



# Interdisciplinarity and Social Justice

## Revisioning Academic Accountability

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Chapter One

Interdisciplinarity and Social Justice

An Introduction

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Introduction

Many interdisciplinary fields exemplify the political ambivalence that characterizes the U.S. academy: Ostensibly a critique of that institution's role in reinforcing inequalities, their very existence indicates a belief that the academy may also be an equalizing force in society. Supporters of the ethnic studies, cultural studies, and women's studies programs founded in the late 1960s, for instance, carried their battles from political movements into universities in the faith that changing the production of knowledge would transform social relations, broaden access for the disenfranchised, and thereby change the agents and the consequences of knowledge production. The pattern of scholars and activists joining forces to open fields of research and teaching continued in subsequent decades with the emergence of environmental studies, film and media studies, and gay and lesbian or queer studies. Recent additions—including critical race studies, disability studies, transgender studies, critical legal studies and justice studies, diaspora studies, border studies, and postcolonial studies—take as their epistemological foundation the inherently political nature of all knowledge production, a principle shared by the essays of the present volume.

Through trenchant critiques of disciplinary predecessors, interdisciplinary fields often have defined themselves in contrast with established disciplines. Their attempts to query the conditions and consequences of knowledge production have prompted changes that reach into traditional

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1 disciplines and extend beyond the academy to movements for social justice  
2 (Bender). For instance, because the staffing needs of innovative programs  
3 and evolving disciplines have set in motion institutional changes necessary  
4 to accommodate new types of scholars, hitherto disenfranchised groups  
5 have gained greater access to sites of knowledge production (Boxer; Feier-  
6 man; Stanton and Stewart; Messer-Davidow). From literature to sociology  
7 and into the physical sciences, scholars are engaging the difficult task of  
8 unraveling how assumptions about race, gender, class, colonization, and  
9 sexual orientation are embedded in the structure of interdisciplinary as  
10 well as disciplinary practices that, in turn, intervene to recreate the world  
11 in the image of those assumptions (Shiva; Deloria).

12 In addition to predictable resistance from practitioners of traditional  
13 disciplines, interdisciplinary fields have encountered some institutional, intel-  
14 lectual, and political criticisms from other quarters as well. Even as they have  
15 become established features of the academic landscape, they have struggled  
16 to maintain their affiliations with social movements (Boxer; Loo, and Mar;  
17 Messer-Davidow) and are now frequently subject to criticism from within  
18 those movements. Present variations of interdisciplinarity turn a critical eye  
19 to the political nature of truth production and to those who claim to be its  
20 producers. Their proponents acknowledge that interdisciplinary practices are  
21 not innocent of political and epistemological complicity with multiple struc-  
22 tures of oppression.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the shift from Enlightenment assumptions  
23 and epistemology to postmodern practices has prompted an evaluation of the  
24 political and ethical implications of social movements that remain organized  
25 around such putatively fixed universals as identity or liberation.

26 Interdisciplinary fields are no longer provocative newcomers to the  
27 U.S. academy. Although their proliferation in some ways is a measure of  
28 their success within the academy, the success of their attempts to hold the  
29 academy accountable for its claims of promoting the general welfare and  
30 contributing to a just society remains an open question. *Interdisciplinarity*  
31 *and Social Justice* takes this moment in their history to review the effects  
32 of interdisciplinary fields on our intellectual and political landscape, to  
33 evaluate their ability to deliver their promised social effects, and to consider  
34 their future.

### 35 36 37 Interdisciplinarity: A Contested History

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39 Several influential publications on interdisciplinarity render considerations  
40 of politics and social justice secondary or obscure them altogether. Two such  
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books were published early in the formative 1970s following international seminars organized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): *Interdisciplinarity: Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities* (Michaud et al.) and *Interdisciplinarity and Higher Education* (Kocklemans). Two additional influential volumes by Julie Thompson Klein followed in the 1990s (*Interdisciplinarity; Crossing Boundaries*). Taking such fields as social psychology and biochemistry as prototypical, Klein defines interdisciplinarity as the attempt to synthesize existing disciplinary concepts with the goal of achieving a unity of knowledge for a nonspecialized general education (*Interdisciplinarity* 12). This apolitical, holistic approach to interdisciplinarity, which we would term multidisciplinary, is found across the board in the academy from the humanities (Fish) to science research centers (Weingart) to professional associations (Newell).<sup>2</sup> But Klein's history largely disregards the social and intellectual challenges to academic orthodoxy and the politics that were the breeding ground for interdisciplinary programs.<sup>3</sup> Absent that context, Klein advocates an interdisciplinarity that rejects narrow specialization in favor of an integrative blend of disciplines on the grounds that social needs are best served by the latter's general education approach (*Interdisciplinarity* 15, 27, 38).

Area studies and development studies offer early examples of an interdisciplinarity that assumes the neutrality of disciplinary truth claims and seeks their integration. But since area studies (including American studies) emerged in the U.S. academy during the early years of the Cold War, any neutrality they claim is belied by their reliance on the category of the nation-state (Brantlinger 27; Shumway) that, in turn, naturalizes colonial territorial boundaries (Chow, "Politics and Pedagogy" 133–34; Kaplan and Grewal 70–72). The divisions suggested by Asian studies and American studies parse difference into manageable and essentialized areas domesticates a global network of contradictory power relations, whereas development studies spin evidence of inequity and injustice into tales of inevitable progress (Sbert; Rafael; Pletsch; Esteva; Escobar).

But against the neutrality of disciplinary knowledge stands an array of scholarship that uncovers the messy history of disciplinary norms linked to social inequalities and entangled in lengthy, highly politicized struggles about authoritative claims to truth (Moran 8; Steinmetz, *Politics*; Messer-Davidow, Shumway, and Sylvan). Hans Flexner and others note that the emergence of modern notions of disciplinarity in European academies in the nineteenth century coincided with the industrial revolution, agrarian changes, and "the general 'scientification' of knowledge" (Flexner 105–06 ctd.; Klein, *Interdisciplinarity* 21; Moran 5–14). As a consequence, modern

1 education shifted toward specialized teaching based on research configured by  
2 the modern disciplines, which in turn was driven by industrial demand for  
3 emergent technologies and appropriately trained employees. Lorraine Daston  
4 has argued that the traditional European emphasis on liberal humanism  
5 as the basis for educational authority was replaced between the 1810s and  
6 1840s in Germany by the research seminar that linked specialized training  
7 to emerging professions such as philologist or laboratory scientist, university  
8 teacher or industrial chemist (71–72, 77–78). Rather than the philosopher's  
9 skillful thought unifying the knowledge practices of advanced education,  
10 in the newly configured German university, critical thought was supplanted  
11 by the form and values of the seminar itself: diligence, punctuality, perfor-  
12 mance of written and oral work on schedule, careful attention to minute  
13 detail, devotion to technique, and a cult of thoroughness, responsibility, and  
14 exactitude (78, 82). The spread of what has come to be known as the Ger-  
15 man model of the research university throughout Europe and its colonies  
16 combined with the attendant proliferation of specialized disciplines and  
17 their seminar format for advanced study to produce the modern, seemingly  
18 worldwide university.

