

Alex Hunt (& SueEllen Campbell)

WLA Past Presidents' Address 2020

Thursday, Oct. 22, noon hour, virtually San Diego

Public Face West: How to Find a Wider Audience and Why We Might Oughta

I want to offer thanks to you all for being in attendance this year online and for coming to this talk, which will be a rather brief discussion (informal and not very scholarly—no footnotes here) of the crucial issue of audience, and how we should consider making a public turn with our work.

I want to thank my co-president, SueEllen Campbell, for accepting my invitation to join me in putting on the 2019 conference. SueEllen was the perfect partner for this work—smart, efficient, good-willed.

Finally, let me offer thanks to our 2020 presidents, Kerry Fine and Rebecca Lush, for all the hard work they put into getting the conference online. And to the next presidents, Lisa Tatonetti and Audrey Goodman, for the thought they are putting into their meeting, and to the WLA exec, which has been engaged in making difficult decisions for the good of WLA's future. I have no doubt that ultimately we'll emerge from this period stronger in our operations and in our scholarly fellowship.

Last week I attended the Western History Association meeting and gave a talk on the work of CSAW, the Center for the American West, the academic center I run, and I accepted the WHA's Autry Public History Prize that was awarded CSAW for our Red Dead Redemption project. And this certainly helped me think about the talk I'm giving today . . .

Which is not a talk about theory, methodology, or trends in Western American literary scholarship. It's more a reflection with a couple of arguments—meant with best intentions and in all humility—about how we might change as academics and as an organization to meet challenging times. And by challenging times, we mean even before Covid-19, though, of course, more so now.

Via email and zoom, incidentally, SueEllen helped me write this address, or at least had input, as well as editorial and veto power. So in my remarks today I'm going to be slipping between first person singular and first person plural—doing my best to distinguish ideas that coalesced for SueEllen and me as we did our collaboration, and thinking that is my own.

We know we are speaking to a professionally diverse audience, so this talk is going to resonate in different ways with people in different professional situations. But maybe these questions will describe some of you:

Do you have a monotonous teaching schedule? The occasional section of composition? The 3 prep/4 course spring semester, the grading, grading, grading? Is this what you wanted?

Or alternatively, do you enjoy a 2/2 load, sabbaticals, PhD students, and publishing a discipline-changing book every few years? Does this fulfill your academic dreams?

If you answered yes to either scenario, then carry on. But we suspect most of you would say no, that you do not fall into one of these extreme categories. Like me, who taught a 4/4 load for years, you may have a position in which you'd like to teach a bit less and research a bit more, but you're not at an R1. Or, like SueEllen, you may find yourself at a mid-career moment that is outwardly successful but not quite satisfactory. And I realize some of you are grad students, adjunct faculty, and academics working outside of academia, so this will apply to you differently, though I think it's still relevant.

SueEllen and I, however, followed traditional academic career trajectories, and I want to briefly give some background. SueEllen got me into Western lit when I was an undergrad at Colorado State University and brought me to my first WLA in 1995. In addition to her work as an English professor and a nature writer, SueEllen in 2007 got involved in a National Science Foundation grant. The grant, on climate change science, included an education/outreach component (as such grants not infrequently do). This led to her work as a climate science communicator, coordinating on campus more than 120 talks by scholars in 8 colleges and 25 departments over two years. SueEllen herself gave 15 or 20 climate change lectures at various venues over the years.

As for me, after years of laying the groundwork at West Texas A&M University, I founded the Center for the Study of the American West in 2016. The center has been extremely active in putting on events, running internships, and providing research support.

As you may know, for the 2019 WLA conference, I cajoled SueEllen out of a well-earned retirement to be co-president.

Our conference theme in 2019 was “Not Cloudy All Day: Climates of Change in the American West.” While especially inviting climate change-related papers, the theme was more broadly about change of all sorts that we face socially, environmentally, culturally, etc. But what we also wanted to promote was the idea of scholarly intervention in public discourse, of entering into the role of the public intellectual.

We promoted this by introducing the “Public Intellectual” panels at the 2019 conference, and in so doing immediately ran into the central conundrum—how should we encourage people to give talks aimed at the general public when they are facing a room full of academics? Should we invite the public? Maybe we can put those panels toward the end of the day, say on Friday, to

try to entice locals to come hear us talk. Will our conference venue allow this? Is it logistically practical. Well, no, we decided, not really. It's forced and awkward and won't work. So we ended up with presentations ostensibly aimed at the public but delivered to fellow academics. And many, we found, didn't really hit the mark.

