

# Introduction

## Humanities to the Rescue

DAVID R. CASTILLO

The Humanities to the Rescue book series is a public humanities project dedicated to discussing the role of the arts and the humanities today. As we reflect on the current “crisis of the humanities” in the context of the multifaceted and profound challenges we face in the twenty-first century, the first obvious question we might ask is: What can we do to rescue the arts and humanities from the failing funding model of higher education and the perils of the market university? Yet, Humanities to the Rescue seeks to answer an even bigger and potentially more pressing question: *What can the arts and humanities do to rescue our communities from the antismarts epidemic that has taken hold of public discourse in the post-truth age?* This new book series will explore the different ways in which humanistic disciplines can help us interpret and navigate our rapidly changing environment in the current age of media saturation and informational silos.

As we are inundated 24/7 with a barrage of fake news, demagoguery, hate speech, and self-interested denialisms that are threatening our democratic institutions (not to mention our planetary survival), it is more urgent than ever for the humanities to reclaim a central place in public discourse; to bring evidence-based analysis, ethics, imagination, and creativity to bear on the big challenges of our time. In the current social environment dominated by *attention merchants* who trade in misinformation and divisiveness, the arts and humanities must continue to point the way forward.<sup>1</sup> While

the erosion of our civic and political institutions has accelerated with the rise of entrenched media silos, coming to grips with the current crisis of democracy and reclaiming a viable democratic future will require a sense of history and a collective reinvestment in humanistic education, dialectical inquiry, public ethics, and political imagination.

A locally and globally engaged and engaging humanities must help us break through the walls of the media bubble that treats intellectualism with impatience and suspicion while offering cover to the special interests invested in ignoring or actively denying such uncomfortable realities as global warming and structural injustice. Humanists and artists can bring crucial skills to address the current resurgence of authoritarianism, fundamentalism, racism, and misogyny, as well as the cynical posturing that continues to justify destructive economic and environmental policies.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking as the UB Silver's Visiting Professor in the Humanities as part of the inaugural 2018 "Humanities to the Rescue" event that inspired the creation of this book series, fiction writer Margaret Atwood challenged her audience to reflect on the seminal questions that drive the humanities. She made a key point about the need to revisit these historically humanistic questions as we ponder the future we would want to inhabit: "Here is a question that is at the core of the humanities [. . .] Where and how do we want to live? Is it in a society that strives to right ancient wrongs, to search for balance and equality, and to respect truth and fairness, or do we want to live in some other place in some other way? It will be up to you to decide that, to question values, to explore the nature of truth and fairness. It will be up to you to understand the stories and to create better ones."<sup>3</sup>

The Humanities to the Rescue book series seeks to deepen our understanding of the stories that make sense of our world and to help us envision better ones (as Atwood urged us to do). In the process, we will examine the cultural, economic, and political structures that bind us while fostering regenerative ways of thinking and reimagining the past, the present, and the future. The contributors to this inaugural volume deal directly with these matters as they revisit, reclaim, and reassess the "revolutionary" legacy of May '68 in light of the urgency of the future in true Benjaminian fashion.<sup>4</sup>

As indicated in the Acknowledgments, this essay collection grew out of a 2018 UB Conference organized and sponsored by the Humanities Institute and the Melodia E. Jones Chair and cosponsored by the Department of Comparative Literature, the Department of English, the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, and the Eugenio Donato Chair of Comparative Literature. In 2018, French and Francophone scholars and

cultural theorists memorialized and celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of May '68 all over the world. Using these commemorative events as context, the conference organizers asked a distinguished group of international scholars working on both sides of the Atlantic to retrace the transcontinental seeding(s) of May '68 and to help us rekindle their unfulfilled utopianism. The resulting symposium turned out to be every bit as stimulating as we had hoped: "Buffalo: Transcontinental Crossroads of a Critical Insurrection."