19 Joe Moran notes the expanding impact of the physical sciences in the  
20 nineteenth century, when they became the measure for all other knowledge  
21 and the template for the new fields now known as the social sciences (Moran  
22 5–7; Haskell; Shumway and Messer-Davidow). Following Michel Foucault  
23 (*Clinic*), Michel de Certeau (1984), and Terry Eagleton, James Clifford has  
24 argued that from the seventeenth century onward, the natural sciences  
25 defined themselves in opposition to the humanities by contrasting their  
26 aim of transparent signification with an emphasis on rhetoric (in rhetoric  
27 or literature), pressing their claims to facticity against the status of fiction,  
28 myth (in literature), or superstition (religion), and practicing objectivity in  
29 contrast with subjectivity (Clifford 5). Thus the natural sciences pressed even  
30 the humanities to adopt the criteria of evidence and argumentation modeled  
31 on modern reason, as exemplified by mathematics in the physical sciences  
32 (Moran 7). Indeed, Moran argues that the move towards interdisciplinary  
33 study in the humanities challenges precisely the preeminence of science as  
34 the predominant model for disciplinary truth claims. Such histories sug-  
35 gest the importance of examining the complicity of the modern research  
36 university with the industrialization of modern society, the enclosure of  
37 agrarian lands, the emergence of market economies and the modern pro-  
38 fessions, and attendant questions of exploitation, inequality, and injustice  
39 (Flexner; Althusser; Bourdieu).

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In Michel Foucault's widely influential account (*Discipline; "Subject and Power"*), the French Enlightenment provides the backdrop for the formation of modern discipline understood as both bodily discipline and docility and disciplined knowledge forms. Vincent Leitch summarizes a permeation of the social by discipline so detailed and thorough as to produce the modern disciplinary society:

[From] the 1760s to the 1960s—the modern era—societies became increasingly regulated by norms directed at the “docile body” and disseminated through a network of cooperating “disciplinary institutions,” including the judicial, military, educational, workshop, psychiatric, welfare, religions, and prison establishments, all of which entities enforce norms and correct delinquencies. . . . In casting the school as a “disciplinary institution,” Foucault has in mind specifically the use of dozens of so-called disciplines, that is, microtechniques of registration, organization, observation, corrections, and control [such as] examinations, case studies, records, partitions and cells, enclosures, rankings, objectifications, monitoring systems, assessments, hierarchies, norms, tables (such as timetables), and individualizations. The disciplines, invented by the Enlightenment, facilitate the submission of bodies and the extraction from them of useful forces. These small everyday physical mechanisms operate beneath our established egalitarian law as ideals, producing a counter law that subordinates and limits reciprocities [. . .] Universities and colleges deploy the micro disciplines to train and discipline the students in preparations not only for jobs and professional disciplines, but for disciplinary societies. (168)

This configuration of educational institutions also accounts for the multiplication of the specialist societies and journals that still remain powerful regulatory and enforcement mechanisms in the Eurocentric academy. Foucault's account has been central to much interdisciplinary work that names the trouble with established disciplines in the Eurocentric university (Brown; Messer-Davidow, Shumway, and Sylvan; Shumway; Said; R. Young).

The competing histories of the justice effects of the modern disciplinary university reviewed here suggest numerous ways to understand the relationship between interdisciplinarity and social justice. The narratives

1 of Flexner, Daston, and Moran indicate that the modern, disciplinary  
 2 academy limits the audience of academic writing to other specialists in  
 3 the academy, industry, and government, even as it supplies that audience  
 4 with evaluative criteria such as originality, viability, and the regulative  
 5 mechanisms of the research seminar (Daston 79). Against that backdrop,  
 6 interdisciplinarity may be understood as returning critique to the center  
 7 of the educational enterprise while changing the social groups that benefit  
 8 from the educational enterprise. The Foucauldian account also implies  
 9 that interdisciplinarity can be an intervention into a modern microphysics  
 10 of power to prepare students not for disciplinary society but for practices  
 11 that ground social relations outside those defined by the professions and  
 12 by measures of capitalist productivity.

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 15 Justice Through New Objects of Knowledge  
 16 and New Methods  
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18 Within education, interest in social justice increased dramatically in the 1960s  
 19 and early 1970s as students and faculty on campuses worldwide learned  
 20 from anticolonial liberation struggles in the global south and linked their  
 21 language, tactics, and goals to change primary, secondary, and postsecond-  
 22 ary education (Ali and Watkins; Katsiaficas; Committee; Editorial Staff;  
 23 Omatsu). For instance, in their early years, ethnic studies in the United  
 24 States resulted from broad, cross-racial coalitions demanding third-world  
 25 liberation for students domestically and overseas (Caute; Naison; Acree;  
 26 Whitson and Kyles; Wang). As Steven Feierman has shown in an analysis  
 27 of the discipline of history, decolonization in the global south combined  
 28 with multiple liberation and civil rights movements in the global north to  
 29 provoke a major shift in the academy, evidenced by increasing racial, gender,  
 30 sexual preference, and national diversity of scholars at work in academic  
 31 institutions and consequent major shifts in historiography. Greater interest  
 32 in social justice is also seen in a general crisis of epistemology, signaled by  
 33 dramatically decreased satisfaction with knowledge protocols to the social  
 34 effects of academic work (Boxer; Carson; Deloria; Eagleton; Feierman  
 35 84–86; Foucault, *Archaeology*; Guha and Spivak; Miller; Said; Steinmetz,  
 36 “Decolonizing”; Chakravorty, this volume), or what Levinas has termed  
 37 “ontological imperialism” (qtd. Feierman 167–68). From the crisis in the  
 38 credibility of educational institutions emerged a number of interdisciplinary  
 39 fields that refused disciplinary claims to political neutrality and objectivity,  
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preferring instead to direct their research and teaching openly toward the aims of social justice.<sup>4</sup>

Through a complex process of negotiated agreements with university leaders and, in the case of public institutions, with state officials (J. Cohen), the fields of study that emerged were generally named in terms of discrete social groups contextualized, as in the case of environmental studies, both as particular objects of knowledge and as agents of change. In the United States, these included fields—such as Black Studies, Chicano studies, and Asian American studies—that rejected disciplines dominated by white faculty and the erasure of non-white objects of knowledge; early women’s studies programs that emphasized the study of women as a corrective both to their erasure from the humanities and to the pervasive sexism of the academy and the society (Boxer; Messer-Davidow); and Native American studies for those who rejected imperialism in the academy. These were accompanied in England by an attention to socioeconomic class that brought the concerns of the working class to the center in the academy (Hall; Williams, *Revolution* 57–70). And comparable changes were occurring around the globe, as students and faculty engaged in social struggles turned their attention to transforming the academy in Tokyo, Mexico City, Lagos, Rio de Janeiro, Cairo, and across western and eastern Europe (Zolov; Ali and Watkins; Caute). The extraordinarily high level of interest in engaging the politics of knowledge production is indicated, for example, by the exponential rise in the number of women’s studies courses in the United States: from about seventeen in the academic year 1969–1970, to about seventy-three in the following year, to nearly seven hundred in 1971–1972. In the ensuing decades, some eighty campus-based research centers, autonomous professional associations, and thousands of feminist presses, book series, journals, and newsletters have been established (Messer-Davidow 83–85).