This is, with apology, to take nothing away from the fine individuals who volunteered for our experiment, and we acknowledge the winner, Caroline Straty Kraft, UT Austin, "Caring for the Land: Women in Rural Space in the Work of Sanora Babb and Wendell Berry." Hearty congratulations to Caroline on this excellent effort.

But I'll come back to this matter of the WLA conference and the *public* later on. First, we wanted to talk about our own professorial work as public intellectuals.

We think the move toward the public intellectual role is necessary, on a lot of levels, as we face the coming "College Apocalypse" of demographic shift set to hit us by 2026. But most especially because we think we have something to say that matters for the world we inhabit so that we need to be speaking to a large audience and not merely one another. Not to discount the important work we do in classrooms, but if we don't have anything worth saying to a broader audience, then we will receive an increasingly small share of university resources.

We admit a certain envy of historians. In any barroom in America sits a besotted fellow who has a shelf full of books on Little Bighorn or Lewis and Clark, who could and would engage you in an argument over military tactics, national policy, or the virtues and vices of 20/20 hindsight.

After the 2019 State of the Union Address, Patti Limerick's column in the *Denver Post* from February 14, 2020, was "Trump Drains American West of Dignity and Meaning." Here she

takes on Trump's simplistic appeals to a simplistic version of western history that needs no explanation to this audience. Limerick has long been a hero of mine for her ability to transition from theoretically sophisticated—though always readable—academic history to giving talks at the local Legion hall and writing columns in the newspaper. Here is a fine scholar who has made a commitment to participating in public discourse, to mediating discussions between developers and environmentalists and to wading into debates about memorials and monuments.

You may, like us, have admired Heather Cox Richardson's Facebook missives on these dark times, which have won her quite a following. Richardson is a historian of nineteenth-century US, reconstruction, and western history. And she manages to make use of her specialized knowledge even in the quite different context of today's politics.

Why, we wonder wistfully, do we literary scholars have no such following? Creative writers, novelists, poets—they have a following out there. But literary critics and scholars? Even someone as well known and published as Henry Louis Gates sells more books to university libraries than to what we might call a typical educated American reader. None of us wants to praise Harold Bloom, but at least he was in public discourse. If we're being honest, we suspect that many of us who write literary criticism would, given options, prefer to read something else. Like history or a good novel. I'm being flippant here and I know this is a complicated matter, but am I wrong?

On the other hand, what we do can be powerful stuff, and there is no good reason we could not develop a larger audience. Our methodologies offer powerful tools for examining issues of representation, ideas of identity, the cultural work of text. Considering narrative and metaphor, we reveal how we shape our reality and our lives. Our discipline is powerfully attuned to how we construct sense of place, interact with the environment. We should never underrate

the simple but profound importance of the power of literary criticism to enable us to rethink or reimagine the world in which we live.

But acting on this realization requires recalibration and practice. SueEllen and I, and maybe many of you, are unlikely advocates for a public turn, as we are introverts who prefer to speak to a small seminar and to argue via email. But we want to encourage you to consider becoming a public intellectual, and offer some practical strategy—as well as telling you how this has enriched and vitalized our careers.

Here is what to do.

1. Be outgoing. Go across campus. Team teach something. Talk to professors from other disciplines about contemporary issues that concern you. Teach a class relevant to that issue and make it open to community members to audit.

(Make colleagues in different disciplines aware of your interests in their research, how it overlaps with your research. This can lead to participation in grants.)

SueEllen found opportunities to team-teach, through her institution that was not inviting to such ideas, once co-teaching a course on Thoreau with a forest ecology professor, and another time on Nature & Human Nature with a colleague in microbiology.

2. Put on an interdisciplinary panel on some contemporary issue, not on campus. CSAW has a major initiative, Forgotten Frontera, which involves an annual community conversation panel comprised of academics and members of the regional Latinx community, an event held in a community center.

3. Just make yourself available. Speak to book clubs, local history groups about a regional author or classic book. Develop a set of presentations out of your areas of expertise that you think would be of general interest, and make it known you're willing to come speak.

My department runs a monthly "Great Books" series at which I have discussed such great books as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Paulo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*—take that, Harold Bloom!

Think about venues like libraries, senior centers, book shops, churches.

But beyond that, in our cases, to be honest, this has meant going way out of our comfort zones, in terms of expertise as well as temperament. SueEllen gives talks on climate change. I give talks on regional history from a cultural studies and ethnic studies sort of direction, which means I often have to defend the charge of being "one of them revisionists."

