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How do you do interdisciplinarity?

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By Roberta Pala

The AusSTS Interdisciplinary workshop took place at Deakin University, in Melbourne, Australia from the 3rd to the 5th of July 2019.

The workshop quite literally started with a confession of the feeling of insecurity that surfaces when you step into an interdisciplinary setting. Cordelia Fine, opening Keynote of the 3-day workshop, began her lecture '50 Shades of Grey Matter', by sharing her initial hesitancy, which I'm sure felt familiar to most scholars there. In fact, this dual sense of insecurity and hesitancy was precisely what this event was tapping into: how to take the destabilising feeling that sets in when we blur disciplinary boundaries – epistemologically, ontologically, physically – and turn it into a constructive, generous attitude.

The field of Science, Technology and Society attracts thinkers from a multitude of different academic backgrounds, including gender studies, philosophy, anthropology, social sciences, psychology, creative arts, etc. As a scholar trained in a number of these disciplines, I've often felt that a dedicated space to cultivate multiple creative tensions was needed. The AusSTS workshop offered exactly that – the possibility to stay with, pause and dwell on the trouble of interdisciplinarity, to safely and liberally explore its potentialities and the innovative relations that can emerge from it.

Fine began her Keynote by discussing the critiques she received for her problematisation of neuroscience's claims that link brain differences with sex differences. The rest of the lecture addressed the importance of leaving space for reflexivity within a research field, making it possible to critique and contextualise the knowledge-making practices embedded within. One aspect of the lecture that I found most critical was Fine's emphasis on the problems that arise when science is clearly separated from value, as if these were distinct types of concerns. Empirical findings feed into moral and ethical values, and vice versa, and doing science without acknowledging this relationship is imprecise and, more importantly, potentially harmful. For example, practices within the field of neuroscience can end up reinforcing gender essentialism, which in turn legitimises discriminatory practices as 'backed' by scientific claims. While this is not a new critique, Professor Fine also offered some advice about how to create a productive debate, by normalising the fundamental role of

disagreement as an integral part of scientific practice and by upholding scholarly norms. This means focusing on someone's claims, rather than attacking them for being ideological and foreclosing the possibility of engaging with their work; it also means taking into account the assumptions behind our practices as scholars and thinkers.



The workshop continued with a series of 5-minute presentations, each framed as either short provocations or works-in-progress, which allowed for a safe and supportive space to discuss and grapple with vulnerabilities and concerns regarding our work. The presentations were followed by panel discussions, organised per themes. While I cannot do justice to the scope and complexity of the discussions, I will focus on how they addressed the recurring onto-epistemological, methodological and ethical concerns that populate the intersection between science and society, which we face both as scholars *and* as actants in this world. Overall, the need for new relations to be thought, enacted and critiqued emerged.

The 'Creative' panel, for example, bravely discussed the potentialities of re-thinking and re-framing responses to science. Academic research can use creativity to re-amplify human and nonhuman stories, to reflect on the tensions between intuitive knowledges and technologies and to ask what stories are championed and what stories are erased. This kind application of creativity is useful when thinking about human-nonhuman ecologies, eroding conventions defining what it means to be human, or about the feminist concerns and ethics of Big data, all topics of interest at AusSTS. The key insight is that the decision to do research this way is political. *Is creativity political, too? Is there space for contemplation in academia? Can we do work outside the text?*

The 'Code' panel brought together scholars who reflected on the materiality of the digital world. The panel discussed the prescribing and

sense-making machines that govern modern life, and specifically, the algorithmic management of what we might normally consider social, intimate human experiences (for example musical taste via Spotify recommendations), focusing on the implications of these new forms of connections and disconnections and their embeddedness in everyday life. *Are categories and distinctions such as 'human' and 'digital' useful to think about these connections? What would the subversion to algorithmic interfaces look like?*

The 'Care' panel, traversing different types of care management (enacted pharmaceutically, biomedically, recreationally, etc.), centralised the policing of care, asking: *what forms of care are available, and to whom? Who is given the role to care, and who is denied the possibility to care?* This important discussion also tried to address the concerns of 'doing care' in an academic world increasingly vulnerable to neoliberal pressures. The panel proposed a *methodology* of care: this entails thinking of your work as co-constructed; that is, thinking of your 'participants' as your 'collaborators'; sharing decision-making processes; and making a commitment to think slowly, even if that commitment directly conflicts with the time demands of academic research.

