

Headnote for the 2007 Institute on the Public Humanities:

I gave versions of following statement at roundtables that Bruce Burgett organized under the title “Cultural Studies *and...*,” and held at the U.S. Cultural Studies Association conference last April and at the Cultural Studies Now conference in East London this past July. Other roundtable panelists spoke from the intersections of cultural studies and the practice fields of “Arts Politics” (Randy Martin, Tisch School of the Arts), “Community Engagement” (Ien Ang, Western Sydney University), “Education” (Handel Wright, University of British Columbia), “Performance-based Research” (Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, UW Bothell), and “Service Learning” (Sara Dorow, University of Alberta).

As the title suggests, the roundtables were designed to reflect on cultural studies as a project defined by its relationships to proximate sets of ideas, practices, and institutions. In choosing *not* to construct discussion around “Cultural Studies *and...*” any of the other inter/disciplines it frequently appears with (Ethnic Studies, Women Studies, Performance Studies, Queer Studies, etc.), the roundtable sought to de-center the university as the core locus of knowledge production, and to advance instead consideration of research, teaching, and engagement activities that bridge spaces both on and off campus. In other words, the roundtable was designed to push forward a consideration of *intersectoral*, and not just *interdisciplinary*, knowledge-making practices, understanding the latter as a subcategory of the former.

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**Roundtable: “Cultural Studies *and...*”**

***Cultural Studies and Public Humanities***

Miriam Bartha

I first encountered the term “public humanities” when I applied for my current position as Assistant Director for the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington. At the Simpson Center, I help organize public programs and partnerships, develop collaborative, cross-sectoral projects with faculty and graduate students, and support the professional development necessary for this kind of work. The University of Washington is a public university, dually charged with educating the state’s citizenry and workforce and competing nationally for research money, faculty, and prestige. On my “flapship” campus in Seattle, the College of Arts & Sciences and the Division of the Arts and Humanities are organized traditionally by discipline and department, structures that the Simpson Center is intended to augment and bridge. I’ll begin to situate my remarks by saying a few words about what led me here.

Before arriving at the Simpson Center, I completed a dissertation located at the intersection of cultural studies, performance studies, and women’s studies. I taught in English and Women Studies departments. So far, typical story. Here’s the twist: I quit my graduate studies after my doctoral qualifying exams, and went to work in New York at the PEN American Center. PEN American is the largest national chapter of the international non-profit writer’s advocacy organization. There I was involved in the

governance work of a professional membership organization reforming itself to compete with other arts-based non-profits, and also with the campaigns and programs PEN is known for: protection for politically threatened writers, literacy through literature and prison writing programs, copyright and translation promotion, affirmative action within the publishing industry, and resisting censorship.

When I returned to graduate school, I continued to pursue projects that built organizational and administrative skills: a performance/discussion series called *Poetry and the Public Sphere*; and HOW2, an inter-institutional project digitally archiving and renewing a historical journal of experimental women's writing. These experiences taught me some of the different ways in which literature and culture are construed, constructed, and circulated in and across academic and non-academic domains. This has been critical to the way that I think about cultural studies and the public humanities, and the dominant professionalization of cultural work in humanities disciplines and interdisciplines.

From this perspective, "public humanities" is a term that can be at least partially contrasted with the "academic humanities." Here "academic humanities" refers to the modes of thought, research, and education particular to humanities divisions and departments within institutions of higher education. The "academic humanities," in this sense, can be thought of as a term that indexes one organizational sector within the "professional humanities" – a broader category used in the report by 1990 ACLS National Taskforce on Scholarship and the Public Humanities to refer to diverse institutional sectors working in and on the humanities. These sectors range from local libraries and museums to state humanities councils to national and international funding and lobbying organizations such as the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council of Learned Societies itself.

The construct of the "public humanities" marks a partial reassessment and redirection from within these cultural and educational institutions, which have enjoyed some significant public/governmental postwar state funding. It responds to a perceived crisis, characterized as a disconnect between these institutions, the larger publics whose support they need, and the public goods and interests their professional activity might support. As strategic intervention, "public humanities" differentiates and links a diverse set of practices intended to counteract these disconnects by building bridges among different publics. In practice, this frequently means building relationships with actors in different professional and organizational sectors, from media brokers to community organizers to educators working in formal and informal spaces.

