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ARTICLE

Resonance and Method in Literary Studies

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Abstract

This article suggests directions and approaches for amplifying and deepening the work of the humanities in communities beyond the academy, with specific attention to public readerships and scholarship in literary studies globally. It argues that in the academic humanities, scholars work with materials that resonate with broad public audiences, but the scholarship they produce in their interpretation of those materials—in the case of literary studies, literary texts—does not often enough reach or resonate with wider audiences. Drawing upon the concept of "resonance" as distinctly theorized first by literary critic Wai Chee Dimock and more recently by sociologist Hartmut Rosa, this article describes how scholarship in literary studies might open itself up to the possibility of resonant relationships with readers who are not formally trained in the field but whose thoughtful and deeply held convictions, commitments, and articulations of experience are valuable to the exchange of ideas around which intellectual life is constructed. This article details two possible answers to the methodological question of what would be necessary for the further development of a publicly engaged literary criticism, one emphasizing interpretation as a broadly shared project in the humanities sector and the other focusing on targeted publicly engaged peer review.

Keywords: democracy; global studies; literary studies; public humanities

There are countless ways to rethink literary studies as a public practice. The most experimental of them require a move beyond what the theorist Rita Felski has termed "the limits of critique," into an open space of engagement where new intellectual possibilities can be found in the crosscurrents of insights and ideas from academic and nonacademic sources.[1] In this article, I explore what some of these possibilities might look like, and how they could be pursued, with an awareness that they are conditioned by two underlying claims: first, that the work of literary studies—the detailed interpretation and contextualization of literary texts—has considerable untapped potential to resonate with readers whose lives and thinking have not been shaped by specialized, advanced training in the humanities, and, second, that scholarship in literary studies can be meaningfully advanced through close attention to input from these readers.[2] Taken together, these claims place certain demands

[1] Felski 2015.

[2] For an influential argument on scholarly and professional formation (and deformation) in the academic literary humanities, see Guillory 2022.

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upon scholars who are interested in engaging seriously with public readerships and stakeholders. One is the necessity of adapting their use of language to be legible outside of the academy. But on a deeper level, they must also cultivate the ability to approach, with genuine respect and curiosity, the topic of personal conviction and belief, acknowledging a range of perspectives held by readers from diverse backgrounds, including views informed by their religious faith traditions, a broad spectrum of social and political commitments, and knowledge informally passed down through families and communities.

When scholars in literary studies—I count myself among them, although I am not and have never been positioned as tenure-track faculty in a college or university—write about literature, we should think expansively about how our work, both in its style and in its substance, might be meaningfully felt by and drawn upon in the lives of readers beyond the academy.[3] We should also, I will argue, seek out insights from nonacademic readers in the production of literary interpretation and in the construction of arguments about meaning in context. In other words, we should expect to find in public readerships something to which we can ourselves relate and something of value for our thinking. Academic and nonacademic readers are likely to bring very different intuitions and habits to their reading practices, given that academics are trained in scholarly methods (many of which emphasize critique rather than sincere belief in a set of positive claims about the world). But, I would argue, they share a general disposition toward the literature in that all readers are drawn to the page by the interplay between thought and feeling.[4] As such, readers from different backgrounds and levels of scholarly expertise have much more in common than only the deep affective attachments to books that are expressed in places beyond the campus and the conference panel, where readers of all backgrounds give an account of loving literature.[5]

As we walk the hidden roads that lead from poem to poem, we are often alone, encountering the text as an object of study.[6] And yet we are also never alone, having been both preceded and surrounded by the other readers whose company we invisibly keep. In this way, we participate in a procession of readers from across time and place, which brings together the living and the dead, the celebrated and the unknown. It is a gathering of readers of the global literary canon and its defiant alternatives—the stories and voices that elite readers have refused or failed to include—readers of everything, anything, that has been written, among all of this, what has been declared to be the best of it. In our professional capacities in literary studies—especially in the classroom, but also often in our writing and research—we seek to clear paths into the inexhaustible precincts of literature, to inhabit and welcome others into its vast endlessness.[7] But how often do we, in turn, take the time to elicit and reflect on the ideas of those whose names are not listed in our bibliographies?[8]

In this article, I will outline an approach to the global public literary humanities that takes shared interpretive responsibility as its framework and resonance as its motivating force. This approach is one answer to—or a set of flexible, adaptable models in service of—the

[3] See Newfield 2025 on humanities research funding and the imperative or expectation of discovery and knowledge being put to "general use." See also Looser 2024 on the necessity of public writing as a scholarly habit.

