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The Public Fallout of the Humanities' Crisis: Critiquing the Public Turn in Rhetoric and Composition Studies

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“[T]he imperative to ‘save’ the humanities often propels us into states of urgency in which we imagine that the only future left to us will be the one secured precisely through those metrics of value that are most in need of critical re-evaluation.”
--Judith Butler “Ordinary, Incredulous” (33)

RECENTLY, KENTUCKY GOVERNOR Matt Bevin stated unequivocally that college students majoring in electrical engineering were more deserving of state funding than those majoring in French literature (Cohen). In a primary debate for the election of 2016, Republican presidential candidate Senator Marco Rubio cautioned philosophy majors that they would be better off learning how to weld (Rappeport), and within the last two years, the Obama administration proposed that we begin ranking US colleges and universities on earnings after graduation—a proposal that rankled colleges and universities and sent humanities scholars into an even deeper tailspin (Shear).

The argument that the humanities is out of sync with the general public is, by now, a familiar critique that higher education officials have attempted to address directly. For example, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* 2014 article, “Humanities Scholars Grapple with Their Pitch to the Public,” Jennifer Ruark suggests that humanities researchers must make room for “public outreach” in their work in an effort to respond to an increasingly hostile public. This article is one of many over the years in which the *Chronicle* has attempted to patch what is popularly believed to be a wounded relationship between the general public and those insulated behind the ivied walls of academia.¹ Humanities

representatives, through pressure from policymakers, administrators, and colleagues, have marketed a bold turn to the “public good” in an effort to placate the demands of a struggling economy and populace, a puzzling move for a group of scholars and professors whose studies were always already committed to the betterment of humanity.

Clearly, one of humanities scholars’ biggest obstacles is their perceived failure at demonstrating the relevance of their disciplinary values of critical thinking, analysis, and ethically informed deliberation to (1) the needs of a contemporary globalized public driven by a consumer economy, and (2) the needs of undergraduates, also driven by a consumer economy, who feel the economic pressure of student loan debt and unemployment. Thus, confronted by a public and political establishment that openly disdains the liberal arts philosophy of higher education in favor of a career-oriented cultural and economic valuation, humanities disciplines have had a crisis of identity. When education is valued only by the metric of post-graduate employment or is “instrumentalized” in this way, humanities disciplines realize they are in a losing game. Subsequently, they have transformed into self-promoting bodies that risk betraying their core values—critical thinking, analysis, informed deliberation, ethical interpretation, and humaneness—as they struggle to survive.

This problem piece raises questions about humanities scholars’ seemingly logical acquiescence to the public turn. On the one hand, this concession makes sense: the marketization of the university has shifted educational priorities to those that are most fiscally promising. For the humanities to demonstrate this kind of promise, it needs to first dis-identify with academia and second *recommit* to public interests. On the other hand, this concession carries with it practical consequences to consider: What is lost or betrayed in the movement to the public turn? Which groups of people or programs are most at risk in this paradigmatic shift? And, finally, how does attention to the public turn eschew the negative material conditions of the university in the twenty-first century?

Beginning with an overview of the public turn in the humanities, this piece makes salient the complexities associated with disciplinary imperatives, like the public turn, that dictate what should be taught, by whom, and why. We share our own disciplinary example in the field of rhetoric and composition in order to uncover the ethical implications of our field’s embrace of the public turn, specifically as they relate to issues of labor. Finally, we call on other disciplines in the humanities to question critically how the public turn influences the way disciplines (1) conceive of their ethical imperatives; (2) redefine themselves in relation to changing economic landscapes; and (3) return to their core values of critical thinking, analysis, informed deliberation, ethical interpretation, and humaneness by questioning their allegiances to the public turn.

The Public Turn in the Humanities

The public humanities, like the digital humanities, is a recent phenomenon that both mirrors and contributes to this economic instrumentalization of

education. A quick Google search for “public humanities” yields 28,800,000 results, with the first hits including centers at Brown University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Rice University, University of Florida, Portland State University, George Mason University, the National Endowment for the Humanities, University of Iowa, Virginia Tech, and the New York Council for the Humanities. From small liberal-arts schools to nationally ranked, large state schools, to government-funded state and national organizations, the humanities is rapidly coming to be defined by its public relevance.