Joined under the umbrella of interdisciplinarity, disparate emergent methods and pedagogies shared a rejection of the commonplace belief in the neutrality of academic knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Participants explored research topics and pedagogies and methods in the hope of countering inequalities naturalized by the truth claims of the academy: racial and gender inequities given the alibi by the biological and social sciences, global economic disparities defended by much of history and economics—the list is very long. One common strategy involved invading the fields once claimed by the natural and social sciences while working to redefine the terms, methods, and politics of knowledge. For example, the interest in class issues in Black Studies, women’s studies, postcolonial studies, and film studies, as



1 well as in literature and philosophy, may be read as an attempt to contest  
2 the claim to ownership of the economic by the field of economics, as we see  
3 in the work of Lindon Barrett, Alex Juhasz, and Patrick Brantlinger in the  
4 present volume. The emphasis on broadening the notion of the political to  
5 include the personal, the body, and the quotidian in feminism, literature,  
6 and ethnic studies may also be seen as an attack on claims to monopolize  
7 the political by those in the field of political science or on claims to know  
8 the body by biologists, as seen in the following chapters by Mary Romero,  
9 Robert DeChaine, and Joe Parker. Questions about environmental impacts  
10 and limits may be seen as a struggle for ownership of the natural world  
11 between those in environmental studies and chemists, biologists, and engi-  
12 neers. Frequently, interrogations of the modern academy came about from  
13 questions regarding the content of scholarship, for instance as a consequence  
14 of demands to know about topics that had been erased or demeaned by  
15 seemingly neutral methods, canons, and protocols—for example, African  
16 American authors in literary studies, working-class members in histories, or  
17 the effects on women of drugs that scientists tested only on men. Indeed,  
18 one way to understand the emergence of interdisciplinary fields is as a  
19 struggle over ownership of objects of knowledge with high-stakes implica-  
20 tions for social relations.

21 The logic of linking interdisciplinarity to social justice through naming  
22 new objects of knowledge obtains as more recent arrivals—queer studies,  
23 diaspora studies, media studies, critical legal studies, critical race studies,  
24 and postcolonial studies—gain footholds in the academy. A similar logic is  
25 pursued by fields—disability studies, transgender studies, critical whiteness  
26 studies, and critical masculinity studies—waiting often impatiently in the  
27 wings for their turn on the stage of academic legitimacy. The continuing  
28 proliferation of interdisciplinary fields, along with their ongoing promiscuous  
29 relations with each other and with the disciplines, suggests that the disciplin-  
30 ary form of the modern academy has failed to contain the challenge to its  
31 own status as a neutral, objective institution with only neutral or positive  
32 social effects. The larger threat to justice targeted by these newly emerging  
33 fields is the same as that identified by the more established interdisciplinary  
34 fields: the definitive tendency of the dominant to appropriate the emergent  
35 under the limits of justice in modern societies (Williams, *Marxism* 121–27;  
36 Spivak, *Death* 1–3, 10–11 and n. 15, 106).

37 Many scholars working in interdisciplinary fields conceptualize justice  
38 primarily in the tradition of the European Enlightenment as retribution for  
39 crimes or damages and as fairness of distribution. Inequality is taken as a  
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sign of the failure of modern institutions to render real such modern ideals; 1  
 research and teaching, then, seek to promote greater equality by critiquing 2  
 social and legal practices and by training young people to increase the pace 3  
 of social change (e.g., Montoya-Lewis, Messer-Davidow, and Soldatenko 4  
 in this volume). In this widely practiced approach, justice means a fair, 5  
 universal application of public policies and legal standards to all members 6  
 of society, with the goal of an equal distribution of resources. But some 7  
 fields have divided because of debates about the most politically efficacious 8  
 methods and epistemes, pedagogies and theories for achieving this version of 9  
 justice. There are those in women's studies (Messer-Davidow 129–213) and 10  
 cultural studies (Bennett; Appadurai; Milner; Brantlinger in this volume), 11  
 among other fields, who hold that the move to interdisciplinarity has been 12  
 a political failure (Loo; Miller; Soldatenko in this volume). Others, such 13  
 as the feminist Wendy Brown, resort to urging the abolition of their own 14  
 interdisciplinary fields, so discouraged are they by the continuing complicity 15  
 of those fields with modern conceptions of politics, power, the individual, 16  
 and other such foundational terms (Brown; Wiegman, "Introduction"). Still 17  
 others have refused to join the academy or have left it entirely in order to 18  
 pursue the work of social justice in venues they believe to be less compro- 19  
 mised by institutional forces and regulations.<sup>6</sup> 20

Changing conceptions of justice, power, and knowledge have 21  
 rebounded in fields founded on putatively coherent objects of knowledge 22  
 that each requires its own autonomous area of inquiry. Amy Robinson, for 23  
 instance, argues that analogies between race and sexuality consolidate each 24  
 as an autonomous sphere. The resulting segregation of the two leads to the 25  
 presumption of "the normative whiteness of the gay subject," a problematic 26  
 development from an antiracist position (qtd. Joseph 274). Similar analogies 27  
 between feminist studies and lesbian and gay studies that suggest that the 28  
 two fields are discrete domains have been critiqued by Judith Butler who, 29  
 using intersectionality, contends that sexual difference is central to under- 30  
 standing sexual orientation ("Against Proper"; ctd. Joseph 274). Rey Chow 31  
 has argued against the foundational terms of area studies and comparative 32  
 literature as haunted by essentializing and conservative notions of culture, 33  
 history, territory, and language in their reinscriptions of the nation-state 34  
 and the first world as universal norms (*Writing Diaspora* 16–17, 128–29). 35  
 Such arguments suggest that for the purposes of social justice, the most 36  
 appropriate objects of study are located at the intersections of fields sepa- 37  
 rated by the linguistic-cum-disciplinary pressures of regulatory regimes. 38  
 Yet there is no obvious or explicitly designated institutional basis for such 39  
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1 work; we will return to this point when considering the next steps for  
2 interdisciplinarity.

3 Motivating these criticisms are the disciplinary pressures, both within  
4 the academy and in social movements, to constitute coherent, readily recog-  
5 nizable objects as grounds for social movements and fields of study. Despite  
6 the best efforts of those working in interdisciplinary fields, the disciplines  
7 are still largely effective at defining the terms and limits of coherence and  
8 visibility, and thereby of academic legitimacy and credibility (Bowman,  
9 "Alarming"; Messer-Davidow). As Wendy Brown and others have argued,  
10 however, the politically conservative character of the very objects of knowl-  
11 edge that shape both fields of study and social movements require caution,  
12 critique, and constructive responses that make explicit the costs of allowing  
13 foundational concepts to determine the politics and ethics of interdisciplin-  
14 ary work (Brown; Wiegman, "Progress of Gender" 128; Stryker 14). Such  
15 seemingly neutral terms as "women," "nation," "culture," "political," "libera-  
16 tion," and "resistance" consolidate assumptions that render both academic  
17 study and social movements complicit with problematic modern institutions,  
18 histories of domination, and erasures of subordinated groups.

