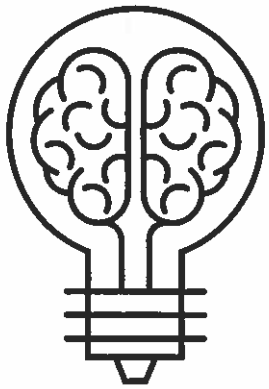

Generous Thinking

A RADICAL APPROACH TO SAVING THE UNIVERSITY

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Preface

The book you have in front of you explores some possibilities for rebuilding a relationship of trust between universities and the publics they are meant to serve. That this trust—like so much else in today's public sphere—needs rebuilding seems all too evident as I write, in 2018, as the news is filled with evidence of its spectacular failures. The university has been undermined by the withdrawal of public support for its functions, but that public support has been undermined by the university's own betrayals of the public trust. My hope is that this volume might provide one pathway toward renewing that trust. It won't be easy, but it's crucial to the future of higher education—perhaps especially, though not exclusively, in the United States—that we try.

The central argument of this book begins from the growing sense that the critical thinking that forms the center of higher education today has somehow fallen out of whack, that it has come to be seen as privileging the negation rather than creation of ideas and institutions. The problem with this critical mode is not that its insights aren't correct, nor that the structures of contemporary culture don't require critique, but rather, first, that that critique has become less a means of paving the way toward a better alternative than an end in itself, and second, that this mode of critique, of rejection, of refusal has metastasized, becoming the dominant mode of political reaction in recent years. The greatest manifestation of this refusal may well be the pervasive refusal to listen, without which real critical thinking—the contemplation of ideas from multiple points of view, the weighing of evidence for and against, the selection among carefully considered alternatives—is

impossible. The mode of critique practiced in academic life certainly does not bear sole responsibility for the devolution of public discourse into an endless series of shouting matches, but the rejection that is so often practiced within the academy—a rejection, as I'll argue, mandated by the competitive structures of reward that shape the contemporary university—has been embraced and indeed perfected by precisely the forces that those academic critics have sought to oppose. If we are to find a way out of this mess, we need to restore the basis of critical thinking by regrounding public discourse in listening, in generosity, in community.

The first seeds of the idea for this book were planted late in the Obama administration, a time when the call to generosity, community, and care seemed only natural, if imperfectly acted upon. Much of it was drafted during the 2016 presidential campaign and its 2017 aftermath, when the same call seemed to take on a kind of desperation. It has been difficult, in several ways, to keep this from becoming a fundamentally angry or despairing book, while nonetheless allowing its anger and despair space in amongst its general emotional swirl. Acknowledging those emotions and their often very personal origins is one of the ways in which this book tries to find some common ground with the public that it seeks to create, a public that is not just composed of other scholars but also administrators, students, parents, policymakers, and the many other people who affect and care about the futures of our institutions of higher education. The book also tries, as much as possible, to minimize its scholarly apparatus; while I still rely on many voices who have contributed significantly to my thinking about the questions I raise, my goal has been to keep this text as broadly accessible as possible.

As is true of any book, this one is of necessity incomplete. It is a snapshot in time, a view from a particular place at a particular

moment. It tries to recognize the enormous diversity within the higher education landscape today but is finally grounded in the place where I sit: a large, public, land-grant research university in the United States. I've included a large number of perspectives and examples in thinking through the problems I'm exploring, but there are many other writers and thinkers on higher education today who could have been included. While this book begins from a scholar's concerns and ways of looking at the world—that is inescapably who I am—it doesn't carry with it the scholar's usual desire for completeness. There is much, much more that could be said, and—I'll return to this point in the end—I hope that you'll participate in saying it.

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Our generosity may leave us empty, but our emptiness then pulls gently at the whole until the thing in motion returns to replenish us.—Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*

Introduction

> Community offers the promise of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence. To belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place. To be welcome, even if we are strangers. . . . To feel a sense of belonging is important because it will lead us from conversations about safety and comfort to other conversations, such as our relatedness and willingness to provide hospitality and generosity.
> —PETER BLOCK, *COMMUNITY*

> One of the dangers we face in our educational systems is the loss of a feeling of community, not just the loss of closeness among those with whom we work and with our students, but also the loss of a feeling of connection and closeness with the world beyond the academy.
> —BELL HOOKS, *TEACHING COMMUNITY*

The argument that this book presents—and I will admit right up front that this is an argument and that I am hoping to persuade you of its rightness—begins for me with what has come to feel like an emblematic moment of university life. Some years ago, I gave my graduate seminar a recent article to read. I do not now remember what that article was, or even what it was about, but I do remember clearly that upon opening the discussion by asking for first impressions, several students in a row

offered fairly merciless takedowns, pointing out the essay's critical failures and ideological blindspots. Some of those readings were justified, but at least a couple of them seemed, frankly, to have missed the point. After the third such response, I interjected: "Okay, okay, I want to dig into all of that, but let's back up a bit first. What's the author's argument? What's her goal in the article? What does she want the reader to come away with?"

Silence.

I won't rehash all of what ensued, but suffice it to say that it was a difficult moment. I was a lot younger and a fair bit less steady on my feet then, and my initial response to the silence was to start wondering whether I'd asked a stupid question, whether the sudden failure to meet my gaze was a sign that my students were now wondering how I'd ever gotten to this point in my career with such a pedestrian perspective, whether having asked them about the argument was tantamount to asking them what the author's name was and where they might find it on the page, either so painfully obvious that they were mortified to find themselves being treated like high-school students or so apparently superficial that there must be deeper layers that they were missing. "It's not a trick question," I said, asking again for somebody to take a stab at summarizing the argument. It only gradually became clear to me that the question was not stupid or superficial but rather oddly unfamiliar, that everything in their educations to that point had prepared them for interrogating and unpacking, demystifying and subverting, all of the most important critical acts of reading against the grain—what Peter Elbow once called "the doubting game"—but too little emphasis had been placed on its complement, "the believing game," and its central acts of paying attention, of listening, of reading with rather than reading against.

Before this starts to sound like a complaint about the kids these days, let me place alongside it another emblematic anecdote, this one in the form of a Twitter joke:

> *question answered, next dude steps up to mic*
>
> Hi, this is not so much a question and more of a—
>
> *trap door opens, he plummets. Slurping sounds and screams are cut off by the sealing of the floor above him*
>
> *brief hiatus as two-thirds of the line return to their seats* (Baker)

The hilarity that this joke induces has everything to do with our recognition of that moment, the frequency with which we find ourselves in a post-presentation "discussion session" in which there is precious little discussion of the presentation per se and a whole lot more airing of views. It's not that the views are bad, or that comments are unwarranted: rather, this moment indicates something about our dispositions in the act of engaging with the ideas of others, which is to say that they are too often fixated on our own ideas, that we are waiting for the next moment when we can get them on the table.

This book is in large part about my desire to see universities and those who work in and around them—faculty members and administrators, in particular, but also staff members, students, parents, trustees, legislators, and the many other people who affect or are concerned about the futures of our institutions of higher education—develop more responsive, more open, more positive relationships that reach across the borders of our campuses. In it I argue that a key component of building those relationships is for all of us to cultivate a greater disposition toward what I am

going to call "generous thinking," a mode of engagement that emphasizes listening over speaking, community over individualism, collaboration over competition, and lingering with the ideas that are in front of us rather than continually pressing forward to where we want to go. But I don't want the two examples above to make it appear that I am primarily focused on getting those of us within the university to communicate more productively with one another, though that certainly wouldn't hurt. The ways that we exchange ideas with one another—in our publications, at our conferences, in our committee meetings—could all bear some close examination. However, in the chapters that follow, I am asking us to take a closer look at the ways that we connect with a range of broader publics around and through our work, publics ranging from our students to our local communities and beyond, to all the ways the university engages with the world. And some focused thinking about that mode of public connection is in order, I would suggest, because our institutions are facing a panoply of crises that we cannot solve on our own.