[4] See Woodward 2009a, particularly the introduction, "Thinking Feeling, Feeling Thinking."

[5] Lynch 2015.

[6] Bloom 1971.

[7] Helen Vendler 2015 writes, "Poetry belongs to all," but "its audience often needs—as I do still—paths into its inexhaustible precincts" (14).

[8] For an example of scholarship in literary studies that investigates and illuminates the contributions of public readerships, see McHenry 2002.

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methodological question of what would be necessary for the development of a publicly engaged literary criticism that moves beyond the established (and, to be clear, still vitally important) genres of the book review and the public lecture. This way of doing our work would be characterized by a postcritical openness to new meanings of the text, the active involvement of many readers from a variety of backgrounds, and an emphasis on convictions, beliefs, and demonstrated personal commitments rather than (or emerging from) identity categories. It would draw upon talent from across the humanities sector, both within and far beyond the tenured professoriate. It would directly confront the current threats around the world, particularly in the United States, being leveled against democracy, truth, freedom of inquiry, the honest and ethical transmission of cultural heritage, and the continuance of the academic disciplines in the humanities. It would be motivated by the urgent need to repair our relationships to one another, and to bring about what is still possible: an end to seemingly endless cultural warfare, and the rise in its place of a genuinely resonant society.[9]

In 1997, literary critic Wai Chee Dimock published an article in *PMLA* titled "A Theory of Resonance," in which she proposed "a diachronic historicism" for what would become global literary studies.[10] In the article, Dimock beautifully and persuasively articulates a "long view of history," which "allows texts to be seen as objects that do a lot of traveling: across space and especially across time."[11] The text, for Dimock, is defined (contra Harold Bloom) by its "persistent unraveling" rather than by a persistent "integrity."[12] She writes, "meanings are produced over and over again, attaching themselves to, overlapping with, and sometimes coming into conflict with previous ones," meaning that "a text cannot and will not remain forever the same object."[13] What we need today is an application of Dimock's theory of resonance that can trace, or illuminate, how texts travel across deep divides in our society, across differences of belief about our lived reality. Dimock's nuanced sensibility regarding the long history of almost unimaginable differences across vividly diverse expanses of time and place in human experience epitomizes the strengths of humanities scholars as they are formed by their academic study. But the space between people now—along breakage points including but certainly not limited to educational attainment—can feel wider even than the historical terrain she so ambitiously maps out. She writes, "human beings are finite, bringing short-lived meanings to long-lived words." Readers in different eras, "living among other circumstances and sensitized by other concerns, bring to the same words a different web of meaning."[14] What happens when two readers bring to the same words two radically different webs of meaning—in the very same historical moment? In 2025, at the height, or the low point, depending on how you read it, of the culture wars, it may be that these varied meanings, produced repeatedly and differently, come into conflict simultaneously.

Dimock, alive to the unfolding of this history, attended in subsequent years to the growing imperative for literary studies to turn toward public audiences. Twenty years after the article on resonance, readers of *PMLA* find her as the journal's editor, advocating for experimental, publicly engaged research. She writes, "an experimental science is also a reparative science. Constantly running into difficulties and constantly coming up short, it is duty-bound to address [its] disappointing outcomes. Among the things that it does are the

[9] Cassegård, Malmqvist, and Ståhl 2023.
[10] Dimock 1997, 1061.
[11] Dimock 1997, 1061.
[12] Dimock 1997, 1062.
[13] Dimock 1997, 1062.
[14] Dimock 1997, 1061.

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repairs necessitated by its failures."[15] Unlike in the scientific disciplines, where failure is revered and put to use, literary scholars, she notes,

> still tend to be nonexperimentalists. We stick with what already exists, seeing our objects of study as finished products … completed before our arrival and summoned now only to be observed and critiqued, these antecedent objects stand at an input-discouraging distance. We use our critical lenses, the equivalent of telescopes, to bring them into our fields of vision, but they remain closed chapters and done deals. We don't dream of collaborating with these texts, nor do we design experiments to test their behavior under altered circumstances.[16]

Dimock highlights the web-based publication *Public Books* as her outstanding case study of how this kind of work can be pursued. That project, to "give academic writing a good name," as Sharon Marcus, who, alongside Caitlin Zaloom, co-founded the site in 2012, deserves and has received extensive praise.[17] But, while the success of *Public Books* signals a way forward for literary studies in the world, it should not be expected to stand alone in its decisive interventions. Many more creative pathways can and should be built and attempted.