It has only been in the past few years that the “public” (which, in this rhetorical context, signifies more often than not an amorphous externality that designates anything “not academic” and, further, anything not under the traditional disciplinary heading of the “humanities”) has come to define the humanities in a simultaneous relationship of opposition and courtship at a remarkable rate. For example, in 2008 Brown University changed the name of its John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization to its current name, “The Center for Public Humanities,” which carries the mission of helping “students, practitioners, and communities make art, history, and culture *meaningful, useful, and accessible*” (emphasis added). Similarly, the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for the Humanities took on a particularly public focus in 2013 with a Public Humanities Fellowship program supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and, as recently as Spring 2015, the center is expanding to include a graduate program that extends “scholarship and teaching *beyond the boundaries of the university*” in order to “*broaden the impact of their research*” (emphasis added).

As demonstrated by these examples, the rhetoric surrounding the humanities’ public turn, even while attempting to make the humanities more relevant to the current climate of job seekers and practical applications, continues to rely on the tired dichotomy of the classroom as theoretical and the “real world” as practical and, thus, reifies the separation between academia and the very “public” it is trying to reach. Moreover, it also suggests that the work done in the humanities is grounded in and emerges out of the very public that it must then (re)translate its work for in order for that work to be conceived of as “meaningful, useful, and accessible.” In other words, the humanities needs the *public* humanities in order to make the work of the humanities meaningful, even though it has always already been public. The humanities is, after all, one of very few disciplines that is centered on the social, political, and ethical relationships between language and culture. The paradox of the public turn in the humanities is paralleled by another paradox, one that serves to complicate the metric by which publics assign value to the humanities.

Taking up this second paradox, Peter Brooks’ edited collection *The Humanities and Public Life* captures the discomfort humanities scholars have with this public turn. Specifically, Judith Butler, in her essay “Ordinary, Incredulous,” argues that the premise that the humanities’ value must be demonstrated externally and to the public is paradoxical to the value of the humanities since, in demonstrating its value, it must be instrumentalized in

precisely the ways that the humanities work against. In other words, in trying to justify their existence through the public humanities, humanities disciplines are simultaneously undermining their intrinsic value because the terms on which they must be justified run counter to the critical work of the humanities: “If the humanities are to make a difference in public life, does that mean we have to say that they are instrumental to some other social good?” (27). The bind is thus: if we comply with the demand to translate the humanities to those particular instrumentalized metrics of value in order to continue to receive funding (both internal and external), then we risk complying “too well” and thus “forfeiting one of the most important tasks of the humanities, namely, to think critically about modes of measurement and schemes of evaluation in order to figure out which ones are justified, which ones really suit their objectives, and which ones are introduced and maintained by scholarship and teaching in the humanities” (Butler 30). The humanities, in other words, often critique precisely that which enables participation in public life—the norms and conventions governed by rhetoric that determine the ethical compass of public life.² However, when the humanities is put to work only in the service of that public life, it risks losing its critical lens at the expense of undermining its very existence and legitimacy as applicable to the public.

Additionally, despite suffering from these shared pressures, individual humanities disciplines have turned toward the public in disparate ways without much interdisciplinary dialogue, an oversight that reinforces negative perceptions of higher education and the humanities, in particular, as comprised of “silo cultures” detached not only from the real world but from one another. For example, in their 2014 article “The Case for Academics as Public Intellectuals,” Nicholas Behm, Sherry Rankins-Roberts, and Duane Roen argue that the “lack of interaction with academics in other fields and with the public causes important research to be obscured in translation, encourages public skepticism, and intensifies negative perceptions of higher education.” These disparate responses often undermine the work that the public turn in the humanities attempts to achieve since this turn to the public, even while serving to legitimize the humanities disciplines’ cultural and economic capital, is ultimately strangling their ability to work together to perform their most important function: successfully critiquing the very corporatization of the university and the subsequent labor implications for which this public turn is partially responsible.