These crises, I want to acknowledge right at the outset, do not always give the impression of being life-threatening, world-historical, or approaching the kind or degree of the highly volatile political situation spreading around the globe, a moment when the threat of international terrorism is being met with and surpassed by a surge in nationalist politics and domestic terror; when millions of people running for their lives are confused with and held responsible for the thing they're running from; when many residents of our communities find themselves in grave danger posed by those sworn to serve and protect them; when the communications network once imagined to create a borderless utopia of rational collectivist actors not only feeds attacks on those who dare to criticize the manifestations of oppression within that

network but also demonstrates its real potential for undermining the constitutional functioning of the nation-state; when the planet itself gives every sign not of nearing an ecological tipping point but, instead, of being well past it.

And yet the decline in public support for higher education is, as Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier argue in *Austerity Blues*, of a piece with these other crises, part of a series of national and international transformations in assumptions about the responsibility of governments for the public good—the very notion, in fact, that there *can be* such a thing as the public good—and the consequences of those transformations are indeed life or death in many cases.

This connection may not seem obvious. To some readers, no doubt, the fact that at this hour of the world I am writing about the importance of generosity for the future of the university may appear self-indulgent and self-marginalizing, a head-in-the-sand retreat into the aesthetic (or worse, the academic) and a refusal of real political action. I hope, by the end of this book, to have put together a case for why this is not so—why, in fact, the particular modes of generous thinking that I am asking us to undertake within and around our institutions of higher education have the potential to help us navigate the present crises, if not to solve them. Of course, many academic fields are directly focused on pressing public issues, and many scholars are already working in publicly engaged ways. The argument of the book that follows asks us, in some sense, to generalize that engagement, and to think about the ways that it might, if permitted, transform the institution and the ways that scholars, students, and staff members work within it. That is to say, the best of what the university has to offer lies less in its specific power to advance knowledge or solve problems in any of its many fields than in its more general, more crucial

ability to be a model and a support for generous thinking as a way of being in and with the world. It's for this reason that those of us who work in those institutions must take a good hard look at ourselves and the ways that we engage with one another and with the world, in order to ensure that we're doing everything we possibly can to create the ways of thinking we'd like to see manifested around us.

Us and Them

But first: Who is this "we" I keep referring to, what is it precisely that we do, and why does it matter? Much of this book focuses on the university's permanent faculty, partially because that faculty is my community of practice and partially because of the extent to which the work done by the faculty is the public face of the university: research and teaching are the primary purposes and visible outputs of our institutions. Moreover, the principles of shared governance under which many of our institutions operate—at least in theory—suggest that tenured and tenure-track faculty members are key contributors to the future of those institutions. Whether through action or neglect, we have helped create the university's present situation, and we need to contend with that, not least by taking responsibility for shaping what is to come. But I want to be careful with the ways that I deploy this "we." As Helen Small has pointed out, "The first person plural is the regularly preferred point of view for much writing about the academic profession for the academic profession. It is a rhetorical sleight of hand by which the concerns of the profession can be made to seem entirely congruent with those of the democratic polity as a whole" (141). That is to say, I hope that the argument that follows has something important to say to readers who teach

at institutions of higher education but off the tenure track, or who work on university campuses but are not faculty, or who do not work on university campuses at all, and that it might become possible for the "we" that I am addressing to refer to all of us, on campus and off, who want to strengthen both our systems of higher education and our ways of engaging with one another in order to help us all build stronger, more empowered communities. But it's important to acknowledge that the "we" that bears the greatest responsibility for caring for the university and for building relationships between the university and the broader publics that it serves, and thus the most immediate antecedent for my "we," is those of us on campus, and especially the permanent faculty.

Every "we" implies a "them," of course, and the ways we define and conceive of that "them" points to one of the primary problems of the contemporary university, and especially the public university in the United States. These institutions were founded explicitly to serve the people of their states or regions or communities, and thus those publics should be understood as part of "us." And yet, the borders of the campus have done more than define a space: they determine a sense of belonging as well, transforming everything off-campus into "them," a generalized other. We recognize that they are, in varying ways, people with whom we want to engage, but it's important to consider how, given the ways that our interactions will inevitably be defined by the ways we think of those with whom we interact. As Kelly Susan Bradbury has explored, traditional academics' exclusion of certain kinds of education and certain kinds of work from the category of the "intellectual" profoundly affects nonacademics' willingness to understand themselves as part of that category, and the rampant anti-intellectualism in American culture may well be a result, a defensive reaction against what is felt to be a prior exclusion. That

is to say, academics' presumed authority over who gets to be an intellectual comes with a profound cost, as it convinces "them" that they are not, and that they would not want to be.

So it's important for us to ask ourselves: Do we understand the people who are not on campus to be an audience—a passive group that merely takes in information that the university provides? Do we understand them to be a public, a self-activated and actualized group capable not only of participating in multidirectional exchanges both with the university and among its members, but also of acting on its own behalf? Or even more, do we consider them to be a complex collection of communities—not just groups who interact with one another and with us, but groups of which we are in fact a part? How can we shape this understanding in a way that might begin to create a richer, more interactive, more generous sense not just of "them" but of the larger "us" that we together form?

Such an understanding requires some careful thinking about the nature of community, which is a thornier concept than it might at first appear. As Miranda Joseph writes in *Against the Romance of Community,* the concept is often used as a placeholder for something that exists outside the dominant institutional structures of contemporary life, a set of ostensibly organic felt relationships that derive from a mythical premodern moment in which people lived and worked in more direct connection with one another, without the mediating forces of modern capitalism. "Community" is also an imagined relationship, in Benedict Anderson's sense, as its invocation is designed to yoke together bodies whose existence as a group is largely constructed. "The gay community" serves in this fashion as Joseph's primary reference point, a concept often used both idealistically and as a form of

discipline, a claim of unity that smooths over and thus suppresses internal difference and disagreement.

Moreover, Joseph points out, the notion of community is often deployed as if the relationships that it describes could provide an antidote to or an escape from the problems created by contemporary political and economic life. This suggestion, she argues, serves to distract us from the supplementary role that community actually serves with respect to the mainstream economy, filling its gaps and smoothing over its flaws in ways that permit it to function without real opposition. The alternative presented by community—people working together! helping each other!—allows the specter of socialism, or genuine state support for the needs of the public, to be dismissed. Thus we turn to social network–based fundraising campaigns to support people facing major health crises, rather than demanding universal health care. Thus elementary school bake sales rather than full funding for education. And thus a wide range of activity among nonprofit organizations—entities that often describe themselves explicitly as working on behalf of the community—that serve to fill needs left behind by a retreating state and thereby allow that retreat to go unchallenged.

As Fabricant and Brier explore in *Austerity Blues,* the state's ongoing disclaimer of its responsibilities for the public welfare, from the Reagan era forward, makes itself felt across the social sphere—in housing policy, in environmental policy, and, of course, in education. Throughout this book, one of my interests lies in the effects of, and the need to reverse, the shift in our cultural understanding of education, and especially higher education; where in the mid-twentieth century, the value of education was largely understood to be social, it has in recent decades come to be

described as providing primarily private, individual benefits. And this, inevitably, has accompanied a shift from education being treated as a public service to being treated as a private responsibility. Fabricant and Brier note that this transition is just one manifestation of the state gradually displacing its responsibilities for the public welfare onto private citizens and, as Joseph's reading suggests, onto a range of socially oriented nonprofits supported largely through private philanthropy. This displacement is at work in the defunding of public universities, which effectively transforms them into nonprofit organizations rather than state institutions. The effects of this program of neoliberal reform run deep, not least being that the dominant motivator behind these privatized institutions becomes sustainability rather than service, leaving universities, like nonprofits, in an endless cycle of fundraising and budget cuts.

