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Public Humanities in the Reconstructed
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Abstract Colleges and universities that can withstand the fallout of the COVID-19 crisis will need to redouble their efforts to engage students in the kinds of intellectual and social experiences that cannot be attained remotely or in isolation. Public humanities, which promotes collaboration, civic and community engagement, and inter-institutional alliances, can be one such reparative force for the reconstructed university. This essay describes the work of graduate student researchers in an interdisciplinary public humanities seminar at Emory University who partnered with a large regional theater on a project involving dramaturgy and audience engagement for a spring 2020 production of Lynn Nottage's play *Sweat* (first performed in 2015). The graduate seminar and the project—both before and in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak—offer a compelling model for critical humanistic pedagogy and research that counteracts the isolation and insularity exacerbated by the pandemic.

Keywords COVID-19, public humanities, collaboration, pedagogy, theater

The four men, uneasy in their bodies, await the next moment in a fractured togetherness.

—Concluding stage direction of Lynn Nottage, *Sweat* (2018)

We picked a hell of a time to try to break the humanities out of their quarantine. In Spring 2020, Emory University piloted an interdisciplinary graduate seminar in public humanities. At the center of this course were four collaborative research projects that teams of humanities graduate students conducted with partner organizations throughout Atlanta. The goal of each project was to activate humanistic research skills, habits of mind, theoretical paradigms, and bodies of knowledge in untraditional contexts and situations, such as a large regional theater or a local nonprofit devoted to community

advocacy. We sought to generate what Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2019: xi, 4) calls “generous thinking,” which “rebuild[s] a relationship of trust between universities and the publics they are meant to serve” (xi) by cultivating a scholarly ethic of “listening over speaking, community over individualism, collaboration over competition” (4). The seminar was inspired by, and a contribution to, the burgeoning movement already underway to promote publicly engaged research and teaching across universities.¹

The novel coronavirus was not impressed with our plans. Where we encouraged collaboration to break the mold of solitary, proprietary research that structures the majority of scholarly activity in the humanities, it demanded isolation. Where we promoted site-specific civic engagement to extend the reach of humanities research, it demanded remote learning. Where we sought to build meaningful and durable ties between the university and other institutions with humanistic missions, it rendered even the campus inaccessible to us. And where we sought to combat the loneliness of graduate study by stimulating elements of play, surprise, humility, mutuality, and camaraderie, it generated a profound sense of fear, uncertainty, and loss. What could it possibly mean, in this dire situation, to take the humanities public when public space became an assemblage of toxic surfaces staging potentially deadly encounters with others?

Each collaborative research project in the seminar was significantly disrupted by the miserable dictates of the pandemic. Yet despite the near-ruination of our original plans, the model of public humanities has an even stronger rationale than it did in the halcyon pre-COVID-19 era. As those colleges and universities that can withstand the financial fallout of the crisis reassemble themselves once social proximation is no longer forbidden, they will need to redouble their efforts to engage students passionately in the kinds of intellectual and social experiences that cannot be attained remotely.

The work of one research team before and in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak offers a compelling model for this kind of critical humanistic pedagogy that combats our discipline’s paradigm of individualistic and solitary scholarship—characteristics exacerbated by the global pandemic. Graduate students Sophia Leonard, Makenzie Renee Fitzgerald, and Víctor Velázquez Antonio collaborated with Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre on a project involving dramaturgy and audience engagement for a production of Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2015 play *Sweat*. When the outbreak of COVID-19 made a live production of *Sweat* impossible, the students worked with the theater

to reimagine drama without a stage and to reconsider how to engage publics that are no longer able to convene *as* publics. The original project and its transformation from a live event into a city-wide virtual reading experience has affirmed for us that if the humanities are not to be even further marginalized in the reconstructed university, we must create opportunities for encounters with the documentary and expressive record of human experience to propel us into new kinds of socially meaningful experiences and cross-professional alliances. The work of repairing the damage done to the institutions that support artistic expression and humanistic interpretation begins, in the words of Sushil Sivaram (2019), when we “allow different institutional attitudes and imaginaries to seep into each other.”