What might motivate more broadly such a major shift in our scholarly work, toward experimentation, toward public readerships? In the humanities, as elsewhere, we are witnessing a global crisis that sociologist Hartmut Rosa has identified as a diminishment of resonance as an effect of acceleration in contemporary life. He developed this theory of resonance in response to his own earlier theory of social acceleration.[18] Both have gained traction and wide reception in and beyond his field. In summarizing his arguments, he writes,

> An aimless, endless compulsion toward escalation ultimately leads to problematic, even dysfunctional or pathological, relationships to the world on the part of both subjects and society as a whole. This dysfunction can be observed in the three great crises of the present day: the environmental crisis, the crisis of democracy, and the psychological crisis (as manifested, for example, in ever-growing rates of burnout). The first indicates a disturbance in the relation between human beings and our non-human environment or nature, the second a disturbance in our relationship to the social world, and the third a pathological disorder in our subjective relation to the self.[19]

If Rosa's descriptions of the dynamics underlying contemporary life are accurate, and if his arguments for how to confront and possibly change those dynamics—because they are causing measurable, observable, and also intangible, devastating harm—are compelling, and generally, I think that they are, then I would suggest that his ideas have implications for many fields, including literary studies. Rosa's answer to the question of how we might respond to the overwhelming crises described above is that, in short, we should aim to value not accumulation but "intrinsic joy," and that we should seek to develop a relationship to the world "marked by enduring resonant experiences."[20] Reading and interpretation can be experienced in so many affective registers: as tedious, exciting, or unsettling, just as

[15] Dimock 2017, 243.
[16] Dimock 2017, 243.
[17] Marcus 2015, 474.
[18] See Rosa 2013.
[19] Rosa 2019, 2.
[20] Rosa 2019, 8, 14.

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examples. But surely, we can describe our most memorable intellectual interactions with literary texts as opening up enduring resonant experiences. What can literary studies scholars do to orient their work more often and more collectively toward this latent possibility?

For the purposes of scholars in literary studies, Rosa's work on resonance can push us beyond the current ideal of making our work merely relevant to public readerships and toward participation in a reframing of our fundamental values. Literary studies scholars are, I would argue, very well positioned to offer a unique and substantial contribution to the imperative of moving away from our society's current "frenetic standstill" and toward, instead, "a resonant society."[21] Both Dimock and Rosa point to repair as a necessary task, for experimental research, to propel itself forward to new discoveries, and for society, to renew and sustain itself for a livable future. Dimock's theory of literary resonance provides a disciplinarily grounded way to think about the text in the world. Rosa's sociological theory of resonance offers literary studies scholars a way to think about the world itself and how our reading practices might participate in and shape it—ideally, for the better.

1. Interpretation as public practice

Scholars in literary studies have always enacted forms of public engagement in their work, and public audiences and readerships have materialized in response.[22] As academic discussions of what has come to be called public scholarship have advanced, the various forms and overall number of public humanities projects have proliferated, particularly in recent years.[23] A brief survey of the public humanities landscape shows how scholars are already moving in many directions at once, undertaking their research agendas while engaging with public audiences along a spectrum of activities. And, increasingly, they are being acknowledged by their departments and institutions for this work, as evidenced by the emergence of standards of evaluation for public scholarship being created by professional organizations and taken up in tenure review.[24] This is positive progress; the field has dynamically changed in the years following an era during the early twenty-first century in which advocacy for public engagement in the humanities gained intense momentum.[25]

At this point, what remains to be done? Scholars in literary studies are well prepared to influence wider publics. And many are enacting that project. But the path of influence is often designed to lead in only one direction. Public readerships are often positioned to receive ideas *about*, rather than be consulted *for* their ideas on, the texts at hand.[26] As such, there is still a deep potential to involve public readerships in literary studies, particularly in its research processes, and to answer in entirely new ways a question posed by Kathleen

[21] Cassegård et al. 2023, 178.

