Theories and Methodologies

State Humanities Councils and the Public Humanities: A Forum

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MODERATED AND EDITED BY BRIAN YOTHERS

On 13 May 2024, the authors held a conversation about state and territorial (also known as jurisdictional) humanities councils and the role that they play in empowering the public humanities in both its theoretical and its applied forms. The discussion was moderated by Brian Yothers, chair of the Department of English at Saint Louis University, and the participants were Phoebe Stein, president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils and past executive director of Maryland Humanities; Eric Lupfer, executive director of Humanities Texas; Ashley Beard-Fosnow, executive director of Missouri Humanities; Brandon Johnson, executive director of New Mexico Humanities; and Maryse Jayasuriya, professor of English at Saint Louis University and past board member of Humanities Texas.

Two factors motivated the conversation: first, a conviction that scholars committed to the public humanities who are housed in academic departments at universities need to be in conversation with practitioners of the public humanities who have a direct mandate to work with the broader community through humanities councils and, second, the concern that those housed in the university too often lack awareness of the work done in the public humanities by those who work outside it. Although the conversation focused more on methodology and praxis than on theory, an underlying assumption is the centrality of the humanities to self-governance, as James F. Veninga argues in *The Humanities and the Civic Imagination* (133). Another theoretical presupposition that emerged is the commitment of the public humanities to acknowledge, as

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

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Matthew Wickman puts it, "that publics of various sizes and consistencies should be 'engaged' rather than addressed as passive receptacles of university learning" (8). Humanities councils have a long history of creating and documenting sustainable, public-facing programming that is responsive to the needs of communities and thus plays an important role in supporting the public humanities. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Brian Yothers: Could you explain the context in which state and jurisdictional humanities councils work and how their modes of engagement differ from those of humanities departments in research universities, including state institutions?

Phoebe Stein: I am president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, the national membership organization for the nation's fifty-six state and territorial humanities councils. The work of the humanities councils is intertwined with the work of academic departments and universities and is community-based. The knowledge and research produced in the academic community are highlighted and featured and shared with communities through humanities councils, and these communities also have a lot of knowledge to share with the academic community. Humanities councils work with academic institutions to offer programs free of charge in public spaces, usually off-campus, in community libraries, historical societies, barber shops, or Veterans of Foreign Wars halls, for example. The venues are different for the programming sponsored by humanities councils, and the content is both linked to what is offered by academic communities and more accessible to the public.

Brian Yothers: What would you describe as the underlying (implicit or explicit) theory of the public humanities according to which humanities councils work? In other words, what are the underlying assumptions that shape the institutional values or strategies of such councils?

Brandon Johnson: The humanities are for everyone. We are all humanists in some fashion. Human beings tell stories. They share ideas. They create texts. As a result, they are both producers and consumers of humanistic work, and to focus only on humanities in higher education, as important as they are, is to miss an important piece of what makes the humanities significant. Partnerships are essential, bringing academic humanists together with people in the community. Humanities councils are cognizant of the fact that the term *scholar* can and should be understood in a capacious way. There are tradition bearers in all communities and cultures. I live in New Mexico, where we have a sizable Native American population. There is tremendous tradition and cultural richness in this community, and if we do not look to tradition builders and elders as scholars, we cut out an important part of the culture of our region.

Eric Lupfer: I would add that the state and jurisdictional humanities councils are active in multiple networks, not just academic ones. Humanities Texas is active in the state's library and museum networks and in historical preservation. Of all the humanities councils nationwide, we may be unique in the level of our investment in K–12 education, specifically secondary education, which aims to support how history and the language arts are taught around the state.

Ashley Beard-Fosnow: Missouri Humanities was one of the first state humanities committees, and in the 15 March 1971 article of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* announcing the program, the chairman, Robert G. Waldron, said that the state committee's objective was to "make the content of the humanities an essential part of each citizen's approach to problem solving" ("Panel"). I love this statement because it perfectly reflects the "why" of humanities councils: our vision is to build a more thoughtful and informed civil society. My job as executive director of Missouri Humanities is to make the humanities a larger part of public life in communities across the state. While the universities have an academic focus and are focused on student learning outcomes and research, the humanities councils work to involve the public in order to build an informed citizenry.