19 Once the motivation of interdisciplinary work, modern notions of  
20 justice are now scrutinized and found wanting. For those who advocate  
21 critical self-examination from within interdisciplinary fields, the principal  
22 task now is to interrogate the limits of our understanding of justice and,  
23 perhaps paradoxically, to render visible the injustices of simultaneously  
24 silenced and normalized coercions and violences effected through the often  
25 subtle enforcement mechanisms of disciplinary society. That aim requires  
26 a constant refusal of certainty so that, in the view of Gayatri Spivak,  
27 objects of knowledge are rendered intelligible even as the knowing subject  
28 remains critical of every success at rendering something intelligible ("Power/  
29 Knowledge" 28). Based on a recognition of the highly politicized history  
30 of language in limiting the politics and ethics of practice, Spivak follows  
31 Foucault in researching the ways that the subject subjects itself to certain  
32 power/knowledge relations through the ability to know ("Power/Knowl-  
33 edge" 28, 34, 39). Such scholarship, which Judith Butler identifies as "the  
34 desubjugation of the subject within the politics of truth," places the limits  
35 of intelligibility at the heart of work toward social justice, with the latter  
36 conceived as spaces and relations that refuse norms that install modern  
37 social hierarchies and the violences on which they depend ("Doing Justice"  
38 622, 35). By marking each act of naming as overdetermined by the troubled  
39 modern history of language and intelligibility, interdisciplinarity can open  
40 up a plurality of ethics, so that ethical knowledge practices may, in the  
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words of André Glucksmann, “make appear the dissymetries, the disequi- 1  
 lebriums, the aporias, the impossibilities, which are precisely the objects of 2  
 all commitment” (qtd. Spivak, “Power/Knowledge” 40). Inquiry is brought 3  
 to productive crisis when the intelligibility of the object of knowledge is 4  
 taken as its central question. Against the limits of modern knowledge, we 5  
 can respond by tracking those limits as an index of the ethics and politics 6  
 of the knowledge practices we perform (McClintock; Radway; Spivak, 7  
 “Subaltern Studies”; Sullivan 37–56; Brown). 8

An interdisciplinarity located at this juncture can seek to account for 9  
 and resist disciplinary domestication in ways that retain social justice and 10  
 ethical concerns. As in papers by Barrett, Wiegman, Parker, Chakravorty, 11  
 and others in the present volume, the practice of interdisciplinarity can take 12  
 the social construction of knowledge as a political project focused on issues 13  
 of justice. Likewise, Paul Bowman has argued for interdisciplinary practices 14  
 that are “alterdisciplinary” in their thoroughgoing attention to the complicity 15  
 of disciplines with social hegemonies. According to Bowman, rather than 16  
 present knowledge as definitive, correct, and sacred, as the disciplines tend 17  
 to do, interdisciplinarity “open[s] up the fissure or wound which is the 18  
 university’s very constitutive incompleteness . . . an injury . . . also an *in-jury*, 19  
 in the sense of being tied to the injurious, the un-just” (“Alterdisciplinar- 20  
 ity” 67). Simon O’Sullivan argues for a reconception of interdisciplinarity 21  
 using the concept of the rhizome developed by Giles Deleuze and Felix 22  
 Guattari. To oppose the disciplinary effect of fixing knowledge, to which 23  
 cultural studies has been subject, O’Sullivan argues that the purpose of 24  
 scholarship is “not to *understand* the world . . . but rather to create the 25  
 world differently . . . which involves less an object of study, even less does 26  
 it involve a reading, an interpretation of objects. . . . Instead it involves a 27  
*pragmatics* . . . to reorder our ‘selves’ and our world” (82, 84). Cultural studies 28  
 “does not name a discipline but rather a *function* . . . a deterritorialisation 29  
 from other disciplines, from academia, and inevitably from itself” (88). 30  
 Here interdisciplinarity turns against the limits of its own defining object 31  
 of knowledge, rendering its own practices subject to critique in order to 32  
 resist the disciplinary stabilization of meanings and fields and the consequent 33  
 normalization of social hierarchies and their violences. 34

### Justice Through the Turn Toward Difference 35

As activists and academics critique their own epistemologies, some have 36  
 also become unwilling to allow their scholarship to be determined by the 37  
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1 practices of modern social movements. Drawing eclectically from multiple  
2 sources to rethink truth claims and knowledge protocols, they have reshaped  
3 the politics and ethics of the object of knowledge as well. The approaches  
4 we now consider are characterized by this cautious, even suspicious stance  
5 toward the linkage of interdisciplinary scholarship and political action.

6 One of the earliest and most influential such gestures has come to be  
7 known as the theory of intersectionality, first articulated by the Combahee  
8 River Collective in the mid-1970s: “[W]e are actively committed to strug-  
9 gling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our  
10 particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based  
11 upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (13). By  
12 naming identities located at the intersection of multiple, linked oppressions,  
13 the Collective made visible the erasures effected by the narrow scope both  
14 of academic inquiry and of social movements. Their critique encompassed  
15 traditional disciplines as well as new interdisciplinary fields and extended  
16 from the white-dominated feminist and male-dominated black liberation  
17 movements to the black feminists of the National Black Feminist Organi-  
18 zation (NBFO) founded in 1973. Similar positions on intersectionality are  
19 found in publications from the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the  
20 important 1981 anthology of the writings of women of color, *This Bridge  
21 Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe  
22 Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa.

23 Intersectionality has led to numerous fundamental changes in social  
24 movements and in the epistemological practice of disciplinary and also  
25 interdisciplinary work. In particular, it has prompted a shift from identity  
26 to difference in gender and race studies, together with criticism of essential-  
27 ist and universalist conceptions of such foundational categories as gender,  
28 race, sexuality, and nation. Intersectionality has also secured the function  
29 of theory as a critique not only of epistemology and the academy but also  
30 of power relations within social movements.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, it has shifted  
31 analyses of power away from an emphasis on the universal and toward  
32 theories of justice that attend to difference and heterogeneity. The far-  
33 reaching impact of this reorientation is evident in the work in critical legal  
34 studies and philosophy (Willett) and by feminist philosophers and social  
35 critics, such as Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser, who advocate the  
36 modification of traditional principles of redistributive justice to recognize  
37 the justice claims both of identitarian groups and of group heterogeneity. In  
38 a less modernist vein, Jean François Lyotard has argued for the centrality  
39 of heterogeneity, difference, and incommensurability in our thinking about  
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justice. Rather than the totalizations of universal principles (*Postmodern* 66), he emphasizes working at the limits of the protocols and prescriptions of justice (*Just* 100), for instance, by questioning the homogenizing categories of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and citizenship that ground many modern movements for social justice. The proliferating postmodern reconsiderations of justice (Mouffe; Nancy, *Creation*; Badiou; Derrida, "Legal Force"; Ziarek) are themselves examples of interdisciplinary interventions into what was once the territory of disciplines (philosophy, law) and of social movements.

