

## Do The Humanities Need a New Humanism?

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“The question of our relation to regimes of value is not a personal but an institutional question. A key condition of any institutional politics, however, is that intellectuals do not denigrate their own status as possessors of cultural capital; that they accept and struggle with the contradictions that this entails; and that their cultural politics, right across the spectrum of cultural texts, should be openly and without embarrassment presented as their politics, not someone else’s” (Frow 169)

### 1. Introduction: the context today

Do the humanities need a new humanism?<sup>1</sup> I think so, and I see a consensus emerging to this effect, although many of the details still need to be worked out across a range of positions (Kristeva, Mbembe and Posel, Said, Scott, Spivak). In essence, many agree with Edward Said that “it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism” (Said 10), “situating critique at the very heart of humanism” (Said 47) and recognizing that such critique carries practical consequences for the work that we do in the humanities. In his influential *Keywords*, under the entry on “Humanity,” Raymond Williams discusses the new 19<sup>th</sup> C use of humanism “to represent the developed sense of **humanist** and the **humanities**: a particular kind of learning associated with particular attitudes to CULTURE (q.v.) and **human** development or perfection” (bolding in original 123). This learning and these attitudes now seem to be changing once again.

Grant Farred summarizes the situation as follows: “The needs, ethical justifications, epistemic imperatives, and very possibilities and historical conditions for knowledge production are at stake” (50). Xiaoying Wang agrees: “The Kantian notion of the autonomy of reason—one of the most powerful expressions of the ideal of free intellectual inquiry, not least in the Humanities—is no longer acceptable in the commercialized world of advanced capitalism, and knowledge becomes something that needs to prove its worth by market or market like standards. Geoffrey Galt Harpham notes a related dimension of this problem, suggesting that according to *The Humanities in American Life*, ‘[The humanities] show

how the individual is autonomous and at the same time bound...”, concluding “that humanities are inconceivable without some idea of the human” (26). In response to Harpham, Jonathan Culler concludes that : “the term humanities seems to have tied a set of academic disciplines to a particular ideology of the human” (40). In such a context, Maureen McNeill, in *New Keywords*, working with the keyword, “Human,” provides a different orientation to her definition than did Williams: “**Humanist** may be a synonym for humanitarian, although it may also refer to someone who is a student of human affairs or who pursues the studies of the **humanities** (bolding in original 165). This begs the question of what the humanities mean today. They have lost their anchoring in that “particular kind of learning” identified by Williams but have not yet found “the new humanism we need” (Kristeva 14)..

While neither humanism nor the humanities rate discussion in Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin’s *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, a succinct definition of humanism is provided in the Glossary at the end of Childs and Williams’ *Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*. Here they note that the universal ‘man’ implied in humanism “masks the oppressive minority (in the numerical sense) interest of the white, middle-class, heterosexual European male” (231). Such a definition has motivated the postcolonial attention to particularity over the past few decades yet as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing notes, “There has been much less attention to the history of the universal, as it, too, has been produced in the colonial encounter.” She argues that “Post-colonial theory challenges scholars to position our work between the traps of the universal and the culturally specific. Both conceits have been ploys of colonial knowledge, that is, knowledge that legitimates the superiority of the West as defined against its Others” (1). As this system of knowledge comes under question, so too do the kinds of particularisms and universalisms that it once seemed to legitimate. This is the territory that I negotiate here in the hope of broadening current Canadian discussions about “retooling the humanities” beyond the limited terrain through which they are currently defining themselves.

I have kept the epigraph from John Frow's *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* at the top of my page while working on this chapter because it reminds me of what I think is at stake in this book's deliberations: as humanists, we are institutionally positioned in ways that accord us privilege, even when we feel under threat, and it is our responsibility to recognize that privilege and use it, not to hide behind the mask of interpretation but to recognize openly that all interpretations that we offer will arise in relation to our situation and our investments. That does not mean that as academics we are not dedicated to a search for truth.<sup>2</sup> It merely means that we recognize the fallibilistic nature of human understandings of the true; that is, that it is "open to revision on the basis of new or relevant information" (Moya 13).<sup>3</sup> This is one of the foundations of academic research that the humanities share with the other sciences. What might such a position mean for retooling the humanities in the research contexts that this book discusses? Should we be framing our research questions and our projects differently? Could we explain our projects in more satisfying ways to a larger public without sacrificing what is most important about them to ourselves? If the mission of the humanities is changing in response to globalizing pressures, how may we articulate that mission today? As part of that larger project, how may we situate the national in global and international contexts in ways that ensure our continuing agency?

Behind these questions lie others. Is more attention required to the relations across the humanities, humanism and humanitarianism, and to the relations between the particular and the universal that these have charted? What is the mission of research in the human sciences today and how well is it responding to the changes being brought about by globalizing processes? (Appadurai 2000, 2006; Davidson and Goldberg). If we recognize, with Asha Varadharajan, that "the articulation of crisis itself functions as a species of crisis management" (621), then how does one move beyond the rhetoric of crisis to more productive understandings of our current moment? As Linda Hutcheon notes in the special millennial issue of *PMLA*, "our ongoing sense of embattlement as a profession" has been a

constant of the twentieth century of this organization (1726).<sup>4</sup> Yet to note continuities in this history is not necessarily to deny the present moment its own specificity.

