

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public Humanities Before Public Humanities

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Abstract

This article makes the case for unearthing a long history of public humanities. The story begins with the very emergence of universities in the United States and continues through key moments where people of color and Indigenous people have shaped the history of public humanities. Risam makes the case against allowing the novelty of the term “public humanities” to erase this history and for resisting cooptation of public humanities by the neoliberal university.

Keywords: public humanities; history of higher education

The term “public humanities” is an important one that aims to legitimize the efforts of scholars today who refuse to let their work be bound by the walls and gates of colleges and universities, who aim to share their knowledge with the world, and even cocreate knowledge with community partners.¹ But public humanities can fall prey to a popular trend in the academy: coining new terms that attribute novel status to age-old practices. At best, the term risks dehistoricizing the work, and at worst, it can erase the unrecognized contributions of minoritized people and obscure the power dynamics behind knowledge-making practices in the humanities². For public humanities, such moves undermine its purpose and undercut its impact. Therefore, it’s high time we recognize the lost history of public humanities.

The humanities in U.S. colleges and universities have always been inseparable from the task of colonizing North America and, eventually, building a new nation. Harvard, William & Mary, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Brown, Rutgers, and Dartmouth are collectively known as the nine “colonial colleges.”³ At face value, the name references the fact that they were founded before the American Revolution began in 1776. But, in their own ways, they were integral to settler colonialism under the British crown and a newly forming United States. Founded in 1636, Harvard emerged from its founders’ goals to “advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches.”⁴ In 1701, Yale was founded through an act by the Governor and General

¹ Smulyan 2020; Wingo et al. 2020; Santana et al. 2023; Fischer-Livne and May-Curry 2024.

² Risam 2019.

³ Thelin 2019.

⁴ Harvard Divinity School n.d.

Assembly of Connecticut, to prepare young people “for Public employment both in Church & Civil State.”⁵ Columbia was chartered by King George II as an Anglican college, while William & Mary was established by royal charter to “train young men for the Anglican ministry, to educate youth in good letters and manners, and to propagate the Christian gospel among the Indians.”⁶ The brainchild of Eleazar Wheelock, Dartmouth was founded to train Indigenous men to be Christian missionaries. Wheelock sent Samson Occom, a Mohegan preacher, to England to raise funds for the college, but by 1771, Wheelock had taken the money, moved to New Hampshire, and established Dartmouth to primarily educate young white men of the colonies as Congregationalist ministers instead.⁷ The colonial colleges were “colonial” in many senses of the term.

As the missions of these institutions suggest, they were foremost engaged in humanistic education: literacy, letters, and religion. The young, white men, usually of some means, who attended were being prepared to assume leadership of religious communities for the colonies and, ultimately, the new nation. Intentions to educate Native Americans were assimilationist in aims, a mission of Christian paternalism integral to colonialism. By virtue of their founding goals, these colleges and universities were not envisioning a humanities constrained within their walls but taken out into the world to be applied—to fashion a government, influence culture, and shape the landscape of power for a settler colony that would transform into a new settler-colonial state. This humanistic mission was supported by the theft of land from Native Americans, profit from slavery in plantations of the Caribbean and the U.S. South, and enslaved labor from Black people⁸ all the while largely excluding them from access to higher education. Regardless of the rhetoric of an “ivory tower,” isolated from the world, the university and the role of the humanities within it has always been *of the world*.

Despite every attempt to limit the rights to literacy and education in the U.S., the humanities have been uncontrollable. They escaped the tight grips of educational systems and found their way into the public, sometimes into the hands of the very people they sought to exclude. This brought great bewilderment at the intellectual capacities of those who were not believed capable of producing humanities knowledge: writing, stories, and unique insights on human experience in multiple genres, from the creative to the critical. An early, powerful example is the case of Phillis Wheatley who was kidnapped and enslaved in West Africa, then purchased by the Wheatley family in Boston. Wheatley learned to read and write from children in the family, then turned her hand to writing poetry. She was emancipated after her volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published in 1773. Some critics simply could not believe that Wheatley, a Black woman, had written the poems herself—that someone who, by virtue of her identity, was less-than-human to them could write poetry. Wheatley was put on trial by eminent colonists, including the Governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson.⁹ This wasn’t just an inquiry into Wheatley’s authorship but an interrogation of her very humanity.

Over time, many people of color and Indigenous people who gained access to humanities knowledge in and beyond colleges and universities used their skills to create opportunities

⁵ Schiff *n.d.*

⁶ College of William and Mary, *n.d.*

⁷ Peyr 1998.

⁸ Wilder 2013; Stein 2022.

⁹ Gates 2023.

for their communities—and to prove that they are, in fact, human. In 1825, Tuscarora artist David Cusick published oral histories of the Haudenosaunee in the book *Sketches of Ancient History of Six Nations*, sharing their history on their own terms. Students at the Female Seminar in the Cherokee Nation began publishing a newspaper called *A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds* in 1854. Countless other Indigenous “firsts” are filled with publications and periodicals, sharing humanities knowledge and creating space for others of the communities to do so.

