

Dædalus

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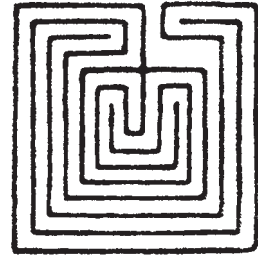
The Humanities in American Life: Transforming the Relationship with the Public



Carin Berkowitz, Norman Bradburn
& Robert B. Townsend, guest editors

with Alan Liu · Abigail Droge · Scott Kleinman
Lindsay Thomas · Dan C. Baciú · Jeremy Douglass
Judith Butler · Sara Guyer · Matthew Gibson
George J. Sánchez · Denise D. Meringolo · Lee Boot
Denise Griffin Johnson · Maureen O'Neill
Fath Davis Ruffins · Susan Smulyan · Rita Chin
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Margaret M. Mitchell · Kwame Anthony Appiah
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& Dipesh Chakrabarty

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“The Humanities in American Life: Transforming the Relationship with the Public”

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Inside front cover: (top) Javier Mendoza (photographer), *Standing Up for Their Rights*, 1986, Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library. Original caption dated August 12, 1986, reads: “About 500 men, women and children carrying signs and shouting ‘No prison in East L.A.’ march up and down Olympic Boulevard, protesting the proposed site of a 1,700-bed, medium security state prison.” (bottom) Two visitors examine the Boyle Heights Museum exhibition *Aquí Estamos Y No Nos Vamos* at CASA 0101 in East Los Angeles, 2017. Photo courtesy of Michelle Vasquez-Ruiz.

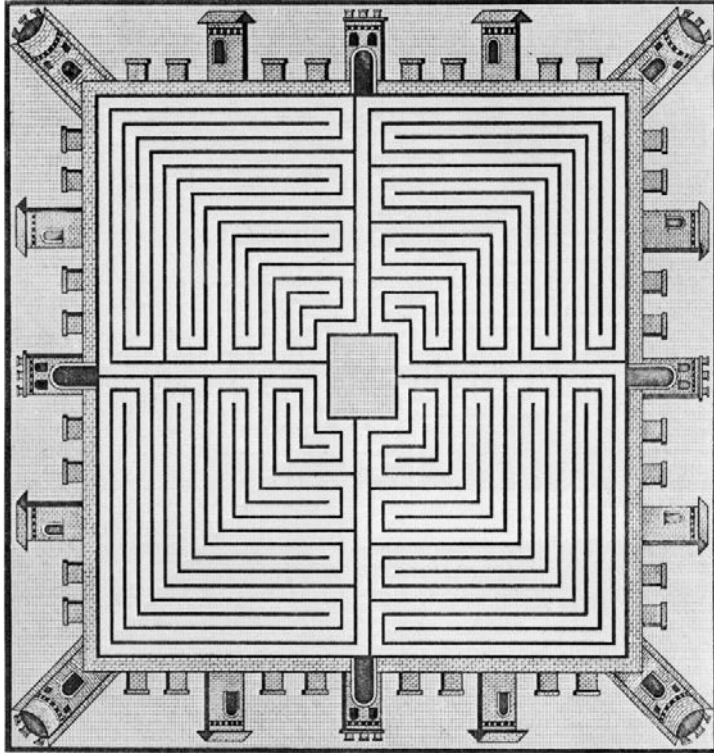
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Nineteenth-century depiction of a Roman mosaic labyrinth, now lost, found in Villa di Diomede, Pompeii

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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*,¹ 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)² 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 spring 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.

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

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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

- ¹ 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>.
- ² 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>.

The State of the Humanities circa 2022

Robert B. Townsend & Norman Bradburn

Depending on one's perspective, the situation for the humanities can appear either quite dire or in a state of renewal and vitality. In the four-year colleges and universities that often set the terms of discussion about the field, the situation is troubling by almost any measure. Even prior to the pandemic, humanities departments were being closed and students were gravitating toward other fields in their selection of majors. Nevertheless, leaders in the public humanities (such as state humanities councils and academic centers for the public humanities) look to a wider range of engagements with the humanities beyond the academy and report that their programs and activities are quite robust (or at least were so, before the COVID-19 pandemic). Since the Great Recession, these divisions have grown increasingly stark, as the downward trends in academia have steepened, while visitation rates at other public humanities institutions – such as art museums and historic sites – have showed a modest rebound.¹ The question remains: how are these trends related and which better reflects the long-term health of the field?

As a starting point for this volume, this essay summarizes recent data about the state of the field both within and beyond the walls of academia. One of the great challenges lies in the gap between the public and academic sides of the humanities, and a more fundamental question about what the humanities actually represent. For the purposes of this essay (and for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators project, which serves as the source of much of the information), the definition we use is quite expansive. We include a broad array of activities in which Americans engage as part of their personal and work lives: for example, early childhood reading; K–12 and higher education in humanities subjects; later-in-life engagement with the humanities through books, the Internet, television, and cultural institutions; as well as descriptive writing and technical reading on the job. This definition captures the broader engagements of the public in a variety of humanistic practices that extend beyond academic disciplines and research. What it does not resolve is the relationship between the humanities as represented in the larger range of humanistic activities and the humanities represented in the academic disciplines. The latter are more self-consciously aware of their

position in a field of activity under that label – though in our experience writing about the field, that consciousness tends to be partial and secondary to their identities as members of disciplines – and they often supply personnel and material to public humanities institutions. Whether that relationship is or should be unidirectional (with academia training specialists who in turn develop and deliver materials to a receptive public audience) or bidirectional (with the public shaping and influencing the choices and activities of the professionals) is a recurring question throughout this issue.

Regardless of what one might imagine as the ideal relationship between the public and the academic humanities, one of the first challenges is the limited public awareness of the field as an organized form of activity. Early exploratory work for a recent Humanities Indicators survey of the general public proved instructive in this regard; it suggested that Americans have diverse – and often errant – conceptions of what the term *humanities* means. When asked to define it, most respondents fell back on labels and words that would be familiar to faculty or public humanists. But we also found that a substantial number of Americans hear the term and connect it to other concepts, including good works (such as giving blood or charitable giving). Others thought the term could or should encompass anything that has to do with human beings, including science and medicine.²

Regardless of how a member of the public might pour meaning into the term when they hear the word *humanities*, they are likely to engage with some humanities content and humanistic practices on a regular basis. Many of them watch historical documentaries, read books, search for and engage with humanities content on the Internet, and engage in ethical decision-making, even if they may not conceive of those activities under a singular umbrella term. But their engagements tend not to align in ways that will seem meaningful to academic humanists. For instance, we found the patterns of engagement are more likely to fall along modes of engagement than disciplinary content: frequent readers tend to read both fiction and nonfiction, people who watch historical documentaries also tend to watch documentaries on other humanities content, and those who look to the Internet for one type of humanities content are more likely to look there for others. Conversely, those who watch historical television shows appear no more likely to engage with historical content in other forms than other Americans. The results of the survey serve as an important reminder that the conceptual boundaries and distinctions that often seem quite meaningful to practitioners in the field rarely carry outside of academic debates.

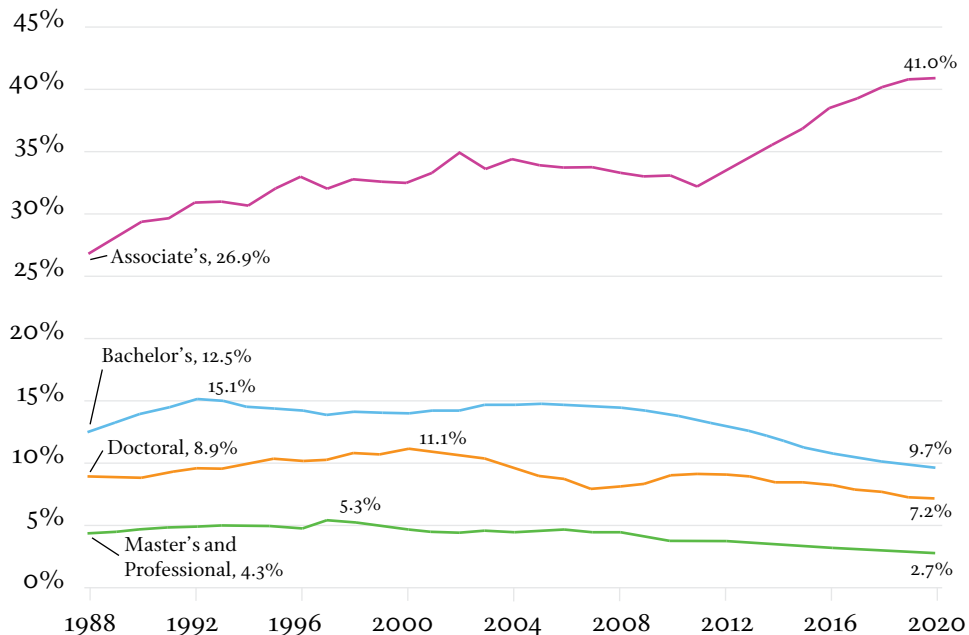
While the findings underscore fundamental differences between the ways humanities practitioners think of the field and the ways the public engages with it, the survey also offered evidence about the positive relationship between the

humanities and the public. Substantial shares of Americans reported engaging at least occasionally in some of these activities, particularly watching shows with historical content and reading fiction and nonfiction books. And when these activities are wrapped together under the umbrella term *humanities* (and further defined as “studying or participating in activities related to literature, languages, history, and philosophy”), more than 80 percent of American adults hold very positive views about the field. These positive attitudes extend from the personal and societal benefits to the public to the need to learn the subjects of the humanities.³ Taken together, the survey results seem to confirm the positive stories from those who engage with the public humanities.

But that is not the story that one is likely to read in the higher education media, where the focus tends to center on the field as an academic enterprise. In this sphere, the humanities tend to be defined more narrowly, in terms of areas of research and study at an advanced level, typically in one of the disciplines associated with the field.⁴ Here there is ample cause for concern, most visibly in the trends of students earning degrees in the field. From 2012 to 2020, the annual number of humanities bachelor’s degrees awarded fell almost 16 percent, with some of the larger disciplines, such as history, losing almost one-third of their majors. At the same time, the number of degrees awarded to students in the STEM fields has grown substantially: for instance, the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in engineering and in the health and medical sciences increased by more than 56 percent over the same period. As a result, the humanities have greatly diminished as measured by their share of students earning undergraduate degrees. As of 2020, the humanities were conferring less than 10 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, the lowest level on record (see Figure 1). Given that faculty members in humanities departments often rely on those students to make a case for departmental resources, they can hardly be blamed for feeling endangered, just as administrators may look at those trends and wonder if they need the same number of faculty members in the department.

The reasons for the recent declines in humanities majors remain understudied but appear more complex than the explanations that typically appear in the media. In many of the articles reviewed for this essay, the problem seems reduced to two variables: rising college costs and student debt, on one side, and relatively low earnings for humanities graduates, on the other. These factors undoubtedly play a part, especially given how often the earnings of humanities majors are juxtaposed with those of STEM majors in news articles on the subject. But this earnings differential has been true for decades and seems unlikely to be the only explanation (though in the context of sharply rising college costs and debt levels, it should not be entirely discounted). The median earnings of humanities graduates are certainly lower than those of their counterparts from many of the STEM subjects, but they are still substantially higher than among those who never earned a college degree. Moreover, when one looks at less tangible measures of job and life satisfac-

Figure 1
Humanities as a Share of All Degrees Awarded at Level, 1988–2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Completions Survey, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data/survey-components/7/completions>.

tion for humanities graduates, one finds ample evidence that they are as satisfied with their jobs and their lives as college graduates from almost every other field.⁵

So where might the problem for college majors lie? Consider a few other possible factors. The number of students earning dual enrollment credits while in high school as well as AP credits from tests in humanities subjects has skyrocketed over the past two decades. This is occurring at the same time that the number of students earning associate's degrees in the humanities and liberal arts in community colleges has grown to unprecedented levels. As Figure 1 shows, while the humanities have been losing ground at every other degree level, they have been rising sharply among those earning degrees from community colleges. While these credits create less expensive routes into and through a four-year college degree, they can have the unintended effect of diverting students around the introductory courses at four-year colleges and universities that have traditionally served as an entrée into a college major.

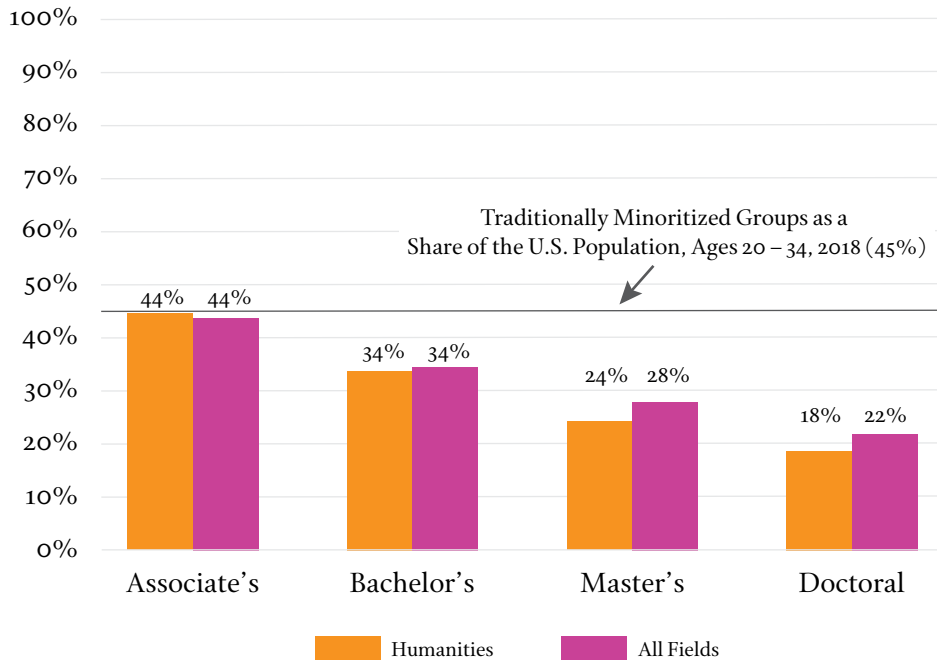
A separate variable that turns up in recent surveys of college alumni from the humanities indicates that they are among the least likely to see a connection between their college major and the jobs they take after earning their degree. In a 2019 survey, less than one-third of the humanities graduates in the workforce thought there was a close connection between their job and their degree.⁶ There are many intangible virtues of studying in the field – such as the value of exploring a subject for its own sake – but as tuition relative to postcollege earnings reaches historic highs, promoting these less tangible values might not be enough. At the very least, faculty members might consider greater transparency in their syllabi and class work, helping students to see that they are also gaining important “transferable” skills in their classes – research, organization, and written and oral communication – and not just specific content knowledge.

The demographics of those entering study in the humanities also remain a significant issue for the field. The share of students from minoritized groups earning degrees in the humanities is close to the average among all college graduates, particularly at the undergraduate level (see Figure 2). That sets the bar exceptionally low, however, because there is a lack of diversity in the college student population as a whole. Only among students receiving associate’s degrees is the share of students from minoritized groups (Alaska Native, American Indian, Asian American, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander), at 44 percent, near the total share in the population; from there it falls to 34 percent among those receiving bachelor’s degrees and 18 percent among those receiving PhDs in the field, less than half the share in the population overall.

The differences between degree levels speak to a challenge for the field, but also an opportunity. If the field could attract more students earning associate’s degrees and develop mentorship and retention programs that aided them from one degree level to the next, it could improve on both the numbers of students earning bachelor’s and doctoral degrees and the enduring lack of demographic diversity within the field.

While the specific causes of the recent declines in humanities majors remain murky, the effects of those declines on the academic professions that educate those students appear clearer. From 2008 to 2010, academic job ads posted with scholarly societies in the field fell more than 30 percent (much of that during the Great Recession, but with further losses in the years since).⁷ In some of the largest fields, such as the modern languages, job openings have continued to decline, while others had only modest recoveries followed by additional declines during the pandemic. While many doctoral programs in the field have started to cut back admissions, the field still conferred almost 5,500 PhDs in the United States in 2020 (9 percent higher than the number awarded in 2008). Given the sustained nature of this job crisis, many of the largest disciplines have turned to promoting career training and employment options for PhDs beyond academia.

Figure 2
Share of Degrees Awarded to Minoritized Groups, 2015–2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Completions Survey, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data/survey-components/7/completions>. Note: Values can differ slightly due to rounding.

This returns us to the value of a thriving humanities enterprise outside of academia. For decades, the National Endowment for the Humanities and its state affiliates have supported thousands of institutions ranging from small local historical societies to museums and nonprofits with large multimillion dollar budgets. A recent effort to develop a pilot census of humanities organizations turned up 45,752 institutions, including 24,022 libraries and archives, 8,033 museums, and 13,654 historical institutions.⁸

These organizations have provided employment opportunities for humanities graduates, but more than that, they have provided another vital public face for the field. In the national survey on the humanities, almost half of Americans reported they had visited art and history museums at least “sometimes” in the previous year. Much larger shares of Americans engaged with the humanities through television, the Internet, and podcasts, though we do not know the source or quality of

the information they were consuming.⁹ All that speaks to broad national interest in output and activities from the humanities.

But one notable area of concern for the field is the declining amount of time Americans spend reading for personal interest. From 2003 to 2018, the average time spent reading for leisure fell from twenty-two minutes to just sixteen minutes (compared with an average of almost three hours watching television and nearly thirty minutes playing games and using computers for leisure).¹⁰ To the extent reading remains a fundamental aspect of the humanities enterprise – especially for the teaching of the humanities at colleges and universities – the waning of that particular capacity in the populace should be a significant concern.

The trends and findings here need an important caveat: they only represent points of time in the past. We both have been studying the field long enough to watch dire predictions about the state of the field turn around, occasionally into fragile states of optimism. The declines in humanities majors and the job crisis for PhDs of the present had their precursors in the 1970s, and the programming developed to address those changes often evaporated as the trends reversed. The field would be better prepared for the future if it drew lessons from its past, built structures and institutions that could carry through waves of crisis and optimism, and forged strong and enduring relationships across all the institutions that represent the humanities.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ According to the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the share of the public that had visited a museum or historic site increased 4.4 percentage points from 2012 to 2017, while the share visiting art museums increased almost 3 percentage points. See National Endowment for the Arts, *U.S. Trends in Arts Attendance and Literary Reading: 2002–2017: A First Look at Results from the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2018), <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2017-sppapreviewREV-sept2018.pdf>.
- ² Humanities Indicators, *The Humanities in American Life: Insights from a 2019 Survey of the Public's Attitudes & Engagement* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 4.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 30–32.
- ⁴ See, for instance, Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisis-of-confidence/567565/>; and Kevin Carey, “The Bleak Job Landscape of Adjunctopia for Ph.D.s,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/upshot/academic-job-crisis-phd.html>.
- ⁵ Humanities Indicators, *The State of the Humanities 2021: Graduates in the Workforce & Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021).
- ⁶ Original analysis by the Humanities Indicators of data from the National Science Foundation, National Survey of College Graduates, 2019, published in *The State of the Humanities 2021*, 26.
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- ⁸ Humanities Indicators, “Welcome to NIHO: Humanities Organizations by the Numbers,” National Inventory of Humanities Organizations, <https://niho.knack.com/niho#overview/> (accessed April 5, 2022).
- ⁹ The findings in the American Academy survey of the public were quite similar to the results from a related survey by the American Historical Association. See American Historical Association, “History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey,” <https://www.historians.org/history-culture-survey>.
- ¹⁰ Original analysis by the Humanities Indicators of data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, available online at “Time Spent Reading,” <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/public-life/time-spent-reading>.

What Everyone Says : Public Perceptions of the Humanities in the Media

*Alan Liu, Abigail Droge, Scott Kleinman,
Lindsay Thomas, Dan C. Baciu & Jeremy Douglass*

Using computational means to understand patterns in how the humanities are mentioned in U.S. journalism, the WhatEvery1Says project brings into focus challenging problems in the perception of the humanities. This essay reports on the project's findings and some of the further questions that emerged from them. For example, how does the "humanities crisis" appear among the many crises of our time? Why do the humanities figure so often in connection with concrete, ordinary life yet also seem abstract in value? How can more of the substance of humanistic research be communicated as opposed to appearing as just academic business? And why is there so little focus in the media on how underrepresented populations are positioned in relation to the humanities by comparison to science and social, political, or economic issues? The essay concludes by recommending that the humanities reframe their crisis as part of larger human crises requiring multidisciplinary "grand challenge" approaches.

They say the humanities are in crisis. Society values the sciences and engineering more; students turn to other majors; humanities programs are the first to be cut in recessions; and funding support for the humanities continues to be a national budget rounding error.¹ This picture does not improve when the humanities are considered over centuries. As Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon argue in *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*, the humanities have been in crisis throughout modernity because they staked their values in opposition to those of capitalistic, industrial society:

The story of the *Geisteswissenschaften* [or "the modern humanities"] as narrated by their advocates from Dilthey's day to ours has consistently been one of crisis and decline in which capitalism, industrialization, technology, and the sciences eroded the humanities' cultural legitimacy and epistemic authority.²

Whenever the coin of modern industrial society landed face up, the humanities were in crisis; and whenever face down (as in recessions), they were doubly in crisis.

Yet in 2019, when the American Academy's Humanities Indicators surveyed Americans' views of the humanities, the top takeaway was that there was "considerable agreement about the personal and societal benefits of the humanities, substantial engagement with a variety of humanities activities at home and in the workplace, and strong support for teaching humanities subjects in the schools." Also, "relatively few Americans agree with a variety of negative statements about the field."³

So what *does* everyone say about the humanities? In 2013, after the Great Recession, our 4Humanities.org initiative, which pursues humanities advocacy using digital means, started the WhatEvery1Says project (WE1S) to answer this question.⁴ Funded from 2017 to 2021 by a \$1.1 million grant from the Mellon Foundation's Public Knowledge program (formerly called Scholarly Communications), the project explored public perception of the humanities through methods complementing, but mainly differing from, the Humanities Indicators' surveying approach.⁵ We read the media. In particular, we used databases (primarily Lexis-Nexis) and other online sources to gather a corpus of 1,028,629 English-language, journalistic media documents mentioning the word "humanities" and, for some research purposes, also the terms "liberal arts," "the arts" (in the British sense spanning humanities and arts), and "science(s)." This corpus, which we organized in collection subsets (such as our C-1 collection of U.S. mainstream, local, and student newspaper articles), draws on 1,053 U.S. and 437 international news and other sources from the 1980s through 2019, though mostly after 2000. For comparison, we also gathered a random sample of 1.38 million documents from those sources. In addition, we harvested over six million social media posts mentioning the "humanities" and related terms (about five million from Twitter and one million from Reddit), and about 1.2 million transcripts of U.S. television news broadcasts from those available in the Internet Archive.⁶

Why search for the word "humanities" and related keywords? These terms by themselves do not cast a net over all the humanities. In the vast sea of public discourse, the humanities also appear under the names of "literature," "history," or other specific fields and are evoked everywhere in discussions of particular people, books, organizations, or events. There is no predefined, bounded set of media documents for studying public discussion of humanities topics. So we aimed for a strategically chosen subset of journalistic materials mentioning the literal word "humanities" in order to capture a swath of examples on both sides of the line between a general concept and specific kinds of humanities, and between wider public discussion (as when "humanities" comes up in relation to broadly literary or historical areas) and specialized academic discourse on the humanities.

Focusing our analysis for the present on U.S. sources, we pursued research questions with the aid of a computational machine learning method called "topic modeling," complemented by other algorithmic methods such as text classifica-

tion, keyphrase extraction, statistical detection of words distinctive to groups of texts (using the Wilcoxon rank sum test), and simple counting (such as how often “humanities” comes up by comparison with “science[s]”). Widely utilized in the sciences, social sciences, and digital humanities, topic modeling assists humans in understanding large collections of texts by discovering what appear to be thematically coherent “topics.” It does so by analyzing which words tend to co-occur across a corpus and in individual texts. In a topic model, co-occurring words are assembled into groups and ranked by prominence within that group. When articles contain many words from such a group (to take an example, words like “London” and “Parliament”), this can suggest that they participate in the topic behind that group (here, perhaps, “British government”). Topic models also separate out different topics even if they share words, as would be the case in articles discussing “London” in an overlapping vocabulary of economics, referring to the city’s status as a finance capital. Further aiding in grasping large corpora, topic models indicate the relative weights of topics in the whole document set as well as in individual texts (which are infused with multiple topics in different proportions), and additionally identify specific documents highly associated with topics of interest, thus guiding researchers to particular texts to read closely.⁷

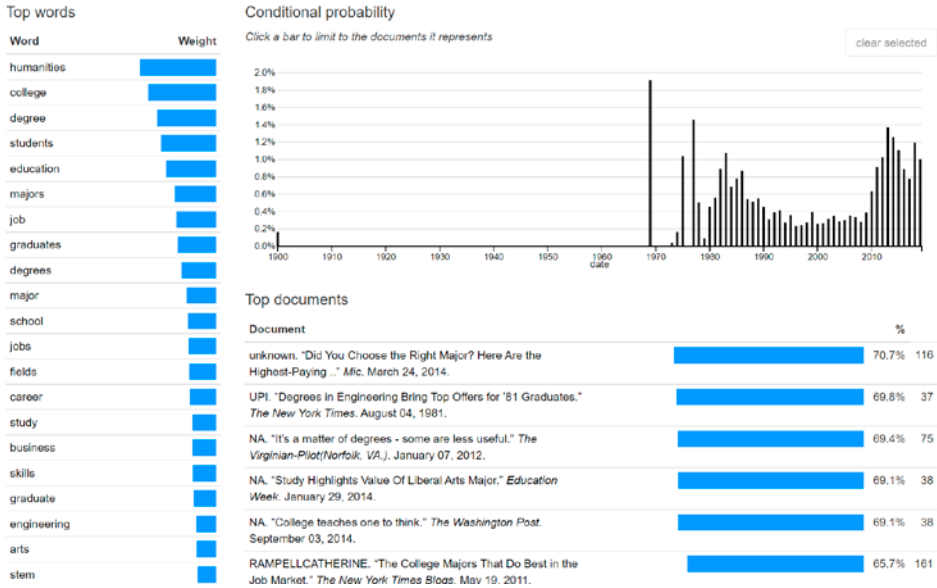
So what did we find? Initially, we drew up findings on our website in one-page, modular, plain-language “key finding cards” inspired by data-reporting methods in the nutrition, medical, and data science fields.⁸ Drawing on those cards, and connecting and amplifying their themes, we here put forward broader claims. Below are our most important larger findings, which in our conclusion we frame in an overarching argument: the challenges posed by public perception of the humanities are an opportunity to reposition the humanities in relation to the largest crises – the “grand challenges” – of our time.

An important initial context for understanding the profile of the humanities in the media is that their public mindshare is very small. In a random sample from top U.S. newspapers, 2 percent of articles mention the humanities. By comparison, 7 percent mention the sciences.⁹ The “humanities crisis,” a frame that academic humanists often feel is all-consuming, is not a crisis in the awareness of larger society (though it does receive some attention in college journalism).¹⁰ Even within the comparatively few discussions of the humanities in the media, crisis is by no means the predominant frame. Instead, such discussions encompass a wide set of associations – even mundane ones that would not individually seem to be worth mentioning – that destabilize our preconceived definitions of what the term humanities means.

Our corpus shows, for example, that the humanities are threaded throughout people’s experiences as part of the ordinary happenings of life.¹¹ Embedded in the everyday, event-oriented, and local, the humanities participate in a constant

Figure 1
 Topic Model of WE1S Collection 1 Shown in Andrew Goldstone's Dfr-Browser (adapted for WE1S)

Topic 25

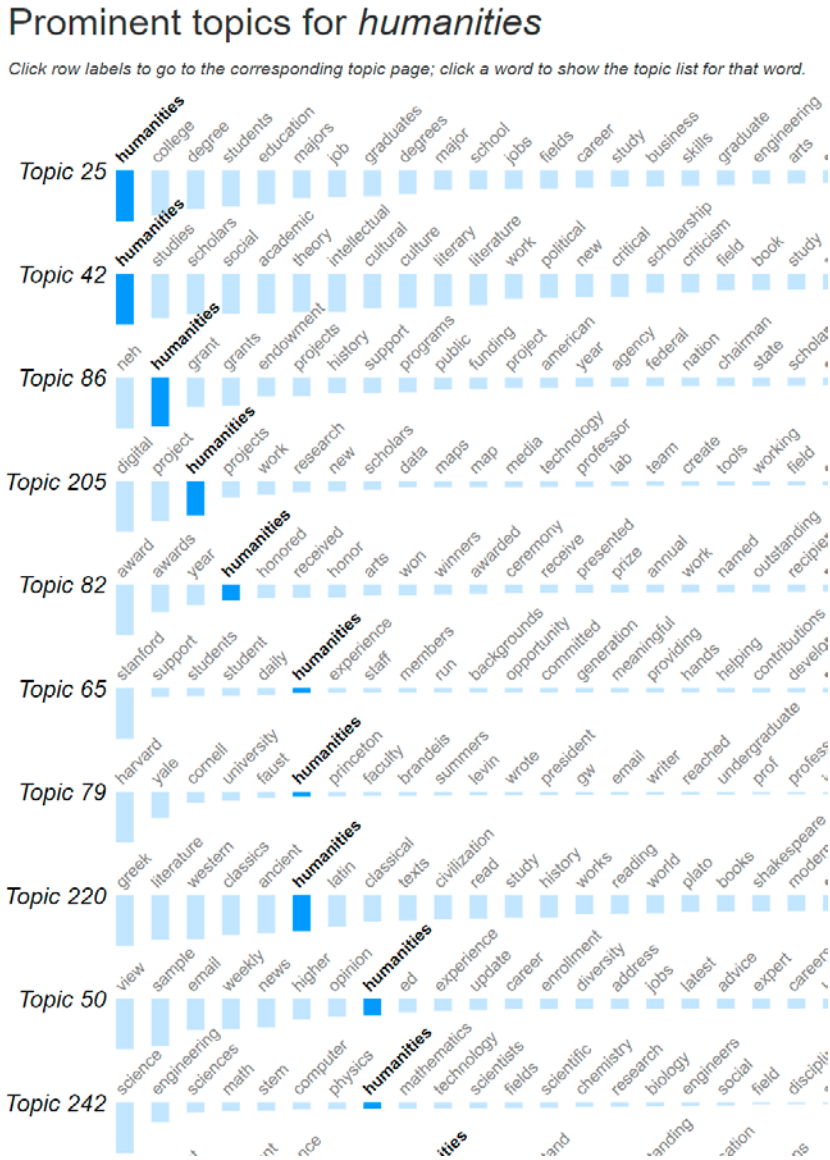


Collection 1: U.S. News Media, c. 1989-2019 (WE1S core collection of articles mentio

Overview Topic Document Word Bibliography Word index

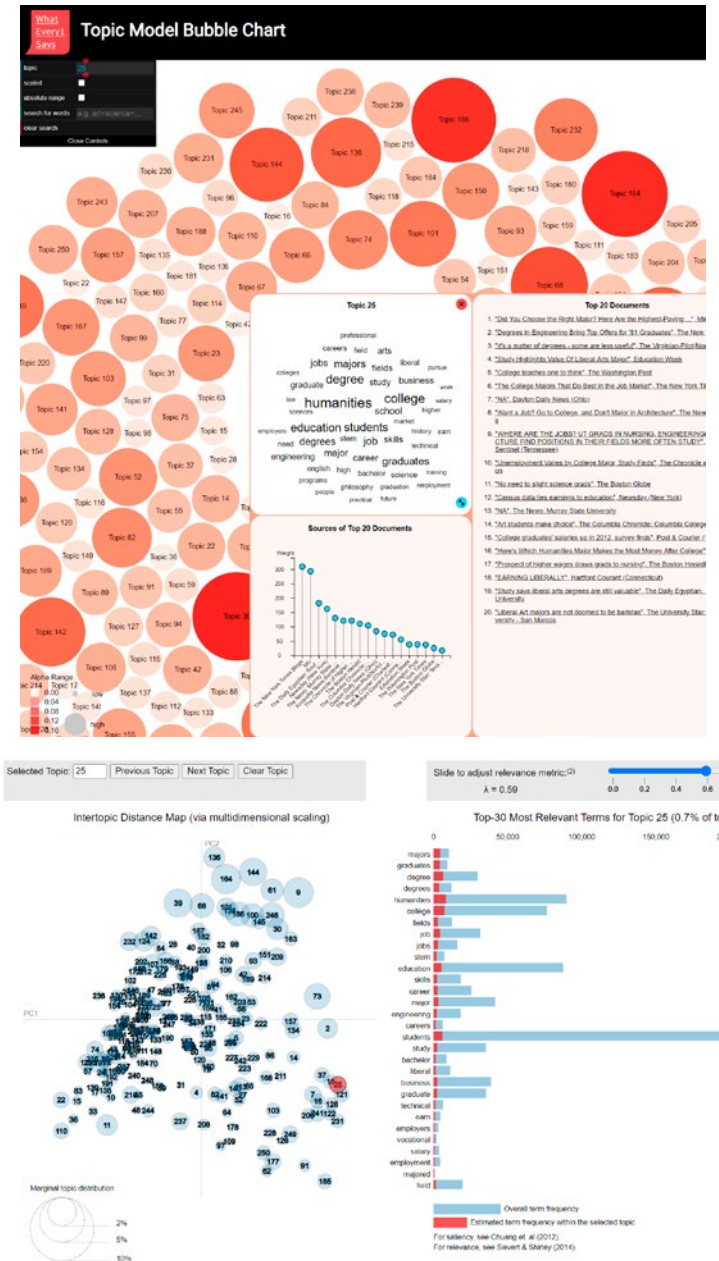


Figure 1, continued



Note: Separate views show part of a grid of 250 topics, the top topics in which the word “humanities” frequently appears, and a detailed look at Topic 25, displaying the most frequent words in the topic and documents highly associated with those words. For live examples of visualizations shown in Figures 1 and 2 and other topic model visualization tools, see the “start page” of Collection 1 at “Collection 1: U.S. News Media, c. 1989–2019,” WhatEvery1Says, http://harbor.english.ucsb.edu:10002/collections/20190620_2238_us-humanities-all-no-reddit/.

Figure 2
 Topic Model of Collection 1 Shown in Sihwa Park's TopicBubbles and Ben Mabey's pyLDavis



Note: Sihwa Park's TopicBubbles was created as part of WEIS and Ben Mabey's pyLDavis is based on Carson Sievert and Kenny Shirley's LDavis.

stream of cultural activity and community gatherings, appearing in discourse about local arts festivals, bookstore readings, museum exhibits, and campus events.¹² Similarly, on Twitter, students mainly use the term humanities to chronicle everyday moments on campus, such as attending a class, taking an exam, or noting an event in the humanities building.¹³

The humanities also index the “ordinary” in the different sense of fundamental events of living and dying. Wilcoxon test and keyphrase extraction data show that articles containing “humanities” from top-circulation newspapers, for example, are characterized in part by family-oriented language such as “wife,” “mother,” “father,” “son,” “daughter,” “children,” and “parents” as well as life-event verbs such as “born,” “married,” and “died,” often indicating the frequency of obituaries and wedding announcements.¹⁴ Mentions of the humanities disproportionately accompany such genres representing momentous personal occasions when families for reasons of their own find it important that a loved one’s life be crowned by citing a humanities degree, award, or organization. Notably, this kind of everydayness appears to be more pronounced for the humanities than for the sciences. While we found in our corpus that documents mentioning the sciences far outnumber those mentioning the humanities (by a ratio of about twenty-five to one), the numbers of obituaries mentioning the sciences and the humanities are relatively even.¹⁵ This finding suggests just how widely humanities-related organizations and activities are deposited throughout the social body. Genres that are often overlooked in discussions of the humanities – event listings, marriage announcements, and obituaries – became central for us as a previously unrecognized milieu of the powerful, widely distributed impact of the humanities.

Another main context for the humanities in the media is higher education. Words like “students,” “faculty,” “dean,” “courses,” “major,” and “departments” frequently co-occur with “humanities,” indicating how deeply the humanities are tethered to academia, particularly college teaching. Higher education is a dominant discursive frame in Twitter posts mentioning “humanities” as well.¹⁶ Across our collections, the media not only depicts the humanities as siloed in universities but also sees few distinctions between its academic fields.¹⁷ Whereas individual scientific disciplines are often clearly delineated, humanities fields tend to blur together as generic “academics.”¹⁸ Screened behind a dense mass of institutional arrangements and infrastructure, even prominent humanities disciplines are often illegible.¹⁹ Other humanities fields fade entirely out of view.²⁰

The way the humanities appear in higher education varies by institution, however. When we compare articles from a variety of university and college student newspapers using Wilcoxon tests, we see differences between private and public institutions.²¹ Articles associated with private institutions often emphasize the language of student experience, growth, and exploration, along with big questions

of human meaning marked by terms like “experience,” “develop,” “explore,” “practice,” “personal,” “interest,” “idea,” “unique,” “opportunity,” “intellectual,” “understand,” and “question.”²² We also see this phenomenon in subsets of private institution newspapers, including at women’s colleges (“thinking” is characteristic), religious schools (big-question words like “justice” are common), and liberal arts schools (words such as “experience” and “feel” are prominent).²³ Articles in the newspapers of public institutions, by contrast, are broadly characterized by organizational and infrastructural language such as “state,” “campus,” and “building.”²⁴ Newspapers at Hispanic-serving institutions and those at community colleges similarly favor language related to academic structures and infrastructure, such as “student,” “president,” “campus,” “instructor,” and “transfer.”²⁵ Perhaps most illuminating, the word “humanities” itself is more distinctive to sources from private institutions, doctoral universities, and religious colleges, suggesting that the term indexes a topography of prestige and resources.

The above contexts – everyday public life and academic infrastructure – represent two major frames through which media coverage refracts the humanities. What is *missing*, however, is just as important. One crucial absence we believe we have found lies in coverage of the humanities as they relate to underrepresented racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity groups. We see relatively little attention in the media to how people of color, women, or members of the LGBTQ+ community are positioned by (or position themselves in relation to) the humanities, at least as a focused area, approach, or set of institutional structures and infrastructures. We have not found many answers in the media at scale for questions such as, “How are different gender and ethnic groups positioned in relation to the humanities in public discourse?” and “What kind of conversations do these groups hold about the humanities?”²⁶ This differs from media discourse on the sciences, in which, for instance, many articles discuss involving more girls and women in STEM.²⁷ The media, and the public it informs, seem oblivious to the humanities as an important context in which to situate underrepresented social groups. Attention is focused instead on such groups in relation to the sciences or broader social, political, and economic contexts, creating an omission in public discourse that is all the more striking given that the humanities have been at the forefront of much research and teaching about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and related concepts.²⁸ This is a crucial omission that we think should be tested further by gathering additional corpus materials to overcome some of the limitations we encountered using proprietary databases of news sources to analyze media related to specific communities.²⁹

Another significant absence in media representations of the humanities is what we might call colloquially the actual “stuff” of the humanities: the materials, contents, and outputs of humanistic endeavors. Straightforward reporting on the objects and outcomes of humanities research, for example, is notably missing

in our corpus. By contrast, articles about scientific research often rivet the public's attention on actual *things* observed or discovered, like exoplanets, particle accelerators, or genes.³⁰ With the exception of books, the humanities are exceptionally object-poor in the media. Analysis of key phrases in top-circulation newspapers and student newspapers, for example, yields an impression of a contentless humanities. Names of literary figures, historical events, or fine-grained subjects of humanistic study are not mentioned with sufficient frequency to become embedded in readers' consciousness as humanities "stuff" (though arts events, such as painting exhibitions, musical performances, and, above all, theatrical productions, do appear frequently).³¹ When the stuff of the humanities is mentioned, it is often at one remove in coverage of its communicative activities, such as talks, classes, discussions, panels, and festivals. Whereas scientific findings are announced in articles that start, "Researchers find . . ." or "Studies show . . .," humanities stuff travels under the cover of its packaging in a venue or calendar event ("Professor to give talk . . .").³²

Even overt defenses of the humanities in the media lack explicit objects and outputs. Justifications for the humanities as contributing to the "public good" or providing "job skills" tend to be unmoored from specifics.³³ Commentators argue that the humanities are central to citizenship, for example, but rarely offer tangible descriptions of the mechanics of that citizenship involving the humanities in political process, intervention, commentary, or democratic engagement.³⁴ Science debates, in contrast, often convey specific political or legal contexts and refer explicitly to laws, bills, hearings, policies, court cases, and presidential agendas, giving a clearer sense of the public forums and avenues for civic action linked to scientific questions.³⁵ Or consider job-oriented justifications for the humanities that emphasize flexibility in skills and careers. "History majors do . . . everything," for example, and humanities skills "can be applied to many different occupations" and "keep open as many employment options as possible."³⁶ Such justifications assert the broad relevance of a humanities education but do little to provide students with a clear idea of the day-to-day practicalities of applying the content or methods of humanistic study to jobs. In writings that defend the humanities, platitudes stand in for precision.

In short, media representations of the humanities diverge toward the extremes of the minutely specific, grounded in announcements of events and venues, and the unspecified, floating free from individuals and their communities into generalities. This suggests that the humanities struggle to be perceived as capable of bridging scales, of zooming in to the individual human scale while also zooming out to the societal scale. How the humanities help people move step by step from the minute experience of reading a book or attending a class, for example, to larger social and world action, and then back again in a round-trip of local-global engagement is not at all obvious. Genre conventions in the media increase the dif-

faculty of traversing from the small to big humanities, from “the book I love” to “the issues we care about.” We see in our corpus that discussions of the humanities span between media genres anchored in the local and particular – the obituary, event announcement, review, course listing, college news bulletin, or tweet about a class – and genres aimed at sweeping claims, such as op-ed defenses of the humanities. But there is no obvious genre conducive to mixing those scales: that is, not a “sidebar” or “color story” on the humanities but a kind of societal advice column on how to take concrete instances of humanities engagement at the individual level and apply them to large-scale social and other problems.

These findings help us imagine repositioning the humanities in society, activating problems in their media perception to goad not just an image change but core changes in what the humanities actually *do* that could earn an image makeover. We close by advancing this goal of reimagining through the overarching argument foreshadowed earlier about how the humanities can engage the “grand challenges” of our time.

Consider that while the humanities are often pictured by its stakeholders to be hanging on through serial crises – recently, the Great Recession and the COVID-19 recession – they are not unique in this regard. Responding to the same Great and COVID recessions, respectively, the Obama and Biden presidential administrations painted a scene of national crisis in some of their signature policy initiatives, including a crisis in the legitimacy of government itself. Alluding to the latter, which is like a crisis within a crisis, the Obama White House’s 2009 “A Strategy for American Innovation: Driving Towards Sustainable Growth and Quality Jobs” asked if “the recent crisis [the Great Recession] was the result of too much rather than too little government support,” and answered that it “illustrates that the free market itself does not promote the long-term benefit of society.”³⁷ And the Biden White House’s 2021 “Fact Sheet: The American Jobs Plan,” which declared a multitrillion dollar infrastructure proposal, specified a litany of crises – the “climate crisis” (mentioned four times), “western drought crisis,” “affordable housing crisis,” “caregiving crisis,” and “economic crisis” – to argue for “infrastructure investments across all levels of government.”³⁸

In our context, we can say that Obama and Biden made a metaphorical “humanities” out of the “government,” portraying government, like the humanities, as a kind of tragic hero agonistes. Both suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Their crisis is to be, or not to be.

But there is an important difference between the two portrayals of crisis. The humanities appear as passive victims. But the presidents strategically reframe crisis to assert that government is necessary to meet it. That new frame is the idea of “challenges,” and especially grand challenges. The Obama White House’s “A Strategy for American Innovation” ends with a climactic recommendation to

“Harness Science and Technology to Address the ‘Grand Challenges’ of the 21st Century.” In similar language, the Biden policy statement declares, “Like great projects of the past, the President’s plan will unify and mobilize the country to meet the great challenges of our time.”

Originally modeled on the mathematician David Hilbert’s declaration in 1900 of twenty-three unsolved mathematical challenges, the grand challenges paradigm – a kind of transcendental to-do list – has become a commonplace policy instrument in governmental, national academy, professional association, philanthropic, higher education, and other domains. Some examples are the grand challenge goals and/or grants declared for the United States or the world by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (starting with its “Grand Challenges in Global Health”); the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA); the U.S. National Academy of Engineering; the U.S. Department of Energy; and the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare. University-led grand challenges followed apace.³⁹

A grand challenge is a crisis under another name. It recognizes calamity yet envisions concerted actions in response. Grand challenge initiatives confront crises of national or global proportions that have no discrete or near-term solution and require collaborative, interdisciplinary solutions on multiple fronts: scientific, engineering, biomedical, agricultural, social, economic, cultural, ethical, and educational. World energy, world climate, world hunger and thirst, and world disease are examples. The purpose of defining grand challenges is to marshal expertise and resources to address such crises.

The grand challenge paradigm is open to criticism, including lack of systemic holism (it is listicles all the way down), outsize emphasis on STEM fields, deterministic solutionism, displacement of any historical or other inquiry not strictly instrumental, and others.⁴⁰ Still, there is one advantage of a grand challenge narrative over a crisis one that should be striking for those concerned about the “humanities crisis.” Whatever the STEM bias of grand challenges, every single one requires at some point serious engagement with the humanities – with history, culture, language, and ethics – as cause, effect, or both. For instance, any grand challenge affecting, or affected by, population migration at scale (which may be all grand challenges) is ipso facto also a humanistic challenge because of the entailments of history, culture, language, and ethics. Heidi Bostic argues for the necessary participation of the humanities in grand challenges in an opinion piece published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Scientists and engineers remind us again and again that these matters [grand challenges] must be understood within broader realms of human concern, like health, vulnerability, sustainability, and the joy of living. These are basic issues of meaning, purpose, and value, questions that the humanities confront. We can thus see underlying

all of the other grand challenges the fundamental questions at the heart of humanistic inquiry: Who are we and how ought we to live? And so the humanities also reveal additional grand challenges overlooked by science, engineering, and technology.⁴¹

In short, there is no humanities crisis as such. Instead, the humanities are enfolded in expressions of, and responses to, larger *human crises*. Can the humanities position themselves in partnership with the sciences and social sciences as part of the full “liberal arts” and “human sciences” needed to address the shared challenges of our time?

In public perception, some aspects of the humanities we have identified in our findings seem remarkably ill-suited to answering this question in the affirmative. However, we also discern promising features and new trends that could be harnessed to articulate the potential alliance of the humanities with the sciences, engineering, medicine, and other areas in approaching society’s challenges. We identify four key aspects of the humanities to build on. The humanities need to practice – and be *seen* to practice – the following: moving between the public and academic spheres; adding particularity to the global; building concrete, material practices into larger conceptual frames of value; and engaging methodologically across disciplines.

First, grand challenges require a humanities able to traverse, and to value equally, the public and academic. We concur with today’s robust initiatives and discussion of the public humanities. But our findings show that the notion of the public humanities runs against the grain of public perception. The media may associate the humanities with many public events and experiences, but it also portrays them as siloed, as we put it, in inscrutable academia. Nevertheless, public and academic spheres overlap in media coverage of what we termed ordinary experiences, events, lectures, literature readings, and so on. That wide river delta of the humanities flooding across everyday individual and social life creates fertile ground on which to build the public humanities.

Second, grand challenges require that the sweeping scope of the “grand” be particularized for specific nations, locales, and communities. The humanities can be pivotal in making that turn to the here-and-now, and me-and-mine. After all, the Gates Foundation’s Global Grand Challenges evolved into a family of initiatives addressed to varied regions: Grand Challenges Africa, Grand Challenges Explorations-Brazil, Grand Challenges India, and so on.⁴² It turns out that grand challenges have no one-size-fits-all solution because they are complicated by the specific lived experiences of different groups. Humanities methods can in principle shine in this regard. A humanistic approach to grand challenges would pursue both civilization-wide and deeply nuanced, local approaches to particular peoples and individuals. However, we also found problems hindering the perception that the humanities can help individuate grand challenges, including a paucity of me-

dia discussion about the relation of the humanities to underrepresented identity communities and disparities in views of the humanities across educational institutions with differing local resources and demographics. Lacunae of this sort underscore the need for the humanities to bridge between the universal and individual scales of grand challenges (zooming in and out, as we said earlier) by more fully applying its rigorous sensitivity to human difference in the public sphere. If the humanities can be seen to be vital in contributing their individuating approach to asking the big questions of grand challenges, then they may also be perceived as crucial in ensuring that the power to ask such questions is not reserved only for a privileged few.

