theories and methodologies

The Sustainable Humanities

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What's in a Term?

ANY DISCUSSION OF HOW THE HUMANITIES CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINABILITY OR HOW THE HUMANITIES ARE SUSTAINABLE MUST BEGIN with what critics of the sustainability concept have called its cultural deficit: academic humanists and artists have not been central to discussions of what sustainability is and might be. Sustainability is most commonly understood in economic terms, as production that respects ecological carrying capacities. Because the sustainability concept is "squishy," in Bill McKibben's words, it invariably drifts toward the more pragmatic project of sustainable development, the goal of which is keeping modernization viable—a goal dubious to many environmentalists as well as to cultural critics (102). In an era when the rhetoric of crisis dominates public conversation about political, social, educational, and environmental affairs, the term *sustainability* can seem anemic. Its emphasis on long-term planning and stewarding of resources has none of the dramatic appeal of apocalyptic visions of a world in which all human and natural ecologies are in collapse. For many environmental critics, it is a term that in some sense fails to account for the necessity of drastic changes in how resources are protected, much less distributed, and it relies too heavily on protecting the very state of affairs that got us into trouble in the first place. For its critics, and even for its reluctant supporters, it is a term about managing anxieties that shuttle between local and global concerns, individual and corporate responsibilities.

In her recent essay "Aesthetics of Sustainability," the German artist and critic Hildegard Kurt issued a clarion call, arguing that the "future viability" of sustainable development depends on its rapprochement with humanist education and the arts, with symbolic and aesthetic creative practice (238). We want to introduce a new term, *the sustainable humanities*, to suggest that sustainability and the humanities have always been compatible projects. While the sustainable humanities include the work of ecocritics and environmental critics, it refers more broadly to the ecological value of hu-

manities education, whether or not it directly addresses environmental concerns. We speak as English professors and environmental critics committed to interdisciplinary dialogue in the humanities.

For some time we in the academic humanities have been contemplating our own relevance in relation to sustainable development, without perhaps using the word *sustainability*, but we should use this word and claim for our intellectual practice the economic values it entails. We have had to ask ourselves if our professional practice exceeds ecological carrying capacities and if the humanities will survive in this economic climate. The across-the-board defunding of humanities and social science curricula, especially in public universities, has led to questions about our resilience. Interdisciplinary collaborations mark our most pointed bid for survival, and many of these collaborations have pursued ends that are ecological, insofar as ecology always has been intimately linked to economy, to scales of production. In the past fifteen years or so, academic humanists have partnered with digital artists, libraries, and publishers to explore collaborative methods of humanist practice and to query what the material bases of a sustainable archive might be. The English professor Alan Liu's *Transcriptions*, a digital curricular development and research initiative started in 1998, offers a classic example. We've considered the material through which we store the products of our labor (e.g., whether or not the paperless university is plausible), and we've considered the material conditions of our labor more widely (e.g., whether or not we should write books or teach in physical classrooms).

Many of these questions have been based on assumptions of attrition, of a "slow violence" to humanities education, to borrow Rob Nixon's term, that requires resignation to diminishment. Sustainability and the humanities share an intellectual and political aim, but we must guard against understanding them individually or together through a model of scarcity, even though the resources that might make these concepts viable in the future are scarce. We propose a more open future for humanities education, one in which the sustainable humanities are central to the concerns of social ecology or to sustainability when it is defined as the "humanization" of modernity (Kurt 238).

