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Edited by Ignacio López-Calvo and Christina Lux

The Humanities in
the Age of Information
and Post-Truth

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Edited by Ignacio López-Calvo
and Christina Lux



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Rage and Beauty: Celebrating Complexity, Democracy, and the Humanities

Robert D. Newman

One of the most fascinating things I have found in my recent return to the Carolinas, where I did my graduate work three decades ago, after having spent the past fourteen years in Salt Lake City, Utah, where the prevailing subtext in many conversations as well as policy issues and political debates centered around the Mormon/non-Mormon divide, is how, even during the tenure of our first African American president, the prevailing subtext still centers on race. Granted, it is an issue that pervades much of the country, but many of the seeds of the issue remain grounded in the South, although often nuanced in rhetoric and covert policy and practice. As we talk about the country's shifts in so many directions, exploring honestly and in depth the reasons behind divides and then engaging in civil discourse and study to bridge them remain the crucial challenges and the primary obstacles toward our true progress as a democratic and civil society. Interrogating and bridging are the core methodologies in humanities research and teaching; thus, I would argue, a humanities perspective is essential to our understanding and our success personally and collectively as citizens, to the success of our mission as educators and scholars, and to our ability to address the intractable problems—from climate change to immigration to national security to inequality to the proper exercise of critical judgment—that face us and require pluralistic analysis, recommendations, and implementation in order to be overcome.

Before discussing the challenges to the humanities and how we might better address those challenges, I would like to offer a story that helps illustrate the complexities of interrogation and bridging. It's an old story about the pope and the chief rabbi of Italy:

Several centuries ago, the pope decreed that all the Jews had to leave Italy. There was, of course, a huge outcry from the Jewish community,

so the pope offered a deal. He would have a religious debate with a leader of the Jewish community. If the Jewish leader won the debate, the Jews would be permitted to stay in Italy. If the pope won, the Jews would have to leave.

The Jewish community met and picked an aged rabbi, Moishe, to represent them in the debate. Rabbi Moishe, however, could not speak Latin and the pope could not speak Yiddish, so it was decided it would be a silent debate.

On the day of the great debate the pope and Rabbi Moishe sat opposite each other for a full minute before the pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Rabbi Moishe looked back and raised one finger.

Next, the pope waved his finger around his head. Rabbi Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. The pope then brought out a communion wafer and a chalice of wine. Rabbi Moishe pulled out an apple. With that, the pope stood up and said, "I concede the debate. This man has bested me. The Jews can stay."

Later, the cardinals gathered around the pope, asking him what had happened. The pope said, "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions. Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground to show that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us of our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community crowded around Rabbi Moishe, asking what happened. "Well," said Moishe, "first he said to me, 'You Jews have three days to get out of here.' So I said to him, 'Not one of us is going to leave.' Then he tells me the whole city would be cleared of Jews. So I said to him, 'Listen here, Mr. Pope, the Jews . . . we stay right here!'"

"And then?" asked a woman.

"Who knows?" said Rabbi Moishe. "We broke for lunch."

Now our political and religious debates are seldom silent and are typically perpetuated rather than solved through misunderstanding. And

although it may seem remote, steeped as we have been in a presidential campaign premised on meandering sensationalism and unsubstantiated assertions, we look to authenticity, to enduring truths to help us salvage reason and sense in the jumble of mixed messages we receive steadily. When I listen to some of the recent political declarations, I am reminded of the great Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn, who offered this advice to aspiring actresses: “The most important thing about acting is sincerity. If you can fake that, you’ve got it made.”

The mission of the humanities is to expose rather than create shams, to root out the sources of and to rectify bogus claims and unsubstantiated assertions. We are all about storytelling, but as a revelation of truth and understanding, not for reckless self-promotion.

These core methodologies—interrogating and bridging—are mutually connected. To bridge one must first interrogate. But interrogation does not permit us to dwell in comfort zones and is born from a healthy skepticism, as distinct from cynicism, that often makes humanists irritating to themselves and others in their perpetual dissatisfaction with the norm. A certain unease within the active mind is fundamental to the human condition. Despite all the self-help manuals, we simply cannot leave well enough alone.

