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Infrastructures of Repair

Rachel Arteaga 

The Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, College of Arts & Sciences, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA
Email: rarteaga@uw.edu

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Abstract

The future of public humanities will be determined by the infrastructural investments that support its continued development. These include, in the context of the United States, increased federal funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities; a serious re-engagement in the material support of new humanities scholarly production by private foundations; and a focused effort by humanities organizations to cultivate philanthropic donors. This manifesto argues that the humanities are the rightful inheritance of every person, regardless of background or position. If we are to take seriously both the resource needs of humanities research—which demand that funds be allocated for highly trained scholars to read, interpret, authenticate, preserve, and circulate primary source material—and the idea that no one has a higher claim than anyone else to these sources and processes and the insights they yield—which demands that individuals outside of the academy explicitly experience them selves as equal participants in the humanities—then our approach to both research infrastructure and public engagement must radically shift to emphasize repair. Repair, here, is the interpersonal, intellectual, strategic, repetitious, time-intensive work of ensuring that every individual can claim this rightful cultural inheritance. It is the work of creating the conditions for encounters between individuals and the vastness of history, culture, and difference. The future of public humanities must be in the creation of replicable models for these encounters, in the knowledge that in every instance, the work of the humanities is and must be unreproducible.

Keywords: Public humanities; infrastructure; higher education; advocacy

The future of public humanities will be determined by the infrastructural investments that support its continued development. These include, in the context of the United States, increased federal funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities; a serious re-engagement in the material support of new humanities scholarly production by private foundations; and a focused effort by humanities organizations to cultivate philanthropic donors. Many scholars have persuasively argued that humanities research is significantly underfunded in American colleges and universities.¹ Past President of the Modern Language Association, Christopher Newfield, writes, “How do we know that most administrators and

¹ Examples include remarks and public writing by a range of scholars such as Dianne Harris (<https://societyhumanities.as.cornell.edu/news/dianne-harris-deliver-future-humanities-lecture>), Paula Krebs (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/10/opinions/works-progress-administration-for-covid-19-crisis-humanities-krebs/index.html>), and

policymakers don't see literary study as research? Because, in basic materialist terms, they don't fund it." He calls for the development of "a national strategy for building a new humanities infrastructure," which would include funding for what he describes as "dedicated spaces for basic research on deep and difficult issues that require advanced expertise and unfold over years." Key to his advocacy for an expansive vision for humanities funding is the point that as a sector we need support for both "society-based and university-based humanities" as well as meaningful exchange between them.² In a global context, the World Humanities Report, a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI) and the International Council of Philosophy and the Human Sciences (CIPSH), in further partnership with UNESCO – all humanities infrastructures in themselves – calls for stronger support for "advancing research in the humanities including fellowships, institutes and centers, scholarly networks, journals, and university presses" internationally. It also points to the need to "advance both the scholarly and the applied (public) humanities," and declares that in both of these forms, "the humanities are part of the public good."³

While persuasive, this frequently stated dual commitment to basic research and public engagement still does not tell our audiences and potential funders what it is that we will contribute to society in return for their trust and investments. Indeed, to make any such promise undermines the task of humanistic inquiry, which cannot know in advance what it seeks to discover. In their review and summary description of the foundational documents that shaped the research university, Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, and Chad Wellmon identify a key value that has persisted to the present day: that "scholars need time and space to pursue knowledge that might one day be of use beyond the university."⁴ The emphasis here should be on the word "might" and its provisional significance. Independence from any requirement to produce useful knowledge is critical to the pursuit of knowledge. We can protect this value while also recognizing that a premise of public investment in research is not that it certainly will, but that it *might* – we hope – yield insights that will benefit society. How often do we ask, as humanities scholars, what our ongoing research might have to offer to the larger world? What would happen if we routinely demanded this of ourselves? I would argue that if individual scholars across all fields of the humanities made a serious commitment to engage with public audiences, frequently and consistently over the course of the research process, we could persuasively and cumulatively demonstrate the value of our work to those entities and individuals well-positioned to support it. We should do this even when the insights and findings of our work are partial or preliminary, and even when they take the form of questions rather than statements, as they often do. Meaningful public engagement must become for all of us a habit of mind, embedded in our standards and practices alongside those in which we were trained, such as close reading and the critical questioning of sources and archives.

Indeed, it is the *relationship* between humanities scholarship and the publicly engaged iterations of humanities activities that must be given first priority in discussions of infrastructure and capacity building in our sector. As so many leaders in the humanities rightly argue, we need new research across a diverse array of disciplines and methodologies, sited in locations around the world. We need more public programming, dissemination, and circulation of humanities texts, questions, and concepts, especially in places where

Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch (<https://histphil.org/2023/01/06/where-have-all-the-funders-gone-how-big-phil-anthropology-left-the-humanities-behind/>).

² Newfield 2023, 6, 17, 2.

³ Guyer 2024.

