history of exclusion. Yet despite the variety and richness of these accounts, all of them pass over a crucial juncture: the disciplining of philosophy within the modern research university in the late nineteenth century. Philosophy was defined as a discipline, which is to say as a regional ontology, whose focus was on philosophizing with other properly trained and certified professionals.

Interdisciplinarity does not form part of the philosophical lexicon—even as the issues it raises move just beneath the surface. This incongruity is most glaring in the figure of Socrates. The patron saint of philosophy was an *avant la lettre* transdisciplinary: He rejected expertise and did his philosophizing via conversations in the agora, with people from all walks of life. But this fact, so central to Socrates's practice, receives no attention by twentieth- and now twenty-first-century philosophers. Philosophers pride themselves on leaving no assumption unchallenged, but since the rise of the modern research university, thinkers have scarcely raised the question of whether there is something improper in restricting their work to the disciplinary tasks of training students and writing for other professional philosophers. They have ignored the question of whether philosophy is, or should be, a discipline like other disciplines across the university.

Prior to what Steve Fuller (2016) has called the neo-Kantian settlement, philosophers had had no central home. They could be found anywhere—serving as diplomats, living off sinecures, functioning as clergy, grinding lenses, even housed within a college or university. That is, philosophers were as much transdisciplinary as disciplinary thinkers. This constituted more than merely a fact of location: While some philosophers wrote for other experts, a sizable portion of philosophic energies were devoted to live and pressing societal issues, not abstractly within the pages of professional journals (which in any case did not exist), but out and about in the world. Today we would call this a co-productionary model of knowledge.

These earlier, predisciplinary philosophers were also interdisciplinary thinkers. Figures like Descartes and Hume interacted with scholars of all types. But here the term “interdisciplinary” must be used advisedly. Before Kant and the development of modern disciplinary culture, the scientist and the philosopher were often one and the same person. The intellectual and social roles had not yet diverged. Moreover, not only did their work cross disciplinary boundaries, which were in any case much more fluid than they are today, but also, and more fundamentally, it was the distinctive task of the philosopher to create, go beyond, erase, and redraw the boundaries and categories of thought.

Philosophers once thought that there is something problematic about treating philosophy as simply one discipline alongside the others. It was once understood that, in addition to fine-grained analyses, philosophy offered perspectives that undergirded, capped off, or synthesized the work of other disciplines such as physics or biology, and then connected those insights to our larger concerns. Such work lost favor in the twentieth century—dismissed as *Weltanschauung* philosophy by analytic philosophers, and as foundationalism by continental philosophers. Serious philosophers became inhabitants of the research university. Against the inclinations of Socrates, philosophers became experts like other disciplinary specialists. They debate issues as they were defined in professional journals rather than by the life-world; their students were expected to master a discourse directed toward other professional philosophers rather than to the world at large.

In twentieth-century philosophy, acceptance of the disciplinary culture of the modern university was not viewed as a problem. No longer framing discussions in terms of everyday questions concerning truth, goodness, and beauty, epistemology turned into abstract

considerations on the nature of truth, ethics into meta-ethics, and social and political philosophy into general reflections on the nature of freedom and social responsibility. The institutional housing of knowledge—disciplines, departments, professional societies, and peer-reviewed journals—developed as a matter of course. This inattention is reflected in the fact that until quite recently the field of interdisciplinary studies has attracted few philosophers—although this is changing today, with work being done by O’Rourke, Fuller, Schmidt, Hoffman, Holbrook, Frodeman, and others.

Early twentieth-century philosophers were faced with a dilemma: With the natural and social sciences claiming to map the whole of knowledge, what role was there for philosophy and the humanities generally? There were several possibilities: Philosophers could serve as

- synthesizers of academic knowledge;
- formalists providing the logical undergirding for research and education;
- translators integrating the disciplines, and helping to bring the larger insights of the academy to the world at large;
- disciplinary specialists who focused on recondite philosophical problems in ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and the like;
- practitioners working in the field with people from all walks of life;
- or a combination of some or all of these roles.

