

Letter from William Doty

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While lecturing at Indiana earlier this year (the J. Jeffery Auer lecture in political communication)—which event included a delightful luncheon at the Folklore Institute—graduate student Liz Locke gifted me with *FF* 28/2. Her marvelous “Orpheus and Orphism” in that journal issue has already been copied for several colleagues in classics and gender studies. But I want here to respond to Stephen Olbrys’ “What’s There to Fear from a Crisis Anyway!” (pp. 43-94)—which is given an extraordinary amount of publication space, but deserves it, as an essay that scopes a disciplinary field craftily. Indeed, it is a “disciplinary field” that bears significant developments for several cross-/interdisciplinary endeavors and deserves the sort of attention that Julie Thompson Klein and I have highlighted (Interdisciplinary Resources, *Issues in Integrative Studies* Spec. Num. 8, 1990; *Interdisciplinary Studies Today*, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 58, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994). I reply here only to a few of Olbrys’ topics.

Nearly as old as Methuselah, I can own up to having initiation-publication copies of several of the items that Olbrys mentions (in cloth editions, no less!). While I am not a professional folklorist, folklore studies has been close to my comp-lit/hermeneutical foci for years, so that I am very much aware of many of the issues raised in this sprawling retrospective account. “Sprawling” of necessity, of course, since it is characteristic of interdisciplines to range freely across strict disciplinary boundaries. And may their tribe(s) never fail to increase! That I am also identified as a postmodernist theorist only thickens the mix: I write here primarily to encourage contemporary/future studies beyond the baccalaureate to evolve beyond the trivializing/literalizing disciplinary straitjackets all too prevalent across the last couple of decades in academia.

Olbrys sets his cap toward deliteralizing and deconstructing in the East, and toward reconstruction in the West. To which I chant the sixties’ “Right on!” “Postmodernism” is somewhere in the middle of that, and I am intrigued to witness graduate student-level interaction with and prognosis of *any* academic status quo. Perhaps my remarks here may contribute *bon courage!* (somehow the French seems semantically stronger than the English here).

I am delighted (as an old fart ready to retire soon, but active in some eight or nine disciplines across my academic career) to witness such reflection upon disciplines, upon (as well) the boundaries and divides between them.

We need only cite Thomas Kuhn or Victor Turner to remind us and our colleagues of the importance of escaping the narrowest disciplinary defines (established primarily, and recently, by a basically Teutonic-Enlightenment figuration of academe, when not by the fact that more baccalaureates in business are now given yearly than in all the liberal arts and sciences). *Everywhere* one looks down the turnpike, real-world productivity skips right on past strict disciplinary divides into teamwork, shared epistemologies, and repeatedly-refined and -redesigned multi- or interdisciplinary research teams. Now administering an interdisciplinary Ph.D myself, I can but shout Hurrah!, even as I lament the lack of GTA dollars for students outside the well-established majors.

What is included in “postmodernism” can be debated endlessly, yet we all know that it is a portmanteau term for what any self-respecting twentieth-century project without exception will entail: debriding Enlightenment models of their sheer rationalism, incorporating lived-world realia, and admitting freely the tenuousness of the possible (the brave living through of positions that may anticipate being outdated within the next decade).

Already Friedrich Nietzsche laid foundations for such perspectives, yet fundamentalist scholarship has oh-so-repeatedly ignored authentic revisionist models. Will there be a newly-configured Cultural Studies/Communication Studies/Critical Theory/New Folkloristics/Post-Colonialist/Etc.” framework/s for which current graduate student generations will operate?

Probably only plurals—polyphonics such as I have argued in *Mythography* (2nd ed. now completed). Olbrys’s essay in *FF* is as good as it gets, in terms of challenges and forays at the border/s: thankfully his work finds print in such a way as to ask *any* traditional disciplinary specialist to reconsider—redesign—the maps of the disciplinary status quo. *None* of the present disciplines dare ignore such re-imaginings as they confront the next millennium.