13. Of Apes and Children
Communication, Interdisciplinarity, and Michael Tomasello's *Why We Cooperate* (2009)

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1. Introduction

We have all learned to value interdisciplinarity.[1] No grant application will be successful without it. Today, many of the most important academic institutions are sponsored on the premise that they foster collaborations between fields and subfields. My own discipline, American studies, "has held up interdisciplinarity as a sign of its own maverick status" since its inception.[2] And it is not likely that the "enormous amount of genre mixing in intellectual life" that has been going on for the past couple of decades will lose its original appeal anytime soon.[3] However, while most academics will hold on to the promise of interdisciplinary work, few of them are prepared to probe the conditions of their optimism. Why do scholars believe in the success of communication between academic fields? What are the conditions that allow us to assume that transfer of knowledge within and across disciplines is fea-

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1   On the significance of interdisciplinarity since the 1960s, see Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: Norton, 2010), 93–126; David Alworth, "Hip to Post45," *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 3 (2013): 621–33; Rebecca Hill, "What Is This Thing Called Interdisciplinarity? Teaching Interdisciplinary Methods Courses in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 361–65.

2   Hill, "This Thing Called Interdisciplinarity," 361. Within the German American Studies context, we may think of such institutions as the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin, The Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies in Mainz, or the Heidelberg Center for American Studies.

3   Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *The American Scholar* 49, no. 2 (1980): 165–79, here 165.

sible and/or productive? What do scholars do when they communicate with one another? Why do they get along? What is their language?

Reluctant to predict definite answers, I want to engage with these questions in a discussion of Michael Tomasello's book *Why We Cooperate*, an abridged version of his 2008 "Tanner Lectures on Human Values" at Stanford University.[4] Given the rich diversity of approaches and methodologies within literary and cultural studies, Tomasello's slim book on evolutionary anthropology may not be the most likely choice, to be sure. But its location within the world of academic knowledge might also be its greatest asset: interdisciplinary consultation as a method to gauge the limits and possibilities of interdisciplinarity on a more general scale.

To be more precise: Tomasello's work enables us to imagine what literary and cultural studies can learn from the behavioral sciences. In particular, it might help us circumnavigate some of the impasses that occur when literary scholars speak about the social. Based on empirical research on human infants and chimpanzees, Tomasello's findings on how and why human individuals cooperate complements and challenges sociology-inspired scholarship in the Humanities and its continued strong emphasis on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. What Tomasello shows is that there exists a dimension of mutual understanding in processes of social interaction that need not be learned nor rehearsed. Rather, cooperation and interaction are behavioral expressions of a natural, pre-linguistic state of being, available already to infants at age one. I would like to speculate about the consequences of this claim. My intuition is that if we take seriously the suggested dialogue between the fields and Tomasello's notion of a pre-discursive, naturalized concept of human interaction, we will have to reconsider the idea of interdisciplinarity as such. Let's take a closer look at the problem at stake.

2. Translation, Translatability, Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity has become so ubiquitous within the Humanities—literary and cultural studies in particular—that many would hesitate to call it a concept at all, let alone spend time on theorizing it or turning it into a problem. The question, however, is not whether joint or multidisciplinary scholarship

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4   All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Michael Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

produces valuable results, nor whether those engaged in interdisciplinary collaborations are qualified or entitled to tap into other disciplinary territories, even if it is only to trump "one's disciplinary mates by importing prestigious ideas from unrelated disciplines."[5] We do not need to speak about the "potential" of interdisciplinarity, as if that has ever been questioned.[6] The current crisis of scholarship in the Humanities makes conversations across disciplines and academic fields almost imperative—not least in order to generate third-party funding as a way of keeping scholarship financially viable.

