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**Report to the Council¹
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Welcome, everyone, to the 2020 Annual Meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies.

First, I want to thank you for joining us. Especially now, in the midst of closing out the academic year in a pandemic, we prize your gift of time. The work you do in your roles as scholars, teachers, mentors, administrators, society directors, board members, and staff—or some mixture of these—is crucial to fulfilling our collective mission.

I also thank our chair, Bill Kirby, and all his colleagues on the ACLS board, for giving me the opportunity to serve humanistic studies in this post. Who could have predicted one year ago this week, as I prepared to talk at this meeting with my wonderful predecessor, Pauline Yu, that I would be speaking with you today from my living room on the Lower East Side? Let me say now how grateful I am to Pauline and Steve Wheatley for their constant support and advice.

When Pauline and I spoke before this group last spring, she invited me to talk about who and what was on my mind as I prepared to move to ACLS. My answer was great faculty and institutions working with limited resources; the societies, distinctively valuable as one of the only ways scholars connect across schools; the challenge of serving both scholars engaged in public-facing research and curiosity-driven scholars working on topics without immediate public relevance; and the importance of listening to, and working with, the next generation and diverse voices who have not historically had the place they deserve at the planning table: graduate students, scholars of color, first-generation scholars, and faculty on the front lines of teaching most of the nation’s college students.

I was eager to join ACLS because along with the work of supporting scholars and sustaining the societies, the Council has a long-standing role in fostering collaborative action for

¹ 1 A video of President Connolly’s report is available in the media collection on the ACLS website, www.acls.org.

positive change in the academy. Throughout its history, we have encouraged academics to respond actively to social conflict and community needs. One of the first questions the Council entertained in the 1920s—alas, without making much progress—was the development of a single international language. Much more successful was the Council’s work on area studies, including Asian and Latin American studies and what we now call African American studies—all of which were on the agenda in the 1930s and 1940s. Cultivating strong relationships between college professors and secondary school teachers was a significant issue for the Council in the wake of the GI Bill and again under Stan Katz’s presidency in the 1990s.

Given all the talk out there about the future of work, ACLS seems to me ideally placed to envision the future of *scholarly* work. Anchoring that as-yet uncharted future is work that successfully captures the interest of the next generation of students and the curious public. This work will appear in proliferating forms and styles; it will be collaborative and accessible. It will be produced in an ever-growing number of spaces, both inside and outside colleges and universities, as the academy defines itself more broadly and inclusively: in continuing education ventures and public libraries, in art collectives and experimental humanities labs, in museums and courses of study mounted totally online.

Right now, thanks to COVID-19, everything feels different, but my thinking from a year ago remains much the same. Since last July, I’ve been grateful to work with colleagues at ACLS and beyond who have joined in planning what I think of as our “humanistic action”: action on behalf of humanistic scholars and scholarship that is itself humanistic in design and implementation. Humanistic action is based in a commitment to clear reasoning, justice, self-awareness, a sense of obligation to others, to seeing matters in a dialogical and historically informed way, and from different standpoints.

To ensure a humanistic approach to planning the start of our second century, our first priority was to learn from as many different constituencies as possible. We pursued two tracks: research and dialogue. We did a lot of reading in the ACLS archives, and we did a lot of listening and talking.

Thanks to the generosity of the Mellon Foundation, ACLS hosted three Second Century Conversation groups this winter, bringing together faculty and administrators with a reputation for fresh thinking about higher education. John D’Arms, president of ACLS from 1997 to 2002, convened similar planning conversations. From what I’ve read of his notes, both of us benefited from the company of interlocutors who were provocative and inspiring.

ACLS also held Centennial Conversations across the country with faculty, students, and administrators in large and small groups, which spurred many useful follow-up exchanges. I made visits or calls with all our Consortium representatives and deans, and drew heavily on the friendly generosity of people at a range of schools. Time doesn’t permit me to review all those meetings, so I will only mention the unforgettable weeklong road trip I took with new ACLS Chief of Staff Kelly Buttermore to visit the University of West Alabama and Central Arkansas

University, where we learned from and were moved by students and faculty alike, and built relationships we trust will last for years to come.

