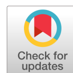

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ARTICLE

Public Humanities, Then and Now

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Abstract

This essay considers how the nineteenth-century idea of the university as a refuge, constructed by thinkers like John Henry Newman, continues to shape contemporary universities and the field of public humanities. This vision of the university has lasting appeal for obvious reasons. In a culture predicated on speed, slowness is a political act. In a culture of hot takes, cold reasoning often provides necessary context, a wider view. And yet, as W. E. B. Du Bois warns, the "tenacious legend" of the Victorian university is dangerous because it separates the university from mass culture. Building on Du Bois's thinking, the essay concludes that instead of seeking protection, enclosure, or recognition within university institutions, public humanities practitioners should seek refuge in the relationships of mutual responsibility they foster.

Keywords: John Henry Newman; public humanities; university reform; W. E. B. DuBois

I begin with two scenes from nineteenth-century British literature. First, Jude Fawley from Thomas Hardy's *Jude of the Obscure*, confronting the walls of the colleges in Christminster City (a fictional Oxford).[1] He travels to Christminster to become a scholar but soon realizes that "a wall divided him from those happy young contemporaries of his with whom he shared a common mental life; men who had nothing to do from morning till night but read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest."[2] The wall is material: Jude traces its presence with his fingers as he walks by and builds such walls when laboring as a stonemason. The wall is a metaphor: the protected spaces of university learning are not for poor laborers like Jude.

Second, Nora Wycherley, a recent graduate of Newnham College in Amy Levy's "Between Two Stools," writes nostalgically to her former classmate as she uneasily adjusts to life in London.[3] She is happiest when she can "be quiet and alone in one's room" and remember the days of college – she transforms her room into "a refuge" – "a place to be alone."[4] Her parents force her into London society, but she is most content behind closed doors where she can read, study, and continue to pursue her education. The room is material: Nora describes the pleasure of shutting the door on her family. The room is a metaphor: as

[1] Hardy [1895] 1998.
[2] Hardy [1895] 1998, 86.
[3] Wycherley 1883.
[4] Levy 1883, 337, 339.

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Virginia Woolf would later explain to Newnham College students in a lecture that became *A Room of One's Own*, women need their own space to break free from patriarchal structures that crowd women's lives.[5]

These two literary scenes show how even in a period of university expansion in Britain, people celebrated liberal education because of its separation from the world of workers, society, and public debate.[6] I suggest that the power of such scenes endure long beyond their specific historical moment. W. E. B. Du Bois agrees. When people speak of universities, he argues, they often imagine Oxford or Cambridge from Victorian Britain: it is "a tenacious legend preserved in fiction, poetry, and essay."[7] In what follows, I trace the role of John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* in preserving this legend, focusing on how his concept of liberal education travels while the historical context in which he wrote is forgotten.[8] I argue that thinking about nineteenth-century understandings of the university in their historical context and as a transhistorical idea is useful for the field of public humanities both because it questions the lasting idea of the university as a refuge and reveals that appeals to public authority can solidify existing power relations rather than generate new forms of knowledge. I conclude by arguing for cultivating relationships of mutual responsibility, drawing on examples from twenty-first century universities in the United States to make my case.

Newman wrote *The Idea of a University* at a moment when the university's relationship to the public was increasingly the subject of debates in British periodicals and literature.[9] The 1850 Royal Commission initiated a series of conversations about what a modern university should be: Should it try to honor founding principles or adapt with modern times? Should it emphasize liberal knowledge (what John Henry Newman calls the formation of a "philosophical habit") or prepare students for professions?[10] Should it favor colleges or strengthen the university and unite the various colleges into a single institution? Should it prioritize professors or tutors? What connection should it have to the church? At this time, the humanities meant the classics, which did not hold much interest for the British public. As Sydney Smith's article in the *Edinburgh Review* complains, universities are attached to the classics to avoid dealing with contemporary subjects like political economy or the history of land enclosure: "to come so near to common life, would seem to be undignified and contemptible."[11,12]

[5] Woolf 1929.

