Guest Column

The New Public Humanists

JULIE ELLISON

Public humanities is about finding both practical and conceptual locations, spaces, and translations between the various kinds of humanities work that people are doing.

—Evan Carton (2009)

Blurring the Boundary

THE LINE BETWEEN THE ACADEMIC HUMANITIES AND THE PUBLIC humanities is fuzzy and getting more so all the time—and that is a good thing. We inherit a distinction between the public humanities, oriented to nonspecialist audiences and nonacademic careers, and the academic humanities, oriented to "disciplinary professionalism" (Bender 9).[1] While academic and public understandings of the humanities will not merge anytime soon, they can no longer be neatly drawn as distinct if contiguous domains. Well-marked paths that cross and recross this boundary delineate a third space—a space for the practice of public scholarship. Timothy K. Eatman refers to public scholarship as "scholarly or creative activity that joins serious intellectual endeavor with a commitment to public practice and public consequence" ("Engaged Scholarship" 18). In this intermediate zone, we can follow the tracks of academic humanists who partner with nonacademic institutions and organizations, interlaced with the footprints of publicly engaged cultural professionals based in other sectors. Citizens of William Paulson's "enlarged humanities" (inclusive of "the entire project of making and remaking the social, cultural, and material collectives to which we belong" [191]), these scholars describe themselves as undertaking "different forms of making knowledge 'about, for, and with' diverse publics and communities," as Eatman and I demonstrated in our

JULIE ELLISON is professor of American culture and English at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. From 2001 to 2007 she served as founding director of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, a consortium of colleges and universities. The author of *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (U of Chicago P, 1999), as well as two earlier books, she is writing on the public project of the humanities.

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2008 report *Scholarship in Public* (Ellison and Eatman iv).[2]

There is sufficient evidence of the shift from the public humanities to the mediating practices of publicly engaged academic scholars to confirm the impression that a new sort of public humanities is finding traction in American colleges and universities. As Gregory Jay observes in his incisive survey of changing constructions of the humanities, there has been a "move *from* public humanities *to* public scholarship and engagement" (54).

Many academic humanists, myself included, see themselves as participants in the broader civic engagement movement in higher education, an unfolding response to the "Copernican revolution" that is agitating higher education (Scobey 48). An important strand of that movement is the effort to knit together public work and academic work. Not all civically engaged campus-community partnerships result in public scholarship, and not all public endeavors by scholars are civically engaged. But the idea of public scholarship as central to civic engagement in higher education is particularly resonant because it changes how faculty members see themselves. While what we make is important, the emergence of a new kind of public humanities registers most powerfully at the level of who we are.

I begin my reflections on this trend by exploring platforms for learning how to do public scholarship in the humanities. I look at graduate programs and humanities centers where the new public humanities has taken hold. Having described how the new public humanists name and claim professional identities, I examine the cycle of making, understanding, and writing the campus-community project, one of the most common genres of public engagement. I conclude by underscoring the importance of how academic humanists exercise "institutional agency" in support of the university's public mission (Newfield 157).

First, though, some history is in order. The dual construction of the humanities, as either academic or public, was inscribed in the formation of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which originated as a support system for disciplinary professionalism. As Elizabeth Lynn suggests in her fine study of state humanities councils, the NEH was set up in 1965 in response to the demands of humanities scholars, who were legitimately unhappy about funding inequities after the creation of the National Science Foundation. The NEH was constituted as a powerful academic project (Ayers 26). The state humanities councils—vehicles for a new kind of public humanities programming—were launched in the early 1970s as the result of efforts to further legitimize the NEH as an agency that funds academic scholarship. The council movement began around the time that universities established the first public humanities degree programs on their campuses to prepare public humanities professionals for off-campus work. But the state councils aimed to translate faculty expertise in a different way and for different purposes, summed up in what Lynn categorizes as overtly civic "principles of access" and "'democracy needs' arguments" (3–4)—frameworks that remained, at best, supplementary to humanities departments. The persistent "two culture" system at the NEH has further inhibited a much-needed national conversation on how public programming and publicly engaged academic scholarship might converge. This internal divide at the NEH may be closing as a result of the agency's investment in digital projects, some of which are at once civic and scholarly. Overall, however, the state humanities councils continue to operate within the inherited paradigm: the academic humanities are located in the disciplinary sphere of the university while the public humanities organizations recruit willing scholars for programs off campus.

