**Interview with C.R. Grimmer**

**“Not Just Wishful Thinking: Public Scholarship and Activism”**

ANNIE DWYER: Welcome to *Going Public*, a podcast dedicated to exploring public scholarship and publicly-engaged teaching in the humanities. My name is Annie Dwyer and, at the time of this recording, I am the Assistant Program Director of a Mellon initiative at the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities.

The initiative's name is *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration*. Since 2015, two successive Mellon initiatives by this name have supported public scholars at the University of Washington–both faculty developing new graduate seminars in the humanities with public-facing components, and doctoral students pursuing public projects in the humanities. The episodes of *Going Public* consist of interviews with Mellon-supported public scholars after they have launched their projects or taught their public-facing seminars.

Please do check out our companion website, which includes faculty fellow syllabi as well as doctoral student fellow project overviews, artifacts, and other ephemera.

The podcast, along with the website, is intended to serve as a resource for scholars interested in developing similar projects and seminars. You can find the *Going Public* website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic). You can also find the link in the description of today’s episode.

Today's episode, "Not Just Wishful Thinking," is an interview with C.R. Grimmer, a poet, scholar, and teacher who earned their PhD in English at the University of Washington in 2019 and earned their MFA in Creative Writing at Portland State University in 2013. C.R. also created and hosts *The Poetry Vlog*, which is a teaching YouTube channel and podcast that’s dedicated to building social justice coalitions through arts and scholarship dialogues. *The Poetry Vlog* has been supported by many awards, among them a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Public Projects in the Humanities in the summer of 2019. Our conversation explores, among many other things, how to work collaboratively and reciprocally with students, the intersections of social media and public scholarship, and hope as a call to action.

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Annie Dwyer: C.R., thank you for joining us today.

C.R. GRIMMER: Oh, yeah, thank you for having me here. I'm sorry. I'm not used to being interviewed. [LAUGHTER] I'm used to saying that intro.

ANNIE DWYER: Well, that is actually a nice segue into welcoming you to the podcast. Why don't we just begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about *The Poetry Vlog* which is why you're here today. It's a YouTube teaching channel and podcast—that's the very short descriptor—but tell us more about this project.

C.R. GRIMMER: So, *The Poetry Vlog*, which I'll also call *TPV* because I get tired of saying *The Poetry Vlog* over and over, is, as you said, a teaching channel for YouTube and podcast formats, and it specifically tries to build out social justice coalitions through poetry scholarship and arts dialogues. And it's been through three seasons, so it's about 75 episodes--now a little bit more--and then a good deal more of podcast episodes because the first two seasons we did daily micro readings as well in the podcast format. And then a fourth season's coming up. But before I go into that kind of stuff, a key piece of the vlog project is that it features artists, and community members, activists, and my own students to try to kind of democratize the way we think about knowledge production and integrate the types of conversations that are happening in artist communities as scholarship while providing materials that are useful for teachers and genres that students absorb every day.

ANNIE DWYER: Fantastic. C.R., how did this project emerge? What was the kind of exigence or inspiration that led to the development of *The Poetry Vlog*?

C.R. GRIMMER: I was just starting to dissertate when Donald Trump was elected to presidency in the U.S. So, I'll cut to the main piece of it, which as I'm writing this dissertation about how activist poets today are building on this rich history of activism among artists and scholars, especially Black queer feminist traditions in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, it seemed a bit hypocritical to then kind of insistently do this argument in a monographed form, and not actually participate in and produce knowledge with the artists and the activists and the community members themselves.

ANNIE DWYER: I love how you're tying form and content together here in your answers to that question. And it strikes me, too, that the primary way in which this tool is changing kind of circulations of knowledge and elevating subjugated knowledges is through classroom use in many cases, or that's one of the main uses in any case. And I'm just wondering, can you say how you or how you've seen other people use *The Poetry Vlog* in their classroom?

C.R. GRIMMER: Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER: How is it put to use, I guess.

C.R. GRIMMER: Yeah, and I'll do a shameless plug here about Season 4 because I'm actually working with another fellow, Rebecca Taylor, and we're creating specific lesson plans for the Season 4 episodes because there's a press that's interested in publishing a critical edition of Season 4 where the videos have kind of critical summaries attached to them and then these concrete lesson plans for people to practice teaching with these videos in their classroom with sources on the teaching methods that they're practicing. So, there are some kind of basic, basic, basic, this is the lesson plan you can adapt it for your class, materials in the works. Other ways they've been used already though would be that I do feature contemporary artists and authors. So, I know that I've had colleagues that will use a video with, say, Laura Bay, in a class where they're teaching her book. Or, Jericho Brown is a Pulitzer-winning poet. He's also the first self-identified Black gay male Pulitzer winner, and there are a lot of folks that are teaching his book.

