



# Countermapping the Humanities

**Build, Bridge, Pilot, Repeat: Computational Engagement and Public Scholarship**

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Countermapping the Humanities leverages machine learning to engage 154 students, faculty, and community members from across NYC with ties to CUNY in a dialogue about how to cultivate effective public scholarship at the City University of New York. This pilot project is embedded within a larger suite of experimental research activities mapping and countermapping landscapes of public practice in the humanities at CUNY.

This report documents the purpose, process and findings of this project and offers possibilities for future work in research, teaching and higher ed policy.



**The Center  
for the  
Humanities**

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*A project of the Seminar on Public Engagement & Collaborative Research (2020-2023)  
Center for the Humanities, CUNY Graduate Center*

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## Introduction: About Countermapping the Humanities

82% of City University of New York (CUNY) students come from New York City, and 82% of CUNY graduates stay in NYC.<sup>1</sup> CUNY publics and NYC publics are braided publics with multifaceted and sometimes deeply contradictory interwoven world-senses: a whole public, but never a homogenous public. Through the Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research, CUNY deepens conversations with and accountability toward a vast group of diverse people who live, work and learn in NYC. Countermapping the Humanities is an experimental research project designed by Seminar participants to learn how scholar-activism is conceived, performed and supported at the Graduate Center and across CUNY's 25 campuses.

In order to collate community opinion on the stakes, state and aims of publicly engaged and activist scholarship in the humanities at CUNY, this pilot engaged 154 participants through Polis. Polis is a digital, conversational tool that blends human understanding, advanced statistics and machine-learning to achieve public consensus on fractious issues. The research design, analysis and this report seek to address the following questions:

- How does the CUNY research community advance public scholarship?
- Are our current public scholarship models sustainable and regenerative?
- Does our public scholarship promote equity within CUNY and across our city?
- What forms of research do our peers in our communities, neighborhoods and movements value most?

This pilot has surfaced opportunities for further exploration in our classrooms, in our boardrooms and across our city. The purpose of this report is to document the process, summarize initial findings and invite new collaborators to engage with the methods and learnings. For more information about Countermapping the Humanities, please visit the project archive, where you will find knowledge artifacts like daily data hauls and how-to videos as well as downloadable resources such as public humanities base maps, lesson plans, daily data hauls, and an IRB handbook for humanists conducting research with human subjects: [www.centerforthehumanities.org](http://www.centerforthehumanities.org).

## Doing Public Humanities @ CUNY, “The People’s University”

When held accountable to its highest promise, public higher education can be an expression and an engine of a healthy democracy, wherein the barriers to mass participation in nonelectoral and electoral politics might be swept away, replaced by strategic access points for diverse, non-exclusionary and informed publics to participate in a range of decision-making, leadership and knowledge niches. Completing the feedback loop (to paraphrase CUNY labor and education scholar Steve Brier), it is public higher education that produces and reproduces these diverse, non-exclusionary and informed publics. These publics are capable of sorting fact from fiction, choosing common good over private gain and recognizing science as distinct from propaganda in order to participate fully in the shape their lives, cities and worlds take.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cuny.edu/about/>, accessed Apr 26, 2022

The many mixed-media, multi-scalar public projects emerging from the Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research are conceived of and carried out with the support of a transdisciplinary cohort that connects cultural agents across sectors for 2-4 years of sustained discourse. Facilitated by the Center for the Humanities at the CUNY Graduate Center, three such cohorts have produced over 100 publicly engaged projects across all five boroughs and supported over 60 graduate students and faculty fellows from across all 25 CUNY campuses since 2014. These initiatives have led us to interrogate conventional understandings of “the public” and “public good,” working in concert with many diverse publics to hone a critical and constructive approach to (re)making public higher graduate education. We have done so by testing new mechanisms for responsive and engaged public scholarship with explicit social justice aims in situ and on location around NYC.

Our work has shifted both the culture of and the support structures that bolster public scholarship at the GC and CUNY. We have also built capacity across our community of public partners to create and integrate research that speaks to the rhythm of rupture, struggle, and repair occurring in everyday life. For example, urgent research coproduced through community partnerships has fed into the design and implementation of projects such as:

