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Transforming America: The University as Public Good

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Transforming America: The University as Public Good

Nancy Cantor
with a response by **Kristina Valaitis**

Foreseeable
Futures #3

Position Papers from:
Imagining America:
Artists and Scholars in Public Life

Foreseeable Futures

From IA: Artists & Scholars in Public Life

Dear Reader,

I invite you to join a national conversation about education, democracy, and the imagination.

Imagining America is a consortium of 56 diverse colleges and universities from across the U.S. They share a commitment to the civic mission of higher education--and to the role of the arts, humanities, and design in animating that mission.

The Foreseeable Futures Series is Imagining America's way of drawing more people into the collegial exchanges begun at our national conferences. This is the third paper in the Series. Like our previous contributors, Nancy Cantor and Kristina Valaitis find powerful ways to do the work of community engagement and reflection. And in the process, they craft arguments that are useful to all of us.

The series began with Richard J. Franke's *Democratic Vistas for the Humanities*. He set forth his conviction that "scholars and artists should be connected to a larger audience" because democracy demands it. This view was forged during his career as a CEO, university trustee, and founder of the Chicago Humanities Festival. The second position paper was Mary Schmidt Campbell's essay, *Harlem: Parable of Promise or Peril*. Campbell, Dean of the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, told the story of her directorship of the Studio Museum of Harlem during a period when "a band of guerilla culture-warriors" began "a quiet but fervent revolution" uptown.

Now it is Nancy Cantor's turn. Cantor has said that being a university president is her public scholarship project. And she is right. A leading social psychologist, she has become a philosopher and strategist of public engagement in higher education. As Provost of the University of Michigan, she located the University's position on affirmative action within the broad framework of education for a diverse democracy. As part of that commitment to publicly consequential scholarship, she helped to found Imagining America at the University of Michigan in the late 1990s.

Imagining America's 2003 conference was hosted by Cantor when she was Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The conference theme was "Affirming Action: The New Politics of Cultural Knowledge." That phrase, "affirming action," sums up Cantor's own approach to leadership. In her address, she outlines a number of bold campus-community partnerships, many of which were integral to the *Brown v. Board of Education* Commemoration at the University of Illinois. Cantor makes a passionate case for the arts as "a context for exchange" and "a medium for participation" in a society where "pervasive and longstanding racial divides" persist.

As this goes to press, Nancy Cantor is poised to begin her new job as Chancellor and President of Syracuse University. We congratulate her on her new post, knowing that there, too, she and her colleagues will find inventive ways for diverse communities to undertake the co-creation of knowledge and art.

Kristina Valaitis is Director of the Illinois Humanities Council. State humanities councils are crucial to the public life of knowledge in every state. Councils do the essential work of civic dialogue on tough issues and fund programs that make communities full partners in scholarship and research. The Illinois Humanities Council has a particularly distinguished record of accomplishment. Its Odyssey Project, an ambitious humanities curriculum for poor people, was featured in the Summer 2002 *Imagining America* newsletter, available online.

In responding to Cantor's address, Valaitis asks tough, affectionate questions of her university-based colleagues and offers "suggestions for action," including some pointed advice on the tenure system.

We hope that you will join the conversation that is aired in these pages and take part in the work of *Imagining America*. Please visit our web site at www.ia.umich.edu.

Julie Ellison
Director



Nancy Cantor

Nancy Cantor is the 11th Chancellor and President of Syracuse University, as well as Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies in The College of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Cantor came to Syracuse from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she was chancellor.

Dr. Cantor is recognized for her scholarly contributions to the understanding of how individuals perceive and think about their social worlds, pursue personal goals, and how they regulate their behavior to adapt to life's most challenging social environments. She is co-author or co-editor of three books and author or co-author of some 90 book chapters and journal articles.

She has been an advocate for racial justice and for diversity in higher education, and she has written and lectured widely on these subjects. At the University of Michigan she was closely involved in the university's defense of affirmative action in the cases Grutter and Gratz, decided by the Supreme Court in 2003.

Before becoming provost at the University of Michigan, Dr. Cantor was that university's dean of the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies. At Princeton she served as chair of the department of psychology. She received her A.B. in 1974 from Sarah Lawrence College and her Ph.D. in psychology in 1978 from Stanford University.

Dr. Cantor is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. She is the past chair and a member of the board of directors of the American Association for Higher Education, and a member of the board of the American Council on Education. She serves on the board of trustees of Sarah Lawrence College, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and the American Institutes for Research. She has served as a member of the National Advisory Board of the National Survey of Student Engagement and on various advisory boards and study sections of the National Science Foundation and the National Research Council, and a Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues.

