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Humanities at the center: Insights from building a public humanities program

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Abstract

This essay uses the experience of building a new public humanities program to explore approaches for revitalizing the field. While public humanities scholars have recently focused much of their attention on the "public" part of the public humanities, in the day-to-day institutional context the lack of attention on the "humanities" part can lead to problematic consequences for demonstrating their value. By exploring how the humanities are both lost and found in the different pieces of our nascent program, we argue that the best way to build lasting interdisciplinary and campus-community bridges—and assert the humanities' vitality—is to rebalance so that we're placing just as much on emphasis on the practice of the humanities as on the engagement of the public.

Keywords

Public humanities, humanities crisis, humanities revitalization, engaged humanities, humanities programs, undergraduate research

Introduction

The question of how best to showcase the value of the humanities may be a perennial favorite of pundits and scholars alike, but for those of us trying to build new humanities programs, it's one that takes on a particularly urgent flavor. Anyone who even casually follows the ubiquitous "humanities crisis" genre knows that the arguments for the field's value swing back and forth with regularity, often hinging on assertions of timeless beauty and truth or current marketable skills and utility. While these arguments reliably produce

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fodder for political and intellectual debates, we can't help but notice that they rarely generate applicable insights for those of us interested in pragmatic solutions to everyday institutional challenges. Why not reverse this tendency toward wide-angle theoretical takes on the humanities and center instead those day-to-day programmatic challenges in order to develop better understandings of how to revive and grow the field? This essay is our attempt to do that by thinking through the experience of developing a new public humanities program at our institution.

Given the oversaturation, in both popular and academic outlets, of the question of how best to revitalize the humanities, those pieces that tread productive new ground stand out all the more. Case in point: two recent entries published just a week apart in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* widen the horizon of the genre to reveal a broader crossroads, one that has resonance for building new humanities programs. In "The Humanities Must Go on the Offensive," Karen E. Spierling argues for an unapologetic centering of the humanities to replace the reactive defenses that kneecap the field's power. According to Spierling, humanists need to get their chins out of the dirt, quit groveling about skills and employment statistics, and instead make the full-throated argument that "there is no functioning, stable, globalized world of the future without the humanities" (Spierling, 2019: 4). Spierling calls for insisting on the humanities' value for "understanding other people, places, and societies" and the necessity of that understanding to the social, economic, and political stability of individuals and cultures—hardly new ground for anyone familiar with the genre (4). But it's the unapologetic, assertive tone that's notable; no defensive crouch here, no point-by-point refutation of all the spurious "zombie" beliefs about the humanities, a term Michael Bérubé coined for the uncanny way that certain false ideas about the field survive despite ample evidence to the contrary (Bérubé, 2011: 99). For Spierling, the humanities simply must be central to the work of any healthy university and society, and so any defense of them must start from this unequivocal positioning of the field at the core of intellectual advancement.

Less than a week earlier, Jeffrey J. Williams had argued that any hope of making the humanities this type of centerpiece might be futile because the field's true growth was already taking place through their connection to other disciplines. While the humanities writ large might be shrinking, he writes, new hybrid-humanities fields built on interdisciplinary exchange with other disciplines, and especially STEM and the professional fields, are growing and quickly gaining institutional support. These new hybrids include digital humanities, medical humanities, environmental humanities, and of particular interest to us, public humanities. While the prospect of a growing humanities might be initially alluring, Williams warns that what might seem like "evolutionary progress" for the field may in fact be something more like a trap, in which the humanities enter into relationships with other fields on unequal footing, thus becoming "valued only insofar as they link with and augment those other disciplines" (Williams, 2019: B16). The "applied disciplines," as he calls them, may come to dictate the terms of the work, the questions that get asked, and the scope of exploration, to the point that the humanities occupy an ever-smaller space in the partnership: "In their effort to accommodate other disciplines, the humanities themselves may be co-opted and lose the very critical independence that defines them" (Williams, 2019: B16). While Spierling argues unabashedly for the

centrality of the humanities to both higher education and the wider world, Williams suggests that true growth will lie in hybrid partnerships that, in an ironic twist, may finally bring that much sought-after value to the humanities by draining them of their unique perspectives and powers.