The 'Narrative' panel examined our responsibility as academics to rethink dominant narratives, consider the implications of our knowledge claims, and find a way to stay with the complexity of the real, problematising the tendency to reduce these complexities to easy tropes. The panelists then went a step further and interrogated what it means to impose narrative to mess. *How do we make the mess productive?*

A highlight of the workshop was the keynote conversation, 'Transgenerational Politics, Solidarity and Justice-to-Come', between Jack Halberstam and Dr J R Latham. This was a generous, thought-provoking trans-generational discussion of trans experiences, which offered insights into the implications of the new visibility of the trans body. This visibility was carefully discussed in its double edge complications: while on one side it is allowing for trans experiences to finally be recognised in a way that makes it impossible to dismiss them, on the other side, visibility brings further scrutiny, undermining the infiltrating powers that trans bodies have had in the past. The speakers reflected on how trans-visibility and trans resistance have made hegemonic masculinity even more visible. In addressing the bathroom debate, for example, Halberstam and Latham reminded us that the real danger for women is and has always been violent masculinity, not trans folks. The misplaced anxiety used to justify the discrimination and policing of trans bodies, is actually empowering structural and violent masculinity, of which trans folks are often the victims. But, as Halberstam explained: "Nothing happens to gender norms that only impacts one part of the population." Undoing

gender norms has implications and potential to improve quality of life for all of society. In this undoing work resides the possibility to make the world finally available to all.



During the 3-day event, interdisciplinarity and collaborative possibilities became not only a matter of topic, but also of methods in academic research. Some sub-workshops dealt with the practical demands of collaborative work, such as how to communicate your work outside academia and how to deal with the power imbalances of doing research with external stakeholders.

Sarah Hayes' workshop, 'Communicating your research beyond the academic sphere', addressed exactly those insecurities that arise from the discomfort of having to think about how to communicate – let alone sell – your work outside academia.

Hayes emphasised the importance of curating a coherent and cohesive narrative about yourself as a researcher: this means not exclusively focusing on publications and research, but utilising social media's scope to make your work accessible to a broader audience. But you don't have to use all platforms, Hayes advised. Choose a platform that you will want to use, because "it's better not to have a Twitter account, rather than having one that is clearly neglected".

We are often told that a way to reach and engage with audiences outside university spaces is to avoid disciplinary jargon. During the workshop however, we were asked to think about this type of communication as very different in nature. That is, it's not about translating into lay language, it's about the way we tell our stories. Start with a compelling point of your work, think about the results, and distill what exactly is at stake.

Communicating our work outside academia does not need to be an

uncomfortable side project. Actually, this exercise feeds *back* into our academic work. It forces us to think about our early motivations, what brought us to this topic, what is important to us. These moments, when you bring back the personal at the heart of your work, rebel against the trappings of academic pace and its jargon, often perceived as artificiality.

Kari Lancaster and Declan Kuch's fantastic workshop, 'Studying up, down, slow, and fast', forced us right into the practical problems of interdisciplinary and embedded research. We dealt with questions of power and vulnerability, of how to (literally!) sit with different ways of making knowledge. As an example, we considered the problematic entanglements of conference ethnography, where you have to face the 'problem' of having to present your work to a room full of your own research participants! And what if those participants are also important, high level stakeholders, like the leaders of an international non-governmental organisation? The types of questions and scenarios we faced can feel quite distant to the isolating and text-focused conditions of PhD work. I struggled to rethink research engagements in terms of research *with* collaborators (not just participants), instead of research *on* a topic; to think about negotiating aims and sharing goals with different stakeholders and communities; to take the risk of deciding when it's more productive to let go of our knowledge stances and when it's instead more important to focus on convincing someone that a problem can be rethought. The logics of interdisciplinarity require us to consider our research as more than reporting back to stakeholders, and instead, as a way to open up the space for more questions, and for making it possible to ask "what other view is out there?" where there is no one right answer.