For some, the problem is merely that the humanities have a public relations problem in conveying the value of the work that they have always done. Others, particularly in the United States, blame the postmodern and cultural turns in which the humanities turned their backs on traditional humanism and/or old left politics (McCann and Szalay; Sanbonmatsu). As Eric Lott notes, “By now, blaming the counterculture for the ‘cultural turn’ in left political theory so as to indict both is a pretty tired act” (471). Yet such arguments continue to be made and rewarded and that is because at their best they raise genuine questions about the malaise of the humanities today. At the same time, however, this malaise needs to be placed in the wider context of the contemporary university and all its forms of knowledge construction (Hohendahl), while recognizing the different national and regional contexts in which this situation plays out somewhat differently (Farred, Morris, Parker, Therborn).<sup>5</sup>

The decline in cultural capital of humanities research (as opposed to the rise in prestige of a few elite universities [see Donoghue] ) is in many ways mirrored by what is happening in the sciences. The corporatization of the university is leading to greater public distrust of all forms of knowledge production. The disinterested pursuit of truth is questioned when private partners provide research funding and claim the right to control the dissemination of research findings. The religious right is challenging scientific conclusions. The justification for knowledge production has become its ability to serve short-term economic ends rather than to advance understanding in its broadest sense. In short, the current malaise of the humanities is both particular to the humanities as currently practised and defended *and* part of a larger problem. Furthermore, this problem is to some extent exactly the kind of problem that the forms of analysis developed in the humanities are in theory well suited to solve: we pride ourselves on our attention to complexity and contextualization, our ability to negotiate conflicting interpretations, and even our ability to “use words in defense of human life” (Ngugi 36).. However, too

many of our own justifications have tried to work either within the narrow framework of the marketplace or in the kind of highly theoretical formulation that leads Gayatri Spivak to describe the arena of the humanities as “the uncoercive rearrangement of desire” (101). While there may be no viable middle ground between these two positions, the one narrowly instrumentalist and the other excessively abstract, these extremes demarcate the current territory of the debate.

In an effort to re-chart the terms of the debate, the first section of this paper attends more closely to the current demand for “retooling” the human sciences and the various responses developed within my discipline, English studies, and my country, Canada, to these. My final three sections specifically address humanities research, in part because, as Hohendahl notes, “the defense of the humanities has been made first and foremost in the context of the undergraduate college” (3-4). As such, it has not always been effective in addressing questions relating to research. The second section addresses the work of the recently abolished Law Commission of Canada (LCC) in commissioning and partnering in the creation of public interest research. In many ways, the LCC, as an independent policy-oriented public body, responsible to Parliament but with the authority to initiate research as well as respond to specific requests from the Justice Minister, modelled an ideal mode of collaboration linking the general public, academic research, and the policy community. Its demise weakens these links at a time when they seem to be needed more than ever. I draw an analogy between the ways in which the LCC worked and one of the directions in which the new humanities might move. The third section charts a complementary direction, looking briefly at my own postcolonial work toward developing a new humanism as one example of how humanities research is reconfiguring itself in response to changing needs and public dynamics, especially globalization. The fourth considers humanities participation as I have experienced it within a large scale inter-disciplinary research project. I conclude that researchers in the humanities need to continue to investigate ways of connecting our work to that of our colleagues within our own and other disciplines and the public. We should not wait for specific attacks on our work

to craft a response but rather attempt to change the thinking of circulating discourses at every level on which they operate.

## **2. The Case For Change**

According to recent documents published by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Canada's national funding agency for work in these fields, the humanities need to change. The only question is how to manage it. This demand for change, many think, implies pressure for the humanities to become more instrumentalist, more like those social sciences that are oriented toward policy formation or more like those techno-sciences aimed toward patenting new technologies. Those pressures exist, and while there is consensus that they need to be resisted, how to frame dissent and design alternatives remains under debate. In response, some seek to defend the status quo and others to return to the traditions of earlier times. Still others respond with cynicism about the ways in which the commodification of knowledge and careerism now seem unavoidable. Still others imply that the humanities, far from being irrelevant, continue to influence contemporary civil society. The 2003 *English Studies in Canada (ESC)* "Readers' Forum: What's Left of English Studies?" introduces a range of positions historicizing and analyzing possibilities, many of which require further attention. In what follows, I focus on this Canadian example rather than the many U.S.-based special journal issues devoted to this topic because despite globalizing pressures, nation-based institutions and their funding systems still make a difference.<sup>6</sup>

Several of the articles in *ESC* address my own sense of the particular urgency and nature of the problems that Canadian humanities practitioners currently face. Christopher Keep names one of the issues that I wish to pursue here: "if we accept the proposition that the cultural authority of the humanities is in decline," he argues, the cause may be "our lingering devotion to an idea of the 'human' that is increasingly anachronistic (59). He concludes that "we need to resist the romantic myth of man's fall into the mechanical and to consider alternative models of the human other than that offered by the

idealist tradition” (65). While Keep deplores the desire for “some pure, unsullied space exterior to the machinic order” (65) my own perspective coming from postcolonial studies leads me to place my emphasis on the full implications of such a desire for some “pure, unsullied space,” rather than on the machinic specifically as one source of the problem.<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman find the governing difficulty in “the conditions of and for thinking today” in *Capital* (17). These conditions are evolving as I write. What can be done with such an insight? My interest falls on how such a system continues to renew its legitimacy through managing and directing such desires: that is, not just the desire for purity but also the corresponding desire to sully or defy it, what we might call in general terms, the postmodern dynamic. This takes shape at broad theoretical levels, such as the conditions for thinking humanism; and at very particular levels, three of which are raised here: the phenomenological experience of being human as invoked through poetry; the work of independent advisory bodies to the government, such as the Law Commission of Canada (whose abolition was announced by the Stephen Harper government the very day the first version of this paper was due, Sept 28, 2006); and the research conducted within the SSHRC-funded MCRI on “Globalization and Autonomy” in which I have participated.

I continue to believe that we need to attend to the contradictions of humanism, its current vulnerability and its potential for transformation, so that the opening of the “imagination to hope” (46), lauded by Daniel Heath Justice in his contribution to the *ESC* Forum, may be realized and transformed into action for achieving the social justice that he desires. Heath Justice finds “the human connection” (47) alive in English studies today and “still a site where progressive change can occur, where a passionate investment in transformation and challenging intellectualism can save lives and enrich our reality” (53). Many of us may share the experience he describes on a personal level, especially in relation to the dynamics of the classroom, without finding it sufficient to the institutional challenges and structural changes underway in the current moment. It is not enough to argue that our teaching translates

our scholarship into the broader public sphere through the face to face engagements with students we all treasure nor does it seem convincing to suggest that the kinds of pressures identified in the SSHRC discussion document are not present elsewhere, as Patricia Badr and Sandra Tomc argue in their contribution.