[22] In his classic study of the profession, Gerald Graff 1987 notes that in the nineteenth century, literary societies were crucial in the development of the professional study of literature; they involved public readerships in a range of ways. He writes, "by bringing the local culture into contact with contemporary currents of taste, public readings and lectures and the activities of the literary societies and student magazines had an important influence in breaking down genteel moral opposition to secular literature" (45). For a more recent study of the long history of public humanities, see Risam 2025.

[23] For example, see Arteaga and Johnsen 2021. See also Fisher-Livne and May-Curry 2024.

[24] See Modern Language Association 2022.

[25] Bartha 2010.

[26] For an example of a scholarly contribution to literary studies that is shaped, from its inquiry through its conclusions, by a deep engagement with a public readership, see Cocola 2021.

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Woodward in her 2009 article on the future of the humanities: "What would public literary criticism look like?" That question stands alone and demands many distinctive answers. But it is also important to answer her subsequent question in the affirmative, in the strongest possible terms. She continues, "would a public broader than the readership of the *New York Review of Books, American Book Review, Bookforum*, and the *American Poetry Review* care?"[27] Yes. It is our task to make it so, by meaningfully involving nonacademic readers in literary interpretation and contextualization, and not only in the consumption of books and book reviews.

What do I mean by the term "public readerships?" I define this as specific groups of readers gathered on the basis of interest in a particular subject, idea, question, text, or publication. I am pointedly avoiding the term "general reader" and its palpable distinctions among readers from different classes or levels of educational access and privilege. I do make a distinction between academic and nonacademic readers, in that, as I have described above, academic readers are shaped by their training in highly specialized ways. This also means that the same person who at one moment can be best defined as an academic reader (e.g., in relation to certain literary texts) can at the next moment be better understood as part of a public readership (e.g., when reading the journal *Nature*, in which she will find reported updates from the sciences, across fields in which she may have little background, in an accessible style). Public readerships convene to interact with and respond to texts. What would it look like to develop direct, reciprocal interactions between literary studies scholars and public readerships at the point of interpretation?

I propose two possible interventions that could help scholars in the field achieve this: first, I outline a process that would expand our understanding of expertise in literary studies to include the full range of thoughtful, highly trained, and practiced readers of literature positioned in formal, or professional, roles across the humanities sector. By engaging with these readers, many of whom continuously interface with public audiences on behalf of their organizations, we can bring scholarly work, as it is being constructed, into closer proximity to public readerships. That scholarship would, in turn, be shaped, and strengthened, by the contributions of these readers. Second, I outline a separate process through which public readerships could be explicitly represented in the pre-publication review of scholarship in literary studies. Obtaining reader feedback from nonacademic reviewers would sharpen inquiry and interpretation in literary studies by drawing out insights into the primary text that might be otherwise overlooked. It would intrude upon academic stylistic habits such that scholars could learn to communicate more effectively with public readerships. The interpretation of the cultural record is—or, it should be—a collective endeavor and a shared responsibility. Too often in literary studies, the collective has not included as many people or perspectives as it could have if there were structures and methods in place for meaningful public engagement throughout the research process. These two experimental approaches could serve as starting points for changing that.

We do not need to theorize what we can readily observe: in the academic humanities, we do not retain or ever fully draw upon the talent we produce at any level of our educational and training programs. It is the opposite: we are dramatically underutilizing talent in our sector, at the same time that our sector is under threat.[28] David Laurence, whose institutional

[27] Woodward 2009b, 120–21.

[28] The single best resource for information related to professional outcomes in the humanities is the "Workforce" section of Humanities Indicators (https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/workforce), a project of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. For a detailed history of threats to the academic humanities,

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research has informed decades of programmatic work at the Modern Language Association, defines the humanities sector broadly. He explains,

> "institutions of research scholarship and higher education form an important part of the total picture, but only a part. The institutional infrastructure includes in addition the schools; libraries; museums; publishing, including commercial publishing as well as scholarly presses and journals; and certain editorial and storytelling work carried on in the broader entertainment and news industry, especially work having to do with the commercial production and distribution of books, newspapers, and magazines, broadcast television and radio, film, and the Internet. Making this infrastructure visible so it can be named as such—as an infrastructure—is important because once we see it and name it others have a basis to understand how the cultural life of the society flows from this great array of institutions built over many decades of investment and grounded in forms of humanistic learning that the society has a vital stake in supporting and sustaining.[29]

Much of the humanities sector is shaped by literary studies, through coursework and lifelong engagement with reading, writing about, and sharing literature with various audiences. The sector is significantly populated by highly skilled readers. Why not ask them to participate more directly in literary interpretation?

