

# ***IMPACT***

**THE JOURNAL OF THE CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING AND LEARNING**



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## ABOUT US

**ABOUT:** *Impact: The Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Teaching & Learning* is a peer-reviewed, bi-annual online journal that publishes scholarly and creative non-fiction essays about the theory, practice and assessment of interdisciplinary education. *Impact* is produced by the Center for Interdisciplinary Teaching & Learning at the College of General Studies, Boston University ([www.bu.edu/cgs/citi](http://www.bu.edu/cgs/citi)). *Impact* accepts submissions throughout the year and publishes issues in February and July. Please submit your essays for consideration at <https://citi.submittable.com/submit>.

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## EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Dear Readers,

The motivation for this issue came from the vibrant and amazing response from presenters and audience alike to a recent NeMLA panel we proposed on podcast use in the college classroom. Of course, like the podcast revolution itself, the catalyst for the panel was *Serial*, Koenig's Peabody Award winning "audio game changer." Our panel considered how it could also be a pedagogical game changer and explored how *Serial* inspired students and professors to engage in new and exciting pedagogies.

In this issue, we begin with an introduction to the podcast's emerging role in higher education, especially in creating "flipped," interactive classrooms. We then hear from one professor who relays how she literally changes the game in multimodal learning by encouraging students to find their voice in recording their own podcasts. Our next contributor details how teaching *Serial* and other podcasts at a criminal justice college allows her students to make interdisciplinary and "interwoven" reflections alongside canonical texts. Our final author explains how the addictive, binge-worthy nature of the podcast inspires students to reflectively assess their own writing.

Podcasts connect us to each other, and as two of our colleagues shared with us their enthusiasm and support of podcasts, we asked them to review different podcasts for their joys and challenges. We hope this issue encourages professors to consider employing podcasts in the classroom and we thank our contributors for inspiring us as teachers, learners and listeners.

Best,

Rick Cole and Beth Kramer, Editors

## ABOUT THIS ISSUE'S AUTHORS

**Rick Cole and Beth Kramer** are members of the Rhetoric Division at Boston University's College of General Studies. They have over a decade of experience teaching composition and research skills as part of an interdisciplinary program, and are currently studying new ways to integrate multimodal learning into the writing classroom.

**Julie Gafney** holds a PhD in English Literature from the CUNY Graduate Center. She has taught over 15 undergraduate courses at John Jay College, New Jersey City University, and the University of Chicago. She currently works on academic policy at Hunter College.

**Bethany Holmstrom** is an Assistant Professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York. She received her PhD in Theatre from CUNY Graduate Center.

**John W. Mackey** is Chair of the Social Sciences Division of Boston University's College of General Studies, where he received the Peyton Richter Award for Interdisciplinary Teaching in 2016. He is a contributing author of *The Modernization of the Western World: A Society Transformed* and his work has appeared in *Salon* and *We're History*.

**Joshua Pederson** is Assistant Professor of Humanities at Boston University. He is the author of *The Forsaken Son: Child Murder and Atonement in Modern American Fiction* (Northwestern, 2016), and he has published numerous essays on trauma theory and religion and literature.

**Kate Peterson** earned her MFA from Eastern Washington University where she has taught composition as an adjunct professor since 2014. Her chapbook of poems, *Grist*, won the Floating Bridge Prize and was published in 2016. Kate is currently the interim director of Get Lit! Programs.

# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## Latest Announcements

Please refer to CITL's website for our latest announcements: <http://www.bu.edu/cgs/citl/>.

Also note that this summer we are co-sponsoring the 22nd Annual Dickens Symposium: Interdisciplinary Dickens <http://www.bu.edu/cgs/citl/annualconference/>

## ***IMPACT* ESSAY COMPETITION**

Every December, the editors of *Impact: The Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Teaching & Learning* invite submissions of scholarly and creative non-fiction essays between 1,000 and 5,000 words on any aspect of interdisciplinary teaching or research. The author of the winning essay will receive a \$250 award and publication in *Impact*.

Essays should be readable to a general, educated audience, and they should follow the documentation style most prevalent in the author's disciplinary field. Essays for this contest should be submitted by the first Monday in December to <http://CITL.submittable.com/submit>. See our general submission guidelines in Submittable.

CITL reserves the right to not publish a winner in any given year. Faculty and staff from the College of General Studies are not eligible to submit to this contest.

## Podcasts and the Twenty-first Century College Classroom

By Rick Cole and Beth Kramer, Boston University

It is difficult to work in higher education without hearing the continued buzz around “flipping” the classroom. As Dan Berrett notes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “flipping describes the inversion of expectations in the traditional college lecture. It takes many forms, including interactive engagement, just-in-time teaching (in which students respond to Web-based questions before class, and the professor uses this feedback to inform his or her teaching), and peer instruction.” As Berrett points out, “flipping” has become a label for a variety of activities that require students to take a more active, participatory role in their learning. He explains while many universities support these shifts for differing reasons, including economic and technological goals, one of the largest reasons is learning outcomes. Kathy Missildine, in her study of flipped classroom techniques, uses the term “hybrid” to explain this shift in which technology facilitates a more interactive learning environment (598). Instead of the passive learning environment of the traditional lecture, in a flipped classroom “students cannot passively receive material in class...instead they gather the information largely outside of class, by reading, watching recorded lectures, or listening to podcasts” (Berrett). Across the country, college classrooms from Humanities to STEM disciplines are undergoing drastic transformations as they experiment with these active new models and forms.

Podcasts are one of the newest pieces in this trend towards interactive engagement in the twenty-first century classroom. M’hammed Abdous, in collaboration with other pedagogical scholars, notes the increased effectiveness of professor-generated podcasts as stand-ins for lectures by measuring download frequency, and builds upon a range of studies that find these types of podcasts to be “a powerful tool that complements traditional course resources” (Abdous 17). However, while the lecture podcast has gained much attention for its role in allowing students to listen to lectures outside of class, there has been less exploration on using the incredibly rich library of popular podcasts as texts themselves in the “flipped” classroom. The goal of this article is to discuss our experience using the captivating podcast *Serial* as both content in our research composition course, and as a key component of changing our classrooms to a more learner-centered, “flipped” model.

### Podcasts and Academic Curiosity

The popularity of podcasts as a genre has exploded in the last decade. Dino Grandoni of the *New York Times* simply describes podcasts as “audio stories that can be saved and played on a computer or smartphone.” Along with their rising popularity, he stresses how the long-format style of podcasts allows for a kind of in-depth journalism that gives many in the field optimism (Grandoni). They are also more than just audiobooks with a single narrator reading words off a page; rather, podcasts often integrate a variety of viewpoints, voices, scores, and sound effects to create a rounded and sensory narrative. In other words, by their very nature, podcasts are participatory, which is why they facilitate a learner-centered classroom. The *Serial* podcast in particular caught our attention because of the astounding critical and popular response. *Serial* is Sarah Koenig’s week by week telling of a murder case involving two high school seniors in 1999. Amanda Ong reveals from her interview with *Serial* podcast creators that the podcast skyrocketed in use and became “the fastest podcast to reach five million downloads in iTunes history. As of February 2016, *Serial* had been downloaded over 80 million times” (Ong). It also won the Peabody award in 2014, the only podcast to ever achieve this honor. The sheer volume of listeners and engagement that followed fueled our desire to integrate it into the curriculum of our research composition course.

