

# Introduction

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**T**HIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF *New Literary History* explores the relevance of Bruno Latour's work for the humanities in two distinct yet related ways. First, how might this work reinvigorate or reorient literary studies, art history, religious studies, or other disciplines in the humanities? And second, how does it speak to "humanities discourse"—that is to say, the countless lamentations, perorations, jeremiads, diagnoses, and defenses of the humanities that have appeared in recent years, and that constitute a genre in their own right? Latour's work, as we will see, gives us a rather different perspective on this flood of commentary and metacommentary. Some of the standard defenses of the humanities—they make us more human! they teach us to be critical thinkers!—start to sound hollow, and we find ourselves reaching for other argumentative weapons and diplomatic tools.

Let's begin with a thought experiment: what exactly would be lost if we lost the humanities? Such a question invites us to imagine an experience of loss and to anticipate the reactions triggered by this loss.<sup>1</sup> Only in the gray early morning light, when a lover departs in a taxi for the last time, are we suddenly made aware of the depth and intensity of our passion. So too, perhaps we can more fully appreciate why the humanities are irreplaceable by contemplating the prospect of their nonexistence. According to one influential line of thought, the loss of the humanities would mean, above all, the loss of critique. Critique, of course, has a long history that can be spun in diverse ways; as a synonym for Socratic or Kantian modes of philosophical questioning, for example, or to denote an adversarial and agonistic style of political argument. This latter use of the term, especially, has gained increased traction in the humanities in the last half century. Critique, in this sense, typically includes the following elements: a spirit of skeptical reflection or outright condemnation; an emphasis on its own precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing social forces; the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work; and the assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *uncritical*.<sup>2</sup>

This association of the humanities with critique has recently been underscored by Terry Eagleton in a widely noted essay. "Are the hu-

manities about to disappear?” Eagleton wonders. He goes on: “What we have witnessed in our own time is the death of universities as centres of critique. Since Margaret Thatcher, the role of academia has been to service the status quo, not challenge it in the name of justice, tradition, imagination, human welfare, the free play of the mind or alternative visions of the future.”<sup>3</sup> The declining role and influence of the humanities is tied, Eagleton declares, to the evisceration of critical thinking. Thanks to an increasingly instrumental and market-driven view of knowledge, underwritten by ballooning bureaucracies that cast professors and students in the roles of managers and consumers, the concerns of the humanities are made to seem ever more peripheral.

We can endorse Eagleton’s anger and frustration about the sidelining of the humanities without subscribing to the terms of his defense. Indeed, his own words might give us pause, for they do not support his argument as well as he might think. Some of the ideas he invokes—imagination, perhaps; tradition, certainly—are hardly synonymous with critique; indeed, they have often been seen as its antithesis. “Critique” may be too broad-brush a term to help us think through the various practices of the humanities. As Helen Small writes: “The work of the humanities is frequently descriptive, or appreciative, or imaginative, or provocative, or speculative, more than it is critical.”<sup>4</sup> That intellectuals so often invoke “critique” as a guiding ethos and principle speaks to the grip of an either/or mindset: the fear that if one is not declaring one’s opposition to the status quo, one is therefore being co-opted by it. The practices of academic life may turn out to be more messy, more ambiguous, and more interesting.

Is it possible to voice a defense of the humanities that is not anchored exclusively in the value of “critical thinking”? Are there other attitudes, orientations, modes of argument in play? To what extent are humanists engaged in practices of making as well as unmaking, composing as well as questioning, creating as well as subverting? And can we talk about the social ties of the humanities in ways that avoid the dichotomy of heroic opposition or craven cooption? We surely need a multidimensional defense of the humanities; one that accumulates rationales rather than limiting them or narrowing them down. In this spirit, I advance four possible terms—curating, conveying, criticizing, composing—hoping that the lure of alliteration will not overly compromise the force of the argument.

These words are verbs rather than nouns; actions and practices rather than entities. Current defenses of the humanities, as several contributors to this issue note, often revive versions of the two-cultures split: the sciences deliver better bridges and cures for cancer, while the humanities

make us ethical citizens, more empathic individuals, or critical thinkers. The preserve of the sciences, in short, is the material and natural world, whereas the task of the humanities is to create better persons. Such a strong division of domains and objects seems unfortunate, especially at a time when the humanities are becoming ever more concerned with ecological questions, climate change, and the future of the planet. Thinking about the humanities as a series of actions, practices, and interventions may thus prove more helpful.

