Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship in Language and Literature Programs

MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Valuing the Public Humanities

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Executive Summary

These guidelines offer suggestions for departments, institutions, and faculty members in languages and literatures for valuing and assessing research in the public humanities. Because much public humanities scholarship involves engagement with communities, particularly bilingual and multilingual communities, this document places particular emphasis on the ethical questions that arise in community-engaged scholarly work. The guidelines also acknowledge genres of public humanities work that align more closely with traditional forms of humanities scholarship: research published in nonacademic venues, such as periodicals and blogs, or op-eds, lectures, and podcasts disseminated to wider audiences beyond the academy in English and other languages.

Broadly, the guidance provided here is meant to engage with the fundamental questions that drive a peer review process in cases where traditional peer review may not currently be feasible and to suggest alternative modes of peer review where possible. The suggested principles of evaluation for public humanities projects are as follows:

1. the scope and impact of the project (How substantial is the work undertaken? What are its effects in the geographic and intellectual communities in which it participates? How does it change what we know or what we do?);

2. the form and dissemination of the project (How is the project shared with its audience? How is its form—print, digital, participatory, or otherwise—adapted to the specific needs of its public?);

3. the extent of existing deliverables and, where relevant, the future trajectory of the project (How has the project—if, like many digital or oral projects, it is a work perennially in progress—achieved some portions of its aims to date? How does it lay the groundwork for future development? How will such future development be evaluated?); and

4. the nature and extent of collaboration where applicable (How, for projects that involve collaboration among scholars or with a wider community, is collaboration structured? How are ethical relationships with the community or collaborators secured and assured?).

These questions are the key to valuing and evaluating public humanities scholarship, and this document elaborates on how they can be understood and applied.

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Introduction

At a time of increased anxiety over the value of the humanities, public humanities scholarship that engages multiple and diverse audiences beyond the university in literature, modern languages, translation and interpretation studies, history, the arts, and cultural heritage has the potential to demonstrate the powerful impact of the humanities in the world. Public humanities scholarship can actively engage with the needs of bilingual and multilingual communities, both local and global. This scholarship takes many forms: writing about one's research in magazines or op-eds, producing a podcast, contributing to a blog, collaborating with a community, developing an exhibit, or leading reading groups at a library. When it involves ethical collaboration with communities, public humanities scholarship can decenter the university as the sole site of expertise, creating new forms of knowledge. Whether written by one person or composed collaboratively with community partners, public humanities scholarship facilitates dialogue and collaboration with multiple publics in order to collectively engage new audiences in the humanities. Despite the crucial contributions of public humanities scholarship to the making of new knowledges and the generating of impact, faculty reward systems often overlook the value of this work in literature, philosophy, history, and cultural studies.

Because of the nature of the enterprise, the forms of public humanities projects evolve regularly and change more rapidly than do more traditional forms of scholarship (i.e., the monograph, edited collection, and journal article). These are strengths, not limitations, of this work. Public humanities scholarship is expansive in nature and includes, but is not limited to, print and digital forms of individual and collective scholarship published in venues that reach broad audiences, such as op-eds; community events, such as speaker series or community reading events; analog projects, like exhibits in public spaces, interpretive material, and cultural heritage sites; and digital projects like podcasts, websites, or apps—and some projects may appear in more than one of these iterations. Public humanities scholarship may undergo forms of review and evaluation, such as those provided by the Scholarly Podcasting Open Peer Review project at Wilfrid Laurier University Press or Debates in the Digital Humanities at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, that are distinct from traditional forms of peer review. Public humanities work may rely heavily on review and evaluation that involves community partners and other stakeholders outside conventional academic or scholarly structures; this review should be regarded as meaningfully as is traditional peer review, and indeed such review should be seen as an integral component of ethical collaboration.

Public humanities scholarship that brings expertise to bear on policy questions and is shared with a broad audience may have a particular impact, and it is noteworthy that in some areas (educational policy, for example) publications that are read more widely than academic journals may have an impact that is far greater than is typically measured by the prestige of the venue. The impact of public humanities scholarship

on multiple and diverse audiences, across local ecosystems, which leads to new understandings of our shared world and action based on that new understanding, demands the creation of guidelines and measures that value the work according to that impact. Whether by sharing knowledge beyond the academy or in direct collaboration with community members, public humanities scholarship contributes directly to the common good through an engagement with our local and global communities. Therefore, creating faculty reward structures that value publicly oriented humanities scholarship and activity is a matter of urgency for both humanities scholars and the broader society in which we live and work.