But in terms of institutional realities there seems to have been no choice: philosophers had to become scientific, embracing the structure of the modern research university, which consists of a spread of specialties demarcated from one another. Disciplinary culture became the standard for what would count as proper philosophy. It was the only way to secure the field’s survival. But it was not as if philosophy found a familiar niche in a new institutional ecosystem, one that allowed it to continue to do what it had long been doing. Rather, philosophy itself changed. It became a creature of disciplinarity. Though few philosophers recognized the shift, preferring to believe that they and Socrates remained members of the same species.

The christening of philosophy as a discipline was an act of purification that gave birth to the now commonsense view of the field. Over the course of the twentieth century philosophers abandoned John Dewey’s public philosophy for W. V. O. Quine’s way of treating philosophy as a technical exercise. While it is possible to point to philosophers who *work with* (rather than merely talk about) nonacademic problems, for the vast majority of philosophers the lack of societal engagement has become a sign of intellectual seriousness. As Quine himself put it in a 1979 *Newsday* piece (reprinted in Quine 1981), philosophers do not “have any peculiar fitness for helping . . . society.”

To reiterate the main point: The well-regarded historian of analytic philosophy Scott Soames (2016) has noted the interdisciplinary aspects of twentieth-century philosophy. While granting that the logical empiricists of the 1930s through the 1950s viewed philosophy as having its own distinctive subject matter, Soames points out that philosophers such as Frege, Russell, Gödel, and Turing made crucial contributions to the creation of set-theory within mathematics and the theory of computation that laid the groundwork for the digital age. Similarly, philosophers such as Carnap and Kripke provided a background for studying meaning in language, just as Jeffrey made fundamental contributions to decision theory,

advancing the fields of political science and economics. Philosophers today continue to make important contributions to cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

But Soames ignores the fact that most of these interdisciplinary effects were the result of passive diffusion rather than active engagement. And he is silent on the other roles that philosophers had once played—as synthesizer, translator, field practitioner, or gadfly. In his 2005 *Philosophical Analysis in the 20th Century*, in an epilogue titled “The Era of Specialisation,” Soames notes, “philosophy as a whole—has become an aggregate of related but semi-independent investigations, very much like other academic disciplines.” He concludes by suggesting, “what seems to be the fragmentation in philosophy found at the end of the 20th century may be due to more than the institutional imperatives of specialisation and professionalisation. It may be inherent in the subject itself” (cited in Rorty 2005). This is certainly the case for the last 125 years of philosophy; but whether this is a reflection of philosophy’s essential nature or a matter of its current institutional housing remains open to debate.

11.4 LITERARY STUDIES

Prior to the modern discipline’s formation, “literature” encompassed a broad range of meanings, from polite letters and poetry to anything written, though especially serious writing. The subject appeared in English academies during the late seventeenth century, though literature as imaginative writing did not become prominent until the late eighteenth century. From roughly 1860 to 1915, philology and literary history were the major scholarly practices in the form of editing and annotating texts; compiling bibliographies, dictionaries, and concordances; conducting source and etymology studies; discovering facts; and writing biographies and literary and intellectual histories. In the 1930s and 1940s, criticism became the dominant practice. One strain, led by a group known as the New Critics, emphasized aesthetic formalism in close readings of poems as organically unified objects. In placing moral and social functions of literature within the internal structure of a text, they affirmed the timeless universality Aristotle attributed to literature, rendering historical and cultural change extrinsic to literary scholarship. The other strain, led by the Chicago Critics, emphasized theory and argued for a pluralist approach and humanist moralism concentrated on qualities literature shares with philosophy, ethics, and general ideas. Both strains, though, held that the integrity of the discipline was threatened by nonliterary interests (Graff; Miller; Leitch; Dionne’s “Introduction”; and Weber in Klein 2005).

New Criticism did not establish complete hegemony, however. In the 1930s, teaching English as a second language was professionalized as a branch of applied linguistics and, in the 1940s, creative writing gained a place. Many younger critics with generalist inclinations moved toward literary journalism, and a group known as the New York Intellectuals conceived of literature as a cultural phenomenon open to multiple points of view. Marxist and sociological analysis also fueled cultural criticism. Yet while formalist methodologies continued to hold sway, their dominance loosened as interests expanded. In Europe, interdisciplinary research was promoted as the model for a regenerated study of literature opposed to strict formalism and open to historical awareness. By the mid-1950s similar voices were also being heard in the United States in the name of “multiple interpretation,” “multiple parallelism,” and “multiple causation” (Greenblatt & Gunn; Russell; Robbins; Bender; Cohen;

Herman; and Beck in Klein 2005). Tensions between the intrinsic and the extrinsic, however, continued. The rhetoric of interdisciplinarity abounds in Barricelli and Gibaldi's 1982 *Interrelations of Literature*, with talk of "interplay," "inherent" ties, "reciprocal process," "interpenetration," "interaction," "symmetries," and "symbiotic" and "complementary" relations. At the same time, literature was still deemed "the hub of the wheel of knowledge."

