

Forum

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Walking the Semipublic Talk

TO THE EDITOR:

I almost wish I hadn't read the collection of essays "The Semipublic Intellectual: Academia, Criticism, and the Internet Age" in the March 2015 issue (130.2 [2015]: 439–87). Not one of the articles actually walks the talk. They all talk about the "public" without describing any real-time experience of working with people outside academe, except in the traditional relationship between writers and editors. What happened to the public humanists heralded by Julie Ellison in her *PMLA* guest column of March 2013 ("The New Public Humanists" [128.2 (2013): 289–98])? If academics really want to make a difference, they should get out of their offices and connect with their local communities. There are many ways college professors can use their skills in real time with real people, without hindering their chances for tenure or professional success. They might teach English literature in a prison, lead a writing workshop for kids, serve as a literacy volunteer, or simply take one hour a week to mentor a struggling fourth grader in a public school. Ellison's article provides fascinating examples of people working in the interstices of academia, community service, art, and educational outreach.

Instead of defending obscurity and applauding the ability to "cross ... over without selling out" (477, 474), a new kind of academic citizen would pursue "clarity, inclusivity, and consideration" not only in writing but also in life (477). Given that the United States has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the developed world, perhaps it is time for academics to think about helping people other than themselves. That, to me, is a better way to create "impact" in our world. And who knows, it might teach us something about clear writing and humility, too.

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