

Within the Veil of Interdisciplinary Knowledge?: Jefferson, Du Bois, and the Negation of Politics

Russ Castronovo*

I

IN A ONCE REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT, interdisciplinarity seemed to possess liberatory potential. This moment might be reconstructed out of slogans and images from 1968. “Pluridisciplinarité et interdisciplinarité,” proclaimed banners held by student marchers in Paris of that year.¹ The spirit of interdisciplinarity also appeared in the United States at this time in calls for Women’s Studies, Black Studies, and Ethnic Studies. In the American republic of the 1790s conservatives feared that the destabilizing spirit of the French revolution would spread across the Atlantic, and almost two centuries after the fact French radicalism indeed emerged on college and university campuses, not as the terror of 1789, but as the social unrest of 1968. *San Francisco State on Strike*, a documentary film of the student movement that paralyzed the Bay Area campus for five months, suggests interdisciplinarity as radical consciousness. In the newsreel footage of protests that began in response to the university administration’s failure to support Black Studies and ended with the creation of one of the first programs in Ethnic Studies, students and faculty voice their opposition to “discipline” in its several forms—in the form of police beating and corralling marchers, in the form of an academic curriculum that ignores the concerns of working-class and minority students, and in the form of a tracking system that as early as the third grade conditions segments of school populations for low-paying jobs and unemployment.

Interdisciplinarity in 1968 represented one manifestation of an insurgent awareness that perceptively, if somewhat loosely, linked academic discipline to social control. The Third World Liberation Front that evolved from the demonstrations at San Francisco State mobilized, among other things, an interdisciplinary perspective upon systemic connections between institutional racism, capitalist production, and the

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social reproduction of knowledge. This critique of an educational apparatus that works in tandem with oppressive state power is performed in the documentary by an off-screen striking faculty member who, on being named “John Doe #28” in a temporary restraining order by two state officials, renames the officials “Eichmann #1” and “Eichmann #2.” While the image of public education as fascist hinges on a dubious comparison to Nazi horrors, this hyperbolic allegation also advances a systemic analysis that pushes the limits of academic inquiry well beyond disciplinary limits. Overstepping boundaries between campus and community, higher education and political consciousness, and passive learning and activism, this educator participates in a transdisciplinary ethic of interrogation that questions the university’s configuration of knowledge as apart from public interest and unrelated to social justice.

Notwithstanding its overinflated rhetoric, this denunciation of a disciplinary mindset is impatient of systems of civic decorum, law, and learning that normalize education. In this context, interdisciplinarity—as academic activism, commitment to Ethnic Studies, and use of systemic analysis—constitutes a radical political project. Against this context, disciplinarity—as judicial apparatus, administrative management, and traditional curricula—depoliticizes knowledge by derailing the connective linkages between epistemological boundaries and social hierarchies. In the standoff over the politicization of knowledge, interdisciplinarity has clearly emerged as the winner of 1968, its once-questionable status now regularized in popular interdisciplinary programs like American Studies.² More than three decades after the heyday of campus protests, interdisciplinarity seems the last remnant of a liberatory agenda that has not been recycled as kitsch or as a feel-good moment for a television miniseries like *The ‘60s*. Many commentators view this supposedly enduring radicalism with apprehension. John Searle, for instance, laments that the crusade against disciplinarity has overrun literature departments and the Modern Language Association to the point where professors talk about politics instead of poems.³ Though interdisciplinarity is not as inherently degraded for Richard Levin as it is for Searle, Levin still writes with anxiety about a faddish academic world where “genuine interdisciplinarity” has been replaced by a degraded incarnation of “interdisciplinarity [that] is now seen as a radical project.”⁴ Writing in more bemused tones, Walter Benn Michaels also describes the political bent of interdisciplinary studies—in particular, of New Historicism—as armed with “the conviction that things can be different in the future and thus as the proclamation of a progressive politics.”⁵

Interdisciplinarity dispenses a sort of amazing grace to scholars and critics: once bound by institutional parameters but now freed after the

fragmentation of authority in the human sciences, progressive educators can escape the limits of discipline. Stanley Aronowitz validates this sort of knowledge production which, in his view, contests hierarchy and specialization. Taking Cultural Studies as an exemplar of nonconformist university learning, Aronowitz describes an “anti-hegemonic” methodology whose operation is “radically democratic insofar as it renounces all forms of power monopoly.”⁶ This rhetoric marks the position of the academic left for whom, as Stanley Fish puts it, “interdisciplinary study is more than a device for prodding students to cross boundaries they would otherwise timidly respect; it is an assault on those boundaries and on the entire edifice of hierarchy and power they reflect and sustain In this vision, interdisciplinary study leads not simply to a revolution in the structure of the curriculum but to *revolution tout court*.”⁷ Are all the grant applications, abstracts, and proposals that speak of “my book-length interdisciplinary project” (a phrase that I have not been exempt from using) manifestoes of revolution? While at a certain level this rhetorical question is as facetious as Fish’s rhetoric that ironizes academic commitment, these views nonetheless respond to perceptions that interdisciplinary studies constitute a political force to be reckoned with.

The dissonance between jeremiads about an interdisciplinarity that cheapens disinterested scholarship and radical assertions about reorganizations of knowledge that cultivate democratic thinking does converge, however. What these schismatic views agree upon is that research and pedagogy that question boundaries of investigation, borrow methodologies, and hybridize approaches are deeply political. But what sort of politics does interdisciplinarity enact? Answering this question is indeed difficult because, as Julie Thompson Klein has shown, interdisciplinarity involves a range of assumptions and practices in its various manifestations across the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences. This essay takes aim at a particular modality of interdisciplinarity, one strongly associated with American Studies, to argue that the politics of interdisciplinarity often amounts to a nonpolitics, a negation whose pursuit of interpretative consensus minimizes the conflict and continuing debate that characterize radical democracy. While many involved in the debate would have us believe, either to their chagrin or ebullience, that the mere mention of politics in academic contexts is radical, the rhetoric of American Studies interdisciplinarity suggests otherwise. Talk about the breakdown of the disciplines advocates an integrative recombination of methodologies, inquiries, and conclusions patterned after familiar models of liberal consensus. Above all, interdisciplinarity seeks to establish a common ground and provide proof that historians, sociologists, political theorists, anthropologists, and literary critics can meaningfully participate in a shared conversation.⁸ All knowledge can

be equally understood because under this rubric all knowledge is the same. Built around a plurality of approaches and perspectives, interdisciplinarity endeavors to establish a middle-ground of knowledge that will prove unobjectionable to the constituencies of various university and professional communities.

