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CONTENTS

目錄

06 編言

阮秀莉 | 驚異大航行 (*Fantastic Voyage*)

專題：Literature, Reaching Out! 文學，向前走！

08 阮秀莉摘要 | Spivak on the Critical Role of Literature and the Humanities in Re-Imagining the Future – from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s 2025 Holberg Lecture “Imperatives to Re-Imagining the Future”

11 Robert Newman | The Future Impact of the Humanities – To the Readers in Taiwan

16 Robin Visser | Visionary Advocate of International Environment Humanities: Robert Newman

17 Joni Adamson | Good Energy: Humanities Laboratories, Interdisciplinary Pedagogies, and Building Intergenerational Leadership for a Future We Choose – A Lecture Excerpt

22 Maria Luisa Torres Reyes | Critical Island Studies and CIS Consortium

24 張瓊惠 | 三談跨領域課程：人文領路的科技與環境

26 周序樺 | Farm for Change: 氣候變遷、生態詩學與環境正義觀念實驗室

32 許立欣 | 荻瑾蓀國際會議在島上：「艾蜜莉・荻瑾蓀與生態」之跨文化生態人文實踐

AI專題最終章

39 孫春在 | 即時生成、個人化、語言可塑：AI的知識特質如何帶來跨領域、跨語言與跨模態？

學海行腳

52 阮秀莉 | 鐘聲悠揚中東歐一記2025東吳文化夏令營(2025/7/13–28)

The Future Impact of the Humanities

To the Readers in Taiwan

Robert Newman, the sixth president and director of the National Humanities Center (2015-24), USA

(The NHC is a private, nonprofit organization, and the only independent institute dedicated exclusively to advanced study in all areas of the humanities. <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org>)

If I have any regret about my nine years at the helm of the National Humanities Center, it is that I was not more persistent about committing the Center to be a voice against evil and injustice. I was drawn to a career in the humanities because their stories and lessons did just that. I believe we are at an inflection point in our history where the consequences of taking a wrong turn are potentially as dire as those humanity faced as we entered World War II. As storytellers, scholars, teachers, cultural and civic leaders, it is our responsibility to strategize ways to combat what otherwise might lead to the demise of the fundamental principles we hold dear. It is incumbent on us to create interventions in ways that have broad impact. To aspire to be neutral in the face of pervasive moral malfeasance, the cascading extinction of biodiversity, and the erosion of kindness, compassion, and community is to abnegate our responsibility and to succumb to being the academic Neville Chamberlains of our era.

During my time as a university Dean and as President of the Center, I've often been asked to define the humanities for peers as well as for the general public. Most think of what we do as a collection of distinct disciplines. I've aimed for a much broader explanation. I contend that the humanities offer the repository of our stories, a means for investigating their construction and dissemination, and the instruments for orchestrating new stories. Storytelling contains the full and indispensable array of tools necessary for interrogating and interpreting the human condition in all of its complexities. It does so by engaging the imagination and by producing deep and transformative emotional responses, by animating connections with others and rousing compassion, by elucidating the principles that encourage individual and social harmony, and by exposing the dangers of deception, isolation, and demagoguery. Thereby stories promote democratic thought, civil discourse, and personal fulfillment.

Given all the misinformed but effective negative rhetoric denigrating the humanities as irrelevant and unprofitable, we must ask the following questions: What fundamental changes must the humanities make if we are to preserve their value? How might they reassert their prominence at the core of education? How do we transcend our frustration and despair over a narrative of impending demise to recover agency and purpose in righteous resurrection? These, I believe, are questions we must proactively and substantively address.

With all of our ruminating on the crises in the humanities, particularly their supposed economic shortcomings and institutional marginalization, we should highlight their fundamental emotional power and the dull flatness to which we would be reduced in our everyday transactions without them. Much of the appeal of the humanities resides in their intensely personal revelations through imaginative connections to collective experiences, a knitting together of lives which make the boundaries of the self more permeable, more amenable to tolerance and connection. They permit us to transgress the invisible borders that otherwise separate one dimension of space, time, and identity from another. They bring new voices to the historical record that radically alter that record so that it becomes more comprehensive, more truthful. They also promote listening, focused attention, and reflection, all skills essential to civil and personal viability and sustenance. As a corollary to

Rachel Carson's opening in *Silent Spring*, "Imagine the world without birdsong," which galvanized the environmental movement in the 1960s, I would ask "imagine a world without metaphor."

