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Securing the Future of the Humanities

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Abstract

A decade ago, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published *The Heart of the Matter* report to much acclaim. But what has been the impact of such a high-minded report? In the decade since its publication, we have seen a prevailing anti-humanities rhetoric with significant consequences to the security and persistence of humanistic principles. This article focuses on what many consider to be the most crucial problem of our time, climate change and its consequences, in thinking about how this overwhelming problem offers a rallying point for the insertion of the humanities into practical solutions which require an upending of discrete disciplinary perspectives as well as a bridging of the academic and public divide so that any space between the practice of the humanities and advocacy for social and environmental justice is vastly diminished. It argues for a thorough review of academic reward systems, for a broadening of scholarly definitions, and for a pedagogical focus that demands theory commit to empirical application. Finally, it suggests that we reengage our storytelling prowess with an emphasis on the power of metaphor in order to bolster imaginative response and methodological flexibility that is both cogent and compelling.

Keywords: future; humanities; public humanities

The humanities offer the repository of our stories, a means for investigating their construction and dissemination, and the instruments for orchestrating new stories. They contain the full and indispensable array of tools necessary for interrogating and interpreting the human condition in all of its complexities and messiness. That they do so primarily by engaging the imagination and by producing deep and transformative emotional responses, by animating connections with others and rousing compassion, by elucidating the principles that encourage individual and social harmony, and by exposing the dangers of deception, isolation, and demagoguery are what has underscored their fundamental and irreplaceable union with democratic thought, civil discourse, and compelling pathways to individual and collective fulfillment. Until recently.

A little over a decade ago, in 2013, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published *The Heart of the Matter* report. Subtitled “The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation,” it was commissioned in response to a bipartisan request – a current rarity – from members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives which

asked, “What are the top actions that Congress, state governments, universities, foundations, educators, individual benefactors, and others should take now to maintain national excellence in humanities and social scientific scholarship and education, and to achieve long-term national goals for our intellectual and economic well-being; for a stronger, more vibrant civil society; and for the success of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century?”¹

It was a complementary response to the publication of the National Academies report, *Rising above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*, issued in 2007, which influenced the scientific community to strengthen STEM education and to press for increased funding for scientific research. That effort still resonates preeminently in educational and funding domains, while the influence of *The Heart of the Matter* seems limited by comparison.

The report, composed by an array of leading humanities, arts, and social science practitioners and influencers as well as corporate leaders, university presidents, and a former Supreme Court Justice after a series of workshops and meetings, is ambitious and deeply idealistic, looking, it announces, “to the humanities and social sciences for the skills, information, and sources of creativity that our founders saw as the basis for a democratic, prosperous, and secure nation.”² These disciplines are described as the heart of the matter, “the keeper of the republic – a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common.” “Together,” the report goes on, “they help us understand what it means to be human and connect us with our global community.”³

But what has been the impact of such a high-minded report? In the decade since its publication, we have seen a precipitous decline in humanities majors and faculty positions, not just in the United States but globally. Furthermore, democratic institutions increasingly have been imperiled, we have flirted with a global economic recession, civil society has frayed into persistent polarization, and cultural diplomacy has been largely hijacked by nefarious social media outlets whose prevailing mission is less the free flow of information than the absolute control of it. Anti-humanities rhetoric has dominated political posturing and funding allocations from many who profess the need for a practical focus on economic viability, in crusades against a manufactured Woke ideology, and in demands for relevance that presume STEM as the singular pathway to salvation.

In recognition of the ten-year anniversary of *The Heart of the Matter*, the National Humanities Center and the American Academy jointly held a two part series of discussions in March–April, 2023 that (1) reflected on the report’s impact during the previous decade and (2) projected forward a decade concerning changes that might and should occur in the humanities. “Restoring Our Vitality: The Heart of the Matter and the Future of the Humanities” presented both calls for sustainability of traditional practices and challenges for radical departures from them. One dominant theme was the reliance on narrative as a pervasive strength, while many questioned how best to expand the dimensions and reach of narrative in more explicit service to what has been termed “the crisis in the humanities.”⁴

¹ *The Heart of the Matter* 2013, 8.