The argument in favor of privatization's displacement of responsibility for the public good from the state to the community, one largely accepted on both sides of the aisle, is in significant part based on the inefficiency of government bureaucracies and the far more streamlined and therefore ostensibly effective practices made possible in the private sector. Reversing the trend toward privatization will thus require not just massive public mobilization and demand of elected officials, but also a hard turn away from efficiency as a primary value, and thus a recognition that the building of relationships and the cultivation of care are slow and difficult and of necessity inefficient. In fact, that the value of the public good lies precisely in the ways that it refuses efficiency—but making the case for such a refusal as a necessary value requires a lot of effort, and a lot of caution. My hope is that *Generous Thinking* might lay some key groundwork for that case.

Similar caution is necessary in the calls to "community" that this book issues: such calls, issued uncritically, not only run the risk of enabling the institutions that structure contemporary life to absolve themselves of responsibility for public care, but they also risk essentializing a highly complex and intersectional set of social relations, treating those relations as if they were a simple, single thing. One key aspect of the problem with "the community," that is, might be less about "community" than about "the"; it's possible that acknowledging and foregrounding the multiple and multifarious communities with which all of us engage might help us avoid the exclusions that the declaration of groupness is often designed to produce, the "us" that inevitably suggests a "them." My hope is that my uses of the notion of community throughout this book might benefit from a variant on Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism," a recognition that our definitions of community are always reductive, but also at least potentially useful as organizing tools. In this sense, "community" might serve not to evoke a dangerous, mythical notion of organic unity, but instead a form of solidarity, of coalition-building.

The pragmatic coalition-building function of community is crucial to the future of the university, both in its understanding of the publics with which the institution might work and in its understanding of its own internal structure. But it's also a key part of the university's recent past, one of the important elements of its history that have been undone by recent political shifts. The potential for connecting the university to the communities around it drove student-led calls for institutional change in the 1960s and 1970s, and the understanding of the coalition-building potential of community has long been central to women of color feminisms. But these are calls that have not only gone unheeded but

that have in fact been actively countered. Roderick Ferguson, in *We Demand*, presents a stark portrait of the history of administration and government responses to student and social movements, noting that the dismantling of the public university's publicness begins with a rejection of the expansion of the publics those institutions were intended to serve. Viewed in this light, the Reagan-era launch of the defunding of higher education stems from this backlash against student protests. As Ferguson argues, "Neoliberalism is not just an economic and political formation involving governments and businesses but an ideological project meant to tear down the web of insurgencies that activists have been demanding" (69). The economic in this sense becomes a tool for undoing the political: the state begins its withdrawal from responsibility for the public good at the point at which minoritized communities become inescapably part of the public. This may not be a simple matter of cause and effect, although, as Ferguson explores, the 1971 Powell memorandum's work to argue that corporations, rather than people of color, are the real victims of marginalization certainly indicates a more than casual connection between the neoliberal willingness to tear down the welfare state and all its trappings, including public education, and the recognition of the growing power of minoritized communities.

In this sense, community is and has been the university's weakness, when it should have been its strength. Community has been framed as a site of tension, beginning with the legendary town/gown divide and continuing through anxieties about student activism, when it should have been a source of potential. If we—those of us both on campus and off interested in the project of saving the university both from its opponents and from itself—attempt to understand community strategically, we might be able to build some new collaborations that can help support the

university's future. Recognizing that community is something that does not simply exist but instead must be built, recognizing that community is always complex, negotiated, multifarious, and recognizing the forces that are arrayed against the formation of community might help institutions of higher education, and all of us that work within and for them, think differently about what we do and how we do it. If we were able to understand the university both internally and in its outward connections not as a giant nonprofit organization, focused on the fiscal sustainability required to provide services to a generically understood public, but instead as a site of voluntary community—a site of solidarity—forged with and by the publics we seek to engage, we might begin to develop new models, new structures, that could help all of us reconnect with and recommit to a sense of the common good.

The Liberal Arts

However, in building such a strategic sense of community, we need to contend with the fact that what faculty members actually do on our campuses is often a mystery, and indeed a site of profound misunderstanding, for people outside the academic profession, and even at times for one another. One of my goals in this book is to open our work up a bit, to make the what and why of some parts of university life a bit less opaque, and to encourage all of us to continue that project in ways that might help build a much better sense of the importance of the university in the contemporary world. One of the key areas of misconception about the university today, and one that most needs opening up, is its fundamental purpose. There is, of course, more than one such purpose that these institutions serve: as Clark Kerr said in his 1963 Godkin Lectures at Harvard, universities might be more

appropriately called "multiversities," containing as they do "a whole series of communities and activities held together by a common name [and] a common governing board" (1). And of course there are many different kinds of universities, including elite privates, flagship publics, and regional comprehensives, not to mention small liberal arts colleges and community colleges, all of which have different focuses and different purposes. But when we come down to the central question of why we should *have* a university, or why you should *attend* one, we hit a core difference of opinion.

Public figures such as politicians, trustees, and accrediting bodies increasingly focus on the university as a site of workforce preparation—which, of course, it is: the educations provided by the range of institutions that fall under the category of "universities" provide crucial skills and credentials that enable students to engage in productive careers. However, these discussions often make it sound as if that were the only important part of the university's role, as if the provision of career-enhancing credentials were the sole purpose for which our institutions exist, and as if everything else they do that does not lead directly to economic growth were—especially in the case of public institutions—a misappropriation of resources. This is a pernicious assumption, one that has spread through public discourse and become widely adopted by parents and students, with profound effects on the ways they approach their investments in and time at the university.

Those of us who work in universities, however—the faculty in particular, but also many administrators and a good number of students—think of our institutions not as credentialing agencies but as sites of broad-based education. Thus we might see Chad Wellmon's turn to the notion of "the academy," by which he means the collection of "activities, practices, goals, and norms related to

the creation, cultivation, and transmission of knowledge," as an entity that risks being subsumed by the bureaucratic structures of the university and that must, in his view, be defended from it. The academy in Wellmon's sense is a community capable of providing the deepest, richest possible education, a liberal education in the original sense of the term.

Of course the very label of "liberal education" today, so natural to those of us who are engaged in it, has itself become profoundly politicized, leading the University of Colorado's board of regents to contemplate removing the term "liberal" from the institution's governing documents, as if the liberal aspect of the education it provides were not its breadth but its ideological bent (Zahneis). This politicization has led to some of the most entrenched assumptions and accusations about what's happening on campus these days. Universities are seen by the Right as excluding conservative perspectives and as coddling their liberal snowflake students—claims that, as Ferguson demonstrates, have long been used to demean and thus defuse student movements and to ensure the continued dominance of the status quo precisely by suggesting it is under threat. In response to these suggestions, ostensibly left-leaning faculty and fields are being explicitly targeted by conservative groups such as Turning Point USA, which are determined to see those faculty and fields silenced, terminated, driven off-campus. But even where revolution isn't imagined to be breeding and in need of being stamped out on university campuses, there's a widespread conception about what we do that's almost worse: we waste taxpayer resources by developing, disseminating, and filling our students' heads with useless knowledge that will not lead to a productive career path, and—this part is true, but for reasons that the university alone cannot control—we leave them in massive debt in the process.

And nowhere is this misconception more focused than on the humanities. The humanities are of course only a subset of the constellation of fields that together form the liberal arts, the core academic disciplines that, rather than providing direct professional training, instead engage students through a broad grounding in the study of the cultural, social, and natural world. The liberal arts thus include the sciences and social sciences, though the term has come to be somewhat overidentified with the humanities, whose fields include history, literature, languages, art history, philosophy, and so on—the least pre-professional of the non-pre-professional. Given that relationship, the portrait I'm about to sketch of the humanities today could be extended to many other areas within the curriculum; for example, the sciences' focus on "basic science," or science without direct industry applicability, is often imagined to be just as useless. But the humanities are in certain ways both the core and the limit case of the liberal arts. These fields cultivate an inquisitive mindset, they teach key skills of reading and interpretation, and they focus on writing in ways that can prepare students to learn absolutely anything else over the course of their lives. As the National Humanities Alliance argues in their toolkit on making the case for studying the humanities, the skills these fields foster are highly desired by employers, and humanities majors outperform their peers in several important ways—and yet the humanities are the fields around which no end of jokes about what a student might actually *do* with that degree have been constructed. (The answer is embedded above: *absolutely anything.* In fact, as Derek Newton explores in a blog post for *Forbes,* the majors that a recent study suggests result in the greatest chance of underemployment are those that seem least likely: "Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support Services." Moreover, as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences *Humanities Indicators* project demonstrates, not only do humanities majors end up gainfully employed, but their job satisfaction is among the highest. In other words, they are *happy* in what they do. But I digress.) In this dismissal of the humanities as a collection of valuable fields of study, they serve as a bellwether: what has been happening to them is happening to the university in general, if a little more slowly. So while I focus in some parts of what's ahead on the kinds of arguments that are being made about the humanities in our culture today, it doesn't take too much of a stretch to imagine them being made about sociology, or about physics, or about any other field on campus that isn't named after a specific, remunerative career.

