

Public Humanities & Paths Towards

Maria Devlin McNair and Jeffrey R. Wilson
Harvard Renaissance Colloquium, February 18, 2021

Your Public Humanities Projects

Our Stories

Breakouts to Strategize Projects

Questions and Conversations

Tip Sheet

WRITTEN REMARKS AVAILABLE IN LINK IN THE CHAT

IT'S OK TO POST COMMENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA: @DEVLIN_MCNAIR, @DRJEFFREYWILSON, @SHAKESFORALL

4:05 — MARIA

We want to start by asking you to think about your own work: how might your work surface in a public humanities project?

As we're going through some of our own trials and errors over the next 40 minutes, think about possibilities for bringing your public humanities project to life.

And then we'll jump out into breakout rooms to strategize possible pathways into public humanities.

We'll come back together as a group for questions, conversation about our experiences and, more importantly, your public humanities plans.

And we've prepared a little tip sheet that we'll share, and add to.

/4:05:30

the Salina Journal

Serving Kansas since 1871

IN LIFESTYLES
Ice cream
Homemade summer treat made
with healthier ingredients, Page 15.

Salina, Kansas

Wednesday, July 21, 1993

50 cents

Voters reject school budget increase

\$1 million to be cut from spending plans

By CAROL LICHTI

The Salina Journal
By a vote margin of 3 to 2, voters Tuesday rejected the Salina School District's plan to increase its budget.

That means the Salina School Board will begin looking for ways to trim its proposed spending by about \$1 million.

"We will make the cuts in a calm, rational and informed manner," said board president George Robertson. "It will not be a knee-jerk or punitive action. We will do it as a board with suggestions of people in the Salina

district and the administration of the district."

The final vote was 4,467 to 3,412. The board will have a special meeting, tentatively set for Tuesday, to discuss how to bring the budget into balance. The board meets today to approve the budget, which voters determined Tuesday would include a \$27.5 million general operating fund.

"We will live with the decision and make the best of the situation," Robertson said.

Robertson said the vote doesn't necessarily suggest that the public is unhappy with the way schools are run, but probably says more about how the public feels about property taxes.

"We are disappointed," he said. "But I understand the philosophy behind it. There is

a philosophical battleground this district was caught in. The voter is understandably distraught and distressed — if not disgusted — with the total reliance on property tax, and that's what the state requires the school district to do."

The state's school finance law allows school districts to supplement their per-pupil allocation through what is called a "local option" budget. The Salina board wanted to hike the budget by 3.8 percent, which would have meant a property tax increase of about 0.92 mills.

But a protest petition, circulated by the Central Kansas Taxpayers Association, forced the issue to a vote.

The defeat of the issue means the owner of an \$80,000 home would realize a property tax

savings of about \$44 a year. That savings reflects not only the tax hike planned for this year, but also the loss of a tax hike implemented last year by the board.

If it had been approved, the additional money would have stayed in the district's budget for four years.

Wilber Davis, a former member of the taxpayers association, helped circulate the petition.

"The petition worked," he said Tuesday.

"It's just a shame the Legislature would write a law that makes people have to petition to vote."

A public vote should be automatically required every time a local government entity attempts to raise the property tax, he said.

"There are so many widows, widowers and

people living below the poverty line with no health insurance and no benefits that have to live hand to mouth — for them I feel good," Davis said of the vote. "But for the people who work in the district — the teachers and administrators — I feel bad that they lost. But I believe it is the right thing."

Ron Williams, president of the taxpayers association, was out of town Tuesday and unavailable for comment. But the organization issued a statement through vice president Linda Lyne, who said voters "have given a clear mandate in Salina to cut spending first."

She was disappointed that there wasn't a higher voter turnout. That also bothered

► See OPPONENTS, Page 13

Floodwaters continue to rise in Tescott

By KAREN PARK

The Salina Journal
Carol and Terry Christian have lived in Tescott for 19 years and never before seen water 3 inches deep in their home.

"It won't go out," Carol Christian said of the water as she and her husband rowed a boat to their truck parked on higher ground.

Davis quits taxpayers association

But he plans to keep

4:05:30 — JEFF

Salina, KS. 1993. I'm in seventh grade, and kids all across town walk out of school and march down main street on city hall in protest of local government's failure to fund public schools. In the United States, 40 years of defunding public education has cultural consequences. 20 years of defunding the humanities has consequences. American citizens have received less training in the arts of interpretation at a time when the internet gives individuals an information overload every day. Public humanities returns education to the people that government has taken it away from.

/4:06

Public Humanities: Three Problems

The Social Problem

Education in general and the humanities in particular have lost ground in the United States over the past 40 years, and one consequence has been decreased quality of life.

The Professional Problem

Academia's response to the social problem—the rise of the public humanities—draws upon and perpetuates traditions of elitism and exclusion.

The Practical Problem

The junior academics best positioned to fix the professional problem aren't being trained to do public humanities and don't have any professional incentives to do them.

4:06 — Jeff

Let's start with three related problems:

The Social Problem: Education in general and the humanities in particular have lost ground in the United States over the past 40 years, and one consequence has been decreased quality of life.

The Professional Problem: Academia's response to the social problem—the rise of the public humanities—draws upon and perpetuates traditions of elitism and exclusion.

The Practical Problem: The junior academics best positioned to fix the professional problem aren't being trained to do public humanities and don't have any professional incentives to do them.

/4:06:30

The Nuts and Bolts of Public Humanities

- What does it take to launch a public humanities project?
- What are the skills I should start with?
- What does the process for such projects look like?
- How do I find an audience?
- What advice do public humanities practitioners have for someone early on in this process?

4:06:30 — MARIA

Here are some of the questions we're hoping to address today:

What does it take to launch a public humanities project?

What are the skills I should start with?

What does the process for such projects look like?

How do I find an audience?

What advice do public humanities practitioners have for someone early on in this process?

/4:07

Initial Goals & Motivations

- Maria – my goal was to find
 - Different & potentially larger audience
 - Sense of impact on these audiences
 - Training for teaching
 - Intellectual life outside the university

4:07 — MARIA

My path towards the public humanities was a little bit different than it might be for some of you. A primary motivation for me was finding an intellectual life outside the university. I got married right after graduate school and I knew I was moving to one specific place, and we also wanted to have children right away – and to be honest, we know getting a tenure-track job is hard enough, and that combination of factors made it an unlikely possibility for me. So Public Humanities attracted me for a number of reasons.

First, presenting my research to general audiences and making it fun and accessible would be good training for high school teaching, which was an attractive career for me. I did end up teaching for a year at a prep school, and I believe one reason they hired me was because I had a background in public humanities work.

