

# The Public Futures of the Humanities

*Judith Butler*

*The challenge of demonstrating the value of the humanities can never be fully accomplished by showing that the humanities serve other disciplines. That argument assumes the value of those other disciplines, especially STEM fields, and relegates the humanities to a secondary position whose value is, at most, instrumental. The task is to show the distinctive contribution that the humanities can make to all fields of knowledge by keeping alive values that are irreducible to both instrumentality and profitability. The public humanities stand the best chance of accomplishing this task since it not only shows what the humanities have to offer the public sphere, but how various publics are framing what the humanities do within the university. Further, the public humanities have the potential to reorient the mission of the university. One reason the humanities are underfunded is that they have the power to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism, its market metrics and financial rationality. Universities should be more fully engaged with public art, including literary and arts events, and the public for open debate as a way of demonstrating why the public requires the humanities, and is already engaged in its practices.*

**T**he question of the future of the humanities takes several forms, the most obvious of which is what that future might look like. And yet the question of the future is also a predominant problem for the humanities, one that we would rightly understand as recurrent.

The humanities, in my view, include language and literature programs, the arts (such as theater, performance, film, television, visual arts, music, and musicology), philosophy, classics, cultural studies, and some portion of gender and women's studies, African American and Africana studies, and ethnic studies, to name but a few. In fact, it turns out that all of these fields have different ways of approaching the future, whether unknown, uncertain, promising, or fatal. And yet each field is also contemplating, with no small measure of anxiety, the question of their own future as a discipline and field of study. That question is often bound up not only with the question of the future of the humanities, but also of the university, increasingly run by corporate administrators deploying neoliberal metrics. And under conditions of drastic climate change, there is also for all of the human-

ities the question of the future itself. Indeed, although we are surely called upon to address the future of the humanities, it turns out that our task is linked with at least two others: How do the humanities address the future? And how do the humanities think about the future under climate conditions in which a livable future and an inhabitable Earth are increasingly called into question?

One might suspect that one of the irritating characteristics of the humanities these days is that faculty and students turn initial questions inside out and end up addressing a separate issue, or they examine initial questions endlessly and get bogged down with a close dissection of the terms and assumptions. I would like to suggest that this practice of turning a question over is neither merely clever, nor indulgent, but part of the tradition of philosophical rhetoric that is concerned with persuasion and demonstration. Sometimes, as Socrates himself clearly showed, a question must be questioned in order to start to fathom the best answer: “How do we live a just life?” requires that we take some time to think about what we mean by justice and whether our meaning is coherent or contradictory or contested by other meanings. Similarly, if we ask what future there is for the humanities, we seem to expect a certain kind of answer, but perhaps we are instead asking a broader question: namely, whether there is any future at all, whether the humanities as we know it will be eclipsed and left to vanish. Thus, if one asks what future there is for the humanities or for any other set of institutions and practices, the assumption is that there will be a future and we just do not know whether the humanities will be part of it. This presumes, however, that the social and climactic conditions for the future will persist, and yet we can no longer make that assumption. Whether or not there will be a future for the humanities depends, of course, on whether there is a future at all.

It is thus with anxiety, if not manifest anguish, that we pose the question of the future of the humanities. We do not generally assume that there will be a future, so two questions converge: Is there a future and, if so, what future is that? And who is posing the question, and how is it asked? Is it the humanities? Is pursuing that question one present and future task of the humanities?

The problem is not only climate change and destruction, but the neoliberal values that increasingly pervade higher education. Some worry that the humanities will become absorbed into other fields whose value is already settled or increasingly dominant, or that the humanities will become occasional ornaments for curricula based more profitably in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). According to either scenario, the value of the humanities would become subsumed under other fields, deriving its value from those fields or, as an accessory, losing its independent value. In the one case (the “we will serve you!” alternative), we presume that the value of the humanities is derived from the superior value accorded to other fields, especially STEM fields. By arguing that we have an instrumental use, we assume that the humanities serve fields and insti-

tutions whose value is superior. In the other case (the “keep us around!” alternative), we also accept subservience, but insist upon our singular contribution: we seek either to show that there is an intrinsic value to the humanities (subordinate, yes, to the values of other fields and disciplines, but still valuable) or that we are uniquely equipped to enhance communication skills that will serve students as they seek employment.

