THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Theories and Methodologies of Public Humanities

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In 2020, we—the editors of this section of *PMLA*—were invited by the MLA's executive director, Paula Krebs, to serve on an ad hoc committee charged with writing guidelines for the evaluation of public humanities scholarship. Over the next two years, the three of us worked alongside Herman Beavers, Toby Benis, and Christian Rubio, as well as Dennis Looney and Janine Utell at the MLA, reading widely in the emerging scholarship on public humanities, exploring the broad range of scholarly interventions within public humanities (both digital and analog), and engaging in intensive conversations with one another about what public humanities are and how our committee could best advocate for their recognition within academic awards systems, where they are often assessed as "service" rather than "scholarship." The outcome of our work, *Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship in Language and Literature Programs*, offers advice for faculty members and institutions for valuing public humanities scholarship, with a clear focus on the ethics of public humanities (MLA Ad Hoc Committee).

In the course of our conversations, the ad hoc committee observed that public humanities had received little attention in *PMLA*. Only one article, Julie Ellison's guest column, "The New Public Humanists" in 2013, directly addresses the topic, and while the phrase "public humanities" appears in a smattering of articles on other topics, such as public intellectualism and sustainable, digital, and experiential humanities, it had not quite made inroads in the flagship journal in the modern languages (Lemenager and Foote; Dimock; Altschuler and Weimer). Public humanities have been the subject of a landmark issue of *Profession* (Krebs), but not

of *PMLA*. Representation matters—and, conversely, the absence of sustained attention to public humanities in *PMLA* has deprived them of recognition as a critical methodology for knowledge production, informed by and informing theory. Therefore, we, the three editors, decided to propose a special feature on public humanities for the Theories and Methodologies section of *PMLA* with the goal of claiming space for public humanities within the study of modern languages.

We ourselves are scholar-practitioners of public humanities. Roopika has worked with community partners in K–12 education and with community organizations to diversify local storytelling on the North Shore of Massachusetts and address gaps in representation by recovering and promoting the voices of communities of color. Brian was the principal investigator and founding director of the Humanities Collaborative at EPCC-UTEP, a collaboration between El Paso's major research university and its major community college, from 2018 to 2023, and he also worked with Humanities Texas on some of its summer institutes for high school teachers. Araceli runs the South Carolina Centro Latino at the University of South Carolina Upstate, which focuses on interdisciplinary Latinx studies, civic leadership, multilingual public humanities, translation, and community interpreting. Therefore, our editorial work and the vision for public humanities we articulate here are informed by the blend of theory and praxis we employ in our own approaches to public humanities.

Ours is certainly not the first attempt to bring together the collected voices of public humanities practitioners. In recent years, a number of important interventions have sought to define public humanities. *Doing Public Humanities* (2020), edited by Susan Smulyan, combines case studies and theoretical observations, with particular attention to the experiences of students. In *Digital Community Engagement: Partnering Communities with the Academy* (2020), the editors Rebecca Wingo, Jason Heppler, and Paul Schadewald showcase digital projects that positively affect communities, with a focus on reciprocal relationships between university and community partners. More recently, *The Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship* (2024), edited by Daniel Fisher-Livne and Michelle May-Curry, combines chapters examining theory and praxis for public humanities with case studies on lifting community voices, supporting communities, cultural preservation, education, and support for public humanities scholarship. Along with these volumes, Cambridge University Press recently launched the open-access journal *Public Humanities* (where all three of us serve as advisory board members), which aims to connect a broad audience within and beyond higher education and share knowledge (Wilson and Bulaitis). Contributing to these ongoing conversations, this section of *PMLA* aims to articulate a theoretical core for public humanities while urging attention to public humanities methodologies informed by an ethics of care that challenges the often extractive practices that have proliferated in the history of university-community engagement.