In two years of getting a public humanities program off the ground at our own relatively small institution, we have found ourselves navigating questions that line up quite neatly with the promise and perils that Spierling and Williams outline. First, a brief description of the program can provide context. The Public Research Fellows (or PRF; more on the name later) was born out of the Humanities Collaborative, a group of faculty interested in revitalizing the humanities at the University of Portland (an institution dominated by our College of Arts and Sciences but which also has professional schools of business, education, engineering, and nursing). We organized the program on an undergraduate research model, supporting faculty and student fellows in developing projects related to an annual theme. Throughout the program year, student fellows take a reading course in public humanities methods to learn how to connect their research to a wider public and to collaborate on implementation. Our first annual theme was the Women's Suffrage Centennial, which was to culminate in a March 2020 symposium that would bring community members to campus to interact with fellows' projects, participate in a roundtable with local elected officials, and attend a keynote address by a public intellectual (Brittney Cooper). Although the pandemic intervened, we survived the remote pivot and successfully ran Year 2 in an entirely online format, with the theme of Displacement and Justice and nearly double the number of faculty and student fellows.

As co-founders and coordinators of PRF, we've been struck to discover how a program built to promote and bolster the humanities can at times obscure their place or purpose—an ironic outcome that we think is also reflected in broader revitalization efforts. One key marker of our program's success has been the support and participation of colleagues and students from non-humanities disciplines—from the hearty financial support of our former Dean (a math professor) to the fact that nearly half of the faculty and students who've served as fellows have been from the sciences or social sciences. All of these have signed on eagerly to the "public" portion of PRF, with projects ranging from podcasts to interactive maps to voter guides. Yet the "humanities" piece has often felt lost in the shuffle, which brings us to wonder how much emphasis should be placed on that second half of the term "public humanities"? Is it important to insist upon the humanities' centrality in programs like ours, or is the dispersal of the humanities across fields evidence of their power? In thinking through our work for the purposes of this essay—in exploring how the humanities have or haven't shown up in the program's founding, in the reading course, in one sample project, and in our efforts at community engagement—we've come to realize that we will be most likely to convince others of the utility and distinctiveness of the humanities when we get them to engage in the humanities as *practice,* particularly when treading on ground and when working with people outside of traditional humanities content. That is, in efforts to revitalize the humanities, we may need to strike a balance between Spierling's commitment to doubling down on the humanities as useful because central and Williams's suggestion that the humanities are viewed as central only when serving as bridge to other domains. In what follows, we foreground our own

programmatic challenges and discoveries to explore how centering the humanities depends on helping others *experience* them, even and especially in the important work of "bridging" that the public humanities is best at undertaking.

Public humanities/public vs. humanities

The question of the place of the humanities in a humanities-based program may seem like a tautological one, but the evolution of public-humanities discourse has indeed brought us to this point. Of course, the public humanities as field initially developed in large part as a means of asserting the humanities' vitality against the familiar narratives of crisis and irrelevance. Pushing back against claims of the humanities' lack of real-world import, early public humanities thinkers asserted that the humanities were in fact essential tools for engaged public life. As Sylvia Gale and Evan Carton put it in 2005, "[t]he best way to argue for the relevance of the humanities is not to keep asserting its value to but demonstrate what it is capable of doing, within, across, and beyond the university's walls" (Gale and Carton, 2005: 44). To commit to a vision of the humanities as truly public was, in this line of thinking, to emphasize practice—or, Gale and Carton continue, to "construct [them] less as a circumscribed and endangered resource, or as a rarefied province whose few residents occasionally invite others to enter on guest passes, than as a common site and practical instrument of social production" (Gale and Carton, 2005: 40). We can recognize here notes quite similar to those sounded by Spierling in her argument that far from being the instruments of the ivory tower alone, the humanities form a necessary ingredient for any "functioning, globalized, stable world."

Having established the vital role of the humanities outside the university gates, the work of defining the "public humanities" often turns to pinning down what we mean by the "public" part of the term. For Gale and Carton, foregrounding the public requires involving non-academics in the work of not just "interrogating social arrangements but [also] *making* them" (Gale and Carton, 2005: 39). A manifestation of this shift is to broaden public humanities practice beyond the top-down standard of the public lecture ("outreach," Gale and Carton argue, "is the wrong paradigm for the humanities' future" (Gale and Carton, 2005: 40)) and toward a more mutually enriching engagement in which campuses and communities form authentic and lasting partnerships. In these partnerships, as Jennifer Balengee articulates in a public humanities forum on *Post 45*, "the idea of *exchange* is key: disrupting hierarchies, recognizing difference, and responding to the address of another" (Balengee, 2019). Relatedly, in her piece "Doors, Departments and the Public Humanities," Julie Ellison puts aside the model of scholars addressing the public in favor of positioning the humanities "across sectors"; this kind of work, she continues, "is not generally *about* the humanities…in other words, its primary goal is not appreciation of and involvement in the humanities per se" (Ellison, 2014).

