

## A Sense of Belonging: The Place of Literature and Science in a More Ecologically Alert Academy

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"I have often asked the question of audiences at IU, if we were establishing a new university in Indiana with a budget like we have of \$3 billion dollars, would it look exactly like IU does today, *based as it is in many ways on a 19th century model of higher education*? I have yet to find a person who claims that it would."

(Michael McRobbie, "Transforming Indiana University for The 21st Century.")

I am happy to contribute to this collection of position papers on the field of Literature, Science, and the Arts, even if I feel that my position these days is a bit wobbly and uncertain. Rather than staking a claim with clearly delineated boundaries or making an intervention with surgical precision, this essay (from one who increasingly finds himself thinking alongside and in communication with animals and other non-human agents) will be more of a snuffling, investigatory probing of traces and aromas that seem to constitute evidence of some rather ill-defined situation whose boundaries and temporalities seem very much in flux and seem to be marked by multiple, even conflicting, forces, agents, and contingencies. It is, in short, essayistic in the truest sense of trying something out, attempting to sound more confident than I am, seeking by articulating a position to try and gain a better understanding of the position in which I find myself as I pursue the work I do.

Of the various questions provided as prompts for this essay, all resonate to varying degrees, but three perhaps carry greater resonance than most for my current thinking: "What is the place of the study of literature and science within the academy? How is literature and science evolving in relation to its own splintering? What is the future of the field?" One hardly needs a spoiler alert for an essay of this brevity, but here it is: in the end, my thoughts keep circling toward a paraphrase of a line made famous by Bill Clinton, "it's the ecology, stupid."

Roughly forty years ago, Ihab Hassan imagined the end not only of "modernism," but of humanism: "We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism" (*Prometheus*, 843). Whether one lauds this change as the dawning of a new renaissance, or dreads it as the passing of an old order; by either measure, Hassan's point that we "need to understand" what is happening is well-taken. The transformation Hassan imagined, now a generation or more under way, calls us to new challenges and opportunities in the continuing study of literature, history, and culture; and nowhere are these challenges and opportunities more pressing than in learning to re-think in an ecological context the intellectually and politically progressive work of the past five hundred years that flourished under the banner of humanism. The virtues of humanism are many and real, but they are also inextricably bound up with a necessarily self-defeating anthropocentrism. It is not enough to "think environmentally," we need to learn to "think ecologically."

Thinking environmentally allows one to continue imagining humans at the center and everything else as our surrounding environment; thinking ecologically requires a shift in thought in which we abandon the anthropocentrism on which

humanism depends. And however uncomfortable it may be to abandon anthropocentrism, we need to do it, because among the many things we learned from humanism was a protocol of scientific reasoning that has amassed significant evidence undermining the comfortable ideology of anthropocentrism. Any optimism I may occasionally allow myself about the future (and occasionally I indulge in that luxury), I want to temper with its complement: the resignation of Cassandra. However hopeful I may sometimes allow myself to sound about regenerative possibilities, let me never completely surrender my despair; catastrophes, both ecological and intellectual, abound, and even as they melt, icebergs still threaten.

The transformation imagined in my opening epigraph is under way across the spectrum of post-secondary education, particularly public post-secondary education. The "19<sup>th</sup> century model of higher education" that my university president is leading us away from is the very one that W. E. B. DuBois promoted a century ago in his famous public debate with Booker T. Washington. It is worth remembering that "higher education" did not originally mean "advanced education," much less what it has come to mean: "post-secondary education." Originally, the "higher" in "higher education" alluded to an explicitly non-material elevation of mind and spirit in pursuit of "higher values," not "higher earnings." Where Washington, at the Tuskegee Institute of Technology, emphasized the pragmatic importance of vocational training and job preparation as the path to economic uplift, DuBois (you may recall) insisted that cultural uplift required an educational system that ministered to *The Souls of Black Folk*. At my own institution, I am regularly reminded that we are re-positioning ourselves, as nimbly as we can, as leaders for the next century in a variety of engineering, design, and information sciences and technologies that will galvanize the most exciting transformations in tomorrow's economy. And in everything, we will lead the way in excellence. And, I suspect, nearly every other public institution of post-secondary education is doing the same, or is at least performing similar vocal exercises in hyperbole.

Alas, you may notice that there is no "humanities" in that ambitious pursuit of leadership and excellence. And more importantly—though stated so obliquely that one can choose (if one wishes) to avoid hearing it—all those exciting economic transformations for tomorrow require a reduction in support for the unmentioned "humanities" and particularly that outdated past, some of which actually occurred *before* the outdated "19<sup>th</sup> century." Here—and across America (and, I believe, around the world) Washington has won the debate, and DuBois has lost. Universities—especially public universities—are being re-purposed to produce workers rather than citizens. It is not so much a question of whether education should be skill-based or content-based; more importantly, the skills that are deemed valuable are those that can be marketed to potential employers as offering a competitive edge in the economic marketplace. What, then, is the future for what used to be the humanities in this transformed ecology of knowledge?

