Disciplines and Interdisciplinarity as Relations-in-*différance*: A Derridean Account of Disciplinary Knowledge Differences

by

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Abstract: Disciplines are by their very "origin and nature" unstable–always already differed and deferred from themselves–due to their genetic relation to what Jacques Derrida calls *différance*. In a sense, *différance* is what makes disciplines possible in the first place, and it can be thought of as the economy or mode of operation of disciplines as discursive knowledge formations. In light of this view, interdisciplinary endeavors are also always already subject to the conditions of *différance*. Interdisciplinary integration–necessitated by the differing and deferring effects of *différance*–should then be thought of as a matter of creatively producing relations-in-*différance*.

Keywords: Derrida, *différance*, relationship, discourse, signification, trace, knowledge formations, hospitality to the other

This article aims to further promote the examination of disciplinary knowledge differences and the implications for interdisciplinarity increasingly discussed among interdisciplinarians these days. One such formal discussion was "(Re)Examining the Roots of Disciplinary Knowledge," a panel organized for an Association for Integrative Studies annual conference.[1] The panel discussants contended with two questions that remain crucial to interdisciplinary endeavors nearly ten years later: 1)

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[1] The panel discussion, which occurred at the 2008 annual AIS conference, consisted of William Newell, Angus McMurtry, and myself. A motivating factor for this article was the lively discussion that followed our three short presentations, and I am grateful to all of those in attendance who contributed to such a fruitful and enduring discussion.

"What are the origins and nature of disciplinary knowledge differences?"; and 2) "What are the implications for integration?" My aspiration in this article is to bring to the discussion of these questions a rich resource in epistemological thought, namely Jacques Derrida. While Derrida's work is notoriously difficult to grasp–at times explicitly resisting the reader's appropriation or comprehension–it can be remarkably illuminating when adequately understood and deployed. In service to advancing the discussion of disciplinary knowledge differences and the implications for integration, this article responds to the panel's two key questions in light of Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*. By way of what I intend to be a relatively clear and accessible rendering of what *différance* is,[2] I go on to argue the following: 1) disciplinary knowledge differences are an unavoidable and desirable effect of *différance*; 2) interdisciplinary integration is subject to the same unavoidable (often desirable) effects of *différance* as the disciplines themselves; 3) we should think of interdisciplinary studies as a quintessentially hospitable academic pursuit that welcomes *the other* into relationship.

The outline of my argument below will go something like this: Disciplines are by their very "origin and nature" unstable–always already differed and deferred from themselves–due to their genetic relation to *différance*. In a sense, *différance* is what makes disciplines possible in the first place, and it can be thought of as the economy or mode of operation of disciplines as discursive knowledge formations.[3] In light of this view, interdisciplinary endeavors are also always already subject to the conditions of *différance*. Interdisciplinary integration–necessitated by the differing and deferring effects of *différance*–should then be thought of as a matter of creatively producing relations-in-*différance*.

Let's begin with a healthy attitude of irony about origins, beginnings, and inaugurations. In one of his most seminal essays, "Différance," Derrida challenges the very notion of "a founding principle" or "a controlling

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[2] *Différance* is a complex notion that Derrida renders with (in)famous technicality. Any explanation of *différance* worth its salt is subject to a modicum of philosophical deliberation that should not be considered mere pettifoggery. In this case, and as I hope to further clarify below, *différance* is technically not a "thing," nor is it a non-thing. In addition, Derrida insists that it is not a concept or notion. To wit, *différance* is what makes concepts possible. Having said that, the aim of this article is not to leap down the Derridean rabbit hole; rather, the converse is the case. While remaining faithful to the complexity of the concept of *différance*, my intention is to introduce it as simply and clearly as possible so that it becomes accessible and useful to a broader audience.