## Curating

To speak of “curating the humanities” is to mean something much broader than the mounting of exhibitions in art galleries and museums.<sup>5</sup> Curating, rather, involves a process of caring for—the word has its origins in *caritas*—of guarding, protecting, conserving, caretaking, and looking after. The humanities are, among other things, curators of a disappearing past: guardians of fragile objects, artifacts unmoored by the blows of time, texts slipping slowly into oblivion. What often characterizes these historical remnants, as Stephen Greenblatt writes, is their sheer precariousness, testifying to “the fragility of cultures, to the fall of sustaining institutions and noble houses, the collapse of rituals, the evacuation of myths, the destructive effects of warfare, neglect, and corrosive doubt.”<sup>6</sup> The wounded and vulnerable artifacts of history depend on caring for their survival—without which they are in danger of vanishing, like endangered species, never to reappear.

This defense of curatorship may seem like a conservative definition of the humanities, but this view would be mistaken. Or rather, we need to disentangle the various meanings of conserving and to question the assumption that caretaking—taking care of the past—is inherently conservative in a political sense. It is now captains of industry, after all, who speak breathlessly of change-making, who are eager to sweep away the old-fangled and who worship the cutting-edge. Meanwhile universities are reproached for not being sufficiently attuned to a rhetoric of creative disruption beloved of deal-makers, business analysts, and CEOs (as we learned from bitter experience at the University of Virginia a few years ago.) In short, the temporal schemes of modernism—which counterpose the sluggishness of dominant political or economic interests to the ruptures and innovations of a marginal avant-garde—have lost their last shreds of analytical purchase.

In the face of this cult of technological and consumer-driven innovation, it is important to insist on an ethics of *preservation*—on the value

of the seemingly outmoded, anachronistic, or nonrelevant. Without the humanities, how many of us would loiter and linger amongst the voices of the past? Who would ever come to feel, in their very bones, the bewildering strangeness and opacity of distant forms of life? Among all the forms of knowledge in the university, writes Mark McGurl, it is the humanities that are most invested in time-travel, in moving back and forth across time. We need to conserve not only the texts of the past, he continues, but also those institutions—such as universities and libraries—that safeguard these texts and that are increasingly under threat.<sup>7</sup> It is time for an impassioned defense of institutional structures—structures that have often been hailed as the enemy within a romantic-liberationist strain of literary and art criticism.

In the opening pages of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, Latour speaks to this question: instead of criticizing institutions, can we also learn to trust them? Actor-network-theory has devoted much attention to the institutional networks that allow for the making of knowledge: the messy interactions of human and nonhuman actors—memoranda, files, computers, administrators, articles, equipment, corridor conversations—that allow arguments to be articulated and discoveries to be made. Against a rhetoric of iconoclasm and emancipation from ties, it insists on the inescapability and the value of ties. Meanwhile, Latour's work has long challenged modernist philosophies of history oriented toward the supremacy of the new and the now. Questioning the rhetoric of revolution and the vanguard, of the new broom and the clean slate, it underscores the extent of our historical entanglements and the ubiquity of transtemporal connections. Here we can find resources for another vision of the humanities: one that is attuned to their role in conserving and taking care of the past.

## Conveying

One risk of the language of conserving and preserving is that of conjuring up jars of homemade marmalade or pickled beetroot, arrayed in serried rows in a darkened pantry. The past is, of course, never preserved in this way, sealed off behind glass, but can only be actualized and made meaningful in relation to the concerns of the present.

It is here that “conveying” serves as another key term for the humanities. “Conveying” means both to communicate and to transport. To argue that the humanities are conveyed is to underscore that they are transmitted across time and space into new and often unexpected arenas. And in being transported, they are also translated—into the concerns,

agendas, and interests of diverse audiences and publics. Translation is a key term in actor-network-theory (which is often referred to as a sociology of translation) and is understood not as something imposed on the world—an act of aggressive encroachment on pristine otherness—but as something that defines a world that is always already composed of acts of mediation and transformation. In contrast to what Latour dubs “double click”—the fantasy of effortless information transfer promised by computer technology—such translation is never faithful or complete. “Everything is translated. . . . We may be understood, that is surrounded, diverted, betrayed, displaced, transmitted, but we are never understood *well*. If a message is transported, then it is transformed.”<sup>8</sup>

“*We are never understood well*”: a phrase to be kept in mind in the light of a growing interest in extending and expanding academic networks. We are seeing, for example, a new attention to the public humanities and the “engaged humanities”—a realization that universities need to make stronger alliances with interests and communities outside their walls. At Brown, for example, students can now enroll in a master’s program in the public humanities: a program that combines intellectual content with “practical skills needed for public humanities work: to develop exhibits and websites, care for museum artifacts, conduct oral history interviews, undertake historic preservation projects, facilitate public engagement and partnership, and create and manage cultural programs.”<sup>9</sup> Articulations of the social value of the humanities are becoming ever more prevalent, as a means of pushing back against accusations of esotericism or irrelevance to public life.