⁴ Menand 2017, 3.

democratic systems and norms have been established but are faltering.⁵ Above all, however, we need to connect these two areas to ensure that both are operating at their fullest potential and making their strongest possible contributions to discovery and society. And everyone should be involved and included. As Deb Chachra notes, “The more people who have access to the system, the better off everyone is individually.” Though her work focuses on physical infrastructures for essential services such as water and energy, for example, this is not simply a matter of material well-being. For Chachra, “our shared infrastructural future is a commitment to our shared humanity.”⁶ I would argue that this is also true for the shared future of the academic and public humanities.

While we often think of the humanities as a solitary intellectual endeavor, in truth, they are – or might be – a deeply social infrastructure of repair. The insights of the humanities are the rightful inheritance of every person, regardless of background or position. The methods and content of humanistic inquiry allow us to comprehend, rather than tragically misperceive, our histories and the cultural traditions that contextualize our lives and the lives of those around us. This is essential to the well-being of individuals and societies, and it should be funded accordingly. While the humanities represent only one set of possible ways to understand human life – religious and spiritual beliefs and practices would be another – they are a powerful set of texts and discussions through which that understanding can be gained. But as the humanities fields are currently structured, much of what they have to offer is too often out of reach for people who do not have access to specialized training. If we are to take seriously both the resource needs of humanities research – which demand that funds be allocated for highly trained scholars to read, interpret, authenticate, preserve, and circulate primary source material – and the idea that no one has a higher claim than anyone else to these sources and processes and the insights they yield – which demands that individuals outside of the academy explicitly experience themselves as equal participants in the humanities – then our approach must radically shift to emphasize repair.

Repair, which I am theorizing here as an active form of intellectual labor, is the interpersonal, strategic, repetitious, time-intensive work of ensuring that every individual can claim the humanities as their own. It is the work of creating the necessary conditions for encounters between individuals and the vastness of history, culture, and difference. The future of public humanities must be in the creation of replicable models for these encounters, in the knowledge that in every instance, the work of the humanities is and must be unreproducible. Scholars must speak with and listen to non-specialists. Communities and classrooms must be formed locally in response to shared questions and the challenges of the current moment. As these encounters occur, some will develop into authentic relationships, binding us to one another and informing our perspectives. When we secure the duration of time and the expanse of space necessary for individuals to understand one another across genuine differences – along any axis of diversity, and even across past, present, and future

⁵ In the United States, the infrastructure for public investment in the humanities is both well-established and fragile: federal funding allocated to and distributed by the National Endowment for the Humanities reaches every state and jurisdiction, supporting research, teaching, and public programming. This investment of taxpayer dollars into civic life has been continuous since the founding of the NEH in 1965. A bipartisan commission on the practice of democratic citizenship, convened by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences and led by Danielle Allen, Stephen B. Heintz, and Eric P. Liu, issued a report in 2020 in which state humanities councils are identified as key partners in nothing less than the reinvention of American democracy for this century (<https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>).

⁶ Chachra 2023, 59, 283.

generations – we are building infrastructure for humanistic inquiry and for all of the value that it holds and conveys.

This work is slow and painstaking. As Gayatri Spivak has observed, the fields of study that comprise the humanities offer us an incremental, almost imperceptible, path toward a common future, one person at a time. She writes, “the kind of work we do, silent work, quiet work, slow work, is the work that sustains everything.” This work prioritizes “teaching the intuitions of democracy through an understanding of the meaning of the right to intellectual labor, on top as well as below,” she explains.⁷ In the humanities, we are dedicated to repatriating ourselves and those around us – students, neighbors, strangers – to the place where we most belong, enacting our right to intellectual labor, however we are or have been positioned in the social order that immediately surrounds us. This approach, in its pacing, may feel impossibly mismatched with the urgency of the moment, but it is in fact the surest and to my mind the only way forward. Pragmatically speaking, this means making intensive investments in the time, space, technology, and materials needed for humanities research far in advance of their full use, drawing upon a mix of private and public funding sources.

We must continue to seek that well-supported future. We will know that we have succeeded not when we reach some specific dollar figure, but rather when we sense that the loss of the humanities is widely understood to be a cost that our societies cannot afford to pay, when we see the humanities supported financially, interpersonally, and politically – because people from within and beyond the academy agree that we must have the foresight to invest in it before it is lost to us, and we lose our way. As we seek this future, we should also remember that relationships are the most essential infrastructure of the humanities.⁸ For this reason, even in the face of scarcity and genuine threats to our scholarly traditions, we are well-positioned to rapidly restructure our ambitions and the near-term outcomes of our work through attention to how we invest our time in the lives of those around us. To reflect on our work in the humanities in this way might push us to recalibrate, such that our priorities come into closer alignment with what we proclaim to value.⁹ This begins with a commitment that every one of us can make to connect our ongoing research not just to our scholarly disciplines but also to public audiences and communities. While the continuous work of the humanities will always be inherently intensive and slow, unfolding over the long term, it can also begin immediately: we can orient ourselves toward one another differently, today.

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⁸ Arteaga 2023.

⁹ Agate et al. 2022.

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