She is the wife of Steven R. Brechin, an environmental sociologist and a professor in the Maxwell School and The College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse. She is the mother of two children, Maddy and Archie.

As a prelude, I would like to focus today on the work that I think the arts do in fostering intercultural and intergroup dialogue that can transform America. In this regard, I will speak, naturally, from one perspective or position – that is, from the view of how universities can become, with their community partners, the locus for these kinds of transformative exchanges, whether they occur on campus or in our communities. I also want to position my remarks as based in, and emerging out of, a U.S. setting in which powerful and pervasive and longstanding racial divides give special urgency to the transformative work of the arts as a context for exchange.

My focus on experiences of race and class in this "America" is not intended to ignore other powerful divisions relevant to the U.S. and very powerful in other Americas, such as those of immigration and citizenship, religion and ethnicity, or language in Latin America and Canada. Just as artistic exchanges work best when the originating perspective is clear, so does the work we as scholars and citizens do to promote intercultural dialogue.

Universities have a rare and critical role to play as a public good. We educate the next generation of leaders. We address important societal issues with discoveries that change our world. We preserve our cultural past while laying the groundwork for the future. And we experiment with ways of building community.

This role is "rare" precisely because universities are constituted off to the side of "normal" society, unfettered by the need to deliver immediately on real-world concerns. We should, in principle, encourage an experimental attitude well suited to a thoughtful discourse, from many angles, about important issues. We should be centers of intellectual diversity and should permit a certain intellectual fullness with ideas likely to encourage discovery.

The "critical" role works when we open our gates sufficiently to our many publics that we remain connected to the concerns of the day, the critical societal issues and the voices pushing them. We must also face outward, toward culture-changing work.

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We do our best when we are poised between two worlds, the world of the monastery with its dedication to a higher purpose, and the marketplace, with the multitude of pressing concerns of everyday life.¹

And, as I will argue here, exchanges built around the arts can be especially effective in allowing us to remain poised between worlds – able to celebrate who we are and how we get to know each other, while also taking a self-critical stance on how we normally live our separate lives instead.

Separate, Contested, and Lost

And, speaking of separate lives: Surrounding each university is a world – actually, many worlds – as divisive, insular, bounded, and contested as one can imagine.

Last summer, 35 years after the Kerner Commission warned "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white —separate and unequal,"² racial violence as tragic as any the commission studied broke out in the all-black city of Benton Harbor, Michigan. With cruel irony, this happened just as the Supreme Court was affirming in the Michigan cases—as it had 50 years ago in *Brown v Board of Education*—that this nation has a compelling interest in educating students to live and work together.³

We are now just one generation away from a time when white children will be the minority in our public schools, and different races and ethnic groups still live in separate neighborhoods, attend different schools, churches, synagogues and mosques, and grow up without attending each other's birthday parties, proms, weddings and funerals. In practice, the promise of desegregation in *Brown* is largely unrealized, a vision of a better time that has not yet been achieved.

Because we do not know each other, the stereotypes we hold have led to great injustices and inequalities in such vital areas as employment, health care, and the criminal justice system.

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Preservation

Mirroring these divisions at home, ethnic, religious, and inter-group conflict can be seen in virtually every corner of the globe, resulting in untold human and cultural carnage.

To make matters worse, we have reacted to very real pain and losses on our own shores with a turn inward, a "battening the hatches" if you will, that poses real problems for the kinds of free and vital exchange of people and ideas at the heart of our democracy. It is no accident that when this nation begins to worry about "outsiders," we often clamp down on our own artists and writers, precisely because they are forces for free intercultural expression.

Boundaries that separate, as they do in our own land, contribute to the loss of cultures and indigenous traditions everywhere, as ethnomusicologists, linguists, anthropologists and archaeologists lose track of music in Liberia, native languages in the Southwest, rituals in New Zealand, or treasures in Iraq, to name a few contested arenas.

Lester Monts, for example, who has worked for a long time with the Vai people of Liberia, has collected and written about their songs in an effort to preserve and value these musical and cultural systems, which began to disappear with colonialism and are now under siege both from modern warfare and global culture.

Paradoxically, even as we build these walls, and lose touch with indigenous traditions within them, we also cannot escape the effects of an astonishing and fast-moving revolution in technology that is spreading a certain kind of global culture.

