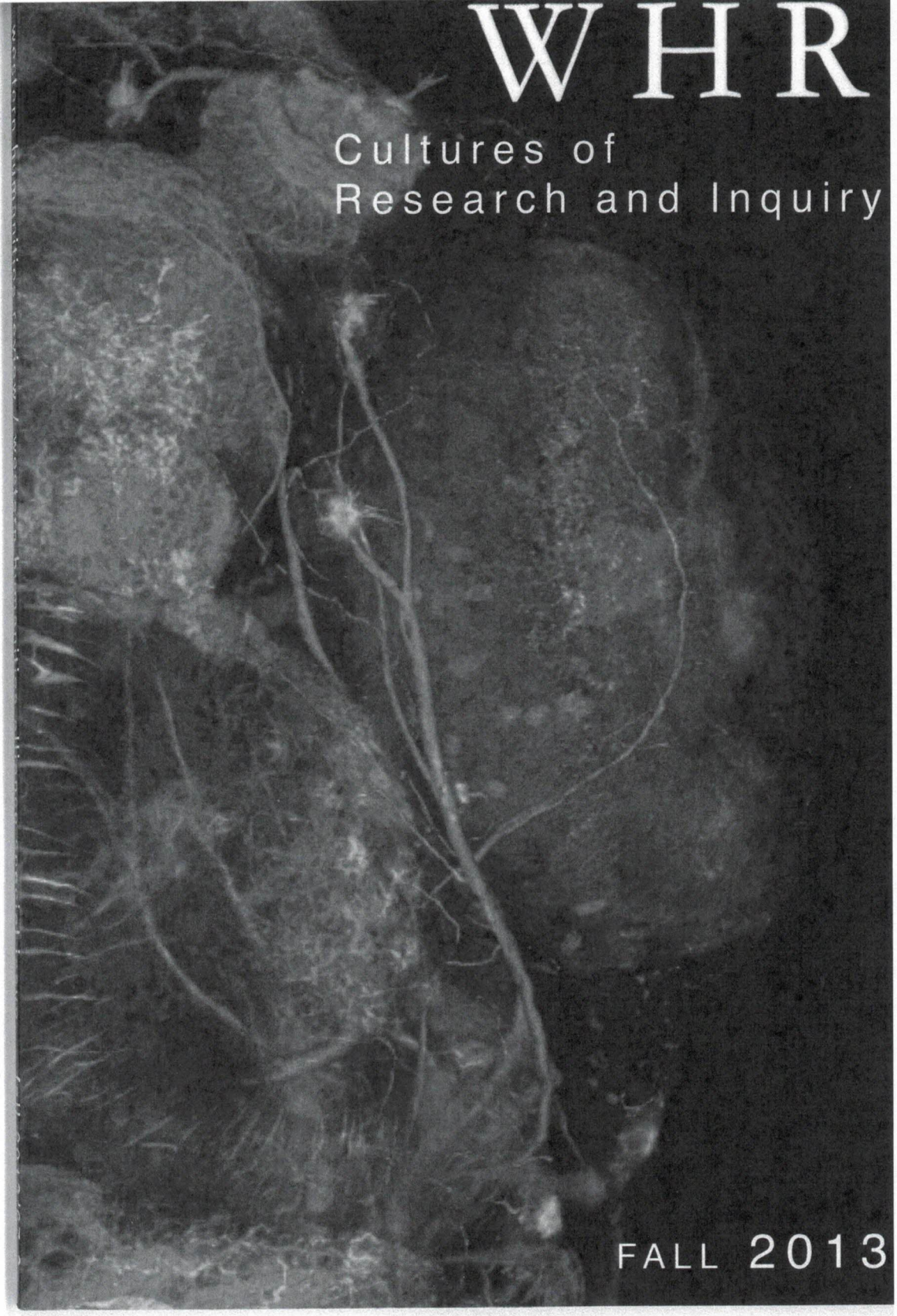
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Western Humanities Alliance Special Issue

Cultures of Research and Inquiry

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Introduction

This conference began with a simple question: What is it that humanists do when we do research? Everyone understands (or thinks they understand) what scientists do: they go into a lab, do experiments, and discover things. Then we read breathless press releases about their exciting new discoveries. But humanists don't, by and large, discover new things: we may have new ideas, but "discovery" is not the word we would usually use to describe our work. While some of us will talk about the questions we are asking, many of us think about the problems we are exploring. Some of us talk about extended inquiry rather than research. The language we use assumes that our work is provisional, and often that it is going over familiar territory. There may be new things that we say, but when we do so, it is as often a shift of perspective as something absolutely new.

