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The Humanities and Interdisciplinarity: Borderless Sympathy and Global Citizenship

Lianne Gabrielle Sauvage

Loyola Marymount University, liannegrsauvage@gmail.com

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**The Humanities and Interdisciplinarity:
Borderless Sympathy and Global Citizenship**

The humanities is a broad range of disciplines that aims to understand human experience through the examination of human relations, culture, history, societies, and philosophies. These disciplines cultivate critical thinking and analysis, the ability and willingness to understand other perspectives, and a *global* approach through which one navigates the world. Interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, is when two or more disciplines are at work and in conversation with each other on a particular topic. The interdisciplinary humanities-based education is aimed at building a comprehensive understanding of the world as it is: complicated, layered, contextual, and most importantly, human.

However, the modern world does not seem to place nearly as much value into humanities-based education as compared to “useful” fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), resulting in a decrease in funding for the arts and an increase in the humanities being perceived as “useless.” The capitalist system under which the United States operates tracks and perceives technological advancement and national profit as growth; STEM fields are currently the most profitable and funded industries because they increase the nation’s wealth and growth on paper, when in actuality, extreme social inequality prevails, wealth gaps are widening, our social services are failing and our education quality is declining (Nussbaum 2, 15).

Living in a globalized and capitalistic society, we are connected to countless lives outside of our own and are dependent on the actions of strangers for our basic survival. The fact of human interdependency has been overshadowed by the myth of autonomy and independence. In

reality, everything we need and want is provided to us by another person, known or unknown. While going to the grocery store and purchasing food with your own money may feel like an expression of independence, the shopper did not *actually* obtain the food themselves; it was first planted, cared for, and harvested by a farmer to then be processed and packaged at a facility with other workers before being stocked on grocery store shelves by clerks. The shopper being able to purchase the item for themselves is only possible due to the work and labor of other people. In her book *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, feminist philosopher Virginia Held states that “Every person starts out as a child dependent on those providing us care, and we remain interdependent with others in thoroughly fundamental ways throughout our lives. [We] can think and act as if we were independent depends on a network of social relations making it possible for us to do so,” (14) meaning that from birth and even until death, we are completely dependent on and under the care of others.

In our current globalized, capitalist society, purchasing any good regardless of necessity connects us to other, nameless, people that were involved in the production and distribution of that good. The global demand for smartphones, for example, directly impacts the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo who mine the minerals necessary for smartphone parts; the demand for smartphones, a basic necessity to function in a modern and technological world, acts as an incentive for capitalists to cut corners, foster unsafe working conditions, and further exploit the Congolese land and people for cheap labor.

In this perspective, it is clear that the actions of one set of people, or several, can directly or indirectly impact the lives of other people, even those thousands of miles away. The undeniable fact of increasing human interdependence necessarily calls for a more humanist, globalist perspective and philosophy that allows us to navigate our increasingly complex world and tackle

interconnected economic, environmental, religious, political, and social issues. In her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* Martha Nussbaum writes,

“The global economy has tied all of us to distant lives. Our simplest decisions as consumers affect the living standard of people in distant nations who are involved in the production of products we use. Our daily lives put pressure on the global environment. It is irresponsible to bury our heads in the sand, ignoring the many ways in which we influence, every day, the lives of distant people. Education, then, should equip us all to function effectively in such discussions, seeing ourselves as ‘citizens of the world,’ to use a time-honored phrase, rather than merely as Americans, or Indians, or Europeans,”

emphasizing the important role education has in ensuring that we have the values and critical thinking skills necessary to navigate a progressively complex and interconnected world.

The humanities and interdisciplinary studies help produce people who could be identified as “citizens of the world,” a moral and ideological orientation that recognizes the fact of modern global interdependency and aims to act in accordance with that knowledge. The exposure to different histories, governments, policies, and sociocultural norms taught in interdisciplinary and humanities studies builds a muscle of empathy and propensity for compassion even for those who may not be in our direct sphere of influence. Furthermore, the abilities and virtues that are cultivated by a humanities-based, interdisciplinary education are the foundation of and essential to the continuation of our modern democracies. Nussbaum argues,

“Today we still maintain that we like democracy and self-governance, and we also think that we like freedom of speech, respect for difference, and understanding of others. We give these values lip service, but we think far too little about what we need to do in order to transmit them to the next generation and ensure their survival...Democracies have great rational and imaginative powers. They also are prone to some serious flaws in reasoning, to parochialism, haste, sloppiness, selfishness, narrowness of the spirit. Education based mainly on profitability in the global market magnifies these deficiencies, producing a greedy obtuseness and a technically trained docility that threaten the very life of democracy itself, and that certainly impede the creation of a decent world culture” (Nussbaum 141-142).

