

Fisher-Livne, D., & May-Curry, M. (Eds.). (2024). *The Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship*. Routledge. 456 pp.

Review by Lisa Dush



The *Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship*, edited by Daniel Fisher-Livne and Michelle May-Curry, is to date the broadest and most substantive collection documenting the nuts and bolts of funding, launching, and sustaining public humanities projects in higher education contexts. It is a valuable resource for educators, campus-community engagement professionals, and higher education administrators alike. These readers can learn from the successes and the challenges the collection describes, as well as from the guiding themes it outlines for public humanities work in higher education.

Fisher-Livne and May-Curry both served as project directors at Humanities for All (HFA), a 6-year initiative of the National Humanities Alliance to document and share best practices in the public humanities across U.S. colleges and universities. Their collection is timely for two reasons. First, generative artificial intelligence has, almost overnight, undermined the scholarly essay and its pedagogical equivalent, the student essay. The *Companion* shows the many ways beyond scholarly writing that humanities knowledge can be activated and shared, from podcasts to public conversations to exhibits to zines. It provides a wealth of ideas for a long-overdue broadening of humanities scholarship and pedagogy. Second, partisan shouters and online bullies now dominate our public discourse. The *Companion* reminds us that reflection and civil dialogue are possible, and that colleges and universities have a role in nurturing these practices.

The *Companion* is a thick book, with 24 chapters authored by 49 contributors, along with a glossary that defines selected terms related to the public humanities. The contributors include academics whose primary affiliations are, in rough order of frequency, history, English, women's and gender studies, American Studies,

anthropology, archaeology, rhetoric and communication, art history, and philosophy. Additionally, a handful of authors and coauthors are not professors but rather work in historic preservation and cultural heritage organizations, museums, and university archives. As a scholar of writing and rhetoric, I enjoyed the contributions by authors from disciplines and settings beyond my own, including Smith's description of his public archaeology work in rural western New York state and Saffery's account of 'Āina Education, a theory and pedagogy grounded in Indigenous traditions and worldview that shapes her organization's work with native Hawaiians.

In their helpful introduction, the editors describe their approach as one of zooming in and zooming out, moving between process-rich case studies of public humanities projects and discussions of theory and principles to inform public humanities more broadly. In this method, the *Companion* adopts a similar approach to HFA's excellent website, which zooms in with profiles of over 2,000 public humanities projects and zooms out with blog articles and reports on public humanities methods, evaluation, and training (See note). The *Companion* also complements another valuable recent collection of scholarship on public humanities in the United States, the Spring 2022 issue of *Dædalus* (Berkowitz et al., 2022), which focuses on "The Humanities in American Life." Fisher-Livne and May-Curry's collection includes contributors from a broader set of U.S. higher education institutions and places greater emphasis on process and pedagogy than the *Dædalus* issue.

The core of the *Companion*—the case studies—document the development, logistics, outcomes, and impact of individual publicly engaged research and teaching projects. The best of these chapters, like Tell's "Vandalism and Storytelling in

the Emmett Till Case,” zoom out from the process details to artfully convey a memorable takeaway. In Tell’s case, the takeaway is that his team’s effort to engage the public in the story of Emmett Till, the victim of a racist murder, was characterized by constant vandalism followed by creative responses to adapt and persist with the project. The team was grounded in the conviction that difficult-to-achieve “racial reconciliation begins by telling the truth” (p. 250), and they thus carried the project forward, even as the signage they installed about Till across the Mississippi Delta region was repeatedly shot full of bullet holes.

Some chapters in the collection stay closely zoomed in, with copious detail about project chronology and logistics that make it difficult to discern their overall lessons. However, among the chapters that I found most compelling were those that provided detailed histories of multistakeholder projects similar to the one I direct at DePaul University, including Burton et al.’s chapter on the cross-institutional Humanities Without Walls consortium and Cook and Chin’s chapter on History Labs at the University of Michigan. That is, individual readers may find the in-the-weeds details helpful when the profiled project aligns with their interests and local context.

