

THEME: DECENTRALIZING THE HISTORY OF THE HUMANITIES

Introduction

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In 2019, the eighth conference in the Making of the Humanities series was held for the first time in a venue located in that part of the world sometimes referred to as the Global South.¹ By meeting in South Africa, the assembled historians of the humanities actively sought to signal that their field had been dominated by a “Western” bias for too long. There is no reason to assume that the history of the humanities is a European affair, and it is therefore crucial to investigate the world’s different humanities traditions on par with those of Europe. In an earlier issue, this journal discussed the goal of a global history of the humanities (vol. 1, no. 2, “Going Global”). In line with Rens Bod’s *New History of the Humanities*, which aims at a global and comparative approach, we strove to appeal to historians who propose alternatives to centralized narratives.² This task remains challenging.

A first challenge is the matter of *language*. Processes of canonization of key figures and texts in the humanities are steered by the availability of translations and the global academic dominance of English. A decentralized approach would pair and contrast sources across a broad range of languages as well as the knowledge traditions that have developed in these languages (calling for an overhaul of the humanistic ideal of single-authored scholarship).³ Another challenge is the history of *nonacademic* humanities,

1. The Making of the Humanities VIII, eighth annual meeting of the Society for the History of the Humanities, University of Cape Town, November 21–23, 2019.

2. Bod, *New History of the Humanities*. The aim to propose alternatives to centralized narratives has been taken up by several authors, for example, by Merolla et al.: “the humanities are still in urgent need of being decolonized and deprovincialized” (“Introduction: Colonial Humanities and Criticality,” 199); and Denecke: “we need to create more equality for other pasts—and learn from all they offer” (“Comparative Global Humanities Now,” 1).

3. See, e.g., Cardoso, “Why Have There Been No Great Portuguese-Language Art Historians?”

such as the works of scholars who had no connection to institutions of humanistic training. Examples include nonacademic historians' accounts of cities and empires, such as the *Ta'rikh al-fattash*, which recounts the rise and fall of the Songhai Empire and the city of Timbuktu.⁴ A third, related challenge is how to integrate traditional text-oriented humanistic scholarship with the history of *embodied* or *tacit knowledge* of musicians, actors, artists, and artisans who enacted, transmitted, and innovated practices in music, theater, and art—which, in many cases, means shifting our focus from the metropolis to rural workshops and to long-distance exchange via trade and migration.⁵ Finally, how should one write the history of *oral humanistic traditions*? Many oral humanistic traditions have been forgotten or even obscured, and indigenous knowledge of certain performative practices may resist writing, as the expertise is not intended for everyone's eyes and ears; yet they form an essential part of a truly decentralized history of the humanities.

In issuing the call for papers for the 2019 Making of the Humanities conference, we invited others to think along these lines, thus further widening the scope of questions for the field. What kind of history of the humanities do we get when we shift our focus away from Europe—or “provincialize” it, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's terminology?⁶ Decentralizing the history of the humanities would mean not only placing the spotlight on centers outside the West but also questioning the need to identify centers. We might rather attempt to move toward an analysis that foregrounds the exchange and circulation of knowledge. Along with centers, notions of periphery have fluctuated in history, which might make us want to ask to what extent canonical figures, texts, institutions, and traditions in the humanities actually depended on information provided by the periphery. Forced collaborators, servants, prisoners, and even enslaved people provided expertise orally or worked as informants, interpreters, and translators.⁷ Their contributions went largely unacknowledged, which continues to skew present-day histories of humanities. Moving away from one's own cultural center often resulted—and all too often still results—in the pitfalls of exoticism and Orientalism. When, and where, did the first attempts at humanistic scholarship that fruitfully compared and contrasted ideas of others originate? These questions were addressed during the conference in Cape Town. The lively exchange of ideas inspired us to announce a related call for papers for this journal,

4. Wise, *Ta'rikh al-fattash*.

5. See, e.g., Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury, eds., *Embodied Knowledge*.

6. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

7. See, e.g., Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism*; Winterbottom, *Hybrid Knowledge in the Early East India Company World*; Raj, “Beyond Postcolonialism . . . and Postpositivism”; Merolla et al., “Introduction: Colonial Humanities and Criticality.”

and the response was such that we decided to publish two special issues, of which the current themed issue is the first.⁸

This issue opens with the 2019 conference's keynote paper, by Elísio Macamo. How, he asks, are Western humanistic ideals and practices problematized by shifting the focus to Africa? How can one deploy a conceptual vocabulary developed in one place, at one particular time, under certain social, political, and economic circumstances to render a specific world unknown to the people who produced the conceptual vocabulary visible and intelligible to them? What is left, then, when we remove Africa from the stock of knowledge the humanities produce? Similar questions, with an emphasis on the study of music, come to the fore in the conference's second keynote paper, by Martin Scherzinger. Settler colonialism introduced technologies for standardizing time and pitch, but some African musical traditions offered modes of patterning that challenged these global-hegemonic organizational principles. His article suggests a local, bounded rationality that, while remaining illegible to European industrial tools, contributes to understanding the world through studying Africa. How European models of scholarship, including archaeology and art history, were forcibly applied to African contexts is likewise addressed by Vera-Simone Schulz. She explores why and how the ruined Swahili stone town of Kua (in today's Tanzania) was characterized as "the Pompeii of East Africa." The next essay, by Larissa Schulte Nordholt, addresses the political tensions that were involved in the attempt at moving away from European colonialist historiography. These were evident when the UNESCO-funded General History of Africa aimed to Africanize the writing of African history.

For an early attempt at writing a comprehensive history of the world, on the basis of European and Asian expertise, Thijs Weststeijn's essay looks back at the seventeenth century. Scholars in the Netherlands took pains to interpret textual and material sources that told a very different story from their own, especially Chinese ones, and integrated these into their historiographical accounts. These Dutchmen were willing to recognize that Adam might have been Chinese. Comparing Chinese and German philological texts written around 1800, Daniel Stumm's article points at basic similarities across different knowledge centers. He identifies considerable overlap between two great traditions in philology. In both, one finds challenges to the idea of a recoverable urtext, close examination of the layer structure of texts, and a focus on lexical analysis. The next essay, by Peng Peng, argues that a dynamic opposite to the one described by Weststeijn was visible in nineteenth-century China, where local archaeologists embraced the idea that Chinese civilization had a European or Middle Eastern origin. But in the 1920s, excavations at

8. The current issue can be seen as a continuation and expansion of "The Rise and Decline of 'Colonial Humanities,'" the forum featured in *History of Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring 2021).

Anyang revealed cultural relics from around 1200 to 1050 BCE, indebted to even older Chinese centers rather than to any Western influence, which fundamentally changed the Chinese archaeologists' view of human civilization. The same struggle to come to terms with Western scholarship on China is presented in Huaiyu Chen's article, which examines how early twentieth-century Chinese scholars encountered Buddhology as it had been developed by Europeans. Academic Orientalism fed into, and conflicted with, the new cultural nationalism of the Republican era, as well as Chinese traditional knowledge on Buddhism and India.

Finally, a different part of the world is presented by Joel Barnes. Australia generally saw itself as a fragment of Europe in the Asia-Pacific. Yet during the twentieth century, transformations in the humanities' methods and approaches have in Australia been bound up with questions of the country's settler-colonial status and proximity to Asia. Studying these programmatic and definitional shifts sheds new light on what the humanities have been and the functions they have served.

The remaining contributions will be published in volume 7 of *History of Humanities*. And with these two issues we hope at least to have opened up a debate to be continued.

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