

NOTE TO READERS: PLEASE EXCUSE THE UNORTHODOX FORMAT (IT IS THE ONE I USE FOR TALKS AND LECTURES)

MAKING YOUR WORK MATTER

THEORIES IN ACTION:
FACULTY KEYNOTE
(APRIL 26, 2012)
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- BOOK, WHEN I CLOSE YOU, I OPEN LIFE wrote the Nobel prize- winning Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda
- if we update Neruda by replacing the word “book” with “computer,” many of you probably have been thinking this same thing with some relief and maybe even joy as you conclude your senior thesis, or capstone project, or whatever piece of intellectual work has brought you to this conference – hurray, you’re closing the books and stepping out into life, into spring and the host of celebrations that lie ahead at graduation
- but Neruda, as a writer who actively supported the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, a man who was a senator in his own country, a man whose protests against the violent repression of miners’ strikes in Chile made him the target of government persecution that forced him into hiding - this man who in so many ways actively worked to make the world around him a better and more just place knew something that you all know as well, for it is the reason that has brought you together at this conference
- and that is that life and books aren’t in fact separate at all – in books we find life and life is shaped by books – much of Neruda’s poetry actually communicates his passionate engagement with issues of injustice in his own world
- in your own projects you too have proven that life and intellectual work are hardly separate – and that is what you’ll be discussing with each other later tonight and then tomorrow as you present your projects and explore their social relevance
- I want to congratulate you heartily on your work and say how honored I am to be speaking to you - because you have done something important and difficult and you have done it boldly and you have done it much earlier in your lives than I myself did

- that is, you have questioned some ideals that have held sway in universities for far too long – and that is the ideal that we should be dispassionate, disengaged and objective observers pursuing knowledge for knowledge’s sake – it is the notion that if we bring our own subjectivity, our own situatedness in the world we care about, our own engagement as human beings with pressing contemporary issues – in short if we bring ourselves into our intellectual work, we will somehow damage the integrity of that work
- this ideal that you have questioned is what has been called by one historian the NOBLE DREAM of objectivity – I want to briefly take apart both of those terms, dream and noble
- disengaged objectivity is a dream because of course it is impossible - there is no such thing as a detached, impartial, objective observer, unless you are a robot– to the process of knowledge production, we inevitably bring our own situations, and our own preoccupations as individuals and members of larger communities - our subjectivity shapes how we see what we study, because we can’t escape ourselves as hard as we try
- therefore, objectivity is actually impossible and the very process of knowledge production creates a relationship between observer and observed that requires ethical engagement on our part because ethics among many other things are about relations between the self and others
- even though disengaged objective knowledge production can be called a dream rather than a reality, it is nonetheless often still held out as the ideal to which we should aspire – and that explains the use of the “noble” to characterize this dream
- this noble dream of disengaged objectivity is inculcated in us from a young age – how many of you were taught in grade school, or high school or here at Brown never to use the word “I” in formal academic writing?
- some of you are perhaps thinking, “but in my senior project I didn’t use the word I. I was objective and not subjective” – yet by virtue of the fact that you are here in this room and presenting at this conference, you have, I think, courageously recognized the distinct limits of the notion that objective disengagement is the ideal basis for valid intellectual work – and that is not just because you’ve brought yourself and your own passion to your work, but because of the nature of the intellectual work you have chosen to do
- as a group, you’ve demonstrated the intimate relationship between life and the production of intellectual knowledge in a huge range of subjects – you’ve worked on everything from TURDUCKENING BLACK HOLES to ODYSSEUS’S *PHARMAKON*: NARRATIVE AND THE INSEPARABILITY OF TRUTH AND MYTH, from INTERFAITH EXCHANGE to HEPATITIS C INFECTION AMONG THE YOUNG AND INCARCERATED, and from STRUGGLING TO

GROW: OBSTACLES IN ROMANIAN AGRICULTURE to GET THEE TO AN ASSEMBLY: MANDATORY PARTICIPATION AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

- as disparate as the subjects you have worked on are , I think they are linked by a common premise: that the production of intellectual knowledge can be the basis for positive change in the world surrounding us – whether that is change in attitudes and understandings or change in practices and policies, or all of that together – you are in other words engaged, not disengaged
- I compliment you on this because I think that it vaults you into the ranks of what the medieval historian John Boswell called WEAPONS-MAKERS
 - Boswell was a professor of history at Yale University, who died of AIDS in 1994 – his studies of homosexuality in medieval Europe remain books prized today by gays and lesbians in the US and elsewhere in the world – texts to which gays and lesbians return again and again in the fight against homophobia and for full civil rights
- Boswell said I OFTEN THINK OF MYSELF AS A WEAPONS-MAKER, THAT IS, I'M TRYING TO PRODUCE THE KNOWLEDGE THAT PEOPLE CAN THEN USE IN SOCIAL STRUGGLES
- here Boswell recognizes the power of intellectual knowledge – and it is indeed very great – it is as Boswell said a weapon
- weapons of course need to be wielded carefully and ethically – as one historian has written: KNOWLEDGE BRINGS THE POWER TO INFLUENCE, TO DECEIVE, TO CONTROL - therefore the production of intellectual knowledge demands of us an ethical stance, it demands us to be responsible and requires us to be engaged no matter what field we are working in
- the extraordinary range of subjects you have worked on shows that there is no knowledge domain so arcane that its theory cannot be put into action – that it does not have social relevance – I myself am living proof of this as was Boswell – because like Boswell I am a medievalist
 - can you think of anything that seems more the incarnation of irrelevant and arcane and divorced from present than medieval history?
- for many years I thought so too – I'm embarrassed to say that it took a world catastrophe to make me ask how my own scholarly work might be socially relevant - this catastrophe was 9/11
 - in wake of 9/11 I did some peace work particularly around US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, went to DC and lobbied RI's congressional delegation – none of this seemed related to my work as medievalist, until news began to filter out about the