The editors help readers draw connections across these case studies through the book’s strong opening and closing sections, which include four opening chapters on “Foundations and Frameworks for Public Humanities Scholarship” and two closing chapters on “Building and Supporting Publicly Engaged Scholarship.” The editors’ introduction, for example, provides a helpful summary of public humanities methods (p. 17) and sites (p. 20), and briefly describes six goals of the public humanities. These goals are used to group the book’s case studies into sections. Five of the goals were articulated by Fisher-Livne (Fisher, 2018) in an essay on the Humanities for All blog: amplifying community voices and histories, preserving culture in times of crisis and change, informing contemporary debates, helping individuals and communities navigate difficult experiences, and expanding educational access. The *Companion* adds a sixth goal, building and supporting public humanities scholarship.

Other important zoom-out concepts in the collection’s bookend sections include Barrios et al.’s idea of “strategic legibility,”

a flexible, audience-dependent approach to public humanities practice and promotion. Kornstein’s section of that chapter, which describes how Drag Story Hour operates at the “threshold of invisibility and hypervisibility” (p. 59), resonates at this moment in 2026, when doing humanities work in public carries real bodily risk for some. Macaya and Sullivan, writing about their engaged work at the City Universities of New York (CUNY), present a more hopeful claim, which is reinforced throughout the collection:

Publicly engaged research in the humanities may be one of the best tools that we have to convince others that universal access to high-quality low-cost public higher education is as foundational to human flourishing as fresh air, clean water, and rich humus. (p. 370)

As I read the *Companion*, two overarching questions surfaced about its arguments, questions that future scholars can take up. The first concerned the editors’ definition of “scholarship,” which they describe as “humanities research, teaching, and programming, conducted in co-equal partnership *with and for* a diversity of individuals and communities” (p. 3). I wondered to what extent the editors’ definition of scholarship is embraced across higher education. Academic readers expecting a more traditional definition of scholarship may be surprised by both the number of case studies focused on pedagogy and the claim that teaching and public programming are scholarship. This argument is not new—it was notably made nearly 20 years ago in Ellison and Eatman’s (2008) *Scholarship in Public* report for Imagining America. A range of scholarly associations in the humanities, including the Modern Language Association, the American Historical Association, and the American Philosophical Association, have likewise issued statements validating public humanities work as scholarship. However, many American higher education institutions have a much narrower definition of what “counts” as scholarship, especially in their tenure and promotion criteria.

Second, I wondered about both the precision and the tenor of the six goals of the publicly engaged humanities that organize the *Companion*. Articulating such goals is a valuable contribution; I have long used Fisher’s (2018) “Goals” essay to introduce both faculty and students to the publicly

engaged humanities. However, as I read the *Companion*, I was often compelled to flip back to its table of contents to see under which of the six goals the chapter at hand was grouped. Many chapters could fit under multiple goals, and some projects were puzzlingly categorized. The editors' taxonomy, while an essential starting point, may not be a perfect field-organizing scheme. Additionally, I think more urgently formulated goals for the publicly engaged humanities may now be in order, given the dire current state of the humanities, higher ed, and deliberative democracy. That is, not "preserving culture in times of crisis and change," but rather "saving cultures threatened by state-sanctioned erasure." And not "informing contemporary debates," but rather "publicly countering dangerous,

politically motivated oversimplifications of complex issues."

In this moment, with the network of state humanities councils in the United States on life support and our colleges and universities likewise sliding into a new era of austerity, it seems plausible that Fisher-Livne and May-Curry's book may have memorialized the golden years of public humanities in American higher education. We can only hope that educators, administrators, and community practitioners will remain committed to the work, regardless of the political and financial realities that bear down on them.



Note

The HFA website is no longer updated; however, the National Humanities Alliance has posted a PDF "Compendium" that archives much of the site's content at <https://nhalliance.org/higher-education/humanities-for-all/>.

About the Reviewer

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