The power of the humanities is best revealed in our shared pursuit of common and essential questions about what it means to be human. What constitutes a good life? How do we know the truth? How do we preserve democracy? What makes a civil society?

I think the impending planetary crises wrought by climate change offer a rallying point for us. The future of the Anthropocene is one that will increasingly require mediation in both practical and philosophical senses. Now technological mediation may ultimately reduce carbon emissions and produce sustainable energy resources. And cooperative political mediation could address environmental justice issues and the damage of industrial toxicity. But to build the solidarity necessary to take on the planetary crisis, a larger conceptual mediation inclusive of more broadly conceived visions of life rather than exclusively human ecosystems must also take place. This is the domain of the humanities.

Bridging the humanities and ecology requires a metaphoric reach beyond speciesist prejudices. With our focus on race, class, gender and sexuality studies during the past couple of decades, we've engaged in a lot of useful introspection about identity. I believe we now need to couple that with more extrospection, the studied relinquishment of a self-centered

perspective, guided by reaching out toward, but never quite enclosing, the viewpoints of other species as Lawrence Buell has written.

With predictions that two thirds of all non-human species will become extinct by 2050, it is necessary that we look beyond ourselves and discover other ways of knowing. For example, through their root systems, trees communicate warnings about pestilence and disease to each other and provide nutrients to ailing members of their group. Our difficulty imagining this stems from our habitually thinking of trees as individuals rather than as members of interconnected communities with diverse intergenerational associations high in the canopy and underground. We know that humpback whales consistently alter their songs with shifts in time and space and that elephants have highly sophisticated intergenerational social structures and exquisitely complex sensitivities for communication via their trunks and feet. Because they lack human language, are they mute? Do they not reason in their own way? Do they not invest their sounds and touches with narrative? Are they not telling stories that pass across generations to illuminate their lives? If we persist in neglecting to embrace the non-human world while fostering its eradication, is it not we humans who are mute and ignorant?

We also need a paradigmatic shift in how we conduct teaching and learning by focusing our students' attention on the idea of *legacy*, compelling them to consider how their actions have impact not

just on themselves but beyond themselves and on future lives, both human and not. Such a focus on *legacy* can alleviate their excessive interiority and translate theory to practice through using humanities methodologies to problem solve.

We must elevate that new pedagogy, continuing to focus on how the local is imbued with the universal, how we can promote information and civic literacy in truthfully examining our local histories in order to imagine a more just and inclusive future. Imagine if we broadly promoted the philosophical question of what constitutes *usefulness*, thereby refuting the nefarious rhetoric that has challenged the humanities. We should be finding fresh ways to demonstrate how restricting the definition of what is *useful* only to reductive notions of economic productivity while ignoring ethical considerations and social goals presents an impoverished perspective that unravels public cohesion. The great economic theorist John Maynard Keynes lamented, "We destroy the beauty of the countryside because the unappropriated splendors of nature have no economic value. We are capable of shutting off the sun and the stars because they do not pay a dividend."

Here is where the humanities must flourish over the next decade. They need to foster multidisciplinary initiatives focused on comprehensive approaches to our current crises. Ecological thinking must be woven throughout the fabric of our scholarship and pedagogy to promote



social and planetary justice. We can help lead the conversation about re-engineering academic reward systems so they are more collaborative and public-facing. Podcasts, hybrid pedagogical models, community partnerships, international blogs, and digital research tools are demonstrating that classrooms are not only within four walls and that scholarship exists not only in pages between covers. Our leadership has, and must continue to expand the humanities proposition, not as distinct sets of isolated subject matter, but as the most integrative, nimble, and innovative collection of resources and methodologies through which other disciplines prosper by association.