² *The Heart of the Matter* 2013, 10.

³ *The Heart of the Matter* 2013, 11.

⁴ *Restoring Our Vitality* 2023.

I wish to build from this discussion, a discussion that also gestures toward the thoughtful conversations that have been occurring at the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association, the American Council of Learned Societies, and elsewhere, to offer some ruminations on the following questions: What fundamental changes must the humanities make in the coming decade if we are to preserve their value? How might they reassert their prominence at the core of education and reestablish the perception that they underpin and bolster democratic thought and practice? How do we go beyond frustration and despair regarding impending demise to recover agency and purpose in righteous resurrection?

I will pose a few points of philosophical and methodological conjecture and possibility. In doing so, I will focus on what many consider to be the most crucial problem of our time, climate change and its consequences, in thinking about how this overwhelming problem offers a rallying point for the insertion of the humanities into practical solutions which require an upending of discrete disciplinary and pedagogical perspectives as well as a bridging of the academic and public divide. I will suggest a thorough review of academic reward systems and institutional structures as well as a broadening of the definitions attached to scholarship and for a new pedagogical focus. Finally, I will argue that we must reengage our storytelling prowess with an emphasis on the power of metaphor to extend the humanities beyond our current anthropocentric and circumscribed view of the human in order to bolster imaginative response and methodological flexibility that is both cogent and compelling.

Amitav Ghosh's 2016 book, *The Great Derangement*, argues that the modern and contemporary novel has failed to address the global climate crisis primarily because of its confinement to a western epistemic tradition that compels writers to dwell on the interiority of character rather than a collective calamity like climate change. Our inability to fathom the impact of an ecological cataclysm constitutes a kind of psychopathology which Ghosh labels a "derangement."⁵ In a subsequent book, he writes, "The crisis that now grips the planet is a crisis that is all-pervasive and omnipresent, in which geopolitics; capitalism; climate change; and racial, ethnic, and religious divides interlock, each amplifying and accelerating the other."⁶

Indeed, modernism exacerbated an intensive dwelling on a singular protagonist and the psychological novel, most pronounced in the *bildungsroman*, intensified a focus on interior point of view shifting the definition of realism from William Dean Howells's insistence on fidelity to the object being perceived to Henry James's on fidelity to the process of perception itself. Postmodernism enhanced this shift with an emphasis on stylistic play and parody, concentrating on a flipping of binary hierarchies and on a Nietzschean dismantling of received Enlightenment assumptions. Critical inquiry often focused more on the intellectual pyrotechnics inherent in the act of dismantling than on what new object or idea might emerge from the ashes, leading to charges of insularity and amoral relativism. The exposure of systemic and oppressive power structures in cultural studies dominated humanities research in the nineties and early twenty-first-century, leading to recovered voices and a concentration on drawing the previously marginalized into mainstream subject matter. Race, class, gender, and sexuality studies have now been thoroughly integrated as touchstones in humanities scholarship and curricula, one might argue as their prevailing mode of discourse.

Is there, however, a tension inherent in this trend if we amplify Ghosh's concern about the prevalence of interiority and a subsequent lack of collective perspective on impending

⁵ Ghosh 2016.

⁶ Ghosh 2021, 222.

calamity? Can an exclusive concentration on individual identity, no matter how significantly tied to issues of social justice, serve a need to embrace the collective not only centered on human but also on the entire human/nonhuman ecological fabric?⁷ Do we continue to countenance the rapid deterioration of planetary biodiversity and the erasure of pristine places because their preservation defies human encroachments? Or are we constrained to a perpetual and destructive obliviousness stoked by an anthropocentric narcissism? These epistemological questions, which clearly are immensely challenging and ultimately unpopular, are nowhere addressed in *The Heart of the Matter*, but are fundamental to a pathway to effecting necessary change reliant on the methodologies inherent in the humanities, of finding ways to conjoin social and ecological justice, as well as a dynamic intersection between personal and societal transformation rather than to view them as mutually exclusive.

