

ARTICLE

Supporting Public Humanities at the Critical Intersections: An Imagining America Manifesto

Erica Kohl-Arenas 

American Studies, University of California, Davis, Davis, CA, USA
Email: ekohl@ucdavis.edu

(Received 03 June 2024; revised 23 September 2024; accepted 24 September 2024)

Abstract

Drawing upon findings from an Imagining America research project funded by the Mellon Foundation (2019–2023), this research paper and manifesto proposes five critical ways in which institutions of higher education can better support public humanities. Through over one hundred individual interviews, twenty multimedia case studies, a national graduate scholar survey, an online study group, and public conversations, we learned how public scholars have consistently conducted research that matters – responding to urgent challenges in the world, including on the pressing ecological, social, racial, and economic justice issues of our time. However, the diverse inter-generational Imagining America (IA) research team also found that most academic institutions are still not designed to support this important work. By favoring narrow disciplinary boundaries and norms and individualized methods over collective commitments and reciprocal partnerships, most institutions marginalize and disincentivize public humanities. Our research respondents overwhelmingly agreed that instead of change initiatives led from the top of the university, publicly engaged scholars themselves lead the way by virtue of their groundbreaking collaborative, relational, reflective, critical yet hopeful grounded research. The manifesto shared at the end of the paper proposes how to support this important work today.

Keywords: higher education; public scholarship; culture change; institutional change; engaged scholarship

Working against the grain of institutional reward structures and disciplinary norms, public scholars have long recognized that impactful research on real-world problems requires imaginative, interdisciplinary, collaborative methods grounded in communities. In a recent research project funded by the Mellon Foundation, a diverse inter-generational team of researchers with *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life* found that public scholars who engage the methodologies of the humanities, arts, and design lead the way in delivering on university commitments to serve the public good. We learned how public scholars have consistently conducted research that matters – responding to urgent challenges in the world, including the pressing ecological, social, racial, and economic justice issues of our time. Yet, we also found that most academic institutions are not designed to support this important work. By favoring narrow disciplinary boundaries and norms, individualized methods over collective commitments, and inordinate bureaucratic hurdles, most institutions marginalize and disincentivize public scholarship. We also found that despite these

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

limitations, public scholars survive and thrive in the corners of the academy transforming institutional cultures and norms from the inside out.

Much of this transformative public humanities and creative work, as well as the accompanying challenges, takes place at the critical intersections where scholars of color, and those from other traditionally marginalized backgrounds, are radically expanding how we understand research and who is considered a producer of knowledge. In academic institutions, as noted by George Sanchez in IA's 2004 *Foreseeable Futures* publication, "faculty of color experience a more difficult context where they are pulled between the commitments to communities of color almost all bring with them to the academy and the departmental culture which tells them, either directly or mostly indirectly, to abandon those ties or risk professional suicide." This is especially true for faculty whose work involves deep engagement with community and social movement partners and where the lines of teaching, service, scholarship, and identity are deeply intertwined. Black feminist, Indigenous-led, and participatory action research traditions have long highlighted how academic cultures and disciplines produce hierarchies that marginalize scholars who bring specific identities, histories, and community-based theories, methods, and commitments to their work. They propose a way forward that centers values of trust, respect, equitable and reflective research practices, relationships of care, and the cultivation of diverse identities across university-community lines.¹

Today we are witnessing a new wave of public and activist humanities scholars mobilizing the resources of the university for community and movement-aligned causes.² As I write this article, students on my campus and around the globe are organizing public humanities seminars, exhibitions, poetry readings, and cultural exchanges at encampments constructed in support of Palestinian liberation. In the United States, Scholars for Social Justice, the Public Scholarship in Action Collective, and institution-based programs such as UCLA's Institute on Inequality and Democracy, The New School Tishman Center's "Centering Justice Manifesto," Trinity College's Social Justice Institute, and many more are claiming university spaces to radically expand the process of knowledge production.