Hard to miss in this series of articulations is how attempts to specify and deepen our sense of the term "public" tend to subordinate—sometimes unintentionally, though sometimes, it seems, quite purposefully—what's particular about the humanities. At times, the work of connecting with various public constituencies requires putting the specifics of humanities inquiry on the back burner. But for some, this relaxing of the term

is precisely the aim. As Evan Carton puts it, the public humanities can form a necessary corrective to the way that "humanities" has traditionally represented a particular set of disciplines in the academy and has thus "circumscribe[d] the circle of who and what counts" (Bott, 2009: 12). The energy of the work of conceiving the public humanities as well as putting them into practice, for Carton and others, has thus been toward opening that circle back up; and in Ricardo Ortiz's framing, "the question of what constitutes public humanities practice should *remain* productively open" (Ortiz, 2019; emphasis added).

Yet when we continue to put our efforts toward rightly constructing and opening up the "public" side of the public humanities, might we obscure and dilute the very set of ideals and practices that got us excited about this work in the first place? What does it look like to have a public humanities that is "not generally *about* the humanities," to use Ellison's phrase again? In our day-to-day work of developing our public humanities program at UP, we've found ourselves challenged by this question. It's disorienting and even a little embarrassing, sometimes, to throw around the term "humanities" and not always have others know what you mean (or even to be unsure yourself)—and to wonder if you're even doing humanities work. To refer back to Carton's language: to keep the term and its practices meaningful, don't we need to "circumscribe" just a little? Don't some ideas or approaches or methods or practices not count as humanities; or, at least, do some count a little more than others? And in the end, doesn't the value of the public humanities depend on its being, in fact, *about* the humanities?

Another way of telling the story of the vulnerability that might emerge from a broad opening or subordination of the term "humanities" comes out of our experience building and gaining support for our fledgling program. Two years ago, we worked closely with the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at our university who had pledged financial support to get the program off the ground. One aspect of the program we debated at some length was its name. Here's a list of program titles we cycled through:

Humanities Center

Humanities Fellows

Humanities Research Fellows

Public Humanities Research Fellows

CAS Fellows

Public Research Fellows

What you can see from this chronological listing of titles considered and discarded—the last one being the title we settled on—is how the "humanities" was ultimately sidelined as a term. Our then-Dean, a professor of mathematics, pressed us to scuttle the word in the title as a strategy for making the program sound more inclusive to faculty and students outside of humanities disciplines. We have indeed attracted more faculty and students from outside than from inside humanities departments and majors, but would

they have declined to participate had the title more directly highlighted the humanities? And as PRF has gained more name recognition and gets institutionalized on our campus, it's odd and a bit dispiriting to have our growing public humanities program obscure its humanities origins—in its title, at least.

A second anecdote is also telling. We recently applied for an NEH Humanities Connections grant to help us build and expand the PRF program at UP, and in the process of drafting, we solicited feedback from an NEH program officer. The central critique the program officer made of our proposal-in-process was that it didn't do enough to demonstrate how the program would deploy humanities ideas, practices, faculty, and courses as connective in nature. Indeed, the granting criteria had stated a preference for work that "foster[s] productive partnerships among humanities faculty and their counterparts in the social and natural sciences and in pre-service or professional programs…in order to encourage and develop new integrative learning opportunities for students." In his feedback, the program officer referred to this criterion and went on to say: "It is perfectly fine that your project seeks to revitalize the humanities at your institution, but if there is not intentional engagement and integration with non-humanities disciplines the proposal will not be competitive." This anecdote is less about the pressures the "public" places on the humanities, but equally demonstrates how attempts to revivify the humanities in their own right can be undercut by even the institutions that are built to support them. The question we arrive at is: must the humanities' relevance be proven only by subordinating their role, diluting their specificity, or channeling them into the role of mere connector? And if so, what happens to the humanities in the long run?