A model that would do so might look something like this: a scholar in literary studies wants to write an essay that will be read by, resonate with, and be useful in some way to a public readership. She chooses a primary text that, based on her expertise, speaks powerfully to the moment. As part of that assessment, she seeks a primary text that turns on a resonant image or an idea that she believes will be felt deeply by a public readership. She calls upon—either through written correspondence, an invitation to meet directly to discuss, an invitation to a closed seminar-style meeting with specified participants, a publicized open forum, or another format that her particular setting and resources lend themselves to—the following people: the youth poet laureate of her state or city, a museum curator, a public-school teacher, a librarian, a two-year college professor, and a graduate student whose dissertation research pertains to the text. (In all of these examples, participation in the project could be conceptualized as a part of the professional activities of the people involved, highly relevant to their ongoing work, and a visible recognition of its value. In other words, the incentives for their participation are already embedded in their careers; the invitation could be framed similarly to any other opportunity to serve or volunteer on a board, committee, or project, and would, one would expect, be similarly received.) She gives all of these invited readers the same primary text, in full, and asks them to offer interpretive responses, following a series of well-designed and deeply considered prompts.

The responsibility of the lead author would be to then collect and collate responses, consider the insights they offer to her own thinking about the primary text, and incorporate those insights into her essay. The questions raised by the readers could shape the parameters of her inquiry. The aspects of the text that resonate most strongly with them might indicate a priority focus area for her. The points articulated by these readers on how the text relates to their experiences, prior reading, and understanding of the current moment might inform

see Reitter and Wellmon 2021. For a recent, pointed example of divestment from the academic humanities, see Cassuto and Weisbuch 2023.

[29] Laurence 2009, 2.

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her main claims about the meaning of the text in context. And their responses could signal some contours of a possible audience for the essay about the text. This could all be taken into account, and accounted for, through a journalistic style with direct quotes from responses and immediate attribution, or a summary response pulling together the major ideas and reactions from the invited readers. Either way, a key step would be to name these readers and acknowledge their insights and contributions. And listing their titles and affiliations would have the additional benefit of making the humanities infrastructure publicly visible.

The role of the scholar/critic/writer here becomes more about assembly and listening than about constructing a theory. She is no longer even reading the text through a particular theoretical lens, but rather through a refraction of multiple perspectives. She is reading democratically: the text belongs equally to all of us. Her work would be necessarily postcritical, animated by a genuine openness to the possible meanings that many readers will find yielded by the text. This follows Felski's explanation that, reading postcritically, "interpretation becomes a coproduction between actors that brings new things to light rather than an endless rumination on a text's hidden meanings or representational failures."[30] Felski continues, "the aim is no longer to diminish or subtract from the reality of the texts we study but to amplify their reality, as energetic cofactors and vital partners in an equal encounter."[31] This approach to reading is one that fits well—I would argue, best—with direct public engagement in literary studies. If we were to depart from the critical habits of mind famously described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as "paranoid" and move instead toward a reparative framework for our reading practices, it would be more likely that through close attention to the text and to our audiences, we are able to produce interpretations that are insightful, relatable, legible, comprehensible, valuable, and even useful to readers beyond our scholarly circles.[32]

By developing a new model for shared literary interpretation, we can distribute responsibility for, and participation in, literary studies more widely. This would have the effect of honoring a more inclusive set of contributions to the work of literary studies. It would offer scholars an option for working with others, rather than in solitude, which, in turn, might invigorate their thinking in unexpected ways. And it would repatriate to our professional community some of the genuinely brilliant and talented people, whose lives and thinking have been shaped by the curriculum of literary studies, but whose work has taken them away from what is most overtly recognized as "the profession" of literary studies. But is this literary criticism via committee? If so, the question might be something less like "would anyone care" about what we write and more along the lines of "why would anyone want to try it?" I would argue that it would be worth the time and trouble, if the insights gained genuinely strengthened the interpretation of the primary text, and/or if the work produced resonated more meaningfully with public readerships. It is not possible to know if either of these outcomes would realistically be the result of such an experiment, so I cannot and do not claim to know with certainty whether or not this concept is a valuable model for literary studies. But I strongly suspect that it would be, in great part, because I have developed it as a new iteration of what might be the most longstanding and compelling tradition in the discipline: the use of intellectual exchange through discussion as a resource for humanities research.

