



The Humanities and the Public Soul¹

Julie Ellison

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Michigan, 435
South State Street, 3187 Angell Hall, Ann Arbor, MI 48109–1003, USA;
jeson@umich.edu

What is public scholarship in the humanities and the arts? There are many meanings to these four keywords—public, scholarship, humanities, arts. Public scholarship itself is a recent term for practices that, while venerable in some fields, are still new to the arts and humanities. What are these unfolding practices and knowledges? In the humanities and in many areas of the arts, collaborative work of any kind is rare, and there is a weak tradition of partnerships by faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates with community and public partners, either individuals or organizations. Consequently, there is plenty of room for ambiguity and debate about definitions. In order to establish a clear starting point for understanding public scholarship in the cultural domain, therefore, I will begin with a strict construction of the word “public”, referring to work conducted in a deliberately democratic fashion by peers impelled by diverse interests and a common public purpose. I will focus on the importance of multiplicity and complexity in work in the arts and humanities that is jointly created as a public good by academic and community collaborators.

When I was growing up, my father published an article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, one of many he would write for the *Post* throughout the 1950s, entitled “They eat smoke for love”. It was about the passion of volunteer fire fighters. Still, that phrase, “they eat smoke for love”, captures something about my father’s own passion for writing, pursued over a long career as a journalist, novelist, editor, professor, and self-published social prophet. The bitter irony of “eating smoke” hints at the long odds of making a living as a writer. But the phrase also applies to the question before us now, to the community-minded love for a different kind of smoke—the fluid paths of imagination and inquiry.

The word “soul”, in the title that Harry Boyte suggested for this essay—“The humanities and the public soul”—floats before us, unresolved and undefined, probably undefinable. The evocative power of that phrase, “the public soul”, goes straight to the heart of the quandaries

of public scholarship in the arts and humanities. The phrase captures the profound desire for meaning and feeling—for soulfulness—that attracts many people to the arts and humanities in the first place. Such emotion runs smack up against the spirit of professional rigor and the norms of professional success. These clashes can be fruitful as long as one attitude does not drive out another. In order to craft the relationship between meaning and feeling in a public fashion, we must grapple with the mixed aspirations perpetually circulating within and between academic and community cultures.

Humanists and artists are always called upon to explain what the humanities are. What is art? Less interesting than the myriad definitions we summon up in response to these queries are the broader associations that cluster around such terms. To many, these disciplines broadly signify expression and inspiration—in sum, they are about *being moved*. They are also identified with analysis, theory, and critique. Artists and humanists in and out of the academy fret about how to negotiate the tension between hope and opposition, desire and critique, feeling and the labor of analyzing feeling. In public scholarship, these stresses become more pronounced. But at the same time, public scholarship can bring these tendencies into new and more fruitful balance. The defining feature of engaged cultural work is a determination to do it all, to undertake complicated projects that join diverse partners, combine the arts and humanities, link teaching with research, bring several generations together, yield new products and relationships, take seriously the past and the future. The driving philosophy is one of both—and, both mind and soul, both local and universal.

In this “both—and” spirit, William Paulson, in *Literary Culture in a World Transformed: A Future for the Humanities* calls for “an enlarged humanism” committed to “the project of enacting human freedom and working in the world in all its dimensions and directions”. The agenda, Paulson argues, is capacious and transformative:

an enlarged humanism . . . locates our creative and constructive tasks as human beings not just in an aesthetic, intellectual, or even cultural sphere but in the entire project of making and remaking the social, cultural, and material collectives to which we belong (191).

History is helpful in establishing this vision of our future, including the history of hope-laden words. Nineteenth and early twentieth century intellectuals defined “genius”, for example, in ways that we might want to take seriously again as part of our usable past. For them, genius—now so unfashionable—was an energy source that could fuel social hope, social labor, and social change.

In Anne Gere’s study of turn-of-the-century women’s literary clubs, she found that identity politics shaped the clubs’ focus. Jewish women read Emma Lazarus, African–American women read Phyllis Wheatley,

working women read Jane Addams. The clubs had a strong self-help orientation, striving to make women “more active agents” on behalf of themselves and their specific communities. At the same time, Gere writes, club members defined poetry “as the language of the soul and the inspiration of humankind”, in other words, as universal. “Effective benevolence” linked to identity politics was central to the clubs, but these were understood to be fueled by the engine of efficacious greatness. Regardless of race, religion, or class, almost all women’s literary clubs promoted the practical power of contagious eloquence by reading Shakespeare, Milton, Longfellow, and the Bible. The social place of eloquence—especially in poetry—is being reclaimed as the both—and logic of earlier eras returns in new forms. That logic held that poetry reflected the union of genius and history, that it served both progressive social reform and personal expressive needs, and that it was simultaneously universal, personal, and supportive of group identities. WEB Dubois framed black Americans’ commitment to “developing the traits and talents of the Negro” as a program of “intellectual commerce” conducted by “co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture”. For Dubois, empowering the “Negro soul” in twentieth century US and international domains while also pursuing “time-glorified methods of delving for Truth”, including those contained in the writings of canonical white writers, was a plausible agenda.