But what even are "public humanities"? Among colleagues in the modern languages, the term has many different meanings. In her essay in this section, Devoney Looser focuses on public humanities as a way of disseminating insights from archival research to public audiences. Public humanities as a means of sharing research beyond scholarly communities take many forms, such as publications in magazines and blog posts, op-eds, analog or digital exhibits, and leading discussions or delivering lectures in settings such as public libraries and community centers (Wickman; Fisher-Livne and May-Curry, "Public Humanities"; Cox and Tilton; Johnsen). For other scholar-practitioners, as Beavers and Allen Brizee discuss in their essays, public humanities involve community engagement—collaboration with community partners to produce knowledge together, across the boundaries of "university" and "community." These collective efforts shape the very nature of humanities research, as community partners play a role in crafting research questions, developing and implementing methodologies, interpreting results, and identifying the genres and venues for dissemination as well as who should be able to access the

outcomes of this collaborative research (Burton et al.; Rogers; Kornstein and Barrios; Santana et al.). The outcomes themselves necessarily vary and may take multiple forms intended to reach broad audiences, including reports, public presentations, websites, and even scholarly communications for academic audiences. Between unidirectional sharing of knowledge and multidirectional community engagement is space for imagining and inventing the methodologies of public humanities and the theories they evince.

We use the term *public humanities* here to speak directly to the increasing interest and investment in the concept within the study of modern languages. Such labor, undertaken with multiple audiences in mind—nonacademic communities and those in higher education—is what Araceli calls "a craft and genre in itself" (Hernández-Laroche 17). While the contributors to this section frame their work within public humanities, they also draw on a number of different terms to describe what they do. *Community engagement* is one that figures prominently and implies active collaboration with community partners in the creation of public scholarship (Wingo et al.; Santana et al.; Holmes; Renwick et al.; Haft). *Civic engagement* is a related term, connoting efforts to identify and address issues that matter to civic communities (Heiland and Huber; Woodward; Hauser). Both community engagement and civic engagement intersect with the concept of "service learning," a broad term for integrating community-related work into students' learning experiences. The term *service learning*, however, has been subjected to important critique, namely that the word *service* conjures a charitable or philanthropic model based on colonial power dynamics—that those of us in universities bring the light of knowledge into communities to solve their problems, ignoring the fact that communities have expertise and problem-solving skills of their own (Mitchell and Humphries; Marullo et al.; Stoecker). Frameworks like "critical service learning" aim to resist these power dynamics, but the use of the language of "community engagement," "civic engagement," and "critically engaged civic learning" moves even

further away from the language of "service" (Mitchell; Vincent et al.; Reynolds). These shifts in terminology are important to us and the authors in our section because we aim to emphasize that public humanities work is not only service but also intellectual labor and a site for scholarly production with community partners as our equals.

While the term *public humanities* has gained traction in recent years, the work of public humanities is hardly new. In some narratives, public humanities can be traced back to Ernest L. Boyer's model for scholarship from 1990, which aimed to expand what counts as "scholarship" to include the scholarship of application or engagement—the use of disciplinary expertise in the world beyond scholarly communications. But, as Roopika has argued, public humanities have a long history that dates back more than two centuries to the very first moments that people of color and Indigenous people gained entrance into higher education. In the 1800s, in the early twentieth century, in the 1960s, and still today, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American students and faculty members have undertaken public humanities work to mediate between their educational institutions and their communities—and, crucially, to take advantage of their positions in higher education to improve the lives of their communities (Risam, "Academic Generosity" and "Public Humanities"). We therefore insist on diverse genealogies for public humanities and aim to resist coining new terms, which so easily leads to the erasure of these histories and the theories and methods that have emerged from them.

