

“Applied Humanities”

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Thank you for giving me this opportunity to think about my scholarship in relation to the problem besetting humanities scholars: justifying our relevance, defending our subject, straining for respect, (whining that we are misunderstood, or patiently citing all the latest studies from successful CEOs about the benefits of) – none of these rhetorical gestures have changed minds. So although this afternoon I’m also engaged in what I’ve already acknowledged may be a futile strategy, the story I tell is largely about practitioners of the humanities, those who put their rhetoric into practice, as a model, already familiar to many of you at Pacific, and which makes me extremely hopeful about a flourishing future.

To begin with myself: though my impulses have been largely culturally determined by birth and some small admixture of nature, the particular subjects of my scholarship have always been environmentally determined, which is to say, largely accidental, depending altogether on location, as you will see. My parents were both first generation college graduates and second generation US citizens; both became teachers and saw education as the key that led to assimilation, to relief from persecution their parents had suffered in Russia, and to lives lived as patriotic cosmopolitans, travelers who always felt that in coming home, to San Francisco where they lived and where I was born and raised, that they were coming home to the best place on earth. Some of my earliest memories are looking at a film in which my father dissected a frog for his community college students and listening to red records (which I still have, though I have no phonograph any longer to play them on), which my mother used to teach her first and second graders phonetics. The records helped me to learn to read by myself, a minor triumph at the time, but one that encouraged me to be alone with a book, to feel that characters in stories were sufficient, sometimes even, superior company. Imaginary worlds were permeable as they could offer me both escape from and opportunities for reflection of what I would find outside the pages of a book. I loved to read because I was good at it, because learning young, it seemed easy, and natural. (By the time I was given a knife in high school, it was too late to feel that carving up a frog was similarly natural. Which is to say, applied learning can never happen too early!)

As I grew older, stories became a way of understanding that the world was made up of diverse peoples and histories and different languages, in which words might not mean the same thing even when translated. For me, growing up meant growing up as a reader such that I began to interrogate my own sympathies which had once seemed so spontaneous and universal. In graduate school, at a time when my professors were preoccupied with various forms of theory, I wanted to trace the history of feeling. What accounted for the sudden shift in values that between roughly 1865 and 1895 in less than 30 years – when what had once been a word of praise – sentiment -- became derogatory – sentimental -- scorned as inauthentic, gendered as feminine, cheap, unearned? I side stepped the greatest example of 19th-century sentimental literature to compare and contrast the ways in which Hawthorne and Dickens depended on arousing

sentiment in their readers as powerful rhetorical tools. But Harriet Beecher Stowe's closing remarks in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* haunted me then and still do now:

There is one thing that every individual can do, – they can see to it that they feel right. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who feels strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. (45.21)

How could she be so sure that there was this thing called feeling right, and that humanity could feel the same way? In hindsight, looking back over my career as a teacher and scholar, I can say that I have been animated to test that assumption. What feelings, if any, can be assumed to be universal? When can one assume a shared humanity, a single human race? What kind of art and what kind of politics can occur if human differences cannot be elided? What good are the humanities (and I might add all forms of knowledge) if they are not shared? Beyond our Gates in spades.

After graduate school, I swerved from the study of great books, those I had first fallen in love with, because I was overwhelmed by the tradition of criticism, and by the authors themselves. I didn't feel able to stand next to them, to find a way to something fresh, new, distinctively mine about subjects owned by so many. How could I possibly believe that after so many interpretations, one more would matter? I have suffered, along with so many others in the humanities, the end of what Luke Menand calls the Golden Age, and have had to find my way in a world in which the humanities have been considered, both inside and outside the academy, frivolous when compared to the sciences or vocational study or, even worse, arcane.

My solution as a critic was to write books that were primarily historical, bringing to the attention of scholars cultural practitioners relatively obscure and uncelebrated. I could avoid feeling superfluous, could even feel virtuous bringing to light relative unknowns, and in the process I was able to demonstrate how what seemed to be minor projects illuminated major American preoccupations: 1. The identification of a national culture as opposed to a regional one (or derivative European one) [Whitman, Emerson] and 2. The incorporation of outcast voices into mainstream culture [Huck Finn, the Blues]. The accidental must describe my coming across the subjects for my books. Visiting Cynthia in Berkeley, I tagged along with her to a performance she was attending which was how I was introduced to The Medea Project: Theater of Incarcerated Women. On sabbatical, living in Washington DC with a group of people involved in the short lived (and very expensive) American National Theater at the Kennedy Center I went with them to view the papers of the earlier incarnation of an American National Theater housed then at George Mason University. I had never heard of The Medea Project though it took place in San Francisco, my home town, and though I had seen the WPA murals in Coit Tower, and had glanced at an old WPA California Guide Book at home, I was completely unaware of the WPA Federal Theater, much less the Negro Units of the Federal Theater Project.

