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Kimbro, Devori, Michael Noschka, and Geoff Way, creators and hosts. Remixing the Humanities

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Remixing the Humanities makes a compelling case for the value of the podcast form in early modern studies, and the humanities more generally, and also epitomizes that form's elegant simplicity. As early as the first episode, Devori Kimbro, Michael Noschka, and Geoff Way utilize the podcast's fundamentally wide-ranging, conversational form to develop, or even just stumble upon, a devastating debunking of popular (and pernicious) journalistic accounts of the indoctrination thesis, according to which a professor spouts out doxa and students dutifully jot it down. I found the slow-burn conversation an extremely compelling way into this subject, and one that was much more convincing than a more focused critique of popular misconceptions of university pedagogy. In this first episode, *Remixing the Humanities* hits on something latent in the podcast as a form: namely, podcasts in general, and *Remixing* in particular, demonstrate through their form the value of conversation without clear purpose or argumentative point, and, in so doing, show how humanistic inquiry challenges purportedly commonsensical logics of means and ends, both in teaching and in research. The hosts clearly recognize this as well, and they often advocate for the generative intellectual and pedagogical benefits of conversation.

Remixing the Humanities ran for 36 episodes, from November 2017 to July 2020. The first four episodes establish the topical organization that extends across the series: episodes 1 and 2 focus on the state of the university and humanities education therein; episodes 3 and 4 on Shakespeare and the notion of relevance. These are also the longest episodes in the series, all clocking in at over an hour; the hosts make a concerted effort to keep later episodes within the 30- to 45-minute range, and mostly succeed. The presenters are all early modernists, and some early episodes are interviews of participants and digital exhibitors at the 2018 Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) conference. However, the majority of the series has a much broader focus, and the interviewees and special guests across the later episodes reflect that. *Remixing the Humanities* (available through all major platforms including iTunes, Spotify, and Google Play) often addresses issues of academic and intellectual labour, primarily in the American and Canadian university systems; the relationship

between teaching and research; and the experienced reality of teaching on precarious, non-tenure-track contracts. These discussions extend beyond Renaissance studies and will thus be of interest to university professors, high school teachers, students of all levels, and perhaps even senior university administrators.

The series of episodes on precarity (three episodes, as well as a series of three interviews on “academia from the margins”) and pedagogy (three episodes, but also the aforementioned discussion of Shakespeare and relevance) are interesting and thought-provoking, sometimes radically so. I was especially interested in the pragmatic discussions of contract grading ([episode 24](#)) and the Qualities of Mercy project ([episodes 34](#) and [35](#)).¹ But the best of these is undoubtedly the first episode on precarity ([episode 15](#)), in which the presenters set out to define that term. Here, the most compelling aspects of this particular podcast, as well as the podcast as a form, show through: namely, the willingness of humanities scholars to explore beyond the sound-bite politics (and political sloganeering in general) of the present. The conversation starts off smartly and circumspectly, acknowledging the fundamental ontological features of precarity (responding to Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*). Both Kimbro and Noschka discuss the ways in which humanities research is complicit in precarity in the academy at a conceptual and professional level. They also quite rightly draw attention to senior faculty’s complicity in the production and maintenance of this employment system.

The interviews, especially those conducted at the 2018 SAA conference in the digital exhibits hall, are also extremely interesting and a valuable introduction to projects that this reviewer at least would not have known about otherwise.² Most notable in this respect for me was the conversation with Jonathan Burton on using social media and video annotation tools to teach close reading ([episode 11](#)). There are also some disarmingly fascinating admissions, such as when Patricia Fumerton acknowledges that part of her interest in popular broadside ballads stems from wanting to counterbalance her initial work on

1. The Qualities of Mercy project was a collaboration among Shakespeare professors across multiple institutions that asked students to perform individual scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* and then share them on YouTube, thus allowing students to compare production choices across institutions. For all the contributions, see youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEcX8YVMVUzMF3r3hUo2Kl8BGOqacYYZg.

2. Two of these interviews were live-streamed and are now also available on YouTube at youtube.com/watch?v=V8TyBErNUMQ.

high-culture forms (episode 12). These interviews, but also the discussions with guests throughout the series, show the conversational form of the podcast at its best. Specialist presenters (as opposed to journalists or popular “translators”) can lead interviewees to reflect on their work *and* its motivation in ways they would not if they were just trying to promote it. Maybe the podcast form, as it develops into a marketing supplement, will not always enable that sort of honest self-reflection, but here it certainly does, and performed, at least for me, that rarest of things: an intellectual examination of the intertwining of one’s professional circumstances, class consciousness, and scholarly work and choices.

I should also note that Kimbro, Noschka, and Way are congenial presences and just generally enjoyable to listen to. For many episodes, they have read some articles on the topic together, so the podcast often takes on the vibe of listening in on a smart, lively reading group.

Although the presenters do frequently reflect on the podcast as a form, I could have done with even more of this, and, at least occasionally, a slightly more skeptical, less boosterish approach. I understand that *Remixing the Humanities* is, at least in part, promoting the podcast form itself. That’s part of the “remixing” and points to one of the other target audiences for the series: namely, scholars interested in the role that new media technologies might play in humanities research and pedagogy. However, I think a clear-eyed discussion of the limitations of the form is not entirely incompatible with that impulse. For example, the presenters maintain in several episodes that one of the benefits of the podcast is its “liveness” and its responsiveness to events. However, the latter could be said of any unedited online written publication, such as a blog (the presenters did start a companion blog for the podcast in 2019) or social media post (the individual presenters were and still are active on Twitter and maintained a podcast-specific account during its run). Sometimes, as in episode 23 on remixing teaching, the praise for “liveness” comes across as impatience with the more considered and deliberate process of scholarly peer review and publication.

