**Interview with Leigh Mercer**

**“We Need to Be Listening to Graduate Students: Public Scholarship, Film Festivals, and Pedagogy”**

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, “We Need to Be Listening to Graduate Students,” is an interview with Leigh Mercer. Leigh is an Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Studies at the University of Washington. In the summer of 2016, Leigh received a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Graduate Seminars in the Humanities, and over the course of that summer developed a course, “Hispanic Film Programming and the Film Festival Phenomenon,” which she taught for the first time in the winter of 2018. Our conversation explores, among other things, navigating the gap between vision and logistics, partnering with K-12 educators, and, of course, the importance of listening to graduate students.

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ANNIE DWYER: Thank you so much for joining me today, Leigh.

LEIGH MERCER: It’s a pleasure to be here.

ANNIE DWYER: Just to begin, I wonder if you can tell us a little bit more about the rationale for your seminar on film festivals as public scholarship. Why a course on film festivals? Why a course on film programming?

LEIGH MERCER: When I began as an assistant professor, now many moons ago, one of the things that surprised me the most was how often I was asked to collaborate on film festivals or film series or film cycles, be it within the university, or beyond the university. Yes, I am a film scholar. It's something one would expect to a certain extent, but I felt unprepared myself from my own graduate training to engage in that kind of work. I had to do a lot of quick learning early on in my professorial career…dealing with budgeting and marketing and public outreach, and questions of design and general community engagement. It just had not been in any way, shape, or form a part of my own doctoral training.

In thinking about my own PhD program in Hispanic studies here at the University of Washington, I knew that I wanted to find a way to incorporate some of that work and give some of that training to our graduate students. I’ll add that a couple years prior to me running this seminar, designing and running this graduate seminar, we had launched a new PhD program in my department that focused on public scholarship, public humanities, with a desire from a core of faculty to have students engaged more be it via translation, be it via work in the arts. This was a course that would introduce that kind of training to our new cohort of PhD students.

ANNIE DWYER: Nice, so can you say a little bit more about what kinds of assignments, what kinds of projects scaffolded those learning objectives…

LEIGH MERCER: We're on the quarter system, and ten weeks is not a lot of time to think about students building a film festival. So, I encouraged them to think of it as a mini film festival. I put them into programming or curatorial groups early on within the first few days of the start of the quarter. They were working out consistently with their smaller groups throughout the quarter to screen films, to be in contact with local film programmers who worked with Spanish language film, be they from the Seattle International Film Festival or the Seattle Latino Film Festival. Those relationships that they developed with programmers working in Seattle in the field helped them hone in and find films that they thought might work for our high school audience.

Halfway through the quarter, they presented their ideas for a thematic micro or mini film festival. And from that point on, having worked with programmers already and screened a whole host of films in their programming groups, they were meeting with instructors, teachers in the Spanish language program at Chief Sealth High School, which we had identified in Seattle as the perfect audience for our film festival. And so, it was more about meeting with students, meeting with faculty at the high school in the second half of the quarter, learning from them what they thought might land well with that [high school] student population and what the needs of that student population were. From there, [graduate] students began to tweak or massage their initial ideas thematically for this film festival and the selections that they'd already begun to make around the films that they hope to include in their festival.

After they'd done that big presentation, halfway through the quarter with the director of the Seattle Latino Film Festival in attendance, and run those ideas by him as a programmer himself, and moved on to working with students and faculty at the high school in the second half of the quarter…by the end of the quarter, [graduate] students were asked to submit a portfolio that outlined what the process had been for them, what they'd learned about programming, how it had changed the concepts that they had about what it meant to study film, and what it meant to bring film to diverse populations.

Beyond that portfolio, which would outline what films would be included, they were designing a program, they were talking about how they would market that festival to the high school students there at Chief Sealth. They were also asked to write a small reflection paper that was more about what they had learned about the public humanities and how their work beyond the doors of the university—with programmers, with high school instructors, with high school students—had changed the way that they thought about cinema and media studies.

ANNIE DWYER: That's so rich. One of the things I love about that assignment–and I want to say too, you actually held the film festival the quarter after the course ended…

LEIGH MERCER: Yes, a couple of months after the quarter ended, we did wind up running this film festival at Chief Sealth, yes.

ANNIE DWYER: That's so exciting. So, the teaching of a seminar on public scholarship became a public scholarship project in itself.