More broadly, if I had a full-time job outside academia, whether teaching or parenting, and only had a small amount of time for academic work, I wanted that work to have impact. I wanted to be able to reach more people and reach them in a different way than I could with a journal article. Before I had any thought of going to

graduate school or being a Shakespeare scholar, I had a professor who made me fall in love with Shakespeare's plays. It sounds a little cliché, but I came out of that course feeling like I understood enough to keep going back to Shakespeare, and I couldn't wait to keep going back, like for the rest of my life. And I thought, if I can find some ways to give other people that same sense – I understand this and I love this – that's a really valuable thing I can give, and that's my way of paying it forward for all the wonderful people who taught me.

That's my very personal, particular path towards public humanities work. But I think we all identify with the sense that we love literature and the arts, it brings us joy, it brings us connection to other people, and it brings us meaning. When I interviewed for my high school job, one of the teachers said, "We live our lives through stories." And I thought, that's wonderful. That's what I do, it's something I want to help my daughter do, and I'd love to help other people do that. Public Humanities can help you look at stories and look at life, and look at them together, and see more, and see more, and see better.

/4:09:30

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Sober for 20 Under 40

Today marks 20 years of clean and sober. At 37, that's more than half my life.

December 17, 2019 by [Jeffrey R. Wilson](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



4:09:30 — JEFF

Hi, my name is Jeff, and I'm an alcoholic. I wrote a little about this in a piece called "Sober for 20 Under 40." I had some dark days in my teen years.

/4:09:45



AN ASU KNOWLEDGE ENTERPRISE CONNECTING PEOPLE TO IDEAS AND TO EACH OTHER

ESSAY

HAMLET IS A SUICIDE TEXT—IT'S TIME TO TEACH IT LIKE ONE

A Scholar of Shakespeare Sees Perils and Possibilities in the Bard's Plays, and His Own Experience



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ART

THE BOOK OF WILLIAM



AUGUST 27, 2009

4:09:45 — JEFF

I wrote about those in a piece called "*Hamlet* is a Suicide Text—It's Time to Teach it Like One." I begin with these really personal experiences because public humanities can bring our academic work back to the experiences and questions that brought us to literary studies in the first place.

/4:10



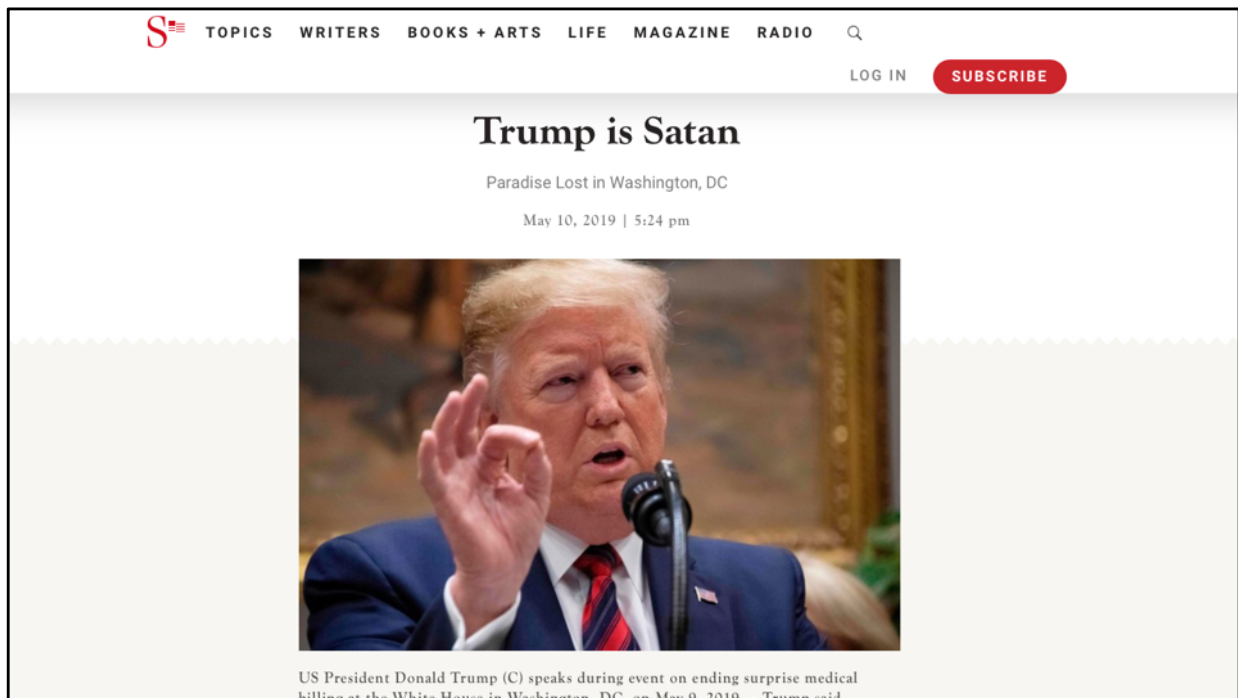
4:10 — JEFF

After a not very impressive high school career in Kansas,

I started higher education at a community college in California, then moved to San Diego State for my bachelor's degree. That's where I fell in love with Milton's poetry, and I always thought I would be a Miltonist.

When I moved up the road to University of California at Irvine, and started teaching writing courses, one of my favorite ways to teach close reading was by looking at the first epic simile in *Paradise Lost*—the one about the sea-farer who anchors his skiff to a whale, thinking it's an island, and then the whale wakes up and goes plunging down, dragging the sailor along.

/4:10:45



4:10:45 — JEFF

What I didn't expect was that this classroom activity would later form the foundation for an essay I wrote, unprovocatively titled "Trump is Satan." Public humanities allows you to find the personal and the political in the academic work you do.

When this piece originally came out, the image was photoshopped to give Trump beady red eyes and devil's horns. I was livid because that tone really goes against what I wrote in the essay. I also remember the editor trying really hard to push the argument toward provocation and controversy in ways that I wasn't comfortable with. And then when the piece came out, he tweeted out, "Liberal Harvard professor calls Trump Satan!"

/4:11:15



(Alex Wong/Getty Images)

Shakespeare shouldn't be relevant to 21st-century politics. His was an age of monarchy, ours one of democracy. Yet President Trump has repeatedly been compared to Shakespearean fools and tyrants: Falstaff, Richard III, Macbeth, Bottom, King Lear, Julius Caesar, Jack Cade. Trump's monarchical politics toss us back into Shakespeare's medieval worlds.

