Introduction: Interdisciplinary Scholarship in a “Post-Racial” Age

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Scholars of the Humanities and Social Sciences need little reminder of the contributions made by interdisciplinary approaches. Except for perhaps a few die-hard disciplinarians who refuse to take even the smallest linguistic turn, or somehow manage to ignore ethnic studies or gender studies, most scholars, even those critical of the practice, by now realize the invigorating effects of trans-disciplinary borrowing on well-trodden scholarly paths. Most academics who identify with the “traditional” disciplines are aware, as Geoff Eley is (in the case of history) that:

know-nothing rejectionism will never actually manage to keep the intrusions of “theory” at bay...if we want to keep history [for which could be read “anthropology,” “sociology,” “English,” etc.] alive and active, we should be welcoming this cross-border traffic rather than trying to close it down. Instead of policing the borderlands “in defense of history,” we should be bringing history’s defenses down. (192)

That interdisciplinarity opens up new fields of study, while sharpening our analytical focus and increasing our methodological capabilities with which we address those fields, is old news. I need not spend more time here explaining its worth. Most have heeded Eley’s call, as well as those made by scholars in various different fields and departments. The “know-nothings” decrease in number. Few still see any input from outside as an “intrusion.”

So why create a journal that focuses so much on interdisciplinarity itself? Trans-Scripts was born not so much from a belief that scholars fail to cross disciplinary lines in the present as from an awareness of what may come in the future. If academics need few reminders of interdisciplinarity’s value, they need even fewer of the implications for scholarship heralded by the current financial crisis. As external and interdepartmental funding pools evaporate, scholars quite understandably turn inwards to their departments. Programs that incorporate several disciplines, often lacking the “marketability” and centralized organization

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of more established departments, are usually among the first to be “defunded” when cuts occur. Furthermore, it is difficult to find a cross-listed class – sites in which many graduate students maintain regular conversations with scholars of different training – when fewer classes are running. When some administrators see little point to the Humanities at all, it is unsurprising that an increasing tone of resignation permeates discussion of interdisciplinary study among Humanities scholars. Also, when academia increasingly adopts a “publish or perish” attitude, when scholars must look to tenure before teaching, there are fewer opportunities for faculty and graduate students to cooperate beyond the traditional advisor-student relationship.

A further challenge has arisen. A marked political shift to the right has shown just how fragile the academic gains made in recent political struggles have become. As ethnic studies is being increasingly forced to prove not just its financial worth but its national loyalty and political neutrality, further avenues of study for interdisciplinary study will likely be closed off. If precedents being set in Arizona are replicated elsewhere, the next generation of scholars might not benefit from the kinds of programs that have often been on the cutting edge of critical inquiry.

Trans-Scripts is a product of this moment, and was created in response to it. It would be foolish to claim that it offers solutions to the problems facing interdisciplinarians, but it does nonetheless fill a small part of a gap that is widening in academia. It provides students and faculty alike with a platform for interdisciplinary conversations. It is certainly no substitute for the kind of deep learning required to master a second (or even a first) discipline. Gender theorist Joan Scott reminds us that “interdisciplinary borrowing [is] a difficult and risky business, requiring that we respect high standards of scholarship as we acquire new ways of analyzing and thinking.” While the Trans of our title evokes a desire to maintain cross-disciplinary connections, the Scripts acknowledges the performative nature of disciplinary rigor; the need to become fluent in new theoretical and methodological languages. If we follow Scott’s next assertion “that one earns the right to criticize work in another field only by the hard effort of learning that field” (438), it is hoped that Trans-Scripts might be the first step for some scholars in that process. For those willing to negotiate the risks, Trans-Scripts offers an opportunity. It gives an Anthropologist, for example, the chance

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1 For a particularly adept and impassioned critique of cuts to the Humanities written by a scientist, see Gregory A. Petsko’s “A Faustian Bargain: An Open Letter to George M. Philip, President of the State University of New York At Albany” in Genome Biology at http://genomebiology.com/2010/11/10/138.

to read how a Political Scientist, or Historian, or Literary Theorist addresses a similar problem. By bringing academics of different scholarly proclivities into conversation with one another about a single broad topic – in this instance, “race” – this publication offers a new starting point. More than provide solutions, it seeks to familiarize scholars with a new set of questions, new methods, and a new sense of self-awareness with which they can advance their own research. By changing the theme with every issue, and Editor-in-Chief along with it, the focus remains always on interdisciplinarity itself, rather than a particular issue or discipline.

