Public Humanities: In Search of A Field

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What is public humanities?

Like Day of DH, Day of PH (or **#DayofPH**) is an ongoing initiative that invites participants to describe, debate and, ideally, reimagine the field by highlighting the variety of ways that practitioners define and shape that field.

Day of PH began as an attempt to document and inventory the range of definitions present in the (perhaps surprising to some!) long history of public humanities. Public humanities is implicitly and explicitly defined in various digital and non-digital spaces: grant application guidelines, university web sites, academic journals, job listings, Twitter feeds, Wikipedia articles.

Our project web site provides a brief institutional history of public humanities in academic contexts and circulates "To-Do Lists" and other reflections on public humanities labor. And on May 9th, we invited people to participate in a (work) day-long series of conversations about public humanities via the Twitter hashtag #DayofPH, which generated **over 800 tweets from almost 300 individual users**.

> "Public humanities is the work of federal, state, nonprofit and community-based cultural organizations that engage the public in conversations, facilitate and present lectures, exhibitions, performances and other programs for the general public on topics such as history, philosophy, popular culture and the arts." (Wikipedia)

Day of PH and Digital Humanities

Broadly, the history of the public humanities arose in **the last fifty years**. It is, then, more recent in proliferation than its nested cousin "public history"; owes much more to the public sector than its friend "museology"; is more cultural in orientation than "civic engagement"; and tends to refer to a different set of institutions than those which are oriented toward "community engagement" or "service learning." However, it both overlaps in dizzying ways with all of those categories…. and is used less frequently than any of them.

That being said, the emergence of **digital public humanities** as a sub-field (or interdisciplinary side project?) of digital and public humanities suggests that the idea of "public humanities" is valued (for various reasons!) by DH practitioners, and vice-versa. Day of PH is certainly informed by some of the methodologies of DH, in the sense that:

It is crowdsourcing knowledge on social media

It is creating a dataset of definitions and networks of public humanities that it will make freely accessible under a Creative Commons license

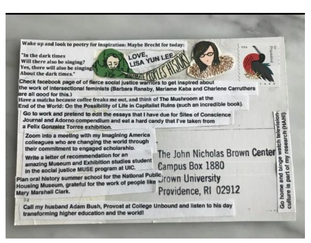
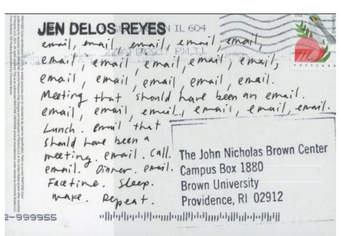
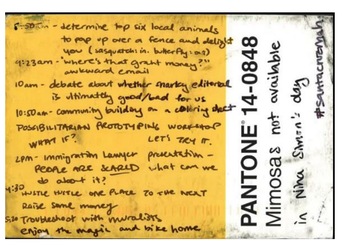
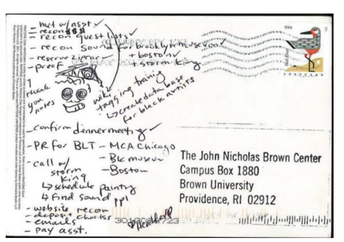
It will visualize and analyze that data in its attempts to map the institutional forces shaping the field over time and in particular geographic regions

Digital Humanities and Public Humanities: Some Questions In Place of A Conclusion

Tensions between academic and non-academic public humanists were an originary impulse of, and have remained at the core of this field, and they have animated our reasons for holding a "Day of Public Humanities" that directs us in its socially mediated arm to look at **the institutional and social contexts of our various sorts of labor**. The difficulties of faculty in the public humanities, digital humanities, and public history with traditional publishing models highlights the uneasy "fit" of these disciplines into the conventional academic modes of inquiry of which these fields have, in the word "public," an implicit critique.

When could digital humanities projects do more to engage with particular publics and their various needs and interests?

What are the benefits as well as the limitations of certain forms of digital advocacy for the humanities in 2017 (and beyond)?

What are alternative models for digital and public humanities beyond grant-funded and university-driven projects, and what resources (and rhetoric) do they require?

Postcards from Day of PH 2017. See more at www.DayofPH.wordpress.com #DayofPH