For almost 25 years *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life* (IA) has been a leading thinker and doer in the space of holding academic institutions accountable to stated missions to serve the public good. During Julie Ellison's tenure as Faculty Director of IA and Timothy Eatman's tenure as Research Director, they produced a groundbreaking report that made this work visible. *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University*³ made the case that community-engaged work in the arts, design, and humanities could be rigorous, excellent, and impactful. The report was used by scholars, artists, and graduate students to advocate for their own advancement and as a campus change organizing tool across the country. Now over a decade after the publication of *Scholarship in Public* much has changed. Often inspired by this report and advocacy from IA leadership, many institutions have revised faculty handbooks and tenure policies, including the University of Minnesota, Purdue University, University of North Carolina Greensboro, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and Occidental College. Several organizations, including the American Council of Learned Societies, the American History Association, the *Modern Language Association*, Campus Compact, and Big Ten Academic Alliance have launched initiatives to push these advances in faculty reward policies further. At the same time, a

¹ Fine 2018; Grant, Woodson, and Dumas 2020; Hooks 1989; Smith, Tuck, and Yang 2018.

² Cann and DeMeulenaere 2020; Choudry 2020; Cole and Heinecke 2018.

³ Ellison and Eatman 2008.

growing body of scholarship continues to make a case for further change in tenure and promotion policies.⁴

Yet much remains to be done. In 2019, IA embarked on a four-year research project to answer the question of how academic institutions might better support public humanities, artmaking, and design. Through over 100 individual interviews, 20 multimedia case studies, a national graduate scholar survey, an online study group, and public conversations, IA's most recent research revealed how most academic institutions are still not designed to support this important work. Interestingly, research respondents overwhelmingly identified the everyday life and culture of academic institutions, not just tenure and promotion policies, as the root of the problem. In our first round of interviews, we selected 22 nationally known (anonymized) individuals celebrated for their work on supporting public scholarship from high-level institutional perches. We interviewed university presidents, provosts, deans, center directors, and association presidents. Strikingly, it was this group of individuals who initially shared that institutions of higher education are slow-moving organizations, designed to resist change. Some described them as archaic, feudal bureaucracies, reliant on Western colonial disciplinary norms and outdated hierarchical modes of organizing. Others more stridently asserted that universities are racial capitalist machines, designed to maintain the status quo through rigid disciplinary boundaries, mobility tropes, and market economies that reward a limited range of "experts" who contribute to the business bottom line. This analysis was not new to us, given the wide range of literature on the topic. A growing field of study sometimes termed Critical University Studies⁵ asks the university and its people to reckon with histories of dispossession, such as higher education's entanglement with the legacy of slavery,⁶ colonization,⁷ theft of land from Indigenous peoples,⁸ gentrification and displacement,⁹ the production of war,¹⁰ and the shifting of debt onto students and families.¹¹ What surprised us was that these assessments came from campus leaders.

For the second round of interviews, we identified 27 scholars and artists with evidence of highly impactful public, engaged arts and humanities work, as well as community-based culture keepers with longstanding relationships with academic institutions. Our graduate scholar research team interviewed over 50 public graduate scholars. In keeping with our assessment of the critical intersections of marginalization and innovation in public humanities work described above, many of these interviewees were women of color, working in close partnership with communities and movements outside of academic institutions. Through this second round of interviews, we learned that out of necessity, brilliance, and love, scholars at these critical intersections have created centers and institutes, cultures of peer support and mentorship, models for engaged research and artmaking accountable to those most impacted, innovations in teaching and mentorship, distributed approaches to ethical peer review, and creative forms of scholarly production. A growing body of scholarship confirms our finding that the work itself is the most promising space of change. In our research, we found, for example, that specific public scholarship initiatives changed the very

⁴ O'Meara et al. 2022; Sdvizkov et al. 2022.

⁵ Boggs and Mitchell 2018.

⁶ Williams, Squire, and Tuitt, 2021.

⁷ Patel 2021.

⁸ Lee and Ahtone 2020.

⁹ Baldwin 2021.

¹⁰ Maira 2018.

¹¹ Martin and Dwyer 2021.

way that university staff, such as security people and janitors, students, and engaged faculty are treated and welcomed into academic spaces by virtue of the intimate and ongoing relationship building work required when creating physical spaces in the university where community partners are welcome. In other cases, we learned how the long-standing methodologies in feminist and indigenous research that involve reciprocal and reflective methodologies that recognize one another and research partners as equally knowledgeable whole human beings have transformed corners of the academy into nurturing spaces of connectivity, peer research sharing, mentorship, and support. Some even recognize how structural advancements in equity and social justice have been catalyzed by public and activist scholars and might be further leveraged through academic institutions.¹² This approach requires that we resist reifying academic institutions as inherently endowed with democratic valor while placing a high value on the power of public knowledge-making and higher education's capacity to serve as a catalyst for change.¹³ Whether through revised policies and procedures, collaborative projects, centers and initiatives, in the classroom, or through the “bolt holes and breathing spaces” that “hotwire” the system toward radical possibility, public scholarship can help universities become hopeful sites of democratic learning and action.¹⁴