Yet interdisciplinarity also frustrates consensus by eroding traditional disciplinary boundaries to the extent that objects of knowledge splinter and fragment. Thus in some recent American Studies work, “America” becomes nonidentical to the United States and relocated to zones shifting between the Americas and between cultures. In an explicit linking of academic practice to American politics, Giles Gunn describes interdisciplinarity as a Jeffersonian methodology. Just as “the achievement of interpretative consensus, or agreement, or uniformity has come to be recognized as quite possibly an illusory ideal in the human sciences,” so too, “earlier, Thomas Jefferson perceived it to be an illusory ideal in political affairs.”⁹ This invocation of Jefferson not only creates suspicion that interdisciplinarity overlaps with a liberal style of politics that ultimately seeks to evade politics. More to the point, Jefferson is among the earliest practitioners of American Studies: his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) ranges across archaeology, political theory, architectural criticism, geography, population demographics, and natural science to explain his vision of the young republic. Within a genealogy of epistemological crossing that reaches back further than 1968, Jefferson’s study produces many of the effects associated with disciplinary breakdowns by suggesting that the immensity, diversity, and newness of America demands drastic reevaluations of knowledge about the natural as well as the political world. However, this radical epistemology also prepares a conservative political agenda by bringing multiple disciplines to bear upon race, evaluating the question of black inferiority as an interdisciplinary concern.

In the next sections, I examine the liberal and interdisciplinary politics of Jefferson’s *Notes* in more detail and then frame my conclusions with respect to another study of race, W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. Even as Du Bois tries out several tacks in understanding the strange place of race in America, he comes to a decision about the inadequacies of interdisciplinary scholarship and its complicity with liberalism’s repudiation of politics. Looking at these “founding fathers” of American Studies offers a much-needed opportunity to make some decisions about the critical practices and methods we use.¹⁰ But before moving to these case studies, it is first necessary to connect interdisciplinarity—in its American Studies modality—to liberalism.

II

While interdisciplinarity and liberalism do not perfectly align, academic methodologies nevertheless have political effects. Interdisciplinarity sidesteps the inherent disagreement and antagonism of democratic striving. A desire for balance stamps interdisciplinarity with a liberal ideology that is wary, even contemptuous, of lasting and radical positionality. Well-worn with criticism, liberalism nevertheless has its “virtues,” as James Kloppenberg argues. Infused with “the fruitfulness of compromise and the value of balance,” liberalism forges beyond political impasse to achieve pragmatic, workable solutions.¹¹ In similar fashion, the balancing of literary criticism and historical research, to take one academic crossing common to American Studies, produces an analysis that equally satisfies traditional disciplinary expectations for textual interpretation and positivist examination of the past. But can the coordination of literature and history also compromise interpretation? In the study of American culture, the breakdown of disciplinary boundaries promotes depoliticization by traversing academic limits in search of a new scholarly world where conclusions are broad enough to be inclusive and final enough to be consensual.

This comparison of interdisciplinarity to liberalism entails more than a convenient use of liberalism’s shortcomings to illuminate holes in the assumptions of American Studies methodologies. Between liberalism and interdisciplinarity in its particular modality of American Studies lies an intimate correlation that can predispose inquiry to quietism. Despite assertions to the contrary, American Studies remains a field that promotes a methodology associated with political consensus. Thus even as one of the early pioneers of this interdiscipline, Gene Wise, discusses the lapsing of “the holistic rhetoric of interdisciplinarity” and the waning of a perspective that seeks to “bring the disciplines together into a single, integrated vision,” his call for a new American Culture Studies depends on a familiar liberalism.¹² In the wake of events clustered around 1968—“Berkeley, Watts, Viet Nam, Haight-Ashbury, the assassinations, black power, flower power, Kent State, Jackson State, Attica, the women’s liberation movement”—he openly wonders if knowledge of American culture still can be rendered into coherent and synthetic groupings (519). While Wise takes social and political fragmentation as an opportunity to revamp research about American culture, his emphasis on elaborating “a single cluster” of fields and methodologies easily meshes with liberal pluralism. “However much we are prompted to integrate,” writes Wise, “we should remember that ours is a pluralistic culture” (533). American culture, no matter how differentiated, still provides overarching organizing principles. The “fresh rhetoric of the

interdisciplinary” that Wise hopes for at the end of his essay seems a bit dusty, not because this rhetoric is actually outdated, but because interdisciplinarity itself, despite its post-1968 makeover, remains indebted to a liberal politics that negates politics, on the one hand, by downplaying conflict in the search for common ground and, on the other, by accepting multiple positions without coming to any decisive political evaluation (543).

American Studies of late is less anxious to reestablish consensus than to seek out conflict. While a complete overview of this scholarship is impossible here, three critical investigations challenge coherent national narratives of identity by focusing on questions of race and democracy. Attention to African-American contexts requires each investigation to depart from older uses of disciplinarity that had helped forge agreement about the “field-imaginary” of both American literature and American Studies.¹³ Set free, as it were, from national axioms and assumptions implicit in earlier Americanist work, these studies revise knowledge about “America” and the United States along fractured, postnational, and even cosmopolitan lines. Yet in each case the move beyond disciplinarity also entails a return to revamped liberal models of American unity.

Eric J. Sundquist overhauls F. O. Matthiessen’s model of consensus in his *To Wake the Nations* by arguing that the “renaissance of American literature occurred in an era . . . [of] fraternally divisive energies.”¹⁴ This examination invites ambiguity and tension, testing the boundaries of American literature by framing the field around African-American expression as well as pushing against the category of the literary itself by ranging across folklore, ethnography, and the law. Sundquist describes his approach as a “dialectic,” but behind the multiple energies of his magisterial project lies a synthetic resolution of national dimension (2). As he describes the forces that have “given rise to some of our most important national literature,” the force of “our” predominates, organizing the shards of pluralism into a familiar political whole (2). So too Ross Posnock stresses “a dialectic between (unraced) universal and (raced) particular” that results in a synthesis of liberal cast. His *Color and Culture* takes heart in the “sign that identity politics is at last losing its prestige in the academy” as the “glamorous provincialisms that congregate under the names multiculturalism and Cultural Studies are revising their tendency to absolutize ethnicity and race.”¹⁵ Scuttling identity by concentrating on action, Posnock envisions an era of “post-identity” in which civic participation need make no reference to family origin, ethnic affiliation, or racial background (88). Whether the issue is action or identity, however, an unmarked space beyond identity has too often been available only to a liberal subject who enjoys the privilege of

declaring the particulars of identity irrelevant in the first place. While some persons may find it convenient to be postidentity, the state remains absolutely committed to identity as a site of governance. Only a neoliberal perspective of the state as incidental can assume a political world without identity. The third book, my *Fathering the Nation*, looks to compile an interdisciplinary array of architectural, literary, pictorial, and political materials to contend that national narrative is always an incoherent enterprise. But from the wreckage of an American democracy splintered by slavery, my study at one juncture resurrects a politics that momentarily hovers above the lapses and conflicts of putatively democratic foundations. This sentiment encourages an “affirmation of freedom transcending” history even as it details a republican memory that refuses to forget origins tainted by deception and inconsistency.¹⁶ An abstract freedom remains the standard currency in a liberal public sphere. And even when a more specific freedom is “retold within different forms” at sites of “national disarticulation,” the nation still provides—if only negatively—the scaffolding (228).