[3] I have appropriated Richard M. Carp's conception of knowledge formations as an alternative to disciplines (Carp, 2001).

principle," including the idea of an identifiable or justifiable origin or genesis, i.e. a stable foundation (Derrida, 1986, p. 6 n. 6). I don't want to get ahead of myself, but this challenge applies to disciplines and disciplinarity, among other things. According to Derrida, "there is nowhere to *begin* to trace the sheaf or the graphics of *différance*. For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility. The problematic of writing is opened by putting into question the value *arkhé*" (Derrida, 1986, p. 6).[4] Elaborating upon the meaning of *arkhé*, Alan Bass, the translator of "Différance," states, "The Greek *arkhé* combines the values of a founding principle and of government by a controlling principle (e.g. *arche*ology, mon*archy*)" (Derrida, 1986, p. 6 n. 6). So, right at the beginning of the essay, we are cautioned by Derrida to adopt a robust disposition of circumspection when attempting to get to the beginning of things. He warns that if we are looking for an origin of *différance* we are simply not going to find one. As I explain below, there are significant implications for the very task of responding to the question, "What are the origins and nature of disciplinary knowledge differences?"

It is important to note that *différance* is wildly polysemous, as is the case with so many of Derrida's key notions. This multiplicity of meaning instantiates the effects of *différance* itself, as it signifies, among other things, a) to *defer*–as in "the action of putting off until later" and b) to *differ*–as in "to be not identical, to be other" (Derrida, 1986, pp. 7-8). The upshot is that *différance* in a sense "causes"[5] discursive things (like disciplines) to be deferred–to be suspended, or put off–as well as to change or become other than they once were, no longer the same. Moreover, *différance* is always already happening, always already operating, as the very basis for discourse, for writing, for signification. To put it another way, *différance* is the very context of discourse, the situation that allows language to emerge and function.

It may be helpful to sketch out a very brief lesson in the philosophy of language so that we may better understand this polysemous (non)concept of *différance*. According to Derrida,

> The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, "thing" here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes

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[4] Note: all italics and boldface in quotations are in the original, unless otherwise specified.

[5] As I explain in more detail below, the scare quotes are necessary here in order to establish a modicum of philosophical technicality. According to Derrida, *différance* is not the cause, origin, or source of anything. It is the very *condition of possibility* of causes, origins, and sources. In a manner of speaking, or it is *as if*, *différance* causes difference and deferral of discourse.

the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. We signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence. (Derrida, 1986, p. 9)

The notion of a signifier (or sign) standing in the place of a signified (or referent) is classically theorized by Ferdinand de Saussure in his groundbreaking text, *Course in General Linguistics* (de Saussure, 1959). In fact, Derrida theorizes both *différance* and his neologism *grammatology* largely in critical response to Saussure's formulation of signification. If I may oversimplify for the sake of brevity and clarity, for Saussure a signifier stands in the place of a signified, "the thing itself" so to speak. Another way of putting it is to say that a sign corresponds to its particular referent, or the thing to which the sign refers. Thus, d-o-g (the word "dog")[6] is the signifier for a signified, in this case a furry, four-legged, domesticated mammal that barks and chases after sticks. D-o-g *refers* to said furry mammal. The signifier or sign acts as a substitute for the signified or referent, regardless of whether the signified is a concept or a "real thing," such as a dog. For Saussure, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary but relatively stable. A signifier is arbitrary in that some other agreed upon signifier could just as easily stand in the place of a particular signified. For example, instead of d-o-g, the English word for dog could just as easily be f-o-o-m-f.[7] There is no necessary relationship between the word dog and the furry mammal we've been discussing; rather, the relationship between a given signifier and its signified is based upon cultural, historical, and linguistic convention. Nevertheless, while the relationship between d-o-g and what we refer to as a dog is arbitrary, for Saussure that relationship is relatively stable in that d-o-g refers to the notion of dog and *not* to the notion of cat. It is precisely the difference between d-o-g and c-a-t that allows for them to be unique as signifiers.

According to Derrida, while Saussure's theory of language is a promising place to start, what Saussure misses is a profound semiotic slippage. Dog gets its meaning only by distinguishing itself from, for instance, hog, but this referentiality means that the signifier dog also somewhat signifies hog.

