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EDITORIAL

How to Do Things with Public Humanities

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As of this writing, the proposed U.S. 2026 Fiscal Budget would eliminate the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts, even after recent drastic cuts to the staffs of and grant support from both agencies.[1] The cuts have already devastated state and local humanities councils and arts organizations, which have historically relied heavily on the support of these federal agencies.[2] Under current circumstances, the appearance of the journal *Public Humanities* in late 2024 and of this themed issue, *Public Humanities in Action*, in the spring of 2025 offer us some much-needed opportunities to reflect on the vitality of the humanities writ large and a Public Humanities movement whose major (if not primary) life-support system currently finds itself in a moment of such materially structural danger, if not demolition.

It matters that the pieces collected here push in a variety of directions against the limitations of the United States as a national frame. The journal itself enjoys a home at an eminent U.K.-based university press, and from that location has gathered expansively international Editorial and Advisory Boards, with members representing many countries across both the Global South and the Global North. *Public Humanities in Action*, in turn, features pieces describing projects that together equal that global reach, including pieces on endeavors and praxes as diverse as the post-war creation of a worldwide network of Iraqi women scholars in-country and across the diaspora, a career testimonial to the intellectual legacy of an influential "public sociologist" in South Africa during and after Apartheid, and an effort using the "Asset-Based Community Development" approach to make museums and art galleries (in Manchester, UK) more accessible to wider swaths of such institutions' community neighbors and local populations.[3]

The United States is not a conventionally "national" frame, given the simultaneously centripetal pull and centrifugal push of its imperial formation(s), lending the U.S.-based projects collected here a correspondingly complex diversity, including such locally anchored and disciplinarily distinct projects as a digital history archive devoted to a Black

[1] Chery 2025.
[2] Schuessler 2025.
[3] Abdelhameed 2025; Joffe 2025; Smith 2025.

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working-class community threatened with erasure in St. Paul, MN, a Mellon-funded public history collaboration between a scholar based at Sarah Lawrence College and the historically Black community constituents of the local public library in Yonkers, NY, and a more institutionally grounded, social justice-oriented community outreach program based in the Institute of Arts and Humanities at the University of California, San Diego.[4] The issue's formulation of a *Public Humanities* ***in Action*** and the variety of the projects it archives push against both governmental and geopolitical frames by forcefully demonstrating the historical tension, one could even say *conflict*, facing intellectual, cultural, and, yes, *political* movements when they constitutionally exceed, and materially explode, such attempts at structural control, containment, and collapse.

These tensions animate the work at both institutional and professional levels as well. Across the pieces collected in the volume, readers will find no consistent model for how, for example, university-based programs, scholars, and students might choose to pursue their Public Humanities projects, whether they are locally based or aspire to reach more general partners and audiences (as some media-based projects here do). Readers will also find a variety of rhetorical approaches to contributors' attempts to make their work both visible and compelling; many of these pieces embrace the genre of the case study, perhaps more characteristic of scholarship in the social sciences, as the original call encouraged contributors both to take a narrative approach in their writing, and to treat their projects more like experimental, indeed entrepreneurial, endeavors enlivened not only by the uncertainty of outcomes but also by the positive risks taken that these endeavors might fail.

Such attempts challenge the conventional logic with which institutions of higher education might prefer to proceed when they reach beyond their walls and gates to engage communities and the publics more visibly—especially in this current moment of intensified scrutiny and vulnerability. They also challenge the conventional logics of scholarship, in (but also beyond) the "humanities," as disciplinarily bound projects of knowledge production addicted to the genres of the article, the chapter, and the book, and in too many spaces still resistant to the (public) podcast, the (public) exhibit, and the (public) gathering.

Public Humanities in Action as a formulation might suggest a certain allergy to theory, but it actually implicates one of the more influential and generative theoretical trends of the past century, namely John Langshaw Austin's linguistic conceptualization of performativity in 1962's *How to Do Things with Words*.[5] Austin famously distinguished speech acts operating in constative from performative modes, with the former emphasizing communication and the production of truth effects, and the latter emphasizing, well, *action*(s), whose effects occurred more as *force*, than as, say, understanding or knowledge. Then Austin re-conflated these terms, conceding that any speech act, by its very nature as speech, and as act, necessarily bears the qualities of both: any meaningful "constative" utterance requires positive action to occur, and to exist, and any "performative" act requires the production of semantic meaning in order to work as something other than accident, or error.

Public Humanities in Action may therefore be a conceptual redundancy: in that redundancy is a key to its professional and practical future(s), in and out of academic settings. If the academic humanities have historically favored the "constative" function of scholarly research, whose primary effect in (and on) the world was understood to come from its

[4] Wingo and Anderson 2025; Soljour 2025; Alvarez 2025.
[5] Austin 1962.

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success as a specific kind of speech act attempting to produce knowledge through convincing its audiences of a targeted "truth," then perhaps the challenge to the academic humanities, especially now, in this moment of the public humanities as an emerging academic endeavor, is to consider the "performative" viability of projects that are no less scholarly, but whose desired impact on the world favors, or at least includes, a species of Austinian force that, in addition to expanding audiences' minds (via knowledge and understanding), may also actively change those audiences' world(s).

Such scholarly impacts may in turn pose a challenge to the academic humanities regarding how best to account for and measure them in whatever may survive in the coming decades of our conventional protocols for tenure and promotion, so journals like *Public Humanities* and issues like *Public Humanities in Action* should become more common, and more frequent, to meet that challenge. Indeed, this issue appears not only a year following the appearance of *The Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship*, but also roughly simultaneously with the January 2025 publication of *PMLA*'s Volume 140, with its important "Theories and Methodologies" cluster on the Public Humanities, and with all three of these projects emerging in the wake of a series of equally influential publications since 2020, including the appearance in 2020 of the Routledge collection *Doing Public Humanities*, the 2022 joint issue of the *ADE/ADFL Bulletin*, and the Summer 2022 issue of *Daedalus* (from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences).[6]

So what, performatively, are these parallel and complementary publications doing? With this issue, the Public Humanities *as a field* takes an additional step toward a possible consolidation *as an (inter)discipline*, and, as it contributes further to the store of knowledge and the force of action that this larger archive of work has already built, and enacted, it hopefully will provide additional ground for institutions willing to start, say, pursuing faculty searches in the Public Humanities, or in crafting faculty searches in any number of traditional humanities disciplines where the desired scholar candidate is already a public humanist in that discipline. This will of course eventually require the creation of new graduate training programs, or tracks, in the Public Humanities, even while such a process commits itself to solving what might on the surface appear to suffer from a chicken-and-egg problem. Such proactive moves on the part of U.S. higher education in support of its larger mission, and in support of Public Humanities work like the projects showcased here, will provide one (but not the only) response to the challenges it faces in the current national political climate.

As of this writing, the other world-historical pivot that humanity is currently generally undergoing comes in the form of artificial intelligence (AI). Already the common wisdom suggests that all future human creativity, and any attempt at the study of its products, will be transformed by what AI will do to everything in our world(s), digital and analogue. Let's therefore imagine *Public Humanities in Action* as a colossal case study in the ingenuity and capacity of the Public Humanities' critical imagination in the digital space, and in the irreducible immunity to AI of *the public*, as actual human bodies, plural and gathered, in actual human time, and in actual human space.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: R.L.O.

[6] Smulyan 2020; Berkowitz, Bradburn, and Townsend 2022; Dickson-Carr 2022; Fisher-Livne May-Curry 2024; Risam, Yothers, and Hernández-LaRoche 2025.

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