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No Time to Defend the Pre-Post-Truth World

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RICHARD PICKARD

No Time to Defend the Pre-Post-Truth World

If by “post-truth world” we mean a suite of interlocking social structures productive of, and dependent for its continued thriving on the persistence of, strategies intended to diminish the reputation, profile, and accessibility of expertise, knowledge, and evidence-based decision-making, then the humanities need only get louder. There is in this arena a battle to be joined, where both the ground and the prize is the social order precisely under attack by the “post-truth” shock troops of PR, punditry, faux journalism, and party politics.

But the humanities, done right, shouldn’t accept the “post-truth” concept at face value, and it’s here that the humanities could contribute the most in this epoch. In essence, the concept of the “post-truth world” implies that the world (“world”) under attack (“attack”) was or is somehow an actual “truth world.” Both presentism and Golden Age-ism are at work in such an assumption, a liberal sense that we’ve managed to change the world for the better over the years of progress, and so the assumption shades imperceptibly at first but incontrovertibly toward conservatism: our world ought not to be questioned and altered, not at its core. Those blamed for the turn to “post-truth,” for their part, decry conservatively the changes that had led to the present “truth” under attack, and come to shade toward the liberal in their appetite for change.

In such a cultural moment, the role of the humanities must be to imagine beyond this swirling, roiling, unproductive oppositionalism. I do not mean to characterize this as a utopian vision or mission, far from it, because after all the fundamental method of the humanities is the Socratic one of asking questions that require the doubting and surpassing of accepted wisdom. Instead, I hope that the humanities can help the broader culture to see the gaps, weaknesses, failures, deficiencies, hypocrisies, and outright malignities that were so manifestly but obscuredly central to the functioning of this world now under attack by the “post-truth”: a world that was marked by accelerating anthropogenic climate change, by ongoing and transforming colonialism, by racism as a structural pillar, by misogyny and sexism.

This was a world where, at a minimum, settler scholars in Canada ought to have regularly declared their debts and obligations to Indigenous peoples whose inhabitation of the land had continued for so long, and to the present day. It was a world where we ought to have consistently refused racialized hierarchies and resisted gendered power structures. It was a world where we should never have stopped insisting that we had collectively been making the

atmosphere and innumerable local environments hostile to the continued existence of humans and of so many other species.

To be plain, this was clearly not the world in existence before the influential rise of those forces we have come to call “post-truth.”

The role of the humanities is to read, and to teach others to read, the kinds of radicalizing texts that do not accept as good enough what is merely the best so far. I think here of, for example:

- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love*
- Jon Gordon, *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions*
- Ursula Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*
- John Lutz, *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations*
- Rita Wong and Dorothy Christian, eds., *Downstream: Reimagining Water*

If through such texts, and such writers, we can come together to recognize and respond to climate change and colonialism, racism and sexism, then perhaps the environmental humanities could help us make our next set of mistakes smaller and less malign. This is by far a more important role than joining the fight against the “post-truth,” because at bottom, such a fight would be only a rearguard action for the humanities, a distraction. The version of “world” under attack in this battle ought not to be conserved or protected, but changed.

This is no time to surrender the radical and radicalizing potential of the humanities. More of us should have been challenging the status quo more fiercely than we were before the “post-truth” turn, and opposing the “post-truth” must not end in a defense of something we should not have been defending in the first place.

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RICHARD PICKARD is a settler and assistant teaching professor living and working on the traditional territories of the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, in the Department of English at the University of Victoria. He teaches composition, professional writing, eighteenth-century poetry, and the environmental humanities.

Reflecting on his scholarly practice, he writes: “every time I come to think, talk or teach about literature, environment, and culture in Canada, I carry with me all the separate occupations, both personal and collective, that my family and I have enacted during our time here, but I am indebted particularly to the Qu’wut’sun, the Snuneymuxw, the Kwakiutl, the Skwax, and the Songhees. To quote Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker, “To choose to identify as Settler Canadian today is as good as declaring, ‘I am aware that I am illegitimate on the land, and I know that I am complicit with and benefit from settler colonialism’” (109). I am a Settler Canadian, and I am therefore illegitimate on the land.”