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## Magical Sign. On the Politics of Inter- and Transdisciplinarity

### Abstract

*For more than a decade ‘inter’- and ‘transdisciplinarity’ have operated as buzzwords in the abundant debates on the changing nature of knowledge, science, society, and their mutual relations. Both terms call up currently highly invested notions in today’s global knowledge economies such as dynamics, mobility, fluidity, flexibility, excellence, connectivity, and adaptiveness. Contrary to these phenomena, inter- and transdisciplinarity also figure as prominent emblems of knowledge projects that understand themselves as critical, transformative, and transgressive of modern science, knowledge, and the order of academic disciplines. Indeed, one could argue that it is especially Women’s and Gender Studies that most strongly appreciate inter- and transdisciplinarity in the academic universe.*

*Inter- and transdisciplinarity thus seem to be able to both fit into models of neoliberal market- and management-oriented reforms of Higher Education and at the same time figure as foundation of the radical and transformative potential of Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies or Postcolonial Studies. Hence, one could indeed argue that inter- and transdisciplinarity function like magical signs, that is, as empty signifiers meaning whatever their users want them to mean.*

*Taking this rather inconsistent positioning and claiming of inter- and transdisciplinarity in and for both neoliberal reforms of Higher Education and transformative knowledge endeavours as a starting point, this paper discusses some of the theoretical, methodological, and institutional problems that arise from this at least incoherent if not paradoxical situation. The aim is neither to provide definitions of inter- or transdisciplinarity nor an inter- or transdisciplinary methodology. It is rather a plea that we first need to chart the intricate terrain of the politics of interdisciplinarity before we will be able to develop a transformative inter- or transdisciplinary methodology in/for Gender Studies.*

Key words: Interdisciplinarity; transdisciplinarity; critical knowledge project; neoliberal market; neoliberal reforms; Higher Education; Women’s Studies.

### **Introduction**

For more than a decade ‘inter’- and ‘transdisciplinarity’ have operated as buzzwords in the abundant debates about the changing nature of knowledge, science, society, and their mutual relations. Both terms currently claim highly invested notions in today’s global knowledge economies such as dynamics, mobility, fluidity, flexibility,

excellence, connectivity, and adaptiveness. Rhetorically they play an integral part in the restructuring of the modern western university as they serve as criteria for excellence in research assessment and teaching evaluation and as a rhetorical resource in the global competition of universities for prestige and funding as well as students and faculty.<sup>1</sup> Interdisciplinarity, Peter Weingart and Nico Stehr (2000: 1) observe, has indeed “become a label almost synonymous with creativity and progress, signalling reform and modernization in science and scientific institutions”. Disciplinarity and academic disciplines, in contrast, are often portrayed as static, rigid, immobile, backward, and resistant against (necessary) reforms. The advocates of transdisciplinarity for example argue, that universities will only be suitable actors in future knowledge production if they overcome their discipline-based structural conservatism and recognize the emergence of a new type of knowledge that is transdisciplinary knowledge. This, scholars like Basarab Nicolescu (1997) suggest, would imply a multi-dimensional opening of the university: towards the civil society, towards other places of knowledge production, towards the cyber-space-time, towards the aim of universality, and towards a redefinition of values governing its own existence.

Nicolescu’s plea for transdisciplinarity is but one example for a rhetoric in which disciplines have indeed become the emblem for the immobility of universities, their supposed inability to change and to adapt to new challenges. In the European Union “Bologna-process” for example, concepts of interdisciplinarity seem to be the perfect match in the process of reorganizing study programs in terms of tradable modules. For it promises the kind of mobility and flexibility needed in a system that organizes Higher Education consistently in terms of a market-oriented consumerist model.

Contrary to these phenomena, however, inter- and transdisciplinarity also figure as prominent emblems of knowledge formations that understand themselves as critical, transformative, and transgressive of modern science, knowledge, and the order of

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<sup>1</sup> To give just one example for this rhetoric, an excerpt from the mission statement of the private “Zeppelin-University” in Friedrichshafen/Germany: “Zeppelin University: a multidisciplinary university for tomorrow’s decision-makers. Zeppelin University is a state-recognised private institution of higher education bridging Business, Culture and Politics. Zeppelin University defines itself as an individualised, international, and interdisciplinary educator of well-rounded decision makers and creative innovators in the fields of business, culture and politics, as well as a multi-disciplinary research institution exploring issues relevant to society.” (07 May 2007 <[http://www.zeppelin-university.de/index\\_eng.php](http://www.zeppelin-university.de/index_eng.php)>)

academic disciplines such as Women's Studies, Queer Studies, and Postcolonial Studies. Indeed, one could argue that it is Women's and Gender Studies that most strongly appreciate inter- and transdisciplinarity in the academic universe (Hark 2005: 335-389).<sup>2</sup> For it is the interdisciplinary nature of Women's Studies and its positioning vis-à-vis universities and their supposedly problematic disciplinary order, many believe, that makes Women's Studies distinct within the academy.

