Theories and Methodologies

# Ephemerality and the Ethics of Public Humanities Scholarship

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> Through struggle, students and faculty become citizens building new relationships with residents, relationships in which everyone is transformed. In the process, these relationships are building a broader campus community with a new, shared knowledge of the world.
>
> (Baldwin 213)

In an essay published in 2014, Rosemary Erickson Johnsen describes the creation by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) of what it termed a "Public Scholar" grant program. The program was part of an initiative the NEH called "The Common Good: The Humanities in the Public Square," which, according to the then-chairman of the NEH, William D. Adams, aimed "to challenge humanities scholars to think creatively about how specialized research can benefit a wider public" (qtd. in Johnsen 9). Johnsen's essay provides a case study of her own public-facing scholarship (not connected to the NEH program). Johnsen worked with the Raven Foundation and Lookingglass Theatre in downtown Chicago as a designated scholar whose job was to produce a brief essay that would appear in a study guide about a particular production, accessible on the theater's website, and to take part in a postperformance discussion involving cast members and the audience (9).

From Johnsen's essay I turn to Henry Giroux's insistence that the university—long considered a purveyor of the public good—has been beset on all sides by neoliberalism, which Giroux describes as "an economic Darwinism that promotes privatization, commodification, free trade, and deregulation" (1). If Johnsen's essay addresses how community engagement can work in a local sense, Giroux's

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*PMLA* 140.1 (2025), doi:10.1632/S0030812925000045

book speaks to the forces that combine to constrain that work. He further states that neoliberalism

> privileges personal responsibility over larger social forces, reinforces the gap between rich and poor by redistributing wealth to the more powerful and wealthy individuals and groups, and it fosters a form of public pedagogy that privileges the entrepreneurial subject while encouraging a value system that promotes self-interest, if not an unchecked selfishness. (1)

In a related work, Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University*, Fitzpatrick recalls a graduate seminar in which she asked her students about their first impression of one of the readings, where she received responses involving "merciless takedowns, pointing out the essay's crucial failures and ideological blind spots" (1–2).

After making the distinction between "reading with rather than reading against," Fitzpatrick goes on to propose that her book

> is in large part about my desire to see universities and those who work in and around them—faculty members and administrators, in particular, but also staff members, students, parents, trustees, legislators, and the many other people who affect or are concerned about the futures of our institutions of higher education—develop more responsive, more open, more positive relationships that reach across the borders of our campuses. (20)

Johnsen, Giroux, and Fitzpatrick are writing from radically divergent rhetorical positions. Johnsen's essay is a case study describing how her expertise in early-twentieth-century English and American literature, specifically crime fiction, led to her serving as a public scholar advancing the efforts of an urban theater group in Chicago. Giroux's book, by contrast, seeks to articulate the way an economic philosophy's deleterious effect on higher education calls for mounting resistance to what he sees as the erosion of the university's commitment to a public good that involves reinforcing notions of social responsibility, communal ties, and scholarly innovation. Fitzpatrick's volume purports to offer alternatives to the kind of interiority and insularity universities have come to represent in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Each, in its own unique fashion, makes inroads to a critique of what Johnsen recognizes as the pressure imposed on the scholarly profession and workplace by the forces Giroux and Fitzpatrick outline in their volumes. By putting these authors into proximity, I hope to suggest not only that there are compelling reasons for scholars to engage in public-facing work in the humanities but also that that work is conducted in an economic climate that, as Giroux observes, is having a deleterious effect on the twenty-first-century university, at a time when, as Fitzpatrick points out, universities need to cease looking inward and begin to look outward. The arguments and observations I put forward below represent my recognition that the public humanities operate in complicated circumstances, in which philanthropic, ideological, and extra-administrative energies collide.

