



PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP IN LITERARY STUDIES

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Public Scholarship in Literary Studies

Edited by

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Conclusion

Literary Study Writ Large

Rosemary Erickson Johnsen

***Public Scholarship in Literary Studies* is grounded in, and a demonstration of, the conviction that literary scholars possess a combination of knowledge base and specialist skills with enormous potential for public scholarship.** Similar to the ways in which public scholars in the field of history rely on, and further develop, their training in historiography and their rich historical knowledge in a specialist area, so too do scholars in literature have both a *data set* and a *skill set* that position them to make strong contributions to public life. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, literary criticism has the potential not only to explain but to actively change our terms of engagement with current realities. Their ongoing, career-long accumulation of specialist knowledge positions literary scholars to speak not just to other scholars and students, but directly to the public. We should never lose sight of the facts that “disciplinary grounding . . . is a key asset” (Parker 469) and that literary scholars enjoy an enormous resource: literature itself.

Literary scholars should be alert and receptive to opportunities created by current events to share our expertise with public audiences. One such opportunity manifested itself for me in the wake of the 2016 election, when the term *gaslighting* achieved an unfortunate new currency. I wrote an essay for *The Los Angeles Review of Books (LARB)* in 2017 that examined Patrick Hamilton’s 1938 stage play *Gaslight: A Victorian Thriller* as the original source of the term. In Hamilton’s hands, an observation about the functioning of Victorian home gaslight systems is transformed into a compelling dramatic device and eventually became shorthand for

the process of driving a person to question their own sanity through deliberate psychological manipulation. In the *LARB* article, my knowledge base as a literary scholar rectifies misapprehensions and uses the tools of literary criticism to illuminate additional dimensions of the term and its inception. I still have to explain who Hamilton is—that has been true since he became the subject of my doctoral dissertation in 1997—but my knowledge of the late 1930s context and his dramatic vision in *Gaslight* now finds newly receptive audiences.

Twenty-first-century historians have enjoyed some success in demonstrating the renewed relevance of history to understanding the present epoch in politics and cultural change, speaking out in op-eds and as #twitterstorians. Since the middle of the last decade, several canonical literary texts have been invoked as sharing parallels with contemporary society such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*. Popular use of adjectives such as *Orwellian* and *dystopian* signals an opportunity for experts in Orwell or the dystopia to enrich public discourse; these scholars have information we can use right now. Christopher Douglas's chapter in this collection describes and dissects this process, one in which knowledge that may have appeared arcane and of interest only to readers of university press studies becomes timely for a much broader audience. The specialist knowledge and disciplinary training that informs his Cornell University Press book, *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right*, also informs the pieces he has written for what we might call a readership of educated citizens. Scholars in literary fields know how much there is to learn from literature; the inclusion of public scholarship in our professional profiles allows us to share such learning beyond our disciplinary communities and classrooms.

Scholars can add depth to public engagement with known texts of interest, but they can also use their training to broaden the set of relevant source material. Critical theory is much maligned outside of the academy, but it offers ways of seeing that are valuable. If no one is calling out for examples of its use, that does not mean a literary scholar cannot deploy it alongside knowledge of primary-source material, literary history (including knowledge of genre developments and changing critical reception), and expert skills in dissecting complex texts. General-audience awareness of what literary scholars know and do is the tip of the iceberg, and public scholarship can reveal just how much else is beneath the surface: familiar-

ity with canonical and lesser-known texts and authors, knowledge of cultural and historical context, and the ability to make connections across times, places, and texts. People often invoke *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, yes, but how much more could Orwell's novel be illuminated by accessible literary analysis and context? And what of lesser-known material that could inform public discourse?

When it comes to public scholarship in literary studies, the trajectory of the work and the scholar are intertwined. The arc of Carmaletta M. Williams's career in Kansas, brought to life in her chapter for this volume, reveals how her academic career, her public engagement, and her own scholarship are inextricably linked. In "Takin' It to the Streets: Public Scholarship in the Heartland," Williams forthrightly shows the challenges, risks, and rewards of her engagement with the public and, in so doing, offers inspiration to others to take courage and go forth. As she and the other contributors indicate, the practitioner is part of the story of public engagement, and the history of my own engagement with public scholarship supports the platform from which I speak. That history also sheds light on the multiplicities of literary study as public scholarship. If we look, we can often discern in the motivations and activities of individuals' professional engagements broader patterns or pivotal moments in the arena of public scholarship. I would like to offer some key moments from my own public-scholarship trajectory in order to demonstrate my long-standing commitment to the subject of this volume but, more importantly, because I believe doing so illuminates the complicated webs of engagement typical for those pursuing public scholarship.