Raymond Williams's early work on the materiality of genre, which prompted readers to conceive of literary forms in relation to their specific conditions of production, in essence founded cultural studies in the concerns of social ecology. We in literary and cultural studies can take Williams's project further into the public sphere by acting more self-consciously as culture producers or allies of contemporary arts projects that reach communities outside the academy. Hybrid works of ethnography, art, and criticism, such as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *Friction* (2005), Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (2002), or Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City* (2010), suggest possibilities for stylistic experimentation that humanist scholars might consider, if not for themselves then for their graduate students, whose curriculum does not often enough address how academic writing can more effectively intervene in material culture to save itself from ecological irrelevance. Arts projects like the digital Land Use Database, sponsored by the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) since the early nineties, make explicit the relations between the production of archives and the public performance of place through layered metaphor that has long been the more cloistered concern of environmental critics. These projects model possibilities for public humanities work related but not confined to academic methods. Matt Coolidge, founder of the CLUI, describes himself as engaged in a pedagogical "trialectic," where digital archives housing photographs and facts about land use in the United States complement public infrastructure tours and more traditional exhibits

showcasing photography and narrative text (287). The CLUI and similar projects, such as the performance of the occluded histories of urban built environments by the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, an arts collective, offer ordinary people the means of getting a representational grasp on macroscale industrial projects, like the Southern California freeway system.

One goal of critical realism is to represent realities that are not usually visible because of the scalar extremes and privatization of space in capitalism today. The critical realist project becomes more earnest in the face of the multiscalar effects of global capitalism, which grows increasingly unstable as it exceeds its ecological limits—for instance, the reserves of so-called conventional oil. Humanist scholars engage in critical realism by offering students the opportunity to discuss or create narratives counter to those of corporate media as all in the classroom think together alongside writers and artists. A collaborative classroom reading of Sekula's photo-essay *Fish Story*, which chronicles the effects of containerization on port cities, is an ecological act. Such a reading might take place in a class devoted to globalization or to contemporary visual culture rather than to sustainability per se. The embodied geographic practices of groups like the CLUI extend the narrative reappropriations common to humanist pedagogy as it happens in the university into external social spaces, which when corporate-owned can be remade as public spaces through the direct-action criticism that these arts collectives model.

Artists who make the narrative and affective work that we do in the classroom visible to alternative publics help us to emphasize the argument that we, too, produce sustainable artifacts and socialities—not just take apart the objects of our culture. Now, when the need for new infrastructures feels keen, criticism must be reaffirmed as a kind of making. In the academy, scholars of the digital humanities have in some regards led the way toward a strong argument for humanities work as the making of sustainable goods, such as archives, social and professional networks, and even interruptions of corporate systems through strategic hacktivism. The digital humanists' interest in hardware and mediated sociability has in turn reanimated the study of books as material artifacts with significant ecological footprints. The convergence of literary and cultural studies with cognitive science adds yet another material substrate to our humanities venture, a consideration of how the arts work, biologically, as sustaining modes of cognition.

We would add that the sustainable humanities can also confront hyperindustrial modernity in the era of unconventional energy mining, of fracking, tar sands, and mountaintop removal, with the unfashionable but nonetheless ecological concept of civic responsibility. For us, the civic includes the sociability (self-consciously "living together") that Hannah Arendt saw as fundamental to genuine political participation, in addition to the protections afforded by citizenship (201). In response to the attritional and exponential violence attached to resource extraction under globalization, Andrew Dobson conceives an ecological citizenship that might extend the rights and privileges attached to a wealthy nation to the people living in its offshore resource colonies. How much natural gas would Shell and Chevron flare in the Niger delta, creating blazing, toxic fires, if the people who lived there were honorary Americans or Dutch?

As Elaine Scarry argues, citizenship—ecological or not—relies more on constitutional guarantees than on the kind of expansive imagining that might follow from, say, studying global environmental literatures (99). Yet the creation of global and postcolonial archives in the environmental humanities, by writers and critics like Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Ursula Heise, Graham Huggan, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Rob Nixon, and Deborah Bird Rose, has offered North American students an affective and imaginative

complement to the cradle-to-grave life-cycle analyses that began to dominate environmental social science in the nineties. More broadly, the archives of literary and cultural studies imply alternative futures, since archives always suggest a charged engagement with the future's past, what the past will be for succeeding generations. The creation of environmental memory, as Lawrence Buell has argued, is a primary contribution that literature and literary studies always have made toward planetary survival, even before the advent of ecocriticism ("Environmental Memory"). Without the environmental memory that literary archives provide, we might never know what places looked or felt like before their injury, the extent of habitat destruction, or the baseline of ecological health. Henry David Thoreau's seasonal notebooks are now being mined for evidence of global climate change.