I begin this essay by distinguishing a set of different but interlocking questions presupposed or implied by asking the question of the future of the humanities. First, there is the question of whether there will be any future at all. Second, assuming that there will be a future for the humanities, what kind of future will that be? Will it be vibrant or weak, compelling or negligible, supported or abandoned? Third, will the future of the humanities, understood as a field, be informed by humanities scholarship concerned with the problem of the future? This last question is important because it implies a fourth and related one: will the “future” of the humanities be decided by calculations and formulae generated by fields external to the humanities, such as sociology, economics, and public policy? Or will the humanities have a say on the matter of its future? Fifth, what will the future of the humanities be now that the future itself is uncertain? And last, is there any chance that the future of the humanities is not something utterly new, but resides as practice and potential in some of its current methods?

The question of the future of the humanities is tied to the question of the value of the humanities and the general task of making public what that value is: that is, establishing the humanities as a public value or, indeed, a public good. I believe that this is especially important under economic and climactic conditions in which many people worry about their futures and are concerned about the destruction of future times. This can happen in different ways: living under conditions of oppression that were never dismantled; living with unpayable student debts that are guaranteed to suffuse and outlast the time of one’s own life; living with the unlivable wages of an adjunct teacher; living with increased carbon emissions that threaten to destroy the climactic conditions of present and future life, imperiling biodiversity and animal breathing. I write this against the backdrop of fires in Northern California. My friends in Greece and Oregon alternate between their antiviral masks and their antiparticulate masks depending on whether at any given moment the air threatens disease or toxicity. We all pose the question of the future of the humanities from some location and within a lived sense of historical time. The question emerges from somewhere and at some point, so those spatio-temporal coordinates are there as conditions of enunciation of the question itself. The question is thus no idle musing, but emerges from a contemporary crisis, a critical situation, one that calls for critical thought. Indeed, critique is itself a form of imagining a way out of crisis, prompted by a dire situation that calls for a new modality of thought and judgment.

If we are faculty in humanities departments, we are aware that our budgets are increasingly restricted, that we cannot hire new faculty at the same pace as before, that our undergraduates are enrolled in increasingly larger courses, and that our graduate students are living on wages that barely rise to poverty levels. The days are nearly gone when scholars openly argue that faculty should not care about fiscal matters in the humanities since the life of the mind is its own reward, and finances are the proper concern of others. Humanists have increasingly become part of these discussions.<sup>1</sup> At least in public universities, fiscal crises regularly lead administrators to decide among programs and departments to fund, and in some cases, a fiscal crisis is declared precisely in order to cut programs that are considered a “drain” on the budget. This idea of the “drain,” however, derives from a cost-benefit analysis that determines value according to economic metrics. Or it follows a neoliberal model in which each department is required to become an entrepreneur of its own future, fundraising to support its staff and students. The metrics used to decide what programs to defund, what programs to leave to languish are rarely, if ever, informed by values produced by the humanities themselves. Those programs that prove profitable – that is, that enhance the cultural capital of the institution, that prove effective at raising funds or attracting grants and fellowships – will be those that are duly rewarded. But university-supported funding is not something any program can now take for granted. Defunding and merging function are the operative threats, and programs are at once deprived of guaranteed institutional support and then treated like clients who have to pay up or pay back to remain in the game. At the University of California, Berkeley, even lecture halls once used by any program for public events now have to be rented for a fee; in this sense and others the university has become a rent-seeking operation, demanding funds from defunded units it should be supporting. The administration no longer considers such spaces to be shared spaces, thresholds that connect the university with the community, open to all. Instead, the large lecture hall and even humanities centers are treated as opportunities to glean, or “claw back,” more money from departments and programs whose very survival is now linked to their entrepreneurial credentials. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the humanities tend not to draw in grants that are as lucrative as those garnered by the social sciences and the sciences. Opinions among humanists are divided about whether to get better at raising funds or whether to sharpen the critique of the neoliberal model that makes entrepreneurial prowess a prerequisite for departmental survival.