A four-week run of *Sweat* through April and May, directed by Tinashe Kajese-Bolden, was set to conclude the Alliance Theatre’s 2019–2020 season. Set in Reading, Pennsylvania, between 2000 and 2008, *Sweat* tells the story of a group of workers at a steel-tubing plant whose lives are thrown into turmoil as the factory owners move their machinery to Mexico and suddenly lock out the remaining employees. Since it first premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in 2015, *Sweat* has been widely acclaimed for the precision and compassion with which Nottage depicts the profound consequences of deindustrialization in the United States—not only the economic consequences like sudden layoffs, untenable pay and benefit cuts, plant lockouts, and a precipitous decline in collective bargaining power, but also the social repercussions, like the fracturing of relationships among friends and loved ones, and among racial and ethnic groups differently impacted by the push and pull of global capital.² As critics have pointed out, *Sweat* channels a long history of politically conscious, realist drama in the United States, evoking the naturalist labor plays of Clifford Odets and Eugene O’Neill’s quintessential bar play *The Iceman Cometh* (1946).³ What distinguishes Nottage’s work from these earlier dramas, David Román explains, is her careful attention to the ways in which ethnicity, race, and gender complicate the present-day picture of the American class system (Mohler, McMahan, Román 2016: 91–92). In the original design for the project attached to the Alliance Theatre’s production of *Sweat*, students were to conduct research into the play’s historical and sociological milieu to inform production choices and to generate ideas for theatrical programs and multimedia content for the Alliance Theatre’s website. Once the play went live, students were to plan and facilitate community conversations and post-show talkbacks about the play’s themes and their

relevance to diverse audiences throughout Atlanta. One event in the works, for example, was a panel hosted in conjunction with Atlanta's National Center for Civil and Human Rights that would place the director in conversation with community partners working on issues of racial reconciliation, immigration, and labor and union organizing.

Sweat was born out of a spirit of “generous thinking” that also guided the design of our public humanities course. The script was informed by extensive collaborative research: for over two years beginning in January 2012, Nottage and Kate Whoriskey—a longtime collaborator of Nottage’s and the director of the original OSF production—travelled to Reading with a team of researchers, collecting stories from nearly one hundred residents including political leaders, union members and striking workers, people experiencing homelessness, schoolteachers, social workers, members of the local police department, and the Berks County chapter of United Way. The play’s dramatic action grew out of a conversation Nottage had with steel workers who had been locked out of their factory for a staggering ninety-two weeks.⁴ (In *Sweat*, the character Brucie has been unemployed for just as long and is in the throes of substance abuse and impoverishment.) Nottage has employed this immersive, collaborative research methodology across her writing—most notably in her first Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Ruined* (2007), which grew out of interviews with women refugees in Uganda, Somalia, Sudan, and Congo—and in her teaching in the theatre department at Columbia.⁵ Though *Sweat* has been performed on and off Broadway and on many regional and university stages, it has taken root in unconventional spaces as well. Shortly after *Sweat* closed at New York’s Public Theater in December 2016, the production team transported the show to Reading for a live performance and community talkback, and, in October 2018, the company began an eighteen-stop tour of the play throughout Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Actors from professional productions performed the play for free in churches, union halls, and social service centers, and each performance was followed by a community conversation, in which audience members shared stories of how the play’s themes resonated with their own experiences. The tour also included a robust schedule of lectures, story circles, community art projects, theater workshops, and discussion groups hosted in conjunction with local organizations, libraries, and artists.⁶ Doris Sommer (2014: 4) refers to the power of provocative artworks to promote social change by inspiring structured but “ungovernable” acts of collective interpretation. The unruly collaborative

spirit underpinning *Sweat*'s emergence as an interactive public arts project guided the work of the Emory/Alliance Theatre team.