Inter- and transdisciplinarity thus seem to be able to both fit into models of neoliberal market- and management-oriented reforms of Higher Education and at the same time figure as foundations of the radical and transformative potential of Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies or Postcolonial Studies. Hence, one could indeed argue that inter- and transdisciplinarity function like magical signs (Katie King 1994), that is, as empty signifiers meaning whatever their users want them to mean. Maybe more than any other feature to describe knowledge formations they are enormously flexible and elastic concepts that have the capacity to emblematised even contradictory ideas.

Taking this rather inconsistent positioning and claiming of inter- and transdisciplinarity in and for both neoliberal reforms of Higher Education and transformative knowledge endeavours as my starting point, I will, in what follows, discuss some of the theoretical, methodological, and institutional problems that arise from this at least incoherent if not paradoxical situation. The aim is neither to provide definitions of inter- or transdisciplinarity nor an inter- or transdisciplinary methodology. It is rather a plea that we first need to chart the intricate terrain of the politics of interdisciplinarity before we will be able to develop a transformative inter- or transdisciplinary methodology in/for Gender Studies.

### **The Politics of Inter/Disciplinarity**

A cursory review of the debates on inter- and transdisciplinarity suggests that these are as much about (academic) politics and what one could call the phantasmatic dimensions of knowledge production as they are about the actual production and organization of

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<sup>2</sup> Exemplary for German Gender Studies debates on inter- and transdisciplinarity and especially for the appreciation of interdisciplinarity in Women's and Gender Studies see Kahlert, Thiessen and Weller (2005).

knowledge. We therefore cannot discuss concepts of inter- and transdisciplinarity without examining both the political issues such as the 'nature' of knowledge formations, politically induced transformations of Higher Education, and the function of inter- or transdisciplinarity as a magical sign. We also cannot leave out the phantasmatic dimensions such as ideas about the transgressive potential of knowledge or the role of feminist knowledge producers as change-agents. This is even more true at a time when a similar logic of interdisciplinary boundary crossing as engaged by feminist scholars informs Higher Education policies and the economic logic of academic capitalism more generally.

And it is even truer in light of the fact that, as German sociologist of science Peter Weingart (1997) observes, concepts of inter- and transdisciplinarity seem to be the most seriously underthought critical, pedagogical, and institutional concepts in the modern academy. Most scholars, he claims, seem to avoid enquiry into the history of discourses and debates about interdisciplinarity. For this would make clear that although since the late 1960s interdisciplinarity is proclaimed, demanded and hailed as the panacea of reforms of Higher Education this has not lead to substantial institutionalization of interdisciplinary research and teaching structures let alone sophisticated transdisciplinary research methodologies (Weingart 1997: 521-529). Quite the contrary, Weingart insists, while interdisciplinary rhetoric proliferates differentiation and specialization in science goes on unhampered. Science historian Julie Thompson Klein (1990) shares Weingarts view. Discussion of interdisciplinarity, she observes, is becoming both broader and deeper. Institutional obstacles to interdisciplinary programs, however, remain formidable.

Though Klein diagnosed this almost two decades ago it still holds true today. While the rhetoric of both scholars and science policy makers towards interdisciplinary or more recently transdisciplinary work is enormously open and supportive, it is de facto difficult to submit work that covers a range of disciplines. It is also difficult to transcend disciplinary-bound perspectives. Borrowing a term from German feminist sociologist Angelika Wetterer (2003: 286-319), one could describe the present situation as a paradoxical juxtaposition of rhetorical modernization and structural perseverance. The discourse is widening and there is a heightened sense of urgency about the need for interdisciplinarity. Whereas at the same time interdisciplinary programs struggle for

legitimacy, resources, and recognition and disciplines become in effect ever more specialised and sealed off.

Insights of sociologists of knowledge Robert Merton (1973) and Uwe Schimank (1994) might be helpful towards understanding this paradox. The prevailing strategy in knowledge production, Merton argues, is to look for niches in uncharted territory, not yet occupied by disciplines – one could call this uncharted territory the domain of interdisciplinarity. In the following, however, it is necessary to avoid contradicting knowledge by insisting on disciplinary competence and its boundaries, to denounce knowledge that does not fall into this realm as ‘undisciplined’. Thus, in the process of research, new and ever finer structures are constantly created as a result of these activities. This is the very essence of the innovation process, but this process follows the logic of disciplinarity that is the logic of differentiation. The role of inter- or transdisciplinarity in that process is that of an intermediate buffer zone, that is a zone providing space for knowledge that has not yet been accommodated by a discipline. Uwe Schimank (1994: 409-432) speaks of a “functional antagonism” in this regard. Following the social differentiation theory, he argues that the successful logic of the scientific system is disciplinary differentiation. Interdisciplinarity then is the functional counterpart to ease the tensions that arise from specialisation. The inter- or transdisciplinary crossing and deconstructing of boundaries could in this regard be seen as part of the reconstruction and maintenance of disciplines rather than their deconstruction. Metaphorically speaking, interdisciplinarity is the lubricant that keeps the disciplinary machinery running. In Deleuzian terms one could argue that interdisciplinarity is part and parcel of the post-disciplinary formation. This, however, does not mean the end of disciplinary power but its release throughout the social field.