Some faculty, administrators, and professional organizations representing the humanities have responded to this situation by seeking to show how the humanities serve other disciplines: the social sciences, the sciences, public policy, law, and the study of the environment. This service is doubtless important, but they do not always engage a collaborative model in which different fields make distinct

and equal contributions to the projects at hand. To avoid ratifying the subordinate and derivative status of the humanities, it is imperative to show how all of the disciplines also require the humanities.<sup>2</sup> If we only seek to show how we might be useful to the STEM fields and other lucrative disciplines, we pursue a strategy that accepts the hierarchy of values that casts the humanities as secondary and derivative. No public defense of the humanities can proceed on the basis of the assumption that the humanities only gain their value by serving more highly funded disciplines and fields. Yes, we are all worried about where humanities PhDs will find work and we are eager to showcase the many talents of our graduates, but if the rationale we use for that purpose admits that the humanities have no value in themselves, we are contributing to the demise of the humanities, making our situation even more dire than it already is.

It is important, then, to make a distinction between 1) showing that the humanities can serve other disciplines in order to establish their instrumental value and 2) showing the distinctive contribution that the humanities can make to all fields of knowledge by keeping alive fields of value that are irreducible to instrumentality and profitability. Arguments like these are often dismissed as romantic or unrealistic, but there are grounds to resist such conclusions. After all, faculty and administrators in the humanities can, and should, become schooled in fiscal budgets and decision-making if only to become knowledgeable participants in such decision-making processes or to hold those making such decisions accountable for their actions. The claim that “cuts have to be made” does not by itself explain which cuts have to be made, and why. Thus, entering into those discussions equipped with an understanding of budgetary decision-making processes is vital for the future of the humanities. At the same time, the humanities comprise precisely those locations within the university where metrics of values are discussed and evaluated. If we ask, according to what measure shall we make a judgment to support or abandon a program, we are implicitly asking what metric of value should be invoked and applied in this decision? That question can only be answered through recourse to another set of values, including those generated by the humanities. If the economic metric is invoked on its own, then the implicit assumption is that there are no other measures of value or, if there are, they are irrelevant or devalued. Thus, it is no contradiction to insist that fiscal decisions be based on a general understanding of the value of the humanities and in light of the measure of value yielded by the humanities, or that fiscal decisions should be made with reference to the general aims of the university and the public goods that the humanities have to offer.

The point is neither to dismantle all forms of economic analysis or fiscal calculation nor to accept the subordination of the humanities as merely useful to those other fields that are understood as more productive and profitable: that is, drawing in more grants and donations, producing lucrative patents, securing licens-

es for intellectual property, collecting tuition fees for masters programs or “cash cows,” all of which generate revenue that can be diverted to fund other programs. The way around such a conundrum is to show not just how the humanities address fundamental public concerns, but to elaborate its public value. The temptation is to understand such a call as nothing other than a further instance of instrumentalism: the humanities are valuable because they serve the public. What needs to be demonstrated, however, is that the public, the public good, life, and futurity all depend upon the humanities, and that without the humanities, not only is the future itself bleak or vanishing, but we have no way of describing, understanding, or countering that bleakness. In this way, it is important that the humanities not be fully justified within the terms of the market, for that marketization of the university is precisely what has diminished and sidelined the humanities.

The problems of precarious labor, unpayable debt, and vanishing climactic conditions for life, to name but a few issues threatening to foreclose a sense of futurity, all result from the unchallenged metrics of profit, unchecked productivity, increasingly pervasive market rationality, and neoliberal values more generally. Hence, for the sake of the future of labor, of life, and of the Earth, we have to ask: how can the humanities become a more vital dimension of our public worlds? Yes, we have finally turned the question around, but perhaps it is now clear why such an inversion is necessary. As much as it is important to support graduate students as they retrain in order to find paid employment, it is equally important to sustain a criticism of the market values that have made the importance of the humanities increasingly difficult to discern and defend.

