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What Is Public Humanities?

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Abstract

Public humanities happens whenever humanities scholarship interacts with public life. Providing a 10-point typology of public humanities, this article explains why we need the humanities – as individuals and as societies – and narrates some moments when the humanities have changed the world. We discuss the rise of "public humanities," some critiques of the field, and a vision for its future.

Keywords: humanities; public humanities; engaged scholarship; applied humanities; community engagement; civic engagement

Public humanities happens whenever humanities scholarship interacts with public life.[1] The most basic form is interpretive thought and conversation about human creativity and culture. But a typology of public humanities includes at least 10 kinds:

1. **Public-facing academic work**, such as writing, teaching, community events, and social media;

2. **Knowledge derived from practitioners**, such as museum professionals, non-profit workers, librarians, journalists, entrepreneurs, and tech developers;

3. **Humanistic knowledge created through collaboration** among people of various publics;

4. **Data** on the humanities in public;

5. **Activism** informed by humanities research;

6. **Policy** work, both writing and implementation;

7. **Pedagogy** for public humanities;

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[1] Prior to the rise of the term *public humanities*, the field was theorized by scholars like Said 2004 and Butler 2014.

8. **Educational programs** in public humanities – graduate, undergraduate, and continuing education;

9. **The social and economic value of the humanities in public** and of the public humanities in academia;

10. **Histories, theories, and critiques** of the field of public humanities.[2]

The humanities study the things humans make – our art, writings, thoughts, religions, governments, histories, technologies, and societies – helping us understand who we are, what we do, how we do it, why, and with what consequences.[3] For individuals, these studies are tools for living a meaningful life, meeting a basic human need to understand the things that bring us joy and sorrow. For societies, the humanities are a mechanism for progress, the means by which our pursuit of justice is informed by our pursuit of truth.[4]

Thus, humanistic inquiry occurs in all societies, which in turn establish educational institutions to house the humanities, from Plato's Academy in Greece (established 387 BCE), the Library of Alexandria in Egypt (around 331 BCE), and the Imperial University in China (141 BCE) to the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco (859), the University of Bologna in Italy (1088), and the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic (1538). So began the academic humanities, giving structure and support to an organically public endeavor while bringing with them the problems inherent to institutions.

But the humanities frequently surface in public life beyond academia. Paul's Letters and the Qur'an are sacred texts that began as humanities scholarship. Confucianism became state ideology in the Han Dynasty. Philosopher Karl Marx inspired the politics of communism. Thomas Clarkson's grad school paper, "An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African," contributed to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was cited by Suffragettes. Eric Williams's research on the economics of Britain's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 informed his service as the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. Anticolonial psychologist Franz Fanon inspired revolutionaries from Malcom X and Che Guevara to Ali Shariati and Steve Biko. Intersectionality shifted from Kimberlie Crenshaw's legal term in academic journals to an activist praxis ("my feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit"). Philosopher Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance anticipated the rise of preferred pronouns as a social practice. Influential youth activists such as Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, and the survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have drawn upon the core humanities curriculum of their secondary educations.[5]

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[2] For alternate typologies of public humanities, see Fisher n.d. and Fisher-Livne and May-Curry 2024.

[3] This definition comes from Wilson 2023. In this definition, the humanities includes (though is not limited to) the fields of Anthropology, Archeology, Classics, Cultural and Creative Studies, Digital Humanities, Disability Studies, Ethnic Studies, Environmental Studies, Gender Studies, History, Law, Linguistics, Literary Studies, Performing Arts, Philosophy, Postcolonial Studies, Psychology, Queer Studies, Religious Studies, Sociology, Theology, Visual Arts, and Women's Studies.

[4] See Drees 2021 and Nussbaum 2010.

[5] For additional examples, see Bod 2014 and the journal *History of Humanities*, especially Denecke, Forte, and Brown 2024.

The public value of the humanities is evident in the field's impact on individuals, communities, societies, and industries.[6]

- In the 1940s to 1960s, leading agitators for African independence held humanities degrees, including Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, J. F. Ade Ajayi, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka.[7]

- Ninety-seven percent of Australians (aged 15 and above) engaged with the arts in 2022.[8]

- Eighty-four percent of Americans say that history education is just as important as business and engineering.[9]

- The Acropolis in Athens, Greece is so popular that it recently capped visitor numbers at 20,000 per day.[10]

- Leading CEOs often have humanities degrees, including Jack Ma (Alibaba), Susan Wojcicki (YouTube), and Michael Eisner (Walt Disney Company).[11]

- One-hundred and fifty countries unanimously recognized culture as a "global public good" at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Conference in 2022.[12]

- There are more than 50 million jobs in the creative industries globally, generating annual revenues of over $2 trillion.[13]

- Psychologists have shown empirically that engaging in the humanities makes people happier.[14]

Yet news coverage often depicts a "crisis in the humanities" – declining student enrolments, decreased funding, and shuttered departments.[15] That crisis is really only in the academic humanities – the professional fields that operate out of colleges and universities. The public humanities are thriving, if we think about the interpretive thoughts and conversations that happen in our daily lives, on the Internet, at the dinner table, in classrooms, on holidays, at the pub, in houses of worship, on TV, and with our friends.