[6] The nineteenth-century university expanded through the foundation of new institutions like University College London, University of Durham, and Owens College in Manchester and civic universities in the second half of the century, and through the foundation of women's colleges like Newnham and Girton. Moreover, Sheldon Rothblatt 1974 argues that enrollments in Oxford and Cambridge tripled between 1800 and 1829 (269). And yet, as Anna Bogen 2006 claims, nineteenth-century thinkers understood liberal education to be "a set of universalized practices whose immunity from historical forces is a key component of their educational effectiveness" (18).

[7] Du Bois 2012,114.

[8] Newman [1852] 1982.

[9] Newman [1852] 1982.

[10] Newman [1852] 1982, 76.

[11] Smith 1809,51.

[12] This debate about the classics continues throughout the nineteenth century. R. C. Webb's 1893 defense of the Classics, "In Defense of Classical Study" begins with the premise that "the humanities, salutary their influence had been in the higher education, powerful as they had been in helping to shape individual minds and characters, did not then possess much hold on the literary and intellectual life of the country at large" (493). Such concerns also appear in the 1850 commission's report. As the Reverend Henry Wall puts it when giving evidence to the commissioners: "the Universities at present have no hold on the affections or associations of the mass of intelligent, educated, and influential people of the country." See Heywood 1853, 241.

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The reforms that this commission initiated – the opening up of scholarships, creation of new professorships, abolition of religious tests for matriculation – depended first on establishing that the government could, in fact, intervene in the administration of the university and change college statutes. The commissioners made this argument by claiming that the university was a "public good" and a "national institution."[13] The commission determined that colleges did not have exclusive control over their property: it was held in "trust" to achieve public good and serve the nation.[14] Here, the public means the state: parliament has authority to oversee private institutions.

In *The Idea of the University*, Newman lamented that periodicals enjoy the public authority once lodged in universities even as he celebrated the university as a refuge. These periodicals demand "new and luminous theories" each day and thus, according to Newman, cannot generate truth.[15] In a time of historical transition, the university stays the same. In a time of fierce public debate, the university offers a refuge. In Newman's words, "the natural home for experiment and speculation is retirement."[16]

This idea of the university as a refuge has lasting appeal for obvious reasons. In a culture predicated on speed, slowness is a political act. In a culture of hot takes, cold reasoning can provide necessary context, a wider view. Many twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars thus encourage nostalgia for the nineteenth-century university. As Bill Readings puts it, "contemporary 'solutions' to the crisis of the University are, in fact, no more than restatements of Humboldt or Newman."[17] Or in the words of Stefan Collini: "Those who wish, nostalgically or defiantly, to cling to what they believe to be the values of the good old days tend to turn to their Newman for support and comfort."[18] Like Nora Wycherley in Levy's story, people turn to Newman because they desire a space apart from the messy politics of public life. They want to close the door and feel safely contained by the walls of the university. Even some public humanities scholars, who argue for more engagement with publics, often perpetuate this vision of the university as refuge as they focus on how public humanities scholarship can "count" – that is, how it can be protected by existing university structures.[19]

Twentieth and twenty-first-century thinkers who turn to Newman often forget the context in which he wrote: the establishment of a Catholic University in Ireland, an institution with an entirely different relationship to both publics and the state because it was located in Ireland at the end of the Great Irish Famine. University education in nineteenth-century Ireland was entangled with colonial and sectarian histories and revealed Ireland's divided publics: Trinity College Dublin was an institution of the ascendancy and limited to Protestant students – there was no university for Irish Catholics. In 1844, Sir Robert Peel proposed founding non-denominational universities in Ireland, which the Catholic Church hierarchy opposed. Rome suggested the Catholic University of Ireland and Paul Cullen, the Archbishop

[13] Heywood 1853, 39, 238.

[14] Heywood 1853, 39.

[15] Newman [1852] 1982, xlv.

[16] See Newman [1852] 1982, xli. It is worth noting that here Newman distinguishes between teaching and research, associating retirement and refuge with learning new things. For him, teaching itself is a disruption of the kind of secluded focus that knowledge production requires.

[17] Readings 1996,62.