To varying degrees, all three studies deploy some form of interdisciplinarity to shift knowledge about American national identity. But in each case the critical terrain causes slipping and sliding back into ways of knowing whose political implications do not run far from precepts of consensus or nation. In her overview of developments in American Studies, Cultural Studies, and other reorganizations of institutional knowledge, Julie Thompson Klein notes that for many practitioners of interdisciplinarity, “differentiation and unity will coexist,” producing the “integrated resolution of a problem” without sacrificing a “plurality of facts, values, norms” (*CB* 223). Balanced between union and plurality, the new terrain of knowledge production seems a lot like the geography of the liberal nation-state imprinted with the motto, “e pluribus unum.” Many disciplines forge a new and enlightened interdiscipline. More typically, however, the concern for unified knowledge and ultimate synthesis fails to show up on the radar, especially given the currency of claims about the fragmentation of knowledge and the uncertain boundaries in and among history, literary criticism, and so forth. Liberalism’s depoliticizing agenda is nonetheless out there—although it often purports to fly below the level of ideology. Gerald Graff, for instance, encourages readers to take the stir that surrounds interdisciplinary studies as impetus to embrace controversy as a means of revitalizing sagging democratic spirits. But this embrace may also be the ideological grip of a liberal nation-state committed to conflict only insofar as liberalism manages such conflict. At a practical level, Graff points to interdisciplinary programs as our best hope for curricular integration. The practical, however, quickly becomes ideological by remaining

consistent with “American democracy” that searches out “a common ground of discussion.”¹⁷ Even when conflict is championed and fault lines within and between disciplines are celebrated, an integrative solution often appears to manage conflict by claiming conflict as instrumental to liberal culture.

Yet for a commentator no less astute than Roland Barthes, the radical significance of epistemological fracturing of knowledge remains beyond the centripetal pull of liberalism: “Interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security . . . it begins . . . when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down—perhaps even violently, via the jolts of fashion—in the interests of a new object and a new language neither of which has a place in the field of the sciences that were to be brought peacefully together, this unease in classification being precisely the point from which it is possible to diagnose a certain mutation.”¹⁸ Barthes made this pronouncement in 1971—as if to aver that there would be no postrevolutionary letdown. Has the scenario of continued agitation been continuous? The fact that the United States Department of Defense began funding the Interdisciplinary Research Laboratories before 1968 invites speculation that the deconstructive work of methodological trespass and disciplinary transgression may be consistent with state imperatives after all. Many critics have argued for the links between the nation-state and university research and education.¹⁹ But liberalism exists as far more than an attribute of the state; in fact, liberalism in classic American formulations canonizes the desire to live free of institutional regulation and bureaucratic intrusion.

Proponents of interdisciplinarity echo this sort of negative freedom in descriptions of de/formations of knowledge that destabilize academic barriers and undercut the power of previously unquestioned epistemological assumptions.²⁰ The liberal imagination, as Lionel Trilling perceived, exceeds matters of state to saturate matters of culture as well. Trilling hones in on “the literary academicism of liberalism” by which he means a certain mealymouthed criticism that retreats from politics by privileging artistic expressions that mystify ideological contradiction. Liberalism shies away from evaluation and decision: writing from a position of mandarin disbelief, Trilling expresses scorn for an attitude that refuses to differentiate (in this instance between Dreiser and James) and thus stifles disagreement. The “liberal criticism” that appreciates Dreiser “establishes the social responsibility of the writer and then goes on to say that, apart from his duty of resembling reality as much as possible, he is not really responsible for anything, not even for his ideas.”²¹ In other words, liberalism as academic style makes judgments that actually retreat from any evaluation of the highly political process and effect of rendering a judgment in the first place. Leaving aside

questions of Dreiser's merit, Trilling fuses academic practice and politics in ways that suggest how interdisciplinarity can reproduce a liberal unwillingness to intervene and evaluate decisively. Although he targets the disciplinary formation of American literary criticism, the connections he forges between liberalism and a style of inquiry that irons out disharmony prove illuminating for our own postdisciplinary era. An agglomeration of multiple perspectives takes precedence over an antagonistic and hierarchical sorting of these perspectives. Liberalism, in short, is consensus without political decision and, as an academic ethos, it takes care not to generate statements that will come under fire from any one of several disciplines, the result being that oppositional interventions are discouraged. Barthes's comments about the lasting "unease" created by mutations of disciplinary knowledge describe a disposition, which, in American Studies contexts, looks a lot like a liberal evacuation of politics that refrains from judgment and differentiation.

In its never-finished methodological tweaking and crossing of academic boundaries, interdisciplinarity implicitly critiques pretensions to unified thinking. The failure to generate a single authoritative interpretation marks the success of interdisciplinarity in destabilizing knowledge. Yet this destabilization still corresponds to liberal politics. By coordinating several approaches, assumptions, or methodologies yet stopping short of evaluating this conjunction, interdisciplinarity seems wary of staking a position that might offend critics from other disciplines. Are the "happy bricoleurs trawling other disciplines for useful theories, methods, and information," to use Ken Wissoker's characterization of academic boundary-crossers, hesitant to undertake the decisive work of sifting through the material that winds up in the interdisciplinary net?²² Is the pleasure of casting about for knowledge a specifically liberal pleasure that accepts a middle-ground without argument? If "radical indeterminacy is . . . characteristic of modern democracy," as Chantal Mouffe insists, then insofar as interdisciplinarity has a politics it appears to be democratic.²³ But Mouffe goes on to qualify this statement by arguing that liberalism seriously dilutes the strength of the political in modern democracy. In its hesitancy to stake a political position, liberalism downplays difference and renders politics inert. Radical indeterminacy does not make a politics: "Undecidability cannot be the last word," writes Mouffe. "Politics calls for *decision* and, despite the difficulty of finding a *final* grounding, any type of political regime consists in establishing a hierarchy among values" (151–52). Academic practice also calls for decision, which can be difficult when the never-finished unsettling of knowledge induces a type of paralysis. Amid the pursuit of an integrative ideal, generosity toward multiple methods and orientations can defuse conflict and forestall conclusions.

While radical indeterminacy at first seems antithetical to liberalism's integrative imagination, the resulting paralysis of critical judgment remains consistent with a liberal evasion of political decision. The reluctance to hierarchize values that Mouffe sees as indicative of liberalism finds its analogue in an interdisciplinary need to satisfy multiple disciplinary requirements rather than come to a conclusion. This need structures American Studies to the extent that liberalism is not only an analogue but an effect of a mode of knowledge production that is wary of evaluation and differentiation.