The humanities, in any case, have long been lauded as providing students with a rich set of interpretive, critical, and ethical skills with which they can engage the world around them. These reading, thinking, and writing skills are increasingly necessary in today's hypermediated, globalized, conflict-filled world—and yet many humanities departments feel themselves increasingly marginalized within their own institutions. This marginalization is related, if not directly attributable, to the degree to which students, parents, administrators, trustees, politicians, the media, and the public at large have been led in a self-reinforcing cycle to believe that these fields are a luxury in the current economic environment: someone particularly visible makes a publicly disparaging remark about what students are going to do with all those art-history degrees; commentators reinforce the sense that humanities majors are worth less than pre-professional degrees with the presumption of clearly defined career paths; parents strongly encourage their students to turn toward fields that seem more pragmatic in such economically uncertain times, fields that seem

somehow to describe a job; administrators note a decline in humanities majors and cut budgets and positions; the jobs crisis for humanities PhDs worsens; the media notices; someone particularly visible makes a publicly disparaging remark about what all those adjuncts were planning on doing with that humanities PhD anyhow; and the whole thing intensifies. In many institutions, this draining away of majors and faculty and resources has reduced the humanities to a means of ensuring that students studying to become engineers and bankers are reminded of the human ends of their work. This is not a terrible thing in and of itself—David Silbersweig has written compellingly in the *Washington Post* about the importance that his undergraduate philosophy major has had for his career as a neuroscientist—but it is not a sufficient ground on which humanities fields can thrive as fields, with their own educational aims, their own research problems, and their own values and goals.

And while this kind of cyclical crisis has not manifested to anything like the same extent in the sciences, there are early indications that it may be spreading in that direction. Concerns around the need to preserve and protect basic research in an era driven by more applied, capitalizable outcomes and beset by the conviction that science has developed a leftward ideological bent are increasing. Where we might once have assumed that the world at large mostly understands that scientific research and the kinds of study that support it are crucial to the general advancement of knowledge, recent shifts in funder policies and priorities suggest a growing scrutiny of that work's economic rather than educational impact, as well as a growing restriction on research areas that have been heavily politicized. Again, the humanities may well be the canary in the university's coal mine, and for that reason, it's crucial that those concerned about the university's future pay

close attention to what's happened in those fields, and particularly to the things that haven't worked as the humanities have attempted to remedy the situation.

One of the key things that hasn't worked is the impassioned plea on behalf of humanities fields: a welter of defenses of the humanities from both inside and outside the academy has been published in recent years, each of which has seemed slightly more defensive than the last, and none of which has had the desired impact. Calls to save the humanities issued by public figures have frequently left scholars dissatisfied, as they often begin with an undertheorized and perhaps even somewhat retrograde sense of what we do and why, and thus frequently give the sense of trying to save our fields from us. (I might here gesture toward a column published in 2016 by the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Bruce Cole, entitled "What's Wrong with the Humanities?", which begins memorably: "Let's face it: Too many humanities scholars are alienating students and the public with their opacity, triviality, and irrelevance.") But perhaps even worse is the degree to which humanities professors themselves—those who, one would think, are best positioned to make the case—have failed to find traction with their arguments. As the unsuccessful defenses proliferate, the public view of the humanities becomes all the worse, leading Simon During to grumble that "whatever things the humanities do well, it is beginning to look as if promoting themselves is not among them." One would be justified in wondering whether, in fact, humanities scholars like it that way, as we are often those who take issue with our own defenses, bitterly disagreeing as we frequently do about the purposes and practices of our fields.

Perhaps this is a good moment for us to stop and consider what it is that the humanities do do well, what the humanities

are for. I will start with a basic definition of the humanities as a cluster of fields that focus on the careful study and analysis of cultures and their many modes of thought and forms of representation—writing, music, art, media, and so on—as they have developed and moved through time and across geographical boundaries, growing out of and adding to our senses of who we are as individuals, as groups, and as nations. The humanities are interested, then, in the ways that representations work, in the relationships between representations and social structures, and in all the ways that human ideas and their expression shape and are shaped by human culture. In this definition we might begin to see the possibility that studying literature or history or art or film or philosophy might not be solely about the object itself, but instead about a way of engaging with the world: in the process one develops the ability to read and interpret what one sees and hears, the insight to understand the multiple layers of what is being communicated and why, and the capacity to put together for oneself an appropriate, thoughtful contribution.

Now, the first thing to note about this definition is that I am certain that many of the humanities scholars who read it are going to disagree with it—they will have nuances and correctives to offer—and it is important to understand that this disagreement does not necessarily mean that my definition is wrong. Nor do I mean to suggest that the nuances and correctives presented would be wrong. Rather, that disagreement is at the heart what we do: we hear one another's interpretations (of texts, of performances, of historical events), and we push back against them. We advance the work in our fields in part through disagreement and revision. This mode of engagement, which one might reasonably call "agonistic," is more pronounced in some fields than others—philosophy is especially known for being downright pugilistic—but it's common

across the humanities and social sciences. Either way, this agonistic approach is both a strength of those fields—and by extension of the university in general—and their Achilles' heel, a thought to which I'll return shortly.

For the moment, though, back to Simon During and his sense that the humanities are terrible at self-promotion. During's complaint, levied at the essays included in Peter Brooks and Hilary Jewett's volume, *The Humanities and Public Life*, is largely that in the act of self-defense, humanities scholars leave behind doing what they do and instead turn to "sermonizing" about the value of what they do. He argues that part of the problem is the assumption that the humanities as we practice them—the study of culture, rather than the objects of culture themselves—ought to have a public life in the first place. For During, it is simply the nature of things that these fields of study "form a world more than they provide a social good," and that making the case for ourselves and our work in "more modest terms" may help us direct that case to "those who matter most in this context": the students who might be inclined to study our fields and the policymakers who might be inclined to support them. In part, During's interest in asking the humanities to stop defending themselves is tied to his sense that these fields—or at least what he refers to as the "core humanities," which I take to mean the study of the canon within the long-established fields of English, history, philosophy, and the like—are intimately implicated in the maintenance rather than the disruption of class- and race-based hierarchies, whose unearned privilege may be one reason why, he notes, these fields have become less popular. He argues in the end that we should remain concerned about ensuring that there is sufficient state support for the humanities in order for students who do not already occupy a position of financial comfort to study our fields, but that

we should not stretch beyond that point by insisting on the public importance of studying the humanities, because that importance is primarily, overwhelmingly, private.

This sense that education in the humanities is of primarily private value is everywhere in today's popular discourse extended to higher education in general: the purpose, we are told, of a college degree is some form of personal enrichment, whether financial (a credential that provides access to more lucrative careers) or otherwise (an experience that provides access to useful or satisfying forms of cultural capital). This privatization of higher education's benefits—part of the general privatization that Christopher Newfield has referred to as the academy's "great mistake"—has been accompanied by a similar shift in its costs from the state to individual families and students, resulting in the downward spiral in funding and other forms of public support in which our institutions and our fields are caught, as well as the astronomically increasing debt load faced by students and their families. As long as a university education is assumed to have a predominantly personal rather than social benefit, it will be argued that making such an education possible is a private rather than a public responsibility, one among many such responsibilities that have devolved upon individuals and families as the state has abjured its responsibility for the public well-being under the new economy. And that economistic mindset will of necessity lead to the devaluation of fields whose benefits are less immediately tangible, less material, less individual. If we are to correct course, if we are to restore public support for our institutions and our fields, we must find ways to communicate and to make clear the public goals that our fields have, and the public good that our institutions serve.

