THE WORTH OF THE HUMANITIES

In 2011 and 2012, a group of scholars, most of them from McGill and Vanderbilt universities, gathered to take stock of the humanities. We undertook to explain the worth of the humanities in a way that would make satisfying sense to us and that would also be able to persuade other people, including people outside the university, about the value of humanities teaching and research. The group included literary scholars in English, French, and Spanish, specialists in cultural studies, visual culture, and media theory, as well as History, Musicology, Architecture, and Law. We met in Montreal in October 2011 and in Nashville in May 2012. Not all of us were at both meetings, but most were. The discussions were lively, inventive, and thoughtful.

This report does not attempt to provide a history of the humanities or an institutional or sociological analysis of the humanities at the present time. It is, we hope, an open-minded and clear-eyed examination of our working assumptions and practices as humanities teachers and researchers. That examination includes an account of the challenges that face the humanities as well as a number of recommendations for the improvement of the fields in which we work.

The conclusions represented here are organized into three sections. The first outlines the most prominent features of humanities research and teaching and their central claims to being of worth. The second suggests several challenges facing the humanities. The third provides a short list of recommendations. These conclusions by no means reflect the unanimous views of the whole group, and they are in fact open to critical rethinking, an openness that is itself a salient characteristic of the humanities.

1. WHAT ARE THE HUMANITIES?

WHAT WE DO

Humanities researchers and teachers help make an historical, public, meaningful world.

How do we do that?

We are a group of fourteen scholars from a range of disciplines. We teach undergraduates and graduate students, and most of us have been or are administrators or leaders of organizations. Michael Holquist was President of the Modern Language Association of America. Bill Ivey was Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities and is now Director of the Curb Centre. Michael Jemtrud was Director of the School of Architecture at McGill. The list at the end of this report provides a partial account of the institutional and public roles that we've played and continue to play. While our work is nurtured within the academic institution, we strive to build bridges between the academy and the broader public (or multiple publics) outside the university.

We do that in part by being original. We create new centres, programs, and publications, like the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt; McGill's Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas; the Shakespeare Moot Court, an interdisciplinary graduate course at McGill that featured court hearings open to the public and even a broadcast debate on Shakespeare and same-sex marriage; or the e-journal, *AmeriQuests*, which provides a public forum for writing and research about real and metaphorical quests for "America."

We also contribute to public life directly by teaching thousands and thousands of young people. The vast majority of our students don't go on to academic careers, but cultivate working lives in business, the arts, the law, or government or non-government service, among other career paths. Their working lives benefit greatly from their university education. Humanities teaching cultivates analytical and argumentative writing and speaking skills as well as capacities for historical inquiry and the analysis of complex artifacts, activities, and problems. The fostering of practical, instrumental skills, which has been an important part of the humanities since the time of Isocrates, is of a piece with the humanities' participation in the creation of spaces for public speech and action. People need to be able to think, speak, and write well if they are to take their place in public dialogue. Thinking, speaking, and writing well also help to constitute the public world itself.

People sometimes talk about the university as an "ivory tower." That idea of the university is kept current in part by the traditional design of university campuses as places set apart from the rest of the world, by the ancient system by which most young people are "admitted" to the institution and to the degrees for which they study, and by the often abstruse language of academic publication. But universities, we suggest, are not monastic enclosures for unworldly study, but rather open spaces in which thousands and thousands of people gather each year to take part in multiple forms of teaching and learning, in the cultivation of new ideas and understanding, and in vigorous intellectual commerce.

WHAT THEY TAKE WITH THEM

If the university is an open space for teaching, learning, and intellectual commerce, what do students take with them when they leave for other places?

Students in humanities programs learn dialogical, self-critical, and flexible thinking. They develop skills in critical analysis and argument and learn how to speak and write in ways that work effectively in different professional and public settings. They discover that the world and the things in it are replete with meaning and that they cannot live fulfilling or effective lives in the present without knowledge of the past. They learn that understanding the world and making a meaningful world are interconnected, that the task of world making is the work of many hands, and that it is accomplished over time.

Because the humanities deal primarily in meaning (as opposed to information), and because meaning is by its character open to interpretation, the work of the humanities is necessarily not definitive or able to exhaust its objects of study; rather, its conclusions are subject to reinterpretation, critique, and dialogue. This is not a weakness but a strength. Humanities scholars study and rethink previous scholarship as well as studying primary material. Since both the primary material and the studies of that material are conversation partners as well as objects of inquiry for present-day researchers, humanities research tends to be reflexive, accumulative, and resistant to definitive answers.