Degree programs in public history and museum studies have been the exception that proves the rule. Their long-standing purpose has been to educate students who will "apply

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their . . . skills . . . in public settings," according to the current mission statement of the first public-history program, which opened at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1976 ("Public History"). For twenty-five years, these programs have prepared students for careers in nonacademic organizations. (Applied public humanities degree programs did not take hold in literary and language studies, and the question of why that is so would be a promising starting point for further inquiry into the history of the disciplines.) In recent years the effects of a worsening academic job market have stimulated fresh interest in professional studies in the humanities. In history, for example, association leaders are calling for departments to learn from public history programs: they should broaden the curriculum for all doctoral students by mainstreaming the public option right from the start rather than reserving it as a belated "Plan B" (Grafton and Grossman).[3]

Since the late 1990s, therefore, a different form of the public humanities has begun to take hold in colleges and universities. If this more recent model does not conform to the tradition of professional education in public history or museology programs, it is not antithetical to it, either. The new public humanities do not exclude nonacademic careers as a graduate student goal—far from it. But, for the most part, faculty members, graduate students, and undergraduates in the humanities who follow this approach are working across the academic-public boundary from the campus side. They are building a modest infrastructure for new public humanities with public scholarship at their core.

Outer-directed graduate programs aimed at preparation for nonacademic careers and these more recent public scholarship initiatives have a good deal in common. Like public history programs, new initiatives that make space for public scholarship attract students eager to acquire skills in collaboration, project development, public presentation, and methodologies such as exhibition, ethnography, documentary, and place making. Publicly engaged scholars share the practical temper of, for example, public historians but often speak a different language. They draw on concepts like epistemological pluralism, agency, "principles of organization based in mutuality," cultural identity theory, equity, and democracy in ways that tie them to different constituencies and lines of descent (Jay 19). They also are likely to partner with a more diverse set of organizations.[4]

Locating the New Public Humanists

These concrete, programmatic changes on campus point to a robust challenge to the habitual academic-public binary in the humanities. I will begin with graduate students, for two reasons: first, because they are so often omitted from the discussion of changes in higher education, present as objects of concern but rarely as participating subjects; and, second, because they are among the pioneers of the new public humanities.

The language used to describe recently founded programs for graduate students shows that *public humanities* persists as a term for nonacademic humanities careers. This is true, for example, of the MA in Public Humanities at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, at Brown University, which graduated its first class in 2007. The program's stated goal is for its students to acquire "the knowledge and skills needed for jobs in museums, historical societies," and other cultural agencies and community organizations ("M.A. Program"). Public Humanities at Yale, an MA program that offers a "concentration in Public Humanities en route to an American Studies doctorate," emphasizes nonacademic pathways but is integrated into the doctoral program in ways that yield public-scholarship effects for students who are pursuing academic careers. Like the state humanities councils, the

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program declares as its purpose to broaden "the concept of 'audience'" by "expanding academic discourse beyond the confines of the classroom, academic publishing, and the academic conference circuit." The emphasis on "building bridges to a wide range of local and regional institutions and their respective publics" echoes the language of the founding group of graduate student advocates.[5] While students "are prepared for public intellectual work" in the national arena of museums and documentary filmmaking, the public humanities here also comprise engagements close to campus ("Public Humanities: Yale"). Thus, although the Yale program is oriented to alternative careers,[6] it is also receptive to public scholarship. Most important, it is open to the agency of students. The active role played by graduate students in the creation of Yale's program emphasizes who the new public humanists are rather than the question of what exactly public scholarship is.

The graduate students in the public humanities group at Yale are not alone. When I founded Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life (IA), a consortium of ninety colleges and universities now based at Syracuse University, I was determined to do something for graduate students. They were among the liveliest proponents of IA's mission: to support artists and scholars whose work as civic professionals centers on publicly engaged scholarship and teaching. IA's graduate-student-led program Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) has shown just how generative national self-organizing by graduate students can be. Over a period of ten years, more than 150 graduate student public scholars in the humanities and related fields have run summits at IA annual meetings. Today these students are publishing, forming regional chapters, and meeting year-round through monthly conference calls.

