

Publishing and the Public Humanities: Michelle May-Curry, Project Director Humanities for All

<https://youtu.be/MEVX60RtDJY>

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What is the National Humanities Alliance and what does your role at NHA involve?

My name is Michelle May-Curry, I am the project director of the Humanities for All initiative at the national humanities alliance um i'm also a lecturer of engaged and public humanities at Georgetown University and alongside my work at NHA and I'm teaching a core course towards their new master's program and engaged public humanities. So my background coming from an American culture PhD program um sort of found me in museum and gallery spaces quite often. So when I think about my own work and public scholarship I often and am in those spaces um thinking in the in that visual vein and material vein. Um, but Humanities for All um as an initiative and as a website um grew out of a desire on the part of the NHA and its partners across the humanities sector and funders at the Mellon Foundation to understand the growing field of the publicly engaged humanities in US higher education to create resources to help higher ed based project directors and students of the humanities do community engaged work and then to communicate the value of this work as a way of using the humanities to collaborate with different types of publics beyond the bounds of the university um and this work connects up with the NHA's wider mission of supporting the humanities on campuses um and in communities and on camp ... and on Capitol Hill um.

The National Humanities Alliance is a nationwide coalition of organizations advocating for the humanities on campuses and in communities and found it was founded in 1981 and has grown to over 230 member organizations um from across different sectors including universities, museums, libraries cultural organizations,

state humanities councils and scholarly societies. Um, and so we cultivate a part of part of NHA's work is cultivating support for federal funding for the humanities through the National Endowment for the Humanities title VI and Fulbright Hayes national archives and the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences and to just generally promote the value um um of studying the humanities and of engaging with the humanities. Um, and then we also do a lot of convening work um that we convene practitioners to explore best practices, um for advocating for the humanities and and doing the public humanities. Um, and we do that through our National Humanities Conference and at our annual meeting and humanities advocacy day in spring. Um but the majority of my work includes demonstrating how the um how community-engaged humanities work um sort of fits into this web of of humanities work happening across the country and around the world.

How would you describe Humanities for All?

There's Humanities for All, the initiative as a whole and then Humanities for All the website [www.humanitiesforall.org] which is I think for librarians going to be the most useful resource that we have, and within our website we have many you know smaller resources that I can dig into um, but the initial effort of Humanities for All was started in 2018 was to collect and categorize and profile higher ed publicly engaged projects and make them available in the form of a searchable database. So this led to a database of 1,500 projects which over the course of the initiative's lifetime has now grown to over 2,000 projects and those projects are searchable by institution type by type of community partner that they engage with by discipline, by theme and by state. Um and I like to put the caveat here when I talk about the public in public humanities to acknowledge that sort of that line between academics and higher ed and sort of like an unnamed public is is an absolutely blurry and arbitrary one and that when not engaged with critically can sort of reinforce some of the class and race and gender hierarchies that many of these projects are trying to upend. Um, and so you know Humanities for All does its best to sort of bring nuance to that um understanding of the public and public humanities by giving many many examples of who the public is, who the community is and what higher ed can be. Um, and so in order to help capture some of that nuance, um the Humanities for All website also um published over 50 in-depth profiles um on some of these projects that do deep dives um into what they are in highlighting voices of project directors and participants and sort of linking to images and videos. Um and then we also work to synthesize themes across these projects so with the aim of sort of better defining

what the public humanities are as they are as it is sort of a quickly coalescing field it's, you know, people have been engaging the public for decades and you know in many different ways since you know higher ed's inception and well before higher ed and so but thinking about sort of the current moment of what the public humanities are and higher ed's embrace of, of this work right now and it's sort of heavy funding across um philanthropic and grant-making spaces, um we're trying to sort of think about what those themes are.

So, so our synthetic essays um are well used and well loved by faculty and practitioners and students and as a library resource I wanted to pinpoint two essays in particular that might be useful: one is on a typology of the public publicly engaged humanities, and another is on the goals of public humanities work. And the typology essay is really great for thinking about how to do this work so how do you do or what is public humanities research versus teaching versus programming you know outreach that might be sort of more public facing rather than publicly engaged and then, what is, what is the infrastructure that supports all of this work what are the majors and minors the centers and institutes the grant funding lines um that support all of this work. So that essay is really great um as a starting point and then for a more values-based approach to the public humanities, we have an essay on the goals of this work which details five goals including: informing contemporary debates, amplifying community voices, and histories, helping individuals and communities navigate difficult experiences, expanding educational access and preserving culture in times of crisis and change.