[18] Collini 2012,41.

[19] Many defenses of the public humanities include reflections on how to address what Smulyan (2022) calls the "'Does it count?' question" (132). For a more in-depth examination of how public humanities programs can "demarcate the humanities from public culture," see Mullen 2014, 4.

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of Armagh and then Dublin, took the reins, appointing Newman rector in 1851. The university, thus, was an institution governed by the church rather than the state – it could not award degrees. Its foundation and subsequent floundering because of financial difficulties and low enrollments (the medical school was its most successful program) offers many lessons – among them, the fact that the newly founded university could not separate itself from Irish politics – it could not function as a refuge. Public and ecclesiastical politics shaped and often divided the institution.[20]

In his role as Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, Newman found himself appealing to the very public authority he dismisses. Cullen asked Newman to give a series of public lectures in Dublin to gather support for the new institution. These lectures provided the foundation for *The Idea of a University.* Writing for *The Catholic University Gazette*, which Newman founded and edited when the university first opened in 1854, he acknowledges that the "vague and diffusive influence of what is called public opinion" is one of the challenges facing the university.[21] Questioning the value of public opinion, Newman sidesteps controversy, refuses to participate in debate and instead suggests that he will describe the university – represent it to impress its importance upon the public rather than convince the public. In other words, he appeals to public authority while continuing to dismiss the value of public debate. Newman attempted to remain neutral, explaining in a letter, "I feel deeply that we shall be ruined, if we let *politics* in."[22]

Nineteenth-century American universities also sought to avoid public controversy while claiming public authority as an institution. For example, American universities used their representativeness – their connection with national culture and the public good – to avoid conversations about slavery. Craig Steven Wilder demonstrates how American colleges were colonial institutions that not only benefited from slave economies, but "stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage."[23] As abolitionist energy grew among students in the nineteenth century, an editorial insisted: "Colleges belonged to the public, and nothing abrasive to the public harmony or divisive in civil affairs could be tolerated in the curriculum or the culture of a student body … The formation of campus antislavery societies insulted the intentions of those who donated money to support education."[24] This editorial simultaneously promotes two conflicting understandings of ownership, both of which prevent abolitionist movements on college: first, "the public," which requires the avoidance of "divisive" issues; and second, the founders and funders of the universities whose individual beliefs and ties to slavery should not be insulted by opening up the university to debate – in other words, these public institutions were not really public at all.

W. E. B. Du Bois argues that this separation from publics in the name of the public good is precisely why the "tenacious legend" of the Victorian university is dangerous. He makes this

[20] Irish nationalism divided the Catholic clergy governing the institution and amplified conflicts between Cullen and Newman. In particular, Newman appointed members of Young Ireland – an Irish nationalist organization – to faculty despite Cullen's explicit warning not to do so. As Stephen Kelly 2011 explains, Newman did so because he thought they were the "ablest" and "clever men" – he still worried about their politics and politics at the university more generally (334).

[21] Newman 1854, 3.

[22] Quoted in Barr 2003, 140.

[23] See Wilder 2013, 11. Of course, British universities also had to reckon with slavery and colonialism. See Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford 2018 for one account.

[24] Wilder 2013, 267.

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claim on the occasion of his 45th anniversary of graduating from Fisk University when reflecting on Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the necessity of them remaining integrated with life – remaining connected to Black communities.[25] By contrast, the Victorian university separates education from mass culture – "flesh and action" and "the noise and fury, clamor and dust of the world" – although the Victorian university claimed to teach universal culture, it was only ever "the education of gentlemen."[26] The Victorian university lives on as an ideal in peoples' imaginations precisely because, as an actual institution, it is bound to end: an educational institution cannot separate itself from the world and continue to thrive. It becomes what Du Bois calls "a university of the air" – an idea that circulates while the institution withers because cultural institutions depend on connections to people, communities, and publics rather than on abstract public authority.[27]