Third, a corollary of requiring grand challenges to be particularized is that universal values (such as global health) need to be infused with concrete, material practices (such as a vaccine that can actually be delivered in Africa). The humanities should participate more fully in such practical thought. Among STEM fields, technology and engineering have been first among equals in grand challenge initiatives because they are applied sciences. By contrast, the humanities are seldom portrayed as applied in this mode, even by advocates defending their value. Justifications that float enormous but empty balloons of value, like “critical thinking” or “flexibility,” are disconnected from the concrete, pragmatic, lived milieu of experience that elsewhere in public discourse radiates from the humanities in event announcements, course listings, wedding notices, and obituaries. In order for the humanities to engage with grand challenges, a chain of linkages from their discrete practices to more general values needs to be established and communicated: for example, first a linkage from a specific poem recited at a funeral to the larger value of the humanities in local communities, then a linkage from community experiences of the humanities to state or national values, and finally a linkage to such grand values as the public good, global health, economic equality, and social equality. Establishing communicable and reproducible practices, conventions, and institutions for moving back and forth in graduated steps between concrete actions and large values can help the humanities join the broader congress of disciplinary practices needed to address world challenges.

Fourth, grand challenges require interdisciplinary exchange not just in research aims but research methods. Humanities methods have room to grow to meet up with those of STEM. Over the course of our project, for example, we gradually came to recognize that our methodology – which mixes humanistic approaches such as close reading with the quantitative, algorithmic, and procedural approaches of the sciences and (in some respects) social sciences – is as central to what our research is about as any finding. It is not crucial whether we call the methods that now overlap in this mixing zone digital humanities, cultural analytics, digital social science, data science, or *in silico* science. What matters is that combining humanistic and scientific methods is one way to revive older notions

of the liberal arts and human sciences in a fresh context that is urgent for society today. Thus consider the research of one of WE1S's former postdoctoral scholars, Dan C. Baciú, whose work blends the humanities with science, mathematics, arts, and digital methods. In "Creativity and Diversification: What Digital Systems Teach," for example, Baciú makes a broad statement about how everything, including culture, is intertwined, creative, and diverse: "any new idea is the product of all past ideas, creativity, and diversification."⁴³ He then translates this proposition word by word into mathematics, which yields an equation (the replicator-mutator equation) that is new to the humanities but long known to unite evolutionary dynamics in the life sciences.⁴⁴ The advantage of using mathematics is not only that it makes a bridge between humanities and life science, but also that the mathematics can be analyzed and applied. Analysis of the equation explains many empirical observations about human culture. For example, analytical solutions of the equation explain the emergence of multiple adaptive topics of discourse rather than the collapse of discourse into one big topic or into accumulated noise and entropy.⁴⁵ These and other insights led Baciú and his collaborators to apply mathematics and develop digital tools and visualization interfaces.⁴⁶ Such work is an example of research in the humanities that is scientific in uniting disciplines and leading from theory through mathematics to practical applications. We who worked on WE1S hope that methods such as ours might help the humanities meet the challenges, including the grand ones, of working together with other fields.

For the moment, the point of leverage for our project is to share our findings and methods with other researchers and the public, beginning with applications of our research in the form of the "Call-to-Action" and "Call-for-Communication" recommendations cards we have begun creating on our website together with prototype "Research-to-Action Toolkits." These suggest concrete steps to reintroduce the humanities to the public. Some recommendations focus on discourse. For instance, how can researching existing student discourse related to the humanities in campus newspapers prompt new ledes for student journalists? Others use the prominence of humanities-related events in the media as occasion-based ways of reengaging the humanities with the public. For instance, how might a "history harvest" or "literature harvest" bind universities and surrounding communities in shared, meaningful humanities practices?⁴⁷ We hope that others will use our open-access data and findings, and our open-source methods and tools, to create their own findings leading to their own recommendations.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Parts of this essay's introduction were adapted from our WhatEvery1Says (WE1S) project website: WhatEvery1Says, “Our Story and Our Results,” <https://we1s.ucsb.edu>.
- ² Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 116.
- ³ Humanities Indicators, *The Humanities in American Life: Insights from a 2019 Survey of the Public's Attitudes & Engagement* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 3, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/humanities-american-life>.

- ⁴ WE1S's principal investigator (PI), three co-PIs, and two postdoctoral scholars coauthored this essay, but the project represents the work of nearly one hundred project participants, including seventy-six graduate and undergraduate student research assistants at the University of California, Santa Barbara; California State University, Northridge; the University of Miami; and Illinois Institute of Technology. See "Our Team," WhatEvery1Says, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/about/team/>. We are not able here to name all contributing individuals, mentioning project members only when citing specific project materials.
- ⁵ We supplemented our methods, however, with surveying, focus groups, and other human subjects research at two of our project's home campuses. See "WE1S Human Subjects Research," WhatEvery1Says, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research/we1s-human-subjects-research/>.
- ⁶ We share under open license the "non-consumptive use" data from our corpus, including word frequency counts, computational models and visualizations, and other derived data, but not plain text restricted by copyright or database licensing terms. For access to full datasets and subset collections (with their data, topic models, and visualizations), see "Research Materials Overview," WhatEvery1Says, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research/we1s-materials/>. Our tools are also available under open license: "Research Tools Overview," WhatEvery1Says, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research/we1s-tools-and-software/>.
- ⁷ For further information on the project's data collection and methods, see Scott Kleinman, Abigail Droge, Lindsay Thomas, and Alan Liu, "Reflections on the Methodology of the WE1S Project," WE1S Research Posts, November 23, 2021, https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research_post/methods-reflection/.
- ⁸ Key finding cards (with reference numbers prefixed "KF") are available at "Key Findings," WhatEvery1Says, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research/we1s-findings/key-findings/>. Along with other cards (such as "M" methods cards and "C" collection cards), these are part of the WE1S reporting system, which starts with one-page descriptions of inputs, processes, and outputs. In referring to our cards in this essay, we often excerpt language from them without quote marks.
- ⁹ Percentages are based on our C-32 collection. See Alan Liu, "Collection 32: U.S. Top Newspapers (Sample of All Articles)," WE1S C-32, December 30, 2019, rev. ed. August 14, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/C-32.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ See Mauro Carassai, "Top Newspapers Do Not Include the Humanities within Crisis Discourse," WE1S KF-1-1, July 6, 2020, rev. ed. June 1, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-1-1.pdf>; Mauro Carassai, "Campus Newspapers Are Much More Focused on the 'Crisis' of the Humanities (Especially in Economic Terms) than Mainstream Media," WE1S KF-1-2, July 9, 2020, rev. ed. July 19, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-1-2.pdf>; Mauro Carassai, "The Media (Especially College Newspapers) Provide an Anatomy of Problems in the Humanities that Frames Them within Larger Issues of Higher Education," WE1S KF-1-3, July 13, 2020, rev. ed. July 22, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-1-3.pdf>; and Francesca Battista, "After 2008, Academic Humanities Advocates Rallied Against a 'Crisis' Largely Absent from Public Discourse," WE1S KF-4-3, December 5, 2019, rev. ed. July 11, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-4-3.pdf>. Reddit data show a less urgent crisis vocabulary of "issues" and "problems," occasionally cresting when circumstances turn "critical." See Raymond Steding, "Students and Others on Red-

- dit See Not the ‘Humanities Crisis’ (the Forest) but Critical Problems and Issues (the Trees),” WE1S KF-6-7, July 22, 2020, rev. ed. September 26, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-6-7.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Tarika Sankar, “The Humanities Are the Art of Ordinary Life,” WE1S KF-5-3, January 3, 2020, rev. ed. May 13, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-3.pdf>. These findings corroborate Michael Levenson’s in *The Humanities and Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- ¹² Sankar, KF-5-3; and Tarika Sankar, “The Humanities Are Robustly Public in Everyday Events and Activities,” WE1S KF-5-8, July 22, 2020, rev. ed. November 11, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-8.pdf>.
- ¹³ Joyce McGee Brummet, “Students on Twitter Use ‘Humanities’ to Talk about Daily Academic and Campus Activity,” WE1S KF-6-3, July 1, 2020, rev. ed. November 11, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-6-3.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ Wilcoxon and keyphrase extraction data: “Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test and Keyphrase Extraction Data Cited in ‘What Everyone Says: Public Perceptions of the Humanities in the Media,’” Zenodo, July 18, 2021, <https://zenodo.org/record/5711303> (folders: “/daedalus/wilcoxon-tests/top-circulation” and “/daedalus/keyphrase-extraction/top-circulation”).
- ¹⁵ Documents in Collection 21 mention science(s) to humanities at about 25:1. Obituaries in Collection 32 are roughly 1:1 (407:476 documents; 579:573 mentions). A caveat is that we have not factored in demographic data to normalize mentions of science versus humanities in obituaries against deaths per year of people with science versus humanities backgrounds. For more on obituaries, including in student newspapers, see Alan Liu, “The High Proportion of Obituaries Mentioning the Humanities Is One Sign of How the Humanities Radiate through Ordinary Life (and Death),” WE1S KF-5-19, June 7, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-19.pdf>; and Jessica Gang, “In Student Newspapers, Parents Appear to Be Supportive Instead of Demanding,” WE1S KF-8-7, July 21, 2020, rev. ed. July 25, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-8-7.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ Kenia Rodriguez, “Twitter Engagement with ‘Humanities’ Is Mostly Academic in Nature,” WE1S KF-6-2, July 6, 2020, rev. ed. July 22, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-6-2.pdf>; and Joyce McGee Brummet, “Academics on Twitter Focus on Jobs for the Humanities, but in Different Contexts for Scholars and Students,” WE1S KF-6-4, July 7, 2020, rev. ed. November 11, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-6-4.pdf>. However, Raymond Steding notes Reddit’s broader “ecosystem of discussion about the humanities.” Raymond Steding, “Reddit Is a Rich, Robust Forum for Discussion of the Humanities Providing an Unfiltered Alternative to Published Media,” WE1S KF-6-6, July 22, 2020, rev. ed. October 1, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-6-6.pdf>. See also his “A Digital Humanities Study of Reddit Student Discourse about the Humanities,” WhatEvery1Says Research Post, August 1, 2019, https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research_post/a-digital-humanities-study-of-reddit-student-discourse-about-the-humanities/.
- ¹⁷ Tarika Sankar and Alan Liu, “The Humanities Appear to the Public to Be Siloed in Universities (Unlike the Sciences),” WE1S KF-5-2, January 3, 2020, rev. ed. June 6, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-2.pdf>.

- ¹⁸ Alan Liu, “The Sciences Stand Out for the Public as Distinct Fields (Unlike the Humanities, which Blur Together as Just ‘Academics’),” WE1S KF-5-7, January 14, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-7.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ For more on the media’s general focus on the “infrastructural humanities” (as observed by WE1S), see Lindsay Thomas and Abigail Droge, “The Humanities in Public: A Computational Analysis of U.S. National and Campus Newspapers,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics* 7 (1) (2022), 36–80, <https://culturalanalytics.org/article/32036-the-humanities-in-public-a-computational-analysis-of-us-national-and-campus-newspapers>.
- ²⁰ Some fields defined as humanities in the 1965 Act establishing the National Endowment for the Humanities receive little media attention. In “The Media Covers Only a Fraction of the Humanities Areas the NEH Was Established by the U.S. Congress to Support,” WE1S KF-7-2, July 15, 2020, rev. ed. July 21, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-7-2.pdf>, Christina Roberts writes: “Studying our Collection 1 . . . we found that only five out of eleven subjects in the NEH definition truly appear in media discourse about the humanities . . . language, literature, history, philosophy, and the arts.”
- ²¹ To make such comparisons possible, WE1S tagged publications by region, politics, identity, medium, and other categories: “Metadata Tags for WE1S Document Sources,” WhatEvery1Says, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research/metadata-tags/>.
- ²² Wilcoxon test results comparing public and private institutions: “Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test and Keyphrase Extraction Data Cited in ‘What Everyone Says: Public Perceptions of the Humanities in the Media,’” folder “/daedalus/wilcoxon-tests/public-private.”
- ²³ Ibid., “/daedalus/wilcoxon-tests/womens-coed,” “/daedalus/wilcoxon-tests/religious,” and “/daedalus/wilcoxon-tests/liberal arts.”
- ²⁴ Ibid., “/daedalus/wilcoxon-tests/private-public.”
- ²⁵ Ibid., “/daedalus/wilcoxon-tests/hsi” and “/daedalus/wilcoxon-tests/community-college.”
- ²⁶ On these questions and related issues in the WE1S project, see Giorgina Paiella, “Thoughts on Diversity in the Archive,” WhatEvery1Says Research Post, July 23, 2018, https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research_post/thoughts-on-diversity-in-the-archive/.
- ²⁷ For example, see WhatEvery1Says, “Collection 33: Articles Classified as Being about the Humanities or the Sciences from U.S. Top-Circulating Newspapers and Student Newspapers, c. 1998–2018–100 Topic Model,” Topic 16, May 15, 2020, http://harbor.english.ucsb.edu:10002/collections/20200515_1455_us-classification-results-top-newspapers-universitywire-hum-sci/dfr-browser/topics100/#/topic/16.
- ²⁸ Although the press might turn to individual humanists as authorities on cultural discourses about diversity and inclusion, overall, there is little media discussion of how research in the humanities intersects with issues concerning race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality within the time frame of our study (which collected media materials up until 2019 prior to more recent public political controversy about critical race theory). See Jamal Russell, “Public Discourse as Represented in the Media Treats Humanists as Authorities on Cultural Discourses about Race, Racism, and Ethics,” WE1S KF-3-1, January 3, 2020, rev. ed. May 31, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-3-1.pdf>; and sam goli, “Contributions of the Academic Humanities to Thought on Gender and Sexual Identity Have Little Impact on Media Coverage of These Issues,” WE1S KF-3-5, July 14, 2020, rev. ed. August 26, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-3-5.pdf>. For more on the relation between the humanities and social groups in the

- media, see Melissa Filbeck, “Discussions in the Media about Gender and Sexual Identity Reveal Conflicting Attitudes about the Humanities,” WE1S KF-3-2, July 16, 2020, rev. ed. July 24, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-3-2.pdf>; Susan Burtner, “In Student Newspaper Articles that Mention the Humanities and Liberal Arts, Race Dominates Conversations around Diversity,” WE1S KF-3-3, July 20, 2020, rev. ed. July 28, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-3-3.pdf>; Jamal Russell, “Opposing Views on Diversity in the Humanities Mobilize the Same Language in Different ‘Frames’ of Understanding,” WE1S KF-3-4, July 22, 2020, rev. ed. August 22, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-3-4.pdf>; Surojit Kayal, “In Both Mainstream and Student Journalism, Universities Appear to be Dominated by Liberals in Ways that Impair Intellectual Diversity,” WE1S KF-4-2, July 27, 2020, rev. ed. October 10, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-4-2.pdf>; and Helen Foley, “Student Journalists Act as Social Inclusivity Activists by Promoting the Importance of Education,” WE1S KF-8-6, July 16, 2020, rev. ed. July 30, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-8-6.pdf>.
- ²⁹ On challenges WE1S faced in preparing a representative corpus to address issues related to the humanities and underrepresented groups, see Samina Ali, “Newspaper Corpus Design and Representativeness Report,” WhatEvery1Says, May 31, 2018, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research/we1s-findings/reports/scoping-research-reports/newspaper-corpus-design-and-representativeness-report/>; Paiella, “Thoughts on Diversity in the Archive”; Giordina Paiella, “Diverse Populations News Sources,” WhatEvery1Says, July 3, 2018, <http://we1s.ucsb.edu/diverse-populations/>; Joyce McGee Brummet, Colleen Tripp, and Katie Wolf, “Media Representation and Diverse Populations,” WhatEvery1Says, July 30, 2018, https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research_post/media-representation-and-diverse-populations/; Giordina Paiella and Tyler Shoemaker, “Scoping Representativeness,” WhatEvery1Says, July 23, 2018, https://we1s.ucsb.edu/research_post/scoping-representativeness/; Tyler Shoemaker, “Methods Issues & Limitations: Models Tend to Elide Political Differences,” WE1S M-100, July 1, 2020, rev. ed. July 7, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/M-100.pdf>; and Susan Burtner, Melissa Filbeck, sam goli, et al., “Methods Issues & Limitations: Word Order Matters,” WE1S M-101, July 16, 2020, rev. ed. November 12, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/M-101.pdf>.
- ³⁰ Alan Liu, “The Public Likes to Take Its Science with Objects, the Bigger or Stranger the Better,” WE1S KF-5-4, December 4, 2019, rev. ed. June 6, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-4.pdf>.
- ³¹ On the relationship between events and the humanities, see Sankar, KF-5-8; Tarika Sankar, “Philosophy Bridges Outward from the Academy through Controversial Social Debates rather than Concrete Events or Activities,” WE1S KF-5-9, July 27, 2020, rev. ed. August 2, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-9.pdf>; Tarika Sankar, “‘History’ Gains More Traction in Public Media Discourse Outside the Academy Compared to Literature and Philosophy,” WE1S KF-5-10, July 27, 2020, rev. ed. August 3, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-10.pdf>; and Tarika Sankar, “Literature Has a Split Personality in the Media. It Is Tied to the Academy, yet Bridges to Public Life in Everyday Book & Reading Events,” WE1S KF-5-11, July 28, 2020, rev. ed. October 14, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-11.pdf>.
- ³² See Thomas and Droge, “The Humanities in Public,” for conclusions from WE1S’s data about “communicated humanities” versus “communicated sciences.” See also Lindsay Thomas and Abigail Droge, “What We Learned about the Humanities from a Study of

- Thousands of Newspaper Articles,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, May 24, 2022, 139–144, <https://doi.org/10.22148/001c.35907>.
- ³³ For how the media represents the value(s) of the humanities, see Phillip M. Cortes, “The Media Assesses the Value of the Humanities both Economically and Intrinsically—but the Great Recession Changed the Balance of the Discussion,” WE1S KF-4-1, April 27, 2020, rev. ed. August 2, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-4-1.pdf>; Francesca Battista and Surojit Kayal, “Students Writing in Campus Newspapers Argue that the Humanities Help Us Engage Meaningfully with Human Nature and Society,” WE1S KF-4-5, December 5, 2019, rev. ed. July 8, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-4-5.pdf>; Phillip M. Cortes, “One Narrative that the Media Promotes Is that Intrinsic Humanistic Values Lead to Jobs, Grants, and Other Tangible Outcomes,” WE1S KF-4-9, July 9, 2020, rev. ed. July 19, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-4-9.pdf>; Phillip M. Cortes, “Paradoxically, the Media both Promotes and Obscures the Value of Humanities Labor,” WE1S KF-4-10, July 10, 2020, rev. ed. July 28, 2020, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-4-10.pdf>; and Phillip M. Cortes, “After 2008, Newspapers Moderately Boosted Coverage of the Positive Economic Value of the Humanities,” WE1S KF-4-12, July 30, 2020, rev. ed. May 3, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-4-12.pdf>.
- ³⁴ Citizenship is a refrain in justifications of the humanities in Collection 33, 100-topic model. See newspaper articles associated with Topic 22: WhatEvery1Says, “Collection 33,” Topic 22, http://harbor.english.ucsb.edu:10002/collections/20200515_1455_us-classification-results-top-newspapers-universitywire-hum-sci/dfr-browser/topics100/#/topic/22. An exception to the lack of humanities-related discussion of civic action is Topic 61, which is associated with open letters, events, research, and teaching efforts driven by social justice issues: WhatEvery1Says, “Collection 33,” Topic 61, http://harbor.english.ucsb.edu:10002/collections/20200515_1455_us-classification-results-top-newspapers-universitywire-hum-sci/dfr-browser/topics100/#/topic/61.
- ³⁵ See science-related articles in Collection 33, 100-topic model, in particular Topic 14: WhatEvery1Says, “Collection 33,” Topic 14, http://harbor.english.ucsb.edu:10002/collections/20200515_1455_us-classification-results-top-newspapers-universitywire-hum-sci/dfr-browser/topics100/#/topic/14.
- ³⁶ These examples are associated with topics in Collection 33, 100-topic model. In relation to Topic 22, see Borden Painter, letter to the editor, February 25, 2009, in response to “Humanities and the Examined Life,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2009; and Nicole Felkins, “Editorial: Humanities Are What Makes Us Human,” *The Pacifican: University of the Pacific*, November 6, 2014. In relation to Topic 100, see “Governor’s Threat to Desubsidize Liberal Arts Education Falls Flat,” *The Wellesley News: Wellesley College*, February 20, 2013. For how students discuss the humanities in relation to job skills, see Rebecca Baker, “Students Writing about Education Value Cognitive Flexibility and ‘Soft Skills’ Associated with the Humanities and Liberal Arts,” WE1S KF-8-1, February 10, 2020, rev. ed. March 22, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-8-1.pdf>.
- ³⁷ Executive Office of the President, National Economic Council, Office of Science and Technology Policy, “A Strategy for American Innovation: Driving towards Sustainable Growth and Quality Jobs” (Washington, D.C.: Office of the President, 2009), 6, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED511653>.

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- ³⁹ See Vanessa Peña and Charles A. Stokes, “Use of Grand Challenges in the Federal Government” (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Defense Analyses, Science & Technology Policy Institute, 2019), <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/u/us/use-of-grand-challenges-in-the-federal-government/d10699final.ashx>; and Michelle Popowitz and Cristin Dorgelo, “Report on University-Led Grand Challenges” (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 2018), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/46f121cr>.
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- ⁴² Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, “Global Grand Challenges,” <https://gcgh.grandchallenges.org/challenges/>.
- ⁴³ Dan C. Baciu, “Creativity and Diversification: What Digital Systems Teach,” *Journal of Thinking Skills and Creativity* 41 (100885) (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2021.100885>.
- ⁴⁴ The replicator-mutator equation is best known for its two main special cases: the quasispecies equation and generalized Lotka-Volterra equations; the latter is also referred to as the replicator equation. The equation can be used to derive or mathematically describe compartmental models of epidemiology, the Susceptible-Infectious-Recovered model, the Price equation, evolutionary game dynamics, variation-selection processes, frequency dependent selection, and homeostatic regulation.
- ⁴⁵ See also Dan C. Baciu, “Chicago Schools: Large-Scale Dissemination and Reception,” *Prometheus* 2 (2019): 20–43.
- ⁴⁶ Two such interfaces, GeoD and TimeD, were partly supported in their development by WE1S and first published in Dan C. Baciu, “Cultural Life: Theory and Empirical Testing,” *Biosystems* 197 (104208) (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biosystems.2020.104208>. See his Figures 2 and 3 for the use of GeoD and TimeD.
- ⁴⁷ For links to our existing recommendation cards, see “Recommendations Overview,” WhatEvery1Says, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/recommendations/>. The history harvest idea is borrowed from William G. Thomas, Patrick D. Jones, and Andrew Witmer, “History Harvests: What Happens When Students Collect and Digitize the People’s History?” *Perspectives on History*, January 1, 2013, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2013/history-harvests>.

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.

The 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.¹ 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.² 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.

The 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.”³ 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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."¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.¹³ 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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ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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).
- ² Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).
- ³ Susan Antón, Aida Gueghian, Craig Lanier Allen, and Carolyn Dinshaw, "GSAS Public Humanities PhD Initiative Mission Statement," New York University.
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- ⁹ 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>.
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- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 24.
- ¹³ 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/>.

Beyond the Survival of the Global Humanities

Sara Guyer

Over the past several years, scholars and critics have begun to talk about the survival of the humanities rather than its crisis. This essay traces the emergence of a rhetoric of salvation and survival in academic advocacy literature, evident in the genres, arguments, and metaphors that writers use to describe the academic humanities. Focusing, first, on a set of recent books that advocate for the humanities as a resource for deliberation, community formation, and critique, the essay then turns to the origin of the contemporary humanities in European philology as a background for the dualism of survival and crisis in narratives about the humanities. The essay concludes by arguing that we need a new framework for understanding the survival of the humanities as global humanities, in particular, one that does not emerge from a European and Christological sense of survival. Drawing upon research conducted as part of the “World Humanities Report,” the essay identifies some of these alternative frameworks based upon the humanities in China, South Africa, and Argentina.

The survival of the humanities is on our minds. While for decades the humanities were ensnared in the rhetoric of crisis, our lament has recently turned to strategy, argument, and manifesto, and with this turn, implicitly and explicitly, to life and survival. Recent book titles like Sidonie Smith’s *A Manifesto for the Humanities* and Eric Hayot’s *Humanist Reason: A History. An Argument. A Plan.*, and collections like *A New Deal for the Humanities* suggest that change is afoot. Judith Butler, in her President’s Address to the Modern Language Association, called this *persistence*, evoking a form of feminist stubbornness.¹ Further, those who continue to hold on to the crisis discourse of the humanities do so now not to indicate an event that could be overcome, but rather a condition that may be permanent, which is nowhere more clear than in Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon’s *Permanent Crisis*. Permanent crisis is nothing if not a name for endurance and survival. But what does it mean to talk about the humanities in terms of survival? What kind of survival are we talking about? And what exactly is going to survive: where and in what form and at what critical cost?

These questions resonate throughout the *World Humanities Report*, a collaboration between the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes and the Inter-

national Council of Philosophy and the Human Sciences, which I have directed since 2018. The organizing questions of the report – Where do the humanities live in the world today? And what are the conditions of their flourishing? – suggest survival more than crisis. Further, the report’s ground-up approach, organized around contributions from distinct national, regional, continental, and linguistic settings, has the secondary effect of reflecting survival as a global condition. In the report, the humanities appear as other than a lasting European formation and colonial/imperial project whose legacies continue to shape disciplines and institutions. Rather, the humanities are a multitudinous, vast, and uneven set of engagements with interpretation, criticism, judgment, representation, translation, preservation, voice, experience, and aesthetics that are not exhausted by European humanism and its disciplinary effects.

The report’s contributors account for a wide range of institutional, disciplinary, and financial interventions, as well as policies and commitments, that will serve today and for the future. It shows further that the institutions of the humanities are modern universities on the European model as we know them, but also NGOs, museums, public humanities projects in radio and podcasts, informal “street” universities, scholarly societies, academies, summer schools, and independent research institutes. These alternative formations include the Forum on Contemporary Theory in India, a mobile winter school that includes participants from across the subcontinent; the Africa Institute, a new graduate program in the arts and humanities based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; and Les Ateliers de la Pensée, a collaboration of scholars, artists, and intellectuals focused in the francophone world working through books, a media campaign, conferences, and an intensive program for early career scholars.² Yet the new rhetoric of survival focuses almost exclusively on the university-based humanities: hiring faculty, maintaining levels of undergraduate enrollment, ensuring lively academic presses, and envisioning forms of collaboration and interdisciplinarity through which the humanities become embedded in all areas of the university, from AI to public health to urban studies.³ In this sense, they raise questions of reproduction and reproducibility, of legacy, and of the difficulty of breaking from dominant legacies that include colonialism and myriad forms of institutionalized political violence. In what follows, I provide an overview of the emergence of this powerful rhetoric of survival in academic advocacy literature, before suggesting the risks of this new discourse and asking whether there are alternatives beyond crisis and survival.

In her account of the precarious state of the humanities within the university, Sidonie Smith, former president of the Modern Language Association, frames the challenge faced by the humanities in terms of “sustainability,” borrowing a framework typically used to describe the future of the planet.⁴ Implicit in sustainability is that a set of collective choices and strategies, whether conceived as

imaginative or sacrificial, has the power to change the lifespan of the humanities and guarantee a future. In Smith's account, the humanities will need to be reconceived in order to be durable; their (our) practices and protocols, particularly as they relate to reproduction (graduate education), will need to be reenvisioned to shift from risk of extinction to *survival*. The newly sustainable practices she enumerates include collaboration, flexibility, open access, innovative teaching, networking, and inclusion. What I find notable in this example is the way that a long-held attachment to crisis and near-death in accounts of the humanities (a crisis that once dominated popular, administrative, and scholarly discourse) has been subsumed by a "life drive." If the earlier account of near-death left many to wonder whether the end already had taken place, whether our time was both that of an ever-deferred future crisis and a past event that had escaped us and for which we were constantly making amends, I want to suggest that this new attention to life in the humanities might also correlate to what Cathy Caruth has called "a different history of survival," one less preoccupied with death and newly consumed with life.⁵

Another version of this preoccupation with life is more subtle in its appearance, less about sustainable strategies and more about the very conception of the humanities and its (their, our) value. Take, for example, Amanda Anderson's Clarendon Lectures on "Psyche and Ethos," in which *life* is the concept and condition through which values are established and affirmed. There, the examined or moral life becomes the vehicle for the survival of the humanities within "transdisciplinary collaborations and precisely around questions of value clarification and understanding of human experience."⁶ In other words, affirming moral life and value as an overlooked (even disparaged) priority of humanities scholarship is also the condition under which the humanities will take on a new and more sustainable life in the university and society. (This is in distinction from the humanities conceived as engaged with precarious life, the hermeneutics of suspicion, irresolution, or futurity.) For Anderson, when understood in relation to *moral life*, the humanities become increasingly valuable to *actual* sustainability: climate science, global health, good governance.

As both of these examples imply, the life or death of the humanities is almost inextricable from an analysis of the one place where we know the humanities are supposed to live: the university.⁷ This analysis has been brewing over many decades, for example, in Jacques Derrida's account of the humanities in his lecture on the university without condition or Bill Readings's collection *The University in Ruins*. Taking Readings's understanding of ruins one step further, Chris Newfield recently asked, in the title of his article, "What Are the Humanities For?" Newfield begins his response by making abundantly clear that the place where the humanities should live – the public university – is itself already dead. As Newfield explains: "Public universities . . . seem not just unable but unwilling to save them-

selves. Given their inertia, public universities will have an easier time moving forward if they start from the idea that public universities as we knew them are dead.”⁸ One wonders who is this public university that is coming into self-awareness of its own death? Is it merely the board of regents, the senior administration, the academic senate, or – insofar as it is not just a single university but the many “flagships” that he lists, in Berkeley, Madison, Ann Arbor, and Chapel Hill – is this merely an impossible or fictional instance of recognition, as impossible as the dead recognizing themselves as dead?

Similarly, one wonders whether life in Newfield’s account, however metaphorical, is a *physical* condition, a matter of *motion* (inertia), or *biological*, and whether sustainability and survival are the same as “movement.” (As if “no motion has she now, no force” describes not a child but the public university.) Newfield continues to qualify what exactly he means by death (if not salvation), describing an institution that lives on as a corpse or ghost, hollowed of the intellectual and socially transformative project at its core. He writes:

Obviously, the institutions and their activities carry on – the building mortgages, the student activities, the administrative hiring, the sports programs, and the academic labor. But their public missions do not . . . they no longer present themselves as forming the destiny of humanity. . . . The mid-twentieth-century public university, in short, is dead.⁹

Newfield concludes his essay on the use (or position) of the humanities by arguing for a reversal of strategy that would amount to revitalizing and reanimating the public university, lifting it from its grave. I am less interested here in the accuracy of his account of universities (though having worked at two of the universities that appear on his list, I can say that it is not so much the abandonment of mission as it is a turn away from the humanities as the steward of that mission, a turn that can be reversed, which Newfield acknowledges) than I am in Newfield’s reliance on a passage from death to life, especially to a life that is ghostly and unfulfilled.

Newfield makes five suggestions for what universities could do to salvage the humanities: three are speech acts (proclaim, admit, define), events in and through language that would also be the evidence of salvation and recovery; two are financial commitments, reinvestments in research and teaching, that also take the form of agreements. He concludes by responding to the question that provides the title of his essay: “My answer to what the humanities are for is that they are for putting mass *Bildung* back at the center of the postcapitalist university that is now in the *early agonies of birth*. The public university is dead. Long live the public university.”¹⁰ For Newfield, the humanities are for saving the university as a public university and for reestablishing its values; the humanities remain the unit within the university that attends to these values. In other words, by saving the universi-

ty, the humanities save the person, and save the people. They turn the infant into a subject and even a citizen.

But this account of a recovered and reformed university as “forming the destiny of humanity,” and of the humanities not just as forming selves or a commons but as a project of *mass bildung*, possesses the over/undertones of twentieth-century populist movements. The evocation of birth agony, destiny, monarchy, sovereignty, and immortality, even if only in order to issue a somewhat hyperbolic call for a public good, cannot ultimately shed its tinge of redemption, a sticky association that attaches onto this rhetoric of the humanities’ salvation and survival. To borrow from the insights of a recent “theological-political genealogy” of survival, I wonder whether the rhetoric of the survival of the humanities, for all of its strategy and pragmatism, recasts the humanities in a quasi-theological, redemptive mode at the moments when the humanities are being recognized as a public good and as valuable to the university’s research mission. And, taking this further, because the humanities issue from a conception of the human and the humane with which they continue to struggle, I wonder too whether any turn to salvation and survival also hosts a history of Christianity, imperialism, and Euro-nationalism. If the university, saved by the humanities, stands in the place of the sovereign, especially at the moment when Newfield announces that the (public good) university is dead – and lives on – what does this mean for the global humanities?¹¹ Can the humanities survive in modern universities beyond their European and Christian origins? Or is the only method of overcoming their origins one that seeks not survival but a radical reconception of the humanities as global humanities?

Put more explicitly, I am asking whether the shift from *crisis* to *survival* that I have been tracing, the shift from a preoccupation with death to a preoccupation with life and living-on, cannot be extricated from a Christological account of the humanities. I am asking whether this reasserts – rather than rearranges – the descent of the humanities from a Latinate and ultimately European framework with the powers of civilization and redemption that it animates (and that animate it). In other words, the survival of the humanities is not just the survival of the humanities. It is the survival of the humanities as “human destiny,” “life beyond death,” and redemption through the university. In this logic, do we need a new concept for their survival, one that opens a global frame and resists destinal thinking?

In what follows, I would like to draw out this example even further, looking first to a somewhat traditional history of the humanities that borrows this figuration (in distinction from the more advocacy-oriented work of the literary scholars I already have introduced), then revisiting the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definition of *humanities* (and its location), before finally considering a Chinese example in which the humanities, modeled after a European or “Western” history, are evoked as part of a nationalist project of survival. In conclusion, I ask wheth-

er there is an alternative to the crisis/survival or apocalypse/redemption framework, and what it might be.

I am following this line of thought not only in order to ask about the conditions of the humanities flourishing in a scholarly or abstract sense, but because I spend a great deal of time arguing for the importance of the humanities within the public university and the value of humanities centers and institutes as sites of possibility and collaboration. At my own University of California, Berkeley, and in national and international contexts, I insist, like Smith and Anderson, that we must think further about “what is to be done,” whether that means redesigning graduate programs or confronting “the question of the moral life more directly, without fear of sounding didactic, benighted, or insufficiently political.”¹² I also am aware that when it comes to substitutions of life for death (and death for life) that we should linger and see how the specter of life and death is overdetermined and how the rhetoric of survival draws not only from ecocriticism and allegory, but equally from ethnonationalism, theology, and the variety of administrative regimes that issue from them and that have led to multiple forms of colonial violence and the repression of Indigenous and minority knowledges. These are projects that universities and humanities scholars often have facilitated rather than resisted.

While I have been looking at Smith, Anderson, and Newfield and their inquiries at the intersection of analysis and institutional activism, even more traditional scholarly accounts of the humanities deploy a survivalist frame. Take, for example, historian James Turner’s *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*. Turner’s argument is that despite their disciplinary diversity – ranging from anthropology to visual culture to philosophy – the humanities, as they have come into being at least since the nineteenth century, are indebted to and entangled with the study of language and literature. Yet Turner’s account of this history of the humanities registers still another version of the rhetoric of survival. In the book’s introductory chapter, he describes his own contribution in this idiom: “Despite many fine monographs, no one to date has ventured an overview of . . . the birth of the modern humanities in the English-speaking world from the womb of philology. . . . This book tells that story.”¹³ Here, the feminized biologization of philology as womb and the humanities as progeny, the suggestion that there is an (unacknowledged) event, following a period of gestation, that occurs in a moment that could be dated, and further the implication of infancy, growth, and, implicitly, death reflect an imagination of the humanities as a living being. More than this, Turner positions his study as having a particular role to play in the obscure birth of the humanities becoming knowable. It is only through his “venture,” his “over-view,” made possible by his fictional stance as a historian who exists outside, above, and beyond the humanities, that the birth and the proper life of the humanities become visible.

When, a few paragraphs later, Turner explicitly talks about survival, it is not the survival of the modern humanities that interests him, but of the “antiquated” practices of philology that are their predecessor, leading him to explain: “Because philology’s legacy *survives* in the ways we build knowledge today, the excavation of the philological past becomes an effort at once of historical reconstruction and present-day self-understanding.”¹⁴ Turner’s history itself is in the mode of *bildungsroman*. But what of this mother-child scene and the humanities as “bless’d babe”? Is it a Kleinian moment of betrayal or a Christological moment of grace? The mother, while the hero of the tale, is also merely a womb. She ends up dead and buried, incapable of telling her own story, and in need of excavation and historical reconstruction, a project Turner enthusiastically takes up. And yet it is she, silent vessel, who is also the very condition of the reconstruction of which she is the object.¹⁵ Just as Newfield’s vision of survival rides on a logic of redemptive sovereignty, so too does this image of maternal death and recovery also make manifest a dichotomy between biologization (and the mortality it implies) and symbolization (and the immortality it invokes). The humanities, here, become merely human, and this is a story of resurrecting the mother – unless, of course, the progeny (the humanities) is Christ himself.

The origin story that Turner recovers focuses on the early (and ongoing) use of *the humanities* at Oxford to refer to the secular study of Latin or Latin and Greek: the classics. Turner, once again absorbing the rhetoric of institutional survival, writes:

It is telling that John Edwin Sandys’s venerable *History of Classical Scholarship*, when it reaches the western Middle Ages, becomes no longer a history of scholarship (of critical editions, commentaries, and scholia) but of *survival* – of where knowledge of ancient texts persisted, of where grammar and rhetoric were still taught.¹⁶

He goes on to refer to the relationships across time and geography in the biblical idiom of “begetting.”

Even here, in resonance with Newfield, institutional survival displaces scholarship, a move whose overdetermination indicates the high stakes of this history. While Turner is compelled by a return of philology in the humanities, his account of that return is somewhat underdetermined. That is, it misses some of the more visible recent returns of philology. While they are not strictly historical in outlook, if included, they might have shaken some of the book’s more confident claims. Here, I am thinking not only of Nietzsche, whose relation to philology was ambivalent, but also the late work of Paul de Man and Edward Said, both of whom, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham points out, despite their differences of style, project, and understanding, wrote essays at the end of their lives with the title: “The Return of Philology.”¹⁷ If, for Turner, philology is the origin of the humanities that he is at work to recover, for de Man and Said, philology already has found its way back to

the humanities, whether as speculative science or as theory. Philology will not just save the humanities, rather it is, as Harpham explains, a way of naming its crisis.

In a very different history than the one we find in Turner, Harpham carefully recalls the origins of philology as the study of languages that for a brief moment served as a model for science – and appeared to be more scientific than science itself. In this context, he also recalls the deep imbrication of philology and racial (racist) theory.¹⁸ Passing from Darwin to Gobineau to our present, Harpham argues (without reference to Turner) that we do not merely get the humanities from philology, we also get from philology the *crisis* of the humanities, and the response to crises outside of the humanities (crises of identity, the nation, and belonging). We get the antagonism between science (theory) and criticism, scholarly and generalist practices, complicity with racism and the resistance to racism, professionalization and skepticism of it. He argues that after the Cold War ended,

the humanities lost something of their reason for being, the legitimating crisis in which they were to have played a necessary part. Moreover, as the humanities, like other academic disciplines, became professionalized, they became insular – self-validating, self-legitimizing, self-referring, self-interested. The link between the humanities and the state on the one hand and the individual on the other became attenuated. Detached from its rationale and isolated from its supporters, the humanities, conceived as a response to various crises themselves fell into crisis; and as higher education took a pragmatic, scientific turn, other sectors of the university, particularly the sciences and professional education, came to command more attention, resources, and prestige.¹⁹

Moving *from* Turner's redemptive account of philology as grounding the humanities *to* Harpham's account of philology's unsettling and contradictory returns, we see that, whether understood as the return of science and theory or the return of pseudoscience, mere criticism, and speculation, whether framed in relation to the *impossible* return to (or of) a stolen homeland (Said) or the *refused* return of a repressed complicity (de Man), philology is not simply an empty vessel to be recovered from the ruins of the present humanities. It is a mobile signifier whose repetitions are entangled with the crisis of the humanities in a scene that the humanities are called upon to witness. In other words, the return of philology can be both central to an account of the living humanities and a source of crisis (and death). While life or death narratives surely raise the stakes of the humanities, these stakes also precede the critical and historical interventions that I have been describing. I have been suggesting that the survival of the humanities and its rhetoric does not merely replace crisis with optimism and a new framework of creative interventions. It also harbors an enduring set of risks and attachments that we cannot ignore.

This confusion of life and death is inscribed in the English definition of the humanities – and in that definition’s displacement. The OED has no stand-alone entry for *humanities*. Instead, *humanities* in English remains a definition within the entry for *humanity*. *Humanize*, *humanitas*, *humanistic* – I could go on – all have their own entries, but to get at a definition of *humanities*, one must access it as the plural of *humanity*, which it is, of course, but which it also is not. Here *humanities* is identified as a subset of the primary definition of *humanity*. It is the plural of *humanity* defined as *humane*, recalling the Latin and the study of Latin letters, and suggesting that the humanities are an index not of the human understood as race or species, but rather as disposition, behavior, and character, as civilized and civilizing. It is *humanity* as *ethos*, not *bios*, and this suggests that ways of relating and ways of knowing are inextricably linked. The fact that there is no stand-alone entry for the humanities in the OED introduces a set of further questions about what we are talking about when we talk about survival. In this defining moment, we can see (and hear) how the *humanities*’ persistence – the value and persistence of methods, disciplines, or practices – do not just evoke, but are indissociable from *humanity*’s persistence. The inclusion of the humanities within this single entry that includes collective and species identities as well as civilizational practices also evokes the long history of the humanities as a violent force within nationalist, colonial, and postcolonial networks and the reproductive force of the humanities at home and in the world. I am suggesting that recent academic narratives of the humanities’ survival, however liberal in their claims, remain burdened by logics of resurrection and redemption that are doggedly Eurocentric and Christological, leading us to question whether there can be a future for the humanities that is at once affirmative and detached from colonial violence and repression.

While I have focused until now on Europe and its legacies, particularly in U.S. academic discourse, I now want to turn to the case of China. From a philological perspective we have seen that *humanities* as a concept and word is *untranslatable*, troubling an account of the global humanities. It is also a word and concept that increasingly circulates in a globalized system of knowledge dominated by English and in the negotiation of institutional forms modeled after those in the United States and Europe.²⁰ At the same time, some historically European institutions today are turning to China (and by extension to the Chinese state) for institutional and financial support, rearranging the global academic order and establishing a new ecosystem for the humanities.

In China, where the fraught relationship between the humanities and human rights continues to play out, it seems that violent force was always part of the modern university’s “public mission” (to use Newfield’s language). As historian Wang Hui has explained, the modern Chinese university emerged with the founding in 1881 of Beiyang Naval School, which connected philology to its global project, re-

quiring daily study of Chinese classics and English language, as well as technical courses taught in English and embedding the humanities within a military education.²¹ Beiyang was the precursor of Peking University, which expanded its offerings in the humanities to include not only classics, but also literature and history, as well as sciences, law, agriculture, and the professions. Wang Hui uses this example to reflect upon the entanglement of the Chinese, American, and European university systems and identifies three stages in the recent history of the humanities in China. These include the removal of all international and scholarly standards, whereby the humanities became pure ideology, followed by the establishment of a university system that had scholarly and intellectual relevance outside of China in the mid-1990s. However, the latest developments in China suggest still another stage. The former relevance and influence of the humanities have been supplanted by a new international strategy that incorporates, rather than overcomes, violence and ideology.

In many ways, it appears as if the humanities in China are flourishing, leading to international conferences, collaborations, and commitments. They certainly have gained the attention and influence of a number of international organizations, including the International Council of Philosophy and the Human Sciences (CIPSH), an NGO formed in the last century to serve as the conscience of UNESCO in the aftermath of European fascism. CIPSH is known for its publication of a massive study of *The Third Reich* that was designed as a platform for European intellectuals to recognize and expose the forms of political violence that led to the near destruction of Europe's Jews, and it also is one of the leading partners for the *World Humanities Report*. Yet because the humanities are underfunded in the United States and Europe, CIPSH today is a benefactor of the contemporary Chinese state that Wang describes, and it is as much a Chinese organization as it is European. But can the humanities flourish even as censorship and repression are the norm? Can they have international resonance while ignoring political violence? Increasingly well endowed and well supported, the state-supported humanities in China have become a source of "soft power" made more powerful by the defunding of the humanities in the rest of the world. Their new stability, unlike the precarity and risk experienced in the United States, is correlated to what Wang calls a "new orthodoxy," which also produces what he does not explicitly state: a set of distractions and justifications for ongoing abuses of freedom and human rights. I read in Wang's history of the humanities in China that the humanities – and the university – today can be made to live and apparently flourish, but they do so in a context where "inquiry without condition" is foreclosed. The history that he tells reminds us that the Chinese university today is, despite its explicit commitments to the humanities, as it was at its outset, a project "with military, industrial, and political motivations . . . the product of 'national salvation and survival.'"²² The place in the world where the humanities are most apparently alive and most ro-

bustly supported is also where they have been left for dead. The life drive here is a cipher and a veil.

I would like to conclude not by outlining a set of new strategies or fashioning a new polemic, but by asking, in light of the account I have provided, whether there are – whether there could be – nonredemptive, nonapocalyptic strategies for the humanities. Can we break from these dramas of life and death and the violences that they permit? Or can we only become increasingly aware of them and commit to reworking them and sustaining the humanities in this way?²³

Returning to Sidonie Smith's *Manifesto*, where I take *sustainability* as another example of the new life drive in the discourse surrounding the humanities, I also find in its somewhat modest and deeply pragmatic tone (that is, this is not mass *bildung* or even moral life, but mere sustainability in what she calls, after D. W. Winnicott, "good enough times") the seed of possibility. First, the way that Smith understands sustainability is, surprisingly, as a form of nonreproduction. Similarly, many arguments about sustainability in an environmental idiom also focus on the nonreproduction of our practices and institutions. This logic, whereby the future is dissociated from reproduction, evokes, even as it differs from, arguments like those Lee Edelman laid out in *No Future*. Even more recently, in an essay on queer philology, Daniel Link asks another version of these questions: "But how to teach, how to develop a non-reproductive or non-reproductivist pedagogy that recovers the power of transformation that the humanities once had, without being confined to the cabinet of useless curiosities?"²⁴

Yet for all of our efforts at preservation, nonreproduction is also one of the significant methods of the humanities. In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, stakes out a new set of scholarly alliances and practices to reflect on his own version of non-self-reproduction and his break from postcolonial theory. He explains: "The fact of the planet . . . coming into view in the everyday lives of humans leads us to question whether the relationship of mutuality between humans and the earth/world that many twentieth-century thinkers *inherited, assumed, and celebrated* has become untenable today." He goes on to ask: "How do we move, in the face of the current ecological crisis, toward *composing* a new 'commons,' a new anthropology, as it were, in search of a *redefinition* of human relationships to the nonhuman, including the planet?"²⁵ Even more radically, and somewhat perversely, Claire Colebrook, in a bleak account of human extinction, suggests that nonreproduction means the artifacts of the humanities will remain without anyone to read them: "the earth's strata will be inscribed with scars of the human capacity to create radical and volatile climactic changes." Because there will be no one left to read, she is left to ask, "how do we account for the fossil records or archives borne by the stone?"²⁶ And, returning to the genealogy of *survival* that I mentioned earlier, Adam Stern leaves us at the end of the book

with the same question with which he began – “Who is speaking of survival?” – a question that he proposes to answer by inventing a new, imaginary figure of scholarly perseverance.²⁷ The questions in each of these texts, by Link, Chakrabarty, Colebrook, and Stern – which also belong to distinct traditions in the humanities (Latin American studies, postcolonial history, critical theory, and religious studies) – and the alternate futures and practices they anticipate suggest a path that might be neither a life drive nor an apocalyptic collapse, even as they each are fully engaged with the histories and theories of life and survival. And all of this leads me to ask whether it is the question itself, “inquiry without condition,” and the other questions to which we have looked – *Can we loosen our grip on survival? Can we let go of life? What would this look like?* – that will enable the humanities to persist, persevere, endure.