Those who understand scientific research know that most "normal science" is less about discovering something absolutely new than most people think, and also more provisional. As often as not, finding one thing leads to another question, and further research may complicate or undermine the findings of scientists. Scientists are often figuring out where one small piece fits into a larger picture. Perhaps because of widespread scientific illiteracy, most people are more impressed by the discovery of a new molecule than they are by a new interpretation of Shakespeare.

As we thought about this question—what are we doing when we do research?—we realized that the faculty involved in planning the conference represented a variety of research cultures—some of us were archive rats, others did fieldwork, others were literary scholars who worked with published texts. So it became clear that we needed to explore the multiple cultures of research and inquiry. We invited scholars to participate who could speak broadly to the concerns we had articulated. The conference proved exciting, as the connections between various perspectives kept echoing one over the other. Questions of embodiment were key; so too were the limits of single perspectives and the ways in which research was strengthened by engaging with multiple frames. If there was a theorist whose work dominated the discussion, it was Merleau-Ponty; if there was a subject, it was the complexity of embodiment, from phenomenological, philosophical and political perspectives. The papers collected here—a sample from the day—provide insight into the ways in which humanist scholars do research; more importantly, they focus on the importance of paying attention to multiple methods of research and interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

These issues were first raised in the keynote address, delivered by Lianne McTavish of the University of Alberta. McTavish spoke as a scholar of early modern visual culture, with a particular interest in bodies, who had recently undertaken an auto-ethnographic research project about her experience as a feminist scholar participating in Figure Girl bodybuilding. She argues that studies of women athletes have been limited by their tendency to study either images of women athletes, or qualitative interviews with athletes. These approaches have tended to reify existing understandings of women's body and of sport. In particular, discussions of athletes have understood the goal of exercise as "freedom:" free-climbing, or running are free and unconstrained activities. McTavish uses her experience of muscle failure—a key moment in training—as a point from which to argue that not only can activity within a rigid set of rules be a source of strength, but that women can feel power in stillness, not just in action. But she doesn't stop there: having been certified as a trainer, McTavish sought to work with women who were victims of domestic abuse. She found, to her surprise, that the exercise they sought was not strength training, but work on breath and relaxation. McTavish builds her argument by moving from phenomenological philosophy to feminist approaches to embodiment to her own experience. The dialectic between experience and theory illuminates both. McTavish's attention both to Husserl's ideas on perspective, and particularly the need to examine questions from multiple angles, and to Merleau-Ponty's concept of body-schema allow her to critique existing scholarship, but also to see her own experience in new ways. Her conclusion—that body schema is so varied that there is no one way to experience exercise as liberating—is perhaps less satisfying than a theoretical approach might hope, but it opens possibilities for further exploration.

Valerie Gray Hardcastle also uses multiple perspectives to come to what might be seen as unsatisfying conclusions. She starts from a big question—what it means to be human—and more particularly, how our understanding of the relationship of mind to body (and even of mind itself) might affect our judgments of moral and legal responsibility. As scientific exploration of the brain proceeds apace, it raises new and challenging questions. By focusing on questions of violence, Hardcastle addresses questions of responsibility (moral and legal) as well as questions of identity. If violence is related to brain malfunctions, what happens to notions of responsibility? Can the brain help us determine in advance who is likely to become violent? There are, it turns out, common bio-patterns in violent offenders. But those patterns also occur among those who are not violent. Science cannot answer ethical questions, but it does narrow them or, in this case, refuse to narrow them. If there is no structure in the brain that distinguishes between "us" (good people who would never become serial killers) and "them" (violent offenders), then no

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one lacks moral responsibility. As she moves from neuro-science to mental illness, to legal definitions of insanity, Hardcastle shows that we have no simple answers, and in spite of excited announcements of studies that pinpoint one or another significant area of the brain for various activities, science does not yet provide us with what we would really like: a guide to who will become violent, and a way of ensuring that we won't. Neuroscience does not help us understand responsibility, she shows; but it does remind us how much we as humans share.