The most complex and wide-ranging intersection between literary studies and sustainability lies at the intersection of literary forms and social affiliation, in how literary forms prompt us to imagine, as communities, a world otherwise. Cognitive critics have begun to discover that this sort of imagining stimulates the brain's built-in theory of mind, a primary index of social skill that gets exercised through encounters with characters thinking about what one another might be thinking in the novel (Zunshine 25). In the classroom, thinking about what other students might be thinking about what characters might be thinking about one another amps up the social exercise. Contemplating the relations among nonhuman beings imagining one another in the descriptive passages of the novel or in the environmental evocations of a poem might also speak to our brain's embodied means of knowing others and practicing a social and ecological commons. If given the "bioregional quiz" developed in 1981 by *Coevolution Quarterly*, some literature students probably could answer more questions about the "region" of a favorite novel than about the one in which they live. Environmentalists might find that disappointing, but we don't need to think of it as a flight from ecology. Rather, we are engaged in teaching students how to see, analyze, imagine, and love worlds that they do not inhabit or do not yet inhabit, worlds present and not present at the same time.

Pedagogies of Scale

At the risk of sounding grandiose, Earth needs the humanities. The sustainability of the humanities requires a clear articulation of the relation between our pedagogical practice and our species's ecological resilience, meaning our ability to bounce back from crisis. In a world in which the university as we know it is endangered, teaching sustainability as humanists requires the kind of collaboration that is established in other activist and scholarly communities. It requires that we pay close attention to how and what we teach in our classes and how we narrate the value of our disciplines to the university at large and to the publics we serve. Collaboration—across and within fields, between institutions, between differently located social actors—demands that we share intellectual resources, but this need not mean that we give up on the idea of disciplinarity. To the contrary, disciplines like literary studies or history have particular contributions to make to the study of sustainability: disciplinarity makes possible a more truly collaborative way of understanding the scale and scope of what we mean when we talk about resilience. Of course, this call to collaborative teaching while maintaining disciplinarity implies frictions, social relations that interrupt the efficiency measures indispensable to globalization. In a moment when universities are attempting to streamline the necessarily frictional process of higher learning, we offer the collaborative humanities as a model of best practice, which challenges the hollow rhetoric of an academic

efficiency that works against human resilience and the growth of intellectual capital.

Teaching is where we humanists feel the budgetary cuts most severely—our classes get larger, our departments more underfunded, our hiring more restricted—and it is thus where the sustainability of the humanities, their contract with the future, is most vulnerable. The aggressive pursuit of cost cutting in the service of "excellence," to quote Bill Readings's caustic indictment, is most evident in the university's treatment of students, whom the system of higher education has turned into a class of people valued as customers and virtually ignored as intellectuals in all but a handful of schools. Among the most vocal of the neoliberal university's critics have been humanities professors like Christopher Newfield (*Unmaking*; Newfield and Meranze), and with the rise of academic writers in the blogosphere, readers can follow comprehensive critiques of the accelerated crisis in higher education and extended, detailed dissections of how this crisis has affected the conditions in discrete institutions, departments, and especially classrooms. If the practice of teaching is where we see the crisis of the university most vividly, so too is it where we can begin to address the interrelated issues of sustainability and humanist practice. The lived experience of being a humanities professor on a material campus, in a material classroom, grounds and inspires our pedagogical practice in surprising ways.