Against this backdrop it comes as no wonder that it is often left unclear as to what the ‘inter’ or ‘trans’ in inter- or transdisciplinarity actually stand for. The original OECD definition of interdisciplinarity, at the Paris-conference on this issue in 1970, for example, was rather broad, ranging from “simple communication of ideas” to the “mutual integration of organizing concepts, methodology, procedures, epistemology, terminology, data, and organization of research and education in a fairly large field” (Thompson Klein 2003). Julie Thompson Klein (1990) has thus described interdisciplinarity as an ‘archipelago’, a number of scattered or regrouped islands

broken away from a system that both provokes and rejects them. Interdisciplinarity has indeed appeared so widely that definitions vary from country to country, institution to institution, from one part of a campus to another, and even among members of the same team. Regarding the boundaries to cross, blur or traverse – e.g. between disciplines, between scientific knowledge and lay knowledge, between the known and the yet unknown, between academy and agora – transdisciplinarity in particular is used in many different, even opposing ways.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the relationship between interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity is often not well thought through. It may be the case, as science historian Steve Fuller (2003) argues, that only the persistently articulated need for interdisciplinary solutions to disciplinary problems brings out the inherently conventional character of disciplines. We could thus understand the latter's stasis and supposed inability to change and innovate as a discursive effect of the politics of interdisciplinarity instead of as an inherent feature of disciplinarity (Fuller 2003).

In fact, if we look at the history of disciplines it soon becomes clear that no discipline has ever been static – simply because they do not exist in isolation – nor have their boundaries been obvious and evident. “If there is an undisputed truth about disciplinarity”, Julie Klein (1993: 185-214) comments, “it is that disciplines change”. Though “discipline” can be regarded as the “first principle” (Clark 1983: 35) in the production and organization of knowledge it was never an undisputed principle. The critique of academic disciplines as limited and confining is as long-standing as the disciplines themselves. We therefore should not misunderstand a discipline as always already “finished”, that is trying to understand the “nature” of disciplines from the end, their disciplinary ‘gestalt’. For, as Steve Fuller (2003) points out, disciplines often started out “as social movements that aspired to address all manner of phenomena and registers of life, not simply the domain of reality over which they came to exercise custodianship”. These movements campaigned against each other to acquire professorships, funding, and influence. Disputes over methodology, for example, operated as symbolic events in this ongoing struggle. Over time, these clashes were institutionally resolved, especially through the creation of academic departments that were entitled to self-reproduction. In historical perspective, Fuller concludes, disciplines

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<sup>3</sup> For different concepts of transdisciplinarity, see Hark (2005: 380-383).

often “function as little more than the legitimating ideology of the makeshift solutions that define the department structure of particular universities”.

Fuller’s view corresponds with science historian Timothy Lenoir’s approach on how to study disciplines:

*“At the heart of the approach to discipline I am proposing is the claim that disciplines are political institutions that demarcate areas of academic territory, allocate privileges and responsibilities of expertise, and structure claims on resources. Disciplines are embedded in market relationships regulating the production and consumption of knowledge; they are creatures of history reflecting human habits and preferences rather than a fixed order of nature.”* (Lenoir 1997: 3)

If we look at disciplines from such a perspective, that is if we understand them as both products of social struggle and as political institutions it follows that any discipline is constantly influenced by points of view and methods of related disciplines. Connectivity is thus not a genuine feature of interdisciplinarity. For disciplinary boundaries are never seamless boundaries. Often, they are poorly demarcated, making them, as sociologist of science Thomas Gieryn (1983: 781-795) suggests, “ambiguous, flexible, historically changing, contextually variable, internally inconsistent, and sometimes disputed” (Gieryn 1983: 785). This, however, does not mean that it is easy to cross disciplinary boundaries or that eventually they would disappear and disciplines merge. As in “real life” one needs visas and the right passport in order to cross borders.

### **Changing Concepts**

Concepts of interdisciplinarity also change over time. And I will give just a few examples of this. Steve Fuller (2003) pointed out, “interdisciplinarians of an earlier era” promoted “critical reflexivity” as the core idea of interdisciplinarity. The “goal of interdisciplinary collaboration today tends to be less the fundamental transformation of intellectual orientation – a realignment of disciplinary boundaries – than the fostering of good communication skills so that no vital information is lost in the pursuit of a

common research project.” Thus, “obstacles in interdisciplinarity”, Fuller continues, “that in the past would have been interpreted as based in disciplinary considerations are now demoted to local problems of project management that need to be overcome as expediently as possible, for purposes of grant renewal and securing the employability of the project members”.