We asked everyone we talked to for insight on three questions: 1.) For the past 20 years, ACLS has concentrated on individual research fellowships. What other projects and programs would you be interested in having us support? 2.) What are the most promising directions in humanistic research, and what is the special role of PhD programs in advancing these new directions? 3.) Given that ACLS has a distinguished history of advocacy, what are the issues you believe would benefit from our intervention now, and why do you believe that ACLS is the right vehicle for this work?

Out of the answers came our verbs of humanistic action you see in our strategic plan, the Venn diagram of what our interlocutors told us was needed and what they believed we could do; *We support, connect, amplify, and renew.*

We support, above all, scholars and scholarship. This is a very generous mandate, but in a world where excellence is distributed widely but resources are ever more constrained, our strategic plan upholds the principle that whenever possible, our grant making should advance structural change for the good in the academy.

At a time of widespread need, our fellowships and grants will help support those scholars the academy of the future needs most. We are working right now to develop a program of support for new and recent PhDs who have navigated a punishing academic job market since 2008 and who must now face the exacerbating consequences of COVID-19. This program will seek to sustain those most vulnerable to external shocks: lecturers, adjuncts, and visiting assistant professors; scholars of color, still too few in every field; and junior faculty who have had to turn on a dime to teach online while trying to finish projects on the tenure clock.

I venture to bet that everyone in this meeting knows or knows of brilliant scholars whose teaching and service obligations prevent them from applying for yearlong fellowships. We are also devising flexible grants to support outstanding research-active faculty who teach in what I think of as the backbone of this country's system of higher education: for example, regional comprehensive institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and tribal colleges. We will keep up constant dialogue with colleagues around the country so that we craft programs that meet needs on the ground. Turning our attention to these groups, we think, is not just the right thing to do; institutions and humanistic fields of study will benefit in countless ways.

Many people we spoke with over the past year expressed the hope that our recognition of the traditional measures of scholarly accomplishment and promotion that were developed over a century ago—the book and the article—will expand to include other modes of knowledge circulation that draw on technology and the changing habits of learners in the twenty-first century. As a trusted arbiter of scholarly excellence, ACLS has the duty to work with our peer

reviewers to spotlight scholars who find ingenious ways to spark the interest of students and the public. The natural diversity of scholarly curiosity and styles makes it impossible, of course, to hold up any single ideal, but Hannah Arendt gets at the essence, in my view, when she praises the capacities of the “enlarged mentality,” saying: “To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting.” We will promote an inclusive definition of what counts as scholarly production, seeking scholars who are imaginative and adventurous, who “go visiting” to diverse communities, in different media, and through new forms of communication of scholarly knowledge.

Our second humanistic action: We connect people. This is no mean job, especially given the datum I think about each night as I go to sleep and which greets me every morning: there are nearly 3,000 four-year institutions of higher education in the United States alone, and more than 1,500 community colleges. Academia in this country exists in a state of competitive fragmentation. In good times it is a huge and gloriously chaotic Rube Goldberg machine of learning and study, with many pathways in and countless projects ticking away in various stages of construction. In times of emergency like this one, the machine’s pieces tend to find themselves in a state of friction, banging against one another, competing for tuition dollars and rankings.

As a result, we see our gatherings as alliance-building forces: important opportunities to tackle long-standing problems in the academy—together—thereby strengthening the infrastructure in which humanistic scholarship can thrive. Thanks to a new grant from the Mellon Foundation, over three years we will convene Summer Institutes made up of three groups that don’t naturally gather in the regular scheme of academic operations: representatives of the learned societies; administrators and faculty leaders; and to my mind the most important group—students and scholars from underrepresented minorities, emerging activist scholars, members of the next generation with ideas about the future. Together we will discuss how to make real our common vision of a just, equitable academy.

In the near future we plan to convene at least two more groups. One will gather librarians and scholars and university leaders to work up best practices for sustaining digital resources. Another will invite academics together with nonacademics and funders to do an exercise in design thinking. What do we want the academy of the future—and humanistic studies—to look like? Imagine PhD programs in the humanities did not exist. How would we design them from the ground up? We see doctoral reform as the linchpin of change, since it is in this stage of the career that future habits and values are formed.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer famously points out in *Truth and Method* that “every conversation creates a common language.... To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but of being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.”