Outcomes of public humanities projects include varied forms of scholarship, such as the development of archives, podcasts, digital stories, exhibitions, and data sets. Yet many departments find it difficult to effectively define, identify, and evaluate public humanities scholarship precisely because the outcomes of this work often do not fit traditional models and measurements of scholarship or often depend heavily on collaboration and the decentering of traditional modes of knowledge creation and dissemination. In public humanities scholarship, the lines between research, teaching, and service often blur and overlap. Consequently, public humanities work often gets slotted into the service category when faculty members are evaluated, even in cases when the outcomes are scholarly and would fit a more expansive definition of scholarship. At colleges and universities that place a low premium on service, public scholarship is thus undervalued in tenure and promotion processes and in the evaluation, retention, and advancement of full-time non-tenure-stream and part-time faculty members.

When the scholarly outputs of public humanities work are not valued as scholarship, faculty members effectively must undertake double the amount of work to meet traditional expectations as well. Scholars of color and scholars from other historically marginalized groups have a long history of engaging in community-facing work that pushes the boundaries of the conventional genres of the journal article and the monograph. Therefore, developing mechanisms to evaluate public humanities scholarship for career advancement is crucial to the struggle for equity and social justice within academia.

Humanities departments must take the lead in developing robust internal processes to evaluate and recognize public humanities scholarship. Rather than capitulate to preconceived notions of acceptable scholarly genres, tenured faculty members have a responsibility to make the case that the unique outputs of public humanities scholarship are, in fact, accepted and valued forms of scholarship. To assist with this process, these guidelines articulate core principles for evaluation of public humanities scholarship, guiding questions for evaluators to consider, and advice for departments, university committees, administrators, and candidates for evaluation.

Principles of Evaluation

This section details principles of evaluation: scope and impact of contribution, form and dissemination of contribution, extent of existing deliverables, and collaboration and the ethics of public humanities scholarship.

Scope and Impact of Contribution

Valuing public humanities work means reframing the ways in which scholarly impact is traditionally measured. Monographs and journal articles are often assessed through citations and peer review, while grants also serve as markers of impact. Measures of impact for public-facing work can include the ways in which the work advances the mission of the institution, improves retention of underrepresented populations in higher education, reaches out to new audiences through multilingual public scholarship, preserves local cultures, creates new areas of study, highlights a need for increased board diversity and training, fosters participatory partnerships, produces more equitable policy, recognizes the need for language accessibility through paid translation and interpreting services, or facilitates new frontiers of engagement with businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, humanities centers, and philanthropic organizations. The impact of this work is measurable—through metrics that differ from the ones on which evaluation has traditionally relied and that may be context-dependent. For instance, what goal did a project set for itself vis-à-vis reaching a new audience or advancing an institutional mission? How has the project creator demonstrated that the goal has been met and that the project is sustainable? A related question to that of impact is scope, because it is necessary to acknowledge the volume and complexity of the work involved in creating the contribution.

Form and Dissemination of Contribution

Public humanities scholarship appears in multiple forms, some ephemeral (events, time-limited exhibits) and some longer-lasting (digital products, collaborative publications, publications in nonacademic venues). The form of a public humanities project should be appropriate to the goals of the project, which should be grounded in the ethics of collaboration. In the evaluation of public humanities scholarship, it is thus crucial to recognize that the language of the project should also be appropriate to partners with whom project directors are collaborating and the audiences the project team strives to reach. The project should also be demonstrably reaching its audience, whether local, regional, national, or international. It should be noted, however, that the dissemination and promotion of public humanities projects without institutional support can be difficult, especially for more precarious members of the community, academic and beyond—all the more reason to ensure the kind of support for which this document is advocating. Moreover, although some projects may be amenable to traditional modes of peer review, and while some may be adaptable to newer forms of peer review, such as those provided by journals like *Reviews in Digital Humanities* or the abovementioned Debates in the Digital Humanities, which have successfully provided peer review for digital public humanities scholarship, many of the more participatory projects of public humanities scholarship are ill-suited to peer review since they require more open forms of review and evaluation. It is thus crucial to separate the assessment of public humanities scholarship from peer review and, instead, to evaluate it through the framework provided here.

