

# UC Berkeley

## Symposia

### Title

Mellon Mashup: How to Succeed in Transdisciplinary Research & Training | Fall 2018 Symposium

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# **THE MELLON MASHUP: HOW TO SUCCEED IN TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & TEACHING**

**GLOBAL URBAN HUMANITIES  
SYMPOSIUM SPRING 2014**

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# SYMPOSIUM DESCRIPTION

## MELLON MASHUP

### *A GLOBAL URBAN HUMANITIES SYMPOSIUM*

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**Location:** Women's Faculty Club Lounge, UC Berkeley

**Date/Time:** Friday February 21, 2014, 2:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.

Transdisciplinary research requires an intellectual openness and commitment that seems increasingly rare in today's academy. Too often, beleaguered collaborators drop the pretense of collaboration and retreat into disciplinary wonderlands, reducing others to a dogged defense of their turf. Even when hegemonic impulses can be resisted, what do we make of the subsequent practices? What should we say to a colleague hopelessly in thrall to the temptations of Grand Theory? Or to an open-minded colleague who willingly incorporates all criticism only to end up buried beneath a bricolage of undifferentiated knowledges? At the end of the day, can we know if our transdisciplinary excursions resulted in demonstrably superior knowledge and action?

'Mellon Mashup' directly confronts these issues in a rapid-fire two-part conversation that begins with a group of visiting scholars who have labored successfully in transdisciplinary borderlands, offering reflections on their project: what worked? what didn't? what lessons can be offered? Session 1 features a group of visiting scholars who labored successfully to produce a transdisciplinary edited volume called *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*. The editors reflect on what worked, what didn't, and what lessons came out of their project. Session 2 assembles a group of innovative Cal-based scholars who consider how these lessons and their own experiences inform the Global Urban Humanities' adventures in transdisciplinary worlds. Following this, a group of Cal-based scholars consider how these experiences could inform the Global Urban Humanities' own Adventures in Transdisciplinary Worlds. Graduate students from the class on "The City and its Moving Images: Urban Theory / Media Theory" attended.

Funded by the Mellon Foundation, the Global Urban Humanities project (GUH) is a three-year project designed to bring together Berkeley's Humanities departments with the College of Environmental Design in order to investigate how transdisciplinary collaborative work can improve research, pedagogy and practices in studying the City. The symposium was organized by Michael Dear, Weihong Bao and Oscar Sosa. Thanks to the Association of American Geographers for making available copies of *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*, and its companion volume *Envisioning Landscapes, Making Worlds: Geography and the Humanities*.



UC Berkeley based scholars discussing 'How to Succeed in Transdisciplinary Research by Really Trying Hard'

# SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY

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## SCHEDULE- FEBRUARY 21, 2014

### 2:00 - 2:15 Welcome

- Words of Welcome: Michael Dear

### 2:15 - 3:15 Session One- The Geohumanities Project: What Worked, What Didn't?

Featuring a group of visiting scholars who labored successfully to produce a transdisciplinary volume entitled *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*. The editors reflect on what worked, what didn't, and what lessons came out of the project

- Jennifer Wolch, Dean, College of Environmental Design
- Jim Ketchum, Island Press, Washington DC
- Sarah Luria, English, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA
- Doug Richardson, Association of American Geographers, Washington DC

### 3:15 - 3:30 Coffee Break

### 3:30 - 5:00 Session Two- How to Succeed in Transdisciplinary Research by Really Trying Hard

A group of innovative Cal-based scholars consider their own experiences and adventures in transdisciplinary worlds. The Open Discussion period allows for audience participation

- Michael Dear, College of Environmental Design
- Janaki Bhakle, History
- Dan Chatman, City & Regional Planning
- Nils Gilman, History + Social Science Matrix
- Jonathan Simon, Law
- Weihong Bao, Film/East Asian

Open discussion.

### 5:00 - 6:00 Reception

- Faculty Club

# SYMPOSIUM ATTENDEES

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## PANELIST

**Jim Ketchum**, American Association of Geographers

**Sarah Luria**, English, College of the Holy Cross

**Doug Richardson**, AAG

**Michael Dear**, City & Regional Planning

**Weihong Bao**, Film & Media and East Asian Languages & Cultures

**Janaki Bhakle**, History

**Dan Chatman**, City & Regional Planning

**Cathryn Carson**, History, Assoc. Dean/Soc Sci, and Acting Director, SocSci Data Lab (D-Lab)

**Jonathan Simon**, Berkeley Law

**Dana Cuff**, Architecture, UCLA

## GLOBAL URBAN HUMANITIES

**Anthony J. Cascardi**, Dean, Arts & Humanities Division, College of Letters & Science

**Jennifer Wolch**, Dean, College of Environmental Design

## STEERING COMMITTEE

**Julia Bryan Wilson**, History of Art

**Teresa Caldeira**, City & Regional Planning

**Margaret Crawford**, Architecture

**Whitney Davis**, History of Art

**Shannon Jackson**, Theatre, Dance & Performance Studies and Rhetoric

**Mark Sandberg**, Film & Media Studies and Scandinavian Studies

**Alan Tansman**, East Asian Languages & Culture

## PROJECT STAFF

**Susan Moffat**, Project Director, Global Urban Humanities

**Oscar Sosa**, GSR, Global Urban Humanities

## **UC BERKELEY ATTENDEES**

**Ananya Roy**, City & Regional Planning

**Charisma Acey**, City & Regional Planning

**Carolina Reid**, City & Regional Planning

**Jason Corburn**, City & Regional Planning

**Anna Lee Saxenian**, City & Regional Planning & I-School

**Ron Rael**, Architecture

**Greig Crysler**, Architecture

**Gregg Castillo**, Architecture

**Andy Shanken**, Architecture

**Kristina Hill**, Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning

**Louise Mazingo**, Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning

**Anne Walsh**, Art Practice

**Greg Niemeyer**, Art Practice

**Winnie Wong**, Rhetoric

**Catherine Flynn**, English

**Richard Cándida Smith**, History

**Jim Holston**, Anthropology & Global Metropolitan Studies

**Michelle Wilde Anderson**, Law

**Allison Post**, Political Science & Global Metropolitan Studies

**Alice Agogino**, Mechanical Engineering

**Björn Hartmann**, Electrical Engineering & Computer Science

**Eric Paulos**, Electrical Engineering & Computer Science; Center for New Media; Director, Living Environments Lab, Co-Director, CITRIS Invention Lab

