Theories and Methodologies

Resonant Texts in Noisy Spaces: Approaching the "Publics" of the Public Humanities

ELIZABETH COGGESHALL

Writing for *PMLA* in 1997, Wai Chee Dimock asserted the value of what she called "resonance" for the study of textual reception across time.[1] As a text resounds across times and spaces, emitting its frequencies in and through diverse acoustic chambers, it mixes its original sound with the ambient noises of the spaces through which it echoes. Dimock theorizes that the "noise" (1063) produced by texts as they resonate within and across histories, locales, geographies, languages, and cultures stimulates "a kind of semantic democracy" (1067), inviting various publics into unexpected, unpredictable, and generative dialogue. "Across time," she claims, such texts "become unfixed, unmoored, and thus democratically claimable" (1068).[2]

The implications of such a democratic unmooring of a text's sound continue to unfold as digital access and technologies expand possibilities for communication and reach. Different publics bring different noises, different hearings. These publics are not simply passive, nonacademic masses waiting to absorb received wisdom. Rather, as the contributions gathered in this feature propose, publics ought to be reckoned with as active collaborators in the production of new meaning, often in ways that problematize expertise as such.

Although the public is not the central focus of her argument, when Dimock writes about the "resonance" of texts across time and space, she projects a vision of the public as an active, democratic crowd in a noisy arena of interpretation that extends across history. Much of what she suggests seems to align with Jürgen Habermas's ideal vision of the public sphere, a space that is—theoretically, at least—universally available to all literate people for their participation and debate. But the "public" of a specific text is not coextensive with the public of the public sphere, as Michael Warner discusses.

ELIZABETH COGGESHALL is associate professor of Italian in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at Florida State University. She is the author of *On Amistà: Negotiating Friendship in Dante's Italy* (U of Toronto P, 2023). Since 2012 she has served as an editor (with Arielle Saiber of Johns Hopkins University) of the digital archive *Dante Today: Citings and Sightings of Dante's Works in Contemporary Culture*, and she is at work on a book project on Dante memes.

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A public, as opposed to *the* public, organizes itself around a text, be it written or performed, audio or visual, analog or digital (Warner 51). A public arises not out of association with an institution or place but within a discursive space, composed of relative strangers (55–56) and predicated on attention and interaction (61–62). Publics act and interact historically, in specific moments in time (68), and their engagement—which is subjective, specific, contingent, mediated, and strategic—participates in the transformative world-making of and around texts (81–82).

Warner was writing as digital culture morphed into Web 2.0, ushering in a couple of decades of increased information dynamism and circulation, as well as expanded opportunities for the interaction of many publics with many texts. Warner's advocacy for thinking about individuated *publics* over *the public* is a critical one for the public humanities, particularly in the era of "networked publics," a phrase I borrow from a volume edited by Kazys Varnelis. In the volume's introduction, the comparative media theorist Mizuko Ito justifies the collection's choice of phrase by claiming the following:

> Rather than assume that everyday media engagement is passive or consumptive, the term *publics* foregrounds a more engaged stance. Networked publics takes this further; now publics are communicating more and more through complex networks that are bottom-up, top-down, as well as side-to-side. Publics can be reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception. (2–3)

Within the networked public culture that Ito and the other contributors to the volume describe, the meanings of all texts are subject to a constant (re)negotiation, brought on by the interaction of ever-changing and unpredictable publics that bring their own creative attention to a text's discursive spheres.

The vast and variegated landscapes of public engagement with literary texts are especially important to chart as scholars strive to assert the value of the humanities without recourse to the demands of markets (Butler 41–45). Yet for those of us who work in smaller language disciplines—whose departments often close as enrollments suffer, unless they pivot toward increased investments in vocational training (Looney et al. 432–35)—it is even more imperative to "market" our work by meeting our publics wherever they are, both in and out of the classroom. This is equally salient for disciplines that deal with remote history, which students and broader publics perceive as disconnected from their life experience, a mere curiosity on which they cannot afford to spend their intellectual energies. Even within the landscape of the neoliberal US university, however, certain canonical texts and their authors—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Austen, to name a few—are unexpectedly malleable. Academic and nonacademic audiences alike engage with these hypercanonical texts (to borrow David Damrosch's term [45]) in both formal and informal settings, as often through pop culture adaptations and memes as through direct engagement with the text. For better or worse, the sound of these texts carries farther and longer, allowing them to resonate in more diverse spaces and to broader groups of listeners.