Another time-related change in concepts of interdisciplinarity is the fairly recent transition from interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity. Although, as both Helga Nowotny (2003) and Julie Klein (2003) point out, “transdisciplinarity is a theme which resurfaces time and again”, recently it has taken some striking turns. Klein dates the term to the international OECD-conference on interdisciplinarity, held in Paris in 1970. The conference organizers defined transdisciplinarity as “framework that transcends the narrow scope of disciplinary frameworks through a comprehensive and overarching synthesis” (Thompson Klein 2003). Other definitions emerged in the ensuing decades, including a new structure of unity informed by the worldview of complexity in science. Such as a new mode of knowledge production that fosters synthetic reconfiguration and recontextualization around problems of application, and collaborative partnerships involving public and private sectors in research on problems of sustainability. The most prominent definition to date is certainly the one proposed by Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott and Michael Gibbons first in their book *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (1994) and again in *Rethinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty* (2001). They define transdisciplinarity as

*“the mobilisation of a range of theoretical perspectives and practical methodologies to solve problems. But, unlike inter- or multi-disciplinarity, it is not necessarily derived from pre-existing disciplines nor does it always contribute to the formation of new disciplines. The creative act lies just as much in the capacity to mobilise and manage these perspectives and methodologies, their ‘external’ orchestration so-to-speak, as in the development of new theories or conceptualisations or the refinement of research methods, the ‘internal’ dynamics of scientific creativity. The configuration of researchers and other participants keeps on changing and gives rise to the often-temporary nature of a ‘Mode 2’ working style. Teams*

*are brought together and dissolve upon having finished their work, only to be re-configured in a different constellation for another task. In other words 'Mode 2' knowledge, in this trans-disciplinary form, is embodied in the expertise of individual researchers and research teams as much as, or possibly more than, it is encoded in conventional research products such as journal articles or even patents." (Nowotny, Gibbon and Scott 2003: 181)*

Nowotny, Gibbons, and Scott situate transdisciplinarity clearly outside the framework of traditional academic disciplines and focuses on the border between academic science and non academic-science. An alternative approach, proposed by German science philosopher Jürgen Mittelstraß (1998) and also widely discussed in German Gender Studies contexts, conceptualizes transdisciplinarity in a quasi post-colonial critical mode as discipline-oriented. In discipline-oriented approaches of transdisciplinarity 'trans' refers to a kind of border traffic between disciplines that is characterized by critical reflexivity. Unlike concepts of interdisciplinarity that leave disciplines intact reflexive transdisciplinarity transcends disciplinary divisions within the historical context of the constitution of disciplines. It reminds disciplines of their historicity and the epistemological contingency of their respective perspectives. It is in this sense that one could speak of transdisciplinarity as operating in a post-colonial mode of critique. And it is this definition of transdisciplinarity that recently appears increasingly as a label for new knowledge formations rooted in cultural critique such as Women's Studies and Gender Studies.

What I hope has become clear thus far is, *first*, interdisciplinary and/or transdisciplinary practices are as little as disciplinary practices neutral. They have histories, and they take place in particular places and in specific times. They can support either hegemonic projects or critical ones. The emergence of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary programs and methods as well as the programs and methods themselves have thus to be understood as much in relation to the history of knowledge production and institutional politics as in relation to the emergence of disciplines and their programs and methods.

*Secondly*, disciplines have created dominant consensus through the creation of boundaries between different kinds of subjects and bodies of knowledge. The boundaries themselves therefore become reified and legitimated, and they have

produced their own subjects and reproduced their own practices. Yet, to simply charge disciplines with inadequacy elides questions of the relationship between knowledge production and institutional histories. Because almost as soon as disciplines establish credibility through discourses of coherence and rigor, they tend to fall into crisis. Against the assertion of distinctive purity, it is thus possible to conceive disciplines as always already hybrid and constantly changing. Moreover, interdisciplinary projects have also often sought disciplinary-like status in the process of institutionalization and thus have fallen into similar dynamics.

### **Inter- and Transdisciplinarity in Women's Studies**

Against the background of this more general discussion on the nature of disciplinarity, inter- and transdisciplinarity, and their related politics, I will now turn to debates on interdisciplinarity in Women's Studies. Why did interdisciplinarity turn out to be such an important feature in defining and distinguishing Women's Studies? Again, my primary concern is not methodological questions of inter- or transdisciplinarity but the politics of interdisciplinarity.

At first sight the variety of inter- or transdisciplinary programs in Women's Studies and Gender Studies both in North America and in Europe seem to prove Weingart's and Klein's diagnosis. That there is a lot of talking about interdisciplinarity yet little substantial infrastructure. Quite the contrary, interdisciplinarity is not only one of the founding and key defining elements of feminist knowledge projects and can almost certainly be found in virtually every mission statement or program description of any Women's Studies program anywhere in the world. Women's Studies programs would very likely claim that they did in fact create interdisciplinary research and teaching structures. And I will give just one albeit rather prominent example: On the 25<sup>th</sup> birthday of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) feminist literary scholar Bonnie Zimmerman (2002: viii-xviii) comments on the beginnings of Women's Studies in the U.S.:

