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## To the Humanities: What Does Communication Studies Give?

Mari Lee Mifsud

University of Richmond, [mmifsud@richmond.edu](mailto:mmifsud@richmond.edu)

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## **To the humanities: what does communication studies give?<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This special issue of *Review of Communication* presents new offerings of the study of communication, forging present and future humanities. This Introduction engages the six essays in this special issue—which extend and intersect across categories of the humanistic study of communication: communication philosophy and ethics, rhetorical theory, history, pedagogy, criticism, and digital humanities—to explore their contributions in defense of the humanities. Taken together, these essays explore the study of communication as 1) a resource for inquiring and exchanging with concepts, practices, and embodiments of difference, the other, and the posthuman; 2) a means of examining the ontological, epistemological, technological, existential, performative, and ethical implications of our communicative being, our being constituted by symbolic action and mediated exchange in ever-present yet always variant material and affective environments, spaces, and places; 3) a discipline emerging from rhetoric, one of the original liberal arts, yet developing in transdisciplinary ways, transforming the binary of humanities and sciences; 4) a tool for decolonizing knowledge(s); 5) a tool for exploring, critiquing, engaging, and creating with the new media of our digital lives together; 6) a long-standing yet ever inventive method and mode for public humanities; and 7) a praxis of resistance. These essays bring to light what studying communication offers the humanities: a plural, public, reflexive, and ever inventive enterprise for examining being human together on this planet.

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<sup>1</sup> Mari Lee Mifsud, Department of Rhetoric and Communication Studies, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA, USA. Email: mmifsud@richmond.edu.

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Like you reading this, I too, study. When I first discovered studying, it happened through a set of encyclopedias my family had purchased. I fell into every world of every word of every image on every page, like magic. I would transform, expanding my awareness of what is possible for being who I could become in a world with others on this planet. I would share my discoveries with such enthusiasm with anyone in my orbit, mostly my family. My family, loving as they were, wondered who I was. My older brother, jokingly yet tellingly, called me “the walking encyclopedia of useless information.” I rather loved this title, laughing along, only for the comedy that he did not know yet of this magical escape from utility, the ensuing freedom and undisturbable joy.

I write so personally to open this special issue as a way of responding to the call of these collected essays. Studying these essays, individually and as a collection, calls us to be deeply reflexive about our stakes in the study of the humanities and as a study of communication, to wonder about such things as joy, freedom, utility, information, knowledge, our human situation in communication on this planet, and all the traditional assumptions about these things. These essays call us to question, too, the use of the term and concept of “human.” In my opening tale, I share of being in question as a child in love with study. This being in question took on a clearly gendered life as now, for being a woman, I am in question, or perhaps better yet under question, for the oppression of the query.<sup>1</sup> The symbolic violence of being in question intensifies for people of color, of diverse genders, sexualities, ethnicities, abilities.<sup>2</sup> This being in question is suffered too by the humanities. As we ask what can be given the humanities for defense against this being in question, these essays offer a vision of posthumanist *paideia*, rhetorical study that attends to affects and environments in the intermingling of matter and meaning. They offer *epideixis* on the public-focused power and possibilities of studying communication, for its

capacity to expose and reform public problems such as violence, racism, classism, and as Nathan Crick puts it in his essay, at large the vileness of the ignoramus. They offer faith, as Jessica N. Sturges puts it in her essay, in the ever inventive, ever generative potential of studying being human in and through communication.<sup>3</sup> This study inspires discovery of worlds and ways of being available to us for what we could become in a life together on this planet.

How could there be a crisis or demise of the humanities in such conditions of need and possibility for studying being human? Yet the proclamations of crisis persist and abound anew.<sup>4</sup> To survey the many evidence-based claims and analytic assessments of crises in the humanities is not my focus in this essay. Rather, I work with the essays in this special issue to discern principles at play in defining, naming, qualifying, and proceeding to assess what studying communication offers the humanities. Thinking through these *stases* shows an ancient resource of our discipline, namely the reflexive awareness that these claims and assessments of crises in the humanities are rhetorics, mediated in a communication economy constituting and exchanging ideas and attitudes about the humanities and interacting with the built and natural environments of their making. In the study of communication this need is both given, as in a first principle of studying communication, and offered to the humanities by the study of communication to fortify its resources.

This special issue is not the first taking stock of the contributions studying communication gives the humanities. It follows and reflects on a 2007 National Communication Association (NCA) white paper that gave an account of the field's categories of study and respective contributions. Their tally, in brief, shows the study of communication:

- offers essential exploration of the means and modes of democratic life and the orchestration of a free people whose organizing principle is a shared responsibility as citizens to engage in living well together
- offers critical understanding and resources for navigating, critiquing, engaging, and preserving the ever-changing arts of expression, systems of exchange, and structures of power through the ages and across cultures
- maps, archives, and preserves the diversity of human knowing, being, and doing by traversing historical, interpretive, theoretical, performative, critical, and cultural lines<sup>5</sup>

This special issue of *The Review of Communication* launches from this NCA white paper and presents new offerings of the study of communication, forging present and future humanities by extending and intersecting across categories of the humanistic study of communication: communication philosophy and ethics, rhetorical theory, history, pedagogy, criticism, and digital humanities. Moreover, one essay, written by two social scientists, extends beyond the humanities, recognizing that science not only ought not, but more so cannot, proceed without the humanities.