Many readers—following the cues of some authors themselves, who might seek to safeguard their texts' original sound—prefer to eschew the broader resonance of texts across time as mere noise that muffles the authorial voice in the echo chambers of mass culture. Some scholarly methods, like historicism, second this impulse, emphasizing the need to reestablish the context and conditions of production that inform a work so that scholars can better understand its original meaning, whether to its author or to its earliest audiences. I would propose a different approach: that engaging with the wide swath of adaptations, appropriations, memes, mash-ups, and remixes of hypercanonical texts can help scholars value the expertise various publics generate about these objects of their long-standing interest and devotion. Hearing a text resonate through noisy spaces builds its textures and uncovers new harmonies and discordances that enrich the text's sound.

The perennial popularity of texts like *The Odyssey* and *Hamlet* drives mass curiosity about them among global audiences. Whether or not they have read them, audiences feel at least a vague sense of familiarity with them, a testament to the ubiquitous presence of these texts in daily lives and vernaculars, both verbal and visual. In such cases, audiences can be framed as "users" or "fans" who locate in the text an opportunity for creative experimentation and play.[3] Readers, users, and fans alike take up the text for their own purposes, be they intellectual, spiritual, personal, ideological, or out of a sense of obligation to be well read in the so-called classics. Accordingly, public-facing projects that attend to these textual objects take different approaches to the publics that they address. These approaches are instructive for thinking not only about the methodologies of public humanities research but also about who constitutes the "publics" of such research.

When approaching public humanities initiatives, one might naturally consider the why, how, what, where, and when of a project (Looser; Smulyan 124). But the critical question in public humanities is *who*. Who are the publics that public humanities projects call in? How much are they authorized to participate in the public sphere that the project constructs and convenes? The typology that I present here represents three disparate modes of defining and engaging with "publics": translational, engaged, and participatory. I connect each with a case study from the field of Dante studies, which boasts a surprising array of academic projects that seek to address nonacademic audiences. Each of these three modes constructs its public through its framing of expertise and the resulting distribution of knowledge.[4] This disparity points to a set of crucial questions to be raised at the outset of public humanities endeavors: Who are the publics of these projects? How are they organized? How are they addressed? What is their involvement in the creation of knowledge? Are they, to use a Dantean metaphor, pilgrims on a journey of learning and growth, or are they ever afforded the opportunity to step into the role of Virgil?

Of these types, participatory public humanities—wherein the experiences, interests, and expertise of broadly distributed, ever-changing, but specific and active publics shape research outcomes—stand to have the broadest and most innovative impact on received wisdom, especially about a hypercanonical text like Dante's *Commedia*. The example I highlight here is *Dante Today*, a participatory public-facing digital archive of references to Dante and his works across contemporary global cultures, which was founded by Arielle Saiber in 2006 and which I joined as coeditor in 2012. *Dante Today* documents public engagement with Dante and his works across languages, cultures, media formats, genres, and so on. In doing so, we listen in to a transglobal conversation among contemporary artists, writers, and other culture makers who discover the resonance between Dante's world and their own. As we listen, we curate, document, and disseminate these dialogues for students and fans of the poem to explore. Our public is both specific and unknown, active and unpredictable. Working with such an active and unpredictable public loosens the authority of Dante and his academic defenders, acknowledges the work of other culture makers who shape the poem's resonance in contemporary life, and liberates readers to create and extract their own meanings from the vast worlds of the poem.