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Brian Yothers: Can you describe some valuable instances of collaboration between university humanities departments and state humanities councils?

Eric Lupfer: Our professional development programs for teachers are a good example. For more than two decades, we have worked with university humanities departments across the state on these programs. Scholars serve as faculty members in our institutes and workshops, thinking with middle and high school teachers about how best to teach topics at the heart of the state's English and social studies curricula—the causes of the Civil War, for example, or Texas during the Spanish colonial period, or seminal works of Texas literature. The scholars share expertise and resources that help the teachers. At the same time, teachers help the scholars understand the pleasures and challenges of teaching these topics at the secondary level. These programs have had a transformative impact on the teachers and university faculty members who have participated.

Maryse Jayasuriya: When I was a faculty member at the University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP), I first heard about Humanities Texas from Maceo Dailey, who was then the director of the African American studies program at UTEP and a member of the Humanities Texas Board. He organized an African American studies symposium at UTEP funded by a Humanities Texas "mini-grant." The symposium was intellectually stimulating and rigorous, and a book collection came out of it. When I had an idea for public programming at UTEP, a reading program called Mining Books that met monthly during the academic year, I reached out to Humanities Texas and talked to Eric, who was directing the grants program at the time. He gave me feedback that helped me develop the program, which is still active twelve years later. It has engaged the wider El Paso community and also the large military base at Fort Bliss. This has been a very fruitful project, and I and my colleagues have benefited from Humanities Texas resources and their newsletter. I hope to experience a similar interweaving in Missouri.

Phoebe Stein: With regard to the community engagement piece, we are talking about reading programs, institutes for teachers, and veterans' programs, among others. I also wanted to ask Eric to speak about the ways in which the humanities have been a resource for communities facing tragedies and crises. This may be an aspect many people have not heard of before.

Eric Lupfer: Immediately following the mass shooting in Uvalde in 2022, I contacted the public library in Uvalde, which we knew to be one of the most dynamic in the state, to see if Humanities Texas and the National Endowment for the Humanities could support some sort of family programming. The director of the library explained that they had been overwhelmed with books, cards, letters, and even original works of art from around the world—all expressions of grief—and he felt that it would be important to establish an archive of these materials and, beyond that, to create an oral history program documenting response to the tragedy. This was an opportunity not only to acknowledge the international response to a tragic event in a rural Texas town but also to highlight the resilience of the local community. We were able to secure special funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and connect the library with experts at the Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, who could help them with preservation and conservation questions about the materials coming into the library. We also connected the library staff members with the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University, which gave them guidance for establishing an oral history program. Phoebe often highlights the responsiveness of the councils, which is one of our key qualities, but I'd also emphasize our connectedness, as we are often the matchmakers bringing individuals and institutions together to bring important humanities projects to fruition.

Brandon Johnson: In New Mexico in 2022, we had the most damaging wildfires in written history in New Mexico. The fires lasted far too long and caused a lot of property damage, as well as damage to the environment, terraforming the region of

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northeastern New Mexico in a way that the natural environment is still healing from. The fires also caused tremendous cultural damage. In a couple of the hardest hit counties, people were primarily agriculturalists. They lost homes, they lost farms, they lost ranges, they lost livestock, but they also lost a lot of cultural materials and cultural knowledge, particularly when people started to move away from the area to save themselves and their families. With the help of emergency funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we were able to capitalize on a connection we already had with New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico, and with another organization, the Menitos Memory Project. We were able to provide ongoing funding to collect oral histories and materials people were able to save from the fires, to document the fires. This work is possible because of our partnership with New Mexico Highlands University. They are the node in the area for a lot of this work already, and our relationship with them enabled us to provide resources. I feel hopeful and am eager to see what happens, even as these communities deal with issues, like housing, that go well beyond cultural preservation.