Taken together, these essays explore the study of communication as 1) a resource for inquiring and exchanging with concepts, practices, and embodiments of difference, the other, and the posthuman; 2) a means of examining the ontological, epistemological, technological, existential, performative, and ethical implications of our communicative being, our being constituted by symbolic action and mediated exchange in ever-present yet always variant material and affective environments, spaces, and places; 3) a discipline emerging from rhetoric, one of the original liberal arts, yet developing in transdisciplinary ways, transforming the binary of humanities and sciences; 4) a tool for decolonizing knowledge(s); 5) a tool for exploring,

critiquing, engaging, and creating with the new media of our digital lives together; 6) a long-standing yet ever inventive method and mode for public humanities; and 7) a praxis of resistance. These essays bring to light what studying communication offers the humanities: a plural, public, reflexive, and ever inventive enterprise for examining being human together on this planet.

In so much of what I have just written by way of introducing my engagement with the essays of this special issue can be found various foils. Let us start with the emphasis on “being human.” If studying communication is involved in this question of what it is to be, to know, and to do the human, who is the human?<sup>6</sup> Traditional histories tell of others—women, people of color, people who do not own property, people who are enslaved, people who are not heteronormed, not cis-gender, people differently bodied and otherwise abled—all as less than fully human, or not even human at all. A focus merely on the “human” in humanistic inquiry into communication in the absence of attending to that which is other than “human,” is at best unethical, at worst deadly, considering the long-standing record of violence against those considered to be other (than human).

Moreover, as environmental and technological matters shape the human condition, attending only to a traditional immaterial concept of “human” presents all the more danger. The problem of catastrophic environmental collapse for the human condition must be faced.<sup>7</sup> An anthropocentric understanding of matter and meaning only reinforces, as Christopher N. Gamble and Joshua S. Hanan write, “our obliviousness to an emerging ecological crisis” and forecloses gains for the large majority of nonhumans.<sup>8</sup> Consider as well the rapidly escalating non-naturalistic structure of the human condition, which Rosi Braidotti describes as a range from digital second life, to genetically modified food, advanced prosthetics, robotics, artificial intelligence, and reproductive technologies. Seeing the blending of human and beyond human—

the human ever blended with the earth and all its species, places, spaces, and technology—blurs traditional distinctions between the human and its others, disrupting the privilege of that which is deemed traditionally to be human, and the self–other binary at large.<sup>9</sup>

As the study of communication has always in some way involved the means of communication, whether the techne of persuasion or the technology of new media, it takes as given, especially post-Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message.<sup>10</sup> Communication as a study has always already recognized the non-naturalistic, technological material infrastructure of being human and living lives together. But, perhaps for this very reason of attending to that which is beyond the traditional boundaries of the human, communication has often been ignored in the humanities.

One recent example can be seen in a well-known assessment of the latest humanities indicators. In his analysis of the state of the humanities based on Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, Benjamin Schmidt decides not to consider the data related to “communications,” which he defines as outside of the humanities proper for its companion methods in social science and collateral focus on professional training. He defines the humanities as only the major majors, so to speak: English, history, philosophy, languages and literatures, and religion.<sup>11</sup>

Even though the Department of Education measures “communication” as in the study of “human” communication, which is indeed a traditional humanistic study arising from one of the three original liberal arts (rhetoric), Schmidt defines communication as communications. This definitional error needs calling out, even if the call out is an introductory one: “communication” as a study is distinct from “communications.” In my undergraduate introduction to this basic lesson, I was taught the distinction this way: The “s” is necessary in the latter for its focus on



media, as “media” is plural. When “communication” is singular, it signals a focus on the human, traditionally taken as singular in comparison to media.

From one perspective, this erasure is a slight by Schmidt. From another, Schmidt’s slight affirms that this binary between communication and communications is a slippery one.

“Communication’s” “human” is protean, ever transitive, hence plural and pluralizing, “human as mediated,” situated in multiple and variant but real if not also fabricated material conditions of environments, spaces, and places.<sup>12</sup> The blurring of the singular and plural versions of the human as mediated and interacting inescapably with the built and natural worlds makes the study of communication a particularly long-standing and robust praxis of what is now being called posthumanist humanities. Now in a posthumanist movement, communication can catapult inquiry into the human context of non-human entities as machines, animals, environments, ambience, and energy.<sup>13</sup>

Catapulting inquiry into the possibilities of publics in a posthuman *paideia*, Rebecca A. Alt and Rosa A. Eberly lead our special issue considering not the human, in the singular, but publics, plural. In “Between Campus and Planet,” Alt and Eberly take seriously “publics” in general, and public problems in particular, and even more particularly, those public problems of the immediate audience of most humanities professors, the students. Alt and Eberly advance a posthumanist *paideia*: a classical rhetorical education interacting anew with contemporary theories oriented toward feminist, antiracist, anticolonialist, new materialist, and posthumanist perspectives on citizenship, civic engagement, and publics. Their work calls for equipping students for life, in a spirit of Kenneth Burke, with collaborative habits and ethical communication practices necessary to respond to the calls of posthumanist democratic life.

