Why Public Humanities?

Susan Smulyan

This essay maps the nature, scope, and implications of the field of "public humanities" as practiced within the university. Calling for a public humanities that is collaborative, process-centered, and committed to racial and social justice, the essay considers the challenges and possibilities the new field brings to university teaching, scholarship, and administration. The author draws from her work at Brown University, her experience as the editor of a book of case studies, Doing Public Humanities*, and her time as a participant-researcher at New Urban Arts, a Providence arts group, to review the organizations and resources devoted to public humanities. Describing why (and what, when, where, and how) a new humanities field began and where it stands now, the essay traces possible lessons for the humanities brought by the evolution of public humanities.*

I have been thinking of this essay as a road map to the ideas and practices of public humanities, a map that would help answer the title question, "why public humanities?" Because I am a historian, I do not usually think in terms of maps; my brain believes that all stories are chronological, and readers would be lost without a timeline to guide them. But public humanities practitioners find maps newly fascinating, and I have attended enough conferences and art exhibits, and reviewed enough digital projects, ranging from practical discussions of analog and virtual tours to abstract visions of maps as new forms of the archive, to know that there are many ways to chart ideas and practices.[1]

Approaching the topic from a number of vantages, this essay will look at some beginning points for public humanities; work through definitions; talk about the stakes for faculty and students – and the universities and communities in which they work – and consider whether public humanities could be transformative rather than simply translational. No matter how you map public humanities, discussions of collaboration and social justice need to be at the center. I also map the on-campus world while knowing that we have many colleagues who work "in public" outside the university, and their contributions inform our own.

I teach in the Department of American Studies at Brown University and recently stepped down as Director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage. The center's master's students in pub-

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lic humanities often rewrote the Wikipedia entry on public humanities as part of their coursework in the introductory class as taught by Steven Lubar. I see Wikipedia as a gigantic public humanities project, and so the exercise worked on several levels. Recently the Wikipedia record read:

> Public humanities is the work of engaging diverse publics in reflecting on heritage, traditions, and history, and the relevance of the humanities to . . . civic and cultural life. Public humanities is often practiced within federal, state, nonprofit and community-based cultural organizations that engage people in conversations . . . and present lectures, exhibitions, performances and other programs for the general public. . . . Public Humanities also exists within universities, as a collaborative enterprise between communities and faculty, staff, and students.[2]

I find my own definition of public humanities within the field of social practice art as undertaken by New Urban Arts, a youth arts organization in Providence, Rhode Island. Putting the humanities in conversation with the arts proves crucial because the arts are the subject of the humanities. What can we learn from artistic methodologies? My definition moves away from the translational – the explanation of university-generated ideas to the public – and imagines the humanities as a process of discovery undertaken by collaborative groups – including university faculty, staff, and students – with communities outside the campus.[3]

Many programs that are doing the same work have different names. A series of university programs that center students and their experiences are called service learning. Others, coming out of the social sciences, talk about student and faculty work in the community as civic engagement.[4] The word *engagement* takes a prominent role in several of the efforts that seem closest to my definition of public humanities. A group of art historians has begun to think about building an engaged art history, and Daniel Fisher, at the National Humanities Alliance, talks of "publicly engaged humanities."[5]

Historian Robyn Schroeder brilliantly lays out the evolving definitions of public humanities, and their contradictions, in a recent anthology that I edited, *Doing Public Humanities*.[6] Schroeder writes about how public humanities evolved in response to concerns of the political left and right and of museums and universities, and how it was strengthened by fears of a decline in university jobs for PhDs. I recognize my own definition when Schroeder writes that "new 'convergences' between arts initiatives and publicly engaged scholarship shared a common critique of 'conventional' university practices which they hoped to unmake and a politics of the local which enlivened this work . . . of vernacular democratic educational action." Schroeder shrewdly shows how the public humanities "caught fire" when it "intersected with changing perceptions of the job market for humanities doctorates . . . influenced by neo-liberalization of university hiring practices, rapid growth in the museum and broader cultural sectors and a generational shift in career orientation which emphasized social outcomes over private gain."[7]