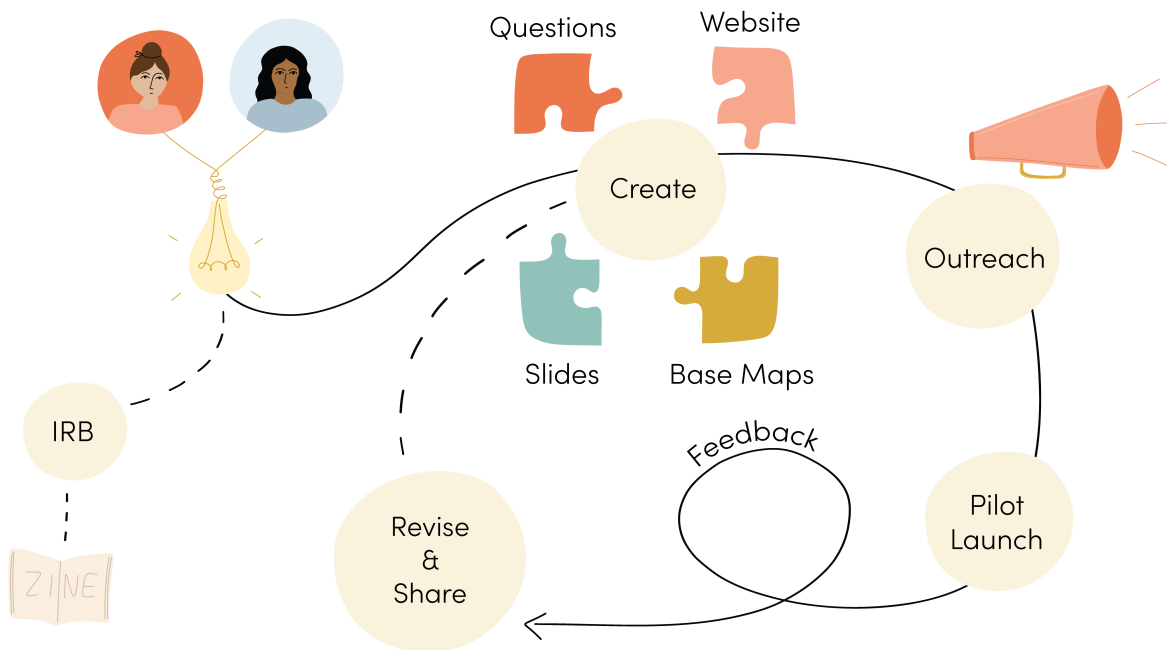
- Community gardens vouchsafing Indigenous foodways
- Oral histories and radical archives stewarded by land-use activists
- Walking tours and counter-cartographies of neighborhoods
- Video games that engage local activists on issues related to ocean pollution on location in Jamarica Bay
- AR/VR technology to support pediatric patient care in hospital settings
- Open classrooms to amplify the work of Black women transforming education today
- Climate justice hubs that connect grassroots EJ communities with CUNY research, resources, and talent
- K-12 education policies presented and advanced by youth leadership in collaboration with youth allies

These projects take seriously the suggestion that public graduate education and research can and should be civic assets bettering lives across the city through both introspection and action.

# Contents

Process Meets Purpose .....	5
Key Questions and Outcomes .....	5
Collaborative Project Design and Methods .....	6
Crowdsourcing Civic Dialogue and Inquiry: Polis & Pilot Overview .....	7
Reflections, Outcomes, and Next Steps .....	12
About the Seminar on Public Engagement & Collaborative Research .....	13
Director’s Afterward .....	14
Acknowledgements .....	17

## Project at a Glance



*Overview of the project steps: Initial collaboration and conceptualization; IRB process (and subsequent Zine publication), creation of core survey questions, website, slide deck, and base maps; outreach via blog posts and presentations; launching the pilot; receiving and incorporating feedback; and sharing the revised version for data collection. The results and learnings from this project will continue to feed back into future work using this approach as an iterative process.*

## Process Meets Purpose

Countermapping the Humanities (2020–2022) prioritizes two principles in both the research itself and the elaboration of our process. The first is that knowledge, resources and opportunities coming out of this project belong to CUNY and NYC publics who coproduced this work through their generous engagement. The second is that healthy civic dialogue requires respectful inquiry, not universal agreement.

The conceit of Countermapping the Humanities was formed during conversations with the Computational Democracy Project, the nonprofit that facilitates Polis, an open-source machine learning tool designed to facilitate asynchronous dialogues among anonymous participants. With in-kind support from the Computational Democracy Project, the research team used Polis to explore how the tools of machine learning can facilitate new civic dialogues about the nature and purpose of public scholarship. Countermapping the Humanities was designed, implemented and analyzed by 2020–2022 Seminar fellows Kristine Riley (Principal Investigator) and Nga Than (Lead Researcher), with support from Seminar director Kendra Sullivan.