LEIGH MERCER: Yeah, the cohort of students–it was outlined to them at the beginning of the quarter that the hope was that this was our quarter to design our dream mini film festival for high school students around the topic of Spanish-language film…and that our goal was, sometime in the near future, that I hoped that they were signing on to the idea that we would carry this film festival out that we had programmed, and [graduate] students were keen to do it. I don't know if they entirely understood how much work would be involved. There was some self-selection that happened I think in the early days of enrollment for the seminar when students saw the logistics of what would be involved, and so I was left with a very enthusiastic cohort that wanted to take on this challenge.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah, I think one of the things that's just so striking to me about the work that students did in your class is the collaborative nature of it. This major assignment around developing a film festival was a fully collaborative project. What was the learning curve around that? How did students experience that collaborative work?

LEIGH MERCER: I think it was a very novel experience for a lot of them. I reflected on this myself with regard to my own graduate education. It was very much a lonely labor of the self. You're writing your research papers, maybe, you're in community with a group of scholars of the written word...

ANNIE DWYER: Mediated by text, right?

LEIGH MERCER: Exactly. But to have to do group presentations, to work in these curatorial groups to defend your choices to make…a lot of the students commented on “I never really had to defend myself and my choices and get my colleagues, my classmates on board with ideas that I had.” That whole negotiation on the programming team–that is what programmers experience, too. Rarely are people programming in solitude; [they] very much defend their programming choices. So, even though there might have been some tension and frustration in the programming groups, it was a real-world experience for them to have and a necessary one.

With regard to the relationships that they developed both with the film programmers, our experts that were Skyping in or visiting our classroom…in the reflection papers at the end of the quarter, the students commented that these were the most amazing voices that they heard, and that was thrilling to me. You want students to see the import of intellectual life beyond the university, too, and that these folks were artists in the way in which they formulated their film festivals and thought about programming in terms of the way they were engaged with very distinct populations, in terms of their festival audiences…and that that might have changed over the course of their careers…and how they had evolved. There was a great back-and-forth I felt because the [graduate] students were engaged in making those choices for themselves and their own mini festival at the same time. It was incredible to have that experience in the classroom with them of the programmers.

Similarly, we all come, generally speaking, from a K-12 educational experience. But I think sometimes academic life in the university can feel divorced from that. I wanted students to recognize that what happens in the high school Spanish-language classroom can have an impact on the way in which we teach and the way in which we think about our work at the university level. And I think that came through very powerfully for the [graduate] students, and they enjoyed learning more about K-12 education, about what it meant to inspire high school students, about what those students were going to carry forward and how it might change the way they [graduate students] think about either continuing with their Spanish-language learning at the university level. There were the typical rubs that come with working in a group setting, but necessary and productive rubs. The amount of outreach that my graduate students were doing with the faculty and the [high school] students in the second half of the quarter, they really got to know that population intimately, and learn what was going to connect to them [high school students] in terms of the choices that they [graduate students] were making around film programming.

ANNIE DWYER: How do you foster equitable and reciprocal community partnerships? What were some of the thoughts that [graduate] students had about that work, the challenges they had about that work, some of the learning they did around building community partnerships?

LEIGH MERCER: Most public school districts around the country have pretty strict guidelines about what kind of films can be screened.

ANNIE DWYER: A-ha.

LEIGH MERCER: …the morality clause around what audiovisual media get shown at school–that was another negotiation that happened–and a point of frustration. It sparked a lot of conversations about cultural difference because certain things that would be not even considered as remarkable in Latin American cultures or Spanish culture, in the States might not have as much acceptance. That was interesting. But the students, my graduate students, quickly realized that they'd spent the first half of the quarter thinking about their ideals and what they wanted for the film festival and their choices and the films that they loved and what they thought.

But once we had faculty from Chief Sealth come and talk to us, once they [graduate students] were in the classrooms starting to visit with [high school] students there and talk to them about the festival and what their interests were, things started shifting very quickly. They realized that their ideas were important. The more and more input they had from the faculty and the [high school] students, they [graduate students] began to realize their [own] ideas might fall flat. There was a great shift that occurred when it became about making this work for them [high school students] and the power of their needs and their ideas challenging some of their [graduate students’] assumptions. Different programming choices started to emerge in the second half of the quarter.

ANNIE DWYER: I love what you said because I think it's a vision of public scholarship where it's not just “There's an audience that you reach with your work,” but a co-creation of a project. You're engaging with your audience before that project has even launched.