A Typology of Approaches to the "Public"

The publication of the MLA's *Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Scholarship in Language and Literature Programs* in 2022 marked a critical intervention in the defense of public-facing scholarship, which decenters the university as the unique site of knowledge production (MLA Ad Hoc Committee). The guidelines allude broadly to two different positions scholars can take with respect to their publics: translational and engaged. Translational projects might seek to disseminate humanities research in formats that are more accessible to and digestible by broad publics. In addition to their accessible platforms, such translational projects anticipate a curious and nonspecialist public of invested readers or listeners eager to learn more. These projects, sometimes referred to as "outreach"

activities (Fisher), seek to translate specialized humanities research for general audiences. Through podcasts and websites, lectures and exhibitions, op-eds and blogs, humanities scholars provide enrichment opportunities to audiences beyond traditional academic settings. As Daniel Fisher points out, projects like these tend to rely on unidirectional platforms, although many also create space for audience engagement. Despite their projects' unidirectionality, most practitioners of translational public humanities report that audience feedback informs research and writing because it clarifies the significance of outcomes while maintaining scholarly rigor. Translational projects value the contributions of nonacademic audiences for helping researchers to set aside commonly held scholarly opinions and to see the objects of study with new eyes (Looser).

A prominent example of such translational work in the discipline of Dante studies is the website *Digital Dante*, led by the eminent *dantista* Teodolinda Barolini of Columbia University. *Digital Dante* offers opportunities for deeper engagement to readers both within university settings and beyond. The *Commento Baroliniano*, one of the site's principal features, presents short, readable, canto-by-canto commentaries by Barolini that highlight historicizing textual methodologies while articulating research in approachable terms and connecting it to contemporary concerns. The site also includes video lectures from Barolini's Dante seminar, as well as multimedia essays on topics related to the poem's images, sounds, history, and text. These features translate Barolini's work—and the work of her collaborators—for audiences seeking a framework to aid them through their reading.

While the public of a translational project like *Digital Dante* is not entirely predictable, one can expect that its user base organizes itself around certain commonalities. Generally, *Digital Dante* users are readers of the poem, seeking support for their reading because of a curiosity that has not been met by their chosen editions. One can presume their demographic diversity, but regardless of identity or background they share a common level of readerly sophistication and thoughtfulness. They look to the expert guidance of the project's director—a well-respected senior scholar and a former president of the Dante Society of America, whose contributions to the field are many and noteworthy and whose position at an elite private university is highly visible. Users might question the specific interpretations she offers, but they nevertheless trust and value her mastery. Research outcomes are not strictly unidirectional, and the site's readers may well provide feedback that could be incorporated as pages are updated. But there is no formal mechanism for feedback, as there would be in a live Q and A session or comment space, so feedback is casual, iterative, and circumstantial. Audiences in translational projects are called in as fellow pilgrims, but they could not be mistaken for guides; the expert serves decidedly in the stead of Dante's Virgil.

The MLA guidelines also point to engagement projects that take a hands-on, collaborative approach to their publics. Researchers on these projects engage in publicly oriented practices that center on care, support, advocacy, and intervention for and with local communities who can benefit from the multilingual expertise, cultural sensitivity, and global awareness of humanities professionals. Engaged public humanities move beyond translation into activism, as researchers collaborate with local partners to put their scholarly and linguistic expertise to work in the service of social justice and equity.

Engaged projects differ from translational ones in that they are driven by local, community-based efforts to put specialized knowledge to work; to raise awareness of conflict, inequity, or injustice; and to mobilize change. Engaged public humanities work combines academic skill sets with the expertise of nonacademic specialists, involving community partners in direct collaboration.[5] Projects like these advance causes that would promote the well-being or visibility of underrepresented communities, present narratives that run counter to existing power dynamics, and "put history to work in ways that require us to align ourselves with the people we serve" (Meringolo et al. 95).