But what are those public goals? What are the less tangible benefits of our fields? We don't do a very good job of articulating

these things. In fact, despite the role so many of us have as professors, we often seem to have a hard time *professing*, describing what we do and arguing on behalf of the values that sustain our work. It's not unlikely that this difficulty with positive arguments is related to our quite considered rejection of positivism, the philosophical principle that the only valid forms of knowledge are those that are derived from neutral observation and thus objective; we are too aware of the inevitable subjectivity of all observation and all knowledge to take a forceful, public stand on behalf of *our* knowledge. It's hard to express our values without recourse to what feel to us like politically regressive, universalizing master narratives about the nature of the good. And like During, many of us are less than comfortable with making the case to the public for the importance of our work precisely because of the extent to which our fields have been used to define and support cultural and social hierarchies. Such is certainly true of the humanities and the long history of unearned privilege that those fields have stored up, studied, and transmitted: the relationship between the "core humanities" and now-discredited white male–dominated forms of humanism creates grave discomfort for us as we attempt to explain the value of those fields today. Humanism's triumphant belief in the power of human reason and the humanities' study of what Matthew Arnold so blithely but searingly referred to as "the best that has been thought and said" have together long been used as a means of solidifying and perpetuating the social order, with all its injustices and exclusions. We are understandably queasy about our fields' development out of the projects of nationalism and cultural dominance, and we recognize the ways that the fervent expression of values and ideologies has been used to create those projects and all their hierarchies and violences, thereby leaving us unable, unwilling, or just plain

nervous about stating clearly and passionately any ethics and values and goals that we bring to our work. We instead protect ourselves with what Lisa Ruddick has described as "the game of academic cool": in order to avoid appearing naïve—or worse, complicit—we complicate; we argue from a rigorously theorized position on behalf of a progressive, and at times radical, project; we read, as they say, against the grain.

That description is no doubt an overgeneralization, and describing our more serious attempts to question the ideological structures of our field as a mere attempt to avoid appearing naïve is uncharitable, if not downright unfair. But it is an intellectual strategy that I think many of us can recognize. More importantly, it's a strategy that in public discourse gets mistaken—at times, it seems, intentionally—for itself being ideological in intent and effect: this is how universities come to be accused of "brainwashing" their students, filling their heads with leftist rejections of the basic goodness of the dominant Western culture. On campus, we know that's not the case: the overwhelming majority of what we teach, even in the most progressively oriented departments, is still that culture. Our classes on Shakespeare, on European art, on American history are still full. It's just that we attempt to teach all of this in context: Shakespeare no longer sits alone atop the canon of literature in English, but is accompanied by authors from around the world; courses on European art consider its deep transnational correspondences and influences; our narrative of American history strives not to leave out the inconveniently ugly bits. It's of course important to recognize the extent to which this scrutiny of the curriculum, and the dismissal of the contemporary humanities as nonserious, coincides with the inclusion of material relevant to minoritized communities, and it's vital to recognize the political rather than aesthetic

underpinnings of the desire for return to the hierarchies of old-school humanities, most starkly visible in the ways that calls to that cultural heritage have recently been deployed in support of nationalist and white supremacist projects (Perry).

But there's more at work in the strategies with which we argue within our fields than opposition to such regressive, oppressive ideologies; we don't read against the grain just because we reject the politics of the past, or the politics of the present for that matter. In fact, our most critical reading practices are not just a manifestation of our political opposition, but are actually perfectly compatible with the contemporary status quo. As Marco Roth has pointed out, there's an "uncomfortable truth" in the fact that the most critical methods of literary and cultural analysis "have flourished in our period of triumphant neoliberalism, both within the university system and in the world at large." And so the suggestion of a scholar like Wintried Fluck that early twenty-first century problems in the humanities in the United States were tied to "a constant pressure to outradicalize others" (348), especially under the banner of "difference," seems to just miss the mark. The point is not that our critiques surface thanks to pressure from some left-leaning bias in the academy. Rather, the point is that the critiques surface *because of* the conservative-leaning systems and structures in which the university as a whole, and each of us as a result, is mired. Our tendency to read against the grain is part of our makeup precisely because of the ways that we are ourselves *subject to* politics rather than being able to stand outside and neutrally analyze the political. The politics we are subject to, however—and this is the part of Fluck's argument that I think is crucial—is the politics that structures all institutions in the contemporary United States, and perhaps especially universities, a politics that makes inevitable the critical, the negative,

the rejection of everything that has gone before. It is a politics structured around market-based competition, and what Fluck refers to as the race for individual distinction.

Critique and Competition

However much we as scholars might reject individualism as part and parcel of the humanist, positivist ways of the past, our working lives—on campus and off—are overdetermined by it. The entire academic enterprise serves to cultivate individualism, in fact. Beginning with college applications, extending through graduate school admissions, fellowship applications, the job market, publication submissions, and, seemingly finally, the tenure and promotion review, those of us on campus are subject to selection. These processes present themselves as meritocratic: there are some metrics for quality against which applicants are measured, and the best—whatever that might mean in a given context—are rewarded. In actual practice, however, those metrics are never neutral, and what we are measured against is far more often than not one another—sometimes literally: it's not uncommon for research universities to ask external reviewers in tenure and promotion cases to rank candidates against the best two or three scholars in the field. Of course, as Erik Simpson reminds me, this kind of request *is* uncommon in other types of institutions, especially community colleges and regional comprehensive universities. And yet that very distinction raises the question of rankings and hierarchies among institutions and institutional types, and the ways that they are required to compete for faculty and other resources. Always, always, in the hidden unconscious of the profession, there is this competition: for positions, for people, for resources, for acclaim. And the drive to compete that this mode of being instills in us can't ever be fully contained by

these specific processes; it bleeds out into all areas of the ways we work, even when we're working together. The competitive individualism that the academy cultivates makes all of us painfully aware that even our most collaborative efforts will be assessed individually, with the result that even those fields whose advancement depends most on team-based efforts are required to develop careful guidelines for establishing credit and priority.

This competitive individualism contradicts—and in fact undermines—all of the most important communal aspects of life within our institutions of higher education. Our principles of shared governance, for instance, are built on the notion that colleges and universities operate best as collectives, in which all members contribute to their direction and functioning. In actual practice, however, our all-too-clear understanding that (especially at research universities) service to the institution will have the least impact when we are evaluated and ranked for salary increases and promotions encourages faculty members to avoid that labor, to reserve our time and energy for those aspects of our work that will enable recognition of our individual achievements. The results are not good for any of us: faculty disengage from the functioning of the institution and the shared purposes that it serves; some of the work that we might have done is instead taken on by academic and administrative staff; university governance becomes increasingly an administrative function, with an ever-growing phalanx of associate vice provosts creating and overseeing the processes that structure our institutions and our work within them, ostensibly freeing the faculty up to focus on the competitive work that will allow us as individuals and our universities as institutions to climb the rankings.

This is no way to run a collective. It's also no way to structure a fulfilling life: as I've written elsewhere, this disengagement from

community and singular focus on the race for individual distinction is a key factor in the extremely high risk of burnout among college faculty and other intellectual workers. It is all but impossible for us to structure our lives around the things that are most in line with our deepest personal values when we are driven to focus on those things that will create distinction for us, that will allow us to compare ourselves—or our institutions—favorably with one another.

