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What the humanities do in a crisis



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Your humanities are not my humanities.

I work for a national humanities organization, and part of my job is reading about why the humanities matter. It's an old and tired debate. Is it valuable to live a life of the mind? Is there utility in close reading, in critical theory, in the study of literature and art and history and culture?

Every time I read these justifications I end up saying no, the humanities are pointless and should be abolished. But then I remember that I have dedicated over a decade of my life (and many more to come) to the humanities. It's a funny thing, that justifications for the humanities make me throw up my hands in despair.

Consider this article that the New Yorker just published: *what do the humanities do in a crisis?*. Here's how the article describes universities: a cloistered garden. And here's how the article describes the work of humanists: a life of contemplation. As if humanists are paid to sit alone in the sun, reading Aristotle and thinking about the meaning of life.

It's no wonder I don't relate to articles like this. Because I work with hundreds of universities, and thousands of humanists, across the country.

None of the universities I work with are cloistered gardens. And none of the humanists I work with are paid to live a life of contemplation.

Universities as I know them are places of work, not god. And the humanities are sites of action.

What can the humanities do in a crisis? So much more than this.

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Being in quarantine is a strange and difficult thing. I am alone, facing endless days with no one to talk to face to face. Many of my colleagues and friends are trapped with roommates they barely know; in apartments that are cramped and dark; with children they love but are also exhausted by. Many are trying to work from home under difficult conditions. Many have lost — or expect to lose — their jobs.

I think many of us, whether we are humanists or IT workers or retail staff or machinists, relate to the feelings of helplessness and restlessness that Agnes Collard describes in the *New Yorker*. You do not need to be a professor to feel anxious and frustrated, to question the value of your work. Nor do you need to be a professor to turn to literature, art, and philosophy, alongside reality tv and podcasts and tiktok and video workouts and online shopping, in search of comfort.

These are *human* experiences. *Humanists* are professionals who research and educate on topics including art, literature, history, archaeology, linguistics, anthropology, musicology, religion, philosophy, rhetoric, film, and more. Humanists do their work at colleges and universities, but also in K-12 education and at museums, libraries, historical societies, theaters, publishers, business consultancies, and tech companies.

Humanists are experts in areas that are directly related to the events that are occurring right now. As my colleague Brian DeGrazia reminded me recently, humanists study information literacy and misinformation. They study the history of medicine and disease. They study education in online environments. They study labor and exploitation under capitalism. They study how our social structures betray marginalized and vulnerable communities, and how they fit into a global context. They study practices of mourning and responses to trauma. They study healing and compassion and acts of care. So much of what humanists know is essential for us now.

Humanists are also among the first to experience the economic impacts of the pandemic. Since 2008, museums, libraries, colleges, and universities have increasingly come to depend on contingent and precarious employment — contract workers and adjuncts —

to perform essential work like teaching and research. These institutions were among the first to perform layoffs and hiring freezes in response to the pandemic. The humanist professions are facing an economic crisis, and we have a responsibility to act for our community.

This is why I don't relate to discussions of cloisters or a life of the mind. Like many humanists, I did feel called to work in my profession. But that calling is one that puts me in the public sphere, working with other experts to build community, fight inequity, and imagine (and implement) a better future.

That's the humanities I work for. It justifies itself.

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The humanities I know are already doing things in response to the crisis.

One example: the participants in #CovidCampus, a hashtag that colleagues and I started to give university instructors a space to talk about strategies for online teaching.

University instructors are a point of contact for students who may be young, and may be scared, and may be grieving. During the transition to online teaching, they are responsible for providing care for this community, for protecting them from corporate surveillance and online harassment, and for ensuring that they have access to education across time zones and inequitable access to technology. #CovidCampus is a space that instructors, including experts in online teaching and digital community formation, used to share information and develop better teaching practices together.

Another example: Kim Gallon, an assistant professor of history at Purdue, is one of the first people I observed talking about racial disparities in outcomes for coronavirus patients. Long before the Surgeon General was talking about social factors, Dr. Gallon and her colleagues were mobilizing scholars of African American Studies under the twitter handle @Black_Covid.

COVID Black is "rapid response task force & a critical Black DH project created to respond to Black Diasporic communities impacted by the coronavirus pandemic." It

brings together humanists and social scientists to take action to stop Black people from dying from coronavirus at disproportionate rates.

Another example: Quinn Dombrowski, Academic Technology Specialist in the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages at Stanford. Alongside their collaborators in the Data-sitters Club, Quinn has been running a public health campaign that is both playful and informative. The Data-sitters Club uses *The Babysitters Club*, a popular series of children's books from the 80s and 90s, as a framework to offer accessible lessons in text analysis. In response to the pandemic, Quinn has turned that community into an outreach space for advice and laughter as we all respond to the challenges of living under COVID-19.

Another example: The Modern Language Association, the professional organization for scholars of literature, has been vocal and active in its response to the pandemic and its impact on the professional lives of humanists. Under the leadership of Paula Krebs, the MLA has created an emergency fund that gives money directly to underemployed humanists impacted by the virus, helping to ensure that the basic needs of our community are being met. The grant might be used to help alleviate a loss of income from canceled courses, subsidize the additional hours needed to move classes online, or pay for technology needed to facilitate online teaching.