The research team invited public input at all stages of project development, from initial design and recruitment through analysis and sharing of research findings. The pilot involved a 12-month planning phase and a 7-month survey implementation period. The process of building consensus, evaluating the value of the project for our many publics and developing tools and resources has occurred throughout the life of the project and continues to generate new materials. The project has required cross-training, articulation and translation of disciplinary standards as well as consensus-building between collaborators. These activities have yielded capacity-building resources for the CUNY research community and the broader field.

In addition to the 154 individuals who participated in the Polis survey, the research team engaged faculty, students and community members to make every stage of the research process accessible. The project's [website](#) hosted knowledge artifacts intended for public use, including the survey, complementary teaching resources designed by Riley and humanities mapping and spatialization activities designed by geographer Aurash Kwarazhad to help CUNY scholar-activists engage with the project's core principles through critical, creative praxis that combined place-based and digital modalities of engagement.

## Key Questions and Outcomes

Countermapping the Humanities has enabled the Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research to redefine the “public humanities” and better plan for the future of engaged scholarship at CUNY and across NYC. The Polis platform's built-in analytics helped to identify specific areas of consensus, polarity and uncertainty, organizing 124 of the 154 participants into various opinion groups. These preliminary findings have surfaced key questions for further exploration and identified promising lines of inquiry for future research.

The following key takeaways and emerging questions represent the research team’s analysis as well as contributions made by participants through their contributions to the survey.

Key Takeaway	Sample Emerging Question
Many participants agreed that CUNY has a responsibility to serve its communities.	What is the university’s role in providing community resources?
Many participants agreed that the public humanities is important to the future of public higher education.	How is CUNY un/successful at supporting these values?
Many participants disagreed about the relationship between the public humanities and social justice.	Can or should public humanities research be value-neutral?
Many participants indicated uncertainty about statements and questions originating from other participants.	Where and how can machine learning address polarization in civic dialogue?
Participant statements differentiated between the value of lived experience and broader knowledge production.	Does the university reward lived experience?

These key takeaways and questions offer informed points of departure for CUNY research and policy design. They invite greater consideration and more extended dialogues about where and how our institution engages in social justice initiatives and holds itself accountable to our publics.

## Collaborative Project Design and Methods

Countermapping the Humanities explores emergent questions about the possibilities of computational research as part of a layered approach to interdisciplinary public humanities praxis. Integrating the core principles public scholarship—inclusivity, participation and accessibility—the research team designed a new area of inquiry to apply the open-source tool Polis. Through iterative discussion, deep dives into the literature and reflections on the work of present and past Seminar fellows, this project surfaced three themes that exemplify CUNY’s vision, mission and spirit:

1. Scholar-activism, which challenges systems of oppression and connects one’s academic work to the pursuit of social welfare.
2. Public higher education, which produces knowledges that serve the public and acts as a site of organizing for social movements.
3. Knowledge produced from lived experience, which disrupts the academy’s traditions of neutrality and objectivity to center diverse publics.

The above themes are critical to the work of the Seminar, where research fellows focus on topics such as the grassroots environmental justice ecosystem in NYC, the preservation and proliferation of migrant archives during times of crisis, and how to teach and interpret the cultural, economic and political fallout of Puerto Rican debt through mass-media podcasts, public syllabi and student fellowships, to name a very few. Each of these issues became more urgent and complex during the pandemic, even as pre-pandemic modes of participatory research became unsafe and impossible to implement.

In this context, machine learning introduced a new way for CUNY public scholars to advance projects and build on existing relationships while safely engaging with our collaborators on questions of value, purpose, impact and viability. The project was sparked by a suggestion from Seminar faculty participant Michael Menser, who coordinated a cohort teach-in with Darshana Narayanan of the Computational Democracy Project. At the time, Menser was developing a Polis survey to assess and address student food precarity at Brooklyn College during COVID-19—a project that has resulted in the formation of an interdisciplinary foodways faculty group working across CUNY to support food justice studies: a campus kitchen, food pantry, and vegetable garden, and a suite of classes taught by urban gardeners at Brooklyn College.

Another early Polis project studied the twin crises of racism and the pandemic in New York City public schools from parents' perspectives. These early Polis projects demonstrated the fluid movement of discourse between virtual and physical spaces, digital and proximate communities, the direct impact of open-source, community-determined data collection and the material conditions of the participants' lives.