This technology revolution has other effects as well. It should connect us and give us access to each other, but on an individual level, as novelist Richard Powers has observed, it can isolate, exhaust, and overwhelm. In some regards it makes our world smaller, with a barrage of news 24 hours a day accelerating our sense of tragedy and dread, but not genuinely or deeply connecting us to the experiences or voices of those beyond the digital divide.

Affirming
Hope

We must ask ourselves how we can help shape this revolution. How can technology be a means of forging connections within and across communities, sharing worlds, freeing the imagination, and expressing differences while still reaching out to each other?

Artists and Scholars Lighting the Future

In this world of foreboding, artists and humanists working at the boundary between campus and community can provide a medium for participation in a dialectic in which intra-cultural expression and intercultural dialogue are intimately intertwined, just as the growth of the self is inextricably bound with one's interdependence with others.

The arts, broadly defined as "expressive culture," can be the medium, not just the reflection, of intra-cultural affirmation and intercultural dialogue. They can express difference while building trust, rather than conflict or separation, and they make possible a creative, dynamic coexistence that richly affirms each part. The arts of all forms, from visual to performing, provide a context for exchange that we must nurture.

The arts can forge sustained connections between peoples and ideas and cultures that otherwise either simply remain invisible, unexpressed, or worse yet, clash in destructive ways. Across our institutions and around the globe, scholars, artists, citizens, and students are teaming up—sometimes, but not always, aided by some form of cyber technology—to explore differences, preserve and interpret and share cultural heritages, and criticize ourselves and thereby foster new dialogues.

Many of these projects fulfill the hope of preparing for a more peaceful world largely by their ability to embrace several generations at once, interweaving different kinds of expertise about life, including the scholar's penchant for cataloguing the range of experience and the community's search for a dominant, coherent voice. By teaming up, there is an enriched authenticity to the dialogue.

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For this dialogue to flourish, we must suspend the norms through which we live and our habits for perceiving the world. We need a place apart, where we can listen to our inner voices and those of others. The arts, which stand to the side of daily life, allow the expression of self and of social tensions in this safe way. We need to combine the arts as a medium for learning about ourselves and others with the open-mindedness of students oriented to change. The freedom of an academic setting, whether on or off campus, can often provide a powerful context for safe exchange, allowing artistic expression to reveal some of the ills of our time.

Exploring Difference

As we all try to explore difference, we are often drawn first to the safety of artistic expressions of them. On our campus, for example, we recently began a year long commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v Board* decision with the exhibition at our Krannert Art Museum of "Visualizing the Blues," a dazzling and poignant collection of photographs of life in the Mississippi Delta between Reconstruction and the end of the millennium.⁴

As collected by the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis, the images capture the experiences that have contributed to the culture of the American South and the huge barriers between the lives of blacks and whites. Even when taking a lunch break together in the same cotton field, as photographer Dorothea Lange showed, black workers and white workers inhabited two worlds with parallel narratives.

Deborah Willis Kennedy writes "The blues is a life and death struggle. The blues permits the living to defend life/living."⁵ To visualize the blues, one must contend with prejudice and racism, blood and spit, malice and murder. Ernest Withers took such a photograph: "Boarding House Bathroom From Which James Earl Ray Shot Dr. King, 422 South Main Street, Memphis, April 1968." The photograph shows very little, and yet it shows everything: a filthy toilet, an old tub, a pock-marked wall, the open window from which a killer silenced the greatest voice for peace in the 20th Century. The image puts us there, unable to stop the crime or understand it, but unable to forget it.

Expression

Photographer Mark Steinmetz show us the loneliness and boredom of a young white girl lying on the hood of a car in "Athens, Georgia, 1996," and Birney Imes suggests a whole world in "Turk's Place, Leflore County," where a tiny string of colored lights has been turned on at sundown on a summer night, and a door stands open to a brightly lit room, drawing us down a dirt road to a parking lot in the middle of nowhere, empty of everything but possibilities.

Such an exhibit reminds us that people who love the blues may live a world away from Memphis. One of the most telling photographs is a self-portrait by Tseng Kwong Chi, a Chinese who, at the height of the cold war, proudly took his own photograph at the gates of Graceland, appropriating the stance of the white man who became a legend and a phenomenal commercial success by appropriating black music for white teen-agers.

Although the photographs in "Visualizing the Blues" often have an undercurrent of violence or show the aftermath of violence, one can look at them and become intimately involved without direct personal risk beyond the vulnerability that comes from feeling others' pain. Like all the arts, they offer a safe haven—for the artist to express conflict, anger, and dissent and for the audience to suspend the protectionism in which we normally indulge, the boundaries we draw to isolate ourselves and look inward, not outward.

