The Remapping of
Interdisciplinary Inquiry:
A Commentary and Critique

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THE CURRENT STATE of defensive restiveness in interdisciplinary studies is well illustrated by last year's annual graduate student symposium sponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art. The symposium's theme—"Collapsing Categories: Discourses on the High/Low and the Public/Private in American Art and Culture"—captures the uneasy mood of acrimonious debate among interdisciplinarians at a time when widespread restructuring of knowledge and rapid divisions of intellectual labor, leavened with skepticism over the Enlightenment project inspired by postmodernism, have sown what Julie Thompson Klein (1990) diagnoses as "wide confusion" (p. 14) and "profound epistemological crisis" (p. 11) both across and within the knowledge disciplines. Most telling is the fact that none of the six graduate students delivering papers at the Whilney symposium were from art history departments. Instead, they were from interdisciplinary programs in American Studies, Comparative Literature, and, among others, a hybrid graduate program in history, theory and criticism. The students' subject matters appeared to follow the fault lines of the symposium's collapsing disciplinary categories. One student gave a lecture on public beaches. Another presented a paper about graffiti art. Other topics rounding out the program included female punk rockers, black male bodies, and prostitution and the art of Andy Warhol. Acknowledging that the "Collapsing Categories" symposium made audiences nervous and traditional art historians "extremely defensive," the curator of education for the Whitney explained that "issues of visual interpretation [today] are taken up by a variety of fields." As such, "no longer can art history," she proclaimed, "control who says what about museums and the visual."

The destabilizing of conventional disciplinary boundaries and discipline-bound authority have also been featured on the annual meeting agendas of major academic organizations whose members practice interdisciplinary inquiry, pedagogy, and cultural analysis. Papers at the fourteenth annual conference of the Association for Intcgrative Studies, for example, probed into the "Voices of Harmony/Voices of Dissonance" at play in various modes of interdisciplinary work which, according to the call for papers, either "bring harmony out of apparent dissonance" or "produce creative dissonance within apparent harmony." Under the annual theme of "Cultural Transformations/Countering Traditions," the American Studies Association's 1993 conference program committee invited papers that emphasize processes of change and decentering, including joint sessions devoted to survival, conflict, parting, insurgency, removal, invasion, schism, resistance, revolutionóany "fads, trends, schools, cycles, [or] movements," in short, which illuminate processes of "traditions countering traditions."

1.

In the current fervent climate of centrifugal restructurings, the academic disciplines, heeding the border crossings launched by interdisciplinary programs, organizations, and centers, are themselves undergoing vigorous transformations that counter their own disciplinary traditions. Theoretical assumptions and methodological practices across the Humanities, and beyond, are being called into question and probed by immanent critique. Are reason, language, and history, for example, adequate tools for understanding the world? Are national boundaries viable parameters for the study of culture? Are established canons of great works reliable indices for dividing "high" and "low" culture? Are myths and symbols useful interpretive constructs for the student of culture? Or are they ideological fabrications or cartoon expressions of unicultural chauvinism or, as one observer recently remarked, a "crock"? Considering the Whitney Art Museum symposium, in particular, does art reflect or refract a monoculture that unites the conscious intentions or hidden subjectivities of artists and audiences? Or does art destabilize, subvert, or "collapse" such intentions or subjectivities?

One of the most interesting (and most problematic) results of disciplinary remappings and interdisciplinary mutations has been the "switch of attention," as Richard Rorty (1991) puts it, "from electoral to cultural politics"—some prefer the phrase "identity politics"—among a newly energized and theoretically emboldened "American academic left" (p. 487) situated not in economics, political science, and sociology departments but in hybrid cultural studies programs spawned by literature departments. English professors have been far more hospitable than their social science brethren to the importation of European cultural theories largely responsible for the cartographic renovation of the humanities in American colleges and universities. The political ramifications of contemporary Eurotheory that Rorty calls into question in a scorching commentary in *Dissent* center on an overriding premise of European postmodernism: as Michael Ryan (1988) explains, cultural texts—ranging anywhere across the false divide between "high" and "low" culture, from poems to videos, from public beaches to female punk rockers, from political conventions speeches to Roseanne soliloquies—*are social processes and social processes are always textualized; moreover, the mechanisms of such textualizaiions always carry overt as well as covert ideological freight* (Ryan, 1988), Because of the ideological locus of all textuality, politics itself shifts from the gritty venue of conventional activism in the civic culture—voter registration, civil agitation, community organizing, petition for redress—to the arrangements of power interpreted from cultural texts by critics in the academic culture. "An English professor I know," writes Rorty (1991), "got a letter from a young man who described himself as writing from a shelter for the homeless, where he had been helping out for some months. This man explained that he was utterly discouraged with piecemeal remedies for misery, and had resolved to study the roots of social injustice. So he hoped to be admitted to graduate study in English" (p. 487).