In keeping with this scholarship, the IA research team organized a call for Stories of Change case studies to provide solid evidence of projects that bridge university-community knowledge production and counter histories of harm and exclusion. From projects that address racial justice on campus, to community planning initiatives, to peer networks to recognize the wisdom of Filipina care workers, to prison arts programs, to Mexico-US cross-border mural making, to a remote-access “crip nightlife” project, and many more, these *Stories of Change* sit alongside the stories told in our second round of interviews as demonstrations of how the work itself changes the academy. The story from the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), for example, shows how a group of determined faculty and staff organized a campus-wide initiative and addressed community partner concerns related to racial equity in university-community relationships. Titled, “A Driving Force for Culturally and Structurally Aware University-Community Partnerships,” the story shows how an interdisciplinary group forged alliances on and off campus to catalyze real change at the intersections of teaching, research, and service. Another Story of Change, “The Genesis of Express Newark,” shows how a dedicated team of administrators, staff, and community leaders can create a truly equitable “third space” to make art for social change across community-university lines. And yet other stories, like the “Charting Pathways of Intellectual Leadership Case Student,” provide a specific framework for aligning the evaluation of scholarship with articulated but not always demonstrated values of the university.

Just as this critical work leads the way, it was disheartening to learn about the emotional and physical labor required of public humanities and arts researchers and the urgent necessity to build positive peer support and mentoring systems. A common refrain in our interviews went something like, “don’t talk about your public humanities work to your dissertation committee” or “you can do that kind of work after tenure” or even, “you will be an Associate Professor forever doing that kind of work” (i.e., Don’t do it). As is similarly told by Lorgia García Peña in *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color* (2022) and Victoria Reyes in *Academic Outsider: Stories of Exclusion and Hope* (2022), we heard

¹² Hale, Snow-Gerono, and Morales 2008; Hooks 1989; Paperson 2017; Patel 2021; Peña 2022; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2015; Valenzuela 2017.

¹³ Cantor 2020; Fine 2018.

¹⁴ Paperson 2017.

about how creating spaces of care and mentorship are especially critical for scholars from traditionally marginalized backgrounds who find themselves further challenged when choosing to engage community-oriented methods not understood or appreciated by traditional disciplinary gatekeepers. One way that our research respondents described these supportive institutional spaces is as an “undercommons”¹⁵ where specifically activist and movement-aligned scholars build caring relationships, collective power, and a safe space to produce radical research. Harney and Moten take the position that undercommons scholars experience a necessarily “fugitive” relationship to the academy as they work in “marooned” communities set up to avoid cooptation and control from the institutional center. Others who use the term “undercommons” more loosely describe the many supportive hybrid spaces occupied by activist scholars.¹⁶ Running through these perspectives is an analysis of power and marginalization along the intersections of race, class, gender, and ability, often with a focus on how efforts to institutionalize “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” fail to recognize the fundamental demands of engaged researchers, translating calls to action into moderate frameworks and bureaucratic practices.¹⁷

While only partially shared here as a short format essay, our research produced “five meaning making statements” – essentially campus change imperatives on behalf of public scholars. In this inaugural Manifesto Issue of *Public Humanities*, I close by turning these five statements into a mini manifesto, below. As you read on, you may ask yourself, how should I use this sometimes-strident sounding manifesto and who is it designed for? You may also ask, am I in a position of power where I can make these kinds of assertions out loud without being dismissed or marginalized? The answer to your questions will depend upon what you are trying to achieve, what kinds of people have the power to catalyze the change that you seek, and what kinds of language and ideas those stakeholders find most compelling. Toward helping answer the above questions for anyone who wants to make academic institutions a more hospitable and energizing place for public humanities, *Imagining America* created the *Organizing Culture Change Public Scholar Imagination Guide* with resources and tools to reflect on the value of the work, develop institutional change strategies, create communications campaigns, map power, find your people, and envision the world we want. Each activity in the Guide might help you translate this manifesto to different audiences, and includes reflection prompts for you to come up with your own individual or collective statements of value and worth. We also created a deck of *Public Scholar Conversation Cards* designed to spark conversation about the joy, contributions, and struggles of public scholars and to nurture supportive relationships and environments for public scholars to thrive as you create change agendas together. Read on for the Mini Manifesto in the form of the five intentionally broad, flexible, editable, translatable Meaning Making Statements and suggestions for addressing them.