So, it was helpful to be able to say this is the author himself kind of talking about how he navigates the world and really making clear that there are living people behind these different books that are being studied. So that's the difficult route and the easy route. The difficult one, publish lesson plans, even if it's basic. And then the easy one is there are authors, and people teach their books. And then they're really useful for online learning, to be honest. So, I've used the videos sometimes just to stage a rhetorical situation, meaning like, hey, students, here's a video with an author and your teacher. They're talking. What did you gain from this moment of visual on the screen that you wouldn't have if it was text-based? Or something along those lines.

Another one that's helpful to mention, even if it's theoretically driven, is I know that when I was teaching, especially someone who is white and cis-gendered, that I wanted to make sure I wasn't positioning myself as the expert, especially since I teach predominantly not cis-white-gendered authors. So, another way I use it is that instead of having an author Zoom in and teach for me for a day, which has all sorts of problems, I think, or kind of be like the expert for the day with Q&A, this is a way of kind of bringing them back in repeatedly as experts and having them share in that kind of distribution of knowledge. So, it's another way to kind of decenter the teacher in the classroom.

ANNIE DWYER: There are so many things in what you just said, but I think it also just prompts me to kind of think about your work in its particularity. And I think one of the things that's characteristic is this way in which you're kind of blurring the line between public scholarship and public pedagogy in the work that you do. And I guess I'm just wondering if you might offer some of your thoughts about that: pedagogy as public scholarship, and what happens when you consider the classroom as a public space? Are there other questions that come up for you in this work and in this intersection between pedagogy and scholarship?

C.R. GRIMMER: That is a really, really good question. So, I recently was at--and recently being summer 2021--I was at the Digital Pedagogy Institute. And they had a keynote speaker, Hannah McGregor, who actually was the founder of the first peer-reviewed podcast network, so, of course, I went to her talk. I was interested in general. But she ended up spending a lot of the talk actually discussing the intersection of public scholarship, public pedagogy, and just traditional scholarship, actually. And so, I can't do justice to her analysis.

But I had a few key takeaways from it. One was she outlined the ways that oftentimes teaching is seen as a very feminized labor, which of course us in academia, at least, and a lot of folks who aren't in academia, understand. It's service-oriented, you’re seen as doing a certain form of caretaking. Usually, in tenure-track profiles, it's not seen as the kind of individualistic accomplishment of a publication or your research. And at the same time, a lot of public scholarship means that you're having to constantly interact with people to better understand a topic. You're both sharing information, but if you're doing a good job of participating in it and treating it as research versus dissemination, you're interacting with people to learn together.

If you think about contemporary research teaching practices, they encourage this same type of activity, right? It's like you shouldn't be talking at people. Good teaching is actually interactive where people mutually contribute, which is also a sort of feminist teaching practice. The same kind of conversations are actually happening in the creative writing world. So, there was a really good book that recently came out. I believe it's called *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, so pretty straightforward. And it talks about similar principles, which is our learning and our research has to be wrapped up in our engagement with other people.

In engaging with other people, we are also exchanging knowledge, and that becomes wrapped up in pedagogy as well. It’s something that I think a lot of us in public scholarship feel but don't always have the language for it. And oftentimes, not in this scenario, but in conference settings and especially when you're applying for academic jobs or promotion, you're asked to distinguish between them because of what it will count for. And so, it ends up getting wrapped up in the service category instead of either because people aren't quite sure what to do with it.

ANNIE DWYER: That's such a useful answer. And I think what's so interesting about the way that you recapped that session is the way in which collaboration emerges as the thing which typifies both good public scholarship and a kind of feminist pedagogy. And that approach to shared knowledge production is what begins to kind of blur the boundary between scholarship and pedagogy.

C.R. GRIMMER: That's a much better way of putting it. Like that's so much more on point because it's exactly, I think, what it is, and it's wrapped up in the anxiety of justifying it or having it validated as being on par with something else instead of equally valuable because of what it is.

