Theories and Methodologies

Early Career Public Humanists: A Forum

TIEANNA GRAPHENREED, LAUREL GRIMES, AND TAYLOR SEAVER
MODERATED BY CASSANDRA TANKS
EDITED BY ROOPIKA RISAM

On 30 October 2024, early career scholars who work in public humanities discussed the theories, methods, and influences on their work. The conversation was moderated by Cassandra Tanks, a PhD student in world history at Northeastern University, and organized by Roopika Risam, associate professor of digital humanities and social engagement at Dartmouth College. The participants were Tieanna Graphenreed, who recently received a PhD in English from Northeastern University and is now a community history and digitization specialist at Boston Public Library; Laurel Grimes, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation who is working with the All Our Kin Collective and pursuing an MA in Native American studies at the University of Oklahoma; and Taylor Seaver, a Chicana who is completing an MA in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in Mexican American studies at the University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley, where she undertakes community-engaged work. This wide-ranging conversation addresses important themes that inform the theories and methodologies of public humanities, including ontologies and epistemologies, language, and subjectivity. Collectively, these scholars offer a vision for public humanities that centers Latinx, Black, and Indigenous perspectives, reimagines the idea of community, and reframes the notion of expertise. The conversation has been edited for length by Risam.

Cassandra Tanks: I would like to start with the methods that you use, why you bring them together, and how they impact your public humanities work.

Biographical notes about the contributors appear at the end of the forum.

Taylor Seaver: In my history training, what was really conflicting was that idea that you need to remain objective, but in

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ethnic studies and Mexican American studies, we emphasize creativity, closeness, reflection, and community. My current research is on the colonial legacy of the Rio Grande Valley and its impact on the fashion aesthetics of Chicana and Latina *maestras* ("teachers"). I employ the *plática* method, kind of like an oral history, but more reciprocal—it's a conversation. The research participant shares, but I also connect with them and find similarities, mainly because we're from similar backgrounds. By the end of the session, we're not just discussing research, we're actually creating bonds, friendships. That process combats the idea of objectivity. Within these different spaces, we're caught in between methodologies and theories.

Tieanna Graphenreed: Doing my research was especially difficult. There were no Black rhetoricians at Northeastern University. There still are not any Black rhetoricians at Northeastern University. I found myself pulling from a variety of fields, which is a really beautiful part about digital humanities work and public humanities—this is work that is inherently interdisciplinary, and it challenges you to reach across, to be in conversation with as many people as possible, and to draw inspiration from and credit them. Citation, for example, is political. I found myself pulling from Black geography research. I pulled from rhetorical education. And I used both as a moment to redress how, as Christina Sharpe would say, the world that we live in is based in anti-Blackness. Every moment of reckoning with a text, with history, with an archive is a moment to redress the state. The methods that have spoken to me the most have been drawing from Black feminism—which is to say, also from activist and advocacy work. This search for a method has taught me a lot about how, at the end of the day, what we're really thinking about is dreaming of a world in which we all have everything that we need—in which all our material needs are met and we have material access, where we are all represented, where we have access to our histories and our histories are treated like we matter.

Laurel Grimes: What I heard in what both of you said are the ethics of reciprocity and of accountability, which we talk about in Indigenous studies. At the beginning of this roundtable, I introduced myself in my language and I identified my community—I am a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma—because those are the people that I'm accountable to and those are the people that my work is meant to serve. Prioritizing the ethics of community care and community as a scholarly practice is really essential to pushing our work forward in a productive and good way. Janice Gaudet, for example, talks about visiting as a methodology. And Dian Million writes about felt theory as a theoretical approach that would lead into methods. Both scholars' work is fairly interdisciplinary and focuses on how we interact with each other, on pulling from multiple sources, and on the ethics of our interactions. That is how we make sure that our work is truthful to the experiences of the people who we come from. For my field in particular, we can often trap ourselves by only looking into the past and looking at what we lost; employing theories like mosaic theory and Indigenous futurities, specifically in the way that Laura Harjo writes about them, can be a more hopeful approach. These theories don't necessarily lessen the grief that we hold, but they do encourage us to look forward toward healing in a way that is accessible from the spaces that we occupy.