Many of the difficulties associated with the humanities rest in those tireless probings, nuances, and unsettlings. Critical thinking and intelligent questioning are not the stuff of inertia and ease, and the status quo does not benefit from them. The systematic attempts to marginalize the humanities seen in political rhetoric, marketing misinformation and its consumption by parents and students, and in the priorities sometimes established by some university administrators, underscore a neoliberal agenda that couches everything in terms of short-term profit and commodification of natural and human attributes. “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” in this dystopian scenario becomes “Profit, profit, and the pursuit of profit.” “We the people” becomes “We the economically elite,” and the message has been channeled through stereotyping, divisiveness, and fearmongering that seethes with rage and dupes those who are maligned into a false sense of power in maligning others.

Making fun of the humanities as esoteric and impractical is nothing new; humanists themselves have indulged in this playful poking at least as much as nonhumanists. Aristophanes ridicules metaphysical conundrums in *The Clouds* when he depicts Socrates asking such questions as whether

a gnat buzzes through its nose or its anus, a ludicrous early version of contemplating how many angels fit on the head of a pin.

But unlike the sciences, much of our appeal is grounded in our allegiance to mystery and the miraculous, a fidelity to the ungraspable, to the riddle that dwells in the heart of metaphor, and to empathy. Keats labeled our poetic capacity to reach into the spirit of someone or something distinct from ourselves “negative capability.” William Empson called ambiguity the core quality of poetic beauty. Furthermore, the humanities, unlike the sciences, are premised on studying thoughts that now are scientifically untenable or artistic and literary styles that have become archaic. As Stephen Greenblatt has stated, humanists “begin with the desire to speak with the dead.”¹ Such an attachment to the intangible and historical renders us easy targets for charges of irrelevance.

The culture wars of the 1990s challenged traditional disciplinary lenses and foregrounded previously marginalized political currents that threw the profession into a quandary with which it still struggles over relevance, subject matter, and methodology. The debates over whether or not race, class, gender, and sexuality should supplant aesthetic devices for unlocking the secrets stored within texts forced humanists to confront their traditional identities. But the debates centered on how we should approach the humanities, not, as they now do, over whether or not the humanities should continue to be funded as a legitimate field of study. The emergence of the latter debate has created a dire and destabilizing state of affairs from which we are increasingly reeling.

Contemporary humanities education has become multifaceted in its complications, a feature of its continuous unfolding, but also a challenge to its sustainability. The headlong rush of state legislatures and both public and private universities into support of STEM programs at the expense of, rather than as complementary to, humanities programs masks the fact that majors in both the physical sciences and mathematics have diminished more rapidly than those in the humanities, that half of those who graduate in STEM fields are not working in those fields after ten years but do not possess the foundational skills necessary for adaptability in a changing workforce that are taught in the humanities. But many institutions of higher learning have seized this one-dimensional trajectory, the logical outcome of which is that they become little more than vo-tech schools with football teams. We in the humanities still are committed to breadth of learning and a respect for the pursuit of knowledge for

knowledge's sake, akin to the frontier spirit that propelled us as a nation, the consecration of discovery as a foundational and sacred principle of who we are and why we are here.

While it is easy to suggest that the study of the humanities is elitist given the need to secure good paying jobs that result from direct vocational training, what can be more elitist than arguing that learning about literature, history, philosophy, foreign cultures, and languages should be strictly the purview of the wealthy who do not have to concern themselves with job training?

Although some argue the humanities cannot cure cancer, cannot win a war against terrorists, and cannot increase your paycheck and therefore should take a backseat to those enterprises that can, consider the following: Without the ability to listen carefully to and engage with a patient's narrative, in other words to take a good case history, early detection and prevention of many cancers do not occur. And for those who must endure cancer treatment or make critical decisions regarding how they live and sometimes how they die, humanities touchstones matter as much as chemical interventions. As for the war on terror, perhaps an in-depth study of history by the occupants of the White House in 2003 might have prevented us from fighting ISIS today. Kenneth Burke wrote of literature as providing "equipment for living."² Indeed humanities skills offer a multifaceted and adaptable toolbox for navigating career shifts and changing workforce demands. And it is a statistical fact that liberal arts majors earn more during their lifetimes than business majors.