ANNIE DWYER: I think what it does is it's always sort of in tension with economies of prestige that only validate or valorize the individual scholar's achievements. I think this is so evident in your project because students are not just the audience of *The Poetry Vlog*, but they are also some of your collaborators. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about how your project has involved work with students, and how you've found ways to work across a faculty-instructor-student divide in a way that's respectful, equitable, mutually beneficial. How do you do that? What are some of the things to be aware of in trying to do that?

C.R. GRIMMER: Yes, so I have a lot of thoughts on this line actually. I mean, so the first two seasons was just me, right? And then I had a summer of funding thanks to the lovely folks at the Simpson Center through the Mellon Fellowship, of course. And I spent that summer trying to think about ways to have it be student-centered in the truest sense, so, by and for students. Now, a couple of dilemmas came up with this. The first absolutely most obvious one is just money. So, the fellowship was a generous summer off of teaching and working on this project, and I got a new camera. That basically summarizes it.

I was still dissertating, so I didn't really have pocket change to pay a fair hourly rate to students. I was like, well, I can't hire students to just do it because I can't pay them well enough to ask them to do that. But what I can do is I can teach them what I've learned, and then work with them on adapting those types of skills for their different majors, degrees, and career paths. So, I thought about teaching a course and making it part of the class, but that felt pretty exploitative because then I'm getting paid to teach the class, and they're doing the vlog in the class. So, I ended up going with independent studies. And for those of you listening that don't know this, independent studies, the instructor doesn't get paid for them. So, I was like this way, I'm not getting paid to not pay you to learn and do this.

ANNIE DWYER: So, your students aren't being exploited, but you are.

[LAUGHTER]

C.R. GRIMMER: The idea at the time was, OK, I can teach the students how to do this. We'll learn teamwork skills. They'll get very practical on the job, that kind of internship experience without the pressure of having to be hired and just do it. They get to learn while they're doing it.

ANNIE DWYER: What an opportunity.

C.R. GRIMMER: Yeah, so they get what they need and then, in theory, I get what I need, but I would say I understood going in that teaching them to do it would be just as time-consuming as just doing it. I've been teaching 10 years so I know. There's no easy way, you know? So, I made some really big mistakes at first, you know?

ANNIE DWYER: Useful to share if you're willing.

C.R. GRIMMER: Yeah, no, I am. I am, and no one ever actually asks me about this, so I'm grateful to have the space to talk through those mistakes so other people don't make them. I was very casual about how I posted the call. I thought, well, this is very simple. It's a call for interns, and they'll get to audit this. And I'll help them with it, and the season will be done that way. What that did though is created an enormous amount of confusion around what I was actually asking for. And fairly put, which was I had some people rightfully raise the concern, like are you just asking students to do this for you for free? Like, what is that? And so, when I went back over the call for applicants, I realized I should have really slowed down and looked into how to transparently and equitably relay exactly what they are signing up for and what they get out of it. And then I need to make it very clear that I'm open to hearing what else they need out of it to make sure that they're not in any way getting less out of it than they're putting in.

So that was a hard--it was a call out, as needed to be done. And at first, of course, I was like, oh, I guess I shouldn't at all, you know? Like panic. And I was like, no, I think actually the real lesson here is I need to make sure that I'm careful to explain to students in no uncertain terms this is what it is.

And I want to hear from you other ways to make sure that this doesn't turn into that. So, if you're done learning it by week three, we need to have other things lined up that I'm teaching you because even though there is a sort of social contract between a teacher and a student, so in my mind I was like, well, it's obvious. If I'm teaching you for free, I'm teaching you so you get something out of it. And I had to remember that students' experiences with teachers aren't always that, and especially not as research assistants or interns. Like they're oftentimes just given rote filing, you know? Or work where they're really just doing it for the person. It's not teaching--being taught anything.

So, I had to step back and question “Why did I assume that my goodness or my intention would be assumed? And how is that informed by my identity, again, white, cis person? How is it informed by the number of years I've been in academia now and understand the concept of an independent study? And students--what are their experiences coming into it?” So, I overhauled the call: “This is what I will be teaching, and I need you to in your cover letter say what you need to get out of it, even if it's not listed. And we'll also be needing to talk about ‘Is this something where I can make sure I'm putting in the same number of hours helping you as you're putting into the project?’” So did that, which I thought was successful. I was able to have some great students join because of that. And I'm happy to say every single one of them has since gotten placed in a better-paid internship situation, or a job, or a grad program. They have a letter from me forever.