Academic humanists, now resistant to universals, suffer from the worst side effect of our powerful and necessary skepticism: we have made theory and action relative strangers to one another. The world of the humanities, as Paulson observes, suffers from “the overemphasis on critique, the mentality of a guild that fancies itself a counterculture . . . and the excessive focus on reproducing the professoriate”. Yet there is a strong and interesting tradition that joins the concepts of beauty, truth, freedom, and genius to the labors of social change and the advancement of the interests of particular communities. What if we recognized the ongoing life of this tradition and took it seriously? What if we respond to Paulson’s revival of Kenneth Burke’s “Literature as equipment for living” and begin to treat the arts and humanities “as a resource, as an extension of our collective sense organs, brains, and voiceboxes, near and far, then and now, which we can use as we participate in, and try to sustain, the life of the world”. We do not need to reactivate nineteenth century notions of genius. But, like Paulson, we should commit ourselves to terms like “living” and “the world” that can carry a similar charge in our own day.

Speaking in hopeful terms, for those habituated to critique, puts us in a changed relationship to our cultural past and present. It confronts us with the history of words like “beauty”, “genius”, “inspiration”, and, yes, “soul”—a vocabulary consistent with a desire for public speech and public practices.

Public scholarship in the arts and humanities most differs from standard academic practice through its explicit hopefulness. Such work is based on the conviction that it is possible for artists and humanists to make original, smart, and beautiful work that matters to particular communities and to higher education. Public scholarship provides a field for experiment, in which introspection and invention can be carried out sociably and publicly, yielding new relationships, new knowledge, and tangible public goods. The challenge for public scholars is to connect the difficulties of plausible hope with the emerging economies of cultural work. This connection can be made in leaderly ways. Models are available.

Over the last two decades, scholars have addressed profoundly civic issues: the history and meaning of “the public sphere” and “civil society”, the importance of place, cultures of everyday life and ordinary people, the artistic and cultural achievements of women and racial and ethnic minorities; national and family memory, the life of the body, the power of stories to structure experience; the resurgence of poetry spoken aloud; and the layered histories of how artists and intellectuals are connected to their times and settings. Yet the public importance of the work of academic scholars in the cultural disciplines was declared to be vanishing even as their scholarly subject matter was becoming more inclusive and democratic.

What's happened to the humanities? is the title of a 1993 collection of essays about the academic humanities. The story it tells is a characteristic one of decline: “the humanities have become a more marginal part of [higher] education”, afflicted by “declining academic status” and by “reductions in financial support” from the National Endowment for the Humanities, foundations, individual donors, and universities themselves. The contributors to this volume argue that the fading stature of the academic humanities leads to these disciplines being under-resourced. They protest that money is flowing to public programs and away from original scholarship. They lament the fact that, despite the fundamental human and public importance of cultural knowledge, the humanities increasingly are viewed as irrelevant. Scholars often deplore the fact that funding increasingly is tied to collaborative projects, with less support available for individual work in the studio or the archive. This pressure is felt as coercive, as sabotage of the conditions needed for imagination and reflection.

There are similar narratives of decline in the arts, pervaded by anxiety about cuts in funding for individual artists; selection mechanisms that keep radical or disturbing work out of contention; and the perceived competition between quality and accessibility. These pervasive worries about public pressures on the arts and humanities are not confined to higher education and are not unique to the US.

David Scobey summed up this state of affairs in his introduction to the Arts of Citizenship Program at the University of Michigan (<http://www.diversityweb.org/Digest/Sm01/arts.html>):

The culture wars of the past decade have shown how deeply Americans are divided about their civic values—and how much they endow the arts and humanities with public significance. Academics . . . have pursued exciting new research into popular culture, the media, and civic values, yet our work has often been framed in ways that are inaccessible to the publics that we study. Partly because of this distance, the arts and humanities have been lightning rods for conflicts over such topics as the teaching of American history, ethnoracial diversity, and public funding for the arts.