Using an n-gram, Schroeder traces the concept of public humanities to the 1970s but shows how the concept took off in the 1990s. Yet, in 2000, when I drafted a proposal for a Center for Public Humanities that would, in collaboration with the Department of American Studies, offer an MA program, my only references were to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the State Humanities Councils. We knew about public history from reading and publishing in *The Public Historian* (now nearing its fortieth anniversary issue) and attending National Council for Public History meetings (which began in 1980). And we learned even more about museum studies by working and having fellowships in museums big and small.[8] We were also influenced by writers and bloggers about the field, by the new digital humanities, and by organizations beginning to move beyond the translational humanities described in our proposal.

Brown's Center for Public Humanities was established in 2002, with the two-year MA program starting in 2005. It is still the only program in the country offering a public humanities degree to both MA and doctoral students on the way to a PhD. Brown's public humanities MA program replaced one in museum studies as those of us in American studies sought a curriculum and students that were more interested in communities (like students in African American, ethnic, and women's studies), more interdisciplinary, and more expansive than museums. On our campus, the Center for Public Humanities and the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (CSSJ) grew together, both with public-facing missions. Established as a result of the 2006 report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, authored by faculty in history, Africana studies, and American studies, the CSSJ declares its mission is "to examine the history and legacies of slavery in ways that engage a broad public."[9] An early project was a jointly funded fellowship for a public humanities MA student in "the public history of slavery." The CSSJ describes its work as public humanities, ranging from collaborations with global slavery museums to programs for local high school students.[10] The partnership between the Center for Public Humanities and the CSSJ has enriched the public humanities and kept race and justice at the core of Brown's definition of public humanities.

Beyond our campus, several intellectual currents at the turn of the twenty-first century proved important to how we taught and thought about public humanities. American culture scholar Julie Ellison's work, in particular, combined theory and praxis in illuminating ways. As we planned for public humanities at Brown, Ellison and her colleague David Scobey "were developing an engaged arts and humanities presence at the University of Michigan." In 1999, at a national conference sponsored by the University of Michigan, the Woodrow Wilson Center, and the White House Millennium Council, they launched Imagining America: Artists + Scholars in American Life, a national organization. With publications, graduate students as important participants, and an annual conference, Imagining America became a touchstone and key resource for those working in public humanities.[11]

In the essay "This American Life: How Are the Humanities Public?" Ellison presented a preliminary reading of Humanities Indicators' data on American life. She wrote of the "intense anxiety, across all sorts of colleges and universities, around higher education's public mission" and noted that "the tensions between universities and the communities that surround them are deeply cultural and are definitely a matter for the humanities." But she was also excited by "blurring" the line between the arts and humanities "in interesting ways." Finally, Ellison pointed to the importance of the "ongoing histories of race and ethnicity, migration and diaspora" as "one of a number of places where these histories can be told and rectified."[12] Considering collaboration, Ellison used the word "bridging" – a concept that blogger and curator Nina Simon also referenced in her Museum 2.0 blog and later work – to understand how humanities content could improve reciprocal collaborations.[13]

In 2013, Ellison, in "The New Public Humanists," describes "a new sort of public humanities . . . finding traction in American colleges and universities" and cites Scobey as calling for an "effort to knit together public work and academic work." Ellison was excited that "concrete, programmatic changes on campus point to a robust challenge to the habitual academic-public binary in the humanities." She credited graduate students for reimagining the public humanities as they reacted to negative factors (a difficult job market and a "simple neo-liberal pre-professional model") as well as to the positive appeal of potentially more interesting careers. In addition, Ellison noted that "practitioners of the new public humanities were producing books and essays that cannot be understood outside the conditions of collaborative production – direct, coequal involvement with living people and organizations."[14]

At this point on our map – and in the corresponding chronological story (historians never quit) – we have academic programs that have been established; we have the beginning of a theory and methodology for public humanities; and we have a national organization that is working on the ground. But one set of questions always arises when we talk about transformational public humanities: what changes are necessary for faculty and students, and eventually for the universities in which they operate?