Thus, the question remains, can the humanities still be valued externally and publicly when it serves to critique the very thing that it is valued to uphold? The authors of this article say “yes,” but only insofar as the language of “deliverables” that pervade higher education and to which the humanities is also subject, serves to critique its own practice as it translates its work to the public in the form of activism. Sharing stories of how humanities disciplines are confronting these struggles seems essential to weathering the storm. To facilitate an open dialogue with other humanities disciplines, we examine in the following section the ways in which the overlapping fields of rhetoric and composition and writing studies (hereafter referred to as “rhetoric and

composition” or “RC”) have manifested this public turn by questioning the field’s efforts to position advocacy and activism as signifiers and justifiers of the public even as those moves are predicated on the very labor dynamics they seek to critique.

The Public Turn in Rhetoric and Composition and Writing Studies

As practitioners and scholars of the discipline of rhetoric and composition (RC), which has historically resided in English departments, we have witnessed a response to the growing pressures of instrumentalization that demands scrutiny. It is not an easy story to tell, since our discipline’s inception and growth is directly related to the dwindling support of traditional humanities projects, including the study of literature. Yet, it is by revealing these contradictions that we begin to see the real consequences of the humanities’ crisis, not just for the disciplines writ large but for those of us working on the ground. For RC, reaching out to the public demonstrates relevance in an unforgiving political climate and the realization of existing core values. Despite the legitimacy of these exigencies, the “public turn” in our discipline has often undermined not only the humanities’ historical goals, but also the public turn itself.

Extensively marketed in our field recently, the public turn has been revered as a panacea to the challenges associated with disciplinary legitimation. Paula Mathieu, in particular, in her recent book, *Tactics of Hope*, provides a relatively exhaustive overview of the kinds of “public” work RC instructors and scholars perform. Most of the public efforts identified are not new, but what makes them significant and worth discussing now is the concerted effort on the part of scholars like Mathieu and others to not just acknowledge the “public turn” but to make it an essential, if not defining, part of the discipline.³ While the subjects of study and practice come under different names, the underlying motivations remain steady: (1) connecting students to communities outside of the classroom to demonstrate relevance of academic study to the “real world,” (2) studying writing and speaking in non-academic contexts to show integrity and value of varied “literacies,” and (3) demonstrating an ethic of community involvement and civic action as a model for students and budding professionals. A brief overview of the kinds of public work RC specialists are doing in their scholarship and classrooms includes the following: service learning, public writing in the classroom, community literacy, multimodal literacies, digital literacies, and civic engagement (2-8). Implicit in these public efforts is an important advocacy impulse, a desire to expose students to particular world views and to become particular kinds of active citizens. In many ways, these projects aim to equally value students’ lives outside of the university with their lives inside it. While this move is informed by broader pressures, RC has been responding to the public and migrating outside of university boundaries from its inception as a discipline.

RC was born from necessity and a desire to expand and to connect. The story of the discipline started with a problem. In the late 1940s and early

1950s, with the growing number of students eligible to receive funding to attend college via the GI bill, English literature faculty tasked with teaching writing found there was little to no scholarship or pedagogical help available. With the exception of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), founded in 1949, very few professional organizations allowed for the systematic exchange of ideas related to college composition pedagogy. Eventually, a group of English professors began the process of establishing the foundations for what we now consider “rhetoric and composition.” Over time, however, as areas of specialties developed and interdisciplinarity became more accepted, RC specialists soundly rejected literary studies, its progenitor, as the primary training ground and pedagogical approach for the teaching of writing because of literature’s focus on form and its lack of attention to how different groups of students practice and develop literacy. Simultaneously, recognizing the access that introductory writing courses afforded students, faculty started to see their roles as more profound: teaching students how to effectively write and communicate inside the university, as well as outside of it as participatory citizens in democracy. This shift was, arguably, one of the first public turns in the humanities, but we came to understand it as a practical (not just philosophical) endeavor.