Other interdisciplinary reconsiderations of epistemology resulting from an emphasis on difference and its concomitant rejection of essential and universal categories have built on dissatisfaction with modern objectivity as the prototypical convention for legitimating truth claims, with varying results. Among feminists, for example, Emma Perez and Joan Scott reject outright the possibility of objective knowledge (Perez; Scott 1–27), in contrast with others who argue for revisions of objectivity (Harding; Haraway; Moya and Hames-Garcia). The wide-ranging consequences of the move to epistemological uncertainty are evident in challenges to essentialism and naturalized conceptions of the body in race-, gender-, sexuality-, and disability-based fields, as for example in critical race theory (Delgado, "Introduction" xv). From the perspective of this analytic stance, hostility to theory appears as a reluctance to relinquish access to an unmediated and objective knowledge of transparent reality. It may also be an unintentional and contradictory refusal to mark the hierarchies, hegemonies and economies of value that render disciplinary (and institutionalized forms of interdisciplinary) knowledge "exclusive, and always in some measure violent, unethical, and biased" (Bowman, "Alarming" 70).

Suspicion of the European Enlightenment promise of transparent knowledge has had a significant impact both on long-established fields such as feminist/women's studies, cultural studies, and critical legal studies, and on more recent arrivals such as postcolonial studies, queer studies, and disability studies. That change might be characterized as an increased vitality resulting from renewed discussions about goals and methods, epistemologies and politics. To be sure, gains in vitality and relevance have been accompanied by a loss of unity and homogeneity, as practitioners critique the inability of their own interdisciplinary fields to break with the foundational categories of modern epistemology. Moreover, critiques of disciplinary knowledge protocols have generated a number of new interdisciplinary fields that, by seeking institutional acceptance without

1 compromising their stance of dissent, attempt to carry the impact of epis-  
2 temological uncertainty into the very heart of the academy. Some—such  
3 as postcolonial studies (Spivak, *Post-Colonial*; Said; R. Young), subaltern  
4 studies (Guha and Spivak; Chaturvedi), queer studies (Corber and Valoc-  
5 chi; Kirsch; Warner), and critical race theory (Delgado, “Introduction” xv;  
6 Unger)—are associated with already well-respected social justice movements.  
7 Others name objects of knowledge comparable with those of women’s  
8 studies or ethnic studies in that they attend to social groups that have been  
9 erased, ignored, or demeaned by the modern academy, such as transgender  
10 studies (Stryker and Whittle), diaspora studies (Gilroy; Tololyan), border  
11 studies (Rosaldo; Anzaldúa), and disability studies (Davis). Several fields  
12 investigate social norms naturalized under modernity; critical whiteness  
13 studies (Rasmussen; López; Dyer; Naison) and critical masculinity studies  
14 (Sedgwick; Halberstam; Gardner; Berger) exemplify this critical tendency.  
15 Yet others emphasize newly influential technologies and industries that have  
16 not received prominent attention from the academic disciplines of the late  
17 nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; included in this list are cinema  
18 studies, film studies, and media studies.

19 These approaches to interdisciplinarity draw on protocols and objects  
20 of knowledge that are not possible within the terms of the modern disci-  
21 plines. Roland Barthes is often quoted as arguing that interdisciplinary work  
22 creates new objects of knowledge and even a new language to produce an  
23 “unease in classification” (qtd. Moran 16) important not only for academics  
24 but also for the foundational workings of meaning itself:

25  
26 Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about  
27 confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact,  
28 is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it’s  
29 not enough to choose a “subject” (a theme) and gather around  
30 it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a  
31 new object that belongs to no one. (Barthes, qtd. Clifford 1)  
32

33 Others are inspired by Foucault’s examples of instances when scholar-  
34 ship has introduced “a new object, calling for new conceptual tools, and for  
35 fresh theoretical foundations . . . a true monster, so much so that [modern  
36 knowledge] could not even properly speak of [it] . . . [unlike someone]  
37 committing no more than a disciplined error.” (*Archaeology* 224) Such  
38 claims on behalf of interdisciplinarity exceed reformist demands by some  
39 interdisciplinarians for increased attention to already established, disciplined  
40  
41

objects of knowledge. Instead, their ambitious scope suggests that the desire to peg knowing to ethics and justice may be prompting an epistemic break as interdisciplinarians debate the most appropriate knowledge protocols and logics for achieving their aims (Bono, Dean, and Ziarek; Castronovo; Nancy, "Answering"; Gasché).

### Another Justice: New Protocols and Logics

By drawing on knowledges and logics violently attacked or overlooked in the aporias of modern knowledge protocols, some interdisciplinary practitioners have argued for constituting knowledge of that which is effaced and occluded within the terms of those protocols. Included in such knowledge are the violent, frequently deadly effects of social practices, effects that contradict claims to progress and mythologies of equality (Anzaldúa 5–12; Devi 98, 118; Foucault, *Discipline* 265–67, 302–03; White 135). The current of interdisciplinarity examined in this section questions modern epistemologies by exposing the latter's imbrication with overt and direct violence. It also provides persuasive critiques of the more subtle, internalized destructive effects resulting in what we have so far named inadequately as docility (Anzaldúa 20, 22, 59; Devi 109–10, 118, 127, 142; Foucault, *Discipline* 11–12, 16, 274–75; White 136, 41).

In lieu of modern knowledge protocols, Robyn Wiegman (among others) supports a feminist interdisciplinary politics that seeks to render legible the ways that troubled identity categories themselves reproduce exclusions and violent silencing (Wiegman, "Progress of Gender" 107, 127–33). She points out that just as identitarian logic and realist referents place under erasure such objects of knowledge as female masculinities, gay and lesbian studies, intersexualities, sexual minority cultures, and transgender identities and communities, so, too, the violent policing by the Euro-American medical tradition of normative gender boundaries—in their sanctioning, for example, of surgical interventions following intersex births—erases the very possibility of intersexed subjectivities and communities. Similarly, from within disability studies, transgender studies, and queer studies come charges that, instead of positioning people with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people as subjects with agency, "numerous professional and academic disciplines . . . concentrate upon the management, repair, and maintenance of physical and cognitive incapacity" (Mitchell and Snyder 1, qtd. McRuer, "Good" 97). By challenging not



1 only modern laboratory science but also social welfare policy and medical  
2 practices, activists and scholars in these fields show that they have much to  
3 contribute to social movements that seek to restore agency to groups that  
4 modern limits of visibility would rather objectify than empower, rather  
5 modify or medicate than celebrate and legitimate. In a similar fashion,  
6 Laura Donaldson has argued convincingly against the epistemic violence  
7 of the erasure in some postcolonial work of indigenous issues and the per-  
8 sistent “woman question,” rendering invisible the ways subalterns achieve  
9 subject status (Donaldson and Kwok 5; Donaldson 45, 51–54). On this  
10 important final point regarding subject status, there is some congruence  
11 in queer, disability, postcolonial, feminist, and subaltern studies to suggest  
12 that, insofar as it resists the normative foundations of the modern subject,  
13 interdisciplinarity may work to reclaim subject status, political agency, and  
14 effective organizing for members of marginal groups.

