**Interview with Amanda Doxtater**

**“Sustaining Relationships: Community Partners, Film Festivals, and Flexible 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, "Sustaining Relationships," is an interview with Amanda Doxtater, Assistant Professor and Barbro Osher Endowed Chair of Swedish Studies at the University of Washington. In the summer of 2018, Amanda received a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Graduate Seminars in the Humanities, and over the course of that summer developed a course, “Institutions in Scandinavian Studies: Cinema, Museum, and the Square,” which she taught for the first time in winter of 2020. Our conversation explores, among other things, the rewards of collaborating with museums and other public institutions, the necessity of pedagogical flexibility, and, of course, the question of developing and sustaining relationships of respect between the university and community partners.

…

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

AMANDA DOXTATER: Thanks for having me.

ANNIE DWYER: I'm wondering if we can begin with your course concept, “Cinema, Museum, and the Square,” and perhaps as a way to introduce listeners to your class, can you tell us a little about the specificity of cinema in public institutions in the Scandinavian context? In particular, I think it'd be helpful to know more about how Nordic Film Institutes function as public institutions. I know folks who are less familiar with some of the traditions outside of the American context might not know much about them.

AMANDA DOXTATER: That was something that I was curious about exploring with this course…to what extent these film institutes–each of the Nordic countries has a national film institute–to what extent they already function like a public-facing humanities and/or public institution. In each of these countries, film funding constitutes an important part of the way that these small nations are outward-facing. It's a part of the cultural diplomacy aspect of these cultures. They're institutionalized as public cultural heritage. Also, film plays an important part in understanding of national identity and cultural values. The film institutes–they have aspects that help with developing film and producing film, but also they usually produce materials for teaching film in the classroom. So I use a lot of–in my film courses that are in Swedish–the pedagogical materials that the Swedish Film Institute produces for teachers in Sweden at all levels of education. And those are produced, these pedagogical materials.

The two that we focused on in this course were the Swedish Film Institute and the Danish Film Institute, where I've spent time. I enjoy these spaces that are…they both have this production aspect, but they're also places. They have research archives. They have libraries. They also have cafes. They have screening rooms. They have places…the Danish Film Institute has places where you can go, and you and your kids–kids can make films. It's not just an academic public, it's a public-public space for film consumption and production. It's different from going to an art-house cinema or going to a multiplex. I did my dissertation research on the collection of one of Denmark's most famous directors, Carl Theodor Dreyer, whose collection was housed in the Danish Film Institute. So I was there a lot, and then I could go downstairs and eat lunch and then go see a film in the evening.

ANNIE DWYER : I think that came across so clearly in your course, too, because one of the things that struck me as so unique about the assignment prompts and the way that you're conceiving of publics and public institutions and public scholarship is your attention to space. For instance, for your final project you had students think about how their projected film festival or installation would engage in some way with the physical, architectural space of the museum, or its mission. I'm wondering if you can say a little more about space as important to public engagement?

AMANDA DOTATER: For the purposes of this course, I was interested in engaging in the new space of the National Nordic Museum. The inspiration for this course came about because the Nordic Heritage Museum moved from its previous building in Ballard to a brand new building in Ballard. And it changed names to the Nordic Museum and now it's the National Nordic Museum. The Danish Film Institute used to be the Danish Film Museum, and so I was curious about two things: whether there was a way of replicating my experience spending a lot of time in the physical spaces of the film institutes, whether we could replicate that through digital means–because these institutions have expansive websites and resources online. To what extent can you give a sense of the way that these spaces are used online? But then also there's a zombie film festival that the Nordic Heritage Museum, or the Nordic Museum, puts on and those are screened in this new museum space, too. As I was thinking about what this course could do, I wanted to give a comparable experience.

The film that was at the center of this was *The Square* by [Ruben Östlund](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruben_%C3%96stlund) from 2017–I think that's when it came out. It's dealing with a lot of the same things–representations of the museum, publics brought into the museum, and the spatialization of relationships in Swedish culture through art installations and things like that. “How can cinema as a medium represent something like the museum or public sphere?” were also these questions that were interesting to me to explore.

ANNIE DWYER : I think it was such an interesting endeavor to try to use the course as an opportunity to strengthen relationships with the Nordic National Museum. I'm wondering if you can say a little more about how you did that, how that partnership looked, what your collaboration looked like, and if there's any advice that comes out of that for other scholars who are looking to partner with museums or other public institutions in either their scholarship or their teaching.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yeah. I remember one of the big concerns and questions about public-facing scholarship that we talked about in our cohort when we were designing these courses was how to sustain relationships with community members and partners, and how to honor them and not make it parasitic, exploitative…or like a savior coming in from the academy to reach in and help. We didn't have to worry about any of that because, from the beginning, the Nordic Heritage Museum was founded by one of our alumni and several of our professors and professors emerita are on the board of the National Nordic Museum, and Stina Cowan, who we're working with, whose position is the Educational and Cultural Programs Manager–she also did a Master's Degree in our department, and so…

ANNIE DWYER : A lot of existing relationships.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yeah, exactly. So it was building on existing relationships. Our faculty in Scandinavian Studies had given…we had a series of public lectures in the museum. There were a lot of connections already. It didn't feel exploitative at all. These relationships have been mutual from the beginning. So in that sense, it was a lot easier than–and different from–some of the other kinds of partnerships that people are working with these public facing courses. We didn't really have to develop any new relationships, and we didn't have to worry about sustaining them after the course ended.