While many students gravitate to PAGE because their unconventional public commitments make them feel marginalized in their departments, some of them come because they are enrolled in graduate programs that are vigorously receptive to public scholarship and public creative practice. These certificate and degree programs are oriented to "critical work informed by matters of public salience" and prepare people for careers as "citizen humanists" on *or* off campus (Ellison and Eatman 1; Davidson). The combined pursuit of advanced study and making knowledge with community partners is central to these students' practice, which develops skills useful to nonacademic careers without offering defined career tracks. In these settings, *public humanities* means something like "publicly engaged but not necessarily nonacademic humanities." Public scholarship programs speak to students who are already constructing identities as future "democratic professionals" on college campuses as well as to those who, facing the academic job search, want to diversify their professional portfolios or are curious about "what's out there" (Dzur 271–73).

The most robust graduate program for the new public humanists is the Certificate Program in Public Scholarship, at the University of Washington's Simpson Center for the Humanities. The certificate program was formed after six years during which the center, with important initial support from the Graduate School, offered an annual, weeklong public humanities institute for graduate students. As the institute's founder, Kathleen Woodward, notes, it provided affective opportunities—a deliberate focus on "intellectual morale"—along with scholarly strategies: "new ways of imagining our scholarship as public goods, not just professional products, [gave] our graduate students a greater sense of meaning . . . a calling" ("Work-Work Balance" 995). These initiatives at the University of Washington have sought to cultivate the "diverse practices of community-based cultural research" and the efficacy of graduate students themselves ("Institute"). In fall 2013 a new doctoral program in Hispanic studies at the University

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of Washington will admit its first students. They will be required to enroll in the Certificate Program in Public Scholarship, integrating the certificate into a doctoral program.

For students "pursuing careers within and outside higher education," the Simpson Center promises self-development adequate to the rigors of "working across"—and the labors of crossing are present in its organizational syntax. The center's Web site specifies the importance of offering its students the chance to develop the "capacity to imagine and enact collaborative cultural work across multiple sites inside and outside the university, and to represent their own aspirations and abilities as publicly engaged scholars" ("Institute"). The sheer number of times that *and* appears in these documents reveals the inelegant but urgent syntax of the aspiring public scholar: a syntax that performs a relational, locational identity lived both in and out of academe.

Motivated graduate students propel a number of similar programs that provide additional evidence of the trend to the new public humanities, resulting from "model and mission transfer" between campuses (Woodward, "Future" 114). Examples include the Arts of Citizenship Program, of the Rackham School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan; the interdisciplinary MA in Cultural Studies, at the University of Washington, Bothell; the Graduate Institute on Public Engagement and the Academy, at the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, University of Iowa; and the Public Humanities Exchange, of the Center for the Humanities, University of Wisconsin, Madison, which funds graduate student projects "convened outside the boundaries of academia" ("About Public Humanities Exchange").

The public humanities have been a key ingredient in faculty-driven initiatives too, especially the formation of new humanities centers. A growing number of centers have *public* in their titles and speak of partnerships in their mission statements. For many faculty members who are active in these humanities research units, the public humanities no longer mean simply public lectures, and interdisciplinarity takes extramural forms. These centers include Ohio State University's Humanities Institute (founded in 1997); the Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience, at Rutgers University, Newark (1992); the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities, at Auburn University (1985); the Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere, at the University of Florida (2000); the Center for New England Culture, at the University of New Hampshire, Durham (2002); and the University of Texas, Austin's, Humanities Institute (2001). Collectively these centers have fostered an identifiable repertoire of public scholarship activities: collaborative projects; citywide events; multiyear campus-community projects; digital humanities projects; Teachers as Scholars programs;[7] conferences planned with regional partners, such as the Black New England conferences of the Center for New England Culture; "difficult dialogues" and other deliberative democracy events; and, at the University of Texas, Austin, sabbaticals for community members (Ellison, "This American Life" 4).[8]

