

# Introduction

*Carin Berkowitz, Norman Bradburn &  
Robert B. Townsend*

There are several reasons that this is an opportune time to examine the state of the humanities. Over the past decade, there have been a number of reports on the health and value of the humanities, led, of course, by the American Academy's report, *The Heart of the Matter*,<sup>1</sup> but those qualitative investigations have been supplemented in recent years by the release of important new empirical data on the humanities, including two national surveys by the Academy's Humanities Indicators (on the status of departments at four-year colleges and the attitudes of the general public about the field)<sup>2</sup> as well as a deep text analysis carried out by the University of California, Santa Barbara, the University of Miami, and California State University, Northridge, which analyzes commentary about the humanities in the press and social media. The findings from these studies bring important new evidence to bear on the state of the humanities both as an academic enterprise and as a social good, and are described in greater detail in this volume. Moreover, as this volume goes to press, the past two years point to the vital role the humanities play in society. To name just two recent examples, this role surfaced in public efforts to understand and respond to the human dimensions of pandemics and policing, as well as the contested histories of the United States and the world. The responses to these challenges could have a transformative effect on public perceptions of the humanities, but only if both practitioners and audiences understand better what the humanities are and what role they play in the world around them. The field needs to build bridges between its disciplines and its publics, between the questions it poses and the solutions that can be identified in the work of the humanities.

The most recent issue of *Dædalus* on the state of the field was published in the winter of 2009, but that was in a very different context from the one we find ourselves in now, in the summer of 2022, particularly for those who work (or aspire to work) in academia. As the first essay in the issue ("The State of the Humanities circa 2022") details, the number of undergraduate majors and the number of academic jobs have fallen sharply in almost every humanities discipline in the years since. But even as the academic humanities seem particularly beleaguered, a

growing effort to connect the humanities to the public appears to be gaining recognition in the field. The public humanities have long had a substantial presence outside the academy in many public-serving institutions in the history and culture sectors, as well as the public programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities and its subsidiary state humanities councils. Until recently, however, these activities have received only limited recognition within academic circles. In a 2017 survey of humanities departments, just 38 percent indicated public humanities work would be considered valuable for promotion and tenure, with a modestly higher share in history departments, which started to develop more robust “public history” programs over the past forty years. While a handful of colleges and universities have now formalized public humanities centers and programs on their campuses, they remain the exceptions to the rule. And unlike the digital humanities, which have an ample number of volumes articulating the shape and scope of their portion of the field, the public humanities still have only a few – and relatively recent – edited volumes to mark their emergence. At the same time, the place of the academic humanities in public humanities work is unclear, particularly as organizations committed to diversifying the public humanities think seriously about how expertise can be constituted outside of its traditional home.

This issue of *Dædalus* weaves these disparate conversations together, bringing a range of perspectives from across the breadth of the humanities enterprise into dialogue. The authors are leading representatives in their aspects of the field, within their disciplines, institutional settings, or areas of practice. The first two essays establish a statistical basis for this conversation. First, Norman Bradburn and Robert B. Townsend survey recent evidence about the health of the humanities, while potentially raising fresh challenges to the field’s perceptions about itself. Then Alan Liu and his colleagues on the WhatEvery1Says project assemble the recent wealth of information they have gathered on media presentations of the humanities to offer fresh insights into the public’s understanding of the field (in “What Everyone Says: Public Perceptions of the Humanities in the Media”). Their findings are both rich and surprising, as they discover the term has a substantial presence in public discourse, but often not where one would expect it, and rarely in forms that relate to academic discourse.

Shifting from empirical evidence about the current state of the field to discussions about its future, the next three essays pose larger questions about the direction of the field and where it might be (or perhaps should be) heading. In “The Public Futures of the Humanities,” Judith Butler challenges perceptions of the academic humanities, while raising concerns about the field’s enclosure within the “ivory tower.” She calls on academics to reposition their own work within the larger challenges facing society and the world; she fashions a vision of the field that draws on the world and reports back to it. Sara Guyer, in “Beyond the

Survival of the Global Humanities,” then builds on the perspective offered by Judith Butler by positioning the challenges into a larger global frame, drawing on a new world report on the humanities that she is editing. Their perspectives reflect the view of the academic humanities looking out. Carin Berkowitz and Matthew Gibson, leaders of state humanities councils in New Jersey and Virginia, turn the viewpoint around and redescribe the humanities from the position of those who develop programming for the public every day. In “Reframing the Public Humanities: The Tensions, Challenges & Potentials of a More Expansive Endeavor,” they describe what it means to bring the humanities to audiences outside the academy and challenge their academic colleagues to recognize both the vitality of the public humanities and the role it can play in mediating the relationship between the public and the academic field.

