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Putting George Sand in Play from the Local Theatre to the Football Stadium

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(Received 29 August 2024; revised 19 November 2024; accepted 21 November 2024)

Abstract

This article explores the potential of public humanities to bridge the gap between academia and the public by performing the humanities in unconventional spaces. Through two case studies – adapting George Sand’s *Indiana* for a local theatre production and hosting an outreach booth at a football match for their Pride game – we demonstrate the value of engaging *with* the public, rather than presenting research *to* the public. By reflecting on these experiments, we discuss what it means to do the public humanities dialogically and what we learned from this process. Our experiments reveal that effective public humanities require collapsing the divide between academia and the public by meeting audiences where they are and fostering reciprocal learning. By integrating academic insights into popular contexts, we demonstrate how the humanities remain vital and relevant. These initiatives challenge traditional models of outreach, affirming the discipline’s role as a collaborative, dynamic field that thrives through active dialogue with diverse communities.

Keywords: football and sexuality; George Sand; performance studies; public humanities; youth and academia

One of the first events we attended as incoming doctoral students to the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto was a workshop on how to prepare for a non-academic career. Helpful as these sessions are for more advanced students, it was a bit of a jolt to be faced with the bleak reality of the academic job market from the outset of our programme. During the workshop, we listened to our peers voicing fears that after spending the better part of a decade in graduate school, they will find themselves without a job in their specific fields. Venturing outside those familiar grounds – for example, in the private sector – required “special” experiences specific to various “industries” and “worlds.” What we found most ironic in these conversations was the fact that we were all students of comparative literature, well-versed in problems of translation and navigators of various worlds. Applying to jobs outside academia also asks us to find creative ways to translate niche academic interests, to make them intelligible for audiences who normally do not engage with them.

Our own experiments in bringing the humanities to these non-academic venues, which we will describe in this essay, were largely inspired by the lack of imagination we sensed during

that professional development workshop. Ostensibly, it prepared us for jobs “beyond” academia. To our chagrin, all of the “non-academic” jobs that were presented to us were, at best, adjacent to academia: university publishing presses, working for university administration, or even running professional development seminars for universities! Part of this lack of imagination is due to an inability for some academics to see themselves in the “real” world, which is a limitation that must be overcome if humanities programmes are to survive in a time when graduates are increasingly turning their backs on academic careers and when even tenured professors are threatened by program cuts.¹ This is less of a problem for disciplines in the natural sciences, social sciences, and professional studies, whose fields of research are said to be more useful for industry and/or society.²

Though scholars like Donoghue and Reitter and Wellmon have shown that the recent commodification of humanities degrees has its special risks and a longer history, part of what we aim to show with our experiments with the public humanities is that the skills and knowledge we develop as humanities scholars can become useful products for the public.³ This is not to say that public humanities projects should only aim for monetization or to fit existing economic trends. What we want to suggest instead is that if the primary barrier to academics entering the job market beyond the academy is a lack of precedence, then creative public engagement of this sort can serve as an exhibition. We have learned thus far that the humanities are at home in many disparate spaces – from the local theatre to the football stadium.

First experiment: the local theatre

During the 2022–2023 academic year, we adapted George Sand’s first novel, *Indiana*, for the stage. We reached out to the Toronto chapter of the Alliance Française, an international organisation that promotes Francophone culture around the world by making its own performances and exhibitions affordable. Adhering to their mission statement, we agreed to keep our event free in exchange for a discounted rate for their Spadina Theatre, conveniently located next to University of Toronto buildings and cultural landmarks of the community at large. In fact, given our modest funding and the way university booking systems work, we could not afford to stage our play at the University of Toronto. In our case, we were truly driven out of the university and into the arms of the public!

Our choice of author, George Sand, worked well with our vision for our public humanities initiative. Her work invited several layers of translation: French to English, novel to stage, and the romantic world of the 1830s to the digital world of the 2020s. Born Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin in 1804, she picked up the pen name George Sand and became one of France’s most prolific novelists in the nineteenth century. Living through times of monarchies, empires, and republics, she remained fiercely democratic and once reprimanded another famous French author, Gustave Flaubert, for his elitist view of literary practice:

I have heard you say, “I write for ten or twelve people only.” One says in conversation many things which are the result of the impression of the moment; but you are not alone in saying that. It was the opinion of the Lundi or the thesis of that day. I protested inwardly. The twelve persons for whom you write, who appreciate you, are as good as

¹ Donoghue 2018.