**Mike Jerrett**, Public Health

## **TOWNSEND CENTER**

**Celeste Langan**, English

**Michael Lacey**, French

**Leslie Kurke**, Classics/Literature





Engaged attendees listening to the round table discussions at the Symposium

# SYMPOSIUM REFLECTIONS

## INTERDISCIPLINARITY AT THE “MELLON MASHUP”

March 18, 2014

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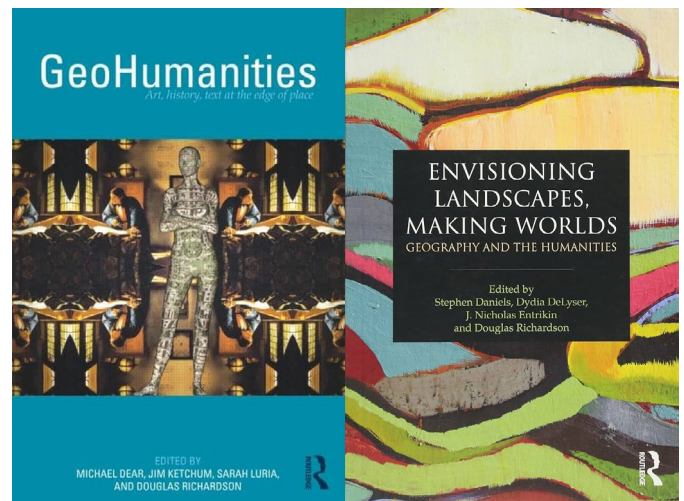
By Oscar Sosa

On February 21st the Global Urban Humanities Initiative (GloUH) hosted a group of local and visiting faculty from the social sciences and the humanities who met for a few hours to discuss the advantages and challenges of engaging in truly transdisciplinary research. In a nod to the funder of GloUH and its goal of mixing things up, Professor Michael Dear (Department of City and Regional Planning) dubbed the gathering the “Mellon Mashup.” The event began with CED Dean Jennifer Wolch engaging with professors Dear and Jim Ketchum (American Association of Geographers), Sarah Luria (Holy Cross) and Doug Richardson (AAG), who shared their experience working on *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*, a book project that brought together scholars, artists and practitioners from geography, architecture, humanities and the arts. Panel members talked about key moments in the production of the book where the question of mutual understandings, commonalities and learning from other disciplines became central to the project.

The presenters were joined by UC Berkeley professors Charisma Acey (DCRP), Louise Mazingo (Landscape and Environmental Planning), Alison Post (Political Science), Mark Sandberg (Film) and graduate students from the GloUH spring 2014 course “The City and its Moving Images,” co-taught by Michael Dear and Weihong Bao. The second session focused on viewpoints from UC Berkeley faculty Janaki Bakhle (History), Dan Chatman (DCRP), Nils Gilman (Social Science Matrix), Jonathan Simon (Law) and Weihong Bao (Film, Chinese Studies). The panel touched on important issues related to collaborating across disciplines as well as the challenges intrinsic to transdisciplinary work. The panel engaged in conversation with other faculty and students attending, covering topics and concerns that ranged from methodological and epistemological issues to day-to-day

collaboration and institutional challenges to transdisciplinarity.

While the attendees agreed on the importance of transdisciplinarity, there were also diverse opinions on how to better engage in this kind of work. When is a project transdisciplinary? Are some disciplines inherently transdisciplinary? -or, to put it on Dan Chatman’s terms – interdisciplinary? Nils Gilman summarized the spirit of the conversation with a call to come down from the hills and onto the plains of disciplines. He spoke of the importance of bringing transdisciplinary work away from the edges and into the core of a discipline’s research and publishing concerns.



Publications discussed at  
the Symposium

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# “MELLON MASHUP” WRITE UP

February 21, 2014

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By Evelyn Shih

The winning metaphor of the mashup, for me, was the edge. Productively interjected by Professor Bao, it allows the abstract concept of “interdisciplinarity” to take a certain shape. Certainly, there was the “T model,” which is a model of the individual practicing an iconoclastic interdisciplinarity; but what the edge allows us to do is to congregate. When we recognize where disciplines touch, where they antagonize and energize each other, we can begin to use those edges to push on our own assumptions and comfortable methodologies. If we can gather on these edges in groups of thinkers who have similar concerns, we may by our common strength sharpen the edge, harden it so that it can not only push, but cut through ossified modes of academic work. Perhaps sometimes we can push further into multidirectionality, ceding what is usually a “bi-disciplinarity” to champion the creative confluence of three or more disciplines. This would create a nexus instead of an edge; but as the metaphor suggests, the nexus is not so much about cutting through. It is about emanation from a point, or gathering at the center.

If we can take the example of Geohumanities, I think that the edge is a more common and a more easily constructed type of interdisciplinarity. In fact, Geohumanities is a good example of an “interdiscipline” in formation, in which certain specific disciplines come together and the rules of a new methodology begin to emerge. I say this because the conference yielded edited volumes, and will also yield an experimental journal that will endeavor to keep the same threads of inquiry open. There has been a concerted attempt on the part of the participants to work in a certain direction, a direction determined both by individual vision and contingencies of the greater socio-economic structure of the academy. I do not think that any given geographer and any given practitioner of the humanities, whichever of the many disciplines that may be, will come to the same conclusions about the edges of their disciplines. However, in aggregate, those who gather at the edge will work out certain conclusions, certain pathways that will guide the new interdiscipline.