## **Crowdsourcing Civic Dialogue and Inquiry: Polis & Pilot Overview**

Wedding data science, public deliberation, and democratic process, the Computational Democracy Project develops open tools and software for self-governance based on the belief that that collective human intelligence can be gathered and synthesized through inclusive methods in machine learning that tend the fires of the public good. This organization works with government organizations and NGOs to engage participants through and interpret findings from Polis, a real-time system for gathering, analyzing, and understanding what large groups of people think in their own words, enabled by advanced statistics and machine learning. Narayanan was keen to pilot Polis with a research cohort consisting predominantly of humanists and social scientists to learn about the possibilities of the research tool in this arena.

*"This project has the potential to open up a whole new space for Polis and provide a powerful new tool to researchers in the digital humanities and the social sciences. This project also resonates strongly with my personal commitment to breaking down disciplinary silos, moving information into the public realm, and increasing public participation in decision-making."<sup>2</sup>*

**- Dr. Darshana Narayanan, Computational Democracy Project Liaison**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://humanitiesforall.org/blog/countermapping-the-humanities-cuny-a-public-humanities-study>

A version of Polis was famously deployed in resolving policy between the traditional taxi fleets licensed by the Taiwanese government, Uber Inc. and Ministry of Transformation in Taipei, resulting in concessions on all sides that arguably enhanced taxi driver and rider experiences. The survey encouraged users to begin all agree/disagree statements with “my feeling is,” and all parties were encouraged to share and invite responses to their feelings in turn. One observed result was that the survey making, taking and interpolating process allowed the Ministry of Transportation to empathize with diverse stakeholder concerns.<sup>3</sup>

If cultivating empathy among polarized publics is a primary concern of the humanities in contemporary society, what might humanists learn from democratic computing? Working closely with Narayanan, the research team crafted a Polis conversation for this new area of inquiry. Underlying the dialogue designed for survey participants, the team sought to explore key questions such as:

- Within the framework of public scholarship, what forms of new knowledge are generated, recognized, and rewarded in higher education?
- How can collaborative meaning-making processes (including creative/introspective activities as well as embodied endeavors like gardening, caretaking, and decision making) taking place in public locations across the city support empathic connection across difference, enabling critical and constructive debate in everyday spaces of discourse and action?
- Do these processes also have the potential to advance critical inquiry? To what end?
- How might partnerships like the one between Polis and the Seminar for Public Engagement facilitate more bidirectional design, accountability and evaluation in interdisciplinary public scholarship?
- Should humanities centers and institutes play a bigger role in connecting and resourcing intra- and extramural public thinkers, actors, and makers?
- Can a conversation platform function as an objective survey and an advocacy tool? Can research function this way?

These questions informed all phases of our research, from planning and design to implementation, analysis and dissemination.

Polis is survey-based. Each campaign begins with a set of agree-disagree statements that determine demographics and sort participant avatars into like-minded groups. Participants are invited to comment on the statements presented and to add new statements to the survey. The final survey is an accretion of views and opinions, focusing on what Polis practitioners call coherence, or rough consensus; not convergence, or coordinated consensus (literally plotted on coordinates). Rough consensus is something like the sense of a group, not its precise position in an argument. The goal of the platform is not to bring two sides of an argument together, but rather to identify and follow the narrow path that runs the edge between two points of view. It aims not to change anyone’s mind, but to change everyone’s direction.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://blog.pol.is/uber-responds-to-vtaiwans-coherent-blended-volition-3e9b75102b9b>

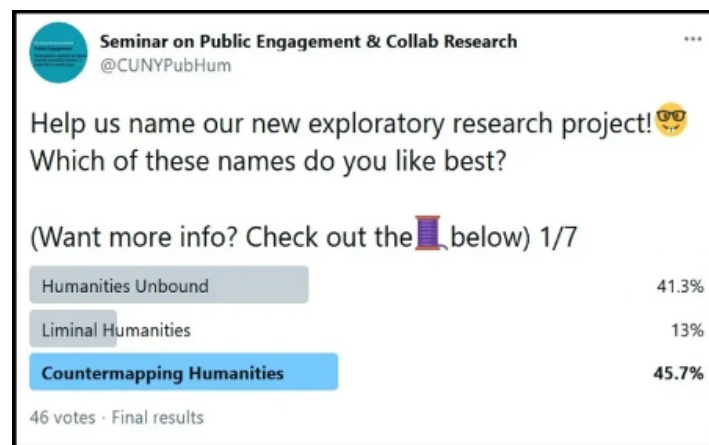


Unlike traditional survey research, the Polis model creates opportunities for participants to be collaborators in knowledge production and offers a meaningful way to engage with participants in knowledge production by making participants co-creators of survey questions in ways that fundamentally shape Polis conversations and outcomes. Polis creators articulated a research question that the Seminar team might make interdisciplinary inquiries into: namely, how might this survey-based approach to bridging polarized values fit into public discourse in the humanities? By approaching research from another angle, might the new tool inspire humanists to answer heretofore unasked questions? Might the humanists in turn illuminate new applications of the platform in the minds of Polis creators?

