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## The Humanities Are Not a Luxury: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century

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The humanities are at the heart of knowing about the human condition; they are not a luxury. Anyone who loves contemporary poetry and who knows the work of Audre Lorde will recognize the allusion to her early 1980s essay: "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives" (1984, 38). Lorde's "our" means "women"; mine means "humans," means all of us. My "poetry" includes music, history, art, philosophy, dance, theater – all the arts and humanities.

The subtitle of this article might have been "or, better thinking through poetry" or even "mind your metaphors." Poets and poetry mine metaphors, and in doing so they restore our language, which is constantly being stolen from us – muddled as it is by many politicians, by advertising, and by others who want to move us with metaphor but who do not want us to think critically about the implications of their comparisons. Delivering a talk to students at Amherst College, Robert Frost plainly stated how important metaphor is for thinking itself: "We still ask boys in college to think ... but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them it is just putting this and that

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together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky" (1972, 336). Recent events in academe have made me more aware than ever of how crucial metaphors are for our thinking.

### **Minding our metaphors**

In speaking about the effects of the California budget crisis on the state's university system, Mark Yudof, president of the University of California, declared – on national television, no less – that "many of our, if I can put it this way, businesses are in good shape. We're doing very well there. Our hospitals are full, our medical business, our medical research, the patient care. So, we have this core problem: Who is going to pay the salary of the English department? We have to have it. Who's going to pay it in sociology, in the humanities? And that's where we're running into trouble" (Yudof 2009). As I was listening to Yudof, I suddenly heard the voice of my late father roaring in my ears: "A PhD in English? Are you insane? You'll never get a job." In my mind's eye flashed the clippings from the *New York Times* that he used to send me, without comment but with red circles drawn around headlines such as "Yale English PhD Drives Taxicab for Living." We fought – over the phone, at holiday dinners. "Law school," he would yell. "PhD in English. Poetry," I would yell back. These memories rushed over me when I heard Yudof single out English professors and ask, "who is going to pay the salaries?"

Later, in a letter to the editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Yudof sought to clarify his point. But instead, he made matters worse.

When I told a television audience that a "core problem" the University of California faces is "who is going to pay the salary of the English department," my point was that the state's chronic underfunding of our public-university system has put more pressure on disciplines and departments that cannot rely on outside revenue streams, unlike, say our hospitals and research laboratories . . . My reference to English departments . . . was offered only as an example. I previously have made references in this context to a generic "Portuguese department." I could just as easily have invoked freshman sociology. (Yudof 2010)

In the context of today's university, Yudof's remarks are hardly surprising. After all, the same point has been made over and over again by many administrators and, indeed, by many faculty members. The prevailing narrative – that humanities curricula, professors, and research cost but do not *pay* – drives discourses, which drive decisions, which, in turn, create realities. The problem is that there's a misleading metaphor lurking behind this narrative, a misleading way of "putting this and that together."

Emily Dickinson declared, "We see – Comparatively" (1998, 580), and she was absolutely correct. Our metaphors frame our thinking; they shape what can be imagined. Yudof's "how do we pay" begins to frame the humanities as "expensive." Look up the definition of "luxury" and you find "expensive," "inessential," and "desirable but not indispensable." It has become difficult not only to maintain but, in the first place, to obtain support for research in the humanities, which tends not to be funded by large drug corporations or by the military; support for our pedagogy so that classes are smaller, interactions between student and professor are more intimate, direct, personal; support for our administrative underpinning so that time that could best be spent reading or writing is not spent on photocopying or making PDFs or filling out yet another form documenting our time, our travel, our office supplies.

Rhetoric such as Yudof's casts humanities and the social sciences as luxuries, as desirable but not indispensable – in effect, as inessential for the corporatized world of the contemporary American university. Perhaps Yudof does not make the comparison more explicitly because he knows that his way of putting this and that together really does not compute.