I am convinced that these are not merely rhetorical questions, nor strictly theoretical ones. They are the same questions that almost every academic humanities department in a U.S. university asks as hiring season comes around. At that moment, the question inevitably surfaces of whether to replace faculty who have retired with those in the same fields, or to create spaces for new fields and new voices, often in interdisciplinary, emergent, or historically under-recognized areas of research and teaching. Do these new voices have a place in the university if it means having to give up areas of study that it seems *always* belonged there and thus always should belong? Is nonreproduction a form of risk or a form of survival? Can it be both? These questions and strategies of differentiation give us some sense that there can be nonreproductive substitutions. So too do the emerging sites of the humanities with which I began – mobile, adjacent, temporary, instrumentalist, and activist – reveal how collaborations within and beyond the university, even as they appear to be acts of abandonment, are also instances of survival. These ongoing negotiations, which cut across the boundaries and disciplines that we know, are and will be worked out in time.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Judith Butler, “Stumbling, Errancy, Persistence: The Struggle for the Humanities,” The Presidential Address, MLA Convention 2021, January 8, 2021. See also Amy B. Wang, “‘Nevertheless, She Persisted’ Becomes New Battle Cry after McConnell Silences Elizabeth Warren,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2017.
- ² See Forum on Contemporary Theory, a Member of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, <https://fctworld.org>; The Africa Institute, <https://theafrica.institute.org>; and les Ateliers de la Pensée, <https://www.lesateliersdelapensee.org>.
- ³ At my own university, three examples come immediately to mind: the Kavli Center for Ethics, Science, and the Public; the establishment of the new College for Computing, Data Science, and Society, which includes society as part of its mission; and the multiyear program “The Art of Writing,” designed to integrate writing as an art of persuasion and inquiry into courses across the campus, and not only in the arts and humanities.
- ⁴ Sidonie Smith, “Manifesto for a Sustainable Humanities,” in *Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 108.
- ⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 17.
- ⁶ Amanda Anderson, *Psyche and Ethos: Moral Life after Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.
- ⁷ The Humanities Indicators and the National Endowment for the Humanities have made a point of identifying the place of the humanities in American life, but that realm of inquiry will await another occasion.
- ⁸ Christopher Newfield, “What Are the Humanities For? Rebuilding the Public University,” in *A New Deal for the Humanities*, ed. Gordon Hutner and Feisal G. Mohamed (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 160.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ My emphasis. Ibid., 176.
- ¹¹ On a somewhat different topic, Smith in her recovery of the humanities turns not to a set of speech acts and the monarchy but to the workers, evoking Lenin in a chapter she calls “What Is to Be Done?” See Smith, *Manifesto for the Humanities*.
- ¹² Anderson, *Psyche and Ethos*, 104.
- ¹³ James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), xiii.
- ¹⁴ My emphasis. Ibid., 185.
- ¹⁵ My thinking here is indebted to a set of analyses of mothers and poetry, including those by Cathy Caruth and Barbara Johnson. See Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).
- ¹⁶ My emphasis. Turner, *Philology*, 25.

- ¹⁷ See Paul de Man, “The Return to Philology,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Edward Said, “The Return to Philology,” in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- ¹⁸ I am here glossing over a history of literature and science that Amanda Jo Goldstein more completely tells. See Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- ¹⁹ Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, 189.
- ²⁰ See Barbara Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).
- ²¹ See Wang Hui, “The Humanities in China: History and Challenges,” *History of the Humanities* 5 (2) (2020): 309–331.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 314.
- ²³ See Ralph Hexter, with Craig Buckwald, “Conquering the Obstacles to Kingdom and Fate: The Ethics of Reading and the University Administrator,” in *The Humanities and Public Life*, ed. Peter Brooks and Hilary Jewett (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
- ²⁴ Daniel Link, “Why Should We Be So Humanistic?” in *World Humanities Report* (forthcoming).
- ²⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 19–20.
- ²⁶ Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays in Extinction, Vol. 1* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 23.
- ²⁷ See Adam Stern, *Survival: A Theological-Political Genealogy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

Reframing the Public Humanities : The Tensions, Challenges & Potentials of a More Expansive Endeavor

Carin Berkowitz & Matthew Gibson

This essay assesses the so-called crisis in the humanities from the vantage point of the state humanities councils, looking at the richness and increasing diversity of public humanities work happening outside the academy. The essay posits that the humanities are flourishing in a variety of public spaces, where voices outside the academy are more effectively questioning what it means to commemorate the past and build in community and meaning through that process. But even with such work thriving, the humanities face challenges. Some of those challenges are related to definitional and communications issues in and between both the academic and public sectors. Other challenges are related to access and allocation of resources. While this essay does not pretend to have “answers” to these perennial issues, it suggests that both the academy and the public might benefit from and create more lasting and relevant impact from bridge-building that marries the expertise and knowledge from both communities.

We would like to begin this piece by situating ourselves. We spend a lot of our professional lives talking about how knowledge is local and rooted in one’s specific cultural perspective and experience, so we would be betraying a cause we espouse and care deeply about if we did not start out by telling you that our perspectives are biased and formed by our own trajectories. We are directors of state humanities councils: National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)–funded 501(c)(3) nonprofits devoted to the support of the public humanities on a statewide level. Those councils are charged with taking the humanities outside the ivory tower, building support for them locally, developing a model of those disciplines that feels relevant and worthwhile to the average taxpayer and to local lawmakers, and creating more participatory versions of subjects that are often studied in exclusionary ways. To do that work, we need to create bridges between academic subjects and a different kind of world, but also to identify what is wanting in the academic versions so that we can support it meaningfully elsewhere. We come to those roles shaped by complex backgrounds our-

selves: both of us have PhDs (Matthew in literature and Carin in the history of science) and know the scholarly world well, and yet both of us also need to be able to inhabit worlds like advocacy, fundraising, budgets, human resources, website development, community organizing, museums, and cultural festivals. Our vantage points are undeniably adjacent to and deliberately fashioned to be distinct from those within the academy's bounds. We are amphibians, moving between environments, though perhaps clunkier in moving through them because we cross boundaries. This is reflected in our arguments and our examples, which are very much those of two people occupying the liminal spaces, looking, sometimes with bemusement, at the spaces to either side of us.

We suspect that phrases incorporating the words “crisis” and “humanities” feel familiar to many readers. Assertions that the humanities are in crisis litter specialized newspapers and websites like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the blogs of faculty members at elite universities, but they also permeate popular magazines like *The Atlantic*.¹ So what do people mean when they say that the humanities are in crisis? And are they right?

Writings that bemoan the decline and crisis of the *academic* humanities at four-year colleges point to a number of indicators: a steady and sometimes steep decline of undergraduate majors in areas such as history, classics, and English; faculty salary inequities in humanities disciplines compared with those in STEM departments; and even the shuttering of traditional humanities departments at some colleges and universities.²

It is useful in this case to note that when talking about perceptions of decline in the humanities, people seem to struggle a bit to define the thing that is in decline, in the end regarding the humanities as the nonsciences, and rarely defining the humanities using an underlying system of positive values or methods or subjects. That lack of a core explanatory system or epistemology, for a time, defined the crisis itself.³

Historian Benjamin Schmidt argues in a 2018 article in *The Atlantic* that although the descriptions of a crisis are long-standing, things have actually and meaningfully come to look like a crisis in the last fifteen years:

Almost every humanities field has seen a rapid drop in majors: History is down about 45 percent from its 2007 peak, while the number of English majors has fallen by nearly half since the late 1990s. Student majors have dropped, rapidly, at a variety of types of institutions. Declines have hit almost every field in the humanities.⁴

This does indeed sound like a crisis, but it is a very specific kind of crisis: it is a crisis for those faculty whose jobs depend on student enrollment at universities and perhaps a crisis for higher education and its fostering of the liberal arts. But one could argue that the crisis is limited to one very particular kind of ecosystem. One could even argue (provocatively) that such a crisis is akin to the crisis for coal

mining communities brought about by a switch to renewable energy sources. Is it a crisis for society? Is it even a crisis for those subjects of study rooted in the humanities? We are less sure of the answer to those questions.

What we do know, however, is that the humanities work being supported and created in the public sphere is not beset by these same challenges. This essay traces a flourishing and diversifying set of subjects and practices that we call the *public humanities*. This field of work is fraught with definitional problems that are similar to those of its academic humanities cousin, but not with the attending sense of deficit or crisis. In fact, the public humanities are in some ways richer and broader than they have ever been, more rooted in a form of knowledge construction that embraces people who have been systematically and historically excluded from the construction of the academic humanities: the public humanities are now socio-economically, racially, and ethnically diverse in their moments of construction and not just in their subjects of study or planned dissemination.

We alluded earlier to a need for a robust definition of the humanities. This is important if we are to understand the crisis in which they seem to find themselves – or, rather, in which academics find *themselves* in light of metrics such as the downward trends in humanities majors – and, rather separately, if we are to describe a world of public humanities that is not similarly suffering.⁵ The NEH itself provides one such definition:

The term “humanities” includes, but is not limited to, the study and interpretation of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism, and theory of the arts; those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.⁶

Such a definition becomes a self-referential litany of academic disciplines with a half-hearted allusion to public engagement and relevance. When it comes down to it, as comparative literature scholar Eric Hayot contends, the academic humanities have a marketing problem that begins with the lack of a compelling core identity.⁷ While listing disciplines helps identify what the humanities are in higher education, they are not terribly useful when we go beyond the walls of the academy and into public settings. At their core, the public humanities are about relationships across time: with ourselves, with one another, with our built and natural environments.

So if we have a definition for the humanities – albeit a weak one – what then are the public humanities? Wikipedia, sometimes a useful starting place, defines the public humanities as:

the work of engaging diverse publics in reflecting on heritage, traditions, and history, and the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of civic and cultural life. Public humanities is often practiced within federal, state, nonprofit and community-based cultural organizations that engage people in conversations, facilitate and present lectures, exhibitions, performances and other programs for the general public on topics such as history, philosophy, popular culture and the arts. Public Humanities also exists within universities, as a collaborative enterprise between communities and faculty, staff, and students.⁸

This is a workable and workman-like definition, again resorting to some of the listing tendencies seen in the academic humanities. However, the use of the passive voice in “engaging diverse publics” suggests someone doing the engaging: perhaps a scholar, curator, or entity from the “federal, state, nonprofit and community-based” cultural sector bringing content knowledge to communities as passive consumers, not creators themselves. This is not to denigrate the value of this type of public or “applied” humanities, as it has sometimes been called. Much of the programming that state and jurisdictional councils produce follows such a path and there is distinct value in providing a platform for academic scholarship in the public interest.

But in another form, the engagement with “current conditions of civic and cultural life” and the knowledge and meaning derived through that public humanities work is created and led by communities rather than being created and led by scholars within the academy or nonprofit cultural agencies *for* those publics. This type of public humanities might be better understood as the *publics’ humanities*, and it is the sort that we have been working to foster in the humanities council network. If we are interested in this more expansive understanding of who makes up the world of public humanities, we must have a way of defining the work done by the public, who are themselves not tied to disciplines. We will explore possibilities for and challenges in such definitional work in this essay.

At the core of such a shift in thinking and in the expansion of the public humanities, and fundamental to this definitional exercise, are a number of fascinating and perhaps contentious questions. If the public humanities can be liberated from needing the role of the traditional scholar, mediator, or gatekeeper, as we suggest they can, what, then, counts as doing scholarship in this new context? Does the time that a genealogist puts into their research and written public output count as scholarship? Are tradition bearers and the holders and tellers of oral histories scholars? Is cultural activism scholarship? Politics? A mix of both? More pointedly, if the definition of scholar and scholarship and the work of the humanities and the public humanities are more open than what we have previously believed, how might resources *currently* allocated to the humanities and scholarship industry be allocated more equitably?

To better understand the roles that state and jurisdictional humanities councils play in the public humanities sector, it is useful to recount briefly the history of how and why these councils came into being and to convey some of the ways they currently engage grassroots humanities work across the country. The legislation that created the NEH and its sibling agency, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), underscores the public as the primary actor and stakeholder in the world of ideas. In fact, the very first of twelve declarations in the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act (1965) proclaims that “the arts and the humanities belong to all the people of the United States.”⁹

In its early years, the NEH was sluggish to heed this public emphasis, prioritizing instead matters related to higher education. According to historian Jamil Zainaldin, it was not that “NEH leadership opposed public involvement in the development of humanities programs as such; it is that they could not visualize programs originating outside these expert and professional domains” of the academy. Throughout the NEH’s history, we can see a marked division around how much the agency should serve the nonexpert public.¹⁰

Unlike the NEH, the NEA was quicker to embrace its public mandate by creating state and regional arts commissions to support artists and arts organizations at a grassroots level. Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI), one of the authors of the 1965 Arts and Humanities Act, was, according to Zainaldin, “puzzled that the humanities endowment’s leadership could not or would not grasp that state-based entities” would garner more public support for the humanities while also making it easier to “help you [the NEH] help yourself here on the Hill.” Pell’s comment underscores what was always a potential strength for the humanities: while in their more academic instantiation they could sound aloof and without clear utility, in the public they could better justify the use of taxpayer dollars for the agency. Seeing the writing on the wall, the NEH finally followed the NEA’s lead and in the early 1970s began creating a network of affiliate humanities councils across the nation.¹¹

Almost fifty years later, the work of humanities councils – what they actually *do* in supporting and creating public programming – is thriving, despite what is allegedly happening in the academy. We see this in Congress’s growing investments in public arts and humanities. We see it in expanded engagement with and access to public programming at book festivals, folklife performances, and increased use of and referrals to digital public scholarship resources such as podcasts and state and regional online encyclopedias. Critically, we also see the growing vitality of these programs. And outside council walls, we see the public humanities on full display in our strident, politicized, and racialized contests over national history and narrative, sometimes with tragic results.

Since 2014, Congress has steadily increased appropriations to the NEH and the NEA. While it might be misleading to call these increases “net gains” if one adjusts

these numbers for inflation, steady annual increases underscore that members of Congress on both sides of the aisle value the humanities and the public humanities, especially.¹² Thinking back to Senator Pell's argument that investments in public humanities would help the NEH help itself on the Hill, appropriations grow because organizations such as the Federation of State Humanities Councils and its humanities council membership educate elected officials year-round about the impact that council programs and grants have in states, districts, and territories. Even if congressional representatives differ in where they see the value of the NEH and the public humanities, they are often drawn to the work of nonpartisan state and territorial councils because these organizations visibly and directly support the activities of constituents they serve.¹³

Councils have been long-time partners of institutions of higher education, amplifying research and ideas from within the academy to the general public. From council-created online state and regional encyclopedias to radio programming and podcasts, this work creates access to thematic and place-based scholarship that provides informational value and contextual relevance in people's daily lives.¹⁴ Councils also create and support public programs such as book festivals and speaker series that bring writers, historians, and thought leaders to public audiences every year, virtually and in person.

While these are all forms of the public humanities that come *from* the academy or emanate from within humanities councils, as we mentioned before, the best versions of the public humanities – the real “grassroots” humanities – are created by publics, not merely for them. Too often when scholars have talked about public versions of disciplines they have meant merely that their wisdom would be understood by or distributed within a public. In its more radical form, however, the public humanities ask instead for the academy to give up its ownership of knowledge creation (see public historian Denise Meringolo's essay in this volume for one specific example of cocreated work in the public humanities; it is notable for its eloquent discussions of the potential of this kind of work, as well as of the hard work necessary to upend power dynamics, build trust, and create new knowledge through genuine partnerships between academics and communities). The humanities council network is a place to look for the sort of public creation of knowledge to which we are referring because they were initially founded not to do their own programs, but to be agile and responsive to aid local, “bottom-up” (that is, nonacademic and noninstitutional) versions of the humanities with grants. That local humanities work is deeply intertwined with people's lives, their politics, their communities, and their cultures. In New Jersey and Virginia, humanities projects by the people have taken many forms; some examples might help illustrate this kind of work.

A group of residents in one New Jersey town discovered that a number of local institutions, including a street, were named after a judge who had been involved

in using his judicial authority to sell free Blacks in New Jersey into slavery in the Deep South in 1818. That group developed a committee and a project involving local church leaders, members of the local Black community, and a small number of faculty from Rutgers who happen also to be members of this community to document the names and lives of those who were sold, to petition to remove the name of the judge from the town's structures, and to build a permanent memorial to the tragedy in a state that often regards itself as free of the taint of slavery. The project has grown since its inception, creating educational materials, building new community ties among people who are involved, and holding widely attended public events. The group is also writing history. Through research, they have developed a list of 137 victims (as of the summer of 2021) and have found biographical details about many of those men, women, and children. Sometimes that history can even be traced and tied to contemporary lives. The act of resurrecting names and ties, of participating in the difficult process of creating that history, has helped to make real for participants in the project the severing of family bonds and the elusiveness of family history for African Americans. The New Jersey Council for the Humanities (NJCH) did not conceive this work, nor did it direct any aspect of the project, and it does not claim ownership of the knowledge or outcomes of this work; but through its grants program, the NJCH helped to fund this project.

In another example, when Peggy Scott and Charlotte Brody learned of their local school board's decision in 2017 to consolidate Benjamin Franklin Yancey Elementary with two other schools, the two residents of Esmont, Virginia, knew they had to do something to recognize the school's namesake and what the school's legacy meant to the local Black community, lest that history be forgotten. When the county board of supervisors moved to make the Yancey school into a community center, Scott and Brody, who had attended the school in the early 1960s, saw their opportunity and began to work on how they could tell and commemorate that history for this new space. Without forming an organization or their own nonprofit to do it, Scott and Brody led the development and installation of the B. F. Yancey Heritage and History Exhibit, exploring Benjamin Franklin Yancey's life and the story of Black education in the community. Even though the Virginia council provided a grant to support the creation of the exhibit, the idea, work, and execution were purely the result of two public residents who wanted to make sure that the display "would give the opportunity to talk about how there were people in the days before us that wanted to see these [Black] children educated."¹⁵ Working with a historian to help collect oral histories in the community and research primary documents from local libraries and archives, the story highlights the educational journey of the building dating back to Reconstruction and the work of Benjamin Yancey to build and run the first school for Black students in the area.

Earlier, when we discussed the idea of "liberating" the humanities from the academy and institutional power structures, we asked what a more equitable al-

location of resources might look like. In this context, it is unsurprising that people of color led both of the projects described above and that these projects address racial inequity and bring into question who owns and creates knowledge. But even if humanities councils are better poised or have more desire to support a more equitable distribution of resources for grassroots public humanities work, councils still run into a wall of restrictions imposed by federal and state funding sources that pose significant barriers to entry. While federal and state governments should seek to ensure taxpayer funds are spent responsibly, corporate governance structures demanded by federal agencies also limit the ability of humanities councils to authentically engage grassroots efforts.

Our case for the robustness of the public humanities in great part depends on demonstrating that the humanities not only exist but exert considerable influence in the unruly and undisciplined spaces beyond the classroom, beyond peer review, and even beyond structures of federal grant-making. We recognize the risk in making such an argument: that we lose the thread and define the public humanities such that suddenly everything is included, and they therefore lose meaning. But we believe there is a consistent and expansive philosophical core to the humanities that can describe the work and be appreciated in both academic and public settings.

Looking at our national headlines over the last few years – disputes over what to do with monuments and building names; the 1619 Project versus the 1776 Commission; defining history education as critical race theory in America’s classrooms – it is curious that the academic humanities are in such crisis when debate around the nation’s narrative and history, and who controls how that story is told, is so heightened and the stakes are so high. While some of the terms have shifted, this is by no means a new debate. In exploring contests over monuments in U.S. history, public monuments scholar Kirk Savage explained in 1997:

Today we are acutely aware of public space as a representational battleground, where many different social groups fight for access and fight for control of the images that define them. Recent controversies over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, the John Ahearn bronzes in the Bronx, and the Arthur Ashe statue in Richmond... have put the problem on the front page of newspapers and in the halls of government.¹⁶

Public space continues to be the clearest battleground of meaning making. But instead of fighting to dictate and control which permanent images represent the singular “us” of a pluralistic society, publics are more often embracing organic content creation and curation. This is where we see some of the most vibrant and pure forms of the publics’ humanities.

In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, for instance, communities – mostly of color – created ad hoc memorials across the nation. At the Minneapolis inter-

section where Floyd was murdered, community members erected parking barriers and constructed what would become George Floyd Square both to memorialize him and to tell the story of the enduring legacy and effects of racism. One year later, the city of Minneapolis began to remove the barriers around the square to enable traffic flow while also committing to preserve certain aspects of the public art and content created at the site.

During that same summer in Richmond, Virginia, people focused their acts of memorializing and protest on Monument Avenue's Robert E. Lee statue. With spray paint, placards, and signs, what had been constructed in 1890 as a vestige of the Lost Cause and message of White supremacy was gradually transformed into a living monument connecting that history to the contemporary moment. Both a public art installation and publicly curated history exhibit, the site was now dedicated to telling the biographies and stories of Black people killed by White people and police. The small circle of grass on which more than 150,000 mostly White people had erected a statue 130 years before was now transfigured by a hand-painted sign honoring a young local Black man also killed by police, reading: "Welcome to Beautiful Marcus-David Peters Circle, Liberated By the People, MMXX." At night, using the statue as canvas, an artist projected onto the monument images of Black agents of change, from Harriet Tubman to Representative John Lewis, Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Du Bois. Recognizing the power such a reclamation brought into public space and life, an image of George Floyd being projected on the statue became the front cover of *National Geographic's* annual edition of "A Year in Pictures."

In New Jersey, there were similar transformations of statues across the state, sometimes through graffiti, sometimes through the obscuring of statues of Christopher Columbus and George Washington, whose fleeting presence in various towns across the state has long been the rationale for placards and statues.¹⁷ But then new statues were erected as well; unlike the organic and ephemeral collection of tributes, emotional notes, and items of remembrance in Minneapolis, the city of Newark, itself with a history of racist police violence, was gifted, from artist Stanley Watts, a seven-hundred-pound statue of a welcoming George Floyd, sitting on a bench, to be placed in front of City Hall. The city embraced the gift of the statue, making it a project of commemoration that was fundamentally tied to government, but it was vandalized within a week of its installation.¹⁸ Debates over the narrative of our national history, sometimes violent in nature, are taking place in the streets of our country, in both sanctioned and unsanctioned ways. We want to assert here that they too are an expression of the public humanities, and that they have no ties to authorizing bodies like the academy or government funding agencies.

Beyond being powerful expressions of racial injustice, these types of public humanities activities raise a number of fascinating questions. First, are they "the hu-

manities” at all, or are they expressions of social activism and protest? If we define the public humanities as work that engages “diverse publics in reflecting on heritage, traditions, and history” and their relevance “to the current conditions of civic and cultural life,” then it seems these activities do just that, *and* they are also expressions of social justice and protest. If we then posit that these “unofficial” monuments are public expressions of the humanities, how do we as “professional humanists” – academics, museum curators, humanities councils – come to terms with them when, for our work, we rely typically on the permanent, or near permanent, preservation of things: their archivability, retrievability, researchability? How do works that embrace ephemerality and fluidity fit into a more discipline- and methods-based humanities ecosystem when, like street art, these utterances are living and invite layering? And, perhaps, finally, what happens to these expressions when they become sanctioned by the state (understanding that the state, here, represents all forms of institutional power), for example, when the City of Minneapolis commits to preserving aspects of George Floyd Square? Who will be invited to help choose what is preserved? Does the retroactive sanctioning of such work dilute the power of the original act of public creation and spatial disruption?

We believe that these questions should be difficult to answer, and we do not purport to be able to answer them. However, we need to create points of permeability and exchange between spheres of humanistic exploration and creation. The humanities of the streets, for instance, must belong to the people, but it must also be able to find pathways to the organized work of nonprofits, to grant funding, and to the academy.

We began this essay by talking about the crisis in the humanities, and where that does and does not live. We have made the case that the humanities are thriving in some spaces, incorporating diverse people and stories that have long been sought as subjects or recipients but not as creators of knowledge by the academy. And we have shown that from its inception, at least from the perspective of Congress, the NEH was meant to allow broad publics to take part in the nation’s cultural endeavors. It is worth considering another passage from that founding legislation:

Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.¹⁹

The wisdom of that legislation feels strikingly prescient today. The humanities, or rather, a humanities rooted in the public, a humanities of new expressions of culture and of new understandings derived from shared perspectives, has the potential to create the wisdom and vision alluded to in the NEH’s founding legis-

lation and to address the divisions and disconnectedness so common in contemporary America. In doing so, it will be a humanities not in crisis but in its heyday.

As we contemplate such a new humanities, it is important to define the endeavor expansively, so that our understanding of the humanities does not begin (or end) in a list of academic disciplines. At the NJCH, we say that the humanities involve the examination of history, values, culture, and beliefs, but we would like to find an even clearer common thread that holds our humanistic work together. We think that the way to do this is to talk about the humanities as a means of understanding the experiences and perspectives of others. Whether through history, literature, anthropology, religion, or cultural studies, the humanities teach us about how others see the world. If the humanities are about understanding the perspectives and experiences of others, then the reason to participate in them is built into their very definition, and we can see why, amidst the tumult of recent years, the public humanities are thriving among those who would like to overcome or at least diminish the divides in their communities.

But to see the humanities, including the public humanities, realize their potential, we need to find the bridges between academic institutions, nonprofit humanities organizations, and broader communities. Together, we need a humanities that is rooted in disciplines and methods drawn from the academy but that is also rooted in our communities, that is supported by the academy without being appropriated by it. How do we create such an ecosystem of cocreation, power-sharing, and sharing knowledge without breaking trust between the power structure of the academy, the nonprofit industrial complex, and the multitude of publics? We challenge our colleagues in the academy to engage with local communities in ways that involve the setting aside of their power and privilege (for though they often go unacknowledged, the academy bestows the ultimate privileges of job security and freedom of expression that are unavailable in nearly every other sector of work) and engage with communities on equal footing. We challenge our communities to meet with their academic colleagues without resentment or suspicion of expertise that has too often been used as a distancing mechanism. We challenge ourselves to leave behind the chips that so naturally reside on the shoulders of intermediaries and amphibians, who sit between worlds and properly belong to none. We hope to create opportunities by building new networks that cross the boundaries of institutions like colleges and universities, museums and libraries, and community organizations, because such bridges will be built through individual interactions long before we will see any kind of cultural shifts. But we trust that the payoff for this engagement will include broader, inclusive, and more widely valued histories and literatures and a wiser and more just society. It is a tall challenge, but if we can build this sort of ecosystem, the humanities, even those seen through the prism of academic lines and enrollments, will no longer be in crisis.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Many of the pieces in this volume seek to provide a critique of or more nuanced read of these claims about a crisis. We are very much in dialogue with them. See, for example, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, “Max Weber Invented the Crisis of the Humanities,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/max-weber-invented-the-crisis-of-the-humanities/>; and Merve Emre and Len Gutkin, “The Groves of Academe Are Always on Fire,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-groves-of-academe-are-always-on-fire>. A quick search will reveal many additional examples from *The Chronicle* and *Inside Higher Education*. See also Ben Schmidt, “Mea Culpa: There *Is* a Crisis in the Humanities,” Sapping Attention, July 27, 2018, <http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2018/07/mea-culpa-there-is-crisis-in-humanities.html>; and Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/>.
- ² Scott Jaschik, “What You Teach Is What You Earn,” *Inside Higher Education*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/28/study-finds-continued-large-gaps-faculty-salaries-based-discipline>. “The best paying fields for full professors (public and private combined) are legal (\$145,732), business (\$129,904) and engineering (\$129,012). Theology is the only field where the average for full professor is less than \$80,000 (\$79,838). . . . Business is the only field in the study where new assistant professors average a six-figure salary (\$113,924). New assistant professors in key humanities fields earn just over half that total. The average for new assistant professors of English is \$57,592 and for history the figure is \$58,412.”
- ³ Stuart A. Selby, “The Screen and the Humanities in General Education,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 3 (2) (1969): 119–127, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3331530>.
- ⁴ Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis.”
- ⁵ As we stated above, and as the very thorough blog post, “The ‘Crisis’ in the Humanities” by Wayne Bivens-Tatum helps put into historical context, being in a “state of crisis” is

not a new phenomenon for the humanities. People have been talking about it since at least the 1950s. See Wayne Bivens-Tatum, “The ‘Crisis’ in the Humanities,” *Academic Librarian*, November 5, 2010. Searching for “crisis in the humanities” in Google Books’ Ngram Viewer, for example, shows a spike in the phrase’s usage in the mid-1960s, close to the same time as the passage of the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities Act; Ngram Viewer, Google Books, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>. This spike is due primarily to the publication in 1964 of *Crisis in the Humanities*, a compilation of essays edited by J. H. Plumb, and subsequent and prolific citations of that book until the mid-1970s; J. H. Plumb, *Crisis in the Humanities* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964). The next steady incline of the phrase in journals and monographs follows from the mid-1990s and the “culture war” and assault on arts and culture to the mid-2000s. The steep escalation in which we continue to find ourselves begins with the aftermath of the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009. According to the Ngram Viewer, the trend of the phrase is beginning to plateau, but hardly declining.

⁶ 20 U.S. Code § 952 (a), accessed via the Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/952#a>.

⁷ Eric Hayot, “The Humanities Have a Marketing Problem,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-humanities-have-a-marketing-problem>. Hayot contends that the main problem in the academic humanities is that “The curriculum is stale. . . . The majors are stale.” While his perspective and solutions are still insular to the academy rather than focused more broadly on public engagement and relevance, Hayot suggests that “if we want students to understand the relationship between what we teach and questions of immense contemporary concern, we should put those matters of concern into our curricular structures.” For him, interdisciplinarity and theme-based curricula around topics of relevant concern are critical. He acknowledges that we already have a model for this in more cultural studies–based interdisciplines.

⁸ “Public Humanities,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_humanities (accessed July 2, 2021).

⁹ For a full transcription of the Act, see National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, Public Law 89-209, September 29, 1965, <https://www.neh.gov/about/history/national-foundation-arts-and-humanities-act-1965-pl-89-209>.

¹⁰ For more in-depth histories, see Jamil Zainaldin, “Public Works: NEH, Congress, and the State Humanities Councils,” *The Public Historian* 35 (1) (2013): 28–50; and Mary Rizzo, “Humanities Councils,” *The Inclusive Historian’s Handbook*, May 23, 2019.

¹¹ It is important to note here that the NEH chose a governance and organizational model for humanities councils that diverged from the state agency model that the NEA created for arts commissions. Where state and regional arts commissions are run by the state or jurisdictional government, humanities councils are independent nonprofit entities.

¹² In fact, we can undercut our argument here and say that investments in the arts and humanities reached their peak in 1979 (using 2019 dollars). And given the leaps in funding to other government programs, one can easily make the argument that there has been a seismic divestment in the arts and humanities in government appropriations. On the other hand, given the alternative of four straight years from the Trump White House to zero-out these agencies, we will take the uninflated gains.

- ¹³ Such activities include grant-making to cultural nonprofits, expanding inclusive cultural documentation and preservation projects, outreach to veterans groups with book and writing programs, and colloquia and participatory forums focusing on civics education.
- ¹⁴ Council-created or -supported online regional encyclopedias are published in territories and states including Colorado, Georgia, Guam, Louisiana, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia, and Virginia. Radio programs and podcasts include New York Humanities' *Amended*, which explores suffrage history with host Laura Free, associate professor of history at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Virginia Humanities produces *With Good Reason*, an NPR program featuring professors from Virginia's public universities and colleges discussing their research and its relevance to the public. From 2008 until 2020, Virginia Humanities also produced *BackStory*, a popular public history podcast featuring several history professors discussing the history behind the headlines of today's news.
- ¹⁵ Allison Wrabel, "Yancey Heritage and History Exhibit Tells the Story of Education in Esmont," *The Daily Progress*, February 27, 2021, https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/education/watch-now-yancey-heritage-and-history-exhibit-tells-the-story-of-education-in-esmont/article_49e2ce16-7893-11eb-b383-bb5012fe58c9.html.
- ¹⁶ Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 5.
- ¹⁷ For example, Joe Martucci, "Christopher Columbus Statue to Come Down in Atlantic City," *The Press of Atlantic City*, June 28, 2020, https://pressofatlanticcity.com/news/christopher-columbus-statue-to-come-down-in-atlantic-city/article_2bed34af-4b8a-55b5-b480-63f31e5341d5.html; and Isaac Avilucea, "2 Charged with Defacing George Washington Monument in Trenton," *Trentonian*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.trentonian.com/2020/06/25/2-charged-with-defacing-george-washington-monument-in-trenton/>.
- ¹⁸ Tom Wiedmann and Mark J. Bonamo, "George Floyd Statue at Newark City Hall Defaced One Week after Unveiling," *TAPinto*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.tapinto.net/towns/newark/sections/arts-and-entertainment/articles/george-floyd-statue-at-newark-city-hall-defaced-one-week-after-unveiling>.
- ¹⁹ National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965.

Opening the Humanities to New Fields & New Voices

George J. Sánchez

This essay explores efforts to enact effective “public humanities” among humanities practitioners as the “public” in the United States is changing profoundly. In particular, it explores the creation of the Boyle Heights Museum in East Los Angeles as an attempt to bridge the gap in historical practice and outreach between an immigrant and Latino community with a team of faculty, doctoral, and undergraduate students from the University of Southern California. Building four historical exhibitions in the Boyle Heights community, this team is a reflection of the growing awareness of the need to establish new institutional practices in archiving and historical presentations that reach new immigrant communities. New PhD students are in search of approaches to historical training, publishing, and output that engage with these new publics. Our own survival in the humanities fields is increasingly dependent on reaching these publics and creating this diversity of the humanities.

On October 1, 2017, the Boyle Heights Museum opened in the lobby of the CASA 0101 Theater with an exhibit on the history of the Boyle Heights neighborhood in the heart of East Los Angeles, California. The first exhibit, *Aquí Estamos y No Nos Vamos*, drew hundreds of visitors to its opening, with a line down First Street waiting to enter the gallery. The exhibit told the story of the repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans from Boyle Heights during the 1930s, and the struggle of that community to stay in Los Angeles during that period. But it also put that struggle in the context of contemporary efforts by the Trump administration to criminalize the twenty-first-century immigrant community and target it for deportation. The exhibit was a collective product of a team of Latina/o undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Southern California under my direction: they did the research, collected the photographs, wrote the exhibit script, and translated it into a bilingual format, often aided by the immigrant parents of the students. Our public program that day was a celebration of this effort and the opening of a new institution, complete with an online presence, that would document and display the rich history that this neighborhood represents.¹

Rather than simply a story of inclusion on the part of new institutional players in the telling of U.S. history, this new exhibition opening by a new community-based museum in a multipurpose arts location deep in an immigrant-based Latino community is the future of the public humanities in the United States. That future is something that larger institutional structures of the humanities with traditional leadership and that cater to an older white population have a hard time seeing or planning for, but increasingly these new populations will determine the course of the humanities in the United States. Either the older institutions will learn quickly to adapt and create new audiences for their work or they will slowly wither away under the weight of demographic change, unappealing products, and an unwillingness to evolve. Indeed, I argue that the fate of the humanities is at stake in many different ways.

The Census Bureau's recent release of the population report on the 2020 U.S. Census gives us some sense of the massive demographic changes occurring in the U.S. population.² While overall population growth in the last decade slowed substantially, the growth that did occur, totaling an increase of about twenty-three million, was made up entirely by people who identified as Hispanic, Asian, Black, or more than one race. Whites accounted for 0 percent of the population growth in the 2010s. Indeed, the non-Hispanic white population declined for the first time in U.S. history and became substantially older, with a median age at forty-four compared with the Hispanic median age at thirty. Marking a long-term decline in the white birthrate, people who identify as white make up 58 percent of the U.S. population, down from 64 percent in 2010 and 69 percent in 2000. Among those under the age of eighteen, a majority checked boxes other than white (compared with 65 percent who checked white ten years earlier). Hispanics accounted for about half the nation's population growth in the last ten years, while Asians accounted for one-fifth of the growth and the Black population another tenth. In 2020, nearly one-in-four Americans identified as either Hispanic or Asian. Immigrants to the United States largely come from Latin America or Asia and settle in large cities like New York or Los Angeles, but they also fan out broadly across the nation. As of 2020, 98 percent of Americans live in a county experiencing Latino population growth, and 95 percent of Americans live in counties experiencing Asian population growth.³

But the fate of the humanities is governed by more than simply demographic transformation. These new populations have rarely been targets of humanities outreach, and few institutions have done an adequate job in diversifying their workforce. Rather than thinking of this as affirmative action for the collective good, the various fields of the humanities need to see it as affirmative action for survival. These groups are not new token representations of diversity fueled by racial transformation, which has been the norm in diversity work in the humanities to date. Leaders in the humanities have to contemplate that the survival of

their various fields is dependent on their ability to recruit, reach, and satisfy the humanistic outlooks of these new populations in their institutions.

In other words, this essay takes on more than the crisis of the *humanities* in its understanding of the *public humanities*, but also addresses the crisis of the *public* in the growing work of the public humanities. How has the public changed in the recent past, and how does that changing public affect the way we must operate in the public humanities? Since colleges and universities continue to produce most of the practitioners in the public humanities – whether as college graduates, master’s and PhD students, or faculty who build between institutional settings – we must ask: have our institutions of higher learning diversified sufficiently to readily bring expertise based on community knowledge, growing new scholarship, and passion to understand new perspectives to the world of the public humanities?

The Boyle Heights Museum began by deciding that this new institution would be built within the Boyle Heights neighborhood and inside a recognized community-based outlet for artistic representations in theater and visual art. By placing the Boyle Heights Museum in Boyle Heights, our philosophy was to take public history to the public we were trying to reach, rather than making the public come to us in another setting. Most individuals in this working-class community of immigrants have never been inside a museum building, largely because those buildings are located far away from the barrio in spots intended to attract white upper- and middle-class audiences to locations they find safe and appealing. From the Getty Museum to the County Museum of Art, the institutions of the arts and humanities in segregated Los Angeles are almost always built in white districts. Few institutions, except for underfunded extremely small organizations like the CASA 0101 Theater, are built in East or South Los Angeles or in any other neighborhoods dominated by the city’s Black and Brown communities.

How do you build and nurture a community of museumgoers in a working-class Latino district like Boyle Heights? The programming we implemented to accompany the three exhibitions launched between 2017 and 2019 were key to the success of the exhibitions themselves. In the spring of 2018, our second exhibit celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the 1968 student walkouts from the high schools of East Los Angeles to protest conditions at the schools. We interviewed walkout participants such as Paula Crisostomo and Vickie Castro, focusing on the women of that movement whose roles were often underacknowledged by the historical accounts that had been written.⁴ In one of the most moving programs sponsored during the run of this exhibit, we brought together five women who had been active in the walkouts, now all in their sixties, with four current high school activists, all young women who wrote for the *Boyle Heights Beat*, a locally produced newspaper staffed by high school students. While the young reporters started

by asking questions to the walkout participants about their decision-making in their youth, eventually the older women turned the tables and asked the young reporters about the struggles in their own lives. Some of the high school students recounted emotionally what life was like living in fear of your parents' potential deportation and the emotional trauma they suffered. Connections across generations, using local history as a bridge, were formed that day in a powerful and moving tribute to the resiliency of both generations of women activists.

Along with programming that reinforced the continued relevance of historical exhibitions to the current population, we used various approaches to bring different generations of local residents through the doors of the museum. One group we incorporated regularly into our programming was a young generation of local students to which USC had already committed itself called the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI). In order to increase the college-going rate of local K–12 students, USC works with sixth graders from the local public schools in Boyle Heights through after-school and weekend tutoring and additional classwork every year until their high school graduation. NAI parents must also commit to regular involvement in the programming. One of the individuals at USC responsible for NAI parents in Boyle Heights worked on the staff of the Boyle Heights Museum. We directly involved those families in the credited work of attending a programming event geared for them, and the K–12 students often guided their parents around the historical exhibition, aided by the preliminary work we had done with them. In this way, the younger generations of Latino students were often the ones who brought their immigrant parents in to participate in museum events, all made possible by the locality of the venue.

All our exhibitions were bilingual in presentation, and we spent a great deal of time making sure that we used English and Spanish signage throughout to attract and sustain a multilingual population. Families appreciated this effort, as visitors could read the exhibit text in whatever language they felt most comfortable. Likewise, our online presence and website are also consistently bilingual, as are the advertisements about upcoming events and exhibitions. Because the exhibitions themselves were produced by a group of USC undergraduate and graduate students who often concentrated their academic efforts in English, this was a strategic decision that was easier made than done in practice. We identified those of us who felt comfortable producing exhibition text in Spanish, and even utilized some of our own parents who are truly bilingual or Spanish-dominant to check our translations or help with the basic work of producing the exhibitions in Spanish.

The need to change and widen our approach to public history in the United States has been recognized at the largest national scale: namely, at the Smithsonian Institution. In December 2020, during a lame duck session in the waning days of the Trump administration, Congress passed legislation for

two long-desired additions to the Smithsonian network of museums: the Museum of the American Latino and the Museum of the American Woman. Both additions recognized that the existing Smithsonian museums had inadequately addressed the importance of these populations in the United States. In the case of the Museum of the American Latino, several scathing reports had shown the inadequacy of the Smithsonian's approach to expanding its offerings and exhibitions to include the largest minority group in the United States.⁵ I participated in the first gatherings of Latina/o historians, an online series of three meetings sponsored by the Mellon Foundation in summer 2021 to begin the arduous task of determining the narrative approach to this new museum and to give guidance around the parameters of its exhibition strategy and archival ambitions. One of the most significant questions we addressed was how much Latin American history was necessary in this museum to adequately do justice to the contextualization of the diversity of the Latino experience in the United States.⁶

What is happening at the national level is also manifesting in an explosion of interest in regional and local museums that focus on the Latino experience in these contexts. In summer 2021, I joined the Scholars' Council of the Mexican American Civil Rights Initiative (MACRI), an organization that formed in 2019 to create a new museum and programming institute that would focus on the political and social achievements of Mexican Americans in San Antonio (where MACRI was situated) and the wider U.S. Southwest. MACRI was supported by the San Antonio City Council, partly as a way of generating additional tourist interest in the regional history of civic empowerment of Mexican Americans in San Antonio.⁷ This new effort would join with established museums like the Museo del Barrio in Harlem in New York City and the Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, two places with longer established histories as regional Latino-oriented museums in the nation. While Los Angeles spent decades without a museum focused on the largest racial/ethnic group in southern California, the Plaza de Cultura y Artes was established in 2010 to celebrate the city's Mexican origins and its continued history and culture, which dominate the local history.⁸ In 2021, in fact, the Plaza Museum opened an auxiliary outlet that focuses on the culinary contributions of Mexican and Latino cuisine.

Most of these historical museums are actually institutions that combine historical and art exhibitions, promoting larger cultural displays as well as displays of political and civic engagement. The reason for this expansive cultural stretch is that few institutions, whether centered on history or art, have done an adequate job of building collections or displays that integrate the contributions of Latinas/os to these respective humanities fields. Every new institution that centers on the Latino population, therefore, is placed under enormous pressure to display all forms of cultural, political, and historical contributions to U.S. society and culture, in the past and in the present.

In fall 2018, the Boyle Heights Museum produced, with the support of the California Council for the Humanities, our third exhibition: on the life of Edward Roybal, the first Mexican American elected to the Los Angeles City Council in the twentieth century. The history of Roybal and his family displayed the courage and tenacity that we often witnessed among Boyle Heights residents, a story we thought had not received the attention it deserved in Los Angeles, especially in chronicles of the political history of the city and region. In particular, the multi-racial nature of the political coalition he put together in 1949, along with the newly formed Community Services Organization, was critical in moving the neighborhood forward through electoral representation. Roybal left a legacy of fighting for one's neighborhood that has been exemplified by his own children, especially his daughter Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, and by the Roybal Foundation, which continues this work throughout East Los Angeles today. We were honored to be featured in a Facebook Live interview with Univision, a Spanish language television station in Los Angeles, that extended the reach of the exhibit and the concurrent theatrical play running at CASA 0101.

One thing that became clear to us in building the exhibition on the life of Edward Roybal was the lack of a commitment to the creation of local, regional, or national archives, both material and document archives, that could develop exhibitions in the future. Despite the fact that Roybal is one of the most important figures in the history of Los Angeles and the empowerment of the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the United States at this time, no major institution has shown interest in obtaining his city council desk nor other material objects related to his tenure on the city council or in Congress for preservation purposes or potential future display in museum exhibitions. These materials remain in the office building that houses the Roybal Foundation in East Los Angeles, even while several university archives now hold multiple collections of his vast legacy of paper archives from his various public offices. Our small exhibit could display reproductions of various documents from these paper archives, but simply was not secure enough to show material objects large or small. Those institutions in Los Angeles and nationally that could store and preserve those objects have not shown interest in doing so. This is how future silences are created and sustained.

Our team of public historians very quickly became known in Boyle Heights as a group dedicated to the preservation of local history. It is not surprising, therefore, that we were approached by Quetzal Flores, a noted local musician who at the time was working for the East Los Angeles Community Corporation, to evaluate a roomful of documents he encountered in Casa del Mexicano, a long-standing social service center in Boyle Heights scheduled to be remodeled and repurposed. We were asked to evaluate the contents of file cabinets and storage boxes left behind by immigrant organizations working with the Los Angeles Consulate of Mexico when that building was foreclosed and became property of the state of

California. What we knew was that part of the collection had already proven useful in one of the first scholarly studies of undocumented workers in California by Stanford historian Ana Raquel Minian.⁹

The team spent a day investigating the contents of a room full of paper documents and newsletters, almost all in Spanish, as well as a unique set of photographs. We produced a report that we circulated to a variety of university archives to gauge their interest in preserving these archival items. We learned that Stanford University Archives had already passed on the materials, and the Special Collections Unit at the University of Southern California did not have any interest. But we connected with the archivist at the library of California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), an institution that has particular interest in Boyle Heights history. After extensive negotiations with the current owners of the Casa del Mexicano, CSULA was able to obtain these valuable documents, which will be made available to future researchers and curators. The Boyle Heights Museum hopes to partner with CSULA libraries to help digitize the collection and feature it in one of our future exhibitions.

This ongoing commitment to civic engagement through our work at the Boyle Heights Museum has also transformed my graduate teaching and mentorship. I believe that I am part of a larger movement to radically change the nature of graduate education in the twenty-first century and to produce a new generation of scholar activists who do not structure their lives around scholarship solely for the disciplines they represent, but instead desire to engage the wider public in everything they do.¹⁰ And rather than seeing this effort as just a new form of public history or community engagement standing alone, I believe that it will require a full rethinking of the purpose of scholarship in the humanities for the twenty-first century, with a definition of the public that is much more expansive, multiracial, and class diverse than previous versions of civic engagement have been. In short, nothing less than a rethinking of humanities education at the graduate level is necessary to reinvigorate our disciplines and prepare us for the challenges of relevancy and impact for this new generation of scholars and publics.