The humanities are as central to learning and to life as they always have been, but their tangible outcomes are more difficult to measure than other disciplines. The production and dissemination of knowledge cannot be counted like the number of widgets on an assembly line. How do we measure how a thesis formulated in an essay on literature finds its way into discussions about how we approach historical events that, over the course of several years, dynamically change the discipline or transform how teachers construct a syllabus? Yet articles about nineteenth-century slave narratives and women's domestic journals did just that. Or how a passage gleaned from one publication influences a classroom presentation by another professor who has read it, that in turn catches the imagination of an undergraduate student who goes on to apply it to her own invention or to a repurposing of her life.

The practice of humanities scholarship traditionally has been viewed as a monastic enterprise, a retreat from the daily trials and tribulations of worldly affairs in order to concentrate intellectually. However, much of the argument for preserving the study and teaching of humanities relies on its connections to the foundations of democratic thinking. From Socrates onward, the ability to reason rigorously and flexibly has been thought to undergird democracy. Indeed Jonathan Arac has argued that, without the democratic claim, humanists would have “nothing important to do.”³

Martha Nussbaum has argued for universal norms to improve justice for women globally, refuting cultural relativism, especially regarding practices such as genital mutilation, as an approach that offers the “sort of moral collapse depicted by Dante when he describes the crowd of souls who mill around the vestibule of hell, dragging their banner now one way now another, never willing to set it down and take a definite stand on any moral or political question. Such people, he implies, are the most despicable of all. They can’t even get into hell because they have not been willing to stand for anything in life.”⁴ We need to stand for what we always have stood for—the understanding and elevation of the human condition—and we need to use our rhetorical skills to make sure the public understands this and recognizes it as an essential need.

In an op-ed in the *New York Times*, “Will the Humanities Save Us?,” Stanley Fish wrote:

Do the humanities ennoble? And for that matter, is it the business of the humanities, or of any other area of academic study, to save us? The answer in both cases, I think, is no. The premise of secular humanism (or of just old-fashioned humanism) is that the examples of action and thought portrayed in the enduring works of literature, philosophy and history can create in readers the desire to emulate them. . . .

It’s a pretty idea, but there is no evidence to support it and a lot of evidence against it. If it were true, the most generous, patient, good-hearted and honest people on earth would be the members of literature and philosophy departments, who spend every waking hour with great books and great thoughts, and as someone who’s been there (for 45 years) I can tell you it just isn’t so. Teachers and students of literature and philosophy don’t learn how to be good and wise; they learn how to analyze literary effects and to distinguish between

different accounts of the foundations of knowledge. . . . Teachers of literature and philosophy are competent in a subject, not in a ministry. It is not the business of the humanities to save us, no more than it is their business to bring revenue to a state or a university.⁵

Let us bracket the concluding comment about the business of the humanities not being able to bring revenue to a state or a university, which, in a time of capital campaigns, shrinking state and federal appropriations, budget cuts, and increased costs to compete for students and faculty, seems a nice pipe dream. Fish's argument is that students and practitioners of the humanities learn or perform a craft, no less or more important than scientists, engineers, or statisticians. He calls the humanities a "business." To attach to them the mission of saving or elevating souls, transforming behavior, or instilling wise counsel that will convert profane human relations into sacred models just misses the reality of its endeavors within the mundane workspace of the contemporary university.

Now let us go to one of the comments in the *New York Times* blog posted in response to Fish's essay. T. Trent writes:

Pretty easy to say when you're one of the people who never once had to ask this particular question in order to earn a living teaching humanities. I'm reading this after 2:30 am because I just picked up four sections of temp-work civilization courses late, late last week. They start tomorrow afternoon. In another city. But, hey, thanks for high-fiving my task: after a dozen hours of trying to shovel Cicero et al. into four syllabi for approximately \$8 an hour with no benefits, or, in other words, half of what I earned in construction two decades ago, before I got my Ph.D., I needed a good laugh. And it would be self-centered to wish for more than that.⁶

Trent's irritation is palpable but instructive in that it also focuses on matters of competence, business, and impossible expectations, albeit from a completely different perspective than Fish's. Fish rejects the notion that the humanities should be entrusted with the responsibility to ennoble. Trent does not even see the opportunity for this responsibility, and furthermore resents Fish's preaching from on high that we should not be expected to preach from on high.