Identifying SSHRC's discussion document, Badr and Tomc assert that "such legislative pressure is not part of the elite U.S university system, where the assumption is that experts should be allowed to do their jobs as they see fit" (15). I think this misunderstands the SSHRC initiative, which is not about legislative pressure but community debate and renewal and shows naiveté about the current U.S. system. Given what we know about the various forms of political, financial and peer pressures on U.S.-based academics, and pressures subtle and not-so-subtle toward self-censorship going back most memorably to the McCarthy era and revived during the current "war on terror," their claim that the elite U.S. university system is a pure space not subject to populist pressures seems a surprising claim. The various U.S. based special issues of academic journals devoted to the crisis in the humanities cited in this article present a different picture. Institutional pressures to conform do vary from one system to the next, and more often operate, when this is feasible, through subtle means of rewards and disincentives, often linked to a combination of sanctioned ignorance and the sheer unthinkability of alternatives rather than through direct political interference. Nonetheless, enough evidence exists of how such pressures work within every system to make such a claim unconvincing.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, I also question their implied approbation for a system in which experts are not subject to outside scrutiny and accountability beyond their own circle. University research requires the protections of academic freedom but this does not mean that ideas should not be subject to academic standards and questioning, both within and beyond the academy. Political interference to punish the holders of unpopular research positions, whether they are taken by Philippe Rushton<sup>9</sup> or Ward Churchill<sup>10</sup>, would destroy the integrity of the system. The right of researchers to explore unpopular



ideas must be defended. At the same time, however, such positions must be assessed for the quality of their evidence and argumentation. The Rushton and Rushdie<sup>11</sup> affairs blew up at roughly the same time. Without addressing the nature of their very different unpopular interventions into the public sphere, I argue that Ontario Liberal Premier David Peterson's call for Rushton to be fired was as misguided as the Ayatollah's *fatwah* against Rushdie. The unpopularity of certain ideas with vocal sectors of the public cannot be the criterion for their rejection but, in the case of research, the research itself must be refuted or maintained by the best and most carefully observed academic standards if respect for research is to be maintained.<sup>12</sup>

As the chart Badr and Tomc employ to open their article indicates, serious attention to the questions that matter can easily be swamped by faddishness, in academia as elsewhere. Indeed, if they are correct in arguing that "the humanities have, in large measure, already shaped contemporary civil society" (14), then in my view the humanities certainly do have a lot to answer for. Contemporary civil society shows little regard for serious scholarship and little respect for the disinterested search for truth. By casting the SSHRC discussion document in terms of a style makeover, through the image of a "frumpy" humanities in need of "a drastic makeover" (8), and then arguing that the discipline really is just fine because what motivates it is a "shared commitment to creative momentum" (15), they sidestep the opportunity here for radical rethinking of goals and achievements. If they are right in finding that "The students educated in humanities programs in the 1980s and 1990s now run Hollywood, run CNN, run *Time* and *Vogue*, run the History Channel, HBO, and the CBC" (14), then what they find laudable, I find damning. These media seem complicit with dominant orthodoxies in ways that ignore the growing gaps between rich and poor, promoting instead the revival of colonialist modes of representing the world. They promote what Henry Giroux terms a "politics of disposability" through advocating the nihilistic view that "truth-telling as such is impossible" (Sanbonmatsu 197; see also Wang). While Sanbonmatsu's critique of postmodern orthodoxy is far too sweeping, lumping together, by his own

admission, “two dozen different disciplines, subfields, and areas of study, including Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Rhetoric and Composition, English Literature” and a range of other humanities disciplines, and “even” some of the social sciences (199), as dangerous carriers of what he calls the postmodern virus (198), his article exemplifies the fact that there are rewards to be found not just in promoting but also in attacking postmodern research initiatives. I find their breezy defence of the postmodern as ineffective as his thunderous denunciation.

There are contradictions, then, in what is being said about the impact of humanities research. On the one hand, it is defended for upholding traditional values and on the other, for forming the avant-garde. On the one hand, it continues to be attacked (from the left as well as from the right) as dangerously subversive of the fabric of society and on the other, as increasingly irrelevant. These various assessments of societal impact do not necessarily rule each other out. They often blur in SSHRC’s expression of desire for greater collaboration with partners and stakeholders and broader dissemination of research findings. These are key components of SSHRC’s new strategic plan emerging out of the knowledge council consultations. The concern about societal impact comes from the humanities community itself. This shift in focus is to some extent recommended by the earlier report of the Working Group on the Future of the Humanities: *Alternative Wor[l]ds*. The new SSHRC strategic plan, called the *Knowledge Council*, argues that current activities “don’t go far enough in getting research knowledge to Canadians—they do not give us systematic interaction between the research community and the rest of the society that will guarantee excellent research knowledge reaches the people who need it” (12).

In this paper, I ask whether such systematic interaction is desirable and, if it is worth pursuing, what conditions might make it possible. First, I wish to question the assumptions implied by the language used by SSHRC in this instance. It is too crudely utilitarian to convey the value of the full range of humanities research and it may not even fully suffice to meet the needs of policy communities.

The rhetoric of *Alternative Wor(l)ds* is ambiguous. “The people who need it” is a vague phrase that suggests decision-makers more than an idea of the general public: it could be read to exclude more than include. The report of the commission of inquiry into the Mahar Arar case suggests that the RCMP believed that even the politicians responsible for this jurisdiction did not need full disclosure, let alone the general public. Surely the general public are the people who need it in a functioning democracy, yet the trend today, as I will outline below in my discussion of the Law Commission of Canada, is toward limiting information to elites.