Yet character comparisons plucked for quick laughs obscure the plots of these plays, just as satires of Trump — think "Saturday Night Live" — don't take seriously how this story might end. We're living a Shakespearean tragedy. We're in Act V, Scene i. And Shakespeare's visions of tragedy may help us see into the future.

It could end like "Julius Caesar," in which a nation moves toward the death of democracy. Or like "Coriolanus," in which the proud man is consumed by the multiple armies of enemies he has made throughout his life. Or like "King Lear," in which a once-great family is decimated

RECOMMENDED ON DAILY NEWS

Trump hotel in D.C. boosts price for March 4, the day when QAnon predicts the former president will return to office



Teen's final moments caught on TikTok video before fatal shooting at Georgia hotel



NYC father of five shot dead, two others stabbed in Queens robbery gone wrong



4:11:15 — JEFF

It reminds me of the time I framed an essay by saying we should stop making character comparisons and focus instead on plot, and the New York Daily News titled the piece, "Which of Shakespeare's tragic heroes is Donald Trump?"

/4:11:30

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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Why I Write on My Mobile Phone

By Jeffrey R. Wilson | FEBRUARY 9, 2015

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

4:11:30 — JEFF

During grad school, I met my wife. We wanted to wait to start having kids until after I'd filed my dissertation. We missed the mark by about six months, and so I had to write the final forty pages of my dissertation on my phone with a screaming child in the other hand. That evolved into putting my kid in his stroller, and going for these epic three-hour walks, where I would dictate into phone. And that's now pretty much the only way I can write. I can't sit at a desk and bang out words. I have to be up and moving around. The energy in my movement leads to energy in my ideas. So I wrote about this in my very first public piece, from 2015, called "Why I Write on My Mobile Phone." (One thing about public writing that I didn't expect is how cool it is when people create art based on your ideas.) And from that experience I learned the single most important thing about public writing: *Don't make an argument. Tell a story.*

/4:12:15

Article



Shakespeare and criminology

Jeffrey R. Wilson
Harvard University, USA

Crime Media Culture
2014, Vol. 10(2) 97–114
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Abstract

This paper suggests that Shakespeare's plays offer an embryonic version of criminology, and that they remain a valuable resource for the field, both a theoretical and a pedagogical resource. On the one hand, for criminology scholars, Shakespeare can open up new avenues of theoretical consideration, for the criminal events depicted in his plays reflect complex philosophical debates about crime and justice, making interpretations of those events inherently theoretical; reading

4:12:15 — JEFF

I got my PhD in 2012, wrote a dissertation about Shakespeare, not Milton. I had no luck on the job market for a couple years in a row, but I did get hired to teach writing classes in—of all places—a Department of Criminal Justice. My experience teaching in that department led to an article called “Shakespeare and Criminology.” Doing academic work creates opportunities to do public humanities. So one day I get an email from Shankar Vedantam, the social science correspondent at NPR, who also happens to be a big theater nut.

/4:12:45



4:12:45 — JEFF

He said he was developing a podcast that would marry the humanities and the social sciences, and asked if I would like to talk about “Shakespeare and Criminology” for the pilot episode. That conversation that we recorded in 2015 ended up thinking about what’s called “broken windows policing” in light of the attempts at law enforcement reform in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*.

Public humanities comes in addition to—not in place of—our academic work. The strength of public humanities depends upon the strength of the academic work it grows from.

/4:14

Initial Moves

- HarvardX – “Shakespeare’s World”
- Public writing – *St. Austin Review*
- Ingredients: academic expertise, personal relationships, wide general reading, personal concerns



**Jane Austen’s Novels:
Reading and Revelation**

In Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, *Colin Clendon* meets with *Elinor Dashwood* for a private conversation. *Elinor’s* neighbor *Mrs Jennings* overheard a few phrases of the conversation and concludes that *Colin Clendon* has proposed. She approaches *Elinor* afterwards with a smile: “I assure you I never was better pleased in my life, and I wish you joy of it never substitute for the original. Only by moving temperately through the book itself, with its series of perspectives carefully arranged by the author, can we grasp the book’s true significance—which lies in the way the author ultimately changes our perspective. What does this process look like? We get a glimpse of it through *Mrs Jennings*.



**A Local Habitation and a Name:
Logos and Language in *Macbeth***

How did a brief period in English history—the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries—leave us such lasting riches of the English language? For four hundred years, our ears have been trained and our style shaped by the verses of the King James Bible, the prose of Richard “discernment and suggestion.” But to writers trained rigorously in English and Latin, Latinate words were precise and powerful because they retained all the life of their physical roots. Our Elizabethan homely describes Isaac and Jacob “depending or hanging only on the help and trust that they ing the play’s central questions. Perhaps the greatest question in *Macbeth* is, where does evil come from? It was a paradox since Scythians have one could know truly choose what is worse. Shakespeare uses a traditional image of evil, darkness, to capture evil’s origins. As the plot



4:14 — MARIA

How did I get into Public Humanities work? I would say if you think you might want to do this later, start thinking about it now – open yourself up to possible topics and opportunities and connections. I knew I wanted to pursue this option, so I had a rule of thumb in graduate school, which was, if someone asks you to do something, say yes. Stephen Greenblatt was creating this set of online courses for HarvardX called “Shakespeare’s World” and he asked me to help produce them, so I said yes – that was my first foray into online education.

In grad school, I also attended a conference on Catholic literature –met an editor who invited me to contribute some pieces to a journal he for non-academics audiences.

And my takeaways from these experiences were, that the ingredients for Public Humanities work are academic expertise plus a wide cultural net. Jeff said this work is only as good as the academic research behind it, and I think that’s essential to keep in mind. We sometimes talk about “boiling things down” or “watering things down” for lay audiences like they mean the same thing, but watering down is diluting – boiling down is intensifying the original flavor. So you want some good flavors going in to

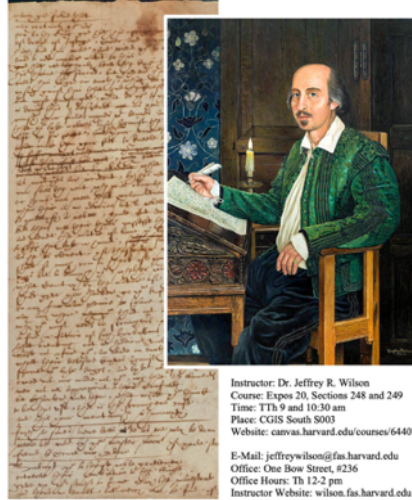
start, so to speak, or you won't end up with a satisfying final product. So you do want good academic background – but also a sense of how to connect what's vital in your narrower field to some larger phenomenon. So for this piece I wrote on laughter, piece on laughter, I cited Dante, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Robert Burns, and Jane Austen's Emma – but also Harry Potter, two films of Sherlock Holmes, the rom com Notting Hill.