In 2015, a group of college and university faculty and students interested in public humanities formed a regional organization to talk together about some of the issues raised by public humanities. The North Eastern Public Humanities Consortium

(NEPH) had founding members from the Ivy League (Harvard, Brown, Columbia, and Yale); private universities (Tufts and Lehigh); and public universities (University of Delaware, University of Massachusetts Boston, and Rutgers University–Newark). During five annual meetings and from a variety of collaborations, participants explored what public humanities meant to college pedagogy, academic bureaucracy, faculty careers, and university-community interaction. Only Brown's and Yale's programs carried the name "public humanities," but the other campuses understood the work they were doing (including oral history, material culture, digital humanities, and community collaborations) as public humanities.

The NEPH collaborated on a white paper, which historian Matthew Frye Jacobson included as part of a recent essay. The white paper describes interlocking crises that faced the university – crises of atomization, division, confusion and doubt, amnesia, and anomie – and bemoans the diminishing of "the American university's most far-reaching public charge as a community resource and as incubator, catalyst and democratic steward of the society's intellectual resources." The most deeply felt part of the NEPH manifesto was, I think, the material on the role of knowledge creation, a description of the job of the faculty:

> The knowledge we produce is squarely rooted in the best methods and practices of our professional training, yet it is often more expansive and dimensional for being generated in dialog with diverse partners.... Our project is not merely to get the work of the university out into the world (though it is partly that, too), but to build new archives, create new paradigms, recover buried histories, and weave new narratives of the sort that can only be produced when guild members cease to speak amongst themselves exclusively.[15]

When discussing the ways in which faculty and students practice public humanities, I want to begin with the NEPH's positive vision of such a practice. Most such discussions start with the negative: with the question of whether public humanities scholarship "counts" toward tenure. The connected question is whether and how we should train graduate students to do this kind of work if it does not count or if such training exists only as a back-up plan for PhDs who cannot find tenure-track jobs (the so-called alt-ac track). I understand the materiality and importance of such questions but believe we should first explore why we would want to undertake this scholarship and then consider how it fits or reshapes current systems.

Many faculty members in the humanities – in the traditions of African American studies, ethnic studies, women's studies, American studies, public history, and cultural anthropology, for example – have long conceived, directed, and participated in public humanities projects. We have done them because we felt a special commitment to our communities; because it was part of the mission of our departments; or because such work fit our scholarly interests. While it has been part of our practice, it is not always recognized by our departments or universities. According to the Humanities Indicators, "in an estimated half of humanities departments," faculty members (or staff and students) work with state humanities councils or community groups. At the same time, the Humanities Indicators demonstrate that most departments do not consider public humanities when evaluating scholarship: "only an estimated 11% of departments indicated that such activity was 'very important' or 'essential' for tenure."[16] Here, the Humanities Indicators provide evidence that faculty are doing public humanities work despite not being recognized professionally for that work. For many faculty members, public humanities projects supplement, or even make possible, the scholarship that is recognized. For at least some faculty members, tenure is not the only issue in planning their scholarly work. A closer look at these faculty practices might help us understand the true value of the humanities. A useful study would categorize and interview the faculty involved in the 1,800 public projects described in the National Humanities Alliance's blog, Humanities for All.[17] If such projects do not count, why do faculty undertake them?

The disconnect between faculty practice and tenure expectations deserves scrutiny, raising several issues and a couple of possible ways forward. First, there may be a simple (but challenging) stickiness to the rubrics. While public humanities has been widely accepted, tenure committees change their expectations slowly and only under pressure. The Humanities Indicators note that "a growing number of commenters in recent years have pointed to public humanities as a vehicle for elevating the profile of the field."[18] The American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the National Council on Public History continue to update their joint report "Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian," which was first published in 2010 and last modified in 2017, to remind history departments of the importance of public, particularly museum, work for tenure.[19] We must continue to work at this ground level to have our contributions recognized.