I first encountered the term *public scholarship* when I served on the Modern Language Association's Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (CSWP) from 2008 to 2011. Having been engaged in public scholarship for some years without benefit of the nomenclature, the term was not simply a useful marker but a way to begin drilling down into its definition: Where does one draw the lines in defining the boundaries of public scholarship? At that time, efforts were being made to get "public scholarship" recognized as a category of activity distinct from service, freelancing, or personal-interest activity. The MLA's CSWP identified it as an issue with particular significance for women scholars, and the committee sponsored panels on the topic at the annual convention during the period of my committee service. My initial acquaintance with the term was significant for me personally in terms of taking my own "community engagement" seriously, but it is also a broader reflection of movements then afoot.

In 2012, I took another step forward in public engagement by establishing my own Web site. Web presence was a standard expectation for academics by then, but my own university exerted such tight control over the content that I realized I needed to create and manage my own. I consulted a colleague in my university's College of Business, selected and registered a domain name, and signed a contract for web hosting with a commercial provider. Designing the site, creating and updating the content, learning how to solve problems, and add features: all of these things took me into new territory. The following year, when I signed on to Twitter (at the behest of the director of the sculpture park on the grounds of my university's campus), I learned how to make the Web site and my Twitter presence work together. Five years after that, when I was directing an NEH project, I had those two outlets in place to make multidirectional engagement easier and more visible. By the time I was presenting at the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study on how to use Twitter for public-humanities engagement in 2019, I had come a long way. If now I see that my Web site is in need of a redesign, that, too, is part of the process! Like my introduction to the terminology of public scholarship, my experiences in establishing a cyber presence were natural reflections of broader developments, as are the connections between those activities and my commitment to public scholarship.

My 2015 article "Public Scholarship: Making the Case" in *Modern Language Studies* was a case study of my experience serving as scholar for several productions at a Chicago-area theater. The moment captured in that article is one of transition: the MLA had begun encouraging members to use public engagement as a way to advocate for the value of MLA mission-centric research, teaching, and engagement, and the National Endowment for the Humanities had recently announced the creation of an initiative called the Common Good: The Humanities in the Public Square. In 2015, there was a pressing need to "make the case" for public-facing literary criticism to the public, to campus evaluators, and to colleagues within the discipline. There were a limited number of scholarly articles published at that time, and venues such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, professional associations, and community and government agencies offered material of value to those trying to better understand and define their engagements with public scholarship. *Imagining America* published "Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University: A Resource on Promotion and Tenure in the Arts, Humanities, and Design"

(Ellison and Eatman) as long ago as 2008, and the American Historical Association adopted “Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian” in 2010, with substantial revisions in 2017. Professional associations in the humanities and social sciences continue to raise their level of commitment to research into, and support for, public scholarship, which in turn bolsters attempts being made at individual institutions to bring standards for public engagement into tenure processes. The upswing in public engagement has been fueled in part by a changing political landscape, which has only increased the urgency to show how our disciplinary work can have meaning for many publics. The multitudinous ways people with advanced training and professional qualifications in literary study make their living in a time of waning support for higher education extends our understanding of what public scholarship might look like and how it can be built into institutional structures, including, but going beyond, those afforded to college and university faculty.

There are signs that this shift in valuation is underway. Increasing recognition of the need for it can be seen in a variety of grant programs—for example, including NEH programs directed at public scholarship. In founding its Public Scholars program, the NEH “entered a long-term commitment to encourage scholarship in the humanities for general audiences” (NEH). Our contributors in this volume include a 2018 NEH public scholar, Cynthia L. Haven, whose chapter demonstrates the impact of her work, grounded in the practices of literary criticism, on international audiences. Beyond its directly designated grants for public scholarship, the NEH has several other initiatives that underwrite and amplify what can be considered public scholarship. In 2017, I was awarded the first of two NEH grants I received under the auspices of the Dialogues on the Experience of War (DEW) program, part of Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War initiative launched in the spring of 2014 (the same year the Common Good was announced). The DEW program is part of the Education Division of the NEH, and the two projects I designed and delivered involved training student-veterans to serve as embedded discussion facilitators in credit-bearing university courses and then at a series of public events. The practice of literary criticism on a diverse set of war-related literature was enacted by the faculty codirectors and, more importantly, by the team of student-veterans. Under the auspices of the grants, the student-veterans were trained as discussion facilitators for the class and went on to engage audiences across campus and the surrounding community through