I am not the only person in the humanities thinking about a radical reinvention of graduate training based on reaching wider publics. The American Historical Association (AHA) has led efforts in what they call “career diversity for historians” by launching an initiative to help history departments better prepare graduate students and early-career historians for career options both within and beyond the academy. Working collaboratively with three dozen departments from around the nation, the AHA is utilizing both its substantial network of scholars to meticulously study where trained PhDs in history end up working and a Mellon Foundation grant to push faculty and departments to think more expansively about the

occupations PhD graduates in history might fill. Currently, less than half of all PhDs in history end up working in four-year tenure-track faculty positions, and about one-quarter find employment outside the academy altogether. This effort has led some departments to think about incorporating training within their PhD programs to prepare graduates for work in museums and archives, corporations and nonprofits, publishing houses and other places where historical training may be vital to the performance of certain jobs.¹¹

At the same time, I am aware of how desperately white the academy has remained despite decades of work to diversify the professoriate.¹² Among full-time professors in 2013, 58 percent of faculty members were white males and 26 percent were white females, with less than 3 percent of full-time professors being either African American or Latino. In 2015, when racial minority students launched massive protests at campuses across the country, their number one complaint was the lack of minority professors in the classroom. Even though many major universities launched new initiatives in the wake of these student protests to hire minority faculty members, the problem for many humanities departments starts at the undergraduate level, where students are staying away from our majors, and continues on to our PhD programs, where diversity is still sorely lacking despite the clear needs.

At USC, I run the university's Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program, identifying promising sophomores with sustained research funding and encouraging them to pursue PhDs and fill the ranks of the future faculty.¹³ However, I have learned that young budding scholars do not simply want to reproduce the lives they see among current tenure-track faculty in the classroom. They embrace a higher ideal of reaching a wider public with their work than is typical for most university faculty. This aspiration makes sense to them, since our nation's K-12 school-age population is majority-minority, and whites have accounted for less than half of all births in the United States since 2012. Their public is not well-represented among our humanities disciplines and writing just for the disciplines seems like a waste of their talents and interests. Over my career, I have searched for ways to make the study, research, and presentation of U.S. history more relevant to students' lives, and to the lives of people of color, recent immigrants to this country, and those who are often marginal to U.S. universities.

Projects to reach these wider publics have affected the kind of graduate students who have been drawn to work with me over the years. When we opened the Boyle Heights Museum in 2017, the project manager of our first exhibition was a first year PhD student in American studies and ethnicity whose own pathway exemplifies the kind of graduate student I consistently attract to USC. Michelle Vasquez-Ruiz was born to undocumented parents living on the Westside of Los Angeles who had emigrated to the United States from Oaxaca, Mexico.¹⁴ Like many other first-born and first-generation college students, she was the child that

translated for her parents growing up, dealing with doctors, teachers, and government inquiries. Michelle attended the University of California, Irvine as an undergraduate business student, but changed her major after taking her first Chicano studies course. As an undergraduate activist in MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), a Chicano student political organization, Michelle continued wanting to make an impact on the lives of others for the better, especially as she became more aware of her own Indigenous background. In her life, it was always faculty of color who encouraged her to think of getting an advanced degree, starting with a master's degree in history at California State University, Los Angeles.

Michelle grew more critical of traditional historical approaches that did not engage communities through oral histories and archival collecting. So she sought an interdisciplinary PhD program in American studies and ethnicity at USC. She was attracted to work with me because so many of my PhD students engaged the public directly in their work, particularly Latino communities in California. Her vision was to be a researcher actively involved in archival collecting and constructing new collections of populations like her own that had often been ignored by traditional libraries and archivists. Her training has included digital mapping of Indigenous communities in Los Angeles through collaboration with scholars at UCLA, and her intended dissertation project will explore the changing dynamics for Indigenous migrants from Oaxaca to Los Angeles as they continue to fulfill their traditional obligations to their communities of origin and as the restrictive policies along the U.S.-Mexican border become more militarized and punitive. Michelle realizes that community-based research requires a passion, commitment, and sense of duty rare among traditional academics. As she says, "it is not just a job." It requires communication to a public outside of the academy that she wants to sustain and grow. Michelle describes the intellectual projects conducted by her mentors as "uniquely human," in which the connection to the public is clear and direct. We must take seriously the intellectual and personal desires of this new generation of humanities scholars entering the academy who are determined to have their work make a wider impact.

One of the graduate students who organizes the public programming for the Boyle Heights Museum is Yesenia Navarette Hunter, a nontraditional PhD candidate in the history department who moved her family to Los Angeles from the state of Washington to attend graduate school.¹⁵ Yesenia grew up in a large migrant farm-working family, born thirteenth of seventeen children. Her family came from Mexico, and many of them are undocumented. Yesenia grew up on the Yakama Indian Reservation in Washington State. When she was about forty years old and with four children of her own, Yesenia started a four-year college degree at Heritage College on the Yakama Reservation, where she was incorporated into the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship program. Getting involved in Mellon

Mays moved Yesenia from pursuing a degree in social work to acquiring a humanities degree instead.

Yesenia's entire pathway to her PhD work was rooted in community-based musical workshops in *son jaracho* with Mexican migrant families, especially women who used music to recall their Mexican and Indigenous roots. She also worked on arts workshops for children with other local parents to encourage them to become writers and artists of their own lives. Our connection formed because I could identify her project of storytelling and creativity within the discipline of history and as helping others in migrant families to understand their own history of dislocations as transnational migrants. For her dissertation, Yesenia is producing a historical project that focuses on the migrant farm-working women in families in the Yakama Valley who have lived dislocated lives as transients, in which rhythms of movements and music have provided roots and stability. Yesenia has already been hired as an assistant professor by Heritage College, the institution that first attracted her as a nontraditional college student.

For Yesenia and Michelle, the Boyle Heights Museum project allowed them to learn how to train undergraduates to do research that has community impact. Both also discovered how to use the discipline of history in public spaces beyond their own academic work. In our work in the Boyle Heights Museum, students are always the first to remind us to listen to the community and to develop our public programming with community interests and ideas in mind. Both Yesenia and Michelle strongly believe that in their own academic work, like our collective public historical work, community members should be able to hear themselves in our stories and in our histories, and see themselves as belonging because they have a story to tell others: a living history.

In 2019–2020, a new configuration of graduate and undergraduate students at USC worked with me to develop “Traditions of Innovations,” our fourth exhibit, which focuses on the spirit of entrepreneurship in the Boyle Heights past and present.¹⁶ Partly to counteract gentrification pressures that see financial capital coming from outside the neighborhood as its only hope, we are documenting and telling stories of local residents and business owners in Boyle Heights who have enriched the lives of residents while building and maintaining a prosperous life for themselves. We focus on the history of entrepreneurship by concentrating on local businesses of the past like the Phillips Music Store and the Pan-American Bank, but also by examining the commitments of their proprietors William Phillips and bank cofounder Francisco Bravo. We also celebrate the power of individual entrepreneurs engaged in everything from street vending *elotes* to providing music as local mariachis for hire. Businesses that have remained in Boyle Heights over generations like Candelas Music Shop, providing custom-made guitars for all musical genres, are key to our history of entrepreneurship, since the Delgado

family first started the business in the 1940s with their grandfather's migration to Los Angeles, and two subsequent generations have kept the business in the neighborhood on Brooklyn Avenue, now named Avenida Cesar Chavez. And new establishments like Espacio 1839 continue the tradition of local businesses whose concept of service extends beyond making profits to serving the community with much-needed services and products.

Through the telling and retelling of these stories, we hope to keep the history of the Boyle Heights community alive in the minds of current residents, students, and neighbors. But it is also clear that this is a living history that matters to local residents who often struggle to pass along hope to their children growing up hearing national politicians and even local pundits target them as what is wrong in Los Angeles. I expect that people living their lives in Boyle Heights today will continue making history that matters to the future of the United States and shaping the contours of their lives as Americans for a long time to come. In other words, the Boyle Heights Museum, in one form or another, will have plenty more exhibitions to mount and stories to tell. There is no reason to believe any differently; the histories told in our exhibitions exemplify the strength of people who have overcome much adversity to persevere, survive, and prosper. When I think of the future of the United States, and the humanities that matters in this country, I often think of Boyle Heights.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹² For an early-twenty-first-century analysis of the difficulty of this work in the historical profession, see George J. Sánchez, “Confronting a Crisis in the Historical Profession,” *Perspectives on History*, October 2007, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2007/confronting-a-crisis-in-the-historical-profession>.
- ¹³ For the national program, see the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, <https://www.mmuf.org>. For information regarding the MMUF program at USC, see Dornsife Office of Diversity, “Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program,” <https://dornsife.usc.edu/mmuf-programs/>.
- ¹⁴ Author interview with Michelle Vasquez-Ruiz on August 13, 2019.
- ¹⁵ Author interview with Yesenia Hunter on August 13, 2019.
- ¹⁶ See Boyle Heights Museum, “Boyle Heights: Traditions of Innovations,” <https://www.boyleheightsmuseum.org/current-exhibition> (accessed April 6, 2022).

Creating Knowledge with the Public: Disrupting the Expert/Audience Hierarchy

*Denise D. Meringolo with Lee Boot,
Denise Griffin Johnson & Maureen O'Neill*

This essay provides both a philosophy and a case study to define, analyze, and explore community-centered public history practice. In its ideal form, community-centered public history practice strives for equity and inclusion. It is service-oriented. It is often future-focused. On the ground, in real time, community-centered public history practice requires constant recalibration, humility, and active collaboration that can be challenging for academically trained scholars to fully embrace. The co-authors share their experiences and impressions in order to highlight both the difficulty and the value of this work.

Public history is an interdisciplinary field composed of individuals with a common interest in understanding the past. Public historians work for museums, historical societies, government agencies, consulting firms, and academic departments. Many deliver original content and translate specialized knowledge to nonexpert audiences. But others practice community-centered public history, engaging self-identified public(s) as equal partners in a process of inquiry, research, and interpretation. They position themselves not as authoritative experts but as collaborators in the cocreation of knowledge.¹ Community-centered public history challenges deeply held beliefs about scholarship and authority. It requires constant attention to power dynamics, epistemology, expression, ownership, and accessibility.² Community-centered public history can generate critical understandings of the human condition that are rooted in place, embodied in lived experiences, and responsive to the questions, needs, and interests identified by a broad social network.³

Community-centered public historians strive to be both responsive and responsible. Our work requires us to be responsive to the needs and interests of the communities we serve and responsible advocates on their behalf. At the same time, we remain responsible for upholding the highest standards of our disciplines, and responsive to questions and critique from our academically

oriented colleagues.⁴ Balancing the demands of the discipline with those of our collaborators requires constant recalibration. We must occupy a clear ethical position, building relationships and trust before we begin any work. We must listen to our community partners before we frame questions and shift the typical orientation of scholarly inquiry, honoring life experience as a legitimate source of both questions and knowledge. We put history to work in ways that require us to align ourselves with the people we serve.⁵ Community-based practice demands humility, self-discipline, and compassion. Our role in any given collaboration should begin with a question rooted in service. Not “what can I tell you about the past?” but rather, “how might I best put my particular skills to work to help you answer your own questions or accomplish your own goals?”

Community-centered public historians seek to activate the past for the present. We believe that engaging people in a process of knowledge creation can have a profound – if unpredictable – impact on the communities we serve. This requires a deep commitment to equity, inclusivity, and truth. Our work exposes systemic racism and inequity in the realm of culture. Commemorative statues, interpreted landscapes, and collecting institutions have come under long-overdue public scrutiny in the twenty-first century. Rather than inspiring exploration or sparking dialogue, these places represent exclusive ideas about the past and silence counternarratives and experiences that challenge their ideological project to advance a belief that the past was both benign and simple. Effective community-centered public history practice can transform both public space and public uses of the past but only if it challenges existing power structures, insists on truth-telling, allows for discomfort, and does not shy away from dismantling institutions that no longer serve us.⁶

What does community-centered public history practice look like in real time?⁷ Community-centered public history is best practiced slowly, but sometimes events impacting the people we serve require us to work quickly. Such was the case in our effort to provide a meaningful, responsible, and authentic response for the people engaged in the Baltimore Uprising. The Uprising began on April 12, 2015. Baltimore city police, patrolling in the Sandtown/Winchester neighborhood, chased a twenty-five-year-old man named Freddie Gray. They handcuffed him and dragged him to a police van. Gray was injured during this encounter and repeatedly asked for medical assistance. Instead, officers tossed him into the back of the vehicle, failing to secure him safely. Gray suffered additional injury as the van bumped and jerked along city streets for thirty minutes. People assembled outside the local police station, protesting both the brutality of the arrest and the failure of police to provide medical aid. After Freddie Gray died on April 19 from a spinal injury, the protests expanded.

Police violence against Black men has long been a subject of protest. As police departments began to acquire military-grade weapons and gear in the 1960s, protests became more persistent and more visible. Arguably, however, public debate, civic unrest, and media attention around this issue did not enter into broad public consciousness until the 1990s.⁸ Active opposition to the violent policing of Black people led to the 2013 creation of Black Lives Matter. Founders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi established the organization in response to the murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin by a vigilante.⁹ By the time of Freddie Gray's arrest, Black Lives Matter had organized two high-profile protests against the police: the first after the July 2014 murder of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, shot twelve times by Ferguson, Missouri, police after allegedly stealing cigars; and the second after the November 2014 murder of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio. Rice was playing with a toy pellet gun when shot by police.

Because the protests in Baltimore were recognizable as part of a national movement, they attracted national media attention. Intense focus on incidents of property damage and looting (most of which took place on April 27, the day of Freddie Gray's funeral) shaped public perception.¹⁰ Reporters and politicians alike described an encounter between police and a crowd of young people at Mondawmin Mall in West Baltimore as the moment when protests became a "riot."¹¹ Governor Larry Hogan activated the National Guard. City Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake declared a citywide curfew.¹² Both she and President Barack Obama attracted outrage from activists for their use of the term "thugs." In comments he made on April 28, Obama distinguished between "criminals and thugs who tore up the city" from those who had participated in "several days of peaceful protests," which he argued should have received more media attention.¹³ Rawlings-Blake similarly said, "It is very clear there is a difference with the peaceful protests."¹⁴ Regardless, media outlets across the country repeated the charge that Baltimore was suffering through a "riot" perpetrated by "thugs," language that simplified a complex situation and delegitimized activists' efforts to draw attention to the plague of police violence.

From the vantage point of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), however, the death of Freddie Gray and the protests that followed were not national dramas unfolding on television. Then-President Freeman Hrabowski reflected on the fact that he had crossed paths with Freddie Gray's father. The elder Gray had been a student at Coppin State when Hrabowski was an administrator there.¹⁵ Students, alumni, staff, and faculty, many of whom were born, live, or work in Baltimore, participated in demonstrations.

Seeking to unpack the impact of the unrest on the campus community, UMBC scholars organized a teach-in on campus. Faculty offered insights into the ongoing crisis of police violence and the history of racial injustice in Baltimore. The teach-in provided valuable context during a tumultuous moment. It also repre-

sented the University's broad commitment to public engagement. In the months and years after the town hall, UMBC students, faculty, and administrators produced a variety of projects, articles, syllabi, and events to interpret and commemorate the Uprising.¹⁶

But, in the moment, the teach-in also revealed a sharp divide in the public humanities. Some expressed frustration, anger, and sadness that the teach-in seemed both to gloss over racism on campus and to compound it by co-opting Black people's experiences as the object of intellectual inquiry. These feelings were expressed by members of the campus community who had first-hand encounters with microaggressions, injustice, inequity, and violence. In some ways, the teach-in delegitimized the epistemological value of their stories just as the word "thugs" had flattened a complicated and diverse series of responses to injustice.

During the Uprising, those directly impacted by its deep societal roots did not need experts to tell a story of injustice to them. They needed to be centered in a conversation about inequality, racism, injustice, and violence. They needed to be heard, not addressed. It was evident that the moment demanded something more akin to community-centered public history.

The events unfolding in Baltimore, their characterization in the media, and the extent to which both of these revealed and exacerbated systemic racism all became central to urgent discussions taking place in my public history classroom. My students and I worried about the stories emerging about the Uprising, concerned that the voices of protesters and activists would be silenced.

Histories of social and political disruption often originate in official records that emphasize the perspectives of police officers, government leaders, and media figures. These records become collections, held in archives and museums. The stature of these institutions lends them a false sense of objectivity. Taken together, these conditions reinforce damaging fictions. Individual actors bolstered by their proximity to institutions conferring authority – the mayor's office, the police department, the historical society, or the university – appear to direct the course of history, while groups of people operating outside formal power structures appear as little more than a frustrated mob or as victims. We are left with a historical landscape that is more than simply exclusive; it is implicated in the reproduction of inequality, and it undermines our efforts to foster critical reflection.¹⁷

My students and I decided that the most responsible way for us to be of service was to create a space where the people most directly impacted by the conditions leading up to the Baltimore Uprising and those involved in the protests could control their representation. We established Preserve the Baltimore Uprising, a crowdsourced, digital collection. Individuals can upload digital materials directly to the collection, and they control the decision about whether a given item goes public or remains private.

The collection was founded on a community-centered philosophy. By adopting crowdsourcing as its primary method, we built a space where local people can create an alternative to the official narrative taking shape in the media. It also directly challenges the exclusive collections practices, long undertaken by cultural institutions.

But collecting is only a first, necessary step in a community-centered public history process. In 2017, I received support from the Whiting Foundation to activate the collection as a platform for cocreation and dialogue. Between June 2018 and December 2019, I worked with a broad range of culture activists, high school students and teachers, community-based organizations, artists, and university faculty in a collaborative process to develop a deeper, community-centered understanding of the causes and consequences of the Baltimore Uprising of 2015.

The project unfolded in parallel arenas. I worked with 150 students and nine teachers at three city high schools: Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Baltimore City College High School, and Bard College High School. First, we explored the history and value of museum and archival collections. Together, we examined the ways in which collecting practices have shaped misleading interpretations of the past. Students came to recognize that gathering stories and conducting oral histories could be a form of community service. Second, we engaged in a process of collaborative inquiry. We used materials in the digital collection to identify focal points for dialogue. Students participated in small story circles, sharing their own memories and experiences to help identify questions. They read a variety of reports on the causes and consequences of the Uprising. I worked with them to unpack these sources and develop research projects based on their questions. Third, I trained them in oral history methods. Finally, I worked with teachers to facilitate collaborative interpretation, supporting students in the development of a variety of projects that enabled them to arrive at new understandings of the history and impact of racial injustice in Baltimore.

Maureen O'Neill, Library Media Specialist and Film Teacher at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, served as a key partner. She recognized the ways in which community-centered collaboration differed from other forms of university-school partnerships. Her reflection on our collaboration makes particular note of the rapport we developed:

Our high school's partnership with UMBC was focused on organizing a student-driven oral history/public history project for 2018–2019 school year, using the Preserve the Baltimore Uprising digital collection as a springboard to encourage students to reflect on these events, explore their history, and develop creative, interpretive projects. This was merely the galvanizing concept, however, since Denise Meringolo demonstrated just how much possibility can manifest in schools and communities when academics wield their power and resources in true partnership and collaboration with schools.

While I have experienced many “partnerships” with colleges and universities, they are most often driven by the dictates and structures of grant requirements and the literal logistics of separate worlds. Many academics either don’t remember their own schooling experiences before higher education, or they are consciously avoiding a return to our very controlled and paternally-structured worlds. The intellectual freedom advocated on college campuses is difficult to replicate when our K – 12 physical and resource limitations are so much more structured in a high school than on a college campus. Schedules are more rigid and complex in high schools, and this matrix of time and space can constrict the dialogue, communication and exchange that takes place within this type of partnership.

Denise was very in touch with our world at Poly, and she soon realized that she would have to be the one to demonstrate the most flexibility in order to make the partnership successful. She spent the physical time necessary on our campus to be present and develop the relationships necessary to make our partnership even logistically possible. She would spend an entire day in our school library so that she could meet with different students and teachers throughout our school day, rather than asking us to rearrange student and teacher availability to meet a narrow visit timeframe for her benefit. This was significant because it removed participation barriers for us in the high school, both mentally and physically. The complexity required for a K – 12 school to meet with academic volunteers, mentors, etc., is almost more than the benefits are worth for many schools because our bandwidth for organizing such events is dwindling every day under the increased demands of K – 12 bureaucracy.

For academics to “get out of the way” in order to support the work happening in schools and communities, based on my experience with Denise, means that the academics themselves must be more present. Denise was physically present in our school, bringing snacks to our students as she sat and talked with them. She was present as she led a workshop in oral history interviews for our AP Research class, providing us with digital audio recorders and recommending audio transcription services that we still use several years later. She was emotionally present with us, speaking to me about my struggles outside school caring for my dying mother as I faced the daily demands of my teaching job. She was intellectually present in the ways which she allowed for our partnership pathways on this project to be sculpted by the interests and abilities of our students and teachers, not just the demands of her grant or her university department. For example, she had initially envisioned our oral history work as something that could be used to support National History Day-type projects, but that wasn’t where the student interest or energies manifested during that year. She also recognized that student and teacher time and efforts are valuable, and she placed a monetary value on participation so that participants’ contributions were paid through stipends. Our students do not have extensive amounts of leisure time, waiting to be filled. They have families that need financial contributions. Our students hold jobs while taking full

academic course loads. Denise understood this and made our students' participation possible by meeting us "where we lived" here at our school.

But such work requires courage. When Denise first approached me about the project, she explained in an email, "I see this project as a framework within which there is significant flexibility for meeting specific school/teacher/student needs and interests . . . leaving specifics unknown was the right decision but it is also making me anxious!!" Educational systems, corporations, foundations, all get very nervous when approached with the unknown. We must test and assess and quantify our learning experiences so that no child is left behind. But there are other ways of being left behind, and one of them is being left alone, being kept apart from each other. For academics' work to be relevant, it must be grounded in full-fledged time, space and relationship with we who are their partners. Denise, our academic partner, met with us in our own space. She listened to what was in our curriculum and our plans. She listened to the students and their goals for the year. She witnessed their talents. And she returned, week after month for the whole school year, even when it was colder and darker and more difficult to do so.

Denise's work was ultimately focused on community and young peoples' experiences of the Baltimore Uprising in response to the death of Freddie Gray. Part of what led to that event was a disinclination to listen to people and communities, to deny people's humanity. One of the key ways this is done is by silencing people and their stories. Denise made sure that she "listened" to our school community in multiple ways, by talking with us in ways that supported us and didn't stress us for her own academic objectives. By engaging in this kind of work, she helped to ameliorate systems and structures of oppression which continue through silence and the absence of human relationships.

O'Neill describes the elements of a successful community-centered project. The collaboration worked because we refused to put ourselves as experts at the center of the work. Instead, we engaged in deep listening and facilitated both dialogue and reflection that freed students and teachers to construct truthful stories about the Uprising.

The project also took shape in community spaces in and around West Baltimore. This work was led by Denise Griffin Johnson, a CultureWorks Culture Agent for the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture.¹⁸ A West Baltimore native, culture activist, and educator, Griffin Johnson uses story circles as a method for moving grassroots ideas, interests, and questions from the margins to the center of public humanities. Her description of her process captures the ways in which community-centered practice can disrupt more traditional hierarchies of knowledge production:

The Story Circle makes us human. The practice takes away perceived power based on a societal perspective that sometimes, we use to define ourselves, things, titles, places, status, etc.

We gather in a Story Circle and give a prompt to share a story. It is a story about an experience you had, you remember. You usually can recall it; maybe because it made you feel, or how you were judged, or impacted, maybe it provided you an epiphany to further your human consciousness. I recall, when a Design and Architecture Symposium, asked me to facilitate a Story Circle. The focus of the symposium and the prompt asked how Design and Architecture has influenced or disrupted community passage. It was a big circle, over 20 participants. They all shared a story. No one in the circle shared a story about Design and Architecture disruption of the passage of people moving through their community.

Instead, participants talked about things they experienced in their lives that created an emphasis or path for their forward movement in a certain profession or to support community empowerment work. All the stories were an expression of human interactions.

As this example shows us, the Story Circle is a Cultural practice, a tool, a method, to get people together, to better understand one another, build bridges, help one another accept and understand their interpretation of their experiences and values. Story Circles re-connect, connect, build fellowship and build community.

I like to recall my understanding of working with both Dr. Meringolo and Mr. Boot. Our conversations originated when I was invited to UMBC for a discussion about public humanities “Who Talks, Who listens, and Who Matters.” I was fascinated then, and I still am fascinated today, when I hear someone say “they give a voice to people.” What does that really mean?

While there are people in our society who are not able to express themselves verbally, due to a disability, most of us are verbal and all of us have our own voice. During the session, Dr. Meringolo talked about Preserving the Baltimore Uprising. She had been collecting information and other things as a historian. Preserving and honoring history is so important, directly related to culture for me.

As a Cultural Organizer, I found what she was doing interesting in that people created the actions of the Baltimore Uprising and therefore, in my practice as a Cultural Organizer, I believed strongly their voices and stories should be preserved, honored, and respected. The people did the work, created the action and the action extended beyond the individual to the collective.

The Collection of stories and filming for the Whiting Public Engagement Fellowship provided space for community to express feeling and share ideology and resources. It also helped to give meaning to the action from a human perspective. The filming provided high quality viewing, the announcements were artistic, creating community actions into art, and the participants from high school students, teachers, community and others were interested in partaking in the further creation of community.

Why is this practice relevant? I recall some of the expressions and thankfulness that I heard from participants of the Story Circles from the Whiting Project. The stories that were shared, I hold in high regard and evolved as a human soul through the practice and interactions.

I was amazed when a high school student shared Dr. Cornel West's definition of community. I was grateful that a high school teacher showed up in community to ask for support for her colleagues and student body to discuss the Baltimore Uprising. Another participant acknowledged the therapeutic value of the discussion and expressed gratitude. Others wanted to be part of the experience because it created community.

The Story Circle sets the environment for us to have the opportunity to be honored, respected, and listened to, as we can come to realize we are all a part of community, if we allow ourselves to be.

The ending of a Story Circle creates a 3rd story. The story is the middle; the 3rd story begins a new narrative, a new understanding, a connection with one another that provides the opportunity to build community.

Denise Griffin Johnson's language is poetry. So is her process. As her reflection suggests, she is appropriately suspicious of the questions raised by those coming into communities from institutions that have excluded or dismissed embodied knowledge. She also trusts people to speak their truth even in oppressive contexts. She positions herself as a conduit, coming from a place of intimate community knowledge and finely honed dialogic skill. She does not speak for the community. Nor does she need to amplify their voices. Rather, she recognizes that a crack in the structure is a space where knowledge can blossom.

We had planned to bring students from several schools together with members of community groups to foster dialogue across boundaries of generation and neighborhood. Unfortunately, we could never successfully connect the two sides of the project. Instead, we came to understand the story circles and the student work as two forms of community-centered public history practice. Denise Griffin Johnson worked with adults at the Arch Social Club, a historically Black organization in West Baltimore, and with members of the Baltimore Police Monitoring Team, a community-based organization designed to foster better relationships between city residents and law enforcement.

Lee Boot, a media artist and filmmaker at UMBC, and his students filmed these events and created four short films to document the knowledge shared by local people.¹⁹ These films are now linked to the digital collection. Boot views his role in the project this way:

I've worked with cultural organizer, Denise Griffin Johnson, for several years starting with our collaboration on a project to bring the annual meeting of the Imaging Amer-

ica organization to Baltimore back in 2015. This has given me a number of opportunities to experience and film story circles as Denise crafted them. The power of them struck me immediately but has also deepened with time. I've seen how people honor one another by showing up, sitting with one another, and sharing something meaningful in a ritual of respectful listening and engagement. In story circles, versus, say, "town halls," I've observed a depth and breadth of telling and listening that I had not previously experienced. Like the best of the arts, story circles are an evolved structure that builds social capital – meaning relationships and trust. They take time, but ultimately allow for ideas to take root, for collective action to emerge. Though they might not always build consensus, they always feel like progress.

A criticism often leveled at news and documentary films is that they're not often entertaining enough to hold an audience. As a filmmaker making documentary works, one hears that people don't like "talking heads." Nothing is more boring. I find this curious. When I listen to friends and family talk about their favorite stories, whether in film or in books, a large portion of what I hear is descriptions of people (using their heads – both literally and figuratively) to talk in memorable and moving ways. Even spectacular films, filled with action, pivot on moments when a character, through dialog, manages to convey something critical and meaningful to another. Of course, it's not just media; it's life. What do we talk about with family or friends at the end of the day? It's not how someone might have rushed down the hall toward me; it's what they said when they got there. The story circle is a sacred art form designed to create such moments. For this reason, I am committed to story circles, and to extending and amplifying them – lifting them up – by translating them into media well enough to convey the moments transparently.

This is hard. Mostly I've failed. The challenge of filming and editing a story circle has many interrelated pieces to it. You want to be able to record what is said without influencing it, so you must be unobtrusive enough for participants to ignore you. The most efficient and effective way to capture footage of people telling their truth is by putting the camera right in front of them. But that would place you, the filmmaker, somewhere inside the circle, blocking people from seeing and being seen. Obviously, this is a bad idea if you want to be ignored. Instead, it's best to stand outside the circle and shoot across to the other side. But what if people unexpectedly begin talking when you are right behind them? You need a second camera operator on the other side of the circle. Now you are in the frame, so the footage will often show the filmmakers. That's fine. There's nothing to hide, but it can be startling for those watching the film. It often feels as though you are never filming from quite the right angle. It's better toward the beginning of the event, when one speaker gives way to another in a relatively orderly way. But later, when the discussion begins to generate itself and heats up, everything becomes unpredictable.

And then there's the audio recording. To get good sound, mics should be as close to the source as possible. It would be best to "wire" everyone – ten, twenty, or thirty people with their own microphones, but very few budgets can pull that off. (Did I mention that there is likely no budget at all?) Instead, we mount "shotgun" mics to the cameras, and have a third person "boom" the speaker (hold a mic near them on a pole) but these methods pick up lots of background sound – particularly in the places where story circles happen: community gathering places; not sound stages.

Still, despite the challenges, there is something unusually compelling about the circular format and the passion it calls forth that I believe will work in film. I like that it's easy to lose a sense of the geography of the scene, and get caught in the swirl – getting ping-ponged back and forth and having to anchor yourself in nothing but the truths people tell.

Like Denise Griffin Johnson, Lee Boot approaches his work through the lens of art and culture. He captures a truth that might otherwise be overlooked or invisible in more formal public humanities practice.

Measuring the success of community-centered public history can be tricky. There may be no peer-reviewed publication, scholarly accolades, or public product. In many cases, the process is the product, because the goals are to build an intellectual community that cuts across institutional and demographic boundaries and to ensure that knowledge gained is not extracted from participants. Our project came without strings. Students were not required to upload oral histories or projects to Preserve the Baltimore Uprising, though some did. Story circle participants did not have to sign consent to be recorded, though they all did.

We measure our success in more subtle ways. Students became more confident in their own knowledge. Museum professionals allowed their best practices to shift. Through dialogue came mutual respect.

We hosted two public events. In April 2019, students and teachers from all three participating schools assembled at the Maryland Historical Society along with local residents who had participated in story circles and with staff of the Maryland Historical Society. On October 26, 2019, local people who had participated in the story circle project assembled at the Arch Social Club for a film screening. In both spaces, we discussed the importance of recording these experiences, and we acknowledged deep fissures that remain both within the West Baltimore community and in the city at large. We are hopeful because community-centered public history practice can begin to bridge those fissures, and many groups and individuals are committed to that work.²⁰

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Grassroots Museums & the Changing Landscape of the Public Humanities

Fath Davis Ruffins

This essay is a brief history of the development of “grassroots” or community-based museums since the 1960s. These museums pioneered new kinds of relationships with their communities that were far different from older museums and, in the process, helped fundamentally enlarge and diversify public humanities. The essay begins with a focus on three museums founded in 1967: El Museo del Barrio in New York City, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (Smithsonian) in Washington, D.C., and the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle. Over the last fifty years, these museums have grown and stabilized and newer, bigger museums with similar goals have developed. These changes suggest that one future for humanities scholars is to become involved in new publics outside of the academy who are seeking humanistic analysis of their distinctive, previously marginalized, community stories.

When I joined the staff of the Museum of History and Technology in 1981, I was excited to be working in one of the largest museums dedicated to the preservation, analysis, and interpretation of American history. I knew that I wanted to do historical analysis, but in a way that spoke to a wider public than that of a university classroom. I did not know that I was entering a field that was just beginning to organize itself.

Around 1977 or so, the phrase “public history movement” emerged.¹ As the University of California, Santa Barbara, began shaping its public history program, Professor G. Wesley Johnson organized a series of discussions with people working in museums and at historic sites and national historic parks as well as with other federal government historians, archaeologists, and folklorists. Many discussed how their work was distinct from that of university-based scholars in the same fields. Working with funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Arizona Humanities Council, Johnson organized a public history conference in Phoenix. As a direct result, in 1980, the National Council on Public History (NCPH) was incorporated in Washington, D.C.²

I also did not expect to discover and then become a part of a cultural movement: scores of people working diligently across the nation to develop “grassroots museums.” Though understudied to this day, grassroots museums have had

some large-scale influences on American cultural and social life over the last sixty years. My scholarship has focused in part on the complex intersections between “public history” or “public humanities” and the ethnic-specific histories of preservation, interpretation, and presentation by African Americans and other American minority groups. This essay investigates what can be posited about the future of humanistic disciplines and practices by viewing public history and grassroots museums in tandem.

Since the NCPH was formed in 1980, there has been an ongoing debate over what constitutes the fundamental elements of public history or public humanities. In the beginning, some suggested that it was simply traditional history, but presented outside the academy, in venues such as museums or historic houses. More recently, several principles have coalesced that define contemporary public history, including:

- “Shared authority” between public professionals and oral history interviewees and/or other community members to “shape a narrative process” or product (such as an exhibition or program).³
- “Active collaboration” between public professionals and their stakeholders, “constantly reframing questions and improving interpretations in conversation so that there is a ‘shared inquiry.’”⁴
- “Multidisciplinary” or “interdisciplinary” approaches of necessity. Authority is shared among public professionals from a variety of disciplines to analyze and form interpretations holistically.⁵
- Service to the public; a “scholarship of engagement” or mutual learning.⁶ Not only does the public humanist seek to educate the audience but also to “learn something about the ways in which average people understand, use, and value the past.”⁷
- A commitment to “reconnect with the public and demonstrate [the] value and relevance” of the humanities “in contemporary life.”⁸

For many practitioners, these five elements express the key values they hold and share as the fundamental praxis of their work. Indeed, these statements reflect a multidecade process of conflict and dialogue among public humanists. Even so, many public historians continue to debate how best to translate these ideas into action.

Fortunately, public humanists can take inspiration from the grassroots or community museum movement because it pioneered these same ideas and created many durable examples by successfully applying them in the real world. Beginning in the 1950s, African American cultural activists created grassroots museums, often using skills they had developed as civil rights community organizers. Soon,

activists in other urban minority communities began to invent their own museums. The new museums and cultural centers emerged from social relationships in which like-minded people had bonded over local (and sometimes national) struggles, mostly for civil rights. These institutions came into being by sharing authority between the founders, staffs, and activated community members. Both the content and process of their exhibits engaged with and served their communities and enlarged America's interest in what museum professionals call the public humanities.

Over the last sixty years, more than 450 grassroots or community museums have been built (although not all survived). Though it is hard to get solid figures, the Association of African American Museums estimates that there are over four hundred African American museums.⁹ The online Guide to Hispanic and Latino Museums lists twenty-four such institutions.¹⁰ Due to the overlay between Asian art and Asian American museums, it is difficult to get firm figures on the number of specifically Asian American museums as well as the number of Japanese internment and other historic sites that are part of the National Park Service. However, there are at least twenty listed in major cities such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Seattle. This is an extraordinary number of new public humanities institutions that were founded mostly outside of preexisting organizations, such as universities or state historical societies. The continuous formation of these new museums and cultural centers suggests a tremendous public desire for humanities content.

The first of these grassroots or community museums was the Ebony Museum in Chicago in 1961 (now known as the DuSable Museum of African American History).¹¹ In the mid-1950s, Margaret Burroughs (1915–2010) and her second husband Charles (1920–1994) were both longtime social activists. Margaret was an artist, poet, and teacher in the Chicago public schools. In the late 1930s, she was one of the founders of the Southside Community Art Center, a place for Black artists to show their work, build community with other Black artists, and teach skills to young people and emerging artists.¹² However, Burroughs had remained too leftist for the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s and was asked to leave the board of the Center. During the 1950s, the Burroughs opened an art gallery in their sizeable home and invited in schoolchildren for educational tours. They also sponsored evening events and salons for their community and welcomed their artistic, activist, intellectual, and interracial group of friends. By 1961, the effort had outgrown their home, and the Burroughs and a small cohort of friends decided to incorporate formally.¹³ Today, the DuSable remains the “oldest independent African American museum”; it celebrated its sixtieth year of operation in 2021.¹⁴

Most of these museums emerged in large urban areas, often in neighborhoods associated with a particular minority ethnic or racial group. The DuSable origi-

nated in the Southside of Chicago, long known as the “Black Metropolis.” Other examples include the Museum of Afro-American History, first located in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts (1963); the Charles Wright Museum on Grand Boulevard in Detroit (1965); El Museo del Barrio in Spanish Harlem in New York City (1967); the Wing Luke Museum in a pan-Asian neighborhood in Seattle (1967); the Anacostia Museum in Anacostia, east of the river in Washington, D.C. (1967); and the Studio Museum in Harlem (1968). These are just some of the earliest and most successful of these grassroots institutions.

What made these museums distinctive and essentially unlike most historically White museums was their relationships to audiences and communities. Traditional large-scale museums tend to be built in the most prestigious parts of town, and most historic houses and estates showcase the wealth and stature of the notable worthies who founded them. The purpose of most of these institutions was to bring ordinary people to important places where they could be uplifted, or to provide a setting where scholars, connoisseurs, and collectors could congregate and appreciate elite culture.

By contrast, the grassroots institutions were established in specific neighborhoods and directed toward marginalized minority groups. In a sense, this was an early form of restorative justice or “restorative history,” particularly for African Americans. From the very beginning of the nation, scholars, newspaper writers, politicians, and ministers in predominately White institutions maintained that Black people and Native people had contributed nothing to the heroic building of the country or to its predominant Anglo-American culture. This “history of no history” was crucial to the maintenance of slavery and later segregation. People without a history and a record of contributions can be more easily and thoroughly oppressed.¹⁵ These grassroots museums saw their mission as correcting these mainstream historical inaccuracies. They sought to present a more authentic history of their people’s cultural contributions and historical sacrifices, such as serving in the military during America’s wars.

In the beginning, none of these museums would have qualified as such according to the standards of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). At that time, the AAM’s fundamental definition of a museum required having and stewarding a collection of artifacts and/or maintaining a historic building. Initially, these new grassroots institutions were not so focused on acquiring collections. Instead, they were committed to producing art and exhibitions that uplifted and inspired people by focusing on their distinctive histories. Rather quickly, as they become more significant in their local communities, they received objects and had to confront the care of those collections. At first, what separated the museum staffs from their visitors was only their zeal and commitment to interpreting the history and culture of their people.

None of these early founders or founding directors were “museum people” who had attended either Winterthur or Cooperstown graduate programs in decorative arts or museum studies. Rather, they were teachers, social workers, and civil rights activists who saw needs in their communities that they wanted to address. A number were also working artists, such as many of the founders of El Museo del Barrio. These artists often had a keen sense of how the mainstream museums ignored minority artists. Compared to some of the other founders, they may have had a better sense of how museums functioned.

These museum founders and the early cadres of students, activists, and volunteers worked with their families, neighbors, and friends to learn what kinds of exhibitions they would like to see and what kind of programs they would like to attend. A fundamental practice involved showing their communities that they had a history, that their ancestors had contributed to building the nation, that their ancestors had struggled to resist and protest their unfair treatment by the larger society, and that their artists had contributed to the cultural efflorescence of America.

Three examples demonstrate the trajectory of these grassroots museums: El Museo del Barrio (New York City), the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience (Seattle), and the Anacostia Community Museum (Washington, D.C.). All of these museums first opened their doors in 1967. In the fifty-five years since, they have expanded more than once. Today, they are located in newly constructed or renovated buildings, designed specifically to look and feel in many ways like professionally run museums. Briefly, here are their stories.

In the mid-1960s, a number of teachers, artists, and social activists in New York’s Puerto Rican community began to call for some kind of cultural center. In 1967, artist and art teacher Raphael Montañez Ortiz became the founding director of El Museo del Barrio, supported by a much larger group of local artists, educators, activists, and volunteers. In describing its mission, Ortiz said the museum “is bravely girding itself to meet . . . ‘the needs of Puerto Ricans for a cultural identity. As a people, Puerto Ricans have been disenfranchised, economically, politically and culturally.’” He added, “as a group like the Young Lords was born to deal with the political and economic disenfranchisement, so Museo is an attempt to begin to come to terms with our cultural disenfranchisement.”¹⁶

At first, the museum had no specific home and consisted of boxes of materials in an available classroom in a New York City public school. Over the next few years, the museum bounced from a few rented rooms to various storefronts. Yet even when the museum had no permanent home, Ortiz and the artists, teachers, and volunteers organized exhibitions in libraries, schools, and occasionally small galleries. Their goal was to encourage the collection of personal records documenting the lives of families in East Harlem; to provide an outlet for Puerto Rican (and other Latino/a) local artists; to represent the importance of Puerto Rican culture in New York City; and to inform their community about the history

of Puerto Ricans, both locally and on their Caribbean island homeland. By 1977, the museum had gained enough public support from the city to move into the unused Heckscher building, located on Fifth Avenue. Today, the building has been renovated to include a working theater, lobby, and more collections and gallery space.

Of these three museums, El Museo has suffered the greatest internal turmoil. On some occasions, the staff and director worked for free. Several times in the 1970s and 1980s El Museo almost closed due to its financial problems. At other times, the directors, staff, board members, local supporters, and critics have fiercely disagreed over whether the museum was dedicated solely to Puerto Ricans, to all Latin Americans, or to Latin artists throughout the hemisphere. By the early 2000s, El Museo had garnered criticism from some of the former activists who had been involved in its earliest phases. It was also attacked by scholars who critiqued the whole concept of “Latin American art” in part because that positioning tended to uplift artists from other nations and to devalue U.S.-based Latino/a artists.¹⁷

Today, El Museo has clarified its purpose, acknowledging a complex institutional history. Its website states:

OUR PURPOSE

- El Museo del Barrio’s purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret the art and artifacts of Caribbean and Latin American cultures for posterity.
- To enhance the sense of identity, self-esteem and self-knowledge of the Caribbean and Latin American peoples by educating them in their artistic heritage and bringing art and artists into their communities.
- To provide an educational forum that promotes an appreciation and understanding of Caribbean and Latin American art and culture and its rich contribution to North America.
- To offer Caribbean and Latin American artists greater access to institutional support in the national and international art world.
- To convert young people of Caribbean and Latin American descent into the next generation of museum-goers, stakeholders in the institution created for them.
- To fulfill our special responsibility as a center of learning and training ground for the growing numbers of artists, educators, art historians, and museum professionals interested in Caribbean and Latin American art.
- This mission reaffirms the vision of Raphael Montañez Ortiz, who founded El Museo del Barrio in 1969, and of the Puerto Rican educators, artists, and community activists who worked in support of this goal.¹⁸

This contemporary restating of their purpose reiterates their original and on-going commitment to the arts of Caribbean peoples, such as Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans. But it also makes it clear that other Latinos are explicitly included in the museum's purview.

The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum opened in Washington, D.C., in 1967 as an outpost of the Smithsonian Institution and the first federally funded grassroots museum. The museum is often described as being established by Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley (1913–2001). In reality, an organization of older activists in the Anacostia neighborhood had spent years trying to get a museum or cultural center in their part of the city. When Secretary Ripley began to look for a likely community spot, the Anacostia Neighborhood Alliance seized the opportunity. Marion Hope and her group successfully insisted that the Smithsonian hire their candidate as the founding director: Reverend John Kinard, a local activist, minister, and native son.¹⁹

Zora Martin Felton, the first director of education at the Anacostia Museum, remembered that the staff often had to stay until 10 p.m. or later. Since its first location was in the former Carver Theater on Nichols Avenue in the heart of downtown Anacostia, the museum had an auditorium with a stage. Community choirs would practice there. School bands might rehearse there. Local activist groups could schedule meetings there.²⁰

In this way, the museum was revolutionary in being fully participatory with its neighbors and community. It took forty years for the concept of the “participatory museum” to become an important and urgent new idea in the wider public humanities/museum world. The staffs of these early grassroots museums often had the urgency and the fierce commitment of a cadre of civil rights workers. In fact, many were veterans of those struggles. They saw their work on social and cultural issues as being critical tools in empowering their communities for political and electoral battles.

Because Nichols Avenue (later renamed Martin Luther King Boulevard) became drug-ridden and dangerous, the Anacostia Museum moved to a new location in 1987. Though it has a commanding view of the city, the Museum is in a somewhat isolated spot, further from the “thick of the neighborhood” than when it was in the Carver Theater. However, the attractive building was specifically built to be a museum and has been renovated several times over the years, providing more space for the library, collections, and storage.

In recent years, the Anacostia Community Museum has articulated a new mission to document the various communities of the city of Washington. The museum's recent exhibition, “A Right to the City,” details the changing nature of six neighborhoods, including the once Latino-dominated Adams-Morgan; a shrinking Chinatown; and the Brookland neighborhood, which was integrated long before the current wave of gentrification.²¹

In Seattle, the Wing Luke Memorial Museum was also organized in 1967, by a group of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese American activists. The museum was named after Wing Luke (1925 – 1965), a Chinese American lawyer who served as the Assistant Attorney General of Washington State in the Civil Rights Division and a member of the Seattle City Council from 1962 until his death in a plane crash in 1965.²² A group of pan-Asian shopkeepers, teachers, and activists came together to establish a memorial in his memory and to give voice to a community that had lost their chief spokesman.

The Wing Luke Museum was unusual in that it was dedicated to the wide spectrum of Asian and Pacific Islander American people, while most Asian American museums today are nation/ethnic specific: Japanese American, Chinese American, or Korean American, in part due to the different geography of where these groups settled.²³ The Wing Luke Memorial Museum began in a storefront, but moved in 1987 to a larger building. In 2008, the museum became associated with the National Park Service as part of the Asian Pacific American Heritage Corridor and relocated into an even more spacious building associated with a number of related historic structures nearby. In 2010, the museum's current name was adopted: the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. Today, it is still the only pan-Asian museum in the United States.

What remains distinctive about these grassroots museums is their shared mission to give voice to their communities. The Wing Luke Museum, in a previous values statement, highlighted the importance of community-based work: "People give us meaning and purpose. Relationships are our foundation. We desire community empowerment and ownership." They went on to outline the ten principles of community-based work:

1. Community-based work must be rooted in relationships of trust and respect.
2. Community-based work requires a safe, comfortable environment to express ideas and share experiences.
3. Community-based work requires listening, flexibility, agility and patience.
4. It is democratic in nature – not top-down, and not a funnel for input.
5. Community ownership of their stories enables communities to hold and use them towards their own self-determined purposes.
6. Opportunities to learn abound in community-based work.
7. Community empowerment results from bringing together diverse people within communities who might not otherwise connect and collaborate together, increased community pride through increased visibility, development of professional skills and resources within the community from grant writing to educating to publishing and more.

8. Community-based work draws together communities and creates deep engagement and connections within as well as to the broader public.
9. Community-based work creates a safe place to speak your story and your truth.
10. People get involved in heart-felt work, doing something that they believe in.²⁴

As with El Museo and the Anacostia Museum, the Wing Luke's values statement resonates and reaffirms the original concerns of their founders. Strikingly, what has emerged as "best practices" in the public humanities echoes many of the sentiments that these museums first articulated sixty-five years ago.

During the 1980s, the number and variety of grassroots museums increased. In 1980, community organizer John Kuo Wei Tchen and an interracial group of activists launched the New York Chinatown History Project on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Art enthusiast and Urban League activist Aurelia Brooks (1931–2021) became the founding director of the California African American Museum in Los Angeles in 1981. Carlos Tortolero and a group of fellow public school teachers opened the Mexican Fine Arts Museum in Chicago in 1982, now known as the National Museum of Mexican Art.

A growing number of the founding directors of these museums were academically trained in related disciplines such as history, while in the 1960s, none of the founders of these institutions were academics, though most had been to college and were professionals. By the mid-1980s, more of these leaders had PhDs, though none were trained as public humanities scholars.²⁵ In 1988, the National Afro American Museum and Cultural Center opened in Wilberforce, Ohio. John Fleming, a Peace Corp volunteer, civil rights scholar, and activist, was its founding director. Also in 1988, former member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and former D.C. city councilmember Frank Smith formed the African American Civil War Museum and Memorial in Washington, D.C. Other founding leaders in this period were professional administrators. For instance, in 1985, a group of Nisei (that is, second-generation Japanese Americans) organized the Japanese American National Museum, which opened with Irene Hirano (1948–2020) as the founding director.