Inasmuch, however, as there is widespread agreement about the necessity to collaborate with colleagues working in neighboring academic fields, there has been little concern about the theoretical conditions that would enable this kind of exchange. What, for example, is the meta-language that allows scholars of various disciplines to engage in joint scholarship without compromising or obscuring the premises of their own disciplinary homelands? I will return to the question a bit further down. Scientific paradigms are not necessarily compatible with one another, and finding a language to facilitate communication between fields comes with a baggage of tricky questions about the practices of scholarship itself. We may briefly turn to philosopher Donald Davidson to get an idea of what the issue is. In a much-quoted essay, he writes:

> Philosophers of many persuasions are prone to talk of conceptual schemes. Conceptual schemes, we are told, are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme. Re-

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5   Marshall Sahlins, "The Conflicts of the Faculty," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 997–1018, here 1014.

6   On the "potential" of interdisciplinarity as a method in American studies, see Simon Wendt, "American Studies as a Multi/Inter/Transdisciplinary Endeavor? Problems, Challenges, and the Potential of Heroism for Collaborative Research," in *Projecting American Studies: Essays on Theory, Method, and Practice*, ed. Frank Kelleter and Alexander Starre (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018), 197–205.

ality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another.[7]

Davidson's observation builds on a longer scholarly tradition seeking to emphasize the historical and methodological idiosyncrasies of scientific discourse.[8] It also rephrases a point well known among literary scholars with Derridean leanings: the non-identity of languages and sign systems and the untranslatability of individual experience. For academics socialized in the 1980s and 1990s, broadly committed to the project of deconstruction, the unreliability of codes and referencing systems represented a somewhat liberating, subversive potential because linguistic unreliability seemed to suggest resistance to hegemonic control and political cooptation. This was the identitarian promise of theory's golden age. Postcolonial, critical race, queer and gender studies became dominant as their proponents fused the allure of high theory with liberal, progressive political programs. The revisionist turns of the past four decades within American studies reflect this commitment in exemplary fashion.[9]

At the same time, however, that Davidson's observation seems compatible with theory production in literary and cultural studies, it also calls into question the premises upon which the notion of non-translatability and the arguments derived from it may become meaningful. Insisting on the idea of linguistic and conceptual non-identity between languages (and identities) builds on a sense of relativism that cannot be logically maintained: "The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability."[10]

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7   Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973–1974): 5–20, here 5.

8   See Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, trans. Frederick Bradley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1935] 1979); Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964); Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, trans. Karl Popper (London: Routledge, [1935] 1999).

9   On the institutional history of American studies as a discipline and its various political turns, see Lucy Maddox, *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

10   Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 6.

For Davidson, sharing a conceptual scheme is thus related to sharing a language. "The relation may be supposed to be this: if conceptual schemes differ, so do languages. But speakers of different languages may share a conceptual scheme provided there is a way of translating one language into the other."[11]

For the purposes of our discussion, the key phrase in the above quote is "provided there is." For it is neither clear whether translation between disciplines is possible, nor whether it should be desirable. When scholars of different fields attempt to speak to one another about a problem or a cluster of questions they think is pertinent to their scholarly communities, they must assume that both sides have something to offer that neither of them could generate alone. Examples abound. We may think of fields that have traditionally been located at the opposite ends of the disciplinary curriculum, as in recent attempts to make neuro-science and biology adaptable to cultural studies and vice versa. But it may also be fields of inquiry that have evolved in close proximity to one another and that seem to share a good deal of common ground with regard to both methodology and thematic orientation: philosophy and the arts; literature and the social sciences; history and political science.

The more intricate problem, I believe, is to explain the conceptual grounds upon which communication between disciplines succeeds in the first place. Davidson himself has introduced the "principle of charity," describing a mutually dependent need for interpretative compensation among practitioners of different occupations and speakers of different languages.[12] Paul Grice's "cooperative principle" has usefully alerted us that interaction amongst humans is successful as long as we assume an underlying purpose and the acceptance of a shared set of conversational maxims and implicatures.[13] Margaret Gilbert and John Searle have advanced the idea of a "shared intentionality," which Tomasello heavily relies on.[14] And Jürgen Habermas has variously defended

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11   Davidson, 7.

12   See Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 18–19.

13   See H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics* 3, ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975): 41–58, here 45.