## ESSAYS—CONTINUED

Part of the popularity of *Serial* rests on the 18-year old case that Koenig studies, which is full of intrigue, suspense and controversy over the addictive 12 episodes. But for us, *Serial* also represents the draw of the podcast form itself—the ability to make a story come to life by hearing the voices of victims, their families, law enforcement professionals and of course Koenig’s smart narration. Much of the desire to “flip” the classroom stems from the notion that students today are both savvy and distracted. College students are used to a variety of electronic mediums that engage all of their senses and as a result they are less captivated by the traditional texts they read for the traditional lecture format. While many professors bemoan the changes to their students’ listening and reading habits over the years, research has been emerging that supports a direct link between internet use and evolving study habits. Mokhtari, Reichard, and Gardner’s 2009 study, “The Impact of Internet and Television Use on the Reading Habits and Practices of College Students,” finds that students are often multitasking when they perform academic reading, and they are spending and enjoying more time on the internet than they do on coursework (614). Many educators wonder how to get their students as excited about books and essays as the public was about following Koenig’s week by week narration. Given the tremendous popular appeal of and substantive intellectual discussion in the *Serial* podcast, we asked ourselves if integrating this podcast into the classroom directly might be a way to achieve high learning outcomes. Could we challenge our students with complex ideas at the same time that we appeal to the multifaceted way that they process information?

### ***Serial* Podcast, Student Engagement and Peer Instruction**

Of course, educators using podcasts as the central “text” in the college classroom might have reservations about the lack of rigor in not assigning a traditional reading. Some might have concerns about the material not being as nuanced or academic, or that the podcast form might cause students to take the work less seriously. Yet, a variety of instructors have used podcasts in high school classrooms and note surprising results. Michael Godsey explains that while he was initially concerned to make *Serial* the central component of a unit in his high school English class, it led to an *increase* in reading and critical thinking, with students spending more time analyzing material like clues and maps, writing in journals, and reading transcripts, blogs and reports. He also cites research like Hogan’s 2014 study in the *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* that supports how listening comprehension skills are directly tied to reading comprehension skills (Hogan, as qtd in Godsey). Linda Flanagan, who looks at the trend of podcasts in the high school classroom confirms these findings, and further notes the advantages for ELL students. In a podcast, she explains, an unfamiliar word or two will not stop you—and podcasts often help students tune out other distractions because they are stimulated both mentally and aurally (Flanagan). Godsey connects this research to his own observations in the classroom: “A few students learning English as a second language wrote that they like how they can read the words and - as one student put it - promptly ‘hear how they’re supposed to sound.’” We were equally intrigued by the idea that the key antagonist to our students’ engagement with our assignments – their smartphones- might instead be flipped to facilitate *more* reading and *more* learning.

A link between podcasts and listener engagement has also been found. Emma Rodero, in her study published in the *Journal of Communications Research*, discusses how radio and all radio-related literature provides “the capacity to stimulate the creation of mental images in the listener’s mind” (458). She describes the active nature of listening, finding correlation between attention and the use of sound effects and other audio features that help listeners visualize and remember narrative (474-75). And our own experience using *Serial* in our research course reinforced these discoveries. Students scored the highest average grade on a comprehension quiz that Professor Kramer gave on the first 3 episodes of *Serial* (compared to 10 other quizzes that she gave that year on written texts); students in Professor Cole’s class asked to integrate *more* episodes into the curriculum and voluntarily researched well outside the parameters of the course. We noticed new voices entering discussion, as students who were less engaged by other units were suddenly vocal and

## ESSAYS—CONTINUED

vibrant members of the class. They would remember specific details and minute information. Students would send us links to recent stories and news on the case, even into the summer and next semester. As one of our former students emailed almost a year after the course ended, “I am still following this closely because it certainly opened up a whole array of questions and ideas for me.” Thus on a primary level, the use of the podcast seemed to satisfy one of the basic requirements of the flipped classroom—increasing interactive engagement for the students.

In addition, it also provided rich opportunities for another tenet of the flipped classroom—peer instruction. Professor Kramer found that the podcast worked on two levels in this way. On one hand, the openness of the case that Koenig traces in *Serial* allows for several arguments that can all be supported with evidence that she slowly reveals. By pairing students into in-class groups, and asking them to place evidence into categories for or against the defendant, they began to do sophisticated analytical work and back up their arguments with concrete details. They were also truly engaged in this group work, passionately working together to make sense of how to analyze and interpret a piece of evidence. On the other hand, the ability of the students to see how many different arguments could be sustained cautioned against reductionism and simple solutions for complex problems. It led to a formal research project on an ethical issue of their choice, where they were encouraged to model Koenig’s method of exploring all facets of the issue before reaching a conclusion. Many wrote in their end-of-the-year reflection that their approach to the formal research project was transformed by their work on *Serial*.

In Professor Cole’s class, not only was an increase in peer instruction and collaboration evident, but so was an increase in opportunities for students to envision the connection between oration and rhetorical invention. He divided the class into two groups, and created an active courtroom setup complete with one side working for the defendant and another for the prosecution. Over the course of a few weeks, students had to collaborate to publicly present formal cases, refute testimony, and manage closing arguments based on the material they found in *Serial* and which they subsequently researched. The work that they did in this process led to a formal research paper where they argued for or against the defendant citing evidence ranging from the emotional instability of memory, deception detection in law enforcement, and even the legal precedent for cell-phone tower testimony. When asked to describe why his writing was clearer in the *Serial* paper, one student replied, “I felt like a lawyer explaining things for a jury.” Randy Bass and Heidi Elmendorf employ the term *social pedagogies* to explain how writing for an authentic audience transforms the classroom: “Social pedagogies build in iterative cycles of engagement with the most difficult material, and through a focus on authentic audience and representation of knowledge for others, help students deepen their understanding of core concepts by engaging in the ways of thinking, practicing and communicating in a field.” By encouraging students to be producers of knowledge, this assignment transformed roles wherein the students were experts presenting research/ testimony and the professor was receptive civic servant. In both of our experiences, incorporating *Serial* led to dynamic classroom environments where students were prepared, engaged, and using classroom time to build upon and interrogate assigned material—a true model of the “flipped” classroom.

### Podcasts and the Future of the Flipped Classroom

With more and more research pointing to the benefits of broadening the use of podcasts in the college classroom, we are optimistic about the future possibilities beyond *Serial* itself. Building upon our classroom successes to date, we look forward to experimenting with podcasts such as NPR’s *RadioLab* and *Welcome to Nightvale* as further “texts” in our courses. Both of these works are explored in this issue, and reveal a similar level of production value underpinning them. We are also encouraged by the increased attention that podcasts are receiving from our colleagues at Boston University and beyond. In fact, the motivation for this essay stems from our recent NeMLA panel on podcasts and pedagogy. Our presenters’ *flipped* pedagogical

## ESSAYS— CONTINUED

strategies ranged from pairing podcasts and iconic texts to employing podcasts to encourage student assessment of their writing to empowering students to produce their own podcasts. We hope that this issue is just the beginning of work that helps future podcast pedagogues find and use quality podcasts in their courses, to meet the challenge of creating a truly interactive “flipped” classroom to engage twenty-first century college students.

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## ESSAYS—CONTINUED

### Podcasting in the Composition Classroom: Writing, Research, and Activism

By Bethany Holmstrom, La Guardia Community College, CUNY

My approach to using podcasts in composition classes was influenced by several factors: my own binge-consumption of the first season of *Serial*, the growing momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, campus programs linked to a year-long exploration of Muslim identity in America, and a desire to have students consider audience more deeply in their research and writing process. The season of theatre and performance programming at LaGuardia Performing Arts Center was part of the *Beyond Sacred: Unthinking Muslim Identity* grant, from the Association for Performing Arts Presenters. I felt that productive intersections on exclusion in the United States could be drawn between campus happenings connected to the grant, and the larger, national political moment. My aim was to facilitate student engagement in their own areas of interest in terms of social issues and activism, while immersing them in a variety of research and writing processes. By providing students with a platform for exploring forms of exclusion or injustice, I also hoped to expose *all* of us to the different and varying political interests and life experiences among us. Addressing the issues facing particular groups of people requires that students acknowledge human differences in the face of oppression. Audre Lorde points out that a “profit economy...needs outsiders as surplus people,” and thus “we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing.” Instead, we must “recognize those differences,” as Lorde suggests, which will in turn enable us to “examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation” (115). Asking students to research and present on a social or political cause that they find compelling—whether they find it directly applicable to their own circumstances or not—encourages them to examine stories about human difference and share them with others.

