

# Forum

## Examining Infrastructure and Ourselves

TO THE EDITOR:

Wai Chee Dimock's interest in infrastructure art is timely ("Infrastructure Art"; *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 1, pp. 9–15), and I urge her to focus on a critical aspect of it—namely, the norms and assumptions behind our scholarship.

Similar examination is going on in, for instance, psychology. Brian Nosek's research project, at the University of Virginia, began innocently enough, with the goal of replicating the results of key psychological studies and became—when Nosek could not get the same outcomes—one of the most radical lines of inquiry in the new century. His effort has positioned psychology to redefine itself as a science, as it investigates how evidence is constructed, how experiments are framed, and how biases inform research, peer review, and publication.

Like Nosek, we in the humanities should examine in detail our current scholarly attitudes, our expectations, the conceptual frameworks of our essays, and the goals we expect scholarship to meet. We should also look at all aspects of peer review (its setup, the evidence it produces, the reviewers' expectations, class evaluations), as well as how editorial boards work and how tenure and promotion criteria are defined and assessed.

We should approach these structures supporting our profession with the urgency we displayed during the culture wars, when we last talked about framing issues in a radical way. This time around, our goal would be to come up with new understandings of how scholarship is constructed, appropriate to our place in history, which (as Dimock indicates) is bracketed on one end by hybridizations and on the other by interdisciplinarity between the humanities and sciences.

I also urge Dimock to set an example by leading this kind of inquiry into the infrastructure because *PMLA*, as the journal of our um-

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brella organization, is in the best position to direct such a complex undertaking. This thorough self-examination would also be a way we, scholars of culture, could collectively respond to the “fake news” phenomenon (I tried to explain why turning to self-criticism might be beneficial in times of general crisis at the beginning of my essay on Freud titled “Antigone’s Kind: The Way of Blood in Psychoanalysis” [*Umbr(a)*, 2004, pp. 161–81]). It would show that we are so determined to support values of inclusivity, diversity, and reason that we are willing to put our discourses at risk, and it would also help us clarify why alt-right suspicion and destruction of truth are categorically different from deconstruction and subversion as we practice them.

*Petar Ramadanovic*

University of New Hampshire, Durham

*Reply:*

I thank Petar Ramadanovic for broadening our discussion of infrastructure by highlighting reflection on our own discipline as

an integral part of collaborative making. The discipline-wide coordinates that we have built together—roads taken and not taken, evidentiary norms stated and not stated, objectives met and not met—shape the ways we teach, write, and do research as much as any individually cited critical paradigm does. Reflecting on these coordinates would give further meaning and purpose to what we do now, as a scholarly community facing up to the challenges of a new era. Today, when the crisis of the humanities seems to be played out on a much larger stage, as “facts” and “alternative facts” do battle in almost every sphere of life, especially in the sciences, a crucial part of our infrastructure building depends on our ability to take stock of our own practices. Proceeding on the basis of this self-reflection would open the way to new collaborative partnerships, giving literary studies a place in public life and a stake in repairing the damage already inflicted by us on the world’s shared ecologies.

*Wai Chee Dimock*

Yale University