The limits of science are also foregrounded by Jon Marks, in his essay on the bio-politics of genomics. Genomics, like neuroscience, has been the subject of much excited press coverage. Marks argues that we should understand the science of genomics as deeply inflected by what he refers to as biopolitics. Like Hardcastle, Marks asks a version of the question, what does it mean to be human? Are we just a mass of cells that are endlessly replicable and fungible? If so, do we have rights in our own cells? What are the implications of thinking that our DNA determines our fate? As Marks argues, scientific claims that your destiny is in your DNA—or in your particular genome—are as partial as claims made a century ago that Mendelian genetics allowed us to understand that the creature was born, not made. And they have political implications, for both environmental and social policy.

To pursue this inquiry, Marks turns to genealogy, a popular hobby. He begins with a quick calculation: We each have more ancestors 10,000 years ago than there were people alive then. It is therefore almost certain that we are all descended from everyone alive 10,000 years ago who has living descendants. The difference between populations is the *frequency* with which we are descended from different individuals, not their presence in our family tree. As Marks shows, this reverses the Biblical narrative: we are not all descended from one couple, but all of us now are descended from all of those alive 10,000 years ago.

But to say this is not satisfying the human urge to define their heritage; Marks argues, the more trivial the scientific finding, the more significant its cultural capital. This has long been true: the market in fake family trees goes back at least 500 years, and is still going strong. What genomics has done is provide a scientific gloss on an old trade. He uses as examples some of the issues raised by "recreational ancestry testing." Companies that use mitochondrial DNA—the DNA passed on through the maternal line—promise to identify the area of the globe from which your ancestors came. They can do this for Europe (going back to your ancestors of the Upper Pleistocene, some 20,000 years ago), while others market themselves to African-Americans, and locate their place of origin in Africa. There are only three large problems with this. First, the geographical references are very loose (we collected mitochondrial DNA that matches yours in this place). More important, if

we go back 300 years, we have an average of 4000 ancestors, and going back 20,000 years, we have 10^{240} ancestors; yet mitochondrial DNA tells us about only one. Finally, it assumes a population stability that is at odds with historical knowledge of patterns of population movement. Given all this, the further back in time you go, the more trivial the finding is. Companies marketing primarily to the Jewish community use an alternative, the y-chromosome data to identify priestly ancestry, which is then identified as being shared with Moses, because the Jewish priestly caste was derived from Aaron, Moses' brother. In all of these cases, the science is "true," but it has been given a layer of cultural significance that goes well beyond its real meaning. And these basic questions of meaning do not address the question of how mitochondrial DNA is collected, and what people were told, and the ethical issues of scientists profiting from materials they gather.

Both Hardcastle and Marks point to the ways our culture wants science to provide clear answers, while the answers are anything but. Marks, in looking at the culture of genomics, argues that it pursues knowledge seemingly blind to its cultural and political contexts, while Hardcastle shows that the ways in which neuro-science identifies brain patterns are at odds with ethical ideas of personal responsibility. As Marks puts it, there is a tension between accurate scientific data and meaningful epistemology; we want science to tell us things it cannot do. They each demonstrate how contemporary culture shapes research, which simultaneously—and perhaps as a result—requires skeptical examination from multiple angles.

The cultures of research we live with, these papers show, are ones where certainty is elusive, and multiple angles of analysis and vision are vital. It is not an accident that the discussions during the conference kept coming back to the lenses provided by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. What we share as we do research in the humanities is a commitment to looking at ideas in the round, from multiple perspectives, with the knowledge that—as McTavish suggested in the opening plenary—no one lens was sufficient. This may provide less certainty than some would wish, but it provides a rich tapestry of ideas as we move forward.