Other questions arise around the nature of “systematic interaction” and “excellent research knowledge.” I would argue that policy communities do not need academics to prescribe policy options. That is their job. Like the broader public, however, they do need academics to provide them with a full picture of the situation under investigation, the range of possible policy options to which it gives rise, and some sense of the strengths and weaknesses of each. In other words, they need information and open-ended analysis that benefits from a richly contextualized sense of the situation, the historical record, knowledge of what has happened and is happening in comparative contexts, and some understanding of the positions of those involved. These, academic research can provide. Such provision, however, works best on an ongoing basis so that the depth of understanding required will be there when urgent demands unexpectedly emerge. Rather than attempt to justify humanities research by calculating indirect financial benefits, lauding the desirability of “creative communities” for promoting a climate of “innovation,” and celebrating national sentiment through telling the nation’s story, humanities researchers might concentrate on sharing the actual results of our research with an audience broader than simply our peers.

In the May 2006 *PMLA*, Wendy Hesford argues that “The Bush administration’s encroachment on civil liberties, unlawful surveillance and detentions, silencing of minority voices, feeding of global anxieties, and crushing of dissent remind us of the urgency and critical work of the humanities” (795).

This statement invokes McNeill's linking of the humanitarian and the humanities, making a standard rhetorical gesture toward what now seems an insufficiently examined case for the current role of the humanities. The Canadian government is enacting its own variation on such "security" themes and even provincial governments, on the urging of the UN Security Council, have the power to enact regulations (rather than laws) with profound implications for the conduct of daily life, which could easily pass beneath the radar of most of us (*Crossing Borders*). It is too early to see what Canadian scholars of the humanities will do –or could do--about the abolishment of many social justice-related programs in the minority Conservative government's latest announcements. Les Whittington and Bruce Campion-Smith list "Jobless youths, volunteers, aboriginals, the illiterate and many others" as among those hardest hit (*Toronto Star* Sept 26, 2006). The Court Challenges Program and the Law Commission of Canada were also cut. It is not clear to me that the critical work of the humanities, my own included, is responding adequately to such changes nor that it is necessarily well designed to do so. The following section considers the work of the LCC as a model for the kind of humanities interdisciplinary collaboration that could provide the new humanism that we need.

### **3. The Law Commission of Canada**

Established by the Law Commission of Canada Act in 1996<sup>13</sup>, the Law Commission of Canada was mandated to "adopt a multidisciplinary approach to its work that views the law and the legal system in a broad social and economic context" (Law Commission of Canada Act). The Commission's *2006 Annual Report* states that "the mission of the Law Commission of Canada is to engage Canadians in the renewal of the law to ensure that it is relevant, responsive, effective, equally accessible to all, and just" (I). In the report, the "President's Message" elaborates several principles: "To strive for relevant law, one has to first accept that society is much more dynamic than law;" "Adopting new concepts and approaches to law is one of the means that society relies on to respond to change;" "The relevance of the law cannot be determined solely through legal analysis. It is one of the hallmarks of modern society that

new knowledge emerges from a multitude of disciplines”; and “As an independent federal entity, the Law Commission is committed to engaging Canadians in a non-partisan dialogue on the nature of required changes to the law” (1). These propositions are rooted in the mandate of the Act. At the time the Commission’s funding was cut, it was working on the following issues: “the increasing number of vulnerable workers, the growing space that private security services occupy, the advent of globalization, and the strong affirmation of indigenous legal traditions by many aboriginal peoples” (1).

On September 26, 2006, the minority Conservative government of Canada announced that it was cutting funding to the Law Commission of Canada to zero (See Ibbitson for details). On their website, the Commission notes that they were informed of this decision on September 25. It states: “Over the past nine years, the Commission engaged Canadians in the process of law reform through the forging of productive networks among academic and other communities while consulting the public through various innovative means.” Their follow-up press release stressed “the characteristics that set Law reform agencies apart from other mechanisms.” These include its “unique multidisciplinary approach to law reform,” its “independence,” “transparency,” and ability to consult “with experts and Canadians from all walks of life.” Of particular value is the “ability of law reform bodies to examine both the legal and social implications of reform, to take a long-term view, to openly consult with the public and to bring politically-difficult topics into the open for debate.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the apparent rationale for cutting the program reveals an impoverished understanding of the needs of an advanced democratic society in a globalizing world (See Archer, Russell). The Justice Minister at the time, Vic Toews, is quoted as saying “The Law Commission provided government with advice that we found that we could receive through other mechanisms at our disposal” (Archer). He lists his own government department, the legal community at large, and the Canadian Bar Association as alternative sites of advice.

This logic is refuted by many. Lorne Sossin in the same article is cited as saying that “It’s not a bottom line that’s going to see a payoff in increased productivity or a tangible gain in a particular

year...It's about creating networks and relationships that will have much greater and deeper payoffs down the road" (Archer). This is why the LCC's partnerships, drawing on the research of experts from many disciplines, including "jurists, philosophers, criminologists, sociologists, economists, etc" (Le Bouthillier) and involving the wider public, remains so important both nationally and internationally. Le Bouthillier points out that "The impact of this decision is that Canada is distancing itself from the model adopted by other countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and some thirty others with which we have an important part of our legal heritage." This claim is reinforced by Mark Perry's account of the international conference sponsored by the LCC, building on several years of research "on the complicated relationship between public police forces and private security agencies" (242). Perry notes the strong degree of interest, both internationally and across a broad spectrum of participants and the breadth of topics covered, which nonetheless reinforced the overall focus "on the transformation of policing and the growth in demand for such services (243). He also remarks that "The views from around the world showed coherence that I would not have predicted" (242). Canadians are part of a global system and we need national research bodies, such as the LCC, to enable us to put changes occurring here in broader contexts if we are to devise effective means for dealing with them.

In cancelling funding, such arguments for a broadly-based view of the societal changes that the law must address are rejected, as is an interdisciplinary and broadly consultative approach to legal reform. For the government to cut LCC funding at a time when it had a financial surplus, in order to pay for more tax cuts, indicates a short-sighted view of the relation between law and society and possibly even, as some have suggested, an aversion to research that calls into question their beliefs (see Russell). The government substitutes a narrowly instrumentalist and reactive view of the law for the forward-looking mandate originally given the Commission. The analogy with shifts in attitudes to higher education are clear. Geiger notes that "Britain is moving away from a publicly funded higher education system, and the accompanying ideal of a university education as one of the social benefits of taxation—

knowledge funded out of public resources for the public good—seems to be fading” (63). Similar shifts are happening in Canada.