15 Wiegman joins Eve Sedgwick, Susan Jeffords, and Judith Butler  
16 in rejecting the notion of fixed identities as “a conceptual framework for  
17 rendering the body biologically determinant” and rendered subject to  
18 social hierarchies (Wiegman, “Progress of Gender” 116, 20–21). Instead  
19 of assuming the necessity of universal, essential, and coherent identities as  
20 preconditional foundations for social order or for putatively neutral knowl-  
21 edges, this approach explores naturalized norms as part of contested and  
22 contradictory fields of power. When it examines and enacts what Wiegman  
23 names as “non-identitarian and unpredictable mobilities of bodies, desires,  
24 and practices” (Wiegman, “Progress of Gender” 130), interdisciplinarity  
25 becomes a type of anti-identitarian “queer” that seeks to liberate both  
26 knowledges and bodies from effective subjection. Rather than represent  
27 queer as an identity extension to gay and lesbian (C. Cohen 438–39, 459–60;  
28 Sullivan 43–56), this notion of the queer functions as a cipher for the more  
29 destabilizing methods and aims of interdisciplinarity. In that function, it is  
30 analogous to “crip” in relation to disability studies (McRuer, *Crip Theory*)  
31 and, to a lesser extent, gender studies in relation to women’s studies and  
32 postcolonial studies in relation to third world studies.

33 In rejecting stabilized knowledge practices founded on the fixity of  
34 the disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) object of knowledge, some interdis-  
35 ciplinary work has turned toward new criteria for determining not only  
36 the character of knowledge but also attendant conceptions of justice. Like  
37 Wiegman and Butler, Spivak regards the knowing subject as itself an effect  
38 produced by conjunctures within a network of structures, forces, and dis-  
39 ciplines, rather than as the autonomous individual will pursued by early  
40  
41

subaltern studies of historiography (Spivak, "Subaltern Studies" 213–14). 1  
 If that autonomous subject is amenable to and reinforced by disciplinary 2  
 investigation, then Spivak proposes interdisciplinarity as "an institutional 3  
 calculus for recoding or instrumentalizing undecidability" (Spivak, *Death* 4  
 49). Spivak's emphasis on undecidability reaches to the social hierarchies and 5  
 unequal relations between self and other inscribed in language itself (*Death* 6  
 52). Her rejection of the fixity and determinism carried out by language 7  
 reconstitutes not only the limits and politics of the object of knowledge, 8  
 but also of the collectivities with which writing and reading subjects align 9  
 themselves. This indeterminacy strategy thereby aims to allow readers 10  
 and knowers to "open entry into responsibility with the subaltern other" 11  
 (Spivak, *Death* 69).<sup>8</sup> 12

Such critical reflections on the conditions of knowledge lead to recon- 13  
 siderations of the concept of justice with implications that reach far beyond 14  
 the academy. A number of interdisciplinary activist-academics shift their 15  
 very construal of justice by appropriating the language of fields as far-flung 16  
 as medicine or law for newly politicized ends, for instance, by naming their 17  
 goals as healing or reconciliation. The repair work (Spelman) in question 18  
 may involve healing the alienation that divides subject from object and 19  
 that arranges subjects in social hierarchies or as the centralized and the 20  
 marginalized (O'Sullivan 86; Taussig). For Anzaldúa, interdisciplinary work 21  
 carries out a healing of the bleeding *herida abierta* or open wound that is the 22  
 borderlands/la frontera, and of the splitting of self from other that makes 23  
 possible hatred, violence, and exploitation (Anzaldúa, Preface [n.p.], 3, 86, 24  
 202–03). According to Anzaldúa, those who are healed practice interdis- 25  
 ciplinarity according to a logic that appears crazy or nonsensical to those 26  
 still under the spell of the disciplines (Anzaldúa 19, 197), but they become 27  
 intermediaries comfortably at work in the ambiguities and contradictions 28  
 at the crossroads where differences meet (Anzaldúa 80). 29

And sometimes justice takes unrecognizable forms. For example, 30  
 Spivak argues that the most appropriate politics and ethics for interdis- 31  
 ciplinary work take the form of earning the trust of the subaltern (Spivak, 32  
 "Power/Knowledge"), apparent in moments of great intimacy and even 33  
 love (Spivak, "French Feminisms Revisited" 166–71; Spivak, "The Politics 34  
 of Translation" 180–83). As one of Mahsweta Devi's characters remarks, 35  
 despairing at the ineffectiveness of the nation-state and at the inability of 36  
 journalistic knowledge and mass-media news even to recognize the violent 37  
 effects of injustice and colonization, "To build it [real exchange] you must 38  
 love beyond reason for a long time" (Devi 195–96). Healing, reconciliation, 39  
 40

1 love—such aims sidestep the contractual logic of modern justice, in search  
2 of, as David Carrol writes, another “justice that . . . does not put an end to  
3 disputes and differences, that is continually in search of its rules and laws  
4 rather than presupposing and simply applying them to each case” (Carroll  
5 75, qtd. Ziarek 85).

6 The prominence of epistemology and theory within interdisciplinary  
7 scholarship has perhaps been the most controversial factor for those who  
8 seek to emphasize the academy’s obligations to foster the practice of justice.  
9 Criticisms and counter-critiques are plentiful between those, often self-  
10 named realists, who rely on objectivist or materialist measures of injustice  
11 and those who have cast off from the stable shores of realism to question  
12 its normalization, its politics and ethics, and ultimately, its utility for the  
13 ends of social justice variously conceived. One of the difficulties of these  
14 debates is that the various approaches use different methods for measuring  
15 political effectiveness: Whereas some emphasize economic redistribution or  
16 policy changes, others draw attention to redefining the limits and terms of  
17 the political, and still others promote practices that make legible forms of  
18 injustice that are rendered invisible by the knowledge protocols of modern  
19 epistemes. Certainly the debates are indicators of the contested character of  
20 academic politics. Yet they also mark interdisciplinarity as a place where  
21 competing academic protocols, standards, and logics, together with the  
22 goals and values of social justice movements, are made explicit in order to  
23 be debated, interrogated, and reshaped.

### 24 25 26 Overview of Essays 27

28 The present volume is an attempt to present a range of carefully consid-  
29 ered responses from social justice perspectives to one or more visions for  
30 interdisciplinarity. Each essay explicitly or implicitly responds to critiques of  
31 established disciplines, while also engaging activist and scholarly literature  
32 that is critical of aspects of interdisciplinary academic work.

33 Essays in the first section attend to the social justice issues at stake  
34 in critiques of the disciplines. Lisa Lowe contends that the social sciences  
35 have been brought to an epistemic crisis not through the interventions of  
36 poststructuralist theory but rather through their own failure to capture  
37 the totality of globalization. She notes that social scientists have long used  
38 metaphors to explain the relations between cultures, social systems, nations,  
39 and economies that characterize globalization, thereby questioning presump-  
40

41

tions of socioeconomic stability while failing to capture widening economic inequalities and proliferating forms of difference. By exposing the social justice implications of the literary character of social science, Lowe displaces the hierarchy of the scientific over the literary and turns the totalizing claims of modern social science against their own truths.

Mary Romero deploys critical race theory to link the field of sociology with the history of racism in the United States and shows how the preoccupation with meritocracy, mobility, and assimilation normalizes whiteness and middle-class standards that mask privilege and sociostructural disadvantages. Using as her case study the actions of the Chandler, Arizona, police and immigration officials that inscribe citizenship on the body and systematically degrade communities of color, she uncovers the failure of sociologists of immigration to learn not only from critical race theory but also from another subfield, the sociology of race. Romero's use of an interdisciplinary method brings issues of civil rights and human rights to the forefront of research and positions them as catalytic for bringing together communities of color as allies across differences in citizenship status.

