

**T**HIS DECK OF CARDS EMERGED OUT OF a series of textual exercises and collaborative experiments undertaken in the autumn of 2022 at Princeton University. A few words, then, about how these paper bits came to be — and what they represent.

Since 2010/2011 Princeton has been home to a somewhat unusual interdisciplinary Ph.D. program known as IHUM, the “Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in the Humanities.” Engendered at a moment when a reshaping of graduate education was felt to be necessary, and drawing on an ambition to integrate critical and creative practices across the humanistic and qualitative social-scientific departments, the IHUM program was designed to facilitate ambitious, idiosyncratic, and collaborative work by graduate students and faculty committed to the continuous reimagining of the humanistic tradition (in the broadest sense). A co-taught core graduate seminar, “Interdisciplinarity and Anti-disciplinarity,” lies at the heart of the program, drawing on a variety of faculty from around the university and centering a semester of collaborative inquiry on the institutional and conceptual topology of

the modern university (i.e., modes of scholarly and scientific knowledge production; epistemic and sociopolitical genealogies of learned “fields”; divergent trajectories of academic professionalization and expertise; institutional procedures and their fiscal/administrative contexts; legacies of injustice, ambition, and accommodation; etc.).

A salient idiosyncrasy of “Interdisciplinarity and Anti-disciplinarity” stands as the opening wager of the course: a voluntary and a joint commitment to create (or at least to try to create), across the semester, some kind of explicitly *collaborative* final project. The nature of that final project (its form, themes, and the manner in which it will be realized) is left ostentatiously open from the outset. The willing students and participating faculty read together, talk together, and begin to experiment together, all with an eye toward nurturing some kind of “new work” into existence. While this kind of class structure is by no means unknown within art schools or theater programs or architecture studios, such “atelier”-style courses are relatively unusual in the *wissenschaftlich* humanities, particularly at the graduate level

in American research universities. Indeed, collaborative work remains an anomaly in most graduate programs. It is difficult to do, difficult to evaluate within the existing frameworks of credit, and when such work is self-consciously “creative” it sits especially awkwardly with respect to the mainline activities encouraged upon those pursuing scholarly life.

All this makes a lot of sense. Such work is always a little risky, and a commitment to “openness” must include a genuine openness to failure — and in some years “Interdisciplinarity and Antidisciplinarity” has “failed” (in a manner of speaking, anyway), in that final projects have not exactly “gelled,” producing no final thing to which we could point. Though we learned from those years as well.

That said, there have also been marked and memorable successes: the collaboratively authored and edited book, *Keywords;... Particularly Relevant to Academic Life, &c.* (Princeton University Press, 2018), came out of one ambitious cycle of the course, and ultimately went into a second printing after some good reviews and even a translation. A subsequent year, disrupted by the pandemic,

saw the realization of a very interesting set of performative “Protocols for Insurgent Interdisciplinarity,” a kind of Situationist-style handbook for more-and-less ludic (if mostly unrealized) on-campus interventions aimed at disrupting departmental silos. In another year, an investigation into “orphaned books” (physical books relegated to various tragicomic conditions of marginal or symbolic presence, e.g., book décor in common rooms, library-like coffeeshops, etc.) gave rise to an actual exhibition — with accompanying documentation.

The present *DECK-COLLAGE* took shape as the final project of the 2022 iteration of “Interdisciplinarity and Antidisciplinarity.” These cards document a wall-sized array of interlaced and interlocking text-fragments, a collage that resulted from a semester-long process of iterative reading, annotation, excision, and juxtaposition. A self-conscious preoccupation with the transdisciplinary nature of *citation* motivated this undertaking, and we read our way through the history of the footnote (guided by a visit from Anthony Grafton), delved the legacy of paratextual literary forms (e.g., Pope’s *Dunciad*), reflected

on the “seamfulness” of collage (reading and talking with Marshall Brown), and puzzled the spatial implications of mural expression (Sylvia Lavin, *Kissing Architecture*). Informed by all this, and by a subtending concern with cross-disciplinary “grafting” and bibliographic “satura,” we began to cut up our readings. And to cut up our notes. And to sort and classify and reciprocally comment on these slips of paper in a manner reminiscent of the humanist tradition of “commonplacing.”

But the final configuration of all this — such as can be reconstructed, puzzle-like, from these cards — resulted from a single afternoon of mostly silent and strikingly chess-like “play.” We brought our (annotated) slips and laid them out on the table, and we agreed, by emergent “rules,” that we would, in pairs, undertake wordless “conversations” by means of serial “moves”: person A would select a slip from the table and affix it to the large glass wall of our otherwise windowless room; person B would select a second slip, and affix it in proximity, responsively; this would continue until the conversation played itself out. Or until the timer sounded.

Subsequent rounds involved an opportunity for “commentary” (by means of hanging label-tags), and for higher-level structural observations (by means of literal “threads,” configured in such a way as to mark linkages or highlight particular moments).

It is hard to convey the crossing lines of pleasure, puzzlement, and insight that laced the occasion. Here and there one caught a glimpse of linguistic or conceptual *délire*. Now and again one heard an audible giggle. Ideas took shape on the wall — some new (to us), some very old. It was a striking kind of “review session” for our semester, and something more, too.

And that was it. We went out for noodles together, and called it quits on the term. But not before agreeing that we would try to preserve something of what we had done. What you hold is our effort in that regard.

The term “*décollage*,” of which our title is a homophonic translation, has a number of meanings in French, including the taking-off of an airplane. But its root sense is something like “unsticking.” In the post-war period, particularly in connection with the work of the Fluxus-adjacent German artist

Wolf Vostell, the term comes to signify a whole world of aesthetic (and political) ambition: an art of “taking things apart”; a practice of anti-*collage*, a body of work achieved through cut-up and cut-through.

Our collage was itself the result of some “unsticking”: not only did we loosen our text fragments from their matrix in this or that anthology or academic department, but we also had to ourselves come a little “unglued” from our scholarly identities along the way. How fitting, then, we thought, to allow *décollage* to have the last word. To preserve what we had done (while taking it apart), to make it portable (and re-combinable), we cut up our collage. And you have the result here, in these little slips of paper.

Cutting up, cutting out, and cutting in: disciplines, Eddie Glaude reminded us when he came to visit the class, are *bibliographies*. And by these lights, might it be right to say that both interdisciplinarity and antidisciplinarity may require, from time to time, some judicious *bibliotomy*? That may be the wager of our *DECK-COLLAGE*.

—D. Graham Burnett

# The DECK-COLLAGE

*represents the collaborative  
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