## [I]

In the summer of 2020, I was invited to be part of a Modern Language Association ad hoc committee whose aims were first to ruminate on the values and questions that emerge from the public humanities and second to "articulate core principles for evaluation of public humanities scholarship" (MLA Ad Hoc Committee). By shifting the understanding of public humanities from the realm of service and reframing it as scholarly endeavor, our committee sought to build a foundation on which both a theoretical and a practical body of scholarship might comfortably rest. To that end, I would like to reprise my contribution to the report, published as *Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship in Language and Literature Programs*, which constituted what I felt were the ethical dimensions of public humanities scholarship. In this essay, I hope to supplement that contribution with a discussion of what it means to bring this scholarship into contested public spaces.

Universities and colleges in the United States use rhetoric that situates their efforts squarely and

securely in the interest of the public good. But these claims rarely mention the vast influence these institutions exert in the municipalities where they reside or the fact that their nonprofit status is often belied by their need to create additional revenue streams that can offset losses in state and federal funding. Hence, any public-facing and community-engaged scholarship and partnerships must start by grasping the complexities of what Davarian Baldwin has termed "UniverCities," where "the shift in higher education policy from public good to private profits" assumes increasing importance in how institutions of higher learning maintain relationships with their neighbors in the surrounding community (6).

When conducting archive-based scholarship for the purpose of creating a public exhibit that endeavors to uncover disturbing facts about the recent (or distant) past, or when engaging in other forms of public humanities, scholars need to exert the necessary time, energy, and thinking to develop strategies for how to approach communities. They should acknowledge that these projects are likely to be carried out alongside the economic and policymaking initiatives with which institutions for higher learning leverage the essential role they play in municipal and regional economies. As Baldwin points out, the term "civic engagement" is complicated by the fact that these institutions use it to obscure their larger intent to gain greater control of the real estate and retail markets (5).

An ethical approach to the public humanities begins, then, with the acknowledgment that the work takes place amid whatever economic and policy initiatives are currently in play. It proceeds from the assumption that public humanities should eschew the impulse to mimic the extractive posture of the scholar's institution, insisting that the surrounding communities are sites of knowledge and cultural production, as well as spaces whose meaning derives from the lived experience of the inhabitants as they go about acts of placemaking.

To this end, projects that fall under the rubric of the public humanities must always be mindful of how they are imagined apart from the "institutional agendas that might seek to accumulate power and influence" (MLA Ad Hoc Committee). In keeping with that ethical tenet, I would like to proffer a brief description of the Africana studies seminar August Wilson and Beyond, which I have been teaching with my colleague Suzana Berger since 2013.[1] The seminar invites members of the West Philadelphia community onto the campus of the University of Pennsylvania to study August Wilson's Twentieth-Century Cycle alongside university students. As the seminar has evolved, it has come to include reading Wilson's body of work in conjunction with essays and book chapters that focus attention on the university's effects on the West Philadelphia community. One of the readings is by the historian Stefan M. Bradley and titled "There Goes the Neighborhood: Penn's Postwar Expansion Project," from his book *Upending the Ivory Tower*, in which he describes how Penn's strategic plan for expanding its geographic holdings to increase its standing among its Ivy League peers put it in direct conflict with the surrounding community. "Advancing a healthy reciprocal relationship," Bradley observes, "between a university and the surrounding neighborhood has proven to be difficult if not elusive for institutions like Columbia and Penn" (198).

Our students read Bradley's historical account alongside another by Pearl B. Simpson, an essay describing a neighborhood known as "the Black Bottom," in which she traces the arc of a community located near the University of Pennsylvania from a state of prosperity and inclusiveness to the destruction of the neighborhood and the displacement of its residents that began in 1958, when Penn received funding from the United States government to create what came to be known by several names, including Science Hill and University City. The readings from Bradley and Simpson go a long way to helping students in the seminar historicize not only their presence but also that of their West Philadelphia classmates. Indeed, Simpson has frequented several of the seminar's community events, and as a Black Bottom resident herself, she describes walking by the Penn campus on her way to West Philadelphia High School, knowing that she would not be welcome on the campus.