Beyond acceptance of this form of scholarship by universities and their tenure committees, public humanities challenges the rubrics themselves. Tenure requirements represent a retrograde way of defining and evaluating faculty work while public humanities points to a new, more expansive definition of scholarship. As the North Eastern Public Humanities Consortium white paper notes,

> we challenge the norms of the gatekeeping function of the modern university as arbiter of what ascends to the status of "knowledge." There is such a thing as vernacular theorizing and wisdom; communities know. This local knowledge is often lost to the university in its capacity as a credentialing institution and in its guild-like guardianship of instructional capital.[20]

By changing the definition of scholarship, public humanities blurs the lines between research, teaching, and service on which so many rubrics are built. I routinely serve on departmental tenure committees that struggle to contain innovative projects within one category. Creative junior scholars present scholarship that also contributes to their teaching and service work. The tenure committee struggles to discipline such unruly projects so that they are legible to university tenure and promotion boards. As such projects multiply, and as pressure continues from scholarly societies, departments, and faculty members alike, rubrics will have to change, but that change happens slowly.

As part of the process, and as a way to continue to grant tenure to innovative scholars, I have begun to think about a "scholarship of public humanities" and how that might be imagined. I recently edited the collection *Doing Public Humanities*, which presents case studies of work done by the faculty, staff, and students affiliated with Brown's Center for Public Humanities in collaboration with local communities. The book models the scholarship of public humanities and shows the central role of racial justice in the subject and approach of the essays; the importance of case studies as a format; and the intertwined nature of public humanities with the arts. The publication, featuring essays by scholar-practitioners, helped make our scholarship legible to the university and to the larger scholarly community.

I want to consider the scholarship of public humanities in a big frame: what would it mean to do a different kind of scholarship, to change scholarship itself? But we need to think in a small frame as well: how do we do this work in a university/department that has not changed? I learned about the big frame – how to change our scholarship – by working at New Urban Arts. I learned about the small frame by working at an Ivy League university, about three miles away. My essay in the *Doing Public Humanities* anthology compares New Urban Arts, and the education and creative practice they undertake, with what happens at Brown, and tries to explore both the big and small frames for public humanities.

New Urban Arts is an art studio for emerging artists and high school students, housed in a storefront across the street from three high schools in Providence. The artists serve as volunteer mentors – more guides than teachers – to the students; the students choose their mentors and have enormous power within the organization and over their own art-making. In 2016–2017, New Urban Arts served over five hundred students (about half came more than once a week) and twenty-five emerging artists who volunteered as mentors. Only 12 percent of the students identified as White and 82 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch according to income guidelines. The organization had eight staff members and a budget of about $500,000. I have worked with New Urban Arts for more than ten years, at first more as a volunteer than as a faculty member, until my time there became my scholarly research.

The form of art practiced at this storefront provides important lessons for how we think about the humanities and scholarship. Newcomers to New Urban Arts repeatedly ask: "what is the art" in the organization's name? Is it the work the students produce? Or do the students serve as apprentices and their mentors produce the art with student help? Or does the studio offer classes ("How to Make Art") and the art is produced somewhere else, maybe after the students and the mentors leave, education in hand?

New Urban Arts has collectively thought about these questions. They state that they foster a "creative practice":

> What if creativity were a social enterprise rather than an individual one? What if our creativity was measured not by a finished artwork – the innate talent it may suggest or the prescribed expectations it may meet – but by the extent to which that work was fueled by our own process, our own questions, and by our relationships with one another?[21]

With this definition, New Urban Arts places itself directly in the field of social practice art and changed how I thought about humanities scholarship. Exploring social practice art (which, like public humanities, goes by many names), I looked not only at New Urban Arts but also at Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, the work of Wendy Ewald, and Project Row Houses in Houston and, by extension, the organization Creative Time.[22] How social practice artists understand their practice changed mine. For my purposes, social practice art believes that art is public and community-based; the creative process is as important as the product; work is collaborative; and the practice employs a social justice framework, examining oppression and inequality. Like all social practice art, what happens at New Urban Arts is participatory and engaged with and answerable to a community. And from its beginnings, New Urban Arts rooted itself in social justice activism, addressing issues of racial inequality in its programming and service, and saw its work as a chance to create with students enrolled in the poorest schools in Providence.