"We live with a level of uncertainty in America that we haven't known, at least in my lifetime," (quoted in Foster n.d.) Nottage said in an interview about *Sweat*, and on Friday, March 13, that uncertainty engulfed the Alliance's operations. In suspending the remainder of its theatrical season, including the entire production of *Sweat*, the Alliance thus joined the cascade of closures, suspensions, and delays across the globe. Acting as an angry *deus ex machina*, the coronavirus laid bare and exploited all the hidden financial and organizational vulnerabilities of a seemingly thriving theater, in much the way that the lockout in *Sweat* throws the town of Reading into turmoil. In the weeks that followed the March 13 announcement, the Alliance staff faced the extraordinary challenge of conjuring a mission for a suddenly stageless theater, which they imagined as a site to promote healing and connectedness in a time of mourning and disconnection. After participating in an urgent brainstorming session with Alliance staff, the students quickly pivoted to researching how other theater companies internationally were working to engage audiences when their stages went dark.

By the beginning of April, the Alliance Theatre decided to move forward with a city-wide virtual "play club" for *Sweat* in place of a live production. For one week when the production would have been onstage, Nottage's script would be made available for free on the Alliance Theatre's website (with the publisher's permission) alongside a library of multimedia content to facilitate a dynamic reading experience. This content included a short guide with instructions on how to gather virtually for discussion, theater-making, and creative interpretation as well as commentary in response to *Sweat* from Atlanta artists and community organizations. The weeklong experience would also include two live virtual events: a Zoom panel spotlighting race, labor, and immigration in the play and a conversation between Kajese-Bolden and Pearl Cleage, the Alliance's playwright-in-residence, on the role of the arts in times of crisis. Throughout the week, participants would be encouraged to share their responses to the virtual experience of *Sweat* through community storytelling activities and social media engagement. Soon, a new goal emerged: to rethink what it means to make and interpret theatrical works by facilitating participatory, creative, and collaborative responses to the shared aesthetic object of *Sweat*.

Work on this new project was no substitute for the graduate students' original plans to watch their research come alive in a theatrical

production and associated community programming. But it did afford a meaningful chance to salvage and reframe some of their pre-COVID-19 research and critical thinking about the play and its reverberations. One group member spoke about the value of witnessing and becoming enfolded in the “different shades of grief” that the production team, director, and fellow students experienced in the wake of the play’s closure. Sivaram’s (2019) notion of institutional seepage activated by the public humanities entailed in this case not only a flow of knowledge and ideas but also a reciprocal sense of loss.

The semester’s unanticipated pivot also generated a space to reflect and chart one path forward for scholars through the long-term institutional damage wrought by the coronavirus shutdown. We envisage publicly engaged humanistic scholarship as a reparative force, rather than a niche experiment to be left behind while humanities departments try to reassemble old structures. For the inter-institutional goals of public humanities projects run precisely counter to the tidal pull of social distancing: collaboration over isolation, community engagement rather than remote learning, expanded professional and intellectual networks over knowledge produced in disciplinary and physical quarantines. On this last point, it is worth noting that public humanities is sometimes rationalized as part of an “alt-ac” strategy for expanding employment opportunities for humanists. Indeed, students on the project reported benefits in learning soft skills that may become professionally useful, including concise and accessible multi-modal writing, time management, problem-solving, teamwork, and—especially in light of the play’s cancellation—an understanding of the economic forces undergirding different professional and cultural realms. Yet the seminar projects were not designed with alt-ac career development in mind: they were research projects intended to activate traditional humanistic skills and habits of mind—research, critical thinking, and writing—and let them loose in a world that needs them. One of the students marveled that vital research conducted for a major professional theater looked and felt like the kind of work done to prepare for oral exams in English; she also reported feeling at times that she was learning about potential overlaps with the disciplines of oral history and journalism. For another student, the sense that a powerful institution trusted and depended on graduate students’ ideas and talents to realize their mission made her wonder where else her skills and talents might be valuable.