In an essay titled "The Humanities Really Do Make a Profit," which was published by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Robert Watson (2010), professor of English at the University of California at Los Angeles, took issue with Yudof's televised comments. Watson pointed out that the humanities and the social sciences typically "generate more tuition income than 100 percent of their total expenditure." Yudof's letter to the editor of the *Chronicle*, which made matters worse by expanding his initial declaration to include all humanities and social science fields, was intended as a response to Watson. Yet astonishingly, after characterizing the humanities as expendable luxuries, Yudof confirmed Watson's assertion that the humanities do, in fact, pay: "I have long made the case that, with undergraduates all paying the same fees, the humanities indeed can be seen as cross-subsidizing science, engineering and similar departments. Because of laboratory needs, the compensation markets which govern faculty salaries in these fields, and other factors, these latter disciplines simply are more expensive to operate" (Yudof 2010). So although he (and many others) uses language to describe the humanities as desirable but expensive, difficult to obtain, and increasingly difficult to maintain – language that describes and defines "luxury" – the humanities clearly are not a luxury. They not only bring in more tuition dollars than they spend, but, to paraphrase Lorde, the humanities form the "quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. [The humanities are] the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought."

### **The humanities are not in crisis**

Yudof and others who seek to describe the present situation use another misleading metaphor that structures our thinking so we cannot think straight, at least not about the state of the humanities. Yudof's "core problem" is a "crisis." (Think of the many articles you have seen with "crisis" and "humanities" in the title.) We need to mind our metaphors again. Look in any dictionary, and you will find that a crisis is a turning point, a decisive change. At this point, a simple fact needs to be stated, clearly and unambiguously: the humanities are not in crisis.

Yes, images we never expected to see have been broadcast widely, making it seem that the humanities are in crisis. After all, who ever expected to see crowds of students, professors, and staff brandishing hand-painted signs that read, "save the humanities," and being surrounded

by helmeted Darth Vader-esque policemen in full riot gear? Visually, these recall images I became accustomed to seeing in my teenage years – the war protests, the throngs throwing tear gas canisters back at police, the students being shot down by the National Guard at Kent State. One sees those “save the humanities” pictures and thinks crisis, turning point. But it is not crisis that led to those protests and those signs, though everyone keeps calling it that.



Student protest, University of California (Mark Ralston/AFP/GettyImages)

So that I can demonstrate my point, indulge me in a kind of temporal Jeopardy. See whether you can provide – in the form of questions, of course – the approximate dates of the following four quotations. The first is from a graduate application statement: “‘The statistics gathered by the MLA in annual surveys . . . are not encouraging for new PhDs seeking teaching positions.’ Thank you, MLA, for bursting my bubble of undergraduate idealism and for rendering even more difficult the already monumental task of explaining Why I Want to Go to Graduate School. Why, indeed, in an age of declining enrollments, shrinking budgets, and waning interest in the humanities have I set my sights on an academic career?”

The second quotation is from a president of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS): “To be sure, the past ten or fifteen years have not been a particularly happy time for those of us in the humanities. In the colleges and universities we have seen a movement away from the study of history, philosophy, literature, and foreign languages, disciplines central to our concerns and – we would argue – to the nation’s concerns. We have seen our PhD graduates unable to find academic jobs and consequently earning a living wherever they can.”

The third is from an internationally renowned historian: “The humanities are attacked every day; the host of their enemies is legion and their defenders a mere handful.” The fourth and final quotation is from an American academic and literary critic: “The humanities themselves have ceased to be humane . . . [and are] content to become the humble handmaids of science.”

Following are the correct “Jeopardy” answers. “What is 1908?” The applicant is Professor Marilee Lindemann of the University of Maryland, who had more than one job offer when she went on the market in the late 1980s. “What is 1982?” The ACLS president is Robert M. Lumiansky. “What is 1938?” The historian is Gilbert Chinard. “What is 1902?” The literary critic is Irving Babbitt, noted for founding “New Humanism.”

