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ARTICLE

Across Spaces and Divisions: A Conversation on the Uses of Public Humanities

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Abstract

What would an approach to public humanities that centers the principles of LANDBACK, a movement that locates liberation for Indigenous people in "putting Indigenous Lands back into Indigenous hands," look like? In this conversation with Megan Red Shirt-Shaw, Meredith McCoy, and Elizabeth Rule—facilitated by Jennifer Guiliano and Roopika Risam—the team behind the Landback Universities project explores the possibilities and urgency of public humanities informed by Indigenous ways of knowing, cultural protocols, and the responsibility of universities to undertake repair work to be in right relation with Indigenous communities they have dispossessed. Topics addressed in this conversation include the limits of "decolonization" as a university discourse and buzzword that, at best, results in land acknowledgments—brief statements about the Native nations whose lands universities occupy, typically without any commitment to address the university's ongoing participation in dispossession; the tensions between diversity, equity, and inclusion and "decolonization," which undercut very real, decolonial calls for land restoration and the remaking of systems of power on campuses; the ethics of collaborations on humanities-related initiatives with Indigenous communities; and negotiating right-wing politics that curtail opportunities for this work.

Keywords: Indigenous Studies; Landback; manifesto; public humanities

Over the last three years, participants in the conversation transcribed below have been working together on *Landback Universities*, a project intended to support colleagues at colleges and universities undertaking reparative work to address the histories and ongoing structures of settler colonialism at their institutions.

Meredith McCoy (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa descent and Associate Professor in American Studies and History at Carleton College), Jennifer Guiliano (white settler and Professor of History, Native American and Indigenous Studies, and American Studies at IU Indianapolis), and Roopika Risam (settler-immigrant and Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies, Comparative Literature, and Digital Humanities and Social Engagement at Dartmouth College) began collaborating in 2020 as part of the special issue of the *Native American and Indigenous Studies* journal that responded to *Land-Grab Universities*, Tristan

Ahtone and Robert Lee's database documenting the financial benefits that colleges and universities have received from grants of land expropriated from Native peoples in the United States through the Morrill Act of 1862.[1] In the process of writing this article, as scholars committed to Indigenous student and faculty advocacy on their campuses, they identified a number of areas for future exploration: How can we articulate the ways that universities have benefited from the expropriation of Native lands even if they weren't beneficiaries of the Morrill Act?[2] How could we best amplify and support the efforts of Native students, staff, and faculty to move institutions toward not just acknowledging their complicity in Indigenous dispossession but also repairing relations with Native nations they have dispossessed and beginning a process of reparation? McCoy, Guiliano, and Risam met at Indiana University—Indianapolis in 2021 to map out the myriad ways that Native dispossession permeates higher education in the United States, in every unit—from student affairs to facilities, academic affairs, and food services. They recognized that tackling this problem required large-scale cooperation with others engaged with the same questions. Inspired by the work of Megan Red Shirt-Shaw (Oglala & Sicangu Lakota and Director of Native Student Services at the University of South Dakota and a doctoral student in organizational leadership at the University of Minnesota), who had written the important policy brief, "Beyond the Land Acknowledgment: College 'LAND BACK' or Free Tuition for Native Students," they envisioned a series of convenings that would bring together people working toward Landback, a range of practices from rematriation of land, to providing access rights to university spaces, co-ownership models, stewardship, and establishing institution-to-government relations.[3] They reached out to Red Shirt-Shaw and to Elizabeth Rule (enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and Assistant Professor of Critical Race, Gender, and Culture Studies at American University), who had been the Director of the AT&T Center for Indigenous Politics and Policy at George Washington University, to form the core team, with consulting support from McCoy, for *Landback Universities*, which would pursue funding to support strategies for advancing reparative initiatives to bring colleges and universities into the right relations with local Native communities and those in other geographical regions who had been dispossessed by the institutions.[4] This work brings together staff and faculty from across the United States to consider investments in and impediments to ethical Indigenous engagement, both internally and externally, to transform institutions of higher education—a project that necessarily involves deep work across the humanities and beyond.[5]

Emerging from our collaboration on *Landback Universities*, several of us began discussing our respective curricular and research projects that fall broadly under the term "public humanities," particularly in collaborations with Indigenous community partners. In the conversation that follows, McCoy, Rule, Guiliano, and Risam discuss our thoughts about the terminology that describes our work, its value, and institutional and community support for it. We chose to use a conversational format to illustrate the Indigenous "talking circle" methodology.[6] Talking circles are based on relational and reciprocal learning.[7] By integrating storytelling, witnessing, and self-reflection, this practice encourages trust, empathy, awareness, and respectful listening.