Yet even a response somewhat critical of an LCC publication, such as Margaret Hall’s review of *Restoring Dignity: Responding to Child Abuse in Canadian Institutions*, concludes that “The Report is a tremendous resource for individuals and organisations with an interest in institutional child abuse” (299). Hall’s review is especially interesting for at least two reasons. She argues that the LCC may not have been sufficiently at arms-length from a government agenda in this case, and that “the Report spreads itself too thin” (295-296). While she finds the report valuable in creating a profile of the “dangerous institution” (296) and in evaluating various form of redress, in identifying “eight criteria which the ideal process of redress would incorporate” (296) and in making “six general recommendations and 47 specific recommendations” (298), she argues that “[w]hat is needed is an evaluation of how the approaches discussed in the Report could fit together to address the range of needs and interests arising from institutional abuse” (300). In other words, the integrating function that only such work can provide needs to be strengthened rather than broken down into its component parts and addressed in a piecemeal fashion. Her critique centres on the LCC’s decision to recommend an overall “‘best’ response, and its failure to then confront the inherent contradiction of that model” (301). In other words, she values the depth and breadth of the research but believes that in this case the LCC rushed too quickly to a policy recommendation that did not suit all cases. With the abolishment of the LCC, such wide ranging research and consultation will have to be sacrificed in favour of the focussed policy recommendation designed to suit whatever problem seems most pressing at the moment. In my view, the reactive model is never as useful, in the end, as the proactive model that the LCC embraced.

In his presentation to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, on November 1, 2006, on the effects of the abolition of the Commission, Yves Le Bouthillier makes several important points to this effect.. “Perhaps most importantly,” he suggests, “the elimination of the Law Commission

removes an important neutral voice from a highly politically charged debate.” While he is referring to work on indigenous law in this instance, the same is surely true of ongoing work on policing, globalization, vulnerable workers and other projects now cut short before completion.

As the open letter to the minister of justice protesting this cut observes, the Law Commission of Canada was “uniquely positioned” to explore a range of “complicated questions that go to the heart of justice in this country.” Whereas “Parliament and the ministry of justice develop policy and make laws [, t]he law commission does neither. Instead, it gathers the best expertise and sponsors comprehensive research on the toughest questions. Most important, it engages Canadians directly in deliberating upon how law and the legal system can best serve their communities.” These are functions that cannot be replaced by the organizations cited by Toews. They are also dimensions of the Law Commission’s work that I had noted in its yearly participation in Congress and in its partnership with the Major Collaborative Research Initiative on “Globalization and Autonomy,” with which I have been involved since 2001.

One initiative that I had taken to advance the critical work of the humanities in relation to broader societal concerns was to arrange an interdisciplinary workshop discussion of the Law Commission of Canada’s discussion paper, *Crossing Borders: Law in a Globalized World*, at the University of Manitoba in October 2006.<sup>15</sup> In the first version of this paper, this section on the LCC was designed as a good news story on potential best practices, modelling ways in which humanities researchers and independent public bodies might collaborate. The workshop brought together colleagues from a range of disciplines to educate ourselves about the ways in which globalization is affecting law-making and enforcement in Canada and internationally and to brainstorm among ourselves about how such issues might best be addressed. Our initial plan was to provide feedback to the Commission. Now, we will need to find other venues for discussing these questions, most likely in a more piecemeal way.



*Crossing Borders* provides a range of case studies and a series of questions on which the Commission sought public input as it prepared to advise the federal government about the implications of globalization for law reform in Canada. This strikes me as a good example of the ways in which our independent research might be pooled from time to time in response to new problems requiring fuller contextualization before fully workable solutions could be defined. I found that many of the people across campus who work on various aspects of the law in its social and historical contexts had not always met one another due to the compartmentalized nature of our daily work. The provision of a discussion paper such as this, the result of a collaboration of a legal scholar and a political scientist, both Scholars in Residence at the Commission for a year, is exactly the kind of research collaboration that might productively translate specialized scholarship into a mode that is more accessible across the broader public sphere. The document cites school children who were involved in earlier consultations along with legal experts and the issues raised carry profound implications for the character of our democracy and the quality of our lives.

It shows why a view of knowledge premised only on short-term “need” is limited. Persuading readers that they need such information is one thing; but the current legal situation extends far beyond perceptions of need. Current debates about what rules should govern globalization, who should make them and in what contexts are clearly as much about democracy and values as they are about need. They raise questions about legitimacy and accountability, sovereignty and justice, which are not easily resolved. These larger contexts of value and desire constitute part of the territory of the humanities, yet we are not always able to see the contributions we might make to such discussions. We note that the humanities prefer critique, problematization, and the raising of questions to presenting solutions or packaging knowledge as product, as if these disqualify us from policy debates. Yet these skills can be helpful in such a context. We like to show how complicated an issue may be. The challenge is to distinguish our talent for complexity from what my colleague Len Findlay terms the urge to embrace

opacity. Insofar as our research can illuminate complexities, this too is a strength many policy-makers are learning to appreciate. Rather than accept a given frame of reference, we may prefer to recontextualize an issue, to demonstrate how its reframing may lead to new questions as well as different solutions. Such an approach may take more time to develop but it can sometimes save time in the long run. Just as the world is learning to appreciate the wisdom of the “slow food” movement, there is now a climate of thinking in which our ability to take the long-range view and the circuitous route may be redefined as a strength rather than a weakness. We are more likely to have a future playing devil’s advocate than technical advisor. Our role may lie more in correcting tendencies toward ideological over-simplifications of the past and present than toward prescribing precise futures. We may excel in demonstrating the multiple ways in which an issue may be couched rather than selecting one straight route forward.