**T**he case for the public humanities has been at the center of efforts on the part of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and other funding institutions to show the importance of the humanities to public life. We hear of “public engagement” offices in universities, and it seems that establishing a relationship between the humanities (and the university) and the public is widely regarded as important to maintaining fields of study and institutions of higher education alike. Not long ago there was a convention according to which some scholars would be designated by the media and universities as “public intellectuals.” These were scholars who departed from their scholarly work in order to take public stands on issues of common concern. In the humanities, Edward Said and Cornel West are perhaps the most well-known of such scholars. One problem with the title, however, is that it assumes that these scholars make a distinction between scholarship, on the one hand, and public thinking, on the other, and it suggests that very few individuals, usually from elite institutions, could be named in such a way. As much as the group called public intellectuals show the importance of intellectual thought for cultural and political matters of common concern, they can only make an indirect case for what the humanities could offer. They serve

as models for the humanities, but they are also treated as exceptions, having left the walls of the academy to enter public life. That last impression, however, assumes a generally nonporous wall between the academy and its publics. The shift from “public intellectuals” to “public humanities” surely changed both of those assumptions, not only explaining what humanities scholars do for a wider public but showing how the humanities are themselves a public exercise, a defining and even invaluable feature of public life.

The problem, however, is that there are at least two ways of describing what the public humanities are and this seems related to how we think about “public engagement.” Public engagement can be public relations, addressing the media and various constituencies on the value of what various research projects are, the success of pedagogical innovation, and so on. Public engagement can also describe community-oriented projects, contributions to K–12 curricula, pro bono legal services offered by law schools, translation services for migrants, and prison university programs. All these are indisputably important, and they may well involve students and faculty from the fields in the humanities. But they each represent different versions of what the public humanities are, and can be. The public humanities, however, cannot be reduced to the presence of humanists in forms of public engagement undertaken by universities in an effort to advertise its mission to a broader public, to engage with local businesses and nonprofits, or even in its service-oriented contribution to local communities. As much as service is important, it is equally imperative to undertake service in such a way that foregrounds rather than negates the value of the humanities.

The University of Michigan, for instance, describes its “Public Engagement and the Humanities” program as providing goods and services:

We define public goods in the humanities broadly: products or services that are provided without profit to all members of a society. Examples might include exhibits, oral histories, archives, audiovisual projects, community engagement projects, K–12 focused projects, public programming endeavors, etc.

These are all important projects worthy of support, but does the rationale provided imply that public humanities should be defined as public services? If so, it would appear that public humanities practitioners emerge from the university and then enter the public to undertake such services, but the wall between the university and the public is kept intact.

A slightly but still significantly different version of the public humanities comes from New York University’s website. They state upfront and unequivocally that “diverse publics frame our scholarly endeavors and inform our teaching and research.”<sup>3</sup> A straightforward claim, but note that “the publics” are notably plural, implying that the public sphere is not unitary, but composed of communities that have not always been included in the dominant idea of “the public.”<sup>4</sup> Fur-

ther, these publics are not a target audience or an identified recipient of services. Those publics are *framing* the scholarship within the university. Their statement breaks down the distinction between universities and publics when they refer to “the responsibility to engage deeply with the broader publics in which we all play a part.” Such a formulation suggests that scholars are, from the start, also members of those publics, and that their work is a way of operating within those public spheres. Further, the main task of such scholarship, teaching, and career preparation is, according to the NYU public humanities project, “to integrate modes of public engagement into their scholarship.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, public worlds are not over there, beyond the walls, into which scholars occasionally enter to provide goods and services; rather, those various publics frame the way scholarship and teaching is undertaken, the questions asked, the hypotheticals with which we begin, the purpose for which we undertake our various projects. Those publics are in the university from the beginning, and include students, staff, administrators, and faculty.

I underscore this distinction between public engagement and public humanities to suggest that the public humanities can ideally reorient the mission of the university. This would be a quite different task from defending and defining the humanities within the university in ever more refined terms. It would, rather, let the humanities now be framed and animated by the various publics that, yes, universities serve, and of which they are a part. In short, perhaps there is no future for the humanities without first reorienting the relation between universities and their publics.

The decreasing number of tenure-track positions within the humanities makes it urgent to find alternate career pathways for PhDs.<sup>6</sup> The sense of urgency is clearly warranted, but it would be a mistake to conclude that we need to cede all ground to and accept the hegemony of market values and retrain students in business and tech as quickly as possible. We think that retraining PhDs will strengthen the placement records of graduate programs, records that now include “alt-ac” (alternative academic) as legitimate trajectories. We are probably right, for there is no doubt that nonacademic careers are equally legitimate and should not be regarded as less valuable, as they are by those who understand the tenure-track line as the only sign of success. That mindset is changing, and none too soon. But if we rush to make humanities PhDs marketable, are we not strengthening precisely the metrics that have diminished the value of the humanities within universities? We are mightily split when we lament the destructive effect of market values on our disciplines while at the same time seeking to convert our PhDs into marketable workers.