*“Women’s Studies, as we understood it at its outset in the late 1960s, included critique and reform of traditional disciplines, combining and recombining disciplinary perspectives into new formations, and inventing entirely new ways of analyzing and understanding the category woman. Through interdisciplinary invention and disciplinary reform, we would radically transform the discursive structures of society.” (Zimmerman 2002: ix-x)*

There are several characteristics attributed to interdisciplinarity that made it of significant interest to Women’s Studies in the first place. *Foremost*, interdisciplinarity offered a framework to conceptualize a “space” between the disciplines – Merton’s uncharted territory –, a space necessary for the intervention in knowledge production. Feminist scholars figured this space as a gap between the perspectives of women on the one hand and the assumptions, models, theories, canons, and questions the so-called traditional disciplines had developed on women on the other hand. Feminist scholarship has in fact more than adequately demonstrated the existence of this gap during the past 30 years of research and teaching. As a consequence, some disciplines opened their borders to include previously excluded research questions, while others revised their methodology to make room for the recognition of gender as a research variable, if not a category of analysis.

Interdisciplinarity, *secondly*, offered feminist scholars a language that enabled them to combine the insights of two or more fields of study. This knowledge, many feminist scholars argued, would be unassimilable by the disciplines. For both in content and in form, and by virtue of its very production, they believed, such knowledge stands already as an implicit critique of the disciplinary organization of knowledge.

*Third*, while interdisciplinarity incorporates disciplinary approaches to knowledge when they are useful, while it borrows and incorporates, it does not feel constrained by disciplinary methods and rules for the uses of such approaches. Interdisciplinarity, thus, holds the promise of disobedience, unruliness, and rebelliousness (not only) against disciplinary regimes: features with high currency in Women’s Studies contexts. Often, for example, Women's Studies is thus described as ‘crossing (out) the disciplines’. This phrase captures the revolutionary promise that is inherent in interdisciplinarity, namely, that in crossing, it will cross out the disciplines.

Additionally, it holds the promise of a fundamental epistemic challenge that, in producing new knowledge that does not “fit” the disciplinary structure, feminist interdisciplinarity will somehow undermine the very legitimacy of the disciplines themselves. It is these kind of promises that make up the phantasmatic dimension of knowledge production. They enable feminists to imagine themselves as change agents and feminist theory as a transformative power.

The language of interdisciplinarity, I would thus argue, provided feminist scholars foremost with a means to draw a distinction, to paraphrase Niklas Luhmann, to differentiate and distinguish their project from already established disciplines. Interdisciplinarity provided the space necessary to articulate feminist ideas and accommodate these ideas within academe, it was and maybe still is a vehicle to articulate and establish feminist knowledge and not the goal.

This becomes even more evident when we consider that different Women’s Studies programs conceptualise and practice inter- and transdisciplinarity in many different ways. What is called interdisciplinarity in one institution might not be recognized as such or could be called multi- or transdisciplinarity in another. Interdisciplinarity, Bonnie Zimmerman (2002) for example observes, “typically refers to a course team-taught by more than one professor, or in which a scattering of ideas gleaned from the more accessible texts in several fields is strung together or introduced to the students as possibilities for further research. Only rarely does it refer to entirely new ways of organizing and exploring the knowledge-base of Women’s Studies.” (Zimmerman 2002: x) Accordingly, for most Women’s and Gender Studies programs it would be more accurate to speak of multidisciplinary instead of a genuinely inter- or transdisciplinary research and teaching approach. Canadian feminist scholar Susanne Luhmann (2001) shares Zimmerman’s observations. Luhmann argues that most “degree-granting Women’s Studies programs created over the last three decades in North America offer only a few courses specifically designed as Women’s Studies courses for Women’s Studies programs while the majority of course offerings continue to draw on existing resources in various disciplines”. Also most teaching positions as well as research projects are still tied closely to specific disciplines. “This points”, Luhmann concludes, “to the overall additive quality of interdisciplinary Women’s

Studies and seems to confirm rather than question the disciplinary organization of the university.” (Luhmann 2001)

In addition, it may also be the case that government agencies, university presidents or reformers of Higher Education who endorse inter- or transdisciplinarity understand interdisciplinarity quite differently from what feminist scholars have in mind when they try to set up inter- or transdisciplinary programs and structures. As a consequence, feminist academics may possibly find themselves in a situation in which they are forced to frame their projects in terms not of their own making. And might not have the institutional and intellectual resources to work through the effects this will have on their ideas, concepts, and projects.

Against this backdrop one could argue that in Women’s Studies interdisciplinarity is as much a seriously underthought critical, pedagogical and institutional concept as everywhere else in the academic universe. As Marjorie Pryse (2000) argues for the U.S. context: “For 30 years Women’s Studies has lived with casual and unexamined understandings of interdisciplinarity” (Pryse 2000: 106).

Pryse is extremely critical of Women’s Studies failure to develop a critical interdisciplinary methodology. “Gender, race, class, and sexuality as vectors of analysis”, she argues, “have served as place-holders for some methodology that we have yet to design” (ibid.). We have failed to understand, she continues, that these vectors “do not in themselves constitute methodology even though they do define both our political and intellectual commitments” (ibid.).