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Every week I meet online with a group of humanists to talk about the future of the humanities. None of us are tenure track faculty members, but we are all deeply invested in ensuring that the study of people and culture thrives in our society.

Agnes Callard asks what the humanities can do in a time of crisis. For people like us, people who are victims of racism and sexism and classism in our universities, of escalating tuition costs, of the defunding of higher education, and of the collapse of stable jobs in the humanities, that crisis has been here for a long time.

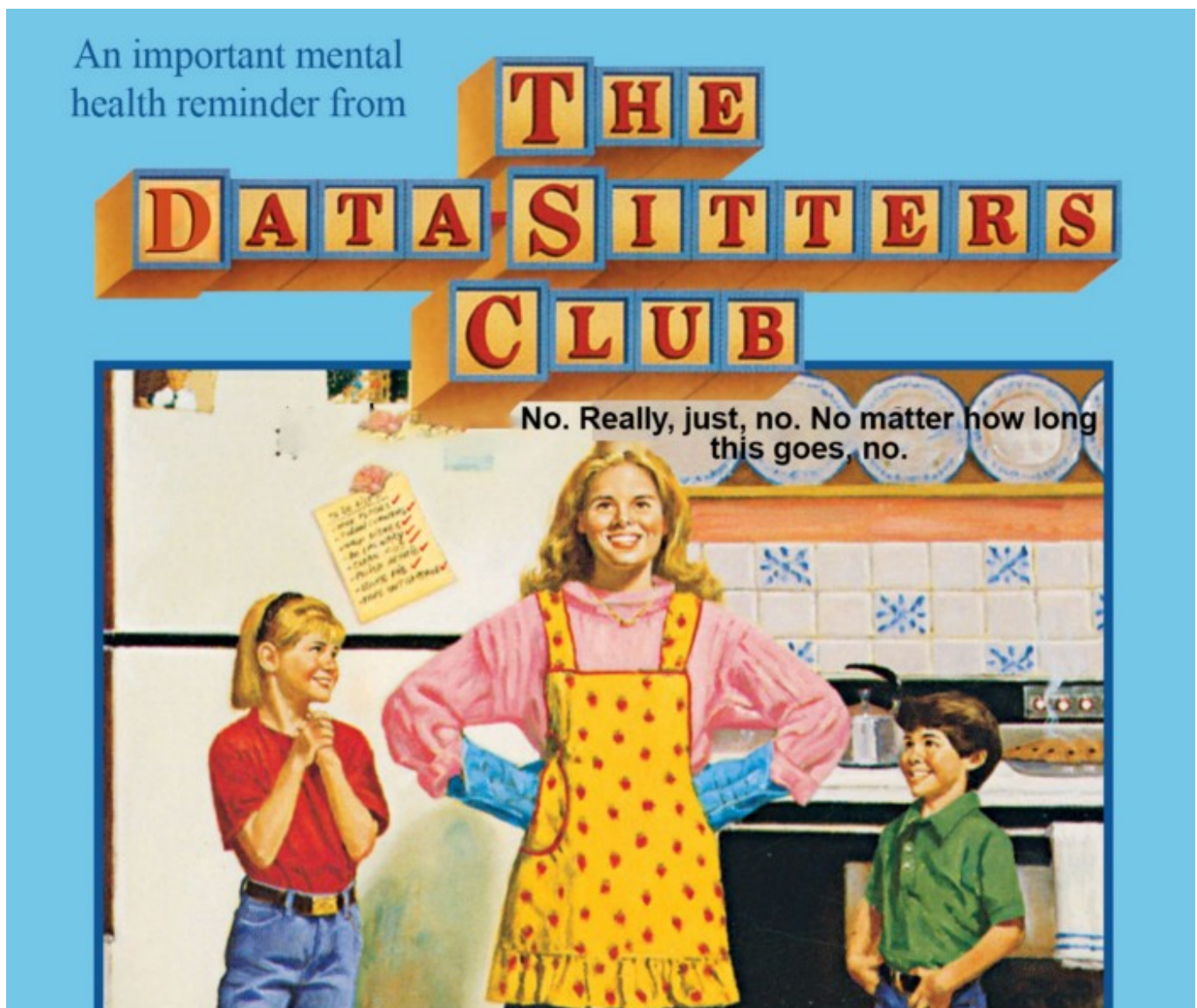
We have not been waiting. And we have not been silent.

What do the humanities do in a time of crisis? We do what every profession does. We mobilize our communities, identify our areas of expertise, and find ways to work together for the collective good. We come together to envision a better future. And then we begin the work of making that future real.

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this piece is for — and couldn't have been written without — amanda henrichs, mimi winick, cass adair, jim mcgrath, brian degrazia, quinn dombrowski, and alex wermer-colan. my friends in failure and in faith.

thanks to quinn, alex, and ashley for reading an early draft, and to my mom, who told me to write this.





We've been home and homeschooling for four weeks now. But it's fine if that hasn't transformed you into a domestic goddess.

Never once have we approached a moment where my kids have stared at me adoringly while I stand in the kitchen in penny loafers, with an apron, oven mitts, and a freshly-baked pie. Mostly we watch movies and have popcorn for dinner and try to figure out what to do with yet another can of chickpeas. But that's okay. We don't have to come out of this with a newfound love of domesticity. We just need to make sure everyone survives.

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