But in both instances what drew me in were the discordant sounds, the clashing of individual voices, in the service of a collective project to create a more democratic and productive nation. The interviews I found in the archives at George Mason of the people who had worked in the WPA Federal Theater and the interviews I conducted in San Francisco, with the incarcerated and ex, were filled with vivid stories of aspirations and dashed hopes: to transform American culture,

to rehabilitate American lives. That is to say, both of these projects applied the arts to solve social problems. After all, the WPA was about putting people to work; so, too, The Medea Project attempts to educate the most uneducated among us to think about the skills they would need to take care of their children and of themselves. Both leaders were pragmatic about the limits of art in the face of institutional impediments, and both knew they could be successful only in so far as they were able to work collaboratively across whole swatches of institutions: Flanagan had to convince Congress, citizens, and general audiences that there would be a visible payoff from spending tax dollars on the arts; Jones has to manage the bureaucracy of a jail system, and persuade philanthropists and social workers to work with her. Both insisted upon expanding access: Flanagan not only organized Negro Units, but Yiddish and Spanish ones, and her notion was not that theater should happen only in New York or in Washington DC but around the country, even *in* the countryside. Just as the brilliant part of Jones's project was to convince the sheriff that the jailed women should perform in public, allowing all of us in that space together wonder what makes some of us free and others not. Both projects complicated the notion of the human race, as Negroes disagreed over what constituted an authentic Negro, and the incarcerated women argued whether Medea was helpless or to blame for killing her children. I was captivated by both projects for the ways in which they overturned and complicated normative views of identity – personal, racial, and national -- even as they insisted on a common purpose: that in sharing stories and expertise, people could create a more effective and empathetic social world.

Since writing those books, in my own teaching, scholarship, and deaning, I have been testing the value of collaboration and application as a strategy for more effective learning and an expansion of the connections among us. For the past six years I have taught a course on Urban Arts, an exploration of how creative expression fuels the economy of cities. Using depressed Hartford Connecticut as my backdrop, I had students read Richard Florida's *The Creative Class*. Is it true, as he contends, that high tech, a gay life style, universities, engineers, and artists are drivers of a vibrant economy? And what Portland and Austin and San Francisco, for instance, share? My students and I would fan out over various disciplines and institutions, visiting conventional and alternative arts spaces; meeting with bloggers and entrepreneurs; trolling the internet for the latest in how music is marketed. I wanted the students to interview curators and real estate agents, to do further research on some aspect of what they heard, write individual papers testing Florida's theories, and collaborate on a creative project. They were already very accomplished consumers; how might they become producers? As artists or chemists or historians – or all three?

One year I had them put on a week's worth of *365 Days/365 Plays*, written by Suzan-Lori Parks, an author I had been following and writing about for some time. I set them loose to figure out what they wanted to do, where, and how, with the only stipulation that they would perform in a public space, not just for students in the class. Very few of those students planned to major in the arts, but off they went, to collaborate on sets, design, advertising. Knowing that their peers would be their audience (and anyone else in the community who would be passing by or who would come) they took more care with this presentation than they had with their papers, written only for me. Insisting that my students *do* and then contemplate how successful their doing had made made their thinking more arresting, their language more concrete. I have become convinced that the interweaving of reading (theory) and practice (application) is a great fit for students of the 21st century. Bringing together students with very different interests and skills (artists and

engineers, creative writers and proto advertisers) took some translation, certainly, but also made the end project much more successful, all around. It takes a village, indeed.

As a scholar, I was fascinated by Parks – because of the way in which she over ran traditional categories, literary, racial, cultural. Her work has ranged from the highly experimental to the utterly commercial --from early, experimental plays like *Betting on the Dust Commander* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* to the later more realistic Pulitzer prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog*; she has written the screenplay for Spike Lee's film *Girl 6* and the script for Oprah Winfrey's television adaptation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; and also a Faulknerian novel, *Getting Mother's Body*, her take on *As I Lay Dying*; she writes songs too. Winner now of both a Pulitzer and a MacArthur, Parks is hardly an unknown as she mostly was when I first saw her work in New York a decade ago. For those who follow theater, she is very well known, far more so than Rhodessa Jones. She gives interviews and talks at colleges; she appears on Charlie Rose; is paired with Wynton Marsalis for televised conversations; she and Eric Schlosser share the same agent. I'm interested what makes her so potent an artist – what makes her connect so well.