The 1992 *Introduction to Scholarship* published by the Modern Language Association differed. The most notable contrast was an entirely new category of representation—cross-disciplinary and cultural studies. It contained chapters on interdisciplinary, feminist and gender, ethnic and minority, border, and cultural studies. Disciplinary relations were also more expansive than a decade earlier. The chapter on language, culture, and society acknowledged the impact of theory, women's and gender studies, the role of the computer, and interdisciplinary interests in writing. And heightened interest in the social contexts of language used stimulated studies ranging from global theories of orality and national language policy to turn-taking in conversations. In a chapter mapping interdisciplinary approaches, Giles Gunn identified an even wider range of practices. The simplest way of mapping them, tracing the relationship of one discipline to another, reveals practices such as psychoanalytic criticism and reader-response criticism in the relationship of literature and psychology. A different picture appears when asking what new subjects and topics have emerged, such as the history of the book and the ideology of gender, race, and class. Each topic, in turn, generated further investigations.

Ultimately, Gunn concluded, the result of interdisciplinary study, if not its purpose, is to dispute and disorder conventional understandings of relations between origin and terminus, center and periphery, focus and margin, inside and outside: "The threading of disciplinary principles and procedures is frequently doubled, tripled, and quadrupled in ways that are not only mixed but, from a conventional disciplinary perspective, somewhat off center." In the 1980s, for instance, new historicism moved beyond New Criticism's emphasis on the verbal icon and literary text as a self-contained, formal, and thematic unity. Scholars shared social historians' challenge to consensus histories and a semiotic view of culture, signaled by keywords of "interplay," "negotiation," and "circulation" in a shifting conceptualization of history from "background" to a "shared code" in a network of practices, beliefs, and institutions. When established categories are defamiliarized, character, language, and theme are not apportioned solely to literary scholars, "primitive" customs to anthropologists, and demographic patterns to social historians. Nonetheless, disciplinary economies still operated. The defining rubrics of the Enlightenment framework in eighteenth century studies were aesthetic autonomy, authorship, disinterestedness, and gendered sexuality. New historicism, cultural materialism, feminist literary history, and deconstruction all transformed thinking about these rubrics while crossing boundaries separating individual arts from each other and from historical, scientific, and social scientific discourses. Yet familiar tensions between the "literary" and the "extraliterary," continued to appear (Greenblatt; Hermand; Beck; and Bender in Klein 2005).

Audience-oriented criticism is another case in point. It emerged from social, intellectual, and literary developments in Germany during the late 1960s. As the subfield evolved, it moved beyond German *Rezeptionsgeschichte* into a general view incorporating social and political histories of readership. Yet as audience-oriented criticism and reader-response theory took root in literary studies, art history, and sociology, it was often folded back into

the internalist primacy of word, image, and behavior. Others, though, had a more transdisciplinary vision (Suleiman 1980, pp. 6–7). Commenting on changes in eighteenth century studies, John Bender contended, “It is one thing to compare literature with the other arts or with—shall we say—philosophy, conceived as uniquely structured disciplines, and quite another to treat novels, paintings, buildings, logical treatises, legislation, and institutional regulations as texts participating in the complex and contestatory processes through which societies define and maintain the structure not only of their institutions but of human entities” (1992, pp. 87–88). In what became a widely cited warrant for a transformative view, Roland Barthes (1977) had argued earlier that “Interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security.” It begins when the solidarity of existing disciplines breaks down, signaled by an “unease” in classification. Change, though, appears more often in the form of an epistemological slide than a sharp break.