Cassandra Tanks: I have often talked about how I see my work as a public humanist, a public historian, an archivist, as actually being very forward-thinking. This archival work gives something to the future, and being critical now helps the generations to come be engaged with their history.

I would like to hear how the public humanities may present an opportunity to redress some of the shortcomings of the methods and theories that are more field-specific. What is it like being at odds with theories, methods, and the academy, as people who challenge scholarly approaches with public humanities?

Taylor Seaver: Marginalized people—in my work, Chicanx, Mexican American, and Mexican students—are always seen as a deficit. But we're actually an asset. One advantage of being marginalized

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is being at odds—being in an in-between. It is a strength, because it informs our research in a unique and intimate way. The work of everybody here is powerful because we're all in some type of in-between.

Laurel Grimes: I talk a lot about marginality with my peers and with my colleagues. The reality is that the academic institution was built as a system to serve very specific people, and it's not the majority of the people who are interacting with it. The academy can be a really incredible space for progress and for community, if we persevere. But the academy has to become a community space. The hardships of the academic institution require that we be very cognizant of the ways that academic success will ask you to compromise your ethics. But working in the academy is a way to use the skills that I've developed to infiltrate and Indigenize these spaces and contribute to the creation of community here.

Tieanna Graphenreed: bell hooks thinks of "queer" as in being "at odds" with the world and everything around you. This feeling of being at odds initially felt really alienating. A big part of my doctoral research, which ended up focusing on civic rhetorical education, underscored the way that an education system is configured as the character-forming project of a society. But what does the discipline mean by "character-forming"? What behaviors is education supposed to inculcate? Where are our chances to say no? My dissertation became an opportunity to say education happens here at home and in community spaces, not just in formalized schools. You get to shape your own character through a variety of practices, but you have to understand that you are at odds with the world around you. Ideally, being at odds with the world around you means that you're envisioning the ways that it can change to be better. So, as I think of how my research methods connect with public work, one really beautiful part of public humanities is thinking about the whole person and the embodied experience.

Cassandra Tanks: A lot of public humanities work with students is promoted as character-forming—as helping them find their purpose. It is very individualistic. But I'm also hearing, in your words about this work, a more insurgent approach, in a fantastic way. How does this relate to language and creative human expression output? Could you talk about the language of your methods and methodologies and the role of language in being a public humanist?

Taylor Seaver: My methodologies are literally in Spanish. The language is a barrier to people who don't know Spanish. And because they don't know what it means, they dismiss it. Language is a communal effort. The methodology, theory, and language all connect, and they emphasize a variety of languages on the borderlands: Tex-Mex, English, Spanish, so many different languages. Using "we" makes education more communal than individualistic and draws on those methodologies that emphasize community as the root of our work. Going into Chicana feminist thought really empowers you and makes your language different. I use my own stories and my *testimonios* because I center *pláticas*, because I switch between Spanish and English and Tex-Mex—and that language use empowers my work.

Laurel Grimes: I can relate because most of the work that I do is centered on creating spaces for Indigenous languages to grow. Doing that work and studying my own Chickasaw language has really opened my eyes to how intrinsic language is to peoplehood. Language is the framing of our entire cosmology. Until you sit down and think about the impact of language, you may not realize how embedded it is in the way that you think—and therefore act. Chikashshanompa' is a verb-based language, so everything—nouns, adjectives, adverbs, even colors—is also a verb. In English, which is a very hierarchical and domineering language, when you, as a speaker, describe something, you're putting yourself in a position of authority. I look at the plant that's on my windowsill, and I say, "That plant is a plant" and "that plant is green," so it's a green plant because that's how I've chosen to describe it from my authoritarian position. In the Chickasaw language, the word for *green* means "to be green," and the noun for *plant* is also a verb. So when I say, "hohfo okchamali," instead

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of saying that the plant is green, I'm saying that the being that has chosen to be a plant is also choosing to be green—the authority over plantness and greenness are transferred back to the entity that I'm describing, and its animacy and autonomy are acknowledged in my speech. Think about the wealth of cultural knowledge and cosmological perspective that is held in just that statement alone. We can learn so much about our histories, and therefore about our current and future selves, through the use of our language. An effort to revitalize language is a public health effort, a spiritual effort, an agricultural effort, a restorative justice effort.