Whereas our commemoration of *Brown* includes a year of symposia, courses, community-based projects, performances, and dialogues, marking both the victories initiated by this landmark decision and its unfulfilled promises, "Visualizing the Blues," through the breadth and honesty of its portrayal, communicates this bitter-sweet message in one collected moment. Sometimes pictures really do speak a thousand words, light up a thousand lives.

Inviting Others In

In fact, part of the effectiveness of "Visualizing the Blues" is that while ostensibly showing the separateness of the worlds of blacks and whites in the American

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South, then and now, it actually draws the viewer into a dialogue across those worlds. This is not atypical of artistic expression, as it frequently both affirms difference and still manages to draw in others, offering the possibility of bonds that go across cultures, time and place, inviting others in instead of pushing them away.

Another example of this is the documentary "The Amasong Chorus: Singing Out," by Jay Rosenstein, a member of our journalism faculty. The documentary, which recently debuted as part of our *Brown v Board* commemoration, charts the origins and growth of Champaign Urbana's premiere lesbian/feminist chorus. It shows us the beauty, the love, the pain and the humiliation that have been suffered by the members of this outstanding chorus, while drawing us into a dialogue with them. We are invited in, across cultures, not pushed away. Moreover, this exchange operates on multiple levels, as the film also documents the exchanges within the chorus itself, in which lesbian and straight members share both their voices and their lives with each other.

Brenda Farnell, a cultural anthropologist on our campus who is also a former dancer, is among those trying to break down the boundaries that have led to the destruction of indigenous languages and culture. She is working to preserve languages of the Plains Indians. These languages, which are in danger of extinction, combine gestures and sound, and Dr. Farnell records the multifaceted performances of elder storytellers, from the Nakota and Crow in Montana to the Kiowa in Oklahoma, trying to reverse the process of loss and to invite others in to carry on.

Equalizing Standing

The arts work to empower and to foster intercultural dialogue partly because everyone has some "standing" in the "conversation." The arts offer an escape from the silencing that tends to come in "normal" society through the subtleties of power and status. The arts, through performances, through dialogues, are a uniting force, more like the counterpoint of Bach than a debate in which one side inevitably dominates.

Share Possibilities

In the arts, for example, it is not only diplomats who can discuss and negotiate peace. Without money, without limousines, without hotel reservations, children are taking it up, one to one, from different parts of the globe through a "Peace through Poetry" exchange on the internet, sponsored by iEARN, an international educational and resource network. At the moment, the 16 schools participating in this project are located in Chicago, Lithuania, Japan, Bulgaria, Moscow, and in Urbana, a few blocks from our campus.

"Nothing will be as good as you want it to be/If you do nothing for it," writes 16-year-old Yuri Petrovichev, from Kiev, Ukraine. "You should put your soul in it."⁶

"Before the war commences the end is clear," writes Rositsa Kuneva, a student from Bulgaria. "All taking part are losers, nobody wins./Never wins the one who fights against his fear/Sluicing down the earth with bloody rinse."⁷

Dialogues like these strip away the armor that we think we need to protect our place in the world, and there is nothing quite like the voices of students when they are given standing through artistic expression. They remind us that things could be different.

Sharing the Particulars

One of the reasons that "Peace through Poetry" can work its magic is that unlike most of our languages, art forms are shared across cultures—expressed differently but derived from similar impulses that are easily grasped. Choreography and body movement, vocal expression in song, and the range of human emotions expressed on hand-made instruments; these are common art forms in which different expressions can be appreciated and shared by people throughout the world. And because great art has the tendency to gather together all generations, all classes, all levels of expertise, the arts are unique in their ability to represent the particulars of local experience and yet to communicate universally.

One such shared impulse that often finds its way into artistic expression is the remarkable drive for survival and the restoration of voice that heals. At the Maryland

Institute for Technology in the Humanities, a digital archive project, *Narratives That Heal*,⁸ researched and created by Carolina Robertson, contains universal stories of survival and healing from particular communities across the globe: an ivory carver and farmer in Ghana, a Hawaiian woman who composed more than 300 songs, many of which are standard hits in the modern hula repertoire, an Argentine social psychologist detained and tortured for eight years during his country's "Dirty War," who teaches workshops about the hidden art that emerges as a tool for survival, even in the worst human conditions.

Just as "*Peace through Poetry*" is an ongoing act of negotiation, the *Narratives That Heal* draw on the life-giving power of the arts to record the endless struggles for survival of so many peoples in so many places over so long.

Around the world, we are seeing libraries serving as centers for recording the particulars of these struggles, but also for actively exchanging information so as to create opportunity.