## [II]

One of the ethical considerations in the MLA committee's guidelines involves the need for scholars considering archival projects to approach the surrounding community as an equal partner in the work of knowledge production, giving communities equal say in how those projects should be conceptualized, implemented, and sustained. Because these projects often involve work that can extend over a period of years, our committee emphasized the importance of thinking of public scholarship as endeavors in which a scholarly article or monograph might not be the result. In such instances, the emphasis of the project might not be on deliverables in the form of datasets, quantitative analysis, and impersonal description of real people's lives, but rather might be on community inhabitants themselves as contributors to a shared body of knowledge.

For the entire existence of the Wilson seminar, we have partnered with the West Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, and more recently with Theater in the X, a Black theater group whose productions are mounted in West Philadelphia's Malcolm X Park. One of the core values of the seminar is that we do not remove anything in the way of shared stories, artifacts, photographs, or transcripts without the express permission of West Philadelphia residents. Further, we have resisted the impulse to create an archive from these materials. This core value grew out of our sense that University of Pennsylvania researchers often extracted data from the West Philadelphia community without returning to share their findings or even acknowledging the individuals who provided those findings. Under such conditions, we have decided that what starts out as being the sole province of community members remains so at the end of the seminar.

Hence, the interviews that our students conduct with West Philadelphia residents do not take the form of transcripts stored on a server. Rather, our students produce what the Smithsonian Institution calls a "tape log," in which subjects or themes that emerge at specific moments in the interview are documented. And though we have collected dozens of photographs and videos of community events or the performance of the seminar's capstone project, none of them appear on a website devoted to chronicling the seminar's history. Should the Cultural Alliance or Theater in the X request that those materials be returned, we would simply put them on a portable hard drive and make it available to them, no questions asked. By eschewing an extractive posture toward our neighbors in favor of a collaborative one emphasizing their self-determination and autonomy, we seek to avoid the need to use our findings as a justification for the seminar's existence.

Wilson's Twentieth-Century Cycle functions not as a set of discrete textual events meant solely to testify to the importance of Wilson's contributions to American drama but as a model for how Wilson's constant investment in acts of storytelling constitutes an integral aspect of communal health and placemaking. Wilson believed that his plays could not come into existence unless he could build a dialogue with his characters, allowing their voices to emerge from his consciousness and crystallize into the characters readers have come to know from works like *Fences*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *Gem of the Ocean*. This belief is central to the establishment of a pedagogical practice that involves taking interviews collected from West Philadelphia and using them as the basis for monologues. Those monologues are often performed as part of a publicly staged reading featuring professional actors from the Philadelphia dramatic community. After the performance, our students (from Penn and West Philadelphia) hold discussions with the audience based on questions they have developed in advance. The event is thus not only academic, in that it fulfills one of the seminar's pedagogical goals, but also celebratory and inclusive since we invite local food venders to provide the cuisine and we hold the event in spaces where the community feels welcome.

## [III]

By placing the act of story making at the center of our practice, we make the relationship between storytelling and place a constant point of emphasis. Moreover, acts of oral storytelling are often context-driven, meaning that they play a role in raising

children, managing family crises, and dealing with change. Hence, we engage issues that emerge in specific geographic locations in West Philadelphia—for example, the Walnut Hill Homeowners Association's collaboration with the Paul Robeson House and Museum to get the intersection of 50th and Walnut Streets renamed Paul Robeson Way. But the seminar could just as easily take the form of engaging with activists seeking to stem the effects of gun violence on neighborhood youth. An emphasis on story making allows these issues to assume a place in the foreground.

During the fall semester of 2017, our students were joined by an honors English class from William G. Sayre High School, several blocks up the street from the Penn campus. We paid a small stipend to the teacher and provided tokens for the students to take public transit to campus. The capstone event of that year's seminar involved a series of monologues set in a church in which the mother of a gunshot victim sat a few rows behind the mother of his assailant. Sayre students described what it meant to occupy neighborhoods in which gun violence, anti-LGBTQ sentiments, and food deserts were part of their everyday reality. Working collaboratively, the students created a capstone event that allowed the audience to process the grief, rage, and sadness that hangs over communities haunted by gun violence.