III

Interdisciplinarity is a sublime project for Jefferson. Replete with tables, diagrams, and maps, *Notes on the State of Virginia* exemplifies a posture of detachment whose effects match the governing strategies of political liberalism: the integration of discordance into a whole so vast allows for no point of specific intervention. American splendor—both as natural and sociopolitical phenomena for Jefferson—reconciles conflict as just one element of an overall sublime coherence. Deep within the chaos of Virginia's scenic beauty lies a unity beyond comprehension. In the physical universe, the horizon seen from the Blue Ridge mountains confronts the spectator with a spectacle of "riot and tumult rushing around" that only makes it more inviting "to pass through the breach and participate of the calm below. Here the eye ultimately composes itself."²⁴ This blend of aesthetic sensibility and naturalist observation finds its equivalent in Jefferson's population demographics, which move from census data to biopolitical evaluations of the impact of immigration on republican government. Initial skepticism that exponential increases in population will breed "a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass" gives way to hopes of political harmony that will one day witness "our government be more homogeneous, more peaceable, more durable" (NV125). Jefferson's study leaps over and unifies epistemic divisions, adducing political laws from a survey of natural laws. While such an operation constructs the sociopolitical order as immutable natural fact, it also manifests an early interdisciplinary consciousness that integrates different lines of inquiry and draws on various methods to produce a comprehensive study of America.

This liberal vision does not integrate blacks, however. For Jefferson, the institutional, social, and "natural" history that circumscribes African populations in the United States remains forever discordant but not

disruptive of sublime unity. "Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state?" asks Jefferson (*NV* 186). Although the impossibility of black incorporation would seem to destroy epistemological as well as political harmony, prejudicial treatment and black debasement are themselves points of consensus. From virtually every disciplinary perspective that *Notes* adopts, African Americans prove inassimilable to the grander unity of the nation. Knowledge comes together in the agreement that every method and fact proves the inevitability of black degradation. Sociology (Jefferson documents the "deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites"), literary criticism (Phyllis Wheatley's poems "are below the dignity of criticism"), fine arts (Jefferson claims he "never [saw] even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture" produced by blacks), sexuality (black men are "more ardent after their female"), aesthetic judgment (whites possess "superior beauty"), and pseudobiology (blacks "secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin") all unite in opposition to incorporating blacks into the republic (*NV* 186, 189, 187).²⁵ Racism is an interdisciplinary project: it unifies a wide range of presuppositions and observations into an authoritative system of knowledge about specific groups of people.²⁶ *Notes* crosses boundaries such as those between natural history and law to pinion blacks with an assortment of methods and "facts." All this is *not* to say that interdisciplinarity is racist—but it is to argue that the authority of Jefferson's racism depends upon "evidence" found in diverse locations from aesthetics to anatomy, gathered by multiple methods, and understood by way of a synthesis of scientific theory and political theory.

But the interdisciplinary dream of total knowledge and seamless conclusions, as Gunn argues with his allusion to Jefferson, remains always deferred, an abortive undertaking that gestures to the impossibility of interpretative consensus. Incompleteness and imperfection of the epistemological project nonetheless accord with the indecision inherent in liberal politics. The radical indeterminacy that Mouffe considers endemic to liberalism and Gunn sees as an "inescapable fact" (I 258) of interdisciplinary studies converge in *Notes* where scholarly apparatus and political disposition each exhibit a measured reluctance to stake a conclusion or position. Much as the "rapture of the spectator" before American scenic wonders "is really indescribable" (*NV* 54) or natural variation in animals "depends on circumstances unsearchable to beings with our capacities" (*NV* 78), so too Jefferson's deductions about blacks depend on a politics of liberal undecidability. In the absence of evidence so indisputable as to settle once and for all the debate over black intellectual and moral capacity, the agreement among sociology, literary

criticism, biology, and aesthetics seems the safest bet in *Notes*. Jefferson's well-known ambivalence about black equality is resolved under a half-hearted gesture toward more interdisciplinary research. Even after he has enumerated "the real distinctions which nature has made" between blacks and whites (NV186), Jefferson acknowledges:

The opinion, that they [blacks] are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence. To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the anatomical knife, to optical glasses, to analysis by fire, or by solvents. How much more then where it is a faculty, not a substance, we are examining; where it eludes research of all the senses . . . let me add too, as a circumstance of great tenderness, where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of beings which their Creator may perhaps have given them. (NV192)

Jefferson's "diffidence" neither proves nor contradicts earlier convictions about the retrograde status of black culture in the United States; the truth or falsity of racial stereotype remains inconclusive at present. Such unknowability is itself part of liberal interdisciplinarity: as he admits a certain epistemological uncertainty with his statement that black mental capabilities "elud[e] the research of all the senses," Jefferson also retreats into political indecision. Political indecision here functions as a negation of politics that sustains not the debate over slavery but the business of slavery as usual. His commitment to undertake more historical, moral, and "scientific" research leads to only one conclusion, namely, that nothing can be done now and the status quo as a default position should prevail. Only when Jefferson thinks in a mode other than disciplinarity or interdisciplinarity does a principled political position emerge. As he moves from knowledge to sentiment, from "many observations" to "great tenderness," Jefferson expresses a belief, one not supported by any epistemological formulation invoked in preceding pages, based on an affective narrative. His emotion constitutes a partial perspective whose implementation would have definite political consequences.

But to force the issue in this manner would threaten the ideal of interpretative consensus. As a prototypical foray into American Studies, *Notes*' avoidance of conflict never places its author in position where racism can be confirmed or denied. The point, however, is not that early American interdisciplinarity is racist. Instead, my argument is that liberalism—as both scholarly and political project—often proceeds with a synthetic perspective that allows for multiple but not necessarily different positions as a means of establishing a regime built not on force,

but on consensus. Force is neither a good nor a bad thing when it comes to knowledge; as Foucault recognized, knowledge is already a matter of power.²⁷ A story of tenderness, decision, or other moment of evaluation can prepare alternatives to liberalism's contempt for conflict and ultimate negation of politics by encouraging readers and citizens to force the issue. But as a matter of politics, force proves more threatening: "I tremble for my country, when I recollect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever," wrote Jefferson as he once more returned to the problem of slavery (*NV* 215).

IV

The problem of American Studies is the problem of liberalism: its simultaneous desire for and rejection of inclusive, consensual knowledge produces a compensatory awareness that no definitive conclusions or deeply-felt positions can be advanced. While inconclusiveness may aptly express human limitations in understanding the complexities of social reality, it nonetheless keeps the ongoing investigation of reality as a central organizing basis of inquiry. Slighted by this style of inquiry are unreal accounts of the social world, fictional projections that imagine possibilities for social equality and political freedom.