Focusing in detail on the shooting murder on the University of Maryland campus of a Black man, Richard Collins III, by a white Maryland undergraduate affiliated with an Alt-Reich organization, and on the fraternity pledging death of Timothy Piazza, a Penn State University student, Alt and Eberly offer a theory of and praxis for a posthumanist *paideia*. A posthumanist *paideia* would “demand Maryland students, faculty, and administrators address the discursive and material conditions—the social truths—that allow white supremacy to flourish.” A posthumanist *paideia* would “demand that Penn State students, faculty, and staff confront what happened on their campus and collaboratively work to address the many questions this horrid incident [of Piazza’s pledging death] raises.” Enacting a posthumanist *paideia* as public scholarship as Alt and Eberly envision builds on rhetoric’s traditions of civic education via engagement with local exigencies by way of attending to “the material and affective environments that shape human experience.”

The question of how private interest so profanely eclipses the common good features prominently in Alt and Eberly’s essay. Problematizing this eclipse and clarifying the focus of the humanities in higher education on public goods rather than private interests emerges as central work of their essay. This work shifts modes of civic engagement, citizenship, and publics beyond the liberal autonomous subject.

Yet, imagining a future for the humanities and higher education beyond the liberal autonomous subject presents a challenge in the conditions of the neoliberal university in late stage capitalism. In “The Crisis of Higher Education and the Neoliberal Recalibration of the Common Good,” Barbara Biesecker makes the case that the crisis in the humanities is both real and manufactured. Taking account in great detail of the material and affective environments that shape the humanities in the neoliberal university, Biesecker shows this double-figured crisis is “a

strong indication that the common good has slowly but surely been remade.” This remaking is in the form of the private, the individual self, recalibrating the common good as Biesecker shows how, from the welfare of the many and basic care for one and all to what Biesecker dubs “the care-of-the-self-as-care-for-others.” Because of this remaking of the common good, a different kind of future for the humanities “can therefore not be won by humanist scholar–teachers digging in our heels and insisting that others recognize and duly acknowledge that humanities education is an elementary and self-evident common good.” Instead, Biesecker calls for humanists to “rigorously interrogate” our own investment in the common good, and “on that radically unsettled ground begin to articulate alternatives to late neoliberal hegemony.”

Like Alt and Eberly, Biesecker calls for “using the classroom as training ground” to figure futures, as Biesecker writes, or to imagine that which is not yet, as Alt and Eberly write inspired by Henry Giroux. Whereas Alt and Eberly focus on posthumanist public scholarship to engage public problems, Biesecker—echoing Foucault—calls for a vigilant application of counter-pressure upon “switch points” of modern power. Both engage the classroom as a “proto-public” or “training ground” for participatory readiness in public life. While this is a long-term pedagogical goal, as Biesecker admits, it can be achieved, not through du jour notions of student-centered learning feeding neoliberalism’s fantasy of philanthropy as panacea but in Biesecker’s terms, “through the hard labor of decentering pervasive habits of thought.”

Biesecker does more than just call for a reimagined classroom, she shares her actual class, “Communication, Rhetoric, and the Common Good.” Sketching the details, she shares the course is taught as an entry level course to grant greatest access early in a student’s studies. Collectively and collaboratively, students explore questions of the common good, expanding over the course of a semester from the local, to the national, to the global. She shares the key

questions of the course: What is the common good? Who does it serve? What are its benefits? What kinds of discourses and practices enable or constrain the common good? If answers are not obvious to these questions, who decides and how? Such a course, such a pedagogy requires of us to teach students “how to recognize the open-endedness at the origin of the production of all value.”

Recognizing open-endedness as such is a critical move in figuring futures for humanistic study, and a move resulting from critique. Recognizing this, Biesecker asks, “how might students be moved not merely to critique the neoliberal status quo but to imagine and demand something better?”

Biesecker’s vision shares in Alt and Eberly’s. Both essays work to shift the study of rhetoric away from such traditional measures as effective public speaking via focus on the individual student crafting and making persuasive arguments about public matters. In this traditional paradigm, the public good becomes a singular, concretized commodity that serves the speaker’s purpose as an inartistic (*atechnic*) proof (e.g., bringing “the law” to the argument). But neither the law nor the public good are concrete. A posthumanist rhetorical praxis of studying humanities by way of immersing as a class in the communicative and rhetorical dynamics of the making (and unmaking) of the public or the common good serves to break up the concrete.<sup>14</sup>

Invention of potentially persuasive sayables as an art does not go away in this praxis but it arises otherwise, *not* from a concretized fabrication of the common good by a fabricated-to-be universal human thought-to-be acting as a liberal autonomous subject out to persuade others the value of this concrete fabrication. Invention arises otherwise, as Jane Sutton and I theorize as a transpositional figure of *alloiostrophe*: a turn (*strophe*) to the other (*alloio-*) in an open-ended capacity to interact.<sup>15</sup> Invention arises otherwise, but how to learn this other art? Both Alt and

Eberly and Biesecker call for the classroom to become a training ground for participatory readiness, as a proto-public, by way of a collective immersion in the material and affective environments that generate the topoi for inventing necessarily collaborative decision making about the common good. Such immersion is not about finding the available means of persuasion to capture audiences in a shared understanding of the common good. Rather, it is about immersing in the material and affective environments of public problems, to experience and learn collectively, not just in a class but as a class, with members recognizing their shared responsibility and ethical obligation to invent anew the future in which the common good gets constituted, collaboratively created, communicated, performed. Such a class recognizes a charge: to figure out a better future for living well together on this planet.