ANNIE DWYER: I think those moments of demystification with the students that you work with are so valuable and so hard to come by, particularly in the context of a big research institution where students might not have a lot of one-on-one time with the instructor or faculty. And, it also reminds me of so much of what is part of the ethos of your project is access, right? Access to that kind of information, also, access to poetry and other forms of cultural production and knowledge production.

And I think there's oftentimes an overly simplistic way of pitting scholarly or theoretical complexity and accessibility against one another, and your work really troubles that dichotomy quite nicely. So, I'm just wondering if you can speak a little bit more to how your project works to increase accessibility, and what it does to complicate what access looks like—and what scholarship looks like, for that matter?

C.R. GRIMMER: The reason I'm pausing is I realize that what I learned with the vlog was about registers of accessibility that don't often get associated with the word accessibility. I'm in the disability community, queer crip community, and have been deeply engaged in questions of physical and neuro access for a long time, which oftentimes colloquially people think captions, visual aids, auditory aids, rescheduling proctored test times, font size, how the information are read. Like there's all these kind of practices you can put in place. The easy answer to that is students have the added layer of audiovisual materials paired with the textual so that they have different types of access depending on their physical needs. And ideally, that's helpful for neurodivergent users as well because now they have different ways they can navigate it based on their own learning processing style. So that part's, I think, fairly simple.

But I think the part of access that then oftentimes gets talked about is in terms of financial access. So, this is where it's important to me that I'm posting in ways that anybody could partake of the information, engage, comment, email me, interact, regardless of their ability to afford access to a university library. Or just as importantly, physical and financial access to a room in a city or in a particular building. And this stood out to me, especially because, like I mentioned earlier, having navigated to very different regional spaces, that physical access makes an enormous difference. It's much easier to go to a talk by someone in the middle of Seattle than in the middle of Troy, Michigan. And the information differs accordingly. So that's the other access piece.

But I think the part of access that's more interesting to me and that I've been thinking through with this project is that we need to start thinking about the modes and methods of information that students who are not in education-first families interact with each day and better respond in those modes and in those methods so that students are not faced with having to exchange their lived cultural experience for academic cultural experience when they reach higher education settings. So, something that was really important to me was that students recognize the genre conventions that are common on YouTube. I have no desire to be a YouTuber. Sidebar, there is nothing about the vlog that would ever go viral. It is not what makes for a viral YouTube video in the first place. That aside, I wanted to make sure that I use the same genre conventions and use the type of format that students are already familiar with, so that if I'm teaching this video in a community college classroom, that extra access barrier of the cultural knowledge, and language, and cues you come in with don't need to be set aside in exchange for another form.

It's not, scholars now need to drop monograph texts and switch to YouTube. We don't all need to go to YouTube. It's more like for the type of information that I want to get across and the way that I want to learn getting that information across, then I need to think about the types of cultural accessibility that come with those communities so that I'm not asking them to meet me just where I'm at. And that's where I think it gets blurrier, actually, is that I don't think it's an either/or. I think there has to be a way to start being more agile across the different types of methods so that folks from different backgrounds have access and a different register than we usually think of.

ANNIE DWYER: I think what you're saying is so smart in considering genre and genre accessibility within questions of access is such a useful framing because I think we often don't think about the kind of cognitive work and load that it takes to learn, and adapt, and adopt the conventions of a new genre. And I also am so glad that you brought up YouTube as a medium because I'd love to ask you about that. I think yours is an example of a public scholarship project that intersects with social media. And I'm just wondering, given all of the complications around using social media, what advice would you offer scholars who are using social media as part of a public scholarship project? And I'm wondering if you have ideas on how you navigate the genre that you use critically to avoid its pitfalls, amplify its opportunities? Any thoughts on that would be so welcome, I think.

C.R. GRIMMER: Yeah, so I have another caveat I guess I should put in place that is I spent a lot of time learning about social media and doing a kind of disturbing deep dive into what actually works on Instagram, and Twitter. And as you might imagine, the more you dive into, ironically, YouTube videos explaining how to take advantage of social media, the more disturbing it gets. And again, my research is actually about problematizing the way that racial capitalism gets perpetuated through these types of circulation mediums, but circulation is necessary to change the canon. What do you do with that?