"I like a good novel," concludes Du Bois in the final sentence of his 1940 autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*.²⁸ Comparing his life to the unfolding of fiction, he voices preference for a discourse of possibility in which political imagination could overleap the "bitter disappointments" and "the pain and evil" of an oppressive social reality (*DD* 326). In contrast to his adversary, Booker T. Washington, who confesses, "[f]iction I little care for . . . I have to almost force myself to read a novel," Du Bois refuses to be circumscribed by a social reality constructed by white interests.²⁹ Instead of balancing his politicized knowledge with numerous other perspectives, Du Bois describes the world in the singular terms of what for too long has been the counterfactual and unrealized prospect of justice. As he sees it, consensus creates a hegemony of "absolute and ultimate authority" by appealing to the liberal proviso that since "[i]n the long run force defeats itself" the evasion of principled conflict and sidestepping of political disagreement best promotes a stable, unified cultural order (*DD* 220). Du Bois pursues a path not routed into either interpretative or political consensus by agitating for thought and practice dedicated to "real and open democratic control" (*DD* 220). Democracy after this fashion differs markedly from "absolute and ultimate authority" because it does not pretend to be comprehensive, but neither does it translate incompleteness into an excuse to

refrain from the articulation of a position or the performance of an action. What democratic control of knowledge means is that social reality can be treated as narrative, which, like a “good novel” or the “fiction” that Washington did not read, reveals how knowledge about the world is produced. Taken as a fictive project, the production of social reality can be reproduced differently, imagined along alternative lines with new endings.

Indeed, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) culminates with a fictional short story, “Of the Coming of John,” and the long attenuated cultural narratives in “Of the Sorrow Songs.” Yet the preceding chapters seem an interdisciplinary effort. History, sociology, psychology, ethnography, and autobiography reinforce and undercut one another in this “border text,” as Susan Mizruchi puts it, which “crosses disciplinary boundaries while helping to define them.”³⁰ In his impatience with disciplinary narrowness, Du Bois chides the “car-window sociologist” for developing a perspective no more informed than the view of blacks presented by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.³¹ Miss Ophelia’s summary condemnation of blacks as “Shiftless!” prefigures the hasty conclusions of turn-of-the-century social science. Adherence to disciplinary concerns both confirms stereotype and deactivates political commitment: as Du Bois grimly recalled in *Dusk of Dawn*, “one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved” (*DD* 67). Broad denunciations are demanded, criticism that can address the global mistreatment of blacks in not simply sociological but economic, political, and spiritual terms as well.

In a comprehensive judgment, *Souls* proclaims of the Negro: “To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice” (*SBF* 216, my emphasis), Inverting Jefferson’s use of the natural order to unify multiple perspectives, Du Bois posits racial servitude as the antisublime. Whereas Jefferson stigmatizes blacks in order to preserve aesthetic and political coherence, Du Bois in his repeated stress on “all” unmarks such an encompassing view or comprehensive policy as a toxic form of inclusion. What makes Du Bois’s summary of racial history antisublime is not just the dubious unity that it produces. The assertion of slavery’s total evil is neither transcendent nor rooted in consensus; instead it is a partial perspective originating in the experience and worldview of “the American Negro for two centuries” (*SBF* 216). Qualifying the universal force of “all” by “to him,” Du Bois registers the denunciation of slavery as a product of specifically black thought and dreaming. *Souls* here privileges a hierarchical evaluation of social reality that defies interpretative consensus. How many antebellum (or even postbellum) white

citizens would have joined the Negro in asserting such conclusions about slavery?

The particularity of Negro judgment opposes resolutions to the problem of the color-line that claim the “absolute and ultimate authority” of consensus. More “balanced” views of slavery calculated to appease white interests—such as the plantation nostalgia of Washington’s Atlanta Exposition Address that spoke of Negro servitude in terms of “our loyalty to you in the past”—found easy acceptance, played to approving audiences, and garnered the patronage of white business interests (*US* 148). Both views are partial—except that where Du Bois acknowledges the situational bias of black perspective, Washington’s project to assimilate blacks to the commercial and industrial interests of white capitalism masquerades as interpretative consensus. Far better to Du Bois’s mind is self-conscious *partiality*, where partiality is understood both as a limited worldview and as a committed political stance. Black social criticism necessarily exists as a matter of force, challenging a consensus under which the airing of a Negro perspective requires struggle in the first place.

To demonstrate the superiority of partial knowledge, Du Bois operates by counterexample and shows how interpretations backed by the support of several disciplinary masters lead away from politics and decision and toward a liberal evacuation of politics. In the chapter from *Souls* entitled “Of the Training of Black Men,” Du Bois momentarily integrates economic history, social anthropology, and psychology into an encompassing analysis of the race question. This union of perspectives seemingly allows for an authoritative answer: by “reconciling [these] three vast and partially contradictory streams of thought,” a single solution to historic inequality emerges when “the one panacea of Education leaps to the lips of all” (*SBF* 272). Education will dignify labor, foster tolerance and charity, and reveal the ideal of freedom as a political necessity. But the seamlessness of this social antidote troubles Du Bois. He wonders if a solution that responds to so many concerns is anything more than a “truism,” so comprehensive and vague as to lack the particularity and partiality needed to tell new and different parables about a race of people stranded between “the Temple of Knowledge” and the “Gates of Toil” (*SBF* 272, 274). As a cure-all that responds equally to white social anxieties, Washington’s economic concerns, and Du Bois’s political agenda, education would bridge the gap between Tuskegee (where students were dissuaded from being seen carrying books lest white visitors feel uncomfortable) and *Souls*’ unembarrassed image of a solitary black laborer poring over a French grammar.³² This bridge, however, is forged by dulling the pointed differences between

Du Bois and Washington. Mouthed as a pabulum with no fuller narrative behind it, education might produce accord between these two antagonists by diluting political difference. As Du Bois observes, “when we have vaguely said that Education will set this tangle straight, what have we uttered but a truism,” the implication is that he prefers a tangle of complexities in which the politics behind modest technical training cannot be reconciled to a view of education as a challenge to American apartheid (*SBF* 272). A capacious account that balances several perspectives not only flattens the complexities inherent in the “double life” of the Negro; it also promotes an interpretation that squelches political contestation.