As Stuart Hall reminds us, cultural studies is imbricated in these discussions of the humanities. In postwar, postcolonial Birmingham, rapid social change forced a critical rethinking of dominant disciplinary understandings of culture and society, and a reevaluation of the humanities as an integrated, disinterested enterprise.<sup>1</sup> Here cultural studies emerges as strategic, local adaptation to a specific historical conjuncture. Thus, when Hall says that "most of us had to leave the humanities to do serious work in the

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 11-23.

humanities,” he characterizes the cultural studies project as a transformation of humanities practice and knowledge through its multiple displacements from traditional disciplinary and academic structures. The project promises to open onto a whole set of politically-informed, transdisciplinary knowledge projects bridging different educational and cultural worlds.

I do not want to suggest that cultural studies always fulfills this promise. However contested its university receptions have been at different sites and moments, cultural studies has grown and legitimated itself as a specifically academic field. As Hall himself argues elsewhere, its success means that cultural studies now also finds itself haunted by the specter of its own professionalization, and the narrow, self-referential paths of knowledge circulation that follow from it, including the orientation of presentations and publications to national and international circuits and the resulting tendency to abstract research from the particularities of local conjunctures and politically adaptive praxis. That cultural studies claims the difference of its intellectual project through its political commitments to agendas from outside the academy intensifies the tension. But it does not resolve it.

To the extent that cultural studies resists dominant forms of academic professionalization and seeks productive reconnection with other constituencies, it shares with the public humanities a problematic concerned with the question of how we can rethink the work of publics and the work of culture in and beyond the humanities. Within that problematic, though, there are differences.

Where cultural studies arrives under the banner of critical new left/post Marxist politics, the public humanities generally operates as a pluralist umbrella that covers very diverse practices by deploying two terms that have been amply critiqued for their universalist claims and normative functions—the civic notions of “the human” and the “public.” In other words, cultural studies has been highly suspicious of the kind of liberal pluralism invoked and deployed by the term “public humanities.” Yet the pluralism the “public humanities” encodes also enables different tactical and institutional deployments. It may be necessary to explore where its pluralism can provide cultural studies’ projects political opportunity or political cover, and not simply political neutralization.

This ambiguity is particularly evident when we turn to actual activities and projects that appear under rubric of the public humanities. The term is often used to invoke all manner of public interaction or interface trafficking in cultural knowledge, ranging from the public intellectual’s 15 minutes of fame, to more extended, reciprocal forms of community-based service learning, to integrated, participatory, problem-based research collaborations. Some projects evolve as hybrids of these various forms, and some result in a variety of public and academic products, from policy and planning recommendations, to museum exhibitions and installations, to new curricula, monographs, and journal articles. As a label for these activities, “public humanities” is always an adaptation to local terrain, a strategy intended to reorient practices of research, teaching, or engagement within the context of their operation. It can include community engagement,

education, art politics, performance research and service learning among its own, and often in their combination with others.

As Ien Ang, George Yudice, and others in cultural studies have suggested, these “public humanities” projects respond to policy shifts promoting public-private partnerships. These shifts pose tactical risks and opportunities for both cultural studies and the humanities more largely. Where they subject cultural research to reductive and instrumental measures of social utility, they need to be critiqued. But they need to be engaged creatively as well as critically, in praxis-oriented, research collaborations aligned with progressive social agendas. These partnerships are in themselves new conjunctures, and as such, they offer mutual opportunities for understanding and transforming very different knowledge practices, including those of university-based scholarship.

So the question is this: If the public humanities and cultural studies are to move from civic or political sentiment to civic or political effectivity, what practices are needed? Michael Warner has expertly exposed how investments in the public intellectual as a figure perpetuate fallacies about how publics actually function. Others have also questioned the limits of construing public engagement as one-way transmission of expert knowledge. Organizations advocating for the public humanities increasingly foreground the promise of reciprocally-organized collaborative projects as alternatives that yield new relationships and research. In their local articulation to particular circumstances and/or constituent community agendas, such projects find common alliance and grounding with other academic field formations that claim historical relation and political responsiveness to progressive social movements, such as women studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, working-class studies, and environmental studies.