With all of our ruminating on the crises in the humanities, particularly their supposed economic shortcomings and their increasing institutional marginalization, it is important to remind ourselves of their fundamental emotional power and of the flatness to which we would be reduced in our personal and worldly transactions without them. Much of the appeal of the humanities resides in their intensely personal revelations through imaginative connections to collective experiences, a knitting together of lives which make the boundaries of the self more permeable, more amenable to tolerance and compassion. They permit us to transgress the invisible borders that otherwise separate one dimension of space, time, and identity from another. They bring new voices to the historical record that radically alter that record so that it becomes more comprehensive and more truthful. They also promote listening, focused attention, and reflection, all skills essential to civil and personal viability and sustenance. As a corollary to Rachel Carson's opening in *Silent Spring*, which galvanized the environmental movement in the 1960s, I would ask "imagine a world without metaphor."⁸

A solely defensive reliance on economic arguments and counter-arguments therefore forces humanities advocates onto slippery turf, away from their *raison d'être* and crucial contributions to personal and societal flourishing. While arming ourselves with the elevator speeches and data necessary to counter misinformation is important, dwelling solely in this economic dimension cedes our most persuasive avenues of response, diminishing our poetic power in order to fit into a procrustean bed. Such an exclusively reactionary focus, rather than mitigating erosion, threatens a continued dwindling of the imaginative, interrogative and empathetic impulses core to the humanities that deserve enhancement and celebration even if devoid of immediate monetary value. The power of the humanities is best revealed in our shared pursuit of common and essential questions about what it means to be human. What constitutes a good life? How do we know the truth? How do we preserve democracy? The foundational role of the humanities in a civil society stems from the connections made between the lessons learned from history, literature, and philosophy and the significant links between our personal and collective lives.

Public perceptions of the humanities are also tied to a list of disciplines rather than the methodologies and practical applications that knit them together. The ivory tower separating the academy from the wider world, the abstract retreats of academic discourse when theorizing the grand challenges of contemporary life, the discrete separation of classroom

⁷ An interesting response to this vexing question, one that ties race and gender studies to post-human ecology, is Wynter 2015.

⁸ For a more complete discussion of ecology and metaphor, see Newman 2018.

from community, the academic reward system and budget structures which disadvantage collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and public engagement while dismissing service as a third-tier gesture all promote an elitist stasis which counters efforts at public support while diverting the humanities from the very materials and alliances that should nourish and sustain them.

A more humble and inclusive approach to public engagement by the academy is needed. It is not a matter of scholars distributing their wisdom within the public, but a relinquishment of ownership of knowledge creation, the creation of trust, and the building of genuine partnerships. Increasingly, we need public humanities work created and led by communities in conjunction with rather than in service to scholars and students.⁹

What counts as scholarship in this new context? How do we foster and better reward collaborative scholarship, especially in an era where the burgeoning of digital humanities and multi-disciplinary perspectives is premised upon it? How do we count podcasting, digital mapping, pedagogical scholarship, and field work? If the definition of scholar and scholarship and the work of the humanities and the public humanities is more open, how might we better address resource allocation and reward structures? These are key questions with which an entrenched and often defensive academic system is only beginning to engage.

We also need a paradigmatic shift in how we conduct teaching and learning with educators introducing a revolutionary pedagogy to promote this shift. I believe this pedagogy would focus more on legacy projects wherein students are compelled to consider how their actions have impact beyond themselves and what consequences their lives have on future lives, both human and not. Such a focus on legacy might address Ghosh's concern with excessive interiority while elevating an emphasis on translating theory to practice. The rapidly expanding fields of Environmental Humanities and Medical Humanities are primed for such a pedagogy. Experiential learning must be more thoroughly integrated into the curriculum, equipping students with problem solving skills directly relevant to issues that surround and impact their lives and the lives of others with whom they should interact so they realize that teachers exist in multiple guises and settings and that learning opportunities are the stuff of daily living.