The concept of an “audience” in composition is particularly important (as well as being one of the objectives set for the ENG 101 course at LaGuardia Community College). Often, research papers are written in a vacuum, with the only exchange of ideas happening between student and professor (and a handful of peer editors along the way). Most writing in a range of occupations, however, assumes a particular audience: even we, as scholars, or teachers, write for our peers and colleagues. Why then should students write solely for their instructors? By devising multimodal and digital projects that are designed for a larger reach, we can encourage students to not only envision an audience, but to write and research specifically with an audience in mind: an audience that moves beyond the limited confines of the student-to-professor exchange. This awareness of audience necessitates that students articulate and meet a range of demands and skills: the purpose of writing, the possible diverse interests and backgrounds of their audience, the rhetorical methods they will deploy, how they will “hook” their audience, and accessibility of the product. Cynthia Selfe advocates for multimodal learning, arguing that, “when we limit our understanding of composing and our teaching to composition to a single modality, when we focus on print alone...we ensure that instruction is less accessible to a wide range of learners, and we constrain students’ ability to succeed” (137). More modalities, she believes, allow us to “expand the field of play for students with different learning styles and different ways of reflecting upon the world,” and better prepare them for the “changing set of communicative needs in a globalized world” (137). The end result of a multimodal project like a podcast also generates an easily shareable project, enabling an environment where students become a community of listeners and responders to one another. Of course, that is not to say that students cannot become a community via peer editing or discussion groups, but my students tend to display greater eagerness to listen to several podcasts than read several papers.

## ESSAYS—CONTINUED

When deployed as the end product—and as an object of study—in a composition classroom, podcasts can demand a range of strategies and instructional practices that tap into the skills listed just above, and present opportunities for scaffolding writing and research skills. Podcasts are also affordable for students to make, and do not require very expensive digital tools or advanced technical training: my students executed their podcasts with smartphones for recording audio, and used the open source program Audacity (with many instructional videos available via YouTube: a round-up of the ones my students found most useful is [linked here](#), which includes a [good overview on basic editing in Audacity](#) as part of the CNET “How To” series). While the sound quality was quite obviously not as high as more expensive equipment would yield, the podcasts produced were audible and easily shared among students.

As a way into the course, I elected to delve into the historical roots of exclusion in the U.S. In the wake of Ferguson, an exploration of how “race” and “ethnicity” are constructed and then reified provided a timely case study for our initial class discussions. For instance, an early session in the semester focused on building context and connections, and providing students the broad strokes of the history of lynching. After watching/listening to Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” students also read Mat Johnson’s graphic novel *Incognegro*, about a black reporter in the 1920s who can “pass” and goes undercover in the South: he reports back on the lynchings and violence he witnesses to the Harlem newspaper he works for. In addition, students listened to a *Radio Diaries*’ podcast that was a recovered oral history of a lynching (and included a survivor). We discussed the various forms of media; the multiple messages, stories, and voices captured in each instance; and drew connections between artistic renderings and historical realities.

But, ultimately, the aim was for students to assert their own agency: by considering their own potential audiences, defining their areas of interest, and exposing their listeners to a particular argument they wished to make. To scaffold this process, I found Kristin L. Arola, Jennifer Sheppard, and Cheryl E. Ball’s *Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects* and Anne Frances Wysocki and Dennis A. Lynch’s *Compose, Design, Advocate* to be helpful. These two texts advise students through the reading, research, and writing processes; both texts also orient students towards an awareness of their audience, and ask them to consider the practical applications of their research and writing. For instance, Wysocki and Lynch ask students to craft a statement of purpose, wherein they “tie purposes, audiences, and contexts together, see how they interrelate, and suggest concrete choices for production” (32). The textbooks facilitated inquiry into a topic and a deeper consideration of audience, providing models of student work and detailed questions to guide students through the process.

During the course, each student recorded two podcasts. These recordings could be done collaboratively, or as solo endeavors, but the second built upon the first, in terms of skills and—potentially—content. The first recording was a “riff” podcast, where students mulled over and responded to texts and media we had encountered thus far in class together. The “riff” podcast might not necessarily posit an argument: students could use this as way of reflecting and making connections, without making an explicit claim per se. To help prepare them for the initial recording, students developed a written design plan, which included a statement of purpose, and a research narrative with talking points. This assignment asked students to articulate clearly what they intended to explore (the topic/theme), and to choose texts that we shared in common that were most appropriate for their “riff.” In addition, students clearly had to set up quotes and references for their listeners, since the visual cues would not be in place due to the change of medium: this was a very efficient way to highlight both citation practices and the introduction of textual evidence. Because we were drawing on shared texts, students were better able to advise one another on their choices during the peer-editing process. I recorded an example with colleague Naomi Stubbs as a model, and executed a written design plan

## ESSAYS—CONTINUED

as well. The reader can listen to our model podcast [linked here](#). These models served as a point of reference, and offered yet another potential podcast format for them to consider: a “chat” that was perhaps more informal in nature than some of the prior recordings we encountered. The “riff” podcast also gave students an opportunity to play with the digital tools required to execute the project, and acquainted them with the research and writing process. The audience for the first podcast was their own section of 101, along with another section I was running during the same semester. Students deposited their “riffs” into a Dropbox folder shared between the classes. They were asked to listen to at least two or three other podcasts in preparation for the midterm, where they responded to the products, reflecting upon the analyses offered and making broader connections.

The second podcast had to include at least one interview subject, and had to be explicitly argument-driven. The impetus for including an interview subject was three-fold: to encourage engagement with a member of the community; for students to identify a subject and justify (in the design plan) the subject’s “expertise” or unique qualifications to speak to this issue; and to encourage students to approach their subjects with a developed and carefully considered list of questions. Students devised a research topic/question, and pitched their statement of purpose to their composition peers orally during one class session. The pitch was suggested in *Writer/Designer*, though the pitch proposed in the textbook is more in the spirit of an “elevator speech” and a means of “convincing audience members that...you know what you are talking about;” our pitches, however, also served to point out gaps and solicit further input and sources (55). Students used it as an opportunity to get feedback, narrow the scope of their project, and/or receive suggestions on how they might need to provide more background for the audience before launching into the interview. The statement of purpose additionally included their intended audience, the best/worst outcomes, their personal connection to the topic, and their thesis. After receiving feedback, they completed this initial part of the design plan and moved on to the next steps: showing how they were going to deploy the rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos; developing their research narrative; and identifying the aforementioned interview subjects and questions. This entire design plan was completed before they began recording. I created [a Prezi](#) to walk students through the process and give them a sense of the overall shape of the project before we went through the various stages.

The range of products was impressive and spoke to the many and diverse interests and concerns held by students. One student explored standardized testing, after helping her child prepare for a high-stakes standardized test. Another focused on broken-windows policing, and interviewed a criminal justice professor at the college; this “classist and racist policing...has been devastating for our community,” the student claimed in her design plan and podcast [linked here](#). A particularly effective podcast looked at the lack of resources for single parents (especially mothers) who are enrolling in college classes, interviewing both fellow students and staff at the college. The student said she “strongly believes...an improvement in these programs is necessary and that it will help more single mother students that will eventually finish their degree;” she went on to discuss statistics on the lack of programs and college drop-out rates, along with available initiatives and programs in the plan and in her podcast. Others used talking points and findings arrived at in their initial podcasts as jumping off points to explore issues like misogyny, colorism, or Islamophobia more deeply. Many students pointed out the personal nature of their work: “my motivation for this...stemmed from the fact that I am a Muslim and have personally felt discriminated against on a number of occasions,” one student revealed, before interviewing friends and family about “living in America before 9/11, directly after 9/11 and how they feel now.” This particular student hoped to push back against media portrayals, and move beyond the limited or biased representations others might have “heard, seen and read on television and/or minor articles.” Another student focused on immigration, particularly looking at the issues facing the Mexican community; though he was legally safe and protected, he worried about the status of other members in his community, especially when deportation could tear families apart: “these undocumented parents help build the

## ESSAYS— CONTINUED

economy...[and] they have built a new life in the U.S.” In his podcast, this student also focused on the effects on children’s mental and emotional health if their parents are deported.

