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Report to the Council¹

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We are thinking a lot about anniversaries as the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) approaches the centennial of its founding next year. We will have more opportunity to think and talk about the origins of ACLS in the coming months, but it is yet 2018, after all, so this morning I would like to focus on another milestone, about which much has been written lately: the 50th anniversary of the tumultuous events of 1968, events that even as they were happening consolidated a sense of “the sixties” as a cultural and political hinge in American history. Protests against the Vietnam War, assassinations, demonstrations, the “police riot” of Chicago ’68—all catalyzed divisions between those rejecting “the establishment” and those demanding support for “law and order.” Campuses became battle zones, as student strikes turned to building occupations that were cleared, often violently, by the police. Campuses were indeed contested. I know. I was there. Learned societies were drawn into this maelstrom. The December 1968 meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA) was disrupted when a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, Louis Kampf, was arrested for hanging posters in the host hotel’s lobby. Professor Kampf was a member of the “New University Conference,”

¹ A video of President Yu’s report is available in the media collection on the ACLS website, www.acls.org.

whose declared aims were “to make the MLA more responsive to the demands of a society—and a university—in desperate need of radical change.” Further, the insurgents sought “to give a forum to graduate students and young faculty,” who were “the most exploited and least listened to amongst us; they experience the MLA meeting as a corral and auction block; their grievances should be heard.”²

Protests and disruptions at other society meetings prompted the Conference of Secretaries, as the collective of directors of ACLS societies was then known, to convene a special conference on the theme “Confrontation and Learned Societies.” Authors contributing to the conference recommended that learned societies stay aloof from campus and political confrontations. “There is little good we are equipped to accomplish by contentious involvement and much harm may come of the attempt,” wrote one.³ George Winchester Stone of the MLA ridiculed Louis Kampf’s critique of his association and agreed that societies, as professional associations, should not enter the public fray. That Professor Kampf would soon become president of the MLA underscores the scope and rapidity of the changes rippling through the academy at this time.

Since the sixties, political divides have widened outside academia, while the academy itself has been a regular object of suspicion and derision by those who objected to the social and cultural changes then unleashed. Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968, and the next year invoked the idea of a “silent majority” enduring impatiently the vocal protests of a few. Ronald Reagan launched his political career by opposing student protests at the University of California, Berkeley. The culture wars of the seventies and eighties extended the conflicts of the sixties on an intellectual plane.

In the 1997 volume *What’s Happened to the Humanities?*, a group of senior scholars surveyed the “battlefields of an extended *Kulturkampf*” in which the humanities, “subjects [that] have proven extremely sensitive to pressures for social change in society at large, . . . fought bitter and clamorous battles” over “[e]very liberal cause—from freedom of speech and the Vietnam War to anticolonialism and the nonreferentiality of language.” “With what results,” these established scholars asked, “have the humanities made themselves into the conscience of the society?”⁴

² Ohmann, Richard, and Louis Kampf, Paul Lauter, Noam Chomsky, and Florence Howe, et al. “Reforming the MLA.” *The New York Review of Books*, December 19, 1968.

³ *Confrontation and Learned Societies*. Edited by John Voss and Paul L. Ward, New York: New York UP, 1970, p. 13.

⁴ *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* Edited by Alvin Kernan, Princeton UP, 1977, pp. 3-4, 6.

Two of my predecessors as ACLS president contributed to this volume. Re-reading their essays, and all of those collected, one gathers that a consensus had developed that the pressures experienced by the humanities during the culture wars did not diminish what our fields have to offer the public, but instead expanded our stock-in-trade. John D'Arms worried about the erosion of the national infrastructure for research support in the humanities, a circumstance he ardently sought to redress when he came to ACLS. While he was concerned that recently emerged intellectual paradigms might alienate potential donors who knew an older humanities from their undergraduate years, he avowed that “[f]ew of us would wish to deny the demographic and political realities that have given rise to some of the best multicultural scholarship,” and that “the intellectual contributions of postmodern theoretical approaches have significantly affected the way many of us go about our work.”⁵ In his detailed study of curricular offerings, Francis Oakley rebuffed the idea that “the American professoriate is somehow bent . . . on engineering nothing less than the collapse of Western civilization itself” and found remarkable persistence in the subjects and methods taught by faculty, including a great deal of close reading and a continued sympathy for New Criticism.⁶

Where should the humanities be? Today’s salient question is less *what has happened to the humanities* than *where are the humanities*. Where should they be found?