Here is a clip of Parks talking to students at Emerson. <http://livestre.am/4pj6r> (45.42) XXXXX
 You can see how inspirational she is; how well she connects to college students. Find what is missing, she says, reflect each day on your day and make connections. So Ralph Waldo Emerson visits Emerson College along with Suzan-Lori Parks! What I believe is exciting about Parks is the way in which she invites us to take part in her projects, whether by tracing the ways in which she invokes a literary precursor like Hawthorne – or by asking all of us to stage our own days and then hers as well. It wasn't enough just to have written the plays, or even have a theater produce them. Instead she and Bonnie Metzger, her directing partner, decided to co-produce a *365 Days/Plays* National Festival, involving hundreds of theaters around the United States, lasting an entire year, leasing out the rights for a dollar to theaters to put on a week's worth of plays from November 13th to November 12th, 2006-07. I saw the 2006 Thanksgiving week in some theater I couldn't now find my way to in Oakland! This effort, as Parks and Metzger wrote in the printed edition, created “a testament not only to the daily artistic process, but also to the incredible diversity and richness of the American theatrical landscape” (401). And beyond that, it testified to Parks's belief that the arts are at “the very center of life – not as a monument but as a commonplace necessity like fire, water, bread or shoes” (401).

It felt (I think) to those of us who watched different weeks performed in different venues by different companies, or produced/performed in them ourselves, that the single play or individual event gained weight, “energy,” because we knew we were part of something more. I don't know if we were cleansed or purged by what we saw, but there was an undeniable *frisson*, an energy, of being part of something larger, some idea grander than the single performance. It was clear there wasn't a “right” way to do, for instance, Day 1 “Start Here”; they started everywhere and led to who knew where. Multiple productions got thrown up on youtube; you could see them almost immediately, in real time. Some productions used videos and elaborate staging; others had people stand on a corner and read the words. It was all an experiment, all multiple and exponential attempts at uncoiling the energy from the words on the page. It tied people together and made them aware not only of the state of their own small city/community, but of others, everywhere, interrogating their own borders and how they should stage their “here.” Professor

Macelle Mahala presented a production last year at Pacific – 70 Days worth! Here is just the first scene of *365 Days*, put on by Pacific students. **XXXXXXX**

I can tell you there are no stage directions that guided Professor Mahala and her actors. But you can tell they connected with their audience; laughter, silence, overload, something not understood, a mystery. What would happen next? Where would it end? She made room for us.

What drew me to Parks, as a teacher and as a scholar, was the way she modeled a kind of joyous and fearless and experiential practice that mixed together a vast amount of canonical learning and the confidence to turn it upside down and inside out and create something new. So, for the first time I was actually able to write about the great authors I had veered away from since graduate school because she became my medium – her play, *Fucking A* being one of her *Scarlet Letter* plays in which the “heroine” has five children and is herself an illiterate living under a bridge. I’d never found a way to write about Hawthorne or Faulkner or Shakespeare, but now because she played around with them, I had a path through her to them.

Educated at Mt. Holyoke, Parks is a product of the liberal arts tradition. She embraces all roads, all traditions, religious, philosophical, and certainly literary. She suffers no anxiety of influence. Her interest in engaging with Great Authors, the sacred literary canon, is driven by a desire to exercise artistic freedom. She does not find them alien figures, but rather, Ancestors, who ought to be honored, enjoyed, digested, *used*. Wisdom is to be found everywhere. People can claim as family heritage any piece of the literary or religious tradition. Parks refuses a simple equation of experience to creation. The whole idea that one ought to “write what one knows,” she dismisses:

There is a rule that one should write only about "what one knows," which is often interpreted to mean that, if the writer has never been married, but has just broken up with her beau, broken beaung, and not marriage, is the suitable subject for her. Well. We "know" much more than our conscious minds think we know. . . . There is a truth that undercurrents most writing, regardless of situation or subject matter. While there are many fine poets who fought a duel a day, many playwrights who slept with all the men in the state of Texas, many novelists who rode motorcycles helmetless at high speeds, remember too that Phillis Wheatley was a slave, Anton Chekhov worked as a simple country doctor, and Marcel Proust and Emily Dickinson both hardly ever went out of the house. (“Tradition” 27-28)

Truth, for Parks, (a different register from the essential) underlies most of her writing. But truth is not biologically determined; it has nothing to do with race; or predeliction (riding motorcycles helmetless) or circumstance (working as a country doctor). Truth lies elsewhere: in an imagination alive to more than chance or fate. No one sort of life guarantees access to an imaginative truth, but a certain kind of practical openness might.