Much research in the humanities, of course, does not lend itself to being measured in terms of immediate use-value or direct impact: indeed it may actively resist or forcefully challenge such criteria. Yet this point also needs to be conveyed, along with a case for more complex or subtle forms of justification. The call to demonstrate the value of the humanities cannot be waved away as just a neoliberal imposition or a grievous symptom of anti-intellectualism. Being accountable—clarifying what scholars do and why it matters—is not a task that humanists can evade, even if we strenuously object to certain forms of accounting. At a time when an older model of higher education as the leisurely self-cultivation of a cultural elite is open to question—for good reasons—we need other justifications for the costs of the humanities and more eloquent accounts of its contributions.

Ien Ang offers some incisive reflections on this topic, emphasizing the need for scholars to speak to multiple constituencies while also highlighting the schism between political ambitions and political effects in her own field of cultural studies. A vanguard stance and a tendency to speak

and write in code are likely to inhibit rather than to aid intellectuals' engagement with the messy realities of sociopolitical life. "We need," she writes, "to engage in a world where we have to communicate with others who are, to all intents and purposes, intellectual strangers—people who do not already share our approaches and assumptions."<sup>10</sup> These intellectual strangers are not just dim-witted bureaucrats or conservative pundits, but diverse groups who may be nonplussed or mystified by what they hear about the state of humanities disciplines. Scholars have often been reluctant to address this wider audience—thanks, in part, to the influence of theories that drive home the mystifying and ideological nature of everyday language. Against this trend, Ang argues for a scholarship more willing to engage in positive interventions and recommendations, less quick to bridle at lay interpretations or even maladroit accounts of academic ideas. In short, conveying what we do to "intellectual strangers" means being willing to go down unexpected paths and into uncomfortable places, and to recognize that transportation always involves translation.

This brings us to a third aspect of the humanities: *criticizing*. To call for humanists to engage more actively in public life is by no means to imply that their task is to rubberstamp what currently exists. The so-called stakeholders of higher education—whether bureaucrats, politicians, tax payers, private donors, foundations, journalists and public commentators, parents, or students themselves—have diverse expectations of what the humanities should do. However, one widely accepted function is that of criticizing, objecting, and taking issue. Indeed, it is hard to see how sustained thought of any kind, whether inside or outside the academy, could take place without practices of disagreement.

Criticizing, in the sense I employ it here, includes a history of philosophical and political critique, but also leaves room for many other forms and genres of disagreement. On the one hand, the humanities cannot jettison critique, given its defining presence in the history of the humanities. In spite of its own critique of tradition, critique is now part of tradition—the intellectual tradition of modernity—and thus falls under the curatorial function of the humanities. The history of modern thought would be incomprehensible without knowledge of the ideas of Kant and Marx, feminism and Foucault. In this respect, Eagleton's nostalgia for a lost era of critique seems misplaced; many of these ideas are now far more central to literary studies and the humanities than they were decades ago.

On the other hand, the broader term *criticizing* is intended to convey that there are other ways of disagreeing than those signaled by the term critique. Critique often insists on its difference from mere criti-

cism, understood as ordinary disagreement or objection, thanks to its epistemological advantages. In traditional forms of ideology critique, this is a matter of contrasting the illusions or delusions of others to the critic's greater access to truth. Meanwhile, in poststructuralist critique, where the very idea of truth has been "problematized," techniques of troubling or defamiliarizing now signal the critic's self-reflexive distance from the naive or literal beliefs of others. Yet in both cases, we see the methodological asymmetry that characterizes critique: ideas that scholars object to are traced back to hidden structures of which actors themselves remain unaware, while critique remains the ultimate horizon, a virtual synonym for rigorous and radical thought.