LEIGH MERCER: I had a feeling that things would move in that direction but it was powerful to me to watch it play out. I set it up that way. I wanted them to have some space to research the history of film festivals, to think about what it meant to program, to establish what were their own criteria and ideas about film and what they thought would be meaningful for this audience before I threw the audience at them. To me, that was productive–that worked well. It allowed them to get a little entrenched. That felt like something that was really productive for them. They themselves were realizing those shifts that occurred, once that deeper relationship was formed with the students and faculty at the high school in the second half of the quarter, and, of course, beyond as we were working to put the film festival together.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah, I think that's a perennial challenge or not an obstacle, but just something that people who are doing public scholarship are always thinking about is “How do we form these ethical and reciprocal relationships with our community partners?” I'm wondering if there are other things that came up for you as you were teaching this graduate seminar–challenges, difficulties, problematics of public scholarship that you continue to chew on, think through?

LEIGH MERCER: In terms of other challenges, the big thing honestly was my [graduate] students struggled to license the films and to deal with big corporate entities that were used to dealing with for-profit or big massive film festivals. We had to lean heavily on the connections that we had made and the relationships that we had built with the programmers we knew, not just in Seattle, but in Mexico and in Spain. In one instance, one of our programmers connected us to the filmmaker, who allowed us to license the film, who then reached out to the producer and said, “Hey, let these guys use this film and screen this film.”

So the question of licensing fees and projection rights. I had brought someone from the University of Washington libraries into the classroom early on in the quarter to talk to them about these matters and questions of film rights, and what we were going to be able to get away with and not get away with, and what we would need to procure. So, they knew that. But once we were moving ahead with the program and going to organize the festival–this is, again, beyond the parameters of the seminar a couple of months later–it proved to be much more challenging than even I could have envisioned. I guess because I've always partnered with other organizations when it's been myself programming off-campus. And so that was taken care of in a way. Here, it was all on us to make it happen.

ANNIE DWYER: What I love about that too, though, is the challenges that you faced–even if they felt logistical–are the challenges that film programmers face. So you're giving students this really authentic experience of, “Oh, this is actually what it's like…

LEIGH MERCER: Indeed.

ANNIE DWYER: …to build a film festival, and these are the things you need to do and the creative moves you need to make in order to get the licensing that you need.”

LEIGH MERCER: I think the students at a certain point were like, “I thought I just had to make the choices and design the best festival that I could.” And then, “Oh, no.” I think a lot of the heart and soul are those minutiae. Things that require multiple emails that might not be responded to. And then a phone call. And then trying to reach out to someone else within the organization. The persistence and resilience, and making sure you have an awareness of the community of the business behind film too. So, yes, I think that gave them a real-life experience.

ANNIE DWYER: I wonder if you can speak more broadly to how this has shaped your pedagogy. Even when you're not teaching a class on public scholarship, or that has public scholarship in the title, how has it made you think differently about what the work of teaching is?

LEIGH MERCER: Not just the work of teaching, but I was even reflecting recently on–since I taught this course–I've co-authored research for the first time in my career. I've written in the past two years…I've published two co-authored articles. A recognition of the power of intellectual community. Not just in teaching, but also in my own research. Maybe a recognition of my own limitations and that I learn and grow and push myself more when I am in intellectual community. I spent most of my doctoral experience and my early career in my silo. That’s common in the humanities–no one was going to write my book but me. Something about this experience…I realized that there shouldn't be a barrier between my intellectual life within the university and the incredible cultural life that exists beyond the university.

There just needs to be an acknowledgment that [graduate] students are already pursuing different kinds of careers beyond academia. If you acknowledge that reality, and the presence of those students in our classrooms, it's a simple thing; it's a small thing. But the acknowledgment of that reality already drives different kinds of thinking around how we design our classes around the import of group work, of community engagement and collaboration…recognizing how those skills can only benefit someone who does imagine a more traditional track in higher education. Those students who will go off in other directions, working for non-profits, working in translation…to me, that's the most powerful thing. We need to be listening to our graduate students who are oftentimes more aware of the realities of the job market, than faculty.

ANNIE DWYER: I love how you are underscoring the salience of public engagement as a traditional academic. One of the things that's so valuable about that understanding of scholarship is that you eschew this either/or formulation of the problem of professional development for graduate students in the humanities. Sometimes it's framed as either you're preparing students for alt-ac careers, careers outside of academia, or they’ll become Research 1 professors. In the instance of your class, you are equipping students with skills that are relevant to a number of sectors and show versatile career training rather than tracking students for one potential career path or another.

LEIGH MERCER: It's about starting a conversation, and about listening, as well…putting a little more weight on graduate student voices within your program.

ANNIE DWYER: I think that is a wonderful way to close our conversation: with your emphasis on listening to graduate students. Thanks again, so much for joining me today, Leigh.

LEIGH MERCER: It's been my pleasure to be here.

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