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[6] I use hyphens here to note that I am combining letters to spell words, a clunky heuristic graphic illustration that I will drop in the next paragraph.

[7] David Abram offers an account of non-phonetic language that is much less arbitrarily constructed, particularly among Indigenous peoples (Abram, 1996). He details various ways in which some Indigenous languages reflect local landscape, ecology, weather conditions, etc. In other words, such non-phonetic languages have a strong relationship to the lived context of their users, unlike phonetic languages that are intentionally distanced from such existential relations.

In a very significant way, there is a trace of the hog in dog, dog differed and deferred in its relationship with hog. Or, to put it another way, dog and hog are mutually conditioning or mutually referential–they give meaning to one another in their difference and deferral, their *différance*. In practical terms, when I think of dog I also think of hog, albeit somewhere in the background of my mind. Notwithstanding the remoteness of the relation between a hog and the signifier dog, for Derrida this semiotic drift does occur, and with rather dramatic effect.

It is crucial to note that in Derrida's formulation–contra Saussure and the history of Western philosophy–the "thing itself" (a self-same, stable referent) is not present because the "thing itself" is subject to *différance*. The "thing itself," if there were such a thing, would always already be differing and deferring itself, so really there is no "itself" or self-sameness to "things themselves." Each signified is always already a signifier, thereby propelling referentiality further, deferring and differing a stable meaning or referent. As Derrida says, "the sign…is deferred presence" (Derrida, 1986, p. 9), one thing standing in the place of another thing that in some way isn't or cannot be present.

What we're dealing with here is a general "system" of meaning in which everything in discourse or language is what it is according to a constantly shifting and extending context.[8] In a pithy couple of sentences, Derrida puts it thus:

> Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general. (Derrida, 1986, p. 11)

An important implication of the first sentence here is that a concept is meaningful only by way of its context, specifically other concepts, other language, other ideas. The upshot of the second sentence is that *différance*

[8] The issue of whether "purely" formal sciences such as mathematics constitute discourse in the sense I describe here is a matter of controversy. A salient problem is whether or not such formal systems constitute a sort of closed, internal, utterly coherent system. If they do, then perhaps they do not strictly form a *discourse* at all. An implication, then, is that these closed systems would not be subject to the differing and deferring effects of *différance*. It's not my aim here to adjudicate the extent to which various science disciplines experience *différance*, but to the extent that they do indeed involve discourse they do not escape the differing and deferring effects I delineate here. My thanks to Rocco Gangle at Endicott College for helping me to work through the details of the philosophical debate.

is what allows meaning or makes it possible; thus, it is an essential feature of *any* context. As "the systematic play of differences," *différance* is, in a way, context "itself." This "system in general" may be thought of as an economy or mode of operation of signs (or language), i.e., how signs work. Elsewhere, Derrida calls the study of this generalized system *grammatology*, "the science of signs" (Derrida, 1997).

So, as I indicated above in my example of the relation between dog and hog, all things in language and thought are marked by the trace of the things to which they are in relation. Furthermore, all discursive things are divided internally by a sort of spacing or interval, a deferral/differing:

> It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called "present" element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present. An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. (Derrida, 1986, p. 13)

Once again, remember our dog/hog example above: Dog and hog (as well as their referents) get their meaning from one another, as well as from all of the other signs to which they are in relation. I recognize a dog only by distinguishing it from a hog, or a cat, another furry, four-legged, domesticated mammal (that almost never chases after sticks!). Part of what Derrida is getting at–in a precisely philosophical way–is that I cannot think dog without thinking hog and cat and giraffe and hippopotamus and so on. When I think dog, my thinking is marked by the *traces* of hog, cat, giraffe, hippopotamus, etc. These traces are not just the qualities of hogs et al., but the signifier hog in a way infects the signifier dog–dog has a tendency to slip into hog and a host of other signifiers. Not only that, but dog does not "return" to me the same way it left–it is an iteration of my prior signifier/signified dog. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak–whose translator's preface for *Of Grammatology* is a now a canonical interpretation of Derrida's work–

incisively puts the matter this way:

> To repeat our catechism: for Derrida…the signifier and the signified are interchangeable; one is the differance of the other; the concept of the sign itself is no more than a legible yet effaced, unavoidable tool. Repetition leads to a simulacrum, not to the "same." (Derrida, 1997, p. lxv)[9]

The repetition of dog leads to a simulacrum of dog, not the "self-same" dog. As previously stated, the simulacrum of dog contains within it the traces of hog and a host of other signifiers/signifieds, the sign dog still "legible yet effaced."

Another example of what I'm trying to get at here is illustrated by the AutoCorrect and spell checker function in the software application Word, the very application used to produce this article. Unless I enter "différance" in my Word dictionary–thereby making "différance" an acceptable, correct, recognizable, or proper signifier–when I type it one of two things happens: 1) Word automatically changes the word to "difference" with an e not an a, and without the correct French é; or 2) Word puts a red squiggly underline beneath the offending word to let me know that it has been misspelled or that it is unrecognizable, i.e. that it has not been "inscribed in a chain or in a system" belonging to (present to), or accepted by, Word (Derrida, 1986, p. 11). If I hit the spell check icon once an offending word has been identified, Word will suggest other words that are "properly" spelled and lexically related to the "misspelled" word. Sometimes Word will suggest ten or more other possible alternatives. For example, the suggested alternatives to dogg are: dog, doggy, dug, dogs, dig. We might also consider such options as hog, hag, bag, fog, jog, cog, smog, etc. The point is that in a meaningful way, there's a trace of all of these signs within dog, just as there's a great deal of "philosophy" in "religious studies" and "theology."

So far, I have been examining how Derrida's notion of *différance* provides some answers to the first question posed by the AIS conference panel, "(Re) Examining the Roots of Disciplinary Knowledge," namely, "What are the origins and nature of disciplinary knowledge differences?" Now I will address the second critical question in light of *différance*: "What are the implications for interdisciplinary integration?"

Différance destabilizes any sort of "origin and nature," any cause or *arkhé*, therefore any genealogical claim to have identified one. This destabilization of origins necessitates refraining from claiming an "origin and nature" of

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[9] The repetition Spivak refers to here could occur in writing, thought, speech, or imagination. Any time signification is invoked, this sort of repetition occurs. Repetition is part and parcel of reference, one thing standing in for another.

disciplinary differences. Here we are up against a situation that is quite simply difficult to comprehend. This non-concept, *différance*, flies in the face of some of our fundamental equipment for understanding and thinking about our world. It seems to contradict basic categories such as origin, nature, cause, principle, and foundation. With a modicum of fidelity to Derrida's complex articulation of *différance*, while offering a basis for understanding this non-concept, one could say that *différance is the generalized system of difference and deferral at the heart of disciplinary differences*. In a manner of speaking–and only because we are so invested in identifying origins–one could also say that *différance* is the "cause" of disciplinary differences.

Disciplines are *discursive* knowledge formations, based as they are upon signs, whether written, spoken, visual, or otherwise. Subject to the effects of *différance*, disciplines are always already in a process of differing and deferring from "themselves" and from one another. That is to say, disciplines are never merely themselves. They carry within them the traces of the other disciplines that give them their context, along with a sort of automatic self-differentiation, a differing of the self-same. The places where such traces are strongest or most influential are often the most contested, such as the relationship between, let's say, the disciplines of theology, religious studies, and philosophy. It's no secret that a great deal of the history of the so-called "academic study of religion" has been an effort to erase the traces of theology from its scholarship. The relationship between "secular philosophy" and theology is no less troubled, nor is it any less amusing and ironic, as in the case of "radical orthodox" theologians who use poststructuralist philosophy to strengthen their arguments (not to mention the fact that a good deal of radical orthodox theology actually flies under the flag of "post-secular philosophy"!).

