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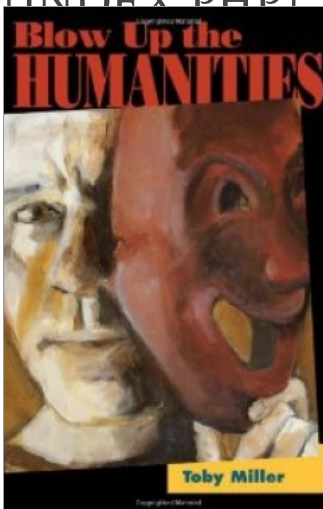
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Teaching, Shall We Say, Elsewhere: A Response to "The Academy in Peril" by Toby Miller (author.php?cid=579)

January 12th, 2013

I AM GRATEFUL to the *Los Angeles Review of Books* for [this symposium](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=1267) and the invitation to respond to it, and thankful to the participants for their engagement with *Blow Up the Humanities*. I appreciate the positive things they said and admire the elegance and intelligence of each contribution. They write more generously and ably than I did — or will here.

That said, in their silences, the pieces incarnate the class distinctions and unwillingness to address the humanities beyond the enclave of Research One schools that animated my book in the first place. Let me briefly restate the argument here: the humanities are rapidly sliding into insignificance in the vast majority of US universities and in public policy. Between 1971 and 2004, English majors declined from 7.6 to 3.9 percent of the national total. Other languages and literatures dropped from 2.5 to 1.3 percent, philosophy and religious studies from 0.9 to 0.7 percent, and history from 18.5 to 10.7 percent. By contrast, business enrollments increased by 176 percent and communication studies shot up 616 percent.

Faced with these unsettling numbers, administrators cut and cut. Compared with other fields, tenure-track hiring in language and literature occurs at two-thirds the national average. In 2009, just 53 percent of humanities faculty was in full-time employment, and an even smaller proportion in tenurable positions. Most people teaching the humanities work full-time in non-Research One schools with gigantic course loads, often on limited-term contracts, or as freeway professors, driving feverishly between teaching jobs to cobble together a living.

And the relative monetary worth of these teachers is diminishing all the time. In 2003, health academics were paid an average of \$6,000 more than in 1987, during which time the humanities average declined by a thousand dollars; in 2005–2006, a business academic cost twice as much as a humanities one, compared to one and a half times as much 20 years earlier.

What about public policy? Barack Obama's 2011 State of the Union address called for increased expenditure on mathematics and science. It did not mention the humanities. The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided not a cent to humanities research; science received \$3 billion. And let's not even talk about the Republican Party, which has announced its desire to exterminate the National Endowment for the Humanities.

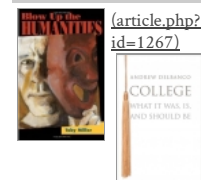
Those numbers form the backdrop to the situation of humanities in US higher education. We must recognize that reality and see past the rare privilege that shields a tiny number of universities and faculty from such slings and arrows.

All three writers correctly identify the absence of a fully fleshed out answer to the dilemmas posed in the book. They ask, reasonably, what a renewed humanities should look like. While Julia Lupton writes sympathetically about my project and kindly refers to some of my other work, she is troubled by this lack and suggests it is substituted by "hyperventilating prose and ugly, angry neologisms" that are "martial and masculine." Eek. Bad Toby.

She rightly prefers "integration and rebuilding" to such macho coinage and a continued centrality in any revised curriculum "for literature, philosophy, history, and languages." This is because they permit "students to tune into the dramas that continue to rock our world, whether as foundational phases (secularization), missed opportunities (primitive communism), or broken promises (liberty/fraternity/equality)."

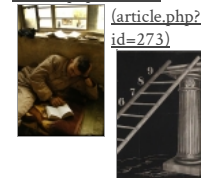
I agree with Lupton that those topics are important. But, as I indicated above, outside the supercharged privilege of a few private and public schools, comparatively few students choose to major in the disciplines Professor Lupton favors. So my response is that while the concerns and theories that animate those fields are valuable, they must be reconceived and reapplied to the subjects that students are actually interested in taking. Clearly, it is best to do so via reintegration rather than machismo, but it needs to be done, one way or the other.