In short, we wondered what we might teach each other by working together across knowledge niches. The Polis team offered to consult with the Center for two years at a small fraction of their normal fee, and Dr. Narayanan subsequently provided two virtual trainings aimed to help Seminar participants **facilitate community conversation and advocacy**.

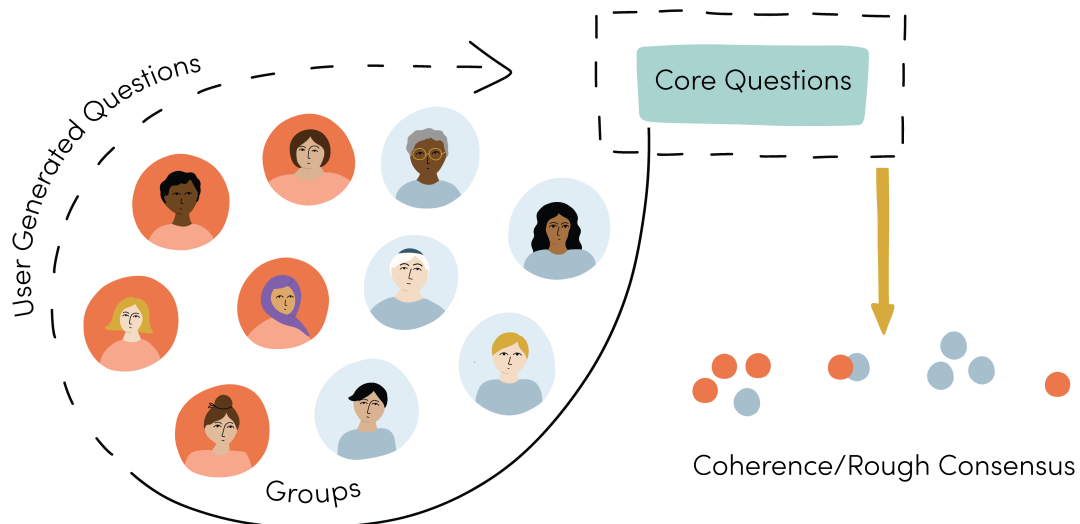
Countermapping the Humanities included CUNY publics as primary collaborators from the earliest stages. For example, the research team utilized Twitter (@CUNYPubHum) to poll the Seminar's social network on three potential titles. As part of the engagement strategy, threads invited other CUNY humanities accounts to take the survey, while also highlighting the innovative work of several of the centers and initiatives across CUNY campuses. Over the course of five days, the poll made thousands of unique impressions and facilitated hundreds of engagements.

## A Public Effort



*The research team utilized a Twitter poll to select the project title.*

## Polis Process Overview



*Visual depiction of the data collection process using Polis. A core set of agree/disagree statements divide respondents into two groups. Participants can add statements to the list of core questions. The data creates coherence/rough consensus rather than consensus, retaining the individualism of participants.*

The PI and Lead Researcher Kristine Riley managed the survey's launch and recruitment with support from staff members at the Center. Participants were primarily recruited through the Center's mailing lists and social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Outreach also included two supplemental sampling strategies: the first to activate people already engaged with the Center's projects and the second to increase multiple metrics of participant diversity. A purposive sampling strategy was used to engage CUNY community members who had attended a prior Center event (the Center has an active list of 80,000 subscribers). The team focused additionally on colleagues who had applied for the Center's CUNY Adjunct Incubator (CAI) in the past.

In alignment with the Seminar's mission to support contingent, part-time, and graduate student instructors, the research team developed recruitment resources for adjunct classrooms and actively recruited from CAI alumni groups. The team also chose to foreground CUNY's adjunct constituencies, because CUNY contingent faculty "combine traditionally siloed bodies of knowledge in community-engaged, action-oriented scholarship in spite of unjust labor conditions," and "many of these projects have implications for pedagogy and critical public scholarship," in the words of political scientist and CUNY educator Celina Su.