And then the other ingredients are personal relationships and personal concerns. A lot of projects come just from people you know. And part of what makes it interesting is if you draw on what matters to you. I remember one day sitting in the Gato Rojo of Dudley and reading Wolfgang Iser about hermeneutics, and it was like fireworks went off in my head – I could look at everything differently. I sat there for two hours frantically writing and missed a dentist appointment. That excitement stuck with me for six years until I got to express it in this article about Jane Austen. So if you want to share something that's meaningful to other people, you can start with what's meaningful to you.

/4:16:30

Expos 20

Why SHAKESPEARE?



4:16:30 — JEFF

I had been applying for every job in New England for two years, and hadn't gotten a single interview. In January 2014, I get a job in the Harvard College Writing Program, and start teaching a course called "Why Shakespeare?" As part of this course, I teach Hamlet every semester, and every time I teach the play I write an essay about it. Doing so helps me remember the process my students are going through, moving from questions about the text to developing arguments to structuring essays.

/4:17

JULY 24, 2015

“It Started Like a Guilty Thing”: the Beginning of *Hamlet* and the Beginning of Modern PoliticsBY JEFFREY R. WILSON

King Hamlet is a tyrant and King Claudius a traitor but, because Shakespeare asked us to experience the events in *Hamlet* from the perspective of the young Prince Hamlet, we are much more inclined to detect and detest King Claudius's political failings than King Hamlet's. If so, then Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, so often seen as the birth of modern psychology, might also tell us a little bit about the beginnings of modern politics as well.

* * *

4:17 — JEFF

The first of my “Essays on Hamlet” got published in 2015 in the leftist magazine Counter Punch. The thing I remember most about this one is that I sent the essay in to the editor, and I got an email back an hour later that said, “This is great. It'll be up on the site this afternoon.” I thought, “Oh crap”: I'm used to 9 months of revise-and-resubmit. And it's something I've had to learn a few times: don't send something out that you're not 100 percent confident in because it might be up on the site that afternoon with your name on it.

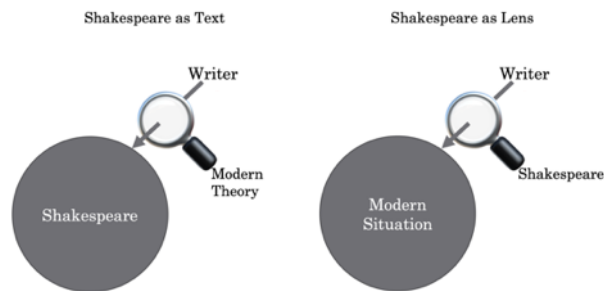
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Part II.

Shakespeare Across the Disciplines

Shakespeare as Text, Shakespeare as Lens

Text and Lens



4:17:30 — JEFF

As a part of our “Why Shakespeare?” course, we think about “Shakespeare Across the Disciplines”—thinking about using other disciplines to interpret Shakespeare, and using Shakespeare to do work in other disciplines. And in the heat of the 2016 US presidential campaign, Jill Bradbury invites me to speak on “Shakespeare Across the Disciplines” at Gallaudet University. I had no idea some quick examples I threw out would grow into Chapter 2 of my book *Shakespeare and Trump*.”

/4:18



4:18 — JEFF

The next year, my local public library in Lowell, MA invites me to talk about Shakespeare and Trump. Figuring out how to package my research for my mother-in-law was so helpful for future public humanities work. Academics know a lot about the content they study, but we've got a lot to learn about how to present that content for people outside our profession.

I told five stories that ended up becoming my five chapters in "Shakespeare and Trump." Doing public humanities—figuring out how to package your research and ideas in accessible, entertaining forms—will pay dividends for your academic work.

/4:18:30



4:18:30 — JEFF

I told five stories that ended up becoming my five chapters in “Shakespeare and Trump.” Doing public humanities—figuring out how to package your research and ideas in accessible, entertaining forms—will pay dividends for your academic work.

That book is written for folks outside Shakespeare studies. It’s important to remember that public humanities is not for scholars. Don’t try to please your fellow scholars when you do public humanities work. I don’t try to please my retired fire-fighter father-in-law when I’m writing a scholarly article.

/4:19



4:19 — JEFF

I had to figure out how to do a book release party during lockdown. And here we can think about what makes for a good online academic event—because that’s public humanities too.

Public humanities work isn’t profitable, financially, but can be very rewarding emotionally for you and for your communities. Public humanities work is how many people in your support system—friends and family—can access and engage with your academic work.

/4:19:30

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the MLA Profession website. On the left is a large blue 'P' logo. To its right is the word 'Profession' in a blue serif font, with 'MLA' in a smaller font above it. Further right are four menu items: 'OPPORTUNITIES', 'ABOUT PROFESSION', 'LATEST ISSUE', and 'PAST ISSUES'. A search icon is on the far right. Below the navigation bar is a banner image of an open book with colorful pages. The main content area has a white background with the following text: 'SPRING 2019' in teal, 'PUBLIC HUMANITIES' in teal with a teal underline, and the title 'Historicizing Presentism: Toward the Creation of a Journal of the Public Humanities' in a large teal serif font. Below the title is the author's name 'By Jeffrey R. Wilson'. At the bottom left is a green circle with a white 'W' and the start of a paragraph: 'What happens when a historicist is confronted with the prospect of presentism? The same thing that happens when a historicist comes face-

4:19:30 — JEFF

The original conclusion to “Shakespeare and Trump” got cut, and it came out in a stand-alone form, calling for the creation of a journal of the Public Humanities. I’m happy to say that exciting talks about that prospect are on-going.

What I like about that project is that—as a peer-reviewed journal—it gives junior academics a professional reason to do public humanities. The best way to save the humanities is to restructure the profession to incentivize public humanities.

/4:20

MarketWatch Latest Coronavirus Watchlist Markets Investing Barron's Personal Finance

BookWatch

Opinion: 10 scenes from Shakespeare that fit Donald Trump's presidency — streaming now

Published: April 23, 2020 at 8:40 a.m. ET

By Jeffrey R. Wilson

William Shakespeare foretold it all, in a mix of tragedies, comedies and historical tales



4:20 — JEFF

Writing a book with some cross-over appeal opened some doors for new public humanities opportunities. That's important because open submissions is where good ideas go to die.