Our original plan was to share these final podcasts with an even wider audience; however, several students did their podcasts on immigration, and even after utilizing the voice-altering functions in Audacity, students were anxious about protecting undocumented interview subjects. Though we made this another inter-class exchange (and thus left it in a semi-closed forum), the sharing was productive, and students responded to each other’s podcasts as part of their final reflection for the class. The podcast-generating process laid bare some of the fundamental components of research and writing that we attempt to instill in students: carefully choosing, justifying, and explaining research sources; identifying experts and relevant sources (even if the experts, in some cases, were identified via their backgrounds and experiences, rather than their educational or occupational credentials); careful planning; the inherent process-oriented nature of writing and research; and writing with a particular audience and objective in mind. By asking students to position themselves as advocates for a particular social/political cause, they were encouraged to draw upon their own experiences and the community around them, instilling a sense of agency and revealing how the personal is always political.

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## ESSAYS—CONTINUED

### Teaching *Serial* at the Criminal Justice College: Discomforting Ethics and Interdisciplinary Methods for Critical Thinking

By Julie L. Gafney, Hunter College

Innovative educators throughout the US have brought Sarah Koenig's wildly popular *Serial* podcast into the classroom as pedagogical tool and richly rewarding text wrapped up in one. Teachers Eleanor Lear and Alexa Schlechter tout the podcast's exciting qualities as certain to interest even the most apathetic of their students and unite the class in mutual fascination with the murder of Hae Min Lee and the guilt or innocence of Adnan Syed (Flanagan 1-2). Public radio scholar Monica Brady-Myerov claims that podcasts like *Serial* work well as tools for slow readers or English language learners, and high school English teacher Michael Godsey celebrates the classroom tactic of simultaneously listening to the podcast while reading its transcript. Paradoxically, Godsey claims, the podcast actually builds a reading "workout" into his class, requiring students to keep pace with the show while using critical analytics to distinguish between the unadorned transcript and the multifaceted audio resource which melds music, sound effects, conversation, interview, explanation, and documents read aloud with experts and witnesses recorded on court tapes (Godsey 1-4). The result is an interwoven text which, like a medieval manuscript, contains both overt and hidden narratives that overlap with one another and impose their meanings atop and alongside each other.

The influence of *Serial* has permeated higher education as well. In April 2015 the CUNY Graduate Center's Comparative Literature department held a conference entitled "Thinking Serially," and the Heyman Center at Columbia University hosted a day-long event on September 23, 2016 called "The New Seriality Studies," at which participants delivered talks on the influence of the serial medium on texts from "The Sopranos" to the corpus of Lupe Fiasco. On a more traditional tack, *Shakespeare Quarterly* ran Vanessa Corredera's "'Not a Moor exactly': Shakespeare, *Serial*, and Modern Constructions of Race" in its 2016 spring issue. Corredera advocates for the inclusion of *Serial* and other podcasts like it in the traditional literature seminar. For her, *Serial* specifically demonstrates that contemporary thinkers, like Shakespeare, do not subscribe to clear categories of identity, but rather conflate race, religion, culture, upbringing, outsider status and a host of other signifiers into complex and messy representations of personhood (Corredera 30-50). Categories such as race and religion are no more static or mutually exclusive to us than they were to Shakespeare or to his audiences, and *Serial* functions as a "very current artifact" that demonstrates this truth, and opens up a Shakespearian (or other Early Modern) text to the kinds of candid conversations on race and Otherness necessary in the contemporary college classroom (Corredera 43).

While anyone, educator or not, will attest to the addictive quality of *Serial*, as well as to its robust commentary on contemporary life, students at John Jay College of Criminal Justice had a much more ambivalent take on the podcast than the students in any of those experiences recounted above. Indeed, it is the very sensationalist quality of the podcast that concerned my students, and the idea of considering Adnan's case as an aesthetic or literary object of inquiry that deeply bothered them. Should, they wondered, a case which had the potential to be reexamined by the courts become the object of national enjoyment and a text from which they might improve their reading comprehension and broaden their idea of compositional form? As an educator in the English department of a criminal justice college, I was forced to reconsider a set of questions surrounding the efficacy and ethics of employing literary texts to teach elements of legal and criminological thought. Is any literary text suitable for such a purpose and, if so, how might the teaching of those texts differ from the teaching of Shakespeare in, say, an Early Modern seminar, or teaching Joan Didion in a first-year writing class?

## ESSAYS—CONTINUED

I am not the first English teacher to teach *Serial* in a criminal justice context. Michael Godsey finds in *Serial* one of the most successful texts he has used in his criminal justice class; he relates, “When I showed *Twelve Angry Men* and even an episode of *Making a Murderer* to my criminal justice class, they were visibly nonplussed, and openly asked for a return to something like *Serial*” (Godsey 3). Students in Godsey’s class “publically debated Syed’s guilt or innocence in Godsey’s classes, addressing a Common Core standard to improve speaking skills, and worked together with other students to create their own podcasts or present mock closing arguments” (Flanagan 4). For Godsey, then, the enthralling quality of *Serial* proved useful fodder for legal argumentation and debate.

I have employed a similar tactic with a similar podcast. At John Jay, I begin my “Crime, Punishment, and Justice in World Literature” course with a twenty minute excerpt of the *Radiolab* podcast episode *Blame*. *Blame* begins with a conversation between a husband and wife, both using pseudonyms, recounting the story of how they fell in love. (My criminal justice students typically stare at me wide-eyed during this portion of the class, wondering what they have gotten themselves into.) Part-way through their story, the husband and wife duo recount how “not-his-real-name-Kevin” underwent successive surgeries to combat a debilitating epileptic condition he had had for years. The final operation was successful. But, Kevin’s wife noticed increasing idiosyncrasies in Kevin’s post-op behavior. He became obsessive, playing the same songs on the piano for hours on end. He also became much more sexually spontaneous, sometimes initiating intimacy at unexpected times and throughout the house.

One day, Kevin answers a knock at his door and is met by a group of Homeland Security officers. He leads them upstairs to his computer, on which he has downloaded a massive amount of child pornography. Kevin is prosecuted and we hear a synopsis of the prosecution’s arguments, which call Kevin a criminal and demand he be sentenced as such. We hear also from the defense, including testimony from Kevin’s surgeon, who claims that the operation, and not Kevin himself, is to blame for the crimes.

At this point, just before the judge makes her decision, I pause the podcast. I ask the class to list each piece of evidence that supports the prosecution, recording their input on the board. We make the same list for the defense. Then, I ask my students to weigh the information before them. If they were the judge, what would they do? Typically opinions vary drastically, and we engage in a spirited conversation, interrogating the evidence at hand, going back to listen to crucial pieces of the podcast again, and trying to understand all of the components of the judge’s decision. At the end of the class, I play the judge’s verdict for the class, and we react and respond.

This is a favorite lesson of mine, and it certainly succeeds largely due to the manifold benefits of the podcast recounted above: the podcast is exciting, it unifies the class immediately, it costs nothing, and it is culturally and socially relevant. *Blame* functions both as a method to introduce the kinds of questions that texts occupied with justice bring forward, and as composition whose efficacy at storytelling and at argumentation may be examined and employed as a model of composition. Moreover, using a podcast as the first object of in-class investigation automatically breaks down preconceived notions of texts students may hold as they step foot into the literature seminar; such breakdown proves useful in a course that spans forms from Greek tragedy to the contemporary Nigerian novel.