The humanities approach their objects of study in distinctive ways—as historically and culturally situated and as intelligible and intelligent interlocutors over the long term. Where the sciences, as empirical modes of research, do not usually treat what they study as conversation partners, the humanities usually do. Humanities research encounters its objects of study as subjects capable of speaking back. Like good life-partners, the objects of humanities study are inexhaustible; indeed, works of art grow over time. "Works break through the boundaries of their own time," Mikhail Bakhtin says, "they live in centuries, that is, in *great time* and frequently

(with great works, always) their lives there are more intense and fuller than are their lives within their own time."[1]

I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation . . . except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice . . . we have no other test of truth and reason than the example of . . . the country we live in.
--Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Cannibals"

Humanist interpretation is historical and has its roots in the study of ancient languages and cultures. It is not surprising therefore that it enables the understanding of geographically and historically distant cultures as well as local ones. The benefits of the study of other times, places, and cultures are in the delight of strangeness itself and in the perspective such strangeness affords moderns on their own ideas and practices. The study of particular expressive forms and of other life-worlds makes possible the creative rethinking of one's own time and place and of one's own enabling assumptions. Critical, historically informed thinking and well as empathetic and imaginative capacities are essential skills in the contemporary world.

The open-ended and critical practices of the humanities fashion a transhistorical dialogue in which artists, political actors, and scholars take part. The humanities have always been alert to the contingency of knowledge and judgment, and humanist scholars have no easy faith in the possibility of utopia (tellingly, the word "utopia" means "nowhere"), but the humanities are nevertheless invested in what Georg Lukacs has described as the discovery, restoration, and preservation of the "unbroken human personality."[2]

MEANING, HISTORY, PUBLICITY[3]

What are the humanities?
--two possible answers:

The rigorous qualitative engagement with knowledge and creativity as a path to an expanded playing field for the human imagination.

The study of the multiform acts of storytelling.

The humanities are a group of academic disciplines that study the speech, action, and created works by which human beings fashion a meaningful world.[4] This statement is true, but it conjures a somewhat misleading picture. What picture might come to mind when you hear about how people use speech, action, or art to make a meaningful world? A person with a violin perhaps, or someone holding a paintbrush, or a man beside a huge heap of stones (he has as well an idea about how to make the stones into a structure). A person giving a rousing political speech, or someone telling a story about the creation of the world. The violinist, the rousing speaker, the owner of the pile of stones, are seeking to

[1] M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 4.
[2] Georg Lukacs, "Marxist Aesthetics and Literary Realism," in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 102.
[3] The primary meaning of "publicity" is simply the quality of being public.
[4] The definition of "speech" and "action" here comes from Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition* (2nd ed. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998), 176), who says that they are "the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human." In her view, speaking and acting are the fundamental political practices. What she means by "political" is well captured by Jacques Rancière's idea of politics as the sphere of equality and original action (*Chronicles of Consensual Times* (London: Continuum, 2010), 2): "Politics is the way of concerning oneself with human affairs based on the mad presupposition that anyone is as intelligent as anyone else and that at least one more thing can always be done other than what is being done."

given durable form to their ideas and intentions. By their artistic and political initiative, they undertake to impose meaning and intelligibility upon what we could call the brute materiality of the world.

In the picture, there is a second person, off to the side and a bit in the background. The second person is observing what the first person is doing. He or she is taking pages of notes on the work of world-creating speech, action, and creative art, and he or she is formulating histories and theories in fields called political history, history of religion, literary studies, architectural theory, art history, musicology, and so on.

In fact, the picture is more complicated and more interesting than this triptych (with its material world, world-creating artist or activist, and note-taking scholar) might suggest. The world itself is never fully unintelligible. All people, not just the artists and political actors, are in the business of meaningful living. And, as we are beginning to understand, even the animals have their own complex social and emotional lives and their own expressive vocabularies. Artists and political actors do make a meaningful world, but so do toolmakers and homemakers. The art of music is bound up with the artisanal work of instrument-making, architecture cannot be pried apart from masonry or carpentry, and even great orations are made from the ordinary words that people use to buy and sell and bid their fellows good morning or good night.