John Dewey told us that “democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”¹⁰ I am calling for a new Deweyesque curriculum, infused with a contemporary awareness of the necessity of ecological thinking, a thoroughly integrated ecological pedagogy, premised on an insistence on converting theory to practice, and focused on a politics of equality that extends beyond anthropocentrism. Such a pedagogy also would point to information and civic literacy, and must reexamine the question of what constitutes usefulness. Restricting the definition of usefulness only to economic productivity while ignoring ethical considerations and social goals presents an impoverished perspective that unravels public cohesion. Bemoaning the “rule of self-destructive financial calculation governing every walk of life,” the great economic theorist John Maynard Keynes lamented, “We destroy the beauty of the countryside because the unappropriated splendors of nature have no economic value. We are capable of shutting off the sun and the stars because they do not pay a dividend.”¹¹

⁹ For an excellent discussion of how we might reframe public engagement that expands these points, see Berkowitz and Gibson 2022, 68–81.

¹⁰ Dewey 1980, 139.

¹¹ Keynes 1933, 764.

The present, imminent, and long-term exacerbating catastrophes that have, are, and will be caused by climate change require another revolutionary moment in promoting the centrality of the public good in our collective thinking. To limit the process of addressing climate change to the purview of science and policy is to risk a less than comprehensive response than this crisis demands. Just as environmental research and studies have been broadened by integrating science and policy with humanities' lenses that provide focus and context in terms of place, ethics, storytelling, and culture, such sharpened and expansive means of problem-solving are imperative for countering human-caused impending disasters with integrated and legacy solutions.

Likewise, to ignore the pervasive and mounting effects of climate change in what we do as humanists is to hermetically seal ourselves off. In arguing for more pronounced connections between the humanities and ecology, I return to their original impulses and their primary methodologies, interrogation, and bridging. I wish to argue for a poetics of ecology and for an ecological humanism. I also wish to argue that it is incumbent upon us scholars, teachers, and advocates for the public good to enter the fray of contemporary concerns and to play a significant role in addressing the large questions that confront us.

The conversation I hope to spark with my comments would insist on posing alternative or supplementary means of assessment more suited to the methodologies and contributions of the humanities and to the place-based philosophy of unification that has steered ecology from its inception in the mind of Alexander von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century. The very term *oecologie*, coined by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, comes from the Greek word for household (*oikos*) as applied to the natural world. What if we better underscored and unwrapped the metaphoric possibilities of this etymology as attached to conservation of the natural world, linking conservation practices to good housekeeping, and a fuller understanding of what constitutes home and why we must be attentive to its maintenance?¹²

The coming future of the Anthropocene is one that will increasingly require mediation in both practical and philosophical senses. Technological mediation may reduce carbon emissions, restore habitats, and make sustainable energy resources more viable. Cooperative international political mediation may address environmental justice issues, the legacies of colonial exploitation, and the damage of industrial toxicity. To build the solidarity necessary to take on the planetary crisis, a larger mediation inclusive of more broadly conceived visions of life rather than exclusively human, technological ecosystems must take place. This is the domain of the humanities.

Cases of direct accountability have largely inspired environmental movements. Can they be extended to a collective accountability that radically redirects behavior, economic structures, and political prosperity in order to save the planet? And will catastrophe galvanize human behavior toward good? As in Kim Stanley Robinson's novel, *The Ministry of the Future*, we can imagine that an extreme heat wave in India might motivate the conscience of the world. An alternative scenario is that such an occurrence spurs more authoritarian regimes.¹³

¹² For a fuller discussion of the connections between the origins of the humanities and ecology, see Newman 2019.

¹³ Robinson 2020.