[1] McCoy, Risam, and Guiliano 2021; Lee et al. 2020.
[2] United States Congress 1862.
[3] Shirt-Shaw 2020.
[4] Risam et al. 2025; Tsosie 2022.
[5] Smulyan 2021.
[6] Tachine, Bird, and Cabrera 2016.
[7] Barkaskas and Gladwin 2021.

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Our goal in this conversation is to articulate an expansive notion of public humanities that puts the needs of Indigenous communities—as determined collectively by them—at the heart of its practices and methods. We touch on the utility of its term, aiming to distinguish between the work of public humanities itself and the academic-centered language for it that may be of little relevance beyond the academy. Our conversation probes the relationship between public humanities and sovereignty, as we emphasize that building relationships with collaborators is a necessary precondition to co-creating knowledge with publics and to ensuring that Native communities' expertise—about what initiatives or projects are needed, how they are designed, who should be involved, and who they should be shared and with whom—is driving the work. When we turn to the question of value, we raise the question of who public humanities is really for and who benefits from it—and we emphatically insist that the answer shouldn't be "the academic," following Sandy Grande's call to refuse the inducements of the academy in her essay, "Refusing the University."[8] At the same time, we recognize that so many Indigenous students, faculty, and staff, as well as Black, Latinx, and Asian American ones, undertake public and community-engaged humanities work, but it's largely ignored or simply relegated to service in evaluation for reappointment, tenure, and promotion processes.[9] We conclude with a discussion of support, particularly from academic institutions and from funders, sharing insights about the kinds needed to facilitate public humanities scholarship that prioritizes Native nations.

1. Terminology

Guiliano: What (if anything) does the term "public humanities" mean to you?

Rule: For me, the public humanities centers a commitment to community engagement and emphasizes the creation and distribution of scholarship for and among public audiences. It's an analysis of the world around us, shared with that same world. Speaking from an Indigenous perspective, the practice of public humanities has always involved a strong sense of community accountability. Throughout my own career, for instance, the entire experience of pursuing higher education and then becoming a faculty member has been driven by a desire to generate new knowledge that benefits Indigenous peoples. In practice, this also means that there are additional processes, procedures, and protocols that Indigenous scholars are expected to adhere to. It was this sense of accountability and spirit of service that drove the work that I did, and later I discovered that this work can be characterized as public humanities.

Risam: What your observations importantly point to, Rule, is how Indigenous scholars have been engaging in the work we now call "public humanities" long before the term has existed. We can trace the phrase "public humanities" back to 1980 when James P. Smith and Steven Weiland published their book *The Extracurricular Curriculum: Academic Disciplines and Public Humanities Programs*, following in the wake of the 1973 reauthorization of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which effected a policy shift toward public programming. Even if we look back just to the 1960s, efforts to establish Native American studies programs and departments were inextricably "public"—tribal sovereignty, community engagement, and partnerships were central to their very existence.[10] And the history reaches farther back through individual efforts. But the erasures of these efforts feel especially troubling.

[8] Grande 2018.

[9] Baez 2000; Settles et al. 2021, 2022.

[10] Smith and Weiland 1980.

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McCoy: Right, and a lot of my thinking about this does come out of American studies and Indigenous Studies. Like you're saying, Risam, both of these fields have really long histories of thinking about public-facing work. This includes making sure that knowledge production is happening in a shared way across institutional and community spaces and thinking about the purpose of the work as being accountable to the community. Sometimes when I hear "public humanities," it's framed as "Let's take the assets that are in universities and share that knowledge out with the community." My approach is thinking less about the knowledge that's in one space that we're going to put out in another, and more about the importance of collaboration and co-creation, in a way that advances community priorities.