Let me be clear that I do not consider the sharpening or hardening of an edge counter to the aims of interdisciplinarity. On the contrary, I think there has been a rich history of interdisciplinarity in the academy, made up of various edges that gained prominence at different times. Like disciplines, interdisciplines may eventually become too set in their ways, or become saturated, or lose hold of our collective imagination. But that is no reason not to form new interdisciplines; and it is equally no reason to look down on past interdisciplines as failed attempts at innovation. If we historicize, interdisciplines as a group may be understood as a constant source of innovation. As Professor Bao eloquently pointed out in our class discussion, these moments of interdisciplinarity and innovation often coincide with moments of crisis, when our existing disciplinary boundaries can no longer hold sway over us. They are no longer convincing; they have lost their sense of futurity and feel bound up in past structures of feeling and structures of power. Perhaps with new information and new material conditions, we see them all too well, and have lost the ability to immerse ourselves in them. This is precisely the moment at which we throw ourselves against the edge and seek to cut out a new path.

What concerns me, and what I believed concerned many of my colleagues in the class discussion, is the feeling that the interdisciplinarity of our moment, gathered as it is around new institutional formations of funding, is too hasty to raise up certain values and to drive certain points of view out of existence. In particular, my personal feeling is that capital--however distributed--tends to err on the side of triumphalism. If we got funding for this project, there must be more inherent value for this than another project X that is getting less and less funding! As someone who considers herself a participant in critical Area Studies and who hopes to get funding from as many as four different national governments, I am well aware of the ideological problems of funding sources. And as someone with a thick personal network in the IT industries of Silicon Valley and in East Asia, I am well aware of the fact that the most individuals most talented at producing technological innovation, creating market rationality, and building new frameworks for capital can often be blind to important philosophical, political, environmental, and social issues that plague the world as a result of their success. Money circulates, but it does not discriminate. At the same time that we continue to push, and hope that the edge we have gathered around continues to sharpen, to gather support and--to be pragmatic--funding, I believe it is always our job to question, to scrutinize, to complicate.

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# INTER-/TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND EDUCATION MASH-UP AT UC BERKELEY

February 21, 2014

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By Tobias Deml

## Prelude

One thing you can get at Berkeley is smart people. While you find out that 70% of the people living in LA are “actually actors”, in Berkeley you find out that 70% of the people that cluster around the campus are – and that includes Bros, Hipsters, Hippies, Co-Op habitants and boarders, quiet Engineering students and loud political activists – are actually super smart, without quotation marks.

One thing I realized is that there’s a certain level of intellectual ability that comes with age, experience and level of education. Some of the most mindblowing conversations that I personally encountered in my first two semesters at UC Berkeley were with graduate students. They had been around long enough to be around my age (I’m 24 now), and spent some years diving extremely deep into a subject or discipline as part of their Master’s or PhD programs. Since my second semester I tried to smuggle myself into one of these graduate classes, but was rejected the first time around for being “an undergraduate who doesn’t belong here”. All I wanted on my Telebears for Christmas was to be enrolled in a class whose ID was three digits long and started with a “2” – 0 stands for lower division courses (i.e. Film 025B), 1 stands for upper division undergraduate courses (i.e. Film 144) and 2 stands for graduate level classes, such as Film 240.

I went and expressed my deep desire to be in the class, to participate in intellectually stimulating conversation, deep study of a subject, and bringing a filmmaking approach to some of the issues discussed. The two professors leading the class, Prof. Weihong Bao (Film & Chinese) and Prof. Michael Dear (City Planning) eventually granted me access to the course, together with 12 graduate and postgraduate students. The class itself is multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary in its approach and its content. The title of

the class? “The City and Its Moving Images: Urban Theory, Media Theory”. This fascinated me from the get-go; the class had an in-built duality of content, discourse and methodology. So far, we watched a lot of films about cities, talked about urban planning as an aesthetic and a functional tool of system creation. Urban theory centers around the analysis of cities in their historical, social, economic, political, psychological, architectural and infrastructural roles for society. Media theory makes the actual medium (may that be film, paper, buildings, microchips, stone etc.) and its applications/expressions (filmmaking, writing, rhetoric, information transfer and storage, theater and performance, etc.) its subject of inquiry. These two have a lot of overlaps and corresponding literature written about topics that touch both disciplines, regardless how far-fetched that may seem initially. The city as a space is often either shown in films, or is a place where films can be shown, for example. Approaching film from an urban planning perspective is a quite fascinating experience, and opened up a lot of concepts to me – mostly how the urban society connects with the media that it consumes.



At the Mellon Mash-Up in the UC Berkeley Women’s Faculty Club building - at this roundtable, a variety of Berkeley professors from different disciplines discussed their experience (positive and negative) with inter-/transdisciplinary research work.

As part of the class, we were invited in participating in a “Mash-Up”, a sort of roundtable or mini-convention of two dozen Berkeley professors and researchers that were interested in having an interdisciplinary conversation.

## The Mellon Mash-Up of “How to Succeed in Transdisciplinary Research by Trying Really Hard”

The Mash-Up had two sections; I had to cater to my many filmmaking duties during the first section, so I burst into the room when the second session was about to start. Both sessions were heavily influenced by the individuals who participated in editing the Geohumanities book; a transdisciplinary book on the role of Geography in the Humanities and vice versa – and how these two disciplines could create working and lasting symbioses.

I can't possibly continue the article without talking about a central conflict that is already embedded into the title: Are we talking about Transdisciplinary, or Interdisciplinary? What is the difference? A discipline in an academic setting is often called a “field”, or more simple, a “subject”. Math, English, Geography, Molecular Cell Biology are all disciplines.