Tieanna Graphenreed: In my work at the Boston Public Library, something that's been really successful as an initiative is ensuring that the materials we offer are available in the ten most-used languages in the city. Translation is one thing, but being able to speak and have a conversation and to practice exchange with another person is another thing. As I grow in this role, I'm being presented with an opportunity to be in community with others in a better way, by learning languages in ways that are useful, caring, and beneficial to the people that I'm in community with. And that extends their opportunities to share their stories in whatever ways they see fit, which also ensures they're in control of their stories.

Cassandra Tanks: Language, on a very practical level, in the archiving work that I do, is an inherent problem, because, in order for archives to be organized, searchable, findable—all like the hallmarks of a good archive—they have to use keywords and metadata. But the provenance of keywords and metadata, the history of archives, is just so deeply colonial, so engaged in the project of cultural genocide, in the colonial project. Empowering people to take control is enormously radical in some circles, but for others it's just an acknowledgment of other ways of knowing, different institutions of knowledge, and what makes a good source. How do you negotiate your role as a connector, a node between academic projects and these communities who have generated modes and ways and institutions of knowing?

Taylor Seaver: I go back to my home, an approach influenced by pedagogies of the home, which is a theory that Dolores Delgado Bernal employs in her work—pulling from the home, pulling from the culture, which can be as minuscule as learning how to turn on a comal or press tortillas. Applying that to research, it's listening to your mom and grandma in the living room as they share stories of farmwork in the fields, of migrating north, of my grandpa coming from Mexico. That listening is a connection to my community, and it goes back to language. Language is not just verbal language; it's also aesthetics. And that's what my current research focuses on: how our adornment and our dress in academic spaces connects us, and connects us as a form of community. Most of the people in my office, for example, are Latinas, specifically Chicanas from the borderlands. Wearing red lipstick, hoops, or beaded jewelry is an avenue to empowerment for us. That type of connection creates community in academic spaces and links to those stories I was raised with, my pedagogies of the home, as well as the epistemology of my brown body, from Cindy Cruz, and my geography of self, from Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa argues that the way our bodies have experienced the world, the borders that we experience on a daily basis, helps us navigate the borders we continue to face. Those traumas are marked on us forever. All these theories, all my experiences, connect me to my community.

Tieanna Graphenreed: I've been thinking about myself as a connector to the communities around me. As Taylor mentioned, our stories, our histories, our homes live in our bodies—that is, part of the self is memory—and they all constitute the praxis of being human and humane. What does it mean to be humane? What does it mean to be in a community and do our work? One of the definitions of public humanities is work that shows how human beings process, document, and learn from uniquely human experiences. The project of being human is understanding that there's a messiness to being human, while trying to determine sources and resources. It is never an error to

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look within the self and to reach out to the people around us, to ask them what they think and be in discourse with one another.

Laurel Grimes: I love the idea of thinking about memory as a source and the self as a source. I saw a social media post from someone asking about citing a dream or hallucination in their dissertation: "What's the MLA format for my dream?" They were joking, of course, but that's a serious thing we talk about in Indigenous studies: What was revealed to you when you went to sweat? What do you know about your community from your dreams and from things you have realized subconsciously? I think about that a lot, about what it means to be an Indigenous scholar, and I think that, for me to be a node, it means realizing that my community's needs have to come before whatever my position is within the academy. It means considering education not as an ego-motivated project, which I think it is for a lot of people who do not have a community ethic. Humility is a prerequisite for success as someone in the public humanities, proving ourselves trustworthy to our communities despite our engagement with the academy. What is life in this project of education, without love for your people behind it?