Noting foils, see the “on” in that ending sentence of the prior paragraph. If I wish to go where Alt and Eberly and Biesecker envision, I must shift perspective from “on” to “along,” as in living well together along with this planet, and as a species born of this planet and dependent upon this planet. We cannot take the planet for granted. I am drawn to fantasizing about the spread of recent laws granting personhood to the earth, like the Bolivian Law of Mother Earth granting personhood rights to the planet as a living being.<sup>16</sup> Or consider the granting of legal status as a living entity to the Whanganui river of the local Maori tribe of Whanganui in New Zealand. Gerrard Albert, the lead negotiator for the tribe, explains that the river has always been and to this day is considered an ancestor, so the tribe

fought to find an approximation in law so that all others can understand that from our perspective treating the river as a living entity is the correct way to approach it, as in indivisible whole, instead of the traditional model for the last 100 years of treating it from a perspective of ownership and management.<sup>17</sup>

Albert's articulation of this paradigm shift brings to focus the stakes of life itself: decolonizing thought and land. This decolonizing move is marked by a shift in the recognition of rights beyond the human. The neoliberal version of a shift beyond the human happens to have already happened, in the granting of personhood to corporations in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*.<sup>18</sup> The differences between these case studies of Bolivia, of Whanganui, and of *Citizens United* offers evidence of the open-endedness of the production of value at play, namely personhood and the rights afforded therein. Personhood is not just for human persons. It can be for the whole earth, rivers, and corporations. Whereas traditional rhetorical arts would be trained to guide speakers to persuade others one way or the other on personhood and its parameters, this traditional approach is all the more about ownership and management of attitudes and affects, rather than inventing otherwise from immersion in them. The revolutionized rhetorical theory, history, and pedagogy of Alt and Eberly and Biesecker trains a class to begin from this open-endedness. This approach offers an energy of intervention and invention otherwise via posthuman *paideia*, a rhetorical education for communication and the common good.

This concern to offer ethical strategies to avoid sustaining and replicating structures of domination is central to Jordana Cox and Lauren Tilton's "The Digital Public Humanities" Working with my writing on rhetoric and the gift, attending especially to my engagement with Henry Johnstone, in conversation with a digital humanities project (DPH) *Photogrammar*, Cox and Tilton contribute to conceptualizing argument as something other than winning over an adversary, or capturing audiences.

Their essay brings into focus yet another foil: Why accept a position of being in question? of needing to give defense? of being expected to give account? Why would we agree to these terms as humanities professionals? Cox and Tilton tell us why: the material economic

conditions lived in this “crisis” of the humanities, “especially for people working in precarious positions and struggling institutions, the imperative to defend the humanities has become a constant.” To accept this imperative is a material necessity, but takes a toll, “To be in a state of constant justification can drain time, money, and energy from other areas of work.” Forestalling risk-taking and open-ended inquiry are additional costs, with perhaps the greatest of costs being the obscuring of “our fields’ most precious offerings, those that exceed the discourses of economic gain or immediate utility.” Yet, not all is lost in accepting the imperative to defend, as “the steady pressure” to defend sharpens thinking, and in Cox and Tilton’s descriptions of their own experience, catalyzes new thinking, interdepartmental partnerships, and experimental public programs; “The imperative to argue has produced sustained conversations about what the humanities are, why they matter, and to whom.”

As Cox and Tilton review the serious costs of the imperative to defend the humanities, as well as the surprising benefits of this practice, they do so *not* to discern which side is their preference, but to show the need for a paradigm shift, taking us to another place, beyond being in question, other than an imperative to defend. This other place is characterized by generativity and generosity of argument. Their essay offers a distinctive response to the humanities “crisis”: “a commitment to *giving resources* for humanistic inquiry—to activating the humanities’ already broad constituencies—rather than seeking to capture adversaries.”

Their case study is *Photogrammar*, a DPH project of Tilton’s with collaborators Taylor Arnold and Laura Wexler. *Photogrammar* goes digital with the Farm Security Administration Office of War Information (FSA-OWI) collection, which contains 170,000 photographs of the Great Depression and World War II, including some of the most iconic images by photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Arthur Rothstein. Photographers were sent across

the country by the U.S. federal government to document American life in order to build support for and justify government programs, namely relief programs and military might for war. These images show America “often at her most vulnerable.”<sup>19</sup>

As Cox and Tilton take us through the user-experience of *Photogrammar*—doing a remarkably clear job of shifting from digital experience to analogue description—we learn that this digital project, open to the public, not behind a pay wall, engages publics in visual, non-linear, embodied, collaborative, open-ended humanistic inquiry. Cox and Tilton characterize this inquiry as at once generative of unexpected discoveries, meaning-making, knowledge creating, world-building, and generous not only in terms of open access, but in terms of the resources offered. For example, *Photogrammar* gives open access to 170,000 images, when prior to being taken digital, the archive published only 80,000 images, with the remaining being filed. As another example, whereas scholarship on the FSA-OWI collection has privileged attention to Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans, *Photogrammar* draws attention to all of the project’s photographers, including the lesser-known. Yet another example is the design of *Photogrammar* to have “generous interfaces.” Drawing from Mitchell Whitelaw’s theory, *Photogrammar* uses “multiple, fragmentary representations to reveal the complexity and diversity of cultural collections.” These representations built around maps and visualizations offer multiple, non-linear ways to experience and interpret the FSA-OWI. This is just a sample of examples. Cox and Tilton show well the ways *Photogrammar* as a DPH project gives generous resources for open-ended, open-access humanistic inquiry marking a radical movement both “prior to and in excess of” traditional humanities scholarship centering persuasiveness of text-focused, content-driven communication in manuscript form.



