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INTRODUCTION TO THE *JOURNAL OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS THEORY*
SPECIAL ISSUE ON “CIVIC HUMANITIES”

When Executive Editor of the *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*, Victor Taylor, invited me to co-edit an issue on the “Civic Humanities” with him, I immediately started thinking of historical and contemporary ways that scholars in the humanities have brought their research to bear on civic, everyday life, and particularly Gregory L. Ulmer’s work on *electracy* and Rudolphe Töpffer’s invention of the graphic novel. With these two frameworks, this special issue revisits Ulmer’s 1983 call for inventing ways of “communicating the knowledge of the cultural disciplines to a general public, which the normal, so-called humanist critics claim to desire” (*Electracy* 190), and Töpffer’s method of invention in the early-nineteenth century—as relays for thinking through the process of inventing new modes of discourse for today. The contents of this issue focus on what is common to both theorists: turning theory into practice.

Our aim with this eclectic collection of work is to offer varying perspectives on civic engagement and the role of teachers and scholars in engaging students in civic discourse, however that comes to be. While readers may agree with some perspectives and disagree with others, we encourage every reader to sincerely consider these perspectives and how we, as teachers and scholars ourselves, can integrate, build upon, or re-consider these views to further the everyday social, cultural, and political work of the arts and humanities.

In Section I, we have three articles by Carl Raschke, Lydia Ferguson, and Hui-Chun Li; in Section II, two videos by April Obrien and A.D. Carson; and in Section III, interviews with artists and scholars working to develop methods of popularizing knowledge-making practices in the humanities, including Gregory L. Ulmer, Nick Sousanis, Doris Sommer, Henry Giroux, and Gaia. (See below for abstracts of each work.)

Articles

Carl Raschke’s “The Civic Humanities and the Plight of Neoliberalism” examines how the the “civic” component of the humanities has been reconfigured in recent years to conform to a global neoliberal agenda. He explores the recent literature on neoliberalism, derived from Michel Foucault’s lectures in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that includes the work of such major figures as Wendy Brown, David Harvey, and Mauricio Lazzarato. In “Civic Engagements Through a Transductive Discourse of Care,” Hui-Chun Li argues for a “discourse of care that aims to challenge the industrialized memories and serve as a possible paradigm of speculation and suspension if not interference with the current techno-capitalized memories.” Specifically, he is interested in how such practices can cultivate “long-term vision, intensify elaboration of memories that have been forgotten by humans

in the process of accelerated disappearance, and serve as a critical lens to see the world as the naked eye cannot." In all the discourse of care, Li examines projects exploring the problems of memory in the age of hyperattention (following Katherine Hayles), and ways to extend the short-circuited synapses of the brain and the society" in order to suspend the accelerated destruction of late-capitalist progress.

Finally, Lydia Ferguson's "Researching the Past to Write the Present: Archival Research as Civic Engagement," describes a pedagogical method designed for a first-year composition (writing) course. As she argues, "the benefits of cultural and archival research" in these courses "assists students in honing their research skills in the Digital Humanities age while teaching them how to delve into the past in order to better understand the present." More significantly, the teaching practice she describes works to have students connect their personal "family and community resources" to their academic studies.

Videos

April Obrien's "The Ghosts of Pendleton" explores Ulmer's idea of "kónsult" as an interactive space where people can address social issues and "consult" together on how to enact change. Her video addresses the explicit and implicit racism that still pervades a small, Southern town outside of Clemson, South Carolina. Through the use of historical documents and imagery, as well as contemporary photos and videos, the video argues that citizens of Pendleton, South Carolina can create a kónsult to change the conversation in a town that is still highly segregated 225 years after its founding. Broadly, the film also exists as a model for digital creativity and contends that visual media is a powerful venue to convey these messages of socio-political change.

A. D. Carson's "Owning My Masters" is the introduction to his dissertation work on hip-hop, and is delivered entirely in audio form as a collection of rap and spoken word recordings. The video here serves as one of many possible explorations and analyses of the problem of hip-hop scholarship, such as the role Hip-Hop performance plays in knowledge production; how hip-hop performance can resist the limits set upon it by academic convention; how scholars might more effectively approach Hip-Hop academically so that it speaks through its own form[s] and avoids re-inscribing the "oppression" the form seeks to subvert; how we might deal with the issue[s] of access for producers of cultural products like Rap music/lyrics; and whether considerations of responsibility regarding access change is created by people who have not achieved the notoriety of popular artists whose works are studied in academic institutions but would likely not qualify to study or teach at those institutions.

Interviews

In my interview with Gregory Ulmer, I wanted to get a sense of how Ulmer came to his research project and what advice he might offer young and emerging

scholars engaging in civic humanities work. The interview begins with Ulmer reflecting on his career as a teacher, scholar, and life-long student, and is thoughts on the future of the University in light of recent events and institutional changes. As he suggests, one emerging opportunity is to re-think the humanities curriculum not as STEAM (with the “A” surreptitiously added into STEM), but as “Humanities + Movies, Music, Media,” or the H’MMM disciplines. As he wrote to me, the new rhetoric “depends on a new collaboration and syncretism among all the disciplines now isolated from one another in the silo architectonics of literate learning” and one informed by “what we bring to the table, native to our own disciplines and skills.”

Drew Stowe’s interview with Nick Sousanis is a fascinating look into the mind of a scholar and teacher who regularly writes and illustrates his scholarship in comics-form. The interview covers a lot of ground, but focuses on Sousanis’ creative process and how he navigates the political landscape of academia while also doing the work he wants to do, particularly doing scholarship in his own mode of discourse. However, as he notes, not “everyone needs to write accessible work. I think I needed to write that way. But, if that’s the way you need to work, then that ought to be encouraged.”

Victor Taylor’s interview with Henry Giroux begins with a discussion of the differences between “civic engagement” and “community engagement.” As Giroux notes, “civic engagement is the antidote to a notion of volunteerism that extends the privatizing and individualistic values of capitalism” and entails “working collectively with others to not only transforming consciousness but also about changing the material conditions of oppression.” In critical theory tradition, Giroux details some of the difficulties facing institutions of higher education in the twenty-first century and describes how civic engagement, “the stuff of long term visions,” may become a crucial step in re-forming the university to create “social spaces that offer some relevance to their lives and connect them to larger issues.”

Finally, Shelly Clay-Robinson’s interview with Gaia offers a brief overview of the installation and studio artist’s work in street art, art which is inherently illegal, to intervene in issues surrounding shared civic space. As Gaia sees it, the “responsibility of consultation has been shifted almost entirely to the artist in most cases, and it is solely incumbent upon us to do the difficult groundwork.” If such is the case, perhaps we, as scholars in the humanities, need to begin carrying our fair share of this work.

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