Worth noting, however, is that RC’s separation from literary studies—and its movement to serve the public good—did not come without consequence.⁴ The resulting feud in English departments between literature and rhetoric and composition scholars was perhaps most famously recorded in the staged 1992 debate between Gary Tate and Erica Lindemann at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, later published in *College English*. In “Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature,” Lindemann laid the foundation for the modern identity of the RC discipline by writing,

[W]hen freshman read and write about imaginative literature alone, they remain poorly prepared for the writing required of them in courses outside the English department . . . we ought to instead appreciate the varieties and excellences of academic discourse. Such an appreciation would discourage us from drawing false dichotomies between “them” and “us,” between academic and personal writing, between writing inside and outside of the university. (311)

One could argue that the discipline’s social conscience, the seeds of which were planted post-WWII in educating the new *demos*, grew wildly after this declaration. In the twenty-five years since this debate, the break from literature is nearly complete, and the discipline of RC has come to be defined largely by its social consciousness and outward focus.

As this narrative suggests, just as responsiveness defines the discipline, so does fracturing. One sees a dual purpose in the name of the discipline itself, and indeed, at points, scholars have self-identified as either composition or rhetoric specialists, although most are loyal to “rhetoric and composition” and its underlying pedagogical orientation. Historically, scholars interested in

composition kept their research limited to their students' writing in the classroom, while those scholars interested in rhetoric saw their field of study as virtually unlimited in scope and examined rhetoric in any number of contexts both inside and outside of the university similarly to disciplines such as communication (which often houses rhetoric scholars today), sociology, or anthropology. To compete with their rhetoric counterparts, to diversify their subject matter, and to appease universities in which interdisciplinarity and increasingly non-academic relevance became important, composition scholars have followed suit and have expanded their research to include not just "college composition" but "writing studies" generally, which encompasses much more than the literacy practices of college students.⁵

One of the most direct and absolute calls to take composition scholarship "outside of the university" came from Bronwyn Williams' 2010 piece "Seeking New Worlds: The Study of Writing Beyond Our Classrooms." Williams points to a number of disciplinary "bodies" including writing across the curriculum, digital writing, and writing centers that make up RC's disciplinary solar system and revolve around our seeming sun: "student writing." He quickly disrupts the tidiness of the metaphor, however, by pointing to the number of scholars whose work attends to "nearby solar systems" of literacy and writing in non-academic settings (128). Instead of conceiving of these efforts as blips, he argues that RC scholars "encourage more research about the writing taking place off campus" and that "we use this moment to engage in a systematic conscious reconsideration of the practices, and just as important, of the nature and perceptions of our field" (130). Broadening the idea of writing scholarship indicates not only that the discipline consider writing outside of the university, but also suggests a change in the way promotion and tenure is awarded with a more mindful consideration of scholars' publications in tangential fields (142). Williams encourages RC to spread beyond its borders and, rather than sticking to a static mission statement, recast itself as dynamic and reactionary. He writes, "As media and culture make writing more fluid and borderless—part of the daily work of life—our responsibility is to follow, as researchers, teachers, and advocates, those literacy practices, wherever they lead" (143). Williams' call was prescient. Indeed, now, the only thing fixed about RC's identity is its attention to non-academic contexts.

Though the emphasis on the kind of writing has changed, the fundamental mission of the discipline has remained the same since its initial break from literature. RC, as a discipline of the humanities, has long seen itself as responsible for both teaching students how to write well and how to participate effectively in democracy and self-advocacy within and beyond university contexts. One can trace RC's preoccupation with writing more broadly conceived to a few defining trends that helped to shape RC's identity, including literacy studies, feminist-Marxist theory, and critical-Marxist pedagogical theory. As a result of its philosophical heritage, many RC scholars see the discipline as having historical grounding in the practice of advocacy and the advancement of democracy, which, as Ralph Cintron argues, imbues the work with "a kind of innate virtue" (100). The "public turn" finds its

touchstone in this defining disciplinary characteristic. In fact, in a recent issue of the American Association of University Professors journal *Academe*, Nicholas Behm, Sherry Rankins-Roberts, and notable RC scholar Duane Roen make the case that academics in general should “assume [their] roles as agents of democracy and perform service that promotes the public good,” a charge that at once fulfills a noble responsibility and also legitimizes a deliberate change in the academic *telos*.