At the end of that seminar, both Sayre and Penn students alike asked why the class had not centered on the question of gentrification. And so the following semester our seminar turned to the question of gentrification. My own research highlighted the ways that a number of neighborhoods in West Philadelphia were plagued by higher temperatures that were the result of an absence of trees on its streets. The absence of canopy cover meant that temperatures often exceeded the temperatures in Philadelphia's more affluent Center City neighborhoods by ten degrees or more. I found that gentrification and climate change often worked hand in hand. The best example of this, which became part of the class materials that term, was New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. To study this question further, we applied for and received a six-thousand-dollar seed grant from Penn's Program in the Environmental Humanities, which allowed us to partner with (and pay a small stipend to) two alumni of the seminar, who served as liaisons between our seminar and community groups involved in struggles against gentrification led by developers seeking to either purchase or replace existing housing.

Several of Wilson's plays feature the issue of gentrification prominently (and several of the plays reference it in a less focused manner). *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney*, and the final play in the Twentieth-Century Cycle, *Radio Golf*, all involve the threats posed by gentrification and urban renewal in Pittsburgh's Hill District. As we stated in the grant proposal:

> [I]n *Two Trains Running*, Memphis Lee's restaurant located in Pittsburgh's Hill District is in danger of being torn down and the residents who gather there dispersed. In *Jitney*, a group of jitney cab drivers meet to decide how they are going to deal with an order to vacate their jitney station so the city can tear the building that houses it down as part of an urban renewal project. And finally, *Radio Golf* involves a local politician's efforts to gentrify an urban enclave that has been occupied by African American residents since the turn of the century, including a house once owned by his grandfather.

Our two community outreach coordinators identified and engaged with community activists working to counter gentrification efforts in the city. We traveled to various points in the city to listen to residents' stories involving the displacement of their neighbors followed by the arrival of new residents who moved in to "green" buildings designed to maximize renewable energy. One of the groups we encountered was composed of homeowners in the Kingsessing neighborhood (adjacent to Penn). We connected with them at the Kingsessing branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia, where the seminar presented a staged reading of monologues and a postperformance discussion focusing on the gentrification of a West Philadelphia neighborhood. On a cold January afternoon, over forty residents

engaged with members of the seminar in the branch's community room.

It is important to highlight, then, that though we do not gainsay the importance of sharing resources with our community partners, the larger significance lies in the opportunity to create moments—however fleeting they might be—in which the knowledge production that arises out of our collaboration is simultaneously an act of intervention. Not long after generating my contributions to the MLA guidelines, it occurred to me that ethical considerations notwithstanding, the current debates regarding identity politics and the cultural wars constitute something that should not be glossed over in this discussion. This is especially so considering the erosion of the belief that higher education is an inherent public good, a belief that is interconnected with what the political scientist Richard Merelman refers to as "cultural projection."[2] Merelman defines cultural projection as "the conscious or unconscious effort by a social group and its allies to place new images of itself before other social groups, and before the general public" (3).

As one might expect, cultural projection is neither unidirectional nor antihegemonic. Indeed, the conservative refashioning of the notion of "woke" from a Black vernacular formation meant to describe what it means to experience—and subsequently act on—a political (that is, racial) awakening to one meant to denote the dangers of being indoctrinated by left-wing thinkers into a space characterized by self-doubt, reverse racism, and white guilt is evidence of the social dramas conflicting cultural projections can generate. This situation is suggestive of how quickly the public humanities can be politicized at both ends of the political spectrum. It is important to point out that the public humanities are just as easily employed in the service of conservative agendas. Indeed, what is a march decrying the removal of a statue commemorating the exploits of a Confederate general but a public humanities project that seeks to instantiate a usable past that is neither inclusive nor equitable.