Extent of Existing Deliverables

While some public humanities projects may be time-limited, many are works in progress that do not have finite boundaries that indicate completion. Therefore, the onus on project creators is to articulate the short- and long-term vision for the project, its benchmarks, milestones, and timeline. The onus on evaluators is to

assess the project through the vision provided by the creator. When creators outline and plan for the life cycle of the project, evaluators can assess a project through its own goals and measure its progress toward those goals. Such outlining and planning also sets the stage for long-term contributions and future expansion by the creators or iteration by others who wish to build on an existing project.

Collaboration and the Ethics of Public Humanities Scholarship

Collaboration in public humanities scholarship requires a reciprocal approach that values the talents and labor in the communities with which we engage. Public humanities scholarship creates new networks for faculty members, staff members, and students within the institution; with other universities, colleges, and K–12 institutions; and beyond educational institutions. Work undertaken with experts beyond academic institutions provides our students with a greater array of career-readiness skills, resiliency, and connectedness to neighboring communities. Collaboration, in this way, requires expanding the notion of intellectual leadership to amplify the grassroots, historically minoritized voices within and beyond our campuses. Effective public humanities scholarship recognizes community partners as fellow creators of knowledge, not sites of extraction. With the goal of making meaningful contributions to multiple publics, public humanities scholarship thus requires incorporating the voices of community partners into project design at all stages (research questions, methods, execution, and analysis) and crediting their contributions.

Collaboration with community partners in public humanities scholarship raises important ethical concerns that must be part of any evaluative process. Efforts to undertake public-facing and community-engaged scholarship and partnerships must begin by grasping the complexities of what Davarian Baldwin has termed the "UniverCit[y]," where "the shift in higher education policy from public good to private profits" assumes increasing importance in how institutions of higher learning maintain relationships with their neighbors in the surrounding community (14). As Baldwin describes in his book *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower*, these interactions are too often driven by agendas that turn on sustaining imbalances of power and resources against the counterforce generated by community activism.

What this means, for example, is that in conducting archival research for the purpose of creating a public exhibit that uncovers disturbing facts about the past, scholars need to exert the necessary time, energy, and thinking to develop strategies for approaching communities. Approaches from public humanities scholars sometimes occur in the fraught context of colleges and universities' economic and policy-making initiatives in municipal and regional economies. As Baldwin points out, the term *civic engagement* is complicated by the fact that institutions of higher education can use the term to obscure intent to consolidate economic control in a region.

An ethical approach to the public humanities begins, then, with the open acknowledgment that the work takes place despite whatever economic and policy initiatives are currently in play and should be approached from the standpoint of shared struggle and common cause. Such an approach proceeds from the assumption that public humanities scholarship often challenges the power of institutions and should be valued for the challenges it presents. Public humanities scholarship insists that communities are sites of knowledge and cultural production as well as spaces whose meanings derive from the lived experiences of the inhabitants as they engage in acts of placemaking. As such, this work should help create healthier

and more generative relationships with communities, not mimic the extractive posture of institutions whose values have perpetuated (and in some cases continue to perpetuate) systemic racism and colonialist ideologies. The people who reside in the surrounding community, the college's or university's neighbors, must be respected by those who seek to engage in public scholarship and teaching. Public humanities scholars should not approach these communities as broken or somehow deficient. This does not mean that problem-solving should not be part of the agenda of public humanities scholarship, but any such work done in collaboration with community partners must proceed from an ethical relationship with those partners, and an awareness of this necessity must inform any evaluation and recognition of public humanities scholarship.

It is the hope that the following guidelines lead to ethical and democratic forms of engagement and collaboration:

1. Projects should be imagined apart from institutional agendas that might seek to accumulate power and influence.

2. Efforts to create archival projects must be framed around the idea that knowledge production is the result of a partnership in which scholars and community members have an equal say in how to proceed.