The journal also provides a non-classroom forum in which faculty and students can discuss issues with one another. Not only has it allowed graduate student to place their work alongside recognized scholars – such as Hortense Spillers, Joy James, Frank Dikötter, Clarence Lang, Elizabeth Abel, and Dan Cohn-Sherbok – the journal itself could not have been published without the help of faculty advisors and reviewers at various institutions. Its existence is testament to the fact that UC Irvine still values student-faculty cooperation, and as such Trans-Scripts is offered as an example for other settings, as well as a reminder of why already existing relationships across generations must be maintained. Moreover, it seeks to do all this on a minimal budget. An online format and the generous will of students and faculty alike proves that there is room for continued interdisciplinary study in the face of economic crisis.

The theme of the first issue, “Race: Theories, Identities, Intersections, Histories, and the ‘Post-Racial’ Society,” is no less a product of the moment than the format is. The political leanings that currently imperil ethnic studies simultaneously guide discourse on race both within and without academia. Again, academics need little reminder of how discussions in the US alone of social issues, whether ethnic studies, midterm election candidates, presidential policy, immigration, or the site of a mosque (to name but a few examples), have become increasingly hysterical and racialized. And yet this comes at the very moment, we are told, that we have entered the realm of the “post-racial.” This paradox might be easily dismissed. Most people, academics or not, see enough daily evidence to know that the post-racial is a fallacy. But while we can dismiss the validity of the idea, we cannot, and must not, so easily dismiss the power that the idea carries, or the reason for its genesis. One of the main benefits of the cultural turn, a truly interdisciplinary movement, has been the tendency among scholars towards self-reflection. Stuart Hall, when reminiscing about the establishment of the interdisciplinary “Birmingham School” of cultural studies, claims that its pedagogical stance “always insisted that intellectuals themselves take responsibility for how the knowledge they produce is then transmitted into society; that they can’t wash their hands of the game of translating knowledge
into the practice of culture” (18). This self-reflective tendency must be applied to current discussions of the post-racial, and this is something of which some scholars do need reminding. We cannot simply dismiss ideas of the post-racial, and pat ourselves on the back for doing so. We must take responsibility for the knowledge we create, and that includes critiques of current debates on race. We need to ask deeper questions: why has the idea of the post-racial gained so much cultural currency, despite its seemingly obvious flaws? What issues lose attention to it? And most importantly, who benefits, and how, from the telling?

Some of the issue’s contributors take up this work. In her discussion of the right wing-induced racial taboo that constrains the Obama administration, Elizabeth Abel asks whether “critical intervention domesticate[s] these deceptive practices, according them the trappings of a legitimate subject?” (13) Reflecting on a recent New York Times article that, like its subjects, celebrates racial hybridity as a liberating force (a distinctly post-racial celebration), Hortense Spillers warns us that “racial ambiguity is itself a new-world thematic,” the invocation of which inadvertently “take[s] us backward into the latest avatar of the reification of race” (2, 3). Again the need for responsible discussion is paramount. Furthermore, Muriam Davis points out that the post-racial discursive paradigm is not solely the domain of the Obama era US. In her analysis of racialized discussions of Islam, Davis expands the category of “post-racial” geographically to France and Algeria, and temporally back to the nineteenth century, arguing convincingly that “the elision inherent in the ‘post-racial’ also applies to religious categories and has deeply colonial roots” (17). If we view the concept of the post-racial as a cynical tactic that circumscribes criticism of racism, as Abel does, its transnational plasticity goes some way to supporting Frank Dikötter’s analysis of racism as a simultaneously global and particular phenomenon; a phenomenon that must be investigated through “an ‘interactive model’ that emphasises the worldviews constructed by local historical agents, analysing the complex cognitive, social, and political dimensions” (34). This attention to local particularity in itself justifies a publication that allows comparison of race and racism in British imperial policy, US treatment of Native Americans, Jewish reaction to antisemitism in a variety of historical and geographical arena, postcolonial African literature, and the transnational circulation of republican ideology based on racial exclusion.

Trans-Scripts acknowledges that past examples might shed light on present concerns. An historical approach indeed might help us understand the genesis of the idea, but this study must be conducted responsibly. We might better understand what silences the post-racial imposes if we consider the very ways in previous which discussions of race have been negatively configured by the (often antiracist) ideals that informed them. Just as Hall’s work asks us to take that
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responsibility, a plethora of brilliant scholarship similarly calls for historically informed self-reflection. Saidiya Hartman has convincingly argued against the simple domination vs. resistance; master vs. slave; violent vs. passive narrative, pointing out that “it was often the case that benevolent correctives and declarations of slave humanity intensified brutal exercise of power upon the captive body rather than ameliorating the chattel condition.” So that when we assume a sympathetic stance, we must ask: “Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance?” (3-4). As such, we need a more nuanced history of race. We must be self-aware in our study of racism not only that subjection was often couched as compassion, but that our own assumptions of compassion towards historical subjects might replicate certain acts of violence. In this issue, Luke Reader examines Leonard Woolf’s imperial policy, that even when aimed at benevolence, “developed a racial dynamic that identified difference as a source of deficiency amongst the inhabitants of Britain’s foreign possessions, creating a set of problems that only continued intervention by colonial experts could solve” (104). His essay thus signals:

an opportunity to dismantle an historiographical assumption that associates left-wing thought with opposition to empire, and right-wing ideology as celebrative of imperialism. In a nation saturated by empire, all cultural and social transactions had imperial implications, no matter whether the ideology that one subscribed to was of the right or the left. (124)