Karen Kitching, for example, city librarian at the Alberton Public Library in South Africa, spent a summer at our Mortenson Center for International Library Programs, partnering through the Illinois State Library with local libraries throughout this state. Afterwards she wrote: "This program gave me the opportunity to reflect on my situation, and I realized that I am limiting myself. There are so many opportunities for me and areas where I can contribute." The program, she said, "gave me wings!"

Preserving Our Pasts

Indeed, the arts offer ways to draw from the past, from traditions and legacies, while offering a beacon for change. They make places for us to be at home in ourselves. And they offer us ways to venture out of that home into new territory.

Last year, for example, the New Orleans African American Museum of Art, Culture, and History teamed up with the Mayor's Housing and Neighborhood Development office to reclaim the area around North

Projects like these serve to invigorate our children as future citizens by connecting them to both the pleasures and the pain of the local history of their communities.

Claiborne Avenue, believed to be the oldest black neighborhood in the nation. It had been an oasis of green until its oak trees were cut down, in spite of opposition, to build Interstate 10. The oaks were replaced by an elevated highway and 40 concrete pillars, each 8 to 10 feet around and 16 to 20 feet high.

With help from the mayor and the museums, artists got together to paint murals on the pillars to memorialize the people, traditions, organizations, and institutions of the historic Treme and Seventh Ward neighborhoods of New Orleans. The name of the project, which was a successful blend of the arts and community activism, was called "Restore the Oaks."

If you go to New Orleans, it will also not take you long to realize that Zydeco bands often include two and even three generations among their members, and the music flourishes in locations such as bowling alleys, where aficionados go to "rock and bowl." These intergenerational "performances" loudly announce the evolution of an art form and its new place in the world.

Through the gathering together of generations and of communities, it is possible to at once solidify traditions in the arts and invigorate those traditions. This year in our Jazz Threads series, a partnership between the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts on campus and at least 40 local jazz artists and advocates, we are celebrating the grand legacy of jazz in Champaign and its possibilities in the future of our community.⁹

"Hometown jazz heroes," such as the renowned jazz trumpet player Cecil Bridgewater, are coming home to give performances and classes on campus and in the community, for "students" of all ages. This is a very ambitious project built around the affirmation of and inspiration that comes from these local heroes and this local history. At the same time, Jazz Threads has turned out to provide a powerful context for exchange about the very painful history of racism, discrimination, and prejudice in our community and on our campus. By embracing the self-critical stance of this artistic exchange, the way is opened to build community going forward.

Perhaps most critically, projects like those in New Orleans and Jazz Threads here in Champaign and David Scobey's children's theater productions of oral histories of elderly Detroit residents,¹⁰ serve to invigorate our children as future citizens by connecting them to both the pleasures and the pain of the local history of their communities. Scobey, in fact, aptly named his series of intergenerational programmatic collaborations, "The Arts of Citizenship." By moving together across generations in artistic exchange, it is also likely that other barriers so corrosive to our communities begin to come down.

Moving Together: The Arts and Intercultural Dialogue

In the end, it is precisely this unique power of the arts to demolish corrosive barriers and foster honest intercultural dialogue that makes them so essential to the life of a university as a public good. When universities turn their campuses into communities of practice in the arts, barriers between campus groups and with our neighbors, dissolve. Consider an example from Illinois, mirrored by similar ones across higher education.

Last year was a time of intense distress and growing conflict between our Jewish and Muslim student communities, substantial and comparable in size, in the wake of ever-escalating tensions in the Middle East and worldwide. These tensions, which had been festering for several years with considerable anger and polarization on both sides, were further inflamed by publication in the student newspaper of anti-Palestinian one-truth advertisements from a group external to the University followed several months later by an intentionally provocative anti-Semitic letter from a person in Seattle. The situation seemed grim as Israel's Independence Day approached and students on each "side" planned for celebrations and protests on the Quadrangle. In the face of potential confrontation we turned to student leaders, relying in particular on two women, one Jewish and the other Muslim, who had engaged in student-run intergroup dialogues before.

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Within three weeks, these two students gathered 50 students from diverse backgrounds to create, in their words, a cultural symposium on Israel/Palestine for the first evening of Independence Day. They worked feverously, developing a network of personal relationships in the process, to create a richly woven tapestry of displays, performances, prayer offerings, songs, readings, and so forth, gathering these "normally" very hostile groups together for a long evening of "*Common Ground in the Holy Land*." Not only did this calm the tide of potential conflict the next day on the Quad, but even more significantly it set a standard for intercultural dialogue unprecedented for these student advocates and "adversaries." The impact was extraordinary, and it continues to be felt in the diminution of hate speech on campus, the flourishing of more intercultural dialogues, and the emergence of student leaders ready to talk across traditional divides.