Raquel Montoya-Lewis links epistemological and socioeconomic issues with a comparative analysis of Native American tribal courtroom procedures to demonstrate how forms of justice unavailable in the U.S. courtroom may be achieved. By telling localized stories of tribal courts in which she has presided as judge through the prism of critical legal studies, Montoya-Lewis rejects generalizations that would assimilate specificity to the national legal hegemony. At the same time, she illustrates the interventions of hegemonic legal structures, such as "the law of white spaces," in which her stories occurred.

Mrinalini Chakravorty reads the undisciplined play of juxtaposed historical, literary, and political registers by the Anglophone Arab woman writer and journalist Ahdaf Soueif as providing a Pan-Arab yet heterogeneous catalyst for Middle Eastern struggles against Western imperialism. Chakravorty demonstrates how moments of careful transfer and translation within and between disciplinary knowledges and dominant and marginalized cultures produce alternative discourses for recognizing the claims of the dispossessed. This brings to crisis the legitimacy of the Western modernizing project that, although entrenched in institutional authority (of governments, nations, and universities), all the while bolsters its power through the capture of markets and by its logic of commodification. By identifying Soueif's tactical opposition to habits of scholarship and journalism that produce the Middle East as a particular kind of sublime commodity in the West, Chakravorty

1 presents Soueif as crisscrossing the bounds of fiction and history, legitimacy  
2 and marginality, and legibility and illegibility to confront urgent questions  
3 of violence, torture, and rights.

4 The volume's second section examines the nature of claims to social  
5 justice in interdisciplinary fields. Patrick Brantlinger anchors cultural stud-  
6 ies in the study of value as a counter discourse to the claim of capitalist  
7 economics as the modern "science of value." Proposing that ethical consid-  
8 erations should be central to all academic fields, he holds that postmodern  
9 theories fail to provide meaningful opposition to capitalist globalization and  
10 to recent U.S. economic policies. In so doing, he makes explicit some of the  
11 stakes in counterattacks from the left against the postmodernist rejection of  
12 class as a foundational concept. Alex Juhasz works back and forth between  
13 personal narrative and a Marxist analysis of praxis in cinema and media  
14 studies to argue for a revived emphasis on social change in interdisciplin-  
15 ary fields. By focusing on histories both personal and transnational of the  
16 emergence in the academy of cinema studies, queer studies, and women's  
17 studies, Juhasz recovers a leftist tradition of activism linking academic and  
18 cultural production with social justice.

19 Joe Parker takes up the question of refusals of the domestication of  
20 both disciplinary and interdisciplinary academic work by critically exam-  
21 ining the writing, teaching, and other embodied practices of Michel Fou-  
22 cault, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Parker finds  
23 promising avenues for dedisciplining academic work in the reconstitution  
24 of the power effects of knowledge through building horizontal solidarities  
25 disrupted by the modern power/knowledge regime, in the exploration of  
26 ways the body may resist docility, and in work against the grain of the  
27 modern general distributional economy of bodies (prisoners, women factory  
28 workers, the subaltern).

29 In the final paper of this section, Mike Soldatenko documents how the  
30 internal colonialist model influential in the early years of Chicano studies  
31 became an important template for activist leftist research, only to fall prey  
32 to the internal colonialism of interdisciplinary fields, including Chicano  
33 studies itself. Interdisciplinarity promised an epistemological revolution  
34 within the academy and a departure from the problematic heritage of the  
35 social science and humanities disciplines. Yet it failed to recognize how  
36 its own inevitable disciplinary practices ultimately would work to manage  
37 Chicano studies as part of the hidden curriculum.

38 The final section reminds practitioners of interdisciplinarity that there  
39 are numerous pitfalls in attempts to render social justice central to academic  
40  
41

and social movement practices. Robyn Wiegman suggests that the turn to the particular, the embodied, and the local has not been a successful strategy for those who would interrogate whiteness. Based on a reading of canonical works in critical whiteness studies and of *Forrest Gump*'s appropriation of racialized U.S. history, Wiegman outlines how particularity is not the opposite of the universal. Instead, it is the site that affords white power its historical and political elasticity, the site for the emergence of histories and inequalities of racial asymmetries and oppressions. By illuminating how antiracist whiteness is constructed through analogies with the injury and minoritization of racialized minorities in ways that reinscribe the unified, masculinist humanist subject, Wiegman suggests that particularism in itself is insufficient for anti-racism.

Lindon Barrett argues that African American studies privileges the starkest symptomatic drives of the insistent, mass violence by which Western modernity reiterates itself, and documents that violence through an analysis of the historical role of race in modern Western commodity fetishism. Through a careful critique of the ways in which the rationalizing of "the oppression of people of color" reiterates modern Western subjectivity, Barrett draws on Slavoj Žižek to constitute a more unruly African American studies in which desire and the subject may become recalcitrant to being mapped by the administrative and intellectual taxonomies of the academy and yet still constitute communities of social justice.

Robert DeChaine works between border studies and communication studies to critique the turn towards borderlessness in postmodern figurations, taking for his central case study the medical humanitarian group *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) and the *sans frontiérisme* (without borders) movement it has spawned. Critical of that organization's universalist assumption of a human that preexists the political, DeChaine follows political geographers and others in arguing for the presence of the political in all constitutions of spatial relations. Fostered by postmodern scholarship, *sans frontiérisme*'s affect-charged challenge to difference can also be read as a mode of discipline that, in the name of humanity, insists that all space be available to the homogenizing reach of culturally specific norms.

Leila Neti's comparison of black internationalism in the first half of the twentieth century with contemporary interdisciplinary academic movements suggests the need for academics to accommodate diverse sites of knowledge production within a coherent analytic structure that creates contact points while also allowing for necessary spaces of difference. Neti's analysis attends to the risk of working with stable categories of discipline

1 and nation even while attempting to displace the power dynamics of center  
2 and periphery that they install. By contrasting W. E. B. Du Bois's vision  
3 for global solidarity with the cosmopolitanism of Kwame Anthony Appiah,  
4 Bruce Robbins, and others, she argues that examinations of violence, power,  
5 and race must avoid normalizing universalisms in favor of productive soli-  
6 darities. Neti looks to African American involvement in global anticolonial  
7 causes as offering a possible resolution to the debate about universalism  
8 and particularism that perplexes social justice movements. That model of  
9 dialogue within difference, she suggests, might also serve interdisciplinary  
10 endeavors as they attempt to create viable points of contact across episte-  
11 mological borders.

12 The successful conservative counteroffensive on the advances made  
13 by progressive social movements inside and outside the academy comes  
14 under scrutiny by Ellen Messer-Davidow. Messer-Davidow takes as her  
15 main case study retrenchments in accessibility to higher education for racial  
16 minorities, single parents, and low- to middle-income students that have  
17 weakened egalitarian claims to social justice. Arguing that some research  
18 must be written for deployment in public and policy-making arenas, Messer-  
19 Davidow demands accountability to social justice concerns from academics,  
20 and demonstrates that real-world problems are complicated cross-sector  
21 phenomena that must be understood through an interdisciplinary or mul-  
22 tidisciplinary approach.