The same students who so eagerly enjoyed the *Blame* experience in their literature classroom balked when I taught several episodes of *Serial* alongside Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata* later on in the semester. I admit that my tactic in pairing *Serial* and Tolstoy was much like that of Corredera, who extolls the virtues of partnering older more inscrutable texts with younger texts whose appeal and substance are more easily discerned and absorbed: “teachers can more logically invite expressly relevant discussions and allow innovative pairings, like smartly and responsibly connecting “iconic” Shakespeare with “hip” *Serial* (Corredera 49). My aim in

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pairing the two texts was to compare the different iterations of revenge killing, and contrast the social and ethical concerns raised by each. Both the Tolstoy text and *Serial* also subscribe to a conversational form by which questions are taken up, ideas discussed, and conflicting opinions weighed via a dialectical exchange rather than by some sort of narrative telos; I hoped to pursue the intersection of form and content by highlighting this formal similarity, and by positing these textual conversations, and the conversations we have in a classroom setting, alongside the imagined conversations of a jury meting out justice. In so doing, I subscribed to Joe Moran's theorization of interdisciplinary work, by which fruitful investigation may be yielded by acknowledging the distinctions between diverse disciplines and the products of those disciplines; in laying disparate texts from divergent literary and cultural backgrounds side-by-side, I simultaneously acknowledged "the existence and relative resilience of disciplines as modes of thorough and institutional practices," while also encouraging what Moran refers to as "the intellectually promiscuous and interlocking nature of interdisciplinarity" (14). The formal similarities between the Tolstoy text and the podcast cast their historical and literary differences into sharp relief and allowed for a conversation that incorporated, rather than eschewed, those differences.

To my surprise, the Tolstoy text proved easy to discuss. Students had strong opinions on the varying expressions of misogyny and classism related by the protagonist and his companions on the train; moreover, the class had no trouble jumping from those articulations to their own experiences, or to contemporary articulations of similar positions. *Serial*, on the other hand, was a difficult text. Students had a lot of questions about the storyline and even more questions about what was happening to Adnan and his case right now. When they discovered that Adnan was petitioning to reopen his trial due to ineffective council, they had an even harder time talking about the story of the podcast and comparing it, text beside text, with the *Kreutzer Sonata*. Instead, the conversation circled current strains of police prejudice and brutality largely perpetrated against men of color, the failures of the criminal justice system in dealing with these cases, and initiatives like the Innocence Project by which some attempt to remedy those failures. I finally asked my students outright what they thought about the podcast itself and whether or not they enjoyed it. To a person, my students seemed unwilling to admit even that they had taken pleasure in the story or been interested in the characters. To them, the people in the podcast were not characters at all, but flesh and blood humans, one of whom had been murdered, another who had been sent to prison, and countless others whose lives had been turned upside down by the killing and subsequent trial and conviction.

The differences between *Serial* and *Othello* or the *Kreutzer Sonata* are obvious. Time and narrative fiction separate them, rendering the former "real" and the latter two "stories." But my students also differentiated powerfully between the *Serial* podcast and the Radiolab podcast *Blame*. Why? I'll suggest that it is because the case and trial in *Blame* had already taken place, the perpetrator admitted some degree of guilt, served his sentence, and had moved on with his life. He and his wife had stayed together. He was happy. Despite the fact that "Kevin" and his wife are real people, just as real as Adnan Syed is, and just as real as Hae Min Lee was, they told their story as something that had happened in the past. Moreover, their story followed the familiar and comforting narrative of wrongdoing, punishment, and redemption. "Kevin" had had a problem for which he was both to blame and not to blame. His condition and his culpability were examined and judged by a court. In fact, Kevin's arrest led him to seek better medication to control his impulses, and he now no longer suffers from the kinds of obsessive thoughts that troubled him previously; in fact, his punishment may be read as curative as well as punitive.

Not so with Adnan Syed. Adnan maintains his innocence in Hae Min Lee's murder and while he claims to have found peace in prison and to have become a devout Muslim in his adulthood, neither he nor his family believe that his life sentence is just or merited. In *Serial*, we see a criminal justice system that is flawed, prejudicial, and variable. Certainly some superheroes like Project Innocence's Deirdre Enright emerge as bastions of juridical light. Most police, attorneys, judges and jury members who appear in the podcast,

## ESSAYS—CONTINUED

however, appear to be all too disappointing in their snap judgments, assumptions, and biases. I understand my students' unwillingness to talk about the podcast, and their engagement with the almost magical thinking idea that speaking about Adnan's trial would somehow jeopardize his future trial, as a form of protest against the criminal justice system that they worry will serve them poorly as citizens and as possible future employees. We all want a criminal justice system that functions as it does in *Blame*, but *Serial* poses an all-too-familiar alternative.

Contemporary college students are coming of age in a moment shaped simultaneously by increased expressions of and pride in non-normative identities, and also by police killings of men and women of color, Donald Trump's brand of xenophobia, a rash of anti-Semitic bomb threats, and prejudicial policies like the bathroom bills that attempt to curtail and stamp out the Other. As has been exhaustively reported and discussed, college students respond by claiming their classrooms and campuses as safe spaces in which they can construct an alternative reality that disallows the violence, both literal and rhetorical, that permeates much of public life. Much controversy has arisen around the efficacy of the elite academic institution's zealous attempts to correct troubling trends in public life by establishing a refuge in the college or university. On one hand, all students, and particularly students who may be increasingly fearful of attack, deportation, or prejudicial legislation, require the safety and comfort to attend and participate fully in their coursework. As Amira Quraishi, Catherine Fox, Tracy E. Ore, and many others have documented, any introspective or subject-driven coursework requires that all of its participants be fully capable of engaging in Socratic dialogue, and a prerequisite for such capacity is the reasonable expectation of personal safety and respect. As Quraishi notes, however, the security that shows of solidarity with queer, Muslim, black, Latino, immigrant, poor and a host of other students establish is intended not to shut down classroom dialogue, but rather to open it up: "The method for 'getting along' is through asking unconventional questions, putting one's self in another's shoes by role-playing, examining oneself and how others perceive them..." (Quraishi 209). Paradoxically, the uncomfortable dialectical exchange between students who have different backgrounds or different perceptions of the world around them is, in fact, the end goal of the safe space. Just as a pairing of *Serial* with Shakespeare or Tolstoy intensifies, rather than limits, dialogue between and about the paired texts, so too much safe space within the college or university encourages, rather than stamp outs, the spirited and robust dialogue that undergirds a productive and progressive liberal arts education.

While I would not espouse the incendiary rhetoric and needless pugnacity of the University of Chicago's recent letter pushing back against trigger warnings and safe spaces, I do find that the classroom must be a place for discomfort as well as for comfort. I find *Serial* a supremely valuable text not because of its accessibility and potential to entertain, but rather because it produces precisely the kinds of conversations about aesthetic texts and their place in contemporary ethics. As the American Association of University Professors put it in 2014, "Some discomfort is inevitable in classrooms if the goal is to expose students to new ideas, have them question beliefs they have taken for granted, grapple with ethical problems they have never considered, and, more generally, expand their horizons so as to become informed and responsible democratic citizens" (Graham 1). My students' unwillingness to discuss *Serial* and the conversations that their hesitation and discomfort raised are, I think, essential to the contemporary criminal justice classroom, as well as the contemporary literature seminar. *Serial* straddles the border of literary text and news report; its messiness, its resistance to generic categorization, its disconcerting coexistence of a capacity to entertain alongside its influence on a decades-long murder trial, raise just the kinds of concerns that criminal justice students, or any students for that matter, must consider in their college classrooms. Rather than presenting a static example of a court case, as I had initially imagined, the podcast opened up the question of how unstable and messy identities can function as part of a just legal system. How can a system that relies on the perceptions and judgments of a flawed public avoid putting the wrong man of color in prison, or shooting a man of color for being at the wrong place at the wrong time? Such questions are painful to ask, and painful to answer. But to avoid the asking, to exclude a text like *Serial* because it prompts discomfort would be to do a

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disservice to the students who will become the next generation of criminal justice professionals, as well as to the public they will serve.

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## PODCAST REVIEWS

### Podcast as Pedagogy: Using *Serial* as a Bridge to Understanding Research in Composition

By Kate Peterson, Eastern Washington University

The following article is based upon a prezi delivered at NeMLA - [linked here](#).