As the two designers of "*Common Ground*" now reflect on their efforts, they write with great poignancy of the ways in which the artistic expressions that evening, the readings, the music, and the poetry, served to "re-humanize and de-politicize" the peoples and ideas at the heart of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Surely, it will take many more such evenings of cultural expression and sharing to defuse these deep tensions thoroughly, but if anything can sustain this "moving together," it is the art that sprang up that evening.

The experience of common ground is at the core of the cultural work of artists, students, and the place where differences intersect. Art allows its presenters and audiences alike to step away from norms and ideologies and passions that can be isolating and stultifying; to suspend judgments of each other for a few moments, to express social tensions in a safe way. As art unfolds, participants, whether on campus, in the community, or in both places, live together for a moment in a land of intellectual and social playfulness – serious, not giddy – but playful in its message that things can be different. That experience is also what defines education at its best and most hopeful.

Parts of this article, delivered as a speech at the Imagining America Conference, have been reproduced in other venues, including Liberal Education, Vol. 90, No. 2, Spring 2004, and the 2003 Charles Fowler Colloquium at the University of Maryland, College Park, on October 21, 2003.

¹Nancy Cantor and Steven Schomberg, "Poised Between 2 Worlds: The University as Monastery and Marketplace," *EDUCAUSE review*, Vol. 38, No. 2, March/April 2003.

²National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, March 1, 1968, p.1.

³*Grutter v Bollinger*, No. 02-214, Supreme Court, June 23, 2003.

⁴<http://www.ogdenmuseum.org/exhibitions/exhibition-visualizing-blues.html>

⁵Deborah Willis Kennedy, "Coda: Imaging the Blues," in *Visualizing the Blues: Images of the American South catalog*, ed. Wendy McDoris, Memphis: The Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 2000.

⁶<http://www.vceducation.org/peace/schools/ukraine208.html>

⁷<http://www.vceducation.org/peace/schools/varnabulgaria.html>

⁸<http://www.mith2.umd.edu/nth/>

⁹<http://www.uiuc.edu/jazz/>

¹⁰<http://www.artsofcitizenship.umich.edu/about/program.html>

Response to Nancy Cantor's Keynote Address

Kristina Valaitis

Kristina A. Valaitis is Executive Director of the Illinois Humanities Council. She joined the IHC staff in 1979, and served successively as program officer, Director of Publications and Associate Director. She is currently on the board of the Northern Illinois University Foundation and the Chicago Metro History Education Center. She is a member of the Advisory Committee for the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Public Education. She has served on the board of the Illinois Center for the Book, the Illinois Heritage Tourism Advisory Board, the advisory board for READ ILLINOIS, the literature panel for the Illinois Arts Council, and the Institutional Actions Committee of the North Central Association. Ms. Valaitis has authored essays and reviews on contemporary writers, liberal learning, and the public humanities. Illinois: A Photographic Portrait of the Prairie State for which she wrote the accompanying essays, is now in its second printing. She has taught literature and humanities courses at Arizona State University where she was an assistant professor. Ms. Valaitis earned her bachelor's degree with highest honors, and her MA, and Ph.D. in English literature from Northern Illinois University. She was a Graduate Fellow in English literature at University College, Oxford, England.

It is very difficult to give any response except *hurrah!* to such a humane understanding of the value of education and the stance of the university: "to be poised between two worlds, the world of the monastery with its dedication to a higher purpose, and the marketplace, with the multitude of pressing concerns of everyday life." I would be proud to be a part of the university you envision. I applaud you for imagining better ways for the university to be a resource for the larger community.

This linking work that we do between university scholars and community audiences is very exciting, but it is not for the faint of heart nor for those with short attention spans.

From my work with the Illinois Humanities Council, I know that this is easier said than done. The IHC is an educational organization that seeks to make the humanities a part of the lives of individuals as well as communities. The IHC accomplishes its work through a variety of means. We award grants to other nonprofit organizations that are doing this work. We partner with organizations to sponsor programs ourselves. In all that we do, we link scholars in the humanities and members of the general public in what has been called lifelong learning. It is voluntary, informal learning. We believe that the community is stronger because of the humanities.

This linking work that we do between university scholars and community audiences, among civic, educational, and cultural organizations, both private and public, is very exciting, but it is not for the faint of heart nor for those with short attention spans. A long view of history and an optimistic view of human nature are helpful, as well as a large dollop of humility.