One might conclude that the public humanities, irrespective of how they are conceptualized in the MLA guidelines, are not a new phenomenon, nor have they always been used in the service of inclusion and racial equity. Hence, one reason the public humanities were, for so long, meant to serve as a gauge of professional service rather than as scholarship was because the dominant culture could enact policies around the granting of tenure, professional legitimacy, and social mobility that were driven by a spatial politics born out of a need to situate whiteness and white supremacy as the raisons d'être of the modern university, as a kind of unimpeachable common sense. These policies also reserved the role of "legitimate" scholarly praxis to forms of knowledge production such as scholarly articles, public lectures articulating narrow kinds of expertise, and scholarly monographs published by university presses.

## [IV]

I want to revisit the constellation of ideas I identified at the outset of this discussion. For Johnsen, Giroux, and Fitzpatrick seek to make readers aware of the dangers that lie in the emergence of policies and ideologies that reduce the social relevance of educational practices to a series of transactional events that affect everything from how and what sort of knowledge is valued to the relationships between institutions of higher learning and their surrounding communities. Recall that our original task in the creation of the MLA guidelines was to formulate for scholars working in the public humanities a code of ethics that was meant to be not binding but empowering. By insisting on the need for scholars to distance themselves from the controlling and manipulative strategies of universities and colleges, emphasizing the importance of sharing resources and spoils from scholarly work, seeing the spaces occupied by community neighbors as sites of knowledge production rather than sites ripe for extraction, and framing scholarly efforts as collaborative and inclusive, I hoped to foreground a state of affairs in which relationality might supplant transactional policies. I will admit, here, to being idealistic to a fault.

But as Fitzpatrick so elegantly points out, the value of the humanities as a public good is greatly compromised because it is so often posited within

the context of competition and individual achievement. And the ad hoc committee was organized around the idea that these concepts are endemic to the academy. In the end, the guidelines were conceptualized to help departments reward scholars who elect to do public-facing scholarship and activism by transforming what had been initially conceived of as service into fungible forms of scholarly production. Fitzpatrick's seminar clearly puts on display the excesses that issue from a hermeneutics of suspicion, where students "had no other position than the critical available to them, [and] the need to stake out their own individual, distinctive positions within the seminar room left them unable to articulate in any positive sense what the article was trying to accomplish because that articulation would have left their own readings somehow indistinguishable from those of the author" (29). Fitzpatrick recalls the work of the scholar Rita Felski, whose book *The Limits of Critique* describes a situation in which value falls victim to an increasingly institutionalized notion of distrust.

Toni Morrison has pointed out in response to queries regarding when she "would stop writing about race" that one can make such a gesture only if one fails to recognize that the question is being posed by someone who is just as "raced" as the Black writer or lawyer or poet or president or keynote speaker (00:25:00–26:10). In other words, one cannot travel to "see" race without recognizing that doing so involves transporting race from home to destinations, where one imagines that the objective is to see those historical, public humanities sites, meet those individuals, and stand in the very space in which racial struggle occurred. What is happening, in ways that are difficult to discern in the best of circumstances, is that traveling to see race, to witness the atrocities once committed by individuals who viewed Black and brown bodies as being too backward to be taken seriously as thinking human beings, simply brings those settings of those atrocities into contact with those processes—one might refer to them as cultural norms—that allow one to feel bad about what happened to "those people" (even if one is sufficiently cultured to avoid using such a phrase) but in the end to dissociate oneself from the behaviors denoting anti-Black racism.

An ethics governing engagement in public humanities scholarship is essential to acts of policy revision and assessment because ethical approaches have the power to remind people that their efforts are contingent and impermanent. Without this understanding, the public humanities have the power to become cultural projections that endeavor to speak *for* a community as opposed to speaking *with* them. As the guidelines so eloquently and elegantly point out, much of the value of public humanities scholarship is that it is often ongoing, perpetuated by a recognition of shared interests and concerns that change over time.

