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Authors

Cascardi, Anthony
Dear, Michael

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ANTHONY CASCARDI AND MICHAEL DEAR

What Are the Urban Humanities?

The efforts in research and teaching that fly under the flag of the “urban humanities” represent one example of a much larger set of phenomena that have emerged across humanistic disciplines for the past two decades. That hybrid initiatives like this have appeared alongside many more broad-based interdisciplinary efforts is telling of the challenges involved in attempting to transform the knowledge and practices that had settled into more or less stable institutional configurations. The existing configurations have proven difficult to change because our institutions are less malleable than we might wish, and because they provide a sense of permanence—some would say a false sense of permanence—in the face of broad shifts in the external conditions surrounding the academic enterprise such as the withdrawal of public support for state institutions and the privatization of higher education across all sectors. But the naturalization of disciplines cannot be a good thing because it leads us to forget that the disciplines are human constructs, and that neither the objects of their study nor their methodological predilections are natural features of the world. It is not that disciplines are intrinsically pernicious, since specialization has led to greater insight and practical interventions, but that academic disciplines have progressively narrowed an appreciation of the meaning of human existence and ways in which it can be bettered.

The creation of interdisciplinary fields has been one way of moving beyond disciplinary specialization toward a more holistic appreciation of the world and its problems. Since the 1980s, interdisciplinarity has given rise to various subdisciplinary “studies” (e.g., women’s studies, gender studies, sound studies). California was on the forefront of this trend. With them there have emerged new departments and centers. Their aim has been to establish areas of inquiry not recognized by preexisting disciplines (or concealed by them) and to create institutional spaces in which they could achieve the legitimacy enjoyed by the “traditional” humanistic disciplines like

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philosophy, history, and English. At the same time, the very notion of the “humanities” has come under various pressures, some originating from external demands to justify their relevance to contemporary realities, and others originating organically from within the disciplines themselves, motivated by the desire to establish more meaningful connections with a broad range of worldly activity. This has given rise to the hybrid humanities.

Why the “hybrid” modifier? Taken by itself, the term “humanities” carries relatively little meaning for those disciplines internal to it, serving mostly as a convenient abstraction for scholars who need to represent their disciplines externally, or for those on the outside who often demonstrate very little knowledge of the kind of work that humanists do. By contrast, the “hybrid humanities” better describe new areas of inquiry, areas where humanists have been making productive new connections, often outside established disciplines. These connections bridge some of the time-honored questions in the humanities with a set of new and emergent methods, technologies, and materials. The digital humanities, including some of its specific foci such as digital history, are some of the most prominent examples of the hybridization of the humanities. Other fields coalescing as spatial humanities, geohumanities, urban humanities, and global urban humanities represent more recent instances of this same hybridizing effort.

The hybridization reflected in the emergent field of urban humanities has happened with the willing participation of the environmental design disciplines, including architecture, urban and regional planning, and landscape and environmental design. Indeed, some argue that both as a discipline and as a practice, architecture became hybrid early on. In lectures delivered during the 1990s, later published under the title *How Architecture Got its Hump*, Roger Connah argued that architecture has long been “subject to interrelations with other disciplines. Film, photography, drawing, philosophy, and language are perhaps more familiar and fashionable interrelations. Recent indications suggest that dance, music, opera, physics, chaos theories, the new science of materials, computer science and software, and even boxing and cuisine are now being explored as serious analogical sources and interference for architectural theory, prediction, space, and metaphysics. . . .”¹ Add to this list the new technologies associated with geographical information systems (GIS) plus a renewed interest in *place* as

a means of counterbalancing the anonymizing forces of globalization, and it is not difficult to see how and why an environment hospitable to collaboration would begin to emerge.

The short history of the geohumanities is instructive because it represents a transdisciplinary merger that originated outside the humanities, from geography. The movement has its origins in a 2007 conference at the University of Virginia, organized by the Association of American Geographers (AAG). At that time, the term “geohumanities” had not yet been invented. The conference’s principal presentations were later included in a collective volume entitled *GeoHumanities: Art, History, and Text at the Edge of Place* (Routledge, 2011). It included critical reflections, empirical analyses, topical vignettes, and artwork from many fields, organized in a four-part structure: creative places (geocreativity); spatial literacies (geotexts); visual geographies (geomagey); and spatial histories (geohistory). *Place* emerged as the common analytical focus of the book’s contributors. The editors prized transdisciplinarity, which seeks a fusion of diverse disciplinary approaches into novel hybrids distinct from parent disciplines, because its nonexclusionary openness to all forms of knowing produced a kind of “democratic intelligence” incorporating different ways of seeing and offering a firmer foundation for the shift from knowledge to action. Not until the very last pages of the volume did a tentative definition of the field materialize: “The geohumanities that emerges in this book is a transdisciplinary and multimethodological inquiry that begins with the human meanings of place and proceeds to reconstruct those meanings in ways that produce new knowledge and the promise of a better-informed scholarly and political practice.”² A few years later, in 2014, the AAG launched a new journal entitled *GeoHumanities*, with an editorial board comprised of geographers and representatives of many humanities disciplines, signaling the legitimacy of this maturing discipline.