The deficiency of encompassing or impartial interpretation stems from a synthetic logic laden with the promises of “world-wide coöperation” and “a new human unity” (*SBF* 271). Unity and cooperation are hardly deplorable goals—and yet Du Bois argues that the utopian prospect of the integrative quest darkly results in dystopian formations of knowledge and power. “[B]ehind this thought lurks the afterthought of force and dominion,” he writes in explanation of how an earlier “interdisciplinary” practice legitimated the slave trade in the past and neocolonialist practices in the present. *Souls* unveils interpretative consensus as a dangerous fiction, a smoothing-over of brutal facts. The point, however, is not to declaim this fiction and long for some more honest or less partial accounting. Fiction is precisely the point of *Souls*: Du Bois intervenes in the realities limiting black spiritual and political life by turning to fiction and imagining different modes of narrativizing social facts through stories whose omissions, particularity, and bias make them anything but liberal. While *Souls* marshals economics, history, political theory, sociology, and so forth, to resolve the Negro’s unreconciled twoness, its author ultimately prefers to speak, not in terms of disciplines or their admixture, but of stories and narrative. Whether Du Bois is describing sharecropping, strained race relations, or the pained self-consciousness of the Negro, his analysis either originates in or takes shape as fiction: the “poetic justice” of Emancipation becomes “solemn prose” with the foot-dragging of Congress (*SBF* 228); “Hard tales of cruelty and mistreatment of the chained freemen are told” in order to preface the economics of convict labor (*SBF* 296); “Once upon a time I taught school in the hills of Tennessee” begins an intimate ethnography of a black agricultural community (*SBF* 253); in the psychology of a newer generation “War, Hell, and Slavery were but childhood tales” (*SBF* 258); a political evaluation of Washington’s meteoric success must first listen to “the tale of the methods” used to court dollars and white approbation (*SBF* 241). Each instance reveals the narrative construction of knowledge and with that disclosure come hopes for reconstructing

knowledge along different lines. References to tales, fables, myths, and stories accumulate to the point where the penultimate chapter of *Souls*, "Of the Coming of John," fictionally narrates, among other things, "facts" about education as a process of estrangement. And the book's concluding discussion of the Sorrow Songs, in conjunction with the bars of music that introduce each chapter, suggests that lying behind the array of sociological, psychological, and economic approaches are ancient, half-understood expressions of larger cultural narratives of exile and diaspora. Just as the "haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" memorializes and exposes the possibility of sympathy as an impossibility since the "black slave" is rendered distinct from "men," narrative preserves the material difficulties of its own articulation (*SBF* 378). Narrative does not forget the struggle that precedes knowledge unlike a type of liberal interdisciplinarity, which searches for accord—even if it is an agreement that no conclusions can be reached—among several perspectives.

The methodology of *Souls* is neither multidisciplinary nor interdisciplinary; instead, it is narrational.³³ Since Du Bois contends that knowledge, especially where race is at issue, is not advanced by the disciplines or their recombination, he shifts emphasis to concentrate on the mode of articulating and conveying knowledge. By thinking about the creation and construction of discourse—whether that discourse settles into disciplines or not—he hopes that he can tell "a tale twice told but seldom written," which will lead, not to the repetition of the same story over and over, but to different versions rife with the partiality of incompleteness and commitment (*SBF* 209). In the disjunction between oral tale and written record, Du Bois utilizes narrative as material practice. Just as the transcription of the Sorrow Songs inevitably changes aural legacy into graphic text, writing social reality as narrative introduces the prospect of changing confirmed social "facts" about Negro backwardness, political ineptitude, or social inferiority. As a means of producing knowledge, narrative welcomes persistent tensions falsely assuaged by liberal interdisciplinarity. "We must ask," writes Du Bois, "what are the actual relations of whites and blacks in the South," yet his answer makes no appeal to an amalgam of sociology, politics, and economics even though the analysis of preceding chapters runs along these lines (*SBF* 321). Instead, he states that the question "must be answered not by apology or fault-finding, but by a plain, unvarnished tale" (*SBF* 321). The accentuation of narrative here alludes to Othello's self-deprecating promise to deliver an "unvarnish'd tale" of how he wooed and won Desdemona in Shakespeare's play (1.3.90). Mention of an "unvarnished tale," as James Olney notes, serves as a stock feature in many slave narratives invoking *Othello* as an apology for stylistic deficiency.

But as Olney also observes, only white editors and amanuenses quoted *Othello* and that in the rare instances when black narrators cited Shakespeare the model was not the Moor but Hamlet or Lear.³⁴ Du Bois sides neither with slave narrator nor antislavery editor to allude instead toward the tense and conflicted production of narrative. His willingness to tell a tale involves the material circumstances of black expression, the association of whiteness and textual power, and his own conviction that “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not” (*SBF* 284). A tale is itself inevitably a narrative of interpretative antagonisms.

To prioritize fiction, tales, and narrative is not to retreat into a disciplinary haven, a specifically literary one.³⁵ Du Bois is not, in essence, a literary critic but rather a writer who produces a narrative that reimagines the painfully constricted realities of black life in the United States. *Souls* disavows disciplinary *and* interdisciplinarity by recognizing the narrativity that lies at the heart of all historical, sociological, and scientific, as well as literary, discourse. He intuits narrative as an antagonistic process in order to emphasize the material conditions of its production. Once identified after this manner, material conditions can be questioned, revised, and changed. By writing racial history and racial reality as fiction, Du Bois acquires the capacity of overturning repressive social “fact.” The trick is not to scour different disciplines and accumulate more facts that speak equally to history or economics. Interdisciplinary knowledge can always be countered with disciplinary knowledge and vice versa, all without leading to any political decision or intervention. As Du Bois acknowledges, his own sociological observations about the life and condition of black folk in Dougherty County, Georgia can be offset and deauthorized by the “car-window sociologist.” Instead of participating in the production of more facts, Du Bois suggests the possibility of resisting the fact of social reality itself by operating in a counterfactual mode:

Had political exigencies been less pressing, the opposition to government guardianship of Negroes less bitter, and the attachment to the slave system less strong, the social seer can well *imagine* a far better policy,—a permanent Freedmen’s Bureau, with a national system of Negro schools; a carefully supervised employment and labor office; a system of impartial protection before the regular courts; and . . . institutions for social betterment. . . . All this vast expenditure of money and brains *might have* formed a great school of prospective citizenship, and solved in a way we have not yet solved the most perplexing and persistent of the Negro problems . . . such an institution was unthinkable in 1870. (*SBF* 238, my emphasis)

By thinking about what did not happen in the past, Du Bois imagines that present social conditions might have a different future. The oracular

figure who not only prophesizes but also transforms events is the “social seer.” His talents recall the famous mystical characterization of the Negro at the beginning of *Souls* as an entity whose double-consciousness never congeals into a unified perspective: just as “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,” the “social seer” does not glimpse reality so much as he sees beyond it to unrealized social possibilities (*SBF* 214). Far better to be sheathed with a caul than to be ensconced within any number of disciplines. By thinking about what “was unthinkable in 1870,” Du Bois in this passage operates outside historical, sociological, and political facts that have limited black existence to a narrow and soul-deadening reality.