Latour has argued at length against this kind of asymmetry—whereby scholars sustain their own claims to authority by exposing the naive beliefs, fantasies, or fetishes of others. To portray others as being driven by hidden structures that only the critical gaze can discern is to speak about them rather than to them, from the standpoint of the vanguard. Scholars can only hope to engage larger audiences—rather than chastise or admonish them—if they are willing to put themselves in the shoes of their interlocutors, to combine disagreement with empathy, and to take countervailing arguments seriously as arguments, rather than treating them merely as symptoms. As Stefan Collini writes, we need to extend imaginative sympathy to the agents we study. "Depth of understanding involves something which is more than merely a matter of deconstructive alertness; it involves a measure of interpretative charity and at least the beginnings of a wide responsiveness."<sup>11</sup> Criticism that adopts such a stance is not only less dogmatic but also more likely to be heard by the intellectual strangers invoked by Ang.

A final verb: *composing*. In a manifesto published in *New Literary History*, Latour articulates a vision of composition as an alternative to critique. The latter, he notes, is exceptionally skilled at deconstructing and demystifying, seeking to render things less real by underscoring their social constructedness. It is very good, in short, at pulling out the rug from under one's feet, while failing to provide a place where one might stand, however temporarily or tentatively. The idea of composition, by contrast, speaks to the possibility of trying to compose a common world, even if this world can only be built out of many different parts. It is about making rather than unmaking, adding rather than subtracting, translating rather than separating. Composition leaves room for both art and politics; theory and practice. The word has its roots in art, music, theater, dance, but also speaks to the creation of communities and political collectives; it directs our attention away from the uninteresting question of what is constructed or not constructed to the key

question of whether something is well made or badly made. "It is time to compose," Latour writes, "in all the meanings of the word, including to compose with, that is to compromise, to care, to move slowly, with caution and precaution."<sup>12</sup>

The focus of Latour's essay is the insufficiency of the idea of Nature in dealing with the crisis of climate change. Yet many of his remarks are also germane to the concerns of the humanities. Could they help inspire an alternative vision of what humanists do? One that is less invested in the iconoclasm of critique and more invested in forms of making and building? In a recent book on the future of the humanities, Yves Citton remarks that politicians are fond of invoking the "knowledge economy" and the need to equip students for the "information society." Let us do our best, says Citton, to replace such slogans with references to "cultures of interpretation"—a term that affords a stronger case for what the humanities offer. Interpretation, here, is not a matter of recovering original or final meanings, but of mediating and translating, as texts are slotted into ever-changing frames.<sup>13</sup> This view of interpretation resonates with Latour's emphasis on composition, as a forging of links between things that were previously unconnected. Interpretation becomes an act of co-making that brings new things to light rather than a deciphering of repressed meaning or an endless rumination on the deficits or indeterminacies of language.

Meanwhile the language of composition draws humanists closer to others who are invested in making, building, constructing, whether out of joists and steel plates or musical notes and physical gestures: engineers; painters; set designers; composers; novelists; website builders; scientists; dancers. Such rapprochements should be welcomed, as forms of conveyance that can bring unexpected fruits and unanticipated insights. To those committed to such cross-disciplinary conversations, the oft-cited adage—it is the humanities that make us human—can only seem misguided. Sarah Churchwell, for example, claims that "the humanities are where we locate our own lives, our own meanings; they embrace thinking, curiosity, creation, psychology, emotion. . . . We need the advanced study of humanities so that we might, some day, become advanced humans."<sup>14</sup> Are sociologists or mathematicians less human than philosophers or literary critics? Is their work not inspired by intense curiosity, bursts of creativity, affect, and emotion? And is it timely to underscore the exceptional status of humans at a time when our entanglement with, and dependence upon, both nature and technology have never been more evident? In his recent Tanner lectures, Latour proposes that the humanities and sciences find common ground and create new alliances in the face of shared threats to academic institutions.



What connects them, he suggests, is a deep sense of puzzlement about phenomena; while scientists start with the unfamiliar, humanists seek to render things unfamiliar. In both cases, the effect is to turn self-evident substances back into contingent and often surprising constellations of actors. Whether they work in libraries or laboratories, scholars are passionately concerned with distinctions that are invisible or uninteresting to others. Hence Latour's final rallying cry: "Hair splitters of all disciplines unite!"<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps, then, we can defend the humanities without falling back on well-worn sentiments about the human or critique. Various disciplines in the humanities are linked by a commitment to preserving, conserving, and caring for. As the ideas of these disciplines are conveyed and communicated to intellectual strangers, we should expect, and even welcome, translation, mistranslation, and transformation. And rather than embracing a perpetual ethos of deconstructing or destabilizing, we might devote more attention to making, building, and connecting. Reflections along these lines may allow us to articulate a stronger case for why the humanities matter.

