

## INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES:

### RECIPES FOR ELEPHANT AND RABBIT STEW

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I borrow the culinary metaphor in my title from the well-known anthropologist Clifford Geertz. His elephant and rabbit stew analogy reminds us that cross-disciplinary marriages rarely occur between equals and thus may generate anxiety. Geertz notes, for example, that history has increasingly borrowed subjects and methodologies traditionally associated with anthropology, while anthropology has adopted diachronic analysis that has always been history's domain:

History is threatened (one hears it said) by the anthropological stress on the mundane, the ordinary, the everyday, which turns it away from the powers that really move the world—Kings, Thinkers, Ideologies, Prices, Classes, and Revolutions—toward bottom-up obsessions with charivaris, dowries, cat massacres, cock fights, and millers' tales, that move only readers, and them to relativism. . . . Anthropologists complain that the historian's reliance on written documents leaves us prey to elitist accounts and literary conventionalisms. Historians complain that the anthropologists' reliance on oral testimony leaves us prey to invented tradition and the frailties of memory.<sup>1</sup>

Geertz concludes that, despite the "shouting in the street" (his term) about the blurring of disciplinary boundaries, the encounters between history and anthropology have on the whole been salutary and that the influence of one discipline on the other has stabilized: "Any conjunction, whether as a mixture of discourses or as a convergence of attention, is bound to be an elephant and rabbit stew ('take one elephant, one rabbit ...'), about which the elephant need not unduly worry as to its savor coming through. As for the rabbit it is used to such arrangements" (334).

I suspect Geertz would be wary (I certainly am) of the kind of disciplinary blending recommended by E. O. Wilson in which all boundaries between disciplines disappear through universal "consilience," as he calls it. In an unpalatable recipe for elephant and rabbit stew, Wilson argues for the unity of all knowledge—specifically that of the Humanities and the Social Sciences, which he lumps together, and the hard sciences. In his recipe the flavor of the hard sciences, especially biology, overwhelms that of the

humanities and social sciences. He attempts to explain all phenomena—including aesthetic enjoyment—in biological, that is, genetic, terms.<sup>2</sup> Both the Geertz model and the Wilson model for contact between the disciplines suggest fairly permanent changes in disciplinary fields; in Geertz's formulation the influence is mutual, in Wilson's one-sided.

I want to concentrate here on humanities research and what I consider salutary encounters between research fields for humanities scholars. Geertz is rather self-effacing (perhaps ironically so) in proposing that history is the elephant and anthropology the rabbit in his interdisciplinary stew. Rarely is a humanities discipline the dominant flavor in any cross-disciplinary recipe. The culture wars that are so much in the news these days have in part been motivated by the humanities' adoption of social science topics and methodologies. Geertz's own landmark work on Balinese cock fights has had significant influence not only on history but on literary studies as well. Humanities scholars have to some degree abandoned their traditional territory—the appreciation of the true and the beautiful—to focus instead on social phenomena such as gender, race, and class.<sup>3</sup> A certain number of humanities faculty at the University of Kansas (KU) have moved a portion of their appointments to area studies programs where they can more comfortably include social science material in their teaching and research.

Without passing judgment on these "arrangements" as Geertz calls them, I want to focus the remainder of my remarks on the interdisciplinary recipes that I believe are most productive for much humanities research. They are not the blendings that create permanent changes in an individual scholar's field but flavorings that make a difference in that scholar's current project or in the way he or she conducts his or her career-long research program. Rather than addressing the abstract level of fields or disciplines, I want to talk about interactions between real people who are carrying out specific creative or research programs. It is difficult to find a precise term for the kinds of experiences with another discipline that I have in mind, so I will just simply baptize them "inspirational encounters." In an inspirational encounter a scholar receives an enabling idea from another; one disciplinary approach borrows a spice or two from the other.