Locating the humanities in the PRF course

Jen McDaneld

The humanities seem to be particularly adept at slipping into the background, and so far, we've harnessed that quality as a tool in building a broad-based, interdisciplinary program. But this structure may also contribute to the very narratives about the humanities that the program originally aimed to undo. When we developed PRF on the undergraduate research model, we included a public humanities reading course that all student fellows would take. As a co-director of the program, I created the course and have now taught two iterations of it. Titled "Introduction to Public Humanities: Theory and Practice" and meeting once a week, the course provides a place for students to come together to learn about public humanities methods and discuss their own efforts in using them to develop publicly-engaged research projects. In the fall, students first read about the "crisis" of the humanities and its corollary, the crisis of higher education more broadly, in order to place the evolution of the public humanities movement. The spring term functions more like a workshop, when we shift from developing foundations to honing projects. In year 1 the course enrolled 11 student fellows; in year 2 enrollment grew to 19. Students range from sophomores to seniors and from majors across the university, including Theater, International Languages, History, Music, and English but also Political Science, Math, Business, Biology, Psychology, and Chemistry.

My experience with the course suggests that having prioritized building an inclusive structure that draws a wide field of participants and projects (leaving the question of the humanities "productively open," to put it in Ortiz's terms), we may now need to re-establish an equilibrium between this openness, on the one hand, and centering the humanities, on the other. Productive openness, it turns out, may not be all that productive when it comes to achieving the program's original objectives and in fact may reproduce narratives of the field's lack of utility in the "real world." A brief return to the founding documents of PRF helps get at these tensions. The program originated within the Humanities Collaborative, a loose consortium of faculty interested in revitalizing the humanities on UP's campus. In the group's founding manifesto, the Collaborative proposed to "make space for Humanities-related conversation and creative exploration at UP" and "convey to the UP community the central place of the Humanities in university education" in order to "assert the vitality, relevance, and necessity of the Humanities in all aspects of our lived experience" and "cultivate deep support for and promotion of the Humanities." Those may be lofty goals that no program could be expected to achieve in just two years, but it's worth asking whether our focus on attracting interdisciplinary collaboration, on the one hand, and on the "public" side of the public humanities, on the other, has led us on a path from which they can't be possibly reached.

A closer look at the course syllabus offers an example of this problem. In an effort to make the course appealing and legible to students from a wide array of fields, I constructed an overview that hinges less on what the public humanities are and more on the broad framework of crisis. The idea was to draw in students with a problem they all are already invested in—the cost, and relevance, of college. I begin with the stark assertion that higher education is "in a state of crisis" and then suggest that while "at first it may have seemed like only the humanistic disciplines were under siege, it's now clear that the entire project of the liberal arts is under pressure." Hoping that I'm hitting home with them, I continue in this vein: "The critiques of universities have become commonplace: too expensive, too detached, not practical or relevant enough for the fast-paced and vocation-focused 21st century." And then I pose the program hook: "In the face of mounting challenges, how should students, faculty, and universities respond?"

While I self-consciously built the syllabus overview to draw in all students, not just humanities majors, I'm now wondering whether the framing may also construct the humanities as primarily in need rather than vitally necessary. In my desire to expose students to the debates about revitalization, I may also be setting them up to understand the field first and foremost as endangered, which can then make it difficult in the next breath to argue that the humanities offer robust tools even for mitigating these very "crises." Perhaps humanities scholars like myself have become numb to how this rhetorical footwork looks from the outside because we're so familiar with it, but one effect of the language of revitalization, and the crisis framework that is its corollary, is to situate the humanities as the primary site requiring intervention, something that needs to be solved, dealt with, rescued. The problem is that for students who may not have any previous commitment to the humanities, using this framework without also centering the practices of the humanities can backfire: given the multiple crises we face nationally and globally in

our current era, they may be thinking, is it really the humanities that we ought to be saving?

You might be wondering: how can a public humanities course not be centered on the humanities? After all, we do spend much of our time examining public humanities project examples from across the globe, using the Humanities for All site as an archive for imagining the possibilities in students' own work. But because the majority of students in the class have little background in the humanities, I have found myself framing activities like these on foundations that all students might have in common, which has meant more describing what the humanities can do rather than actually doing those things. Students examine a wide array of Humanities for All examples and report back to the class, sure, but we don't actually experience the powerful forms of humanities inquiry that those projects are putting into practice. It might sound obvious or trite but I've come to realize that talking about the humanities doesn't produce the same insights and discoveries that actively practicing the humanities generates. In turn, this broad exposure may not provide non-humanities students enough of a foundation to fully understand the field's value and rigor; in fact, this structure might be giving some students just enough background to simply reify the troubling narrative that the humanities are a luxury add-on rather than a necessity for rigorous intellectual public engagement. In other words, while the interdisciplinary structure of the program is a strength (drawing in students who otherwise would have little exposure to humanities—exactly what we're always hoping to do!), if we want to avoid also reproducing the well-worn trope of the humanities as non-essential for this group, it also calls for a more rigorous and self-conscious practice of humanities inquiry.