Our section on public humanities comprises six essays and three roundtables that draw on the experiences of a range of public humanities practitioners. We showcase the voices of faculty members, graduate students, early career scholars, translators and interpreters, and state humanities councils. In the spirit of recognizing that expertise lies far beyond faculty roles in universities, we demonstrate that the theories and methodologies of public humanities are collaboratively generated by all of these practitioners and others, including but not limited to those in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums, as well as technologists, civic

engagement professionals, community partners, and people who are practicing humanistic inquiry to support their communities, even if they do not identify as "public humanists"—such as the members of the more than fifty thousand humanities organizations recognized in the National Inventory of Humanities Organizations ("About"). The contributions in this section collectively articulate theoretical and methodological cornerstones for public humanities: ethics, language, and pedagogy, the methods of partnership, and the very definition of "public." The essays and roundtable comments demonstrate that theory, method, and public humanities are themselves multidirectional.

The "Public" of Public Humanities

Effective public humanities scholarship requires a theoretically grounded articulation of who the "publics" addressed by a project are, while also allowing scholars to theorize the very nature of "publics" themselves. As Looser proposes in her essay for this section, public humanities imply an orientation beyond scholarly communication and toward public-facing work. She makes the case that this work demands a broader understanding of whom archival research is for, arguing that its results and outputs are just as important for an enlarged audience to learn about as they are for scholarly ones. But public humanities necessarily make a critical intervention in the ways that "publics" are conceptualized. Engaging with concepts of "public" theorized by Michael Warner and Mizuko Ito, Elizabeth Coggeshall's essay makes the case for the multiple publics of public humanities, asking the critical question of who the publics called into being by public humanities projects are. She theorizes three modes of engaging with these publics—translational, engaged, and participatory—each defined by a unique methodology, and examines how they are manifested in case studies from public humanities projects in the field of Dante studies.

Brizee likewise theorizes the nature of the "public," linking the very mission of public humanities to the Greek philosopher Isocrates's assertion

that *phrónēsis*, or practical wisdom, and *artē*, or excellence in public life, are achieved through a blend of theory and praxis. Intellectual development, therefore, can be fully realized only by looking beyond the boundaries of academic scholarship and making space for the work that it does in the world. Closing the perceived gap between university and community also entails recognizing that we as scholars are ourselves simultaneously part of various publics, not removed from them. We, like community partners and others who create public humanities scholarship, are in fact part of many publics and even counterpublics, in Warner's figuration (112–14). This is why Eric Touya de Marenne, in his essay, emphasizes the importance of helping students prepare for humanities-informed participation in careers in social sciences and STEM. Given these considerations, the public of public humanities is best understood in multiplicity, determined by interactions with audiences beyond the academy and, crucially, by the ways in which they are addressed by the public humanities scholarship itself—as consumers, as cocreators, and as participants who shape interpretation and meaning.

Partnership as Public Humanities

From a methodological standpoint, there is no public humanities without partnership. The translational approach to publics that both Looser and Coggeshall describe, while unidirectional, nonetheless requires collaboration. Publishing an op-ed or an article involves engaging with the publication venue's editors and copyeditors, who help shape the piece to most effectively communicate with the audience. Sharing archival research through an analog exhibit may require working with librarians, archivists, curators, and graphic designers, among others, while a digital exhibit could require the addition of developers or technologists to the team as well. Beavers's essay in this section describes his long-running public humanities seminar in West Philadelphia, which tackles issues like gentrification and climate through the work of the playwright August Wilson and is made possible only through collaboration with community

organizations. The efforts by Brizee to tell stories about neighborhoods surrounding the universities where he has worked likewise require community consent and involvement. The engaged stance that Coggeshall, Beavers, and Brizee elaborate requires active collaboration on research design, implementation, and dissemination with community partners. The participatory opportunities for partnership that Coggeshall advocates create space for more flexible forms of collaboration that emerge through online participation with networked publics, such as crowdsourcing, transcribing, curating, and interpretation. In every case, public humanities scholarship depends on those connections and interactions.