Interdisciplinary studies may be profitably thought of as an engagement with disciplinary traces. In this line of thinking, integration is a matter of bringing to light what I call relationships-in-*différance*, relations that "already exist" but that simply haven't been revealed yet. Alternatively, integration may be the endeavor of creating new relationships-in-*différance*, webs of disciplinary traces that produce something new.[10] The creativity of

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[10] The "something new" could be just about anything: a medical innovation, an idea, a piece of art, a better way of understanding cultural phenomena, a more humane mousetrap. As previously noted, Derrida is circumspect when addressing *origins* [*arkhé*], the moment when something becomes "new." Rather than pursue philosophical prevarication in service to "getting Derrida right," our focus here should be on the "something new" as an emergent node or web of relationships-in-*différance*. Elsewhere, I discuss this new production specifically as an effect of *theurgy*, a form of scholarly co-creation and collaboration with the Divine. Relevant to the context of this article, I claim that "*doing*…interdisciplinary studies can be a spiritual pursuit that transforms both the practitioner and sacred reality itself" (Haar Farris, 2016, p. 117).

the interdisciplinary insight is in discovering or producing a relationship, or webs of relationships, bringing together disciplinary traces. The job of the interdisciplinarian is thus to promote relationships-in-*différance*, whether those relationships were previously nascent, occult, or non-existent. Interdisciplinary studies as disciplinary relationships-in-*différance* privileges the *relationships* between discursive knowledge formations rather than the "newness" of the product.

Interdisciplinary studies as relationships-in-*différance* places such a high value on relationship partly to acknowledge that disciplinary differences do exist. Spend a morning attending sessions of the annual conference of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies, and you will be regaled by stories of interdisciplinarians hard at work *making relationships* across disciplinary boundaries. The bread and butter of the interdisciplinarian is to find ways to bring things into relationship. I utilize relationship language because it does not assume what sort of connection or link is being made. Integration is one name for the sort of relationship that an interdisciplinarian makes, but that integration may come at the cost of straining relations among prevailing knowledge formations. Interdisciplinary work can appear to be transgressive, sundering disciplinary structures in service to creating new relationships.[11] In light of my discussion of *différance* above, the interdisciplinarian may be in the uncomfortable but necessary role of an agent of differing and deferral. Just as the Death card in the Major Arcana of the Tarot signifies the end of something in order to give way to something else, interdisciplinarity may create new relationships by destabilizing or ending others. While it may appear threatening to various disciplinary stabilities (including drives to maintain self-sameness), interdisciplinary work at its best is a positive

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[11] While tried and true members of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies may prefer positive terms for the implications of integration for the knowledge formations they bring into relationship–as I do–my professional experience tells me this is still not a mainstream view. As a card carrying interdisciplinarian looking for tenure track work in an academy that still privileges regimented disciplinary boundaries, I can say with near certainty that my interdisciplinary Ph.D. has disqualified me as too much of a rogue for many disciplinary positions. In addition, I have had an edited book project fall through at the last minute because its contents were deemed "too experimental" (read: interdisciplinary) even though the publisher's editor maintained that the quality of the submissions was unassailable. I do not intend for this anecdotal information to be airing dirty laundry. Rather, I simply wish to be real about the current state of the academy and its attitude toward interdisciplinary work.

affirmation of new relationships.[12]

Vive la différance! Like its Derridean relative, deconstruction, *différance* can appear threatening: destabilization, disruption, differing, deferring, no identity, no origin, no foundation, etc. Derrida delights in defying appearances: While *différance* is threatening, it is also the "source"[13] of innovation, new insights, interdisciplinary breakthroughs, the inauguration of new fields of study, and creative thinking. John Caputo, a highly regarded interpreter of Derrida's work, venturing to render deconstruction in a nutshell, says,

> one might go so far as to say deconstruction is respect, respect
> for the other, a respectful, responsible affirmation of the other,