Academics have plenty of legitimate concerns about the new public scholarship. For example, we have not begun to solve the problem of how to give public scholars time to think and write substantively about their work. How are we to combine our participation in communities of practice with writing? And the academic reward system is just starting to show signs of flexibility in the area of more responsive tenure policies.

The specific importance of public scholarship in the arts and humanities is to provide purposeful social learning, spaces where individuals and groups with “trustworthy knowledge” convene to pursue joint inquiry and invention that produces a concrete result. Central to this work is the crafting of “a politics of educated hope”—and “everyday politics” of coalition. There are real differences in the work styles, cultural agendas, professional status, and politics of artists and humanists working in diverse locations. But there are also productive points of intersection that mark potential agreement on what content is interesting, what aesthetic and thematic strands are most promising, what complexity is worth capturing. This, it seems to me, is the basis for “educated hope” about public scholarship.

One of the most important outcomes of public scholarship in the arts and humanities can be the integration of hope and critique. When I am collaborating with Chris Maxey-Reeves, a third grade teacher and my partner in the Poetry of Everyday Life Project, linking University of Michigan undergrads and Ann Arbor third graders, critique is fundamental. It is one component of an act of guided creation that we bring to the Ann Arbor Public Schools and the Ann Arbor District Library, to parents and kids, saying “We believe in this and so should you”. We find ways to challenge university students and third graders to recognize and resist poetic cliché, for example, or to see through conventional idioms of beauty and emotion. On our field trip to a gritty urban park marked by the traces of the homeless people who live and sleep there, we work with the kids as they struggle to find words for their complex social knowledge of the half-seen homeless individuals

who write fierce messages to park visitors in multi-colored chalk on the bridge. At the same time, we are not shy about proclaiming the power of agency, discovery, and feeling. We walk a fine line. You can celebrate something to the point of suppressing dissent, subtlety, and complication. But it is a fallacy to think that claiming the public good requires you to leave your intellectual tough-mindedness and creative ambition at the door.

What if campus-based artists and humanists—connoisseurs of metaphor—took ourselves more literally? What if we took the question of democratizing the canon literally enough to enter in the joint discovery of literary knowledge with non-academics? What if we took the passion for public spaces literally enough to collaborate with municipal partners on site design? What if we took our interest in gender and genre literally enough to work with high-school girls active in the poetry slam movement?

Finally, what if we learned what hope sounds like in public utterance? Here is an example of eloquence in the service of public scholarship, notable for its powerful complexity of vision. At the national conference of “Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life” in fall 2000, Dr Pearl Simpson spoke about the vibrant Black Bottom community that the University of Pennsylvania displaced and replaced in Philadelphia. She set forth how, in the enduring anguish of this site of so-called urban renewal, the Black Bottom Project created a full-length play based on the history of the neighborhood. The play was created and performed by former residents of the Black Bottom, University City High School students, and Penn students and faculty. For Dr Simpson, the value of the project was manifold.

“If you were, you were, and if you are, you are, and you deserve to be heard”, said Dr Pearl, as she asked to be called. She continued: “We need ongoingness, we need refreshment, we need more people to take the place of those who go on to the great beyond because it’s very important for everybody to know their history, regardless of how small or how minute the place. Some people want reparations, some people want recognition, and everybody wants respect”.

The intricacy of Dr Pearl Simpson’s statement mirrors the diverse project team; the neighborhood, school, and university cultures it traversed; and the pride and sorrow bound up in the fate of the Black Bottom neighborhood. Dr Pearl finds words for needs and desires ranging from economic justice (“reparations”), a place in the city’s self-knowledge (“recognition”), a continuous link to past experience (“ongoingness”), hope for the future and solace for past losses (“refreshment”). She negotiates consensus and disagreement in the repetition of “We need . . . We need” and in the sequence, “Some people . . . some people . . . everybody”. The powerful moral and political claim to histories of a community’s place, however “minute”, establishes

the premise for a multidimensional public scholarship project. There is no more compact or powerful witness to the ethical relationship between part and present communities than this: “If you were, you were, and if you are, you are”.

What would a national laboratory for public cultural work look like? A fruitful ecology of public cultural enterprise is made up of local, national, and global networks of people and projects. At the local level, a modest economy of co-created work, grounded in broadly shared intuitions, carried out by campus and community partners, is subtly changing the zeitgeist in the arts and humanities. To bring this ecosystem vividly to life, I will survey the defining characteristics of a handful of exemplary programs. In so doing, I draw on the experience of *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, founded in 1999 as a partner program of the White House Millennium Council and in 2001 as a consortium of colleges and universities.