David Palumbo-Liu also says some nice things about my work, but is concerned by my failure to address "the challenges cultural studies — as it is currently configured and as it



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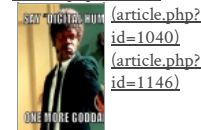
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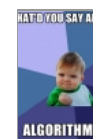
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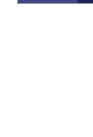


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might be imagined — faces.” I do not give “real examples of how this assemblage necessarily produces a qualitatively different result in terms of its disruptive effect.” So, “[d]on’t tell me what it will do,” he writes, “show me what it looks like.” I’m not going to criticize media and cultural studies here — the book has a chapter that does exactly that — but I will offer an instance of “how to” in a moment.

Srinivas Aravamudan is more troubled by the book than the other readers. Or perhaps he is not so much troubled as annoyed by its “presentism and anti-intellectualism.” He is sufficiently concerned enough to worry about my welfare, suspecting that such qualities and the proposals flowing from them will leave me “few potential friends” and generate “instant enmity, if not raucous laughter.” These are mighty dire words.

I don’t want to be lonely, and after reading these warnings, I shan’t seek to enter the Duke campus (where Professor Aravamudan is a Dean) lest I encounter disdain and hilarity, from the chap on the front gate to folks in corner offices. As it happens, I actually underwent something akin to a tenure review at Duke — unusual for someone who has never set foot on its tobacco-endowed turf or basketball-founded *parquet*. Remember the Sokal scandal from the mid-1990s, when the journal *Social Text* was an object of derision, attracting “enmity, if not raucous laughter” after falling prey to a hoax manuscript submitted by a physicist? Just after the story broke across underoccupied newsrooms, the editorial committee voted for me to become its coeditor, via a selection process that had been in place for some years. But this time, the result was queried by the journal’s publisher, Duke University Press, which invoked their publishing deal to have me vetted, indicating that Duke administrators required this (they would be the silken *apparatchiks* of senior management). I was not supposed to know about the process, but loose lips leaked.

Remarkably, I passed. But that was well before I wrote *Blow Up the Humanities*, which Doris Duke’s senior common room apparently regards as the academic equivalent of a scratch-and-sniff screening of *Abbott and Costello Meet the Flu* on a double bill with *George Carlin Versus the FCC*. Just as well my term at *Social Text* came to an end before that happened.

A key critique from Professor Aravamudan is that I seek “to replace everything from art history, philosophy, literature, history, religion, and the languages departments with an overblown cultural and media studies” and “blithely [ignore] the substantial methodological contributions and real discoveries of fields such as sociology, psychology, behavioral economics, and anthropology toward our understanding of the human.”

This would indeed be unfortunate, if it were true. But to know that would require close reading, an enterprise seemingly in short supply down Tobacco Road these days.

First, it isn’t my desire but the desire of hundreds of thousands of students that is consigning several humanities disciplines to pedagogic penury. Second, I cite numerous authorities from the social sciences throughout the volume, and conclude with suggestions for a program based on interdisciplinary schools that involves close collaborations with them. As someone who has taught anthropology, political science, and sociology and studied politics and economics, I am aware of their contributions, albeit in a way that has apparently allowed itself to be blithely ignored.

As I indicated, all three responses point to the absence of a detailed example of what might replace the current humanities. So here is an offering. It borrows from *Blow Up the Humanities* to suggest some questions one might address when constructing classes on uplifting books, or sending young *littérateurs* onto the freeway in search of the non-Research One exit.

The offering takes the form of a quiz for humanists. Try it out on your friends at a January tailgate party or a ballpark this summer if conversation is flagging. Do you know:

- the number of books sold in the countries you study?
- how many people buy or borrow books each year, and what proportion read virtual or material versions?
- which companies dominate publishing and why?
- how many publishers there are now versus 10 or 20 years ago?
- how books are optioned for adaptation as films?