² Reitter and Wellmon 2021.

³ Donoghue 2018; Reitter and Wellmon 2021.

you are or surpass you. You never had any need of reading the eleven others to be yourself. But, one writes for all the world, for all who need to be initiated; when one is not understood, one is resigned and recommences.⁴

We understood how much Sand had endeavoured to “write for all the world” when we were able to cut and use many of the dialogues from her first novel, *Indiana*, without serious editing. Indiana is a rebellious young woman in an unhappy marriage who falls in love with Raymon de Ramière, a dandy and serial dater. Indiana’s many admonishments of Raymon – for example, for seeking to trade her “whole life for one brief day” of pleasure – was relatable in the era of social media and dating apps.⁵ There were also several queer motifs in the story that demonstrate the contemporaneity of Sand’s novel: Indiana’s cousin, Sir Ralph, confessed his love to her in a manner similar to modern “coming out” stories. Thanks to Sir Ralph’s androgynous character, we were able to gender-swap Sir Ralph with “Lady Rachel” throughout the play. Not by coincidence, Sand also had her own lesbian adventure with a theatre actress around the time she wrote *Indiana*.⁶

The first lesson we learned through staging a play as non-theatre professionals was how difficult it was to retain talent in our project. As several drama students dropped out from the production, we realised that the problem was the gap between our public humanities approach and young artists’ expectations about a “real” production. They normally preferred the technical dimensions of established productions over staging theoretical debates like the meaning of love, pleasure, or gender. We also realised that without specific incentives, it is difficult to get students to volunteer for a production solely for public humanities outreach. If we could not retain the attention of students working on the production, how could we gain the interest of those outside it?

We remedied this problem by breaking the fourth wall in our script, blurring the line between fact and fiction, character and actor. We played with the fact we could not keep our actors, pretending we lost them during the night of the production and making it seem like we were calling random members of the audience to help us continue the show. Breaking character in this way also allowed us to mirror some of the themes George Sand addressed in the romance she created – like commitment, spontaneity, and betrayal – which further demonstrated why we felt the 1832 novel was contemporary to our “attention economy” today.

We also interrupted the action to hear from George Sand – by way of narrated voice recordings – something other productions of her works have also done.⁷ The audience could now reckon with the reasons she thought her public works were less read under the accelerated modernity of the Second Empire, namely that she allegedly lacked *personality*.⁸ George Sand was recognised neither as a man nor as a woman: her sometimes unintelligible androgyny became the metaphor we identified as central in our work of public humanities and informed our next initiative.

⁴ McKenzie 1979, 19.

⁵ Sand 1852, 125.

⁶ Maurois 1953.

⁷ Lison 2000.

⁸ Lubin 1964.

Second experiment: the football stadium

During the 2023–2024 academic year, we ran an information booth as part of York United’s Pride game against Vancouver FC. Sand’s gender ambiguity had brought us to wonder how one can better explain it – and like good comparatists, we found another metaphor: football.

Gender and football, we reasoned, were both difficult to explain. For example, Real Madrid has not been playing well during its ongoing 2024–2025 campaign – it recently lost 4–0 against rival Barcelona FC – and yet it was crowned undisputed European champion the year before. Coaches, TV pundits, and Twitter/X experts all have possible explanations for such discrepancies: one can blame a specific player, tactic, mood, or pure chance, but ultimately there is not one absolute truth. Gender and sexuality are also dynamic processes where one cannot easily distinguish causes from their effects.

We prepared a poster explaining these connections in a fun and accessible way. We used hashtags like #DynamicLikeUs and #ComplicatedLikeTheGame and compiled facts and figures about certain clubs, leagues, and rivalries. We then used memes to turn the content on football into a commentary on gender fluidity. For example, Bayern Munich used to win the Bundesliga almost every year until new manager Xabi Alonso helped rival Bayer Leverkusen (nicknamed “Neverkusen”) steal their title in 2024. “Unless a Xabi Alonso comes into your life,” we wrote on assumptions about fixed gender identities, juxtaposing Leverkusen’s destabilising success with a picture of the (destabilising-ly attractive!) Spanish manager.