Again, Dante studies produces examples of engaged projects that pair academics with

community partners to promote justice, equity, and inclusiveness. One might think of the collaboration between Ronald Jenkins, a professor of theater at Wesleyan University, and BL Shirelle and Naomi Wilson, two formerly incarcerated women who use music to disseminate knowledge about and advocate for change within the US prison system. Jenkins has long taught Dante's poem in theater workshops in both men's and women's prisons across the United States, Italy, and Indonesia. Jenkins and his university students collaborate with currently and formerly incarcerated artists, bringing together audiences in and around the university with audiences in Connecticut prisons to read Dante's poem as a way of illuminating the *selva oscura* ("dark wood") of personal experience. Through this work he met Wilson, a gospel singer, and Shirelle, a rapper and producer, who have begun working with Jenkins to create performances that interpret their experiences through the lens of Dante's allegory. The most recent performance, "Incarcerated Stories: Documenting In/Justice," draws connections between Dante's poetry and that of Shirelle and Wilson, as they uncover the resonances between Dante's pilgrimage through hell and their own embodied encounters with infernal spaces. Jenkins and the artists learn from one another, each serving in their turn as Virgil to a learning pilgrim.

Digital Dante and "Incarcerated Stories" both involve *dantisti* who bring their expertise out of ivory towers and into public forums. But the publics they engage are not the same—one is dispersed, unknown, and passive; the other specific, known, and active. Their approaches to each of their publics differ significantly in their respective framing of expertise, in their transmission and feedback mechanisms, and in the very way they conceptualize the public whom their work engages.

If translational work anticipates a wide and open audience ready to learn, and engaged work brings together small cohorts to effect change, a final, third approach incorporates elements of both: participatory public humanities projects, which rely on the participation of specific but unpredictable publics for contributions to the outcomes of research. Participatory projects do not emphasize communicating specialized research to general audiences, nor are they necessarily aimed at commitments that advance political or social change. By contrast, participatory projects invite audiences to take part in and shape the interpretive and meaning-making processes of humanistic inquiry, with intellectual goals that change depending on the public that emerges to take part. Much like the archives that Devoney Looser describes in her contribution to this feature, these projects are exploratory and bidirectional. Participation can take many forms: documenting, submitting, curating, transcribing, editing, interpreting, and creating. Many participatory projects rely on crowdsourcing, which allows for specific but unpredictable publics to emerge in response to the project's call. As Warner has claimed about publics more broadly, the project's public is called into being by its very participation. It is the work itself that makes the public.

Dante Today

In Dante studies, the digital archival project *Dante Today: Citings and Sightings of Dante and His Works in Contemporary Culture* typifies the participatory model.[6] *Dante Today* has been online since 2006, when Saiber founded the site at Bowdoin College. At the time, Saiber envisioned taking the small collection of newspaper clippings, web links, and material artifacts that students, colleagues, and friends had brought her over the years, moving them out of a filing cabinet, and posting them to a digital archival space. With the assistance of the Bowdoin IT developer David Israel, Saiber created *Dante Today*, a *WordPress* site that was until recently housed on Bowdoin College's servers (both Saiber and the site have since moved to Johns Hopkins University).

From the start, crowdsourcing was the collection's central growth mechanism.[7] This was part of the ethos of participatory digital activity in 2006: in fact, the site was founded in the same year that the word *crowdsource* was coined.[8] To develop the early collection, Saiber relied on a small but steadfast

audience of Dante connoisseurs—including many of her students, but also a handful of nonacademic fans. Now, the *Dante Today* collection has reached over 2,200 artifacts, all referencing Dante and his works across twentieth- and twenty-first-century global cultures. In addition to artifacts from our own research, we receive submissions from a host of contributors: students (both in higher education programs and in high schools), scholars, artists, writers, musicians, curators, filmmakers, producers, and marketers, all of whom contribute their suggestions for new posts through our "Submit a Citing" form. Our project aims not to instruct a broad public in Dante's work, unlocking meaning for nonspecialist readers. Instead, we aim to explore the edges of the worlds that Dante brought into being—worlds that have expanded far beyond his expectations for them, thanks to the unpredictable and creative interactions of the many publics that have engaged with his works across time and space. This exploratory mission would be impossible without the contributions of a wide base of "fans" of the poem, who act as Virgils to our research team and our users, the learning pilgrims.