One of the challenges of teaching the Wilson seminar is removing the barriers that might prohibit participation of our neighbors in the seminar. This means taking special care to ensure access to buildings on the Penn campus while also holding events in West Philadelphia that emphasize acts of personal and familial storytelling. However, I realize that in thinking about how the seminar tries to create spaces in which the public humanities can flourish out of the collaborative partnerships we have formed with the West Philadelphia Cultural Alliance and Theater in the X, it could be that what we have been striving for is not, as we might have surmised, a kind of permanence, a sustained level of trust, commitment, and devotion to a set of shared principles and values.

Indeed, public humanities scholarship occurs in a state of constant renegotiation. Hence, whether I am teaching Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* or James Baldwin's short story "Going to Meet the Man," what needs to be emphasized is the transformation of the lived experience of the participants. Students in the Wilson seminar take interviews they have conducted in the West Philadelphia community and use them as the basis for dramatic monologues that are eventually performed by professional actors. What they learn in this process is that one must contend with the distinction between the play—the printed version of a playwright's creative labor—and the script. The former is fixed and situated in textual space, copyright-protected and

thereby immutable. The latter, conversely, is plastic, fluid, a product that issues from the collaboration between director, actors, and playwright that responds to its social and cultural milieu, which means that the scripted version of a play is the product of shared labor: cultural projection to be sure, but one that has a more spectral—and speculative—relationship to its surroundings than one might imagine.

As my university endeavors to think about how it will reimagine itself by implementing a new strategic plan that ostensibly will change how it relates to its West Philadelphia neighbors, I find myself wondering what sort of public humanities project becomes possible if participants in my seminar determine to put together the narratives by descendants of those who committed acts of racist atrocities against Black and brown bodies with the narratives of those descended from people victimized by racial violence. How, for example, might the staggering levels of gun violence in North, Southwest, and West Philadelphia be compared with the opiate addiction and joblessness (and, yes, gun violence) in Appalachia? What is clear is that the public humanities are much more eclectic and complex than one might believe. Though scholars are prone to see the public humanities as an instrument of social justice, the public humanities can just as easily be used to sustain narratives of exclusion and dishonesty.

I don't have a final word on this; indeed, I want to resist the impulse and instead suggest that efforts in the public humanities might best be framed around the notion of what I am calling "sustainable ephemerality," referring to Édouard Glissant's description of the rhizome, "which maintains the idea of 'rootedness' but challenges that of a totalitarian root" (11). Glissant uses the term "errantry" to highlight that place where deviations from norms and standards intersect with the notion of adventure. Here, I would insist on adventures of a sort that eschews the heroic. Public humanities projects are, to my mind, at their best when they foreground relationality. I would argue for rejecting cultural projections that aim for "increased awareness" or empathy in and of itself in favor of a commitment to creating spaces of affective play. Our unwillingness in the Wilson seminar to see stories as artifacts is meant to cast each seminar as an ephemeral projection whose goal is that Penn students come to see themselves as West Philadelphia residents with a stake in the lives of those beyond the campus limits.

## Notes

1. The seminar evolved from a first-year seminar conceived solely for the benefit of University of Pennsylvania students to a seminar that invites members of the West Philadelphia community to join with Penn students to read the plays in August Wilson's Twentieth-Century Cycle, which document the African American experience in the twentieth century.

2. State legislatures dominated by Republican supermajorities are currently passing statutes outlawing DEI as well as making the teaching of books thought of as "woke" (a term that encompasses the cultural production of not only racial groups but also sexual and gender communities deemed to be outside the mainstream). Moreover, in a neoliberal economy that equates education with vocational opportunity and corporate investment, an increasing number of institutions of higher learning are closing academic units labeled either financially extravagant or irrelevant, a list that includes departments of economics, history, foreign language, gender studies, and religious studies.

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