A second strategy of targeted sampling<sup>4</sup> was used to outreach directly to humanities departments at one of CUNY's undergraduate senior colleges with several centers and initiatives aligned with the project's goals. At the end of the survey, Riley coded and analyzed the outcomes from project-specific strategies to complement the analysis automatically generated by Polis.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/hs/pubhealth/p8462/misc/watters\\_lecture\\_04.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/hs/pubhealth/p8462/misc/watters_lecture_04.pdf)

Again, Polis's automated analysis allowed researchers to dedicate time to improving participation; however, it was important not to rely solely on Polis's analysis when assessing the project's outcomes. Researcher criticality and knowledge from lived experience of CUNY publics are essential for theorizing and making sense of the findings from Polis's reports. The parallel strategies of human and machine interpretation provided novel insights, demonstrating the utility of such tools in public research.

Piloting a survey can be a useful step in any research project, and it is particularly essential when experimenting with a new method or design. Social scientists sometimes test and retest survey questions many times to assess how participants, each with unique backgrounds and experiences, may interpret the aims of specific questions. This was particularly important for Countermapping the Humanities for a few reasons:

1. **Polis was designed to facilitate conversations, which is different from traditional survey research**, so using the platform for (quasi-)empirical research was a new experiment.
2. **Instead of answering questions, participants vote "yes," "no" or "pass" on statements**, and the limited choices are meant to highlight areas of consensus and polarization.
3. **Participants can submit their own statements for future participants and grow the conversation**, whereas traditional surveys are typically standardized across participants and don't include questions from other participants.
4. **Polis' interface is new and not commonly used (yet!)**, and what may seem intuitive to its creators or previous users can be confusing for new users.

Therefore, the pilot aimed to gauge not only the **quality of the original seed statements**, but also how potential participants would respond to a **relatively unknown survey platform**. In anticipation of how these technological innovations could impact overall engagement, the survey was piloted with current Seminar fellows. Though the small pool was not necessarily representative of the full diversity of the project's intended participants, the fellows are part of CUNY public humanities networks that extended beyond the GC and university system itself.

A debrief was held to collect feedback from 9 fellows, who were asked:

1. Did participants interpret the seed statements similarly to researchers' original intent?
2. How easy or difficult was it to navigate Polis' interface?
3. Were participants motivated to submit their own statements? (More importantly, did they even understand that they could and how to do so?)
4. To what degree do researchers need to moderate, and/or paraphrase participant statements?
5. Should there be guidelines set for moderating statements (both to be inclusive as well as scientifically sound)? If so, what should they be?

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<sup>5</sup> [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01757.x?casa\\_token=Nap7uf9XqDgAAAAA:D82C79EG\\_yGP9L8uKwP4xfuRgR5lShFOYx5HczjgEeyiHtgg2NwKm21K15lyYWMc5YozkW\\_\\_\\_WcpZB0](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01757.x?casa_token=Nap7uf9XqDgAAAAA:D82C79EG_yGP9L8uKwP4xfuRgR5lShFOYx5HczjgEeyiHtgg2NwKm21K15lyYWMc5YozkW___WcpZB0)

<sup>6</sup> [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4614-3876-2\\_7](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4614-3876-2_7)

In general, the participants felt that the seed statements were self-explanatory. However, the user interface of Polis needed further explanation. Without additional explanation to participants about how the survey worked, fellows thought potential participants might get confused and either not participate at all, not finish the survey or not input their own statements. They suggested creating a short video to explain how to take the survey and what motivated the research.

### Expanding the Digital Toolbox



*The pilot debrief revealed future participants may need more intensive guidance on how—and why—to take the survey. The Seminar commissioned an instructional video to support participation.*

The pilot debrief revealed that future participants may need more intensive guidance on how—and why—to take the survey. In response, the Seminar commissioned an instructional video to support participation in the survey. The video was inspired by “NYC Parents Speak Out,” a Polis campaign led by Dr. Wendy Luttrell and her team in the urban education program at the GC. The Countermapping the Humanities video was created by Ahmed Soliman, an undergraduate colleague at CUNY’s Borough of Manhattan Community College.

### Reflections, Outcomes, and Next Steps

As public scholarship continues to dismantle the barriers between academe and community, researchers can use digital tools like Polis to make knowledge production a more creative, inclusive, accessible and collaborative process. In this case, Polis enabled the research team to allocate limited researcher time to essential early-stage details, knowing certain analyses would be automatically generated by the platform’s algorithm later. Overall, piloting the survey led to new and refined strategies for the survey design, website and participant recruitment, helping the research team anticipate challenges and make strategic decisions about the project as a whole.

Knowledge artifacts produced along the way remain resources for public use—and we hope future scholars will find key resources, weekly data downloads and reports, and much more archived on the Center for the Humanities website. The goal of our project outputs, including the present report, is to share our research process with CUNY publics, inform decision-makers in administration about the perceived and actual value of this type of work, and inspire public scholars to leverage our process and findings to enrich interdisciplinary research within and beyond the humanities.