—Susan D. Amussen, Editor

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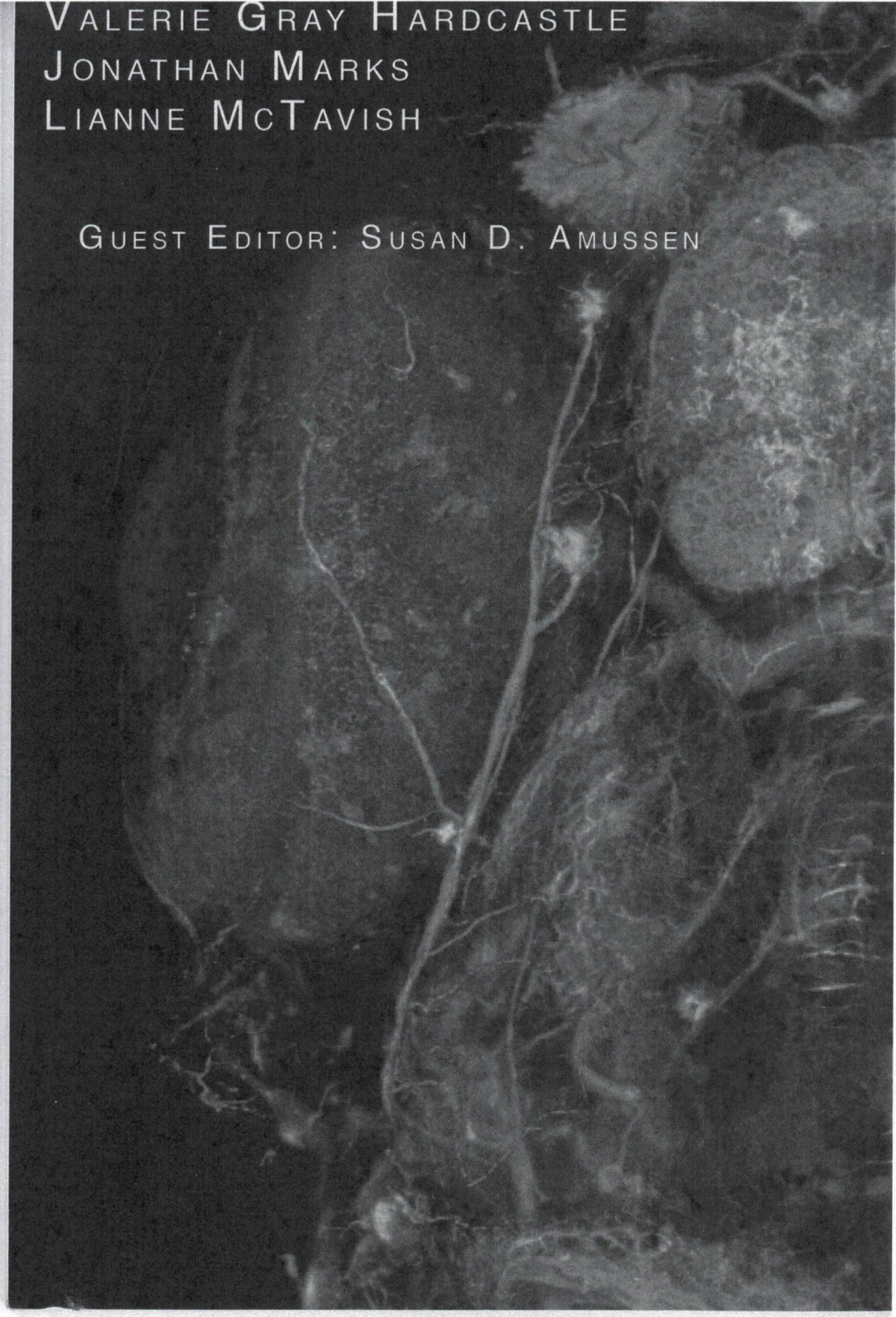
Valerie Gray Hardcastle
Jonathan Marks
Lianne McTavish
Guest Editor: Susan D. Amussen