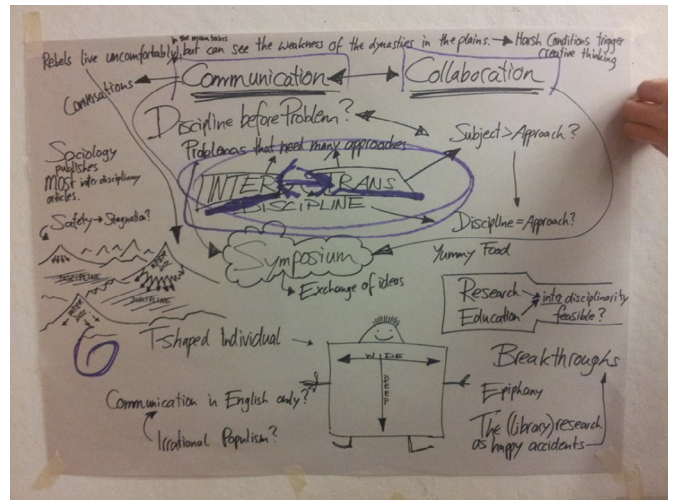
### Interdisciplinary VS. Transdisciplinary

Anush, a former Harvard student and current Rhetoric grad student at Berkeley, brought up this question during class, arguing that “transdisciplinary” might be too big of a claim. The meaning of these words is extremely important to use them in an informed and intelligent manner, so here's what both terms imply by their use:

1. Interdisciplinary – “inter” means “between, among” – so interdisciplinary research is research between or among multiple disciplines.
2. Transdisciplinary – “trans” means “across, beyond” – so transdisciplinary work either goes across or even beyond disciplines themselves.

This leads to a quite interesting distinction between the two, although they are closely related – if you're talking about interdisciplinary work, you're interested in bringing two disciplines together and finding what is between them, or what they share in common. If you're talking about transdisciplinary research, you might be referring to research that goes beyond what we think of as disciplines.

Why does it matter? It's a question of values. Do you value the discipline more, or the subject of research? This question is rhetorical, as it will be answered differently by each individual that is part of academia. It's like apples and oranges – there's no right or wrong, just different viewpoints. As part of the class, we were asked to create a visual representation of what our impression of said Mash-Up was, so here's what this ended up looking like:



My brainstormed memory-notes on the symposium. A central question is the Inter-Trans duality of collaborative research across fields, as well as the central dilemma of any collective work: Collaboration and Communication. You can also spot the handsome “T-Shaped individual”, to which I'll get in a little bit.



Notes from my fellow classmates. The discussion over our various notes and approaches/impressions was absolutely delightful. A takeaway: There's nothing better than a recap and reflection in order to give a topic true meaning and importance.

## The T-Shaped Individual

A person's intellectual/epistemological mapping can be visualized as a 2-dimensional graph of penetration: Laterally and vertically.

The lateral shape or expansion depicts how "wide" the person is educated, as in how many disciplines or fields of knowledge they have a certain level of knowledge in.

The vertical part of the "T" shape is concerned with being deeply entrenched and knowledgeable in one specific discipline or subject, being an "expert" at it. One of the professors at the symposium brought this model of an individual up because it lends itself greatly to interdisciplinary approaches; multiple T-shaped individuals would know enough about each others' fields that they are able to spot overlaps, while being able to provide valuable expertise at their "home" discipline to the collaborators. I personally felt very validated with this proposed model, as it is something I've pursued all my life – getting a general education that spans as far across fields as possible, while being as knowledgeable as possible in my home discipline (which has been digital visual art since I was 14, and has since heavily focused on filmmaking from age 20 on).

## Problem VS. Approach

One of the things I drew from the discussion in front of me was the question: What matters more, the subject/problem of research (say, the Human Mind), or the approach to it (Physics, Chemistry, Molecular Cell Biology, Psychology)? Where does one trump the other; where does a specific subject blossom under an interdisciplinary approach? Are there subjects that necessitate a transdisciplinary approach and can only be grasped if the borderlines of disciplines blur? One important discussion arising out of similar questions was the notion that Transdisciplinary research transforms disciplines into mere tools; a researcher would look at a problem and then see which tool would suit them the best to further analyze the issues at hand – rather than being stuck inside of a discipline and trying to grapple with the problem from a pre-defined zone and set of tools. This would imply that Transdisciplinarity itself abandons (or at least heavily questions) the traditional approach and viewpoint that disciplines themselves are the end – rather, it transforms disciplines/approaches into means, into tools that can be used for an ultimate end – the subject of research. It's a very important discussion to have within an academic setting; few classes apart from ours really focus on an interdisciplinary listing and approach, and are usually dominated by the discipline rather than the subject. My assessment is that an inter- or transdisciplinary approach will always yield greater insights into the "big picture" of a problem – but the strict separation between disciplines, at least for the

individualization of available tools, is a necessity for structured research.

The separation between approaches ultimately leads to a diversification in attack points and eases the "division of labor" in research clusters; at the same time, it has to be conducted with an interdisciplinary agenda and oversight in order to draw larger conclusions that pertain to all fields that were touched.

## Conclusion

Hearing extremely educated people with decades of academic and research experience talk to one another, across disciplines and tables, was a real inspiration. It is imperative for academia to further pursue these discussions and expand them to the graduate and possibly even undergraduate level, as the exchanges were clearly fruitful for participants and observers alike. Just one more reason to reassure myself that largely withdrawing from the film industry in order to advance my intellectual pursuits at Berkeley was 100% the right decision

# THE MELLON “MASH-UP” AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

March 5, 2014

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By Kimberly Richards

*Nine scholars are squished together at the head of a table. Roughly an equal number of graduate students sit along the sides.*

Dan Chatman: You shouldn't be in a silo because a silo is where they store grain. The point is that you can't get outside the silo, you're stuck in a silo . . . but the silo is also where you maybe also learn how to do some stuff. . . . You have tension between knowing how to do something well and doing something in multiple ways well. To me transdisciplinarity is the kind of thing one should do after tenure. That's when one has got the discipline down well enough to branch out.