Cassandra Tanks: Outstandingly said. I'd like to close by asking each of you to share who is a thinker, a mentor, a scholar who has resonated with you or perhaps sits on your soul shoulders like a little cartoon angel or devil as you go forward in your work. This question is prompted by conversations I had with my mentor, my adviser, the person whose work I strive to embody and emulate, someone whose life, unfortunately, was taken far too early: Angel David Nieves. He was always promoting the fact that the academy was just catching up with what people had already been doing: countermapping, critical archiving, decolonizing X, Y, and Z. The academy is now saying this is an important methodology, we should be doing this, when it's been an effort in our communities for so long. With his voice always in my ear, I feel strongly that a public humanist's role is to put the needs of communities, the people with which we are so fortunate to be engaging, ahead of the needs of the academy because the academy is just catching up with what they've been doing. Again, for me, because I have to lift his name up, that person is Angel David Nieves.

Taylor Seaver: For me, there are multiple people. They're all from my community because there's not really an external source for my inspiration to do this type of work. First and foremost, it's my family, my grandparents, who were farmworkers. Their stories inform so much of my work. In everything I do, I find some way to incorporate the pedagogy of my house, my home, my family, my culture, my ancestors, my community. So my self really is a reflection of a lot of different people. Then, the Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa. Additionally, Stephanie Alvarez, who mentored my undergraduate research on Chicanx student activism—she's monumental. I would like to say she has protected me in these spaces. She's allowed me to learn how to navigate these spaces independently. She's a mother. She's a *maestra*. And she is so powerful. And, of course, without *my* mother, my research would not exist. It's the Rio Grande Valley community. My community inspires all of my work. Even as I leave for a PhD, hopefully next year, I will take the valley with me everywhere I go.

Laurel Grimes: I could go down a list of every single person that I know and say they inspired me—my friends and family, my larger community. But if I had to focus on one person here, it would be Jessa Rae Growing Thunder, who's Nakota and Dakota and who has really been inspiring me as a scholar and as an artist lately. I talked to her not too long ago about my master's thesis, which is about the creative self-portraiture of Indigenous women artists from the 1970s to 2020 and how those artworks stand in connection to land relationships and relocation, gendered and sexualized violences, and conceptions of femininity in historical and modern spaces. Jessa Rae has talked to me about how Indigenous crafts prove that intellectualism has always existed in our communities, specifically with respect to quill work, which required artists to be mathematicians, botanists, chemists,

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experts, and other things that, outside Indigenous communities, where Indigenous art practices have been devalued, are thought of as separate from the artistic process of quill work. Everything Jessa Rae does is based in community, and talking to her and having her perspective has been really inspiring for me.

Tieanna Graphenreed: I've mentioned a few names, like Christina Sharpe, and there's also Katherine McKittrick, who's a Black geographer, and Jacqueline Jones Royster, a rhetorician who wrote the piece "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own." They are all pillars. The work that they've gifted the world has been centered on the politics that I've developed as someone who wants to be a part of the world in the best ways possible, and in the most loving and caring ways possible. Also, the Combahee River Collective is probably one of the best assemblages of thinkers and beings joining together on a collective mission toward a future that looks like freedom for all people and imagining what the world could be like if we were all free, if we all had everything that we need and deserve, and if we all folded in on one another in times of need and care. This mission is already represented in our communities, and I relish the idea of seeing it at a global scale. My mom has been my anchor, keeping me grounded. One of the first lessons she ever taught me was that the easiest thing that you can do is be kind. Being kind is a deliberate action to practice love. It's a choice that you can make every day. And a special shout-out to Nicole Aljoe at Northeastern, who really kept me anchored and helped me see my place for myself. Professor Aljoe and the community of Black and brown women that I've been a part of have really kept me afloat, and sometimes that's all we can do: stay afloat, even with holes in our boat, and keep plugging our way through. That's what I'm really, really grateful for.

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