the shared practice of literary criticism. Over the course of two projects (2017–19), the student-veteran team, course students, the codirectors, and others filmed a televised town hall event discussing humanities texts before a live audience; hosted a Veterans Day program on campus that included an open poetry discussion, veteran art exhibition, WWI panel discussion, and the premiere of a documentary film made by one of our 2017 student-veterans; and brought interactive humanities discussions to local sites, including a VFW post, public library, and community college. Instruction and practice in the tools of literary criticism, confidence in its value, and an ever-increasing knowledge base of primary sources helped establish these student-veterans as public scholars in their own right.

The public events and activities of the grant projects illustrate the potential of literary criticism to serve as meaningful, even transformative, public scholarship, and they represent the “multi-directional exchange of ideas” (Johnsen 9) characteristic of successful public scholarship grounded in literary study. Furthermore, the connections made through these projects, in tandem with my move to an administrative role at the university, illustrate how public scholarship often develops in a nonlinear way quite distinct from the traditional progression of literary scholarship in the academy. The literary criticism engaged in with diverse publics through the grant projects has benefited participants; it has also led to new kinds of professional engagement for me that are practice based and advocacy oriented, including presentations at conferences and interest groups for administrators, veterans affairs professionals, and veterans organizations. The practice of literary criticism was brought, through the grants, to individual members of the community and then, in turn, found openings for new avenues of institutionalization, such as the invitation we received to help a nearby regional comprehensive university learn how to incorporate literary study in its Green Zone training. These interconnections and opportunities all revolve around the public practice of literary analysis.

The time is right for *Public Scholarship in Literary Studies*. In the twenty-first-century landscape of growing institutional and civic imperatives for literary scholars to engage in public-facing dissemination of their work, our understanding of public scholarship in the humanities has undergone significant shifts. Increasingly, the professional organizations of many humanities and social-science disciplines are calling for their members to engage in public scholarship and are beginning to provide tools for academic evaluators to credit such work. As the practice of public scholarship

has grown, its forms have multiplied. The contributors to this volume, writing out of their own experiences in the field, showcase best practices in a range of public-scholarship modes. Their contributions to praxis offer innovative models for those seeking to engage in public scholarship as newcomers or as longtime participants, and they provide rich material for use by those who seek to understand and/or evaluate public scholarship in the humanities. The editors are particularly pleased that this volume is being published on the digital-first open-access platform of Amherst College Press, and the collection is offered as an invitation for further conversation. It is also a call to action.

The power of literature to enrich and inform understanding is well known to literary scholars. Increasingly, however, that foundational truth is disregarded or actively attacked. Literature, like much of the humanities, is often spoken of as a luxury or, even worse, as useless. Bringing literary study into the realm of public scholarship can help counter those misperceptions, working both individually and collectively to restore some confidence in what we do as scholars of literature. Public scholarship becomes the means to share what literary scholarship offers, but also to chip away at the presence of anti-intellectualism in contemporary society. Our ability to serve as intermediary between text and audience—the kinds of work we routinely do in our classrooms and at campus events—positions us to contribute beyond campus and our scholarly communities and to learn from the perspectives and insights available from those who do not inhabit our campuses. Public scholarship often takes forms recognizably similar to teaching and learning, but it can also serve as advocacy. We need that now more than ever.

A few decades ago, Cora Kaplan conceptualized *political* for humanities scholars as a deliberate position in which “what is being taught . . . is being taught in relation to a dynamic of what you might *do* or *produce* or *be* in some future conjuncture, rather than just as an object of study” (21, original emphasis). The immediate context for Kaplan’s definition was feminist scholarship in the academy, but I believe it’s a vision that can invite literary scholars to embrace and create opportunities to be more adventurous in considering public forms for their research and teaching practice. What might public scholarship look like *now*, against a backdrop of a global pandemic, social-justice activism, and an evident need for critical engagement with texts of all kinds? The contributors to *Public Scholarship in Literary Studies* share their own trajectories that continue to adapt and develop;

their chapters offer personal experience, knowledge, and inspiration. If this volume's readers are inspired to embrace a forward-looking, active vision of engagement for public scholarship, we can change the world.

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