It was October of 2014 and the now award-winning podcast *Serial* had just begun its first season. Before the first episode had even finished, I started to think about how I might use it in my classroom. It was engaging; the narrator, Sarah Koenig, was immediately trustworthy and relatable. It made me think critically, it was employing effective rhetorical strategies to keep my attention, and the stakes were high—had an innocent man been wrongfully convicted of murder? *Serial* is a critically acclaimed podcast that was created by the producers of *This American Life*. Koenig investigates the conviction of Adnan Syed, who has spent the last eighteen years in prison for the murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. Although Koenig is looking into the case because many feel that Syed was wrongfully convicted, or at least he was denied his right to effective assistance of counsel, she does her best to remain objective throughout the entire series, shedding light on questions both never answered and never asked. She uncovers evidence and witnesses the original trial itself had not borne out. The podcast does not end with a clear answer as to whether or not Syed was indeed wrongfully convicted; however, the information gathered both from the producers and as a result of the podcast's sudden fame, (and the spin-off podcast, *Undisclosed*) has led to a new trial for Syed. This development allowed for many pedagogical opportunities, such as discussing the importance of research, the responsibility of researchers and narrators to remain objective, and the value in asking questions even if they may never be answered.

When I first considered implementing *Serial*, I asked my students to raise their hands if they had ever listened to a podcast: only two hands went up in a class of twenty-five. Today, when I ask the same question, closer to half of my students raise their hands. According to Edison Research, an estimated 57 million people were listening to podcasts in 2016. Podcasts have been steadily rising in popularity amongst a younger generation, and true-crime stories, especially those that one can “binge,” are also very popular. Many high school teachers, too, have found implementing *Serial* into their classrooms useful as it meets many of the Common Core Standards: “The new standards call for challenging readings, increased emphasis on nonfiction, and a focus on depth over breadth in high school English classes. Teachers should be asking students to make written arguments using specific evidence from reading assignments, often pulling together examples from multiple texts” (Collette). The podcast helps me teach skills and concepts like rhetorical analysis, integration of quotes, authorial agency, literature review, objectivity, critical thinking, and much more. These are just a few of the many reasons that *Serial* is an excellent teaching tool, especially when teaching the research process.

#### Rhetorical Analysis

One important goal in my classes is to get students thinking more about audience. *Serial* is a perfect tool for this, particularly because Sarah Koenig is such a successful narrator. In fact, the podcast won a Peabody Award in 2014 for its superb narration and innovative form, and Koenig is constantly engaging with her audience and making rhetorical decisions with them in mind. The first major assignment in my class is a rhetorical analysis paper. I use our textbook to begin teaching concepts like situation, purpose, claims, rhetorical triangle, etc. Once we have those concepts down, then I move on to using the podcast as an example. Most of the time we are thinking about the podcast from a production standpoint; thinking of Koenig and the producers as authors and trying to understand their rhetorical choices. Since it is one story told in weekly segments, we can analyze the order of the information as well and think about the purpose of each episode as part of a larger picture. We are also able to talk about Koenig's expectations for her audience. For

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example, in episode eight, Koenig interviews one of the jurors. She introduces this person as such, and moves on. Later in the same episode, Koenig introduces a retired detective, Jim Trainum. The staff hired Trainum to look into the case because the original detectives refused to participate in the podcast. Koenig takes much longer to introduce Trainum, showing the audience that she understands they need a bit more information on the qualifications and background of this man in order to find his testimony relevant and credible. In the case of the juror, all we need to know is that she was an original juror assigned to Syed's case, and we understand her purpose in the episode. This is just one small example of introducing evidence and providing context for the reader. I start and stop the recording as we listen, so that we can discuss rhetorical strategies, musical breaks, cliffhangers, the order of the episodes and why those choices matter. Once they understand how important it is to make decisions with their audience in mind, they are more prepared to write a successful, researched argument paper.

In addition, *Serial's* popularity leads to many research opportunities outside the scope of the podcast, which allow students to review articles on race, privilege, journalistic responsibility, and the failings of our criminal justice system. I ask my students to analyze an article from *The Atlantic*, written by Conor Friedersdorf. The article is a defense of *Serial*, Koenig, and the style of narrative journalism that *Serial's* parent podcast, *This American Life*, has made famous. A handful of critics accused Koenig of exemplifying white privilege in her reporting, provoking Friedersdorf to make a thoughtful and compelling argument against the backlash that *Serial* was facing. He asks, "Would journalism or social justice be advanced if *This American Life* told fewer stories like these to its huge, influential audience—or would it be better if other broadcast journalism more resembled *This American Life*?" Despite the difficulty of this text, the conversations which arise from it are always lively because my students become so invested in the podcast and the case. Because the students are so invested, I can also use the transcripts from the episodes to ask students to read along while we listen in class; this is especially beneficial for non-native speakers.

### The Research Process

Since the central focus of the class is writing a research paper, I ask my students to choose a topic that stems from their rhetorical analysis of the podcast. This leads them to look for answers to questions dealing with race, religion, journalism, and other issues concerning social and criminal justice. *Serial* works as a successful model for the research process because each episode works to answer one central question: Was there justice in this case? Sarah Koenig acts as an investigator, though she tells us that she is not a professional. She is a journalist who wants to understand what really happened, and whether or not the system got it right. This allows the students to relate to her and follow in her footsteps for their own projects. Koenig begins by looking over old documents, interviewing the key people involved, including Syed himself, and compiling a long list of questions she would need answered in order to decide for herself what happened. Most episodes focus on a specific aspect of the case that needs more investigation. Normally, students may be inclined to choose a topic with which they are already familiar, but this is not the case in my *Serial* classes. I explain to them that, just like Koenig, most of their time should be reserved for asking more questions in order to become experts on their particular topics. If they understand that the focus is less about the end result of their research and more about the process, just as *Serial* is often less about the case and more about Koenig's journey to find the truth, then they are more likely to choose topics that will keep them interested in learning.

As students become more situated in their topics and construct proposals, *Serial* offers further teaching opportunities about the research process. *Serial* is very helpful in explaining the concept of synthesis, as Koenig manages to combine the ideas and words of so many sources throughout the series. Our discussion posts during this section of the class focus on understanding how Koenig introduces sources, how she organizes the information, and how she explains her findings in a way that her audience can clearly follow. In

## PODCAST REVIEWS— CONTINUED

episode eight alone, Koenig presents information from over a dozen sources in order to paint a more objective picture of one of the key players in the case. The day we listen to this episode in class is one of the most satisfying, because I can see my students grasping important concepts like using quotes as evidence, rather than using them to tell the story or where a summary might be more successful. Koenig shows students that before they can join a conversation they need to listen to what others can teach them.

Part of having students join this academic conversation is having them create a class literature review. *Serial*'s popularity means that it is easy to find dozens of articles written about its successful narration, its journalistic style, whether or not it is ethical to be a “fan” of a podcast that deals with a young woman’s murder, and many other issues. I bring between ten and fifteen articles to class, all pertaining to *Serial*, and my students group up to summarize them, and use keywords or phrases (I’ve found it useful to call these “hashtags”) to help find common themes or ideas. I write each article title on the board, followed by the group’s summary and chosen hashtags. We then think about a few different research questions (for example “Is *Serial* an effective teaching tool?”) and list all of the articles that would help answer those questions. We also think about the order and grouping of the articles, and students can see that there must be a central idea that holds all of their sources together in order to write a successful literature review, and that asking questions can often be a good way to move from source to source. My students enjoy the lesson because they are eager to read anything that might shed more light on the case, which also makes them read with a more critical eye. Having a visual representation along with the example of Koenig’s own summaries and synthesis, helps them to become more successful researchers, and writers.