/4:20:15

Submit "Shakespeare and Trump: It's Tragedy, Not Tyranny": -NY Review of Books-, -NYT Books-, -Paris Review-, -The Millions-, -Elec Lit-, -Boston Review-, -Public Books-, -NYTimes-, -Wash Post-, -Time-, - HuffPost-, -LA Times-, -The Nation-, -The Guardian-, -New Statesman-, -New Republic-, CNN, -NYT-, New Yorker, -Atlantic-, -Guardian-, Newsweek, -New York-, - Slate-, -Daily Beast-, Salon, -Vox-, -Boston Globe-, LARB, TLS, -Jacobin-, Book Riot, Observer, Vogue, Vanity Fair, Current Affairs, Harpers, Chronicle, Public Books, 1843,

Submit "23 ShakesMemes for the Age of Trump": -Mashable-, -BuzzFeed-, - Mental Floss-, -The Ringer-, - Daily Beast-, -Teen Vogue-, -Reader's Digest-, - McSweeney's-, -Vogue-, -Vanity Fair-, -Current Affairs-

Submit "The Tragedy of Donald Trump": -The New Yorker-, -Longreads-, -The Atlantic-, -Harpers-, -LARB-, - Boston Review-, -Chronicle-, -Public Books-, - Vox-, Lit Hub, The Millions, The Paris Review, The New Inquiry, Aeon

4:20:15

I found an old checklist of the places I (unsuccessfully) submitted some "Shakespeare and Trump" pieces to. They all said no.

So it's important for us to build a network that can usher good public humanities into the world. Public humanities often come about through pre-existing relationships.

/4:20:30



4:20:30 — JEFF

Start small—interviews for friends’ blogs, niche websites, hometown newspapers. Working in these lower-stakes venues will help you get a feel for what works and what doesn’t. You don’t want to be figuring that out in the middle of a nationally televised interview.

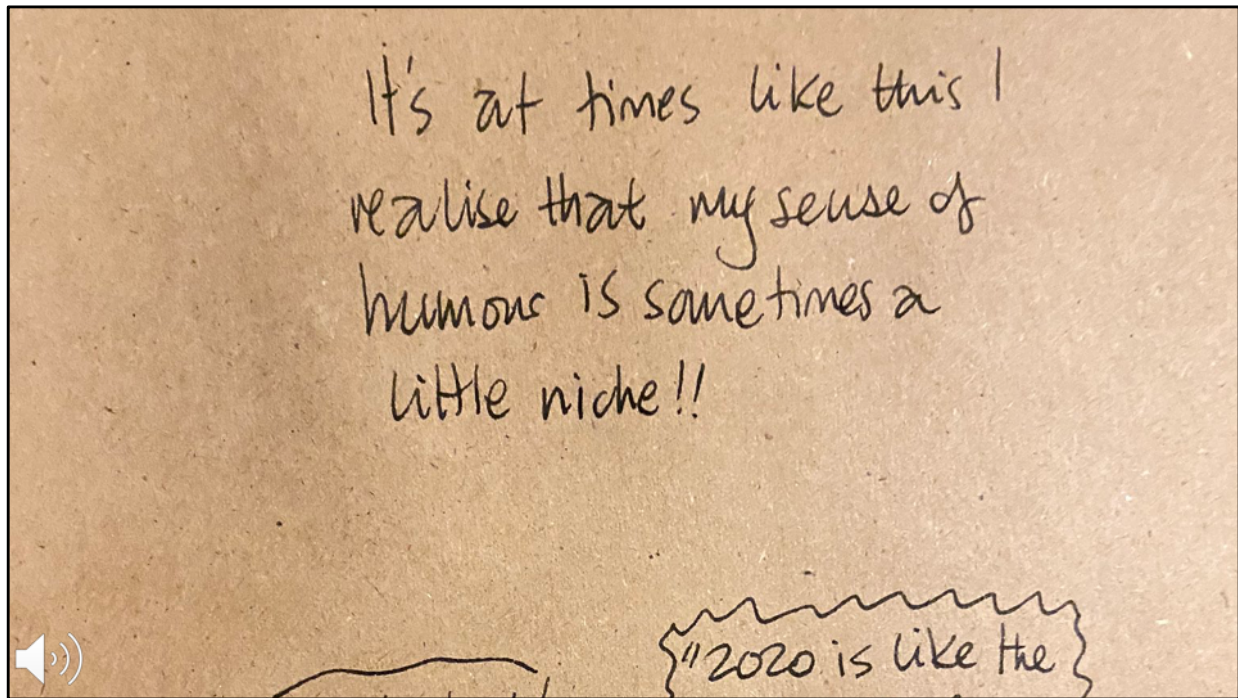
/4:20:45



4:20:45 — JEFF

And then you meet some new friends, and they invite you to do things.

/4:21



4:21 — JEFF

So some guy draws this cartoon of himself sitting in a bathtub listening to this podcast I'm on. I really don't know how to feel about this one.

Public humanities work will lead to some, how to say, memorable moments of human interaction. Sometimes those will be joyous and life-affirming, sometimes bizarre and hilarious, and sometimes quite unsettling and unfortunate.

/4:21:30

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Saturday, December 5, 2020
Today's Paper

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Get to know the German power couple behind the Pfizer vaccine.

Analysis: Trump's Final Days of Rage and Denial

- The last act of the Trump presidency has taken on the stormy elements of a drama more common to history or literature than a modern White House.
- While Mr. Trump will leave office in 46 days, the last few weeks may only foreshadow what he will be like after he departs.



Trump Campaigns in Georgia With His Own Lost Race on His Mind
Before a rally with two senators in runoff elections, President Trump urged the governor to call a special legislative session to overturn Joe Biden's win.

Republicans Pushed to Restrict Voting. Millions of Americans Pushed Back.
Almost 160 million people voted this year, as new options made necessary by the pandemic removed many of the traditional barriers to casting ballots.

President Trump in the Oval Office on Thursday. He has continued to denounce the results of the election.
Doug Mills/The New York Times

Opinion

Frank Bruni
Death Came for the Dakotas
In terms of the coronavirus, they're a theater of American disgrace.

Ross Douthat
Why Do So Many Americans Think the Election Was Stolen?
Looking for the reasons behind a seemingly unreasonable belief.