In a similar vein, Bonnie Zimmerman (2002) urges one to consider the question whether Women’s Studies did indeed move beyond disciplines to new ways of thinking about women and gender. 30 years after the beginning of Women’s Studies, she argues, “the way in which we frame our research and teaching continues to be grounded in traditional disciplines” (Zimmerman 2002: x). Although, Zimmerman continues, “feminist theory is the key to the interdisciplinary practices of Women’s Studies”, it has not pushed far enough beyond the disciplinary divisions, because “theories and methodologies draw so tenaciously upon their disciplinary families of origin” (ibid.). Critical theorists, for example, would not speak to, or understand, social scientists. Also, Women’s Studies has barely addressed the assumptions and methodologies of the

natural sciences or intellectually incorporated the arts sufficiently, let alone begun to think about theory and methodology outside Western structures and traditions.

Whereas Pryse and Zimmerman point to the failure of Women's Studies to develop an interdisciplinary methodology, on a more optimistic note feminist literary scholar Sneja Gunew (2002: 47-65) describes Women's Studies as "a continuing experiment in interdisciplinarity". Women's Studies, she argues, is "able to offer a tradition of experimentation in interdisciplinarity in areas ranging from curriculum design to pedagogical principles, team-teaching, and, at least, course articulation" (Ibid.). This, however, Gunew warns, "does not always mean that Women's Studies has been able to pursue these experiments systematically or to theorize them clearly" (Ibid.). We thus "need to learn more about integrated interdisciplinarity", Gunew concludes, because, due to its common focus on women, Women's Studies has too often taken interdisciplinarity for granted (Gunew 2002: 51). "Much of what I've experienced", she comments, "has been a putting of disciplines side by side in a multidisciplinary way rather than working for an integrated model" (Ibid.).

This is for the most part due to the fact that despite their efforts to the contrary Women's Studies is still deeply implicated in the conventional structure of disciplines. Moreover, the skills that faculty bring to the programs are thoroughly informed by their own disciplinary training. The actual study programs are thus often structured along the disciplinary lines familiar to the faculty teaching in the program instead of along interdisciplinary-framed research questions or problems. Given that most Women Studies scholars come from the humanities and the social sciences this can – among other challenges – in practice lead to a further distancing from the sciences, medicine, and technical fields. In addition, because of the institutional history of Women's Studies as primarily occurring in faculties of humanities and the social sciences, as well as its being subjected to a legacy of underfunding and marginalization, Women's Studies often lacked time and resources to fully articulate its ideas on interdisciplinarity. And last but not least, practices and traditions of professionalisation within fields will have a great deal to do with the possibility of interdisciplinarity.

Consequently, the departmental and curricular structures within most Women's Studies programs combine core courses and faculty with cross-listed courses (and faculty). From the disciplines appears a promise of an opportunity for developing

interdisciplinarity. In actuality it often produces a tension between core and cross-listed. In which feminist knowledge remains dialogically connected to traditional disciplines even though the perspective students bring back into the disciplines from their core courses involves critique of those disciplines. Women's Studies thus appear to occupy the space of critique simply by virtue of its organizational position “outside” the traditional disciplines.

### **Disputed Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity as a Site of the Making of Women's Studies**

This leads me to my last argument. As I discussed in the beginning, when interdisciplinarity is discussed often more is at stake than the production and organization of knowledge. Discussions of interdisciplinarity articulate issues concerning the distinctness, integrity, coherence, and claims to authority of academic fields. They are part of the making of disciplines as conflicts are crucial to creating and defining disciplines. This is true for debates in Women's Studies on interdisciplinarity. They are part of the history of conflict in a field struggling to become a discipline.

I will try to demonstrate this via an exemplary discussion of three texts published in the late 1990s in two U.S.-feminist journals, *Feminist Studies*, and *differences*. These texts speak of the tensions surrounding Women's Studies at a particular moment of its history that is a moment in time when debates on the premise, aims, and legitimation of Women's Studies as a discrete area of study proliferated. All three texts consider the question how interdisciplinarity functions in the process of constituting the field.

The first text I am looking at is Judith A. Allen and Sally Kitch's contribution to the *Feminist Studies*' special issue on Women's Studies, “Disciplined by Disciplines? The Need for an Interdisciplinary Research Mission in Women's Studies” (1998). Allen and Kitch maintain that Women's Studies is under threat from the disciplines, or, more precisely, is “disciplined by disciplines” (Allen and Kitch 1998: 275-299). They promote the institutionalization of Women's Studies as an *interdiscipline* with autonomous interdisciplinary Ph.D. programs, its own research mission, and separate