I looked at New Urban Arts and asked: why does our scholarship not look more like social practice art? Why is there not a New Urban Humanities? I hope that our book *Doing Public Humanities* documents and analyzes a public humanities rooted in process and collaboration and dedicated to political activism: we do not do research about communities; we do research with communities and then present what we have learned together. We see the essays as exploring, as well, the small-frame view of the scholarship of public humanities. The book shows that public humanities scholars can write about their projects (what they have learned and been taught) in formats that can be peer-reviewed, following historians and anthropologists in relying on case studies. Public humanities as a collaborative humanities, undertaken in a social justice framework and written through engaged case studies, could change how the humanities are viewed and provide a road map for changing the world. This is the kind of humanities I want to practice.

One important influence in thinking through a public humanities scholarship would be the field of digital humanities, which emerged at the same time as, and is often intertwined with, public humanities. Digital humanities takes up, for example, the issue of expertise and its location. When archives are accessible online for all to see, what is the role of the scholar? In addition, digital initiatives often make room for collaboration (crowdsourcing in digital parlance) and so need to consider questions of authorship and authority. The two fields have much to learn from each other and continued dialogue could help both.[23]

A good example of the scholarship of public humanities is the Humanities and Public Life series from the University of Iowa Press, edited by Teresa Mangum and Anne Valk and sponsored by the Obermann Center for Advanced Study at the University of Iowa.[24] The series currently has seven books in print, ranging from English literature to history to geography.[25] The books "strike a . . . balance between reflection and analysis of the project's significance and impact . . . and the 'story' of the project as it unfolded." Mangum notes, "we started so that people who are doing public scholarship or working with communities would have a way to represent their work in a format that would be intelligible to their colleagues." The challenge in such work, according to Mangum, is not that the university scholarship overwhelms the community programs who struggle to understand it, but the opposite: humanities scholars sometimes forget that they have anything to contribute when faced with the compelling and successful community organizations with whom they collaborate.[26]

The "goals of the publicly engaged humanities," as Daniel Fisher outlines, show what the humanities scholar brings to public work. Fisher uses examples from the Humanities for All website and presents five overarching goals for the public humanities: informing contemporary debates; amplifying community voices and histories; helping individuals and communities navigate difficult experiences; expanding educational access; and preserving culture in times of crisis and change.[27] Case studies that simply document the community knowledge that the scholar has "discovered" are incomplete as public humanities projects. They should also highlight the contribution of the humanities to the shared knowledge production. Fisher's ontology pushes faculty and students to think about their contributions.

Conceptualizing the role of the humanities in public projects must be a starting point for training graduate students in public humanities, particularly those enrolled in humanities PhD programs. Just as flipping the switch on the "does it count?" question forces faculty to consider the role of the humanities in the university and in the larger world, in graduate training, we must also change the way we think about what has come to be known as alt-ac. Training in public humanities for graduate students should not only provide skills needed for a job outside the university; it should cultivate a set of approaches that changes how we mobilize and consider the humanities to improve all of our practices, whether working on campus or off. Without changing anything else about how academic jobs are built; transforming the relationship between the university and the community; or recognizing the vibrancy of the nonprofit world and the jobs it includes, the concept of alt-ac is bankrupt.[28] Given the crisis in university hiring, students will need to see the boundaries between universities and nonprofits as porous and train flexibly to move among job options in the nonprofit sector. Both Matthew Jacobson and I have described our work with PhD (and, in my case, MA) students in public humanities introductory and methodology courses that try to enlarge the definition of the humanities and humanities scholarship as they introduce certain approaches to the public.[29]

A public humanities framework should also change undergraduate teaching. For example, humanities faculty could help students understand the nonprofit sector, as business and communications faculty help students with job advice in the for-profit world. The Humanities Indicators show that despite "the need to expose humanities students (at the undergraduate and graduate level) to information on a range of career options," few programs in the humanities required internships or offered "occupationally oriented coursework or workshops."[30] A public humanities approach to the undergraduate curriculum need not be career-driven in order to help students understand how the knowledge and skills they have learned can help them with a job in the "third largest employer in the U.S. economy," namely, the nonprofit sector.[31] In fact, a wider view of the humanities, taking into account how the humanities can be valuable beyond the campus, makes such pedagogy newly important.