Margaret Renkl
And Play Like a Girl She Did

Jonathan C. Lipson and Gerald Posner
The Sacklers' Last Poison Pill

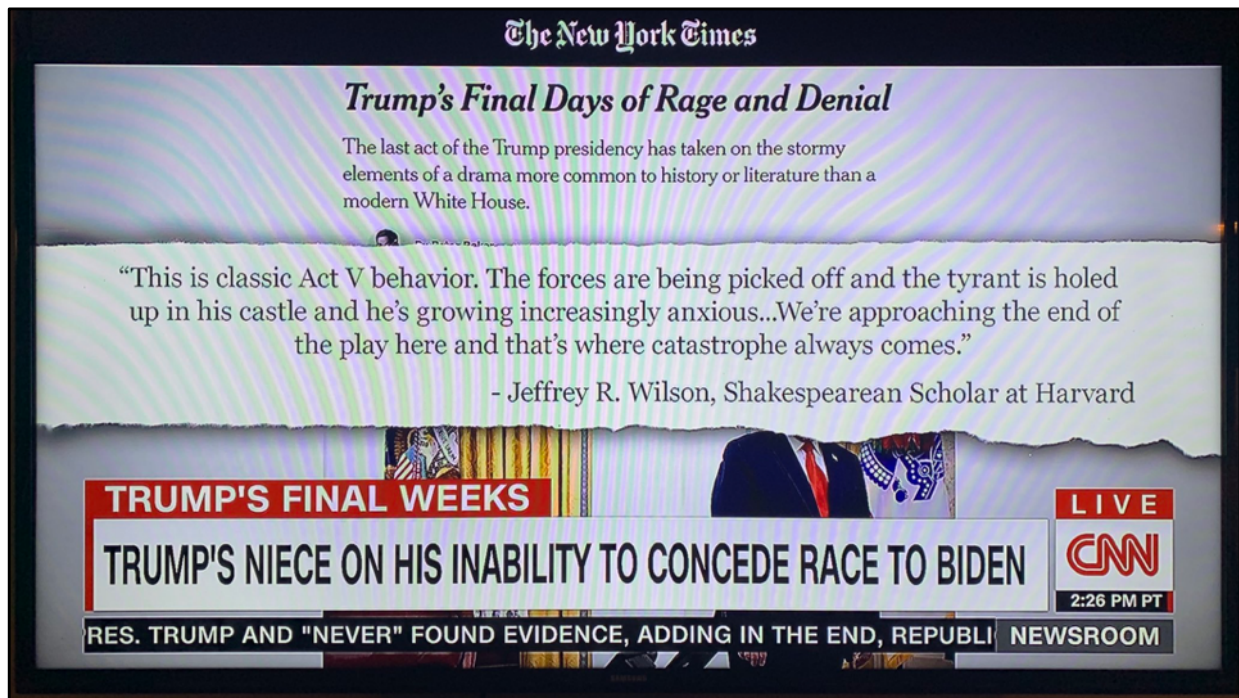
Marianne Eloise
I'm Autistic. I Didn't Know Until I Was 27.

Nicholas Kristof
The Children of Pornhub

4:21:30 — JEFF

So it's December 2020, and we had a Covid exposure in our family, so I was isolating from my family in what we came to call my fortress of solitude. It was the final week of the semester, and I had wall-to-wall meetings with students. I got an email from Peter Baker, the Washington correspondent at the New York Times, asking if I could comment for a story he was working on. I was so stressed out and exhausted, but told him I had a brief window between student meetings from 2-2:15 that afternoon, if he wanted to stop by my Zoom office hours, which is an absurd thing to say to a respected journalist.

/4:22



4:22 — JEFF

I did no prep for the interview, and tossed out what I thought was a throw-away comment—calling Trump’s December “classic act V behavior”—which seemed to give folks a good way of understanding the situation. What I love about this one is that it illustrates why I do public humanities: because the terms of literary studies can help us interpret life.

/4:22:15



4:22:30 — JEFF

Peter Baker was a guest on Alex Witt's MSNBC show, and then Alex Witt invites me to come on her show. I'm really not someone who's comfortable in the spotlight, but I challenged myself to rise to the occasion because there was an important point I wanted to make.


/4:22:45




4:22:45 — JEFF



/4:23


Big break




- *Ministry of Ideas* podcast – writer and producer
 - Articles for Boston Globe
 - Guest on *TheatreArtLifePodcast*
 - Senior editor, John Templeton Foundation grant project *Illuminations*
- Key takeaway
 - **The audience is the focus**
 - How do I make the audience *want* to learn from me? (Aesthetics)
 - How do I give the audience something exciting to learn? (Narrative & relevance)
 - How do I make it easy for the audience to learn? (Clarity)
 - Research and writing skills are real
 - Be comfortable not being an expert; be smart at becoming an expert
 - Jobs lead to jobs



IDEAS | MARIA DEVILAKONAKIS
How children's literature became everybody's literature







ILLUMINATIONS

4:23 — MARIA

My first ‘big break’ was getting to work on the podcast Ministry of Ideas, first as a writer, then as a producer. I got into this because I met the podcast creator, Zachary Davis, while working for HarvardX. He asked if I wanted to pitch some ideas for MOI, and we were off and running. This led to spin-off jobs – writing up articles on my episodes for the Boston Globe, doing interviews about my work with other podcasts, working on another project with Zach called Illuminations.

CLICK

And my big takeaway from work on MOI was that you can find answers to a lot of your questions – what do I write about, what do I include, what voice do I use, where do I start – if you just keep the audience as your focus. Think about the experience the audience is having, and that will guide your decisions.

So first, it doesn’t matter what you’re saying if no one is sticking around to hear you say it. This isn’t a research paper that other people in your field have to read. They need to want to listen. So first you have to make the experience pleasurable, by

focusing on aesthetics. Sometimes that's in a very literal way, by paying attention to the art on your website or the sound design of your podcast. I did an episode on Children's Literature and we used clips from films, and when I heard Gandalf saying "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that's given to us," and the music playing, that's when I got goosebumps.

But the aesthetic experience also has to do with the storytelling style. Jeff said don't make an argument, tell a story. That's going to be a different approach than you'd take with a paper, where you plant the question and the answer right up front. Start with some engaging question and bring the audience with you as you gradually illuminate the answer. So for my episode on Shakespeare, *Hamilton*, and literary canons, we said, "Canons have been criticized as instruments of exclusion – but could they actually be the pathways to much greater inclusion?"

And once you've got the audience wanting to hear what you have to say, you think, What can I say that's worth hearing? What's exciting, what will make an impact? Part of that comes from the narrative structure: you start a provocative question. And then you respond with a *big* answer. So our Children's Literature episode addressed the topic of why so many older people read children's books, and it started by asking, "Does children's literature save adults?" and we ended by saying, "Children's books satisfy an innate human need – they challenge us to be better." That's a big claim. If it's true, it's something important. You'll have to make simpler, more generalized statements *and* bigger, more grandiose claims than feel comfortable in most academic settings. But those kinds of statements can be more true or less true depending on the work, and your work can get you to the "more true ones."