## About the Seminar on Public Engagement & Collaborative Research

The Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research (Center for the Humanities, CUNY Graduate Center) has served as an incubator for public humanities projects, partnerships and research with a social justice thrust since 2014. Every two to four years, a cohort of 20 to 40 CUNY students, faculty, and NYC collaborators from civic, cultural and activist spheres came together to devise community-led, project-based research, pedagogy and creative activities.

As artist, scholar and faculty fellow Chloë Bass puts it, “The Seminar on Public Engagement offers an opportunity that should be common throughout CUNY, yet sadly, for the most part, isn’t: the chance to connect with like-minded colleagues who work beyond the siloed bubbles of independent academic or activist fields. The work of the Seminar on Public Engagement, its ability to bring together amazing thinkers, as well as to make public that work to a diversity of audiences within CUNY and beyond, very much inspired the work of creating Social Practice CUNY, the cross-CUNY, Mellon-funded program that Gregory Sholette (a former faculty co-lead for the Seminar on Public Engagement) and I co-direct. As I see it, the Seminar is valuable both in the moment and well-beyond, and has led to so many funding opportunities, conversational opportunities, and flexible models for nimble, relevant work for the CUNY community. The academic calendar, systems, and ways of working almost never allow for this, even when we claim to want to work with publics who may not be on our schedule, or speaking in our same voice. The Seminar is a gift.”

In terms of “accounting,” in just a few years, the Seminar produced over 100 publicly engaged projects and over 800 public events ranging from direct actions to political education workshops to dance and theatrical performances. It also produced 15 full-length publications; launched 12 digital, interpretive platforms and public syllabi; curated 5 exhibitions; seeded 3 community gardens; initiated, processed, and/or preserved dozens of community archives; provided working groups with time, space and tools; and functioned as an incubator that funded the public scholarship of 40 contingent faculty (adjuncts) over the last 8 years. Working together with over 100 public partners, this transdisciplinary, cross-sectoral community of practice has expanded humanities praxes at CUNY and across NYC, bolstering folks in their efforts to strengthen the social, cultural and material collectives to which they belong through the production of project-based public research.

These projects make possible what William Paulson referred to as the “enlarged humanities.”<sup>7</sup> The enlarged humanities are a suite of practices that remake for the better the cultural and material conditions of participants’ lives—at least for the duration of the project and, with enough luck and funding, a little longer. The seminar is organized around the principle that widespread and well-resourced participation in the enlarged humanities is one goal of public scholarship and a fair measure of a society’s capacities to nourish just and livable worlds.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801487309/literary-culture-in-a-world-transformed/#bookTabs=1>

## Director's Afterward

"What should we do with what we know now," strikes me as a very good way to describe how I often feel at the "end" of any public research project. They are iterative, progressive and open-ended journeys that surface empathy and cultivate social responsibility. This expanded sense of empathy and responsibility ensures social research is a never-ending cycle of objective, reflective, interpretive and decisional processes. For me, Countermapping the Humanities has furthered these learning revolutions and deepened by commitment to the public humanities.

The public humanities are an evolving field of study and a suite of tools that support the production of collaborative knowledge "on location," in peoples' lived lives within and beyond the university. More than just academic interdisciplinarity, many public humanists see research as vital to the continuation of public life. The public humanities is an existential concern that calls into question some fundamental assumptions about the public, the public university, cultural authority and the distribution of power across social, racial and geographical lines. A public humanities approach to scholarship is one that assumes and organizes its research around the belief that valuable theory is never limited to university contexts, but is also always unfolding anywhere people gather to better grapple with, respond to and create anew their shared realities.

So, what is the role of the university-affiliated public humanist? To create horizontal and bidirectional pathways that connect and resource knowledge actors and niches evolving across sectors, honing modes of working collaboratively that erode notions of "inside" and "outside" through knowledge creation, maintenance—or preservation, and circulation. To gather and redistribute resources to extra-institutional actors.

Antonio Gramsci has called these extra-institutional actors "organic intellectuals." In his estimation, organic intellectuals are busy developing necessary social analysis outside and alongside the university, rigorously whittling what he termed "folk wisdom" and "common sense" into a toolkit of critical strategies that have the power to change the material conditions of their politic spheres. Mindy Thompson Fullilove might call such knowledge actors "working class intellectuals." Paula Gunn Allen might describe them as Indigenous or feminist practitioners analyzing everyday life from outside patriarchal, colonial frameworks of the university system, thereby breaking them down and building them back more with a more careful, relational and intersectional approach to operations. Doris Sommer, in her work with Antanas Mockus, refers to them as "cultural agents," after Frederick Schiller, shifting the politics of the possible through mass participation in cultural production. Stanley Aranowitz and Henri Giroux use the term "transformative intellectuals" to describe them. I might argue that it takes two (or more) elements: transformation and collaboration.