Duality and Inclusivity are principles she insists upon, as the most important creative principles under which she operates. This may be biographically driven: her father in the Army, the family wandering, going to school in Germany where she didn’t know the language. Raised Roman Catholic, she invokes more often now a sort of *mélange* of New Age/Far Eastern practices (yoga, meditation, Zen, dance) that she relies on to stay creative. James Baldwin, her teacher in college, became a model for her, of an artist bound to his discipline of writing, and through writing, developed a more capacious, inclusive self. Parks, from the beginning then, had this model of

writing in which you write not just for your self or about your self, or others like your self, but rather a model in which you write to and for the many, that is, for all. She is not so different from Stowe, that is, in her insistence on a humanity which she finds by listening for it.

As teacher, scholar, and – finally – dean, these practitioners, Flanagan, Jones, Parks have been my models for the kind of applied creativity I believe in. “See what’s missing in the world and make it appear.” Attuned to the past and the present, collaborate with others with different skills and compose a different future. I am thrilled that in the seven short weeks I’ve been here in Stockton, at the College of the Pacific I’ve found numerous examples of the sort of radical inclusivity, collaboration, exploration, and innovation – a reaching out beyond our own disciplinary gates and those that separate us from Stockton. Students are *doing*; they’re not just passively learning. Students with Professor Hetrick are mapping in three dimensions meteors that are hitting the atmosphere – hitting it right now! Next year, local high school students who live in District 4, Downtown/lower Magnolia will be joined by our students in walking the streets to map the kinds of businesses, grocery stores that are there in order to make recommendations that would (we think) improve health outcomes, with the research to be written up by sociologists Lara Killick and Ethel Nicdao. I just bought the most beautiful plates made by graduating senior Jessica Fong, which I could hang on the wall, but I’d rather, and Professor Burkett gives me permission, eat off of them. **XXXX** Power point photos of Jennifer Fong.

As I think about the Strategic Plan of 2020 I bold three points that are, to me, the most important. **XXXX** Power Point Strategic Plan 1 and then 2. First, that innovative teaching for our 21st-century student means, I believe, emphasizing applied strategies that challenge students to test their theories in practice; second, that the model of teacher-scholar is fundamental because if a teacher isn’t engaged in cutting edge research we cannot prepare our students for the world they will graduate into, nor can we expect students to perform the kind of research they will have to do in whatever vocation they choose – whether it be manipulating statistics or analyzing reliable data; and finally, though it may be accidental that we are all here, since we are, I believe we have an obligation to connect beyond our gates because if we do not we will not prepare our students for the world elsewhere. The world is a complex place. We need to let our students know what is missing – and give them the tools to fashion what’s needed. Stats, Data, a Telescope, A Brief Written for the Supreme Court, a Wheel to Throw a Pot, and a Business Plan to Market it. We ought to be able to measure to what degree our students know more than facts but can create something that’s missing by the time they leave the Pacific. Let us figure out how to assess *that* course of study!

Journeys abound on the western frontier. They are part of our heritage, part of our history. So it seems fitting that the books I’ve been reading by scholars at the College the last few weeks have been reading is *The Indianization of Lewis and Clark, Volume I* in which I am learning the virtues of wearing deer skin rather than linen coats, and Amy Smith’s *All Roads Lead to Austen*, in which she recounts the reading groups she led in Spanish all over Central and Latin America to see what translated and what did not. Both exemplars of how we become transformed by contact with others different from ourselves. And in the process, for better and worse, trade and business and all kinds of cultural exchange follow. Helping students navigate this world is what we do as teachers and scholars. As a student myself, I have already been transformed by what I have found here, in my conversations with you about the past and present. I am looking for my

next accidental scholarly project, and, while searching for it, I dedicate myself to support you with yours already well launched.