Building on Du Bois's claims, I argue that instead of seeking protection, enclosure, or recognition within university institutions, public humanities practitioners should seek refuge in the relationships of mutual responsibility they build. I draw on examples from the United States, the context I am most familiar with, to make my case. Although universities like to present themselves as autonomous enclosures, their operations are always shaped by relations to the world, specifically, what Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein call "settler colonial and racial capitalist regimes of accumulation."[28] Universities – in the nineteenth century, twentieth century, and twenty-first century – secure the very social relations that they define themselves as removed from. The idea of the university as a refuge, then, is a "move to innocence" or a form of "colonial unknowing" – a way of avoiding responsibility, a practice of knowledge that depends on perpetuating ignorance by obscuring historical and social relationships.[29]

What do relationships of mutual responsibility look like? From the perspective of the university, they often look like failure: the failure to protect students from the worries of the world and the university from divisive conflicts in the political realm; the failure to make knowledge count; the failure to build a brand; and the failure to achieve recognition from the university. Although funding public humanities projects often requires success narratives, practitioners know that knowledge emerges from reckoning with what does not and cannot work in existing structures.[30] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney celebrate such failure as they insist that the proper relationship to the university is "to steal what one can" – to embrace fugitivity, refuse the university's governing principles, and go underground where collective study can emerge.[31] Relationships of mutual responsibility look like refusing a single protagonist for narratives of study – the student – and reframing study as a public and collective act.[32] They look like changing principles of knowledge in response to the needs of communities, rather than assimilating communities into the existing structure of the

[25] Du Bois 2012,114.

[26] Du Bois [1993] 2012, 114–15.

[27] Du Bois [1933] 2012, 115.

[28] Boggs et al. 2019, 3.

[29] Tuck and Yang 2012, 9–10; Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein 2016.

[30] Elizabeth Effinger (2022) offers one example of such reflections, suggesting that "attempts and efforts to do good (whether as an individual or collective), on can also create monsters" (231).

[31] Harney and Moten 2013, 26.

[32] Here, I am thinking about Eli Meyerhoff's 2019 discussion of Corey Menafee breaking a stained-glass window depicting enslaved people in Yale University's Calhoun College dining hall in *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World.* The university's reaction to Menafee's act positions students as in need of safety because they are the subjects who study, and Menafee as an unthinking employee thus obscuring the fact that Menifee's decision to break the window also "comes from a place of study" (12).

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university.[33] They look like resisting what Samuel P. Catlin calls "campus panic," or anxiety about protests and politics on campus that directs attention away from unfolding events in the world like genocide in Gaza.[34] They look like being rooted in a community and place that extends beyond campus rather than securing a refuge through walls – vestiges of the nineteenth century – and surveillance and policing – twentieth- and twenty-first-century innovations.[35]

I believe that public humanities, as a theory and a practice, can help build such relationships. But to do so, scholars have to abandon the fantasy of enclosures – of walls and a room of one's own that protect students and professors alike – and claim responsibility for the social relationships universities work to secure.

Mary Mullen is Associate Professor of English at Villanova University. She is the author of *Novel Institutions: Anachronism, Irish Novels, and Nineteenth-Century Realism* (Edinburgh, 2019) and co-editor, with Renee Fox, of the forthcoming collection, *Race, Violence, and Form: The Referent of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool). She has published articles on English and Irish writing, settler colonialism, public humanities, and the politics of time. She is currently writing a book on the colonial politics of public interest.

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[33] Roderick Ferguson's 2012 *The Reorder of Things* is helpful in explaining how the university archives or assimilates "minority difference" but also how to dream of "visions that are in the institution but not of it" (18). Ashon Crawley 2018 is also helpful here, insisting that "the very concepts of inside and outside, private and public, are creations, creations in the service of the project of white supremacism and its epistemological limits" (4).

[34] Catlin 2024; Gaza Academics and Administrators 2024.

[35] Andy Hines and Dennis Hogan provide one example of this practice through their course, "University City: Race, Power and Politics in Philadelphia" which focuses on how colleges and university shape the political economy of Philadelphia. See Mercier 2024. Another example is the 2024 call by scholars in Gaza to reopen universities that concludes, "We built these universities from tents. And from tents, with the support of our friends, we will rebuild them once again."

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