Intellectual currents of the day informed and continue to inform our practice as curators of a digital public archive. We begin from premises advocated by John Fiske, who advises that the work of the popular analyst is "to investigate what traditional critics ignore or denigrate in popular texts, and to concentrate on those texts that have either escaped critical attention altogether or have been noticed only to be denigrated" (*Understanding* 85). Theories of fandom, participation, and media convergence, in particular, illuminate the processes by which the artifacts in our collection emerge and circulate in and across networked culture, as do the principles of reading popular culture advocated by media theorists like Fiske and Henry Jenkins.[9] Over the past three decades Jenkins has sought to shed light on informal means of participation in culture making by groups at the margins: fans primarily, but also creators who straddle the boundary between consumption and production of new media. He understands this participation as an output of media convergence, which he describes not as a technological shift but as a cultural one, "as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (*Convergence Culture* 3). One might first and foremost think of the authors of fan fictions or producers of pop adaptations of literary texts, like the many self-insert novels, poems, and graphic novels documented on our site. But *Dante Today* and its many collaborators encourage us also to think about forms of cultural production that are even more marginal to literary scholarship, such as memes, blog posts, personal reflections, creative translations, fan art, videos, and other peer-to-peer shareable media. Together, these artifacts and their producers participate in the process of shaping our general cultural understanding of a work and its afterlives outside the boundaries of what scholars might have to say about it.

Beyond their value as a recruitment device for underenrolled programs, these popular texts also stand as counterweights to the prevailing discourse about the poem, which would hold the *Divine Comedy* up as a monument of supreme moral and intellectual authority, a relic in the tradition of Great (European) Books.[10] We see the poem differently: for us it is a living document that initiates dialogue. A significant thrust of our activity has been to elevate alternative voices into the conversation on the *Divine Comedy*, permitting those voices to resonate as they may. By doing so, not only do we expand the canon, we also subvert the poet's stringent expectations of meaning, loosening the tight grip Dante sought to maintain over his own poem and its interpretation.

Our public's knowledge is essential to our efforts. While we might stumble across artifacts through haphazard search mechanisms, the direct intervention of other fans of Dante's works steers us away from our conventional academic biases to show us meanings that we hadn't previously conceived. Consider, for example, the Irish singer-songwriter Hozier's reinterpretation of Dante's depiction of gluttony as a warmongering, consumptive impulse that lays waste to younger generations in favor of satisfying its own insatiable need, a meaning further elaborated by bloggers, Redditors,

and students in our classrooms.[11] Contributions like these allow us to see alternative resonances that change across times and spaces, which, as Dimock might say, make the text "sound" differently. As Dimock claims, "the 'object' of literary studies is thus an object with an unstable ontology, since a text can resonate only insofar as it is touched by the effects of its travels" (1061). Collectively, the contributions of our public help us capture the dynamic range of the text's meanings, through seven hundred years and several continents of travels. This is not a matter of extraction, as Herman Beavers cautions against in his contribution to this feature. Rather, it is a practice of justice, equity, and access as we create space for a broad but unpredictable public to tell its own stories of the poem's resonance.

Engaging with Unpredictable Publics

In 2008, Adrienne Russell, Ito, Todd Richmond, and Marc Tuters theorized what they described as "emergent networked public culture" (Russell et al. 49). In 2025, networked public culture has more fully taken form: peer-to-peer distribution, social networking, and streaming platforms (featuring both amateur and commercial productions) have emerged as competitors to more traditional forms of culture craft. In the wake of what Jenkins has dubbed "media convergence" in networked culture (*Convergence Culture* 2), wherein top-down networks of cultural mediation are increasingly complemented—and disrupted—by peer-to-peer sharing, new countercanons develop alongside the hypercanonical works of ages past.[12] Amateur culture makers may not threaten to supersede canonical authors, but their production provides a necessary counterpart to traditional modes of interpreting the canon. As Russell and her coauthors comment, "Taken together these new ways of making and sharing culture have broad ramifications for the fundamental relations between production and consumption and the traditional sources of authority for culture and knowledge" (49). The participation of publics in public humanities projects—publics that are called into being by that very participation—invites new culture makers into dialogue with researchers and productively disrupts traditional lines of authority.