As with the geohumanities, the global urban humanities exert an expansive force over the way the humanities have tended to operate, both at the level of theory and as a set of practices—i.e., it has encouraged expansion of the theoretical and practical fields operative among humanists with global relevance. What specifically are those expansive forces?

The humanities have long privileged texts as their model, even where their primary materials were not texts in the



Photograph courtesy of Margaret Crawford.

literal sense—for example, musical scores, or easel paintings. The dominant metaphor of the disciplines was “reading,” a term that signaled both the preeminence of texts and the fact that the work of the humanities lay principally in interpretation. But in privileging reading and interpretation, too little attention was paid to lived experience; indeed, most sophisticated theories of interpretation cautioned against making connections between what was available as text and any sense of experience at all. To make the humanities global and urban meant, first of all, attending to conditions that cannot be fully metaphorized as “texts.” They incorporate what is left out in the process of textualization—that is, all the physical, material, social, and geographical factors that happen together in real time and in real space, even if they are recorded textually in ways that can be retrieved post hoc. And second, going global and urban introduced to the

humanities a much broader tool kit of representational opportunities and analytical methods—e.g., in mapping and comparative textual investigations. In short, the urban humanities expanded the field of humanistic inquiry by adding new dimensions—of time, space, mapping, method—to the relatively two-dimensional world of textual interpretation.

The urban humanities have also posed previously neglected questions about practice and intervention on top of, or alongside, questions of interpretation. Humanists rarely use the word “intervention,” or have done so principally in the context of discursive engagements in response to a conference paper or lecture. By contrast, profession-oriented fields such as architecture and urban planning embrace questions about what *can* and *might* be done. The hovering question—what should be done?—demands a practical response to what *is* but also creates an opening

for speculation about the possibilities of what *might be*. In the zone where environmental design intersects with the humanities, humanists are drawn to think in ways that are at once more practical and more imaginative than they are accustomed to. That effort, in turn, has consequences that are potentially beneficial for the disposition of the humanities more broadly conceived. Indeed, one of the criticisms leveled at the humanities is that the disciplines are too heavily weighted toward critical analysis and take insufficient notice of the possibilities for positive transformation.³ It has too often been forgotten that “ideology” is only meaningful in contrast to “utopia,” and that bottomless critique will eventually eat away any hope for a constructive view of the world. In engaging with future prospects, the urban humanities have introduced a way of thinking that stands some chance of breaking free from the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Not surprisingly, much urban humanities work has drawn on the creative disciplines—art practice, new media, theatre and performance, etc. But there is an additional reason why the disciplines just mentioned have been so hospitable to this work, which has more to do with method than with subject matter. Conventional humanistic scholarship has by and large been an individual affair. Notwithstanding exemplary efforts of teamwork that have produced magnificent outcomes (e.g., the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary), humanists have operated for the most part as solo practitioners. The dominant model has been the lone scholar in the archive. Because divergence and dominance weigh more heavily than collaboration in the appraisal of humanistic research, there have been few incentives for humanists to collaborate. In the traditional humanities, the important thing is to demonstrate how one’s particular view (interpretation) *diverges* from those already available, and then to hope for the *dominance* of that view, which all others will respectfully cite, at least until they can assert some powerful divergence from it. In work coalescing around the urban humanities, where interpretation is not privileged over creativity, design, and intervention, there is greater room—indeed, an imperative—for collaborative endeavors. Because work in theater and other arts is also open to the participation of multiple actors, the convergence between these disciplines and the urban humanities is not difficult to understand. At the same time, exposure to the kinds of studio work and field study that are familiar in environmental design challenges humanists to experience

what it is like to work collectively, hence less proprietarily than they are used to. These pedagogical situations have obliged humanists to explore new ways of working, drawing on skills that they may find new and strange, pressing the need to show work that is preliminary and offered in formal criticism sessions at various stages of finality, and questioned for its practical utility and application.

None of these comments should be taken as a judgment against the traditional humanities. There is simply too much of the world’s knowledge—and experience—bound in books (and musical scores, and works of art) for anyone to forsake the values of reading and interpretation. It should not be forgotten that reading itself generates new experiences. Montaigne wrote, “. . . there are more books about books than about any other subject.”⁴ A master of irony, and endowed with great worldly wisdom brought from experience, Montaigne did not abandon writing, but rather assumed a distanced stance in relation to the book he was writing, which he also claimed was identical with himself.

Looking ahead, gathering researchers in transdisciplinary dialogue may not be as difficult as it first seems. Scholars are already accustomed to engaging simultaneously with multiple viewpoints; this is, after all, the basis of argumentation. We are capable of assessing different kinds of evidence and readily commit to transparency—that is, being forthcoming about how our studies are framed and conclusions derived. Many scholars willingly admit to the provisionality of their findings, and the inevitability that today’s knowledges will be superseded by subsequent discoveries and reinterpretations. Remarkably, we almost always acknowledge the utility of transdisciplinary work, as if the potential of such engagement is self-evident. Given these widespread, seemingly propitious circumstances, what could stand in the way of successful collaborative practice?