Can you explain:

- the business structure of the publishing industry?
- the experience of working in it as a forester, editor, or driver?
- the relationships of novelists, agents, and editors?
- how books appear in the front of chain stores (or are never in stock)?
- the role of the International Publishers Association, the Pan African Booksellers Association, the Book Industry Study Group, the Publishers Database for Responsible and Ethical Paper Sourcing, the Federation of Indian Publishers, the Fédération des Editeurs Européens, the Society of Publishers in Asia, and the Book Industry Environmental Council?



- cultural policies affecting publishers and libraries?
- why the market for books of literary theory and criticism is dramatically shrinking? and
- the relative environmental impact of ebooks versus paper ones?

Further, are you teaching classes about, or does anyone in your department explain to students, the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which jeopardizes fair use by turning digital works into commodity forms and criminalizing their appropriation, or how the International Federation of Reproduction Rights Organizations goes about its business? Do you study how the industry manages innovation and experimentation? Or why people say books are dying when the UK, for example, is experiencing a golden age of volume and sales, and worldwide there are now more iPhone applications for books than games?

There are important innovations in the humanities that can, of course, be drawn on to answer some of these questions. I admire the “new” literary history’s tripartite approach to analyzing texts, what the historian Roger Chartier calls the reconstruction of “older readings from their sparse and multiple traces”; a focus on “the text itself, the object that conveys it, and the act that grasps it”; and an identification of “the strategies by which authors and publishers tried to impose an orthodoxy or a prescribed reading.”

But these existing approaches must be supplemented to account for linguistic translations, material publications, promotional paratexts, reading practices, ecological impacts, and the like. Books accrete and attenuate meanings as they rub up against, trope, and are troped by other fictional and factual texts, social relations, and material objects, then disposed of by ragpickers — all those occasions that allow them to exist, or declare their moment to be over.

In short, we must consider the life cycle of texts as commodity signs. Engagements with their literary qualities must be supplemented, and sometimes supplanted, by an account of the conditions under which they are made, circulated, received, interpreted, criticized, and discarded, considering all the shifts and shocks that characterize their existence as cultural commodities, their ongoing renewal as the temporary “property” of varied, productive workers and publics. A text is a passage across space and time, its life remade again and again by institutions, discourses, and practices of manufacture, circulation, reception, and refuse. That means knowing which companies make books, their processes of production and distribution, systems of cross-subsidy and profit, the complicity of educational canons with business plans in the circulation of texts, press coverage of prizes, and the carbon footprint of culture.

Such questions are rarely posed in the humanities as they exist today: the who, what, when, where, why, how, and effect of textuality. The more familiar and comfortable world — the seminarian hermeneut ablaze, interpreting meaning left, right, and center — remains hegemonic in doctoral programs and subsidized publishing. Elsewhere, not so much.

It will be a challenge to recreate our interpretative worlds, but it is necessary if we want to reengage the wider US student body. We simply must confront the fact that the vast growth in US higher education since the 1970s has taken place amongst the lower middle and working classes. They enroll in state schools that are more vocational than private ones, and their supplies and demands are necessarily distant from small sections and ethical self-styling. They are insufficiently attracted by departments of literature, history, or philosophy to become majors in the same number as their forebears, or their peers in fancier places.

The truth is that, despite the good intentions of everyone involved, the crisis in the humanities cannot be solved by actions taken within the relative autonomy of fancy schools — unless, perhaps, they change the way they educate their graduate students, who currently fan out around the country replicating a form of life that attracts insufficient majors for such scholarly parthenogenesis to function effectively. Wealthy universities may well be reinventing the humanities for the tablet-wielding rather than the tab-popping generation. But what will that mean for the student down the road in the state school — the one who is taught by the prof working, shall we say, elsewhere?

