

Publishing and the Public Humanities: Teresa Mangum & Annie Valk, Humanities and Public Life series

<https://youtu.be/yuUynV9Tsg0>

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Hello, I'm Catherine Cocks, a member of the Publishing and Public Humanities working group. In this video you'll hear from Teresa Mangum and Annie Valk, the series editors of the Humanities and Public Life book series. This series was designed as a platform for books by people undertaking publicly engaged humanities projects. The questions posed are designed to highlight the importance of establishing structures and opportunities for the people doing publicly engaged work to reflect, document, and publish in ways that embody the collaborative relationships and messy processes of engaged research.

Anne Valk (AV): My name is Annie Valk and I am currently a professor of history at the CUNY City University of New York Graduate Center and I direct the American Social History Project and I'm a historian with the interest and expertise in 20th century U.S oral and public history.

Teresa Mangum (T M): And I'm Teresa Mangum and I'm a professor in the departments of Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies and English at the University of Iowa, with an affiliation with our Public Policy Center also, and I'm the director of the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies.

TM: Annie and I got to know each other through the organization Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, and as part of that group which gave us language to talk about publicly engaged scholarship and practice, we started to think about the challenge that anybody doing public projects faces in how to share their work with their colleagues and how to have it register for fellow academics, especially those

who aren't doing public work, and in the humanities that means book publication, unfortunately, book and article publication still. It's becoming more flexible, but you know, with digital projects and other possibilities, but we worked with Catherine when she was at the University of Iowa Press to propose, put together a proposal for a book series that would essentially give people doing the work a platform to share their projects, and one of our um, our our hopes was to make the book as flexible as possible and be very open to different kinds of format, to convince the press that we would need more images and um, and more openness in chunks of text and the way they might look in order to incorporate a range of voices, instead of just focusing on one person as a speaker. So we also saw the book as as an opportunity, the book series, to say to people, "Figure out a way to gather what you've been doing and reflect on what you've been doing, that lets you slow down long enough to share that work with other people and in a form your colleagues will recognize and reward."

AV: One more hope or motivation that we had with the series was to try and create ways for people who are practitioners of public history to think about impact and to think about how do you measure and describe impact. I think both Teresa and I were aware that from, from our role as having sat on grant review committees, for instance, or being connected to local Humanities Councils, that there are lots of claims that people make, particularly around civic engagement, that claims that that is an outcome of this kind of work, but it's really, really hard to actually measure when and if and how that has occurred. So our hope was that the these books together could offer some ways for people who are working in the field to begin to think about how do we actually measure impact and describe what kinds of impact this work has had.

AV: These books are all different from each other; there is nothing formulaic about the ways that these books are put together, and that, when we could say more about what that means for authors and sometimes the challenges of thinking about that, but we really needed a partner who was able and willing to embrace that innovation and to be open to the possibility of different kinds of models. And Teresa alluded to this earlier, one has been that a lot of people who are doing this work are really interested in more broadly sharing it with audiences, but that they can't or they won't take the time to actually sit down and write a book. And partly that is that people are pouring so much of their time and energy back into these projects, and so that it's often hard uh for them to justify stepping aside to write about it.

AV: I think the other way in which it's sometimes difficult is many of the people who are practitioners are not coming from fields where they have experience writing books. And some of the books that we've published have been by first-time authors, people who are very experienced in their field but had not ever written a book before. And we've had more people that we've approached who have great projects that we would love to see result in a book who've said, like, "A book is just not a meaningful way for me to share my research," so uh so I think we've encountered that. Um I guess the second thing is that it's been challenging for authors to think through how to really capture what are often very complex projects that have extended over multiple years and involve many different partners and lots of different um, elements and aspects to it, and so I think people have often struggled to figure out are they writing, is what they're writing about their project, is what they're writing about their work as a publicly engaged humanist, is it about community impact, how could they do that, how could they describe their project and its impact in a way that also reflects those multiple partners and multiple people who've been involved in it so doesn't create just one authoritative take on what is often a collaborative and complex project. So that's something that I think each individual author has just struggled through with, with our help I hope, but really it's not something where they can just look at a previous book in the series and say, "I'm going to do what that author did," they have to figure it out for themselves because their projects are so different.

T M: And two things I guess I would add as challenges, so one of my great regrets about the series is there have been two books in particular that people actually had drafted a book, um but, but in all the ways Annie's describing, the project you know, it just needed another, one more round of revision to open up to audiences new to the to the project and the work. It's so hard to, to get out of the immediacy, uh you know, in a sense of almost chronology into some other, reflective, audience-oriented brain in these books, and that's the big leap that, that we get thrilled when we see people make. It's encouraging to see signs around the country of—and I think a lot of this coming out of the combination of covid and of much more open and frank discussion that white people are participating in about race relations and racial violence in this country, violence based on the racist country—um that I can see the way there's been, you know, there are cracks now in conventional academic reward systems and preoccupations and an openness for a moment—I never assume this is going to last—for the moment to um, many people in academia who did not think about these

questions before wanting to think about how they're, how they can take their scholarly interest and do some work in the world with it, um in collaboration with others, with their students, and also new interest on the part of administrations and thinking about how to reward and support such work.