Naming the New Humanists

These developments show the new public humanities to be a hybrid, intersectional affair, an impression confirmed by how we refer to the people who are engaged in it, these new interstitial professionals. The complexities of naming point to the transformation of work identities as a central, if usually undeclared, purpose of public scholarship initiatives—a purpose that is as much a driver as the goal of changing the forms and content of scholarship. Publicly engaged scholars cannot be fitted to a single professional role or described in a single word. The hyphen is the telltale mark of public scholars, who, strikingly, do not call themselves "public humanists," perhaps

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because the term is still strongly associated with nonacademic careers. George Yúdice calls for an "archaeologist-practitioner" (337). The editors of *Museum Frictions* grapple with similar challenges of professional description: contributing authors "combine the roles of scholar, practitioner, and activist . . . and blur assumed divisions among the museum, the academy, and engaged social action" (Karp and Kratz 21). Sylvia Gale and Evan Carton, too, document unconventional professional descriptions: "'service researchers' (an anthropologist), 'mutual actors' (a landscape architect), 'scholar-artist-citizens' (a theater and dance scholar) or 'scholarly activists' (a communications professor)" (42). And when Kathleen Woodward asks, "What different terms do [contributors to an edited volume] deploy to describe themselves?" she answers, "Public scholar. Activist scholar. Scholar activist. Scholarly producer. Scholar-citizen. Scholar-advocate. Academic-activist. Public activist-scholar. Public intellectual" ("Future" 115–16).

The renegotiation of young humanities scholars' identities, evident in these complicated acts of naming, is confirmed by studies of these cohorts. The Publicly Engaged Scholars study is part of an ongoing research program conducted by IA on the career aspirations of publicly engaged early-career scholars. Seventy-five percent of the almost five hundred survey participants responded that it was "important," "very important," or "extremely important" "to find a position after graduate school at a college or university that values publicly engaged scholarship" (Eatman, "Re-imagine" 7). The study confirms the both-and identities of publicly engaged scholars—their attachments to the academy and their impatience with its civic inhibitions. Participants were "as likely to value the traditional scholarly enterprise as they [were] to value social justice, public engagement and/or activism"—but the even balance between these two sets of values is telling (Eatman, *PES National Survey Result Summary*).[9]

Publicly engaged scholars are seeking more capacious professional identities that combine traditional and experimental elements. And the assertion that the new public humanities—and new public humanists—are plural or intersectional leads to a further conclusion. If the public humanities are "mixed," if they mediate between one place and another and between one kind of practice and another, and if public humanists are also defined in terms of their hyphenated identities, then perhaps this area of the humanities has come to be defined positionally rather than as a complex of subjects and methodologies. The positional humanist is driving the new public humanities.

Doing, Understanding, and Writing the Project

How do you do projects, understand organizations, and write about both as a positional humanist? We need to think more not only about what it means to do projects but also about what it means to engage in the close reading of projects and to author the writings that emerge from such reading. Reflecting on these questions is one mode of converting the public humanities into public scholarship.

My own version of epistemological pluralism has been fostered through fifteen years of experience with projects that involve words—spoken, performed, written, and drawn. These projects include *the 51st (dream) state* / The America Project (a five-year collaboration with the late poet and theater artist Sekou Sundiata); "Boomtown," with the InsideOut Literary Arts Project, of Detroit; activities with teachers, school counselors, high school students, third graders, and staff members at parks and public libraries linked to courses called "Getting In: What College Means in America" and "The Poetry of Everyday Life"; and the Isithunzi Writing Workshop, which drew me to the question of the lyric visual gesture in the writing process of Johannesburg printmakers composing artist statements. During and long after

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these projects, as a new public humanist who is also a literary historian, I have labored to craft a poetics of "the project" as the molecular unit of public work ("Lyric Citizenship" 92).

Practitioners of the new public humanities are producing books and essays that cannot be understood outside the conditions of collaborative production—direct, coequal involvement with living people and organizations. Such writings require the reader to attend closely to programmatic variables—overt or tacit—in the social biography of the text.[10] Indeed, these elements point to an emerging "cultural organizational studies" of and in the public humanities. As Yúdice notes, "[A]gency is never wholly one's own; it requires working in a range of groups and organizations, at a moment when there are significant changes in how organizations understand knowledge and in how they desire democracy." The operative words here are "range," signaling a plurality of organizational encounters; "knowledge," pointing to how learning works in and between organizations; and "desire," underscoring the presence or absence of democratic intent as a defining feature of organizational life (157–58).