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Joe Amato · a day ago

Either I'm really exceptional, or I'm just not the imagined reader for this line of argument, to which I nonetheless, paradoxically, find myself drawn. (This is my way of saying that trying to explain my reservations here is really more work than it should be, as I could probably iron out my differences with Miller -- which as I commented last time are, sans the pedagogical issues per se, still encapsulated in Aravamudan's response -- in about ten minutes' worth of conversation.) First, there's little question to my way of thinking that, as a result of demographic and economic shifts and corresponding labor realities, tier 1 schools will gradually become the only ones capable of offering, w/o boxfuls of curricular band-aids and other relatively extreme measures, what used to be called a liberal education (and their graduates will go on to gainful employ b/c, yknow, this is the advantage of a tier 1 education). Now assuming this is as inexorable as I make it out to be, then the question becomes one of what the other tiers should be doing meanwhile. Should they be playing catch-up, as above, or should they follow Miller's lead? Based on that list of questions he poses -- I have to follow his lead *here* anyway -- it sounds like he would have English instructors start to develop an expertise e.g. in publishing. Or to put it another way, it sounds like he believes that most English instructors have their noses too close to the page (and I do mean page) to see the digital forest for the paper trees. I mean, I could take a reasonable shot at any one of those questions, most of which are a regular topic of discussion in all of my creative writing workshops if only b/c the students there imagine themselves, in admittedly too many cases, as prospective authors, and so they need to understand the business -- and social mechanics -- of publishing, which is of course changing (never mind that some of these questions admit of no straightforward answers -- e.g., whether ebooks are greener than paper books). But also b/c I've been publishing both online and on the small presses (and academic presses) for two decades now, and have been busy plying the screenwriting trade meanwhile, and am as of 2011 intimately involved in a new small press venture (that's a plug for Steerage Press). You simply can't exist in such writing locales w/o finding yourself embroiled in such discussions, at least from time to time. And so perhaps I'm the exception (yes, this is what I meant by exception-al), and perhaps this is b/c I started out as an engineer in industry -- more exceptions! -- and it was some years before I migrated into higher ed. And my migration was accompanied by a kind of hands-on approach to highly nuanced intellectual matters (which migratory origins sometimes had the regrettable effect of emptying such matters of their nuance). But then, if this is the case, why am I not esp. *happy* with what Miller proposes? I mean, he's reading the tea leaves aright, as far as I can tell. So what's wrong with trying to retool -- the lower tiers anyway -- so that they can at least compete *as* academic, what, enterprises in this changing, what, marketplace? Well, my resistance has something to do not with the ideal of a liberal education so much as with this sense I get -- w/o reading Miller's book (so what am talking about anyway?) -- that we should permit consumer demand to drive, rather willy-nilly, our curricula. That is, even if we can't, w/o boxfuls of curricular band-aids and other relatively extreme measures, compete with the liberal education being offered by the Ivies and elsewhere, perhaps our renewed efforts ought *not* to be tailored so stridently with what our students desire. In fact, teaching over here in tier 3 land for the past decade (yes, yes, contingent faculty, two tenure denials, yadda yadda), I can assure anyone who wishes to be so assured that it's not like my students are teaching me all about the online world. Indeed, too many of them work too many hours a week to keep abreast of more exotic developments in this regard, and so I'm the one telling them, for instance, about mobile augmented reality. And I'm also the one telling them about works on the small presses (and major trades, for that matter) that they might want to read. And once in a while, sure, they'll turn me on to something important. But my point is that I still think instructors have a key responsibility in guiding students toward that which is most important, and worthy of our attention, and I think you're far more likely to see love on a two-way street in this regard if the classroom is understood as a place not only of interpretation but of constructing; and constructing not only meaning, but artifacts as such; and not only essays (video or otherwise) or research papers, but literature, by which I mean something far more radically diverse and ancient than the tepid account that too often passes for public appreciation. That might be an uphill battle, sure -- esp. given the number of hours many students are working over here in tier 3 land, and the debt they're accumulating -- and it might in fact constitute merely a residue of some outmoded faith in an outdated humanism; but it might be a battle worth fighting, and there might be some residues worth clinging to, esp. by those who are presumably skilled in working with letters, and regardless of the overarching lapse in liberal educational ideals. Not sure if that's a response or a friendly amendment, but it's too long by half, so I'll let it go here.

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