3. Proceeds generated by exhibits or presentations that involve admissions fees should be shared with the individuals from the community with whom we are partnering.

4. Public humanities scholarship and teaching must operate within a moral, ethical, and geographically specific context in which acts of communal storytelling are valued as requisite parts of the overall agenda.

5. In the light of the complexity that accompanies efforts at public-facing scholarship, projects involving community partners should embrace the notion that scholarly needs should never take precedence over communal integrity and morality. There needs to be a commitment to negotiations that operate in good faith, with a spirit of collaboration at its center.

6. The goal of public-facing scholarship should be outcomes that are mutually beneficial for individuals, institutions, and communities alike, where us/them frameworks are set aside in favor of generative and flexible commitments that emphasize "we" and "us" and in which adherence to ethical norms is central.

Guiding Questions for Assessing Public Humanities Scholarship

The following questions will be broadly applicable to public humanities work, although they may require adjustment depending on the scope of the community engaged and the degree of collaboration involved:

- How does the project contribute to the well-being of the community, beyond its effect on the career of the faculty member developing it, the institution sponsoring it, and the financial interests of the business community?

- How has the faculty member identified and cultivated allies and partners for the common good and the furtherance of scholarship and ensured that this process has been undertaken ethically?

- How does the project contribute to student learning and the mentoring of students?

- How does the project contribute to the community's knowledge of itself and its engagement with the wider world?

- How does the project acknowledge and contribute to the community's agency and not just its status as an object of study?

- How does the project contribute to the advancement of public humanities as an area of inquiry, and how does it interact with current disciplinary conversations and advance the fields it engages?

- How does the project demonstrate an awareness of current conversations in the field and explain how it advances or revises those conversations?

- How does the project contribute to the common good, adding something to the community's experience and resources that was not there before?

- How does the project foster intellectual community, recognizing that membership in an intellectual community is not simply a matter of credentials?

- What role have community partners played in the design of the project at all stages (research question, methods, implementation, assessment, development of outcomes)?

- What are the milestones of the proposed project, including the timeline for various phases, and how much progress has been made in relation to the timeline?

- How has the project planned for accessibility, both in terms of disability and public engagement?

- How has the project been shared with public audiences?

- How has the project addressed harm reduction (e.g., safety, surveillance, respect for cultural protocols over what should be shared and with whom)?

- How has the project planned for potential reuse or for its use as a building block for future, cross-disciplinary projects?

- How are collaborative relationships developed in a way that allows them to be maintained over time?

- How does this project plan for sustainability beyond its initial funding or labor model?

Advice

This section offers advice for departments, committees and administrators, candidates, and external reviewers.

For Departments

Humanities departments have an obligation to broaden their understanding of scholarly outputs expected for hiring, promotion, and tenure in the academy and for the advancement of non-tenure-track and part-time faculty members.

Evaluation rubrics of such work for promotion and tenure, based on the MLA's principles and guidelines for evaluation, should be developed within departments in conversation with deans and provosts. Departmental

colleagues should familiarize themselves with these guidelines and be prepared to mentor early-career scholars undertaking public humanities scholarship. Developing department-specific guidelines that address the value of public humanities scholarship for career advancement would encourage this kind of work and also diversify faculties and, ultimately, student cohorts.

For Appointment, Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure Committees and Administrators

Faculty evaluators and administrators should broaden their understanding of the scholarly outputs expected for hiring, promotion, and tenure in the academy. Particularly important to consider are the ways the characteristics valued in peer-reviewed scholarly books and journal articles also appear in public-facing projects: depth of engagement with previous scholarship, scope of contribution to major lines of inquiry in the field, impact on the field and on the broader community, and inventiveness and clarity in communication. Faculty evaluators and administrators should use the guiding questions for assessment to evaluate public-facing work and to consider and measure the scholarly impact of public humanities work.

For Candidates

Candidates for reappointment, tenure, and promotion should view the guiding questions for assessment as a series of questions they should use, as appropriate, to frame their public humanities scholarship in narratives and other evaluation documents.

For External Reviewers

External reviewers should use the guidelines to assess public humanities scholarship. These reviewers should speak directly to how the projects being evaluated meet the guiding questions for assessment.

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