A first cohort of Black humanities scholars emerged in the 19th century. In 1849, Charles L. Reason, the first Black college professor at a predominantly white institution, was appointed a professor of *belle-letters* at New York Central College, McGrawville, which was founded as an integrated institution. He eventually left to focus on public education reform and abolition. The first Black woman college professor, Sarah Jane Woodson Early, taught English and Latin at Wilberforce University, a historically Black college, as early as 1858. She would go on to become a public school educator and activist. The first Black woman to earn a doctoral degree, Nettie Craig-Asberry, studied music at the Kansas Conservatory of Music and Elocution, earning her PhD in 1883. She subsequently became a music teacher and founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Tacoma, Washington. (Edward Alexander Bouchet, the first Black man to earn a doctoral degree in 1876 studied physics.) They were all committed to moving the humanities from colleges and universities into the world. In 1896, W.E.B. Du Bois became the first Black person to receive a PhD from Harvard. A quintessential public humanist, through his work in and out of the professoriate, Du Bois created opportunities for other Black people to produce humanities knowledge. Well before his work as founding editor of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*, which is well known, Du Bois created several periodicals—*The Moon Illustrated Weekly* (1905–1906) and *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* (1907–1910)—to promote opportunities for Black people to share their writing. Throughout his life, until his death in 1963, Du Bois was not only engaging in public humanities but making it possible for others to participate too.

The efforts of these early scholars reverberated in the emergence of ethnic studies fields in the 1960s and 1970s. The development of new departments in Black studies, Chicano(a) studies, Native American studies, and Asian American studies was inextricable from commitments to communities and activism. The roots of these fields are in community and civic engagement, such as oral history projects to document these communities, service learning with community organizations, and collaborations with K-12 schools.¹⁰ Most critically, these institutional changes were the result of student and faculty demands for curricula that reflected their experiences and valued the knowledge of their communities.

This brief foray into the history of higher education gives truth to the lie that the *humanities* were ever not *public humanities*. And long before there ever was a term for it, people of color and Indigenous people have used their relationships to colleges and universities for community uplift. Yet, their important contributions on both micro and macro, as well as individual and structural, levels, have been overlooked.

Words matter. The term “public humanities” is absolutely essential to making this work, that has been insufficiently valued and evaluated for faculty, visible. Valuing public humanities is especially important because this work is often, still, undertaken by academics

¹⁰ Kwon and Nguyen 2016.

who are minoritized.¹¹ A term like “public humanities” and, indeed, initiatives like this journal are crucial to making it “count.” This is especially important for faculty of color and Indigenous faculty who work in ethnic studies fields, whose research is not taken as seriously because they are interdisciplinary or have an identitarian basis.¹² Like the public humanists of the 19th and 20th centuries, we are still being punished for pursuing this work when it’s relegated to “service” and not recognized as integral to scholarship and teaching. But the recent popularity of public humanities overshadows and erases a long history, and it’s critical that we do not let it effect such erasures.

We must watch out for rhetoric about public humanities “saving” the humanities. At the individual level, we have to be wary of public humanities becoming another way of chasing what Sandy Grande¹³ calls the “inducements” of the university: awards, grants, publications, and other forms of professional recognition. Too frequently, public humanities in these formulations is understood in limited ways, largely mono-directional transmission of the results of our research in op-eds, public essays, and public talks. Of course, there is nothing wrong with sharing ideas in such venues. But there’s another, more critical form of public humanities reflected in the long history of public humanities that I enumerated: actively engaging with community partners in the co-construction of humanistic inquiry. That’s where the *real* power of public humanities lies.

This can be a tough pill for many academics to swallow. After all, we spent years of graduate education being socialized to a system that tells us we are the experts. But expertise lies all around us, beyond the walls of higher education. There are rich possibilities in collaborating with communities, in working together to produce knowledge.¹⁴ To do this, we can look back to the untold history of public humanities and define a commitment to a mode of public humanities that emphasizes multidirectional exchanges of expertise and ideas, and a long-term commitment to building relationships.

Similarly, we also have to be careful about how the visibility of public humanities opens it up to cooptation by the neoliberal university, which undertakes fundraising, promotion, and publicity on the basis of faculty, staff, and students being engaged in the communities around them. It’s easy for our colleges and universities to publish a photograph and write up a news story about those of us undertaking community-engaged work without making any kind of commitment to the communities surrounding an academic institution—or any real commitment to supporting those of us doing this work. As Davarian Baldwin¹⁵ has suggested, colleges and universities have a long, troubling history of extracting resources from the communities around them without giving much back in return.

As higher education institutions continue reckoning with their histories and ongoing complicity of Indigenous dispossession and enslavement, it’s essential to commit to a new, reparative public humanities. This work rejects extractive practices and aims to bring our colleges and universities—and ourselves—in right relation with the communities that have been harmed and commits to unearthing the lost histories of public humanities before public humanities. It begins with investing in the communities to which our institutions are accountable and ensuring that the stories of those who undertook public humanities long before us are heard.

¹¹ Risam 2022.

¹² Holmes 2023.

¹³ Grande 2018.

¹⁴ Santana et al. 2023.

¹⁵ Baldwin 2021.

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