In many ways, the twenty-first century public turn in the humanities echoes the dream that Lindemann first articulated for RC in 1992: “to discourage us from drawing false dichotomies between ‘them’ and ‘us,’ between academic and personal writing, between writing inside and outside of the university,” which is why, coupled with the increasing pressure from universities to improve community relations and provide job training through experiential education, the public turn may very well be permanent. Moving students’ writing to the “streets,” as Mathieu explains, meets “the desire for writing to enter civic debates; for street life to enter classrooms through a focus on local, social issues; for students to hit the streets by performing service, and for teachers and scholars to conduct activist or community-grounded research” (1). As a realization of the virtues of educating citizens in a democracy, the “public turn” requires little justification. Mathieu writes that “with increasing public initiatives, writing instruction today is deeply implicated in complications of race and class and institutional power, and the ethical problems are complex” (xiv). By introducing students to the fraught contexts in which most writing happens, faculty have discovered a way to fully replace the content of their courses that began as literature, migrated to readings on cultural/social issues to which students felt little connection, to finally living, breathing interactions with real writers, audiences, contexts, and purposes that allow for the kind of democratic participation that before seemed possible only theoretically.

While this shift might make philosophical sense, it belies practical consequences that have the potential to undermine its history and its goals, particularly as they pertain to issues of labor in RC. To begin, by placing the study of writing largely outside of the classroom, those who spend the most time in classrooms, namely non-tenure track (NTT) and contingent faculty, potentially have the least chance to participate. The study of non-academic contexts requires financial and institutional support, as well as time and access that is not readily available to NTT faculty. Such a model, therefore, privileges those who are on the tenure track or are tenured (TT/T).⁶ RC houses great numbers (and in many institutions, the majority) of NTT and contingent faculty who are primarily tasked with teaching introductory writing classes, but who are also asked to teach upper-level courses. Faculty of all ranks feel pressure to perform service learning and community literacy projects from not just their scholarly peers but also from their administration, who are more often than not encouraging some form of community involvement that scales outward from local communities to globally networked learning. For example, Old Dominion University offers recognition through awards and stipends for

service learning and community outreach, and Northeastern University is predicated on an experiential learning model that privileges teaching and research that does not occur in the classroom only. While admirable in theory, these opportunities are often more available to TT/T faculty who have the time and prestige to orchestrate partnerships, mobilize students, manage logistics, and employ assistants, and then have the time and resources to write about it. NTT and contingent faculty are generally teaching 4-5 courses per semester and several in the summer, sometimes at more than one institution. In many departments, NTT faculty are teaching the most classes to the most students, yet they are offered the least support.

In many ways, then, this focus on the public has left NTT faculty teaching the bulk of composition courses and doing the bulk of idea exchange regarding the improvement of student writing and literacy in the university without the support required to effectively take students to the streets, as the broader trend and our history demands. Since few tenure-track faculty are actually teaching introductory writing courses, the question becomes, what students are actually exposed to these public outreach opportunities? When RC scholars discuss the public turn's value, we must question the degree to which this trend realistically saturates our practices before we can measure its success.

For TT/T faculty, there is an equally disturbing consequence of the "public turn." While out of reach for most NTT faculty whose commitments to teaching and service make such practice (and certainly scholarship) virtually impossible, TT/T faculty have an opportunity to create compelling public experiences for students and to be rewarded through grants and other stipends. However, the hard work that goes into establishing community partnerships, designing communication channels for students and community members, securing funding for logistics, and creating a rewarding and valuable pedagogy around these experiences will not be duly rewarded until the faculty publishes on that pedagogical work. The difficult groundwork for creating successful public projects for students is rarely valued by tenure and promotion committees as much as are publications and service to the institution, even though the discipline and, ostensibly, most university administrations actively encourage such work under the auspices of the public turn. Unsurprisingly, this difficulty leads many RC scholars to produce scholarship about writing and rhetoric happening in non-academic contexts, often to the exclusion of college writing and pedagogy altogether, prompting the question, in what currency does our discipline actually deal, if not in student writing? As Williams suggests, to do the kind of work that the public turn demands successfully, tenure and promotion must be reconceived not just at disciplinary but also at institutional levels (142). Until then, despite the lip-service at the institutional level, committing to the "public turn" in our classrooms—for NTT and TT alike—is risky and unsustainable, and may drive us even further from a focus on student writing and our students' foremost needs.