This individualistic, competitive requirement is inseparable from the privatization that Newfield describes as the political unconscious of the contemporary university. Competition and the race for individual distinction structure the growing conviction that not only the benefits of higher education but also all of our categories of success—both in educational outcomes and in intellectual achievement—can only ever be personal, private, individual rather than social. And no amount of trying to persuade ourselves, or our administrations, or our legislatures of the public good that we, our fields, and our institutions serve will take root unless we figure out how to step off the competitive track, to live the multiplicity of our academic lives in ways that diverge from the singular path now laid out before us.

The need for a different way of being extends to all aspects of scholars' lives, including—to return to the agonistic approach to advancing knowledge in the humanities that I mentioned earlier—our critical methodologies. This sense of agon, or struggle, encourages us to reject the readings and arguments that have gone before us and to focus on advancing new ways of looking at the material we study. It is this mode of argumentation that leads Fluck to posit a pressure to "outradicalize" one another, given the need to distinguish ourselves and our readings from the many others in our fields. However, the political orientation of our critiques is ultimately of lesser importance than the competitive drive that lies beneath them. Distinguishing our arguments from those of others working in our fields is the primary goal: that we often choose the terrain of the ideological, or wind up embroiled in what Paul Ricoeur describes as the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in order to effect that distinction is a mere by-product. So when my graduate students began their engagement with the article I'd asked them to read by critiquing—and in fact dismissing—it on ideological grounds, the key force at work was not just what Rita Felski describes in *The Limits of Critique* as our suspicious "conviction" that both the texts that we study and the ways that we have been led to study them are "up to no good" (58). Far more important to the problem in that moment was that my students had no other position than the critical available to them, that the need to stake out their own individual, distinctive positions within the seminar room left them unable to articulate in any positive sense what the article was trying to accomplish because that articulation would have left their own readings somehow indistinguishable from those of the author. So they—we—reject, dismiss, critique. We outradicalize, but in the service of a highly individualistic form of competition. And however much this mode of reading has done to advance our fields and their social commitments—and I will stipulate that it has done a lot—competitive engagement like this too often looks to the many readers just outside our scholarly circles, including students, parents, administrators, and policymakers, like pure negativity, a rejection of the materials of our shared if contested culture, not to mention a seemingly endless series of internal arguments, all of which might well lead them to ask what is to be gained from supporting a field, or an institution, that seems intent on self-dismantling.

Worse, scholars' internalization of the individualistic imperative to compete and its manifestation in arguments whose primary work is that of rejection have provided an inroad into higher education for some forces that are hastening its dismantling. Bill Readings, in *The University in Ruins*, powerfully traces the transition of the purposes of higher education from the propagation of the culture of the nation-state and the training of its citizens therein, through an important period of resistance and protest that did the crucial work of opening up both access to higher education and the canon that it taught, to its current role, which seems to be the production of value (both intellectual and human) for global capital. This is to say that many of our concerns about and critiques of the goals of our institutions of higher learning as they were established are well-founded: they were developed in order to cultivate a particular model of citizenship based on exclusion and oppression and focused on the reproduction of state power. The problem is that in the absence of those defining goals, the purpose of higher education has drifted, and not in the ways we would have hoped. As in so many other areas of the contemporary public world, where service to the state is no longer focal, and where the state's responsibilities to its citizens are no longer clear, corporate interests have interceded. We may no longer promote exclusion and oppression in training state citizens, but we reinstantiate it in a new guise when we turn, however inadvertently, to training corporate citizens. Even worse, rejecting or critiquing that purpose is simply not working: not only is capital extraordinarily able to absorb all critique and to marginalize those who make it, but our inability to stop competing with one another ensures that our critique is contained within the forces of the market that we serve. Perhaps we might have reached, as Felski's title suggests, the limits of critique: perhaps we might need

to adopt a new mode of approach in order to make a dent in the systems that hem us in.

But that is not to say that I am rejecting critique, or critical thinking, or that I think scholars need somehow to find a way "beyond" critique. In fact, the critical approach is at the heart of what scholars do. Not only would we be justified in bristling against any suggestion that we abandon critique, or abandon the social commitments that underwrite it, in favor of an approach to our work that might be more friendly or positive, but we'd also be well within reason if we were to point out that the critique of critique *is still critique*, that it makes use of criticism's negative mode in the very act of negating it. Moreover, the critique of critique is too often driven either by a disdain for difficulty or by a rejection of the political in scholarly work. Scholars, perhaps unsurprisingly, take the rejection of the political critique that grounds our work, often accompanied by calls to return to the traditions that made "Western culture" great, as further evidence of our basic correctness: see, contemporary culture really is dominated by conservative and even reactionary forces that must exclude our ideas as a threat to their very being. We also take the resistance to difficulty, especially in the humanities, whether of language or of argument, as a sign of dismissal, of a refusal to take us and our work seriously: no one, after all, scoffs at the uses of jargon in high-energy physics. Meanwhile, even the physicists scoff at the uses of jargon in the humanities: one might be reminded of Alan Sokal's hoax perpetrated on the journal *Social Text*, in which he submitted an article arguing that gravity is a social construct as a means of demonstrating what he saw as the intellectual vacuity of both the journal and its field. It worked: not only was the article published, but it made cultural studies a laughing stock. Jennifer Ruark explores the cascading impact of this hoax

in a recent oral history, in which Sokal himself notes the "persistent anti-intellectual current" in American culture, which "looks down on the pointy-headed professors and is happy to pick up on any excuse to have a laugh at them," recognizing the damage done by this intramural finger-pointing.

None of this is to say that scholars shouldn't be critical of one another's work. It is, however, to suggest that the motives behind our critique might be worth a closer look. And so, too, are the motives behind what feels to us like the public rejection or dismissal of the kinds of work that we do, which might at times be more complex than we automatically assume. For instance, the calls for comprehensibility and the return to tradition in the humanities—see again Bruce Cole—aren't just about a refusal of difficulty, or a refusal to take us and our work seriously. These calls may be at least in part a sign of the degree to which people care about our subject matter, about literature or history or art. They might indicate the degree to which people feel the cultures we study to be their own, leading them to want on some level to engage with us, to understand and participate in what we're up to. If so, a bit of generosity on our part might do much to defuse some of the hostility toward our ways of working. There is of course grave political opposition to much of the work that is done on our college campuses today, and I do not at all wish to dismiss the threat that opposition can pose, but I also want to suggest that that glimmer of care for our subject matter creates the opportunity, if we take it seriously, to create forms of connection and dialogue that might help further rather than stymie the work that we do.

Some of my thinking about ways that attention to care might encourage scholars to approach the work that we do from a slightly different perspective has developed out of a talk I heard a couple of years ago by David Scobey, then the dean of the New School for Public Engagement. His suggestion was that scholarly work in the humanities is in a kind of imbalance, that critical thinking has dominated at the expense of a more socially directed mode of what he called "generous thinking," and that a recalibration of the balance between the two might enable us to make possible a greater public commitment in our work, which in turn might inspire a greater public commitment to our work. This book, having drawn its title from Scobey, obviously builds on his argument, but with one key revision: generous thinking is not and should not be opposed to critical thinking. In fact, the two should be fully aligned, and my hope in what follows is to help guide us toward modes of working that allow us to more fruitfully connect the generous and the critical in scholarly work. Rather than critical thinking, the dark opposite of generous thinking, that which has in fact created an imbalance in scholarly work—and not just in the humanities, but across the curriculum—is *competitive* thinking, thinking that is compelled by what sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen called "invidious comparison," or what Fluck refers to as the "race for professional distinction." It is the competitive that has undermined the capacity for community-building, both within our campuses and between our campuses and the broader public. What kinds of new discussions, new relationships, new projects might be possible if our critical thinking practices eschewed competition and were instead grounded in generosity?

