Editorial

Inter/Trans/Post-Disciplinarity: Explorations of Encounters Across Disciplines

> "What is needed are respectful engagements with different disciplinary practices, not ... portrayals that make caricatures of another discipline from some position outside it."
> - Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

As new editors of the GJSS, we would like to use this editorial not only to introduce ourselves and to discuss the themes of the current issue, but also to take the opportunity provided with a change in editorial leadership to provide a retrospective of sorts. In the course of this introduction to the first issue of the new decade, then, we will explore: Where has the GJSS been? Where is it today? Where is it going? In so doing, we hope to provide the reader with an overview of some of the important and reoccurring themes of the journal, including the current issue on the broad topic of interdisciplinary methods and methodologies.

Interdisciplinary Foundations

In 2004, frustrated by the lack of institutional space for interdisciplinary exploration, graduate students at several universities formed the GJSS 'out of the conviction that different tools for the acquisition of knowledge should be confronted, compared and brought together in order to analyse the most complex aspects of our social reality' (Leonelli 2004: iii). Six years on, the GJSS continues to work with this conviction, as it explores the transformatory implications of interdisciplinary dialogues, work and research on issues as wide-ranging as environmental policy, gender and mental health issues, and translation practices (of both the language and disciplinary variety) in Europe and beyond. The journal has covered the disciplines that are 'inherently' interdisciplinary (gender studies, queer studies and genomics) as well as the more traditional disciplines to which an interdisciplinary focus is more challenging (criminology, economics and biology).

Over the course of the six years of GJSS dialogue it has become

Graduate Journal of Social Sicence June 2010, Vol. 7, Issue 1
 ISSN: 1572-3763

clear that when we are talking about inter-/trans-/post-disciplinary methodologies, we are not only talking about speaking across languages, but also through and among ontological and epistemological foundations (Bruusgaard et al, this issue; Peireria et al, 2009). We are concerned with reflecting upon the political and social implications of knowledge production and "its relations to action and social change" Liinason and van der Tuin, 2007: 1). We are recognizing the need for a "transfer from dichotomizations such as disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity, empirical/theoretical as well as quantitative/qualitative" into a thematic organization of research and exploration (Liinason and van der Tuin, 2007: 8). And we are drawing from an understanding that, at its very root, inter-/trans-/post-disciplinary practice is about the "willingness to express a plurality of viewpoints, to mediate between different perspectives in a context-sensitive and overtly goal-directed way" (Leonelli, 2005: 1). If we take these gestures to their ultimate conclusion, we are talking about alliance politics – building alliances across barriers. In working with and across such boundaries through a recognition of what distinct standpoints have to offer, the GJSS is not masking the chasms that lie between them. Instead, the goal is to acknowledge how those divisions may become sites for productive inter-/trans-/post-disciplinary dialogue; to challenge the secluding tendencies of traditional academic practice by critically addressing the possible difficulties or incongruities that turned them so in the first place; embracing those tensions as sites of potential opportunities and correspondences.

Challenges and Charms: Entering the Second Decade of Interdisciplinary Investigation

We open the issue with Marina Franchi's review of the seminar, "Interdisciplinarity: Desire and Dilemma in Contemporary European Gender Studies." The seminar, held at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics, featured several up-and-coming academics in the field of European Gender Studies, including former GJSS editor Mia Liinason. The questions posed and themes explored at the seminar on the ongoing debates around the meanings and practices of interdisciplinarity echo those posed by this and former issues of the GJSS: Is there a limit to interdisciplinarity? What are the political and social implications of interdisciplinary practice? How can the (feminist) objectives of interdisciplinarity in gender studies be recognized in today's (neo-liberal) political climate? Beyond these important questions, the review also reminds us of the need to critically examine the ways in which we label "interdisciplinary" practice, as the panellists pointed out one of the

"paradoxes" of interdisciplinarity in its use as a "buzzword" in European higher education policy; a rhetorical integration which, in practice, can cement powerful divisions. Franchi relates such concerns to an essay by Sabine Hark in Vol 4 (2) of the GJSS, viewing the use of inter- or transdisciplinarity as a "magic sign" or "empty signifier" whose meaning is dictated according to positionality and power of interdisciplinarity in the academic setting (Hark, 2007). The review which commends the challenging framework of the conference therefore suggests a pressing and persistent need in academia to similarly engage and question the terms through in which interdisciplinarity is being debated and put to practice.