These directors showed an increasing interest in consulting university-based scholars. And unlike earlier grassroots museums, which had started in storefronts but grown into larger buildings, these 1980s museums often started as new buildings or in major renovations of historic buildings. To generate funds beyond their local communities, these institutions needed the support of major foundations such as the Ford Foundation or the Mellon Foundation. They also began to apply to government programs such as the National Endowments for the Humanities

and the Arts and the Institute for Museums and Library Services. These foundations and programs required academic consultants as par for the course in their grant applications. To get these larger grants, museums across the board needed to forge relationships with university-based scholars.

These newer directors were instrumental in this process. Many had previous contacts with university-based scholars and could initially rely on personal contacts to seek scholars interested in this public arena. Directors sought scholars' advice as consultants, asked them to serve on museum panels and boards, and sometimes contracted them to work as guest curators, often paired with a more experienced museum exhibition developer or designer.

The grassroots museum movement of the 1950s and 1960s largely preceded the formal founding of African American and other ethnic studies programs and departments at universities.²⁶ However, by the 1980s, they could draw on the books and expertise of social historians and others interested in history "from the bottom up," as a growing number of scholars began publishing in ethnic studies, women's studies, and cultural studies. As these areas of humanities scholarship grew, there were more sympathetic academics than there had been in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1980s and 1990s, grassroots museums could consult and call upon them to inform their exhibitions and programs.

Some of these grassroots museum directors and staff began to publish journal articles and essays in books that detailed and analyzed their values, methods, and practices. For example, John Kuo Wei Tchen, cofounder of the Chinatown History Project, published an extremely influential essay, "Creating the Dialogic Museum."²⁷ Tchen described the Chinatown History Project as having a "dialogue driven approach" that was essential to determine what the "public needs" that history can serve. Rather than having exhibitions and programming organized exclusively by professional historians and specialists, this dialogic approach required working with and sharing interpretive authority with those who brought the wisdom of "lived experience." In this process of dialogue, new historical knowledge might well surface. Since much of the work produced by professional historians over decades tended to stereotype and marginalize Chinese people and Chinatowns, this new knowledge often served as a corrective to the previous professional scholarship.²⁸

By the early 1990s, several public or community-facing museums opened, such as the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1991 and the Birmingham [Alabama] Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) in 1992. Both museums originally focused on the specific and distinctive local aspects of the modern civil rights movement. In Memphis, the NCRM acquired the Lorraine Motel, the Black-owned hotel that Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was staying in when he was assassinated in 1968.²⁹ Consequently, this museum is set in a historic location and stewards a historic building. The BCRI is likewise situated in a historic district in

downtown Birmingham and stands across from Kelly Ingram Park, where many demonstrations took place, including those met with the infamous use of dogs and hoses. Down the street is the 16th Street Baptist Church where four girls died when the Ku Klux Klan bombed the church in 1963. Both the NCRM and the BCRI were organized by Black-led interracial groups of cultural activists who felt that what was most historic and meaningful about their African American community was its history of direct resistance to segregation.

The Memphis and Birmingham civil rights museums demonstrated the profound new effect grassroots museums could have on local heritage tourism and even traditional tourism. Although some White businessmen and chamber of commerce folks (and some ordinary White people too) feared that the presence of these museums would only interest African Americans, the museums proved to be popular with “mainstream” or White visitors as well. Indeed, the Alabama Tourism board revealed that BCRI was one of the most visited and popular sites in the state, bringing significant new dollars to hotels, restaurants, tour guides, and businesses.³⁰ This unexpected prominence in tourism was a boon to those two institutions, in part because they proved their monetary value to mainstream interests, some of whom had initially opposed the museums.

Grassroots museums and centers continue to emerge, though during the last twenty years, the trend has been toward larger and more imposing museums and centers, often with million-dollar buildings and professional staff (though not necessarily trained in museum work). After twenty years of work by activists, in 2000, the National Hispanic Cultural Center (NHCC) opened in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with a twenty-acre campus. Over the years, the center has encompassed a plaza, three theaters, an art museum, a historic building, an education center, a library, a genealogy center, and a restaurant. The NHCC also houses a Spanish Resource Center, a branch of the Spanish embassy, and the Instituto Cervantes. The NHCC is a division of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs. The museum’s website carefully states that they produce exhibitions and programming “that are meaningful to the local community. [The NHCC] offers the Hispanic, Chicano, and Latinx artist a place to present their work and bring it to the national stage.”³¹

What might we conclude from this history that is instructive for thinking about the possible future of the humanities? There are two significant conclusions and/or signposts that emerge from these complicated histories of the development and growth of the grassroots museum.

First, outside universities, there is a tremendous interest in humanities that are “relevant” to particular publics. “Relevance” was a watchword of the 1960s that has since fallen into disuse. Nonetheless, the concept of relevance is helpful here. The landscape of public history has been changing for sixty years: there are new

publics, sometimes nontraditional publics, that are hungry for information pertinent to their own identities, however constructed. Though this essay has focused on ethnic-specific museums, there are other types of grassroots museums, such as for LGBTQ+ histories, for readers of comic books, and for many kinds of music. Museums retain widespread public trust whereas many other institutions, such as governments, newspapers, or even universities, have lost a great deal of public trust.

Second, many of the people who know and were shaped by those kinds of institutions are now rising to leadership positions in public humanities institutions. The preeminent example is Lonnie Bunch, who was named Secretary of the Smithsonian in 2019 after serving as founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Bunch selected Korean American Meroe Park, a former CIA official, and Native American Kevin Gover, former director of the National Museum of the American Indian, as two of his administrators. As mainstream museums attempt to appeal to diverse national and international publics and as predominantly White museums explore shared authority and digital co-curation, they will need the expertise of more people who were shaped by these grassroots institutions, professionally or personally.

In the months since the global protests over the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, various predominantly White museums and cultural centers have named an African American or Latino/a American to a prominent position, often for the first time. During this current, highly polarized racial climate in the United States and the world, public humanists from these minority communities have moved from the margins to some of the most important mainstream museums in the land. Often formally trained in public humanities, a younger generation of directors and curators, many honed in these grassroots institutions, are now posed to lead and influence mainstream institutions. This new generation may be able to make fundamental changes in American museums and cultural centers and provide new directions for humanistic institutions, speaking both locally and globally to new publics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Barbara J. Howe, “Reflections on an Idea: NCPH’s First Decade Chair’s Annual Address,” *The Public Historian* 11 (3) (1989): 70. See also Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Towards a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), xiv–xvii; and Robyn Schroeder, “The Rise of the Public Humanists,” in *Doing Public Humanities*, ed. Susan Smulyan (New York: Routledge, 2021), 6–7.
- ² With funds from the NEH, a second conference was held in Santa Barbara in 1979. Another outcome of these discussions was the formation of the Society for History in the Federal Government. Howe, “Reflections on an Idea,” 71.
- ³ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xxiv. See also Schroeder, “The Rise of the Public Humanists,” 11; and “How Is Public History Different from ‘Regular’ History?” National Council on Public History, <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/> (accessed August 2, 2021).
- ⁴ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xxiii–xxiv.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, xxv.
- ⁶ Schroeder, “The Rise of the Public Humanists,” 13. See also Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xxv.
- ⁷ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xxv.
- ⁸ Schroeder, “The Rise of the Public Humanists,” 13–14.
- ⁹ “History,” Association of African American Museums, <https://blackmuseums.org/history-2/> (accessed January 8, 2022).
- ¹⁰ “Guide to Latino & Hispanic Museums in the U.S.,” Mi LegaSi, <https://www.milegasi.com/blogs/hispanic-heritage/latino-museums-guide> (accessed January 8, 2022).
- ¹¹ “About Us,” DuSable Museum, <https://www.dusablemuseum.org/about-us/> (accessed July 31, 2021). In 1968, the name was changed to honor Jean Baptiste Point du Sable (before 1750–1818), who many celebrate as the first non-Indigenous permanent settler of what is now Chicago. He is sometimes called the “Founder of Chicago.” He was a frontier trader, married a Potawatomi Nation woman, Kithawa (Catherine), and became a

wealthy merchant. He later moved near to what is now St. Louis, Missouri (then Spanish Louisiana), and died there.

- ¹² “About Us,” Southside Community Art Center, <https://www.sscartcenter.org/about-us/> (accessed August 2, 2021); and “History and Archives,” Southside Community Art Center, <https://www.sscartcenter.org/about-us/building-legacy/> (accessed August 2, 2021). In some respects, the Southside Community Art Center (SSAC) grew out of artists’ involvement with the Federal Art Project that was part of the WPA. Artists began organizing to buy a building in 1938 and succeeded by 1940. Dedicated by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in May 1940, Burroughs was one of seven original artist members that included Archibald Motley, Eldzier Cortor, and Charles White; she was the only woman. Over many ups and downs, the Southside Center has persisted as a vital institution. The building earned Chicago Landmark status in 1994. In 2017, the SSAC was named a national treasure and, in 2018, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- ¹³ Fath Davis Ruffins, “Building Homes for Black History: Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers, 1915–1995,” *The Public Historian* 40 (3) (2018): 13–43, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.13>. See also “Margaret Burroughs: Biography,” interview, The History Makers, June 12, 2010, <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/margaret-burroughs-40> (accessed January 5, 2022); and “South Side Stories: The Art and Influence of Dr. Margaret T. Burroughs, 1960–1980,” DuSable Museum, <https://www.dusablemuseum.org/exhibition/south-side-stories/> (accessed January 5, 2022).
- ¹⁴ By which they mean the first African American museum not attached to a university. African Americans have a longer history of independent “public history” organizations than is generally known to many scholars of public humanities. While many ethnic and racial groups founded fraternal and sororal societies, religious sodalities, and other affinity organizations, African Americans are among the first to have museums. The first African American museum opened in 1868 at what is now Hampton University in Virginia. Although originally more of a naturalist’s collection, by the 1890s, the Hampton Museum began to acquire collections of African art and artifacts. Howard University opened its museum on paper in 1867, but did not designate a formal museum and archives space until the 1870s. By the 1930s, renowned HBCUs Fisk University (Nashville, Tennessee), Howard University (Washington, D.C.), and Atlanta University (Atlanta, Georgia) had all developed art galleries and/or museums on their campuses.
- ¹⁵ Many early African American historians articulated these sentiments. For this essay, perhaps the most important was Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950). In 1915, Woodson and several associates formed the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Chicago (later renamed the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, ASALH). Woodson was the second African American to receive a PhD in history from Harvard University, in 1912. (W. E. B. DuBois, 1868–1963, was the first in 1895.) This was the first and is still today the largest organization devoted to African American history and culture. Therefore, Woodson intentionally created a financially independent historical society, an early organization of truly public history. For many decades, African Americans with PhDs could not teach in predominantly White institutions and had great difficulty getting published in mainstream journals, such as the *Journal of American History* or the *American Historical Review*. In 1916, Woodson founded the *Journal of Negro History* and later the *Journal of Negro Education* to fill this gap. In 1926, he founded “Negro History Week” to have public celebrations of the histories that Negro scholars were writing. By the 1940s, Negro History Week was observed in segregated Negro schools, churches, and by a full array of Negro organizations, newspapers and

other publications, and businesses. Indeed, a key service that the ASALH performed was to produce and distribute kits to teachers, ministers, and other thought leaders for each year, focusing on particular themes and providing background information, feature articles, and art to help plan celebrations with the appropriate content.

- ¹⁶ Grace Glueck, "Barrio Museum : Hope Si, Home No," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/07/30/archives/barrio-museum-hope-si-home-no.html>. See also Will Lissner, "Puerto Rican Art Museum Finally Gets Its Own Home," *The New York Times*, July 10, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/10/archives/puerto-rican-art-museum-finally-gets-its-own-home.html>; and George Gent, "Puerto Rican Art Is Shown Uptown," *The New York Times*, May 1, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/05/01/archives/puerto-rican-art-is-shown-uptown.html>.
- ¹⁷ See Arlene Davila, "Latinizing Culture: Art, Museums, and the Politics of U.S. Multicultural Encompassment," *Cultural Anthropology* 14 (2) (1999): 180–202, accessed at <https://jstor.org/stable/65656>.
- ¹⁸ "Our Purpose," El Museo del Barrio, <https://www.elmuseo.org/history-mission/> (accessed January 9, 2022). This website also features a thirty-eight-page history of the museum that candidly lists financial and other problems. It also documents an astonishingly long list of exhibitions and artists' works on display despite the difficulties.
- ¹⁹ John Kinard, founding director of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., interview with author, April 1, 1985.
- ²⁰ Zora Martin Felton, interview with Jeffrey C. Stewart and Fath Davis Ruffins, 1986; and Zora Martin Felton, interview with author, November 2019. See also Anacostia Neighborhood Museum 1967/1977, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution, 1977.
- ²¹ "Right to the City," exhibition, Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, <https://www.si.edu/exhibitions/right-city%3Aevent-exhib-6222> (accessed January 8, 2022). See also the online exhibition, "'A Right to the City' Digital Exhibit," Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/34d99cccb2c5454da7b4f08e482c1987> (accessed January 8, 2022).
- ²² "Our Namesake—Wing Luke," Wing Luke Museum (accessed July 31, 2021).
- ²³ David Takami, "Luke, Wing (1925–1965)," History Link.org, <https://www.historylink.org/file/2047> (accessed July 30, 2021). See also Sherry Stripling, "Wing Luke: The Man Behind the Museum," *The Seattle Times*, February 25, 2005, <https://www.historylink.org/file/2047> (accessed July 30, 2021).
- ²⁴ About Us," Wing Luke Museum (accessed January 8, 2022).
- ²⁵ When they went to graduate school, public history did not exist as a field within history or American studies.
- ²⁶ In 1968, a five-month-long student rebellion at San Francisco State University ended in a bloody attack by the police sent into the campus by California Governor Ronald Reagan. Although some of the students were beaten senseless and some were arrested and served time in prison, by 1969, there was an Afro-American studies department with other similar ethnic studies programs on the way.
- ²⁷ John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating A Dialogic Museum : The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 285–326. This book includes chapters by a number of the found-

ers or founding directors mentioned in this essay. Today, it is the Museum of the Chinese in America; see “History,” Museum of the Chinese in America, <https://www.mocanyc.org/about/history/> (accessed July 31, 2021).

- ²⁸ Tchen is an example of an activist who cofounded a museum, earned a PhD, and became a professor. He has written extensively on the theory and practice of the public humanities and helped to train a new generation of students who became museum professionals as well as scholars. Tchen is currently the chair of the Public History and Humanities Department at Rutgers University, Newark, and serves as the director of the Clement A. Price Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience.
- ²⁹ Years later, the NCRM also acquired the rooming house from which James Earl Ray, King’s convicted assassin, fired his shots, which is across a courtyard and an alley from the Lorraine Motel.
- ³⁰ Fath Davis Ruffins, “Revisiting the Old Plantation: Reparations, Reconciliation, and Museumizing American Slavery,” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).
- ³¹ “About Creating a Cultural Home,” National Hispanic Cultural Center, <https://www.nhccnm.org/about/> (accessed August 4, 2021).

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-

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 sec-

tors 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 Wil-

son 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 prac-

tice, 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 rou-

tinely 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 work-

ing 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 Bagues, 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.

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The Case for Bringing Experiential Learning into the Humanities

Edward J. Balleisen & Rita Chin

Drawing on innovative programs at the University of Michigan and Duke University, this essay explores an important trend in humanistic education: the provision of opportunities for experiential learning, whether for undergraduates or graduate students. Avenues for applied humanistic research, such as research-based internships and courses structured around collaborative, client-inflected research projects, provide numerous benefits. In addition to cultivating teamwork, leadership, and communications skills, such experiences build intellectual confidence, expand horizons, and foster motivation to pursue additional research challenges. Although humanistic experiments with experiential learning now abound across higher education, pedagogical conservatism among faculty has slowed the pace of change, with pilots often occurring outside the frameworks of standard curricular structures. We call on departments in the humanities and interpretive social sciences to embrace the promise of engaged, public-facing scholarly endeavor, and to make collaborative research a core feature of curricular expectations for students at all levels.

As several essays in this issue of *Daedalus* emphasize, recent discussions about the humanities tend to begin with an understandably mournful nod to the terrible academic job market. The statistics are not pretty. In our discipline of history, the annual number of PhDs granted remained slightly under one thousand in 2019, reflecting a gradual decline from a high of almost 1,100 in 2014. But academic job advertisements, which reached a peak of over one thousand in 2008, have now stabilized at around five hundred tenure-track positions a year.¹ The financial stringency associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has only further reduced academic hiring. For many scholars at research-intensive universities, such parlous statistics represent an existential threat to humanistic inquiry.

This focus on a shrinking academic jobs market, however, distracts from two broader trends that deserve sustained attention. First, students and parents share an increasing expectation that higher education will directly prepare undergraduates for the world of employment. This perspective, along with growing skepticism about the relevance of humanistic study for nonacademic career prepara-

tion, helps to explain the declining numbers of undergraduates who major in humanistic disciplines.²

Second, many humanists based in universities have embraced an inward turn that emphasizes knowledge for knowledge's sake, rather than seeing knowledge as a tool for change in the broader world. Those same scholars have shied away from making the case for the importance of higher-order thinking, research, and analysis – all fostered by humanistic engagement – in leadership roles, whatever the industry or sector, or for meaningful civic participation.³ The inward turn has reinforced isolating modes of communication. As academic humanists have embraced high cultural theory, they have sometimes made abstruse prose a badge of sophistication, limiting their capacity to reach wider publics outside the academy, or connect effectively with nonhumanist colleagues in their own colleges and universities.⁴

The ideal of a life devoted purely to ideas, research, and scholarship, moreover, does not accurately convey the lived realities of most academic careers. Most obviously, effective teaching depends on the ability to make complexity accessible to nonexperts. A significant fraction of faculty time also involves collaboration on committee work, faculty searches, and program reviews, alongside, eventually, stints in administrative roles. Discussions about the state of the humanities often presuppose that faculty are free agents who only teach, research, and write, but they play much more varied roles within complex educational institutions.

Yet training in the humanities at all levels continues to emphasize the cultivation of intellectual expertise far more than other capacities that matter greatly in the twenty-first-century world of work, such as leadership, collaboration with diverse colleagues, and versatility in communication. These latter “soft skills” facilitate effectiveness across economic sectors and types of organizations, including those in higher education, and they rank highly among the qualities that employers say they look for in job applicants.⁵ To call for much more intentional engagement with the fostering of such capacities in humanities education, then, is not so much an embrace of “alt-ac” or some kind of Plan B, but rather being honest about the kinds of skills needed to forge fulfilling careers, whether within or outside academia. This approach, we contend, can invigorate humanistic inquiry, broadening its engagement with pressing societal issues, making humanities courses and majors more attractive to undergraduates, and building closer connections between more traditional aspects of humanistic thinking and crucial elements of effectiveness in diverse, collaborative workplaces.

Although there is much work to be done, we can point to important pedagogical experiments that can guide reform efforts. Focusing on recent undertakings that involve forms of experiential and project-based learning at our respective universities, but also taking account of instructive efforts elsewhere, this essay lays out key elements of curricular reform that incorporate a wider range of skills and teach them in a self-conscious way.

In the University of Michigan history department, faculty leaders began thinking about the so-called crisis in the humanities in the mid-2010s. Their efforts to respond to this predicament emerged from two different starting points: a commitment to public history that evolved into a broader vision of publicly engaged scholarship, and a desire to take seriously the national conversations on “career diversity” for doctoral students spearheaded by the American Historical Association (AHA).

Initially, faculty tackled these issues separately, motivated by different commitments and pressures. The department’s public history cluster focused primarily on undergraduates. This group explored how historical study might allow college students to engage with societally relevant issues, provide them with hands-on research experience, and help them create tangible deliverables that could be shared with parents, friends, and prospective employers. The career diversity cluster sought to integrate the AHA’s key transferable skills – collaboration, communication, basic quantitative capacity, digital literacy, and intellectual self-confidence – into the graduate curriculum to prepare PhD students to compete successfully in multiple careers, including those in the professoriate.⁶

Over time, the department came to see public engagement and career diversity as closely linked, since learning how to produce publicly engaged scholarship prepares students for a broad range of careers. For students to succeed in any career in the twenty-first century, whether inside or outside the academy, they need to communicate effectively with a wide variety of audiences.

An especially successful outcome of this public engagement and career diversity work has been “HistoryLabs,” a new kind of team-based, project-driven course, offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Two principles inform the HistoryLabs model. First, most students do not “intuit” the fundamentals of humanities research simply by reading scholarship. Rather, they need to be guided through the process of defining a research question, finding archival and other sources, and assessing and interpreting evidence. Second, the best way to teach these core skills is through collaborative projects. This approach requires pedagogical choices that disrupt the long-standing disciplinary practices of solitary reading, research, and writing. It similarly requires dispensing with the assumption that the only graduate courses worth taking deepen intellectual field expertise.

HistoryLabs organize students into teams that work together on common research projects. One of the first undergraduate lab courses, on police brutality in Detroit, produced digitized maps of police-civilian encounters from 1957 – 1973. In some of the most exciting versions, projects are framed by an organizational “client” that needs historical research to accomplish its broader goals. Another early undergraduate lab worked with the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center to engage students in developing the contextual background material for lawyers representing refugees seeking asylum in the United States.⁷ The inaugural grad-

uate HistoryLab partnered with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to curate primary-source collections on designated themes for its digital teaching tool, *Experiencing History*.⁸

In every case, faculty lead the courses, using class time to model how to conduct research with databases or in archives, assess and interpret different types of sources, detect patterns over time and space, and develop overarching arguments. Students also meet as teams outside of class, both to undertake research and assemble their findings into products for nonacademic audiences. Those outputs take many forms, including collectively authored reports, document write-ups, databases, digital maps, and exhibitions. Faculty and students provide iterative feedback on each team's research and writing. If a project has a client, students engage directly with the organizational partner. Instead of writing a capstone paper read by a single faculty member, students create tangible products to convey their research results to clients, who often put that analysis to immediate use through policy guidance, legal casebooks, teaching modules, or public exhibits.

As the history department was developing these pedagogical innovations, Michigan's Rackham Graduate School started to promote new priorities for graduate training in relation to the changing landscape of higher education across all fields. Rackham's vision for twenty-first-century graduate education has emphasized a student-centered approach rather than faculty needs or preferences, which translates into a focus on broadening students' career horizons and embedding professional development into graduate training.

The most important innovation reflecting this new vision has been provision of financial support to doctoral candidates while they undertake a part-time, semester-length internship.⁹ This Doctoral Internship Program enables students to apply their academic expertise and skills to real-world problems and exposes them to nonacademic work environments (in the nonprofit, government, startup, or corporate sectors). It expands the traditional model of summer PhD internships, which Rackham has offered for some time, to the academic year, providing maximal flexibility with options for fully paid positions. Rackham treats these internships as a learning opportunity that complements the more conventional types of doctoral student preparation – teaching assistantships and research assistantships – and funds them at the same rate.

By supporting internships with academic-year funding, Rackham's internship program represents a significant shift in how doctoral students prepare for careers. It integrates this professional development opportunity as a fundamental aspect of doctoral training. To be sure, the costs of this major initiative are massive, as it covers tuition, fees, health insurance, and stipend, effectively providing an extra term of funding for doctoral students who participate. Rackham has estimated that endowing such a program to make internships accessible to students in all fields will run upwards of \$50 million.

For the last quarter-century, Duke University has prioritized investments in interdisciplinary, collaborative, research-inflected education, embracing an updated version of the early-twentieth-century Wisconsin Idea, the philosophy that universities should direct their resources toward addressing the most salient societal challenges. President Richard Brodhead, a renowned scholar of American literature, conceptualized this ethos in 2007 as “knowledge in the service of society.” Through a series of university strategic plans and fundraising campaigns, Duke has encouraged deans, heads of interdisciplinary units, and faculty members to develop programs that animate this vision.

One key initiative came out of the humanities a decade ago, spearheaded by the then dean of humanities, Srinivas Aravamudan, and director of the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute, Ian Baucom. Aravamudan and Baucom put together a major Mellon Foundation grant, Humanities Writ Large, that emphasized pathways for interdisciplinary research, including collaborative projects that incorporated students and sought to bring humanistic expertise to bear on major societal problems. In 2016, Duke also secured a National Endowment for the Humanities Next Generation Implementation Grant to support innovations in humanities graduate education, including external internships and the hiring of a complementary advisor to offer guidance about resources and opportunities beyond their departments.¹⁰ Other pivotal undertakings, such as the decision to establish the Duke Global Health Institute, or the creation of the Bass Connections program (more on that below), were university-wide efforts that sought to engage faculty from every school and division of knowledge. As a result of these university-wide priorities, the turn to collaborative inquiry has received major philanthropic and external grant support, which now sustains annual budgets that exceed \$3 million a year.

Duke students in the humanities can now pursue several avenues that involve team-based projects, many in partnership with an external organization, and often involving public-facing outputs. Humanities Labs were a key feature of Humanities Writ Large, and they have been extended in a second Mellon grant, Humanities Unbounded. These labs bring together several lead faculty with PhD students and undergraduates around a broad theme, such as artistic depictions of slavery and freedom, cultural representations of migration, microhistory as method and practice, or Black music as a window on American culture. Modes of organization and intellectual goals vary greatly, but every lab incorporates team-based research and seeks to reach broader audiences.¹¹

Duke also supports many year-long interdisciplinary research teams through Bass Connections, intensive summer projects through the Story+ and Data+ programs, and a growing number of semester-long courses designed around team-based research. In Bass Connections, sixty to seventy project teams operate annually, with faculty-led research endeavors that collectively span the sciences and social sciences as well as the humanities, and that often cross the divisions of

knowledge. Averaging twelve to thirteen participants, these teams incorporate at least two faculty leads, a small number of graduate and professional students, and a larger number of undergraduates. In many cases, teams also include staff members, a postdoc, and representatives from external partners, such as cultural institutions, government agencies, nonprofits, or businesses. Faculty leads frequently devise a subteam structure, with smaller groups, often led by PhD students, tackling specific dimensions of the larger undertaking.¹²

In Story+, run by the Franklin Humanities Institute, smaller teams of three or four undergraduates receive stipends for summer work on a public-facing humanities project grounded in interpretive methods. Each team has a graduate student mentor and a sponsor, sometimes a faculty member, sometimes the Duke Libraries or another Duke unit, sometimes an external partner such as the National Humanities Center or Durham's Geer Street Cemetery.¹³ This structure was modeled on an earlier summer research program, Data+, that emphasizes quantitative data science techniques, but always includes several projects that use methods like text mining and topic modeling to grapple with humanistic issues. An expanding number of semester-long courses designed around group projects further extends options to engage with collaborative research and writing. Finally, humanities PhD students continue to be able to undertake summer internships with cultural organizations and NGOs.

Collectively, these curricular and cocurricular offerings reach several thousand Duke students a year, with a significant fraction providing exposure to humanistic problems, research methods, and modes of communication. The latter range from more traditional scholarly outputs like coauthored journal articles and book chapters to more creative endeavors, including works of art, oral history archives, curated primary source repositories, policy reports, interactive digital maps and data visualizations, public exhibits, documentaries, and podcasts. These different approaches represent variations on a central theme: empower students to work together on open-ended humanities research, bounded by the expectation of concrete products that envisage actual audiences.

In the digital version of this essay, we offer appendices that convey the extraordinarily diverse topics and outputs that have emerged from Duke's (and Michigan's) investments in humanistic experiential learning, including examples that brought humanistic expertise into explicit dialogue with the sciences and/or social sciences. All of these undertakings confront similar challenges, such as how to:

- balance a more didactic presentation of key content and context with space for exploration, inquiry, and the completion of concrete deliverables;
- furnish sufficient scaffolding to give students initial direction, while leaving enough scope for collaborative decision-making so that students feel

invested in the project and experience the inevitable course corrections of truly open-ended research;

- build team cohesion, especially when team members come from different backgrounds and draw on diverse styles of thinking and epistemological foundations;
- overcome the free-rider problem in group projects; and
- navigate and incorporate the priorities and feedback of institutional sponsors/clients (where applicable).

The educational ecosystem that has emerged at Duke provides several mechanisms to address these challenges. There are a growing number of faculty members and doctoral students whose experience in leading collaborative projects enable them to serve as touchstones of advice. Programs like Story+ and Data+ create cross-team community among students that generates peer mentoring. The Bass Connections program provides extensive resources for team leads and offers short courses in project management for PhD students.

In addition, the many avenues for collaborative inquiry at Duke facilitate longer-term project evolution. A humanities lab may generate an idea for a year-long project team, or lay groundwork for semester-long course offerings. (Indeed, with Humanities Unbounded, we have encouraged departments to construct labs around a set of thematically related courses.) A year-long project team may conceptualize a summer mini-project as a way to launch their research or explore additional questions through a second or even third year.

Michigan and Duke are hardly the only places that have engaged in pedagogical innovation that blends collaborative research with educational experience, and often experimentation with public-facing outputs. The range of activity runs a wide gamut. At Davidson College, historian John Wertheimer has been teaching a highly successful collaborative undergraduate research seminar for two decades. Until recently, students generated a publishable article-length analysis of some historical problem related to law and race in the Carolinas. Since 2019, the seminar has focused on producing a documentary, in partnership with Wake Forest MFA students.¹⁴ The Engaged Cornell program facilitates dozens of community-focused courses like the American Studies Seminar “Underground Railroad,” which asks undergraduates to undertake research projects in partnership with upstate New York historic sites that served as waystations for African Americans escaping from slavery.¹⁵

Over the last decade, PhD internship programs and humanities labs have proliferated across higher education, often facilitated by grant funding from the Mellon Foundation or the National Endowment for the Humanities. At the Univer-

sity of Iowa, a Mellon-funded “Humanities for the Public Good” program places PhD students in summer internships with NGOs and community organizations.¹⁶ Through the Arizona State Humanities Lab, undergraduates explore rotating themes through collaborative project courses, such as “Indigenizing Food Systems,” “Decolonizing ‘Madness,’” and “Language Emergency,” the last involving a partnership with Arizona Indigenous communities to work on sustaining “linguistic and cultural heritages.”¹⁷ Similar opportunities have emerged at the University of Washington, the City University of New York Graduate Center, and many campuses in between.

Some especially ambitious research projects have blended research experiences for students with expansive public engagement. The Colored Conventions Project (CCP) stands out in this regard. Founded by Gabrielle Foreman at the University of Delaware, and now based at Penn State since Foreman moved there, the CCP is a massive undertaking to identify and document the myriad political and social conventions held by African Americans in the nineteenth century. Involving painstaking research in libraries and archives, careful digitization of primary sources, and the creation of digital exhibits and teaching resources, this NEH-funded project has attracted dozens of student researchers. Its leaders also have organized hundreds of nonacademics to join in the work of transcribing convention proceedings.¹⁸

Indeed, several essays in this issue of *Daedalus* describe similar projects and initiatives. At the University of California, Santa Barbara, an evolving WE1S team brings together faculty, postdocs, graduate students, and undergrads around data analysis of public discourse about the humanities. At New Urban Arts in Providence, high schoolers explore “creative practice” framed around artistic engagement with pressing community issues. In Baltimore, community members have joined with faculty and students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, to cocreate an expansive set of oral histories and photographs that engage with the origins, course, and consequences of the 2015 Baltimore Uprising. In Los Angeles, a team of University of Southern California Latino/a graduate and undergraduate students constructed a powerful exhibit on the history of the Boyle Heights neighborhood. Experimentation with humanistic experiential learning beckons in every section of the country, at multiple educational levels, and in partnership with an impressive array of cultural institutions and community organizations.

Any decision to develop, implement, and support an educational ecosystem that fosters engaged, collaborative, public-facing inquiry in the humanities will require significant expenditure of time, money, and effort. But the payoffs are also tremendous. These experiences have generated an array of positive outcomes, measured through student surveys, focus groups, and faculty reflections.

For undergraduates, project-based courses and summer programs offer a rich introduction to the research process, including question identification, the setting and carrying out of a research agenda, adjustment in the face of unexpected challenges or problems, and translation of research findings into defined outputs for specific audiences. Students in the Michigan HistoryLabs experienced hands-on archival work in multiple registers. While some admitted that “it could be tedious,” they also expressed excitement at the final outcomes: “we were doing something real with history and making an impact.” These opportunities allow undergraduates to work closely with faculty and graduate students and hone skills in collaboration and communication. Participants in Duke’s Bass Connections affirmed that the experience helped them “develop insight” into the “skills and interests that will be crucial in guiding future choices.” Those who stick with ongoing teams beyond a single year often get the chance to take on leadership roles. Bass Connections, raved one student, “provided me with a bridge between the classroom and the real world. It was also the most rewarding leadership opportunity I’ve had.” A remarkably high fraction of Story+ undergraduates, moreover, go on to write honors theses.

Doctoral students report similar gains from being introduced to the research process through collaborative, project-based courses. In the discipline of history, students have long wished that faculty would show them how to conduct archival research. As we note above, PhD students in HistoryLab courses learn the nuts and bolts of historical research in addition to transferable skills such as collaboration, project management, and communication. In reflecting on the experience, one student explained, “I had no idea how the most fundamental aspects of research, such as defining a research question or establishing a justification for material we had gathered, could be complicated by working with other people.” Another valued the opportunity for teaching her how “to work outside my immediate field of interest” and “with strict deadlines.” Still another student reflected on how “professors and fellow graduate students are both your colleagues and mentors – helping you navigate issues that commonly emerge with the process of research. This course and experience gave me more confidence than any course I have taken.” Many agreed that the experience was “the most formative course in my graduate student career.”

Doctoral students who participate in analogous endeavors at Duke encounter the challenges and payoffs of larger scale intellectual projects. “In fields where collaboration is rare,” explained one student, “project teams provide opportunities to work with others towards a common goal, develop transferable skills and make connections with people outside your department.” Indeed, there are many downstream payoffs: “The skills and experiences I gained from these projects,” another student reflected, “will not only help me better navigate postgraduate life, but will positively affect my upcoming dissertation research and writing.” Still

another emphasized how a Bass Connections project “constituted a deeply formative teaching experience.” This comment points to the way that leadership roles on teams expose PhD students to the many facets of project management: sensible delegation, coordination among team members, and, ideally, the cultivation of an inclusive mode of decision-making. Occupying intermediary roles between faculty and undergraduate team members, they further learn how to mentor undergraduates and constructively engage faculty.

Graduate internships allow PhD students to expand their career horizons by employing their scholarly expertise and research skills in nonacademic professional contexts. At the same time, students provide business, industry, nonprofit, and government sectors with expertise, gaining intellectual self-confidence and demonstrating the value of doctoral-level knowledge to employers in a wide range of fields. Like applied research projects undertaken within the university, internships typically require students to be part of collaborative teams and to communicate their ideas in multiple modes to nonexpert audiences. Either type of experiential learning thus cultivates “soft skills” crucial to career success. At both Michigan and Duke, students can avail themselves of wrap-around support before, during, and after they undertake their internships: staff offer workshops on resume writing, the interview process, and networking, and convene learning communities to facilitate reflection and career discernment.

For both undergraduates and PhD students, experiential learning has turned out to be a notable “X” factor when they enter job markets or seek other competitive postdegree opportunities. The ability to discuss project-based research and the process of creating clear outputs for specific audiences, and often clients, helps our students stand out. In application essays, cover letters, and interviews, they can describe concrete roles and tangible achievements that resonate with admission committees and potential employers, whether inside or outside academia.

Faculty who have taken the plunge into collaborative projects as a way to teach have reaped significant benefits as well. For many, there is considerable intellectual excitement at seeing what empowered students can accomplish. Some scholars have developed new skills in imagining, planning, and carrying out larger scale research projects. Others have identified new avenues for research, or developed strong partnerships with organizations outside the university, expanding their capacity to engage with publics at every phase of the research process.

Despite the enthusiasm with which experiential learning opportunities have been embraced by some doctoral students, faculty, and academic leaders, challenges remain. Many students still view “lab” courses, interdisciplinary research teams, or internships as appropriate for those who know they do not want an academic career. These students remain skeptical that such opportunities enable success within today’s academy as well as beyond it, even

though plenty of anecdotal data suggest that they make candidates shine in academic job searches. Another barrier for students is the entrenched practice of choosing courses based on the goal of deepening field expertise. Many Michigan PhD students do not even consider an open-ended collaborative project or a HistoryLab course focused on a topic that does not directly dovetail with their area of specialization.

Enticing faculty to teach collaborative project courses runs into a similar set of preconceptions related to the premium that faculty place on teaching that aligns with their area of expertise and current research interests. For many academic humanists, any other teaching constitutes a waste of time or a service burden. In the context of shrinking doctoral programs, moreover, some faculty in smaller fields have pitted experimental teaching against subfield expertise and doubled down on the necessity of maintaining older models of doctoral training, lest they have no chance to train PhD students. If graduate programs cannot accommodate both kinds of courses because of fierce competition for students, the argument goes, then pedagogical experiments should give way. As advisers, faculty all too often frame opportunities for experiential learning as distracting PhD students from the specialized research necessary to establish scholarly credentials.

We are convinced that humanities doctoral education has reached a crossroads. Rather than clinging to the older apprenticeship model premised on deep subfield expertise, we see a shifting landscape that calls for imagining a new way forward. What this reimagined graduate training looks like, of course, will depend on the precise contours of the discipline, program, and wider university in question. But an embrace of experiential learning promises to invigorate doctoral and undergraduate education alike.

At Michigan and Duke, change has been catalyzed at several different levels: student, faculty, graduate program, graduate school, and provost office. For many students, the desire to make academic work relevant to their world has underpinned demand for courses that result in tangible products with potential social impact. Some faculty, too, have become invested in explicitly engaged research and scholarship that speak to real world challenges and reach audiences beyond the academy. Both student demand and faculty efforts have resulted in a number of experiments at the ground level, from HistoryLabs and the history graduate student-led podcast program *Reverb Effect* at Michigan to Humanities Labs, intensive summer programs, and year-long research teams at Duke.¹⁹

For departments with graduate programs, the most immediate pressures have been declining undergraduate enrollments (which in many public universities affect the number of teaching assistantships), shrinking doctoral cohorts, and endemic mismatches between open faculty positions and the number of PhD recipients seeking them. Some programs have responded by engaging in the difficult work of interrogating the purpose of the PhD, assessing the fit between faculty

goals and student priorities, and examining whether the current curriculum effectively meets the program's goals.²⁰ This work has led some programs to encourage teaching experiments and reconsider milestones such as preliminary exams, the dissertation prospectus, and even the shape of the dissertation itself. It has led others to embed career and professional development into multiple phases of doctoral training.²¹

At Michigan, another important driver of change has been Rackham Graduate School, which has systematically sought to promote a rethinking of the graduate enterprise on campus. This process began with the articulation of a strategic vision to make doctoral education student-centered, faculty-led, and Rackham-supported. It continued with a major symposium, which convened national leaders in graduate education to speak with Michigan faculty and graduate students about the larger trends, pressures, and challenges facing doctoral training. That dialogue shaped the Advancing New Directions in Graduate Education initiative, which encourages faculty leadership in rethinking doctoral education within departments.²² Each year, Rackham partners with three to six select departments and creates support structures to facilitate reform work in two core areas: improving the early doctoral experience (precandidacy) and embedding career and professional development in doctoral training. This work is slow and painstaking, but it has created rewarding crossdisciplinary discussions among faculty about graduate education reform and the common obstacles (that is, student and faculty buy-in) that they face.

At Duke, the provost office has amplified the ongoing work of the Graduate School. One key move was to convene a major ad hoc committee on PhD education.²³ Implementation of that committee's report has ranged from encouraging every school to take ownership of improving their PhD programs and piloting complementary modes of advising and mentoring, to investing in a set of major interdisciplinary research opportunities for both PhD students and undergraduates and expanding access to internships.

Each level of change driver has its challenges. Students come and go. Often their concerns and needs shift over time: while this generation may be committed to public scholarship and societal impact, the next may have a different agenda altogether. Faculty tend to be creatures of habit. Sometimes their mantra seems to be, "If it isn't broke, don't fix it." Only so many faculty have stepped forward to devote large amounts of time and energy to reforming their graduate programs. And those who do invest the time may see their changes overturned as soon as they leave their leadership positions. Graduate schools have minimal authority over how faculty spend their time. They can offer incentives for program reform and provide scaffolding to guide that work, but they lack the power to impose radical changes that involve the curriculum (that is, requiring "lab courses" or internships) or program milestones.

Along all these dimensions, it will be crucial to ground efforts to encourage expansion of experiential learning in relevant data about its impact on students. Our claims about the many benefits of internships, collaborative research, and public-facing research outputs reflect the assessments that we have conducted at Michigan and Duke. As we note above, however, related innovations are underway in dozens of universities, many prompted by grants from the Mellon Foundation or the National Endowment for the Humanities, others resulting from the creativity of individual faculty members or the inventiveness of specific departments or programs. We need aggregated analysis of how experiential learning shapes longer term student outcomes and career paths.

One useful step would be for some umbrella organization (perhaps the American Academy of Arts and Sciences) to synthesize data from institutions that have experimented with these approaches to humanities education, as well as provide guidance to disciplinary societies and departments about best practices in collecting and interpreting such data. A wider effort at program evaluation, especially if it showed analogous benefits elsewhere, would provide a stronger evidentiary foundation for curricular reform.

That reform process will surely take many shapes, reflecting the creativity that remains a hallmark of humanistic inquiry. And we remain confident that it will sustain key dimensions of long-standing humanities practice: the seminar as crucible of questions, arguments, and dialogue, and the capacity of individuals to conceptualize and carry out research projects. But we call on our academic peers to accelerate the process of expanding humanistic toolkits and research outputs, forging new connections to stakeholders beyond the confines of academic conferences and departmental workshops, and embracing the advantages of collaborative research, community engagement, and team-based projects. The resulting methodological and pedagogical pluralism, we predict, will generate important intellectual cross fertilization. It will expand student horizons and interest. It will emphasize anew the crucial place of humanistic thinking in American life.

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Communication & Media Arts: Of the Humanities & the Future

Roderick P. Hart

The field of communication was added to the menu of higher education in the early part of the twentieth century. One hundred years later, it is thriving at colleges and universities throughout the United States and gaining a foothold abroad as well. This essay recounts its growth, surveys its campus manifestations, and explores the challenges it now confronts. In a world of ever-advancing technologies, of evolving forms of online interaction, and of massive amounts of misinformation and disinformation, no citizen can ignore the changing media environment. While the communication discipline can take pride in its growth, it must also heed the demands of the Old Humanities: to sort fact from fiction, to identify cultural traditions worth honoring, to question how power is arranged and whom it serves, and to help students formulate messages for a diverse and changing world. The field of communication has many challenges before it and that is a glorious thing.

This essay began just as one of the most tumultuous moments in American history was waning. As of June 2022, COVID-19 has killed more than one million Americans; more will be lost before the disease is completely vanquished. Fortunately, scores of brilliant researchers across the globe brought a variety of vaccines to market quickly. Marvelously intricate machines located at companies like Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca produced precious vials of medicine in record time, after which the federal government's Warp Speed Program delivered them to 42,000 zip codes across the United States. Science. Business. Engineering. Government. What more needs to be said?

Getting shots in the arms of 320 million people. Would the pharmaceutical companies share everything they know with one another? Would the workers running the production lines keep their superiors informed of each day's churn? Would the government remain open to inquiries from the press while the vaccine was being delivered? Would the Trump administration tell the Biden administration everything it knew? And what of the people? How many would sign up for the first shot, and who would remind them to get a second? Would the web's grand conspiracies – that vaccines will rot your brain, that vaccines are a Chinese plot – keep people away from the vaccinators? In a nation where 430 different lan-

guages are spoken each day, would medical advisories be translated clearly and distributed broadly? And who would buoy up the people's spirits while all of this was going on?

COVID-19 reminds us yet again that communication is a delicate thing, brilliant when it works, devastating when it does not. Speaking of devastation, during his last days in office, President Donald Trump stood on a platform, as despots had before him, and harangued twenty thousand people mightily, telling them every lie under the sun. The Trumpers responded immediately, filming themselves while storming the nation's shrine to democracy. Five people died, hundreds went to jail, and the nation was torn apart. Donald Trump did this work with a primitive tool – with his voice.

Then the questions began. Had the United States Capitol Police failed to read their Twitter feeds? Trump's Twitter feed? Indeed, had they not read a daily newspaper during the last four years, outlets that had told the "Stop the Steal" story relentlessly? Had they not heard the shrieking in flyover country after Trump lost the presidency? Had they missed the right wing's coordinated messaging? Did they not notice Fox and Newsmax constantly stoking the postelectoral fires? The United States Capitol Police performed heroically but they also failed to listen.

COVID and the Capitol. Events like these raise a thousand questions and many of them feature human communication. Science can produce vaccines by the truckload, but unless people are persuaded to take them, they are for naught. A U.S. president may have the nuclear football at the ready, but if only public adulation can make him feel truly powerful, dangerous things will happen. These are my biases and I come by them honestly, having studied political rhetoric throughout my career and having served for eleven years as dean of the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. As a result, wherever I look I find people failing to listen. Wherever I look I find people saying unfortunate things. Communication is an open door except when it closes.

And how do the humanities relate to the study of communication? I cannot answer that question without reflecting on my own story. Having entered college in 1962, I have witnessed the remarkable growth of communication studies in the academy. In the latest compilation of degrees conferred by American colleges and universities, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that 110,981 bachelor's degrees were granted in communication and journalism in 2017 – 2018, versus 52,625 in English language and literature, 23,953 in foreign languages and linguistics, 29,552 in history, and 13,097 in philosophy and religious studies.¹ Is the growth of communication studies a good thing? COVID and the Capitol suggest that it is. Unless we understand the rhetorical crosswinds associated with such events, we will be poorly equipped to live a modern life. Communication and the humanities need one another. That is the story I tell here.

I blame Shakespeare for the evil that befell me. As a sophomore English major in 1964, I should have been focusing on aesthetic matters (especially on the objective correlative) and I certainly should not have been thinking about how King Lear reminded me of Lyndon Johnson. But I noticed the resemblance: how Lear wanted to be worshipped by his daughters even as he tried to orchestrate their emotions. I wondered if Johnson might not have a Lear Complex, the need to control without seeming to control, the need to be admired without opening himself up to critique. This was, to be sure, a sophomoric thought. Worse, I ventured that thought in class. I recall the professor's look to this day. It lay somewhere between contempt and disgust. How could I, his look queried, profane Shakespeare's world, a place where one's feelings were meant to be recollected in tranquility, where one was expected to just sigh knowingly?

That look – *that look* – is still emblazoned on my brain. My contribution in class on that fated day may well have been fatuous, and I probably should have been thinking deeper thoughts about the Bard. In my defense, though, students on my campus were beginning to register their opposition to the war in Vietnam, so it seemed to me that Shakespeare might have something to say about the leader of the free world in a time of turmoil. Alas, it turned out there was no room for politics in the English department. So I declared a second major. The communication department, I was to learn, would let me study rhetoric, language at full-stretch. But what did that mean for graduate study? English at Columbia or rhetoric at Penn State? I made a decision. Then life happened.

Higher education has always been a scandal, constantly adding new subjects to its portfolio, domesticating them, and then turning them into a new orthodoxy. Imagine the contretemps, for example, when in 1876, a group of Harvard radicals proposed creating a department of English literature, not a unit that would focus on proper authors like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, but one that would study popularists like Christopher Marlowe, Ben Johnson, and my friend William Shakespeare, writers who played to the crowd, who engaged the base emotions, who made people laugh.² Imagine, too, the campus row at Princeton when, in the early 1900s, a department of philosophy was proposed, not a unit for steeping young Princetonians in Calvinist doctrine, but one that would expose them to Kant, Hegel, and other upstart Germans.³

Things got worse. Suddenly, departments of classics had rivals on campus. No longer were Greek and Latin sufficient, some declared, but students needed to communicate with their contemporaries in other countries as well. In 1803, West Point hired a professor of French studies, and soon departments of modern language began sprouting up in the Ivies and near-Ivies.⁴ Simultaneously, although Yale had housed a department of history since the 1760s, history suddenly became shorter, with some faculty proposing to bypass the Renaissance and explore the

American adventure itself. Would nothing stop such heresies? Could the professoriate not be disciplined?