*The panel of scholars erupts in laughter, Janaki Bhakle nods her head and responds, “Yes,” and the graduate students exchange glances. The tension in the air is palpable.*

This moment provides an entry point into considering a key question that arose for me from the Mellon “mash-up”: what are the stakes of undertaking transdisciplinary research as a graduate student? The answer to this question depends on what one considers to be the purpose of a graduate degree. I consider the doctoral program the time to develop and master a set of skills through rigorous and repetitious training that should result in fluency in some fields of scholarship and proficiency employing a methodological approach. These skills are demonstrated by the completion of a research project that contributes a new, useful, and important idea. A concern that arises is whether or not the student can develop these skills in a timely fashion while engaging in literature and methodologies outside the field. A second concern that feels especially pressing given the so-called crisis in higher education is whether or not a graduate student will be legible on the market (aka adequately trained to teach from a disciplinary perspective) when they have invested in transdisciplinary research. The risk of pursuing transdisciplinary research for graduate students seems to be the threat of

appearing undisciplined upon completion of the degree.

This is a threat to take seriously regardless of passion about transdisciplinarity and frustration with the conservatism of the production of knowledge. If a student's goal is to pursue a career in academia, we must be careful not to exclude ourselves from the job market, regardless of the numerous and valid critiques that can and must be made about that market. Students who do not plan to pursue academia are a separate category. So where does that leave me with Chatman's proposal? Good scholarship in performance studies is usually interdisciplinary. There are very few individuals with the privilege of professorial positions in departments of performance studies. Subsequently, it feels that it is riskier to solely invest in the discipline than it is to pursue interdisciplinary projects. Given that my bachelor's and master's degrees are in English, and an English department would most likely be my home, I need to be strategic about developing a project that incorporates the literature and methods from both disciplines—I need to read and interrupt text and bodies. For me, that interdisciplinary engagement is a priori to a project and research interests. In order to make meaning between those texts and bodies (plays and productions, advertising and audiences) I engage critical theory. The canons of both literary studies and performances studies are predicated on philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists (who could deny the influence of Derrida and Foucault on literary studies or Victor Turner's influence on the formation of performance studies?) There is no escaping transdisciplinary research in the field of performance studies (and perhaps across the humanities). In fact, not understanding key transdisciplinary ideas, such as those of Derrida, Foucault, Marx, or perhaps now even David Harvey, would be the greatest mistake one could take as a graduate student.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that we are disciplined to read, incorporate, and critique those ideas through disciplinary lenses and grammars. Perhaps the goal of the doctoral degree is, then, to appropriate a disciplinary approach to reading a transdisciplinary canon, and also be able to understand the logic of that approach and be able to critique it. We might find another approach from another discipline that seems preferable and thus an interdisciplinary project or perspective is born, but I think that some of the “palpable tension” felt amongst many of the students during the scene described above stems from a misunderstanding between interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. No one disparaged the idea of interdisciplinary research at the “mash-up.” Although

interdisciplinary research does not solve all the problems, the logic of interdisciplinary research follows that of disciplinary knowledge, and thus it is more feasible within the timeframe of a graduate program. That is not to say that we should not ask questions and pursue research that cuts across discipline, but the doctoral dissertation is designed to demonstrate mastery of a disciplinary perspective to a problem (even as a discipline may be composed of transdisciplinary ideas and texts) and it first and foremost must serve this basic purpose.

There is one more element to factor back into this conversation and that is the idea of crisis. While there is ample evidence to suggest that we are facing a “crisis” in higher education as a whole, that state of crisis is especially felt in humanities departments where enrollment is dwindling and very few jobs are opening. I do believe that interdisciplinary research (both within and outside the global urban humanities) can be mutually beneficial, but the stakes are not even between social scientists and humanists. For the humanists, interdisciplinary research (especially that which incorporates more progress-oriented outcomes) can function to reinvigorate disciplines under attack. In sum, while explicitly transdisciplinary research poses quite a threat to graduate students, interdisciplinary research—in the humanities at least—presents graduate students the opportunity to build the skills to carefully and calculatedly reshape disciplines under threat.





# MY MASHUP RESPONSE

March 5, 2014

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By Anooj Kansara

There was a moment near the end of this reflection on interdisciplinarity—called the ‘Mashup’—when geographer Doug Richardson expressed surprise at how ‘conservative’ he felt the panel had been with respect to the promise of this particular form of interdisciplinarity, and interdisciplinarity in general. He perhaps had anticipated something more consonant with (reformed) English professor Sarah Luria’s celebration of this new practico-discursive space of the Geohumanites. Luria’s palpable enthusiasm seemed animated, in part, by a repudiation of the languid work done in disciplinary silos with outmoded approaches. This, naturally, perked up the ears of those who felt themselves to have been doing hard work down in the disciplinary trenches and archives. The exchanges highlighted the importance of an ethic of cross-disciplinary engagement that, in many ways, parallels cross-cultural engagement. Despite the claims to have cornered segments of rationalized bodies of knowledge, each discipline does operate in its own kind of cultural ‘world’ where certain things are visible and others invisible, where certain kinds of claims or projects are meaningful and urgent while others are not. Successful interdisciplinary engagement cannot easily be won through the reading of texts, through the ‘borrowing’ of concepts, nor through the adoption of methods. There is interpersonal communication and engagement required; the transdisciplinary scholar also has to become a skillful mediator and moderator.