A second example from one of our class discussions further illustrates this meta-quality and my sense that even when we're centering the public humanities in our conversations we're not really getting at the humanities part of the term. In the middle of last fall's semester I invited Adam Davis, director of Oregon Humanities, to visit our class to discuss the organization's program The Conversation Project. The program brings together people from across the state to talk about timely and significant issues, guided by a trained facilitator. Conversations range from what it means to age well today, to creativity, to faith and civic life. I had assumed the class would function as an enactment of one of these conversations so that students could gain experience in practicing one of the things humanities practitioners take for granted: the art of dialectical discussion that doesn't seek answers or agreement but greater understanding. But I didn't make this explicit in our preparation, and instead, the class unfolded more like a description of OH's program, with students then asking questions and Davis responding. In watching the interaction unfold, I was reminded that what comes naturally in the humanities classroom needs to be more directly spelled out and modeled in the public humanities course. Moments of humanities discovery—when we suddenly see something we thought we knew well in a totally different way; when we develop a more nuanced idea where we once thought something was clear-cut; when we trace a pattern of thought in a free-wheeling conversation—those moments need to be curated for and experienced by students. Imagine trying to train a literature student without actually reading a text together, but just by discussing a

summary of the text—that same sense of always being once removed can keep students from the very thing that demonstrates the humanities' power and value.

The thing is, this might not just be an issue for us at the individual programmatic level; it might be a problem that shows up in public humanities scholarship and practice writ large. Matthew Wickman identifies a similar phenomenon in his survey of how members of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes define the public humanities. The title of his article "What are the Public Humanities? No, Really, What Are They?" reveals an odd emptiness at the heart of the field as he attempts to define what kinds of work humanities centers are actually doing under the public humanities umbrella. While members had no problem discussing the field in the abstract, Wickman found that it was surprisingly difficult to pin down what the public humanities are in reality; as he puts it, the field appears to be easy to discuss in terms of "ideals," "archetypes" and "moral imperatives" (Wickman, 2016: 7) but less so in terms of what those ideals actually look like in the world. There appears to be an "absent centre" (Wickman, 2016: 7) underneath the broad outlines of the field, even for experts. While Wickman doesn't speculate on the cause of this problem, my experience with the PRF students suggests that it may be the decentering of the humanities within the study and practice of public humanities that produces this disorienting effect. If we're to have any success with the lofty objective of revitalizing the humanities—not to mention if we'd rather not reinscribe troubling constructions of the field as a "nice to have" add-on but one that is ultimately inessential—we may need to rebalance so that we're focusing just as much on the practice of the humanities as we are on the engagement of the public.

A humanities-centered PRF project

Molly Hiro

Although in PRF's first year I only worked on the administrative/organizational side of things, in the second year I served as a faculty fellow as well. Because I teach and study about African American literature, and was inspired by the year 2 theme Displacement and Justice, I drew up a basic proposal to consider Portland's history of excluding and displacing Black communities through so-called urban renewal through the lens of a smattering of recent books published by Black authors about growing up in the city. Rather than hand-picking my student collaborators, I put out a broad call, and from those who responded, ultimately selected two social-science majors (one political science and the other sociology) whose interest in the project stemmed largely from their social-justice and public-policy inclinations and desire to learn more about their adopted city and state's racist past (they're both from neighboring Washington). I had rather intentionally left the project proposal open-ended, aiming for genuine collaboration with my student fellows when it came to project outcome, but for me—because I'm a scholar of literary studies and because I knew there was already so much historical research and writing out there about our broader topic—the primary texts needed to be central. For my students, more familiar with social-scientific and statistical ways of framing social problems, I think this emphasis was at first jarring; in the end, though, I learned how centering humanities practice—even

though I hadn't intended to do so, consciously—could make our collaborative experience all the more enriching.

We spent the first couple of months reading and discussing each of our five texts, collectively tracing patterns in their representation of what it means to grow up Black in Portland, and dabbling in some broad histories of local white supremacy. Since one of our central goals was to come up with a way to overlay parts of the primary texts—four novels and a memoir—onto the spaces of Portland they describe and enliven, we landed on the digital program StoryMaps by ArcGIS to develop our project. Having committed to a narrative-based platform, it became clearer how the humanities-centered approaches that feel so natural to me as to be unconscious in fact needed to be taught or modeled for my research partners from the social sciences. For one thing, I advocated that our website be structured as a kind of story—with a beginning, middle, and end; this came as something of a surprise to my student collaborators who had been thinking in terms of this map or that chart, and less about the sequence in which these would be presented. Another issue, albeit minor, was that when we did lay out the narrative we wanted to unfold in our StoryMap, I'd find I needed to go back through and encourage transitions between sections to aid the overall continuity—to be clearer about whether one part related to another as an ongoing sequence or as a transition to another topic. Overall, then, my mentorship as a humanities practitioner learning a new platform along with my students meant at least in part a need to consistently import and prioritize the basic humanities' emphases on narrative continuity and audience-consciousness in this new public-facing medium.