Two common hurdles blocking diversity in academic discourse are exceptionalism and exclusivity. The former refers to an assertion that one’s own practice is axiomatically superior because one’s own field or discipline somehow furnishes more fundamental or analytically more powerful insights than all others; and the latter actively elevates my claim for special privilege by diminishing yours. One such expression of privilege—intra-, rather than inter-disciplinary, in this case—is the current spat in physics. It concerns the apparent willingness of many physicists to set aside the requirement for experimental confirmation of a theory,



Collage by Ettore Santi.

largely on the grounds that empirical verification (or falsification) of today's ambitious "blue-sky" theorizing is impossible. In a *Nature* article defending "the integrity of physics," Ellis and Silk argue against weakening the "testability requirement for fundamental physics," because this would represent a break with "centuries of philosophical tradition of defining scientific knowledge as empirical."⁵ While not prohibiting the practice of imaginative, evidence-independent inquiry, they warn that legitimacy of the scientific method is at stake, insisting that the "imprimatur of science should be awarded only to a theory that is testable."⁶ The merit of this argument is not at issue here; far more germane is the manner in which their exceptionalism and exclusivity are used to bludgeon peers who search for new ways of seeing.

These days, the assertions that there is no such thing as a single method or world-view and that there is no Grand Theory of Everything are neither original nor especially provocative intellectual stances. All theories are partial, even though many may possess a topical home domain, which their practitioners claim renders some special insight. British philosopher Isaiah Berlin long ago pointed out that human conflicts over differing values are real and unavoidable, and have little or no potential for satisfactory reconciliation. In the face of such radical incommensurabilities, Berlin concluded that we had better focus on learning how to live with them and how to choose between irreconcilable

value systems, rather than construct intellectual conceits and imagined worlds where reconciliation may be feasible.⁷ California's intellectual culture is favorable to this.

Beyond the academy, opposition to transdisciplinarity can be traced to the current political climate associated with neoliberal austerity and its seemingly universal mandate to "Do More With Less." Facing intrusive performance measures, diminished support for public universities, increased emphasis on grant-getting, and proof of relevance in teaching and research, academicians of all stripes are circling their disciplinary wagons as a prelude to launching fierce counteroffenses against any and all exogenous attacks. In defense of their solipsistic worlds, scholars have invented an extraordinary vocabulary for passing judgment, and one can only marvel at the variety and nuance that we have invented to credit or discredit our peers. It's up to practitioners of the hybrid humanities, together with their allies in the digital humanities, geohumanities, and elsewhere to reveal the gains made through their transdisciplinary collaborations. In short, they need to demonstrate the superior outcomes of collaboration.

To give two indications: classical social theory is founded in a distinction between structure and agency, or between the enduring, deep-seated practices and institutions that undergird society (such as markets, law) and the everyday voluntaristic behavior of individuals. In the past, despite the

best intentions, the cleavage between structure and agency seems to have done more to separate disciplinary camps than to act as a fulcrum for articulating the connections between the two. Our experience has been that urban humanities produce superior understandings of the structure/agency connection by its self-conscious, simultaneous engagement with social theory, human experience, and social action. In addition, humanities students hitherto steeped in the “lone scholar” ethos have blossomed intellectually and creatively in response to the collective experience of the studio setting, direct community engagement, and immersion in the “maker” culture of real-world environmental design.

This is only a beginning, and much work and persuasion remain to be done. The greatest imminent challenge facing the emerging urban humanities is how it can be absorbed into the institutional setting of the university without becoming just one more programmatic emphasis in a cross-disciplinary curriculum, or even a new sub-discipline in its own right. Fortunately, examples abound of how to proceed effectively without capitulating to institutional rigor mortis. They include myriad forms of creative commons abundant in the tech world, and the blaze of experimental learning settings spreading like wildfire across campuses. It is no coincidence that many of these

teaching and research start-ups include the appellation *Design* in their titles and manifestos.

Centuries ago the great Montaigne practiced distancing himself from his writing in order to find perspective and generate new experience. These days, perspective and innovation are more readily realized through the surprising transdisciplinary collaborations of the kind envisaged in the urban humanities. **B**

Notes

- ¹ Roger Connah, *How Architecture Got Its Hump* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), xv-xvi.
- ² Michael Dear, J. Ketchum, S. Luria and D. Richardson, eds., *Geohumanities: Art, History & Text at the Edge of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 312.
- ³ See Michael Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
- ⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Donald Frame, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 818.
- ⁵ George Ellis and Joe Silk, “Defend the Integrity of Physics,” *Nature* 516 18.25 (December 2014): 321–322.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.
- ⁷ John Gray, “The Case for Decency,” *New York Review of Books*, 13 July 2006, 20–22.



Photograph by Susan Moffat.