Many, of course, took issue with Richardson’s assessment of conservatism, feeling that they had done more in the space of the Mashup than merely celebrate or condemn—thumbs up or down—feeling that the sobering criticism was constructive and generative without damning the project by any means nor conservatively trying to reinstate the old order of disciplinarity. Carefully and attentively historicizing the disciplines, as Weihong called for, (which is not merely to negatively account for say the discipline’s imbrication in imperialism and so forth) and understanding the kinds of problems and questions the disciplines were designed to address, arose in response to, or

are well-equipped to deal with now can foster more inclusive, less contentious dialogue between scholars and practitioners. But this requires active listening and engagement, not the easy dismissals of out-modedness or ‘silo-ing’. Then the actual conversations across disciplines that are not about interdisciplinarity can begin, conversations about specific objects or shared concerns and problems. Then, out of some friction or misunderstandings between those gathered around the object of interdisciplinary engagement, some more concrete (and hopefully in ‘good faith’) reflections on the nature of the disciplines in question might emerge. I was very curious, for instance, to hear what musicologists might say to Janaki about her first book, what the content of that criticism would be if levied by a careful reader from a ‘near’ but different discipline.

With respect to this event, there was, and still remains, an underlying worry about the way new interdisciplinary undertakings run the risk of celebrating themselves as being on the cutting-edge of research. Such celebration, if uncritical and unaware of prior efforts at interdisciplinarity, might reproduce a kind of obliviousness to the specificities of different disciplines and their understandings, their core competencies, methods and objects. There is, as Michael Dear says, a kind of reign of the ‘fashionable’ in many disciplines, that picks up the next shiny new thing to think with but does not do the hard work of situating it with what came before so as to add to our understandings of both. This also has to do with institutional imperatives and incentives and prestige, and this might require a whole other panel to discuss what first steps towards reorganizing academia to encourage.

I am right now in a continental philosophy and critical theory interdisciplinary social science and humanities Ph.D. program, Rhetoric. Although the name can be difficult to explain, this perhaps helps maintain a healthy ‘shame’ about one’s discipline as Janaki suggested, and this humbling can be the basis of a more open engagement.) I am in the early stages and have yet to feel as though I have found a kind of disciplinary ‘footing’ from which to engage other disciplines in the paradigmatic form of interdisciplinarity, but it has not been a problem for producing work that people find interesting. There are institutional imperatives though, of which I am only virtually aware, in terms of getting articles published in prestigious ‘disciplinary’ journals and positioning oneself for the possibility of a job after graduating. Someone on the panel made a joke about how interdisciplinarity is something for not-(yet-)risk-averse graduate students and for tenured faculty, and I think this is revealing.

The continental philosophy and critical theory discourse that lends the Rhetoric department some coherence encourages a kind of interdisciplinarity, especially when work on that tradition aims to avoid the trappings or endpoints of 'mere' intellectual history. Critical theory was even suggested as a common grammar across many social science disciplines. I worry about the dangers of the hubris of transdisciplinarity though, where one arrogates oneself to the position standing above the fray of the disciplines (as with the 'toolbox' model) and is thereby less likely to be sensitive to or aware of one's own blindspots, what frames one's own questions. As Jonathan Simon said, you tend to ask the questions you can answer. Genuine transdisciplinarity might address the framing of the problems themselves or even address the underlying conditions that make that problem appear in the first place. As Weihong put it, some 'critical' approaches to transdisciplinarity might raise more problems than were initially perceived as opposed to proposing solutions.

In Rhetoric, traversing fields such as visual studies, science studies, and social theory enables me to get a better feel for the edges of each 'world' and to borrow orientations from one and apply them to domains traditionally covered by another, but this has largely, for me, hitherto been in terms of 'conceptual' fields and problems that get worked out in the writing of a term paper. What are the alternatives? One of the exciting things about this course is the encouragement to produce non-written output, to think about the media with which our scholarly and activist practist deals and also the media that it produces. This is particularly appropriate with respect to our class's concern with medium specificity.

Another set of issues that interdisciplinarity has to negotiate is the set of trajectories, impacts, and forms of efficacy that are permissible and meaningful in each discipline. We can think of research projects as having their own temporality, their own gestation periods, their own targets (e.g. provoking curiosity in English students for example or, say, solving a transportation hitch). The stakes of an argument in one discipline might be more or less intelligible or interesting in another discipline, so sometimes conversations between disciplines are not productively contentious but instead produce eye-rolling dismissals. I would like to develop a better feel for what really is incommensurable between disciplines.

The reflections on interdisciplinarity made me, somewhat ironically, more and more curious about mono-disciplinarity, or the coherence of disciplines. And there are open and interesting questions about the difference between multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary orientations.

# INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION FROM PRACTICE TO ACADEMIA

March 5, 2014

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By Ying-Fen Chen

Supported by Mellon Foundation, the UC Berkeley Arts and Humanities Division of the College of Letters and Science and the College of Environmental Design have begun a new Global Humanities Urbanism program for solving the megacities' complex problems, which cannot be addressed by individual approach of any discipline, through interdisciplinary collaborations. This unique event—Mashup! Learning from the Geohumanities Project—hosted by Professor Dear, invited numerous scholars from multiple disciplines to not only share the experience of interdisciplinary publication, but also look for the definition of interdisciplinary collaboration. Although I could not participate in this event, through watching the recording, some concepts mentioned by those intelligent scholars remind me the pedagogy of Graduate Institute of Building and Planning in National Taiwan University where I got my master degree.

In the master program of Graduate Institute of Building and Planning, the first lesson I learned is how to work with the people from different backgrounds. This interdisciplinary collaboration is based on the academic tradition of the UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design in the 1960s when Professor Cristopher Alexander's "pattern language" was one of the dominant approaches for planning and design. The major founders of this institution introduced Alexander's methodology to Taiwan and opened a new planning approach—participatory planning—to both challenge the bureaucratic planning tradition and accelerate the development of democracy in the late 1970s. According to these fundamentals, this master program admits numerous multiple backgrounds' students every year and expects them working in a group for learning from each other and solving spatial problems through interdisciplinary collaborations.