Guiliano: Pulling a thread Rule and McCoy identified (that of knowledge benefiting Indigenous people), I think it is important to understand how we define "public humanities" as tied fundamentally to the notion that the humanities are responsible to specific communities in the public. The best forms of knowledge production in the humanities take that responsibility seriously and ensure that the work being done directly benefits and privileges the needs of the public before the needs of researchers or the academy itself.

Risam: In our work together, and separately, we've all been highly critical of monodirectional approaches to public humanities—write an op-ed, write a *Los Angeles Review of Books* essay on your research, or, worse, extract stories and data for the researcher's benefit—and instead thinking about the work as reparative, redistributive, and reciprocal.

McCoy: And affirming the knowledge that is already in the community. That's why I think about the co-development of projects as being an important part of my approach to public humanities. There are things the academy can do and things it cannot do. Good public humanities work can start by recognizing the expertise that's in a community, naming our priorities together, and approaching those priorities through collaborative initiatives. Then we can use the resources and assets across our respective spaces to create something that is beneficial for all of us.

Risam: That raises the question of in what ways you find the term "public humanities" a useful (or not useful) formulation for the work you are invested in.

Rule: I've found "public humanities" as a term to be very useful at times, and less useful at other times. The term can be useful, for instance, when used within the academy as a way to categorize a body of scholarship and make it legible as a field of scholarly productivity and intervention. This is important, as it can ideally ensure that the essential and time-consuming work (often disproportionately undertaken by marginalized faculty members) of a community-engaged scholar is not disregarded or undervalued by academic institutions. In my own experience, I see the pitfall of the term is that: while public humanities work is inherently tied to the public, the term itself is almost exclusively circulated within scholarly circles.

Guiliano: I agree that the term public humanities is most useful within academic circles; in fact, when I develop work that is explicitly public, I try to use much more specific languages and terms than "the public" or "public." In part, this is because using an aggregated term like "public" often obfuscates the responsibility to specific communities, but also because communities don't think of themselves in these generic terms. Instead, they think of themselves as being of a specific place, people, or group. By forcing concreteness in the use of terms, we also recognize that the public isn't actually singular. It is plural.

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McCoy: When we think about the word "public," it can create an artificial division between people working in institutional spaces (somehow not "the public"), and people accessing the work that institutions create. That division reifies the binaries we were talking about earlier, of where expertise sits. If we can conceive of the public humanities as something that reaches across spaces, breaks down divisions between institutions and community spaces, and recognizes the overlap that already exists there, then it's a useful term. The conversation we're having is about pushing it in a way that's aspirational—about what public humanities can be when they're at their most collaborative, most human-centric, and most accountable to the many different people who might be part of, or an audience for, a project.

Risam: This makes me wonder the extent to which the term "public humanities" is even useful beyond higher education. Would it be useful, or is it too jargony? In some respects, even the term "humanities" feels very "academic." When I work with collaborators in contexts other than academia, I'm unlikely to talk about what we're doing as the "humanities," let alone "public humanities." Instead, we talk in a language we can share —storytelling, hidden histories, and unheard stories. Maybe I should be saying "public humanities!" The state humanities councils that support this work with grant funding and making connections between community organizations and researchers want us to use the term beyond the academy.

McCoy: At its best, the "humanities" give us rich opportunities to focus on how we, as human beings, relate to each other and shape the world around us. How do we build worlds? How do we recreate them when they're not working? When we think about engaging Indigenous knowledge systems and understanding those as part of the world of the humanities, I'm thinking about the values that shape who we are and how we engage with each other, what it means to be in a community, and what it means to take care of places where we live and learn and work and play. All these questions come down to the essence of what it means to be a human being—and what it means to be a *good* human being. And yet, I've also been thinking about whether the term "humanities" is too limiting because, in our academic silos, it excludes the sciences. Indigenous sciences also describe ways of being and knowing the world. Our projects can be interdisciplinary, and they can bring together insights from across the humanities as well as our colleagues, friends, and community partners who work outside the humanities, whose insights are critical for helping us understand this question of what it means to be a human being.

Risam: In that case, what kind of work do you do that intersects with the current usage of the term "public humanities" and what kind of language/words do you use to describe what you do in this space?