Artists and political actors are therefore not alone as world-makers. The world as a place of meanings and values, as opposed to a place of bare physical processes, is being made by many others, humans and animals included. What, then, do artists and political actors do that is so special? The actions of artists and political actors are meaningful in a particular way since they are oriented strongly toward the past and future as well as to the present moment. This quality of attention to the past and future is different from the time-consciousness of artisans and homemakers. They (the artisans and homemakers) also have a sense of being in time, of course, but their attention to the past and future is shorter term and mostly concerned with practical matters. The person who begins his speech by saying “I have a dream” is more deeply mindful of other similar, decisive speeches in the past, and he is looking toward the future consequences of his present oration. The speaker and the others are creating that peculiarly long-term kind of temporality that we call history.

The artists and political actors also aspire to reach out to everyone they can possibly reach so that all people can see the painting or hear the speech. The aspiration to paint a painting that will enchant the world or speak something that will influence a large gathering and many other people besides, that aspiration seeks to create a space that is remarkably open and public. Political speaking and acting and works of art aim to create a public world, which, ideally, includes everyone in consequential thinking and talking about matters of common concern. Finally, if someone wants to make, speak, or do something that will address just about everyone, he or she must seek to reach out to the yet-to-be-born as well as to those that are living today. That aspiration toward ongoing relevance in the future means public making by artists and political actors is of a piece with how they aim to make their works and actions live in historical time.

The particular contribution made by artists and by political actors is the creation of the historical and public character of the human world—the intelligibility of the world over time and the foundational idea of the world *as a world*, that is, as a public, long-enduring space where meaningful and consequential speaking, creating, and acting are possible. But even here, importantly, they do not take on this task alone.

Consider again the shadowy figure in the background, the person observing and formulating histories and theories. In fact, he or she is doing far more than taking notes. That apparently passive note-taker is a sharer in the work of world making. Humanities researchers are not mere recorders of something from which they are condemned to stand apart. By their work as historians, analysts, and theorists, humanities teachers and researchers take an active part in the creation of a public, historical, meaningful world that is populated by the actions, utterances, and works of art and intellect of the past as well as of the present. It is a world able to gather the lives of individual humans into the historical, public collectivity of "humanity," the word that also denominates the disciplines that help constitute it.

The work of the humanities is generally on a smaller scale than that performed by artists and political actors. The Parthenon, constructed in Athens in the fifth century BCE, opens a larger and longer-lasting field of speaking and acting (and building) than any single study of Athenian architecture or religion. Those who built the Parthenon intended it to bind the gods to humanity, to endure for centuries, and to occasion wonder and deep interest in generations of people; and they succeeded, at least as far as we are able to judge. Scholars who study ancient Greek culture usually speak to a defined audience and expect their work to have prominence for a limited time. Of course, this difference between large-scale and small-scale temporality and publicity does not always obtain. For one thing, works can be at once artistic and scholarly. Montaigne's *Essays* is a cranky, brilliant work of scholarship as well as a work of philosophical art. Art and political action often have very short lifetimes, and scholarship sometimes has a very influential and extended life in the world.

Most important, however, is how the humanities are able to keep art and the words and actions of the past alive and influential in the present day and into the future. Archival research; the study of artifacts, texts, and contexts; disciplined analysis and interpretation; and the resulting arguments about the meanings, causes, and effects of acts and made things—all these practices and products of the humanities are indispensible to the creation a world where the things that we say, do, and make have the chance to live longer than we do and to address a broader and more various world than they are able to address in the lifetimes of their makers.

2. QUESTIONS FOR THE HUMANITIES

1. The reflexive and dialogic features of humanities research demand a constant testing of the limits of its field of inquiry—what is inside and what outside the category of "the human." Humanities scholars have often ignored this logic in order to exclude others based on culture, language, sex, race, and class. How do we put in question traditional distinctions between the human, on one side, and the animal or the machine, on the other, while preserving the idea of the "humanities" itself?
2. The works many humanists study were not, by and large, created to be studied, but to be experienced—used, consumed, treasured, circulated. The scholarly endeavor may be seen to have an antagonistic relation to what is studied as well as to those who create it. How can humanities research account for the experiences and lives at the heart of its study while still preserving its analytical and contextualizing orientation?
3. Disciplinarily is an indispensible feature of all research and teaching, yet disciplines can inhibit the development of precisely the kinds of understanding of other worlds that are foundational to the humanities. How can humanities scholars work across disciplines in ways that enrich and enable disciplinary expertise?

