

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 5
Number 2 *Forum Theme 1: Provost Colloquium
on Interdisciplinarity & Forum Theme 2:
Selections from the 3rd Annual College of
Humanities and Fine Arts Graduate Research
Symposium*

Article 16

9-2009

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Marybeth C. Stalp
University of Northern Iowa

Catherine Helen Palczewski
University of Northern Iowa

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Recommended Citation

Stalp, Marybeth C. and Palczewski, Catherine Helen (2009) "An Interdisciplinary Consideration of Marginality," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*: Vol. 5: No. 2, Article 16. Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol5/iss2/16>

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An Interdisciplinary Consideration of Marginality

Marybeth C. Stalp, PhD

Catherine Helen Palczewski, PhD

As the university increases its commitment to interdisciplinary studies, it is imperative that we find productive models of interdisciplinarity in scholarly and creative activities, teaching, and institutional structures. This coauthored essay, written in the spirit of sharing work across disciplines, seeks to participate in the conversation about interdisciplinary scholarship.

Interdisciplinarity in scholarship can be discussed in two ways. First, interdisciplinarity can be enhanced by encouraging people to read across the disciplines. Second, it can be enhanced by encouraging scholarship that is interdisciplinary and multi-methodological. This essay speaks to both of these levels.

First, we should all challenge ourselves to read outside of our research areas within our respective disciplines, to read outside of our narrow disciplines, and finally to incorporate those readings into our own classes and to make clear to students how knowledge construction can occur on multiple levels and by using various methodologies and types of data. For example, it may be easiest to explain what the Humanities can offer to understandings of the human condition by contrasting its offerings to those of the Social Sciences.

Jesse Swan invited us to read together Loïc Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts* (2008). Wacquant is Professor of Sociology at University of California—Berkeley, and Researcher at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne, Paris. Wacquant's work is an example of one book that should be of interest to those who are not sociologists. Grounded solidly within the conversations in Economic and Urban Sociology and informed by world systems theory and using comparative case study as method, this book provides a powerful perspective on contemporary controversies about poverty in the U.S. and France. Wacquant makes use of the case study method to examine comparatively race- and ethnicity-based ghettos in the U.S. (primarily Chicago) and surrounding Paris, France. His research methods are sound and his field sites provide him with rich data—so the statistics, history, and qualitative data provided offer a convincing argument that poverty is not an inherent part of the human condition, but is the foreseeable and preventable result of planned government policies and economic structures.

Wacquant's book provides space for those interested in language and social narratives to participate in conversations about poverty. He repeatedly points to the way commercial media and politicians frame social understandings of poverty through their language choices. However, this is where Wacquant falls short of being an example of interdisciplinary work—for he could be reaching across disciplinary lines rather than



simply within them. His citations, and thus the conversation in which he engages, reference mostly those in sociology, and specifically world systems theorists and Marxists. Thus, in the very places where he could have extended his interdisciplinary hand to communicate with other social scientists and humanities scholars, he instead glosses over the point. He could have expanded his reach by referring to the excellent scholarship on poverty coming out of Women's and Gender Studies (for example, Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon's 1994 *Signs* essay "A Genealogy of 'Dependency': Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State"), Communication Studies (for example, Robert Asen's 2001 book *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*), and philosophy and public affairs (for example, Susan Moller Okin's 2003 review of three different books on development in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, "Poverty, Well-Being, and Gender: What Counts, Who's Heard?"). Wacquant does expand his scope within Sociology, as he brings world systems theory, case study methods, and Marxist analysis to comparative work in poverty and race/ethnicity in a contemporary and international setting, and he does try his hand at micro-level analysis, which can again be viewed as a contribution to the field of world systems theory. Although he still speaks mostly to sociologists, his conversation should be appealing to those in social history, history, political science, and geography, not to mention scholars of race and ethnicity, as he broadly leaves room for others in this particular academic conversation:

...I would underline that the comparison of emerging forms of marginality in the black American ghetto and in the French urban periphery set forth in this book suggests that we need to *revise—but not renounce—class analysis* to take account of the desocialization of wage labour and to better attend to the mutually structuring relations between class, space and that rival principle of vision and division that is ethnicity (denigrated as "race" or not). (Wacquant 2008: 250 emphasis in original)

Different disciplines bring distinct methods, questions and perspectives to topics, and it is helpful to pivot between those different contributions. It may be that the call for interdisciplinarity is a request for those in one discipline to read the works of others, and then introduce to that other discipline what another can offer. Although Wacquant recognizes the need for closer scrutiny of the public discourse about poverty, he does not offer it. However, writing from the perspective of philosophy or rhetoric, other scholars could help sociology work through the power of language to structure human experience, just as social structures delimit it as well. Similarly, the discussions this book generated between Marybeth (a sociologist) and Cate (a rhetorician) were productive and entertaining. To be an exemplar interdisciplinary text, Wacquant would need to read and incorporate the works of those in other fields who are doing similar work—thus providing a multi-faceted way in which to understand race, ethnicity, class, and urban poverty—as well as well thought-out solutions that can be achieved.

Second, we should value and read books that weave together methodologies and disciplines both to see how we can model interdisciplinary work and to vote with our feet



(or eyes) by supporting such work in our bibliographies and in our course reading lists. John Sloop's, Professor of Communication Studies and Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences at Vanderbilt University, *Disciplining Gender* (2004) is one example of such work. Both the subject matter of gender and the method of case study contribute to Sloop's success in presenting a truly interdisciplinary work, reaching widely across disciplinary lines, and at UNI this text reaches across the lines of CSBS, CHFA and the Graduate College to participate in the larger conversation about gender and related research.