As the core of Global Humanities Urbanism, "studio" is set as the major platform for interdisciplinary collaboration in Graduate Institute of Building and Planning. In the first

year program, all students are required to take a 6-unit studio class for each semester, and then, the advanced studio classes in the second year are recommended. The instructors always try hard to mix the students with different background in one group. The experience of my first pin-up let me deeply understand the gaps between varied disciplinary languages. In my group, the goals were to represent a district of Taipei and find some spatial problems which could be developed as the topics for the one-year project. One of the group member who has sociological background expected us to check the keywords of newspaper; one has architectural background, believed a thorough map with multiple layers which present the basic spatial information, such as water resource and traffic data, is the key; one has city planning background, asked us that can she go to the governmental webpage to download some policy reports. And me, because I took a similar studio taught by an instructor from this program in university level, I was trying to combine everyone's interests in such a chaotic situation. No matter how hard we negotiated with each other, our presentation was weird that these puzzles were barely put together.

In the end of the class, I finally realized that the major skill of interdisciplinary collaboration is communication. Only through a qualified communication, we can fully understand the others' thoughts and the logics of different disciplines. We do not need to be an expert of every discipline, but know how to cooperate with an open-minded attitude. On the one hand, I negotiate the figure of the broad map of practical planning problems; on the other hand, I situate my position on that according to my unique lens from one discipline. This methodology can solve more problems than working as an individual.

This memory seemly reflects my present situation of taking this interdisciplinary class that I am still situating myself and negotiating with the whole group as in the past. However, for me, it is easier to find some similarities when I stay in a practical problem oriented interdisciplinary collaboration than have intention to combine multiple disciplines in academic arena. Even though we seemly share some of the same critical theories, the different interpretations of them often lead us to use them for raising diverse problems. How can we gradually sit on the same table if we do not have the same enemy? Or, could we really find the similar natures of multiple disciplines, especially media study and city planning, through this hybrid platform of seminar and studio? I will constantly ask myself the two questions during this semester, and wish I will get some answers in the end of this class.

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# NOTES ON THE MELLON MASHUP

March 5, 2014

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**By Hannah Airriess**

One helpful line of discussion during the panel concerned the experiences of the scholars who were involved with the geohumanities conference that occurred prior to the publication of the book. Sarah Luria and Ed Ayres fondly discussed the exhibition of posters and visual aids that accompanied the conference, noting that it was an excellent way to initiate interdisciplinary conversation between conference participants. As our class this semester has been concerned precisely with this issue of bridging disciplines, this method of sharing knowledge was particularly intriguing to me. My assumption entering into the course was that exchange of knowledge between disciplines would largely occur at the level of reading texts from beyond my field of study and, most importantly, dialogue in the classroom. Luria's discussion of the exhibition, however, demonstrated another way of presenting one's own methodology and mode of thinking beyond verbal exchange. This is useful in that I have noticed certain limitations of interdisciplinary encounters that revolve around conference presentations and scholarly discussion. These limitations vary in nature, but one such instance is the way in which discussion will progress to a point where one participant is pushed into a defensive position regarding the value of their methodology or discipline. These encounters are not so much a free exchange, but rather more akin to a trial. In light of these experiences (which I should note have not been common in our classroom), the presentation of visual materials that present one's own thought process and project seems like it allows for different—and potentially more open—encounters with other disciplines. Furthermore, this kind of visual exchange of ideas in an exhibition environment has the potential to avoid the kind of traps I just noted that are associated with verbal presentation and dialogue.

The conference made it clear that language is one of the most crucial and controversial issues surrounding interdisciplinarity. Many of the conference participants contributed to this discussion of language, helpfully thinking about

interdisciplinary dialogue in terms of translations and creole. Throughout the conference, those associated with the geohumanities publication stressed the open and “jargon-free” nature of the publication. While the term “jargon” has a negative connotation that would lead one to assume we want any text to be jargon-free, this claim opens up an important discussion on the relative status of clarity in academic writing. There is no simple or consistent way to distinguish between what constitutes jargon and accessible text, and such a distinction will unquestionably look different for every scholar. Looking through the geohumanities anthology, the writing is comprehensible and quite accessible to me, as a graduate student in the humanities. But if this text is, as Luria noted, “jargon-free,” then what does that say of the terms that are included and assumed to be understood? In establishing what jargon isn't, does that generate some kind of assumed base knowledge?

Related to this question of jargon is the value of speaking and writing for one's own discipline. While I appreciated the discussion of translation and producing texts accessible across disciplines, Janaki Bakhle's eloquent defense of disciplinarity served as a reminder of the value of such disciplinary vocabularies. While I am not encouraging one to be opaque in their scholarly writing, I don't know if complete accessibility need always be one's first concern. Although interdisciplinary research and writing has proven a fascinating space for new kinds of work (within which I would like to participate), such discussions have simultaneously revealed to me the utility of disciplines and the specific kind of work they can foster. In addition to this issue of interdisciplinary writing, the conference brought up the issue of interdisciplinary reading, as well. Michael noted that he and Weihong shared their reading lists and were surprised at how much overlap there was in terms of foundational texts. However, Michael mentioned that the way they were reading those texts, or what they gained from them, was completely different. Janaki Bakhle also mentioned this difference in reading between the disciplines. While the conference focused heavily on producing materials that bridge disciplines, perhaps paying greater attention to how we read would help us reach greater mutual understanding. If we can all agree, for example, that Lefebvre's *Production of Space* is a crucial text in the humanities and for urban planning, what would it look like to read that together? In our class, it is always fascinating to see what people find in our readings, but the readings are often about sharing knowledge from a specific discipline (reading urban planning texts or film theory, for instance). It could potentially be valuable to experience interdisciplinary reading of texts that are already valued across disciplines in order to reach a conversation about how we read across disciplines.