McCoy: My whole work life! [laughing] *Indigenous Chicago* is a project we started five years ago as an open question to members of the Chicago Native community about whether a project that made Newberry Library resources about local Indigenous histories more visible would be welcomed.[11] The response we got was yes, that it would be a useful project. So we started asking, what are the right mechanisms for a project like that? Is it a high school curriculum? Is it an exhibition at the library? Is it a new round of oral histories? Digital maps? Walking tours? And the community members we were visiting with said that all of them are needed. We established a 25-person advisory board that includes members of the current Chicago Native community and representatives of many of the Native nations who

[11] Miron et al. 2020.

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were removed from their homelands in what is currently Chicago. We broke into project teams and for five years held community conversations about content, format, audience, and language. It resulted in a multifaceted project that we launched in September 2024: a 500-page high school curriculum, an installation that will be up in the Newberry through January 2025, nine new digital maps that reflect everything from removal routes to relocation, 55 new oral histories with community members—all of this work done in collaboration between the Newberry, our project leadership team, the 25-person advisory board, and attendees at open community days where folks were invited to come give their input.

We've been trying to figure out what the right word is to describe our work for four or five years. "Community-engaged" doesn't necessarily convey the sense of authority over the narrative that we've tried to emphasize in the project. We've thought of "community accountable" because there's also a question of labor—who are the ones doing the majority of the labor for drafting the materials? It's mostly a smaller number of the members of each subcommittee and our project leadership team. Perhaps "community accountable" is a better reflection of where the labor is occurring, and then a term like "community responsive" might also reflect that we tried to do the work in alignment with the shared priorities we established at our very first meeting. All of this is to say, I don't typically call *Indigenous Chicago* a "public humanities project," but I do *see* it as a public humanities project. Regardless of whether I say community engaged, community accountable, or community responsive (and I hope it's all of these), I center the word "community" because that's the most important component of the project to me—that this was a project co-designed, co-developed, and co-authored through community partnerships over five years of building relationships and advancing our shared work.

Rule: I'm currently engaged in a number of initiatives that fall under the broad umbrella of the public humanities, including curatorial consultation, exhibit installation and interpretation, mobile application development, digital mapping, podcasting, and writing for a public audience. I tend to describe my own scholarship as "community-engaged," "social impact," and "public-facing," as well as broadly "public humanities."

Guiliano: I agree with Rule that I often use "community-engaged" and "public-facing" instead of public humanities, but I really like the term "community responsive" that McCoy uses. Part of my own work bridges public libraries, digital archives, and museum practices around curation, digital exhibits, walking tours, and the like. These sites themselves have their own preferred terms that have different understandings dependent on context. I'm lucky in that my university is quite invested in "community-engaged research" and has developed an extensive definition that rewards work centering community-based teaching, learning, and research.

Risam: In my head, I just think about it as "work!" Sometimes I work alone, sometimes I work with other people in academic or cultural institutions, and sometimes I work with community partners. For the latter, I can't imagine a situation where I'd even use the word "public humanities" or even "community-engaged work"—it's just "our project." But I'll strategically trot out the term when it's useful: if we need funding, if publishing an article, or if trying to prove to my institution that this work is "scholarship." My co-edited volume *Anti-Racist Community Engagement: Principles and Practices*, which includes a co-authored essay by McCoy,

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was so-named to promote interdisciplinary participation.[12] The monograph I'm writing, *Insurgent Academics: A Radical Account of Public Humanities*, uses the term because it's more legible for promotion to the college-wide tenure committee, even though "social engagement" is part of my job title. Just part of negotiating institutional life.

Guiliano: To what extent is the term "public humanities" inclusive of or exclusive of efforts to work toward Indigenous sovereignty?

McCoy: One of my other hats is co-director of the Carleton Indigenous Engagement in Place Initiative, funded by the Mellon Foundation through the Humanities for All Times grant.[13] The funding empowers us to think institutionally about how Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems can radically transform the work we do in the humanities at a small liberal arts college. That involves funding opportunities for knowledge and capacity development, reflection, and relationship building. For example, we have structures for our faculty to be in partnership with community mentors to collaboratively re-envision how faculty approach teaching—including the what (content), where (classroom or other spaces), when (pacing and time of year), how (pedagogies and framework), and who (who is seen is a knowledge keeper or authority figure). Under the initiative, we also have students doing community-engaged research, where they're embedded with a community mentor doing a project co-designed with them. We're emphasizing partnerships and relationship development but also realize that there are other institutional bureaucratic pieces that can be transformed through rigorous engagement with Indigenous knowledge and values. We know our work has to include active, community co-design and centering of community knowledge to proceed ethically and in alignment with community priorities—when public humanities does so, that's when it can work in affirmation and support of Indigenous sovereignty.

