

The Greater Humanities

James Clifford

WHAT FOLLOWS RESPONDS TO A CONFERENCE held at the University of California at Berkeley in 2010: “The University We Are For.” Its organizers, Wendy Brown and David Theo Goldberg, challenged us to look past our complaints about what’s happening to the university. No kvetching—something we’re all too good at, these days. For fifteen minutes, we had permission to be unambivalently *for* something, to imagine more than we’re likely to get. It’s OK to be utopian, to think big.

I offer an immodest proposal. All the devils in the details can be left for later. There will always be plenty of time for them.

Not too long ago I served as Humanities Division representative on a search committee for a new provost at the University of California at Santa Cruz. One of the candidates—a dean from a large midwestern university, whom we interviewed at the San Jose airport—spoke casually of the “five divisions of the university”: natural sciences, engineering, social sciences, arts, and humanities. And, he added, “if you’re lucky enough to have professional schools, more.” Our candidate went on to talk about funding sources and ways to make the campus grow. At that point, the humanities disappeared from the discussion.

I was naively shocked. Five divisions, or more? When I entered graduate school, we were members of an arts and sciences university, worrying about C. P. Snow’s “two cultures.” I assumed that I belonged to half the landscape. Now, at the airport, my world was a thin and shrinking slice of the pie.

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Clifford, James. “The Greater Humanities.” *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* v. 6 (October 1, 2013), <http://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/greater-humanities>.

The shock has become routinized. We're accustomed, in the humanities, to a seemingly irreversible trend of belittlement. There has been a lot of soul-searching, and blaming, over our reduction to a minor position in the university—a garnish for the main course: practical fields that lead to jobs, that contribute to the economy, that advance the national interest. I don't need to elaborate.

It has been said that this sorry state of affairs is our own fault, that the humanities are too often lost in "critique," mired in jargon, speaking only to those who know the code. To such charges we respond defensively that no one expects physicists or economists to eschew technical language. And why does everyone think they know what humanistic scholarship should be about?

Some may recall Michael Berubé's wicked send-up of business thinking in academic administration that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* a while ago: "A Shakespeare Department and Other Business Ideas for Colleges Everywhere," in which a downsizing administrator, formerly a corporate CEO, looking for value and efficiency in the humanities, recommends creating a single department called "Shakespeare."¹ This at least would be a recognizable brand, with shelf life, something that everyone could understand. It's an all-too-familiar pattern of reduction, the humanities as cultural veneer, consumerist décor.

The Shakespeare Department proposed by Berubé's rationalizing administrator included one social science discipline, anthropology. I take my cue from that. Why only one?

Here I want to argue that there already exists a vital "Greater Humanities" cutting across the university's departments and divisions—something very different from a shrinking wedge of the pie. In the 1970s, the phrase "human sciences" was an attempt to name this expansive intellectual space. "Cultural studies" came and went. And we still don't really know what to call it.

The name "Greater Humanities" may sound like bravado, or even like a kind of quixotic imperialism. It actually has its origin, for me, in the phrase "Greater New York," a phrase seen on signs when I was a child growing up in Manhattan. All those unknown boroughs at the ends of the subway lines...

But the name, a placeholder, is less important than recognizing an already-existing reality—overlapping assumptions, epistemologies, and methods that add up to a sprawling configuration of knowledge practices. These dynamic, deeply rooted ways of thinking and working cannot be contained by more narrowly defined disciplinary traditions.

In my years at UCSC, for example, the disciplines of history, literature, and anthropology have oriented my thinking. I have learned from their specificities of focus, topic, and style. They are each intellectual communities with their own methods, traditions, and secret handshakes. Yet as I negotiate their borders, I never feel that I am moving between fundamentally different approaches to sociocultural meaning and historical reality.

What characterizes the broad configuration of knowledge practices I'm calling the Greater Humanities? I'll hazard a quick sketch—subject of course to debate. I'm painting with a broom here. The Greater Humanities are (1) interpretive, (2) realist, (3) historical, and (4) ethico-political.

¹ *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 28, 2000.

1. *Interpretive*: Work in the Greater Humanities is textual and philological in broad, more than just literary, senses. Interpretation aims for persuasive, perspectival explanations and for temporally contingent descriptions and causes.
2. *Realist* (not “objective”): In the Greater Humanities realism is based on the narrative, figural, and descriptive representation of social, cultural, environmental, and psychological phenomena. Realist accounts are textured, nonreductive, multiscaled, and overdetermined.
3. *Historical*: Ways of knowing in the Greater Humanities grapple with temporally specific conjunctures, tendencies, and fields of force. They are temporal in a Darwinian sense: everything is constantly made and unmade in determinate, material situations, developing without any guaranteed direction.
4. *Ethico-political*: The Greater Humanities can never be content with the instrumental or technical conclusion that something must be so because it works or because people need it. Where does it work? For whom? At whose expense? What “constitutive outsides” trouble all our powerful, meaningful orders?

These overlapping dispositions form a recognizable habitus shared by the humanities and important segments of the social sciences and the theoretically informed arts.