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In his opening essay, Stephen Muecke considers the humanities with the studied perplexity of an anthropologist from another planet, noting the frequent schism between what humanists claim to be doing and what they actually do. Moving across history, linguistics, and literary studies, he proposes that the techniques, practices, and modes of knowing that characterize these fields have little to do with philosophical narratives of critical reason or radical indeterminacy that hover around the humanities. How else, then, might we describe what humanists do? A Latourian perspective on literature, for example, requires us to take seriously the realness of literary objects—as residing not in their autonomy, otherness, or remoteness from the world, but in their ability to increase and multiply connections: to other texts, people, things, concepts, institutions. The field of the environmental humanities is one fertile domain of connectivity that pushes against Nature/Culture bifurcations by allowing scientists and humanists to experiment on the same terrain. Muecke proposes that we replace two major drivers of the humanities—the unmasking power of critique and the unrealistic use of theory—with an emphasis on practice-driven modes of "compositionism" and "experiment" more willing to engage with the concerns of differing publics.

Graham Harman agrees that Latour's work offers a compelling alternative to entrenched positions within the humanities that rely on nature/culture oppositions, whether to champion the former or the latter. At odds with both the social constructivism preferred by the left and the political and philosophical conservatism of the right, it shows that "stability is neither assured nor impossible, but is achieved only at great cost, and only by way of inanimate things." In his essay, Harman traces the arc of Latour's thought, from the Hobbesian dimensions of early actor-network-theory toward a greater openness to moral concerns and "mini-transcendences" in the 1990s to Latour's most recent critique of economic thinking in AIME. If economics aspires to the status of a new master discourse, then it becomes crucial to emphasize other modes—morality, attachment, and organization, as redescribed by Latour—that are at odds with the logic of economic calculation. Via his explication of these modes, Harman draws out their relevance to a rebooted humanities willing to relinquish some of its intellectual tics and *idées fixes*.

Steven Connor's title—"Decomposing the Humanities"—speaks to his skepticism about the soul-stirring claims that are often made on behalf of the humanities: as repositories of the human spirit or vigilant guardians of radical thought. The work of Latour and his mentor Michel Serres models a style of thinking that is less agonistic as well as less self-congratulatory and that can inspire an alternate, more affirmative relationship to the things of this world. As scholars in the humanities become increasingly concerned with climate change, environmental damage, and species destruction, so Latour's questioning of the philosophies of modernity becomes increasingly salient. And yet there is no automatic relation, Connor points out, between styles of thinking (such as the questioning of modern epistemology) and real-world effects. Redressing climate change is ultimately more about engineering than emancipation: if the humanities can give up their *folie de grandeur* and their claim to being sole custodians of the human, perhaps they will have something useful to contribute.

Antoine Hennion offers an enlightening genealogy of the development of actor-network-theory in Latour's work and his own at the CSI (Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation) in Paris. The Center's studies of science and of culture, he notes, pursued closely related but differing tracks, drawing on the concepts of translation and mediation respectively. In both cases, the emphasis on the mutual constitution of objects and relations remains fundamental; an emphasis that has little to do with a skeptical or demystifying language of social construction. For ANT, that things are created via relations does not make them less real but more real. Hennion illustrates the point via his own work on

fans, amateurs, and aficionados: one can take the love of art seriously while also showing how this love is coproduced; by the artwork, but also by bodies and feelings, conversations with friends, knowledge of a pertinent corpus (whether we are talking of rock music or opera arias, horror movies or modernist painting), a formal or informal training in practices of perception and discrimination. Where Bourdieu went wrong, Hennion remarks, was not in situating art in a field of relations, but in inferring that the love of art was therefore an illusion to be demystified: these two ideas have no necessary connection. Meanwhile, the essay also draws out various affinities between actor-network-theory and American pragmatism; the radicalism of William James and John Dewey, Hennion suggests, has yet to be fully appreciated.