In many of these ways, our modes of working are sometimes at odds with those selected by our colleagues in the social sciences. The Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences report, “Large-Scale Research Projects and the Humanities” (2006), makes these points well. It reflects my own experience working in interdisciplinary contexts. Humanities researchers often work and publish alone but this does not mean that we do not collaborate. Our forms of collaboration may operate at a more informal level and may be acknowledged differently, in notes, prefaces and acknowledgements. Our writing styles often differ, with humanists privileging process over conclusions, so that the meaning emerges out of the entire fabric of an argument whereas social scientists tend to signal the development of an argument broken down into its constituent parts and leading to a clearly articulated set of conclusions. If such is the case, then how do we bring understanding of the value of our methods and modes to larger constituencies, especially those confronting serious problems that seem to demand the kind of immediate solutions that we are unwilling to offer?

I have no immediate answers to these questions. They continue to challenge me. This is not the first time that the mission and conduct of the humanities has been questioned. The contemporary moment, however, offers a particular challenge and an opportunity for serious self-examination. This is a time when scholarship across the board is being questioned and when its cultural capital is diminishing (See Mooney). It also seems to be a time when we need to combine expertise if we are to address problems of global magnitude: cultural, environmental, social and political. Colleagues in the sciences are reorganizing to change the way they conduct, publish and vet their work and how they communicate its value to a wider society. Those of us working in the humanities also need to move beyond defensiveness and flippancy to consider our mission in light of the challenges represented by our changing times.

Of particular interest to me is the way in which understandings of culture are changing perceptions of the disciplines. Although many in the humanities cling to the notion that culture is our province of expertise, in fact responsibility for culture as currently understood has largely migrated into anthropology, communications, film sociology and even business schools. The “war on terror” is diminishing the authority of English studies even further, not contributing to its revival as many had hoped. Few turn to English to learn about non-Western cultures. Few value the kinds of intimacies and empathies that literature can provide for negotiating global conflicts. Mathew Arnold’s notion of literature as “modernity’s moral anchor” (Viswanathan 137) is rightly questioned on many fronts. The kinds of literacies once afforded by literary study no longer seem necessary for negotiating social relations today. Some within the discipline even question the applicability of the concept of “research” to the kind of largely interpretive work that most people still conduct within literature departments. I think that such a position is mistaken, but it indicates the lack of consensus about the most basic terms of the debates that this book is designed to address.

John Sanbonmatsu may be the latest young polemicist to launch his career through attacking the cultural turn, the humanities and Humanities Institutes. He blames postmodernism for ineffectuality in the face of contemporary challenges, while dismissing far too quickly the problems inherent in traditional humanism. He writes: “Prior to about 1970, higher education in the West had been legitimated ideologically in terms of the university’s role in fulfilling traditional humanistic ideals—increasing the storehouse of human knowledge, shaping individual character, creating an informed national citizenry, and so on. The fact that this mission was largely a fiction, or that these lofty ideals worked hand in glove to promote the interest of capital and the state, is not the point” (201). It is not the point for him but it is for me. He sees this mission as not only preferable to what has replaced it, but precisely valuable for its messianic qualities. His desire to return to what he terms “holism in theory and practice” (221) blinds him to the value of critiques of traditional humanism and to the many modes in which humanism is being reinvented to provide a more capacious understanding of the human and our place within a globalized planet. His critique of postcolonial thinking, based mainly on the early work of Homi Bhabha, ignores (among other things) the theories of transplanetary advanced by Paul Gilroy and Gayatri Spivak and the advocacy of a new form of humanism put forward by thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, David Scott and Sylvia Wynter. These are not identical projects but they work in parallel fashion and sometimes intersect. To what extent might such work redirect contemporary inquiry in the humanities beyond its current impasse? Are there implications within such planetary and new humanist thinking for how to reorganize academic work in the humanities and reconnect it to the world?

**4. “A humanism made to the measure of the world”** (David Scott citing Aimé Césaire, 119. 122)

What David Scott terms “the connection between humanism and dehumanization” (119) may have been the major dilemma of the twentieth century, sharpened for many who found colonization

troubling and even for many who did not, by the events of the Holocaust. While postcolonial scholarship notes that “Humanism and colonialism inhabit the same cognitive-political universe inasmuch as Europe’s discovery of its Self is simultaneous with its discovery of its Others” (Scott 120), neither Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon nor Edward Said wish to abandon humanism entirely. Instead, they want to reform it to make its achievements more closely match its declared aspirations. The Caribbean scholar Sylvia Wynter follows in their footsteps, aspiring, as David Scott puts it, “to a certain ideal of humanism—a dissonant, a non-identitarian, but nonetheless a comprehensive and planetary humanism” (121). While Sanbonmatsu argues that collective action for change cannot be realized without repudiating poststructuralist theories, these thinkers, based on their own experiences of racism and colonialism, argue on the contrary that only such a rethinking of foundations and *working through* the legacies of history can lead to progressive social change. Wynter’s work, as explained by Scott, “is concerned to anchor the human and its projects in its material (social and bodily) conditions” and “to track the ‘codes’ and ‘genres’ in terms of which the understanding (including self-understanding) is constituted” (121). Such work challenges the codes through which the white middle class establishes its hegemony and notes how these codes are changing in response to globalizing pressures. Wynter suggests that “The new code is now that of eugenic/dysgenic, selected/dyselected, in place of the earlier rational/irrational as well as of that of the spirit/flesh” (182). If this is so, then understanding how the new codes operate may require alliances with disciplines, particularly in the sciences, whose work we have not generally considered, certainly not in full interdisciplinary partnerships, before. At the same time, we will need to consider how the residual codes continue to operate today.

