

Transverse Disciplines: Queer-Feminist, Anti-racist, and Decolonial Approaches to the University, edited by Simone Pfleger and Carrie Smith

Nicole Slattery

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Book Review: *Transverse Disciplines: Queer-Feminist, Anti-racist, and Decolonial Approaches to the University*

Pfleger, Simone, and Carrie Smith, eds. *Transverse Disciplines: Queer-Feminist, Anti-racist, and Decolonial Approaches to the University*. University of Toronto Press, 2022, 379pp., \$80.00.

Nicole Slattery

University of Toronto

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Simone Pfleger and Carrie Smith's edited volume, *Transverse Discipline: Queer-Feminist, Anti-racist, and Decolonial Approaches to the University*, reflects on the ways that academic disciplines can be reimagined through transformative collaborations and commitments to decolonial and anti-racist work. The collected essays focus specifically on the future that can be imagined for German studies. This volume asks difficult questions about how the discipline, and academia, might navigate changes necessitated by neoliberal policies, institutional mandates, financial urgencies, and other sociopolitical realities, and push back against other converging crises in our society. The authors answer these questions by focusing on our conceptions of disciplinary boundaries, through the reflection and contemplation of "transverse" orientations that cut across contexts, disrupt linear thinking, and destabilize normative systems embedded within our institutions (14). The selected chapters do this thoughtfully, by demonstrating how transverse thinking has long been nurtured by Black, queer, neurodivergent, and other minoritized scholars and activists. Altogether, this volume provides ways of re-orienting and re-imagining disciplinary fields and their relationships to other disciplines by discussing ways to foreground marginalized voices and center anti-racist, decolonial, queer, and anti-capitalist frameworks in practice (7). While a discourse of crisis frames the volume, these essays are grounded in strategies of care, cooperation, and collaboration, and the shared implicative responsibility to reshape the future of academic work and institutional structures alongside these theoretical and activist frameworks.

The volume opens with a thoughtful introduction from the editors, Pflieger and Smith, who center this project in calls for undoing, unmaking and remaking, and reorientation of their field of scholarship – German studies. They argue that this requires a commitment to honest and ethical practices, urging readers to ask ourselves how we are accountable “to where and how and with whom we do our disciplinary coupling and uncoupling” (14), and emphasize that each way of forming these connections reconfigures the power structures within which we are embedded. In the vein of transversal thinking, the discipline of academic librarianship has much to interrogate by instrumentalizing the knowledge contained in this volume. As a liaison librarian, this book has evoked my own reflections on the disciplinary bounds that shape the scope of my work, as well as what is to be learned and forged through engagement with modes of inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary orientation in my practice. However, to do this we must first interrogate our positionalities and implicatedness in systems of power and privilege. What frameworks orient us? Which ways of knowing are validated and which are not? What possibilities emerge when approaching our discipline transversally?

The volume presents fourteen contributing chapters, divided into three sections. The opening section, “Situating Disciplinarity: Diagnoses, Genealogies and Possibilities,” explores opportunities to attend to the historical and structural legacies of higher education. The essays highlight the oppressive impacts of hegemonic norms and structures within academic institutions, which are designed to privilege certain bodies and expertise. I feel it is important to highlight the case study by Finch, Elliot, and McDonnell, which examines the hierarchies that are upheld through the sources legitimized through teaching and research. They detail a curriculum project undertaken at their university that aimed to shift power away from academics and towards students, through transdisciplinary student-led approaches. They argue that it is not enough to diversify a curriculum without also questioning the social stratification implied in the ways that some voices are included, and some are not. The essay, primarily authored by Professor Helen Finch, attempts to share its student-led rationale by including the autoethnographies of two students, named as co-authors. I highlight this chapter to emphasize its contributions to dismantling hierarchies of power in academic knowledge production.

Section 2, “Against Insularity,” features a collection of essays that illustrates how the boundaries and practices of research, teaching, and writing in academia can be rethought to mobilize discourses of activism, racism, memory, and colonialism. An important contribution is Baer and Boovy’s discussion of the troubled contexts of their own US academic institutions as land-grant universities. Their essay provides a call to action for these institutions to engage with place-based and community-led research, through Black feminist, queer, and ecological frameworks, to address their harmful histories calcified into their structures. I was particularly struck by their

use of adrienne maree brown's concept of "pleasure activism" to playfully re-orient their politics of resistance and "enable different forms of respect, care, and kinship among faculty, students, and local communities beyond established hierarchies and boundaries of knowledge" (145). I urge members of Canadian academic institutions to also reflect on this chapter. While many of our institutions are not deemed land-grant universities, many have profited (and still profit) from dispossessed Indigenous lands (Chua 2023).

The final section, "Speculative Methodologies and Radical Relationality," adopts an activist stance to emphasize the importance of positionality and anti-racist queer-feminist critiques as tools to destabilize hegemonic structures. Within this section, Simone Pfleger in her own chapter explores how centering transdisciplinary relationality enables new modes of solidarity to forge networks and collaborations inside and outside of oneself, one's own discipline, and one's institution. Additionally of note, Maria Stehle provides a beautiful discussion about taking an interspecies approach – as a "transverse" perspective – for transformative community-building, research, collaboration, and creation. Her chapter, which discusses the artwork and stories of trees, reveals the troubles of essentialist thought, particularly in higher education, and anthropocentric perspectives – and instead urges a reflection on ways to pursue interconnection, resistance, and reconceptualization for social justice that takes root, branches out, and extends across (266).

Transverse Disciplines is a visionary contribution that envisions a reimagined future for academia, where social justice is a politic of being, and is grounded in anti-racist, anti-colonial, and queer-feminist approaches. This book should be read by all library workers in academia to guide us towards the notion of being in good relation with each other, the land we are situated on, the communities in which we work, the students we teach, the knowledge we engage with, and finally the disciplines around us. Like German studies, academic librarianship also urgently needs to be decolonized and diversified, heeding to the calls of these chapters to ensure that this reorientation is built upon a foundation that is political and activist in nature.

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