4. Bring a speaker to campus or put on a public symposium—something geared for and attractive to the public, not only the university community. Make the event an evening affair. Or a luncheon, perhaps.

The biggest event I have had was when I invited climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe to campus for a lunch-time talk hosted by CSAW but in partnership with AG/Natural Science AND a group of campus student ministries. There is no such thing as a free lunch, but this one was sure edifying. Over 300 people, including many students and community members, showed up.

5. Speak to a university development person about your ideas for public engagement, and how to involve alumni and donors. I initially shunned these people but later realized that partnering with a fundraiser was a wise move—this has led to many hilarious misadventures in the wilds of west Texas.

6. Be ready and willing to advise colleagues on how to do this kind of work—how to communicate to laypersons, to navigate the curse of knowledge.

Taking part in such activities is not easy or comfortable, we know. It's far easier to stay within your lane—do your scholarship, your classes, your committees.

We have always heard that such activities are frowned upon by academic departments and university administration. This may be true in some places, but it has not been true in our experiences. In fact, as universities recognize the need to engage publicly, you may find such activities quite sincerely appreciated by your administration.

Proceed with caution, by all means, but don't be surprised if these professional fears are overblown.

Think about how such activities might be listed under any or all of your annual report categories of research, teaching, and service. In a way, what we are describing is the ideal of all of these.

For us, certainly, this was a transition that came mostly after tenure, though (at least in my case) well before promotion to full professor.

Some of the speakers at our 2019 conference—notably historian Dan Flores and philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore—are outstanding examples of individuals who have utmost respect in their fields but have made a mid or late career shift to speaking and writing for the public.

That's the ideal, is it not? That we can be tops in our discipline, able to talk the talk and walk the walk of our highest expertise, but to still be able to talk to ordinary people about important ideas in a compelling manner.

And here is the great thing: we have found, and this is really the bottom line for us, that our public-facing activities have been the most interesting and rewarding aspects of our careers. Not only do we feel that we are still learning and growing personally, but that we are making ourselves useful to the world we live in outside the imaginary kingdoms of our classrooms.

This is definitely going to mean getting out of your comfort zone—that, we can guarantee. The public square is a lot more diverse and messy than your campus. You will not be able to make any assumptions about political common ground that, let's face it, you can make in your classroom.

Making this turn will also require recalibration. You cannot give these sorts of talks while thinking about your ideas concerning critical regionalism and affect theory. You will lose the audience.

Instead, this is the place to return to basic assumptions—what is literature and why does it matter? How do stories shape our experience, our sense of place, our community, our environmental acuity?

In making these suggestions, I hope I do not presume too much about what you are already doing. I know you do a lot. Or that I'm speaking past those of you who are struggling to find a secure footing in academia. Nor do I wish to be seen as being anti-intellectual about the work we do, which is often complex and theoretically challenging for good reasons. But in fact, I think what we are advocating is anything but anti-intellectual. And in fact, the ability to communicate our expertise to laypeople is a high-level ability.

As a group, a discipline, we think we must shift further toward public engagement, do more to encourage our colleagues, our departments, and our professional associations—in this direction.

In the time of declining research support, the coming student apocalypse, and now Covid-19, the WLA (like all other entities) is already facing great organizational stress. But perhaps this is a moment that we should also examine our practices more thoroughly and let go of the idea of simply getting back to our older practices.

What are conferences for? For professionals to learn from one another. But is this the best or only model for how we should operate? What if we restructured our meetings in a manner that was more outward facing? How might that change our career, our discipline, our lives, our world?

Here we are, today, worrying about the future of our field and questioning the way we handle our annual conference.

Meanwhile, due to Covid-19 we are taking the conference online, which probably means it's more available to international scholars and graduate students. But in another way it's more exclusive than it has ever been (if only accidentally so) in being closed to people from the host community who might want to come hear a reading or a lecture or a panel.

So probably the path forward is some hybrid thing. For example, we could go for an alternating biannual conference/symposium schedule. In even years, we have an outward facing, open-to-the-public, literary and cultural festival of the American West, held in conjunction with some western community, reservation, park, museum, or other publically engaged entity. In odd years, we have a small professional symposium, a retreat, narrowly focused on a particular set of issues of concern to us as scholars. Or we could have an annual public event along with a series

of small symposia over the course of the year, keeping us more engaged. Benefit of a public facing conference include the ability to attract more attention, more members, more collaboration—and, on the financial front, more sponsorships and grants.

This is what SueEllen and I wanted to communicate to you. Thank you for making our 2019 conference such a pleasure. Thanks for attending today, and thanks for listening.