Dolores Hayden's classic work of feminist urban studies, *Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, sets forth interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and case studies of collaborative public projects that recovered the history of women of color in Los Angeles. Embedded in these case studies is a strong narrative of professional change. George Sanchez recalls the integrated but varied practices that flowed from a decade-long collaborative inquiry into the multiracial history of the Boyle Heights neighborhood: "a major museum exhibition, a teacher's guide made free to all teachers, high school student radio projects, undergraduate and graduate research papers, and hopefully, within a year or so, my own next book" (qtd. in Ellison and Eatman 7). Tiya Miles's *House on Diamond Hill* likewise incorporates the academic author's own narrative of professional change. The goal of her book

> is one of public engagement and information-sharing toward the end of co-constructing a sense of the past that enriches rather than limits communities; and the process of its becoming was one of spirited collaboration between university professors, college students, local researchers, and staff members as well as supporters of a state-operated historic site. (204)

Multiauthor volumes similarly register the altered relationships of the new public humanities. *Harriet Wilson's New England* (2007), an outgrowth of the grassroots Harriet Wilson Project, in Milford, New Hampshire, edited by JerriAnne Boggis, Eve Allegra Raimon, and Barbara W. White, and *Civic Engagement in the Wake of Katrina* (2009), edited by Amy Koritz and George J. Sanchez, challenge the genre of the edited collection of academic essays. Authors include community historians, cultural activists, professors, archivists, poets, journalists, and high school teachers writing in a variety of genres, including poetry and memoir.

Finally, publicly engaged graduate students, like those invoked earlier in this essay, are writing dissertations that derive from their public scholarship. They help us to think concretely about the "ensemble of forms" that becomes possible in response to Sidonie Smith's call for a "new dissertation." For example, Joshua Lambier's integrated understanding of the different arenas of his public work is fundamental to his dissertation. Lambier is a graduate student in English at Western University, in London, Ontario. His dissertation is on the Romantic era and human rights. He also was one of the rare humanists supported by the Trudeau Foundation, he found and attended the Rackham Public Humanities Institute, at the University of Michigan, and he launched a robust public humanities initiative, Public Humanities @ Western, staffed by graduate students and based in Western's College of Arts and Humanities (Lambier). His

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field scholarship and public scholarship form an integrated, manifold project.

Sustaining the New Public Humanists

Scholarly legitimacy, supportive infrastructure, and cross-sectoral communities of practice are intermittent realities for public humanities scholars. To improve on this partial advance, new public humanists need to find pathways to "institutional agency." "Agency is an option," but it is not inevitable (Ellison and Eatman 19). Structured reflection at the departmental level on the latent public dimensions of each discipline; campus coalitions that join constituencies in humanities, arts, diversity, and outreach units; and tapping the resources of national networks like IA are three steps in this direction.[11] Above all, we need to exercise institutional agency to sustain people as well as programs.[12] We must take to heart the growing evidence that the desire to become a different kind of person is driving change in the humanities as much as the desire to work in a systemically engaged institution.

The new public humanists are struggling to balance normative academic identities and identities derived from intermediary positions between universities and other organizations.[13] Gale proposes changing the question from "Who will you be?" to "What do you need to fully activate the roles and the projects that really matter to you?" (325). Professional identities for public humanists increasingly require decisions about what projects to pursue and what organizations to work with. For it is in collaborative relationships that their complex roles take shape. Clearly, both programs and people are becoming oriented to a structurally distinct model of the public humanities—a humanities of, in, and between organizations—though on what scale we cannot yet tell.

Notes

1. Thomas Bender's account of the rise of "disciplinary professionalism" in the postwar period traces the construction of national frameworks of validation in which academics' professional identity was formed.