I hasten to add that the ways of knowing outlined above are active in the so-called hard sciences. Many individual scientists are potential allies of the Greater Humanities, or at least fellow travelers. In some ultimate utopia, the university would be healed of all its divisions. But in the realistic future this is not in the cards. Thus, it seems important to develop a vision, and the supporting institutions, for two more or less equal academic cultures. We don’t want it all. Just our half.

Here is another sketch map of the Greater Humanities—by disciplines this time, many of them internally divided.

Literature: a vast archipelago.

History: also very widely extended, now including visual cultures, non-Western societies, social movements, popular cultures, and much else.

Philosophy: divided into its own “two-cultures,” analytic versus Continental—a divide still weirdly pitched at the English Channel. But there are signs of shifts and transgressions along this once impossible crossing.

Linguistics: also a divided field—“hard” and “soft,” formal and functional. But do we need to choose between the tradition of Sapir and that of Chomsky?

All the “studies” and interdisciplines: American studies, ethnic studies, women’s/feminist studies, cultural studies, science and technology studies, and so on.

Sociocultural anthropology (my own second home) and historical archaeology, human geography, communications, qualitative sociology, and some of environmental studies.

Embattled sectors of politics, economics, and psychology.

What we might call the “theoretical arts”—including theater arts, performance studies, film, and digital media.

This leaves out a good deal. But the map is big enough to make my basic point.

We may well be uncomfortable with so sharp an opposition between the two cultures that currently divide the university. There have always been areas of convergence. Humanities disciplines, or sectors of disciplines, have occasionally tried to be more “scientific” on a natural science model. And, of course, this impulse has importantly defined the “social sciences” (with decidedly mixed results).

Originating from the natural sciences, visions of “consilience” (E. O. Wilson) have imagined a way past the two cultures. But the imitation or assimilation they usually propose (assimilation on whose terms?) is not the same as dialogue or debate. The latter are what the Greater Humanities value: constitutive, ongoing, and indeterminate. This dialogue is hermeneutically rich in ways that I’ve suggested; it is something more than a way of sorting truth from falsehood.

Real dialogue takes place between equals. And we are not equals in the contemporary university. This is a fact and a growing trend, driven by material, political, and economic forces that are all too familiar. The so-called STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) enjoy an unprecedented hegemony in the university. Their epistemological and methodological opposition to the “liberal arts” grows ever more extreme and more intolerant. How can we push back, without defensiveness or apology?

A precedent comes to mind, from a book that influenced me as a graduate student: H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (1958). Hughes, an intellectual historian in dialogue with Talcott Parsons and other leaders of Harvard’s “social relations” initiative, wrote in reaction to the 1950s boom in “social science.” His response begins with a chapter called “The Revolt against Positivism.” Weber, Durkheim, Freud, Croce, Pareto, Marx, and Gramsci—the founders of modern social and psychological analysis—emerge as nonreductive, imaginative, “humanistic” thinkers. They resist methodological reductionism, studying overdetermined, unfinished historical formations, the unconscious mind, complex motivations.

The revolt against positivism wasn’t a revolt against science. And it isn’t new. It rejects a narrow, instrumentalist vision of science, a vision that fetishizes quantifiable, auditable outcomes that are immediately useful (to whom?) and marketable (for whose benefit?). Of course, I’m updating Hughes’s 1950s intervention for the neoliberal present, where we confront an economic positivism perfectly adapted to the sink-or-swim, bootstraps logic (find your own grant) of a privatized, entrepreneurial system of rewards and punishments.

“Greater Humanities” names a possible coalition, based on existing affinities. It could form a “historic bloc” (to channel Gramsci) that would be broadly based and big enough to counter (and engage with) the STEM sectors that increasingly run the show.

Teachers and students, scholars from across the landscape of affinities I’ve sketched out, need to make common cause. The name, Greater Humanities, is simply an exhortation to think big and relationally. It urges us not to circle the wagons, at either departmental or divisional scales, and not to be trapped by “niche” thinking and local survival tactics. If we protect ourselves in these ways, as we sometimes must in our short-term battles against downsizing, we will do nothing to counter the long-term structural forces of belittlement. We will keep getting smaller and more marginal.

I have no concrete instructions on how to build the broad-based institutional bloc I’m imagining. But I do know that it must not look like a bigger and better Humanities Division. The humanities must never be confused with a division. If the academic landscape is shifting, this is

both bad and good news. In the coming years there will certainly be reconfigurations at departmental and larger scales. Why not? There's nothing sacred about these institutional units. And it's often noted that the hyphenating natural sciences don't worry a lot about disciplinary traditions and borders. We need to be open and opportunistic about the coming reconfigurations, at least when these can be made to support our emerging projects and not just the logic of administrative business models.

My remarks are a reminder to keep our eyes on a larger prize, even as we fight more immediate battles for resources and recognition. We need to strengthen existing affinities with the goal of creating a multiplex, adaptive knowledge-space that is fundamentally interpretive, realist, historical, and ethico-political. If we can achieve this, in a changing university, "the humanities" will disappear—in a glowing metamorphosis. A