Yes Citton's essay centers on Latour's most recent book, *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence*. The book's turn to *differing* modes of existence—religion, politics, reference, morality, etc.—responds to and revises the aforementioned tenets of actor-network-theory (where the repeated recourse to a language of actants and networks runs the risk of making everything sound very similar). This emphasis on a “pluriverse”—on multiple modes of being that are equally real—also challenges the propensity to invoke just one mode, economics, to explain or justify everything (the glories of the free market for the right; the tyrannies of capitalism on the left). How, then, does AIME speak to the concerns of literary critics? Latour's account of the mode of existence of “fictional beings”—including not just fiction, but various artistic and expressive endeavors—offers a powerful redescription of our objects of study. It speaks not only to our attachment to works of literature, Citton argues, but how such works can help us reattach—to new concerns, commitments, collectives. As forms of “meshwork,” literature and art can weave fragments together, compose common agendas, binding humans to nonhumans in response to the current reality of ecological and environmental crisis. And here Citton also underscores the need for closer collaboration between literary critics and scholars of media and mediation.

In her essay, Barbara Herrnstein Smith turns to Latour's writings on religion—as “remarkable works of lyrical philosophizing.” For Latour, that scientific facts are constructed—fabricated, put together out of heterogeneous elements—does not render them less real but more real. The same is true—applying the principles of a symmetrical anthropology—of demons and divinities, whose potency is forged via numerous mediations and networks of co-actors. While both scientific knowledge and religious belief are equally composed, they are nonetheless incommensurable in their modes of veridiction and their tone and mood. In

developing this line of argument, Smith remarks, Latour manages to tie together “a theoretically sophisticated account of scientific knowledge with a rhetorically deft Christian apologetics.” Smith remains skeptical, however, about the strong demarcation between science and religion that she sees in *AIME*, while also noting the book’s conspicuous lack of interest in religions other than Christianity. Meanwhile, Latour’s vision of history turns out to be less symmetrical than his anthropology. *AIME*’s condemnation of the Moderns echoes a familiar narrative of modernity as a fall from grace that risks becoming totalizing or moralistic—against the express intentions of Latour’s own method.

Michael Witmore is interested in Latour’s challenge to long-established divisions between the sciences and the humanities as they speak to the intellectual hybrid of the “digital humanities.” As an example of such digital humanities practice, he describes his own recent work on conjunctions in Shakespeare’s plays: a blending of humanistic expertise and interpretation with the scanning and processing capacities of computers. The value of such an approach, he remarks, lies not just in providing statistical support for generalizations about large bodies of texts, but in the potential for highlighting distinctions invisible to the human eye—as in the case of Eadweard Muybridge’s famous photos of galloping horses, we are confronted with a surprising or counterintuitive perspective on what we think we already know. Rather than seeing the sciences and the humanities as opponents, Witmore endorses Latour’s recommendation that we conceive of them as allies and urges us to expand our vision of what counts as humanist scholarship.

In his essay, Dipesh Chakrabarty underscores the drastic implications of climate change for intellectual disciplines and divisions of labor. It is no longer feasible to sustain the division of the ethical and the rational from the purely biological that has justified the separation of the humanities from the natural sciences. Chakrabarty traces out the logic of this opposition as it is articulated in Kant’s distinction between animal life—as natural, given, and taken-for-granted—and human life, as the struggle to achieve a more perfect and just society. What is now often called the Anthropocene, by contrast, has forced a new awareness of the entanglement of humans with natural forces they have helped cause but cannot control, and the urgent need to adopt less anthropocentric perspectives on the future of the planet. It is in Latour’s work, Chakrabarty concludes, that we can find a model of thinking that is fully attentive to the agency of the nonhuman and the related question of “deep time.”

Nigel Thrift takes issue with the ubiquitous “it’s all got worse” lament that drives discussion of higher education. This story of decline, he points out, fails to grapple with many of the reasons why things have changed:

that universities have become more bureaucratic, for example, is not unrelated to the dramatic expansion of their intellectual and public activities (including big science), as well as the much larger numbers of students they now serve. The nostalgia for an “artisanal” model of the liberal arts, meanwhile, ignores the ways in which such a model has historically shored up—and continues to sustain—class privilege. In this context, Latour’s work offers a way of more fully coming to terms with the differing modes of existence that now characterize higher education. Rather than holding fast to a picture of themselves as an intellectual or spiritual elite threatened by the vulgarities of the marketplace, academics need to become more involved in reimagining and redesigning the university—in a way that can honor its varied and conflicting duties as well as its multiple intellectual and public roles.