14   See Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 154–203; John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 1–30; Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 56–93; Tomasello, *The Origins of Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 342–47; Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, 1–48.

his notion of "communicative rationality" to explain meaningful social inter-action in what he defines as a "post-metaphysical world."[15]

These (and other) approaches describe the discursive conditions for suc-cessful interaction, but in so doing, they must rely—for better or worse—on a set of abstract principles that necessarily precede the moment of communica-tive action itself. In other words: these theories acknowledge the particularity of different (communicative) practices but only in so far as they assume a common linguistic/conceptual backdrop against which differences manifest themselves and can be smoothed out. If this is the precondition for interdis-ciplinarity as a method—that we can reach that common ground—then the practical question has to be: how can we get there? I ask this question as a literary scholar and will use Michael Tomasello's arguments to help me frame a tentative solution.

3. Literature, Communication, Exchange

If culture and literature are man-made, as few would dispute, there must be a quintessentially human, non-discursive dimension to reading and writing, preceding literature's appropriation within the theory world of English de-partments or in fact any other professional-academic terrain. There must, in other words, be a dimension to literary production that, in John Dewey's sense of "experience," helps us to understand the artwork before it is framed and categorized conceptually; the consequence of an "impulsion," an almost phys-ical reaction to the materials of our everyday environments: "On the lower scale, air and food materials are such things; on the higher, tools, whether the pen of the writer or the anvil of the blacksmith, utensils and furnishings, property, friends, and institutions, all the support and sustenances without which a civilized life cannot be."[16]

For Tomasello, these fundamental forms of human interaction and the experience of a shared object world become meaningful and authoritative through the work of social institutions. This should not come as a surprise.

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15   See Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, Band. 1: Handlungsrational-ität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 369–409; Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 27–83.

16   John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, [1934] 2005), 61.

"Social institutions are sets of behavioral practices governed by various kinds of mutually recognized norms and rules" (xi). What might be somewhat more astonishing in Tomasello's account of institutionality is the age at which a sense of social cooperation evolves amongst humans. Social practices, as well as the "norms and rules" necessary to preform them successfully, are acquired at the earliest stages of infancy, "pre-linguistically, at twelve to fourteen months of age" (18). Reminiscent of Paul Grice's "cooperative principle," human infants "not only inform others of things helpfully and accurately interpret informative intentions directed at them, they even understand imperatives in cooperative fashion" (19).

Though for different reasons, these processes of meaningful interaction are observable in groups of human infants but also amongst communities of great apes. The difference lies in what Tomasello calls "directed" or "shared intentionality" (39). Whereas chimpanzees cooperate exclusively to gratify immediate personal needs, human infants are "part of some larger we-intentionality" (ibid.), that is, they are naturally prone to identify with others and thus produce "a conception of the self as one among others" (40). Importantly, this sense of solidarity exists prior to infants entering systematic regimens of social normalization; the notion of a "we-ness" exists as a bio-genetically determined constant, available to all human individuals and developing only later into more specifically coded social and disciplinary norms. What this means, essentially, is that no matter where we come from and regardless of our professional occupations, there exists a propensity amongst humans to enforce socially cooperative behavior independently of "the fear of authority" and "the promise of reciprocity" (38). In other words, human individuals are born as social animals before institutionally controlled modes of habitualization and rehearsals of social practices can be set in motion. What are the implications of this argument for the ways in which we conduct research as members of scientific communities? And in how far may it be helpful for explaining the alleged success of interdisciplinary work?

Let's return to the analogy of conceptual schemes and languages. For Tomasello, languages are used to perform complex practices; they attain significance within concrete institutional settings, where they are employed to ensure and regulate cooperative practices of a certain kind: there is a certain way of doing things, that is, using language, in particular fields of practice that are specific to the site of practice itself. Of course, this applies to all areas of social life and cannot be reduced to fields of cultural production: if I walk into the super-market, "my entering the store subjects me to a

whole range of rules and obligations" (56), most of which I expect to be in place and most of which I comply with without ever thinking about them. There are goods to be purchased; I am not allowed to steal; I'll have to wait in line at the checkout counter; if the goods that I bought are damaged in any way I can return them. "What is common to all of these institutional phenomena is a uniquely human sense of 'we'" (57). Supermarkets work because there is a shared agreement about the premises that govern behavior once you have entered the supermarket world. The supermarket world as any institutionalized site of practice is defined by "joint goals and distinct and generalized roles, with participants mutually aware" that "they are dependent on one another for success" (99). These practices, Tomasello maintains, entail "the seeds of generalized, agent-neutral normative judgments of rights and responsibilities (99) that can also be found "in social institutions" (99).