Recovering from the Fallout

This condensed story of rhetoric and composition's "public turn" represents an effort to encourage more self-auditing among humanities disciplines and more cross-talk among them. What we wish to emphasize is simply this: as those of us in the humanities respond to this crisis, we must take care to question critically our assumptions about the public turn and the agents that we think benefit most from the turn, whether that be individual institutions, disciplines within the humanities, or faculty members, contingent and TT/T alike. In other words, we should do more than abide by market demands to position the humanities as a reactive public enterprise that benevolently maneuvers shifting economic landscapes.

To participate in such critical questioning, then, requires that we:

1. Develop cross-disciplinary spaces for humanities scholars to share openly the impact of the public turn and to question the ethical consequences that emerge from the paradigm shift. An obvious starting place for such dialogue is publications like these, specifically devoted to questions about the future of the humanities, but also humanities-based academic conferences like the National Humanities Conference that bring together scholars from various fields to engage. In these venues, we can participate in disruptive debates about the influence of the public turn and how it has reshaped, redefined, and limited our disciplinary missions without falling into regressive and reductive stances that either seek to make static the definition and work of the humanities and/or seek to further legitimate the humanities by leveraging other kinds of marketable phenomena, like the digital humanities.
2. Not assume that the nobility of our missions alone will be enough to redeem us. They won't. Instead, we need further examination of how our continued turn to the public yields ethical consequences for the ways we define and disseminate disciplinary values to students and community partners, the ways we structure our academic work force, and the ways we comply with institutional models that counter our fields' imperatives.
3. Take stock of the practical consequences of our strategies. One consequence of the public turn in RC, for example, has been gaining a voice in statewide and nationwide policy making regarding first-year writing and its value to the university. This consequence is a positive one. However, a negative consequence appears in tandem with regard to who gets to speak on these issues and who has institutional support to participate in statewide and national conversations.

While the CCCCs' "Position Statement on Faculty Work in Community-Based Settings" and the Council of Writing Program Administrators' resolution "Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration" offer discursive hope within our field, these documents are anything but legally binding. They serve only as disciplinary recommendations.

Further, there's no distinction for what such recommendations mean for TT/T vs. NTT faculty. In a report published by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, as of 2012, 75.5% of instructional staff are contingent. In RC, we are in keeping with the national standard, with roughly 70% of composition courses taught by contingent faculty (Palmquist and Doe 353). What's worse is that most of these faculty are evaluated purely on their teaching, with only a small number of positions that value NTT professional activity. The question remains, then, who does the public turn actually serve?

Finally, as a corollary to the activist-advocacy scholarship that informs the public turn, many TT/T faculty have taken a scholarly interest in issues of social justice and NTT faculty labor struggles in their own discipline and the larger institution. While often born from genuine concern for peers, many of these projects are also the result of the surging interest in relevancy and civic action emerging from the very same charge for more works of "public good" from the struggling humanities. Contingent faculty, especially, often face institutionally inhumane working conditions, teaching a tremendous number of classes for little pay, often with no benefits, time, or resources to produce or engage with scholarship, even as it relates to their teaching. Therefore, it is interesting to note that, while there are NTT and contingent faculty who have managed to circulate scholarship related to their working conditions in RC, the real bulk of the activist and labor scholarship comes from TT/T faculty in relatively secure positions. In other words, faculty who are privileged enough to produce this scholarship because they have the resources and the protection of tenure are writing about the very condition that they will likely not have to face themselves. The additional sad irony of this phenomenon is that the activist scholarship that is institutionally recognized is precisely the scholarship least likely to be seen and acted upon by the subjects of that scholarship.