Generous Thinking

What is it I mean when I talk about generosity in this context? I'll dig much further into this in the next chapter, but for the moment: I don't mean the term to refer to "giving" in any material

sense, or even in any simple metaphorical sense. Instead, what I'm hoping to develop, in myself most of all, is a generosity of mind, by which I mean to indicate an openness to possibility. That openness begins for me by trying to develop a listening presence in the world, which is to say a conversational disposition that is not merely waiting for my next opportunity to speak but instead genuinely focusing on what is being said to me, beginning from the assumption that in any given exchange I likely have less to teach than I have to learn. Generous thinking also means working to think *with* rather than *against*, whether the objects of those prepositions are texts or people. It means, as Lisa Rhody explores in a blog post on the applicability of improvisational comedy's "rule of agreement" to academic life, adopting a mode of exchange that begins with *yes* rather than *no:* as she describes it, among colleagues, the rule of agreement functions as "a momentary staving off of the impulse to assume that someone else's scholarship is fashioned out of ignorance or apathy or even ill will or that the conversation was initiated in bad faith. Agreement doesn't have to be about value: it's not even about accuracy or support. The Rule of Agreement is a social contract to respect the intellectual work of your peers." That *yes*, in fact, creates space in which we can recognize the possibilities presented by broadening our notion of who our "peers" might be, creating a much larger "us," not set in opposition to "them." *Yes* creates the opportunity for genuine dialogue, not only among colleagues but with many more potential colleagues, as well as with our objects of study, our predecessors, and the publics we hope to engage. *Yes* encourages us to step away from competition, from the race for professional distinction. *Yes* is the beginning of *yes, and*, through which we create the possibility of working together to build something entirely new.

This mode of generous thinking is already instantiated in many projects that focus on fostering public engagement in and through the work done within the university, including—as just one example—that of groups like Imagining America, which serves to connect academics, artists, and community organizations in ways that can elicit and support their mutual goals for change. Public projects like these are well established on many campuses around the country and in many fields across the curriculum. But one key aspect of understanding generosity as the ground from which the work of the university can and should grow is the requirement that all of us take such public projects just as seriously as the more traditional forms of scholarly work that circulate amongst ourselves. Scholars working in public history, to offer just one example, have some important stories to tell about the difficulties they have faced in getting work in that field appropriately evaluated and credited as scholarship. And a few years ago, after a talk in which a well-respected scholar discussed the broadening possibilities that should be made available for humanities PhDs to have productive and fulfilling careers outside the classroom, including in the public humanities, I overheard a senior academic say with some bemusement, "I take the point, but I don't think it works in all fields. There's long been a 'public history.' But can you imagine a 'public literary criticism'?" His interlocutor chortled bemusedly: *the very idea*. But the world has long been filled with public literary criticism, from the most well-regarded and widely disseminated book reviews through large-scale public reading projects to widespread fan production. All of these are modes of literary work that reach out to nonspecialist audiences and draw them into the kinds of interpretation and analysis that scholars profess, and we ignore that work to our great detriment. How might an increased focus on engaging

with a range of broader publics in and through the literary, or the other materials of our culture, enrich not just their lives but our academic fields?

Scholars' and administrators' resistance to taking such public projects as seriously as we do the work that we circulate amongst ourselves—according them the same kinds of credit and prestige as traditional scholarly publications—speaks to one of two things: first, our anxieties (and they are very real anxieties) about deprofessionalization, about association with the amateur, to which I'll return in a bit; and second, to our continued (and I would argue profoundly misguided) division and ordering of the various categories to which academic labor is committed, with a completely distinct category called "service" all too frequently coming in a distant third behind research and teaching. That ranking among forms of work isn't universal, of course; community colleges, regional comprehensive institutions, and many small liberal arts colleges often have very different means of evaluating academic careers, means that emphasize the importance of engagement with students and other publics. The expectations that push research universities to dismiss public-facing work and to devalue service, in other words, aren't inevitable, but are a byproduct of the hierarchical, competitive drive that determines so much about the ways those institutions operate. Those expectations are painfully short-sighted, overlooking the very real possibilities that public scholarship creates for rebuilding frayed relationships between the university and the publics that it might productively engage. Grounding the university's work in a spirit of generosity might encourage us to erase some of the boundaries between the work that we do inside and the work that we do outside the academy, between "scholarly" work and public work, to consider ways that all of it might have a spirit of service as its foundation. But a

proper valuation of public engagement in scholarly life will require a systemic rethinking of the role that prestige plays in the academic reward system—and this, as I'll discuss in a later chapter, is no small task. It is, however, crucial to a renewed understanding of the relationship between the university and the public good.

Similarly, grounding our work in generous thinking might not only encourage us to adopt a position of greater openness to dialogue with our communities and foster projects that are more publicly engaged, but it might also lead us to place a greater emphasis on—and to attribute a greater value to—collaboration in academic life, and to understand how to properly credit all our collaborators. It might encourage us to support and value various means of working in the open, of sharing our writing at more and earlier stages in the process of its development, and of making the results of our research more readily accessible to and usable by more readers. These are all ways of working that we learned in early stages of our educations, but that, as Danica Savonick reminds me, we too often unlearn in the process of our professionalization. That professionalization doesn't involve simply deepening our knowledge of our subjects, but also learning to hide the imperfections of our early work, learning to claim our polished, finished products as our own. In so doing, we wind up closing out those who might like to be in dialogue with us, as well as those—like our own students—who could benefit from learning about our processes. Generous, generative modes of critical thinking might invite nonexperts into our discussions as they develop, bringing them along in the process of discovery.

But I want to acknowledge that adopting a mode of generous thinking is a task that is simultaneously extremely difficult and easily dismissible. We are accustomed to finding "smart" ways of

thinking that rebut, that question, that complicate. The kinds of listening and openness for which I am here advocating may well be taken as acceding to a form of cultural naïveté at best, or worse, as a politically regressive knuckling-under to the pressures of contemporary ideologies and institutions. This is the sense in which Felski suggests that scholars have internalized "the assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *un*critical" (*Limits* 9). Felski posits that the critical is not a project but instead a mood, a mode of self-performance, an affect—and one to which we have limited ourselves at great cost. I would reorient this argument to focus not on the critical as the dominant mood of our work but instead the competitive, the costs of which are astronomical, not only to each individual scholar in setting a course toward stress-related burnout, but to scholars collectively in undermining our ability to understand ourselves as a community, one capable of disagreeing profoundly and yet still coming together in solidarity to argue for our collective interests. What might become possible for each of us, for all of us, if we were to retain the social commitment that motivates our critical work while stepping off the field of competition, opening ourselves and our work to its many potential connections and conversations?

Such an opening would require us to place ourselves in a new relationship to our objects of study and their many audiences; we would need to be prepared to listen to what they have to tell us, to ask questions that are designed to elicit more about their interests than about ours. That is to say, we would need to open ourselves to the possibility that our ideas might turn out to be wrong. This, it may not surprise you to hear, is an alarming possibility not just for most scholars but for most human beings to countenance, as Kathryn Schulz has explored, and it's a possibility that we will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid facing. But

given the ways in which arguments in our fields proceed, and given what Schulz has called the "Pessimistic Meta-Induction from the History of Everything," it is all but certain that at some future moment our own blind spots, biases, and points of general ignorance will have been uncovered. Refusing to countenance the possibility of this wrongness makes it all the more inevitable, but perhaps keeping it in view might open us to some new opportunities. Possibly being wrong, after all, is part and parcel of what Alan Jacobs calls the "tragic risk" of thinking (*How* 36), but it's also what opens the path toward being "more aware," and toward acting "more responsibly" (49). If everything we write today already bears within it a future anterior in which it will have been demonstrated to be wrong-headed, we have the potential for a genuine exploration of a new path, one along which we develop not just a form of critical audacity but also a kind of critical humility.