So is it the business of the humanities to save us, to remind us of what is true, beautiful, and noble? Are humanities professors our ministers in a secular age? Can we still learn how best to live from the death of Socrates? Should petulant Achilles, wandering Odysseus, or angst-ridden Hamlet be our models? Or do we, like Trent, shovel Cicero, lift iambs, tote spondees, and patch enough together to get us through the next mortgage payment? Is our compass broken, and, if not, can the humanities still point to true North?

Universities have moved from a fixed theocratic curriculum taught by a faculty of generalists to the promotion of secular humanism in a diverse curriculum taught by research specialists to a skepticism of all foundations in both research and teaching. The quest for clarity sometimes becomes obfuscated in jargon-ridden redundancies that celebrate tolerance by limiting debate and that promote equality by denying the rigor of distinction. Humanities has cramped itself in uncomfortable corners premised on following the same research goals of the sciences, yet being unable to generate the research dollars for which university administrators value the sciences. Many students no longer come to our classes seeking the meaning of life; they come to fulfill a requirement for graduation and barely tolerate our attempts to push them out of their comfort zones because our salaries demonstrate such fuss is counterproductive.

Fish tells us we are practitioners of our craft, nothing more, but as such are absolved from the financial obligations of other practitioners of our craft. His respondent is driven by his financial obligations and disparages former deans like Fish for having little grasp of the life of the itinerant instructor with no time for scholarship or for the contemplative life that is its prerequisite. He is a little like the student who wants to get on with life, which means getting on with the dream of financial security. Socrates is interesting, but look at his clothes. Willy Loman, after all, is worth more dead than alive, so what can he teach me? And Macbeth's ambition just got him a crazy wife with a cleanliness fetish. What kind of model for a power couple is that? Getting a Ph.D. ought to give Fish's respondent something better than working construction did. It hasn't, and he resents Fish, whose Ph.D. has, and the educational realities that force him to dispense Cicero like so much gravel and tar on the cracked roadways of our public universities.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes a group of Oxbridge professors:

Many were in cap and gown; some had tufts of fur on their shoulders; others were wheeled in bath-chairs; others, though not past middle age, seemed creased and crushed into shapes so singular that one was reminded of those giant crabs and crayfish who heave with difficulty across the sand of an aquarium. As I leant against the wall the University seemed a sanctuary in which are preserved rare types which would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement of the Strand.⁷

Although ludicrous, this description does not wander far from the clichéd anti-intellectual rhetoric that circulates in state legislatures during hearings on higher education appropriations. Such rhetoric feeds and is fed by public distrust born primarily from misunderstanding over the differences between the university workplace and most other workplaces. This distrust flourishes in an era of economic constraints and corporate downsizing, which increasingly attaches worth to products readily identifiable as useful while zealously excising the cumbersome and the inapplicable. Since the humanities, traditionally the cornerstone of liberal education, increasingly have been targeted as suspicious and, worse, irrelevant, those of us who write and teach in this area increasingly find ourselves tossed on “the pavement of the Strand.” It is time we learned to survive there.

For the humanities to protect its future, a more substantive turn in its public engagement mission and practice is essential. Its practitioners need to do a better job explaining how their educational activities include and benefit the broad social as well as the scholarly community and, yes, how they contribute to economic vibrancy through the production of better informed workers and citizens with enhanced critical thinking and communication skills in a knowledge-based economy. More active participation in that community would seem a good first step. Recognizing that the sanctuary of the university depends on the goodwill and positive perception of those who support it might help elevate that support and guard against obsolescence.