In an effort to make this activity "count" toward their own security, TT/T faculty must invest most of their intellectual energy into peer-reviewed venues that require language and access prohibitive to consumption by NTT faculty in RC and other departments. Drawing awareness to labor issues via less scholarly but more accessible venues would likely make more of a difference in these efforts. Yet, activist faculty must invest their energy into outlets that are more likely to earn them tenure and promotion because their jobs are already threatened by the humanities crisis. While there is certainly a point to be made about the ethical fuzziness of earning tenure at the expense of contingent faculty, the larger question here concerns how our institutions are rewarding our efforts to "promote the public good" that may not fit the traditional tenure and promotion structure.

4. Examine our discipline's trends using the very tools that the discipline fosters—critical thinking, informed deliberation, and ethical interpretation—in order to, as the epigraph from Butler reminds us, re-evaluate the metrics by which we are valued and question whether our motivations are intrinsic to our disciplinary values or complicit with economic pressures.

5. Draw connections between how the public turn in humanities at the postsecondary level is influenced by its instantiations at the K-12 level, and how these instantiations are reified in education departments. That is, the very educational base for K-12 is housed at the university, where new faculty are trained to carry on the mission of the humanities in the K-12 school systems. What is being articulated and in what ways? What kinds of institutional partnerships could be formed in order to leverage the humanities better? Answering these questions will allow us to render visible the circuits that propagate some narratives over others.

6. Finally, most importantly, share these findings with other equally embattled humanities disciplines to compare notes and seek broader, collective solutions that could more realistically lead to institutional change and, as a result, public perceptions of the humanities' value.

ENDNOTES

¹ In addition to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, other publications have confronted this issue by critiquing the humanities' perceived value in relation to the wider public. See, for example, Ryan Skinnell's "A Problem of Publics and the Curious Case at Texas" (2010); Alex Reid's "Academics and Their 'Ivory Tower' Audiences" (2015); Patricia Cohen's "A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding" (2016); and the Education Advisory Board's "Contrary to Popular Belief, Humanities Degrees Are in High Demand by Employers" (2016).

² Take, for example, the work of human rights in the humanities, which critiques the narratives that undermine the very category of what counts as human. In fact, Brooks begins the collection in which Butler's essay features with a critique of the ways in which torture was justified through unethical interpretations of legal texts in the "Torture Memos." He states, "no one trained in the rigorous analysis of poetry, I said to myself, could possibly engage in such bad-faith interpretation without professional conscience intervening to say: this is not right" (Brooks 1).

³ Other publications follow Mathieu's line of inquiry, including Gregory Jay's "The Engaged Humanities: Principles and Practices of Public Scholarship and Teaching" (2010) and Frank Farmer's *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur* (2013).

⁴This brief history of rhetoric and composition is necessarily limited; a full account is beyond the scope of this article. For a more detailed history of how the field separated from literary studies, please see Steven Mailloux's *Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition* (2006). This book also details the division of speech communication from literary studies in 1914. While rhetoric and composition's official split from literature occurred during the second half of the twentieth century, each field experienced similar corollaries, namely that the content of literary studies did not position students to be democratic citizens as much as it reified Arnoldian principles of humanism centered on taste and the "great works" of classical literature.

⁵ The emergence of "writing studies" out of rhetoric and composition can also be interpreted within the larger narrative of the public turn in RC and the humanities because, in developing more recognizable quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, the field can translate data more readily for the non-disciplinary public in a STEM-saturated world. Further, the nomenclature "writing studies" opens up possibilities for the field, no longer relegating it to humanities-based disciplines, but instead to all disciplines and all communities of practice that use composing as a way to organize and engage with the social world.

⁶While we recognize that our distinction between NTT and TT/T faculty is reductive, given institutional disparities across this country, our goal is to emphasize that in RC, particularly, efforts to discipline activism primarily disadvantage NTT and contingent faculty. Further, we also recognize that the privatization of higher education, the "new normal" of corporatized universities, and the erosion of the tenure model produce negative consequences for most humanities faculty. No tier of faculty, therefore, is immune from the challenges of leveraging humanities disciplines as publicly relevant. However, TT/T faculty, precisely by their privilege of tenure, are better positioned to develop meaningful work that promotes the humanities' public value and, even further, to gain the institutional support needed to sustain such projects.

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