On the last day of the event, we were offered two beautiful examples of the results of collaborative work between artists, communities, and academia. We were shown two short films, *Mermaids* (2018) and *MyMy* (2014).

The following short plots of the movies are taken from the poster of the event, that you can find [here](#).

Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland (2018)

In the near future, the Earth is dead and Europeans can no longer survive outdoors for long periods of time. A young Indigenous man, Aiden, taken away when he was just a baby to be part of a medical experiment to save the white race, is released into the world of his family. As he travels with his father and brother across the landscape he confronts two possible futures and pasts.

MyMy (2014)

In a mythic cyberfeminist universe, a frustrated young man yearns for affinity and connection. In this age of digital avatars, he crafts a version of himself that is far more corporeal – by stitching together parts of himself to become his own cyborg twin, embracing the radical potential to create the self. However, his new clone has been corrupted by a techno-magic virus. This Other self embodies a dangerous idea: that there are parts of ourselves beyond our control.

A panel discussion with Tess Lea, Anna Helme and Sean Redmond followed the screening. The panel focused on the political potentialities of filmmaking. It asked what kind of radical possibilities can be explored when filmmakers collaborate with academics. These were both science fiction films, where sci-fi was, paradoxically, to be understood as means of understanding reality.

Filmmaking as a practice can be political. Lea talked about her filmmaking process as a way to liberate this art from the normative, military organisation and schedule of traditional filmmaking. This specific choice was already political. Breaking away from military filmmaking meant breaking away from military narratives. The actors were not separated from the experiences and roles they were portraying; so, in this sense, a lot of improvisation and semi-scripted lines were allowed as part of the process. The use of subtitles was also political in its implications. Not only did it allow the actors to feel more comfortable not having to police their speaking, but it meant making it harder for viewers, especially white and non-indigenous viewers, to read liberally into indigeneity.

Helme considered the liminal space that emerges when you bring performance art, filmmaking and academia together. This in-between space does not make everyone comfortable. It's hard to be rigorous and creative at the same time. But the political implications lay in the creation of a platform where marginalised experiences – especially in academia – are given a voice, and where critical, dialogical relations are possible.

Claiming that a film is political doesn't necessarily mean that it's transformative. The panel delved into the implications of reframing political concerns into narratives. On one side, Lea was quite clear in problematising putting the burden of responsibility of transforming society and dealing with societal concerns on one type of medium or artform. If you want transformative momentum, you need accumulation first. But collaborations allow for new spaces to be created, where radical possibilities are formulated. You make collaborations work when you enter this liminal space with an open heart, when you allow for shared reflections and critiques.

On the final afternoon of the workshop, we were offered the opportunity to

jump out of our comfort zones and actually ‘do collaboration’. After a visit to the Melbourne Museum, we were challenged to develop ideas for a reinterpretation of the existing exhibitions. These ideas were later presented to Melbourne Museum staff. While the discomfort of performing interdisciplinarity, a topic discussed at length in the previous days, was *real*, creativity reigned. Some imagined how to use museum spaces to break disciplinary boundaries and reflect the interrelatedness of animal diversity, Melbourne’s history, indigenous experiences and ‘gut feelings’; others imagined the potentialities of creating a non-museum within the museum, where museums’ rules can be broken to allow a reflection/problematisation of the institutional norms that museums reinforce. Two scholars ran a guided meditation to take us through the cultural and often problematic ways in which dreams are constructed or understood. The Melbourne museum staff were generous in offering enthusiastic and thoughtful feedback on our ideas. The whole experience felt enriching, and worth the initial insecurities of facing the uncomfortable task of proposing to the museum staff new ideas about their own jobs!





The AusSTS workshop proved that an academia that is generous, provocative, slow, and collaborative is possible and should also be fought for. This is a space where challenging discussions can take place constructively and the vulnerability of ideas is nurtured; where our roles as academics are deeply problematised and new methods, new approaches, alternative perspectives that emerge from giving space and voice to marginalised experiences, are discussed. AusSTS' commitment is to navigate these tensions in ethical and responsible ways. We need more of this in academia. I look forward to attending the next AusSTS event.

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- UNSW Environmental Humanities

You can find the final program of the AusSTS2019 interdisciplinary workshop [here](#).

Full album with high resolution images of the event is available [here](#).

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