Ashley Beard-Fosnow: In moments of trial or adversity, we try to capture those stories. After the killing of Michael Brown in 2014 in Ferguson, we worked on a documentary that we called *Just Listening*, which we came back to year after year, seeking community conversations. And in our magazine we have contributions from Missourians highlighting times of tragedy like the 2011 Joplin tornado. There are opportunities for humanists to describe their life's work: one that comes to mind is a group that is trying to capture the history of the Trail of Tears through Missouri. In addition to these big historical moments, we also try to capture the everyday lived experience of Missourians. So many of those stories are joyful and triumphant, and we are exploring and preserving them. One of the best moments in Missouri Humanities history was when we gave a grant to the Urban League of St. Louis to host an evening with Maya Angelou, during which she gave a talk and read her poetry to an audience of two thousand Missourians; by all accounts, it was a life-changing experience. These are the kinds of meaningful experiences that we hope to continue to support through our grant programs and other public programs in every corner of the state.

Brian Yothers: This brings us to a question that has been hovering in the background of many of your remarks so far. In concrete terms, what can faculty members in humanities departments do to make sure that they are taking advantage of the collaborative opportunities that state humanities councils offer? Where are there gaps in communication between public humanities scholars in the university and their counterparts in state humanities councils, and how can these be bridged? How can scholars take advantage of the opportunities for public work that state humanities councils provide?

Eric Lupfer: You can start by looking up your specific state council and seeing what they are doing. What are their programs? What opportunities do they provide? I think this is where many faculty members start to be aware of state humanities councils: they see the grants that are being made, they see the events that are taking place, they see a person they may know who may have been a board member a decade earlier or may have been involved in a grant or a program. Becoming aware of the work of the humanities council in your state is the essential first step.

Phoebe Stein: And then sign up for the newsletters from those state humanities councils! Or sign up for the monthly newsletter from the Federation of State Humanities Councils, which highlights the work of specific councils. Getting into the networks that provide information is valuable, and if folks can make time for more personal contact, that is all the better. The councils have been around for fifty years, so there is very likely a preexisting relationship that you can lean on and tap into, and those relationships go very deeply between the councils and many cultural institutions in the community and also academic organizations.

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Maryse Jayasuriya: The websites of many humanities councils offer a wealth of information, both in terms of grants and in terms of resources for instructors, at the high school level and at the university level—strategies and ideas, but also opportunities for collaboration. I keep an eye out when I attend workshops, lectures, or online programming, and often the symbol for the relevant humanities council is prominently displayed because of the support they have given. Every person that I've talked to, both at Humanities Texas and now among Missouri Humanities personnel, has been so welcoming and so encouraging and provided so many resources. At a time when the humanities are often under attack, there is also a great deal of advocacy being done, which is helpful for us as faculty members and for our students.

Ashley Beard-Fosnow: Faculty members can serve on panels, write for our magazine, or apply for grants—and I would encourage them to say "humanities"! I would like to see more university faculty members use the h-word in a consistent and intentional way instead of talking about the work they are doing in their department only in terms of a specific discipline. Talking about the process of pursuing the truth and understanding the human condition as the humanities more broadly helps us communicate the message that we are trying to get out across the state. To echo Maryse, faculty members can advocate for the humanities as private citizens and local residents, wherever they live. As leaders in their communities, they can advocate for the humanities in the state at every level. I would love to see them partner with us in that way.

Brandon Johnson: After you've signed up for the newsletter, after you've participated in panels or been awarded a grant, you can play a more ambassadorial role and give something back to the council by serving on a board. The boards are governing entities, and it's important to have a mix of voices, including faculty members and people from the humanities. Having good faculty members on the board is essential.

Maryse Jayasuriya: I strongly agree—I know that faculty members are busy with various responsibilities, but saying yes can be important. When I had the opportunity to participate in a Humanities Texas summer institute for teachers, and later when I had the opportunity to serve on the council's board, it enabled me to find out about other avenues for advocating for the humanities.

Brian Yothers: I think that state and jurisdictional humanities councils can be invisible to faculty members precisely because they are so embedded in communities. Or faculty members may be interested in working with humanities councils but may be unsure of how to start, and your remarks give us some direction for how to do so. Working with state humanities councils can be a great help in allowing faculty members to do the sort of public-facing work that we say we want to do—thinking about citizenship, for example.