The next three essays describe efforts to create engaged public humanities programs. George Sánchez and Denise Meringolo describe recent projects by two academics who are building those bridges between their work and their communities. In “Opening the Humanities to New Fields & New Voices,” Sánchez describes his work with students to develop humanities programs that reflect and speak to communities traditionally neglected in the story of Los Angeles. And Meringolo and her colleagues follow with “Creating Knowledge with the Public: Disrupting the Expert/Audience Hierarchy,” which describes a project to capture the history of recent public traumas in Baltimore in ways that build on a respectful dialogue. Fath Davis Ruffins then offers an institutional perspective focused on “Grassroots Museums & the Changing Landscape of the Public Humanities,” examining how museums of a range of sizes took up and then amplified the voices of those who had been long-neglected in the nation’s story.

The next two essays turn the focus from engagements in and with the public to recent efforts to create new bridges between the public and the scholars in the academy. Susan Smulyan describes the establishment of one of the nation’s first academic programs in the public humanities at Brown University (in “Why Public Humanities?”), and Edward Balleisen and Rita Chin, in their essay “The Case for Bringing Experiential Learning into the Humanities,” take up one of the largest challenges for the field (at least as judged by the frequency with which it appears in the media): assisting humanities graduates into the workforce. Writing from the perspectives of the University of Michigan and Duke University, Balleisen and Chin offer examples of new and innovative programs that develop the skills of humanities students by engaging them in projects with and for the public.

Moving from formal programs intended to build better bridges between the humanities and the public, the next set of authors explores new and emerging areas of humanities research that are oriented toward greater public engagement. The first two essays take up two disciplines that we believe are properly aligned with the humanities, but whose alignment tends to remain contested by other

specialists in the field. In “Communication & Media Arts: Of the Humanities & the Future,” Roderick Hart describes the recent emergence of these subjects as areas of research (and statistically, the fastest growing area of humanistic studies). Then Jodi Magness and Margaret Mitchell take up “Religious Studies & the Imagined Boundaries of the Humanities” and assess the relationship between their discipline and the other humanities fields in one direction, and the public, in the other.

The four essays that follow consider the relevance of the humanities to some of the largest areas of public concern. Kwame Anthony Appiah starts this section with “Philosophy, the Humanities & the Life of Freedom,” examining historical and contemporary challenges in philosophical explorations into questions of equality. Keith Wailoo then takes up the medical humanities in “Patients Are Humans Too: The Emergence of Medical Humanities,” describing the development of an area of study given much wider attention by the recent pandemic. The penultimate essay by James Pawelski, “The Positive Humanities: A Focus on Human Flourishing,” describes another emerging area of research that draws on insights from psychology to elevate a new set of potentials for the humanities. And the final essay in the volume, “Planetary Humanities: Straddling the Decolonial/Postcolonial Divide,” by Dipesh Chakrabarty, takes up the human dimensions of climate change to articulate the urgent need for an environmental humanities. Each of the essays in this section demonstrates how the field is evolving to address public needs and counters perceptions of the academic humanities as largely isolated in an ivory tower.

For readers who take the journey from beginning to end in this volume, we hope you will take away a more grounded perspective about what currently ails the humanities, but also a more positive view of a field evolving to meet the challenges of the moment.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Carin Berkowitz** is Executive Director of the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. Previously, she worked for eight years at the Science History Institute, most recently as Director of the Center for Historical Research. She is the author of *Charles Bell and the Anatomy of Reform* (2015) and editor of *Science Museums in Transition: Cultures of Display in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America* (with Bernard Lightman, 2017) and has published in such journals as *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, *British Journal for the History of Science*, and *History of Science*.

**Norman Bradburn**, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1994, is the Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus and Senior Fellow

at NORC at the University of Chicago. He also served as Provost of the University (1984–1989), Chairman of the Department of Behavioral Sciences (1973–1979), and Associate Dean of the Division of the Social Sciences (1971–1973). He is the author of *Building Better Arts Facilities: Lessons from a U.S. National Study* (with Joanna Woronkiewicz and D. Carroll Joynes, 2015), *Thinking about Answers: The Application of Cognitive Processes to Survey Methodology* (with Seymour Sudman and Norbert Schwarz, 2010), and *Polls and Surveys: Understanding What They Tell Us* (with Seymour Sudman, 1991). He is Co-Principal Investigator of the Humanities Indicators.

**Robert B. Townsend** oversees the Humanities, Arts, and Culture programs, the Washington, D.C., office, and the Humanities Indicators at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Prior to the Academy, he spent twenty-four years at the American Historical Association as Director of Research and Deputy Director. He is the author of *History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880 – 1940* (2013) and author or coauthor of more than two hundred articles on various aspects of history, higher education, and public humanities. He is Co-Principal Investigator of the Humanities Indicators.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Heart of the Matter* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013), <https://www.amacad.org/publication/heart-matter>.
- <sup>2</sup> Humanities Indicators, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “Higher Education Surveys,” <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education-surveys>; and “The Humanities in American Life: A Survey of the Public’s Attitudes and Engagement,” <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/humanities-american-life-survey-publics-attitudes-and-engagement>.