AV: I guess my hope would be to see even more work, that even more opportunities um for graduate students to be doing publicly engaged work in a way in which it actually is very deeply tied to and enmeshed in their scholarship, and so I think that there's still a lot of work that needs to happen on the level of graduate departments to make that possible, and certainly Teresa is one of the people who's really been leading an effort to try and provide training and opportunities for students who are interested in doing this work to learn more about it, but I think that it's still not um not supported in any consistent way, and that lots of graduate students and junior faculty still are being forced to make the decision that they're going to delay doing these kinds of projects because they're too hard to do or they're too complicated and they're going to take too much time um and in ways that are going to impede their career um progression, uh so that would be one of my hopes uh in terms of the book series.

AV: I don't know what to say about the book series um like, there certainly are particular topics and kinds of work that Teresa and I are aware of that we really think needs to be, should be represented in the series and and hasn't yet um for many of the reasons that we talked about earlier, and so one of the things that we've batted around was trying to think about uh like, in an ideal world how could we come up with a mechanism, perhaps with funding attached, to be able to support authors who want to write about these projects and just, you need some of some additional support in the way that, you know, to have Teresa be able to get on a plane and go sit with them, or to pair them up with a graduate student, or um to to help create partnerships with experienced writers, um you know, I don't know what that would actually look like, but it's something that, you know, I I think would be really um useful and appreciated in terms of furthering the ability of many scholars to write about the projects that they've been working on.

T M: And I also you know you're making me think, Annie, again about some of these conversations that I've been having. So we have some Mellon funding to um support faculty members who want to take a graduate course they're teaching in in any

humanities field and transform it into a graduate humanities lab that would still count as a seminar. And so these conversations have been so interesting and ultimately productive because it's such a leap of the imagination for people who are interested but not start haven't started projects yet to get past, "Here is a literary topic and here's what the students will read," to "Here is a problem that the humanities and even you know early period work could help us think through" and even possibly come up with new ideas about how to address working with a community partner who could give us, you know, who could put that pressure on us in some ways. And the moment when I see people figure out that they could actually take a course from comparing what two periods look like, literary periods, to the possibility that they could use the way they're studying slavery in the 18th century in art and literature as an approach to working on a particular issue to do with racial conflict in this community with partners, it's just extraordinary. So another thing I would love to see is some kinds of training that would be, there, there are lots now of workshops on um engaged practice, but few of them are for people in the humanities specifically, or they're very local to an institution, and I would love to see our book series hooked up somehow with that kind of, those kind of training opportunities, you know, workshops where people who are just starting, using the books as inspiration could then think about transforming their own work and experiment together as a cohort. That would be amazing.

AV: I would say I would advise people to um, start documenting your process at the beginning, like, don't like, you know, to to build a practice that includes documentation and self-reflection and thinking about how to uh, how to perhaps share some of that documentation publicly along the way. I think that building a practice that does all of those things from the outset will enrich people's projects as well as perhaps make it easier when and if you decide to sit down and write about it.

T M: The, the linked kind of advice... I'm always fascinated that academics are such rigorous researchers in their own lanes, and then they step out of that lane and it doesn't occur to them there's any previous work on whatever it is. I was like, "You're on a committee, something on the parking committee, it never ever occurred to you anybody has ever had thoughts about rules about parking in the history of the world," and I see this all the time with publicly engaged practice. And so I guess another of my hopes would be, without turning into pedants, that we do have a different sense of commitment to engaged practice as a field of study and as a set of practices, not

that there is one that's appropriate but that as with any other methodology, that you would familiarize yourself with, with the different methods and what each offers and the limits of each as part of setting up a project. And ironically, I think if we as academics could do that and still remain committed to being lucid and clear with a range of publics, that would be one more thing we could bring into as our contribution to public projects, instead of expecting our partners to have to know here all these different, you know, notions of how we might define what we're doing, how we might explain what we're doing, what might, what values might govern the way we work together, and our what, and help us to set up our system of accountability and documentation and evaluation.

AV: I would say think about how to, if you're going to write about a project, think about how can you write or tell the story of your project in a way that really pulls your partners into that process, and not necessarily that they have to write it with you, but how can you develop a process that furthers and reflects the kind of partnership that you've built, uh and that doesn't necessarily, that's going to contribute to the vitality of that partnership and not be separate from it.

T M: And that was a really interesting lesson I think we learned with the first couple of books, that we had had this fantasy of, of all the academic and the public partners writing together or co-writing, and then we realized, "This is not a good use of the co-partner's time. It doesn't, it's just not part of their reward system," and so yeah, to get creative about how to include voices without assuming everybody does the same thing.