Given the adversarial rhetoric about the humanities, what we have not done as well as we might, especially since humanities scholars are those who are trained in rhetoric, is to adequately defend ourselves. We often take reactive positions instead of setting the stage for the debate. We often adopt the methodologies and terminology of other disciplines we perceive as being in favor rather than assert creatively our own skills as

interrogators and wordsmiths. And, most alarmingly, we have not done the job of connecting with broader constituencies, of translating our work and our mission so they make sense and resonate with the general public, of demonstrating our fundamental place in helping to make the personal and the collective more fulfilling intellectually, spiritually, economically, culturally, and politically. We need to better communicate our history lessons and show how the philosophical underpinnings of our founding documents, the ramifications of which influence our daily and long-term security and capacity as citizens, are seeded by the humanities and find their expression in the humanities moments that pervade our lives. Since the grand challenges and questions of our time require multiple perspectives and deeply contextualized solutions, we must insist on bringing a humanities lens to bear on their solutions.

Yet a perceptual dichotomy and hierarchy between and in what we call pure research and public humanities still persists in university hiring, salary and research awards, and tenure and promotion practices. The job market is increasingly constrained, yet chairs of dissertation committees continue to try to replicate themselves via their graduate students, while the prospects for such replication are at best diminished and at worst nil. And the digital advances enabling broad and creative dissemination of scholarship, pedagogy, and intellectual conversations that resonate in the public sphere are only now creeping into the realm of what is deemed marginally acceptable in the holy sanctuary of distinguished work. For all the accusations that they are the bastions of neo-Marxist corruption, universities remain among the most conservative institutions in our society.

Assessment of quality and success persists as an increasingly contentious yet ubiquitous aspect of academic life. While some form of external critique or peer review is inherent in virtually every field of humanistic inquiry, increasing demands by accreditation boards, trustees, funding organizations, legislatures, and government agencies for stronger and more quantitative reporting of “outcomes” have produced much consternation. The *Humanities Indicators* published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences have provided useful information, but the extent and manner of their implementation are not yet clear. Academic Analytics has become the go-to source for assessment of institutional and individual faculty rankings that largely determine admission into the Association of American Universities as well as provostian assessments for resource

allocations, yet its understanding of humanities impacts often lags behind and is configured by the paradigms for the sciences.

Furthermore, the means for assessing digital and collaborative research often are vexed, or at least lacking continuity, in most institutional contexts. Also, the advanced research that typically supports ambitious projects in public humanities is sometimes in tension with these projects in terms of audience and impact. Finally, the changing landscapes of scholarly communication have contributed to a sense that assessment metrics and methodologies need serious rethinking.

Questions to be considered in this discussion might involve the following:

1. What kind of time frame offers an accurate assessment of impact?
2. How do we blend qualitative and quantitative assessments usefully?
3. How do we best assess digital, public, and collaborative humanities projects?
4. How do we effectively assess emerging alternative publication venues like web-based publication and open source?
5. How might public humanities be integrated with programs of pure research?
6. What is the value of liberal arts to contemporary university education, and how do we measure its long-term success in life?

Digital humanities and open access have created pathbreaking opportunities for collaboration, dissemination, and reshaping presentation and influence. While the science community generally has quickly accepted open access, seeing it as a means to disseminate its work more expeditiously, especially regarding crucial and immediate concerns, the humanities have lagged behind, perpetuating the two-cultures dichotomy.

Much of the resistance to open access in the humanities has stemmed from a reliance on traditional ideas of peer review, although many forget that double-blind peer review emerged largely in the 1950s and somehow scholarship survived without it before then. This gatekeeper method has not been without its issues, most significantly a perpetuation of sameness in the name of standards. Open access peer review extends the number of commentators, potentially opening the work to fresh considerations from multiple viewpoints while launching a more extended and participatory conversation that still might yield to some circumscribed hierarchy

of decision makers but potentially gets ideas into a broader audience quickly, a significant consideration when we are dealing with the crucial grand challenges of contemporary life.