2.

Long-standing definitions, terms, and categories of interdisciplinarity are themselves collapsing under the strain of three philosophical forces currently reshaping the intellectual and curricular landscapes: (1) as mentioned above, the ideologically supercharged Eurotheories driving cultural study and their depiction of the social arena as inherently rapacious, predatory, and entropic; (2) multiculturism's suspicion of and impatience with organic, pluralist models of social organization and curriculum design that, according to hard-line multiculturalists, privilege integration, assimilation, cooperation, and cross-fertilization at the expense of cultural

differences; and (3) the dialogical spirit of postmodernism and its radical interrogation of certain rhetorical bulwarks of interdisciplinary theory and practice, such as convergence, coherence, and correlation. In addition, it is increasingly difficult to reconcile the paradox of interdisciplinarity in an age of specialization, professionalization, and academic entrepreneurship. Interdisciplinary scholarship, on the one hand, reaches, historically, to broader-based constituencies outside otherwise closed disciplinary communities (American Studies is a particularly good example), while a proliferation of highly specialized, even esoteric, vocabularies, terminologies, and discourses often result from interdisciplinary partnerships, as in the case of biochemistry, social psychology, cultural studies, and physical anthropology.

It is at best problematic, then, to defend or justify a general theory of interdisciplinarity during a time of radical skepticism over possibilities for the interdisciplinary project. Such a theory rests, it should be noted, on two venerable methodological foundations:

1. Interdisciplinary inquiry either *builds bridges* between separate disciplines or *restructures* constituent disciplines.
2. Interdisciplinarity is a corrective to the problem of over-specialization.

The elements of that general theory include at least five conceptual axes and the putative claims often invoked to defend them. The first is epistemological: the search for knowledge and truth is best served through interdisciplinary inquiry. Second, the ethical content of interdisciplinary work stresses unity and integration as fundamental goods worth aspiring to. There is pleasure in synthesis, according to a third aesthetic motive for undertaking interdisciplinary collaborations, as well as beauty in processes that culminate in symmetry and wholeness. The politics of interdisciplinarity, fourth, suggests that civic consensus achieved through a cross-fertilization of opposing viewpoints organizes human differences into a harmonious polity in service to the common good. Finally, the pedagogy of interdisciplinary practices emphasizes synthesis of discrete subjects and mobility across disciplinary lines as keys to liberal learning, critical thinking, and empathetic reflection. "[A]ll interdisciplinary activities," writes Julie Thompson Klein (1990) in her recent effort to articulate a comprehensive theory of interdisciplinarity, "are rooted in the ideas of unity and synthesis, evoking a common epislemology of convergence" (p. 11). "Interdiseiplinarity is [therefore] neither a subject matter nor a body of content. It is a process for achieving an integrative synthesis ..." (p. 188).

3.

That "process for integrative synthesis" is the subject of an important critical exchange between Giles Gunn (1992) and Stanley Fish (1985), an exchange that reflects what I described earlier as the current state of defensive restiveness in interdisciplinary studies.

Giles Gunn counters two popular lines of argument directed at current interdisciplinary study principally by philosophical postmoderns and the so-cailed "Linguistic Left." The first, represented by the views of Stanley Fish, is an epistemological critique of interdisciplinarity. The intellectual freedom or liberation, Fish (1985) argues in a semi-classic essay with the characteristically Fishy title "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard To Do," that supposedly comes from interdisciplinary synthesis is impossible because, as Gunn puts it when explaining Fish's point, "meanings are always produced from a position" (p. 188). We cannot escape the

knowledge ground of our point of view, nor can we simultaneously occupy multiple knowledge grounds. Interdisciplinary inquiry wrongly supposes, so the argument goes, that we can transcend such knowledge grounds or visit more than one perceptual field at a time. Following Plato's famous analogy, we can enter any number of caves, but we can explore only one at a time. Therefore, according to Fish (1985), while *multidisciplinarity* may be tenable, "being interdisciplinary—breaking out of the prison houses of our various specialties to the open range first of a general human knowledge and then of the employment of that knowledge in the great struggles of social and political life—is not a possible human achievement. Being interdisciplinary is more than hard to do; it is impossible to do" (p. 18-19).

The second related line of argument—the "leftist interdisciplinary project," as Gunn calls it— is political. Since disciplinary boundaries in the university co-opt repressive institutional hierarchies ("hegemonies") in the society at-large, leftist inlerdisciplinarians believe that if conventional disciplinary boundaries are dissolved, the mind is liberated. Intellectual liberation in the academy is a precursor to social transformation. This is generally the line of argument taken up in a new field generically camouflaged as "Cultural Studies." "In short," writes Stanley Fish (1985), "for these more radical voices, interdisciplinary study is more than a device for prodding students to cross boundaries they would otherwise timidly respect; it is an assault on those boundaries and on the entire edifice of hierarchy and power they reflect and sustain" (p. 17).

