BLOG POST

Making the Covert Public

By Elizabeth Tavares | June 15, 2021
In the spring of 2021, the US continued to suffer from the effects of the global coronavirus pandemic and the doors remained shut on my two primary places of play: the classroom and the theatre. As a scholar and teacher of early English performance, the classroom challenges were greater than facilitating digital annotation of readings or proctoring exams by way of the university’s content management system. When so much of the teaching of theatre is about how to read the blueprint that is the playtext—interpreting the narrative’s journey as a “map and not a tracing,” to borrow Liz Tomlin’s phrase —having bodies move in and reshape a room to suit the warrants of dialogue and stage direction is not only best, but best practice. Pivoting to a synchronous online environment meant that, in order to cultivate any sense of space or embodiment, inevitably in the cards would be a request of students to relinquish a privacy they owed to no one—a request with the potential to unwittingly reveal privileges of class, ability, gender, and race. I had not appreciated until now the extent to which the basic technology of the shared classroom neutralized some problematic gulfs of privilege.

Unwilling to make the decision for students whether to sacrifice that privacy, I was still faced with the question of how students were to play with seventeenth-century texts and each other in my synchronous online classroom. Having long been animated by what Shawn M. Bullock and Andrea J. Sator call “maker pedagogy,” I was also unwilling to ask students to create something that had no bearing on the kinds of work they would be asked to do in their professional lives; college is the “real world.” This maker approach emphasizes establishing a final course goal that mirrors those deliverables typically asked of experts in the relevant
profession; the steps of design and execution of that deliverable are these assessed
tasks of the course. (A bibliography of pedagogy resources and teaching
instruments <https://adhc.lib.ua.edu/astrea/course/> used were published
alongside the podcast.)

What evolved was an advanced undergraduate literature course focused on
bringing an early playwright’s work to a public through another kind of research-
based performance: a podcast. Rather than a traditional deliverable such as an
article-length research essay, students were asked to make a podcast about the
seventeenth-century English poet Aphra Behn. Author
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDfYS0_HTWA>, spy
<https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/aphra-behn-memoirs-of-a-shee-spy/>, political propagandist <http://stuarts-online.com/resources/films/aphra-behn-poetry-and-the-crisis-of-stuart-monarchy/>, Behn (1640–1689) was one of
the first English women to earn a living by her pen. Set against the tumultuous
backdrop of the English Civil Wars, expanding transatlantic slave trade, and
settler colonialism in the Americas, Behn’s work engages with frankness and
complexity a range of topics, from gender identity to political power. Using as its
occasion the 350th anniversary of the first performance
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2020.1748806> of the first public
performance of a work by Behn, each of the seven podcast episodes survey major
trends across translations of romances and scientific texts, timely plays, erotic
poetry, and an anti-slavery novella. Researched, written, and produced by
University of Alabama undergraduates, this limited series provides the non-
aademic public with a primer to one of the most influential writers in English
you’ve never heard of.

As Devori Kimbro, Michael Noschka, and Geoffrey Way
<https://doi.org/10.3390/h8020067> contend, podcasting “is a vibrant poetic
medium” in the Greek sense of poeisis, “to make,” due to its capacity to facilitate
the analytical muscles of curation. This was a way of leaning into the
opportunities afforded by a synchronous online learning environment, rather than
trying to fit the square peg of Zoom into the round hole of performance
instruction, or disregarding questions of privacy and equity. Podcast pedagogy is
by no means a new approach. Recently Marissa Greenberg
<https://medium.com/the-sundial-acmrs/podcast-pedagogy-5185e1c1016e>
outlined not only its virtues for instructional but also equity, where “the choice of
activities, like the amplification of diverse voices, works to authorize students’ as co-creators of knowledge.” Another pedagogical potential of student-produced podcasts is the ability to facilitate the curatorial skills necessary for public-facing humanities work, including research, storytelling, and how to frame a scalable question, as well as considering the limitations digital dissemination poses to accessibility. The research and analytical skills that students honed in making their episodes were just the same as those for a research paper, suggesting the podcast medium is well-suited to facilitate a suite of curatorial skills, including the crucial selecting, arranging, and synthesizing specialized archives and knowledge for non-specialized auditors.

Students worked in teams to create not just another podcast series, but one that addressed a gap or need in the market of public-facing podcasts so oversaturated with William Shakespeare that one would be forgiven for thinking no other early dramatic works survive, let alone those by women. (The first in a multivolume new edition of the Cambridge Complete Works of Behn <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108887564> has in fact just come into print.) In first conducting assessments of a wide array of excellent podcasts, radio shows, vlogs, and other pop content on Behn, the students were quick to identify both a trend and possible intervention. They observed one of the limitations to the public-facing materials about the poet already out there was the recurring primacy given to critical biography: that her living was in part provided by the sale of plays, poems, and translations among other printed works; and that she worked for a time in espionage for the crown, although perhaps never financially remunerated for that work. In so doing, the existing available public content focusing on Behn’s biography emphasized history and society at the expense of the central questions, craft techniques, and possible implications of her artistic contributions to that cultural moment.

From this collective act of analysis arose the limited series, Aphra Behn: The Podcast <https://adhc.lib.ua.edu/aphra-behn-the-podcast/> , which consists of seven episodes focused on identifying and exploring just those literary features that wend through and across the genres she employed rather than summarizing the post-English Civil Wars context (as so brilliantly done by the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Stuarts Online <http://stuarts-online.com/> ). Students undertook original primary and secondary source research behind paywalls in order to survey the state of the field for popular
audiences in front of them, creating a bridge by focusing on the work rather than biography. Each includes a unique “merit badge,” ranging from interviews with world-class scholars to their own staged readings of relevant scenes. Others include curated collections of relevant images from the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum’s archives, the most expansive in the world for Restoration and eighteenth century English theatre. (The V&A just confirmed plans to cut its curatorial teams by fifteen percent, including merging the Theatre and Performance collection with the department of Furniture, Fashion and Textiles.) Each episode was researched, written, recorded, and edited in production teams, beginning with group-work agreements, developing through pitch and research meetings, and supported by partners at the University of Alabama’s library and Samford Media Center in the research and recording process, using only free and open-source tools. In this way the end result was made by a public institution, with publicly available software, for a non-expert public.

Ultimately, the maker process revealed to students how the kinds of knowledge they so often, like the general public, find covert is not only findable, but can be made public without having to sacrifice the privacy and privilege of a room of one’s own.

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Hi-Phi Nation
Vassar College

Walden, a Game
University of Southern California Game Innovation Lab

Women Who Rock
Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington-Seattle

The Poetry Vlog
Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington-Seattle

Arcade: Literature, the Humanities, and the World
Stanford University

Broadcasting World Literature
Binghamton University

This Is My Century: The Life and Legacy of Margaret Walker
Jackson State University

Remus, Celie, and Me: Preserving and Presenting the History and Life behind the Literature of Putnam County
Willson Center for Humanities and Arts at the University of Georgia

Pages from the Past: Illuminated Medieval & Renaissance Manuscripts in Boston-area Collections
Harvard University