Recent years have seen leading scholars start venturesome conversations outside the academy, in prisons, and work with veterans and high schools, and collaborative community-based research. Our Luce/ACLS Fellowships in Religion, Journalism, and International Affairs sustain this effort by assisting scholars' crossover writing for broad public audiences. Our Mellon-funded Scholars & Society program places faculty for a year in nonprofit organizations, many of them devoted to social progress and reform. And our Mellon/ACLS Public Fellows program supports new PhDs seeking to bring humanistic values and skills to work outside the academy long-term.

Like the dialogues Gadamer describes, these encounters are transformative for the scholars themselves, who emerge from their work outside the academy with new perspectives and, often, new research questions.

We believe passionately in the value humanists bring to public space and public discourse. Our third humanistic action at ACLS is to amplify humanistic work in the public eye. To carry this forward we will use some familiar methods like public seminars or events, but we believe there is even more long-term value in nurturing scholars whose thinking is already amplified—or enlarged, as Hannah Arendt would say—by their attunement to public interests, curiosities, and needs. At the same time, we must ensure that the reward system of academia fully recognizes and celebrates their accomplishments.

As I look at the decline of undergraduate majors in the humanities and humanistic social sciences around the country, now a yearslong trend, I see publicly engaged scholars' transformative engagement with the world outside the academy as a powerful key to making humanistic studies more visible on campus and attracting larger numbers of students. We will seek ways to help scholars—whether they are art historians or philosophers or classicists—treat the walls of the academy as *permeable* barriers, on the model of Hannah Arendt and W.E. B. Du Bois. We will do this not by compelling scholars to limit their research questions to public or present issues but by encouraging them to tackle big questions, to articulate clearly the value of the knowledge they seek, and to make it a priority to reclaim their due place in public discourse by finding fellow travelers in the vast human crowd outside campus. One hour spent on the internet shows that the curiosities of humanity are wonderfully sprawling and diverse.

Current conditions may nudge scholars faster down this path. In the wake of COVID-19, college instructors all over the country have had no choice but to experiment with new ways of communicating with their students and colleagues. We find ourselves exploring a universe online that brings new opportunities to find and share texts and artifacts, to get to know students and colleagues in their living rooms, to become adept in visual media, to see just how many sources of bad and good information exist out there. From the conversations I've had recently, when this immediate crisis is over, young scholars in particular will not view the circulation of scholarly knowledge or their role as teachers in quite the same way as before. It's our job to listen to them and to figure out the new shape of scholarly work that is to come.

Finally, we seek to renew. We aim to reinvigorate ourselves and you: our partners in the learned societies and colleges and universities.

This spring is a historically unprecedented time of illness and hope, mourning and relief, that is prompting many people to ask what kind of world we want on the other side of the pandemic. We have a chance to ask what we love most, what we most want to preserve, what obstacles we see to the academy we want.

I start from my belief that scholarship itself is a profound act of human love. Not love of wisdom in the abstract sense, or at least not only that. When a scholar directs attention to a poet who died 2,000 years ago, or to a painting made on the other side of the world, or to the economic structure of a society long gone or far away or next door right now, that scholar may be doing archival or critical or interpretive work, but he or she is also doing the human work of remembrance, which is the work of love.

Love of humanity anchors the core humanistic action of scholarship: the effort to preserve and understand the marvelous particularity and plurality of humans and the things and ideas we create.

I must move to a close, and I am happy to take questions for a few minutes. I will end by assuring you that most of our daily work is not conducted in such grand and earnest language. But as we prepare to dive into the everyday practices of board election and budget approval and my reminding you to familiarize yourself with our new strategic plan, which guides this report to you, it's worth remembering the truly grand purpose that drives our community. Thank you again for your attention.

In closing, I want to share with you the words of a marvelous poet who also taught at the City College of the City University of New York: Adrienne Rich. Her great poem "A Mark of Resistance"² captures for me our commitment to hard work and our confidence:

Stone by stone I pile
this cairn of my intention
with the noon's weight on my back,
exposed and vulnerable
across the slanting fields
which I love but I cannot save
from floods that are to come;
can only fasten down
with this work of my hands,
these painfully assembled

² Rich, Adrienne. "A Mark of Resistance" *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=27403>.

stones, in the shape of nothing
that has ever existed before.
A pile of stones: an assertion
That this piece of country matters
For large and simple reasons.
A mark of resistance, a sign.

Thank you, everyone.