Dionne Brand’s poetry and fiction demonstrate how the kind of creative work studied in the humanities may contribute to re-theorizing community and global citizenship today, within a reconfigured humanist structure.<sup>16</sup> I argue that Brand’s poetry has always been political in ways that challenge Habermasian notions of the public sphere as a place of purely rational deliberation *and*

theories that pit the global against the local. Reading backwards from *Inventory* to her earlier works, it is possible to identify how she develops a practice of affective citizenship beginning from the emotional register in which injustice lodges itself in the very body of the poet as a special kind of witness, one who declares: “there are atomic openings in my chest/to hold the wounded” (*Inventory* 100). To reconcile the Shelleyian task of the poet as legislator for the world with her own notions of democracy and equity, she must first describe accurately what is at stake in conflicts now, presented not as information nor analysis but through poetry and story as intimate inventory in an inspired revision of the Gramscian sense of this term. The inventories of *Inventory* provide a different kind of truth, extending beyond the reach of the news as currently mediatized and now distrusted by many. Brand develops an affective citizenship capable of challenging dominant imaginaries on a terrain that they have successfully claimed as their own: the emotional registers of the political. She reclaims citizenship from the claims of ownership asserted by bodies such as the National Citizens Coalition and the National Taxpayers Association, relocating citizenship within the lived experience of a redefined humanity.<sup>17</sup> Brand’s poetry, and the modes of interpretation developed within the humanities to analyse poetry’s complexities, remind those of us working in the humanities that we have work of value to contribute to contemporary discussion of citizenship, community and democracy.

### **5. Collaborative, Interdisciplinary Work.**

“Transdisciplinarity does not in itself suffice to reconstruct the new humanism we need”

(Kristeva 14)

To bring this kind of interpretive work into effective dialogue with other interpretative communities—the social sciences, policy circles and the public—will not be easy. The translation challenges, as I have suggested, are different. My interest here is in extending the dialogue across research communities. To work across disciplines, it seems that literary study will need to complement its almost exclusive focus on the particular (the phenomenological and performative intimacies made so

urgent in Brand's work) with the insights of disciplines that consider phenomena on a larger scale. Their perspectives can provide greater distance from our tendency to valorize the specific in order to consider how the larger picture coheres. During our last team meeting, a fellow literary scholar addressed the social scientists among us to the effect that she was used to working on one author, possibly one work by one author, and found herself taken aback by the scale at which the social scientists worked, which was usually the scale of the nation-state. While she was exaggerating a little, the point seems to hold. When our project was first conceived, the social scientists assumed that "autonomy" referred to state autonomy almost exclusively. Until the humanists raised the issue, they had not thought of autonomy in personal terms, nor in philosophical rather than purely political terms. Our project, then, has benefited from such simple exchanges, enabling us to appreciate more fully just what is meant when globalization theorists speak of how interscalar relations have become a distinguishing feature of globalization today. Such work can take place in disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts. The point, I think, is that researchers need always to be aware of our different audiences in such contexts and be willing to make concessions to get our points across. There is often, as Anna Tsing notes, "a cross-disciplinary misunderstanding of terms" at play in such situations (4).

In her introduction to *Friction*, Tsing makes just the opposite case about tendencies within the humanities and social sciences, writing that

Humanities scholars and social scientists tend toward opposite poles. Where the former often find the universalizing quality of capitalism its most important trait (e.g., Jameson 2002), the latter look for unevenness and specificity within the cultural production of capitalism (e.g. Yanagisako 2002; Mitchell 2002). Where the former imagine mobilization of the universal as key to effective opposition to exploitation (e.g., Hardt and Negri 2000), the latter look for resistance in place-based struggles (Massey 1995) and unexpected linkages (Gibson-Graham 1996). (4).

Such mutual misunderstandings can only become productive if fully engaged. Humanities fields are internally so heterogeneous that it is difficult to select a single theorist as typical of the group. For every Jameson, Hardt and Negri, we could substitute a scholar of the particular. Yet to a humanist such as myself, what seems striking is how often humanities scholarship on a particular question seems almost entirely inconsequential to its full transdisciplinary elaboration.

When I began work on the volume titled “Globalization, Autonomy and Community” for our MCRI, I was struck by the way in which Gerard Delanty’s book on *Community* in Routledge’s Key Ideas series surveyed a range of disciplinary engagements with the concept without ever considering the discipline of English and work by F.R. Leavis or Raymond Williams. The revival of attention to community has occurred simultaneously within humanities and social sciences disciplines yet there has been little interaction among them. Where there is interaction, it often seems to be the humanists working with social science research, but this is an intellectual traffic that remains lop-sided. The same condition prevails with work on autonomy. There is little interaction between the work on autonomy within analytic philosophy and that conducted within political science although there is more interaction across these disciplinary divides within liberal traditions. Only feminist research on autonomy seems truly interdisciplinary.

Our MCRI enabled us to cross these disciplinary divides in ways that have been productive for our thinking and our research results. Nonetheless, translating our research into a format suitable for Aid to Scholarly Publications (ASPP) peer review has not been easy.<sup>18</sup> If a peer reviewer has not experienced the kind of transformative dialogues in which we have participated over the last four years, he or she may judge our work according to his or her own disciplinary imperatives and find it lacking. Adjusting interdisciplinary work to speak to several disciplines simultaneously, while also addressing a wider interdisciplinary community is a challenge we continue to negotiate. The more we engage in explaining the often invisible assumptions and protocols that guide our work to others whose training



puts them outside our circle, the more adept we will become at thinking about how to communicate our work beyond the classroom and the specialist academic journal. These are new skills for which there are currently few rewards beyond those intrinsic to the work itself. Collaboration, especially across disciplines, is time-consuming.

If we wish to encourage SSHRC to pursue this path, then the academic rewards system will need to be restructured, the time allowed for such work to be adjusted, and the funding supplied most likely increased. SSHRC is recognizing some of these necessities through the MCRI program and the new Strategic Clusters. These programs will train a new generation more attentive to the demands of communicating across disciplinary and knowledge community differences. I see hope for reconnecting with a broader public in the kind of training that such initiatives provide, especially for a newer generation of scholars. It will be important, however, for researchers in the humanities to continue to investigate ways of connecting our work to that of our colleagues and the broader public. Current budget cuts reinforce the point that we should not wait for specific attacks on our work to craft a response but rather attempt to change the thinking of circulating discourses at every level on which they operate.