When cultural studies practitioners think about their potential contributions to practical politics, they frequently highlight critical forms of knowledge and inquiry capable of generating self-reflexivity and conceptual shifts among participants. And yet, without other forms of collaborative engagement, academic forms of critique may overlook and misapprehend so much context that they cannot do the critical work of opening new possibilities for transformative understanding or action. Taking up the position of outside expert, they miss the expertise of others. They miss their own opportunities for self-reflectivity and transformative learning; they forfeit inquiry and research.

By contrast, project partnerships require that university-based and community-based collaborators negotiate differences among institutional missions, professional orientations, and core knowledges. Such transitive exchanges pose unique challenges and demand adaptive skills from all participants. If navigated successfully, however, the process yields profound personal, professional, and institutional insights, and with new understanding, new ways of working that shift the practices and consciousness of all involved.

Let me give you one example of a project where we are collectively researching that question about practice at my university. As co-directors of the Institute on the Public Humanities for Doctoral Students, Bruce Burgett and I guide graduate students from

across our university through a process that opens these questions about cultural work, social change, professional and institutional development. The intensive one-week program starts with a consideration of the policy debates I've alluded to here. This is followed by two full-day site visits at cultural organizations where we explore site-specific practices of knowledge-making.

For example, the Wing Luke Asian Museum, located in Seattle's International District, develops its exhibits through a collaborative community-based curation process. Our students entered that space *as if* attending the first community advisory board meeting for an in-development exhibit on the theme of women and violence. At the LGBT Community Center they entered as a focus group within that organization's strategic development processes. We often then give the students a Call for Proposals that asks them to work collaboratively to articulate their collective interests and knowledge to site-based projects. In this way, they work in groups and with site leaders to cultivate new skills and hone their ability to imagine collaborative projects at different levels of scale.

When they return to the university, they are better able to recognize the specificity of their university-based knowledge-making practices and to navigate the shifts public engagement will necessitate in traditional approaches to research and teaching. At the Institute's close, participants collectively generate their own report to their departments, the Graduate School, and the Simpson Center for the Humanities recommending specific structural changes in graduate education to better support engaged scholarship and alternative forms of professionalization. Their report evidences the project-based skills they've developed together, even as it practices new policy skills and engages another level of institutional learning. Writing it, they take up an activist position within the institution, enact themselves as a cohort, and transition back into their respective programs by imagining and working to develop the linkages and pathways that will sustain their common commitment to collaborative culture work.

So, is this humanities research? My own academic professional training in the academic humanities did not prepare me to recognize it as such. But my more recent work, and the research networks it has generated, does. It is precisely this shift in perspective that the research project traveling under the name of the Institute on the Public Humanities is meant to precipitate. This collaborative work is also research into practices of knowledge making, into the social formation of knowledge, into its institutional constructions and valuations and how to intervene in them.

Is this cultural studies? To the extent that dominant U.S. formations of cultural studies remain mortgaged to prevailing academic research modes and values, I'm afraid the answer will be no. To the extent that cultural studies can be committed to praxis-driven inquiry, to values and questions that emerge in relationship and engagement with others in the field of culture, the answer, I think, must be yes.

Traveling together along the latter path, cultural studies and the public humanities are likely to remain wary allies. The pressing questions are how the differences between them can feed generative, action-oriented inquiry into what truly *public and collaborative*

*research* can and should be, what political and ethical purposes organize that work, and what transformations in professional activity, education, and institutions are necessary to achieve and sustain it. Answers to these questions promise to remake what we now reference in professional terms as either “cultural studies” or “public humanities.”

Afternote:

*This is where my talk for the cultural studies conferences ended. One of the persistent questions for me that it would be particular helpful for me to reflect on in the context of an Institute on the “public humanities” concerns the efficacy, adaptability, and limitations of that language to organize and reorient research, teaching, and engagement beyond identifications with the traditional humanities. Working off the interventions of cultural studies into the humanities and the social sciences, Bruce and I have often made use of the language of “culture work” and “cultural research” instead of that of “the public humanities” in this same context. I’d like to continue to think with you about how these languages work in the various contexts in which we work and aspire to work and I would welcome your further thoughts and responses.*