One of the best exercises in humility that I have found in my work is to ask "Who would miss the Illinois Humanities Council?" We have had to brave the answer to this question when our federal funding had been threatened. And I am pleased to note that the people who would miss the IHC were willing to write letters, talk to their legislators, and even to dig deeper into their own pockets.

The IHC has this support, in large measure, because we have been doing work *with, for* and *because* of the communities of Illinois for almost 30 years. Also, we have learned how to be advocates at the state and the federal level through the examples of our sister humanities councils and the fine work of Alene Valkanas at the Illinois Arts Alliance.

While I'd like to think that having only 8 state cents per capita to implement our statewide mission is the problem, I know our challenges cannot be met by money

Who would miss the university I am calling the State University of Arcadia?

alone. We have been trying to listen to people in communities, to let them help us identify how we can be a resource to them, and to find the best role to play in our state. More often than not the IHC's role is that of a learner rather than teacher. We need to be better at this.

As someone who loved school and kept staying in school and getting more degrees than were probably necessary, I have to say it, even though it is heresy. **Who would miss the university I am calling the State University of Arcadia?** The State University of Arcadia is sited in a small city, Calypso. It is a research university, with professional schools; and the state of Arcadia and a variety of federal and private sources support it. It is one of the best universities in the nation.

Of course those of us who believe in the idea of a university made concrete in the Chancellor's speech know that if one university closes we are all diminished, especially those of us who read John Donne at an early age.

But let's get more particular. Who would miss the State University of Arcadia (SUA)?

Certainly, SUA would be missed by **those who keep the physical plant going** – who maintain the grounds, change the light bulbs, staff the many offices and departments of the university. Could they find other jobs? Perhaps, but they might have to move.

Faculty and administrators would also miss the university, but they are more mobile, a part of the academic community that is not necessarily place-bound. Some faculty members, for example, given their fields of study, are already working partially in other sectors – those in the professions, in performing or visual arts, in the sciences. Others might find it more difficult to find work in their fields.

Their families, of course, might tell a different story. Children in school, spouses involved in community

activities or perhaps working off-campus—all of them live in the university community, but have deep roots in Calypso itself.

What about students? Some who lived nearby or in-state would miss the University, but others might just have one less school to choose from. Graduate students might have to follow their advisors to another school.

What about alumni? Can they shift their allegiance to another university they have attended? What about businesses in Calypso? Some that were tied to student life would no doubt suffer first, but others might, too. Depending on the economics of the state of Arcadia, the University might not be the sole economic engine.

What about corporations? Corporations benefit from the creativity of Arcadia. Can they continue to support the research laboratories alone? Will the quality of the workforce in the state of Arcadia suffer if the university shuts its doors?

And who will miss all that a university brings to the life of Arcadia in general and Calypso in particular – **the life of the mind, the voice that knowledge gives us in the polis, the informed citizen that democracy demands?**

What on-going community projects will founder because the University is gone; what civic, educational, or cultural organization will be weakened if the university is gone? Who will know that the internationally-known expert on Troy, on stem cells, on the tribes of the Sepik, on virtual reality is no longer living in Calypso? Well, I think you get my picture. Ironically, it is easier to imagine the loss of the University as an economic engine than as an intellectual resource in the community in which it is located, the state or region from which it draws adherents, or the nation and world in which it has influence.

Why might this be so?

In part, because this is just an exercise and my imagination may be anemic. **In large part, however, it is because the COMMUNITY at large does not**

The community at large does not necessarily believe that universities do want to face outward.

necessarily believe that universities do want to face outward. Moreover, if a university is about culture-changing work, some communities might actually fear it.

I think of the failures of urban renewal in which some universities throughout the country have played a part. I think, too, of one neighborhood arts organization in Chicago whose work has been the subject of a few university researchers. The director of this organization has said, in essence, "It takes a lot of time, but we are happy to talk to them. But do they ever leave us with anything, even a copy of their report?"

Chancellor Cantor's examples of ways in which U of I and other universities have engaged the public through the arts and humanities are inspiring. I assume that every university represented here can come up with equally wonderful examples. I have a few myself, some favorites.

However, I suspect that many, if not most of these, are the result of the work and persuasive powers of a few scholars and artists at the university who have a personal commitment to the role of the humanities in community life, not necessarily because these activities are valued by the university.