There is actually great hope in the fact that these despairing words were uttered thirty years, seventy years, and more than a century ago. Notwithstanding the worries expressed during each of these previous periods, the humanities are still very much here – as are all the same anxieties. What does this tell us? For one thing, the humanities are not under the pressure of crisis. That way of thinking, allowing “crisis” to frame our sense of things, has had us lurching from one funding shortfall to another. It is as if there have never been funding shortfalls before, as if it is always Groundhog Day for the humanities. The erosion of support for the humanities – and the fear of erosion – as well as the perennial anxiety about the state of the humanities are *systemic*. Until we acknowledge this fact we will keep lurching from one point to another, unable to recognize the repetition, and continually slouching toward but then away from the problem.

### **Public disinvestment**

In the years following World War II, access to quality education became increasingly democratized. Recent studies have found “strong causal ties between US early educational development and economic successes: the United States was far ahead of European rivals in high school graduation rates by 1940 and developed a similar lead over virtually every other country in college graduation rates in the thirty years after World War II. It consolidated this lead during the economic ‘golden age’ of high growth and broadening national prosperity” (Newfield 2010, 611). So what happened? Given that the data show that our economic prosperity has been directly related to broad access to higher education, why is it that we have been witnessing what Christopher Newfield (2010, 611) aptly terms “an aggressive disinvestment in high-quality public universities” that provide that access?

Newfield argues compellingly that the attempted disestablishment of the greatest public education system in the world, the one that has provided the most access to the highest quality education for the most citizens, correlates to the tumult of the 1960s and to responses to it. In the wake of the effective antiwar and civil rights protests, a joke circulated that the powers-that-be vowed, “We will never educate our children this well again.” I now wonder whether the joke bespoke reality. Indeed, in a confidential memorandum to leaders of the US Chamber of Commerce, titled “Attack on the American Free Enterprise System,” Lewis Powell (1971), a Nixon appointee to the Supreme Court, flatly declared that the real threat was not from the “revolutionaries who would destroy the entire system” but from “perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians. In most of these groups the movement against the system is participated in only by minorities. Yet, these often are the most articulate, the most vocal, the most prolific in their writing and speaking.” Powell’s memorandum is widely credited with inspiring the formation of the conservative think-tank system. Newfield concludes that Powell clearly understood “that the university’s educated middle-class cadres were more likely to change the US business system in the short run than were the more visible radicals” (2008, 53). The groups Powell saw as undermining business were those highly skilled and adept as critical thinkers and symbolic analysts.

It is beyond the scope of this article to determine whether Newfield is correct that the systemic assault on the humanities is an effort to contain critical thinking, to divest the university of its foundations for nuanced inquiry that may challenge the powers that be, and to transform higher learning into a machine for producing highly skilled but pacified workers rather than questioning citizens capable of symbolic analysis. But it is certainly worth

taking such critiques seriously. These matters are, after all, central to our national security. A strong, vibrant democracy depends upon an environment within which oppositional thinking is not feared but, rather, is used to advance us all. “Not to discover weakness is,” as Emily Dickinson knew, “but the artifice of strength” (1976, 1054).

To return to the lesson about minding our metaphors, it is noteworthy that the metaphors used to describe the system of public education began to change dramatically in the late 1970s and early 1980s. With the “Reagan revolution” we saw the metaphors for all things public shift from “resource,” “investment,” and “enhancement” to “drain.” The “public good” ceased to be described as “commonwealth” and started to be characterized instead as “picking the pockets of private money.”

### **The technology of self-consciousness**

In conclusion, I offer five recommendations for how we in the humanities can best use our most powerful tool: the technology of self-consciousness, of mindfulness.

**1 Dispute the myth that the humanities cost but do not pay.** We need not accept the metaphors we are given. Most important, we must work to correct the myth that we in the humanities do not pay for ourselves, that the humanities cost but do not pay. This is no simple matter. As Hans Robert Jauss (1970) pointed out, once an error has been received as fact, the “chain of reception” of that error becomes almost impossible to break – regardless of the amount of contrary evidence. In my work on Emily Dickinson, I have repeatedly learned how powerful Jauss’s insight really is. Many believe that Dickinson was a recluse, that she became that way because some mystery man broke her heart, and that this, in turn, inspired her to write her poetry. I and other Dickinson scholars have uncovered many facts that disprove this theory about her life, yet readers in thrall to demure, heartbroken Emily Dickinson simply cannot abide those inconvenient (for them) truths. Breaking the chain of reception that holds that the humanities do not pay will be very hard, and we must be mindful that we are working against a force field of collective delusion in which we ourselves have been complicit. Yet in dispelling the myth, we are teaching how to read a situation differently, how to evaluate evidence, how to synthesize and form a tenable narrative from the evidence at hand.