Martin Eve and Kathleen Fitzpatrick have studied this question and posed intriguing alternatives in their books. Publishers are beginning experimental forays into alternative processes. For example, University of California Press has Luminos, an open-source experiment for book publication, which is causing publishers to rethink the traditional means of monograph review and dissemination. Such a model offers the potential

to exponentially increase the visibility and impact of scholarly work by making it globally accessible and freely available in digital formats. Costs are covered up front through subventions, breaking down barriers of access at the other end—for libraries and for individual readers anywhere in the world. Open access provides the framework for preserving and reinvigorating monograph publishing for the future through sharing costs between all parties who benefit from publication—author or institution, publisher, and libraries. In this model no one entity carries the whole burden, making it sustainable for the long haul. The selection and review processes remain the same as in a traditional program; the same exacting criteria and peer review standards apply.⁸

While one might cite the economic concerns about the fragility of university press budgets and the resultant limited runs of scholarly books, the intensified competition for acceptance of manuscripts, and the pressures on tenure and promotion considerations, early evidence indicates a 20 percent elevation in sales of university press books first offered via open access.

Just as digital humanities projects and web-based publication are forcing universities to rethink tenure and promotion requirements, alternative publication venues like open source will continue to compel us to stretch our imaginations and our bureaucracies to accommodate changes that come naturally both to a technologically enhanced culture and to an intellectually vibrant and interdisciplinary scholarly community. Further, the elitist disdain for work that engages the public domain must take a backseat to the necessity—rhetorical, ethical, and for the sake of survival—to translate the impact of our inquiries within both the esoteric

communities of experts as well as the profound intersections where broad ideas touch everyday pleasures and struggles.

Accessibility of both the impact and the language of humanities scholarship to the general public remains a vexed issue and a barrier to countering the prevailing economic myopia used to promote STEM and business studies to the detriment of the humanities. The American Historical Association has spearheaded approaches to broadening graduate curricula so that students have options other than the rapidly shrinking tenure-track route. These include the capacity to write accessibly and to communicate succinctly and effectively the value of historical research. In doing so, they are returning to their roots. In his 1931 presidential address to the AHA, Carl Becker said, “Research will be of little import except in so far as it is translated into common knowledge. . . . The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world.”⁹

Similarly the National Humanities Center has launched a podcast series in which its resident fellows elucidate their research in fifteen-minute conversations with which an exponentially widening audience has engaged.¹⁰ The Center’s *Humanities Moments* project also reaches diverse constituencies of the population who share their recognition of how transformative personal moments in their lives connect to texts, issues, and events directly linked to the humanities.¹¹ By emphasizing the process of discovery rather than the ultimate product, *Humanities Moments* becomes an understandable scholarly tool easily repurposed for pedagogical applications and for translating the myriad ways by which we solve complex problems in relatable personal terms.

When we confront injustice, our greatest historical moments and transformations in terms of individual heroism and communal coalescence in defense of equality have occurred: “When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.” In an eloquent, poetic, clearly substantiated argument, the Declaration of Independence, an essential document in the great tradition of the humanities, interrogates with power and precision what has rendered the situation in 1776 intolerable in terms of the basic principles of human empowerment and human community, articulating a necessary

opposition that would find fruition in that grand bridging document, the Constitution: “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”¹²

To celebrate the complexity that is at the heart of democracy and to celebrate as well the bridging, the knitting together of contradictions that the humanities embody both in its texts and, just as important, in its application to the most profound junctures of daily life, requires a public recognition that, in our darkest and most troubled moments as well as in those moments of intense joy and revelation, as individuals and as communities, as a people whose deepest bond rests in our embrace rather than in a shunning of diversity, it is the humanities moments in our personal lives and in our collective experiences that teach us best who we are and what we might be. In his great poem about the Irish uprising, “Easter 1916,” W. B. Yeats writes, “A terrible beauty is born.” This convergence of opposites, how within the troubled flames of historical events we forge insight that demands a reckoning, resounds again and again in the interstices of the humanities moments that populate the crucial connections and compassionate stretches we are called upon to make if our better natures are to endure.

Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65, about the ravages of time and the poet’s struggles to pen immortal lines in the face of this mortality, offers a similar oppositional move in its initial quatrain:

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
But sad mortality o’er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea? I wish to conclude with a few examples of humanities moments that penetrate rage with beauty, that channel our justifiable pain and outrage into actions that sustain and ennoble.