Visual, non-linear, and participatory, *Photogrammar* engages users in embodied, interactive, humanistic inquiry, and collaborative and open-ended argument characterized more so by generativity and generosity, than persuasiveness and calculation. This centering in performing generative argument offers an invitation to enlist participants in humanistic inquiry rather than win them over about a particular content message about American life at this time. Sans a content-driven message, the acts of looking and making choices about where to look and how to look become acts of civic spectatorship, constituting publics through embodied, open, collaborative argumentation. Drawing from Ariella Azoulay's theory of civic spectatorship, which is subsequently elaborated by Robert Hariman and John Lucaites in *The Public Image*, Cox and Tilton underscore civic spectatorship as a position from which to act ethically and politically, as the basis of a civil contract "binding the spectator to a subject suffering violence" and offering means of intervention.

From Cox and Tilton's work we see not only the creativity of inventing new ways of arguing, beyond affirmative and negative propositional argument to visual, non-linear, and interactive digital humanistic arguing, but also that this creativity is transdisciplinary. DPH offers a bridge between the technological and rhetorical, quantitative and qualitative, between individual and collaborative work, between the humanities and social sciences. And it brings this wealth of collaborative engagement to bear on public matter(s). In putting rhetoric and communication in conversation with DPH, and with the posthuman argumentation of *Photogrammar*, a transdisciplinary study of communication creates an entirely new holistic approach. The humanities and social sciences transcend each other and the outcome is something beyond the mere addition of the parts, the outcome is transformative.

Yet in all of its transformative generativity and generosity, DPH is no savior from suffering violence nor from persistent injustice. All the ambiguity, which on the one hand is DPH's virtue, can become its vice. The risks of ambiguity and open-endedness abound. As Cox and Tilton note, when the map lends itself to so many reading practices there will undoubtedly be reading practices its designers oppose in their own scholarship: "the user's gaze could reinforce racism, sexism, classism, or provincialism (prejudice against rural life or disdain against big cities), nostalgia, and even fetishization." They warn of the serious risks that come with giving over viewing practices to the user.

Cox and Tilton's attentions to the flip side of the gift, the taking, calls to my mind G. Thomas Goodnight's theory of polytectonic rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> Rhetoric in this vision (theory) links up with Cox and Tilton's view, engaged with my own, of rhetoric being generative, making many things, worlds, publics. It operates on all materials and produces attitudes, affects, and understandings. Here is Goodnight's definition by way of relation with Richard McKeon's theory of rhetoric as architectonic: architectonics embraces communication as meaningful interaction and exchange within and across personal, professional, and public life; polytectonic rhetoric "simulates such embrace at a distance and seizes communication as a congeries of evolving information tools that secure adaptive, scalable, expandable, mobile, mediated, networks of message-making."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, a polytectonic rhetoric "converts language action to multiple signals, codes, and calculating mechanisms that promote ambiguous discursive, perceptual and symbolic equivalencies through substitution, conversion, transversal equation, shadow replacements, resemblance, and simulation."<sup>22</sup>

Polytectonic rhetoric, as Goodnight makes a most compelling definitional display, is 21-century communication. And there are dystopian as well as utopian scenarios. In the utopian

scenario, architectonics and polytechtonics “bear a conjunctive relationship in which new possibilities for civic engagement, social movement, and community development sometimes contest and bring to justice systems of excess.”<sup>23</sup> A dystopian scenario sketched by Goodnight offers a nightmarish vision of a communications revolution where, for example,

surplus value extracted from communicative work of the masses filters into elite pockets. Surveillance becomes ubiquitous through massive data exchange among private and state entities with extensions from the built environment into mobile flows. Income inequality is rationalized as the reward of entrepreneurship. Information marketing and data analytics unify to reify and expand social stratification. . . . Polysemy becomes fugitive. Top media platforms commercialize message feasts. . . . Digital technologies work feverishly to automate remaindered communicative labor. Global communications is celebrated. Scholars claim that new media stimulate democracy even while state cronyism increases and telecom consolidates its gains. . . . Communications research drives out communication inquiry.”<sup>24</sup>

If a dystopian scenario were to become the defining feature of the 21st century, then Goodnight forecasts that communication studies would be likely to grow in importance, and along with it the need to become “even more intensively than it currently supposes itself to be the object of its own critique”<sup>25</sup>

This need of the communication discipline to be the object of its own critique takes us to our next essay, “Disrupting the Humanities and Social Science Binary.” Kristina Scharp and Lindsey Thomas, both social scientists in communication studies, explore in detail how science both cannot and ought not proceed sans active engagement with the humanities. Scharp and Thomas’s essay shows various ways in which without the humanities, social science cannot

subject itself to be the object of its own critique. Without this reflexive accountability, the dystopian vision can too easily clarify.