Our invited speakers take on that same charge with renewed commitment in this collaborative volume. They bear witness to the radical *multivocality* and *multilocality* of May '68 as a seminal *place of memory* (to refer to Philip Sheldrake's conceptualization) that continues to inspire progressive utopianisms.<sup>5</sup> As Ewa Ziarek notes in her afterword in dialogue with Alain Badiou and Hannah Arendt, *Transcontinental Crossroads* is ultimately a collaborative *act of renewal* that transcends notions of origin and "fidelity to the event" in favor of "new beginnings" (Ziarek).

This idea of a new or "other beginning" of thought is precisely what guides Alberto Moreiras's journey through the multivocal ferments of May '68 in Alain Badiou's *communism*, Etienne Balibar's *citizen-subject*, and Jean-Luc Nancy's *non-equivalential democracy*. Moreiras's essay is as much an exploration of the critical legacy of May '68 as it is a sustained effort to *think anew*, outside and against the dominant Hegelian paradigm. If Moreiras's vision for a new beginning of thought expresses itself through the multivocality of Badiou's, Balibar's, and Nancy's political philosophies, Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott underscores the multilocality of the legacy of May '68 in discussing what he calls the French and the Latin American '68s. He describes the historical "revolt" and its aftermath as the momentous withering away of the relationship between philosophy and politics that would lead to transcontinental interrogations of the categorical order of thought (the Hegelian paradigm in particular), starting with the philosophical writings of French theorist Georges Bataille and the interdisciplinary and multifaceted work of Italian historian Furio Jesi.

While Villalobos-Ruminott looks South to the Latin American '68, others focus on the North American crossroads of this critical insurrection going back to—as Jane Gaines reminds us—*Columbia Revolt* (1968), the documentary shot by the radical collective New York Newsreel. Gaines notes that the events of May '68 and the sustained intellectual movement that followed produced a storm in the US academy, as the philosophical foundations laid in the journals *Tel Quel*, *Positif*, *Cinématique*, and *Cahiers du Cinéma* arrived via the British journal *Screen*, where they were hotly debated

and reformulated, first as reengagement with Marx and Freud and later with Foucault and Derrida. The question for Gaines is whether the legacy of May '68 has been disavowed in the US academy in the aftermath of the historical "turn" of the late twentieth century or whether it has taken on new forms.

In his own retracing of the post-'68 reception of French theory in the US, Jonathan Culler underscores the American invention of poststructuralism, a term that has had little currency in France. Culler pinpoints Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss in "Structure, Sign, and Play" as a foundational text leading to the poststructuralist turn. Culler reengages Derrida's key text in a broad-ranging discussion involving structuralism and poststructuralism, as well as the paradigm-shifting French theory of the 1980s and the New Criticism.

For his part, Vincent Broqua traces the appropriation of poststructuralist theory in the US through the lens of the Language Poetry and New Narrative movements. Broqua notes that while few French philosophers are to be found in the short-lived  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  journal, this does not mean that French theory was absent from the thinking apparatuses of the Language poets. He argues that the West Coast writers associated with the New Narrative movement distinguished themselves from the Language poets in their programmatic attempts to bring back the "gendered subject." According to Broqua this may be interpreted as an effort to achieve in the realm of writing what postminimalism and postconceptualism had accomplished for minimalist and conceptual art.

Peter Consenstein traces another transcontinental literary thread around the experimental work of *Oulipo* going back to the 1960s and '70s. Consenstein reframes the work of the group as a radical form of *collective hacking* that he links to game strategies. He builds on McKenzie Wark's "gamer theory" to offer a class-oriented alternative to the feminist, American, and political critiques of *Oulipo*. Jan Baetens also goes back to the 1960s to illuminate the historical links between certain strings of French theory and emerging forms of cultural experimentation in the fields of graphic art and photography, including the photo stories known as *fumetti*. He examines the background of emerging scholarship in visual mass culture with a focus on the many thresholds that had to be crossed, and the promises it offered for a fruitful encounter between new forms of critical theory and the field of graphic narrative. His historical retrospective registers a subsequent period of "missed encounters" before the recent revival of critical interest in graphic narrative in French theory circles.