I believe that we need to consider the institutional ecology that is changing around us and the new pressures these changes bring to disciplines traditionally defined within the humanities; to re-imagine how we study and teach the practices and values of those disciplines without an *a priori* commitment to an anthropocentric bias, and with a critical practice more tuned to ecological modes of understanding; and that for those of us in literary critical studies, we need to attend more carefully to how critical reading practices may be reconciled with non-anthropocentric, ecological commitments.

If the era we are entering is a posthumanist one, then the traditional ideology of human exceptionalism that is at the heart of humanism is overdue for a renovation. Thinking ecologically challenges us to think in more worldly ways. And it seems to me that there is important work of historical reconsideration to be done here—looking back not to see how literature told the familiar tale of human exceptionalism, but to find those overlooked, little-noticed works and practices that anticipated where we find ourselves. Where traditional humanism defined culture around the privileged category of the human, our current era coincides with an intellectual reorientation to a world in which we are responsive agents within nature-culture networks. The paradigm of dominion, in which the world was a resource at the disposal of the human, is giving way to a paradigm of responsive interaction and mutual interdependencies; and our critical practices need to reflect and respond to that altered orientation.

The most immediate pressure of recent reactionary political movements might suggest something of a counter-narrative to what I am identifying as the intellectual challenge of the future. In the American context, the recently elected Trump administration is every bit as eager to de-emphasize and de-fund agencies and initiatives addressing ecological concerns as it is to defund programs in Arts and Humanities. Those pressures are real, but I understand them to be merely reactionary, political in the narrowest sense seeking to evade rather than to address, unwelcome challenges. Ultimately, such policy debates and budget allocations seem to be driven by short-sighted political and financial interest, rather than by any coherent long-range engagement with those underlying ideological commitments with which productive scholarship seeks to engage. And it is in that latter area where it seems to me that the field of Literature and Science, broadly conceived, has a potentially transformative role to play in how higher education (especially public higher education) imagines its work during the next generation and beyond. The point I am driving at is that discussions of higher education need to address the political location of such discussions, but do so in ways that can distinguish what might be politically expeditious (education as jobs training, research in the interest of commerce, etc.) from what is a deeper ideological transformation (from anthropocentric humanist doctrine to a more capacious ecological understanding of our place in the world).

While the traditional balancing of interests between Arts and Sciences that formed the original organization of the Liberal Arts is being dismantled as much in accordance with, as in opposition to, those short-term political concerns, the deeper transformation taking place is one that challenges us to redefine the virtues and values that humanism advanced, while shedding its untenable anthropocentric bias. An important feature, arguably the most important feature, of humanist ideology was its liberatory potential, mobilizing productive democratic forms of government in opposition to authoritarian rule and stimulating advances in knowledge and the arts that flourish in such free societies. The future of ecological criticism as I imagine it is much more than thinking about literature that in some way engages with "environmental issues," it requires altering our framing theoretical interest in critical practice to engage with dynamic interacting ecologies of knowledge.

For someone like myself working in that period of the late seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century culture that saw the rise of the modern nation state and emergent concept of the autonomous individuated subject, recent theoretical innovations in New Materialist philosophies and Actor-Network Theory are especially rich in analytic potential. I am particularly drawn to the possibility that they offer

useful models for rethinking a foundational theory of property that defines the traditional relationship between beings and things: beings possess things, and things can be possessed by beings; and the properties that things can be said to possess are those that can be known by beings. The last three centuries have been deeply marked by that relation, for both good and ill: the enormously liberating potential of democratic political reorganization; the galvanizing stimulus of dramatic wealth creation; and the extraordinary expansion of human knowledge all flourished under a humanist theory of property relations, but not without the counterbalance of systematic political oppressions, extraordinary hardships exacerbated by systemic wealth disparity, and remarkable degradation of natural resources. Our understanding of those concepts and their relations has largely been dictated by an anthropocentric humanist ideology that grants exceptionalist privilege to one set of beings granted dominion over the rest of the planet. If we are to begin thinking ecologically, then perhaps a simple (but I hope profoundly revolutionary) place to start may be in theorizing "belonging" and tracing its literary and cultural history, which is potentially as rich, but much less attended to than are our various theories of property relations. I continue to believe that literature and the intelligent reading of literature remain valuable and important human activities, but I think it is time, indeed past time, for us to pursue those activities as part of how we belong to this world we do not possess.

### **Works Cited**

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