One significant project that engages primarily undergraduate students in public humanities and public memory is the Humanities Action Lab (HAL), now headquartered at the Clement Price Center at the University of Rutgers–Newark. HAL brings public humanities back to a focus on social and racial justice. Beginning with the Guantánamo Public Memory Project, HAL now has more than forty partners who "collaborate to produce community-curated public humanities projects on urgent social issues." Humanities students join with community groups to develop local contributions to traveling national exhibits and then host the exhibits in their campus communities.[32]

So teaching public humanities to undergraduates brings a social justice focus and helps humanities departments imagine postgraduate lives for their students. In addition, if we reconceptualize what we teach, how we teach it, and why we are important through a public humanities lens, our projects will be at the center of the university's mission. As the North Eastern Public Humanities Consortium's white paper insists:

> The ambitions of Public Humanities, then, require qualities of heart and will that have largely eroded within the neoliberal university – an idealism, a vision, a caring, a hu-

> manity that have all suffered under regimes of over-specialization, professionalization, pragmatism, hierarchy, and scale within the postwar academy.[33]

Despite the successful and transformational stories of public humanities in this essay, the pandemic and the racial reckoning of 2019 to 2021 have changed the future in ways this historian cannot foretell. The nonprofit sector, including universities, face big challenges, moral perhaps even more than financial. Within public humanities, the pandemic has halted many projects; changes in program leadership in the North Eastern Public Humanities Consortium and the move to virtual campuses have slowed interactions; and students have joined with communities in an important and continuing racial reckoning that might help some public humanities programs transform their universities or hold some programs to account for their failures.[34] The Mellon Foundation has begun big and exciting initiatives to fund public humanities (named in just that way) in programs situated in universities as well as in communities. But who receives new grants presents, as is the case with all humanities funding, a struggle over too little.

We might, in these uncertain times, learn from our failures and challenges as well as from the many successes noted in this essay and in other narratives of public humanities. My colleagues at Brown's Center for Slavery and Justice, Maiyah Gamble-Rivers, Shana Weinberg, and Anthony Bogues, wrote about the difficulties of exhibiting the Rosa Parks House in Providence. The project's curators explained that the putative exhibit showed how "the practice of doing public history collided with the neo-liberal ethos of the monetization of historical memory" and, more specifically, about the White commodification of Black history.[35] Even before 2021, we faced obstacles to change around issues of racial and social justice as well as because of the difficult relationship between universities and communities. The work is hard and made more complex by the times in which we find ourselves.

I never believed that public humanities alone could change the university or even the humanities. Yet I find hope for change in digital humanities scholar Kathleen Fitzpatrick's beautifully conceived and described concept of "generous thinking," a road map for how to remake the intellectual foundation of the humanities. Fitzpatrick takes her title concept, generous thinking, from David Scobey, one of the founders of Imagining America, and finds its early manifestation in public humanities projects.[36] Many of the most interesting descriptions and prescriptions for a renewal of the humanities, and of the universities that depend on them, begin at the site of public humanities. I like being in the center of the map. Let's see where we can travel from here.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This essay draws from work done in collaboration with staff and students at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, Brown University, including Sabina Griffin, Ron Potvin, Marisa Brown, Majida Kargbo, Jim McGrath, and Robyn Schroeder, as well as with friends at New Urban Arts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Smulyan is Professor of American Studies at Brown University. She is the editor of *Doing Public Humanities* (2020) and author of *Popular Ideologies: Mass Culture at Mid-Century* (2007) and *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting* (1996).

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