Rule: Methodologically, whereas conventional scholarship has a clearly differentiated principal investigator who leads a research agenda and delivers findings to an audience, the public humanities often enables the audience (i.e., the community) to shape the contours of the investigation and to straddle being both a participant in the research and the audience for whom the research is intended to reach. Tribal IRBs, for example, are examples of sovereignty in action. There are also really important ways in which the work of the public humanities is engaged with sovereignty as a legal concept as well as sovereignty also beyond the legal, such as what Robert Warrior calls "intellectual sovereignty" or Jolene Rickard's concept of "visual sovereignty."[14] For me, the best research happening in Native American and Indigenous Studies is thinking critically about its implications and contributions—even responsibilities—to the broader project of uplifting, strengthening, and supporting sovereignty.

McCoy: Definitely. And when I think about Indigenous sovereignty, it also raises questions for me about voice and leadership: Does your public humanities project have tribal leadership at the table? Where appropriate, are you consulting with tribal historic preservation officers? Are you in conversation with tribal education departments? Have you gone through the necessary tribal research review processes? Are you making sure your project represents a broad swath of the community? And are you considering the labor burden of all

[12] Santana et al. 2023.
[13] Carleton College 2025.
[14] Warrior 1992; Rickard 2022.

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this work and compensating partners in ways that both respect their expertise and work within their current administrative systems?

2. Value

Risam: There's a broader question of value here, and the extent to which you find public humanities valued by or relevant to your position—or to what extent isn't it valued/relevant.

Rule: The work I do in the public humanities is one of my absolute favorite parts of my career as a scholar because I can see the direct impact of my work in the very communities that I collaborated with in the development of the project. As someone trained in American Studies, I also really enjoy the interdisciplinary nature of the public humanities. That said, I see the public humanities facing much of the same devaluation by institutions of higher education that is at times leveled against other interdisciplinary fields like Ethnic Studies, American Studies, and Gender Studies. My hope is that all of these fields and the scholars animating them will be fully valued by their counterparts working in the more traditional disciplines.

McCoy: I want to parse the questions of "relevance" and of "value." Public humanities is highly relevant to my position, but I know it's inconsistently seen as valued. Particularly for faculty who are juniors, the question of how public scholarship, publicly engaged scholarship, and public humanities work is affirmed or seen as rigorous is an area where higher education has a lot of room to grow. As a junior faculty member who's currently undergoing the tenure review process, I felt like I had to make a case that my publicly engaged scholarship *is scholarship.* This was the case, even at an institution that emphasizes public engagement and where I had supportive colleagues who would be able to reinforce those ideas throughout the process. I would love to see a general recognition that this work is not less rigorous. It's equally, if not more rigorous, because you have so many layers of people vetting the work—institutional partners and community partners, who are all doing rounds of review. And then there's also the rigor of collaborative authorship, which is something I try to get my students in American studies to understand. In the humanities, there's prestige for single-authored work, as though we are lone intellectuals creating knowledge out of the void. But meeting somebody who thinks differently than you might and coming together to create something that is legible, cohesive, and communicates with a wide array of readers is incredibly challenging!

Risam: I love how you are expanding the notion of "peer review," McCoy—because when we are engaged with public humanities focused on the co-construction of knowledge and valuing expertise that lies within communities, then the notion of a "peer" necessarily changes. Public humanities not only requires some rethinking of how to "peer review" the work so that it can be vetted, but also rethinking of who is actually vetting it. It's been positive to see venues for publication (like this journal) as well as efforts like the Modern Language Association's *Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly-Engaged Scholarship* to value public humanities scholarship.[15] At the same time, there is always the question of whether the existence of venues and guidelines will translate into proper value, particularly in areas of research that have struggled for legitimacy, like ethnic studies or gender studies.