Calling attention to current transdisciplinary practices not excluding DPH projects such as *Photogrammar*, Scharp and Thomas identify social scientific subfields of the discipline such as family communication and health communication engaging critical humanistic perspectives. They make the case that this engagement challenges and expands social science by directing attention to issues of power, ideological assumptions, and difference.<sup>26</sup> They argue for the possibilities that might emerge when humanists critique texts produced by social science and, alternatively, the potentialities for social science when guided by humanistic inquiry. Scharp and Thomas contend that this kind of integrative and transformative scholarship is not only beneficial, but necessary to the survival and evolution of the communication studies discipline. They illustrate with two case studies: their graduate school rhetoric professor doing social science (Jeffrey A. Bennett and his *Banning Queer Blood*) and their research mentor (Leslie A. Baxter). For Scharp and Thomas, Bennett's and Baxter's work illustrates how humanities inquiry can promote social justice and offer nuanced ways to engage in social scientific research. Of particular note for Scharp and Thomas are the possibilities of transformative research when the humanities and social sciences come together in a transdisciplinary way. They show how the integration of humanistic and social scientific scholarship in the study of communication, in the Bennett and Baxter models, attends to such matters of utmost importance: researcher bias, positionality, and reflexivity; power along lines of privileged and marginalized people; practice and practical applications to make a positive difference in the world and manifest social justice; contradiction and unity of opposites; relational intersections and interactions of people situated in particular contexts; and the coexistence and intermingling of public and private domains of

communication. One of the key examples they use of the transformative possibilities of transdisciplinary humanities and social science in communication studies is contrapuntal analysis in Baxter's *Voicing Relationships*. Scharp and Thomas describe the process of contrapuntal analysis as a cohesive blend of social scientific methodology and humanistic focus on culture and in-situ language use.

While these transformative possibilities of integrated, transdisciplinary humanities and social scientific study of communication are being realized, Scharp and Thomas are careful to point out that structural, institutional, economic, interpersonal, and political constraints can lead scholars engaging such transdisciplinary approaches to experience obstacles. They give as examples journals that will not review work that is not post-positivist, reviewers who do not know how to evaluate work that is not post-positivist, external grant money that often privileges post-positivist projects, and disciplinary narratives that have created and maintained an ideological divide that at times "creates circumstances where a social scientist might never engage with a humanist." Pervasive assumptions privileging "science" over "humanities" make more integrated and transdisciplinary research harder to conduct.

Scharp and Thomas offer some ways of addressing these constraints: we need to communicate with each other to bridge the divide, we must tell and listen to different stories, "engaging and voicing respect for a variety of scholarship is necessary to creating conditions in which transformative scholarship and partnerships can occur"; and we can make curricular changes at the graduate and undergraduate level to encourage bridging rather than maintaining the humanistic and social scientific binary.

Scharp and Thomas's practical solutions are complemented by affective solutions in our next two essays: Jessica N. Sturges's "Obstinate Thought," and Nathan Crick's, "Invectives

Against Ignoramus.” Sturgess offers a frontline affect of obstinance, fortitude in the face of the continual erasure of humanities spaces for study. The virtue of persistence in the face of adverse circumstances is centered by Sturgess in Henry David Thoreau, an exemplar of obstinate thought. For Crick, the trans-historical lesson of invective is centered in Petrarch. Both offer the humanities ways philosophy and communication interact in considerations of ethics and the orchestration of our lives lived together and the ways we create knowledge.

Sturgess begins from precariousness, as in our lives lived on the edge from an “uncaring cosmos” and the ever-possible occurrence of catastrophe, or cataclysmic event, the end of human life and the planet. And yet, “here we are, always on the edge, precarious, and having to make a life.” Her essay is a performance of writing beyond argument, as she too, shares in Cox and Tilton’s view. Yet argue she does, and in a way that exceeds the norms of traditional scholarly writing. She writes that for which she calls, for deep thinking, for studying, for reading, and for the useless, inspired by Ramsey Eric Ramsey’s writing on the dire necessity of the useless as necessary resistance to the value of utility. As Biesecker makes the case we cannot just dig in our heels and defend the humanities with arguments about their virtues, Sturgess calls for us to dig in our heels to defend the humanities, not with arguments about their virtues, but with lives lived in these virtues. Her writing is itself a performance of obstinacy, of digging in her heels in the face of forces set on upset and doing the work of the humanities, beyond exchangeist economic terms, in excess of utility: deep thinking, studying, reading, generating new ideas, creating new ways of living together on this planet so that we may know something other than violence together. This digging in of our heels is “a refusal to ask permission to do our work, and an unwillingness to get out of the way. We must persist against the threat of our displacement.”

A parallel digging in of the heels comes to mind for Sturgess in the book blocs in worldwide students protests against such policies as tuition hikes and budget cuts to public universities. Sturgess's description of book blocs creating shields and blockades in protests decorated to look like the covers of classic and critical books help us see students marching, defending themselves with shields of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, as Sturgess uses for example. Book blocs perform obstinacy, and point in Sturgess's terms, "to the way in which the humanistic tradition can be mobilized toward critical or revolutionary ends." Deep thinking, studying, reading all become acts of resistance and acts of liberation. Being able to explore the depths of this humanistic labor are what protesting students are fighting for, the kind of study that Sturgess describes using Luka Arsenjuk and Michelle Koerner's articulation of moments of study that leave one "intoxicated, those moments of encounter in a text or conversation that blow one's mind, driven by curiosities that are closer to pleasure, to play, to wandering, to leaving work."<sup>27</sup>

These acts are defined and qualified by Sturgess as communicative practices, something she acknowledges the virtue of communication studies for our seeing how. Yet, as we know, communication studies is not immediately recognized as part of the humanities. Regardless, as Scharp and Thomas see, so too Sturgess, the traditional disciplinary division between humanities and social science in communication studies is transcended in the recognition that we live in a world shared with others. Thinking through this "exchanging with others" is a preeminently humanistic task. Liberation practices of humanistic labor enact a hermeneutic attitude toward the world that feels the world as inherently questionable, open-ended, indeterminant. In Sturgess's broad cast, humanistic practices of thinking, reading, writing, studying are communicative practices, at the very least for being an exchange between oneself, the world, and others. For

Sturges, communication is that study which “facilitates and underwrites our sharing a world in common,” and the “creative generation of a response to our worldly circumstances,” our “hermeneutic task.”