And along with narrative, the other thing you want to do is connect what you're talking about to what's happening in the world for your audience. The Children's Lit episode looked at the Parkland activists, who started the #NeverAgain movement after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, and how the leaders were inspired by Harry Potter.

And then, how do I make it easy for the audience to learn– that's all about style. You have to make your style an absolute priority, which academic work doesn't always force you do – and within that, the priority is clarity. Steven Pinker wrote a piece called "Why Academic Writing Stinks and How to Fix It," and he says the major reason academics write un-clear prose is because of "a cognitive blind spot called the Curse of Knowledge: a difficulty in imagining what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know ... The curse of knowledge is a major reason that good scholars write bad prose. It simply doesn't occur to them that their readers don't know what they know." So if you're constantly asking yourself, How would this strike me if I were coming to this topic cold? What would I get, what would I miss? That's a

huge help in shaping your style – especially if you think about hearing your words read out loud.

CLICK

When we're trying to attract English concentrators, we often toss around a lot of statements like, "English teaches you transferrable critical reading and writing skills!" It's actually true. Not everyone has those skills, and they really do work in other areas. So you have to be comfortable not being like a professor-level expert in a topic, but also realize that your research training has enabled you to *become* an expert, for the purposes of this kind of work.

CLICK

And finally: remember that in this work, jobs lead to jobs, or as Jeff and my friend Petyr Baelish would put it,

CLICK

titles do seem to breed titles.

/4:28



4:28:15 — JEFF

I just want to highlight a couple on-going projects. One is what I'm calling "An Oral History of Public Shakespeare," which collects interviews with both practitioners and analysts of public-facing Shakes-Work.

The central argument is that we might we think of early-modern theater as what scholars now call "public engagement." Shakespeare and his contemporaries took sources and ideas from the academia of their time, transformed them into something accessible to an audience outside academia, and created a space for people to think about their lives and times in light of history and creative expression.

/4:28:45



PUBLIC SEMINAR

FEATURE

Public Shakespeare in Public Seminar

Public writing is framed as an alternative to both academic writing and creative projects

June 17, 2019

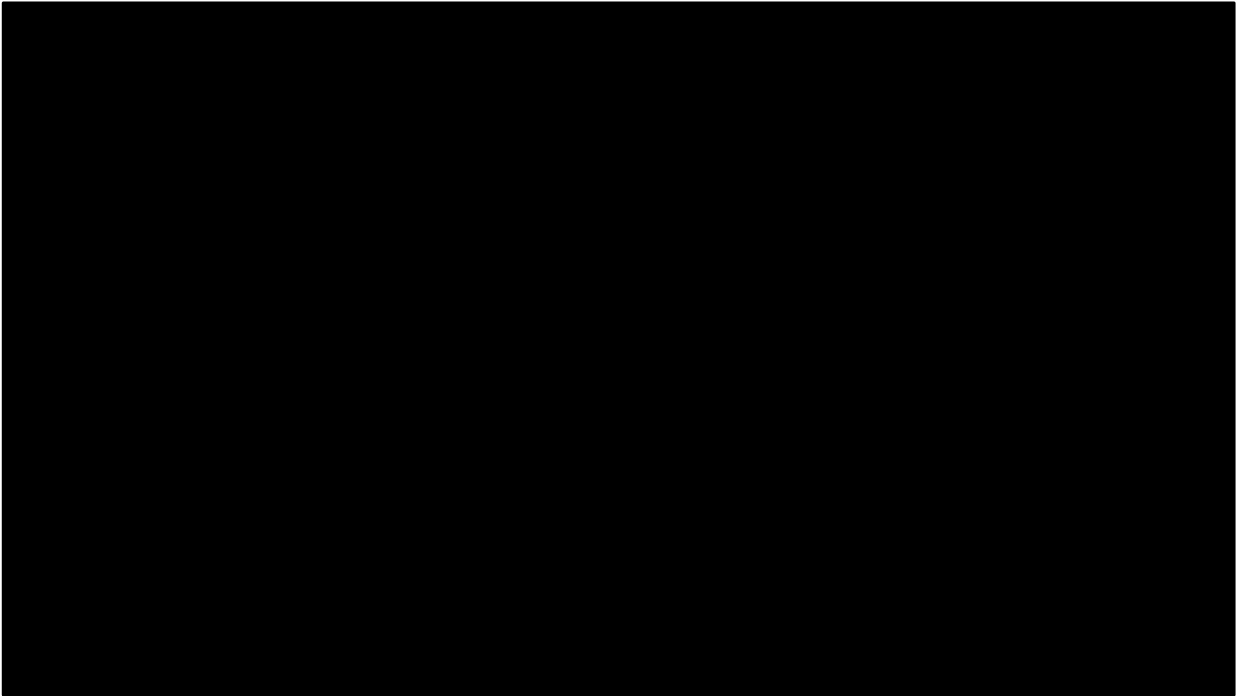


Jeffrey R. Wilson

4:28:45 — JEFF

In 2018, I created a classroom assignment asking students to take their 10-page, heavily footnoted research papers and turn them into public essays written with fire and joy. We've had nine of them published so far, and the Writing Program is doing a little featurette on the assignment.

/4:29



4:29 — JEFF

Class assignments for students can create public humanities from the voices society most needs to hear.

/4:32

Shakespeare For All

- Start of the process
 - Ingredients: academic expertise, personal relationships, experience in teaching, podcasting, public humanities
- Challenges and learning experiences
 - *Hamlet*: the "wrong" material
 - Two productions, two Claudius's
- *Game of Thrones* and Shakespeare
 - Ingredients: academic expertise, personal relationships, personal passion

4:32 — MARIA

Now we come to what's been my most significant Public Humanities project, Shakespeare For All. Shakespeare For All is a set of audio online courses designed to make Shakespeare accessible and enjoyable for an audience with no background in his works. So a project 100% after my own heart. The way I got into this project was through that same set of ingredients – academic expertise, personal relationships, and training in public humanities. My friend Zach Davis from Ministry of Ideas works for a company called Himalaya Learning that produces audio courses. They wanted someone to produce their course on Shakespeare, and he recommended me. But I wouldn't have been a suitable candidate to recommend if I didn't have both the academic credentials and the training in speaking to a general audience. And I would say that I couldn't have produced this course on my own – having a platform, funding, a technical team, that's been essential. But I do have some resources to share if you want to do audio education more independently.