- use of torture by the US against suspected terrorists – during the shockingly muted debate about the morality and efficacy of these illegal methods of interrogation, I started to say to my friends how tragically misguided it was to believe that torture was reliable means of producing the truth – because any medievalist who has read through Inquisition records knows that it isn't
- eventually I wrote an essay that uses medieval evidence in this way to argue against the US' use of torture during the “War on Terror” – it appeared recently in a volume of essays I co-edited together with three other renegade medievalists who like myself, feel the need to speak to the present through our work on the past –this book is called *Why the Middle Ages Matter: Medieval Light on Modern Injustice* – in it professional medievalists reflect on how their knowledge of the distant past can help us better confront injustice in our own world – this volume includes essays on hot button issues today ranging from race to refugees, from presidential politics to gay marriage – all of which, believe it or not, are issues to which medieval history can speak
 - the students I teach at a local men's medium security prison have also encouraged me to believe that even such a seemingly irrelevant field of knowledge as the Middle Ages really does matter
 - for the last two years I have been teaching medieval history at the Adult Correctional Institute in Cranston under the aegis of Brown's faculty-teaching-in-the-prison program, BELLS – over and over again I have been impressed by how the inmate-students find in medieval history ways to explode their pre-conceived notions about the present – how they themselves put theory into action by finding social relevance in this domain of knowledge - how by studying for example the centuries of co-existence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in medieval Spain, they revise their convictions that violent conflict between Jews and Muslims is inevitable
 - I think it is no accident that the BELLS program largely owes its existence to you – more specifically to a student who presented work at this conference last year– and to one of you presenting this year
 - in their terrific work in founding and nurturing BELLS, these two students have, like the rest of you here tonight, been responding to the 2008 report of Brown's Task Force on Undergraduate Education which led to the establishment of this conference – this report emphasized the need for rethinking the **DISTINCTIONS ... BETWEEN THE CURRICULAR AND EXTRACURRICULAR, EVEN BETWEEN CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY**
 - and that of course is exactly what BELLS does and what you all do in one way or another in your projects –literally bring the curricular out of the Brown classroom and into the surrounding world

- in a few weeks, you yourselves are going to walk out of the Brown classroom and into the community – that is, you’re going to graduate
 - one of the questions facing you is how are you going to keep putting theory into action after you don your robes, walk through the Van Wickle Gates and proceed down College Street through lines of cheering faculty and alums
 - how, in other words, will you continue to balance intellectual knowledge production and social relevance in the big brawling world beyond Brown?
 - out there you will face all sorts of challenges if you seek to keep going with this kind of difficult but supremely rewarding work, which I very much hope you will
 - if you choose to pursue graduate study in arts and sciences, you will encounter some powerful people who will argue your knowledge production should be divorced from social engagement – if you go into a non-academic field, you will encounter some other powerful people who will dismiss academic knowledge as irrelevant to practice
 - whatever field of post-Brown endeavor you choose, you will also encounter something that some of you have already faced – that is, that the world mostly doesn’t want to embrace change and tends to resist it, even when it is change for the better
 - all sorts of other challenges as well - you will find your own ways to meet these challenges – but let me offer four suggestions
1. don’t go it alone - find a community of like-minded people – there’s strength and comfort in numbers
 2. find a model, dead or living – someone who has put theory into action in the way you aspire to - what this person did or is doing, can inspire you
 3. be humble – this is a big one – because it involves recognizing that while the intellectual knowledge you command is powerful and makes you into one of Boswell’s weapons-makers, it does not make you infallible – far from it – all knowledge is situated knowledge based on one’s perspective – it does not encompass all perspectives – as the great American historian-activist Howard Zinn wrote, ALL KNOWLEDGE IS OPEN TO DOUBT AND ALL TRUTHS [ARE] PARTIAL
- your ideas about how to bring positive change to the world are not exempt – they too are partial and open to doubt
 - so cultivate humility and an attendant willingness to truly listen to other people, especially those communities of people whom you might be trying to help

because although their perspectives may be very different from yours, their perspectives are the basis for knowledge just as valid as yours