Sturges’s experimental essay defends the study of the humanities by defending study itself and as a communicative practice, meant to “preserve the possibility of imagining and bringing into existence something beyond the mere preservation of the status quo.” To be those who study is to be students of communication, which for Sturges means “students of our dwelling in the world together.”

She warns, too, that this study is not easy, that “the humanities require fortitude and reward patience.” And they require a deliberate obstinance which ultimately Sturges calls “putting our body in the way of the encroaching tides of authoritarianism.” To be so obstinate paradoxically requires movement, a movement of extravagance, like standing in the way of authoritarianism. Crick’s “Invectives against Ignoramuses” offers a rhetorical means of such obstinate movement, namely invective. Invective is throwing one’s voice down in the face of what Crick calls ignoramuses. Crick creates this image of the ignoramus from Petrarch’s *Invectives Against a Physician* and *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*. Crick calls this ignoramus the scholastic ignoramus: “Although technically ‘educated,’ the mark of the scholastic ignoramus is an incapacity to adapt to situations and an over-reliance on dogmatic and deductive reasoning.” Such an ignoramus masks their own ignorance “by wheeling in some purportedly authoritative principle and then arriving at necessary conclusions whose primary purpose is to rationalize some self-interested practice or belief.” Ignoramuses, in Crick’s Petrarchan inspired vision, have minds packed “full of maxims and syllogisms” and go into a



world knowing nearly nothing yet rendering judgments that appear logically necessary though often factually untrue, morally reprehensible, scandalous, and harmful.

Calling out the ignoramus, and calling for the true humanist by way of Petrarch gives light to the historic binary between science and the humanities. The physician, for Petrarch, is part of a larger group of science minded ignoramuses who diminish and denigrate as fraudulent the study of the humanities in favor of studying the physical world and the biological mechanics of the human body. Petrarch is no posthumanist! Yet in working trans-historically, Crick's invective against the ignoramus in the spirit of Petrarch's invective gives resource for resistance to contemporary manifestations of the ignoramus.

That invective as a rhetoric of defense operates in Crick's essay as trans-historical brings us to another foil: what does it mean in the study of communication—in this particular case the study of rhetoric—for ideas and practices to transcend historical boundaries? Does the rhetoric of invective, as performed by Petrarch in his early Renaissance world of white, wealthy, educated men have import in a decolonial world? Can rhetorical resources canonized in the Greco-Roman-Western European-U.S. American rhetorical tradition get culled from their original highly exclusionary and culturally specific (not universal as the tradition claims) contexts (and in the process exposed for the ways exclusion was structured, enabled, performed), and be reimagined for a pluralized public? Each of the essays in this special issue turns to history and tradition in some manner to theorize ways to a new world. The urgency to engage deeply in reflexive critical histories that direct attention to standpoint, cultural specificity, and the particular structuring of power is real. This urgency is amplified by the obstinate refusal to “get over” histories that are not yet over. The colonizing power of Aristotelian rhetorical theory is still orchestrating communication economy across areas of politics, law, and culture. Notions of a person having

ethos, for example, as one who is able to give, who has the most to give, might seem a definition of a virtue of ethos, until we recognize how violent this ethos of being a “credible human” is; the classism alone of this definition is clear when we see, for example, the subaltern.<sup>28</sup> The affect of Aristotelian ethos creates, or at least helps to maintain, the structural conditions for subalternity. There must be a better way of living together than judging those with nothing as having no ethos.

Exposing such structures of power and violence in the study of the canon is now our urgent need. I stand with Sara Ahmed demanding in her manifesto for living a feminist life, in refusing to “get over” histories that are not yet over. The joy the discipline of rhetoric and the study of communication once had in proclaiming the deliberative possibilities of living a free life now encounters the obstinate feminist killjoy. Not that there is no place for joy, but there is no place for the naive joy that speaks in synecdoche about wealthy free white men being the whole of the human. There is no place for a joy in a freedom not reflexive about its being free in no small part from physical labor, with a freedom to spend leisurely days in thought and intellectual engagement while others, rendered invisible, labor physically for the production of necessities of food and home and public spaces. These histories are not yet over, so neither can we be over them.

I am grateful to the authors of these essays for all they give to fortify reflexivity about what studying the humanities means, does, **effects**, and what our personal stakes are in this study as a study of human communication. Asking how we can learn to exchange in common (*com + munis*) while interrogating the “we,” “exchange,” and the “common” may seem a hopeless exercise in the endless circularity of critique. But without this circling back, we cannot move forward with a critical awareness that can serve justice in our future forging of lives lived together on this planet. These essays circle back critically then catapult forward inquiry into the

study of the humanities and what the study of communication gives. Following these essays, I share some suggestions for further reading. May the essays in our special issue and suggested further readings offer a study that is at once practical and urgent for public life and the study of being human, yet also offer paths beyond utility, beyond defense.