Not all alternate career pathways, however, are equally driven by market values. And one task of public humanities programs, whether regarded as tracks within existing humanities PhD programs, or as separate programs, is to find ways



in which humanities PhDs can bring distinct values into public and nonprofit programs. The ACLS describes its aim as fostering “the dynamic potential of the humanities PhD by placing recent PhDs in professional roles with nonprofit and government organizations in the fields of arts management, development, communications, public administration, policy, and digital media.”<sup>7</sup> Such a program clearly seeks to advance careers in nonprofit and public services, and in such cases, the formation in the humanities is not negated in order to gain paid employment: rather, it brings a new set of values, including imagination, language, translation, and critical thought, to the public and nonprofit domain. As such, it does not reduce the humanities to their potential market values, but continues to contest those values, and to affirm a different set of values in the public and nonprofit spheres.

One problem with insisting that the public humanities engage with public and nonprofit organizations is that neoliberalism affects for-profit industries and businesses, public service administration, and nonprofits alike.<sup>8</sup> Institutions in each sphere are concerned with securing funding sources, establishing brand and investment strategies, and hiring people who can bring in more funding or enhance cultural capital. The internal administration of these goals operates according to their own logics, and too often the social aims of a nonprofit are supplanted by the internal aims of its neoliberal workings, with the consequence that the internal hierarchies and income differentials of the organization war with its stated social goals (like economic and environmental justice), treating low-paid workers as dispensable, and often failing to provide health care benefits. If the public humanities place students in nonprofits of this kind, it teaches them a brutal lesson about increased marketization and the precarious character of work. Indeed, if the point of an internship is to provide training that will open an alternative to precarious work within the academy, it makes no sense to funnel graduate students into nonprofits that are operating according to the same neoliberal logics. At the same time, having a paid internship can open doors, and it is an important way to counter the situation in which the intern class in radio and public media, for instance, is restricted to those who can draw on family wealth for basic income during that period. Funding for such internships is generally considered an obligatory part of such programs, as we can see at NYU and at other sponsoring institutions.

Of course, some of these programs borrow neoliberal language – “skill-building” for the market – but that should not mean that PhDs are now reduced to a set of skills. Community organizations in the arts, for instance, are more often than not engaging public practices, seeking to sustain and transform public spheres, and many of them are aiming to keep alive values that are being decimated by market forces, including social and economic inequality, systemic racism, and the destruction of the environment. Groups that combat climate destruction, oppose racism, and support LGBTQI rights and women’s rights can be at once mired in

neoliberal discourse and still fight for values contrary to neoliberalism, inspired by the Mellon-ACLS model focused on preparing PhDs in the humanities for non-profits. Hence, although it is important to orient PhDs in the humanities to non-profits and public services, it does not mean that the very sources destroying the humanities will not be on full display in that “alternative” career.

My point is not to return to a purism that refuses to engage in the market realities of our time. As I have argued, it is important that humanists become fluent in fiscal matters within the university, regardless of whether they were originally trained in such matters. “Retraining” is an imperative for those of us teaching, mentoring, and administering as well. Similarly, it is crucial that PhDs come to know of valuable opportunities outside of the tenure-track, even if that means adapting to new environments and losing the centrality of scholarship in one’s life. At the same time, if adaptation to market values becomes all that we do, we do nothing to contest the reign of market values. Indeed, if market metrics become the new realism, and critics of that very historical situation are dismissed as naive idealists, then the loss is both enormous and unacceptable. That loss is not only the loss of the humanities, but the loss of the critique of market values and what they have done to the university, the social world, and the Earth.