To apply these lines of networked thinking and disrupted authority to our project, the artifacts gathered in *Dante Today* serve not as mere confirmations of the aesthetic and moral worth of the original. Rather, they reveal sites where the values that the poem has come to represent are contested. Our crowd-built archive counterbalances prevailing intellectual discourse about Dante's works. It is a form of on-the-ground research, understanding not only where, how, and why Dante enters into contemporary culture and its conversations, but especially who is involved in these conversations and who is setting the terms.

Expanding the boundaries of "expertise" in ways that welcome more participants into the dialogue also creates opportunities for us to grapple with other forms of cultural, political, religious, and ideological authority that compete with scholarly ones—and with our own personal convictions. This can create some cognitive dissonance for Saiber and me, as we balance the objective presentation of artifacts with our role as curators of the collection. When, for example, in January 2023 the Italian minister of culture Gennaro Sangiuliano referred to Dante as the "fondatore del pensiero di destra" ("founder of right-wing thinking"; qtd. in Salvia), we—Dante students, scholars, and fans—need to understand the trajectories that allowed that sentiment to rise to the top of Italian nationalist discourses. Equally, we need to see how Pope Francis could, in 2021, identify in Dante a "prophet of hope" who "champions the dignity and freedom of each human being." For James Baldwin, Dante's name signaled the alienation of a Black man from the canons of European thought, to which the Swiss villagers he observed were intrinsically tied: "The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo" (169). For Cornel West, Dante is a keen observer of "the centrality of the funk," a companion to the "existential and intellectual excavators [who can] get beneath the deodorized discourses, the sanitized lies, and the

sterilized crimes that's dehumanizing" Black Americans (01:04:48–05:20). If Dante sits comfortably in each of these identities in the public eye, it is crucial for students, scholars, fans, and broader publics to not only listen to but also participate in the many conversations that have interpreted his work in these ways. In these conversations, multiple, localized Dantes make their voices heard.

There is no single "public" that public humanities projects tap into. Instead, multiple and competing publics organize in response to calls for participation. They might be held together by a common interest or stake, a common question or concern. But their participation might be informed by different local environments, different ideological considerations, different backgrounds or abilities, different perspectives and knowledges. These many and diverse publics are noisy, and it is easy to shut out their noise as distracting from the clarion call of a text's original sound. But, as Dimock's theory of resonance maintains, texts that travel across times and spaces are unstable, and in their instability lie multiple invitations to intimate dialogue, creating space for conversation in a vast literary public square. The task of the public humanist, then, is to listen, and allow others to do the same.

Notes

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1. On Dimock's "theory of resonance," see Coggeshall, "Discussing" and "*Dante Today*."

2. On the limitations of the democratizing possibilities of resonance, see Coggeshall, "Discussing."

3. On the distinction between "users" and "readers," see Fazel and Geddes; Dow and Hanson. On "fans" and "fandom," see, among others, Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* and *Fans*; Jenkins et al.

4. See also Devoney Looser's similar claims about archival work in her contribution in this issue of *PMLA*.

5. See the discussions in Brennan; Fisher; Meringolo et al.

6. At the time of writing this essay, we are in the process of migrating the archive to a new, custom-built website, designed by the firm Studio Rainwater. As of January 2025, the *Dante Today* archive can be found at www.dantetoday.org.

7. On *Dante Today*'s use of crowdsourcing and the pitfalls associated with it, see Coggeshall, "Discussing."

8. For a basic theoretical introduction to crowdsourcing, see Brabham. On crowdsourcing in the sphere of cultural heritage, see Ridge; Terras.

9. On fandom and participatory culture, see Jenkins, *Fans*. On media convergence, see Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Jenkins et al. On reading and interpreting popular culture, see Fiske's influential volumes *Reading the Popular* and *Understanding Popular Culture*.

10. Sharp criticism of this interpretive tendency is offered by Harrison; Steinberg.

11. The song, "Eat Your Young," appears as the sixth track on Hozier's 2023 album *Unreal, Unearth*, a concept album inspired by and reinterpreting the nine circles of Dante's hell. The EP *Eat Your Young* was released in March 2023, followed by the full album in August.

12. The terms "countercanon" and "hypercanon" come from Damrosch 45.

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