Forum

The Academic Department as an "Enabling Infrastructure"

To the Editor:

In her editor's column "Experimental Humanities," Wai Chee Dimock presents an arresting case for a new disciplinary method (vol. 132, no. 2, Mar. 2017, pp. 241–49). Dimock cites the much ballyhooed "crisis facing the humanities" as a reason for exploring the "full range" of possibilities surrounding "disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity" in literary studies (241). Her call for scholars of the human sciences to take a cue from their natural-science counterparts and develop a "tool-dependent, collaboration-based, and field-tested" experimental method is key to promoting interdisciplinarity (243).

Of particular interest is Dimock's discussion of Rudolf Carnap's 1946 lectures on experimental method. In his philosophy of modern science, Carnap distinguishes between two types of scientific observation: passive ("waiting until nature provides situations" to observe) and active ("try[ing] to create such situations" [qtd. on 242]). Active observation requires experimental scientists to develop what Dimock calls "enabling infrastructures" that sustain "what is not available or observable in nature" (242). As examples of these enabling infrastructures in experimental astronomy, Dimock cites the Kennedy Space Center launch site in Cape Canaveral; the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, managed for NASA by the California Institute of Technology; and the commercial aerospace manufacturer SpaceX. Shifting from an analysis of experimental astronomy to a prescription for the humanities, Dimock writes:

> Most of us still tend to be nonexperimentalists. We stick with what already exists, seeing our objects of study as finished products, faits accomplis, if not quite stars and galaxies created billions of years ago, then works of literature created three hundred years, thirty years, or three years before we turn our attention to them. Completed before

our arrival and summoned now only to be observed and critiqued, these anteced-ent objects stand at an input-discouraging distance. . . . [T]hey remain closed chapters and done deals. (243)

Perhaps, as nonexperimentalists, literary schol-ars display a particular flare for identifying epistemological dilemmas, for here Dimock presents a fair indictment of literary studies to-day. The more testing problematic for her lies in identifying what comes next.

Dimock suggests a move to digital research tools and grant-fundable ventures encouraging "[h]ybrid scholarship" and "reparative practice" as experimental methods vital to sustaining the humanities (244). As an example of such a venture, Dimock highlights the online literary magazine *Public Books*, whose book reviews and artist interviews showcase works of schol-arly interest in a variety of genres and media. The project's success illustrates the kind of "online infrastructure building" that Dimock deems crucial to developing an experimental humanities (246).

While the idea of an experimental method taking hold in the humanities is attractive, Di-mock's suggestion that scholars move to build-ing online infrastructures as the "experimental" replacement for traditional enabling infrastruc-tures requires some critical pushback. Clearly, as a number of digital humanities scholars have demonstrated, there are benefits to using the In-ternet and digital media as tools for extending the reach of the humanities. Yet Dimock's rec-ommendation revises these scholars' approach by reading the building of these online infra-structures and platforms as a final act of experi-mentation rather than an experimentation on existing infrastructures—of which university-supported academic departments, centers, labs, and initiatives are the most common examples. Dimock's displacement of this call for experi-mentation from the departmental onto the dig-ital realm speaks to a general disillusionment among humanities scholars with the American academy—a disillusionment that seems to de-marcate the lines of crisis purportedly threaten-

ing humanities support and research in the first place. "Completed before our arrival," held "at an input-discouraging distance," "summoned now only to be observed and critiqued," the uni-versity's division of knowledge, according to Di-mock, necessitated the production of academic departments that would remain "closed chap-ters and done deals," preventing the progress of any potential interdisciplinarity and diverting the dream of an experimental humanities. For this reason, I would propose that humanities scholars turn their experimental energies *back* toward the university as the best field test for building truly enabling infrastructures.