Perhaps we humanists believe that a new book on the value of the humanities will be persuasive and demonstrate to administrators and funders why humanities departments and their students should be supported. Or perhaps new fields, such as the digital humanities, will lead the way in establishing the humanities as relevant. Yes, that could be. The problem, however, is not just that we need to innovate according to the fast-paced world of digital technology (which also brought us the surveillance of the algorithm), or translate what we do into market values, but to find ways, digital and otherwise, to insist upon a rival set of values, and to demand that the public value of the humanities be affirmed and provided for in the name of the public and the future.

If there is a single hope that any of us can have for the future of the humanities, it is that the public humanities become a way to assert the public value of the humanities, a way of thinking about the fate of the Earth, our common and uncommon lives together, ways of telling our histories and imagining our futures. The humanities are underfunded precisely because they represent values that challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism and its market metrics. We should perhaps allow that critique to live. And though some skeptics maintain that critique is destructive and purely negative, they tend not to understand the relation between critique and dissent, the power of the imagination to think beyond the status quo, to establish a critical distance on neoliberalism, and to open up possibilities precisely when the felt sense of the world is dire.<sup>9</sup> If we can imagine beyond the fiscal realism of the present, then we are already practitioners of the humanities. We hold out not just for the future of the humanities, but for the future of the world.

A recent survey conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators found that 84 percent of adults in the United States have a positive view of literature, and yet many reported that the teaching of literature at the college or university level is a "waste of time" or "costs too much."<sup>10</sup> The immediate question, then, is why so many people value literature yet also voice skepticism of or disdain for the teaching of literature in higher education. Why can we not make good on the high value placed on literature? The answer may have less to do with the gap of understanding that exists between literary critical schools and the public love of literature than with the structure of higher education as a whole, specifically, with the difficulty of making higher education affordable and responsive to its public. Would literature still be considered a waste of time if it were measured less by productivity and profit and more by its ability to help us consider critically the making and unmaking of worlds? Do art and scholarship become regarded as wasteful or even self-indulgent when the gifts they offer fail to be measured by the available metrics? Certainly, it would be unwise to ignore such market values as we argue for our place within higher education. But if those values come to define what we do, we would be shutting down that horizon of alternative values that gives a sense of life outside the market, against the market, configured through values that affirm the aspirations of a common world and sustainable Earth. Market values not only narrow our ideas of what kind of knowledge is worthwhile, but they are also responsible for the precarious labor of adjuncts who are often working without a livable wage and health insurance. The limiting of imagination and the acceptance of wretched work conditions go hand in hand, following from a "realism" whose terms are too often determined by an unchallenged market rationality.

How do we make the case for what we do that appeals to those who already value literature and the imagination and want to see their connection to their public worlds as something different from a connection to markets and finance? Surveys are a strange form of knowledge gathering, and I have my questions about some of the categories and methods deployed in the Humanities Indicators report. And yet the report offers some insights that illuminate a path forward. So-called political liberals generally have a favorable impression of the term *foreign languages*, while far fewer conservatives perceive that term favorably. Question: What has nationalism got to do with it? Interestingly, it appears that Black, Latinx, and Asian Americans are substantially more likely to believe it is important that young people learn languages other than English, and those who are less affluent are more in favor of learning foreign languages than those who are affluent.<sup>11</sup> This last finding raises a crucial question: what does learning across national and linguistic boundaries offer underrepresented communities? Consider another finding: Latinx and Black Americans are "nearly three times as likely to have frequently attended [poetry/literature readings and other literary] events as White [Ameri-

cans], and the youngest American adults [(ages 18 to 29)] were more than twice as likely as those 45 and older.”<sup>12</sup> If the task ahead is to translate the general appreciation for literature and the arts into an appreciation for what colleges and universities have to offer, we should perhaps take as our point of departure those public poetry and literature readings that compel people, especially young people from communities of color, to show up or tune in with the hope of making sense of their world, reckoning with their histories and their desires. The fields of African American and African diasporic studies are rife with memoir, history, poetry, and experimental writing, including Afro and critical fabulations, providing examples of performance that combine poetry, history, and narration.<sup>13</sup> Indigenous peoples across the Americas rely on poetry and ritual art to preserve their traditions, tell their stories, and negotiate the relations to time and space against a history of genocide and its denial. Throughout Latinx literatures, as diverse as they are, a poetics is operative not only as the study of the technique of poems but also as the technique of persisting while burdened and scarred by a history of colonial expansion and effacement. Feminist, queer, and trans writing has always been linked with fundamental questions of how to survive, live, fight, flourish, and pursue the promise of a collective radical transformation of the world.