We sent this poster to the communications team of one of the few professional football clubs based in Toronto: York United. While initially we were only thinking of sharing it on their social media accounts during Pride month, their team invited us to hold an information booth during a Pride-themed game they were organising. They also wondered if we could design a second poster that specifically tied gender with their own club, a challenge we accepted. We researched York United’s performance over the past few years and found various facts that could be juxtaposed with gender. Their goal machine was not a sole striker as is sometimes the case in football but a combination of players (commentary on how diversity/variance works), their past record against Halifax Wanderers included five victories, five defeats, and nine draws (commentary on how binaries/rivalries develop), and in the past three years, they accumulated almost the same number of points by the end of the season despite managerial changes (commentary on how identity/stability congeal).

During the day of the game, we displayed our posters and freebies for giveaways. We knew our role had to be more passive in this context, drawing the attention of passersby and being there for them should they have questions about our initiative. It was important to make clear that we were not there to expose/impose the latest academic views on gender. Rather, we were supporting York United’s mission to “facilitat[e] important conversation[s] relating to sport and sexuality” that are “inclusive, engaging and – more importantly – educational.”⁹ One stadium patron was especially struck by what they called “the meta-level” application of comparing seemingly unrelated fields for explanatory purposes. We were surprised to see a phrase we hear often interjected in class used so spontaneously in a football stadium. Perhaps the most enjoyable, unexpected interaction we had was when one patron, dragged to watch the game by her avid friends, took up our comparison in the

⁹ O’Callaghan 2024.

opposite direction: instead of explaining gender through football, they wanted us to explain football through gender!

Collapsing the public and the humanities

The lesson from our two experiments is that the goal of public humanities should not restrict itself to *bringing* the humanities to the public. The public humanities will flourish if we can start to re-imagine *being with* the public in spaces that already exist instead of setting up a mobile classroom. What we learned in our experiments is that the public is much more likely to engage with our knowledge and expertise if we meet them where they already are, in a context that already interests them. Suddenly, abstract notions of comparative methodology come down to earth and capture the imagination with concrete examples. Moreover, it is only by being with the public in this way that the reciprocity of knowledge is opened up. If you are only there to explain something, you are less likely to end up learning something in turn.

Our experiments taught us that, in order for the public humanities to be effective, we need to collapse the distance that has been erroneously opened between the public and the humanities. Bridging this gap is not simply a question of outreach. It is an existential threat facing the humanities as a discipline. Not only does it threaten the survival of humanities programmes beyond the largest, most well-funded institutions, but it also risks the intellectual integrity of the discipline itself to the extent that we forget that the public can teach us things as well. It is about merging theory and practice in the public context. By that, we mean the destruction of the false dichotomy set up between the “informed” academics and “uninformed” public. The public humanities should always mean thinking with, not for, the public. It means replacing the idea that research only takes place *in* the academy and only comes to be presented to the public *afterwards*. It means engaging with the public in the process of discovery. This was exemplified for us by the patron at the football game who reminded us that comparison works both ways. In all our preparatory work, we had not considered for a moment that our posters could help people already well versed in gender theory understand football. We should have remembered George Sand’s response to Flaubert’s elitism towards “the people” (in our case, “the public”):

The people, you say! The people are you and me. It would be useless to deny it. There are not two races, the distinction of classes only establishes relative and for the most part illusory inequalities.¹⁰

Beyond these illusory inequalities, be it in a theatre or a football stadium, we found opportunities for education everywhere. What the public humanities will need to flourish is not an army of doctors released upon the public but, to think with Socrates, a humble midwife.

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Author Contributions. Writing – original draft: R.D., D.P.

¹⁰ McKenzie 1979, 213.

Financial Support. Partial funding for the staging of *Indiana* was provided by the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors have no competing interests to declare in relation to the publication of this article.

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Cite this article: Dabbous, Rayyan, and Dominic Pizzolitto. 2025. "Putting George Sand in Play from the Local Theatre to the Football Stadium." *Public Humanities*, 1, e53, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.61>