It could not, but it could create disciplines. In 1914, a brave band of English professors got the field of communication started when James Winans of Cornell, Charles Woolbert of Illinois, James O'Neil of Wisconsin, and fourteen others abandoned the National Council of Teachers of English to form their own association, one that would place a primacy on practical speech, an association that would, in the argot of the times, help people become more useful when they spoke.⁵ Soon, new technologies advanced the discipline further: radio brought argumentation to life; television brought literature to life; film brought history to life. These new technologies changed not only what people said but how they would be heard. Overnight, it seemed, students arrived on campus wanting to *use* what they were learning even as they learned it. These students of communication were an impatient lot, making them seem shallow to philosophers, impetuous to historians, and prosaic to litterateurs. Still, they came.

A recent Humanities Indicators report of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences released data about humanities departments in 2007 and compared them with similar facts gathered ten years later.⁶ Total enrollment for communication undergraduates in the United States was 686,330 in the fall of 2017, with an average of 897.2 students per department. Total graduate enrollment was 65,690 (85.9 per department), with full- and part-time faculty numbering 11,710 (25.5 per department). In part because these departments offered so many communication skills courses, they had more than their share of part-time faculty members.

The report contains both good and bad news for the humanities in general, but the indicators for communication studies are forward-leaning: more and more departments at more and more universities, more students over time at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. History, English, and modern language departments had the most faculty, with communication ranking fourth, outnumbering the thirteen other disciplines sampled (linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, American studies, and so on). Communication departments had an average number of female instructors, but their faculty members were granted tenure more often than most departments.

Enrollment-wise, communication departments had the fourth-highest number of students of the seventeen disciplines assessed and ranked first in degrees granted during the 2017–2018 academic year. Communication students ranked second among those completing a minor (often, I suspect, in schools of business) but they were less likely than most to have a “benchmarking” requirement for graduation. That is, instead of doing a thesis, communication students were especially likely to have one or more internships. Communication students report-

ed liking their career services operations more than most students did, and their departments ranked first among those offering externships. Communication departments ranked better than most in tracking their students' career outcomes.

Also not surprising, given the recency of new media, 41 percent of communication departments offered fully online or hybrid courses (highest among the disciplines studied), although communication students were not heavily involved in what has come to be known as the "digital humanities." At the graduate level, communication departments ranked third (of seventeen fields) in student enrollments and their graduate students were more likely to be instructors of record (in skills-level courses) than to provide grading or classroom support for advanced undergraduate courses. While communication students often helped with campus recruitment efforts to attract community college students, they were not especially active in other forms of community service.

As one of the newer disciplines, communication's architecture differs from campus to campus: different academic structures, different faculty compositions, different scholarly specializations. At the risk of over-generalization, the field is now made up of four broad clusters that respond to quite different scholarly consortia: 1) communication and rhetorical studies (the National Communication Association and the Rhetoric Society of America); 2) journalism and mass communication (the International Communication Association and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication); 3) film and media arts (the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and the University Film & Video Association); and 4) advertising and public relations (the American Academy of Advertising and the American Association for Public Opinion Research).

Faculty members on the same campus (sometimes in the same department) affiliate with one or more of these clusters. Thus, it is not easy to make covering-law statements about the field, but one gets some insight by looking at the different ways it is configured on U.S. campuses:⁷

- Single unit (mostly social scientific): Arizona, Cornell, Ohio State, Michigan, Penn, Purdue, Stanford, UCLA, UCSB, UCSD.
- Single unit (mostly humanistic): Brown, Chicago, Dartmouth, Emory, Massachusetts, Notre Dame, NYU, Pittsburgh, Tulane, Virginia, Yale.
- Single unit (mostly balanced): Denver, Marquette, Miami, New Mexico, Northeastern, Oregon, Utah, Washington.
- Multiple units (co-located departments/schools): Illinois, LSU, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, Northwestern, Penn State, Syracuse, Wisconsin.
- Collective unit (inclusive/multidepartmental): Boston, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Michigan State, Rutgers, Temple, Texas, USC.

- Interdisciplinary/graduate: Berkeley, Columbia, Duke, Georgetown, Harvard, MIT, Princeton.
- Undergraduate/masters: Boston College, George Washington, Ithaca, Macalester, TCU, Tulane, Vanderbilt, Villanova, Wake Forest.

This is but a sampling of how the communication discipline is represented in the United States. Virtually every state flagship offers a PhD in communication, most state regionals offer a master's degree, and the great majority of private schools offers a bachelor's degree. Moody College, for which I was dean between 2004 and 2015, shows how robust the field has become. The College is made up of five academic departments, twelve research and outreach centers, and houses both an NPR station and a PBS affiliate in its four-building complex. The College currently has 102 tenure-track faculty members, 101 professional faculty, 302 staff members, 4,373 undergraduate majors, and 454 graduate students. The College runs semester-long programs for its students in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and New York City, has large career services and student advising offices, and employs seven full-time fundraisers. Over 54,000 individuals have graduated from the College since its inception, thirty of whom have received the Pulitzer Prize and more than fifty an Emmy. Its PhD recipients now teach at colleges and universities across the United States and throughout the world. There is nothing about Moody College that is not complicated.

That is also true for the communication field itself. Some faculty members trace their roots to English departments in the early 1900s. Others harken back to laboratory studies of World War II propaganda conducted by Harold Lasswell and his cohort at the Office of War Information. A significant number of faculty members in communication got their terminal degrees in sociology, psychology, and political science, gravitating to communication departments because of their openness and taste for diversity. Other renegades came to media arts departments from comparative literature and area studies, still studying literature but now literature on-the-move.

Today, the communication field boasts many specializations. Traditional studies of political rhetoric still abound, although they must now calculate how mass media affect people's receptivities. Scholars studying film, television, and social media report their work in over three dozen scholarly journals. Journalism historians generate hypotheses for survey researchers; others conduct online experiments, exposing one set of subjects to Stimulus #1 and others to Stimulus #2. Studies of communication within complex organizations (that is, business, nonprofit, and governmental settings) are now plentiful, but so too are studies of how parents and children communicate at home. And there is more: What sorts of messages will get the elderly to take their medicine? How can teachers use new media

in the high school classroom? Why is misinformation consumed so avidly these days? Are online deepfakes really changing public opinion? How is the “Hollywood ethos” affecting films made by Europeans? Why are young people better informed about environmental challenges than their elders?

One of my colleagues, Scott Stroud, a philosopher by training, has created the Media Ethics Initiative, a wonderful archive of case studies that gets students talking about the issues of the day.⁸ His students ask, for example, if it is ethical to use TikTok to snitch on people for violating COVID-19 restrictions. They also ask what sort of political advertising – if any – should be censured? Are partisan news outlets good for democracy despite their excesses? Should Twitter have cut off Donald Trump? Is doxing always immoral? Are first-person shooter games harmful to children and, if so, how? Is online deception harmless, dangerous, inevitable? Which memes go too far? Which Confederate memorials are allowable? Should sports journalists profit financially from their coverage? Did Nike advance or retard Colin Kaepernick’s civil rights initiative? New questions, the old humanities.

I began my professional career in 1970 at Purdue University, where I taught for nine years. During my interview for a newly opened position at the University of Texas at Austin, I was told *sotto voce* that the department was conducting informal meet-and-greets with undergraduates in an attempt to attract more majors. While the department was prosperous because of the skills courses it taught to all students on campus, it had fewer than one hundred of its own kind, making the department seem insubstantial to some. Today, that department has 584 majors.

Why the increase? There are many reasons, but, generally speaking, the 1970s and 1980s sent a new breed of students to campus. Their immersion in the electronic media was part of that story but they also brought a new mindset with them. Herodotus was fine, they reasoned, and reading *Jane Eyre* enjoyable, but could one combine creativity and pragmatism in equal measure and then make a career of it? These students were unquestionably impatient, heirs to the land-grant mentality that has made American higher education so distinctive. Like those in business and engineering, communication students embraced *homo faber*. They also had a new set of heroes: Aristotle rather than Plato, Neil Postman instead of E. D. Hirsch.

But this is also true: most communication students, like those in linguistics and psychology, take 75 percent of their coursework in the arts and sciences writ large, as well they should. What speechwriter could write a speech, after all, without a taste for history? Who can produce a clever advertisement without a sense for cultural nuance? What journalist could write a feature story without the empirical skills needed to sift through mounds of data responsibly? How can *Twelve*

Years a Slave be brought to the screen without understanding Solomon Northrup's world of 1853? Everyday messages come and go but the messages that linger, those that have impact, come from an education that is broad and deep.

What do students study when studying communication? Depending on the breadth of the curriculum, the answer to that question varies from campus to campus, but most departments offer a range of introductory skills classes. These include public speaking, interviewing skills, introduction to advertising, basic reporting, elements of broadcasting, graphic design, feature writing, sound mixing, introduction to screenwriting, and so on. On some campuses, these classes are taught by lecturers or working professionals and, in the case of departments offering the doctorate, they are sometimes taught by graduate students.

Such courses draw directly on the humanities, focused as they are on compositional skills, audience analysis, structure and form, argument design, visual dexterity, and cultural recognition. Proletarian coursework like this would have shocked the Oxford dons of the nineteenth century but America is America, a place where transactionalism resides comfortably. Communication courses make two bold promises: 1) put in the time and change who you are; and 2) say what you say and change the world. Rousseau would blanch. Ben Franklin's ears would perk up.

The interweaving of communication and the humanities can be seen by looking at just a few of the courses taught at UT's Moody College:

- Communication and rhetorical studies: theories of persuasion, communication and social movements, political communication, conflict resolution, communication and personal relationships, gender and communication, argumentation and advocacy.
- Journalism and mass communication: digital storytelling, news literacy, media law, reporting social justice, online publications, sports reporting, international journalism, online incivility, the Latinx newsroom, news and gender, journalism portfolio.
- Film and media arts: media and society, narrative strategies, history of television, world cinema, digital platforms, Internet cultures, global Hollywood, documentary production, film noir, interactive game development, independent films.
- Advertising and public relations: creativity and culture, international advertising, brands and storytelling, health messaging, ethics of public relations, communication campaigns, digital metrics, audience development and engagement.

Here is something we too often forget: to engage others in communication is to impose ourselves upon them, to narrow their options, and that brings power

to the forefront. The courses listed above focus on questions like these: Whose stories are worth telling? Is mass advertising hegemonic, public relations a whitened sepulcher? How can community tensions be reduced and whose job is it to do such work? Which political promises are legitimate, which a fraud? Who owns the nation's airwaves and what gratuities does ownership permit? Are all Americans being heard regardless of their gender and ethnicity? At what precise point do digital discussions run afoul of human decency? What cultural assumptions are built into the evening news? Must filmmakers conform to an implicit set of social norms? Which public arguments are legitimate? How do we know? Who decides? These questions reveal how intertwined communication and the humanities have become.

The field of communication is still a newcomer on the academic scene but it has had its growing pains. On some campuses, turf wars have developed between communication and the older disciplines, wars exacerbated by imbalances in FTEs (full-time equivalents), most of which favor communication. Because it is an applied liberal art, some traditionalists have questioned the field's depth while others are suspicious of its connection to popular culture. Still other critics resurrect Augustine: to be genuine, communication should be spontaneous, not practiced; to be responsible, communication must lay out the whole case, not just the attractive parts; to be ethical, communication should be taught by those who know the truth, not by those searching for it.

There have been tensions within the field as well. The 1970s brought entirely new discourses to the discipline, as the rhetoric of civil rights and, later, women's rights and gay rights demanded new places in the curriculum. Keeping up with rapidly developing media modalities created budgetary problems in many departments, problems that sometimes masked deeper resentments between senior and junior faculty or between researchers and practitioners. The most notable tensions, however, were those between faculty in the humanities and social sciences, strains that continue to the present.⁹ These latter tensions resulted from competing epistemologies but also from questions about what counts: books versus articles, single- versus co-authored studies, applied versus basic research, foundation-based versus federal grants? The school-to-school taxonomy laid out above shows how these tensions have been resolved (or sublimated) in universities across the United States.

Communication's practical roots have let it escape some of the problems besetting other disciplines, but it has not escaped them all. "Communication scholars have failed the challenges posed by critical theory," say some scholars. "Its laboratory experiments have insufficient statistical power," say others. "Communication is too 'white' a discipline," some argue, too willing to accept racial privileges for the fortunate, cultural erasure for the rest.¹⁰ "Communication is too

timid a discipline,” some complain, too ready to dismiss extramural controversies over gay rights, gender rights, and labor rights. “Communication is too U.S.-centric,” say some, too dismissive of the capitalistic logic undergirding media programming and too accepting of the sheer impossibility of bipartisan politics. “Communication is too Western,” others argue, too ready to ignore the Global South’s needs for cultural recognition, for new modes of governance, and for new technologies of public engagement.¹¹

Some disciplines are based on a *principle*: for philosophy, all truths must be interrogated. Some disciplines are based on a *habit*: for English, reading expands the human heart. Some disciplines are based on a *belief*: for history, to ignore the past is to become its victim. The discipline of communication, I suggest, is based on a *pledge*: freedom goes to the articulate. This pledge has its entailments: Through communication, I decide who will pay me or love me or vote for me. Through communication, I decide who will share my truths, honor my gods, appreciate my heritage, purchase my deodorant. Through communication, I become more than flotsam on the seas of your prejudices, more than jetsam on the tides of your ignorance. Through communication, life’s waters become not my grave.¹² Perhaps these are truisms, but if so, that is what happens when a discipline is built on a pledge.

In 1981, just as enrollments in communication were beginning to soar, I was asked to write an essay for a volume supported by the National Education Association. The essay I wrote was delightfully overwrought and, as I reread it forty years later, its pontifications embarrass me. Still, the essay remains true to the person I have become. In the piece, I castigate the New Philistines who, when describing a college between halves of a Saturday afternoon football game, “make orgiastic allusions to its famed nuclear accelerator, its lengthening cadre of law school graduates, its burgeoning enrollment in data processing, and its newly developed techniques for increasing hog production.”¹³ Rarely, I noted, “do we find academic institutions described as legitimate havens for those who love literature, music, and the arts; who want to know something of their cultural heritage; or who wish to detect moral dilemmas before the special prosecutor knocks on their doors.” The New Philistinism, I warned, could soon engulf us.

I was only getting started. I went on to ask what special burdens are placed upon faculty in communication when confronted with students who have not mastered a foreign language and, hence, who have little crosscultural sensitivity. I also worried about students who struggled when committing their thoughts to paper because they had taken too few English courses or who could not sustain an argument beyond the level of moral expediency because they had eschewed philosophy as well. Those of us in communication will be swamped by the New Philistinism, I continued, if we fail to remember our heritage in the humanities.

My solution at the time: to remember what it means to think rhetorically. For me it meant this:

To think rhetorically means, at the very least, to think about the resources of language as well as to learn how to utter words. To think rhetorically means to consider the cultural assumptions of would-be listeners and to take those assumptions into account when speaking to them. To think rhetorically means to acknowledge that all ideas – even technological ones – are debatable ideas and that no idea has pre-eminence unless people grant it same. To think well rhetorically is to seize upon the ethical dimensions of a human issue and to lay them bare for listeners. To think well rhetorically is to reason consecutively, to structure ideas and arguments in ways understandable to persons ignorant about those ideas and arguments. To think well rhetorically is to disbelieve almost everything one hears and to take intellectual solace in that skepticism.¹⁴

The conclusion I advanced at the time: communication without the humanities is forsaken. Said I:

It is quite possible that our students' inability to understand subtle rhetoric when they hear it results from their misunderstanding the complex human motivations depicted in that unread Pirandello play or from their unfamiliarity with such historical personages as Joe McCarthy and Huey Long. Their untutored critical sensibilities, dulled by a pablum of media extravaganzas, are part of the problem as well. When our students fail to understand how they are influenced by their social environment or how they can marshal their intellectual resources to combat those influences, they play into the hands of the New Philistines. . . . If communication is to become the New Humanities, it must listen respectfully to the current din of pragmatism but it must hearken, too, to the meeker cries of the Old Humanities.¹⁵

Naturally, I am delighted that communication enrollments are strong throughout the United States and that a media-saturated world is greeting our students warmly upon graduation. I am delighted as well that the field's intellectual standards have gotten increasingly higher during my time in the academy. In the last three years, for example, humanities faculty members in my modest-sized department have published three books with Cambridge, two with Oxford, two with Chicago, and one with Berkeley. During that same time, research conducted by my social science colleagues has been funded by an astonishing variety of foundations, agencies, and corporations, all designed to find out why communication fails and when it succeeds. Communication is magical and something of a mystery, but it is no longer a complete mystery.

Some members of my discipline are anguished that Harvard has no communication department for its undergraduates and that the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory has been assigned to poets since 1925. Harvard still has its star debaters, of course, as well as the *Harvard Crimson*, the *Harvard Lampoon*,

and, on the other side of campus, the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy. No doubt, Harvard students would be better off if they could take courses like those offered at Moody College but, somehow, I suspect, they will find a way to make a living upon graduating. Elsewhere in the country, indeed almost everywhere else, students will study communication, the modern incarnation of the oldest humanistic discipline in the Western world.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Outcomes: Degrees Conferred, by Level, Discipline, and Gender, 2017–18,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 16, 2020, https://www.chronicle.com/article/degrees-conferred-by-level-discipline-and-gender-2017-18?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in.
- ² For more on the origins of English departments, see William R. Parker, “Where Do English Departments Come From?” *College English* 28 (5) (1967): 339–351.
- ³ See Princeton University, “Department of Philosophy: The Early Years,” <https://philosophy.princeton.edu/about/early-years>.
- ⁴ John R. McCormick, “History of Foreign Language Teaching at the United States Military Academy,” *Modern Language Journal* 54 (5) (1970), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1970.tb02274.x>.
- ⁵ Roughly ten years later, another group of malcontents left still other English departments to form the first school of journalism at the University of Missouri. See Hilary Akers Dunn, *History of Journalism Education: An Analysis of 100 Years of Journalism Education* (unpublished master’s thesis, Louisiana State University, 2018).
- ⁶ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Humanities in American Life: Insights from a 2019 Survey of the Public’s Attitudes and Engagement* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020).
- ⁷ The first five groupings are restricted to programs regularly enrolling a significant number of doctoral students.
- ⁸ The Media Ethics Initiative is housed within Moody College’s Center for Media Engagement. See <https://mediaethicsinitiative.org/>.

- ⁹ For a data-packed overview of these intradisciplinary differences, see James A. Anderson and Michael K. Middleton, “Epistemological Movements in Communication: An Analysis of Empirical and Rhetorical/Critical Scholarship,” in *A Century of Communication Studies: The Unfinished Conversation*, ed. Pat J. Gehrke and William M. Keith (New York: Routledge, 2015), 82–108.
- ¹⁰ For more on this matter, see a bracingly thoughtful set of essays edited by Thomas Nakayama, “Forum: Whiteness and Communication,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17 (2) (2019): 199–266.
- ¹¹ These and other challenges to the discipline are described in helpful detail in the chapters contained in Gehrke and Keith, eds., *A Century of Communication Studies*.
- ¹² Adapted from Roderick P. Hart, “Why Communication? Why Education? Toward a Politics of Teaching,” *Communication Education* 42 (1993): 97–105.
- ¹³ Roderick P. Hart, “Speech Communication as the New Humanities,” in *Education for the Eighties: Speech Communication*, ed. Gustav Friedrich (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1981), 37. This and subsequent excerpts from this essay have been slightly modified for presentation here.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

Religious Studies & the Imagined Boundaries of the Humanities

Jodi Magness & Margaret M. Mitchell

Religious studies, as taught in American higher education, is in many ways a quint-essential instance of the boundlessness of the humanities, since elements of religious traditions and practices are pervasive in literature, history, art, political science, philosophy, law, music, and so on. At the same time, questions about the definition of “religion,” about what constitutes legitimate “religion” protected as such by “religious freedom,” and about what privileges such “freedom” should entail affect many aspects of our lives as a nation, from the home to the workplace and to the public square. Informed and reasoned inquiry into religious traditions, texts, rituals, and practices is an essential component of civic life, on both individual and public levels. This is acutely the case in the present moment, even as religious studies faces significant challenges in the contemporary climate, both in higher education and our wider culture. We urge its protection and support into the future.

The United States was built on a foundation of religious freedom and tolerance, a principle enshrined in the United States Constitution. Nevertheless, the previous administration enacted a number of Executive Orders and Presidential Proclamations that prevented certain individuals from entering the United States – first from primarily Muslim countries, and later, from largely African countries. Those actions are a stain on our national conscience and are inconsistent with our long history of welcoming people of all faiths and no faith at all.

— March 6, 2021, “Biden Has Overturned Trump’s ‘Muslim Travel Ban’: Activists Say That’s Not Enough” (Scott Simon, host, NPR)¹

In the last term alone, the court sided with Christian religious groups in three argued cases. The court ruled that state programs supporting private schools must include religious ones, that the Trump administration could allow employers with religious objections to deny contraception coverage to female workers and that employment discrimination laws do not apply to many teachers at religious schools.

— April 5, 2021, “An Extraordinary Winning Streak for Religion at the Supreme Court” (Adam Liptak, *The New York Times*)²

Jeremy Gray, State Representative in Alabama, has introduced a bill to allow the practice of yoga in public school gym classes, from which it has been banned since 1993. In response, “Yoga is a very big part of the Hindu religion, and if this bill passes then instructors will be able to come into classrooms as young as kindergarten and bring these children through guided imagery, which is a spiritual exercise,” Becky Gerritson, director of the conservative Eagle Forum of Alabama told state senators.

— April 17, 2021, “Yoga Can Leave You Injured, Psychotic, and a Hindu, Christian Groups Claim” (Ed Pilkington, *The Guardian*)³

Franklin Graham, Twitter: “I have even been asked if Jesus were physically walking on earth now, would He be an advocate for vaccines. My answer was that based on the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Bible, I would have to say – yes, I think Jesus Christ would advocate for people using vaccines and medicines to treat suffering and save lives.” [...] CORRECTION: AN EARLIER VERSION OF THIS STORY MISQUOTED FRANKLIN GRAHAM’S BELIEF ON WHETHER JESUS WOULD HAVE TAKEN THE COVID VACCINE. GRAHAM POSTED ON FACEBOOK THAT JESUS, BECAUSE “HE IS GOD,” WOULD NOT HAVE NEEDED THE VACCINE.

— April 17, 2021 (updated April 19, 2021, caps in original), “Franklin Graham Believes Jesus Would Support COVID Vaccine. He’s Still Catching Grief” (Joe Marusak, *The Charlotte Observer*)⁴

American public life is filled with religion. The four instances cited above, within a span of six weeks last year, evince this, and these are hardly unusual, as the history since then has more than confirmed, sometimes in dramatic ways. Questions about the definition of “religion,” about what constitutes legitimate “religion” protected as such by “religious freedom,” and about what privileges such “freedom” should entail affect many aspects of our lives as a nation, from the home to the workplace and to the public square. Citizenship, immigration, education, health care, reproductive rights, international relations, free speech, employment, taxes: religion – and heated discourse about religion – impact us all. One must understand religion in order to comprehend the current politics and policies shaping America as a nation.

Understanding religion as a culture-shaping force in society is the goal of the humanistic discipline of religious studies. It aims to cultivate essential intellectual competencies – especially independent critical thinking – in and for American citizens. Religiously diverse American society currently (and historically) has been ill-equipped to navigate and to appreciate its own religious diversity. Indeed,

emergency rooms, kindergarten classrooms, and funeral parlors (in addition to homes, schools, communities, the national sphere, and media) are some of the places where this is lived out on a daily basis, and often with very little resources, knowledge, or skills. To function in civil life as part of a society made up of persons with complex and varied religious identities, histories, and commitments, we need to know more about each other. A 2019 Pew survey found among those surveyed that eight-in-ten had more basic knowledge of simple elements of the Christian tradition (such as that Easter commemorates the resurrection of Jesus, not the crucifixion, last supper, or ascension), but

just three-in-ten U.S. adults know that the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday, one-quarter know that Rosh Hashana is the Jewish New Year, and one-in-eight can correctly identify the religion of Maimonides (an influential Jewish scholar in the Middle Ages). Roughly one-in-five Americans (18%) know that the “truth of suffering” is among Buddhism’s four “noble truths,” and just 15% correctly identify the Vedas as a Hindu text.⁵

Beyond such basic knowledge about non-Christian religious traditions – as well as the much more fine-grained knowledge that the Pew survey did not even try to test – what authority do religions, religious texts and artifacts, or persons claiming to speak from or to their religious community have (or should they have) in the public sphere? The question is vital, contested, and perduring. Indeed, the same 2019 Pew survey found that

when asked what the U.S. Constitution says about religion as it relates to federal officeholders, just one-quarter (27%) correctly answer that it says “no religious test” shall be a qualification for holding office; 15% incorrectly believe the Constitution requires federal officeholders to affirm that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, 12% think the Constitution requires elected officials to be sworn in using the Bible, 13% think the Constitution is silent on this issue, and 31% say they are not sure.

It is hard to imagine the full impact that such uncertainty on a fundamental point of “religious liberty” might have on decisions made or attitudes held either by the electorate or by elected officials. The legislative branch (state and national) and the Supreme Court of the United States (as noted above) are continually faced with issues that are framed as matters of “religious freedom”: decisions involving employment, marriage, health care, education, pandemic restrictions on assembly for worship, and so on. One cannot adjudicate such issues, on either a legal or cultural level, without a citizenry that has better knowledge, better skills, and a better sense of their own history about what constitutes religion(s) and the freedoms religions or their adherents demand or deserve.

Religious studies as a discipline taught in undergraduate curricula at two- and four-year colleges and universities and in a wide range of graduate programs (master’s, doctoral) educates a broad diversity of students in such knowledge and skills.

First and foremost, these prepare them to be thoughtful and informed citizens and, second, enable them to bring those competencies to all manner of professions in society, spanning education, law, medicine, the arts, business, diplomacy, public policy, journalism, and technology (to name just some). Because of the complex history of legislation about the teaching of religion in public K–12 schools, and local and national anxieties about how this may or should be done, many American children do not have the opportunity to learn about world religions, or American religious history specifically, until their college years. For many college students, religious studies courses are the first time they are introduced to religions free of the framing of polemic or proselytization, of stereotyping or of sanctimony. Hence, departments of religious studies in higher education play a vital and unique role in preparing students for participation in American civic life.

Like other fields in the humanities, the academic study of religion is facing a crisis that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet, to understand today's situation, it is necessary to consider important trends that have developed over the past two decades. On the eve of the Great Recession in October 2008, a white paper commissioned by the professional association of scholars of religion, the American Academy of Religion, documented significant growth in the academic study of religion in the wake of 9/11:

The number of religious studies majors increased by 22 percent in the past decade (to an estimated 47,000 students), with like percentage increases in the number of total courses offered, course enrollments, and faculty positions in the field. The number of religious studies majors at public institutions has grown even more rapidly, by 40 percent during the same period, signifying a sea-change in the field.⁶

This study also pointed to the establishment of new degree programs or departments of religious studies at public universities around the United States during this same period. Not surprisingly, there was a corresponding shift away from the traditional emphasis on the Bible and Christianity to other religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Above all, after 9/11, colleges and universities scrambled to fill faculty lines in order to offer courses on Islam. Our national tragedy dramatically highlighted the importance of the academic study of religion. “Suddenly, the arguments we had been making for years about the importance of understanding world religious traditions were being made by others: not merely by former Secretaries of State and magazine editors, not merely by the general public, but by college deans, provosts, and presidents.”⁷ The barriers between academia's ivory tower and public discourse crumbled as the media sought out specialists on Islam.

The white paper of 2008 painted a rosy picture of religious studies, noting that the field offers all the essential learning outcomes for American college students

identified by the American Association of Colleges and Universities: intercultural learning; engagement with big questions; critical thinking and writing; moral reasoning; and the application of all these skills to new global contexts and lived behaviors. But within ten years after the white paper was published, the academic study of religion had begun to face new challenges in the wake of the Great Recession and other factors. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators (HI) documents that "From 2011 to 2014, the number of bachelor's degrees conferred in the academic study of religion fell 6.8% . . . the largest decline in 28 years of available data for the discipline."⁸ Similarly, the HI found a "statistically significant" decline in the average number of juniors and seniors with declared majors in religion for the period from 2011–2012 to 2016–2017. The same source notes that in 2014, the proportion of bachelor's degrees in religion awarded by U.S. institutions of higher education was at the lowest point in a downward trajectory that began in 2006, even before the Great Recession. And from 2012–2017, the number of colleges and universities granting degrees in the academic study of religion fell by 3.2 percent.

Similarly, for academic year 2017–2018, the number of positions advertised through the AAR-SBL Employment Services remained at its lowest level since 2003, reaching a historic low of 403 postings, including nonacademic appointments such as administration, fellowships, librarians, K–12, nonprofit, and publishing.⁹ Advertised faculty positions declined steadily from 2008 to 2017, although entry- and mid-level appointments increased modestly in 2018 and 2019. Advertisements for tenure-track positions reached a four-year high in 2019, marking the first consistent increase since 2008. The AAR-SBL Employment Services data for 2018–2019 also indicate trends in the academic study of religion, with advertised positions in early Judaism, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, racial/ethnic minority studies in religion, and gay and lesbian studies trending up over a ten-year average, while numbers in comparative religions and in introduction to religion declined.¹⁰ (The data do not indicate to what extent free Internet services such as the Academic Jobs Wikis may have contributed to the decline in the number of positions advertised through the AAR-SBL Employment Services; in that case, the decrease in advertisements through the AAR-SBL Employment Services might not accurately reflect the number of positions available overall.) At the time of this writing, however, the impact of COVID-19 on the job market is beginning to be felt. The 2019–2020 AAR-SBL Employment Services report, which covers only the period up to June 2020, recorded a new historic low in the number of postings and a decline in the number of institutions advertising.¹¹ The current situation is most uncertain.

Despite decreasing numbers of religious studies majors declared, undergraduate degrees awarded, and degree-granting departments and programs remaining institutionally grounded, the average number of undergraduate minors and graduate students remained fairly steady through 2016–2017, according to HI data.¹²

The same source noted that religion departments offer a larger number of hybrid courses relative to other humanities disciplines. On the other hand, within the humanities, religion departments have the second-lowest share of female faculty (roughly 35 percent; only philosophy is lower). A significantly higher number of such faculty are in tenure-track rather than tenured positions, and a large number are in non-tenure-track positions.¹³

Its distinctive features make the academic study of religion institutionally more vulnerable than other fields in the humanities, which has been magnified in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Although the impact of the pandemic has not been fully assessed at the time of this writing (December 2021), it is evident that all the humanities including religious studies are at the edge of a precipice. As the *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* notes,

In 2008, just as the previous financial crisis hit colleges and universities, the number of undergraduate majors and students had been rising in most humanities disciplines for more than a decade. That trend put pressure on colleges to maintain continuity in faculty levels and departmental support through the financially lean years that followed. Unfortunately, as many colleges and universities face a fresh round of financially wrenching challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most humanities disciplines find themselves in a much weaker position – following declines in students and majors that extend back eight to ten years.¹⁴

In January 2021, Josh Patterson and Robert Townsend documented an alarmingly rapid decline of 31 percent in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in religious studies in just five years, from 2013–2017.¹⁵ These and other trends that became apparent in the wake of the Great Recession – including declining numbers of undergraduate majors and decreasing support for programs and departments (including funding for graduate students and faculty lines) – have accelerated in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, leading to the wholesale elimination of departments and programs. For example, in July 2020, Illinois Wesleyan University discontinued its religion department. Around the same time, Carthage College eliminated its departments of classics and philosophy and great ideas. Shortly afterward, the University of Vermont announced the termination of an assortment of majors including geology, religion, Asian studies, and several language programs such as Greek, Latin, and German. Minors in many of these subject areas are also being cut, plus others in theater and Vermont studies. Master's programs to be cut include Greek and Latin, as well as the teaching of Latin, geology, and historic preservation. The recent national attention given to the closing of the classics department at Howard University – lamented by Cornel West and Jeremy Tate in a widely read *Washington Post* op-ed¹⁶ – applies equally to the assimilation of religious studies faculty into other departments or area studies, which leads to a significant

loss in disciplinary focus and visibility. Such administrative actions in effect declare that independent and informed knowledge of the past is no longer as important as other areas of study. Religious studies is particularly vulnerable to this sort of erasure.

A relative newcomer as an academic discipline within U.S. higher education, the academic study of religion faces singular challenges among the humanities. The teaching of religion (as opposed to religious studies) was long restricted largely to seminaries and private institutions (often in divinity schools or schools of theology). Many scholars of religion and American religious history, including the American Academy of Religion Religious Literacy Guidelines, see the 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* Supreme Court decision as key to the development of religious studies.¹⁷ They cite the words of Justice Thomas Clark in the majority:

In addition, it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

And yet more recently, scholars like Sarah Imhoff and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan of Indiana University have usefully challenged whether the *Schempp* decision has functioned as a kind of mythic "creation story" for the field.¹⁸ They note that before *Schempp*, 45 percent of public colleges and universities (such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, founded in the 1940s) already had religious studies departments (according to Imhoff, "*Schempp* wasn't a founding moment, but it did take place in the midst of a significant change"),¹⁹ and that the *Schempp* decision was focused on K–12 rather than secondary education. Beyond such sociological facts, these scholars emphasize that reasoning such as Justice Clark's shows a priority for the (Christian) Bible that hardly counts as a neutral position in terms of what counts as religion to be studied in public school. In addition, this reasoning presumes a simpler line between what is religion and what is secular than the field of religious studies in reality navigates.²⁰ This debate, both about the past and the present, should continue, even as it is the responsibility of each department and generation of scholars to define and make the case for the field in the present cultural and historical moment.

Nonetheless, it remains the case that in the United States, the academic study of religion, unlike other fields in the humanities (such as history, English, and languages other than English), is not a regular part of the K–12 public school curriculum (contrast this reality with religious studies scholar Jane Webster and col-

leagues' piece on Denmark in the response to the white paper).²¹ Because of their lack of familiarity with the field, many undergraduates are unlikely to consider a major in religious studies prior to enrolling in college. The lack of familiarity with the field means that much (if not most) of the U.S. public (including university administrators and faculty in other disciplines) do not understand that the academic study of religion should not be confused with the practice of or indoctrination in a particular religion. It is an analytical discipline, not devotional or confessional in its aims, and as such can be viewed with suspicion both by those who stand within religious traditions and practice, on the one hand, and by other academics, on the other. Religious studies must continually make the case for itself and its value among the humanistic disciplines.

The American public has mixed and sometimes contradictory views of the humanities. The 2019 HI survey found that 97 percent of American adults had engaged in at least one form of humanities activity at some point in the previous year.²² However, the range of engagement is limited mainly to consuming humanities-related audio and video content, researching humanities subjects online, and reading fiction and nonfiction books. The survey notes that although a substantial share of Americans has been hampered at work due to a deficiency in one or more humanities skills, many do not think they need humanities skills in the workplace.

The HI survey also found that Black and Hispanic Americans and younger Americans were more likely to be among those most engaged with the humanities. Among Black Americans, this is due largely to higher rates of religious text study. Significantly, more Blacks and Hispanics than members of other groups believe it is important to teach young people about differences in religious thought, whereas 23 percent of all American adults surveyed feel that the teaching of differences in religious thought should be delayed until high school. At the same time, the HI survey indicates that a majority of Americans believe the humanities “attract people who are somewhat elitist or pretentious,” a perception that is strongest among Black and younger Americans.²³ This view is partly a result of the lack of universal access to higher education due to its high cost, creating a perception that it is the domain of elites. (The survey failed to ask if academics in STEM and other nonhumanities fields are also viewed as elitist or pretentious.) The perception of elitism is also fostered by a lack of diversity: university and college faculty, especially at the tenured level, are still mostly White men. As noted above, for example, religion departments have a lower proportion of female faculty than any other humanities department except philosophy, and women lag behind in the tenured ranks in most of the humanities.²⁴ Faculty of color are even more poorly represented. It is harder to make a case for the relevance of the humanities and to attract more undergraduates when the faculty look so different from the general population. And it is harder to

interest students in the humanities when they become more and more invisible, and are considered dispensable, in the modern university and in American culture. And yet the HI finding that 58 percent of Americans over the age of eighteen believe that “teaching differences in religious thought” is either important or very important shows that the academic study of religion has more than a light foothold of interest in the larger culture on which to build.²⁵ Tellingly, this agreement was significantly higher among women than men (64 versus 52 percent), even as the rate of agreement with this statement did not substantially shift according to household income. Further surveys may wish to address this question with more particularity (such as beyond “religious thought” to religious rituals, histories, sacred texts, and objects). It would be especially interesting to know if the kinds of questions in the Pew survey, which we referred to earlier, are what the citizenry think is involved in studying “differences in religious thought” or, in turn, what they most especially would like to learn about religion(s) global and local, contemporary and historic, and how that maps onto current curricula in religious studies departments.

The HI survey indicates a need to convey more clearly to the American public the value of a liberal arts education in general and the academic study of religion in particular. While religious studies is intertwined with the fate of the humanities in American higher education, it offers a specific set of learning outcomes and goals. Religious studies courses in our view are designed to cultivate both knowledge and skills, such as the following:

Knowledge

- Major world traditions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity are not singular entities but are all variously instantiated, both now and in the past (such as Islam in West Africa, Judaism in India, Roman Catholicism in the Philippines, or Buddhism in Japan). Beyond this are any number of religious practices (or practices deemed religious) that cut across or beyond these, such as yoga, ancestor worship, prayer, divination, totemism, dietary prescriptions, and rites for naming, marriage, healing, and care of the dead.
- A well-informed and detailed awareness of different historical traditions and their internal variety, including “Christianity” (in all its global and American diversities), but also, as much as possible, all the world’s religious traditions, practices, texts, laws, rituals, and so on. Even if the academic study of religion has had to deal with the problematic legacy of its overly “Christianizing” historical roots in European missionary encounters with world religions, it would be a mistake to avoid Christianity as an object

of study, most especially in the American context, given this country's current religious demographics, historical roots, and influences.

- That religious phenomena (texts, rituals, beliefs, values, forms of community life) can be analyzed by a range of publics in a way that is different from confessional approaches, on the one hand, or cultural condescension, on the other. This does not necessarily have to stand in an adversarial relationship to what religiously affiliated students bring to the conversation, but a more public space for genuine dialogue on the evidence without presuppositions is needed that does not privilege "insider status" (self- or other-proclaimed) as an epistemological necessity or advantage. That this kind of analysis of religion exists is itself a form of knowledge that students gain from coursework in the academic study of religion. Those who learn to do this in the classroom can facilitate that taking place in the public sphere.
- Actual and detailed information about what different traditions have taught and why, from what contexts they arose, how they have interacted with others, how they have issued and responded to critiques. This involves the appreciation that all religions are not alike, nor is the category "religion" self-evident, even as part of the work of the academic study of religion involves disciplined and controlled comparison among and between various traditions and practices.
- A sophisticated and textured understanding of some of the critical issues about religion in the modern world, such as religion and science (medicine, cosmology, technology), religion and race, religious ethics, religion and law, religion and gender and sexuality, religion and the environment, religion and the political order, religion and violence, and the meaning(s) of "secularism."
- A wider knowledge of the role of religion, past and present, in such varied aspects of society and culture as architecture, art, politics, family life, food, literature, music, and so on. A full study of all that comes under the umbrella of the humanities is impossible without taking into account the pervasive effects of religion.

Skills

- An ability to speak with like- and non-like-minded others about religious texts, rituals, and community forms and practices, based on a critical assessment of the evidence and the claims being made for it.
- An ability to contextualize historical claims that are made by religious actors or others who seek to speak in the name of a religious tradition or authority.
- The ability to analyze specific arguments that make appeals to religious authorities and see how they have been crafted, what acts of interpretive

choice are involved, to whom they are appealing, and how they might or might not be persuasive (and to whom).

- The ability to create and foster spaces for dialogue about how religion(s) function in the public sphere that goes beyond advocacy, polemic, praise, or disparagement.
- The ability to understand complex systems of thought (theological, philosophical, ethical) in terms of their own histories and their contemporary instantiations (such as “natural law,” “just war,” views of creation, providence, anthropology, and eschatology).
- The ability to interpret texts, including but not limited to “sacred” scriptures, and to think critically about the hermeneutical issues involved in how ancient sources make meaning or are applied by their interpreters to present contexts.
- An interdisciplinary commitment and curiosity, continually engaged in conversation across the humanistic disciplines and with the public sphere.

The study of religion crosses many disciplinary boundaries in the humanities, embedded and implicated as it is in literature, history, art, political science, philosophy, music, and so on. In many ways, it is a quintessential instance of the boundlessness of the humanities and their pervasive and complex place in human life in the past and present. One can – and we have here – made the case that informed and reasoned inquiry into religious traditions, texts, rituals, and practices is an essential component of civic life, on both individual and public levels. What would it mean to take that seriously into the future?

1. Continuing to emphasize in a range of public arenas (including the American Academy of Arts and Sciences) that literacy about religion is a key competence for citizens, and a requirement for dealing with many complex issues of law, medicine, politics, and culture, such as our opening excerpts – and so many others we could add each day – represent.²⁶
2. Advocating for religious studies education in K–12 education that is multi-religious, nondenominational, and taught by instructors with training in religious studies methodologies and materials.
3. Increasing public outreach and engagement, including with K–12 teachers, local humanities councils and community organizations, and community colleges, a shortcoming of departments of religious studies noted by the HI survey.²⁷

4. Joining other humanities-driven initiatives in working against the movement of American higher education away from liberal arts learning and toward trade school and professional school training. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, American Council of Learned Societies, Mellon Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and other organizations and foundations should take a leadership role in these initiatives, and coordinate with the relevant local stakeholders (faculty, administrators, students, alumni, community leaders, and the public at large).
5. Strengthening academic departments of religious studies in a precarious climate in which they risk elimination or assimilation. In its impassioned statement, “The Academic Study of Religion is Crucial to Higher Education,” of December 16, 2020, the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Religion put it very well: “We call on leaders in institutions of higher learning to take the long view; to recognize the deep values accorded to humanity and societies through the academic study of religion; to acknowledge the centrality of understandings of religion as global citizens grapple with the challenges of creating a better future for the world; to work within appropriate governance structures for the evaluation of, and support for, religious studies departments and curricula; and to work collaboratively to support the academic study of religion.”²⁸

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Philosophy, the Humanities & the Life of Freedom

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Humanistic disciplines have family resemblances rather than a simple shared common aim or method, and, like literal family resemblances, these have an explanation that comes from their historical relationships to one another. Philosophy, in particular, is closely connected to the sciences it has spun off over the centuries, but remains distinct from them, because normative inquiry uses methods different from those of any contemporary science. But much philosophical inquiry, like much humanistic work, is also idiographic rather than nomothetic; it focuses our attention on particular things, rather than seeking generalizations. The rewards of humanistic study are, therefore, as diverse as what we can gain from paying attention to its diverse objects of study. In ethics and political philosophy, in particular, we learn from studying particular episodes in which we discover the significance of certain values by recognizing what is wrong in societies in which they are not respected.

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*¹

No one who is wise will aim to define the humanities in a sentence or two. We use the term to refer to a remarkable variety of scholarly activities and, surveying them, it is not obvious that they have some shared something – an essence, some conditions necessary and sufficient for membership – that explains why we should lump them all together. One common use of the term in practice is to organize the administration of the university, where we have deans of humanities, alongside deans of social sciences, deans of natural sciences, and, often, people with various other decanal titles. But many departments fit uneasily

into these structures. Are anthropologists and historians, say, humanists or social scientists? Some seem surely to be one or the other; many look a little like both. Where does cognitive science – with its computer scientists, its philosophers and neuroscientists and psychologists and linguists – belong? It seems pointless to insist on settling the question, save as a matter of administrative convenience. The humanities dean will hope for fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, but will be delighted, too, when philosophers working on consciousness get grants from the National Institute of Mental Health.

You might think that the difficulty here derives from the fact that the various fields of the humanities display the sort of similarities to one another that Wittgenstein, thinking about games, called family resemblances. It is easy to see what he had in mind. I have the same nose as one of my sisters, like my mother and her father, but our eyes are much darker than theirs were. My father and I had gestures in common, as well as genes. But, as you know, the Y-chromosome I got from my father is in none of my sisters or their children and grandchildren. Nevertheless, any two of us – any two of the more than a dozen descendants of my parents – have things in common (family resemblances, then) even if there are no traits distinctive of the family that we all share. Even in the scattered world of my third cousins, who number in the thousands, I will see, from time to time, that nose, which my grandfather got from his grandfather, whose seven daughters spawned one part of that network of my kin.

But focusing on these various resemblances alone misses something important. Namely, that they have a historical explanation. I have that nose *because* I got the genes for it from my mother. Her father got it from his grandfather, by way of his mother. Those gestures I share with my father, I learned *from* him. I take a lesson from this: sometimes the explanation of why things belong together, the explanation of their family resemblances, is genealogical. There is a historical story, which may or may not be genetic, as to why they are there. And because history is messy and multifarious, there may be many such stories, some not much connected with others.

I want to discuss some of the ways in which one part of the contemporary philosophical landscape – the part that has to do with ethics and politics – fits into, and does not fit into, the humanities. Given our focus, I will be paying attention to the family resemblances at work in the literary and artistic humanities and to the humanistic aspects of the social sciences. But let me say at the start that I think the links to the social and biological sciences are important, too. I argued this before, in a book called *Experiments in Ethics*, in which I tried to show how ethics profits from a dialogue with what used to be called the “moral sciences”: anthropology, economics, evolutionary psychology, and sociology.² A little genealogical sketch may help illuminate why, nevertheless, there is reason to place us in a different family history as well. And the analogy to family

histories here is crucial: all of us belong to many families, traceable by a variety of ancestries.

In his preface to the 1787 edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant said he wanted philosophy to take “the secure path of a science.”³ That move is one crucial starting point for modern professional philosophy in Europe and the cultures that have taken philosophy from her. But what most of us in philosophy departments in the North Atlantic world now do does not belong, in a variety of ways, with either the natural or the social sciences, and it is worth asking why.

One reason, to start us off, is that what we often call nowadays the “Western” philosophical canon – which runs from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, via Ibn Rushd and Aquinas, and on through Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Leibnitz to Kant himself – has spun off a great many sciences, which have then set out on their own. Without Descartes, no Cartesian coordinates; without Leibnitz and calculus, no modern physics; without Pascal, no probability theory; without Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, no economics; without Turing, no computer science; no Rudolf Carnap, no Chomskyan linguistics. So when a subject matter and a set of techniques develop to the point where they can be carried on by a new kind of specialist, they can bud, so to speak, off the philosophical branch.

Nevertheless, philosophy maintains connections with all of those sciences: first, because philosophers think about the philosophy of each particular discipline, of mathematics, physics, biology, economics, and so on. And second, because there are philosophical questions that need to take account of the best science of our day. There are many reasons why this, too, is so.

Here is one. Ontology is about what there is. How can we answer that question adequately while ignoring physics, biology, economics, and psychology? But another important reason is this, and it is crucial to my present purpose. Morality, which is part of the subject matter of ethics, is about what to do and what to feel; about how we should respond to our own, each other’s, and the world’s demands. And to apply norms sensibly we must understand the empirical contexts in which we apply them. No one, of course, denies that in applying norms, you need to know what, as an empirical matter, the effects of what you do will be on others. An opponent who denied that would be a straw man. There are real opponents, though, who deny that psychology can be relevant to the question of what values we ought to be guided by and what sorts of people we should aim to be. To such opponents, one can reasonably put questions such as these.

What would be the point of norms that human beings could not, given our psychologies, obey? After all, reflection suggests, in a philosopher’s formula, that “ought” usually implies “can.” (Which means that if you say somebody *ought* to do something, you must ordinarily be supposing that it is something they *can* do.)