**2 Actively champion the humanities.** In one of her most famous poems, Emily Dickinson reflects on the power of literature (1998, 1286):

There is no Frigate like a Book  
To take us Lands away  
Nor any Coursers like a Page  
Of prancing Poetry –

This Traverse may the poorest take  
Without offence of Toll –  
How frugal is the Chariot  
That bears the Human Soul.

There is no frigate, no bus, no plane, no spaceship, no car, no train like a book, like a song, like an operatic voice, like a painting, like a sculpture, like a drama to hope us imagine other lands and cultures or to help us cultivate the compassion and empathy that are required for democracy, for practicing equality as a fundamental value. As noted in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, it was by thinking and working with theories of narrative that Priscilla Wald reached the conclusion that “an analysis of how the conventions of the outbreak narrative shape attitudes toward disease emergence and social transformation can lead to more effective, just, and compassionate responses both to a changing world and to the problems of global health and human welfare” (Chew 2008, 1203). Communicable diseases are indeed a function of social interactions beyond the biological, and Wald (2008) makes a convincing case that narratives of outbreaks have consequences for the health of individuals and of society as a whole.

**3 Resist the casualization our labor.** Even as we call attention to the importance and the interconnectedness of the humanities’ contributions to higher education – the critical thinking skills, the rigorous but flexible sense of aesthetics – and even as we insist that the work of the humanities is worthy of financial investment, we must resist the erosion of full-time tenured and tenure-track positions. Indeed, we must resist all attempts to put financial concerns

before educational concerns. Yes, in fact, we do generate more dollars and cents than we cost, but we cannot let that be the basis on which we are valued and judged. Our work offers sense and sensibilities that enable us and our students to luxuriate in the everyday, to be attuned to the fact that, after Eve introduced critical inquiry into the world, “never again

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would birds’ song be the same” (Frost 1972, 451). Cultivating those sensibilities is vital if we are to relish and fully inhabit our own humanity.

**4 Be mindful of the ethical burdens of technology.** Humanities workers have always been involved with technology; there have always been machines in our gardens. Accordingly, we must be mindful of the “ethical burdens of technology, especially the technologies that create and disseminate” our work. Technology gathers into itself all the prejudices, biases, preferences, and moral orders associated with its creation. Therefore, technology will “valorize some kinds of knowledge skills and render other kinds invisible” (Bowker and Star 1999, 6). The former will be rewarded by the funding trends of the moment, and we in the humanities must bear the ethical burden that critiques any funding tail wagging a knowledge-worker dog. I will say flat out that the work for which I have obtained the most grant funding is not what I consider to be my most valuable work, though it has been richly rewarded in dollars and cents.

**5 Never assume antagonistic relations with either administrators or scientists.** I have interviewed or otherwise listened very carefully to administrators, deans, provosts, and presidents – most of whom are scientists. I have been profoundly and repeatedly impressed by the fact that scientists deeply value the humanities, and are quite eloquent in their appreciations. One cosmologist remarked, “the value of the humanities? Without the humanities, there are no humans in our knowledge-making, or at least we are amnesiac about them.” The provost of the University of Maryland, an engineer, speaks eloquently, profoundly, and movingly about how the love of poetry is embedded and ingrained in the culture of his home country, Iran, and about how the study of Persian poetry is neither an option nor a luxury; it is a necessity.

“What I,” in the words of my old friend Robert Frost, have been “pointing out is that unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history” (1972, 334). Rather than using metaphors derived from business management, we in the humanities ought to describe ourselves as gardeners. We work in fields, and we cultivate – and both activities are vital to the public good.

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