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[12] Of course, not all "new relationships" are positive ones. Given my experience of the audience for *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*, I am assuming the good faith of the interdisciplinarian to strive for positive, productive relationships (among knowledge formations, people, the natural world, etc.). Once again, many people cringe when they see the Death card in a Tarot reading. Interdisciplinarians are more likely to respond with, "OK, so what good can come of this significant change?!" *Sidebar*: In the fall of 2017, under the auspices of a Wabash Center Fellowship, I will be teaching a World Religions course at Northern Michigan University. In this course, the focus of the study of religion is explicitly in service to students pursuing questions of what it means to live well (i.e. *philosophia* in the Greco-Roman sense of the word). Religious studies as philosophy, philosophy as the study of religion. When I asked the Chair of my department whether I could offer such an interdisciplinary course, his response sought to reinforce some disciplinary relations while allowing for others to emerge. Essentially, he said this: "Sure, that sounds good. Just so long as your course will still reflect the university catalog course description, you have my permission." My burden is to offer a course that maintains a set of disciplinary (and university) standards while seeking to create new relationships-in-*différance*. I'll take it!

[13] Once again, in fidelity to Derrida's nuanced rendering of *différance*, it is technically improper to claim that *différance* is the source or origin of innovation, insights, or breakthroughs. The scare quotes here suggest "in a manner of speaking" or "as if" the source…. In its enigmatic conceptualization, *différance* is akin (truly related) to another Derridean non-concept, *khora*. According to Derrida, "She/it eludes all anthropo-theological schemes, all history, all revelation, and all truth. Preoriginary, *before* and outside all generation, she no longer even has the meaning of a past, of a present that is past. *Before* signifies no temporal anteriority" (Derrida, 1995, pp. 124-125). Niall Lucy, who has taken on the insane endeavor of producing a dictionary of key terms from Derrida's oeuvre, defines *khora* this way: "As Derrida sees it… *khora* is that third thing (between the intelligible and the sensible) that makes it possible to think anything like the difference between pure **being** and pure nothingness (or between my autonomous selfhood and your autonomous otherness); it is what makes it possible to think the difference between 'I' and 'you'. To be brief, *khora* is the pre-philosophical, pre-originary non-locatable non-space that existed without existing before the cosmos. Something like that" (Lucy, 2004, p. 68). *Différance* is something like that.

> a way if not to efface at least to delimit the narcissism of
> the self (which is, quite literally, a tautology) and to make
> some space to let the other be. That is a good way to start out
> thinking about institutions, traditions, communities, justice,
> and religion. (Derrida & Caputo, 1997, p. 44)

Similarly, Martin McQuillan affirms, "A definition (if we really must have such things) of deconstruction might be that deconstruction is an act of reading which allows the other to speak" (McQuillan, 2001, p. 6). To emphasize the threatening effects of difference and deferral engendered by *différance* and deconstruction is to overlook the hospitality to *the other* these economies carry with them. Deconstruction and its cousin-"concept" *différance* represent the potential for new relationships to emerge.

Following Caputo and McQuillan, I propose that we think of interdisciplinary studies as a quintessentially hospitable academic pursuit that welcomes *the other* into relationship. To put it another way, interdisciplinary studies is (or may be) the hospitality of disciplinary relationships-in-*différance*. While relationships can be uncomfortable, it is by relating to an *other* that we learn, grow, and develop. The same goes for disciplines. By exchanging disciplinary knowledge across differences (disciplinary knowledge, insights, methods, perspectives), the disciplines avail themselves of, and align themselves with, the positive and "natural" effects of *différance*. Relationships-in-*différance* not only strengthen our ability to work and play well with others; they also strengthen our own distinctive disciplinary knowledge formations by shoring them up where they are relatively stable, reliable, or strong. To make friends with *différance* is to make friends with *others* as well as ourselves-as-other. Interdisciplinary study is the practice of academic relationships-in-*différance*; at its heart it is a form of hospitality to *the other*.

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