Partnerships are critical to realizing the intellectual endeavor of public humanities, bringing together (in various permutations) research universities, community colleges, state humanities councils, cultural institutions, K–12 schools, and community activists. Public humanities scholars cannot meet the diverse notion of "public(s)" that we have articulated by simply immersing ourselves in collaborations with other academics or within scholarly communities. The roundtable in this section that Brian moderated with Phoebe Stein, Eric Lupfer, Ashley Beard-Fosnow, Maryse Jayasuriya, and Brandon Johnson highlights the role of state humanities councils in providing a context and model for wide-ranging civic partnerships. Lupfer reflects, for example, on the necessity of such collaborations for the public humanities efforts of Humanities Texas in the wake of the Uvalde massacre, which brought together professors, teachers, archivists, and librarians to respond to public trauma and community loss. In the same vein, Brian Kirby, Vincent C. Martinez, Margaret Nelson-Rodriguez, and Brian Yothers have recently explored the potential of partnerships among community colleges, research universities, and civic and cultural organizations to promote public engagement with the humanities in the United States–Mexico borderlands (Kirby et al.). Partnership is inextricable from the methods for public humanities in general, but especially public humanities efforts that respond to concrete problems facing communities and

incorporate scholars with relevant knowledge into this response, while simultaneously drawing from community expertise.

The Ethics of Public Humanities

As we, along with the other members of the ad hoc committee behind the MLA's guidelines, have argued, public humanities require an ethical stance that opposes the extractive ways universities too often engage with publics—swooping in to gather stories and data that then become the basis of a scholar's claim to fame or a university's claim to serve surrounding communities. Instead, public humanities require changing the methods of research, shifting away from a lone scholar who maintains sole control over the direction of a project to a more collective mindset. Beavers makes the case that public humanities must recognize that communities are sites of knowledge production and must value the lived experiences of people who reside there. He calls attention to the fact that such a commitment to the community may change the ways in which research fulfills its ethical obligations to the community. This necessarily influences the methods of a project—how it's designed and undertaken as well as how it's shared. Employing collaborative methods helps reorient the work of university-community engagement away from the extractive and toward the redistributive, beginning with the question of what communities need (if anything), recognizing their capacity to solve their own problems, and building meaningful, lasting relationships like the ones Beavers outlines. Likewise, as the roundtable Roopika organized with the early career practitioners Cassandra Tanks, Tieanna Graphenreed, Taylor Seaver, and Laurel Grimes demonstrates, the ethics of community care and accountability often run counter to prevailing theories and methodologies, requiring a reimagination of how humanities research might be carried out in collaboration with multiple publics.

The ethics of public humanities have theoretical implications as well. As Américo Mendoza-Mori's essay demonstrates, a well-theorized approach to

public humanities, like his invocation of *ayni* as a theoretical core for Indigenous language recovery, is necessary to realize community goals for linguistic justice. In his essay, Brizee further demonstrates that the practices of public humanities are ripe for theorizing. Offering a framework for participatory, iterative, empirical, and resilient methods of public humanities, Brizee speaks to the harms engendered by failing to embrace a collaborative ethos for public humanities. At their heart, the ethics of public humanities are concerned both with justice for the communities they serve and with acknowledgment of the multiple forms that intellectual labor in humanities fields can take.

The Languages of Public Humanities

Public humanities cannot achieve their promise if the public that they address is presumptively English-speaking. Languages, especially Indigenous languages or national languages that are less frequently taught, have a critical role to play in engaging multiple publics, particularly those that have been historically underrepresented in the academy. In this vein, Mendoza-Mori stresses the value of public humanities for supporting endangered languages. Translation, interpretation, and a robust approach to language instruction are critical components of any truly public praxis in the humanities. The roundtable that Maria Francisco-Montesó at South Carolina Centro Latino hosted with fellow translators and interpreters Lamia Benyoussef, Awa Diagne Lo, Stacy Mosher, and N. Imani Robinson speaks to this essential question of how translation and interpreting, which occur in many industries, are public humanities practices. Within language communities, including English-speaking communities, there is a further need for the translation of complex concepts and research into prose that addresses nonacademic audiences and speaks to the significance of the work that we as public humanities scholars do for our wider communities. Such translation opens up dialogue with the intellectual contributions of journalists, theorists, and writers whose ideas and creativity influence and shape their societies, even when under threat of censorship.