A bigger humanities-related question that hung over our project was: what can books add to the discussion of Portland's history of displacing Black communities? Could our chosen texts actually *do* anything toward attending to this shameful legacy? Of course, the simplest thing they do, which we focused on throughout, is offer individual stories attesting to the long-term impacts of exclusion and gentrification. And indeed, this is mostly what our StoryMap showcases, by embedding quotations and anecdotes from the texts that highlight the transitory nature of home, or the feeling of not belonging, or the ways physical displacements can rend communal ties. Yet we had a harder time coming together on our narratives' and our own project's potential to offer any solutions to the problems. The historic displacement of Black communities in Portland was, after all, largely understood as one of geography, urban planning, politics, and economics; what could stories—and fictional stories at that—have to offer? My socially-conscious student collaborators expressed from the start a desire to invite our audience to do more; hence, our StoryMap ends with a "Next Steps" section that invites people to click on a series of links to other (non-narrative, non-humanities) websites where they can learn more about current problems, volunteer their time, or donate to organizations actively working to support BIPOC communities in Portland.

This conclusion to our project seemed to suggest that the humanities have the power to share stories about the past, but not to make meaningful contributions toward alternative and better futures. Yet a part of our narrative that felt important to me—and that I had to kind of convince the students of—invests storytelling itself with a singular power to do just that. Philosopher Jonathan Lear, in an essay titled "The Call of Another's Words,"

describes the transformative experience of hearing a colleague share the dying words of Plenty Coups, a Chief of the Crow Nation. While the tragic decimation of indigenous cultures by white colonizers can be described and measured by the tools of social science, Lear argues, engagement with the humanities may enable more profound awakenings. His own humanities-based investigation into the Crow culture (culminating in a 2008 book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation)*, inspired by Plenty Coups' words, represented what he calls "imaginative possibility" (Lear, 2014: 112). For Lear, it doesn't so much matter whether such possibilities are founded in data or facts; they can still affect the real world: "[i]f one can succeed in making an imaginative possibility robust, it can have a profound effect on how we live our lives. For our lives are shaped not just by what we take to be the case, but also by our sense of what is possible. Once an imaginative possibility is opened up, there is room for it to become a practical necessity" (Lear, 2014: 112).

As such, before it sends readers outward to learn, donate, and volunteer, my team's StoryMap concludes by highlighting just this sort of "imaginative possibility"—in this case, the claim that stories and storytelling have the power to both resist and to heal what the forces of displacement have broken. Each book we featured explicitly invests stories and writing with this power, whether it be Renée Watson's privileging of the healing work of front-porch storytelling in her novel *This Side of Home* or Mitchell S. Jackson's use of "revision" as a metaphor for retrospectively "challeng[ing] most exclusions" (Jackson, 2019: 261) in his memoir *Survival Math*. While my data- and policy-minded student collaborators were at first more inclined to seek material hope and answers for the problems and losses inspired by historic displacement (and of course, it's fair to say that stories don't pay the rent), working on our project together enabled them to discover, with me, how the humanities might lead the way in imagining ways forward even when problems seem irreparably entrenched. In the end, then, the effect of my somewhat stubborn insistence that we keep the focus on our literary texts and my students' openness to collaborating on practices of close reading, pattern tracing, interpretation, and dialectical conversation produced, I think, an experience of the expansive capabilities of the humanities to enable people to reorient to familiar spaces and reconceive stories we think we already know.

Practicing the humanities through community engagement

Thus far we have explored how our fledgling program has struggled with the question of where the humanities fit, and we've suggested that enacting the humanities as practice is key to public humanities work and to the larger project of revitalizing the humanities. Now we turn to the topic of community engagement which, in our first two years of PRF, has been a regular focus of our energies but also, at times, a frustrating challenge. Just as Williams worries that the humanities will be co-opted by the applied disciplines, we've been concerned about their dilution in public partnerships. As such, we've come to wonder whether in fact doubling down on what we know is particular and powerful in humanities practice might be the way forward in bridging the gap between what we do in academia and what we do when we partner with various communities.