[30] Felski 2015, 174.
[31] Felski 2015, 185.
[32] Sedgwick 1997.

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Tenure-line, research-focused faculty often function in relation to their classrooms in precisely the way I have described above: they draw upon seminar discussions and the richness of the pedagogical situation as they develop insights about the literature they are teaching. As evidenced by their countless acknowledgments to their students, the faculty then incorporate those insights into their scholarship.[33] The model I am sketching out as a new resource for the field provides a form of engaged discussion about literature that could be used not only by faculty with secure and well-supported positions in the university, but also by independent scholars who have advanced training in the humanities but who do not have stable positions within academia—and who cannot, therefore, count on the input of students to shape and sharpen their thinking. Anywhere in the world, those of us who are *trained* in literary studies but not *positioned* in literary studies could build out our own networks of highly thoughtful readers. We could then draw upon those networks fluidly, beyond classrooms and institutions. This vision of involving thoughtful readers scattered across a shifting humanities landscape might become increasingly important in places where higher education as an established system is under threat, as in the United States today. In any case, the unwavering commitment in literary studies to the single-authored scholarly monograph and to the sole author herself has led to the publication of many brilliant intellectual projects. It has also contributed to a vast under-utilization of our sector's resources, talent, and infrastructure. We rarely turn to the people who make up and hold together this infrastructure to do the work of interpretation. If we were to do so, we might be able to better answer the question of what literary studies would look like globally if we committed to it as a shared endeavor with public stakes.

In his 2014 book, *Culture and the Death of God*, Terry Eagleton registers the absence of attention to religious faith traditions in contemporary literary and cultural studies.[34] "Almost every cultural theorist today passes over in silence some of the most vital beliefs and activities of billions of ordinary men and women," he writes.[35] Is it also possible that scholars in literary studies overlook much more than the religious beliefs of people outside of our direct professional settings, and indeed that we tend to overlook many things that they believe? If this is the case, how might scholars, in their publicly engaged work, more closely attend to the areas of belief and experience that are vibrantly important in the lives of what Eagleton calls "ordinary men and women," the people who make up what I have called public readerships, who are, in short, nonacademic readers? I would argue that we can demonstrate a genuine interest in the deeply held beliefs of nonacademic readers—their core commitments as individuals—whether these are secular, religious, or otherwise, by asking how the insights those beliefs contain can be brought to bear on literary interpretation. Scholars can accomplish this by seeking out, in addition to and separately from academic peer review, invited review feedback on works-in-progress from nonacademic readers whose beliefs are formalized by social belonging, for example, to a faith community, an activist collective, or a non-profit organization's board of advisors. (In all of these examples, the commitments are affirmative and freely given, which is to say, non-transactional. An invitation could be framed as a welcoming of the perspective represented

[33] In her recent book, *Read Until You Understand: The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature*, designed for a public readership, literary studies scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin 2021 writes, "I have not organized the chapters chronologically as I might do for a literary survey. Instead, the book is designed as a seminar where we readers, together, seek a deeper understanding of the works and the principles they explore" (xi). This description is a model of how depth of classroom engagement can be mirrored onto projects in publicly engaged literary studies—with mutual reading and reflection on shared texts as an informing element for all involved.

[34] Eagleton 2014.

[35] Eagleton 2014, ix.

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by the group in question, one that the writer regards as essential to the topic, and that would be otherwise unavailable to the project. In other words, the incentives for participation are embedded in the shared life of the organization and its voluntary ethos—and that does not even include the motivation, highly operative in many of these examples, of members of such organizations to persuade others of the importance of their cause.)

A model that would do so might look something like this: a scholar in literary studies wants to write an essay that will be read by, resonate with, and be useful in some way to a public readership. He chooses a primary text that, based on his expertise, speaks powerfully to the moment. As part of that assessment, he seeks a primary text that turns on a resonant image or an idea that he believes will be felt deeply by a public readership. He writes the essay, foregrounding the aspects of the text that he thinks will matter most to nonacademic readers who are committed to the general topic it evokes, but may not be familiar with the primary source material. He makes interpretive claims that connect that text and its meaning to the current moment and the framework of belief he sees surrounding it in context. He then searches his local community for a membership-based organization whose mission or statement of belief is relevant to the completed draft essay. He explains and describes his project to the leadership of the organization and requests recommendations for thoughtful readers affiliated with its networks, who might be interested in offering their feedback on the essay in a brief review. He then takes those recommendations, reaches out to the individuals directly, and invites their input on his work. He includes in that message two attachments: the primary text, in full, and the draft essay. He asks the readers to offer their feedback, following a series of thoughtful and open-ended prompts. He would then revise on the basis of this feedback. A key step here would be to name the reviewers and credit them for their intellectual labor in shaping the final, published interpretation, publicly recognizing their contributions and their organizational missions and contexts. This would also indicate clearly to readers of the published piece the basis for their involvement and the central value of their perspectives.