My argument in this paper has been that the new humanism that we need must be capacious enough to encompass interpreting a poem such as Brand's as well as crafting or responding to a discussion document issued by a public body such as the now-defunct Law Commission of Canada. What unites these parts of my argument is the insistence on the need for a broadly contextualized understanding of humanities research as dedicated to understanding the complex linkages and disjunctures that form the context for any policy decision. As the Law Commission itself demonstrated in framing its investigation of policing, *In Search of Security*, in such a way as to embrace both public and private policing functions, resetting the terms of discussion can be as important as designing solutions to pre-defined problems. In redefining policing to conform to its contemporary transformation into a mix of public police and private security, the report demonstrates the need for continual creative

thinking in the service of the public good. The humanities, too, carry the potential for this kind of imaginative renewal, but it will require a collective commitment.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Daniel Coleman and Smaro Kamboureli for the invitation to develop my thinking on this question in the workshop that they organized on "The Culture of Research: Retooling the Humanities," held at the University of Guelph in October 2006. My thanks also go to them and the other participants in the workshop for focussed discussion and advice for revision. I am grateful as well to the Canada Research Chairs program, which has enabled my research on humanities community and which helped to fund my participation in this project. The research for this paper first developed out of my ongoing research with the SSHRC-funded MCRI on Globalization and Autonomy and my SSHRC-funded research on the ends of postcolonialism.

<sup>2</sup> Asha Varadharajan argues that "the conflation of every form of investment with self-interest is a gesture as sentimental as that which separates culture from the barbarism it feeds" (630). And Frederick Cooper recognizes: "Postcolonial studies has a strong stake in not carrying the contextualization of truth claims into a dismissal of truth as just another Western conceit" (414).

<sup>3</sup> See also Satya Mohanty's essay, "Can Our Values Be Objective? On Ethics, Aesthetics and Progressive Politics" and the essays responding to his work in the special issue of *New Literary History*. 32 (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Said notes also that "no matter who is writing or speaking, where, when, or to whom, the humanities always seem to be in deep and usually terminal trouble" (31).

<sup>5</sup> While Farred addresses Latin America and the United States, Morris considers Hong Kong, Australia and the United States, Parker works within the context of Europe and the United Kingdom, and Therborn provides a much more wide-ranging, European-based but global narrative of the fortunes of socialism in the post-war period than that offered by McCann and Szalay.

<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it is alarming how many of these discussions seem to operate with little sense of earlier debates within the discipline. It is surprising how little reference is made, for example, to past issues of two MLA publications, the *ADE Bulletin* and *Profession*. In particular, The *ADE Bulletin* dedicated to "The University of Excellence." 130 (Winter 2002) and issues of *Profession*, with the texts of various Presidential Fora, chart the history of these debates and remain essential reading for scholars attempting to make sense of them.

<sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadurai's *Fear of Small Numbers* addresses the genocidal implications of the desire for purity in its contemporary global manifestations.

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<sup>8</sup> I find Frank Donoghue's argument, in "Prestige," more convincing. He argues that with the rise of for-profit universities, "the prestigious universities and colleges are the last refuge of the humanities; in turn, the humanities have become the curricular vehicle of prestige" (157—but only for the elite schools. Other universities are trapped between "the prestige model and the market model" (158) in a system which is "bad news for the humanities" (160).

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Rushton is a psychology professor at the University of Western Ontario who was accused of racism for his work on genetics after he sent out a 1999 summary version of research he conducted on the science of race in a mass mailing to professors across the North America. For an account of the incident see the *UWO Gazette*, vol. 93, issue 68. Tuesday, February 1, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Ward Churchill, a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, came to mass media attention in 2005, for an essay published on the World Trade Centre attacks in 2001. His university defended his right to engage in controversial political speech. Later, an investigation was launched into allegations of research misconduct in relation to some of his other publications. The committee investigating these claims concluded that he be sanctioned for "research misconduct." There is debate as to whether or not this investigation was in some way launched in retaliation for his earlier controversial statements about the World Trade Centre attacks.

<sup>11</sup> Salman Rushdie was condemned to death by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini on February 14, 1989 in response to the publication of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*.

<sup>12</sup> Fiction should not be confused with research. The timing of the two public outcries, however, was so close that students coming late into one of my classes thought we were discussing Rushdie when we were in fact discussing Rushton. This confusion reminded me of how similar the momentum of such public revulsion might be, and of the need to avoid emotional appeals in adjudicating the claims involved.

<sup>13</sup> In 1992, a previous government had abolished Canada's first Law Reform Commission. Realizing what it had lost, the federal government established the new commission in 1997.

<sup>14</sup> This material, and all reports, publications and calls, were publicly available on the LCC website until their funding was cut. For several months, I could find no sign of this material on the web. The site had simply disappeared. Thanks to the efforts of Annette Demers, reference librarian at the University of Windsor's law library, the Commission's records and reports were discovered to be stored with Library and Archives Canada in their Electronic Collection. This news was posted on the news aggregator SLAW on Feb 13. See <http://www.slaw.ca/2007/02/13/the-late-law-commission-of-canadas-records/> The sudden disappearance of this website and the research reports posted there reinforces my argument that Canadians need open access to such research. By eliminating funding, the government has not only stopped some innovative research in mid-stream, but it also served to close down broad public access to the results of this research. It is not clear how complete the LCC archive is and it is not easily found (if found at all) through a simple google search.

<sup>15</sup> This workshop was arranged through the CFI-funded Research Centre on Globalization and Cultural Studies and the "Law and Society" research cluster at the University of Manitoba. Colleagues from English, History, Law, and Sociology met to discuss the report. A report on the session may be found at the Centre's website: <http://www.umanitoba.ca/centres/gcs/>

<sup>16</sup> This section summarizes an article, "Dionne Brand's Global Intimacies," currently submitted to the *University of Toronto Quarterly* special issue on "Ethics and Canadian Literatures" which is also being translated into Portuguese by Eloina dos Santos for inclusion in a book edited by Eurídice Figuerideo and Maria Bernadette Porto. *Figurações da alteridade*. Niterói: EdUFF, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> She does not mention such bodies by name, but the shifting scope of her employment of the pronoun "we" makes it clear that she refuses their narrowly conceived definitions of citizenship and community.

<sup>18</sup> The application form, for example, requires us to identify three dominant disciplines for the book from a prescribed list and of course any assessor must come from a specific field and background.