1. **There is individual and collective damage done and limits set by the enduring structures and cultures of higher education that do not understand, recognize, or support public scholars. This damage has created wounds and compromises across university and community lines.**

Whether you are a peer, dissertation advisor, reviewer, promotion committee member, or administrator, treat public scholars with respect – take the time to understand, value, and support diverse ways of knowing and thinking. Before judging others as

¹⁵ Harney and Moten 2013.

¹⁶ Patel and Buchanan 2019.

¹⁷ Ferguson 2012; Johnson 2020.

operating outside of the norms of your discipline, ask your student or colleague why they do the work that they do, what kinds of knowledges are being engaged, how they evaluate excellent research or creative practice, and envision their life as a scholar. Support them. If you feel judgmental or confused at first, that is ok. Just ask some good questions and do your research. If you need help understanding the value of public humanities, consider using IA's Public Scholar Conversation Cards or Imagination Guide [here](#) to learn more from your engaged peers. Or try out the "Knowledge Production: Recognizing and Honoring Ways of Knowing" activity in the Imagination Guide.

2. These structures and cultures are maintained through specific disciplinary, bureaucratic, and extra-institutional practices.

Disciplines, organizational rules and practices, and extra-institutional relationships (like extractive research or unequal regional development imperatives) were created by people for specific reasons. Therefore, they can be undone, recreated, or superseded by people too. When a rule, policy, or behavior does not make sense to a public scholar it is usually because it was not made for them (have you ever sought institutional review board approval for a public history or an action research project?). If you are a mentor, advisor, staff person, or anyone in a position asked to support a public scholar, be an ally by finding out what the challenges are (like getting a community-based researcher paid out of a large grant) and find some loopholes! Better yet, work on changing the system in your local program, department, and eventually university. The "Power Mapping the University" activity in the Imagining Guide might be a good place to start.

3. Yet, public scholars are finding ways to survive and thrive by creating spaces of peer support, learning, care, scholarly and creative engagement, and wayfinding.

If you work in a well-resourced unit or office, support the work where it is happening. Do not ask people doing good work in their own safe, innovative, enriching spaces to "scale-up" their efforts to serve everyone to receive funding. Public humanities scholars, like many people in marginalized spaces inside and outside of the academy, rightly fear that "scaling up" often means moving the resources away from already vulnerable spaces and toward those in well-resourced units and disciplines. In hierarchical institutions, scale is often assumed to mean turning a localized departmental effort into a university-wide serving program, managed from a top administrative office. What if scale meant endowing a successful small program to survive in perpetuity, like a strong and sturdy bonsai tree? Or funding multiple efforts in local departments, spreading public humanities methods and models like wildfire across campus?

4. The theories, methods, practices, and outcomes of public scholarship itself lead the way in transforming the academy to recognize and value a wider range of knowers and producers of research, wisdom, and knowledge.

For anyone who wants to make academic institutions more hospitable to public humanities work: keep supporting and resourcing the work where it is happening, on and off campus. Cite, lift, fund, and promote the work of engaged scholars whose collaborative, reciprocal, and reflective methods have produced significant public impact. And serve as an advocate when people try to change campus cultures and systems (like peer review and institutional review boards) to better suit public work.

Recognize and pay community-based researchers and partners for their time and work. “The Work Itself Creates the Change: Stories and Methods of Survivance” activity in the Imagination Guide might spark some ideas.

5. To confront the enduring problems, culture, and policy change on issues internal and external to academic campuses is critical.

Disruptions are abundant in these times. Do not marginalize, silence, penalize, or discipline public scholars when they act in solidarity with regional partners and movements. Long haul community commitments and alliances are often baked into the very DNA of public humanities methods and values. Your vocal support will have ripple effects through the system. If you are unsure of how to support public humanities scholars under pressure, the “Getting the Word Out: Creating Messages for Advocacy and Understanding” might help you develop language for different internal and external audiences.

Public humanities projects are urgently needed today. While extractive research, rigid disciplinary norms, hierarchical institutional structures and bureaucracies, and competitive, individualized modes of evaluating knowledge creation continue to produce stress and harm, projects like those featured in IA’s research and Public Humanities build communities of joy, care, expansive imagination, rigorous and excellent research, and critical hope around the globe.

