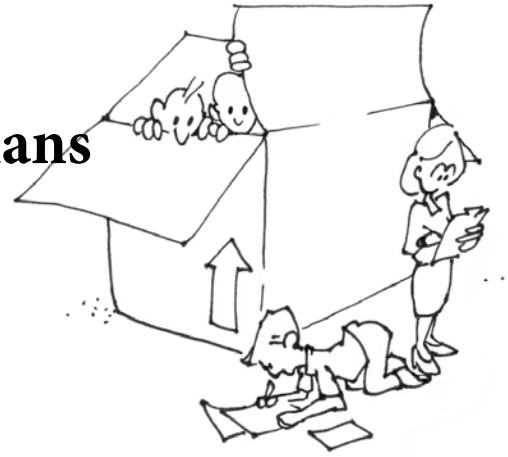


Thinking Outside the Disciplinary Box: Historians and Interdisciplinarity



By Lara Campbell and Christabelle Sethna

At the 2015 CHA meeting in Ottawa, several historians at a roundtable organized and chaired by Lara Campbell discussed their experiences studying, teaching, and researching outside traditional history departments. This roundtable emerged from informal conversations at previous conferences. The goal of the roundtable was to highlight some key themes arising from our experiences, and to generate ideas about our future roles in an interdisciplinary context.

Roundtable members included Sean Carleton, a doctoral student in the Frost Centre for Canadian Studies & Indigenous Studies at Trent University, where he examines the history of education, colonialism, and capitalism in Canada from an interdisciplinary perspective. Roberta Lexier is an Assistant Professor in the Department of General Education at Mount Royal University. Her research focuses on social activism, and she is currently researching how coffee certification programs have a positive effect on the lives of farmers in Honduras, where she also leads an international field school. Dan Horner is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology at Ryerson University, where he works on issues related to public life, migration and the politics of urban space in mid-nineteenth-century Montreal. Daniel Macfarlane is an Assistant Professor in Environmental and Sustainability Studies at Western Michigan Universities. An environmental and transnational historian, his teaching and research delve into interdisciplinary aspects of the Canadian-American water relationship, and he is currently writing a book on the enviro-technical manipulation of Niagara Falls. Christabelle Sethna is an Associate Professor in the Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies and the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa. Her focus is on sex education, contraception, and abortion and recent collaborative projects deal with state surveillance of women's liberation groups in Canada during the Cold War and women's experiences of wartime rape in Europe.

Roundtable members led a fascinating discussion that touched on multiple issues. Alongside enthusiastic audience participants, they spoke about the challenges and the rewards of working outside traditional history departments. Many noted that historians bring a historical framework to the subjects they teach; however, this framework can be disturbing to students who have had negative experiences with the discipline of history. This negativity can surface in student evaluations that may reflect unfavourably on the instructor. Some remarked upon the difficulties that arise when one works regularly across disciplinary boundaries – having to choose, for example, which grant committees should

assess funding applications, or which prize committees may be most suitable, or which publications and research projects will be valued appropriately by colleagues, department chairs, and deans during salary, tenure and promotion reviews. Other members raised the issue of unfair workloads; those in small interdisciplinary departments often bear a heavy administrative load, which other colleagues and administrators do not always recognize. Managing cross-appointments can be especially burdensome as the various faculties or departments involved might have different course loads, teaching assistant hours, seed funding access, and measurements of career success, not to mention conflicting course schedules and reading weeks. In some cases, it was felt that professional advancement within academia had slowed because of the time and effort required annually to re-negotiate the terms of a cross-appointment or re-educate double the number of directors, chairs, and deans about these work conditions.

All who participated also remarked positively on the benefits that come from stretching beyond our disciplinary boundaries. We noted that our own studying, teaching, and researching have been shaped and strengthened by exposure to a wide array of scholarship, diverse pedagogical approaches, and creative formal and informal collaborations with colleagues trained in disciplines other than history. Similarly, many of those present emphasized that at a time of funding cuts to higher education, the future of traditional history departments – and of the humanities and the social sciences more generally – will be built on sustained interdisciplinary connections. In this respect, those of us working outside traditional history departments are ahead of the curve. We concluded that our colleagues and professional associations must prepare graduate students in history to apply for interdisciplinary posts, provide intellectual and material support for collaborative undertakings, encourage fair evaluations for untenured professors who work across multiple fields and faculties, and re-appraise just what a successful career historian means now and in the foreseeable future.

Thanks to the editors of the *CHA Bulletin*, the discussion continues. We have compiled an email list of interested scholars, and are considering the creation of an affiliated committee within the Canadian Historical Association. If you wish to join in, please contact: lcampbel@sfu.ca or christabelle.sethna@uottawa.ca.