The portrait of the “social seer”—a figure this essay implicitly opposes to the interdisciplinary researcher—appears in “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” which explores the hopes, promises, and setbacks of Emancipation. Not until the end of the chapter in a section marked off from the preceding paragraphs does Du Bois try his hand at prophecy: “I have seen a land right merry with the sun, where children sing, and rolling hills lie like passionate women wanton with harvest. And there in the King’s Highway sat and sits a figure veiled and bowed, by which the traveller’s footsteps hasten as they go. On the tainted air broods fear. Three centuries’ thought has been the raising and unveiling of that bowed human heart, and now behold a century new for the duty and the deed. The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (*SBF* 239). The seer’s ominous vision collapses a history of black modernity into the allusive past of the sphinx who brought the “tainted air” of plague to Thebes and confronted the “traveller” with a mortally loaded riddle. Compacted in this narrative is reference to the “King’s Highway,” which, in addition to its biblical import, suggests the murder of the king by Oedipus at the crossroads. So too blacks stand at the crossroads of the twentieth century, confronted with the riddle of what it means to be African in America. At the intersection of a counterfactual mode of investigation and mystic parable appears a timely story of the color-line built around a newness of “duty” and “deed” as much as the wisdom of ancient traditions. The seer perceives conditions as they are, acknowledging both the fertility and foreboding of the landscape, but, more significantly, the seer also envisions conditions as they are not. Rather than adopting multiple angles upon reality, this narrator of twice-told tales and storyteller of the future eschews disciplinary and interdisciplinary concerns to explore what is not known. This commitment to experimentation constitutes a radical practice that addresses problems, such as the question of the color-line, about which consensus may never form. Amid the snap judgments of sociologists and the “truism” of interdisciplinary panaceas, Du Bois

contents that equality and social justice only can be imagined as realities in narrative, in the “gift of story and song” that Africans brought to the New World (*SBF* 386).³⁶

V

This essay’s story of American Studies has beaten a backward path from the post-1968 era of interdisciplinary optimism to Jefferson’s early “interdisciplinary” study of post-1776 Virginia. Du Bois’s *Souls* occupies a midpoint in this genealogy and its many narratives look at knowledge that fuses the present to an antiquated but not dead past. Now in Du Bois’s future, as in his present, the complexity of power and meaning demands complex interpretations. Interdisciplinarity, in part, satisfies this need. Despite its at times polemical charge, then, this essay does not seek to shore up fragmented knowledge in the human sciences or reject the serious challenges of academic boundary crossing. But before we listen to an account of open and unsettled knowledge, we must examine the resonance of a familiar story of political negation that echoes within liberal narratives of interdisciplinary newness. Within the balance of an American Studies approach, conclusive decisions either await a complete picture or are deferred from the get-go because of the impossibility of ever finishing the picture in the first place. Du Bois, for one, understood the urgency for drastic change in the American thinking about race and did not care to wait that long. Even in its insurgent exposure of total consensus as a dream, interdisciplinarity can shy away from intervention.

Sublime explanations that satisfy all vantage points rightly strike us as illusory but no less falsely utopian are claims that interdisciplinarity destabilizes knowledge about the social world. Radical hopes often lead to stable configurations—and Jefferson’s postrevolutionary doubts about slavery that provoke a call for continued investigation is evidence of this quietism. Although the error of Jefferson’s racism is undeniable, do we recognize the pitfalls of his liberal methodology? What stories are to be told about stable configurations produced by interdisciplinary activity, especially in American Studies, in the postrevolutionary era following 1968? These unanswered questions do not constitute a liberal plea for further investigation. Following Du Bois’s cue, they instead might be taken as prompts to experiment with different modalities of knowledge production that—like narrative—proceeds in disregard of formal reality and demands conclusive moments of decision.

NOTES

1 Critical evaluations of the breakdown of disciplinary knowledge employ many related modifications to signal this shift, among them post-, anti-, multi-, cross-, trans-, and interdisciplinary studies. While these prefixes mark subtle and often important differences, the distinctions are not always clear and many writers often use words like “interdisciplinary” and “transdisciplinary” interchangeably. Given this essay’s aim to examine the consensual politics of rigid as well as loose definitions of “interdisciplinary” thinking from Jefferson onward, the most common term—“interdisciplinary”—will be used.

This information about the Paris strikes comes from Julie Thompson Klein who notes that even as this phrase appeared it was “already regarded in some quarters as a familiar, even overworked slogan” (*Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity, and Interdisciplinarity* [Charlottesville, 1996], p. 10; hereafter cited in text as *CB*). For this dating of interdisciplinary study in terms of 1968, see also Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 52.

2 While interdisciplinary programs are thriving both in the sciences and the humanities, my critique in this essay primarily concerns the institutionally popular formation of American Studies. The level of support for American Studies found on many campuses compromises more “marginal” interdisciplinary programs like Ethnic Studies. In an era of academic centralization, college deans have found it tempting to think about grouping the various ethnic studies on campus (for example, African-American, Chicano, and Asian-American Studies) under the single rubric of American Studies.

3 See John Searle, “Is There a Crisis in American Higher Education?” *Partisan Review*, 60 (1993), 706.

4 Richard Levin, “The New Interdisciplinarity in Literary Criticism,” in *After Poststructuralism: Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory*, ed. Nancy Easterlin and Barbara Riebling (Evanston, Ill., 1993), pp. 24, 32.

5 Walter Benn Michaels, “The Victims of New Historicism,” *The Uses of Literary History*, ed. Marshall Brown (Durham, N.C., 1995), p. 192.

6 Stanley Aronowitz, “The Punishment of Disciplines: Cultural Studies and the Transformation of Legitimate Knowledge” in *Postmodern Education: Politics, Culture, and Social Criticism*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux (Minneapolis, 1991), p. 154.

7 Stanley Fish, “Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do,” *Profession 1989* (New York, 1989), 17.

8 To undertake a “transdisciplinary quest,” according to Michael Gorman and Julia Kagiwada, “one must begin by crafting a common language and set of tools” (“Invention, Design, and Discovery: A Transdisciplinary Quest,” *New Literary History*, 26 [1995], 628). This methodology organizes research and investigations around coherence and consensus.

9 Giles Gunn, “Interdisciplinarity,” in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, ed. Joseph Gibaldi (New York, 1992), p. 254; hereafter cited in text as I.

10 In addition to Jefferson and Du Bois, Henry Adams is an American forerunner in the critique of disciplinary knowledge. See Paul Bové, “Abandoning Knowledge: Disciplines, Discourse, Dogma,” *New Literary History*, 25 (1994), 601–19.

11 James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York, 1998), p. 7.

12 Gene Wise, “Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies,” *Prospects*, 4 (1978), 517–18; hereafter cited in text.

13 Donald Pease examines the forces and assumptions that contributed to the “field-imaginary” of “America” as a locus of investigation (“National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives,” *boundary 2*, 19 [1992], 11).