I offer my own career in Spanish literature and the history of ideas as an example of an enhancing interdisciplinary encounter with philosophy. When I was an M.A. student at the University of California at Davis, the graduate teaching assistants' offices were located across the hall from the Philosophy Department on the floor below those of the regular foreign literature professors. I got to know people in philosophy, among them Marjorie Greene, who introduced existentialism and phenomenology into this country just a few years before I met her. Her explications, especially her lucid

account of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas on perception, left an indelible impression on me. Several years later when I was beginning a dissertation at UCLA on an early twentieth-century Spanish novelist, Marjorie's brilliantly vivid synopses of the phenomenological movement came back to me as I was casting about for central ideas to guide my Ph.D. thesis. I was struck by how the quirky verbal style of my modernist author seemed to be carrying out the phenomenological project of description prior to reflective thought. In researching this lead, I did indeed discover that there was a copy of a work by Edmund Husserl, the German founder of phenomenology, in the author's personal library, and my dissertation took flight.

My own story leads in to the second part of this cooking show in which I offer some ways to prepare the kitchen for elephant and rabbit stews, opportunities for humanities scholars to create new recipes with ingredients from other disciplines and perhaps flavor someone else's dish in the process. If you are a desultory cook, you can hope that the elephants and rabbits find their way into the pot on their own—that they will have chance encounters of the kind that I did with an emerging philosophical school. Or, if you believe, as I do, that these meetings and minglings move cutting-edge research forward, you can devise situations in which they are more likely to occur. One can read around in other disciplines, but for truly creative and original work, there is no substitute for face-to-face encounters, for the give and take discussion that makes someone else's work more meaningful and more likely to produce that rare spark that ignites.

At last year's Merrill Advanced Studies Center retreat, Richard Schowen argued for the center model for research, because the center system, he said, allows faculty to come together from different departments and disciplines for interdisciplinary work. (Dr. Schowen, by the way, also indulged in a culinary metaphor to define three types of interaction between disciplines. Under the rubric of "Four-Alarm Sushi" he offered dishes about as inedible as elephant and rabbit stew for "multi-disciplinary," "interdisciplinary," and "cross-disciplinary." (I refer you to last year's Merrill conference proceedings for ingredients and preparation instructions.) I am using the term interdisciplinary in a slightly looser and less scientific manner than Dr. Schowen; I mean any encounter between disciplines that creates a new dish, a new recipe in the kitchen of human knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Humanities research is less overtly amenable to center-type collaboration than the sciences. Seldom do humanists apply for research grants *ensemble* or work together on large projects of a truly original nature. The collaborative projects most common in the humanities are anthologies and bibliographies that are not considered to be the most prestigious kind of humanities scholarship, which is typically the single-authored article or book.

Rather than a lab full of people, the humanist usually requires a "room of one's own," to borrow Virginia Woolf's famous words. Humanities research is often a lonely enterprise undertaken by the individual scholar holed up in the library, archive, or study to read, think, and write.

A Humanities Center is, however, an ideal location for the casual or semi-formal inspirational encounter of the kind I outlined above, the encounter that can prove so important for an individual scholar's progress. The Hall Center for the Humanities, for example, provides a venue and a forum for faculty from across the campus and even for people from off-campus to come together to share current research and for dialogue. There are currently eight ongoing seminars on a variety of topics that draw faculty primarily from the humanities and social sciences but occasionally from the sciences as well. These are well-attended, often an average of 20-30 faculty per monthly meeting of each seminar. Topics for each seminar session are widely publicized well in advance so that interested faculty can plan to attend. In addition, every fall there is a formal seminar with eight faculty committed to attend weekly meetings on a particular topic led by a senior faculty member. These have been directed and populated with faculty from most of the professional schools as well as nearly all the departments in the College.

Allan Hanson of the Department of Anthropology at KU experienced a major change in his theoretical orientation to anthropological work through an early Hall Center seminar on semiotics. Subsequently, he wrote an article "The Making of the Maori" that made national and international news when his theory of Maori culture as invented tradition was misinterpreted in the popular press as relegating Maori customs to ersatz culture. Hanson was at the time participating in another Hall Center seminar on narrative led by literature professor Bill Andrews. The theories of narrative under discussion in the seminar gave Hanson the means to reformulate his argument about invented tradition in a second article that clarified his position and defused the criticism leveled at the first article.