And even if unfollowable norms had some sort of ideal force, how should we actual humans respond to them? If moral philosophy is to connect with moral life, if it is not to be, in the justly pejorative sense, “merely theoretical,” it must attend, in articulating and defending norms, to how they can come to bear in actual lives.

During the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume began his 1748 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* by distinguishing two sorts of moral philosopher. One sort, he said, makes “us *feel* the difference between vice and virtue; they excite and regulate our sentiments.” And, he goes on, as long as “they can but bend our hearts to the love of probity and true honour, they think, that they have fully attained the end of all their labours.”⁴ The others “regard human nature as a subject of speculation; and with a narrow scrutiny examine it, in order to find those principles, which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, and make us approve or blame any particular object, action, or behaviour.”⁵

But it is hard to see how we can pursue the first project of moral exhortation and reform if what we learn in the second, speculative, project suggests that our recommendations are hopelessly unrealistic. At the very least, then, we would owe the psychologists a hearing in our moral lives, even if there were a kind of speculative philosophy that could ignore them.

You can go too far in the other direction, of course. Neuroscientist Sam Harris, in his book *The Moral Landscape*, aimed to meet head-on a claim he says he has often encountered: that the scientific worldview he favors must be silent on moral questions. Religion and philosophy deal with questions about “meaning, morality, and life’s larger purpose,” people say, questions that have no scientific answers. Harris’s view is exactly the opposite. Only science can help us answer these questions, he says. That is because truths about morality and meaning “must relate to facts about the well-being of conscious creatures,”⁶ and science alone – especially neuroscience, his own field of expertise – can uncover those facts. So rather than consulting Aristotle or Kant (let alone the Bible or the Koran) about what it is for human beings to flourish, why not turn to the sciences that study conscious mental life?

Harris means to be denying a thought often ascribed to the same David Hume, according to which there is a clear conceptual distinction between facts and values, the former being susceptible of rational investigation, the latter, supposedly, not. According to Harris, the values, too, can be uncovered by science, the right values, whose pursuit promotes our well-being.

Wait, though. How do we *know* that the morally right act is, as Harris posits, the one that does the most to increase well-being, defined in terms of our conscious states of mind? Has science revealed that? No. And I do not see how it could. That does not seem like a question to be settled through experiment, even guided by theory. And if science cannot do that, then the starting premise of Harris’s arguments must have nonscientific origins.

In fact, what Harris ends up endorsing is something very like utilitarianism, a philosophical position that is now some two centuries old and that faces, as all familiar philosophical positions do, a battery of familiar challenges. The idea is that we should aim to maximize human (or perhaps animal) welfare and that that is all that matters. But even if you accept that basic premise, how do you compare the well-being of different creatures? Should we aim to increase average well-being (in which case a world consisting of one blissed-out hippie may be better than one with a billion just slightly less blissful people)? Or should we go for total well-being (which might favor a world with zillions of people whose lives are barely worth living)? If the mental states of conscious beings are what matter, what is wrong with killing someone in his sleep? How should we weigh present well-being against future well-being? Does no one have rights that we need to take account of?

But the deepest challenge to the only-science answer though, I think, is this. Psychology and neuroscience can tell you what it takes for a normal person to feel satisfaction; economics and political science help you think about what the effects of various public policies will be; physics, chemistry, and biology tell us how the world works, so that we can take what we want from it. These things are all true. Still, given these facts about what produces satisfaction, who will help you decide whether John Stuart Mill was right to say, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”⁷⁷ Indeed, which experiment will confirm that this question is even worth asking? And where will you learn that one reason for studying the sciences is that understanding how the universe works, understanding where we fit into it, would be worthwhile in itself, even if we never put the knowledge to use in doing anything? Faced with people who do not understand this, and who insist that their lives are entirely satisfactory without that knowledge, it is hard to see why they should respond to the fact that many other people do get satisfaction from it. They will, no doubt, have other satisfactions.

So though there is much for ethics to learn from the sciences, natural and social, ethics cannot be reduced to questions those sciences are equipped to answer. And the methods of reflection that philosophers use in answering questions about, to stick with our example, the nature of well-being – the question of what it is for a human life to go well – may *draw on* the results of experiments but are not themselves experimental; theoretical argument in philosophy is also mostly very unlike theoretical argument in biology or physics. That is a first important reason, then, why ethics does not belong among the sciences, even though it needs to be in continuous conversation with them. Our methods are often very different.

My main focus in this essay is going to be on another kind of reason, though: the fact that ethics, unlike the sciences, needs to maintain its contacts with the arts and humanities. Poetry, fiction, biography, art, and music, as well as literary

criticism, cultural theory, and the other humanistic disciplines, are not just materials for moral reflection. They are also sources of moral understanding, inspirations for moral action, and teachers of the sentiments that moral life requires. Philosophy, for this reason, really needs to be able to engage in different moments with each of the disciplines. We need not the sure path of one science, but a difficult conversation among all the different kinds of systematic knowledge. We need it because people need it, and all the disciplines of the humanities have something to contribute.

One characteristic of much writing in the humanities – one family resemblance across much of that broad field – is a concern to continue millennial conversations. In philosophy departments we still really do read Plato (429? – 347 BCE) and Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE) and Confucius (551? – 479 BCE) and, of course, many others who have also read them between their time and ours. Literary scholars discuss novels going back at least to *Satyricon* (first century CE) and *The Golden Ass* (second century CE), and plays, like Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* (fifth century BCE), that Plato and Aristotle would have seen, and poems, like those ascribed to Homer (eighth century BCE?), that they would have known. We think these texts still reward rereading in our radically different contexts. But the rewards are extremely variegated.

Sometimes, as when I read some of the *Nicomachean Ethics* with my students each year in an introduction to ethics, I do so because I think he got something right: friendship really is one of the great human goods. Sometimes, because he got something interestingly wrong: he says that the enslaved are not capable of action “in accordance with excellence.”⁸ Enslavement, I want to reply, reflects the nature of the enslaver not of the enslaved. Sometimes, though, we read him because someone later – perhaps someone much later like Elizabeth Anscombe – took something from her reading of him to remake modern moral philosophy.⁹

On other occasions, as when I read the *Iliad* with students in a class about honor, it is because the poem explores a powerful ideal that has left its traces in our thought, even though it is utterly unlivable now; as Achilles’s rage – the rage that Homer urges the Goddess to sing at the poem’s start, a rage that persists despite the costs to his fellow Achaeans – is difficult for us now to make sense of, much less to respect. In the same class, we read about nineteenth-century Asante generals, who sat playing board games surrounded by barrels of gunpowder, ready to blow themselves up if their troops retreated.¹⁰ Victory or death, they said, and they meant it. There is something crazy in this, even if it made them formidable enemies. But we learn something important about the power of honor in one kind of human life here, something that deepens our understanding of how honor works today: when a young man in a gang in Watts risks his life because he has

been dissed, he is not Achilles or an Asante general, but there is a family resemblance worth noticing. This is crazy and, at the same time, intelligible, too.

But the humanistic concern with past artifacts – the drawing on a fifth-century-BCE Grecian urn, or a nineteenth-century romantic ode about one – is not to be explained simply by the fact that we can draw a lesson from it, so that it provides another general truth that might guide our choices, our thoughts, our feelings. Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" does offer such a generalization, since it ends with that famous couplet:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.¹¹

But whatever the interest of *this* thought, it is not that it is true. It is obviously *not* true. Truth clearly is not beauty. And, if it were, you obviously could not live a decent human life if that was all you knew. What we have here is at best figuratively true, and one of the figures involved is hyperbole. Still, reflection on Keats's ode is something that many thousands of members of the Modern Language Association know how to practice, believe valuable, and can demonstrate the worthwhileness of by teaching new generations of readers to attend to that poem and its companions.¹²

The importance to some disciplines of attention to particulars, and not just to generalities, from the full panoply of the human past and present is something that Wilhelm Windelband drew attention to more than a century ago.¹³ This insistence is, I think, a feature of much work in the humanities. In a once well-known essay on "History and Natural Science," Windelband wrote about all the disciplines that enrich our knowledge of the world, from history to physics, that they were

seeking through their experience of reality either the universal, in the form of a natural law, or the particular in a historically specific form. They consider, on the one side, the always-unchanging form, on the other, the unique, specific content, of what happens in reality. The first are law-based forms of knowledge, the others involve knowledge of particular events; the former teach what is eternally the case, the latter what once existed. Systematic knowledge is – if one may construct new terms of art – in the one case nomothetic, in the other idiographic.¹⁴

It is not that humanistic knowledge is never nomothetic: philologists generalize about language change, philosophers pronounce principles. (And scientists can be idiographers: E. O. Wilson seemed entranced by a particular ant species as well as by general truths about the evolution of the ant.) But humanist inquiry is often idiographic. That is one reason why one characteristic form of humanistic exploration, alongside the article or the treatise, is the essay, a form that Montaigne invented, and that inspired Bacon to do something somewhat different in

English under the same name. An essay is not about proving a general point; it is about stringing together particular insights.¹⁵ It is more like a conversation with oneself, overheard by the reader, than a lecture to the world. All of which makes it even more pressing to ask what the *point* is of attention to these particulars?

Let me point out first that asking that question risks simply denying the claim and following the natural impulse of the nomothete. It is to seek a law, a general answer. We are tempted, that is, to say with Hume, in the *Enquiry* I have already cited, that the study of these things from the past is important because it allows us “to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour.”¹⁶

I want to insist, *per contra*, in defense of the idiographic, that while humanists are generally interested in past particulars, there is no general answer to the question why. The answers are specific to the objects of attention. I do not say we cannot draw general conclusions from past objects and events. Of course – quite obviously – we can. Hume himself does that in his five-volume *History of England*. But that is not the only thing we can do. The story about why it is worth attending to Keats’s ode is an incompletable story, replete with the many kinds of rewards of that attention. In fact, the value of attending to the ode, I want to say, is as various as its readers and the uses to which they put it. The stories about why it is of continuing importance to read Homer or Sappho or Kant or Achebe are specific to their particular works, then. There is, I say again, no general answer.

Still, one central argument for paying attention to the specifics of the past can begin with a point made by Thucydides when he said, in *The Peloponnesian War*, that “an exact knowledge of the past” is “an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it.”¹⁷ If we knew all the problems that were going to arise for us, we would know what general knowledge we would need to draw from the past to face them. But we do not. And so we need a great stock of past cases on which we can draw, so we can figure out, as the world presents its challenges to us, which past cases they resemble or reflect. This is often a kind of analogical reasoning which it would be misleading to characterize as a matter of finding a general law that governs both that past case and this new one. An example can guide us by directing our attention, through resemblances that are inexact, to a feature of the new situation that is parallel to something in the old. This is how legal reasoning in the common law tradition often works: We have rules for thinking about straying domestic animals. Faced with straying ostriches, we ask if we can apply similar rules. To do this, we do not have to identify the common properties of the domestic animals and oversized birds and articulate a general principle: ostriches are identical with cattle and sheep for particular legal purposes. Settling the single case will do.

Perhaps an analogy will help here. It is worth having a toolbox around the house, one with a wide range of tools, whose properties you know something about. But there is no general answer to the question, “Why?” Each tool can be used for lots of things. There is no one thing a screwdriver is useful for. (Resist the temptation to say, *driving screws*. If you claim that is all screwdrivers are good for, you are just revealing you do not know much about the lives of screwdrivers.) And the range of things you can do with each tool is different from the range of what you can do with the others. Claw hammers, like screwdrivers, can be used to remove nails from planks, but screwdrivers, unlike claw hammers, are not generally much use in nailing them in. But you cannot now think of all the things that any particular tool might turn out to be usable for. People are finding new uses for them all the time. Like many philosophers, for example, one use I have for tools is to make a philosophical point. With any tool, you do not know what it is good for until you see what problems arise.

When humanists focus our attention on, say, a text or a work of visual art, one reason is that they think that the experience of attending to it will be a worthwhile experience. They do not think that the value of that attention is exhausted by what it teaches us, where “what it teaches” is some general truth. But they also think that we cannot tell in advance what that poem or painting could teach. It is worth having in your repertory, which is one reason people have learned poetry by heart, one reason we revisit paintings. Because who knows when something from them will deepen our response to a new situation?

A poem or a painting is not *for* anything. Not because it has no uses. It has, in fact, many uses, and new ones may occur to new readers each time their situations change. But the value of the poem does not depend on any one of these uses. It lies, rather, in two sorts of facts: that the experience of reading it can be one worth having, and that sometimes we will return to it in new situations and find that it helps us think and feel and act in response to them. And, as a philosopher humanist, I insist that this is true of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Analects*.

You may wonder why I have such confidence in this. Well, first, let me remind you, that the claim is not that these texts reward attention because they yield something that all humanistic attention delivers. I have denied that there is any such thing. The claim I am making, at the moment, is about those two works in particular. Part of the evidence, in each case, is inductive. People have done the experiment of returning to these texts over millennia and come back with a sense of enlightenment. (Also, but this is a different argument, with pleasure. As Arnold insisted in the first section of *Culture and Anarchy*, we need both “sweetness and light.”)¹⁸ Watching an interesting mind struggle with an important question turns out to be rewarding. But I am also claiming that we cannot say in advance what reading these texts can be good for. And I concede that it is possible that new readers in new situations may come to feel that they are not good for anything old

or new, that their use has been exhausted. Though, frankly, I am not sure I would want to live in a society in which no one had any use for Aristotle and Confucius.

Someone's life is well-lived – Aristotle's word for this is εὐδαιμόν, "blessed with a good genius," as my Greek dictionary puts it – because of what they do, or have, or experience.¹⁹ So, for any life to be worthwhile, there must be things worth doing or having or experiencing. One thing you learn from the humanist's idiographic concern with objects and events from the past is what some of those worthwhile things are. Aristotle, having paid attention, like a good humanist, to some of the particulars, pointed some of them out: friendship, for example, as I mentioned earlier, but also, as he says, developing habits of emotional response that lead to excellence.

When it comes to thinking about political philosophy, and in particular about freedom and equality, it seems to me that one element of the case for the humanistic method of careful idiographic attention to particular past texts and events depends on recognizing something important about moral discovery. Think, for these purposes, about the ideal of liberty that circulated through the American Revolution, and the ideals of equality and fraternity that traveled with it in the great slogan of the French Revolution. Each of those three powerful ideas, so it seems to me, was grasped in part by thinking about what was wrong with the existing shape of things: it was an ancient regime, an established order, that they aimed to overthrow. The idea of liberty, for example, develops through thinking about what is awful about not being in charge of your own society or your own life. What inspires the new ideal of equality is the pain and humiliation associated with belonging to the "lower orders," of being treated as an inferior, required to perform deference, denied access not just to resources – money, education, choices – but to equal standing. Equality becomes the name for the impulse to escape all that.

When the revolutionaries pronounce "all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence, and when, thirteen years later, the French National Assembly recognizes and declares, "les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits" (men are born and remain free and equal in rights) in the Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen, there is a sense in which they do not yet know what they are talking about. They do not yet know what a society of free and equal people will look like.²⁰ What they know is that a society of people whose lives are stunted by domination and inequality will no longer do. They know it is bad to be enslaved. And in learning how to live in a new way, they have to start with what they are seeking to end: the moments of condescension, the insults, large and petty, that demeaned people in the old way of doing things. Those cases come from the history books but also from fiction and from art and, of course, from everyday experience; and from nonfiction literature, as in the slave narratives of the

nineteenth century that articulated the wrongness of enslavement and taught free men and women something about what it meant. Frederick Douglass's struggle with the slave-breaker Covey in chapter 15 of *My Bondage and My Freedom* deepens our understanding of equality by showing us inequality in action.

Mary Wollstonecraft, three years after the French declaration, addressed Talleyrand, who helped to craft it, with her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and, again, she did so, in part, by making visible the disabilities of the legal situation of women, not just by giving a conceptual account of women's equality (which she does) but also by exemplifying those disabilities, for example in marriage law. The point is that Talleyrand and his kind – a prince, a bishop, a wielder of power – could speak of equality while not realizing what it entailed for particular kinds of people. We can learn more about this topic from reading about the situation of gentlewomen in *Emma* or through careful attention to more recent works, such as *A Room of One's Own* or *The Second Sex*.

One of my favorite books to read with students is Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. In it, we see what a life is like that is totally (and willingly) subordinated to the projects of somebody else. Mr. Stevens, Lord Darlington's butler, articulates his professional project in a passage that is powerful because it is so disturbing.

Let us establish this quite clearly: a butler's duty is to provide good service. It is not to meddle in the great affairs of the nation. The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and I, and those of us who wish to make our mark must realize that we best do so by concentrating on what is within our realm.²¹

This political self-negation, we feel, is just the opposite of what democracy asks of us. In recent years, philosophical egalitarianism has been deepened by reflection on what it is to treat one another – and to be treated – as equals.²² Our grasp of what equality means and of why it matters is embodied in narratives like these. And part of why they do it so well is that they engage our sentiments as well as our reason.

Cicero, in his defense of the poet Archias – a defense long-studied by humanists seeking defenses of poetry – tells us how the poet was formed in those “arts by which young boys are gradually molded towards *humanitas*.” And he speaks, in the same rambling Ciceronian sentence, of Antioch, the poet's native city, as “liberalissimisque studiis adfluenti,” that is, abundant in the most liberal studies.²³ So he connects the idea of a preparation for a humane life with the studies most apt for free people. And that, I think, is one way of understanding one root thought of multiple different strands of humanistic thought. The liberal in liberal studies means “befitting a free person.” We are, or at least we should aim to be, free people, and one central ideal of liberalism is a conception of that freedom, which insists that individuals are all entitled to lives of their own, lives in which

the central, shaping decisions are for *them* to take and not to be settled for them by a master. And if you are to discharge the terrific responsibility of making your own life, then you surely need all the help you can get. That is what a liberal education is for, and the humanities, in their multifarious ways, provide instruments that allow us to exercise that responsibility. If we are to study the good life, in ethics, or the just society, in political philosophy, we need to draw on these wellsprings of understanding and of pleasure.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Ich kann diese Ähnlichkeiten nicht besser charakterisieren, als durch das Wort ‘Familienähnlichkeiten’; denn so übergreifen und kreuzen sich die verschiedenen Ähnlichkeiten, die zwischen den Gliedern einer Familie bestehen: Wuchs, Gesichtszüge, Augenfarbe, Gang, Temperament, etc. etc.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th rev. ed. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 36.
- ² Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- ³ “Ob die Bearbeitung der Erkenntnisse, die zum Vernunftgeschäfte gehören, *den sicheren Gang einer Wissenschaft* gehe oder nicht, das läßt sich bald aus dem Erfolg beurteilen.” (“Whether or not the development of the sorts of knowledge that belong to the transactions of reason travels *the secure path of a science* is soon judged by its success.” Italics mine.) Immanuel Kant, Preface to the second edition, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (1787); and Immanuel Kant, *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, vol. 3, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1977), 20.
- ⁴ David Hume, “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,” in *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals by David Hume*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 11.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 1, 6.
- ⁷ John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume X – Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Rout-

- ledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/mill-the-collected-works-of-john-stuart-mill-volume-x-essays-on-ethics-religion-and-society#Mill_0223-10_837.
- ⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Christopher Rowe and Sarah Broadie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 250.
- ⁹ G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (124) (1958): 1–19.
- ¹⁰ John Iliffe, *Honor in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87.
- ¹¹ John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>.
- ¹² See, for example, Walter H. Evert and Jack W. Rhodes, eds., *Approaches to Teaching Keats's Poetry* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1991).
- ¹³ I have discussed this point before in Kwame Anthony Appiah, "For the Humanities," in *The Humanities in the Age of Information and Post-Truth*, ed. Ignacio López-Calvo and Christina Lux (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 25–44.
- ¹⁴ "So dürfen wir sagen: die Erfahrungswissenschaften suchen in der Erkenntnis des Wirklichen entweder das *Allgemeine* in der Form des Naturgesetzes oder *das Einzelne* in der geschichtlich bestimmten Gestalt; sie betrachten zu einem Teil die immer sich gleichbleibende Form, zum anderen Teil den einmaligen, in sich bestimmten Inhalt des wirklichen Geschehens. Die einen sind Gesetzeswissenschaften, die anderen Ereigniswissenschaften; jene lehren, was immer ist, diese, was einmal war. Das wissenschaftliche Denken ist – wenn man neue Kunstausdrücke bilden darf – in dem einen Falle *nomothetisch*, in dem andern *idiographisch*." Wilhelm Windelband, "Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft," in *Präludien. Aufsätze und Reden zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte* (Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1894), 136–160.
- ¹⁵ I have always liked a phrase that Bacon used in describing some of Seneca's Epistles: he spoke of them as "Essaies, – That is dispersed Meditations," in the draft of the unpublished Epistle Dedicatory for the second edition of the *Essays*; quoted in *The Essays of Francis Bacon*, ed. Mary Augusta Scott (New York: Scribner's, 1908), lxx.
- ¹⁶ "Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them." Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," 34.
- ¹⁷ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, book 1, chap. 2, sec. 4. This translation is by Richard Crawley, The Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu//Thucydides/pelopwar.html>.
- ¹⁸ Matthew Arnold, "Sweetness and Light," in *Arnold: "Culture and Anarchy" and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 58–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511802072.008>.

- ¹⁹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Deu%2Fmwn>. By “genius” here they mean what Dr. Johnson gave as the first sense of the term: “the protecting or ruling power of men.” Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: In which the Words Are Deduced from their Originals, and Illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers. To which Are Prefixed, a History of the Language, and an English Grammar*, 6th ed. (London: J. F. and C. Rivington, 1785).
- ²⁰ Nor yet do we. But we have a better idea. And we have identified some new enemies of freedom, such as bamboozlement by the dissemination, sometimes intentional, of distorted pictures of the world through social media.
- ²¹ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989), 199.
- ²² Elizabeth Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287–337; and T. M. Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality” (1997) in *The Ideal of Equality*, ed. Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 41–59.
- ²³ “Nam ut primum ex pueris excessit Archias, atque ab eis artibus quibus aetas puerilis ad humanitatem informari solet se ad scribendi studium contulit, primum Antiochiae –nam ibi natus est loco nobili–celebri quondam urbe et copiosa, atque eruditissimis hominibus liberalissimisque studiis adfluente, celeriter antecellere omnibus ingeni gloria contigit.” (“For when Archias first left boyhood, and turned from those arts by which young boys are gradually molded towards humanitas, he devoted himself to the study of writing, first of all at Antioch—for he was born there in a noble place—which was formerly a famous and rich city, abundant in the most learned men and the most liberal studies, and there he succeeded speedily in showing himself superior to all in talent and in fame.”) M. Tulli Ciceronis, *Pro A. Licinio Archia Poeta Oratio*, para. 4, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/arch.shtml>.

Patients Are Humans Too: The Emergence of Medical Humanities

Keith Wailoo

This essay describes the origins, growth, and transformation of the medical humanities over the past six decades, drawing on the insights of ethicists, physicians, historians, patients, activists, writers, and literature scholars who participated in building the field. The essay traces how the original idea of “humanizing physicians” evolved and how crises from death and dying, to AIDS and COVID-19, expanded humanistic inquiry into health, illness, and the human condition. It examines how a wide array of scholars, professional organizations, disciplinary approaches, academic units, and intellectual agendas came to define the vibrant field. This remarkable growth offers a counterpoint to narratives of decline in the humanities. It is a story of growing relevance shaped by tragedy, of innovative programs in medical schools and on undergraduate campuses, and vital new configurations of ethics, literature, the arts, and history that breathed new life into the study of health and medicine.

Writing in 1982, philosopher Stephen Toulmin observed that the study of ethics (which traditionally meant formal, theoretical moral philosophy) had been reenergized and transformed by its engagement with medicine. In “How Medicine Saved the Life of Ethics,” Toulmin explained that the ethical dilemmas of recent medicine – from death and dying, to contraception, and abortion – had catalyzed a resurgence in the once-moribund field of philosophical inquiry. Two years later, physician Eric Cassell painted a broader portrait of how problems of disease and health had nurtured humanities fields beyond bioethics. Celebrating “the place of humanities in medicine,” he wrote that “the enormously increasing power of medicine to change individual lives . . . and to profoundly influence social policy had all provided rich fare for philosophical, historical, and literary examination, interpretation, and analysis.”¹

In an era when health care had become powerful but also ethically challenged, new trends in the humanistic analysis and critique of medicine flourished. For many scholars drawn to the field, medicine and the humanities were entangled in a perverse love-hate relationship in which literature, history, and philosophy promised to soften medicine’s rough edges and revise its “present romance with technology.”² In a sense, the medical humanities sought to be a counterpoint to

technological hubris; it sought also to encourage physicians to have a deeper personal understanding of the impact of new technologies, new powers, and new health care dilemmas on people's lives. In the writings of Toulmin and Cassell, the medical humanities and ethics harbored a redemptive, utilitarian idea: that broad learning could nurture the soul of the doctor at a time when medicine, enraptured by science, was losing touch with the patient.

This essay draws on the insights of the ethicists, physicians, historians, patients, activists, artists, writers, literature scholars, and others who participated in the building of the medical humanities over the past six decades. The process began as an effort to "humanize medicine," but the agenda grew and transformed remarkably over the years. The story they tell unfolds in three stages: the period from the early 1960s to the 1980s, in which developments centered in medical schools; the years of professional expansion in the 1980s and 1990s when new journals, associations, and teaching initiatives took shape; and the particularly stunning growth of medical humanities in undergraduate colleges in the 2000s, in programs taking varied institutional forms. In what follows, I allow those who participated in this transformation to describe the diversification of work done under the heading of "medical humanities." This essay also traces how the original ideal of humanizing physicians evolved, while other goals such as exploring the human condition became more salient and as recurring crises in medicine and society catalyzed the fragmentation of the field.

The criticism articulated by Cassell and Toulmin – that medicine, in turning to science, was losing touch with patients – had been evident since the late 1950s. Increasing medical specialization was said to push doctors toward a study of disease mechanisms, and away from an understanding of illness. There was also, for example, the problem of unethical human experimentation in the post-World War II era: the revelation that leading researchers conducted experiments such as testing drugs on vulnerable patients without their consent. Such excesses spanned from the testing of polio vaccines on children in mental institutions in the 1950s to the revelation in the 1970s about the decades-long Tuskegee syphilis study, in which Black men with the disease were observed rather than treated over four decades. The disclosures suggested a need for new regulations of professional conduct. But they also suggested a need for deeper introspection about virtue and the duties of caregiving.

As Cassell explained in the early 1980s, the events of the previous two decades had catalyzed medical humanities: for "while medical science can abstract itself and deal solely with body parts, doctors who take care of patients do not have that luxury – they must work with people . . . [and are faced with] the fears, desires, concerns, expectations, hopes, fantasies, and meaning that patients bring." In this telling, the scientific guidance of physicians would always be morally improv-

erished without a fuller understanding of illness, suffering, and health, realities “better taught by literature and the other humanities.”³

Both Toulmin and Cassell dated the birth of this humanistic critique to the early 1960s, when social movements and professional criticism produced curricular change. Over the decade, increasing numbers of women and students from minority backgrounds entered medical schools. The pressure for medical humanities programs was “initiated primarily by students,” explained Cassell. Rejecting the narrowness and perceived irrelevance of scientific medical training, they “were no longer content to be taught what their faculties believe important. It was essential to the students that their classes be ‘relevant’ to the problems of poverty, racial bias, and political ‘oppression.’”⁴

With health and health care in flux, the turmoil of the era made medical humanities necessary for addressing concerns of the moment. The deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and their social integration provoked new questions about the meaning of illness, stigma, and the role of psychiatry in society: was it the case, as critics charged, that institutionalization was merely a scientized form of social control?⁵ New legislation expanded health insurance to the elderly. But why then did the American Medical Association fight so feverishly against passage of Medicare, failing to stop it? Was this an example of the profession’s commitment to economic interest and not, as they claimed, the well-being of patients? And when medical science failed in its quest to preserve life, what was the role of the physician in death and dying?⁶ The subtitle of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s *On Death and Dying* captured the era’s conceptual inversions, and its shift to more patient-centered understandings: “What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy, and their own families.” Worries over the failures of “the biomedical model” ranged widely, gaining even greater force in early 1970s amid burgeoning political, legal, social, and moral debates over reproductive rights, abortion, and homosexuality. Trust in medical expertise was ebbing as core institutions were buffeted by social pressures. In the early 1970s, for example, the American Psychiatric Association gathered to debate removing “homosexuality” from its standard nomenclature of mental illnesses. Little wonder that medical ethics and humanistic understandings of patients, disease, health, and society expanded in significance in this tumultuous era.

The intense demands of the era made medical practice no longer “a field for academic, theoretical, even mandarin investigation alone. . . . It had to be debated in practical, concrete, even political terms,” explained Toulmin.⁷ From the standpoint of the 1980s, Toulmin and Cassell saw medical humanities as a response to the “demand for intelligent discussion of the ethical problems of medical practice and research.”⁸ By the early 1980s, the majority of medical schools had developed programs in the medical humanities, incorporating (in one way or another) the study of literature, history, and ethics into the training of physicians to be at least

conversant with the issues swirling about the profession. Some schools had developed full-fledged departments.⁹ But what neither the philosopher Toulmin nor the physician Cassell could see from the early 1980s was just how rich, diverse, and varied the field would become in the following decades.

As Toulmin and Cassell were penning their thoughts in the early 1980s, medical humanities were also taking shape in undergraduate curricula. Between 1980 and 2000, the critical humanistic analysis of medicine and health produced new scholarship in every field: in the arts, the social sciences, and in literature, history, and philosophy. New crossdisciplinary departments were devoted to the social relations of medicine and science. One such program, the one in which I earned a PhD, had been created in 1962 as the “History and Philosophy of Science,” and then changed its name to “History and Sociology of Science” in 1970. The varied names suggest the multiplicity of lenses being brought to bear on the undergraduate and graduate study of science, health, and their implications for society.

In the 1980s, medical humanities shifted focus notably toward the patient’s experience and the human condition. AIDS, cancer, and other health struggles provided tragic catalysts for new works in literature, art, and history. The global AIDS pandemic, for example, raised a host of new questions not only about viral origins and epidemiology, but also about condoms, sex practices, religious tolerance, gay identity, and changing sexual politics, topics demanding integrated thinking about the human condition across the sciences, public health, social sciences, and humanities.

Where might one seek insight into this new health crisis? Was it perhaps Larry Kramer’s 1985 autobiographical play, *The Normal Heart*, about enduring the early years of AIDS prejudice, indifference, struggle, and fear in New York City? Or perhaps the reflections of physician Abraham Verghese in *My Own Country: A Doctor’s Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS*?¹⁰ Reviewing Verghese’s book in *Literature and Medicine*, Joseph Cady explained that AIDS literature had become vast and had been produced mostly by people vulnerable to the disease. Verghese’s contribution was different, telling his story as a foreign medical graduate in small town Tennessee chronicling the social trauma: the “HIV-positive heterosexual woman...infected by her bisexual husband, hemophiliacs with AIDS...and people with transfusion AIDS (Will and Bess Johnson, who posed an extra level of challenge as well-to-do, ‘pillar of the community,’ fundamentalist Christians who insist on keeping their infection secret).”¹¹ The nation’s AIDS experience made clear that to fully understand the unfolding health tragedy demanded creative storytelling, narrative insight, introspection, and deep sensitivity to the complexity of the human condition. Kramer and Verghese were only two among many medical humanities ideals.

In medical education, new texts were pushing the field forward; new lines of inquiry and pedagogy were opening. When I taught in the medical school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the 1990s (in the department of social medicine), humanizing the physician remained the central driving conceit. The redemptive ideal generated a new textbook in 1997, the *Social Medicine Reader*, a collection of fiction, essays, poetry, case studies, medical reports, and personal narratives by patients and doctors compiled for teaching. The *Reader* aimed to “contribute to an understanding of how medicine and medical practice is profoundly influenced by social, cultural, political, and economic forces.” Elsewhere, physician Rita Charon and literary scholar/ethicist Martha Montello were also compiling essays for an edited collection for a new enterprise labeled “narrative medicine.” As they observed, storytelling underpinned all thoughtful caregiving: “How the patient tells of illness, how the doctor or ethicist represents it in words, who listens as the intern presents at rounds, what the audience is being moved to feel or think – all these narrative dimensions of health care are of profound and defining importance in ethics and patient care.”¹² Such developments transformed medical education in the 1990s. “By 2004,” wrote medical historian Emily Abel and sociologist Saskia Subramanian, “88 of the 125 medical schools surveyed by the American Association of Medical Colleges offered classes in the human dimensions of care, including treating patients as whole people, respecting their cultural values, and responding empathetically to their pain and suffering.” However, these courses were only “a tiny fraction of medical-school curricula.”¹³

Driven by such initiatives, the 1980s and 1990s would be an era of acquisitions, new ventures, and mergers in the medical humanities: new journals established, professional associations combined, and novel academic collaborations explored. In 1980, for example, the *Journal of Medical Humanities* was founded, followed two years later by *Literature and Medicine*. In 1998, three organizations – each representing different facets of the emerging field – merged to produce the American Society of Bioethics and the Humanities (ASBH). The oldest of the three, dating to 1969, was the Society for Health and Human Values (SHHV). The Society for Bioethics Consultation had been founded in the mid-1980s, while the American Association for Bioethics had been established only four years before, in 1994. As the ASBH’s founding president, bioethicist Loretta Kopelman, reflected, the term “humanities” was a reassuring rubric particularly for the non-ethicists, a group that encompasses a vast array of disciplines and specialties:

SHHV had members from many fields including health professionals, law, religious studies, literature, pastoral care, social science, history, visual arts and student groups. Some worried that this diversity of approaches would not be valued in the same way in a new organization. For many of those fearing such marginalization, “humanities” came to stand for inclusiveness and “bioethics” for the sort of rigor in addressing

problems such as are found in publications in philosophy, law, social science or academic medicine. The title “American Society of Bioethics and Humanities” reflected that we wanted all groups to thrive in ASBH.¹⁴

Many of these new ventures proved to be durable, creating the institutional supports, professional associations, journals, texts, and teaching practices necessary to sustain the field. Others, such as the Society for the Arts in Healthcare founded in 1991, were short-lived and difficult to sustain.

By 2000, divergences in the medical humanities agenda appeared, inevitably so. In medical schools, the humanities presence remained small and there would be unavoidable tensions as humanists worked within the overwhelming science-based curriculum. Reflecting on the challenge of balancing history, theory, and practice in medical education, bioethicist Thomas McElhinney observed that

the changes in medicine caused by scientific discovery and technological developments, on the one hand, and social and political transformations, on the other, increasingly highlighted the impossibility of a complete medical education structured only on theory and practice (i.e., basic science and clinical training).¹⁵

Faced with the demands of science and clinical education, students’ responses to the little humanities they encountered varied, said McElhinney: “the humanities will be a distraction to some but an oasis in an otherwise arid environment for others.”¹⁶ The serious and profound need for humanistic insight remained obvious even if curriculum space was limited. By contrast, however, undergraduate college education in the 2000s provided fertile soil for program building and expansive institutional development.

Since 2000, “health humanities” in undergraduate education has expanded as a vibrant complement to the “medical humanities” in medical schools, a development that moved the field significantly beyond its narrow ideals of humanizing physicians. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of undergraduate baccalaureate programs in the health humanities jumped from eight to over forty, followed by another stunning increase in the next decade. By 2021, the number of such programs had reached 119, an eightfold increase since 2000 as one recent survey by humanities and bioethics scholars Erin Gentry Lamb, Sarah Berry, and Therese Jones observed. At the same time that a crisis in the humanities brewed, the once niche field was flourishing. As Lamb, Berry, and Jones noted, “at a time when Liberal Arts education, and humanities programs in particular, are under fire in many public quarters,” health humanities programs were serving a growing, keenly interested population of students (many of whom hoped to enter health care careers).

The utilitarian impulse to produce better caregivers persisted, but the locus of humanistic health education was shifting to undergraduate curricula. And in this

context, the critical sensibilities of the medical humanities sharpened. Colleges across the nation discovered that these years were “an ideal time for students to develop skills valuable . . . to providing humanistic health care across a wide range of health care fields.” Reaching younger students prior to entering health careers cultivated “habits of mind that prepare students for critical and creative thinking, identification of internal biases, and ethical reasoning in decision-making processes – all of which are critical skills for participating in the complex system of U.S. healthcare.”¹⁷ The model gained traction, drawing together students from across disciplines and a range of health-oriented humanities scholars in new teaching and research initiatives.

Commenting on the diverse expansion of such programs in 2009, historian Edward Ayers observed that “we need to understand the many contexts in which the humanities live. They live in departments and disciplines, of course; but they also live in new places, in new forms, and in new combinations.”¹⁸ Medical humanities was one such novel combination. Drawing on cultural studies, women’s studies, disability studies, and other burgeoning fields, programs of medical humanities defined a “rapidly growing field, celebrating the ability of the humanities, as one program put it, to provide ‘insight into the human condition, suffering, personhood, our responsibility to each other.’”¹⁹ Medical humanities became, for many commenters like Ayers, a leading example of the thriving humanities, a vibrant counterpoint to widespread narratives of decline.

That same year in an astute editorial in *Medical Humanities*, physician Audrey Shafer acknowledged the diverse field was showing new academic fracture lines. Not only did institutional and pedagogical goals differ, but gaps had opened between medical humanists who worked directly with patients or in health care settings and those who worked in other educational contexts. Collaborations suffered because “for instance, a performing arts department will have different theoretical underpinnings, methodologies, scholarly activities and products from a philosophy department.”²⁰ Medical humanities was an intellectual hodge-podge, in Shafer’s view, suffering from an identity crisis. Yet despite tensions among scholars with different qualifications, degrees, and agendas, the enterprise remained vibrant with new “demarcations, dilemmas, and delights.” For Shafer, the struggle to hold the field together was itself productive, for “when medical humanities ceases to struggle with what it encompasses . . . then it will cease to be medical humanities.”²¹

Many program builders in undergraduate settings did not share Shafer’s worry about the field’s “identity and boundary bumping,” however. “Health humanities” and “medical humanities” proved to be popular, versatile, and decidedly flexible rubrics for program building in undergraduate contexts. Programs emerged under a growing array of headings: “History, Health, and Humanities,” “Health and Society,” and “Medicine, Science, and the Humanities.”²² If some

embraced narrative ethics and centered the study of literature while others foregrounded history or ethics, this diversity reflected the robust range of what medical humanities had become. The goal remained broad, cross-disciplinary education about the human condition, and deep introspection connecting scholars across fields who were drawn together in teaching and researching the challenges of health and healing.

The agenda of medical humanities had built over time, with no single discipline claiming exclusive ownership over the enterprise. Assessing the field, literature scholar Sari Altschuler pointed forward in the conclusion to her 2018 book, *The Medical Imagination*. In her view, the humanities agenda in medical schools had made modest gains, confining itself to a limited agenda by “mostly aiming at improving physician empathy rather than at shaping and expanding medicine’s ways of knowing.”²³ Meanwhile, programs run by humanists in undergraduate settings remained too heavily focused on the utilitarian task of preparing aspiring health care workers. Both approaches sought “to bring a sense of the human back to medicine that risked being too governed by dispassionate science, routinized procedure, and market logic.”²⁴ These foundational functions of the humanities in medicine (its redemptive capacity for humanizing caregivers and seeing the humanity of patients) had not changed. If anything, they had expanded remarkably in reach and scope, finding new audiences, and developing in new venues.

With this expansion, scholars in a field that had begun modestly (in hopes of humanizing physicians and exploring *the human condition*) now confidently asserted that the very habits of analysis in humanistic inquiry exemplified, in themselves, important “ways of knowing” about health. To Altschuler, “the number and breadth of medical and health humanities programs offer a terrific opportunity” to move beyond empathy building in medicine, and to embrace a bolder vision: “the recognition that humanists have an important and distinct set of tools for knowing the world, as do health professionals.”²⁵ Building on the energetic developments of the past decades, she called on humanists to engage with medical science from a new standpoint – to find common ground with medical educators by embracing the language of “competencies”: practical skill development as the bedrock of medical training. By now, these skills could be clearly articulated as “humanistic competencies – which include narrative, attention, observation, historical perspective, ethics, judgement, performance, and creativity.”²⁶ The list offered a lovely shorthand for the approaches, methods, and practices encompassed within the health humanities. These competencies also highlighted the fraught challenge ahead; the building of medical humanities would involve ceaseless struggle over boundaries and demarcations, even as its core commitment remained restoring humanistic understanding to the vast biomedical and health enterprise.

In the end, the remarkable growth of the health humanities over the past six decades is a story of tragic relevance, driven by the awareness not that medicine had “saved the life of ethics” as Toulmin had noted, but rather by recognition that new configurations of ethics, literature, the arts, and history were vital for breathing life into medicine.

As the medical humanities have widened their reach, one theme has persisted from the early years: professional and human crisis has spawned the search for meaning and introspection about life, illness, recovery, human suffering, the care of the body and spirit, and death. Medicine’s social dilemmas, its professional controversies, human health crises, social tensions over topics from AIDS to abortion and genetics, as well as the profession’s very identity and its claim to authority have catalyzed and fed a growing demand for answers about meaning. The recurring crisis has generated a style of humanistic insight that has flourished not only within traditional disciplines but also in the interstices.

The flourishing of medical humanities is a story of shifting energies: the emergence of new lines of inquiry, new institutional homes, and novel journals and professional associations. As the field has grown, its questions about illness, disease, and the pursuit of health have become more prominent across the academy and beyond its boundaries. The work has adapted to new trends in health movements, disability studies and activism, and questions of race and gender in relation to health. Even as new programs have developed, the work of health humanities has become ever more salient in the disciplines of history, literature, the arts, and in philosophy and ethics.

This expanding humanist venture – spanning from undergraduate and graduate teaching and research to broad public engagements – refutes the narrative of a “humanities in decline.” Redemption and humanization of the practitioner remain goals, as does the deep appreciation of suffering, recovery, and the illness experience. But the past decades have seen a wider critique: an insistence that the tools of the medical humanities are not merely restorative gap-fillers for what is lacking in scientific and technological insight, but that their discernment about the self and identity, suffering and illness are the primary lenses for understanding essential features of human experience, health, and society. The medical humanities provide, then, the means by which we understand the complex problem of how humans respond to illness, and how humans assess the role of science and medicine in the enterprise of healing.

In the same way that the human tragedy of AIDS confirmed the relevance of medical humanities in the 1980s and 1990s, today’s global coronavirus pandemic (and its underlying issues of disparate suffering, loss, blame, conflicted belief, social inequality, misinformation, and varied cultural responses) catalyzes yet another wave of interest in health humanities. And few of COVID’s challenging questions revolve around doctoring or patients alone; in COVID, the health and

well-being of a contentious and fractured *public* raised vexing questions well suited for medical humanists.

As we weather recurring waves of COVID, it has become commonplace for media to turn to medical humanities scholars for insight and guidance. What could literature or history teach us about the social responses to the current pandemic? asked National Public Radio. Could the history of past pandemics provide insight into the current crisis, or serve as guides for the building of effective social responses and healthier, more equitable societies? To answer such questions, public media has sought answers from scholars like French professor Alice Kaplan, who was busily writing a new introduction to Camus's *The Plague*. In early 2020 during the first wave of COVID, sales of the book skyrocketed in Europe. "People are saying in the French press, what do you absolutely need to read in this time? You need to read *The Plague*," Kaplan explained. "Almost as though this novel were a vaccine – not just a novel that can help us think about what we are experiencing, but something that can help heal us."²⁷

The medical humanities began in crises and critiques of medicine, and crisis continued to make the health humanities vital, timely, and necessary. To be sure, the utilitarian ideals remained focused on creating well-rounded medical practitioners. But the field now encompasses a grander and more widely institutionalized, and still richly debated, promise of healing and restoration through literature, the arts, history, and ethics.²⁸ So while it is true that medicine "saved the life of ethics," it is also the case that over these decades, the medical humanities has breathed new life into the humanities while also offering society a kind of healing that medicine itself cannot provide. This remarkable growth offers a counterpoint to narratives of decline in the humanities. It is a story of growing relevance shaped by tragedy, of innovative programs in medical schools and on undergraduate campuses, and vital new configurations of ethics, literature, the arts, and history that have profoundly rejuvenated the study of health and medicine.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Daniel Callahan, Arthur Caplan, and Bruce Jennings, "Preface" to Eric Cassell, *The Place of the Humanities in Medicine* (Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.: The Hastings Center, 1984), 5.
- ² Cassell, *The Place of the Humanities in Medicine*, 6.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁵ Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* (New York: Harper Collins, 1961).
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- ⁹ Cassell listed the four as Pennsylvania State, Wright State, Southern Illinois, and University of Nebraska. Cassell, *The Place of the Humanities in Medicine*, 12.
- ¹⁰ Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart: A Play* (New York: Plume, 1985); and Abraham Verghese, *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
- ¹¹ Joseph Cady, "My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS (review)," *Literature and Medicine* 15 (2) (1996): 278–282.
- ¹² Rita Charon and Martha Montello, "Memory and Anticipation: The Practice of Narrative Ethics," in *Stories Matter: The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*, ed. Rita Charon and Martha Montello (New York: Routledge, 2002).
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The Positive Humanities : A Focus on Human Flourishing

James O. Pawelski

The Positive Humanities can be defined as the branch of learning concerned with culture in its relation to human flourishing. This new field advocates for a eudaimonic turn in the humanities, an explicit recognition of and commitment to human flourishing as a central theme of study and practical aim of the humanities. It holds that this eudaimonic turn can reconnect the humanities with their initial values and goals and provide a unifying and inspiring rationale for the humanities today, opening pathways for greater individual and collective flourishing in societies around the world. After exploring the historical roots and conceptual orientations of the Positive Humanities (which are inclusive of the arts), I present five recommendations for strengthening the focus of the humanities on human flourishing: emphasize 1) wisdom as much as knowledge, 2) collaboration as much as specialization, 3) the positive as much as the negative, 4) effective friction as much as increased efficiency, and 5) the flourishing of humans as much as the flourishing of the humanities.

Human flourishing is a basic and enduring concern of the humanities. In cultures around the world and across time, a perennial desire to understand the nature and enabling conditions of human flourishing and to find ways to increase it has led to the creation of works exploring these themes and to programs of study intended to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to help them and their communities flourish. For example, ancient wisdom traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Judaism – along with the later Christianity and Islam – focused on questions of how to live life well. Although varying widely in their particulars, they shared the basic view that popular methods for advancing flourishing (like pleasure, wealth, power, and fame) can often hinder it, and that flourishing can be achieved only through the cultivation of virtue.¹ These ideas were expressed, developed, communicated, and taught through religious, philosophical, narrative, and historical texts, as well as through music, art, architecture, theater, and other cultural forms.

Historically, the humanities have their roots in ancient Greek and Roman culture. The Greek *paideia* was a program of study emphasizing intellectual, moral, and physical development. Designed to promote human flourishing, what the

Greeks called *eudaimonia*, by producing good citizens who would live their lives well and help the *polis* thrive, the curriculum included instruction in language, philosophy, mathematics, science, and the arts as well as training in gymnastics and wrestling. The Romans included much of this curriculum in what they called the “liberal arts” (*artes liberales*), a program of study intended to provide citizens with the skills free persons needed to flourish and participate actively and wisely in civic life. These subjects were eventually arranged into two groups: the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). Together, they formed the seven liberal arts and constituted the general curriculum of medieval universities.

It was during the Renaissance that the humanities were developed as a distinct program of study. Increasing numbers of scholars believed that scholasticism, the dominant medieval approach to the seven liberal arts, had become disconnected from human flourishing. In a sense, the humanities were the gift of a pandemic, as these scholars were deeply influenced by the Italian poet and scholar Petrarch and his response to a devastating and extended outbreak of the bubonic plague. Known as the Black Death, this pandemic is the deadliest in history, killing an estimated two hundred million people across Europe, Asia, and North Africa in the fourteenth century. Among the dead (estimated to have included between 30 and 60 percent of the population of Western Europe) were many of Petrarch’s friends and associates, and even his own son.² To cope with the personal and social devastation wrought by the Black Death, Petrarch turned to the careful study of a selection of Greek and Roman classics, where he found solace and strength. Scholars who followed his lead and further developed his approach came to be called “humanists,” since they focused on what Cicero had called “studies of humanity” (*studia humanitatis*).³ Humanists found the scholasticism of their day to be overly pedantic and technical, fixating on the resolution of textual contradictions through logical and linguistic analysis, and neglecting the wisdom that had inspired and informed so many of the classics. By contrast, humanists turned their students’ attention precisely to this wisdom, seeking instruction on the nature of happiness and its relation to virtue by turning away from the quadrivium and re-designing the trivium. Keeping grammar and rhetoric, they replaced logic with history, philosophy, and poetry in the search for practical guidance for their lives.⁴ Eventually, the scholasticism of European universities was largely replaced by this new program of study focused directly on human flourishing.