First a debate that, unlike the one between the pope and the rabbi, is by no means silent. On July 13, 2013, George Zimmerman was acquitted in Florida in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. That evening,

three thousand miles away, in Oakland, California, Alicia Garza took to Facebook and posted “A Love Letter to Black People,” which included the phrase “Black Lives Matter.” Her close friend Patrisse Cullors, who lives in L.A., started sharing this message and others with her friends online, attaching the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. The following day, the two friends spoke about how they might organize a campaign to “make sure we are creating a world where black lives actually do matter.” They reached out to a third friend, Opal Tometi, in New York, and the three women set up Tumblr and Twitter accounts where they encouraged users to share stories of why #blacklivesmatter.

This form of hashtag activism gained a strong internet following over the next few months. Then, in August 2014, when Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and protests broke out, the three women and their network helped organize a “freedom ride” as a part of the #blacklivesmatter campaign. More than five hundred people signed up from eighteen cities across the country—and when they arrived in Ferguson, they discovered that there were already protestors carrying banners and chanting the words “Black Lives Matter.”

In the intervening months, as media attention began to focus on police violence and the deaths of unarmed black men, the movement grew exponentially, catalyzing young activists, significantly influencing the political campaigns of presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, as well as drawing negative attention from Donald Trump, and by January 2015 the movement had achieved such widespread impact that the American Dialect Society declared #blacklivesmatter their Word of the Year.

There also is the story of Marcia Chatelain, associate professor of history at Georgetown University. Her own response to the events in Ferguson was to create more opportunities for humanities moments in the classroom—to help teachers and students understand the events in Ferguson. As she notes, Michael Brown was shot just two days before he would have begun his freshman year at Vatterott College. In honor of him and in sympathy with her teaching colleagues across the nation, she decided to reach out to educators via Twitter and ask them to commit their first day of classes to talking about Ferguson. She also asked them to suggest a book, an article, a film, a song, a piece of artwork, or an assignment that spoke to some aspect of the Ferguson events, using the hashtag #FergusonSyllabus.

The response was overwhelming, with thousands of tweets and retweets and contributions ranging from a children's book about living with someone with PTSD to maps of St. Louis's school desegregation, from James Baldwin's essay "A Talk to Teachers" to Nina Simone's song "Mississippi Goddam." A community of educators came together, via the internet, across disciplines and from every corner of the country to help each other and their students from preschool to postdoctoral seminars gain a deeper understanding of the national crisis that was centered in the suburbs of St. Louis.

The Black Lives Matter movement is full of humanities moments having originated and explosively grown through social media. The movement has used these platforms to share stories, disseminate powerful video and still images, and facilitate community dialogue about ideas. It also has served as the primary means for organizing direct action, countering official narratives, and debunking media accounts. The power of story, of narrative, that produces empathy and channels outrage into effective action for social justice is woven into the fabric of the humanities.¹³

Consider too an earlier historical moment that illuminates bridging via the humanities. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated. Robert Kennedy arrived in Indianapolis for a planned campaign rally in his bid for the Democratic nomination for president and was informed of King's death. He was advised by police against making the campaign stop, which was in a part of the city considered to be a dangerous ghetto. But Kennedy insisted on going. He arrived to find the people in a celebratory mood, anticipating the excitement of his appearance. He climbed onto the platform and, realizing they did not know of the assassination, broke the news. Against outcries of pain, anger, and frustration, he went on to calm the crowd by quoting Aeschylus. "My favorite poet was Aeschylus," he said. "He once wrote: 'Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.'" And he continued, "What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black."¹⁴ Indianapolis was the only city in the U.S. with a major African American population that did not burn that night.

Or remember Vedran Smailović, the “cellist of Sarajevo,” who regularly played his cello in the National Library and other bombed-out buildings during the Serbian siege of Sarajevo in 1992. Albinoni’s Adagio in G Minor would emanate from the strings of Smailović’s cello, haunting the air while mortar shells rained down on the city or snipers picked off his friends and neighbors standing in a bread line. Here beauty held a plea, temporarily lifting the prevailing blanket of terror and permitting a peek into an earlier dimension of Sarajevo’s history, a reminder of the exquisitely sweet and tender moments that art can attain even against overwhelming barbarity.

