



2011 John Tyler Caldwell Lecture in the Humanities
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Oct. 21, 2011
Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University
Durham, NC

Eudora Welty's 1944 essay "Some Notes on River Country" begins with this memorable line: "A place that ever was lived in is like a fire that never goes out." Some years back, I went to see the country she describes. This is the stretch of land west of Jackson, Mississippi, and north of Natchez whose settlements are at once weirdly abandoned yet also weirdly preserved. Its chief sites are Windsor, a mansion near Port Gibson whose pomp survives only in an intact set of Corinthian columns; Grand Gulf, a thriving international cotton port until the Mississippi washed the town away; and Rodney's Landing, a river town successful enough to have built a series of exquisitely ornamented churches in the 1840s, until the river changed course and left it high and dry.

These are enchanting places, but the average visitor would draw their lesson very differently from Welty. For these are icons of desolation, images of the utter transience of this world's glory. Windsor, once a great house, survives exclusively as a ruin. Grand Gulf, once a boom town, was wiped from the face of the earth, leaving only the overgrown graves of forgotten entrepreneurs. Rodney's Landing's churches still stand, but wholly disconnected from the people who built and used them. Those people have vanished -- and lest anyone miss the lesson of the extinction of the human, this town is approached through mile after mile covered exclusively with vines.

So how could she say, "A place that ever was lived in is like a fire that never goes out?" If one thing is true of these places, it's that their life did go out. And yet, and yet: Welty felt their distant force when she visited, and I experienced the connection when I went decades later. So how was this? Welty's reply is that the spark of "original ignition," having been once struck, lives on: "Sometimes it gives out glory, sometimes its little light must be sought out to be seen, small and tender as a candle flame, but as certain." But in truth, these places did not simply stay in life: they were brought back to life by the mind of a latter-day observer, re-animated by her powers of perception, sympathy and imagination.

I am here to speak in praise of the humanities, and I begin with my Welty tale to remind us what the humanities are. The humanities aren't just the subjects listed in college course catalogs -- literature, philosophy, history, music and the other arts -- though those are certainly included. The humanities are a name for the process by which all the things humans have made, said, thought and done come back to spark the understandings of other humans across time.

Two facts make this transaction possible. The first is that humans make things, express themselves through the materials that surround them, and that these wrought things -- a tool, a house, a picture or song, an expressed idea -- live on when their fashioners have departed. Faulkner said that the work of art is "the artist's way of scribbling 'Kilroy was here' on the walls of the final and irrevocable oblivion through which he must someday pass." But it isn't only art objects that have this trick of persistence. The idea of representative government was envisioned, once upon a time, by people who have long since left the scene. In Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun, the most everyday mark made by the homeliest figures -- the name a country wife carved in a window pane -- announces the fact of her human being: "Listen, stranger; this was myself; this was I."

Second, as we make things that outlive their makers, another of our innate capacities is that we go out in spirit toward the works of others. Humans have the peculiar ability -- and, judging by the amount of time we spend reading, watching videos, and listening to music, arguably even a fundamental need -- to exit the confines of our own experience and to take up mental residence in spaces created by others. Put these two together and you get the difference the humanities make. This gift for going out of ourselves and entering into things is what gives fresh being to creations whose origins are distant in space and time. As we "get into" it, the book or song composed by another comes to life again as our experience. As Welty trains her gaze on Windsor or Rodney, she feels the obscure life of which these are the remains.

When we live outside ourselves with sufficient intensity of feeling, we in turn have a chance to be changed. This is the way we annex understandings that have been struggled toward by others that we would never have reached on our own. This is how we get to see the world differently from the way our own minds or culture habitually present it, and recognize that our customary outlook is not the only point of view. This is how we learn that there is more to human history than the present, and that our present is itself a moment in time. This is how we begin to understand the other customs, beliefs, and values men and women live by in other countries (or indeed within our own country), and to imagine how differences can be accommodated for a common good.

Understood this way, the humanities are not a specialized taste but the root of the most basic human and civic competencies. If we lacked these gifts, we would be condemned to the harshest of poverties, dependence on our own unaided selves. Collectively, we would have little idea where we came from or where we could be going. So it matters how this impulse is fed.