### Binge-worthy Curriculum

*Serial* is engaging on many levels, and understanding what makes it so attractive can help create more dynamic classrooms full of students who are excited to learn. One important thing to note about *Serial* is that it is what my students would call “binge-worthy.” Each episode ends with a question, a cliffhanger of sorts, so my students are always very interested in finding out what happens next. We know that these days so much of our entertainment is designed to be consumed quickly; we can watch an entire season of television in a single weekend, and often do — at least this is how my students are watching. So introducing them to a twelve-episode podcast they can consume in less than twenty-four hours, and expecting them to wait to listen only when I give them the green-light has potential for problems; however, establishing a weekly assignment that asks them to complete specific tasks related to our course material usually discourages them from binge-listening, and instead harnesses that excitement into completing their assignments. Some students can’t help themselves and end up listening to the series twice. “It really got us worked up,” one of my students said, “Our class as a whole seemed to enjoy it and always wanted to discuss it in class.” The fact that they are excited to do their homework and have worthwhile discussions that will help them understand both the writing and research process, is extremely valuable. Michael Godsey, one of the many educators who has found success using *Serial* in the classroom explores this student excitement: “Students flock to the show for several reasons. The events took place during high school, making the subject matter feel familiar and relevant in a way that classic literature doesn’t...while the excellence of the storytelling takes hold of the listener” (Godsey qtd. in Flanagan). Students can relate to Hae’s and Adnan’s lives, and are able to put themselves in the shoes of those involved. This makes them more invested in the case, and more likely to engage in class discussions to offer their unique perspectives.

Most importantly, *Serial* leaves its audience with thoughtful, captivating questions that are strong pedagogical moments in themselves. Was this podcast made purely to entertain? Was it made to exonerate Syed, or prove that his conviction was just? Was it made to start a larger conversation about our justice system, or about memory and truth? Adrienne LaFrance, staff writer for *The Atlantic*, also reminds us of the ethical implications

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of turning true crime into entertainment when she asks, “What is it, exactly, that people are participating in here? Are *Serial* listeners in it for the important examination of the criminal justice system? Or are we trawling through a grieving family’s pain as a form of entertainment? These are questions much more easily posed than answered.” Finding a podcast that gets my students to think critically about these issues and many more has been invaluable. This tool helps them to analyze a writer’s rhetoric, synthesize the ideas of others, integrate quotes properly, and remain objective throughout the research process. It has also taught them that writing an argument paper is less about proving your point, and more about joining a conversation and working hard to present your ideas in the clearest and most persuasive way, even if the answer is still unclear. The presentation and structure of this story allows students to feel like active participants in solving a crime, and in the process, they become more active participants in their own research process. Students are not only willing but eager to listen to over twelve hours of a podcast, often more than once. In an age where short-burst entertainment is the norm, this is something that deserves our attention. I look forward to continuing to implement *Serial* in my classes, and reaping the benefits as both an educator and a listener.

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## PODCAST REVIEWS—CONTINUED

### Podcast Review: *Welcome to Night Vale*. Written by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor. Narrated by Cecil Baldwin. Produced by Night Vale Presents. 2012-2017.

Reviewed by Joshua Pederson, Boston University

It's hard to overestimate the uniqueness of *Welcome to Night Vale*, the podcast that took the world—or at least the iTunes Store—by storm a few years back. The community radio broadcast from a fictional desert berg is as thoroughly strange as it is addictive. Yet it's easy to tease out its influences. Imagine if every episode of *The Twilight Zone* were set in the same city; *Night Vale* is that city's radio news. Or even better, imagine if Garrison Keillor started broadcasting from Twin Peaks rather than Lake Wobegon. In either case, homespun weirdness is the goal.

A big part of the podcast's fun comes from the huge variety of paranormal and supernatural experiences it features. Yes, there are aliens and secret government conspiracies. (Surely, creators Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor watched *The X-Files* as adolescents.) But there are also angels living in an old woman's house on the edge of town. And mysterious hooded figures haunting a dog park. There is an underground city hidden beneath the pin retrieval area of lane five at the local bowling alley. And a cat suspended forever in space above the sink in the station bathroom. Simply put, the canny and the uncanny mix and mingle so closely in *Night Vale* that the line between them (as Freud once predicted) eventually just disappears. Yet Fink and Cranor play this mingling for laughs as often as they do for chills, and their knack for comedy saves the podcast from feeling cumbersome or self-serious. To their credit, the *Night Vale* creators never forget that science fiction and camp live just a few doors apart on the same road.

But to focus on the podcast's pop-culture roots or its tantalizing play with genre is to miss its literary qualities. Fink and Cranor admit to being scrupulous editors of each of the hundred or so episode scripts, passing each back and forth many times during marathon editing sessions. And the voice of *Night Vale* (Cecil, played by Cecil Baldwin) pronounces each word with such care, such focus, that one can't help but notice how hard the writers are trying to find the *mot juste*—to wrench poetry from prose. This slippage comes to a head in an early episode called "Poetry Week," in which the sheriff's secret police force residents to write hundreds of thousands of pages of verse in a compelled demonstration of civic pride. Some are hilarious. Some are just good. Here is a snippet of one:

On Sunday, a lambent crevice  
opened up in the street outside my house.  
By Tuesday, birds were flying into it.

"I probably won't miss you," my mother said.  
"I'm only interested in the end of the world," I replied.

Many find it difficult to breathe  
without the atmosphere,  
but we knew how;  
we just stopped breathing. (*Cecil Speaks* Episode 20)

Maybe we catch a bit of Elizabeth Bishop here. Maybe Larry Levis. Yet if *Night Vale* has a literary father, surely it is Samuel Beckett. (Beckett too wrote radio plays—which remain some of his most under-appreciated works.) In *Night Vale* as in, say, *Endgame*, the creep of existential dread is never far off. And yet in both, our pained attempts to make meaning in a meaningless universe are often occasions for a black

humor. (After all, as Beckett famously writes, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.”) Here is one of those occasions, in the form of a school superintendent’s report:

The Night Vale School District announces that schools will be closed all of next week, because nothing really matters, and is anything even real? They cited the ever-widening night sky as the impetus for this decision. “How can we place any importance on something so insignificant as math or spelling or history when the void has already swallowed our tiny existence? We are *ants*, crushed daily by the indifferent feet of the universe, and – it’s just no good anymore! We can’t carry on like this,” the School Board said, swigging on a bottle of table wine and bobbing their heads weakly. (*Cecil Speaks* Episode 22)

In giving wide audience to such delectable strangeness, Cranor, Fink, and Baldwin demonstrate the alluring potential of the podcast to host more daring generic and formal experiments than we’re likely to see in other media. I for one can’t wait for the next hundred episodes.

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## Podcast Review: *Revisionist History*. Written by Malcolm Gladwell. Produced by The Slate Group. 2016.

Reviewed by John W. Mackey, Boston University

“Welcome to *Revisionist History*,” host Malcolm Gladwell greets the listener, “where every week we reexamine something from the past that’s been forgotten or misunderstood.” It’s a good title, and a promising description, but both are curiously at odds with what follows in ten roughly half-hour podcast episodes. In fact, most episodes in the series are not revisionist history in any commonly understood sense of the term; Gladwell doesn’t seek to revise our understanding of established narratives by introducing new historical evidence or theoretical approaches. Rather, *Revisionist History* is an eclectic mixture of stories, most of them engaging, on subjects ranging from artistic genius to college accessibility, from misogyny to automobile accidents. If the series has a common thread, it might be that Gladwell wants us to realize that if we adopt a few social science-ish concepts—moral licensing, capitalization, conceptual innovation, the threshold model of behavior, and so on—we would all be less likely to stumble through life misunderstanding everything we see.

As his career as a best-selling author would attest, Gladwell knows how to package a narrative, and is skilled at making ideas digestible to a wide range of readers (or in this case, listeners). And podcast fans with a natural sense of curiosity about diverse subjects will find much to ponder in *Revisionist History*. The problem, however, is that the narratives are *too* neatly packaged, and the ideas are so digestible as to be oversimplified. *Revisionist History* is seductive and fun, but it’s also full of questionable dichotomies and selectively told stories.