- 14 Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 30; hereafter cited in text.
- 15 Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 25; hereafter cited in text.
- 16 Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 226; hereafter cited in text.
- 17 Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York, 1992), p. 195. Even as Graff distinguishes this “common ground” from “the need for an overarching consensus on values,” just as he earlier distinguishes “a common national debate” from a “shared body of national beliefs,” what is to prevent this “common ground” from becoming a new overarching consensus? (pp. 195, 45). The commitment to common national debate can easily become a shared national belief. For a tracing out of national ideology in terms of disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary formations of American literature and American Studies, see David R. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline* (Minneapolis, 1994).
- 18 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), p. 155.
- 19 Julie Thompson Klein discusses interdisciplinary science and the United States government (*Crossing Boundaries*, p. 177), but in the preceding chapter on American literature and American Studies such connections are not pursued. As Shumway shows, however, American Studies emerged during the Cold War as an academic response to the growing specter of Communism (*Creating American Civilization*, p. 312). For Richard Ohmann, it is “[n]ot surprising, then, that the goals of Freshman English, however they were adorned with academic and cultural ideology, should be framed in response to needs of the industrial state and its governing class” (*English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* [New York, 1976], p. 94). See also my “Nation dot com: American Studies and the Production of the Corporatist Citizen” in *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham, N.C., forthcoming).
- 20 Stanley Aronowitz, for instance, in his critique of “the tyranny of the disciplines” takes Cultural Studies as an attack upon “the disciplinary context of knowledge production as the key organizational form of intellectual knowledge” (“The Punishment of Disciplines,” pp. 149, 145). But in an astute overview of interdisciplinarity, Giles Gunn suggests that interdisciplinarity can be the source of tyranny as well in the form of “metadisciplinary despotism.” Gunn argues that “interdisciplinary studies almost of necessity place one discipline in a position of subordination to another” (“Interdisciplinarity,” p. 244).
- 21 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, 1951), p. 21. This is not to say that Trilling remains unconnected to other permutations of liberalism; see Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago, 1988), p. 4. For a reading of Trilling’s critical rendering of ideals of national consensus, see Donald E. Pease, “Negative Interpellations: From Oklahoma City to the Trilling-Matthiessen Transmission,” *boundary 2*, 23 (1996), 1–33.
- 22 Ken Wissoker, “My Interdisciplinarity is Fine, Yours is Underdeveloped: Some Unexpected Problems in Interdisciplinary Research,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (14 April 2000). In describing the split between interdisciplinary writers who see their own work generously reaching out to other fields and interdisciplinary readers who resent others’ “intrusions” into their terrain, Wissoker suggests that there is good reason to be wary that interdisciplinarity will be construed as a disciplinary offense.
- 23 Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London and New York, 1993), p. 12; hereafter cited in text.
- 24 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York, 1975), p. 49; hereafter cited in text as *NV*.

25 Since our current understandings of interdisciplinarity and the disciplines descend from the late nineteenth century, it is indeed difficult to make comparisons to systems of knowledge in Jefferson's day. David Shumway explores disciplinary organizations of knowledge about the topic of "America" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My retrospective identification of disciplinary perspectives in *Notes*, then, is intended less to provide a historical determination about Jefferson's practice than a point of critique for contemporary methodologies.

26 For a similar point in terms of a different history, see Michael Rothberg who discusses the Nazi genocide as "an 'interdisciplinary' project" (*Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* [Minneapolis, 2000], p. 3).

27 In addition to his "Two Lectures" (in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–77*, ed. Colin Gordon [New York, 1980]), see *Discipline and Punish*, in which Michel Foucault discusses the normalizing and regulatory functions of knowledge (New York, 1979), pp. 183–84.

28 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (Millwood, N.Y., 1975), p. 326; hereafter cited in text as *DD*.

29 Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* in *Three Negro Classics*, ed. John Hope Franklin (New York, 1965), p. 172; hereafter cited in text as *US*.

30 Susan Mizruchi, "Neighbors, Strangers, Corpses: Death and Sympathy in the Early Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois," in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York, 1999), p. 275. See also Shamoon Zamir who describes *Souls* in interdisciplinary terms (*Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903* [Chicago, 1995], p. 4).

31 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics* (New York, 1965), p. 314, my emphasis; hereafter cited in text as *SBF*.

32 This recollection of repressive student life at Tuskegee comes from Franklin Frazier and is cited in Ross Posnock (*Color and Culture*, p. 60).

33 Narrative for Du Bois does not have the same moralizing function as for Hayden White. White ends his essay, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," by asking, "Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?" (*The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* [Baltimore, 1987], p. 25). And, at the outset, he aligns narrative and ideology by speaking of the "impulse to narrate" as "natural" and "inevitable" (p. 1). In this shrewd examination of historiographic discourse, White suggests that narrative falsely appears natural and inevitable because it has the force and authority of the law behind it. For Du Bois, in contrast, narrative entails a genealogical excavation of the stories that lie behind unquestioned representations of social reality. Narrative after this manner foregrounds the omissions, amnesia, and exclusions—in short, the processes of construction—that consolidate knowledge as authority. In this sense, then, Du Bois employs narrative as a counter-ideological form of knowledge production. My thanks to Michael Rothberg in working out this distinction.

34 James Olney, "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1985), pp. 165–66.

35 Adolph Reed, for instance, reads Du Bois to reject interdisciplinarity in favor of the disciplinarity of political theory. Faulting Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker, Jr. in particular, Reed complains of literary critics who "eliminat[e] the distinction between literary and political texts, subsuming the latter within the former" (*W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* [New York, 1997], p. 150). Reed makes this critique in order to argue that political theory (which is, incidentally, Reed's own orientation) trumps all other lines of inquiry. This adoption of an extreme

disciplinarity narrows the political to the tautological domain of what in the discipline of political theory already counts as politics.

36 Recent work in American Studies that might be said to share Du Bois's counterfactual, narrative approach of reimagining social reality needs to be identified at this point. There are several prominent examples, representing a range of "disciplines" and "interdisciplines." Patricia J. Williams outlines a practice of critical legal theory that privileges the "rhetorical event" as way of providing "a more nuanced sense of legal and social responsibility" (*The Alchemy of Race and Rights* [Cambridge, Mass., 1991], p. 11). Wai Chee Dimock shares a similar project by conceiving of literature as the "textualization of justice" (*Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy* [Berkeley, 1996], p. 10). In addition to this work in legal theory and literature, notable scholarship in American Studies reexamines citizenship to imagine the contours of revitalized, democratic political participation. Robyn Wiegman examines spectacles of race and gender in order to think about alternatives to a canonical citizenship that hinges on the interplay of corporeal visibility and corporeal invisibility (*American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* [Durham, N.C., 1995]). In Dana Nelson's study about white male fraternal rituals of citizenship, a concluding section on Hollywood images of US presidentialism leads to musings about the "reciprocally dissensual democratic processes" that remain untold within this tradition (*National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* [Durham, N.C., 1998], p. 223). Kevin Gaines examines the ideology of racial uplift to think about what this ideology displaced, namely "a broader vision of uplift as group struggle for citizenship and material advancement" (*Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the 20th Century* [Chapel Hill, 1996], p. 6). Lauren Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C., 1997) charts the cultural forces and ideology that installed a privatized, infantilized, and deadened conception of citizenship at the heart of US politics in the late twentieth century. These investigations thus enable her to think about what has, in Du Bois's sense, become "unthinkable": an enlivened sense of political and social possibility.