Whatever the future of the humanities might be, it will be critical not to separate the humanities from the various art forms on which it depends. English departments teach poets they would not hire or, if they do hire them, pay them less than scholars with many scholarly books. The “arts” are sequestered in programs and projects that do not recognize that the humanities could not exist without the arts, including the language arts, performance, theater, and oral histories. Similarly, the very artworks that compel public attention are not always present in the university curricula, which distinguishes between popular and academic objects of study. Packed into this distinction between popular and academic, however, is the presumption that the university defines itself, and its elitist sense of value, through differentiating itself from public cultures. And yet it is this engagement that is most important for the future of the humanities.

Public events that include performance art, poetry, and literature often draw from publics whose histories and creative works are not included in narrow versions of the literary canon. This is not news. The literatures and art forms included in ethnic studies teaching, for example, are generally related both to a history of exclusion, effacement, extractivism, and empire and to a way of imagining a better world. Palestinian poetry cannot be fully understood apart from the way that it enters and registers the rhythms of ordinary life, the effort to preserve a people’s memory against its erasure by official history, a memory linked through recitation to the task of persisting under protracted conditions of occupation and

dispossession. These are among the many examples in which the connection to public worlds is *already* being made; these sites should be supported as the portals to a broader world, the link between the university and those who require the humanities to live a more illuminated life. The future of the humanities may well depend on realizing that the best case for art, poetry, literature, visual culture, digital art, and performance can only be made if we maintain the connection between the arts and the humanities. The case for the humanities can only be made if we start with the love for the humanities that exists outside the university, in the various publics who depend on art and literature to live and flourish, and then rebuild our institutions to respond to that love, that life call, to foster a critical imagination that helps us rethink the settled version of reality.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Judith Butler**, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2019, is Distinguished Professor in the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of several books, including *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1996), *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2010), and, most recently, *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020).

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Christopher Newfield's important blog and his publications on humanities funding: Christopher Newfield, *Remaking the University*, <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/>; Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).
- <sup>3</sup> Susan Antón, Aida Gueghian, Craig Lanier Allen, and Carolyn Dinshaw, "GSAS Public Humanities PhD Initiative Mission Statement," New York University.
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).
- <sup>5</sup> Antón et al., "GSAS Public Humanities PhD Initiative Mission Statement."
- <sup>6</sup> Modern Language Association, "Careers Outside the Academy," *Final Report from the Committee on Professional Employment* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1997), <https://www.mla.org/Resources/Research/Surveys-Reports-and-Other-Documents/Staffing-Salaries-and-Other-Professional-Issues/Final-Report-from-the-Committee-on-Professional-Employment/Careers-outside-the-Academy>.

- <sup>7</sup> “Mellon/ACLS Public Fellows: Information for Potential Host Organizations,” ACLS, October 30, 2020, accessible on the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201030190514/http://www.acls.org/programs/publicfellowshosts>.
- <sup>8</sup> Soniya Munshi and Graig Willse, eds., “Navigating Neoliberalism in the Academy, Nonprofits, and Beyond,” *S&F Online* 13 (2) (2016), <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/navigating-neoliberalism-in-the-academy-nonprofits-and-beyond/>.
- <sup>9</sup> See my response to the American Association of University Professors’ 2019 report on the future of knowledge: Judith Butler, “A Dissenting View from the Humanities on the AAUP’s Statement on Knowledge,” *Academe* 106 (2) (2020), <https://www.aaup.org/article/dissenting-view-humanities-aaup%E2%80%99s-statement-knowledge#.YRvh-NNKhos>.
- <sup>10</sup> Humanities Indicators, *The Humanities in American Life: Insights from a Survey of the Public’s Attitudes and Engagement* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 1, <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/The-Humanities-in-American-Life.pdf>.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>13</sup> On critical fabulation, see Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: Norton, 2019); Tavia N’yongo, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016). See also David M. Berry, “What Are the Digital Humanities?” The British Academy blog, February 19, 2019, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what-are-digital-humanities/>.