The humanities should be found throughout academia. They should not be confined to elite, well-resourced institutions. As some institutions and funders find they must cut back on the resources they make available for humanities research, we know that ACLS must grow to meet the increasing needs of humanities faculty across the diverse landscape of higher education. In 2018, we will accept the first applications for our new Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellowships program. This new set of awards is designed to support the research ambitions of faculty teaching at two-year colleges. Community colleges are an area of particular interest to ACLS, since we know that their campuses are where the majority of college students in the United States first encounter the humanities.

We are also aiming to recognize research excellence and promise at teaching-intensive four-year institutions. As I mentioned at last year’s annual meeting, thanks to a generous grant from Arcadia, a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, we have increased the number of fellowships available in our central program by 10 percent (to 78), with the intent of extending its reach. This initiative has enjoyed initial success, as we received applications from

⁵ *What’s Happened to the Humanities*. p. 54.

⁶ *What’s Happened to the Humanities*. p. 74.

faculty at 27 institutions that had never before presented a fellowship candidate to ACLS. Our applications now ask for a statement of teaching responsibilities, so that our selection committees can factor that information into their choices. And starting this year, we are offering Project Development grants of \$5,000 to select finalists in our ACLS Fellowship competition who hail from colleges and universities with high teaching responsibilities. We hope that this support will help them advance their research projects and perhaps lead to success in a subsequent competition.

Where should the humanities be? They should be active and visible in the public arena. Queen Elizabeth has been quoted as saying “I must be seen to be believed”; that is, her credibility depends, at least in part, on her visibility. That is certainly true of the academic humanities. But I think we miss important opportunities if we think of public engagement only as a form of public relations, of publicity for what we do. It is reasonable enough to think that greater public understanding of what the humanities are will result in greater public support. But more important is the role the humanities can play in supporting the public in its search for meaning and understanding, thus enacting our basic value proposition, that as knowledge grows, life will be enriched. Our Mellon/ACLS Public Fellows program, which has placed nearly 125 recent humanities PhDs in career-building positions in governmental and nonprofit organizations, is an exploration of new pathways for the circulation of humanistic perspectives, methods, and knowledge throughout society. The program is now in its eighth year, and it was remarkable to receive applications this year from advanced graduate students and recent PhDs who told us that they had known about the Public Fellows program since they entered graduate school. We are especially proud of this demonstration project, which exemplifies the dynamic potential of doctoral education in the humanities. This year’s fellows, whom we look forward to naming in June, will undertake significant projects at partner organizations like the Smithsonian, the Innocence Project, Public Radio International, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Our Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism & International Affairs (RJIA) aims to bring the insights of scholars of religion into partnership with journalists, so as to add balance and nuance to their coverage of national and international affairs that have a religious dimension. While the goal of RJIA is to encourage collaboration between subject matter experts and media experts, an added benefit is that scholars and journalists have more opportunity to interact and to learn about each other’s motivating questions, methods, and practices. I think it is safe to say that humanities scholars and journalists have much in common. The scholarly values which ACLS prizes—analytical rigor, expressive precision, and, especially, undaunted

questioning—are hallmarks of high-quality journalism. Through the RJIA initiative we aim to affirm these connections.

Finally, I would note that we are beginning a new faculty fellowship program called Scholars and Society, funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and inspired in part by efforts such as the Mellon Public Scholars Program at the University of California, Davis, which engages graduate students and their faculty mentors in collaborations with public, community-based organizations. And I know that the American Anthropological Association, American Historical Association, and American Academy of Religion, among other member societies, have been actively developing resources for scholars seeking to go public.

Where should the humanities be? They must be in the digital realm. The recent revelations about the abuse of the personal data of tens of millions of Facebook users are an index of the serious consequences of the swift movement of modern life onto online spaces. Members of the ACLS community have long been grappling with the implications of the digital transformation of communication, knowledge infrastructure, and our engagement with the wider public. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, a 2016 ACLS Fellow and professor of media studies at Brown University, is exploring the ways supposedly neutral algorithms and machine learning processes entrench social categories like race and gender in the digital domain. Burcu Baykurt, a graduate student in communications at Columbia University who was just named a 2018 Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellow, is examining the outcomes of early efforts to create so-called “smart cities” in the United States. As Baykurt’s research shows, digital technologies have the capacity both to generate new kinds of social inequality and to screen those same disparities from view. Other fellows are exposing the complex histories of how we have arrived at our algorithmic, big-datified present. Margaret O’Mara, a 2015 fellow and professor of history at the University of Washington, breaks down the popular narratives about positive disruption and the supposed rugged individualism behind Silicon Valley entrepreneurship, stories that serve the interests of the billionaires who profit from new digital technologies at the expense of individual privacy and the economic well-being of many citizens. Going back much further, Steven Berry, professor of history at the University of Georgia and the principal investigator on an ACLS Digital Extension Grant, traces the data revolution in American society to nineteenth-century efforts to ramp up public-health regimes. His project is colorfully entitled “Big, Bad Data and the Birth of Death as We Know It: How Our Mortality Became Disciplined to Science, the State, and