The episode titled “Hallelujah,” which draws its title from the legendary Leonard Cohen song, highlights some of the shortcomings of the series. In “Hallelujah,” Gladwell examines the long and interesting history of the song, along with Elvis Costello’s “Deportee,” a more mature remake of his own 1984 tune “The Deportees Club.” The episode becomes a meditation on artistic genius, or rather types of artistic genius, based on a distinction theorized by the economist David Galenson. Galenson suggests that modern artists fall into one of two categories—conceptual innovators or experimental innovators. The former, like Picasso, work quickly and have clear ideas that they want to articulate, while the latter, like Cezanne, work by trial and error, producing numerous drafts of their work. Gladwell appears to accept this distinction unquestioningly, even going as far as to list familiar geniuses, fitting them neatly into one of the categories. Herman Melville and Orson Welles, we are told, are Picassos, while Mark Twain and Alfred Hitchcock are Cezannes, and so on. Gladwell’s insistence on shoehorning human creativity into this simplified, binary framework is part of the problem. But the host also fails to interrogate the underlying assumptions of the episode. To Gladwell, “genius” is a taken-for-granted category, rather than a highly subjective, gendered social construct.

Superficial analysis continues throughout much of the centerpiece of Gladwell’s podcast series, a three-episode sequence focused on economics, class, wealth, and education. Gladwell here examines the relationship between education and social mobility, sensibly concluding that Americans are not as good at providing opportunity as we think we are. “Food Fight,” the second of the three episodes, has sparked a mini-controversy in the world of liberal arts colleges. At the heart of the episode is Gladwell’s outrage that wealthy colleges seldom do enough to recruit, admit, and support low-income students. On that point, the podcast offers some useful insight. And Gladwell’s indictment of the college amenities “arms race,” whereby well-heeled institutions try to lure students with luxurious creature comforts and dazzling facilities, is fair enough. But the episode’s insistence on gimmicky storytelling descends into absurdity. Gladwell sets up a misleading,

dichotomous opposition between two elite liberal arts colleges: Vassar College, which does an admirable job of welcoming low-income students but serves terrible food in its dining halls, and Bowdoin College, which serves gourmet food but admits too few students from lower-income backgrounds. The problem, perhaps predictably, is that Gladwell insists that these things are intrinsically linked; one can either attend a college that serves delicious food, or one that has an economic conscience. This is transparently nonsense. But what is worse is that Gladwell proceeds to single out Bowdoin for a kind of demonization that it does not deserve.

To make his case, Gladwell cites The New York Times Access Index, which measures the extent to which colleges serve low-income students. The Index uses a score of 1 as average; Vassar's score of 1.36 is indeed well above the average, good enough to earn the school a laudable eighth place. Bowdoin, which Gladwell tells us scandalously wastes its resources serving high-end meals to the bourgeoisie, earns a score of 1.05, placing it fifty-first on the Index (Leonhardt). Bowdoin's score is *above average*. In other words, the school on which Gladwell focuses his indignation does a pretty good job, comparatively speaking, of admitting low-income students—better than most liberal arts colleges. If Gladwell's point were that all wealthy institutions of higher education should do more to combat inequality and to admit students from underserved populations, and that Bowdoin has a good deal of room for improvement, he'd have a point. But a nuanced, contextualized examination of this issue is not what Gladwell is after here. He wants a neatly packaged story that pits fancy food against ethics, featuring a hero and a villain, and thus he implores his listeners “if you're looking at liberal arts colleges, don't go to Bowdoin. Don't let your kids go to Bowdoin. Don't let your friends go to Bowdoin. Don't give money to Bowdoin, or to any other school that serves amazing food in its dining hall.” One imagines that administrators at, say, Oberlin College, which scores 0.77 and ranks eighty-one spots below Bowdoin on the Index, must be wondering how they escaped Gladwell's ire. (But, by extension, the food at Oberlin must surely be sublime).

Like “Food Fight,” another of *Revisionist History's* education episodes, “Carlos Doesn't Remember,” asks hard questions about social mobility and our education system. And once again, up to a point, Gladwell deserves credit. He follows the story of the episode's title character, an academically gifted young man who grows up amid gang violence in the poor Lennox section of Los Angeles. That students like Carlos face often insurmountable obstacles to educational opportunity, Gladwell argues, is evidence of America's lagging level of social mobility or “capitalization rate”—the percentage of people who are able to develop or capitalize on their potential. Fortunately for Carlos, we learn, he has a wealthy patron, a former entertainment lawyer and philanthropist whose organization works to match poor but brilliant young people with excellent schools. Nevertheless, the challenges of Carlos' underprivileged life mean that his story is more complicated than we first expect. In many ways, Gladwell's narration of Carlos's struggle is an important story, well told.

But what borders on disturbing is the story that Gladwell refuses to tell—the story of Carlos's mother. We learn little about the young man's father, other than his absence for much of Carlos's life. And we learn almost nothing concrete about his mother, either. Yet a kind of barely spoken sexist narrative emerges from the episode, whereby Carlos's mother is implicitly to blame for his situation, and directly responsible for denying Carlos a chance to attend Choate, an elite prep school in Connecticut. The clear implication was that his mother was an unfit, selfish parent. The listener has no reason to doubt this. But when Gladwell asks Carlos where his mother is now, the young man replies that she is in prison. Gladwell the narrator, maddeningly, tells the listener that he will “let you use your imagination” as to why she is incarcerated. After going to great lengths to lead the listener to identify with Carlos, who appears a very likable and sympathetic young man, Gladwell willfully elides his mother's story, othering her in the process. Gladwell, who so

generously empathizes with Carlos and the tens of thousands of poor but gifted students like him, shows no empathy for Carlos's mother.

While focusing on Carlos the individual, and Carlos the exceptional student, Gladwell obscures larger stories about class, poverty, and gender. He doesn't address the systemic inequities that created places like Lennox and the oppressive conditions of Carlos's life in the first place. That Carlos is so exceptional, so clearly brilliant, is what Gladwell seems to find heartbreaking about his story. Gladwell makes a point of recognizing that there are countless students like Carlos who will never have the opportunities he has been afforded. But the listener could be forgiven for thinking that Gladwell's larger point is that what ails our educational and economic systems could be solved by more rich lawyers who pluck more exceptional students from their surroundings and place them in elite schools. And of course, such philanthropic work changes real people's real lives, and deserves recognition. But in a nation with the world's highest incarceration rate, in which women are significantly more likely to live in poverty than men, the story of Carlos's mom seems at least worth acknowledging. As a listener, I've used my imagination, as Gladwell suggests, and I imagine a desperate, poor, single mother, and I imagine that our society failed her just as much as it did Carlos. But we don't find out.

Despite his problematic style of storytelling, Gladwell does raise important social issues throughout the various episodes of *Revisionist History*, nearly any of which could be employed in an undergraduate classroom to stimulate lively discussions. The first episode of the series, "The Lady Vanishes," examines both nineteenth and twenty-first century examples of sexism through the lens of "moral licensing," and is well worth a listen. And in a rhetoric or writing course, or perhaps an introductory social science or journalism course, even Gladwell's spirited but often questionable style of argument could serve important pedagogical purposes and generate debate. In the third episode, "The Big Man Can't Shoot," Gladwell entertainingly tells the stories of former NBA stars Wilt Chamberlain and Rick Barry and their contrasting approaches to shooting free-throws, drawing some dubious conclusions along the way. An assignment asking students to listen to the episode with a careful ear, to evaluate Gladwell's conclusions, and to examine his evidence and arguments critically could help them develop important media literacy skills.

One could even argue that Gladwell's misleading discussion of Vassar and Bowdoin has at least sparked conversation about liberal arts colleges and the perpetuation of privilege, which is a positive achievement. While often frustrating, Gladwell's podcast isn't exactly lightweight; each episode offers thought-provoking discussions of interesting and socially relevant topics. But what is disappointing and unsatisfying about *Revisionist History* is that for someone who so clearly loves sociology and economics, Gladwell leaves out a lot of both.

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