The emphasis on production, output, and economic growth on the personal and national level has led to neglecting and discrediting the arts and humanities, fields that are typically viewed as non-productive insofar as they do not immediately produce capital. Moreover, the increased promotion of the STEM industries, all fields that have a known disposition to produce capital and output, has, intentionally or not, pushed the arts to the side. However, such intense focus on the monetary value of non-humanities and the lack thereof perceived in the arts leads to the degradation of democracies and “[impedes on] the creation of a decent world culture.” It is in the humanities and arts, through learning about other cultures, world history, and different perspectives, that we can cultivate the ability of borderless sympathy necessary to function in an interdependent and interconnected world. An education almost exclusively aimed at profitability and increasing capital breeds insensitive, detached, obtuse, and power-hungry societies and governments that only have their self-interest in mind, an environment inhospitable to a proper democracy.

Interdisciplinarity has done nothing but strengthen my studies, help me understand a multitude of perspectives outside of my own, and enrich my character. By exposing myself to a variety of disciplines and topics, I can build the skills and develop the characteristics necessary to have the critical thinking, borderless sympathy, and openness that a citizen of the world should have. As a Humanities major, I am not limited by a particular curriculum nor do I have to strictly adhere to a set of academic requirements; through the Humanities major, I am not only able to choose for myself what courses to take and thus the direction of my degree, but I also have the freedom to choose what sorts of topics, cultures, and histories I expose myself to. This level of freedom to explore what I am drawn to opened a door of possibilities I otherwise would not have access to if I had limited myself to a singular discipline. During my four years at Loyola

Marymount University, I made it a goal for myself to take courses that tackled contemporary, feminist, and non-Western topics because I wanted to explore perspectives that, perhaps until recently, are not often spotlighted in academia.

One of my first exposures to interdisciplinarity studies in the humanities was my First Year Seminar course during my first semester at university, *On the Technological Sublime*, which analyzed the relationship that films, television, and animation can have with the philosophical concept of the sublime. This course forced its students to see the sublime in mediums often overlooked when it comes to matters of philosophy, to think outside of the box, and to critically examine not only literary texts but also visual and auditory forms of media. In a world wherein media of all forms is simultaneously easily accessible and influential, the ability to analyze and deconstruct the hidden meaning behind art in this form is crucial. *On the Technological Sublime* explored liminality, the occupation of two positions at once, and how it can manifest in different forms such as nature, sound, concepts, people, and art. The ability to find universally valuable qualities or particularly beautiful aspects of a diverse series of works is something I am grateful to have learned so early and something that marks a starting point for engagement in true interdisciplinary work. Taking such a course so early into my undergraduate career laid the foundation and groundwork necessary for me to continue my interdisciplinary studies by helping me become accustomed to viewing things from different academic perspectives and even blending these perspectives to form a unique, nuanced analysis.

Moreover, *On the Technological Sublime* properly prepared me for another film course, *American Cinema: Black Representation*, wherein we investigated the history of African-American cinema from its early beginnings in the Blaxploitation Era to where it stands currently. Through this course, I examined the cycle of culture and history informing media and

the arts, how this cycle was used to hurt the Black community, but also how it was utilized by Black filmmakers to break stereotypes and defy racism in the entertainment industry. In his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall writes, “Our ‘circuit of culture’ suggests that, in fact, meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices... Meaning is also produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural ‘things’... Meanings also regulate and organize our conduct and practices,” discussing how the cycle of culture both influences and is produced by our current cultural and social practices (3-4). Film, similarly to all forms of art, is an ideological apparatus that articulates, expresses, and demonstrates what the sociocultural norms of a given society are; art is one of the first mediums through which all people are taught what is beautiful and grotesque, what is valuable and what is worthless, *who* is valuable and worthless. In *American Cinema: Black Representation*, all of the films we analyzed were, by nature, situated within particular sociopolitical and cultural contexts in American history that were necessary to understand as a prerequisite to comprehend the films in question; not only were we analyzing art, but also analyzing the historical contexts out of which these films were created. Nussbaum writes that,

“The cultivation of sympathy has been a key part of the best modern ideas of democratic education, in both Western and non Western nations. Much of this cultivation must take place in the family, but schools, and even colleges and universities, also play an important role. If they are to play it well, they must give a central role in the curriculum to the humanities and the arts, cultivating a participatory type of education that activates and refines the capacity to see the world through another person’s eyes” (96),

emphasizing the importance of building a propensity for compassion and sympathy. While as a white-passing person of mixed-race descent, I would never have complete access nor total understanding of living life in the shoes of an African-American person, interdisciplinary courses such as Black Cinema allow me to get as close as I can to understanding such a perspective. By

viewing different films tackling different issues within the Black community, particularly through a social, cultural, political, and historical lens, I can get a glimpse of the African-American perspective and culture, and can “see through the world through another person’s eyes.” This muscle of empathy and willingness to put oneself in others’ shoes is precisely the global citizenship that the study of the humanities can cultivate and foster; citizens of the world who have already or want to understand other citizens that we are inextricably connected to.

