



## Angles

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Angles and *limes*

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### Introduction to issue 3

Angles and limes: Straddling the borders of our research practices

Pascale Antolin

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Pascale Antolin

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“If truth is what you seek, then the examined life  
will only take you on a long ride to the limits of  
solitude and leave you by the side of the road  
with your truth and nothing else.”

Thomas Ligetti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human  
Race*

- 1 While curricula in French modern language departments remain structured by the traditional triad—literature, linguistics, and “civilization” (in itself a debated concept)—our actual research practices have significantly evolved under the effect of new theoretical tools and of the way they have spread in (especially) American and British academia.
- 2 The relationship between the “established” disciplines is not always easy, often for reasons less lofty than epistemological ones. Disciplines do not only organize research questions and results, they establish turfs, markets, niches and thus jobs, publication opportunities, research grants and everything which makes research more than a purely disinterested practice. Disciplines discipline the mind and the bodies and define the realm of the possible. Even a cursory glance at a scholarly publisher’s shelflist or sitting on a reviewing committee gives a very quick and clear idea of what “the realms of the possible are.”
- 3 This is the stuff the (American) culture wars were made of. In their wake, academia underwent sometimes drastic, sometimes more subtle restructuring, even in countries which have remained less exposed to the social and political implications of those cultural struggles, such as France. The French humanities and even modern language departments working in close contact with foreign colleagues have long remained impervious to the epistemological inventions and imperatives common in the English-speaking world, even treating them with sarcasm for a long time. The “studies” movement (which is not to be mistaken with the older “area studies” movement) was the most visible institutional product of these culture wars.<sup>1</sup> The welcome—but perhaps

overly radical—critique of “history from above” led to the balkanization of the social sciences and humanities which lost their “universalist” objectives to focus on their own micro questions. The result may have been a deepening of certain aspects of knowledge—although the assessment of the “studies” movement remains to be made—but it has also undoubtedly led to a form of intellectual numbness and sometimes even monomania, or solipsism. This is not to say that all was fruitless in the “studies” movement, but to point at a potential drying up of the research imagination, and correlatively at a desire by scholars who were not intellectually hostile to the reconfiguring of the field but felt a little constrained by it, to look for something else.

- 4 The “way out” that they chose was neither inter- nor transdisciplinary, two postures inherited from “big science” and based on the idea that human sciences, and even more social sciences, work like physics, biology, earth sciences (viz the term “laboratory” which has become standard in France to name a research group) and can be divided rationally among a workforce of researchers whose only quality is their professionalism (such an approach to innovation is now completely undermined not only by start-up but also by mega companies like Google, but is still dominant in academic research). We felt on the contrary that a movement started to emerge where scholars made a partial but real move towards other disciplines, fields, and questions within their own epistemological frame, within their own personal queries. Far from being the result of a taylorization of research, which is often the intellectual basis of inter-disciplinary research, this approach is something akin to a trip, a journey or a move towards the *limes* of one’s field, a displacement out of one’s comfort zone. So the idea was born for this third issue of *Angles*, the *French Journal of Anglophone Studies*, whose mission statement is precisely to investigate new practices, in-between spaces, and research questions which do not immediately fall into clear-cut slots.
- 5 Making it happen, as the phrase goes, was a whole different ball game. The rolling ball proved extremely difficult to catch and the rules of the games were quite fuzzy at best. We thought it would be a challenge, and it was one. We believed, however, that it was a necessary challenge, one that needed to be met and met now, in a moment of deep transformation of our research practices. This is why despite the difficulty we experienced gathering articles—many colleagues expressed interest but felt they could not actually write a piece on it—we felt that we had to make it happen, and after rescheduling we managed to collect a sufficient number of contributions which passed the rigorous process of peer reviewing.
- 6 When we write “the rigorous process of peer reviewing” we do not mean to say that peer reviewing is not always rigorous for the writers. Here it was rigorous for all: reviewers who often did not know what to make of “bastard” pieces, editors who chose the reviewers, discussed with the writers and felt that their classical ways of assigning reviewers was not adapted to scholarly un-identified objects, and of course writers who had made a tremendous effort to tread out of their usual paths and received negative evaluations of their work. As we felt that reviewers always diverged in their appreciation and that we, as editors, often did not agree with the reviewers, we realized how challenging the challenge was. It was a long and hard process, much more than anything we had ever experienced editing other “standard” publications. But it was precisely the name of the game. Displacement and *limes* come at a cost.
- 7 We want to thank the reviewers for their patience and understanding, the authors for going way beyond the traditional revisions required in journals, and also mention the

anonymous authors whose papers we did not publish: the “quality” of their work was generally not at stake, it was just a case of their not quite tackling the issues we wanted to debate in this issue. All—whether or not their submissions are actually published—need to be warmly thanked for their courage and dedication.

- 8 We also had a few surprises. While articles from scholars specializing in “civilization”—a field where various disciplines naturally interact—were expected, there was no submission in this field. Only literature and linguistics are represented in this issue, and bridges built between them—for instance by Sandrine Sorlin. In her article, she focuses on stylistics, which, she writes, “has gained disciplinary legitimacy by paradoxically dismantling disciplinary partitions” between literature and linguistics. Margot Lauwers and Pierre-Antoine Pellerin argue in favor of new tools to approach literary texts: *ecofeminism*, a joint concern for feminism and environmental degradation, can be applied to the study of some texts, Lauwers writes, for “research to be fully representative of the planet’s cultural and biological diversity.” Pellerin promotes *masculinity studies* since, he writes, questioning the traditional straight white male’s viewpoint can profitably “renew the approach to certain literary texts.” Nathalie Jaëck and Arnaud Schmitt further advocate transdisciplinarity in their joint article as they combine and confront both their respective studies of Graham Greene’s short story, “The End of the Party,” and their favorite research tools.
- 9 Authors who finally made it to the “printed” page are prudent. They do not argue for an epistemological revolution that they would be heralding, nor do they believe that their questions apply to all texts. They are modest and highly personal, thus exemplifying a move away from the Grand Theory and a return to the subject, that of the critic this time, not to promote her subjectivity but her specific place in the greater field of criticism.
- 10 One of the contributions here published is an interview. Tammy Berberi’s testimony and her presentation of *disability studies* exemplify the trend towards dividing up the critical field into little operational fields defined by a single-issue preoccupation. It will no doubt stir up reactions and elicit responses triggered by some of the ideological premises that Berberi puts forth. We would like to pursue the conversation with Barberi and our readers in the form of further dialogue by inviting follow-up contributions in the *Varia* section of upcoming issues. Only by being challenged in our critical practices and challenging others will we be able to move beyond the worst possible predicament of science, the infinite repetition of the same.

« On doit échapper à l’alternative du dehors et du  
dedans : il faut être aux frontières. La critique,  
c’est l’analyse des limites et la réflexion sur  
elles. »

Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits* (2001: 1393)

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## NOTES

1. As proof of the popularity of this movement, see the unveiling of a recent academic blog dedicated to a conference on this issue: <https://studies.hypotheses.org/>

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## ABSTRACTS

This issue of *Angles* investigates new practices, in-between spaces, and research questions which do not immediately fall into clear-cut slots.

Ce numéro de *Angles* se penche sur les nouvelles pratiques, les espace entre-deux, et les domaines de recherche qui ne rentrent dans aucune case pré-établie.

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**Mots-clés:** recherche, humanités, sciences sociales, théorie, épistémologie

**Keywords:** research, humanities, social sciences, theory, epistemology

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