Critical humility is one key to generous thinking. In the early days of working on this project, I gave an invited talk in which I tested out some of its core ideas. In the question-and-answer period that followed, one commenter pointed out what he saw as a canny move on my part in talking about generosity: no one wanted to be seen as an ungenerous jerk in disagreeing with me. It was a funny moment, but it gave me real pause; I did not at all intend to use generosity as a shield with which to fend off the possibility of critique. Generosity, in fact, requires remaining open to criticism, not least because, as Alan Jacobs pointed out in the open discussion of this book's draft, "Someone who pays close enough attention to show me where I've gone wrong is being generous to me" (Untitled comment). The importance of remaining open to criticism, of acknowledging the generosity in criticism, was powerfully illustrated for me in a series of tweets from April Hathcock, a scholarly communications librarian and lawyer who

was recently engaged in establishing a new working group in her field. As the members of that working group laid out their expectations and norms for one another, one member offered "assume positive intent": be generous, in other words, in interpreting the behavior and words of others. Hathcock insisted that this expectation be accompanied by another: "own negative effects." That is to say, we must not only refrain from assuming that everyone else is in the wrong, but we also must remain open to the very real possibility that *we might be*. "Assume positive intent; own negative effects": this is generosity accompanied by critical humility, a mode that creates space for genuinely listening to the ideas and experiences of others, even when they contradict or critique our own.

Humility is in short supply across public discourse today, as noted by the project Humility and Conviction in Public Life in describing its mission, which seeks to help all of us "balance our most deeply held convictions with humility and open-mindedness in order to repair public discourse" ("Mission"). It's not, in other words, just an academic problem, but then it's probably unnecessary to point out that critical humility is neither selected for nor encouraged in the academy, and it is certainly not cultivated in graduate school. Quite the opposite, at least in my experience: everything in the environment of the seminar room makes flirting with being wrong unthinkable. And the only way to ensure one's own fundamental rightness seems to be to demonstrate the flaws in all the alternatives. This is the method in which my grad students were trained, a mode of reading that encourages a leap from encountering an idea to countering it, without taking the time in between to really explore it. It's that exploration that a real critical humility—stepping outside competition and into generosity—can open up: the space and time to discover what we

might learn if we are allowed to let go, just a tiny bit, of our investment in being right.

The possibility of being wrong is not the only area of discomfort that foregrounding generosity in our thinking might expose us to, however. Felski argues of literary studies that moving beyond the limits of critique might allow scholars to be more open to the affective, to the embodied experience of the emotions. There is something to be gleaned here for many academic fields, insofar as this aspect of relating to our work as scholars is underexplored. We value objectivity and critical distance, even as we acknowledge these positions to be largely fictional. It's possible that the more we are able to free ourselves to experience and express all of the moods that underwrite our work—including curiosity, appreciation, and perhaps even difficult moments of empathy and love—the richer the work will become. But what I am hoping for in asking us to step away not from the critical, necessarily, but instead from the competitive—from the critique that is offered not in a spirit of generosity but instead as an attempt to create individual distinction—is that we might look for new ways of relating not just to ourselves and our work but to one another, and to the range of publics that we want to cultivate for the university. In turning away from the competitive, we can begin to embrace the full potential of the collaborative; in rejecting the cultivation of prestige, we can adopt a more inviting, open posture. We might be able to fully shed the adopted position of the neutral, impartial, critical observer and instead become participants in the work around us and in the communities undertaking the work. This might mean being able to more readily and wholeheartedly profess the love we feel for our subject matter without fear of sounding naïve or hokey, but it might also mean opening ourselves to more communal experiences of other emotions as well, some of them our emotions,

and some of them directed at us: anxiety, fear, anger. Genuine generosity, as I'll explore, is not a feel-good emotion, but an often painful, failure-filled process related to what Dominick LaCapra has called "empathic unsettlement," in which we are continually called not just to feel for others but to simultaneously acknowledge their irreconcilable otherness. Empathic unsettlement asks us to open ourselves to difference as fully as possible without trying to tamp it down into bland "understanding." This kind of ethical engagement with one another, with our fields, and most importantly with the publics around us can be a hallmark of the university, if we open ourselves and our institutions to the opportunities that genuinely being in community might create.

It's important, however, to note our own anxieties about such a shift, not least our concerns about losing whatever tenuous hold on expertise that contemporary American culture still allows. Scholars work, from graduate school forward, to develop a professional identity based on the cultivation and creation of expert knowledge; we gather recognition for that expertise by performing it for one another, and that recognition allows us to collect the resources we need in order to do the research that shapes our careers and our fields. What risks might we encounter if we open our work to the scrutiny, or even the participation, of nonexperts? We have good cause to fear the decline of esteem for expert knowledge: as Tom Nichols argues in *The Death of Expertise*, early twenty-first century American culture does not have "a healthy skepticism about experts; instead, we actively resent them, with many people assuming that experts are wrong simply by virtue of being experts" (xiii). The effects of such active resentment within the current higher education climate include a rapid trend toward deprofessionalization of scholars and their fields, and here again, the humanities provide an ominous bellwether. In early

2016, to take just one example, the governor of Kentucky rolled out a state budget that included significant cuts for higher education in the state, but announced that those cuts would be differentially distributed. According to the governor, "There will be more incentives to electrical engineers than to French literature majors. . . . All the people in the world that want to study French literature can do so, they are just not going to be subsidized by the taxpayer" (Beam). If you love French literature that much, in other words, you're welcome to spend your life studying it, but your failure to contribute to economic growth renders you unworthy of support. Deidre Lynch has explored a variant of this danger at the heart of literary studies; understanding literature as a subject that one is compelled to study out of love—and for which one must express love—risks turning the scholar into an amateur in the literal sense of the word: a person so devoted to a practice that they ought to be willing to do it for free. Michael Bérubé's 2013 presidential address to the Modern Language Association similarly explored the extent to which the love of what we do as faculty, and our claims of willingness to work "for the love of it," have been made to serve as an alibi for the exploitation of the graduate students and adjunct instructors trying to work their way into the profession. This is, as Fobazi Ettarh powerfully argues, one of the dangers of what she terms "vocational awe," which she notes "is easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or passionate enough to serve without complaint." Feeling called to a way of life, and particularly to a way of life in service to the public good, one relinquishes one's claims to fair treatment.

But what if—and the flurry that follows should be taken as a series of genuinely open rather than rhetorical questions—what

if the university's values and commitments made it possible for those of us who work on campus to develop a new understanding of how expertise is structured and how it functions, an understanding focused just a bit less on individual achievement, on invidious distinction? What if the expertise that the university cultivated were at its root connected to building forms of collectivity, solidarity, and community both on campus and off? What if the communities around the campus were invited to be part of these processes? How might we work together to break down the us-and-them divide between campus and public and instead create a richer, more complex sense of the connections among all of us? If those of us on campus were free to focus on intellectual leadership not as an exercise in forwarding our own individual ideas but rather as a mode of supporting the development of our multiple communities, could we create a richer sense of the future for our fields, and for our institutions? What kinds of public support for institutions of higher education might we be able to generate if we were to argue that community-oriented projects exist in consonance with the work that scholars do in the classroom, or in professional forms of writing, and that institutions must therefore value participation in such projects appropriately? Can we argue persuasively on behalf of using scholarly work to cultivate community, of understanding ourselves in service to that community, while refusing to allow our administrations, our institutions, and our governments to lose sight of the fact that such service is a form of labor that is crucial to the future that we all share? What new purposes for the university might we imagine if we understand its role to be not inculcating state citizens, nor training corporate citizens, but instead facilitating the development of diverse, open communities—both on their campuses and across their borders—

encouraged to think together, to be involved in the ongoing project of how we understand and shape our world?

All of these possibilities that we open up—engaging perspectives other than our own, valuing the productions and manifestations of our multifarious culture, encountering the other in all its irreducible otherness—are the best of what scholars and teachers can offer to the university, and the university to the world. And all of these possibilities begin with cultivating the ability to think generously, to listen—to our subject matter, to our communities, to ourselves. This is an ability desperately needed today, not just on our campuses but in the world at large. I have much more to say, obviously—there are chapters of it ahead—but this listening presence, in which I am willing to countenance without judgment or shame the possibility that I just might be wrong, is where I will hope to leave myself in the end, ready to listen to you.