Sloop presents the reader with 5 case studies that investigate the boundaries and margins constructed around what society would consider "less acceptable" forms of defining gender as well as gender presentation. He makes use of Judith Butler's emphasis on doing gender (also see in sociology West and Zimmerman's 1987 article, "Doing Gender" in *Gender & Society*) makes use of recent and well known examples surrounding complicated gender identity, including: the John/Joan case, Brandon Teena, k.d. lang's sexual ambiguity, media responses to Janet Reno, and media coverage of Barry Winchell and Calpernia Adams.

Overall, Sloop's work is first readable, second interesting, and third easily relevant to a variety of disciplines. Why is this the case? Turning to the field of Women's and Gender Studies can provide some insight. When UNI and other academic institutions developed Women's Studies programs in the 1970s, the call was for these programs to be interdisciplinary in nature, structure, purpose, operation, etc. That is, rather than be housed in any one discipline, and therefore encouraged to nod one's head constantly to method and subject preference determined by an individual discipline, those scholars working in Women's Studies were able to constantly engage in dialogue and scholarship with those outside one's discipline—and more importantly, they wanted to do so. Gender emerged as a topic of study only 40 some years ago, and the very way in which the field was set up requires its scholars to think broadly and write for a wide audience. Interdisciplinary work is founded within the spirit of second wave feminism in the U.S., in that it recognizes power and structure within academia, and constructs programs that work around such obstacles in positive and productive ways.

In addition, Sloop is a careful scholar who provides a rich description of each gendered case, and problematizes each case, but not in the mainstream manner. That is, he encourages the reader to think beyond the strict binary of male/female and brings to light in a quite readable manner issues related to intersex (Joan/John), transgender (Brandon Teena and Calpernia Adams), ambiguous sexuality (k.d. lang), and heteronormativity as applied to unmarried and childfree straight women (Janet Reno). Sloop accomplishes this by demonstrating how society has responded negatively to each case, and implies throughout the text that most of us in mainstream society do not ourselves present gender in the limiting binary proffered to and required of us from birth. In this, Sloop troubles current gender definitions and their applications in contemporary U.S. society. With



these true-life but on the margin examples, we can see how difficult these categories can be for any of us to adhere to successfully and for any length of time.

As Sloop rightly argues,

rather than . . . acting as an example of ‘gender trouble’ that encouraged reassessment of cultural assumptions about human bodies and sexual desire . . . [the people of the case studies] were more often positioned within the larger body of public argument as aberrations in nature’s plan and hence worked to reify dominant assumptions about human bodies and sexual desire. (2)

In fact, he argues that what could have been moments of transgression are not visible as such, for “they are disciplined in advance to be understood through particular heteronormative understandings of the human condition” (23). It is this prophylactic (rather than recuperative) response that he analyzes and reminds us of when he notes that social change occurs at a pace that is “intergenerational rather than interpersonal” (19).

Our discussion of both books was revealing within an interdisciplinary framework. In reading Wacquant, we found that rather than being truly interdisciplinary, Wacquant was conversing with others within sociology, which, as a discipline, is much like other disciplines in terms of its exclusionary structure and individualized development. However, Sloop, by focusing on gender, is likely to be more interdisciplinary due to the scholarship base of Women’s and Gender Studies.

Our discussions led to wondering, what gets in the way of interdisciplinary work? We arrived at three responses. First, interdisciplinary work, is just that, work—it requires us to stretch outside the disciplines which we have spent much time and effort learning, becoming experts in our fields. Second, interdisciplinary work can be threatening to our own view of our discipline—how is one to learn to see differently the very discipline in which one has “grown up” so to speak? Third, it takes time to read, to translate, and even to find what to read. Of course, there is an easy solution: talk to your colleagues in other departments who can serve as guides to their disciplines.

What are the benefits of interdisciplinary work? They are far more expansive than can be covered in this essay. But, one thing is clear. Interdisciplinarity is necessary and useful. At a recent town hall meeting about the strategic plan, a group focused its discussion on interdisciplinarity. What became clear in the conversation between scientists, social scientists, and folks from the humanities was that we always need to remember that we are not just training workers, but we are educating good citizens and community problem solvers. This is why one scientist declared: “Interdisciplinarity is critical for the survival of the species.” If we are not teaching people to make connections (which is what interdisciplinarity is about), we really may not be able to address the serious complex



problems we are now facing. Interdisciplinarity is part of a paradigm shift -- a new way to think about a new world of increasing interdependency and interconnections.

Perhaps it is as simple as this: if we, as members of an academic community, are not talking to each other across disciplinary lines, if we are not translating what our diverse perspectives offer, then how can we expect students upon graduation to be able to think and talk in a nuanced way about the complex problems they face? How can we expect people to understand another's cultural perspective if we cannot understand each other's academic perspectives? Although specialization may have once been the mantra of doctoral programs in which we were trained, teaching at a comprehensive state university has made one thing clear to the two of us: interdisciplinary understanding is at the heart of a liberal arts education that seeks to educate people to be active, engaged, and thoughtful members of their local, state, national and global communities.

Books Reviewed:

Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture. By John M. Sloop. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. Pp. ix + 189. \$80.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality. By Loïc Wacquant. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008. Pp. 1 + 342. \$79.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.