Here, Tomasello seems deceptively close to scholars endorsing Bourdieu-derived descriptions of the art world, or more conventional theories of social practice.[17] But this is only a first impression. Traditional sociological accounts of practice assume an institutionally grounded dialectic between the incorporation and the performance of social scripts.[18] We routinize a set of moves within the bounds of a particular social setting, say, the university classroom. The validity of our (incorporated) knowledge is perpetually affirmed and tested by our peers, fellow academics, as they engage with what we do (as advisors, competitors, peer-reviewers, etc). And of course, the same mechanisms may be assumed to govern other fields of social practice from the local sports club to the administration of professional organizations.

Tomasello's view is notably different; his notion of "we-ness," or "shared intentionality" (57) is not bound to any institutional setting: "it does not come only from the collective, institutional world of supermarkets, private property, health departments, and the like" (57). Rather, as Tomasello's research group has found in a string of experiments on the acquisition of socially normative behavior, cooperative action and its implicit set of rules precede the coming

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17   On the practice turn within the social sciences, see Andreas Reckwitz, "Towards a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Cultural Theorizing," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 2 (2002): 243–63; Karl H. Hörning and Julia Reuter, eds., *Doing Culture: Neue Positionen zum Verhältnis von Kultur und sozialer Praxis* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2004).

18   On the reciprocity of incorporation and performance, see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, [1980] 1990), 52–65; Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 138–42.

into being of social institutions; the belief in cooperation resembles a natural intuition that human infants are equipped with before they enter contexts of social interaction. All "human cultures have rules and norms for sharing or possibly trading food and other valuable objects" (XII).

This is not, however, because individual human beings enter the world unbeknownst of the existence of social institutions, the functions of which they learn in a tedious process of adaptation as they grow up. The opposite seems to be true, as Tomasello maintains. It is as if they already knew the rules of the game before entering the playing field. While scholars trained in cultural sociology feel inclined to explain normative social practices as the consequence of historically and institutionally specific forms of learning, Tomasello stresses almost the opposite: children are endowed with an innate ability to cooperate in ways that other, non-human primates are not. "They form with others joint goals to which both parties are normatively committed, they establish with others domains of joint attention and common conceptual ground, and they create with others symbolic, institutional realities that assign deontic powers to otherwise inert entities" (105). Let's speculate a bit about the consequences of this claim for our understanding of what interdisciplinary could mean.

If we remained radically Wittgensteinean and assumed that scientific disciplines are organized much like "private languages" ("Privatsprachen"), idiosyncratic and non-translatable into other registers of scientific discourse, we would still need what Davidson describes as a conceptual scheme on the basis of which we could speak about the issue of non-translatability.[19] Take the world of literature and literary studies. The trouble of describing the field and its various areas consists precisely in accounting for both a continued sense of systemic cohesion—historically and institutionally—and a simultaneous series of moments of conflict and antagonism among the field's most pertinent practitioners: writers, readers, editors, retailers, professional academic interpreters, and many more. It is almost impossible to describe the multiple levels of practice in and through which they communicate and exchange goods (printed matter) and ideas (at very specific moments in history), while maintaining the long durée narratives of traditional literary-historical

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19 On "Privatsprachen," see Wittgenstein: "The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know—to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (London: Pearson, [1953] 1973), §243.

scholarship. Studies in the history of the book have made that point particularly clear.