Over the past two years, we've aimed to build community engagement into the program in diverse and dynamic ways. In year 1, our women's suffrage theme inspired us to make connections with the Oregon Historical Society, local public libraries, and state politicians. While the pandemic shutdown cancelled our symposium plans, the event was going to include a roundtable featuring elected officials and a student activist who had led campaigns to expand voting rights, alongside suffrage historians. We secured 200 copies of *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, by our symposium keynote speaker, Brittney Cooper, and distributed them to library book groups and local high schools, planning a pre-keynote intimate conversation between Cooper and some of these high school readers. In year 2, confined to Zoom for our exploration of the theme Displacement and Justice, we hosted a virtual conversation featuring representatives of local and regional community organizations, and research teams worked with members of these organizations and others as they developed and implemented their projects.

In these efforts, we have been influenced by—even as we know we've as yet fallen short of—calls among leading public humanities thinkers about what community engagement should look like. Gale and Carton's early calls for this work to move beyond "outreach"—the model of the academic lecture that allows non-academics to listen in—led other practitioners to follow suit, calling for an "engaged humanities" (Jay, 2010: 52) that privileges the formation of public partnerships and defining their ideal outcomes to be the co-collaboration of knowledge between universities and the community (Goettel and Haft, 2010: 361). These "new public humanists" are less interested in disciplinary boundaries and knowledge transfer and more invested in transforming what the production of knowledge looks like (Ellison, 2013: 289). By the time Wickman surveyed leaders of humanities centers in 2016, there was near-complete consensus that public humanities work must involve "active engagement rather than simple transmission of information" (Wickman, 2016: 7) and that publics need to be "engaged," rather than "addressed as passive receptacles of university learning" (Wickman, 2016: 8). These efforts to redefine the field are motivated in part by a desire to upend the standard hierarchy between academia and the world outside it; the public ought to be able to be co-creators of knowledge, not just grateful recipients of it.

As Wickman notes, however, in disrupting this hierarchy these scholars have created another one within their own field, one that values the work of community engagement over more "traditional" forms of public humanities. While this field-refining movement has resulted in exciting new directions, for newcomers to the public humanities it may also tend to set up a standard that will be difficult to meet. And it might be stating the obvious, but these calls for a truly community-engaged humanities tend to leave aside much talk about the humanities part of the practice in favor of detailed discussions of publics and partnerships. But if the humanities aren't well-defined in a public humanities program, can the engagement that happens meaningfully communicate what we value about the humanities?

The frustrating challenge we referred to earlier in our program's efforts to enact community engagement has partly to do with how difficult it can be to partner in truly non-hierarchical and democratic ways. Part of that is due to the nature of the academic year—thus far our program has had fellows propose, develop, and implement projects in

the span of just about nine months—hardly time enough to build genuine partnerships with community organizations. But part of it might also be related to the ways the humanities as valuable practice gets sidelined or obscured when we engage in public. The roundtable discussion we hosted on the topic of Displacement and Justice became an energizing exploration of the accomplishments and challenges these organizations—working with local immigrants, housing issues, and tribal/land concerns—face each day. When we concluded the conversation with an ask about what the groups might want from a place like UP, though, the Zoom-room became a little quieter. It seemed as if these boots-on-the-ground organizers couldn't quite imagine what a bunch of professors and students might be able to actually do for or with them (beyond giving free tuition to members of tribes whose ancestors were displaced from the land on which our campus sits—an excellent idea, if not one our Humanities Collaborative can quite enact). This moment of attempted community engagement came almost to seem like what Gale and Carton and others warn against, but in reverse; a kind of "simple transmission of information" from these organizers to the academic audience. There's certainly nothing wrong with listening more and pontificating less, but this particular engagement felt rather far from the co-creation of publicly relevant knowledge that is the ideal.