I spoke of the humanities as the interplay of human making and human receiving. But a third thing is needed for the reaction to work: some mediating or connecting force, something to bring the past to the present's attention. Welty was brought to her River Country partly by her work as photographer for the Works Progress Administration, the Depression-era agency that commissioned photographers to record the life of regions. I was brought there through the medium of Welty's essay and photographs: in a million years, I would never have happened onto these places on my own.

Since this is so, when we think about the health of the humanities, we need to think of the agencies that carry the human legacy across to its new receivers, and that teach the forms of attention that bring distant things to life.

I'm not a native North Carolinian (had you guessed?), but since moving here I've learned a fair bit about the lives that have been lived in this state, so I have my own thank-you list of institutions that taught me. It was in the brand-new Nasher Museum that I got to see the films H. Lee Waters made in small Piedmont towns in the 1930s and 40s, when he would first catch everyday people in everyday activities, then circle back and allow the town to become the movie audience for their own daily selves. It was at the new History Center at New Bern that I got to see the tools of timber workers from the naval stores industry and oyster harvesters from the Sound, and to hear letters in faint and fading hands voiced into compelling life.

Sorry I started it: this list is far too long to complete. The agencies involved in this broad work of education include elementary and high schools, colleges, universities, and community colleges, museums, libraries, and concert venues, and all manner of formal and informal community activities,

from book clubs on up. Keeping these all strong is essential to our civic well-being. Tonight's host, the North Carolina Humanities Council, helps North Carolinians by the thousands learn the Many Stories that, entered into with delight and added to our store of knowledge, can make us One People, as your tagline says.

But with every gratitude to this rich array of teachers, my first North Carolina immersion came through my own research. So I hope you'll allow me to share the story of how I began going to Carolina in my mind, long before I ever imagined living here.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt was the major African American writer of the post-Civil War generation. Like many writers in his tradition, he was unread and virtually unheard of at the time of my graduate training. He began to be noticed in the 1980s, at which time I read his volume of tales *The Conjure Woman*, loved it, and began to teach it. From there it was an easy step to giving a paper on Chesnutt at a scholarly conference, in which I mentioned drafts of an early Chesnutt novel named *Rena Walden*. After the talk, a stranger in the audience, Reynolds Smith, longtime humanities editor at Duke University Press, came up to ask if I would be interested in doing an edition of this manuscript. Perhaps so, I said, and filed the thought away.

Some months later, I had the idea of going to inspect this manuscript, which like all Chesnutt's papers had been deposited in the Special Collections of the Fisk University Library. Five minutes after arriving, it was clear that there was no such edition to be made. But since I had two days in Nashville before my return flight, I opened some other boxes in the archive, and started into the journals Chesnutt kept in his late teens and twenties, between 1874 and 1882.

This was one of those uncanny moments when the past's fire reignites. Here I was, reading the penmanship of a young man who had written these words one hundred and twenty-five years before, in a moment that must have felt as present and alive to him as my present moment was to me. I was hearing confided hopes, fears and ambitions he had perhaps only ever shared with his diary, with no thought that they would ever be read by others.

After that, off and on for the space of a year, I kept company with Chesnutt, transcribing the journal and trying to grasp the milieu it arose from. This took me mentally to Fayetteville and what to me were a series of revelations. I knew in some abstract way that North Carolina had an unusually large free black population before emancipation: John Hope Franklin, later to be my colleague, had written a book on this subject. Well, here was such a person in his living actuality: a black man from a slave state, neither of whose parents had been slaves. From Booker T. Washington I knew of the ardent desire of blacks during Reconstruction to reclaim the education that had been denied them before. But I would not have guessed that, when free blacks including Chesnutt's father contributed the money to found the Howard School, the consequence was that Fayetteville had a grade school for African-American children before it had one for white. History is particular and thus full of surprises.

Charles Chesnutt was the prize pupil of this newly founded school. Astonishingly precocious, he became the head of school at the age of twenty-two, when it was designated to be one of North Carolina's first two state-supported teacher training institutions, the State Colored Normal School. (The other, white school was the education school at UNC.) Chesnutt's journal supplies access to the thoughts and feelings of a gifted young black person living with the new opportunities and old restrictions this time and place provided. Let's tune in to a moment in this vanished yet visitable past.