4. finally, if ever you should find yourself discouraged in your work to bring positive change to the world through intellectual knowledge, here are 2 thoughts that I hope will inspire you to keep going
 - a. first is to learn a lesson from the Middle Ages and remember that like all living creatures that have ever existed, you too one day will die - modern Western culture does everything possible to deny the fact of death – but in the Middle Ages, writers instead admonished their readers to be mindful of death – memento mori they said – “remember that you must die”- this may seem like a morbid thought, but it actually is a very uplifting one – as medieval writers knew, remembering death spurs us to not waste time and to live life more fully and meaningfully

- the modern poet Mary Oliver beautifully expresses the motivational power of remembering death in her poem entitled WHEN DEATH COMES - she writes:

WHEN IT'S OVER, I WANT TO SAY: ALL MY LIFE
 I WAS A BRIDE MARRIED TO AMAZEMENT,
 I WAS THE BRIDEGROOM TAKING THE WORLD INTO MY ARMS.
 WHEN IT'S OVER, I DON'T WANT TO WONDER
 IF I HAVE MADE OF MY LIFE SOMETHING PARTICULAR, AND REAL.
 I DON'T WANT TO END UP SIMPLY HAVING VISITED THIS WORLD

- so remembering death, I think, motivates us to do the work that really matters

- b. the second thought is to remember how much we owe to everyone and everything around us – that we are not isolated independent individuals but instead exist in a web of interdependence – to know this, all we have to do is to right engage in a thought exercise - think of what had to happen so that we are here together tonight– you think it's just that you did a senior project with social relevance, but that's actually not the case

- an argument could be made that your presence in this room tonight is actually only possible because of the activities of hundreds of thousands if not millions of other people and living creatures all across the globe

– think of the fact that for you to be here now, you had to have been born – and therefore your mother and your father had to have been born – and their parents and their parents and so on all the way back to what medieval people called our “proto-parents” that is Adam and Eve but what we think of as the hominid ancestors of homo sapiens – and think of how for you to be alive right now, you have had to eat literally tons of food since your birth – think of all the farmers who grew that food and all the people involved in transporting that food by road or rail or air to

- the market where you or your parents bought it – and think of all the people who built the trucks or planes or trains that got that food to the market – and the people who built the markets and the people who work at the markets selling you the food
- for you to be here tonight, Brown University itself has to exist – and it wouldn't exist without the faculty who teach the classes you have taken, or without the staff who run the offices and do the maintenance work that keeps the buildings in good order – or without the deans who oversee everything and are there for you when you're in trouble
 - but of course for us to come to Brown and do our job that makes it possible for you to be here tonight, we depend on millions of other people – the people who maintain the roads on which we drive our cars to get here, the people who built those cars, the people maintain those roads, the people who grow the cotton or shear the sheep or find the oil that becomes the cloth for the clothes we all wear, the people in China who build the computers we use, the people who produce the food we eat and so on
 - your senior project itself depends on the intellectual work of countless other people - all those scholars whose articles or books or studies you consulted – and all the scholars upon whose work they in turn relied – and you couldn't have done your work without your advisor, whose thinking was shaped by his or her experiences in graduate school and by his or her mentors who in turn were shaped by their mentors and so on
 - in short, you exist as one node in a vast and marvelous web of people and other living things – a web of interdependence that means we are not separate - and just as you being here depends on this vast web, so everyone else in this vast web depends on you
 - recognizing this interdependence in fact inspires us to cross and indeed to question the boundaries between the curricular and the extra-curricular and between the classroom and the community, to use the language of the 2008 Brown Task Force report, or to return to Neruda's language, the boundary between books and life – it reminds us of the impossibility of disengaged knowledge production because no one can actually ever step outside this web
 - and because everything depends on everything else, everything matters, including your senior project
 - so, appealing as Neruda's poetic image of closing books to open life is, I think we have to put it aside in favor of an equally poetic image that more aptly captures the intimate relationship between intellectual knowledge and the world that you have articulated in your work

- it is with this image, which is one of opening books to find life, that I want to end
- it is an image I borrow from the Middle Ages, more precisely from medieval Europeans who like us were thinking and writing within a university context – by the 12thc., medieval scholars began producing what is known as mirror literature – that is they began to write books with titles like Mirror of Nature, Mirror of History, Mirror of Medicine, Mirror of the Soul, Mirror of Astronomy, Mirror of Law, even Mirror of Life and Death and Mirror of the World – each book had as its subject the domain of life of which it was a mirror
- this medieval metaphor of the book as mirror expresses a concept of intellectual knowledge not as something divorced from the world, but instead as something that allows us to perceive the truth about the world and then act on that truth – because when we gaze into mirrors, unless they are funhouse mirrors, they don't lie – they show us ourselves in all our beauty and all our imperfections - and from what we *see* in them, we can decide what needs to be done – we can then put theory into action
- tonight and tomorrow you will be looking into the mirrors of the world that you have crafted in your senior projects and discussing with each other what you see there – as you do so, you will perceive many different ways in which intellectual work has social relevance, many different ways in which it matters
- it's up to you to choose HOW your work matters to the world beyond Brown – but never forget that it does indeed matter
- CONGRATULATIONS TO YOU ALL!