What is *Imagining America's* agenda? *Imagining America* (IA) is a national consortium of individuals, institutions, and associations that puts cultural work in the public interest at the heart of higher education. IA is a network of artists and humanists who pursue integrative, multi-disciplinary project-based work across the town–gown boundary.

IA calls attention to a turning point in the dynamics of making and understanding culture. IA also offers an example for other disciplines to emulate as they reclaim their public soul and public muscle. It enlists project teams, program directors, and leaders in arts and humanities organizations, as well as university and college presidents. IA addresses the specific resources and challenges of the cultural disciplines, highly communicative and interactive fields with diverse practitioners and publics. IA offers information, convenings, models, access to leadership, and, most importantly, an evolving set of concepts and arguments aimed at constituting public scholarship in the arts and humanities as a movement. IA is both a learning community and a strategic advocate and citizens' lobby for public-minded artists and scholars and their many different partners.

Reflecting on the many extant examples of collaborative public scholarship in the arts and humanities, how do we move forward in the spirit of both–and practices? Michael Frisch, in his presidential address to the American Studies Association, delivered in Detroit in October 2000, helpfully articulates the non-reductive principle of both–and, which is fundamental to the new public scholarship in the arts and humanities: “the holding of different values at the same time without implying confusion, contradiction, or even paradox”:

In collecting . . . a book of narratives based on life-history interviews with Buffalo, New York steelworkers in the aftermath of the evaporation of a once-mighty steel industry, I was struck repeatedly

by how regularly and easily interview subjects moved around the convenient categories presented to them—frequently of an either/or nature . . . They both liked their jobs and hated them. They identified with the union and/or the company yet felt betrayed by either or both. They saw themselves as victims of the plant closings yet refused to act or feel victimized. They were deeply nostalgic and yet fully engaged with moving on. They resisted the very notion that their lives were defined by their work situation, past or present, offering instead a more seamless web in which worlds of family, neighborhood, and community were woven together with work and workplace in their own identities.

Applying “different values at the same time” and different kinds of knowledge in public and community settings is an art that can be taught and learned. In a report on collaborations between the timber industry, communities, and government agencies, Steven Yaffee, Julia Wondolleck, and Steven Lippman of the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources and Environment ask, “What facilitates bridging?” “Bridging”, as they use the term, means collaboration among several different organizations. Their account of successful cultures of collaboration rings true for work in the public arts and humanities. They emphasize the presence of ambiguity, difficulty, complexity, and diversity—all characteristic of cultural work—in the situations that are best served by collaboration. The arts and humanities are sites of other key elements named by Yaffee and his co-authors: “a sense of place, an inclusive approach, a tolerance for small successes”. All of these elements, they note, can be “intentionally promoted through creative efforts”.

Collaboration, they argue, thrives in projects that the participants experience as fluid, uncertain, and calling for improvised strategies. In sum, Yaffee, Wondolleck, and Lippman transform complications that are typically viewed as barriers to community partnerships into conditions of possibility.

When conditions of discouragement become conditions of possibility, when ambiguity provokes meaning—making work, when uncertainty produces new knowledge, public scholarship in the arts and humanities has found its voice.

Endnote

¹ This essay is a revised version of “The humanities and the public soul”, written in 2002 at the invitation of Harry Boyte, co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, for publication on the Center’s web site

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Julie Ellison is Professor of American Culture, English, and Art and Design at the University of Michigan, where she has taught since 1980. She is also Director Emerita of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life (IA), a consortium of 75 universities that fosters democratic engagement through the humanities, arts, and design. In fall 2007, she was Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Syracuse University, completing a national report on tenure policies that are responsive to the work of engaged scholars. Professor Ellison is one of the nation's foremost experts on emergent models of public, community-based and project-centered scholarship. Ellison has worked with collaborators in South Africa since 2003 on the changing relationship between cultural institutions and universities there. She recently completed a speaking tour of New Zealand universities as a Fulbright Senior Scholar, keynoting a national humanities congress. Before starting IA, Ellison served for four years as Associate Vice President for Research at the University of Michigan. She received her BA from Harvard in American History and Literature and her PhD in English from Yale. Ellison's scholarly work ranges across the literature and culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with particular emphasis on gender, emotion, politics, and genre. Chicago University Press published her third scholarly book, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* in 1999. Her current research project focuses on the new politics of cultural knowledge, particularly the reframing of the imagination as a democratic condition by Black intellectuals and artists, and other scholars of color.