Another course that was explicitly interdisciplinary was my Prison Literature course wherein we explored narratives from people who are either currently or formerly incarcerated while analyzing the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of their typically unjust incarceration. Prison Literature exposed me to the nuanced and complex issue of the United States prison-industrial complex, revealing how interconnected the realms of economics, culture, politics, and history are when it comes to the United States incarceration problem. In this class, we would examine literary texts, documentaries, and poems through a sociopolitical and historical lens, putting the disciplines of English, political science, art, and history in direct conversation with each other. Any other approach than an interdisciplinary one would not have given enough context to properly understand the international issue of the prison-industrial complex. Nussbaum states, “All good historical study of one’s nation requires some grounding in world history. Today, however, we need world history and global understanding for reasons that go beyond what is required to understand our own nation. The problems we face and the responsibilities we bear call on us to study the nations and cultures of the world in a more focused and systematic way,” to emphasize that to tackle complicated and layered issues like the prison-industrial complex, one *needs* a wholistic approach that requires a *global* understanding

of not *just* the economic, nor *just* the political, nor *just* the historical but of the comprehensive whole (81-82).

Similarly to Prison Literature, my Politics of Immigration class was an interdisciplinary course that prompted us to look at patterns of migrations, policies, and discourse surrounding several different migrant groups through historical, cultural, political, philosophical, and ethical lenses. We examined the push and pull factors of immigration, and how the United States' economic and political actions affect other countries' migration patterns and the rhetoric around *specific* migrant groups. To take up such a task necessarily requires an interdisciplinary and holistic approach that takes into account the various contexts and circumstances that influence immigration into the United States. In this course, we tackled the ever-evolving meaning of citizenship, the nation-state building project of the United States Empire, the racial spectrum, and the implications these have had on immigrants of all statuses. In Politics of Immigration, interconnectedness and Stuart Hall's circuit of culture had never been more evident. In Alfonso Gonzales' *Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State*, Gonzales analyzes how anti-immigrant discourse as well as the criminalization and demonization of Latino immigrants have become hegemonic, almost common sense, in American society (23). The nativist Right is a niche of the Conservative Party made up of academics, politicians, grassroots organizations and capitalists that firmly believe in the rights of native-born Americans held paramount before immigrant rights (Gonzales 23-24). Gonzales writes that there were "those focused on creating the ideological conditions for implementing their agenda, those directly involved in legal and political battles over immigration, and those devoted to funding and coordinating the activities of the nativist Right," through gradual government and academic infiltration, the nativist Right has made xenophobia hegemonic, effectively inserting their

ideology into the circuit of culture, resulting in the legalization of anti-migrant policies (31). Here, we see the *exploitation* of the interconnectedness of our various institutions and cultures for economic or political gain. The circuit of culture is used in such a way that is beneficial only to some people in the United States, but harmful to other Americans and non-Americans, for the sake of power.

In almost all my courses at Loyola Marymount University, employing interdisciplinary approaches to the variety of topics we covered revealed the complexities of societal issues insofar as these issues cannot be fully addressed through one discipline alone. Everything is situated within a particular time, place, and environment; if we were to analyze any form of media without first learning the sociopolitical and historical context, we cannot truly apprehend the meanings being intentionally or unintentionally projected. Joe Moran in *Interdisciplinarity* writes, “Interdisciplinary approaches often draw attention, either implicitly or explicitly, to the fact that what is studied and taught at universities is always a political question” because such approaches reveal what is hidden between the lines and demonstrate the interconnectedness of *all* societal issues. It cannot be understated how much of an impact my studies have had on my worldview and perspective in life. As an undocumented immigrant, I myself am situated in a nuanced context with generations of migrant history behind me and already hold a unique perspective of experiencing what it’s like to live in two different countries, holding two different political and immigration statuses. My interdisciplinary studies have only widened my worldview and exposed me to cultures and ideas I previously did not have access to. Studying the humanities has helped me build critical thinking and analytical skills that will allow me to be a compassionate citizen of the world, ready to navigate these contexts and societies equipped with the willingness and open-mindedness necessary to do so.

However, unlike myself, most of the world outside of academia does not see the value in pursuing a humanities degree due to the perception that doing so will not reap monetary rewards immediately. This viewpoint reflects a societal shift prioritizing profitability and economic growth over the betterment and enrichment of humanity and our societies, thus undervaluing the essential contributions of the humanities to our collective understanding, empathy, cultural enrichment, and our democracies. The more we devalue the humanities and emphasize profitability, the less we educate the youth about the inextricability of global interconnectedness and interdependency. The humanities and interdisciplinary studies are crucial to cultivating democratic citizens of the world with borderless sympathy, an orientation that only becomes more necessary as time goes on. Without a commitment to the humanities, we risk perpetuating narrow-mindedness and divisiveness, failing to recognize the nuanced complexities of life beyond simplistic black-and-white narratives. In our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, we must act with compassion and sympathy even to people we don't know and are outside of our direct sphere of influence. As Nussbaum argues, the humanities is central to the maintenance of modern democracies and acts as the "soul" of a people (4-6). To neglect the humanities is to also neglect our duty to build a disposition of kindness and understanding not only towards strangers in other countries but in our own country as well. As scholars, we have a duty to uplift the humanities and interdisciplinarity to ensure that our future generations can challenge hegemony, and are equipped with the skills and sensibilities necessary to confront the complex challenges that inevitably lie before us. Through the study of the humanities and interdisciplinary approaches, democracy was born; only through these can democracy be saved.

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Abstract:



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Lianne Gabrielle Sauvage

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