Fernanda Negrete also explores the link between French philosophy and experimental literature. She focuses on the centrality of the notion of

love (*amour*) in post-'68 intellectual circles, especially in the work of Jacques Lacan and Marguerite Duras. Negrete notes that both Lacan and Duras are keenly interested in the potential of love to generate a transformative space beyond the orders of self- and group-identities that would include (or actively embrace) the disruptive force of the unconscious. Negrete is particularly interested in a dimension of *the letter* that Lacan and Duras located beyond the purview of the signifier, in the domains of literature and the psychoanalytic clinic. She underscores the potential of this radically inclusive notion of love to foster new modes of relation today.

Emile Lévesque-Jalbert discusses the deconstructive reading of community performed by Maurice Blanchot. Borrowing from the bipartition of Blanchot's *La Communauté inavouable*, he traces the theme of community through two important readings of Blanchot's work, Nancy's *La Communauté affrontée* and Derrida's *Politiques de l'amitié*. In dialogue with these seminal interpretations and in light of Blanchot's later works (and keeping in mind the orientation of his political activism of the 1960s), Lévesque-Jalbert argues for a "constructive" reading of Blanchot that would underscore the potential of "literature" to build a community for those without community.

For her part, Alison James assesses the recent wave of "new formalisms" in Anglophone literary criticism (e.g., the work of Caroline Levine), which prolongs the legacy of French philosophy—especially with reference to Foucault. James argues that these approaches rehabilitate form only by emphasizing formal disruption, conflict, and inadequacy, often reinforcing the incommensurability of the literary and the social. She notes that contemporary theorists in France, in the meantime, seek alternatives to the idea of form by reconceptualizing rhythm and style.

In her essay, James makes an important point about the mediating function of style, which will reappear in Ziarek's critique of "algorithmic thinking" apropos the emerging aesthetics of data presentation. As Ziarek writes: "Defined by Alison James as the mediation between singular expression and the generality of meaning, the matters of artistic style can be deployed to question the new aesthetic practices of visual presentation of data" (Ziarek). Following this argumentative thread, Ziarek insists on the enduring value of the humanities beyond quantifiable, market-driven notions of instrumentality. As a multifaceted set of interpretive traditions, the humanities would thus offer—according to Ziarek—a much-needed reprieve from (and resistance against) what she calls "the datafied world."

In this sense, one could read the essays included in this volume as effective illustrations of the potential of such interpretive traditions as

philosophy, literature, and cultural criticism to run interference with (and offer alternatives to) the instrumental logic that reduces the world to a collection of quantifiable and tradable resources. The present book would thus provide a broad multivocal response to Lucile Haute's invitation to interrogate our current uses of technologies (in the dual sense captured by the French term *dispositifs*, i.e., devices and apparatuses) and to reflect on their cultural and political implications. While Michel Pierssens is certainly right to point out that the historical conditions that resulted in the "rupture of May '68" are unique in nature and scope, it is also true (as he himself suggests) that the legacy of that rupture could and should inspire new calls to "enthusiastic" action. This is indeed one way to reclaim the legacy of May '68 and to reissue its insurrectional utopianism: Humanities to the Rescue!

## Notes

1. I am borrowing the concept of "attention merchants" from Tim Wu's insightful history of the commodification and monetization of attention in *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get inside Our Heads* (New York: Vintage, 2017).

2. William Egginton and I make this point about the renewed urgency of the Humanities today in dialogue with an earlier age of media saturation in *Media-logies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

3. Quoted in Julia Beck, "During Speech at UB, Atwood Stresses the Importance of the Humanities." Buffalo News, March 19, 2018, [buffalonews.com/2018/03/19/during-speech-at-ub-atwood-stresses-the-importance-of-the-humanities](http://buffalonews.com/2018/03/19/during-speech-at-ub-atwood-stresses-the-importance-of-the-humanities).

4. I am referring here to Walter Benjamin's notion that "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' [. . .] but to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger," in "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.

5. In Philip Shelldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), Shelldrake argues that our symbolic places of memory are not only multivocalities but also multilocalities.