The students’ most profound takeaways, though, were intellectual and personal rather than professional. Each week, students in the

seminar met to compare notes across their projects and to discuss readings on topics such as the history of the humanities, notions of the public sphere and counterpublics, and case studies in publicly engaged humanistic scholarship. The seminar itself often felt more like a communal space to encourage and learn from one another than like the corrosively, if subtly, competitive environment of too many graduate seminars: it was a space to share ideas, plans, strategies, setbacks, fears, questions, revelations, and delight rather than to outsmart one's classmates. In promoting sociality and collaboration over what Christopher Newfield (2016: 144) calls the neoliberal university's injunction to "compete all the time," this model may also promote the mental health and well-being of a uniquely vulnerable cohort of students emerging from an unexpected, and in some cases traumatic, period of disconnection from humans beyond the narrowest circles of their isolated home spaces.

The seminar's social dynamic echoed and built on the collaborative, communal ethos of *Sweat* itself. The learning experience of this theatrical production was an act of cocreation reverberating across the social spectrum, in which workers in a deindustrialized town in Pennsylvania interpreted their own experience for a playwright who then shaped their perspectives into an aesthetic design; the students helped the director and production team at the Alliance Theatre reinterpret—via the interpretive choices of actors—those experiences for an audience in Atlanta (one that in this instance never materialized); the students then created their own structures for eliciting interpretive responses from communities of potential playgoers and readers of the script (for example, in community talkbacks, virtual discussions, and play clubs). We thus close one of many circles with the creation of this essay, which brings our own commitment to public humanities methodology to bear on the manifold meanings generated by Nottage's encounters with the workers of Reading. The most important links on this interpretive chain involve what one student referred to as "letting go," rather than doubling down on a theoretical perspective or research paradigm: releasing one's research or interpretation to prompt reflection and dialogue within other spheres of lived experience. Research, then, became a vehicle for staging public acts of interpretation rather than for the competitive production of novel scholarship that tends to undergird the publish-or-perish mentality in academia. Not only the ethos but the social uses of aesthetic interpretation were highlighted. Interpreting a play became a springboard for understanding social relations in the city in which the research was conducted and the play

was meant to be performed; the production, one student suggested, was not simply *Sweat* but “*Sweat in Atlanta*.”

As students and faculty in search of a more socially engaged model of humanistic learning during this time of social distancing, we find ourselves in a situation not unlike that of the badly bruised characters groping toward an unseen future at the end of the play: in the midst of an unfolding trauma exposing the instability of our social and economic world, we are awaiting the next moment after crisis in a state of “fractured togetherness” (Nottage 2018: 94). The whole project—before its significant transformation wrought by COVID-19 and after—constituted what one student referred to as an exercise in “leaning into uncertainty.” If the goal of scholarship is not simply to settle questions but to involve oneself in an ongoing intellectual conversation of vital social importance, then public humanities in its many forms and settings represents a powerful supplement to traditional formats for humanistic scholarship, even and especially in a time of crisis. As John Dewey (1929: 125, 129) wrote in his 1922 essay “Events and Meanings”—published three years after the H1N1 virus of 1918 was contained—“Solitary confinement is the last term in the prison house of man, and speech with our fellows is the beginning of any liberation from the jail of necessity . . . Apart from conversation, from discourse and communication, there is no thought and no meaning, only just events, dumb, preposterous, destructive.”

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Notes

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- 1 Our project sought to build on the long history of public-facing humanities work pioneered by museum-based art historians and public historians and more recently seen in public-facing work in newer fields, such as the medical/health humanities and environmental humanities. This work has been too frequently seen as ancillary rather than central to humanities disciplines but has recently begun to proliferate in colleges and universities in the United States and abroad.
- 2 Sherry Lee Linkon (2018: 55–94) places *Sweat* within the growing canon of “deindustrialization literature,” or contemporary literary, artistic, and cinematic works that depict the social consequences of the decline of manufacturing and industrial work in the global economy.
- 3 See Als 2016; Schulman 2017; Brantley 2017; and Mohler, McMahon, and Román 2016.
- 4 For more on the origin of *Sweat*, see Foster n.d; Miller 2016; and Reed and Nottage 2016.
- 5 For a description of Nottage’s immersive teaching, see Schulman 2017.
- 6 For more on the Public Theater tour, see Marks 2018 and Pochoda 2018.

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