Actuarial Tables.” You may recall that both O’Mara and Berry have spoken on the “Emerging Theories and Methods in Humanities Research” panels here in recent years.⁷

Later today, ACLS Board of Directors member Marwan Kraidy of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication will moderate a discussion about the ways democracy is both nurtured and strained by contemporary media cultures. I take this opportunity to seed that surely fascinating session with questions for you to ponder: What roles should the scholarly humanities play in deciphering the complexities of our media-saturated lives? How might learned societies, and ACLS itself, foster the kinds of research and public conversations that will help society address the very human and ethical dimensions of the digital that are often treated rather as purely technological?

Where should the humanities be? They should be crossing borders. As the ACLS’s first chairman, Charles Homer Haskins, recounted in *The Rise of the Universities*, there was in the fourteenth century “a great revival of learning . . . a great influx of new knowledge into Western Europe . . . chiefly through the Arab scholars of Spain [who offered] the works of Aristotle, Euclid, Ptolemy, and the Greek physicians, the new arithmetic.”⁸ This last was a digital transformation of a sort, for geometry and mathematics became possible when the use of Arabic digits dissolved the burden of calculating in cumbersome Roman numerals. Even at this early point, the pursuit of knowledge was essentially a transnational enterprise. It remains so, ineluctably, today.

ACLS was founded to represent the American academy abroad, and we continue to nurture cross-border scholarly networks. Our former Humanities Program in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine has given rise to a regional learned society, the International Humanities Association, which, with help from ACLS, now partners with our member society the Association of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies in organizing joint meetings. Over the past 10 years, our African Humanities Program (AHP), funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, has awarded fellowships to nearly 400 scholars from the continent. We are now discussing an additional \$5 million grant from Carnegie to continue to provide fellowships and to help redress the imbalances in scholarly communication. Only three percent of the world’s academic publishing comes from Africa, a number that is seriously incommensurate with the breadth and depth of scholarship produced there. In the next years, AHP will scale up its

⁷ Videos of the presentations of Margaret O’Mara (2015) and Stephen Berry (2014) are available in the media collection on the ACLS website, www.acls.org.

⁸ Haskins, Charles Homer. *The Rise of the Universities*, Cornell UP, 1965, pp. 5-6.

assistance to fellows seeking to publish with African presses. The African Humanities Series has published seven books, with 20 more in various stages of review and production. They range widely over the disciplines, from gender studies, to anthropology, musicology, literary studies, intellectual and social history, philosophy, and sociolinguistics. Topics include the representation of women in African film, cultural transmission by Yoruba hunters through song, the resistance of poets to military rule, and a critical reconstruction of the heritage of Shona philosophy (in southern Africa), still held in thrall by colonialist modernity.

The last 50 years represent one-half of ACLS's history. We have grown substantially in that span. In 1968, we awarded 108 fellowships; this year the number is close to 350. Fifty years ago our endowment, calculated in 2018 dollars, stood at \$29 million; today the balance is over \$140 million, with total assets of almost \$180 million. In 1968, the 13-member ACLS Board of Directors included one woman. The delegates to ACLS were all men. Perhaps the most significant indicator of the health of ACLS and of the academic humanities is the increase in our membership, from 33 to 75 societies, a change indicative of the efflorescence and diversification of humanities scholarship over the last half century.

Finally, why the humanities? What do they offer? The answer to that question is the same as that given in 1919 to the question of why the ACLS should be created. The generation that lived through World War I had seen the passions of war overcome the values of peace. They had learned that it would take special effort to sustain the ideals that underlie humanistic study in the face of forces of domination, destruction, and materialist distraction. Today there is still great social, national, and international need for what the humanities have to offer, but scholarship needs support and structure if it is to have the greatest possible impact. That's why ACLS and its member societies are so essential.