2. To ground these generalizations, we began that report with examples: the Keeping and Creating American Communities Project, in the Atlanta, GA, metropolitan area; the Free Minds Project, in Austin, TX; the Harriet Wilson Project, in Milford, NH; and ten more (vi–vii). Carolyn de la Peña's discerning 2010 overview of engaged humanities projects points to Portland State University's Humanities and Sustainability Research Project, the Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, and several others (4–5).

3. Anthony Grafton and Jim Grossman have offered "A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History," urging that history graduate programs open doors to the "many ways to apply what you've learned to a career." This elicited a cautionary response from the editor of *Public Historian*: "the public historical workplaces they are counting on are being pushed to their own Plan Bs. . . . Historical museums, sites, archives, and research centers have faced public disinvestment as extreme as that afflicting the nation's universities" (Bergstrom 8–9).

4. As new public humanities programs have been launched on university campuses, so too have civically engaged urban knowledge centers. Well-known examples include La Casa de la Raza, in Santa Barbara; Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, in Oakland; the Cultural Wellness Center, in Minneapolis; the Boggs Center, in Detroit; the August Wilson Center, in Pittsburgh; Project Row Houses, in Houston; and the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, in New Orleans. Each of these independent organizations has conceptual and practical frameworks that guide their relationships with academic collaborators, just as corresponding strategies guide campus programs in their relationships with community partners.

5. Public Humanities at Yale also houses faculty-initiated projects with a public focus, notably the Photogrammar Project, which is digitizing the Farm Security Administration–Office of War Information photographs.

6. Discussing programs like Yale's, Leonard Cassuto says that "professors need to identify specific [nonacademic] employment goals for graduate students and work backward to structure a curriculum."

7. In Teachers as Scholars programs, K–12 teachers "participate in small, multiple-day seminars led by leading professors in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Sciences and are, thus, reconnected to the world of scholarship," while "university faculty become far more fully involved in the ongoing efforts of the schools" ("About TAS").

8. At a few institutions, there are both a humanities institute and a public humanities center, reinforcing the supplemental or alternative status of the public humanities.

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9. The research team used the data to construct "a typology of publicly engaged scholars" in the form of seven composite profiles. These profiles suggest narratives of professional identities learned through movement between roles or through commitments to more than one role at a time: e.g., the "Teacher to Engaged Scholar" is a "K–12 teacher . . . [who] enters the academy for graduate work and teaching, but remains committed to . . . schools," and the "Engaged Interdisciplinarian" works to leverage "every opportunity to borrow from different domains of inquiry for the enhancement of [his or her] community based work" ("Engaged Scholars").

10. These texts also speak to the high transaction costs of collaborative projects, including uncertainty ("Will this project create beneficial change?"), stresses surrounding integration ("Will all the moving parts of this project—people, organizations, activities, resources—come together successfully?"), and urgency ("We've promised people that we will make something happen two months from now. Can we do it?" [Turner and Müller 2]). The project's effortful, short-term nature is the basis for Jay's recommendation that public scholarship programs turn short-term projects into long-term partnerships so that several faculty members and multiple cohorts of students can "work with the same partner over the years" (59).

11. Newfield argues that "culture . . . known through agency and action" includes the process of "developing . . . institutional agency" in and with organizations central to our work and our publics as one vital way of "binding . . . knowledge to democratized power" (157). His discussion of the relation between theory choice and institutional agency is especially provocative (144–45).

12. I agree with Gregory Jay that "activities not integrated with curriculum and enrollments are de-prioritized." Jay is right to assert that campus-community projects and short-term programs are harder to sustain without reliable curricular links. After all, the aspirations of the public-minded graduate students I described earlier were likely shaped by their exposure to community-based learning as a "high-impact practice" in their undergraduate programs (Kuh). But public humanists need the curricular connection for reasons beyond mere sustainability: to build publicly active learning communities that nurture critical practice by both students and faculty members.

13. One of the most applicable close readings of how people acquire institutional agency in universities is Sturm's account of "the architecture of inclusion." Sturm analyzes the people who develop "role hybridity" and the programs that serve as "organizational catalysts" and "institutional intermediaries" around issues of gender equity in the sciences and engineering (56, 78, 80). Her arguments can be adapted to make a strong case for supporting the multiorganizational partnerships and plural identities of the new public humanists.

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