Thomas Genova also reinforces Hartman’s argument in his analysis of an early nineteenth-century Cuban novel. He reveals how a “seemingly egalitarian vision of republicanism based on civic virtue – that is, the orientation of one’s energies towards the good of the nation – but that that vision is complicated by the way that the text understands ‘virtue’ to exclude certain groups, particularly Afro-Hispanics, from public life” (55). Oppression was built into the very language of freedom.

Walter Johnson stages a self-aware intervention similar to Hartman.³ His article in the Journal of Social History on the “agency” of antebellum slaves contends that when it is considered solely as resistance, “the term ‘agency’….smuggles a notion of the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood,

³ It is worth noting that both Hartman and Johnson are scholars of “traditional” disciplines who brilliant employ skills from outside their original training. It seems that a scholar develops a better grasp of the dangers of limitations of one’s training when she/he views it from a distance.
with its emphasis on independence and choice, right into the middle of a conversation about slavery against which that supposedly natural (at least for white men) condition was originally defined” (115). If we conflate agency with resistance, we discount the humanity of those that could not resist, while trivializing the acts of resistance, whether overt or covert, that did occur. In the context of the US, Kelli Mosteller follows Johnson’s lead by rejecting traditional views that the Potawatomi Citizen Band’s decision to own private land symbolizes a failure to exhibit agency:

Because the Citizen Band’s method of activism did not take the form of traditional forthright resistance…their actions were not seen, nor have they been interpreted, as expressions of agency or a struggle for security. Rather, policymakers and historians have misinterpreted the actions of the Citizen Band as attempts either to mimic whites or to submit to government authority. Thus, it is easy to overlook the fact that the Citizen Band consciously made a choice…(83)

These articles offer some way to understand how the history of racial oppression has been couched in a language of egalitarianism. Thus, when we hear claims of such egalitarianism today, we must realize that a more sinister power is likely at work.

But where do we go now? How do we address current issues? How do we construct identities in the light of this power? Articles in Trans-Scripts speak to these questions too. Elizabeth Farfán-Santos, in a piece that one might connect to recent US debates on reparations, argues “that the discrimination and violence that the decedents of quilombos [self-identified descendants of slaves] are facing today emerges from the very title they have chosen to adopt, and the political rhetoric that has been attached to it in the name of ‘reparations’” (136). Interviews the author conducts with those experiencing such difficulties offers an insight into the power of fieldwork to capture the human aspect that Hartman fears is lost in studies of slavery and racial oppression.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok sees one possible positive outcome to racism. In his analysis of Jew-hatred, he shows that it has had the power to reinforce community networks. While “antisemitism is an evil” and “should be resisted whatever its form…we need to acknowledge its paradoxical power to renew and enrich Jewish life” (52). Darnell Moore raises questions of how black and queer identities can be reconciled without undue primacy being accorded to one, and suggests that in fact the discursive tendency of queer theorists must engage with activists: “Black Struggle cannot exist as a theoretical concept only, but it must be performed so that social change can be actualized” (167). Sybille Nyeck offers an alternative, seeing literature as a source for political change because it “allows
us to understand the practical and rhetorical implications of plurality and the
correlations between sexualized identities, race, gender, and citizenship beyond
mere coexistence” (177).

It is fitting that a journal created in a politically charged moment should end,
as it began, with two pieces that call for continued political awareness and (self-
reflective) compassionate activism. Clarence Lang offers a brilliant defense of the
power of the humanities to understand social inequality. He points out that
things we study, “events that have occurred in the past…are never fixed, leaving
the past unsettled (206). Indeed, “critical engagement with the humanities serves
to rescue the history of black freedom struggle from the oversimplified
narrative”: we must maintain the humanities, if we are to maintain an activist
tradition (207). Joy James too, argues for a less sanitized version of history: one
that uses the examples of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army as
well as that of Martin Luther King. We need a more holistic set of historical and
theoretical precedents. We need to learn from, and give credit to, those who, like
unfairly imprisoned activists, “cannot be easily interwoven into our everyday
history,” but must be nonetheless (218).

Trans-Scripts is one way in which these histories, theories, and identities might
be conveyed and understood. It offers new methods, new subjects, as well as a
reinforcement of the active good research in the Humanities and Social Sciences
can create. It is a forum in which graduate students and faculty can both
confront the challenges of the post-racial, the shift to the right, and the
economic crisis, through interdisciplinary communication and cooperation.
Works Cited