Acknowledgments. The research conducted by the author for this article was funded by the Mellon Foundation in partnership with Kal Alston and Christina Preston. Lizbeth De La Cruz Santana, Alana Haynes Stein, D. Romo, and Gale Greenlee conducted research on engaged graduate scholars associated with the broader project. Earlier versions of the ideas presented in this article were shared in a report with Imagining America and a blog series for the Community-Based Global Learning Collaborative. Special thanks to all the partners involved in the above work.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: E.K.; Data curation: E.K.; Funding acquisition: E.K.; Investigation: E.K.; Methodology: E.K.; Project administration: E.K.; Writing – original draft: E.K.; Writing – review & editing: E.K.

References

- Baldwin, Davarian L. 2021. *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities*. New York: Bold Type Books.
- Boggs, Abigail, and Nick Mitchell. 2018. “Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus.” *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 2: 432–63.
- Buchanan, Blu, and Kush Patel. 2019. “Dodgy Scholars: Resisting the Neoliberal Academy.” *Public: A Journal of Imagining America* 5, no. 1: 1–10.
- Cann, Colette, and Eric DeMeulenaere. 2020. *The Activist Academic: Engaged Scholarship for Resistance, Hope and Social Change*. Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press.
- Cantor, Nancy. 2020. “Transforming the Academy: The Urgency of Recommitting Higher Education to the Public Good.” *Liberal Education* 106: n1–2.
- Choudry, Aziz. 2020. “Reflections on Academia, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge and Learning.” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 24, no. 1: 28–45.
- Cole, Rose M., and Walter F. Heinecke. 2018. “Higher Education after Neoliberalism: Student Activism as a Guiding Light.” *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 1: 90–116.
- Ellison, Julie, and Timothy Eatman. 2008. *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University*. Syracuse, NY: Imagining America.
- Ferguson, Roderick A. 2012. *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fine, Michelle. 2018. *Just Research in Contentious Times: Widening the Methodological Imagination*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Grant, Carl A., Ashley N. Woodson, and Michael J. Dumas, eds. 2020. *The Future is Black: Afropessimism, Fugitivity, and Radical Hope in Education*. London: Routledge.

- Hale, Charles R. 2008. *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Hooks, Bell. 1989. "Feminism and Black Women's Studies." *Sage* 6, no. 1: 54.
- Johnson, Matthew. 2020. *Undermining Racial Justice: How One University Embraced Inclusion and Inequality*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lee, Robert, Tristan Ahtone, Margaret Pearce, Kalen Goodluck, Geoff McGhee, Cody Leff, Katherine Lanpher, and Taryn Salinas. 2020. "Land-Grab Universities." *High Country News*, March 30.
- Maira, Sunaina. 2018. *Boycott!: The Academy and Justice for Palestine*, Vol. 4. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Martin, Elizabeth C., and Rachel E. Dwyer. 2021. "Financial Stress, Race, and Student Debt during the Great Recession." *Social Currents* 8, no. 5: 424–45.
- O'Meara, KerryAnn, Dawn Culpepper, and Lindsey Templeton. 2022. "Translating Equity-Minded Principles into Faculty Evaluation Reform." In *A Report of the American Council on Education*, 1–24. Washington, DC: ACE.
- Paperson, La. 2017. *A Third University Is Possible*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Patel, Leigh. 2021. *No Study Without Struggle: Confronting Settler Colonialism in Higher Education*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Peña, L. G. 2022. *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Sdvizhkov, Helen, Kathryn Van Zanen, Neeraja Aravamudan, and Elyse L. Aurbach. 2022. "A Framework to Understand and Address Barriers to Community-Engaged Scholarship and Public Engagement in Appointment, Promotion, and Tenure across Higher Education." *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 26, no. 3: 129–47.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, eds. 2018. *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View*. London: Routledge.
- Sudbury, Julia, and Margo Okazawa-Rey. 2015. *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change*. London: Routledge.
- Valenzuela, Angela. 2017. "Academia Cuauhtli: (Re)Locating the Spiritual, If Crooked, Path to Social Justice." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education: QSE*, 30, no. 10: 906–11.
- Williams, Bianca C., Dian D. Squire, and Frank A. Tuitt, eds. 2021. *Plantation Politics and Campus Rebellions: Power, Diversity, and the Emancipatory Struggle in Higher Education*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Cite this article: Kohl-Arenas, Erica. 2025. "Supporting Public Humanities at the Critical Intersections: An Imagining America Manifesto." *Public Humanities*, 1, e26, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.32>