I could also have done with a more extensive discussion of the podcast as a mediated and mediating form (on the order of the discussion of precarity). After all, immediacy and liveness are experiences that exist only for the presenters and interviewees, not for listeners. What we hear is liveness on display, presented for our enjoyment and engagement certainly. But does that represented immediacy invite an audience’s emulative participation, or the

treatment of even liveness as so much transmitted inert content? In their article advocating for the scholarly value of podcasts, the hosts acknowledge the potential problem of conversation's commodification, so they are clearly aware of this feature of the format.³ However, they do not offer enough consideration, in my estimation, of how the mediated, re-presented, and performed nature of the conversation might potentially thwart the authentic immediacy on display.

I think there's a similar missed opportunity in the conversation about academic Twitter in the podcast's final episode ([episode 36](#)). Here, Way with guests Manu Chandler and Gena Zaroski describe the various kinds of scholarly work that Twitter enables, including note-taking, public annotation, public humanities, and entrepreneurial self-promotion. But they do not acknowledge how the first two of these activities, maybe more, are done for display within the social media sphere. The fact that it's for display—showing that you're doing this work—changes at least some of the contours and motivations of scholarly work as well as that work's ability to challenge the surveilling apparatuses of the modern university. You're not just trading notes and having intellectual conversations with colleagues and peers on Twitter. You're doing it for all to see. And it is that spectacularization of your own intellectual work that, I think, requires more critical examination than *Remixing the Humanities* offers, both in the episode on Twitter and throughout its run.

Of course, it might be argued that I'm missing the point—that podcasts don't do the same sort of conceptual or argumentative work that other sorts of research publications do. *Remixing the Humanities* often makes precisely this point. In the first live-stream episode from the 2018 SAA conference ([episode 5](#)) as well as "What Do We Mean by 'Remix'?" ([episode 14](#)), the presenters describe podcasting as an alternative to the traditional research article. However, in those moments when they present podcasting as another type of scholarship, I think the form ceases to be a conversational complement and becomes a methodological competitor (there is more of this in their article on Shakespeare and podcasting). In [episode 14](#), they note that there's a fundamentally different type of scholarly product, if not scholarly process, at work in podcasting: namely, in a scholarly article, it's not acceptable to conclude on open-endedness (this reviewer is not entirely sure that this is true, but I get

3. See Kimbro, Noschka, and Way, "Lend Us Your Earbuds": "Presumably, audiences would neither 'switch off' nor be blindly entertained if the work had something meaningful to say to we the masses." I think this an overly optimistic account of meaning's ability to escape the commodity form.

the point). But that's to tacitly admit that the podcast isn't just a conversation but makes its own non-thetic point by its very existence as conversation. Put more pointedly, is a conversation not making an argument when the conversation repeatedly circles back to the superiority of its own form, conversation, to argument? The frequent refrain in the Shakespeare-centric episodes—"It's not about the answer"—might make sense as a pedagogical practice, but it seems to me mistaken as an account of scholarship. No one funds research, or faculty lines, to not find answers. Similarly, I do not think that anyone really writes a monograph to continue a conversation. You write a book to end one.

For all of its careful, lucid, and compelling accounts of teaching, *Remixing the Humanities* could also have done with more extensive examination of its hosts' theoretical assumptions about pedagogy—namely, that teaching is a matter of emulative modelling as opposed to adversarial provocation or even outright trickery. Could it not be the case that, paradoxically, an open, respectful, and wide-ranging conversation does not reproduce generative openness amongst its participants? In their debunking of the indoctrination thesis in the podcast's first episode, the hosts do raise the possibility that emulation is not actually the case in college classrooms. The fact that this pedagogical possibility—that teaching is adversarial or duplicitous, not mimetic—doesn't get a more extensive hearing bespeaks a limitation of the podcast as a form, which seems to me to require that conversation produce ever more conversation and, ultimately, become an end in itself (thus straying from the pedagogical ends to which we might want to put it). More broadly, I also wonder whether the commonsensical consensus that podcast conversation enables is up to the task of demolishing the economic, institutional, and scholarly conditions that enable the exploitation of precarious labour, academic or otherwise. After all, "good discussion" is right up there with "thank you for your feedback" in the administrator's hymnbook of patronizingly dismissive phrases.

I think it should be clear from my criticism that this podcast is an unmitigated success at one of its central aims: generating ideas about the subjects under discussion. I have had many of Kimbro, Noschka, and Way's discussions rattling around in my head for days, and listening to them has undoubtedly helped me to crystallize some of my own thoughts about pedagogy. But I also think that my criticism of *Remixing the Humanities*—the fact that it's generated by a conversation that claims not to be making an argument—points to the complexity of the pedagogical enterprise. In particular, the mimetic

presuppositions that undergird teachers' praise for accessibility, openness, and open-endedness—that is, that students will imitate the values and virtues we display for them—might require a more extensive, even polemically argumentative, examination than a conversation can provide.

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