The final essays address the relevance of Latour’s work for the visual arts. Patrice Maniglier begins by stressing the need for diplomacy, setting out four principles to guide the interactions between supporters of *AIME* and the “militants” of art—that is, those eager to protect and defend the existence of art by emphasizing its distinctive history, forms, and interests. The mode of existence in *AIME* most relevant to art and aesthetics is Latour’s discussion of “fictional beings.” Yet the art critic or art historian may worry that such a term does not speak well to their concerns. After all, does not “fiction” imply a concern with representation and/or narrative that much modern and contemporary art explicitly rejects? If the term is too narrow in one sense, it seems too broad in another. As used by Latour, “fictional beings” would include virtually anything with an aesthetic dimension—from aspects of ordinary language to advertisements—and would thus fail to account for specifically artistic concerns. In response, Maniglier strives to show that these concerns can be accommodated within a Latourian framework; such a framework, meanwhile, allows us to more fully grasp the profoundly relational qualities of art and aesthetic experience.

Francis Halsall considers the parallels between Latour’s ideas and contemporary art practice: not by “applying” Latour to art, but by drawing out shared techniques, approaches, and orientations. Art, he observes, has become unmoored from any relation to a specific style, object, or medium; it is now defined by a state of radical eclecticism. As a result, there is a conceptual rhyming or resonance between Latour’s work and developments in the art world. The distinctive features of Latour’s work—its conception of actors and networks; its questioning of nature/culture distinctions; its “flat ontology” that levels hierarchies between kinds of actors; its emphasis on the inescapability of mediation and translation—are themes that are also being picked up and explored by

many contemporary artists. Meanwhile Latour is also in key respects an artist: someone who experiments with different cultural platforms and whose academic writing blurs genres by making use of literary device (dialogue, vivid description, extended metaphors, and fictional characters.)

Bruno Latour takes up this theme in his concluding remarks, while remarking on the context-specific nature of “humanities discourse,” with its lack of a direct French equivalent. Looking back on his own development, he traces a series of formative encounters with Nietzsche, Derrida, biblical exegesis, and semiotics—as offering not a schooling in “theory,” understood as a series of vaulting philosophical claims, but a training in meticulous attention to techniques of writing. This attention to modes of expression, along with a conviction that there is no metalanguage that can subsume others, has inspired not only Latour’s scholarship in science and technology studies and other fields, but also his staging of several art exhibitions (*Iconoclash*, *Making Things Public*, and the recently opened *Reset Modernity!*) as experimental zones where different media and modes can connect and collide. Meanwhile, he concludes, the humanities have long paid attention to the extraordinary range of figurations in literature and art; they thus have ample resources with which to question, rather than to reinstate, conceptions of the human that are being radically transformed in the wake of ecological transformation and climate change.

This issue of *New Literary History*, then, hopes to achieve two main goals. First, to introduce Latour’s ideas to some of our readers (in which case the essays are best read in order) or to deepen a familiarity with his work. And second, to explore ways of thinking about the humanities that do not fall back in the genres of the jeremiad, the sermon, or the lament. All too often, it seems, humanists try to save the humanities by nurturing a sense of exceptionalism. It is as if we can only defend what we do by disparaging everyone else—those blinkered scientists holed up in their labs; our attention-challenged students enslaved to their mobile devices; a lamentably indifferent or ignorant public at large. Our contributors have opted to pursue alternative lines of thought and to experiment with other intellectual and practical possibilities. As well as defending the humanities, can we also recompose them?

#### NOTES

1 I owe this question to a conference at the University of Warsaw in 2014 called “Imagine there were no Humanities,” where I developed an early version of these arguments.

2 See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015).

3 Terry Eagleton, “The Death of Universities,” *The Guardian*, December 17, 2010.

4 Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 26.

- 5 See also Michael Meranze, "Curating the Humanities," <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2013/11/curating-humanities.html>.
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- 7 Mark McGurl, "Ordinary Doom: Literary Studies in the Waste Land of the Present," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 329–49. See also Nathan K. Hensley, "Curatorial Reading and Endless War," *Victorian Studies* 56, no. 1 (2013): 59–83.
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- 9 "Program Requirements." John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, <http://www.brown.edu/academics/public-humanities>.
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- 15 Latour, "How to Better Register the Agency of Things," Tanner lecture 1: Semiotics, 12, available at <http://www.world-lecture-project.org/lecture/?id=562e433aab100>. See also Mario Biagioli, "Postdisciplinary Liaisons: Science Studies and the Humanities," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 816–33.

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