23 Miranda Joseph's account of one attempt to defend interdisciplinary  
24 programs in a time of shrinking university budgets offers a cautionary tale  
25 of the increasing commodification of scholarship. Even fields such as cul-  
26 tural studies, founded on the critique of commodification, find themselves  
27 in danger of being domesticated as interdisciplinarity becomes a rubric  
28 for collaboration across the nonprofit/for-profit border, in a manner that  
29 renders cross-sector collaboration little more than a business model. Mean-  
30 while, accounting mechanisms used to measure the performance and hence  
31 the value of academic programs cannot accommodate the questioning of  
32 epistemological foundations that does not translate easily into "real world"  
33 (which too often means revenue producing) applications. Nevertheless,  
34 Joseph maintains that because scholars do not have the luxury of believing  
35 themselves distanced from the market, we must attempt to shape the terms  
36 on which our work is counted and translated.

37 In an afterword inspired by the essays, Ranu Samantrai reflects on  
38 the indeterminate relation between scholarship and activism. Using as her  
39 example one of the many recent controversies about cultural expressions that  
40  
41

exacerbate tensions between majority and minority constituencies, she notes 1  
 that scholarship and activism each fails to provide the certainty needed by 2  
 each other: Scholarship cannot stabilize the truth on which activism relies, 3  
 whereas activism is not able to orient scholarship on a clear course between 4  
 incommensurate claims for justice. Instead of seeking their unification, she 5  
 suggests that their common hope of a good society is served best when 6  
 each functions as a challenge to the other, in a collaboration grounded in 7  
 mutual provocation. 8

Taken together, the papers of *Interdisciplinarity and Social Justice* render 9  
 visible the violences, exclusions, power differentials, and occluded objects of 10  
 knowledge that disciplinary and many interdisciplinary knowledge practices 11  
 refuse to acknowledge. As the crisis of legitimacy for the modern academy 12  
 continues apace, its claim to neutrality and the objectivity of Enlightenment- 13  
 derived forms of science seems decreasingly convincing amidst the ongo- 14  
 ing proliferation and promiscuity of interdisciplinary knowledge practices. 15  
 The demand for accountability to the changing epistemological landscape, 16  
 whether aimed at disciplines or interdisciplinary fields, works against the 17  
 domestication of knowledge that inevitably accompanies institutional suc- 18  
 cess. For interdisciplinary methods that continue to rely on an objectivity 19  
 supporting critical analysis of both society and the academy, that demand 20  
 may come from critics of modern epistemes who caution against the of risk 21  
 of installing universalisms that subtly reinforce unequal power relations. 22  
 Or, for interdisciplinary practices that develop new protocols for logic and 23  
 epistemology, new constitutions of social relations, and new conceptions of 24  
 justice, the demand may come from critics who point out a certain failure 25  
 to engage with pragmatic and even urgent needs in what some see as the 26  
 "real." Each of the papers here asks that moves toward interdisciplinarity 27  
 in the academy and in social movements be accountable to that once-stable, 28  
 now less-easily-assumed, less-readily-knowable, and perhaps ever-elusive 29  
 criterion of social justice. How will we respond? 30

### Notes

1. We have in mind such indictments of the disciplines as the argument 35  
 that the schemas for racial and gender hierarchies that confirmed the lesser civi- 36  
 lizational status of non-Europeans, women, and the working class came from the 37  
 human sciences. But for arguments against the claim that disciplines are complicit 38  
 in inequalitarian social relations, see, among many others, Anderson and Valente. 39

40



1           2. One measure of the debate about the necessarily compromised politics of  
2 the process of achieving “success” in the academy (departmental status with tenure  
3 lines, journals, professional associations, and so forth) is the proliferation of terms  
4 naming the phenomena of interdisciplinarity. Some object to “interdisciplinary”  
5 because it suggests innovation limited to interaction between already established  
6 disciplines; indeed, we prefer “multidisciplinary” as the more accurate name for  
7 that phenomenon. Some opt for “transdisciplinary,” “postdisciplinary,” or even  
8 “antidisciplinary” to reject the implication that fields such as cultural studies or  
9 women’s studies have become little more than one more domesticated academic  
10 endeavor among already accepted disciplines. We prefer to reserve “interdisciplin-  
11 ary” for those fields producing new forms of knowledge that move both education  
12 and social movements towards greater social justice. For further discussion of the  
13 terms, see Bowman, Moran, Newell, and Thompson-Klein, among others.

14           3. Although Klein notes the sudden increases in funding for such in the  
15 1960s and 1970s, she is unable to explain their causes or to explain the skyrocket-  
16 ing interest in extradisciplinary research (*Interdisciplinarity* 35–37). Her reading of  
17 the critiques of the modern academy by ethnic studies and feminist critics reduces  
18 those critiques to calls for pluralism without responding to the significant criticisms  
19 of educational institutions that they formulated (95).

20           4. Although signs of success of progressive student movements, such changes  
21 were also intended, in the words of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and  
22 Development (OECD), to “de-fuse the student rebellion” (Michaud et al. 12).

23           5. As Soldatenko argues in the present volume, the precise link between  
24 the rejection of disciplinary knowledge practices and claims of interdisciplinarity  
25 was not always carefully articulated, but the link was widely argued and led to  
26 important institutional changes in the academy.

27           6. To our regret, the perspectives of this important group are missing from  
28 the current collection.

29           7. We are aware of the objection that the reliance on theory indicates the  
30 persistence of androcentrism, class elitism, and Eurocentrism or white supremacy,  
31 because much of what counts as theory draws on the philosophical writings of  
32 economically privileged white males of Europe and many of its practitioners are  
33 well educated, economically privileged whites, or economically privileged members  
34 of other racial groups (hooks, “Cultural Studies” 128–33; “Postmodern Blackness”;  
35 Cook-Lynn 124–25; Smith 14, 28–40). Such objections often overlook the well-known  
36 ways in which theory has been used to attack racism (Delgado; Donaldson; Dyer;  
37 Gilroy), androcentrism (Boxer; Berger, Wallis, and Watson; Fraser), class elitism  
38 (Marx; Spivak, “Subaltern”), and Eurocentrism itself (Cixous and Clément 70–71;  
39 Derrida, “White” 213; R. Young). These critiques also often assume that theory can  
40 be clearly distinguished from activism or practice, assumptions that Marx and many  
41 others who combined theory and practice would reject. The prominence of theory  
in interdisciplinary scholarship may also be understood within a Eurocentric history

of the academy as a return to the central role of critique in knowledge protocols and social justice work. If philosophy provided the synthesizing, critical frame for the European and classical models of knowledge and education, if only for male social elites, theory would seem to be a likely replacement candidate for those who wish to see knowledge production and social practice held accountable by some synthesizing critique (Zavarzadeh; Wiegman, "Progress of Gender" 120–21, 108, 127; Spivak, *Critique*; Ransom). Moreover, much theory in interdisciplinary fields takes as its explicit objective the imperative to reach well beyond its modern European limits in order to reconstitute, on multiple fronts, the limits of critique.

8. Similar practices of indeterminacy have been influential in critical legal studies (Derrida, "Force of Law"; Dalton), and in numerous other interdisciplinary fields.

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