Even if we had a basic literary-geographic map at hand, we would still be participants in the very world we are trying to describe. The problem is familiar enough. The point here, however, is not to insist on the subjectivity of perspective and the impossibility of a neutral scientific gaze.[20] That is, our interest should not be in the fallibility of field descriptions, if fallibility is used as a concept to discredit the reliability of scholarly perspectives on the grounds of their embeddedness in the discourse they profess to analyze. What appears to be more relevant for the purpose of this discussion are situations in which our sense of direction clashes with that of our peers, when the books we write or read—as literary authors *and* as scholars—simply do not speak to those we deem most important, when communication seems to fail and we feel pressured to account for these moments of failure. These discrepancies, that is, moments in which what we think we are doing clashes with our interlocutor's sense of action, become even more apparent in cross-disciplinary perspective. Just imagine an evolutionary anthropologist and a cognitive linguist, committed to Chomsky's generative grammar, discussing language and language acquisition: a clash of scientific cultures in the most literal sense of the term. It is in those situations that we are in dire need of communicative practices that would enable translation.

The history of science has produced multiple examples in which practitioners of different fields, facing that kind of impasse, have produced marvelously innovative solutions, "puzzle-solving strategies," as Thomas Kuhn famously called them.[21] But these moments of mutual understanding did not come about as the consequence of a planned encounter of different scientific cultures. Progress cannot be planned as such; it can only be hoped for. In most of the cases, chance, unpredictability, and what Tomasello calls a "drift to the arbitrary" have dominated human puzzle-solving activities.[22] In order to understand why communication and translation seem to work out nonetheless, we need to return to Tomasello's notion of a shared intentionality, a quality that we bring into the world before we are socialized as individuals and before

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20   This aspect is fleshed out with enviable clarity in the conclusion of Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*. See Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, [1969] 1972), 199–211.

21   Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*, 35–42.

22   Tomasello, *Origins of Communication*, 220–21.

we become members of particular cultural or scientific communities: the innate belief that human behavior is group-oriented and goal-driven, whatever the exact outcome may be. Infants "do not learn this from adults; it comes naturally" (4). And if it comes naturally, then this, rather than an intricate metalanguage, should be the natural bond between scholars of different fields.

It is a truism, to be sure, that forms of interaction are likely to become increasingly complex and intricate over time, especially as they go along with the evolution of symbolic sign systems, that is, languages and the institutional spaces in which languages and practices become meaningful. It's just that the mechanisms that allow for goal-oriented cooperative behavior exist independently of the various contexts of social (and scientific) practice in which they become manifest. And the same holds true for our capacity to use languages. This uniquely human ability is part of what psychologist Elisabeth Spelke, in a response to *Why We Cooperate*, calls a "cognitive core system" which "emerges early in infancy" and is "universal across our species, despite the many differences in the practices and belief systems of people in different cultural groups."[23] As Spelke's research has shown, "members of distant cultures," just like infants, "perform the same object-representation tasks with similar results," enacting a pre-social, pre-discursive capacity to work together.[24] It is this insight into the human capacity to enforce and regulate joint action that—by analogy—might help to explain some of the more obscure theoretical aspects involved in interdisciplinarity, not least the challenge of translatability.

4. Scholars and Sandboxes

What, then, can we learn from the behavioral sciences that we did not already know? What is the value of Tomasello's work for our understanding of what interdisciplinarity should or could accomplish? The answer that I feel confident with feels somewhat vague and may disappoint, at least at first glance: interdisciplinary communication works—somehow. But we knew that before. The truly interesting point is this: *Why We Cooperate* shows that we have to

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23   Elisabeth S. Spelke, "Forum: Why We Cooperate," in *Why We Cooperate*, Michael Tomasello (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 157. See also Elisabeth S. Spelke and Katherine D. Kinzler, "Core Knowledge," *Developmental Science* 10, no. 1 (2007): 89–96.

24   Spelke, "Forum," 159.

think in new ways about *why* cross-disciplinary exchange works and what the implications of these exchanges are—even if we don't like them. Put most simply, and somewhat provocatively: the reason why conversations between scholars of different disciplines are bound to succeed has nothing to do with their creativity or their expertise at finding hitherto undiscovered disciplinary synergies. Scientific languages, just like natural languages, emerge as the consequence of a shared desire amongst humans for joint action, traceable ontogenetically to the earliest years of infancy. If we extrapolate from Tomasello's findings, we may conclude that scholars engaged in interdisciplinary work are like toddlers seeking help from their mates (and expecting the fulfillment of their request) as they struggle to accomplish a given task (e.g., finish a puzzle, build a sand castle). Whether or not the expected collaboration turns out to be productive is independent of the foregoing moment of bonding and the intuitive commitment to working together. That point is crucial: there will never be a reliable scholarly meta-language, only mutual conceptual approximations to a shared problem. There is a sandbox, there is a red shovel and a blue bucket, but that's about it.