So, the first piece of advice I have is actually spend some time on YouTube Googling how to make an effective Instagram. Start actually listening to the people who do it. How do they do it, and why are they doing it? And is it something you actually need? Or is it something that you're like, well, it's another way to get my information out there? Right? So, an example would be an effective Instagram has a little bit to do with your posting, but mostly to do with your interacting with people. Are you willing to do that every day? Or are you just wanting people to kind of flock to you and watch? So, the first step I think is taking apart the platforms of social media. There's YouTube, there's TikTok now, which I have not bothered to learn, unfortunately, and I'm sure I'll pay for it in a year. There's Instagram, there's Twitter, and there's Facebook. How do people use them effectively? What is their purpose? What happens when that stuff circulates? It only takes a couple of days if you're a good researcher to spend a couple hours a day on YouTube learning that, and you'll get it pretty quickly.

Another piece is acknowledging that every platform is different with very different audiences and very different intentions. How you interact on Twitter is going to be hopefully, wildly different from how you do on Instagram, and your audiences will differ accordingly. And so, it might be a bit of a pragmatic answer in that sense.

ANNIE DWYER: No, that's so useful, though, for listening, the kinds of questions and considerations you should have. I think sometimes it's hard to know where to begin.

C.R. GRIMMER: I see it as a total necessary evil like so many other forms of distribution. And I think I have a special hate for it because of what I study. Like there's a special kind of torture you're putting yourself through if you're a cultural studies scholar and you depend on Instagram because you know that the circulation logics are skewed in a way that's really problematic and depends on you reducing complex ideas into a simplified post and somehow getting people from there to a more complex idea. And no matter how much I hate it, I have to be aware that I am not everyone, and I am especially not my audience, and they do use Instagram.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah, well, and I think that's useful because what it highlights is just that there are these ways in which audiences that you hope to reach are bound up with certain genres that then you would have to use. And some of these choices that we make as public scholars are really constrained. And so, then the question becomes not how do I eliminate all constraints, but how do I sort of navigate them?

C.R. GRIMMER: Yes, yeah. But selfishly, I like how that resonates with poetry because I remember a professor once explaining to me that constraints don't actually limit us, the form of the poem doesn't limit us. What it does is it gives us a space within which we can think more creatively because we're forced to. If you're stuck in the middle of an open field, you're stuck because you don't know which way to go next. Constraint gives you something to think with and against. That's how I view social media if that makes sense. [LAUGHTER] And at the same time, sometimes I really would rather write an essay than an Instagram post.

ANNIE DWYER: That is the most poetic description in the use of social media I've ever heard.

C.R. GRIMMER: But if I were given a choice, write a 10-page essay or one Instagram post, I would choose the 10-page essay. That is a constraint I prefer, but I'm aware of it.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah, I think that's strangely reassuring, C.R., in that it's not about sort of finding the ideal medium or the ideal modality, but that working within the genres that are available to you. What you said about using the constraints of social media as something to think with, it just struck me as so part of the tenor of your project, which is, if you all watch some of the YouTube videos, listen to some of the podcasts, one of the things that comes out so strongly is this orientation towards livability and hope that I think is really characteristic of your work. And I'm wondering if you can speak to that a little bit more. Do you see that as part of your deeper philosophy of public scholarship? Do you see a kind of utopian impulse behind public-facing work, or is the relationship just accidental? I'd love to hear your thoughts on livability.

C.R. GRIMMER: Yeah, it's not accidental. That technically when I first started the project, it was just me posting. I wrote what kind of pithy little saying for it, which was that the basic belief it has is that hope is not just a feeling, but a call to act or to action. And that poetry, as always, is already here to meet it, which if you're a theory head, there's a little pun in there around always already. But if you're not, what, to me, it was, was, OK, I believe that I have to have some kind of hope if I'm studying systemic oppression and violence, or why would I keep studying it? What am I looking for? If I didn't believe there was a potential way to create livability, why would I be so fixated on diagnosing? And so, I needed that. And I think especially when Trump was elected, I needed that. And I could see it with students, and colleagues, and poets, so there was a sort of, OK, if we have this way that we say we believe there can be something better, then what do we do about it? And that's where I believe it's not just wishful thinking. It's actually a very actionable feeling.

So, Lisa Duggan and the late José Esteban Muñoz, have an essay called "Hope and Hopelessness." This is also queer praxis or ways of practicing queerness as a different way to interact with each other. And they wrote, quote, "We write for and from an and in the hopes to better describe actually existing and potential queer worlds that thrive with, through, and because of the negative," end quote. To me, that's what makes it worth kind of pressing on. But it's not “What makes you feel good?” It's “If we can act in these ways there’s a possibility of this something better…”

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