departmental form of organization. Without such change in institutional structures, without constituting it as a separate interdisciplinary discipline, and without a renewed intellectual commitment to doing scholarship under the banner of Women's Studies, without, thus, becoming an *interdiscipline* in its own right, Allen and Kitch consider Women's Studies continued presence in the university at risk. According to Allen and Kitch, Women's Studies is threatened by a divergence between its wide-spread interdisciplinary teaching mission on the one hand, and its predominantly discipline-based research practice on the other. This shores up the disciplines but weakens Women's Studies. Not moving beyond "discipline-focused research," they conclude, "may ultimately call into question the very need for a field called Women's Studies" (Allen and Kitch: 281). Although the very success of Women's Studies in many disciplines made gender an indispensable category of discipline-based scholarship this very success proves dangerous to Women's Studies. It questions the distinct role and, ultimately, the existence of the field itself. Hence, the authors argue that renewed commitment to interdisciplinarity is required, not only at the level of instruction, but more importantly in scholarship and institutional structures. Such commitment to instructional, scholarly, and institutional interdisciplinarity would offer a chance to rescue Women's Studies from the threat of becoming redundant.

Allen and Kitch point to interdisciplinarity in Women's Studies as a solution to an emergent crisis of the field. In the same issue of *Feminist Studies*, Susan Stanford Friedman reflects in her piece "(Inter)Disciplinarity and the Question of the Women's Studies Ph.D." (1998) on her ambivalence toward the very structure that Allan and Kitch favor (Stanford Friedman 1998: 301-325). Friedman thinks through her reluctance to endorse freestanding interdisciplinary Women's Studies programs, especially at the Ph.D. level. Whereas, for Allan and Kitch Women's Studies suffers from the tension of scholarly being too much in the disciplines while Women's Studies programs favor an interdisciplinary teaching profile, for Friedman, Women's Studies as a discipline is not enough. Friedman questions specifically the viability of interdisciplinary Ph.D. programs in Women's Studies since the vastness of Women's Studies knowledge makes it unlikely that one could ever achieve mastery in such field: "The feminist knowledge revolution is so broad ranging in scope and so deep in its complexity of debate and discovery that even an introductory acquaintance across the divisions [of the

humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and performing arts and its respective sub fields] is a major challenge ... [and] the attempt to design a Ph.D. program that draws on knowledge for all four divisions would result in insufficiently rigorous teaching and learning.“ (Stanford Friedman 1998: 314)

Friedman concludes the vastness of such knowledge would produce only insufficiently trained candidates. This problem of coverage becomes even more complicated if one considers the fact that knowledge about gender or women is no longer sufficient knowledge. Instead, analysis that focus on gendering processes needs to interact with analyses that focus on the processes of racialisation, on class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. Such complicated analysis is difficult enough to achieve within one discipline, Friedman insists, to do this across all areas of Women’s Studies is impossible.

In summary: Both accounts of interdisciplinarity in Women’s Studies suggest that Women’s Studies is successful. Successful in integrating itself into disciplinary canons, as Allan and Kitch point out, and successful in producing abundant knowledges, as Friedman informs us. However, these very successes pose threats to the field of Women’s Studies, contradictory threats point to the field becoming superfluous and unmanageable. Interestingly, in the analyses offered by Allan and Kitch and Friedman respectively, the threat to Women’s Studies is understood as coming from outside rather than from within the field. In the account of Allan and Kitch, Women’s Studies is under threat of becoming obsolete because the disciplines take over due to their intellectual, and institutional dominance. To counter this risk, the authors suggest that Women’s Studies must become an interdiscipline, which sounds much like a discipline. In Friedman’s account, to the contrary, interdisciplinarity and high academic standards seem to be contrasting projects. She thus argues at least against autonomous Ph.D. programs in Women’s Studies.

Interestingly enough, neither Allen and Kitch nor Friedman question the “nature” of disciplinarity and its function in the production of knowledge. It seems indeed the “first principle” (Clark 1983: 35) of the organisation of knowledge.

Against this backdrop I will now turn to Biddy Martin’s contribution to the special *differences* issue on Women’s Studies, “Success and its Failures” (1997). Martin thinks about the role of interdisciplinarity in the reorganisation of knowledge in the

university and the role Women's Studies might or might not play in this. In her essay, Martin is sceptical about the future of Women's Studies and, particularly, about its potential to continue as a leader in the re-organisation of knowledge. In her account, Women's Studies has become too similar to other disciplines. It immersed itself in disciplinary and political turf wars and became preoccupied with accepted truth and methodology regimes. Thus, Martin worries that Women's Studies has lost the ability to be the site for true intellectual curiosity, to be still interested in what is *not known* and to treat this creatively.

To move beyond habitual exchanges of accepted truths and the repetition of familiar arguments and positions, and in order to regain the intellectual charge that it once held, Martin holds against normalised knowledge production, Women's Studies would need to assume a leadership role in transforming university curricula into interdisciplinary scholarship and learning. Martin, however, doubts that Women's Studies has the capacity to do so.