The analogy between infants and scholars may no doubt seem inappropriate on a number of levels. After all, academic professionals are hyper-specialists in their fields, experienced intellectual workers, trained at all sorts of institutional levels within and without the academic world. Their professional experience seems to stand in almost diametrical opposition to the pre-discursive naiveté of the toddler, making progress in tedious trial-and-error experiments conducted in the sandbox. But then again, are we not still taking similarly clumsy baby steps in our daily professional lives, testing out what is and what isn't possible within the academic domains we inhabit?

There are, however, some more reliable conclusions that we may derive from Tomasello's work as presented in *Why We Cooperate*. These are more serious for contemporary debates about the future of the research university: interdisciplinarity cannot simply be planned as if collaborations between scholars of different fields would be meaningful and valuable in and of themselves. If they occur, such moments of collaboration should emerge spontaneously, that is, in response to a given problem the solution of which resists predictability and control. Sometimes such endeavors simply do not yield any useful data or insights at all. The outcome of scholarship has never been foreseeable, not even within individual disciplines. Hence, it does not make sense to assume that work across disciplinary borders promises results that are more valuable than those produced within the confines of traditional aca-

demic core disciplines. Interdisciplinarity should not be used as a normative scholarly method to constrain the freedom of scientific inquiry.

And yet, for a number of familiar political and economic reasons, interdisciplinarity will continue to shape academic curricula, M.A. and PhD programs, and entire clusters of research. "Claims that interdisciplinarity is vital to the twenty-first-century university are heralded at a moment when 'tectonic change' is not simply economic hyperbole but may well be upon us."[25] Jacobs's words resonate. If this is a reality, however, that we cannot evade, then the least we can do is to acknowledge what interdisciplinarity truly means, namely a bunch of kids getting together, driven by a sense of community, a "we-ness" that is much stronger than that created by academic departmental affiliations. This is why we cooperate. And this is why the work of Michael Tomasello matters. Do we have to understand each other? No, not necessarily. Will the neuro-sciences help us develop a better understanding of Emily Dickinson's poetry? I truly doubt it. Can medical doctors help literary scholars describe more accurately representations of illness or health in literature? I am positive they can't. But that has never been the goal in the first place. And it shouldn't be.

What should be endorsed, by contrast, is a trust-based curiosity about the unpredictability of conceptual-scientific progress, the belief that things will work out—somehow. And again, I am suggesting this point as a member of a scholarly community that has always felt strong about the permeability of its own disciplinary demarcations. Given its tumultuous institutional history, American Studies is a good place to start thinking about the benefits of interdisciplinary work. But not because that particular field has produced results that would be superior to competing scientific-academic accomplishments. Rather, it's a field that has been invested in the potentials of an open, critical conversation about the very notion of what it means to speak about America as a cultural-political formation. In that sense, reading Tomasello's *Why We Cooperate* may serve as a very timely reminder to re-embrace what one of the field's founders once wrote about the problem of method:

> Method in scholarship grows out of practice, or rather out of repeated criticism of practice intended to remedy observed shortcomings…. A new

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25   Jerry Jacobs, *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5.

method will have to come piecemeal, through a kind of principled oppor-
tunism, in the course of daily struggles with our various tasks. No one man
will be able to redesign the whole enterprise. What will count is the image
in our minds of the structure we believe we are helping to build.[26]

What matters is not how that "structure" looks like, in the words of Smith;
it's the belief that scholars are able to work together, "helping to build" it,
irrespective of its final shape.

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26   Henry Nash Smith, "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" *American Quarterly* 9,
no. 2 (1957): 197–208, here 207.