Certainly we have much to learn about developing better events and opportunities to practice community engagement, but a lesson that might be taken from this example is that engagement that doesn't intentionally and actively enact humanities thinking might continue to result in connections that are more distancing than mutually enriching. Making our conversations and work with community partners foreground and deploy humanities practices such as dialectical thinking, close reading, and open-ended conversation may require a little professor-like "teaching" at times—which might in turn generate that hierarchical structure that we should be alert to avoid—but such hierarchies can move and shift as a project develops. Returning to Wickman's language, we want to question the false binary he creates, which we see in many essays that aim to define the public humanities. Genuine engagement with the public, he argues, should avoid both the "simple transmission of information" and treating community partners as "passive receptacles of university learning." But it's worth asking: when do humanities teachers ever view their work as simple transmission of information, or their students as passive receptacles? The kinds of complex thinking, discoveries, and realizations that happen in our courses—what Kristen Case calls "moments of classroom grace" (Case, 2014: B4)—don't happen because students are showered with information; they come from students' active engagement with the ways we think in the humanities. So, how might we envision centering these practices when we engage outside of the university, in public humanities work?

While we don't necessarily have the answer to that question yet, actively centering the humanities as practice within the program would seem a necessary first step toward one. This would mean paying less attention to the crises of the humanities and instead attending more to the routine moves of humanistic inquiry that connect to daily life. And more broadly it would mean self-consciously balancing our focus between the two parts of the "public humanities," insisting that it's not a zero-sum equation between them, but that a fuller, more balanced exploration of each is key. In her own public humanities

endeavors, Teresa Mangum describes a form of this type of balance as she navigates her love of practicing the humanities with her desire to find practical relevance for that work: "Our tools are questions, skepticism, and the tacit assumption that our task is to understand, complicate, and contextualize the topics we address" but those tools must be harnessed and directed to be able to "tackle the manifold, daily challenges that face us rather than stop at problematizing" (Mangum, 2012: 5). Similarly, we may need to find ways to more directly build these tools into each part of the program in order to most fully engage our publics, whether they be local and in-person or global and online. This is akin to what Case calls for when she argues that "the most substantial contribution of the humanities to public life does not come through empowering elite students and faculty members to reach out to their communities, but by extending the most fundamental element of a real humanities education—the power to doubt and then to reimagine—to as many people as possible" (Case, 2014: B4). Providing opportunities to practice the humanities to a wider public may indeed be the surest direction for revitalizing both the humanities and the campus-community relationship.

Postscript

Spoiler: we didn't get the NEH grant. But a brief reading of our evaluations provides a bit more confirmation that a recentering of the humanities within the program may be in order if we want to successfully reapply. The two most detailed evaluations both cited the potential of the program in using the humanities to bridge disciplines and communities, but they specifically called for more clarification of how the program is located within the humanities and how it will extend humanities inquiry into other areas, including the core curriculum and community engagement. It would seem that even though the grant calls for a framing of the humanities as "connectors," that connecting work must be built upon a humanities foundation that is firmly in place. Again, in our focus on the crisis of the humanities and our rush to demonstrate their relevance as a bridge for other disciplines, we perhaps lost track of the need to articulate the practices that are at the core of these interventions.[1]

Another way of putting this is to say that we must find a way to confidently assert what the humanities do in the world (Spierling) as we look ahead to a landscape in which the humanities function as bridges for interdisciplinary work (Williams). If the future of the humanities hinges on their ability to travel across disciplinary boundaries, and if Williams is right that these new humanities are indeed not only the future but already here, then Spierling's insistence that those humanities better be self-possessed may, ironically, be even more crucial. And while self-conscious questioning and openness may indeed be productive—are in fact hallmarks of humanistic practice themselves—these things can also start to look simply like insecurity that then perpetuates the very discursive and material conditions that we most want to change. PRF, and the field more broadly, may be encountering a similar problem to the one Kathleen Woodward put her finger on in her close reading of the institutional documents of leading public humanities programs. Noting a drift away from the term "intellectual" in the field, she describes it as "an index [...] of the institutional intellectual insecurity of people in the humanities in the United

States today even as many of us are trying, with confidence, to reinvent the humanities" (Woodward, 2009: 117-118). In attempts to shift humanities work toward "the solving of social problems and the responding to community needs," Woodward continues, "we must take care not to inadvertently set to the side the tradition of reflective and interpretive inquiry" (Woodward, 2009: 118-119). As we continue to build the PRF program, we are keeping Woodward's warning in mind. In the focused work of this program development—but, we believe, also in public humanities work at larger scales—we can only effectively engage the public when we prioritize a confident practice of the humanities.

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Notes

1. Postscript to the postscript: in the time since we submitted this article, we reapplied for the NEH grant and were awarded one for 2022-23. While it's difficult to pinpoint precisely why we were successful the second time around, we suspect that more clearly locating the place of the humanities within the grant work (via the planning of a permanent humanities hub on campus) and detailing what the humanities can accomplish in practice (via integration with the core curriculum) had something to do with it.

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