Or Paul Kalanithi’s memoir of transformation from healing doctor to dying patient in *When Breath Becomes Air*, in which he asks perhaps the basic humanities question: What makes life worth living in the face of death? “The transience of life is the engine of its meaning,” Andrew Solomon writes in his review of the book. “Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp the most central aspects of human life,” Kalanithi argues, “hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue.” He and his wife make the difficult decision to have a child while knowing he would not live for very long. In their conversations leading up to this decision, his wife asked him “wouldn’t it make dying more painful knowing he would be leaving his daughter,” and he responded, “Wouldn’t it be great if it did.”¹⁵

There are innumerable such examples, and successful public engagement demands that we cite them in order to tell our story in ways that bridge hearts and minds.

How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea? The humanities teach us how. Against all the adversarial rhetoric about the irrelevance of the humanities that pervades policy and sound bites from politicians to concerns of parents about the economic well-being of their liberal arts major children, never have the humanities been more crucial to our sustainability as citizens in a civil society, to the future success of our children and grandchildren, and to discovering and remembering what is most profound and important in our lives.

The mission of the humanities embraces the essence of democracy and a precious underpinning of our American heritage, freedom of thought. It is a mission that should be promoted and respected, no more an extravagance than nourishing food, clean air, or good health care, as sustenance and ministry for quality of life.

As the core of a successful education, a successful life, and a successful civilization, the humanities help us address crucial issues facing us as a people. Absent a humanities perspective, solutions to racial divides, environmental degradation, climate change, immigration, water rights and resources, food consumption, geopolitical cataclysms, and the implementation of new technologies will remain incomplete. Technology cannot assess the multiple masks of evil, the complicated ethics of choice, the pain of loss, the joys of love, or the frustrations and celebrations our yearning to be both human and more than human produce. Technology is premised on answering the hows and the whats, but not the whys. Only in the humanities do we continue to have that conversation despite its often exasperating indeterminacy.

The humanities encourage a culture of rigor, pluralism, innovation, and evidence. As long as these values are maintained in our processes and products, the shape our work takes, the audiences it reaches, and the valuation it receives benefits from a healthy multiplicity and a resistance to static definitions and one-dimensional accountability. We have always been creative in our means of expression and currently are facing an insidious erosion of our *raison d'être* that feeds into and is fed by the decline of a civil society with an informed and thoughtful public. Our mission includes knowledge production and dissemination not only for the benefit of an esoteric scholarly community but also for the common good.

Notes

1. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1. See also Appiah's essay in this volume for further discussion of this topic.

2. Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living."

3. Arac, "Peculiarities of (the) English," 194. Nussbaum's *Not for Profit* remains one of the most accessible and compelling arguments for the centrality of the humanities to a democratic culture, using Dewey, Tagore, and Winnicott to consider the importance of imagination, play, and empathy to democratic principles. Helen Small's excellent *The Value of the Humanities* also makes the claim that democracy is strengthened by having a higher level of reasoning available within it. She states, "Mill thought that a university education should have a direct bearing on the 'duties of citizenship,'" and Arnold, Newman, and Ruskin all agreed with him that a university education should involve training in skills that had political application and "the possession of an idea of culture, in which the arts had a guaranteed place, was crucial to the flourishing of the individual and the progress of society" (133).

4. Nussbaum and Glover, *Women, Culture and Development*, 1–2.
5. Fish, “Will the Humanities Save Us?”
6. Trent, comment on Stanley Fish.
7. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 8–9.
8. Luminos website, <http://www.luminosoa.org/>.
9. Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” 234.
10. National Humanities Center, *Podcasts*.
11. National Humanities Center, *Humanities Moments*.
12. See Allen’s exquisite *Our Declaration*.
13. Thanks to my colleagues Don Solomon, for conveying information about Black Lives Matter responses on social media, and Brooke Andrade, for her help with citations.
14. Kennedy, “Robert F. Kennedy’s Speech,” 135–36.
15. Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*, 170,143.

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