As Looser's essay suggests, we must resist the idea that communicating to multiple audiences is "dumbing down" ideas and recognize, instead, that we—and public audiences—are collectively enriched by the ability to share our ideas more broadly and to have them understood.

Attention to language pierces through silos, liberates intellectual labor from academic constraints, invites the rich contributions of Indigenous and creole philosophies and practices, and breaks down walls between the university and its neighboring communities. This is as true for the participants in the roundtable on translation and interpreting as for those in the early career public humanists panel. Benyoussef, for example, speaks to how she came to the translation of Arabic writing as a way to highlight the gap between the agency that Arab women demonstrate in their writing and the limited agency they are accorded in the United States—for these women, an intervention in language is a mediation of cultural dislocation. Similarly, Grimes discusses the way her language, Chikashshanompa' (the Chickasaw language), contains ontologies and epistemologies that offer a different worldview than that of English. Through a multilingual engagement with the public, from town squares to digital platforms, public humanists cocreate knowledge that may resonate more authentically and democratically for today's increasingly fast-paced and transforming world.

The Pedagogy of Public Humanities

For many public humanities practitioners who work in universities, public humanities are deeply tied to pedagogy. We have, ourselves, incorporated public humanities into our classrooms, giving students the opportunity to engage with community partners, which as Brizee notes in his essay is a high-impact practice. In the broader context of declining humanities enrollments, when students decide what to study, they are making decisions about what they value. They make these decisions in the context of public perceptions of the humanities from family, friends, teachers, career advisers, the media, and politicians. But public humanities

ask them to consider a different set of priorities that puts the community and the common good first, while offering them an opportunity to reflect critically on their own positioning within society.

Pedagogy also offers a path toward enacting the insights of theory. In his essay, Touya de Marenne considers how we as scholars might bring humanistic approaches to economics and other social sciences as a way of preparing students to engage in civic life—by centering the very human elements of race, class, gender, and nationality that will affect the work they do in the world. For him this means thinking through how to negotiate Henry Giroux's theoretical critiques of neoliberal higher education and the purpose of the university by using postcolonial and feminist theory to inculcate a broader sense of civic-mindedness in students in the social sciences and STEM fields. Touya de Marenne's work demonstrates how the lenses that are integral to humanistic inquiry can intervene in other disciplinary contexts to prepare students for futures as public agents of the humanities. If one of the justifications for higher education in general and the study of the humanities in particular is the need for an informed citizenry, then offering students the opportunity to engage with crucial questions that affect their communities through their study of theory and literature is essential to public humanities methods.

The current state of affairs in the United States and other countries around the world that are turning toward authoritarianism and away from critical public engagement makes understanding and creating new theories and methodologies of public humanities all the more urgent. We see this section of *PMLA*, along with the other recent publications in the field, as necessary contributions to situating public humanities work within a scholarly milieu, even as the work itself engages with multiple publics. We hope that our section will contribute to current efforts to theorize public humanities—to assist other practitioners by outlining theoretical, methodological, and, in many cases, multilingual conversations that they can intervene in and draw from. Practically, we also hope that this intervention in theories and methodologies helps public

humanities practitioners within universities make the case that their work should be valued as scholarship in evaluation, reappointment, tenure, and promotion processes. Above all, we firmly believe that the humanities fulfill their most crucial existential function when responding to the needs of the publics in which they are enmeshed, and when they elicit engagement, participation, and a response in return, promoting civic and community engagement especially in times of increasingly polarized public discourse, heightened threats to democracy, and continuing vulnerability of minoritized communities.

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