July 1874. "While Mister Harris was packing up to-day for his Northern trip, I came upon his journal, one which he kept several years ago, and obtaining his permission, I have read a part of it. In fact nearly all. After reading it, I have concluded to write a journal too." From this first entry, we know that diary-writing was a learned behavior for Chesnutt, a tribute of imitation paid to an admired teacher, and an index to how deeply Chesnutt identified with the new world of teachers, learning, and black educational opportunity.

Summer 1875. Chesnutt hunts for summer teaching jobs in the hinterland between Charlotte and Statesville. It's clear at once how the milieu that supports his aspirations gives him a jaundiced view of other, less privileged lives: "I inquired the way to Jonesville church, and by dint of stopping and inquiring at every house, and by climbing fences and crossing cotton fields, I arrived at Jonesville. Where the 'ville' was I am not able to say, for there was but one house within nearly half a mile of the 'church.' The church itself was a very dilapidated log structure, without a window; but there was no need of one, for the cracks between the logs furnished a plentiful supply."

On this scouting visit, Chesnutt found dinner and a bed with a local family, and his journal lets us tune in to a remarkable dialogue. "After supper we had a talk concerning schools, schoolteachers and preachers. The old man said that 'you teachers and preachers are too hard on us. You want us to pay you thirty or forty dollars a month for sitting in the shade, and that is as much as we can make in 2 or 3 months'." It took me awhile to learn that, having obtained a first-class teaching license (itself a fairly new bureaucratic invention for both white and black educators), Chesnutt was entitled to earn forty dollars a month as a teacher at age seventeen -- a stupefying sum to the agricultural laborer he is speaking with. (Chesnutt was neither the first nor the last teacher whose work was not thought to be work at all by those doing manual labor.)

Secure in the superiority of certified skills, Chesnutt looks scornfully on this lame reply. But by chiding the older man for his cheapness, Chesnutt provokes a fuller articulation of where this man is coming from. "Well, but we haven't got any chance. We all of us work on other people's, white people's, land, and sometimes get cheated out of all we make; we can't get the money." "I'm not too cheap to pay, the man rejoins. I am a tenant farmer, I live in another new post-emancipation status, legally freed yet economically still dependent. So my income is not under my control."

As he gains a deepened sense of the social position of the person he is speaking with, Chesnutt becomes able to fashion a far more effective retort. "Well, you certainly make something?" "Yes." "Now, I'll tell you. You say you are all renters, and get cheated out of your labor, why don't you send your children to school, and qualify them to look out for themselves, to own property, to figure and think about what they are doing, so that they may do better than you?" To paraphrase: Education isn't an expensive scam, it's an investment. The less you think you can afford it, the more you actually need it. Put your money into your kids' education and they'll know how to control their social destinies.

Through this moment in Chesnutt's diaries, we catch people in the act of arguing out the costs and values of education in rural North Carolina ten years after the Civil War, at a time when both were new realities. The argument between educators and the public that pays them is a never-ending dialogue. But it helps to be reminded that funding arguments in our day come out of a long history; that people's views on such issues are always embedded in the circumstances of their social lives; and that we argue more effectively when we become better able to enter into another's other point of view.

With the slightest encouragement, I would go on all night on my work with the Chesnutt diary. But to ensure that David Price can go home with his the medal he deserves, I will draw to a close. You have heard my argument. The humanities aren't a luxury good to be enjoyed by those with high discretionary incomes and long pedigrees in school. They're a fundamental need of our humanity. They enrich us as persons and enable our life with others. When access to them weakens, we pay a major cost.

Now as ever, the humanities need supporters, but we need to think how best to advance the case. In my experience, humanistic advocacy tends to take one of two general forms. On the one hand, devotees repeat mantras that resonate with those who have already undergone humanistic conversion but draw blank stares from the uninitiated. ("Only the humanities raise issues of life's meaning." If you don't already know, what exactly does that mean? "The humanities promote critical thinking." Now there's an unself-critical thought!) On the other hand, aware that this sales pitch is falling flat, we reach for arguments thought to be sure-fire winners with the unhumanistic public, though we know they don't do justice to the cause—"the arts are great because they are essential to economic development (they are, but that's not why they're great); or, if we aren't trained in foreign languages and cultures, we won't be able to decode intelligence from terrorists (ditto).

What we need, before we ask others for investments, is to challenge ourselves to say what the humanities are good for, as simply and truly as we can manage, with examples that prove the point. It's not the easiest of tasks, but it's worth our hard thinking. The life you save may be your own.