We need many more of these kinds of opportunities for fruitful interdisciplinary encounters. We should encourage them with logistical support, especially to bring people together from areas that don't normally share space with each other—humanities, social sciences, sciences, and the professional schools. The sciences (undisputed elephants) have much to offer the humanities (perennial rabbits). Medical science is currently making an important impact on literary studies, some of which focuses on the way the body and disease are deployed in literature across the ages. Current work in genetics, psychology, and sociology could surely assist humanities scholars who are interested in the way in which gender is constructed socially and biologically.

The humanities can also contribute to the health sciences. For example, a humanistic endeavor—film studies—has been assisting some clinical psychologists, who have discovered that humanities materials like films (the novels or narratives of the present and future) are useful in treating certain destructive psychological behavior patterns. When the patient does not heed professional advice to change a behavior, the therapist recommends a film in which a character acts in a parallel way. Mental health professionals have found that patients can much more readily objectify the behavior in which they are engaging when they see it mirrored in film. Once the behavior is identified and objectified, patients are able to modify their own reactions in specific situations that had confounded them in the past.<sup>5</sup>

When I recommend more logistical support for encounters between members of disparate fields, I mean facilitating the necessary time and space for the encounters to take place. It is relatively easy for faculty from the several humanities disciplines to come together at the Hall Center for the Humanities despite the limitations of time we all confront, but it is a challenge for humanities faculty to meet scientists and medical professionals, especially the latter who carry out their work in Kansas City. The scientifically oriented research centers might consider some colloquia or other activities with the humanities center. Roger Sunde, University of Missouri expert on nutrition and participant in this year's Merrill Center retreat, suggested founding a Four-State Institute for Ethics that could address ethical issues in medicine and other areas of human endeavor. That would certainly be an ambitious undertaking, but it could lead to major break-throughs in some of the issues that trouble humanity at large (cloning, assisted suicide, abortion) as we move into the new millennium. The Merrill Center retreat offered the elephants and the rabbits a unique opportunity, if not to join in a stew, at least to consider the merits and logistics of doing so.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, "History and Anthropology," *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 322.

<sup>2</sup> E. O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Geography is currently undergoing a similar dissolution of its disciplinary boundaries with a somewhat less paranoid reaction. A recent issue of the *Chronicle for Higher Education* ("Geographers, in an Expanding Discipline, Struggle to Define Their Space," April 16, 1999, A20-22), Peter Monaghan

writes that "These days, at one extreme the discipline [geography] is akin to geology and related earth sciences, focusing on such subjects as climate, land forms, vegetation, and water. At the other extreme, its embrace of the latest critical theory draws it close to literary and cultural studies, as well as to anthropology, psychology, and sociology." In my own area of literary studies, geography has inspired interest in research on space in literature as well as in cartography, especially as part of what are known as colonial and post-colonial studies.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Schowen's description of the benefits of center-oriented research is as follows: "The telling quality of these centers has been that they lie beyond the normal territorial organization of the university. Their responsibility is not to the dean of any school or college, nor to the chair of any department, but rather to the university research enterprise and—in effect—to the faculty at large. This feature allows projects to be attacked readily by crews of investigators from any combination of entities in the university. At the same time, the question is largely skirted of how to make a territorial assignment of grant income, credit for publications, and the other vital signs by which universities measure the health of their internal organs" (Richard L. Schowen, "The End of Interdisciplinary Research." In Proceedings of the Merrill Advanced Studies Center conference *Mobilizing for Research Opportunities in the Next Century*, vol. 102, p. 57, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, July 1998). His examples, however, were understandably, given his own disciplinary background, taken entirely from what he called the "hard sciences."

<sup>5</sup> "Psychologists are Giving Film Therapy Thumbs Up," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1999.