That is why Chancellor Cantor's speech is so important. She is setting the bar high for universities. She is absolutely right that the arts and the humanities are critical to having the community see the university as a public good; in her words "when universities turn their campuses into communities of practice in the arts, barriers between campus groups and our neighbors dissolve." She looks to the arts and humanities to help create a richer civic life, a safe public square, where we can explore difference, sustain connections, and have our voices heard.

This goal has to work within the *theory* of the university itself as well as in the *practice* of individual scholars and administrators. Are the values expressed in the stories of the university and community organizations working together a part of the theory of what a university should be today? Are these activities valued within the university? Are the values they embody shot through all the other practices, evaluations, and procedures of the university?

Do they count toward tenure decisions for participating faculty, really count?

There is still a wall around the university. Perhaps it is a friendly confine, ivy covered, perhaps with bougainvillea. Perhaps something like a wall may be necessary if the university is to be a cloister for the community, too, a safe space in which we can freely express diversity of opinion and find intellectual common ground. It certainly seems to me that a university is a great place to think about whether such walls are necessary at all, since we don't have to worry about sheep grazing on Arcadia's campus.

If walls, fences, or French windows are unnecessary dividers, it takes people on both sides to break them down. There has been a good start. If we look a little bit beyond the friendly confines of Arcadia, we will see that many arts and humanities organizations, like the state humanities councils, have been working for years, in concert with individual scholars and artists at the university, to create a more vibrant civic life. We cannot do our work without them.

We sadly note, however, that these ambassadors for the university and for the life of the mind are rewarded infrequently and in the worst cases may be penalized within the university for their efforts.

The University needs to take the lead here.

Work that bridges the academy and the community should count toward tenure and promotion. Create a new category. Make it a four-legged stool.

I think you can tell that I have been provoked to thought by this address; so much so that **I have been emboldened to move from reflection and response to suggestions for action.** I do this with humility because I know many people in this room represent institutions that have developed many imaginative ways to improve campus/community relationships; and I would like to know more about them. Some of you will have much to teach others of us who are not so far along.

I make a few suggestions, however, because I care about universities. I believe in pure research, great teaching, and the value of education in civic life; I spend a good part of my professional life defending the importance of the values of the university. But I need some help.

- If a university truly values the intellectual exchange between campus and community, it will reward its ambassadors for their work. Community service should not just mean service to the university community – sitting on committees, and the like. Work that bridges the academy and the community should count toward tenure and promotion. Create a new category. Make it a four-legged stool.
- If a university truly values the arts and humanities in and of themselves and for the way in which they enhance the university as a public good, then support for these fields should be expressed in the allocation of resources as a whole and in funds raised. A few named professorships and/or a new arts center are not enough.
- If a university's role is to mediate between the worlds of the monastery and the marketplace, it shouldn't be the wall. It should work more closely and form alliances with other kinds of mediating organizations, perhaps even take a leadership role in convening them and sharing resources. Someday, I would like a state humanities council or a similar organization to be in on the ground floor when a humanities center is created on campus – not just afterwards, being asked to help support a lecture series.

I would like a state humanities council or a similar organization to be in on the ground floor when a humanities center is created on campus.

- Find imaginative ways to instill in faculty and students the importance of sharing expertise in community settings. Make a note to ask anyone who is talking about their research "How will this benefit the public?" It always will if one thinks about it enough. A book will be read or donated to the library, for example. It is the thinking about it that is important.

I could go on, but this is my favorite.

- Have every faculty member develop at least one presentation for the general public and give it at least once at a library, for an alumni meeting, or for trustees.

If the State University of Arcadia had implemented even one of these suggestions, I don't think anyone would ever think of closing it. There would be a groundswell in its defense throughout the community, whose web of associations and influence, of course, reach far wider than that of the university community alone.

Kristina A. Valaitis
Executive Director
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Transforming America: The University as Public Good was the keynote address for **Imagining America's** third national conference. The conference, held in November 2003 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, gathered scholars, culture-workers, and community members to explore the theme, "Affirming Action: The New Politics of Cultural Knowledge." Nancy Cantor delivered this address while Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is now the Chancellor and President of Syracuse University.

Also included here is a response to Chancellor Cantor's address given by Kristina Valaitis, Executive Director of the Illinois Humanities Council. In addition to her work with the Illinois Humanities Council, Ms. Valaitis has published essays and reviews on contemporary writers, liberal learning, and the public humanities.

Also Available:

Democratic Vistas for the Humanities, by Richard Franke, founder of the Chicago Humanities Festival (Foreseeable Futures #1).

Harlem: Parable of Promise or Peril, by Mary Schmidt Campbell, Dean, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University (Foreseeable Futures #2).

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