Transformative intellectuals add, subtract, and complicate received knowledge as well as the social structures that consolidate power through knowledge production and fortification, such as the university. Lots of people have lots of different ways of naming such thinkers. The convention of naming, of finding a name for a person or a group of people who exist and whose knowledge cultures proliferate without labels, may seem arbitrary, reductive, or even extractive at first glance. But naming it is a step in the direction of codifying extramural

contributions to collective intellection—compensating and rewarding the impact activist knowledge has on critical thought, and vice versa.

Feminist, immigrant, scholar, activist, and faculty fellow Ángeles Donoso Macaya asks: “Can the public university create an archive ‘in common’ with the communities it serves? What would this archive in common look? How does it operate?” Donoso Macaya has facilitated Archives in Common (AiC) since 2020 as part of the Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research in collaboration with La Morada restaurant, which is owned and run by Antonio Saavedra, chef Natalia Méndez and their children, Yajaira, Marco and Carolina. AiC is an activist research project radically situated in the space-time of the pandemic as lived in the South Bronx. She writes, “I wouldn’t describe Archives in Common (AiC) as a research project, mainly because one of the things that AiC has attempted to do is to devise ways of sharing and disseminating knowledges and ways of doing things that already exist ‘out there,’ in spaces like community gardens and mutual aid kitchens. AiC has been able to do this, I think, because of the plasticity of the Seminar (I mean the Seminar has been able to adapt with the projects but also to push against the inertia and the fixed structures of a university like CUNY).”

Donoso Macaya shares the example of *Las hermanas de la milpa/The sisters of the milpa*, a cookbook conceived by chefs Saavedra and Méndez. This text seeks to disseminate Indigenous knowledges and practices both within and beyond the walls of the university, using the resources made available by programs like the Seminar. “After many months of conversations, of working together, of doing mutual aid,” writes Donoso Macaya, “my community partners (the Saavedras, owners of La Morada) and I were able to formulate an ‘archive’ that was not so much a repository of documents kept behind doors, but more like a practice—one that has allowed the Saavedras to create, facilitate and put forward an array of initiatives, from workshops centering medicinal herbs to Indigenous cookbooks, expanding the ways of conceptualizing and doing mutual aid.”

This mode of more-than-research attunes and transforms communities and universities alike. It is one early step in the process of what I see as the function of the future university: to be a radical redistributor of resources, power, and authority foregrounding humanistic ideals such as civic, democratic engagement, deep listening, an orientation toward equity and justice and a deep respect for the dignity of human and nonhuman life. It is the preoccupation of many public humanists to better attune their research to the wisdom generated by everyday people navigating daily struggle: to locate, as Thompson Fullilove has said, themselves in struggle and to develop theory from the standpoint of immersion. And it was in this critical-discursive landscape that *Countermapping the Humanities* was conceived.

This project then reflects upon a moment in time delimited on both sides by the start and end of a fellowship cycle—in the midst of an ongoing pandemic. It was developed and carried out by Kristine Riley and Nga Than during academic years 2020–2021 and 2021–2022. This report was drafted by Riley and Than and prepared for publication by Kendra Sullivan with support from Erica Machulak and Sophia van Hees of the Hikma Collective. Working with consultants codifies the reality that scholars need support when striving to prepare and share findings that exceed their expertise, to stretch their disciplinary comfort zones and to resonate with more pluralistic readerships than those to which their networks offer ready access.

To close, Countermapping the Humanities sought to better understand the role of public humanities scholarship at CUNY and inspire strategies for emerging and early career activist-scholars pursuing academic pathways and projects that engage with the public in all stages of development and dissemination. The concept and the inquiry were inspired by work across three different Seminar cohorts which Sullivan facilitated from fall of 2014 through spring of 2023. Polis has become a reflective tool suggesting possible futures for this work.

The project's reflections and findings are by no means comprehensive and should not be taken as prescriptive or absolute; they are meant to help inform and guide innovation in the public humanities at CUNY and hypothesize possible next steps along the path to institutionalization.

Countermapping the Humanities, and this report, are works in process. In the spirit of collaborative scholarship, we share in the hopes that what remains unfinished here might be picked up with others we have not yet met or worked with elsewhere. In fact, I am standing by!



Kendra Sullivan



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