Once again, claims of radical change were overstated. In a widely read polemic, Stanley Fish (1985) challenged the underlying logic of new developments. As an agenda, he contended, interdisciplinarity seemed to flow naturally from imperatives of left culturalist theory. Deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, radical neopragmatism, and new historicism were critical of two kinds of boundary making: the social structures by which lines of political authority are maintained, and the institutional structures by which disciplines establish and extend territorial claims. Transgressing boundaries, Fish countered, is a subversive process—a *revolution tout court*. However, any strategy that calls into question the foundations of disciplines theoretically negates itself if it becomes institutionalized. The multitude of studies and projects, he maintained, are not radical. They center on straightforward tasks requiring information and techniques from other disciplines. Or, they expand imperialistically into other territories. Or, they establish a new discipline composed of people who represent themselves as “antidisciplinary” but become a new breed of counterprofessionals. As usual, not everyone agreed. Gunn countered Fish’s conservative and pessimistic political stance, claiming it perpetuated the dualism of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity while reinscribing static structure. The radical claim that interdisciplinarity will open the mind is as misleading as the conservative claim it will leave the mind closed. Others challenged Fish’s underlying assumption that disciplines are coherent or homogeneous and that interdisciplinarity is synonymous with the quest unity of knowledge.

What implications follow for the field in the twenty-first century? “Literature as it was,” John Carlos Rowe answered, “can’t be saved.” The term now encompasses older texts and “extraliterary” materials such as letters, diaries, films, paintings, manifestos, and philosophical, political, psychological, religious, and medical treatises (1992, p. 204). The structural trend of the discipline, Ann Middleton further reported, is moving toward topical and interest-group fragmentation, while “text,” “theory,” and “discourse” have become boundary concepts across disciplines (1992, p. 23). Resistance to formalism and extremes of specialism are widespread as well, new forms of text are being studied, and the repertoire of explanatory tools and frameworks has expanded. In the aggregate, practices of cultural, lesbian, and race studies also signal a new period in the history of the discipline. At the same time, Francis Oakley (1997) found, changes in curriculum have occurred primarily through addition, not substitution. Furthermore, W. B. Carnochan contended the coherence of the discipline never existed. The early split of North American literature and language departments

into three areas—philology, literature as moral uplift, and rhetoric and composition—is still present in the guise of theory, literature as political and ethical understanding, and rhetoric and composition. The first and most prestigious variant—literature and theory—now includes cultural, media, gender, and Third World studies. Composition is the second variant, and creative writing the third. Many departments also include film studies, and English as a second language (qtd. in Hutcheon 2000, p. 1722).

11.5 INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND THE FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES

A crisis motif has long characterized accounts of the humanities: In 2011 the National Humanities Center president Geoffrey Harpham noted, “Crisis has become a way of life. What would the humanities be without their crisis?” The answer to this crisis, according to Harvard University’s 2013 “Mapping the Future” report, is to focus on elements such as the development of a “freshman-year challenge” during orientation, the creation of arts and humanities i-labs, and the funding of new faculty positions. Others see these proposals as merely business as usual: Folks (2013) criticized the Harvard report for ignoring issues such as increasing specialization and the production of recondite research of interest only to other specialists, and for seeing the crisis as merely a matter of misbegotten public perceptions.

Interdisciplinarity has been offered as a remedy to claims of academic irrelevance across the academy. In the case of the humanities, whether for good or ill, the radical vision of a postdisciplinary academy has not materialized. However, inter- and transdisciplinary efforts across the humanities suggest that these fields are responding to the changed landscape of twenty-first-century society, in several ways:

- an expanded set of materials and scholarly approaches that counter the status of disciplines as isolated domains
- the erasing of boundaries between the humanities and social sciences, following Geertz’s (1980) notion of “blurred genres” and Bal’s (2002) notion of “traveling concepts” that appear across disciplines and academic communities
- a turn from “unity” of knowledge and culture to “unifying” strategies framed by differing contexts
- a shift in the role model of an interdisciplinarian from a polymath to Carp’s (1996) notion of the “boundary rider,” skilled at walking the borders of disciplinary expertise and interdisciplinarity
- the development of transdisciplinary and entrepreneurial approaches to the humanities (e.g., Briggie 2015) where humanists work in real time with partners outside the academy

None of these trends is well established, and all face the challenges of declining funding within a culture increasingly focused on the bottom line. Nonetheless, these initiatives suggest that the oldest of disciplines and fields of humanities have the potential for new relevance both within and outside the academy.

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