Much has changed since the introduction of this humanistic approach to the university curriculum. In contemporary American colleges and universities, the humanities tend to be thought of less as a comprehensive program of study to increase human flourishing and more as a collection of separate disciplines, each with its own interests and methodological approaches to scholarship. Located within institutions of higher learning, these disciplines are subject to the norms

and values of these institutions, and individual scholars are shaped by their systems of recruitment, retention, and reward. Although early American colleges saw the moral formation of students as central to their mission, the rise of research universities has led to a prioritization of the creation of new knowledge. This change of emphasis has resulted in important breakthroughs in research, but these advances have often come at the cost of shifting attention away from questions of how to live life well. Scholars, under enormous pressure to “publish or perish,” tend to specialize in particular areas of knowledge creation, focusing on increasingly narrow points of scholarship to establish their careers as professional academics. Meanwhile, enrollments in humanities courses and programs at four-year colleges and universities continue to drop, due at least in part to increased vocational pressures on students.⁵ In response, humanities scholars feel the need to proclaim the economic value of taking courses in their disciplines. These shifts toward professional and economic interests come at a time when students, perhaps now more than ever, are in need of the eudaimonic benefits of the humanities. Even before COVID-19, surveys of American students showed alarming increases in anxiety, depression, and suicidality, and the pandemic has made things even worse.⁶

The current situation in the humanities bears some troubling resemblance to the conditions that gave rise to the humanities in the first place. Although the present pandemic is, thankfully, not as severe as the Black Death, some of the same basic problems that troubled Petrarch and his heirs are now faced by millions of students. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a number of societal issues, including the unique mental health challenges of this new generation. And students are entering institutions where the focus of research and teaching has largely drifted away from what they need: an emphasis on the understanding and cultivation of individual and collective human flourishing. What can be done to renew the focus of the humanities on human flourishing?

This is the fundamental question motivating the new field of the Positive Humanities. In view of the Oxford English Dictionary’s broad definition of the humanities as “the branch of learning concerned with human culture,”⁷ the Positive Humanities can be defined as “the branch of learning concerned with human culture *in its relation to human flourishing*.”⁸ The word “culture” is a horticultural term, coming from the Latin *cultura*, meaning “cultivation.” The Positive Humanities hold that just as the successful cultivation of plants results in their flourishing, so too a successful human culture should lead to human flourishing. The Positive Humanities recognize the wide variety of interests that influence the creation of human culture and that determine its roles in society. Many of these interests approach culture instrumentally, focusing on its professional, academic, vocational, and economic value. Although the Positive Humanities are interested in the implications of these instrumental uses of culture for human flourishing, they

are more centrally concerned with the intrinsic benefits of culture, including its eudaimonic effects on personal enjoyment, individual and societal growth, and meaning-making.⁹

The Positive Humanities advocate for a *eudaimonic turn* in the humanities, an explicit recognition of and commitment to human flourishing as a central theme of study and practical aim of the humanities.¹⁰ The Positive Humanities seek insights into the nature and development of human flourishing from the wisdom, narrative, aesthetic, and performance traditions of cultures across time and around the world (and are thus inclusive of the arts). None of these traditions is perfect, of course – far from it – and each has both positive and negative lessons to teach about flourishing. The Positive Humanities understand that a concept as complex as human flourishing calls for collaboration across a wide range of methodological approaches and thus also look to relevant work in the social sciences. The Positive Humanities are especially interested in the practical effects of the relationship between culture and flourishing. Under what circumstances and for whom does cultural engagement increase human flourishing? Are there ways in which culture presents obstacles to flourishing? If so, who is most affected by these obstacles? Perhaps most important, how can cultural engagement be intentionally optimized to help all individuals and communities thrive? These practical questions connect the Positive Humanities to the educational institutions, cultural organizations, and creative industries through which the humanities are typically studied and experienced. With all this in mind, the Positive Humanities can be defined in more detail as “the interdisciplinary, multi-industry, and cross-sector examination and optimization of the relationship between the experience, creation, and study of human culture and the understanding, assessment, and cultivation of human flourishing.”¹¹ In the remainder of this essay, I discuss five specific recommendations from the Positive Humanities for strengthening the focus of the humanities on human flourishing.¹²

The first recommendation is to emphasize wisdom as much as knowledge. In an academic environment that prioritizes and rewards the creation of new knowledge, it is easy to succumb to a kind of intellectualization, focusing more, for example, on the analysis of texts than on the practice of the wisdom contained in those texts. Literary scholar Helen Small gives a definition of the humanities as the study of “the meaning-making practices of human cultures, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity.”¹³ It is easy for the study of meaning-making practices in the humanities to become an intellectual exercise, quite removed from the practical ability to make meaning effectively oneself, and the humanities today tend to focus more on the analysis of meaning-making than on the creation of meaning. To be

sure, knowledge about meaning-making is important, as are skills of interpretation and critical evaluation, but they are insufficient to meet the practical goals of human flourishing that initially inspired the humanities as a program of study. The humanities were intended not just to be a theoretical enterprise but a deeply practical one. I remember one of my philosophy professors in graduate school sneering about the undergraduates coming to him for wisdom, thinking that what he studied and taught could provide guidance for their lives. In the academy, the humanities curriculum has all too often become a way of knowing, with ways of living relegated to student services divisions and campus counseling centers. Important as the work of these divisions and centers is, however, it is vital to understand human flourishing as a central part of the research and teaching mission of higher education. The acquisition of knowledge must not be disconnected from the practice of wisdom. Aristotle argued that the aim of the study of ethics is not just to learn what virtue is, but to become virtuous; so, too, the aim of the study of the humanities should not be merely to know what human flourishing is, but to flourish.¹⁴

There are, of course, many scholars in the humanities who resist the pressures of intellectualization and remain committed to the practical goals of the humanities. And there are many students who resist the pressures of approaching the humanities merely as a set of academic requirements, a body of knowledge to master on the way to obtaining a degree. They value not just learning *about* the humanities but also learning *from* them. My concern is that doing so requires these scholars and students to overcome a misalignment between the basic purposes and goals of the humanities and the conditions under which they are typically taught and studied. My further concern is that so many scholars and students do not overcome this misalignment, depriving them of the most important benefits of the humanities for human flourishing and making it less likely that students will value the humanities enough to continue to engage with them.¹⁵

The second recommendation for strengthening the focus of the humanities on human flourishing is to emphasize collaboration as much as specialization. Many humanities scholars are used to working alone, or even in isolation. This approach may be effective for producing articles and monographs on specialized topics, but it is inadequate for exploring the full range of meanings and practices of human flourishing. And it is especially inadequate for applying them in ways that are fitting and effective for fostering individual and collective flourishing. The common goal of conceptualizing and cultivating human flourishing can bring together scholars within and across different disciplines in the humanities, as well as bridge divides between scholars and makers of culture. A renewal of the focus of the humanities on human flourishing also requires collaboration between the academic humanities, chiefly located within institutions of

higher education, and the public humanities, which emphasize the work of the humanities in communities, cultural organizations, and creative industries beyond colleges and universities.¹⁶

Just as important for human flourishing is collaboration between the humanities and the sciences. These two domains have always been included in the liberal arts, but there have been quarrels between them since ancient times.¹⁷ The divide between them was widened by Renaissance humanists, who excluded the quadrivium from their program of study, as they considered the sciences unhelpful for human flourishing.¹⁸ Whether or not this was true of ancient and medieval approaches, it is certainly not true of the sciences today. Although questions of human flourishing have traditionally belonged to the domain of the humanities, the sciences – and especially the social sciences – have devoted much attention to them over the last few decades. Much work has been done in psychology, economics, political science, sociology, and neuroscience, which has influenced domains as diverse as psychiatry, medicine, public health, organizational studies, education, law, and government. Psychology, for example, has undergone a eudaimonic turn, catalyzed in large part by the founding of a new branch of the discipline: positive psychology. It is worth pausing to explore this development in psychology in more detail, as it has important implications for the Positive Humanities.

Positive psychology has been defined as “the scientific study of what enables individuals and societies to thrive.”¹⁹ Launching the field during his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1998, Martin Seligman argued that psychology had become fixated on the study and treatment of psychopathology. He claimed that work on mental illness is valuable but that on its own it is too narrow to achieve psychology’s broader mission of making the lives of all people better. This mission cannot be fulfilled merely by removing obstacles to better lives, he contended, but also requires the study and cultivation of the actual constituents of individual and collective flourishing.²⁰

Positive psychologists typically study human flourishing in terms of well-being, which can be defined as “optimal psychological functioning and experience.”²¹ As I have observed elsewhere, positive psychology is proceeding in both a complementary and a comprehensive mode in its study of well-being.²² In its complementary mode, it understands mainstream psychology as focused on what delays or destroys well-being – on the mitigation of ill-being – and thus as “indirectly positive.” Positive psychology, by contrast, is focused on what causes or constitutes well-being – on the promotion of well-being – and thus is “directly positive.”²³ Accordingly, work in the field includes topics like gratitude, awe, love, flow, grit, character strengths, healthy relationships, psychological richness, and meaning and purpose in life. In its comprehensive mode, positive psychology relies on a balance between indirect, mitigative approaches and direct, promotional approaches in support of what is contextually optimal, of what is desirable or

preferable under specific conditions and in particular settings. In most real-life situations, the best way to make life better is through a combination of removing ill-being and increasing well-being. The ideal here is *sustainable preference*, in which the short- and long-term well-being interests of each individual and of all groups in a society are respected and supported.²⁴ This ideal cannot be achieved – or even approached – without deep collaboration across all disciplines and fields with a connection to human flourishing.

The third recommendation is to emphasize the positive as much as the negative. It is not only in mainstream psychology that the focus has been on ill-being, on the obstacles to human flourishing. Across much of the work in the humanities over the past few decades, there has been a strong focus on surfacing latent psychopathologies and corrosive ideologies in texts and other forms of culture.²⁵ In some circles, the methodology of critical theory, using what philosopher Paul Ricoeur identified as a “hermeneutics of suspicion,”²⁶ has been used so extensively for these purposes that there has not been much room for other approaches.²⁷ It is important, of course, to be aware of very real problems like alienation, injustice, and malfeasance and the surreptitious ways they can obstruct flourishing for so many individuals and groups. A fixation on what can go wrong, however, often obscures what can go right, leading to missed opportunities for direct action to foster flourishing. At its founding, the World Health Organization defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”²⁸ In a similar way, it is important to understand flourishing as more than just the absence of languishing. For this reason, it is crucial to make room for what Ricoeur called “hermeneutics as a restoration of meaning”²⁹ and has been referred to as a “hermeneutics of affirmation.”³⁰ Flourishing requires as much attention to its conceptualization and direct cultivation as it does to the understanding and overcoming of obstacles to its realization.

Similar to positive psychology, the Positive Humanities function in both a complementary and a comprehensive mode. In their complementary mode, they emphasize the study of the nature and constituents of human flourishing. Some important work along these lines has already begun to emerge in a variety of humanities disciplines. Examples include Darrin McMahon’s work on the intellectual history of happiness;³¹ Daniel Haybron’s and Valerie Tiberius’s work on the philosophy of happiness, well-being, and the good life;³² Menachem Mautner’s exploration of the central role art can play in human flourishing;³³ Ellen Charry’s positive theology and Miroslav Volf’s theology of joy;³⁴ and in literary studies, Eve Sedgwick’s call for “reparative” interpretations, James O. Pawelski and D. J. Moores’s advancement of a eudaimonic turn, and Rita Felski’s advocacy for a “positive aesthetics.”³⁵

In their comprehensive mode, the Positive Humanities advocate for a balanced integration of suspicion and affirmation in the interests of optimizing flourishing in real-life circumstances. Just as a garden requires both weeding and planting to flourish, so our lives and communities require both attention to what delays or destroys human flourishing and to what causes or constitutes it. The optimization of well-being in any context requires a balanced integration of indirect, mitigative approaches and direct, promotional approaches to human flourishing. In this comprehensive mode, for example, the Positive Humanities value critique for the insights it can yield into ways culture sometimes undermines flourishing, and they seek to integrate these insights with reparative and constructive work for advancing individual and collective human flourishing.

The fourth recommendation is to emphasize effective friction as much as increased efficiency. One of the most common critiques of the humanities is that they are inefficient. As mentioned earlier, students are facing rising vocational pressures, with education often viewed merely in terms of job preparation. If the only goal of education is the short-term aim of landing a job – and one that pays as well as possible – then it makes sense to study subjects that will lead directly to desirable employment. Since jobs in technology, business, and medicine pay more than jobs in the humanities, the thinking goes, it is best to spend one’s time in the classroom studying STEM subjects or completing professional programs. Taking courses in the humanities is seen as unnecessary at best and wasteful or distracting at worst.

It is not just in education that efficiency is extolled. Psychologist Barry Schwartz argues that the “modern world is characterized by the worship of efficiency.”³⁶ Citing examples from manufacturing, commerce, and finance, he observes that increasing efficiency by removing friction from these processes is seen as essential to progress. Economists, he notes, hold that the only way to improve a society’s standard of living is to increase efficiency. Schwartz points out, however, that while some efficiency is no doubt good, more efficiency may not be better, especially in cases where there is uncertainty. He cites insurance as an example. In a world where you know your house will not burn down, carrying fire insurance is a waste. But in the world we live in – a world characterized by uncertainty – fire insurance is a wise inefficiency, a worthwhile friction. Schwartz concludes that in our uncertain world, the most reasonable goals are not ones that maximize efficiency under normal conditions, but rather options that lead to satisfactory results under a wide range of possible conditions. In a world of uncertainty, narrow efficiency is unlikely to be the most effective path to long-term success. This is especially true when that narrow efficiency is limited to economic considerations but success is understood broadly in terms of human flourishing. Economic factors are important for human flourishing, but they are by no means the only things that are.

Emotion research supports this understanding of the limited value of efficiency under conditions of uncertainty. Negative emotions like anger, fear, disgust, and sadness are quite efficient, often co-opting our physiology to prepare us for attack, escape, avoidance, or withdrawal even before we are consciously aware of having a problem. Positive emotions like joy, serenity, and awe also have physiological components, but it is not as easy to identify what, if anything, they prepare us to do. This led to a bias against positive emotions until psychologist Barbara Fredrickson proposed the “broaden-and-build” model of positive emotions.³⁷ Her research showed that while negative emotions helpfully narrow our attention, cognition, and behavior in times of danger, positive emotions broaden attention, cognition, and behavior in times of safety. This broadening does not just feel good, but it makes us more creative and allows us to build enduring physical, psychological, and social resources. Negative emotions can be life-saving in the short term, but positive emotions can be life-saving in the long term by helping us to be better prepared for as-yet-unseen dangers when they do arise. From a short-term perspective, positive emotions are inefficient; their effectiveness becomes clear only over the long term.

Similar to economic friction and positive emotions, the humanities can seem inefficient when considered in the short term. Courses in ethics, literature, or theater may or may not teach skills that lead directly to employment, but they can broaden our experience of the world and allow us to build enduring resources that may help us remain creatively resilient in times of unforeseen adversity. We live in a world of uncertainty, where novel problems often arise, for which it is not possible to prepare directly and efficiently. In these situations, broad preparation in the humanities may help us be most effective in facing the difficulties. And although studying the humanities may or may not be the most effective means of taking maximal advantage of immediate employment opportunities, it may be of great value in preparing for the employment needs of the future.

The key here is an Aristotelian mean between excess and deficiency. Too much efficiency can lead to ruinous rigidity, but too little efficiency can lead to a wasteful squandering of time and resources. Keeping human flourishing in mind as the ultimate goal can provide a prudent corrective to both extremes. The humanities should not be forced to yield immediate returns on investment; nor, however, should they be absolved from making significant eudaimonic contributions to our lives.

The fifth and final recommendation is to emphasize the flourishing of humans as much as the flourishing of the humanities. In particular, I would like to recommend the establishment of a new set of indicators for tracking the relationship between the humanities and human flourishing. Since 2009, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has published the Humanities Indi-

cators, collecting and disseminating key data about the infrastructure of the humanities in the United States.³⁸ The Humanities Indicators do an excellent job of gathering, analyzing, and reporting quantitative data on the humanities, but they are aimed at measuring the flourishing of the humanities and not the flourishing of the humans engaged in them. They are aimed at measuring many of the extrinsic benefits of the humanities, but not their intrinsic benefits, things like captivation, pleasure, empathy, cognitive growth, social bonds, and communal meaning.³⁹ Given the traditional connection between the humanities and the understanding and fostering of human flourishing, I believe it is time to create Humanities and Human Flourishing Indicators. Building on the tremendous work of the Humanities Indicators, this new set of measures would focus on tracking how successfully the humanities support the understanding and cultivation of human flourishing. Do the humanities increase human flourishing? If so, in what specific ways? Who is benefiting from this increase? Who is not yet benefiting? Are there unseen harms that are sometimes caused through the humanities? Are there particular ways of engaging with the humanities that are more effective at leading to greater flourishing? How can we optimize the well-being effects of engagement with the humanities?

The social sciences can make considerable methodological contributions to this work. For decades, psychologists have been assessing human flourishing through validated measures of subjective well-being (consisting of high life satisfaction, high positive affect, and low negative affect)⁴⁰ and psychological well-being (understood in terms of six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance).⁴¹ Psychologists continue to develop new instruments (such as the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving, the PERMA-Profiler, and the Psychologically Rich Life Questionnaire)⁴² and to invent and refine methods (such as questionnaires, experience sampling methodologies, and Big Data) for the scientific study of human flourishing.⁴³ Well-being is not merely a matter for psychology, of course, and it is important to move beyond psychology's traditional emphasis on the study of individuals to include work from other social sciences that focuses on ways in which communities and societies function. Epidemiologist Tyler VanderWeele, for example, takes a more comprehensive approach to human flourishing, integrating perspectives from across the social sciences, including psychology, economics, medicine, public health, and other disciplines. He has developed a measure of human flourishing that covers six different domains: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability.⁴⁴ This measure is part of a Global Flourishing Study to assess the flourishing of nearly a quarter of a million participants in twenty-two countries over five years.⁴⁵ The Humanities and Human Flourishing Indicators could also be informed by work

that is being done in the arts and well-being in collaboration with the sciences and medicine.⁴⁶

However competently and comprehensively work on the Humanities and Human Flourishing Indicators is carried out, it will be crucial to keep in mind that empirical assessment of the role of the humanities in human flourishing can only complement and not replace the more traditional ways scholars have thought and written about culture and well-being. A broad range of approaches is necessary to examine something as complex as the relationship between the humanities and human flourishing. It is just as crucial to keep in mind that empirical assessment of the role of the humanities in human flourishing must be a collaborative enterprise that includes humanities scholars and practitioners as equal partners with scientists, since they have invaluable insights into the nature of human flourishing and the various ways the humanities can foster it. Scientific investigation must be informed and guided by the experience and reflection of those who dedicate their lives to the creation and study of culture. Finally, it is equally crucial to make clear that this empirical assessment is not about measuring the *worth* of the humanities. The intrinsic benefits of the humanities must be distinguished from their intrinsic worth, which will no doubt forever remain beyond the reach of scientific measurement. Research on the intrinsic benefits of the humanities cannot be legitimately used to try to create hierarchies of cultures or of cultural forms, and any attempts to do so must be strongly repudiated. With these important caveats in mind, however, collaborative empirical assessment can be uniquely valuable for measuring a range of definable and observable effects of engagement with the humanities on specific aspects of individual and collective human flourishing. The great promise of this work is not only the creation of new knowledge but also the development of evidence-based practices for optimizing the positive effects of humanities engagement on human flourishing across a variety of cultural contexts.

I believe that these five recommendations from the Positive Humanities can help support a eudaimonic turn in the humanities. As I noted at the outset of this essay, human flourishing is a basic and enduring concern of the humanities. There is a real sense, then, in which a eudaimonic turn in the humanities is, in fact, a eudaimonic *return*, not to some idyllic past (no society has fully realized the promise of human flourishing), but to the questions and concerns that gave rise to the humanities in the first place and that have been at their core for most of their history. It is a return that is required of each generation of scholars as they explore and develop ways of flourishing fitting for their times. In the contemporary context, this return must address the basic questions and concerns of the humanities in fresh ways, informed by the considerable depth and range of new knowledge at our disposal and guided by the complex opportunities and challenges presented by our current cultural realities.⁴⁷

This eudaimonic turn in the humanities can bring a number of important benefits. It can help address what literary scholar and essayist Louis Menand has called a “crisis of rationale” in the humanities, with scholars themselves in disagreement about the fundamental nature and purpose of the humanities and thus unable to communicate their value clearly to students, parents, philanthropists, policy-makers, and the general public.⁴⁸ A eudaimonic turn can provide a unifying and communicable rationale for the humanities. It can enable scholars to work together to understand more deeply how human flourishing has been defined and fostered in the past in cultures across the globe and how it can be more effectively conceptualized and cultivated in our world today. The goal here is not the establishment of an orthodoxy. On the contrary, a diversity of perspectives can provide a much-needed richness of inquiry, helping to inform and guide well-being research in the sciences, and opening up new possibilities for human flourishing that are more equitable and widespread than ever before and that support the flourishing of the nonhuman world as well. Moreover, these types of approaches are likely to attract and retain students in humanities courses and programs.

More importantly, these new approaches, with their benefits for the humanities, can also benefit humanity. An explicit focus on understanding and fostering individual and collective human flourishing can be of considerable benefit to the millions of students who study the humanities each year. Because of the central role the humanities play for so many students across so many educational levels and programs, such a focus promises significant and enduring positive effects. Outside the classroom, a eudaimonic turn in the humanities can inform, inspire, and support the work of museums, libraries, performing arts centers, and even entire creative industries (such as in music, movies, and publishing) to advance human flourishing more broadly and justly in our society. Although such work is not easy, it is deeply meaningful, with the aim of exploring and enriching the relationship between culture and human flourishing, and, in so doing, carrying forward a central and perennial purpose of the humanities and opening new possibilities of flourishing for humanity.

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ENDNOTES

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Planetary Humanities: Straddling the Decolonial/Postcolonial Divide

Dipesh Chakrabarty

This essay argues that while the science of climate change treats the Earth as one, political responses to climate change are marked profoundly by the fact that humanity can never speak as one. Questions of climate justice and sustainable human futures have deepened fractured and contested histories of modernity in which the West/non-West division intersects with emergent distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial approaches. But none of these distinctions are absolute. By discussing the works of Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, I seek to show how traditions of European and non-European thought remain entangled even as we seek, intellectually, to decolonize the world. In a connected world, the not-one-ness of humanity acts as a ground for dissension within the humanities but not for any absolute differences.

However one looks at the difficulties of creating a politics of climate change, the question of “anthropological difference” seems to be at the root of those difficulties. Issues of “climate justice,” for instance, or those about historical responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions point, ultimately, to inequalities and power relations between rich and poor nations as well as between the rich and the poor generally, across and inside nations. What makes for a “climate emergency” is the fact that a humanity that is not *one* finds it difficult to respond as *one* to a calendar of carbon budgets and coordinated actions issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which, in effect, treats the planet as *one*. How to think about intrahuman differences in the face of a planet that climate scientists see as “one” has become “the one and the many” aspect of climate politics. Sociologists Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski have recently sought to introduce the idea of “planetary multiplicities” (by which they refer to the undeniable fact that “the Earth has an inherent potential to shift from one state to another and to do this quickly”), but acknowledge the oneness of this planet by seeing it as “a dynamic and self-organized” entity.¹ Come to think of it, all the scenarios of transition to a “zero carbon” global economy and the carbon budgets chalked up by the IPCC do not make sense unless one assumes the planet to be one. Differences between humans have there-

fore emerged as the truly political aspect of what the IPCC sees as a “climate emergency.”²

What I wish to do in this essay is show how the humanist literature on the politics of attending to the challenges of planetary climate change draws on two contrasting ways of thinking about “modernity” and thus about differences between humans. One might broadly imagine these approaches as reflecting an emergent decolonial/postcolonial divide, a division that is, I hasten to add, by no means total. There are many connections between these approaches. They also draw, ironically but differently, on some identifiable traditions of European thought, particularly French theory after May 1968. My treatment of these approaches is necessarily partial, preliminary, exploratory, and illustrative. There are critical aspects to these approaches that I have deliberately left out of consideration for reasons of space.

Philosopher Déborah Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s compelling and thoughtful book *The Ends of the World* gives me an excellent starting point not least because they put forward their propositions with such admirable clarity.³ I appear in the section of the book in which they criticize my having resorted to the biological concept of “species” (as used by the recently departed E. O. Wilson) in the original version of my 2009 essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” now revised and reprinted as chapter 1 of *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*.⁴ As they explain,

We must begin by rejecting any sole candidate to the (in)dignity of being the Anthropocene’s eponymous. The [E. O.] Wilsonian notion of species is dismissed less on the grounds of its phenomenological evanescence, as in Chakrabarty, than *because it is a tributary of modernity’s apolitical, ahistorical conception of Nature, as well as of the Science’s absolute power of arbitrage*. But neither are the revolutionary masses of the classical left, that other recurring incarnation of the modern universal, up to the task; . . . their liberation continues to depend on a generalization and intensification of the modernization front, on the practical (environmental destruction) as well as theoretical (the cult of Nature and Reason) levels.⁵

Their particular criticism of my essay is not important here. Instead I want to highlight two terms of their critique that are central to this discussion: “modernity’s apolitical, ahistorical conception of Nature” and “Science’s absolute power of arbitrage.” Danowski and de Castro go on to write:

The properly *ethnopolitical* situation of “human” as intensive and extensive multiplicity of peoples must be acknowledged as being directly implicated in the Anthropocene crisis. If there is no positive human interest, it is because there is a diversity of political alignments among the various world peoples or “cultures” with several other

non-human actants and peoples (constituting what Latour calls “collectives”) *against* the self-appointed spokespeople of the universal Human.⁶

This line of critique is in continuity with the intellectual program that de Castro had mapped out in his earlier collection of essays *Cannibal Metaphysics*.⁷ That program was to make anthropology into a “permanent exercise in the decolonization of thought.”⁸ Based on his imaginative reading and analysis of what he called Amerindian “perspectivism” and their “multi-naturalism,” this decolonizing vision saw both humans and the world as “non-unified,” with all prospects of unification lying “in the future, under what we would call a multiple hypothetical mode, and will depend on negotiating capacities once the ‘war of the worlds,’ as Latour has called it . . . has been declared.”⁹ As de Castro’s writings make clear and as he often explains, much of the inspiration for this particular mode of decolonizing thought came from the explosive impact that Deleuze and Guattari’s work on the figures of the “savage,” the “primitive,” the “rhizomatic,” and the nomad had on French thought following the events of May 1968, when France was rocked by a revolutionary upheaval of working-class and student protesters, resulting in many weeks of violent civil unrest, economic and political uncertainty, and a profound questioning of orthodox Communists. “For my generation,” writes de Castro, “the name of Gilles Deleuze immediately evokes the change in thought that marked the period circa 1968, when some key elements of our contemporary cultural apperception were invented. The meaning, consequences and the very reality of this change have given rise to a still-raging controversy.”¹⁰ He introduces his own book *Cannibal Metaphysics* as one that “puts forward and illustrates a theory of multiplicities – the Deleuzian theme that has carried the greatest repercussions in and for contemporary anthropology,” influencing, among others, Latour’s critique of modernity in his *We Have Never Been Modern*.¹¹ As de Castro further explicates, echoing the title of Latour’s book,

the concept of multiplicity may have only become thinkable – and therefore thinkable by anthropology – because we are currently entering a nonmerologic, postpopular world where we have never been modern; a world that, more through disinterest than any *Aufhebung*, is leaving in the dust the old infernal distinction between the One and the Multiple that governed so many dualisms, the anthropological pairs and many others as well. . . . Thinking through multiplicities is thinking against the State.¹²

And then again: “Multiplicity is not something like a larger unity, a superior plurality or unity; rather it is a *less than one* obtained by subtraction (hence the importance of the idea of the minor, minority, and minoritization in Deleuze).”¹³

Whether we look at de Castro and Danowski’s work or that of Deleuze and Guattari, the Indigenous remains the privileged site and the original instance of this subversive principle of multiplicity, often seen as embodying some kind of

an Other to the statist ideas of history and modernization that imperial Europe epitomized.¹⁴ “Thinking through multiplicities,” writes de Castro, “is thinking against the state.”¹⁵ In a significant footnote, de Castro mentions that he wrote this sentence in memory of Pierre Clastres, “who was (and remains) one of the rare French anthropologists who knew how to make something out of *Anti-Oedipus*’s ideas, besides being one of the inspirations for the theory of the war machine developed in Plateaus 12 and 13 of *A Thousand Plateaus*.”¹⁶ Indeed, one of the pivotal oppositions around which the text of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* turned was that between the nomadic and the sedentary. In his preface that described the book as an “introduction to the non-fascist life,” Michel Foucault exhorted the reader to

withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality. Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems.

And in all this the figure of the nomad that subsumed that of the “savage” or the “primitive” came to occupy a central position. Foucault’s injunction to the reader of Deleuze and Guattari was telling: “Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.”¹⁷

Deleuze and Guattari opened the famous third chapter of their *Anti-Oedipus* – “Savages, Barbarians, Civilized Men” – by asking, “where do we find enough innocence” that would allow humans to generate “universal history” after “the universal” had been brought to an end by “the conditions determined by an apparently victorious capitalism?”¹⁸ “Innocence” was not a matter of a dialectical reversal of a binary opposition, not in the way that the idea of a “primitive communism” would be preserved and sublimated into the Marxist ideal of communist society. For Deleuze and Guattari recognized that “universal history” was always “the history of contingencies, and not the history of necessity.” The “primitive system” was self-sustaining, its “death . . . always comes from without: history is the history of contingencies and encounters.”¹⁹ The path back to universal history would similarly include “ruptures and limits,” “great accidents . . . and amazing encounters that . . . might have never happened.”²⁰ The “primitive” or the “savage,” however, supplied a principle critical to the generation of a universal human history, the potential for which capital had destroyed. And hence Deleuze and Guattari’s perennial interest in the ethnographic literature on segmentary, acephalic societies. The critical political principle was articulated by placing the nomadic in opposition to the State in their respective relationships to the Earth. “Only the apparatus of the State will be territorial,” write our authors, citing Engels, for “it ‘subdivides not the people but the territory,’ and substitutes a geographic organization for the organization of *gens*.” But “where kinship seems to predominate over the

earth, it is not difficult to show the importance of local ties.” Deleuze and Guattari continue:

This is because the primitive machine subdivides the people, but does so on an indivisible earth where the connective, disjunctive, and conjunctive relations of each section are inscribed along with other relations (thus, for example, the coexistence or complementarity of the section chief and the guardian of the earth). When the division extends to the earth itself, by virtue of an administration that is landed and residential, this cannot be regarded as a promotion of territoriality; on the contrary, it is rather the effect of the first great movement of deterritorialization on the primitive communes. . . . Hence the savage, primitive was indeed the only territorial machine in the strict sense of the term. . . . before there is State.²¹

Ethnographic information about “primitive, segmentary societies” was eventually worked up into the science of nomadology, the twelfth chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, published in 1980 as the second volume of *Anti-Oedipus*. A part of this chapter – Proposition II – was written in amicable disagreement with but also as “a tribute to the memory” of Pierre Clastres.²² The starting point once again was the observation that “primitive, segmentary societies” were not only “societies without a State”; they were actively organized to keep the state at bay. In disagreement with Clastres, however, Deleuze and Guattari also claimed that such societies did not inhabit “a state of nature” that would enable them to remain untouched by the state. The sedentary and nomadic thus did not constitute a mutually exclusive binary.²³ “The law of the State is not the law of All or Nothing (State-societies *or* counter-State societies) but that of interior and exterior.”²⁴ There are “huge worldwide machines” – like multinational corporations or religious organizations – that “enjoy a large measure of autonomy in relation to States,” and there are also “local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of State power.”²⁵ Together they constitute the exterior to the state but not a binary outside. And “local mechanism” of bands and minorities embodies and illustrates the principles of nomadology.

It is on this terrain of thought – and especially the pacesetting work of Deleuze and Guattari in the wake of May 1968 – that the figure of the Indigenous presents itself on the pages of Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* and in Danowski and de Castro’s decolonizing exercise in *The Ends of the World*. Three parties are created in effect in this narrative of a global history of modernity and modernization. I will present them as they are depicted in Danowski and de Castro’s text, which is in deep conversation with Latour’s work, predominantly the latter’s two books, *We Have Never Been Modern* and *Facing Gaia*.²⁶ These parties are – in order of their “importance” and in my terminology – “the original Moderns,” “the Indigenous,” and “the later moderns.” I am not sure where the enslaved of the North Atlantic

would fall in this three-fold distinction, but some of their representatives will turn up in my discussion below. For now, let me stay with this three-fold division.

We know the theoretico-historical lineages of the Indigenous in this body of thought on the Europeanization of the Earth. They are designated “non-Moderns.” Who are the original-Moderns and why are they “original”? The “original-Moderns” are North-Western Europeans, for they are the “Humans of the Holocene” against whom the Terrans (the living who are opposed to the forces that cause global warming) are up in arms in the geostory that Latour presented in his Gifford Lectures published as *Facing Gaia*. As Danowski and de Castro gloss Latour’s text, “These are, it is well understood, none other than the *Moderns*, that race – *originally* North-Western, but increasingly less European and more Chinese, Indian, Brazilian.”²⁷ The “Original-Moderns” are “original” in two senses. They are the first to become “modern”; it is only later that they discover that, “in the East and in the South, other people had learned their lesson too well, taking upon themselves the will and the responsibility for modernization, but in their own, frightful terms.”²⁸ Thus, as modernizers in the East and the South, the Chinese, [the Japanese], the Indians, the Brazilian, and others become un-original in two senses: they are un-original in that they come later with the Europeans as their predecessors, but they are also un-original in that they are “derivatives,” pale copies, as indeed the etymology of the word “original” – from Latin *origo* meaning source, birth – suggests.

Danowski and de Castro are aware of the contemporary demographic weight of the unoriginal-Moderns compared to numbers of the non-Moderns. The 370 million Indigenous people “spread over 70 countries in the world, according to a recent United Nations Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues (2009) estimate,” are “certainly nowhere near the roughly 3.5 billion (read half the human species) crowding our ‘technical metropolises,’ around a billion of which, it should be noted, live in not particularly ‘technical’ slums.”²⁹ Yet in spite of their demographic minority – or because of it – the “non-Moderns” will carry in Danowski and de Castro’s account a moral weight far out of proportion to their numbers. The reason is simple. The Moderns, original or late, represent a failed project that has now resulted in a catastrophe:

Assured of their privileged access to Nature, Moderns saw themselves as a civilizing force come to convince recalcitrant people to rally to the flag of a common world (a single ontological and cosmopolitical regime) that was also, not by coincidence, the world of the Moderns.³⁰

The scientific facts are not at issue, for “we are not discussing if there are such things as global warming and an ongoing environmental collapse; these are among the best-documented . . . phenomena in the history of sciences. . . . [T]here is hardly any significant controversy among scientists concerning the anthropic

origin of climate catastrophe.”³¹ The dissemination of this knowledge may even be an “important factor” in bringing people over to the side of the good. But the project of the Moderns cannot unite humanity anymore. “All unification lies in the future,” in a postcatastrophic world.³² The forces for the good “cannot but be an ‘irremediably minor’ people” (minor in a Deleuzian sense), resembling

less the “phantom public” of Western democracies than *the people that is missing* which Deleuze and Guattari speak of: Kafka and Melville’s minor people, Rimbaud’s inferior races, the Indian that the philosopher becomes . . . – the people, that is, to come; capable of launching a “resistance to the present” and thus of creating a “new earth,” the world to come.³³

It is in “a post-catastrophic time, or, if one wishes, in a *permanently* diminished human world” that “the generally small populations and ‘relatively weak’ technologies of indigenous peoples and so many other sociopolitical minorities of the Earth could become a crucial advantage and resource.”³⁴

Now, the question is not whether Indigenous peoples’ thoughts and practices could provide both intellectual and practical resources as humans search for a way out of their planetary environmental crises. They, of course, do, and Danowski and de Castro’s work (here and elsewhere) shows us how. But it is interesting to observe that their method of effecting a “permanent decolonization” of anthropological thought – much like the Deleuzian tradition from which they take inspiration – does not connect with the emancipatory dreams not only of the late and revolutionary modernizers of Japan, China, India, and Africa, but also of someone like Franz Fanon or, for that matter, B. R. Ambedkar, the greatest modern leader of the Dalits in India, who once publicly asked for Indian society to be completely rebuilt on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity!³⁵ Instead, these late-Modernizers, considered “unoriginal” and “derivative,” are folded back into the story of the “original” European-Moderns. But this is ignoring – to continue to speak with Deleuze and Guattari – the ruptures, discontinuities, and contingencies that made modernity what it was in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where lives were impacted by the domination and racism of European powers but without, as in the case of India, any active elaboration of the near-genocidal logic of European settler-colonial rule.³⁶ Without that history of Asia (and parts of Africa and Latin America), as we have seen, human history would not have undergone the Great Acceleration or acquired its complexity, what Foucault, always more of a historian than Deleuze and Guattari, called “our immediate and concrete actuality.”³⁷

Imagine how the present could have been different if the human population had stabilized in the 1950s or if the world had sourced its energy requirements from nuclear power. Many of our current problems would have still been there

and the problem of disposing of radioactive waste would have been much more intense, but the warming would have been less. There is no politics of the planetary predicament of humans without dealing with issues of climate justice that have to do, profoundly, with the emancipatory aspirations and expectation, and not just fossilized carbon, that still fuel the desire for “growth and development” in the new, populous nations that have now experienced for decades the phenomenon of “mass poverty.” There is nothing morally wrong, as such, with humans wanting to live better and longer, so long as they did not imperil themselves. Besides, while I agree with Latour, de Castro, and others that the consumerist model of capitalist development is unsustainable for most humans, nothing guarantees de Castro’s hope: that a climate disaster resulting in “permanently diminished” human capabilities will give humanity yet another chance at flourishing by making the right use of the accumulated wisdom of the Indigenous non-Moderns. That may or may not come to pass.

Bruno Latour and historian Christophe Bonneuil have helpfully reminded us that there are many ideas about planetarity that circulate at any given time.³⁸ This was as true of the past and as it is of the present. From the pre-historic humans who settled the Pacific Islands thousands of years ago navigating the seas by the night sky to ancient Greek and Indian astrology to peasants’ sayings about seasons, through to the Copernican revolution in the sciences and its consequences: these are all instances of planetary thinking. Bonneuil, borrowing from Hartog’s expression “regimes of historicity,” makes the additional useful suggestion that while there have been different traditions of planetary thinking, there have also been dominant regimes of planetarity – planetary ideas that enjoyed the backing of powers that be in any society.³⁹

One could similarly argue that the “Earth system” that Earth system science speaks of – a planet for which geological and biological processes and histories cannot be thought in complete separation from one another – is a particular way of conceiving of the planet we live on, while there may very well be other competing ways of thinking about the planet (as both Latour and Bonneuil show), ancient, Modern, and non-Modern. I would also happily concede the point that Earth system science, given the role it has played in both positing and explaining the anthropogenic origins of the current episode of planetary warming that the Earth is undergoing, represents a dominant regime of planetarity, given the big-ticket funding that has made this science possible, and the backing it has received from the powerful nations of the world, the United Nations, and various other international organizations. This is also what gives this science a touch of irony. It is a product of the Cold War and is dependent on the technological advances that conflict produced. As Paul Crutzen, the pioneer of the Anthropocene idea in our generation, once said, putting a positive spin on the irony:

Our negative impacts help us to understand the world. My research on our atmosphere has really terrified me. But finally I thought: What would we have known about the atmosphere if it had not been polluted? Because pollution gave us the impetus and triggered the funding to study the workings of the environment.⁴⁰

I would also submit, against those who seem to conflate “scientific knowledge” with the power structures within which scientific research is embedded, that while power structures may very well determine what kinds of knowledge the sciences will produce – a poorly funded climate science may indeed look different (whence follow the politics of funding) – the knowledge produced still must go through the acceptable procedures and protocols of such production. Every consensus in the sciences exists only to be challenged by new research, which is why consensus are much harder won than in the humanities, which in contrast and by its very nature often appears to be a collection of schismatic churches and their conflicting dogma.

What distinguishes “the regime of planetarity” that Earth system science represents is what the singular word *system* suggests. It refers to the way that geology and biology have come to combine in the history of this planet to act like a system supporting the existence of life – complex, multicellular life – on Earth, making it the only “Goldilocks planet” we so far know.⁴¹ This system is not something we can directly perceive or experience even through a telescope; the word *system* here refers to an implicitly heuristic model built on the basis of both observed data and computer modeling, something that seeks to approximate how the Earth system works. Unlike in the case of Indigenous or peasant ideas of planetarity, the idea of the Earth system refers to the roles that parts of the planet that humans have never experienced – the deep seas, for instance, or the ozone layer or the carbon cycles of the planet – play in maintaining its climate system, a system thought of as planetary in scope. Unlike in many other traditions of planetary thinking, Earth system science speaks of time and space on scales that go far beyond what humans can phenomenologically experience. It is for this reason that, read through the findings and propositions of Earth system science, the climate crisis becomes a human encounter with the idea of ourselves as a geological force, an encounter, that is, both with geological deep time and with our entanglement with other forms of life and thus with the geobiological history of the planet. Humanists are still working out the implications of this encounter.

The problem of the “we” is, in fact, the most critical human aspect of our current planetary crisis. There is no one *we* to respond to a planet that is studied by climate scientists as one. If the evidence of human history is anything to go by, there never has been a one *we* of humans. Yet a fallacious aspect of much rational thinking in the humanities is signaled by the constant invoking of a potential *we* of humans as part of conditional solution-proposing statements that take the

form of “If only *we* . . .” Steven Pinker, the well-known devotee of the European Enlightenment and its legacies, is a good case in point. Here is how he explains his “conditional optimism,” faced with the facts of anthropogenic climate change:

Despite a half-century of panic, humanity is not on an irrevocable path to ecological suicide. The fear of resource shortage is misconceived. So is the misanthropic environmentalism that sees modern humans as vile despoilers of a pristine planet. . . . Problems are solvable. That does not mean they will solve themselves, but it does mean that *we* can solve them *if* we sustain the benevolent forces of modernity that have allowed us to solve problems so far, including societal prosperity, wisely regulated markets, international governance, and investments in science and technology.⁴²

Pinker’s conditional optimism leads him to support physicist David Keith’s projects for “moderate, responsive, and temporary” climate engineering designed “only to give humanity breathing space until it eliminates greenhouse gas emissions and brings the CO₂ in the atmosphere back to preindustrial levels.”⁴³ But there is no agreement among even those who study the phenomenon of geoengineering that it will be an unmixed good for humanity. There is, for instance, philosopher Frédéric Neyrat’s considered, humanist, and thoughtful critique of geoengineering that argues for humans acquiring “a capacity for stepping back and regaining some distance [from what they have an impact on]” in a gesture that does not assume a seamless continuity between humans and their “environment.” But will Neyrat’s argument find any more consensus than Pinker’s? One can safely say, “no.” Yet the question of “what is to be done?” will resonate through human thought even as humans remain decisively not-one. This mismatch between the oneness of the planet (IPCC’s assumption) and the not-oneness of humans will keep open the place for decolonial and postcolonial political thought jostling together and around the intensifying problems of anthropogenic climate change.

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- ³ Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. Rodrigo Nunes (Cambridge: Polity, 2017; first published in Portuguese in 2014).
- ⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).
- ⁵ Danowski and de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, 90 (emphasis added).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014; first published in French in 2009).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 48. See also the statement “Anthropology is ready to fully assume its new mission of being the theory/practice of the permanent decolonization of thought.” *Ibid.*, 40.
- ⁹ Danowski and de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, 90. See also de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, chap. 2 and 3, for explication of the ideas of “perspectivism” and “multinaturalism.”
- ¹⁰ De Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 97.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108. In personal conversations, Latour has mentioned to me the influence of Deleuze on his thinking. See also Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993; first published in French in 1991).
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- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109, n. 64.
- ¹⁷ Michel Foucault, “Preface” to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, xiii.
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- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.
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- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 145–146.
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- ³³ Ibid., 94–95.
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- ³⁵ B. R. Ambedkar cited in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000, 2008), 246. See also the discussion in *ibid.*, chap. 2.
- ³⁶ On the genocidal logic of settler-colonial rule, see Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016).
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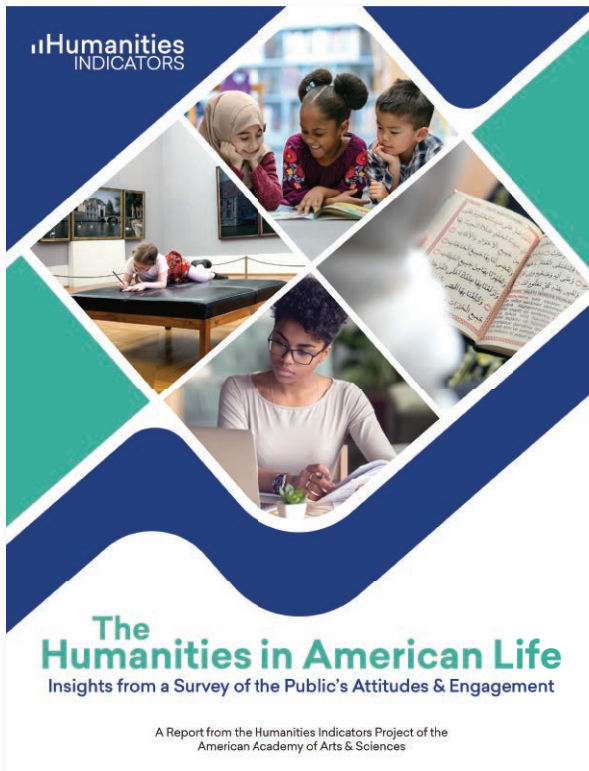
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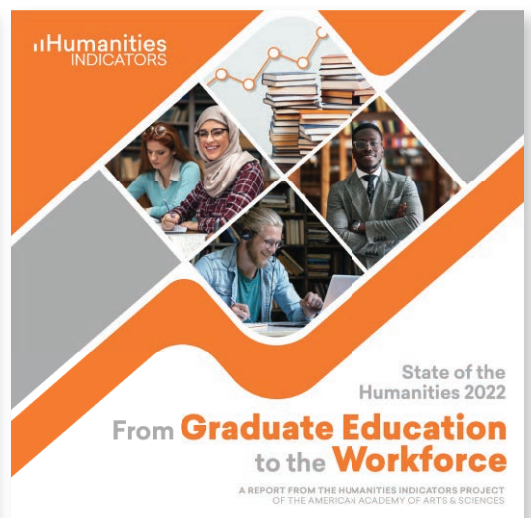
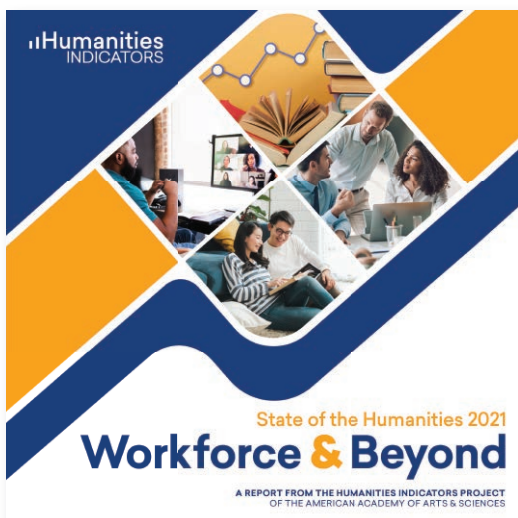
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