The Hebrew term Tikkun Olam refers to repairing a broken world so all can see the oneness of the creation. It goes back to the Old Testament Abraham, winds through the Kabbalah and Midrashic thought, and is made manifest in the modern mitzvahs that constitute acts of good will. It is a profound joining of mysticism with activism. Its spirit is inherent in the American Constitution, in ecological thought, and in the mission of the humanities.

More than any other area of study, the humanities are fundamentally linked to human rights, compassion, the mutuality of the individual and the collective, and the essential preservation and exploration of freedom through life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Laws may codify these practices, but the humanities provide both the underpinnings of that

codification and the methodologies by which they are refreshed and kept relevant.

My hope is that we will continue to be bold and refreshing so that we can be change agents for the greater good, so that we can promote truth and justice and combat evil through the excellence of our scholarship, educational and public engagement programs. While much of what we do in the humanities focuses on the intellect, our opportunities for the future also resonate with the heart, those humanities moments that offer glimpses of the transcendent. Let us stay mindful of bringing head and heart together because that is where we find the most powerful truths.

- This essay is excerpted from Dr. Robert Newman's retirement talk at the National Humanities Center, located in the Research Triangle Park of North Carolina, U.S.A., on October 18, 2024. Dr. Newman was President and Director of the National Humanities Center from 2015-24. The full talk is available at <https://www.youtube.com/live/-fJVaM7xneM?t=6216s> Dr. Robert D. Newman was installed as President and Director of the National Humanities Center on October 22, 2015. His inauguration address, which articulated a compelling vision for the humanities, is available at: <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/robert-d-newman-installed-as-president-and-director/>
- A significant focus of Robert Newman's presidency has been a concerted effort to champion the humanities to public



audiences more broadly, and he has traveled widely to speak with audiences around the world. His efforts have significantly raised the Center's profile as an important resource for scholars, educators, and other knowledge seekers. He has also organized several significant international gatherings bringing together humanities scholars, scientists, artists, policy makers, and activists to consider pressing issues, from hyper partisanship and political conflict to climate change to the development and implementation of artificial intelligence.

- Before assuming the presidency of the National Humanities Center, Dr. Newman was dean of the College of Humanities, professor of English, and associate vice president for interdisciplinary studies at the University of Utah where he was widely recognized for dramatically increasing support for the college, expanding its programs, and broadening campus diversity. In addition to establishing a new humanities building on campus, he led the creation of the university's centers for Asian studies and Latin American studies and of the country's first graduate program in Environmental Humanities.

—News From the Center <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/robert-d-newman-nhc-president-and-director-announce-s-retirement/>



Visionary Advocate of International Environmental Humanities: Robert Newman

Robin Visser (Professor, Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, UNC-Chapel Hill
National Humanities Center Fellow (2017-18))



November 18, 2023, National Humanities Center, Durham, North Carolina
Left to right: Su-ling Yeh (NTU), Matthew Booker (VP, NHC), Robert Newman (Director, NHC), Marguerite Nguyen (Wesleyan University), Robin Visser (UNC-Chapel Hill), Emily Baragwanath (UNC-Chapel Hill).

From the moment Robert Newman arrived at the National Humanities Center he was a strong advocate of environmen-

tal humanities research. I first met Robert in 2017-18 as an NHC Fellow writing a book on Sinophone eco-literature from China and Taiwan. I also worked closely with Robert to help co-organize the 2019 international conference *Beyond Despair: Theory and Practice in Environmental Humanities*. His ambitious vision was to bring together humanists, social scientists, artists, citizens, and scientists from around the world to encourage collaborative solutions to climate crisis. The resulting conference generated unique exchanges between local and international scholars, students, and citizens, and included field trips to local farms and archaeological sites. Spanning topics such as environmental justice, deforestation in Latin America, Indigenous art, environmental pedagogy in East Asia, and the role of fossil fuels in global militarism, participants shared ways to shape climate policies for the twenty-first century.

I enjoyed meeting Robert at NHC Fellow Alumni dinners, but the most memorable was in November 2023 before his retirement, where his speech was erudite, moving, and hilarious!

Robert is a supportive, innovative, visionary mentor and leader whom I am grateful to know.