So in thinking about the values of public humanities that's really where we sort of highlight some of that work across our website and across um publicly engaged efforts. Um and so over the last year we've also launched a number of resources that move us from thinking about what the public humanities are to supporting public humanists in all their different forms and creating spaces for um convening virtually. And, so we've launched a blog on our website where public, publicly engaged project directors can sort of talk about their work um in first person and we've also launched a newsletter which I can talk about a little bit later um but it's, it's sort of a monthly newsletter that is a roundup across um the across the web and across the community of folks doing public humanities work.

What are some of the key publishing challenges for public humanities initiatives?

I am fairly new to the conversation around publishing the public humanities, um but I'm also getting sort of a hands-on approach to these questions right now as a co-editor of a new volume, um that's in its manuscript stages right now for Routledge called the *Routledge Companion to Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship*. Um, and me and my co-editor Daniel Fisher-Livne have been working to think about how to use this volume to sort of speak to some of the challenges um of doing publicly engaged writing. Um, and and so just from this experience over the last year and a half or so, one of the challenges, I guess I'll start with saying all of the most innovative projects right now are working across multiple mediums right so across multiple publics and include correct collaborators from across um different communities as well as levels and ranks within higher ed and these types of innovative projects are not easily captured by traditional scholarly peer-reviewed um you know, publishing venues um they're the sort of dynamic nature of this work requires dynamic publication genres and forms. Um a lot of them the most exciting projects right now are using digital humanities tools and methodologies in new ways that sort of if tried to capture and print sort of lose that same um tone or sense of connection and so I think it's a matter of publishing genres and venues catching up with the sort of methods of public humanities work that are really exciting right now. And there's a couple really great efforts um that are coming out of institutions that have sort of a high yield of public engagement I'm thinking of CUNY Grad Center the City University of New York's grad graduate center they have a publication called *Distributaries* which is a online venue um for publishing publicly engaged writing. Um and I really appreciate some of the work that they're doing right now um and so the second thing I'll say is that many um not all but many academics are incentivized to publish their work based on guidelines for tenure and review within their department um or at their home institutions whether it be publishing for to sort of keep the ball rolling, um, in that process or just to keep an active profile within their department um and for public human humanists whose work incorporates individuals from outside of the academy it's quite possible that these partners are not necessarily incentivized to publish in the same venues or with the same objectives as their higher ed partners um and so finding a form and venue that sort of meets everyone's needs um is difficult and, and current, currently not widely accepted within um tenure and review processes right now. So, sort of juggling the different needs of partners

and scholars the different timelines that, that might um require um is something that I'm seeing play out a lot across the humanities landscape right now.

What's up next for Humanities for All? And how can people get involved?

In terms of how to get involved there's a few different ways so our Humanities for All database is something that we we source the database entries ourselves but we also have a form where people can submit projects to the database themselves and we are constantly hoping that folks submit to that and and we do get a steady stream. Um, and so I encourage um anybody um to submit projects that they're a part of or that they know of that are happening on their campuses that might fit within the Humanities for All database. And I also would love folk to encourage people to submit proposals to write for our Humanities for All blog. It publishes on a monthly basis and it's a really great publishing venue um to to have on our website that sort of gives another layer um to representing the work of higher ed scholars invested in community collaboration um well so as I mentioned before the Humanities for All has been sort of a resource to for people interested in learning what the public communities are and how we're hoping to sort of make the website and the initiative as a whole useful to people interested in looking for support and doing publicly engaged work.

So, we're hoping to launch a resources page um in the coming months um which we will fill out um hopefully over the next year or so with reports and resources that speak to a range of needs for humanists um and we're also we've been had a lot of interest in mapping out the infrastructure that currently exists on higher ed campuses that supports public humanities work. So, as I mentioned before the sort of majors and minors the course pathways the fellowships and grants institutes internships um the workshops the labs that sort of are the breeding ground for this engagement um it's it's an invaluable support to public humanists in higher ed um and it's invaluable in terms of thinking about what the future of higher ed looks like to um sort of feed into those spaces um and so we're hoping to create resources that show the scope of possibility for for these types of um infrastructures on campuses um and we've been sort of doing some one-on-one engagement with um institutions to help them think about what that could look like on their campuses.

So if anyone who is watching this would be interested in receiving support in that way that's tailored to the particular needs of their campuses we would be really happy

to partner with you in that way um. And then finally we're always looking to find more and better ways of communicating um and interacting with the public and this year I mentioned before that we launched a newsletter um and it's a monthly newsletter that we publish on Substack that offers a roundup of publications of public humanities publications call for papers job ads internship ads event news um and we source it from across the country and our subscriber list since starting in January has grown um to over a thousand people and in a short number of months and so we're we're very aware that there's a hunger for this um type of community um even if it's a virtual monthly newsletter community um and we're always looking for submissions um to this newsletter as well to keep to keep it running so lots of ways of getting involved in the next year.

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