Evidenced by a generation of "thick-skinned" (244) agitators and "hybrid scholars" ("still bookish but not giving up on the world" [245]) whose "experimental method" and "re-parative practice" helped birth departments like black studies (244), examples of the experimenta-tion Dimock proposes proliferate throughout the history of our field. Honoring that history means recognizing departmental restructuring as a fo-cal point of that experimentation. While the academy has always proved an ideal site for such experimentation, even during times of social and political resistance, in recent decades its fruitful elasticity has been replaced by a widespread and seemingly reactionary impulse to retract. Instead of wanting to enable experimentation in the pro-duction of humanistic knowledge, universities have been enabling a different kind of ideological practice. My fear is that in their push to turn dig-ital, literary scholars have become the unwitting victims of a bureaucratic university system that no longer desires the production of knowledge in the humanities of any kind.

This is why a properly oriented experi-mental humanities is vital. The humanities scholar's primary concern cannot be for a vir-tual world—nor for, primarily, a literary one. Even restructuring academic departments, as a test of method, is no longer end enough to our work. Instead, we must extend our ener-gies to perpetually reorganizing the static acad-emy when and where it is constituted as such. Our call is to the study of human culture, first

and foremost, but shouldn't our experimental method replace the passive approach of looking at that culture with an active method of "doing something" about it (242)? If, as Dimock makes clear, the production of knowledge needs enabling and infrastructure, as well as enabling infrastructures, shouldn't active (and perhaps activist) scholars look for opportunities to "dream" up human culture and "design experiments to test [its] behavior under altered circumstances" (243)? Such a far-reaching and interdisciplinary project for the humanities, it seems to me, would be truly experimental.

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Reply:

I couldn't agree more. *Experimental* is not a synonym for *digital*; the two should never simply be equated. While digital mediation is important for broad-based access, it would be a mistake to think that this is the sole arena for experimentation or that a digital platform alone could solve all our problems. As I hope my column in this issue ("Education Populism") has made clear, digital platforms need to be continually updated and field-tested to be sustainable; they need input from the ground up. Only when they support and are supported by other infrastructures can they hope to be more than passing fads, momentary winners or losers in an ephemeral world.

In future issues of *PMLA*, I hope to come up with more examples of such grounded endeavors, flourishing on the level of the department and the university, as well as on other, ad hoc platforms. For now I'd like to mention briefly a new initiative at Bard College, the only experimental humanities program in the country as far as I know. Launched in 2012 as a concentration rather than a major, this program draws its faculty members as well as its students entirely from other departments. Its two core courses—History of Experiment and Introduction to Media—reflect this multidepartmental

symbiosis. Finding common ground not in any disciplinary table of contents but in a shared commitment to intellectual breadth and depth, it cultivates a broad understanding of diverse media forms across time, coupled with the fine-grained knowledge that comes from practice. Medieval manuscripts have a place here; so too does radio in Africa. Faculty members in the program are drawn from a range of fields that include literature, computer science, anthropology, history, Africana studies, and languages such as Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish, as well as from various arts programs.

Since there is no experimentation without practice, many of these courses are linked, almost by necessity, to public media outlets: student audio files from the course on Radio Africa, for instance, can be accessed either online, through Human Rights Radio, or through WHDD-FM, Robin Hood Radio, the smallest NPR-affiliated station in America. Team-taught courses, featuring faculty members from at least two departments, meanwhile create a plurality of publics as well as a plurality of mediums within a single course; these include Games at Work (taught by professors from computer science and from film and electronic arts), Geographies of Sound (taught by professors from art history and music), and Technologies of Reading (taught by professors from computer science and from literature).

This collaborative spirit extends to undergraduates, who often join faculty members in fieldwork. The community-oriented Hudson Valley Apples project, growing out of intensive two-week sessions and supported by the Digital History Lab, gathers oral histories, digitizes local collections, and builds public Web sites. Other teams, more museum-oriented, work with the Immersive Media Arts Lab, giving rise to projects such as *Trading Futures*, a three-dimensional, 360-degree video viewed in a hemispheric dome made of corrugated cardboard triangles and binder clips. This piece was recently showcased by the Whitney Museum of American