### **Selected further reading**

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Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

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- Wernimont, Jacqueline. *Numbered Lives: Life and Death in Quantum Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.
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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Mary Beard, *Women and Power* (New York: Liverlight Publishing, 2017). Beard illuminates an ancient history of women being in question, especially when speaking in public, an ancient history still being lived by today. See also Jane Sutton, *The House of My Sojourn: Rhetoric, Women, and the Question of Authority* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Being in Question,” in *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 115–34; Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> I do not emphasize in any way a Christianized or religious notion of faith.

<sup>4</sup> In a long legacy of proclamations of crises in the humanities, the latest tell of denigrated attitudes and budgets, 21st century globalization shifts, professionalization, political divisions, partisan operations, economic crises, inequality, and culture wars. See, for example: Ian Beacock, “Humanist among Machines,” *Aeon*, June 25, 2015. <https://aeon.co/essays/arnold-toynbee-srhines-a-light-on-the-humanities-role-today>; Eric Bennett, “Dear Humanities Professors: We Are the Problem,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 13, 2018; Frank

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Biesecker et al., *Communication Scholarship and the Humanities*, (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For engagement of this question, see Armond R. Townes, "Black 'Matter' Lives," *Women's Studies in Communication* (2019): doi: 10.1080/07491409.2018.1551985; "Whither the

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‘Human’? An Open Letter to the ‘Race and Rhetoric’ Forum,” unpublished paper, (2018),  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/12LFu8xlLpdoOV92JG-8jCNJZQQyn5PMR6XczxTww00w/edit>

<sup>7</sup> USGRP, *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume II* (Washington, DC: US Global Change Research Program, 2018),  
<https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/>.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher N. Gamble and Joshua S. Hanan, “Figures of Entanglement: Special Issue Introduction,” *Review of Communication* 16, no. 4 (2016): 265.

<sup>9</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> On even orality as media, see Armond R. Towns, “Rebels of the Underground: Media, Orality, and the Routes of Black Emancipation,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (2016): 184–97.

<sup>11</sup> See Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018; “Mea Culpa: There Is a Crisis in the Humanities,” *Sapping Attention*, July 27, 2018,  
<https://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2018/07/mea-culpa-there-is-crisis-in-humanities.html>.

<sup>12</sup> On communication and posthuman space and place, see Joan Faber McAlister, “Ten Propositions for Communication Scholars Studying Space and Place,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39, no. 2 (2016): 113–21 McAlister’s essay is an introduction to a special issue worth reading in its entirety.

<sup>13</sup> See Casey Boyle, *Rhetoric as Posthuman Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018); Scot Barnet and Casey Boyle, eds., *Rhetoric Through Everyday Things* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016); Damien Smith Pfister, “Against the Droid’s ‘Instrument of Efficiency,’ for Animalizing Technologies in a Posthumanist Spirit,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50,



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no. 2 (2017) : 201–27; Debra Hawhee, *Rhetoric in Tooth and Claw: Animals, Language, Sensation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013); George Kennedy, “A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of a General Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 1 (1992): 1–21. Kennedy argues that rhetoric, in its most general form, is energy.

<sup>14</sup> A nod to both the album and its namesake song: Chrissie Hynde and The Pretenders, “Break Up the Concrete,” in *Break Up the Concrete* (Santa Monica, CA: Shangri-La Music, 2008), CD. Hynde tells of writing this song after being on the road touring for some time seeing endless concrete, thinking, “Just break up the f-----g concrete!”

<sup>15</sup> Jane Sutton and Mari Lee Mifsud, *A Revolution in Tropes: Alloiostrictrophic Rhetoric* (Baltimore, MD: Lexington, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> World Future Fund, “Law of Mother Earth, The Rights of Our Planet: A Vision from Bolivia,” December 2010, <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Projects/Indicators/motherearthbolivia.html>;

<sup>17</sup> Eleanor Ainge Roy, “New Zealand River Granted Same Legal Rights as Human Being,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/16/new-zealand-river-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-being>.

<sup>18</sup> See Ciara Torres-Spelliscy, “The History of Corporate Personhood,” *Brennan Center for Justice*, April 7, 2014, <https://www.brennancenter.org/blog/hobby-lobby-argument>.

<sup>19</sup> “About: The FSA-OWI,” *Photogrammar*, [http://photogrammar.yale.edu/about/fsa\\_owi/](http://photogrammar.yale.edu/about/fsa_owi/).

<sup>20</sup> See G. Thomas Goodnight, “From Architectonics to Polytechtonics: Rhetoric, Communication, and Information,” *Poroi* 10, no. 1 (2014): 1–21, Article 4, doi: 10.13008/2151-2957.1185.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 14–15.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 16. For an extended analysis and critique of currently lived dystopian polytechnonic rhetoric, see Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Scharp and Thomas cite key works here: Elizabeth A. Suter, “Introduction: Critical Approaches to Family Communication Research: Representation, Critique, and Praxis,” *Journal of Family Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1–8; Nicole Peimonte, “More to the Story: How the Medical Humanities Can Learn From and Enrich Health Communication Studies,” *Review of Communication* 17, no. 3 (2017): 137–48.

<sup>27</sup> See Luka Arsenjuk and Michelle Koerner, “Study, Students, Universities: An Introduction,” *Polygraph* 21 (2009):8.

<sup>28</sup> See Mifsud, *Rhetoric and the Gift: Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Contemporary Communication* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 2015), 82–85; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press 1994, 66–111.