[15] Modern Language Association 2025.

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Guiliano: I agree with all of you that public humanities is situated interdisciplinarily and within large systems of credit, reward, and legitimacy that can be disciplinarily specific. This is something Risam and I have been trying to address as editors of *Reviews in Digital Humanities*, where we've reviewed digital public humanities projects.[16] We take a capacious approach to who can review because faculty aren't always—and often just not—the right people to review the work. I also though find that as much as my university supports working with the public, it also struggles mightily with the intricacies of that work. Communities do not work on academic timelines. They may not be invested in the same outputs. And, as importantly, they may need mechanisms of support that are not common in the academy (e.g., legal and trauma).

Risam: Something I wonder about is the extent to which public humanities projects, particularly those undertaken by individuals or small collectives of people of color and/or Indigenous scholars, are co-opted by colleges and universities, so they can say their institution is engaged in reparative work or social justice—the photo-op of the people actually doing the work becoming cover for institutions that aren't investing in their work, valuing their work, and undertaking needed institutional-level repair work, given how deeply implicated colleges and universities are in Indigenous dispossession and settler colonialism, both in the past and at present. It's hard because we're not going to stop doing this work—it's fundamental to how we understand ourselves as people and as academics.

McCoy: As a historian, I wonder, if my work is not public-facing, then what is its purpose? Where is my work actually doing good in the world if it's siloed behind paywalls? With my work focused on education, if I'm not in conversation with or supporting the work of teachers, what am I doing?

Guiliano: What about value for your communities and/or nations and the communities and/or nations you work with? Although, perhaps you might not want to speak on their behalf.

McCoy: I definitely can't and wouldn't want to speak on their behalf, but what I can say is that with *Indigenous Chicago* and the book I'm currently writing on relocation, I went to the community and asked permission first—is this something you even want? And when the answer was yes, that people thought it would be a good idea, the next question was how we could develop structures and accountability for input that makes sure community priorities, voices, and perspectives continue to guide the work. While I can't speak to whether or not they value it, perhaps the fact that community members put hundreds of hours into *Indigenous Chicago* over five years reflects a sense of the worth of our collective work.

Rule: My public humanities work has always been highly valued by the communities, non-academic institutions, and Indigenous Nations with which I collaborate. In many cases, I have initiated individual public humanities projects specifically at the request of a group who would both participate in the research and become its primary beneficiary. At times, there can be a disconnect between the value placed on public humanities work by universities as compared to public-serving institutions or individual communities. This has shaped my own experience as a faculty member at the assistant professor level working toward tenure because I have to ensure that my public humanities work remains legible to those

[16] Guiliano and Risam 2025.

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who may be unfamiliar with the public humanities as a legitimate and rigorous form of scholarly production.

Guiliano: Rule's highlighting of what constitutes legitimate and rigorous within academic systems is so important. It can take decades to develop relationships and intensive work to maintain those ties; yet the academy doesn't really understand why things like gift-giving, reciprocity, and prioritizing community needs are essential to successful relationships.

Rule: I would like to see universities recognize the ways in which Eurocentrism has historically defined, and continues to shape, notions of scholarly objectivity, methodological practice, and knowledge production. With this in mind, I would like universities to institute policy measures that would value and support forms of scholarly investigation and knowledge dissemination that falls outside of the Eurocentric model, including community-engaged public humanities work.

3. Support

Risam: What kind of support, if any, is available at your institution for your work that intersects with "public humanities?"

Rule: My institution has a fantastic public humanities initiative called the Humanities Truck, which supports faculty who collaborate with community partners.[17] The Humanities Truck itself is a refurbished food truck that affiliated faculty can use as an exhibit space, recording studio, pop-up shop, and more. In 2022, I received a fellowship from the Humanities Truck to advance my work on Indigenous DC, and I used the fellowship to collect oral histories, film a documentary, and design an exhibit that was then installed on the National Mall in Washington, DC for a week.

Guiliano: The university I work for has a number of internal grant competitions that allow public humanities-based work; that said, compared to non-humanities disciplines, these funding streams are incredibly small. Additionally, because of our responsibility-centered financial model where funding follows credit hours, if your work takes place in a school struggling with credit hours (as most humanities schools are), projects often wither after a few years because there is no sustained support for staffing, hiring, or other work.

