



## The borderlands manifesto

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### *Abstract*

Borderlands was launched in 2001 and published its first issue, "Borderphobias", the following year. In this text from 2001, Borderlands' founding editor Anthony Burke explains the transdisciplinary and teratological vision of the journal: to question and transgress disciplinary, political and ontological boundaries, to live and wander in the borderlands with the new and monstrous hybrids of knowledge, thought, sociality and being that can be found and made there. So hey, we were never modern too. A glimpse of our origins and vision; the desire, hope and refusal that began this thing.

Ruthlessly, in spite of itself, the enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness.

—Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno

### *Why Borderlands?*

We wish to think in the spaces between disciplines, their borderlands, so as to challenge the framing and disciplining of knowledge within modernity. We wish to promote and support new forms of writing that blur the lines between fiction, journalism, and essayistic prose. And politically, we feel that the issue of borders—between nations, sexualities, economies, identities and peoples—brings together some of the most pressing issues in the 21st century, issues which drive violence and conflict, mark out profound dilemmas over power, sovereignty and autonomy under globalisation, and remain central to the question of whether we can continue to live together and survive.

In intellectual terms, the Borderlands journal aims to create an open, productive space for the transdisciplinary enterprise—an enterprise that is slowly becoming an ever more common feature of postgraduate and academic research and is undoubtedly helping to transform the university and the broader public culture, often against its will. Its implications are potentially more profound than latter-day concerns about the rise of cultural studies or the impact so-called postmodernism has had on intellectual culture. Hence, we hope that in the spaces of borderlands e-journal you will find economics merging with feminism, continental philosophy and queer theory, politics with cultural theory and history, or the rarefied concerns of political philosophy encountering the complexity, materiality and rush of contemporary events.

Borderlands journal aims to support transdisciplinarity in two ways.

The first is to promote shared yet diverse spaces of intellectual communication, scholarship and practice. Over time you will read here work from most of the disciplines in the humanities—by establishing this shared space we hope to encourage greater dialogue and cross-fertilisation across the human and social

sciences. This pushes beyond multi- or inter-disciplinarity, to encourage writers to draw on tools from other disciplines, to question their own, and to recast the way in which they construct and pursue the apparently stable objects of their inquiry.

The second, more profound and problematic, sense of transdisciplinarity is a blurring of disciplinary boundaries in a way that both creates new hybrids of knowledge and practice, and forces a recasting of the internal rules which govern disciplinary truths—rules which define their boundaries, their shared norms and biases, permissible research projects and forms of writing.

For too long some of the most influential disciplines in the humanities - disciplines such as politics and economics, which determine the course of nations and the human possibilities of millions—have shared more with the enterprise of "Newspeak" in which the boundaries of the thinkable perpetually contract and ossify. As Orwell implicitly understood, this is a serious political danger, both for the practice of democracy and the enterprise of policy. It reduces knowledge to an instrumental tool, a political commodity, and mouths an arrogant rebuke to the liberal premises of the university as a free space of intellectual inquiry.

Yes, knowledge needs structure and logic, but it also needs freedom and surprise, sudden disjunctions and conjunctions, caution and daring at once. Theory needs to be constantly challenged, both on its own epistemological terrain and at the crossroads of its intersection with history and practice. Theory needs to find itself surprised by events, even as it breaks up their structure of obviousness and commonsense.

At its best, transdisciplinarity offers a way out of the hall of mirrors of Cartesian modernity - a modernity which has used a positivist, instrumental image of knowledge to mask practices that have wrought such enormous (and often damaging) transformations of material and human space. Transdisciplinarity promotes a more self-critical, contingent mode of knowledge - it searches knowledge for its effects rather than its truth, in a profound reversal of Modernity's fetish for certainty over responsibility.

## *The study of monsters*

The University has been slow to recognise and allow for transdisciplinary inquiry—as Robert Hodge argued in a 1995 issue of the *Australian Universities Review*, while more and more postgraduates are pursuing such an approach to their research, they run the risk of being inappropriately supervised and assessed. He makes a passionate argument for students to be bold enough to hold to this approach, and for universities to change their culture to reflect the shift.

For Hodge, the transdisciplinary turn is a kind of Kuhnian revolution or, in Foucault's terms, an 'epistemic rupture'. It is a question of refusing the way in which disciplines, whilst transmitting useful and important knowledges, also 'repulse a whole teratology of learning' - teratology being 'the study of monsters'.

Hodge exhorts us to be open to the monstrous, to 'take seriously those problems, beliefs and experiences that are annulled by a dominant discipline, whether they be intractably personal or contaminated by the disreputable demotic or popular, by passion or anger or delight, by the desire to change the world or to dream a new one.' Being a transdisciplinary scholar then is not to seek refuge in a new mastery but to place oneself, as a site and vector of knowledge, at risk - to seek to become something other than what one is. It might be to seek, as Jane Bennett has argued, productive new hybrids of thought, machine, history and subjectivity.

Here the troubling convergences forced on western thought in recent decades—between mind and body, reason and unreason, man and animal, male and female, self and other - are matched by a dissolution of the boundaries which have marked off disciplines from one another and effectively organised powerful systems of learning, pedagogy, research and knowledge. For these reasons, practising transdisciplinary scholarship can itself feel dangerous and troubling, and may produce a certain loneliness. Yet however different, transdisciplinarity is still inspired by the ideals which lie at the root of the liberal tradition, even as it questions its form, limits and history. This is a necessary 'postmodern' irony, because while such work criticises and undermines the Enlightenment, as a historical experience and a series of claims, it continues to

argue within its terms. It asks for free and open debate, democratic spaces of thought, for the university to live up to an ideal it claims to embody. It speaks in the terms of ethics, justice and freedom, even as it rethinks and modifies them.

*Global borderlands of thought—calling writers and readers*

So against the difficulties of uncomprehending teachers and institutions, limited publishing spaces, hostile disciplinary police and closed spaces of dialogue and debate—in short, the epistemic power-politics of modern public life—borderlands journal offers a partial, yet globally accessible, opening. We hope that the global reach provided by the world wide web will be a powerful attraction to scholars to publish with us and will develop readers and networks from more diverse places, especially beyond the academic power centres of North America and Western Europe.

We hope you will join us in this venture—that you will read Borderlands, write for it, enjoy it, and criticise it. Above all, we hope you will use it as a resource to conceive and practice the as yet unthought.

—ANTHONY BURKE

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