CLICK

I thought I'd share some examples of challenges and learning experiences from

making the course. I'll start with *Hamlet* – this course was a big deal, it was the first course. And I started off in kind of a panic because after my interview with the featured scholar, I thought we'd gotten the “wrong” material. I started off with one idea of what was important for people to know about *Hamlet*. We all know that *Hamlet* is the play where Shakespeare invents interiority, invents thinking, invents the human, all those things, so I started off with a framework that was really focused on the psychological – his soliloquies, his motives, his delay, all that kind of stuff.

But the scholar didn't address any of those things. She had this other body of material about *Hamlet* that look at it as a *political* play and a global play, how the succession crisis in *Hamlet* reflects the succession crisis in England, and at how the play's ending with Fortinbras reflects actual political events in Norway and Denmark, how the play references all of continental Europe - and it was wonderful, but it didn't fit my frame. So I changed the frame. I thought, public Humanities doesn't have to be just sharing what all the academics already think, it can make an intervention about how we can change our thinking too. We rewrote the episode to reflect this dynamic of *Hamlet* as a global political play – here's a clip from the opening:

PLAY CLIP

At the same time, we did want to discuss those other aspects of the play. Now, our overall thesis about Shakespeare for the course is that Shakespeare is for all, the reason he's so endlessly interpretable, is because his plays are full of “gaps” (Emma Smith's term) – questions he doesn't answer. So people can keep finding new answers. And we thought the best way to show this in action was actually to have two people discussing Hamlet from two different points of view and we don't even need to try to reconcile them – just show people how different the plays can look.

CLICK

And the particular moment where I felt this approach was most rewarding was when we came to Claudius. I had never given Claudius much thought. But for this course, I changed the way I approached the plays. I barely read them at all. I listened to them and I watched them - I watched lots of different productions. And new things leapt out at me, and one was that, I could hate Claudius's character in Kenneth Branagh's production – but I loved him in the David Tennant production. I ended up thinking, Claudius *should* be king of Denmark. So in addition to all of Hamlet's big soliloquies, I had an actor record Claudius's opening speech and we put our two professors just side by side analyzing it, one showing how it could be a sign of Claudius's fragility and guilt and vulnerability, and the other showing how it could be a sign of his political strength. And it just ended up this fantastic little microcosm of the whole course's take on Shakespeare, that was inspired by coming through performance. So if I could

do graduate school over again, I'd do it by watching and listening more than reading.

CLICK

Game of Thrones intro

/4:37



4:37:30 — JEFF

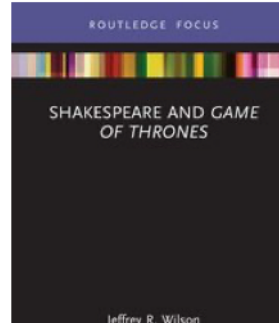
Growing out of those classroom conversations, I wrote a book called “Shakespeare and Game of Thrones.” And it’s dedicated to the “Why Shakespeare?” students because its scholarship for students and non-specialists. It aims to pose those big conceptual questions that so often appear in our classrooms—which are often ethical and political—and to respond with scholarly rigor.

/4:38

"The Wooden O & the Iron Throne: *Game of Thrones* and Shakespeare"

• Process

- Maria mentioned the GOT/Shax project to a friend – the friend mentioned Jeff's project – Maria reach out to Jeff
- From a series of interviews, a constellation of topics emerged
- Maria's plans informed her questions, which questions informed other's responses; their responses changed Maria's plans
- Episodes changed through collaboration - new focus on disability, race, and gender



4:38 — MARIA

/4:40

"The Wooden O & the Iron Throne: *Game of Thrones* and Shakespeare"

- What shaped the episodes?
 - Recurring talks with friends
 - Moments of intense personal engagement
 - Problems that kept me up at night
 - Moments that other people pointed me to
- Where did we go?
 - Why does history make better stories than stories?
 - Is it bad to be honorable?
 - Is morality different for political leaders?
 - How can we do Shakespeare in a totally new way?
 - Why do we love watching violence?
 - What's wrong with us?
 - What makes great art?
- What a highlight Public Humanities project?
 - Collaboration (professors, actors, fans, journalists, scholars)
 - Breaking boundaries between expert & non-expert, high & low culture, personal & professional
 - Linking older, "classic" literature to contemporary cultural phenomenon
 - Analyzing pop culture via scholarship
 - Aesthetics & accessibility



Sound clip – Episode 1, "The Way They Were in the Songs," Jeff Wilson and Reed Edwards



4:40 — MARIA

So I just wanted to sketch a little of where the episode ideas came from, where we got to go, and what made this a highlight moment for me.

The episode ideas came very much from that personal place leading you to the important conceptual places. They came from things I talked about with my friends, things we argued about – did the ending of *Game of Thrones* totally stink or were there redeeming parts? Jeff, pointing me towards the role of stigma in the series. Things that literally kept me up at night – my friend sent me an article about storytelling style in *Game of Thrones* at 11 o'clock at night, I was brushing my teeth, and I just stood there with my toothbrush for 20 minutes scrolling through this article going, This changes everything! And moments of the most intense personal engagement – I first saw *Julius Caesar* 12 years ago, and since then, I've written paper after paper after paper trying to get at this question of "Should I like Brutus?" It's never gone away. I remember watching the opening of "The Winds of Winter" as one of the most intense aesthetic experiences of my life, going, "Something truly awful is about to happen" and also "This is the most amazing thing that's ever happened and please don't let it stop."

CLICK

So starting with these really deep concerns, we got to some really big places in the episodes:

Why does history make a better story than stories?

Is it bad to be noble?

Is morality different for political leaders?

Have we been doing Shakespeare wrong this whole time?

Why do we love watching violence?

What's wrong with us as humans?

What makes great art?

CLICK

And finally I want to stress what made this such an exemplary public humanities project – it was a lot of collaboration, between different kinds of people - professors, actors, journalists, scholars, and fans – I have a friend who just loves learning the history behind Game of Thrones and Shakespeare and we had him to tell the history. And in that way, we broke boundaries between expert & non-expert, high & low culture, what counts as a “personal” question and what counts as a “professional” question. We tied older, “classic” literature to contemporary cultural phenomenon, showing how they illuminate each other, and we used really serious scholarship to show new things about pop culture. And finally, I think we did a really good job making these ideas accessible by making them really aesthetically pleasurable, in terms of sound and music and performance. So here's a clip that kind of pulls all that together.

PLAY CLIP

/4:45

**Public Humanities &
Paths Towards**

Maria Devlin McNair and Jeffrey R. Wilson
Harvard Renaissance Colloquium, February 18, 2021

Your Public
Humanities Projects

Our Stories

Breakouts to
Strategize Projects

4:45 — MARIA

Into breakout rooms

/4:50