McCoy: I see that problem so often—institutional timelines are not community timelines. I need funders to recognize and support connections developing slowly and to let an appropriate timing for collaboration unfold on its own. There are all kinds of artificial deadlines in colleges and universities—grants that run for one, three, or five years at a time, tenure clocks that are five or six years. These aren't necessarily the timelines on which communities move. In institutions, we're so rigidly held to clocks of given academic terms and academic calendars. Our community partners are navigating their own families, lives, their own communities, natural disasters, politics, and pandemics. In academia, we tend to just keep it rolling, like everything should keep going. In addition to our Center for Community and Civic Engagement, I really appreciate the folks in our grant office who have developed relationships with funders and foundations and are willing to put us in touch with potential sources of support.

[17] Hawks 2018.

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Risam: You're making me think that even at the funder level, disciplinarity can be a challenge. I've found state humanities councils to be very open. But in the case of the National Endowment for the Humanities, sometimes I feel caught between grant lines and weird bureaucracies. If I'm doing a public digital project but that involves engagement with K-12 educators and students, the Office of Digital Humanities (ODH) wants to send me to the Division of Education Programs, but then because the project is digital, the division wants to send me back to the ODH. And then there's the fact that foundations are often focused on the humanities, the social sciences, or the natural sciences.

Risam: What would help you more sustainably pursue your work?

McCoy: One of the big interventions would be giving us the time and flexibility to allow things to move at a different pace. Rule has also talked about Eurocentrism in knowledge production as something that she would like to see changed. I'll add that institutional regulations around who is and who is not a knowledge keeper and a valid instructor or author (the way that institutions look to Western credentials to vet whether someone has knowledge)—can be both insulting and limiting. Recognizing community expertise, as people who have the knowledge and the skills to co-produce materials and co-educate in classrooms, would be a big and much appreciated shift.

Risam: I want to draw out something critical that you've said about relationships and about time. So much academic research is premised on the idea that you *don't* have a relationship with people who you are working "on." In fact, in that paradigm, having a relationship makes your scholarship not "objective" and perhaps even suspect.

McCoy: That's right.

Risam: When we accept that relationships are actually *essential*, that means time horizons change. It takes time to build a relationship and build trust with communities we aren't part of. Just because you are Turtle Mountain, doesn't mean that when you collaborate with Prairie Island Mdewankanton Dakota community members, you have a relationship right away. There needs to be time for relationship building, trust, and respect.

McCoy: That's so true. Another point I would like to make is about artificial silos within higher education institutions. Quite often, humanities centers and community engagement offices operate independently of each other.

Risam: That's definitely the case at Dartmouth, even if there's some crossover.

Guiliano: I think most institutions function with separate centers and offices.

McCoy: Those divisions create the perception, even just implicitly, that humanities center programming is internal and community and civic engagement is external. And that's the case even when they support work that's relevant to the other.

Risam: I'm helping out with a public humanities institute for our humanities center, and it very much feels like it's for internal support, which is kind of ironic.

McCoy: Expanding the idea of what is public and what are the humanities does not diminish the essence of the humanities as something that helps us understand ourselves and the world around us—it actually enriches it.

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Our conversation took place in October 2024, a very different political milieu than the one we are living in now. A grant proposal for the kind of public humanities work we are advocating submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities or the National Science Foundation would be immediately discarded from consideration on any number of new rules implemented by the second Trump administration, including the promotion of "discriminatory equity ideology" (whatever that is), and support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) or diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives or activities (DEIA). More than ever, this work needs institutional support, and we need to be prepared to undertake it agilely and economically because public humanities that prioritizes Indigenous communities and their sovereignty is a powerful tool for resisting the erasures that we are already seeing happening, not even a month into the new administration. Against this backdrop, our conversation serves as an intervention, an interjection if you will, to discourses about what constitutes the public and the humanities. As you can see from our conversation, those terms are highly personal, situational, and locally specific. Taken together with other essays in this issue, it is our hope that our conversation resonates with you and might provide a starting point for your own local conversations.

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