Public Humanities: In Search of a Field

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Like the phrase "digital humanities," "public humanities" has proven difficult to pin down, even by practitioners who have come to value this term as an accurate description of their research interests and institutional affiliations. It has been a term used (primarily, but not exclusively, by institutions of higher education in North America and by grant-funding agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities) to describe various forms of cultural production: physical and digital acts of curation, archival initiatives, community outreach, educational programming, and public arts initiatives. It has ties to terms like "public history." More recently, investments in "public humanities" have more frequently intersected (and at times elided) investments in "digital humanities," given the public-facing imperatives of many digital projects and practitioners. Are all digital humanities projects also inevitably public humanities initiatives? When the phrase "public humanities" is invoked, who is most often speaking, and to what do they refer? Who is most likely to fund projects with explicit ties to this term, and what communities are served and financed by these efforts? When practitioners of public humanities write about the value of their work, who do they cite? More generally, what forms, contexts, people, places, geographic regions, occupations, and communities is the term "public humanities" tied to, and who is missing, obscured, erased, or otherwise apart from these conversations?

This poster will document recent efforts by public humanities practitioners at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage (Brown University) to survey and reflect upon both the ten-year history of the Center (and its M.A. program in Public Humanities) and, more generally, the state of "public humanities" as a field of critical inquiry. Postdoctoral researchers and graduate students at the Center have determined that the institutional memory of the Center would benefit greatly from an indexed archive of primary materials (syllabi, photographs, exhibition materials, student projects and writings, among others) as well as a collection of oral histories from major figures in its history (directors, staff, faculty, graduates, community fellows and collaborators), and we are in the process of building this collection in collaboration with representatives of Brown's Center for Digital Scholarship and the Brown Library's digital repository service. We have also begun assembling a database of texts (books, journal articles, grant application guidelines, blog posts, and the language of Center / program recruitment literature, among others) to better understand where and why the phrase "public humanities" has been utilized between the late twentieth century (starting around 1970, in Congressional documents that informed the creation of the NEH) and the early twenty-first century. The poster will contextualize the motivations behind our decisions to focus on particular corpora and the organization of our database.

Beyond the first iteration of this hyperlocal history (which will materialize in the form of the first stage of the Center's collection in Brown's digital repository and will be publicly available to researchers), we will concurrently release a dataset of public humanities corpora and a series of visualizations exploring that data. One will begin to map the geographic regions and institutional ties to public humanities programs and grant-funded public humanities initiatives. Another will document part of the citational history of public humanities discourse by visualizing links between texts present in bibliographic data of a sample set of academic texts. Representative samples of these visualizations, which are not meant to be comprehensive so much as they are intended to be models for potential avenues of inquiry, as well as the methodologies informing them, will be featured in the poster. We will also link these datasets to the crowdsourced data we receive from "Day of Public Humanities" (#DayofPH), a digital project held in May of 2017 that, like the "Day of Digital Humanities" initiative, aims to make the various forms of day-to-day labor (and laborers) in the field visible and to encourage dialogue across and beyond these contexts.