One of the most pressing questions that arose during the panel was the issue of the contribution of interdisciplinary work to the “real world.” Sarah Luria mentioned that she sees interdisciplinary work broadening the capacity of students to enact change in the space around them. She related an anecdote about a colleague in the humanities who felt that producing curiosity in their students was her ultimate aim, but Luria noted that she would rather inspire her students to directly address the “problems of the world.” This inspiration to enact change, however, was specifically framed as producing policy change. While important, this is also a very limiting way of understanding the production of change. How do we understand scholarly work as “doing something”? Is thinking doing? Weihong Bao described the utility of critical theory as “undoing tacit assumptions about the world.” This is a crucial way of understanding my own position as a scholar, but the change this enacts certainly functions on a different register than policy changes. This last set of questions surrounding disciplines, change, and politics was certainly the most provocative during the conference, and an issue that I anticipate will continue to arise during the rest of our course.

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# ON HAVING NO DISCIPLINE

March 5, 2014

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By Alexander B. Craghead

*“The best way to do transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary work is to have no discipline.”*

—Jonathan Simon, J.D.

“How to Succeed in Transdisciplinary  
Research & Teaching”  
February 21, 2014

I have to confess, to me disciplines are a somewhat foreign thing. My background: writer and journalist. My undergraduate training was at a small liberal arts college, where I learned about the dynamics of conflict and applied communications studies. When I entered graduate school, it was to study the history of cities and urbanism. Yet even here, my course shies away from easy disciplinary labeling, for I study these subjects through an architectural history program in a school of design, despite the fact that I have no background in architecture—at least other than writing about it.

If pressed, I might answer that I am a writer by discipline, which is more to say that writing has gotten me out of more financial and intellectual jams than any other pursuit, but in the end, I feel allegiance to no particular academic discipline. In some ways, this lack of discipline, as Jonathan Simon puts it above, makes me “transdisciplinary” by nature.

I am aware of the intellectual danger this places me in. During the recent Mellon Mashup conversation about transdisciplinary work, one of the panelists noted that the safest way to conduct transdisciplinary research was to “wait until you get tenure.” This generated laughter in the room—from myself included—and that laughter was a bit telling. If the safest place for transdisciplinary work is after tenure, what does that say for graduate students such as myself? Is transdisciplinary work, then, something that may prove a liability on a graduate student’s curriculum vitae? More than one participant in the Mashup noted how “often what we like outside of our discipline is unloved within its discipline.” By crossing disciplinary boundaries, do I and other graduate students thus risk being equally “unloved” by the institutions at which we may wish, some day, to teach?

Yet I cannot help the matter. For me, academic work is about more than the production of knowledge. It is a civic act. It is about bringing clarity, understanding, and new knowledge to the debate that helps to shape the city. Archimedes once stated that if only one provided him a place to stand, he could by leverage move the world. My ambitions are far lesser, but his quest for a position from which to wield his lever is also mine, and my inter-in-and-trans-disciplinarity provide possibilities for such standing-points.

There is, however a cost. I often find myself aswim when more disciplined colleagues reveal their depth of understanding. I cannot help but admire their deep knowledge, their fluency with theories and epistemologies that are, to me, foreign. In ways my lack of discipline is my discipline, and constrains me as much as any loyalty to a more traditional discipline may have done.

What then really is transdisciplinary work? Does it really stand in opposition to the disciplines? Is it, in itself, a kind of discipline, or at least a kind of method? Must we frame this as an either/or proposition? I find the framing inadequate.

During the Mashup, Nils Gilman remarked that good transdisciplinary work must go beyond “stapling together” work from differing disciplines, and create “creoles” of academic language and thought. Dan Chatman, from UC Berkeley’s Department of City and Regional Planning, similarly referred to a “lingua franca or shared vernacular” because “why people care is a common language.” Both, I propose, are speaking of a powerful intellectual space of synthesis. The term is one I by far prefer to jargon complexities, for it implicitly acknowledges its intellectual interdependencies.

Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary work without the disciplines is shallow; disciplinary work without the synthesis of transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary work is without purpose. Both are needed. Both depend on each other to be at their best. My choice of synthesis thus is my discipline, and rejects not other disciplines but instead, to borrow from Sir Isaac Newton’s famous utterance, stands on the shoulders of those other disciplines. There is not only room for both approaches, but a need for them, and I struggle every day to bring to my work the same kind of rigor and quest for excellence so much more easily defined within those disciplines upon which I depend.

# SYMPOSIUM SESSIONS- VIDEOS

## SESSION ONE- THE GEOHUMANITIES PROJECT: WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T?



**Video 1: Featuring a group of visiting scholars who labored successfully to produce a transdisciplinary volume entitled *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*. The editors reflect on what worked, what didn't, and what lessons came out of the project-**

- Jennifer Wolch, Dean, College of Environmental Design
- Jim Ketchum, Island Press, Washington DC
- Sarah Luria, English, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA
- Doug Richardson, Association of American Geographers, Washington DC

## SESSION TWO: HOW TO SUCCEED IN TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH BY REALLY TRYING HARD



**Video 2: A group of innovative Cal-based scholars consider their own experiences and adventures in transdisciplinary worlds. The Open Discussion period allows for audience participation-**

- Michael Dear, College of Environmental Design
- Janaki Bhakle, History
- Dan Chatman, City & Regional Planning
- Nils Gilman, History + Social Science Matrix
- Jonathan Simon, Law
- Weihong Bao, Film/East Asian

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SYMPOSIUM SPRING 2014