Hence, where Friedman and Kitch and Allan see an unfinished project of feminist enlightenment, hindered by an unresponsive and inhospitable institution and its academic practices, Martin finds Women's Studies too finished. Thus unable or perhaps even unwilling to take a leading role in the much needed further transformation and the re-thinking and re-defining of knowledge itself. Where Friedman finds Women's Studies not being enough *of* a discipline and Allan and Kitch find it embroiled too much *in* the disciplines, Martin declares Women's Studies as too much *like* a discipline and thus no longer interested in what lies outside of its boundaries or in what is not yet known.

For Friedman and Allan as well as for Kitch, Women's Studies' knowledge production is ultimately limited by institutional demands, demands that are brought to bear onto its knowledges from the *outside*. For Martin on the other hand, Women's Studies are limited from the *inside*. She suggests that we need to trace how Women's Studies is restricted by some of its own practices, theoretical assumptions, pedagogical habits, and epistemological persuasions. Yet, rather than merely putting blame on the field Martin alerts our attention to limitations posed by the *inside* of knowledge itself. She suggests a model of knowledge that does not rely on such distinctions as

inside/outside, margin/centre dichotomies and looks to an epistemology with a different methodology.

This re-imagining of knowledge that Martin seems to suggest expands beyond a mere widening to the field of Women's Studies to other objects/subject of study such as the study of gender and sexuality, a model that some institutions are considering and that is also endorsed by Allan and Kitch. This widening of its subjects of study is an important first step, which, however, has its own limitations if it does not simultaneously consider the epistemological disavowals of such a move. Martin speaks to such disavowals when she outlines how intellectual curiosity is foreclosed through and within established parameters of feminist knowledge. Such foreclosures in turn lead to unrealized interdisciplinarity. Her example of choice is social constructivism and the lack of critique of constructivism, which fosters a deep split between the social sciences and humanities on the one side and the hard sciences on the other. With the exception of a critique of sciences, Women's Studies – like the social sciences and humanities – tends to have little engagement with the sciences. Responses that consist only of resistant and defensive reactions, however, foreclose any kind of genuine curiosity. Martin concludes that the feminist refusal to consider “that ‘biology’ might play any role at all in the construction of subjectivity is indicative of a defensive rather than genuinely curious and interrogative procedure”.

Martin urges a move towards an interdisciplinarity that, besides the social sciences, the humanities and fine arts, also includes the sciences, and, allows us to become “curious again. Curious, about what [d]ifferent disciplinary formations and knowledge can contribute to problems or questions that we share” (Martin 1997: 109). This kind of curiosity needs to include the domains that traditionally have been excluded from the study of women, gender, and sexuality. Further more, to engage that which has been “disavowed, refused, or ignored [so] we might unsettle what have become routine and impoverished practices” (Ibid.). Her appeal for a renewed curiosity urges us to consider and engage knowledge that is not immediately obvious in its relationship to gender, women, and/or sexuality.

### **Material Conditions**

What is thus left out when inter- or transdisciplinarity becomes the norm? How can we guarantee that all disciplinary perspectives are heard in contexts that organise knowledge along hierarchically ordered disciplinary lines? What kind of disciplinary hierarchies already exist in the field of Women's Studies? How can we account for the contingent and uneven development of feminist knowledge in various disciplines without assuming or even claiming an avant-garde role for some disciplines? Functions Women's Studies interdisciplinarity primarily as a mark of distinction in order to differentiate itself from the so-called "traditional" disciplines? In what regards functions interdisciplinarity as an internal disciplinary technology in the Foucaultian sense? How do Women's Studies govern its own intellectual development in contexts in which government policies sometimes favor the humanities, sometimes the social science, and most often the sciences? What if it is precisely the logic of interdisciplinary boundary crossing that universities now find in their own interest to support? And last but not least, given the extensive praise of features such as connectivity, applicability, and boundary crossing attributed to interdisciplinarity, is the critical impulse feminist scholars associate with interdisciplinarity in danger of being assimilated to what Masao Miyoshi (2000) has defined as the new norm for transnational corporate elites: the ability to translate across the boundaries of cultural differences? Is interdisciplinarity thus becoming a stage in the production of the new transnational professional-managerial class thus ceasing to be an emblem of critique?

These are but a few of the material conditions that configure the possibility for critical interdisciplinary work in Women's Studies. In light of these conditions I agree with Kitch and Allen that Women's Studies does indeed need to become a discipline in its own right. In order to be able to develop the kind of interdisciplinary methodology that Pryse, Zimmerman and others call for we need robust institutional infrastructures that not only guarantee participation but also more institutional autonomy for example with regards to curriculum-development. Only then will Women's Studies be truly enabled not only to intervene in sedimented disciplinary regimes and routines but also to develop robust concepts of inter- or transdisciplinarity. As Diane Elam (2002) argues,

the “important move that Women’s Studies can make is that it indeed become a department without simultaneously taking on the rigidity of a discipline. In doing this it can begin to challenge the terms and conditions under which the university is accustomed to operating. Part of the negotiation that Women’s Studies as a department will have to make is preserving, even intensifying, all of its various interdisciplinary connections while arguing for its fiscal, administrative, and disciplinary autonomy” (Elam 2002: 220).

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