In the first essay of the issue, Delia Dumitrica explores the power struggles inherent in the very practice of choosing a methodology as a graduate student, in "Choosing Methods, Negotiating Legitimacy: A metalogue on autoethnography." The innovative use of the nascent method of auto-ethnography allows Dumitrica to present a "metalogue" between a graduate student and advisor in which she explains the importance of auto-ethnography as an interdisciplinary practice. Here, Dumitrica's work draws important links between method and writing, as it highlights how concerns with writing form and style, including language of dialogue and reflexivity become part of the overall method. Further, in exploring academic power through the intersections of disciplines, departments, universities, and individuals, Dumitrica marks the method of "autoethnography as a site of struggle for and against power in terms of knowledge production" (Dumitrica, this issue), and highlights the complexities, difficulties and possibilities of engaging with interdisciplinarity.

Exploring the complexities, difficulties and possibilities of interdisciplinary research is the goal of Emily Bruusgaard, Paula Pinto, Jennifer Swindle, and Satomi Yoshino's article, "'Are we all on the same page?' The Challenges and Charms of Collaboration on a Journey through Interdisciplinarity." A reflection on the practice of interdisciplinarity research in a group setting, Bruusgaard et al use their experience in a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded project as "a valuable starting point for the production of knowledge about theories and concepts, as well as about the social practices and relations that we study" (Peiria et al, 2009: 4), much like the editors and contributors of the last GJSS Special Issue, *Lost (and Found) in Translation*, who looked beyond viewing issues of translation (including translation across disciplines) as a "problem to be solved." The authors, hailing from different disciplines themselves (Human Ecology, Nursing, Sociology and English), transform their experi-

ences into "lessons learned" that would be valuable in embarking on any project that seeks to take interdisciplinarity seriously. Among other aspects necessary for engagement across disciplines, Bruusgaard et al cite the acknowledgement and acceptance of differences "from the outset" as crucial to an interdisciplinary effort built on "mutual trust and respect." This trust and respect is called for by Karen Barad (see the opening quote to this editorial), and is akin to that called for by Donna Haraway, in her concept of "situated knowledges" (1988) and her more recently- elaborated practice of "diffraction" (1997; 2008).

These authors are important to mention here not only for their dedication to engaging across disciplines with "mutual trust and respect", but because they are both dedicated to broadening interdisciplinary work beyond the traditional focus in the social sciences and humanities and into the natural sciences, something that Bruusgaard et al note was lacking in their own engagement, as all project team members were from the humanities and social sciences. Barad (2007: 93) offers transdisciplinarity as a possible avenue to achieve a more profound interaction between disciplines, suggesting that "unlike multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches, a transdisciplinary approach 'does not merely draw from an array of disciplines but rather inquires into the histories of the organization of knowledges and their functions in the formation of subjectivities… mak[ing] visible and put[ting] into crisis the structural links between the disciplining of knowledge and larger social arrangements' [citing Hennessy 1993: 12]". Similarly, Bruusgaard et al's understanding of transdiscipinarity is that it transcends the traditional boundaries of interdisciplinarity by putting the "humanities into a natural, social and health sciences context" and vice versa. And, while the authors close by noting that such an element was not present in their own project, they agree that this is something that they aspire to in future cross-disciplinary interactions.

Working in the tradition of Haraway and other feminist science scholars (notably Londa Schiebinger), Rachel O'Donnell's essay "Imperial Plants: Modern Science, Plant Classification and European Voyages of Discovery" offers an interdisciplinary review of literature on botanical classification and European colonialism. In so doing, O'Donnell explores the ways in which science, nature, and gender were co-constituted during the height of European colonialism. O'Donnell's review makes clear that, in exposing the connections between politics and science, what is at stake is nothing less than the power to create knowledge (and who has it and who does not). Further, O'Donnell argues that recognizing such connections is not only historically important, but critical "in light of

contemporary biotechnological efforts and international development practice" (O'Donnell, this issue).