While the humanities have always informed public life, the term "public humanities" is only about fifty years old.[16] Rooted in U.S. higher education, its earliest mentions relate to funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, established in 1965. Then came the founding of humanities centers in the 1970s (starting with the National Humanities

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[6] See Bate 2011, Small 2014, Benneworth 2015, and Bulaitis 2020.
[7] See Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018.
[8] See Creative Australia 2023.
[9] See Burkholder and Schaffer 2021, 64.
[10] See Liakos and Kolirin 2023.
[11] See Linshi 2015.
[12] See UNESCO 2022.
[13] See Naylor et al. 2021, 9.
[14] See Westgate and Oishi 2022.
[15] See Reitter and Wellmon 2021 and Moran 2022.
[16] See Schroeder 2020.

Center in 1978) and public humanities graduate programs in the 2000s (starting with the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University in 2002). In this genealogy, paradoxically, "public humanities" is an academic endeavor.

This institutional form of the public humanities is open to four critiques:

1. The top-down gifting of knowledge from an educated elite to the unlearned public is a classist inheritance from the Victorian era.

2. The North-American-ness of the field limits less resolutely academic forms of public humanities that exist throughout the rest of the world.

3. In its heavily institutionalized form, public humanities can be more oriented to serving the needs of academics than those of any publics.

4. Not all public humanities is good public humanities.[17]

On this last point, we note that Hitler cited Nietzsche. State propaganda is public humanities; culture wars are public humanities; sages on stages with inflated egos are public humanities. Public humanities is not the answer to all our problems. It's the site of the struggle.

Meanwhile, many of the best instances do not call themselves "public humanities" – as with *The 1619 Project.* This collaboration among *New York Times* journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and academic historians addressed an issue of urgent social concern in the United States by bringing scholarship from the margins of academia to the center of mass media. Historicizing the role of slavery in the foundation of the nation, the project upended the too-simple myth of America's founding fathers as upright patriots resisting the evils of imperialism. Quoting the Declaration of Independence and the clause at the center of America's identity – "that all men are created equal" – Jones observed that "the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of Black people in their midst."[18] Subsequent articles in *The 1619 Project* are informed by rigorous scholarship but written for a wide readership. By actively seizing the reins of power in public communication, *The 1619 Project* sparked national debate about the legacies of slavery, inspired curriculum reform in educational institutions, and inaugurated a culture war in America – all forms of public humanities.

Public humanities is happening when linguist Bolanle Elizabeth Arokoyo creates the first-ever dictionaries for two endangered languages in Nigeria: Olùkùmi and Owé.[19] It is happening when the European group ARCHES – Accessible Resources for Cultural Heritage EcoSystems – uses technology to make museums more accessible to people with disabilities.[20] Public humanities centers the authority of Indigenous scholars and embraces Indigenous intellectual practices to preserve our natural world.[21] Public humanities improves crisis responses, betters healthcare outcomes, and challenges migration policy.[22]

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[17] These critiques come, in part, from Mullen 2016.
[18] See Hannah-Jones 2019a, 2019b.
[19] See Arokoyo 2017 and Arokoyo and Mabodu 2017.
[20] See ARCHES 2020.
[21] See Arias 2018 and Simpson 2021.
[22] For examples, see Scott, Wright, and Bunce 2018, Treadaway et al. 2019, and Bhabha 2018.

The key distinction for public humanities is between doing and thinking – practice and theory – which creates two paradoxes. First, it's entirely possible – even frequent – for people who don't know or care about the term *public humanities* to do things that can aptly be described as public humanities. Second, most of the thinking about public humanities – the theorizing of the field – is done in academic settings that are not themselves public.

Despite strong motivation for individuals and organizations to pursue public humanities, significant barriers exist. Fear of the unknown causes senior scholars to remain within cozy academic enclaves. Junior academics stick to peer-reviewed journals – by academics for academics – because that's what counts for tenure and promotion. Going public risks harassment and abuse, especially for women, queer scholars, and scholars of color. Organizations don't want the risk to institutional reputation that comes with interacting with live social issues. Elsewhere, public humanities become cliquey gated communities closed off to outsiders.[23]

So what comes next?

1. For individuals interested in public humanities, the next step is to learn the skills and strategies of effective mass media communication that take humanities conversations beyond the confines of academia.

2. For institutions committed to public humanities, up next is funding the field – we await the day when every school has a Ronald McDonald Chair of Public Humanities – and restructuring academia's reward system so that scholars have professional incentives to go public.[24]

3. At a societal level, public humanities needs funding codified in government budgets – locally, regionally, and nationally.[25]

With this three-tiered strategy, public humanities promises a future where knowledge about human creativity and culture is more available to more people in more places and at different ages and stages of life, where the field is more representative of the different regions, disciplines, periods, professions, and perspectives of our world, and where public humanities is more thoroughly researched, analyzed, and understood, more widely practiced, better funded, and more concretely impactful in society, bringing individuals, institutions, and nations to better understandings of themselves, the things they have made, and what they might make next.

Jeffrey R. Wilson is the Editor-in-Chief of *Public Humanities* and the author of three books: *Richard III's Bodies from Medieval England to Modernity: Shakespeare and Disability History* (2022), *Shakespeare and Game of Thrones* (2021), and *Shakespeare and Trump* (2020). A Shakespeare scholar at Harvard University, he has been featured on *CNN, NPR, MSNBC, New York Times, Salon, JSTOR Daily, Zocalo Public Square, Academe, CounterPunch*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

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[23] On these risks, see, for example, Cottom 2012.

[24] For starters, see MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Valuing the Public Humanities 2022 and Bulaitis 2024.

[25] This three-tiered strategy is informed by Newfield 2023.

articulation in the humanities in public life. Based at the University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK, Zoe is an interdisciplinary scholar and educator working across liberal arts, creative and cultural studies, and humanities policymaking.

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