4. The social condition of the present is characterized by the privileging of short-term perspectives and instrumental knowledge. How can humanities researchers effectively respond to such tendencies while continuing to contribute meaningfully to the creation of a scholarly community and a public life of ideas?
5. Humanities research has increasingly become disconnected from life outside the academy. It is often outpaced by other fields in the study and constitution of public and purposive communities. Those doing community medical internships, or building civil society organizations in Africa, or working on engineering projects to diminish environmental impact are no less crucially engaged with a critical and constitutive stance to the public sphere. How can the humanities generate a greater creative, critical role in the world outside the academy?
6. The devaluation of humanities disciplines within the academy is real and ongoing. Consider the consolidation, reduction of support, and in some cases wholesale elimination of humanities departments. The inclusion of the humanities within institutional strategic plans often amounts to little more than lip service. The governmental, industrial, and institutional shift toward profit-making and applied research models of the scientific and engineering type is well known. Since the devaluation of the humanities is as much a super-valuation of the instrumental and fiscally productive scientific, engineering, professional, and business disciplines, how can we create an alternative economic model and a different idea of profitability that speaks to the worth of the humanities and creative arts?

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Interdisciplinary

Undertake to do interdisciplinary research and teaching and to do it critically and reflectively.
Identify key interdisciplinary research and teaching areas within humanities disciplines and between humanities and other research areas. Analyze the nature and broader consequences of interdisciplinary initiatives.

One particularly worthwhile area for interdisciplinary work is in Digital Humanities, an emerging field that brings together traditional humanities scholarship and new information technologies and social media. Digital Humanities has a very great capacity to expand the reach and creative force of the humanities and to facilitate new models of collaborative research and new approaches to teaching. Since Digital Humanities is of such great potential value, it is important to open the traditional humanities to collaboration with its digital kin. Since meaning and information are in many ways antithetical models of knowing and communicating, and since the humanities tend to trade in meaning and Digital Humanities in information, it is also important to engage in Digital Humanities work thoughtfully, critically, and self-reflexively.

Humanities and the Arts

Develop collaborative research and teaching between scholarship and the creative arts.

Bring scholarship and the creative arts into substantial, mutually beneficial conversation and collaboration, especially by fostering lines of connection among scholars, creative artists, and leaders in the cultural and entertainment industries. The critical study of the arts can sometimes find itself at a distance from the arts themselves. Indeed, the study of the arts is impeded by a criticism that treats art, literature, music, or theatre as if it were no different in kind from other discursive practices. To bring artists into conversation with scholars is to deepen scholarly attention to the formal features of art and the particular stakes and views of artists, and

it is also to enrich artists' understanding of the history of the social creativity of their own practices and products.

The Public Life of the Humanities

Build bridges between the academy and the multiple publics outside the academy in ways that promote active, two-way intellectual traffic.

The humanities have already a substantial (if under-recognized) public dimension, especially by virtue of the millions (in North America alone) who have been educated in humanities programs. Humanities scholars must still develop larger and more various roles in public life. Creating opportunities for public intellectual work and exchange is of great benefit for all those who take part—members of particular interest communities, students and teachers in elementary and high schools, book clubs, online audiences and discussion groups, radio and TV audiences, and university students and teachers themselves. Such exchanges should play a vital and enabling part in the growth of a public, democratic culture.

WHO WE ARE

1. Darin Barney, Associate Professor, Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship, Art History and Communication Studies, McGill University
2. Robert Barsky, Professor of English, French, European, and Jewish Studies, Vanderbilt University
3. Julie Cumming, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Research and Administration, Schulich School of Music, McGill University
4. Edward H. Friedman, Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of Spanish and Director, Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, Vanderbilt University
5. Peter Hitchcock, Professor of English, Women's Studies, and Film Studies, and Acting Director, Center for Place, Culture, and Politics, City University of New York
6. Michael Holquist, Professor of Comparative Literature Emeritus, Yale University, and Member, Society of Senior Fellows, Columbia University
7. William Ivey, Founding Director, Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy, Vanderbilt University
8. Michael Jemtrud, Founding Director, Carleton Immersive Media Studio (Carleton University, 2000-2007); Associate Professor of Architecture, McGill University
9. Desmond Manderson, Founding Director (2008-2011), Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, McGill University; Professor of Law and Future Fellow, the Research School of Humanities and the Arts, Australian National University
10. Mark Schoenfield, Professor and Chair of English, Vanderbilt University
11. Will Straw, Professor of Art History and Communication Studies, and Director, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada
12. Cecelia Tichi, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of English, Vanderbilt University
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