Gunn argues that interdisciplinary study should not be strictly concerned with the construction of knowledge or the nature of truth-seeking (i.e., epistemology), nor does interdisciplinary inquiry, he believes, necessarily lead to "opening" or "liberating" the mind (i.e., politics). According to Gunn (1992), "the issue that interdisciplinarity addresses is neither how to free the mind nor how to fix it but rather how, as Melville put it in *Moby-Dick* to subtilize it" (p. 190). Interdisciplinary study "alters the way we think about thinking" (p. 192). Interdisciplinary study leads to new conceptual footholds for critical thinking and critical inquiry. Gunn calls this process the "remodeling" of our understanding of a certain subject matter through a reconfiguration of constituent disciplines, a maneuver Roland Barthes refers to as "transversals." Examples of such interdisciplinary reconfigurations traced by Gunn include ethical literary criticism, American Studies, Feminist Studies, Afro-American Studies, Deconstruction, psychoanalytic criticism, and Linguistics. A notable failure in the interdisciplinary remodeling of relational disciplines, Gunn claims, is music and literature, and the "interactions between the visual and the verbal arts" generally.

Gunn (1992) holds out much promise for the future of interdisciplinary study. He insists that "inlerdisciplinarity will remain integral to ... deepening the discussion in the human sciences" (p. 210). Stanley Fish (1985) also finds the successes of interdisciplinary studies "exhilarating" and "heartening." He believes, however, that innovative developments in interdisciplinary work have nothing to do with the "larger claims . . . of liberation, freedom, openness . .. often made for them" (p. 21).

Recalling the delineation of a general theory of interdisciplinarity sketched above, Gunn is far less concerned than leftist interdisciplinarians with the polities of interdisciplinarity or its epistemologieal limitations and ramifications tracked by Stanley Fish. Gunn's focus is on the pedagogical possibilities of interdisciplinary study. "The task [of interdisciplinary work] is not to open the mind or to close it but to make it more penetrating and more discriminating at the same time" (p. 211).

4.

By bracketing off the theory-bound activism and the reified cultural politics of the interdisciplinary Left, Giles Gunn situates the interdisciplinary project closer to what I believe is its greatest potential and its crowning achievement. Simply put: interdisciplinary study is both a methodology *and an ethic*. We might go so far as to say that interdisciplinarity is simultaneously methodological and ethical. The prevailing view is that the interdisciplinary method of inquiry exercises, first and foremost, intellectual and cognitive functions and faculties. But as a pedagogy, interdisciplinarity also *guides* the mind. The interdisciplinary method is teleological: it seeks out connections, unities, commonalities and syntheses between previously disparate intellectual territories or knowledge hierarchies. It is in this latter sense that interdisciplinarity is inescapably ethical. Interdisciplinarity, like the philosophical liberalism that undergirds it, makes moral claims. The wider view, for example, is better than the narrower one. Multiple perspectives are preferred over a particular point-of-vicw. Synthesis deserves precedence over antithesis. Crossing borders beats staying holed up within parochial boundaries. As an ethical project, interdisciplinarity shapes as well a particular view of the moral person that is not inconsistent with practices of moral and civic education in an American public school tradition sustained by universal democratic principles. The moral person, accordingly, transcends the particular and sees him or herself in a consensual relationship to a social whole. The moral person cares about the welfare of others, and recognizes and promotes interdependence among people. The moral person integrates individual interests and social responsibilities and balances self-regarding and other-regarding virtues. She or he fulfills commitments, knows how to compromise, and seeks peaceful resolution of conflicts. The moral person—from Plato's Athenian Stranger to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1986) self-purified "nonviolent gadflies [who] help [people] rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood" (p. 174)—practices, in short, an ethical interdisciplinarity.

 Before moving much further, it is important to note that the current fixation on epistemology and ideology among theorists of interdisciplinarity raises serious questions about this ethical formulation of the interdisciplinary project. One objection is staked out by Stanley Fish in the previously mentioned essay. Underpinned by a postmodern fascination with *contingencies* and *separations*, Fish points out that the intellectual synthesis promised by interdisciplinary border crossings is impossible because "meanings," as Giles Gunn (1992) explains in his exchange with Fish, "are always produced from a position, or by a system, which exists as their unarticulated and unspecifiable ground" (p. 188). Our natural knowledge ground, in other words, is not consensus and synthesis but rather particularity and contingency. As such, the interdisciplinary project does not accomplish much, if anything, particularly "interdisciplinary" or synthetic. It "does little or nothing to open, much less to alter, the mind" (p. 189), according to Gunn's interpretation of Fish's position. As such, "the achievement of interpretive consensus, or agreement, or uniformity has now come to be recognized as quite possibly an illusory ideal" (p. 210)—and, along with it, one supposes, goes much hope, if any, for an ethics based on such a dubious or impracticable epistemology.