Bridging the humanities and ecology requires an emphasis on process more than product and a metaphoric reach beyond speciesist prejudices. We need to embrace what Lawrence Buell has termed disciplined extrospection, the studied relinquishment of a self-centered perspective, guided by reaching out toward, but never quite enclosing, the viewpoint of another species. We have seen elaborations on and refinements of Buell's proposition, most recently in books by Carl Safina, Martha Nussbaum, and others. Such an embrace is formed by narrative and guided by empathy.¹⁴

Transformative moments in the humanities have their analogues in countless ecological moments, moments that transcend codification and embrace science within the realm of astonishment and empathy. Such codification finds an analogue in our anthropocentric dismissal of animal communication. This self-absorbed dismissal has led to a crumbling of biodiversity and an eradication of many nonhuman species, exponentially accelerated by climate change. Since 1970, wildlife populations have fallen by two-thirds, according to the World Wildlife Fund. The World Animal Foundation has predicted that a half of all nonhuman animal species will have become extinct by 2050.¹⁵

Through their root systems, trees communicate warnings about pestilence and disease to each other and provide nutrients to ailing members of their group. Our difficulty imagining this stems from our habitually thinking of trees as individuals rather than as members of interconnected communities and diverse intergenerational associations high in the canopy and underground.¹⁶ It is the same issue a focus on individual identity presents to an ecological mindset in humans as Ghosh's thesis suggests. Some plants emit sounds that are inaudible to humans but audible to some other living things. We know that humpback whales consistently alter their songs with shifts in time and space. Because they lack human language, are they mute? Do they not reason in their own way? Do they not invest their sounds with narrative? Are they telling stories that pass across generations to illuminate their lives and to tell them how to live and why? Is it not both arrogant and isolating to claim human exceptionalism for reason, for language, for empathy, for narrative? If we persist in neglecting to understand and embrace the nonhuman world while fostering its eradication, is it not we humans who are mute and ignorant?

Here is where the humanities must flourish over the next decade in order to manifest their relevance and preserve their viability. They need to make alliances with and contributions to multidisciplinary initiatives focused on our current crises, most importantly climate change. Ecological thinking must be woven throughout the fabric of our scholarship and pedagogy to the same degree as we have done with race, class, gender, and sexuality studies. All have implications for social and planetary justice. Resolutions to seemingly intractable problems require comprehensive approaches, including a humanities perspective. The crises are self-evident. They dominate the news. Emerging disciplines like environmental studies, cognitive studies, narrative medicine, computational linguistics, border studies, and information theory should become the university departments of the future, all of which would have a humanities component in conversation with other fields. Academic reward systems, like tenure and promotion, must be re-engineered to embrace more collaborative and public-facing methods and products rather than sustain their current marginalized and suspect status. Podcasts, hybrid pedagogical models, community partnerships, international

¹⁴ Buell 1995. For further considerations of speciesist limitations, see Safina 2015, Hayhoe 2021, Dunn 2021, and Nussbaum 2023.

¹⁵ Lepore 2022.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Wohlleben 2016.

blogs, and digital research tools are demonstrating that classrooms are not only within four walls and that scholarship exists not only in pages between covers.

Only with a turn toward the pragmatic might the esoteric be safely preserved and nurtured. Commitments to curiosity, discovery, and knowledge for knowledge's sake are the lifeblood of a vibrant civilization. Civil discourse and healthy debate foster such commitments. But all are in danger during prevailing crises that are simultaneously personal, cultural, and planetary. We can deepen the humanities' essential questions beyond abstractions by applying them in service to solving our society's most vexing tangible concerns.

For the humanities to survive, democracy must survive, and the survival of democracy is predicated upon robust humanistic inquiry and principles. No area of study, whether the sciences, engineering, social sciences, or medicine, is so fundamentally linked to human rights, compassion, the mutuality of the individual and the collective, and the essential preservation and exploration of freedom through life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Laws codify these practices. The humanities provide both the underpinnings of that codification and the methodologies by which they are refreshed and kept relevant.¹⁷

While the lofty aspirations advocated by the 2013 American Academy report remain germane, the heart of the matter for 2024 and the immediate future requires a clarion call for activist and practical strategies that offer legacy solutions to global dilemmas. Saving democracy, saving civil society, saving the planet. These all are intimately entwined with securing the future of the humanities.

Robert D. Newman has been the President and Director of the National Humanities Center from 2015 to 2024. He has published six books, over a hundred articles, reviews, and poems, and has given talks throughout the world. He has also been the General Editor of the "Cultural Frames, Framing Culture" series published by the University of Virginia Press since 2001.

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¹⁷ See Newman 2021.

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