In this model, alongside blind peer review in which academics have thrown all of their training at the response, the writer would also receive a different range of reader reports, all of which contain the full weight of personal experience and demonstrated commitment to the topic.[36] This model experimentally assembles a review panel that would immediately be more diverse in terms of educational background, class, status, expertise, worldview, and other identity categories than any imaginable counterpart drawn only from within academia. This model may also help scholars to better understand their own fields of study by illuminating those areas of human experience that they habitually overlook. Michael Warner has memorably described how ways of reading that are not shaped by advanced study of literature are likely to be shaped by other complex imperatives, motivations, and approaches. These reading practices, some, but surely not all, of them emerging from religious and faith traditions, constitute "the unconscious of the profession; whatever worlds are organized around frameworks of reading other than critical protocols remain, for the most part, terra incognita," he writes.[37] By receiving and incorporating feedback directly from readers whose worlds are organized around frameworks of reading that do not resemble our own, we, as scholars in literary studies, may indeed have much to learn about ourselves as readers and the texts on which we base our claim to expertise.

[36] It should be noted that there are many creative approaches to peer review emerging, in particular, in response to the distinct needs of scholarship created in new media and digital humanities. For an example, see Beckstead, Cook, McGregor 2024.

[37] Warner 2004, 33.

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The project of writing well for public readerships—and not only making our work comprehensible to those readers, but also connecting it more deeply and meaningfully with their lives—would be well served by our seeking and integrating feedback from, for example, a Bible study group when we are writing about the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson; climate change activists when we are writing about the poetry of Mary Oliver; and local civil rights organizations when we are writing about a short story by James Baldwin. And that list, which reflects my own work in American literary studies and topics of particular concern within that broad field, could, and would have to, go on from there to represent the interests and projects of scholars in all areas of global literary studies and their local contexts. It would also necessarily revolve around the social and interpersonal resources available in those contexts. Scholars undertaking such an experimental project would need to gather and assess those resources through a process of conversation and reflection, with an emphasis on sustainability—minimally over the life of the current project, and possibly longer. In the best-case outcome, this might result in a one-time engagement with a reviewer whose input becomes a turning point for the way the scholar thinks about the field, or deep and ongoing conversations with the same participants over the course of multiple projects. But in any community, either of these should be understood from the outset as real and exciting possibilities.

This model would push scholars entirely beyond professionalized reading and into direct conversation with public readerships as they do their work in literary interpretation. By undertaking such a review process in a thoughtful and targeted way—by constructing it around demonstrated commitments and deeply held, publicly declared beliefs, scholars would be able to engage with public readerships on a more direct, personal level, and bring them fully into the process of discovery. This model would necessarily be built on trust and mutual respect; its starting point is a clear concordance between the topics and texts at hand and the established beliefs and commitments of the invited reviewers. This alignment, or affinity, in topical focus—emphasizing areas that already matter to these specific individuals—builds dignity and reciprocity into the process.[38]

The aim of publicly engaged scholarship in the global literary humanities should be to ultimately see ourselves and one another more clearly. Direct engagement with nonacademic readers, and designing an exchange of influence and insight into the research process at many possible points, do not guarantee this outcome. But by accepting the well-established and important disciplinary terms that literary studies sets—namely, its insistence on the centrality of the literary text—and by shifting the terms of our approach to find ways to read texts with and alongside public readerships, we may have much to gain. To do so would hold out to all of us, along a newly porous boundary between academic and nonacademic readers, the possibility of becoming educated in the deepest sense of that term—informed, capable, and wise.

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[38] In her 2007 McBride Lecture at Oklahoma Christian University, the novelist Marilynne Robinson reflected on the publication of her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead*: "we tell our students to trust the reader, to respect the reader, and that does include speaking truly from one's own experience, which for most of us does include love and belief" (Humanities Staff 2007).

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