 The ideological position taken in new fields like cultural studies and bolstered by a related politico-curricular reform movement inspired by hard-line multiculturalism shares the postmodern skepticism over interdisciplinary synthesis, with speciai trepidation over its sociopolitical ramifications. As David Bromwich (1992) has recently noted, in many

humanities disciplines, literary study in particular, even the word *common* itself "is subject to a delicate prohibition" (p. xii). A common body of moral values that integrates both a curriculum and a social order, according to some, threatens to become a pretense for domination by privileged classes and groups. As such, "integration" deconstructs into a weapon for oppression and subjugation. As an ideological construction and not, strictly speaking, a pedagogy or methodology, much less an ethic, interdisciplinary study only entrenches in the curriculum, in the words of Manning Marable (1989), "traditionally White, mainstream environments [that] reinforce ethnocentrism and ignorance of nonwhites' cultural and intellectual creativity" (p. 298). Interdisciplinary practices, then, are peremptory not synthetic, juridical not ethical, prescriptive and imperialistic instead of corrective, cathartic, or liberatory. Carter Woodson (1989), historian and founder of the Institute for the Study of Black History, argues further that "the mind of the Black child has been brought under the control of the oppressor" by subjecting that mind to "the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and religion which have established the present code of morals" (p. 298). Some African American and neoprogressive educators like Woodson and Marable sharply discredit pluralist tropes like "integrative studies" and "liberal learning." A curriculum that aims for balance, commonality, and synthesis, they maintain, is no different than a curriculum that seeks to eradicate "difference" and, from the particular vantage point of the minority student, only reinforces ethnocentrism, cultural hegemony, and economic oppression.

   This is not the proper place to tease out the convoluted epistemological arguments that postmodernists mount against integrative pedagogies. Nor do I intend to hunker down onto the ideological battlefield where ardent multiculturists and reactionary traditionalists slug it out over the curriculum and the canon, or try to resolve the argument over whether "consensus" in the curriculum is synonymous with "sameness," conformism, or oppression in the culture. While it is important not to dismiss such matters blithely, the values crisis in contemporary America demands, it seems to me, that we press beyond such objections and inappropriate or, as the case may be, reinvent interdisciplinary study in response to greater challenges facing educators today, including the renovation of curricula to achieve greater educational equity and cultural inelusivencss. In his keynote address to members of the Association for Integrative Studies, Jerry Gaff (1993) underscored the ethical dimension of those challenges when he ranked, among ten key principles for interdisciplinary education, the following top priority: "integrative habits of mind," he insisted, "are *essential* goals for all students and should be *explicit* purposes of *every* academic program" (p. 7)—notwithstanding, one supposes, the particular endowment characteristics or class status of such students.

   Perhaps there is no greater challenge, nor any more durable basis of ethical commitment, than to provide connections, in our scholarship and teaching, in a world that seems so incredibly disconnected. In his commentary on Dante's *Inferno*, T.S. Eliot describes hell as someplace "where nothing connects with nothing." Maybe Matt Gronig is right: maybe "School is Hell." "The teaching profession," according to Vartan Gregorian (1989), "has to provide connections between subjects and between disciplines in order to re-create [a] totality of knowledge. Nationalism used to provide that. Tribalism did. Philosophical views did. Religion did. But as most of these things collapse around us, there's a great burden on the educational establishment to provide some kind of intellectual coherence, some kind of connection with our past, with our current present, and with the future" {p. 32).

   That burden is best carried on the broad shoulders of an interdisciplinary curriculum. Gregorian's call is especially urgent at a time when borders and categories are collapsing all around us and we struggle to remake ourselves and our knowledges into new integrations we

can as yet only imagine. I can think of no better moment than now, then, for interdisciplinary scholar/teachers to be asking ethical questions about the content and context of interdisciplinary studies. How can interdisciplinary work, for example, bring harmony out of the dissonances of a curriculum, on the one hand, increasingly energized by the dynamic differences between races, classes, and genders, and a society, on the other, increasingly threatened by divisiveness, disengagement, and disenfranchisement? Paul de Man (1989) describes the ontological condition of postmodern life as a "deep separation between man's inner consciousness and the totality of what is not himself (pp. 14-15), Interdisciplinary culture critics continue to plot the seemingly endless remappings that arise from such separation manifest in the cultural and social spheres. Even so, can interdisciplinary scholarship heal the wounds of our fractured moral life? Should it? Or is the spirit of integration that has traditionally nourished myths of moral and ontological unity among interdisciplinary humanists more of a problem than a solution? More a sign of weakness and fear than a source of courage?

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