The "charms and challenges" of interdisciplinarity are taken up in four book reviews that close out the issue, expertly edited by Katherine Harrison. Hilde Jakobsen reviews Monique Hennink's *International focus group research: a handbook for the health and social sciences* (2007), providing a useful overview of the ways in which focus groups can be used to their potential, while noting some of the method's shortcomings. The next two reviews take a look at recent work from a more transdisciplinary approach. First, reviewing Teresa Ortiz Gómez's *Medicina, historia y género. 130 años de investigación feminista* (Medicine, history and gender: 130 years of feminist research) (2006), Agata Ignaciuk offers a review of the work of "one of the pioneers in applying and teaching feminist interdisciplinary methodology in the field of history of medicine and science in the Spanish context." Second, Beatriz Revelles Benavente reviews Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), offering readers a brief glimpse into the complex work of the feminist physicist philosopher and examining the ways Barad's work has been taken up in new materialist theory. Finally, Francois Briatte's review of Jonathon W. Moses and Torbjørn Knutsen's, *Ways of Knowing. Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research* (2007), focuses on the distinctive historical approach to methodological inquiry advanced by this text. Specifically, it underscores the relevance of tracing the intellectual and philosophical lineage of social science disciplines, and their associated methodologies, in order to situate the current divisions, connections and debates emanating from them.

Beyond Interdisciplinarity?

As the founding editor of GJSS stated six years ago, "Discourse over interdisciplinarity is thus an essential, if largely unrecognised, part of academic life, insofar as it encourages the necessary flexibility of boundaries and connections among disciplines" (Leonelli 2004: iii). As we have seen in this and past issues, the boundaries between disciplines are indeed unclear. This issue continues to blur the remaining boundaries, asking: how can we make cross-disciplinary encounters more productive? What new methods might lend themselves more readily to cross-disciplinary engagement? And finally, should we move past "interdisciplinarity" into a "trans" or "post" disciplinary world?

Bruusgaard et al. conclude their essay by stating that "we do not yet consider ourselves to be transdisciplinary, but we do believe that this is the path on which we are headed."

Like the members of the SSHRC team, we hope this issue of the GJSS takes us further along on our voyage toward this goal. We also want to acknowledge that there is no clear path on this road, and that we might not even want to move toward yet another category – even one as seemingly flexible as "transdisciplinarity." Ultimately, however, we are eager to continue toward a place where all interactions across disciplines have as their base "mutual trust and respect." We open this issue, then, with the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, one border-crosser who has inspired us both:

> *Caminante, no hay puentes,*
> *se hacen puentes al andar.*
>
> (Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank both the editorial board and the reviewers. We are indebted to the entire GJSS Editorial team for their commitment, dedication and hard work. We also offer enormous gratitude to the anonymous student reviewers and academic reviewers, who offer their time and energy to help ensure that articles submitted to the GJSS are reviewed to the highest standard. Gwendolyn would like to acknowledge Max Tremblay, at the New School for Social Research in New York, and the other members of the Spring 2010 feminist theory reading group of which she was a part, and whose discussions of Donna Haraway's and Karen Barad's work led to many fruitful and animated conversations on ways in which the "hard" and "soft" sciences can better "intra-act" with one another. Both Melissa and Gwendolyn thank the London School of Economics, not only for being a wonderful institutional home, but for offering institutional support for the journal by hosting the editorial email account and providing many other small but important day-to-day necessities. Last, but certainly not least, we thank our former editor, Mia Liinason for her guidance during our initial time as editors here at the GJSS. We are inspired by the work of Mia and the other GJSS members who have come before us and we hope that we can continue on in the tradition that has made the GJSS a home for graduate students who seek to critically engage with inter/trans (or post!) disciplinary methodological inquiry in the social sciences. Any editorial mistakes are ours alone.

Gwendolyn Beetham, New York
Melissa Fernández, London
May 2010

References

Barad, K. 2007. *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning.* Durham, NC; London, England: Duke' University Press.

Haraway, D. 1988. Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.

- 1997. *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan(c)_Meets_OncoMouseTM: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge.

- 2008. *When Species Meet.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hark, S. 2007. Magical Sign: On the Politics of Inter- and Transdisciplinarity, *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 4(2)

Leonelli, S. 2004. Introducing the GJSS: Why a graduate journal about interdisciplinary methodology? *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 1(1).

Leonelli, S. 2005. Pluralism and Normativity in Interdisciplinary Research. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 2(1).

Liinason, M. and Van der Tuin, I. 2007. Practising Feminist Interdisciplinarity *Graduate Journal of Social Science,* 4(2).

Pereira, M., Marhia, N., and Scharff, C. 2009. Interrogating Language Difference and Translation in Social Science Research: Towards a Critical and Interdisciplinary Approach*. Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 6(3).