There are, of course, many different ways of operating as humanities councils, and I don't think that any of the councils represented in this conversation carry out their mission in exactly the same way as any of the others. I'm wondering if you could talk about distinctive ways in which you've approached your mission as a humanities council in your state?

Phoebe Stein: I have the best job, because I have the opportunity to get up close and see all the humanities councils across the nation. We need to know and respect the different cultural and physical landscape of each state's council, as well as the different regional landscapes within each state. In Maryland, or "America in miniature," there are mountains and man-made lakes, there's the beach, there's the forest, there's urban, there's rural—and we could probably say this about almost every jurisdiction. Communities are not uniform. We are talking about different geographic landscapes and different political landscapes, and of course those are shifting. It's also important to remember that the nonprofit boards that govern each humanities council have turnover as well. Councils are nimble in that they are responding

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to a variety of events in communities. Each council is well-established—fifty years old or a bit younger—but what is shared among them all is responsiveness to the diversity in their jurisdictions. There can also be geographic limitations. In a large state like California, for example, the humanities council may not get to every locality. Every council chooses to serve its community in a different way. Diversity is a strength, and we also hold together around shared values.

Eric Lupfer: In Texas, our programs are all designed with the size of the state in mind. We are very active with the state's middle and high school teachers, not just because it is important work, but also because working with teachers is a way of magnifying our impact, since each teacher teaches hundreds of students each year. With the advent of remote programming, we are even more effective in reaching teachers in all corners of the state because half of our teacher development training is now offered online, outside the school day, when teachers can attend. We also do our best to ensure that our programs are broadly accessible—that there are limited barriers to entry. We make sure that our grants are easy to apply for and administer, and that our exhibitions have low rental fees, and that our teacher programs are completely free to teachers and their schools.

Brandon Johnson: Though not as vast as Texas, New Mexico is still a large state, with a smaller urban area that is clustered along the Rio Grande. An essential part of how we operate is finding partnerships to enhance our outreach. We can't do it alone in such a physically large state with a relatively smaller population. We started with our podcasts to engage more with digital humanities work, both for the benefit of access and for the ability to do digital preservation work. New Mexico is chock-full of internationally significant cultural sites, and we feel that it is important for us to aid in their digital preservation, working with Native American communities and our state historical preservation division. Recent digital preservation projects include one at Fort Selden, a mid-nineteenth-century military fort in southern New Mexico, and another at an unoccupied Puebloan site, out of which some very important findings have emerged. This is why I love New Mexico—there's always something to learn.

Ashley Beard-Fosnow: At Missouri Humanities, we offer council-conducted public programs that, for the last couple of years, relate to a common annual theme. Our 2025 theme is democracy in America. We offer traveling exhibits, a speaker's bureau, programs for veterans, and digital content. One of the biggest recent initiatives is Humanities TV, where we curate a collection of films, docuseries, and digital media rooted in the humanities from across the country. One of our popular local projects is Small-Town Showcase, a video series about small Missouri towns. Finally, Missouri Humanities serves as the Library of Congress–affiliated Center for the Book.

Eric Lupfer: Ashley reminded me of something when she quoted from that article announcing the launch of the Missouri humanities council. I keep on my desktop this excerpt from a report written by Jim Veninga, who served as director of the Texas council from 1975 to 1997:

> We know how important, as we move closer to the twenty-first century, the achievement of this goal [of a society of lifelong learners] is to the future of self-governance, to the health of American democracy, to the preservation of freedom, to free institutions. Learning must not stop at the sixth grade, or the twelfth grade, or with a BA, or a PhD degree. Increasingly we will need citizens in touch with history and culture, knowledgeable of the world around them, at home with ideas, able to understand the increasingly difficult choices that we are required to make as individuals and as a nation, and eager to engage their fellow citizens in discussion of those choices. (Veninga, *Triennial Report*)

We need engaged, informed citizens in conversation with one another. That is absolutely central to my understanding of the mission and work of the state and jurisdictional councils.

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Phoebe Stein: Brandon's remark—"there's always something to learn"—is also a good motto for all the work that we do.

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