The humanities are especially suited to speak to the rhetoric of crisis and to problems of futurity and scale because they demand that we understand how narratives about place, about value, and about the relation of social actors to those ideas are made. In the study of English, we pay particular attention not only to the past, even if we study how conflicting narratives have constituted it, but also to the idea of a futurity that is not inevitable, no matter how and where we locate it in a single syllabus, text, or historical period. Every time we teach a class we are also reminded of the social ecology of higher education, how economic facts like class size impinge on social processes such as the development of analytic skills and of the craft of writing. Teaching is the most labor-intensive practice in the humanities, and (if we are lucky) it conventionally occurs in an actual classroom in which we can interact face-to-face with students. Humanities classrooms remain largely taken-for-granted public spaces, spaces that can't easily be privatized because of the kind of social practice that happens in them. Classroom teaching requires getting to know the students as intellectuals, taking account of their opinions, helping them to formulate ideas and refine their critical skills, guiding their research—in short, establishing collaborative relations with them, as thinkers and writers. The sort of teaching we are talking about—idealized in films—is necessarily slow teaching. It serves a small number of students at a time, and it demands individualized, sustained attention.

We can think of collaboration in different registers, in terms of curricular models and classroom practice. Of course, it's possible to teach environmental literature in virtually any period. We can offer syllabi attuned to the more specific concerns of sustainability by conceiving courses that engage struggles to control human and natural resources. Environmental humanists such as Buell, Heise, and Eric Ball and Alice Lai have offered explicit models for creating an archive that can be converted into a syllabus, and the Web site of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment hosts a library of curricular tools. Moreover, numerous universities have produced resources that can help humanities instructors invent courses that link the crisis of the university to environmental sustainability (Jacques; Timpson, Dunbar, Kimmel, Bruyere, Newman, and Mizia). Because environmental critics early recognized collaboration among disciplines as crucial

to the development of their field, which is in part indebted to the findings of natural science, interdisciplinary work has been fairly strong among environmental critics and between environmental critics and scientists. A course titled Sustainability and Collapse that was cotaught by Heise (English, comparative literature) and Mark Zoback (geosciences) at Stanford in 2010 is a noteworthy example of interdisciplinarity in practice. Scholars like Buell ("Ecocriticism") and Heise have argued that the field of environmental humanities is inherently interdisciplinary and collaborative because it is fundamentally committed to working through historical definitions of key words like *nature*, *human*, and *place*.

Yet what is most sustainable in the humanities is not just *what* we can offer nor how many classes can be generated around specific topics or texts that deal with environmentalism and ecology. As English professors, what we recognize as most sustainable in literary studies—how the field approaches larger questions about ecology and how it will remain sustainable in the university—lies at a more basic, even essential, level. Again, literature models new ways of collectively understanding the possible. At the level of language, genre, form, and style, we teach students to see that the process of narrative is a sustained effort in world making, an effort that is historically specific and yet powerfully attuned to the future. Teaching students how to read on the granular level—for example, a Jamesonian reading of form as a historically specific artifact of particular modes of production, the reading of commonsensical words as accretions of historical debates about social values, or a Derridean reading of traces and erasures—is a way of showing them that no moment is historically inevitable.

This has everything to do with the material space of the classroom, with thinking together about narrative, image, or hypertext, becoming what Stanley Fish called "an interpretive community." Teaching in the humanities is itself a sustaining exercise in collaborative narrative or even confabulation, and as such it renews our contract with the future. More than thirty years ago, the environmentalist and renewable energy advocate Amory Lovins warned that "we must be wary of the danger of not being imaginative enough to see how undetermined the future is and how far we can shape it" (15). Some of the options that Lovins considered back then have sadly been foreclosed. Yet the future isn't fully determined, and it belongs to us and to our students. However embattled our jobs may be, by rights we still can, and will, teach. Having long succeeded in the business of the future, which is no less than the generation of complete and conceivable, alternative possible worlds, we scholars of literary and cultural studies need to claim our stake in sustainability—a stake that ought to be planted as deep, to quote Thoreau, "as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved" (244).

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