ANNIE DWYER: That says something about looking to where relationships already exist and not always feeling like you have to reinvent the wheel–just pull from your existing relationships and resources and connections. I think that would be helpful for people to understand if you could tell us a little more about what the public-facing projects were that students pursued, how they worked, what challenges came up as they pursued them…

AMANDA DOXTATER: I imagined this course plugging into the courses that had been developed before in public-facing humanities that dealt specifically with film festivals. This was Yomi Braester's course and then Leigh Mercer's course. And Leigh, she and her students put on…I think it was a two day film festival. That was the model that we were imagining. But then we quickly determined that…so there were four students in my class, so that's one thing, a smaller class perhaps. Then with the timing of it, we taught it right as the pandemic hit–winter 2020. We figured out quickly that we wouldn't be able to either contribute to a mini program for the Nordic Lights Film Festival, which is already ongoing, or do something that was completely a separate festival. If we had wanted to get rights and things like that, we would have had to have started the year before. So timing-wise, we knew that we couldn't do a film festival.

We shifted fairly quickly to “We're just going to put together a proposal for a film festival.” The whole course was so experimental. A lot of times, with Scandinavian Studies courses, they're so small that they have to be adapted on the first day, depending on who's in the class. When I imagined this class, I was hoping that it would draw students outside of Scandinavian Studies and we could bring in, talk about, museum[s] and public institutions in different cultural contexts. But it was all Scandinavian and Baltic students. We narrowed that focus down because those were the expertises and interests that people were bringing to the course.

In the beginning, we were open to either doing a film festival or some kind of installation piece or some kind of programming having to do with these intersections I mentioned before–the film and public institutions and museums, something that took advantage of the space of this new museum. Part of the process was figuring out what this group of students wanted to do. It was a lot of project management that I hadn't…that's not my background or expertise. But we figured it out as we went.

It ended up being they chose to do a film festival and to propose a theme. We wanted the theme to, again, reflect something that had to happen in the museum, and that also sought to bring new publics to the museum, who might not, for instance, have Nordic heritage, or might not be familiar with the Nordic region, or might not have been to Ballard. That was one of the things that they had to think about in designing this–how to bring new people into the museum. There were four students, and they each ended up choosing a film. Then they had to produce a pitch around why that film. The theme that they chose for the festival was “Borders of Belonging.” Each of the films–they had to pitch it. They had to be able to talk about how it related to the larger theme, and then they had to produce some educational or outreach materials related to it.

That was one of the things that went well. It was in the last two weeks of the quarter when we had shifted online radically, so it was one of the first things that happened on Zoom. That went well because they were pitching to Stina Cowan and Leslie Anderson. Leslie is the head curator at the Nordic museum. She had come in to talk to our class so she was familiar and Stina is familiar because we have these connections–everybody knew her. So it was a familiar friendly pitch, and it was so generous of them to spend an hour of their time. But the students got practical feedback on the logistics of putting on a festival, how much it would cost, and how it would happen in the museum. That worked really well.

ANNIE DWYER : That's fantastic because I think in the course of a ten-week quarter, it might not be practical to do something as large scale as put together an entire film festival or installation, but a pitch gives them so much good experience. It makes them do the sort of intellectual work around that, but also is to scale.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yeah. Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER : It's fantastic. The other thing that you did is you were able to get students to participate in the Nordic Lights Film Festival by writing and delivering a five minute oral introduction to the film. Can you say a little more about how that went?

AMANDA DOXTATER: This is something that I…there were a lot of aspects of this course that I, as an academic and a film scholar and a Scandinavianist, had never done before. So that was interesting. But introducing films is something that I've done many times, and it's a skill. Because Dina was curating the Nordic Lights Film Festival, it worked out that each student got to pick a film in the film festival, and they wrote it out. They wrote out a 5 minute introduction, and then we practiced it in our seminar room, and then they delivered it in front of a big audience. So it's a practice of public speaking. That was also something that went well because Stina was happy to not have to introduce all the films. It was a good experience, a practical skill.

ANNIE DWYER : Right. Fantastic on so many levels. It's an authentic assignment with a real audience.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yeah. Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER : Helping the museum, and it's not…it fits within a 10 week quarter. I think it's helpful for people to have examples of scalable public-facing assignments like this that are doable in the quarter system.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yeah. It was good for the visibility of our department, too, to a public that's a cinema-loving public.

ANNIE DWYER : Yeah. Absolutely. Well, and you mentioned it was one of the last moments of life as we knew it, right?

AMANDA DOXTATER: Oh, yes. Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER : You had the misfortune to be teaching this course, which had all of these public engagement components in it, in the winter of 2020…and then pivoted gracefully when everything went online. So I'm wondering…if that experience helped you think through how to effectively respond to the inevitable, unforeseen obstacles and events that interfere with how you had envisioned a course or a project?

AMANDA DOXTATER: In part it was figuring it out day by day–what was going on. One of the things that I was curious about doing was bringing in Leigh Mercer and Yomi Braester. They gave talks alongside one of the graduate students. They each brought in a graduate student who had taken their public humanities course. So, in a way, our course…

ANNIE DWYER : These are–just to interrupt–other folks who have taught Simpson Center-funded public-facing courses around film festivals and cinema.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Exactly. Over the course of the quarter, we invited them in. It was wonderful to hear their experience, both teaching and taking these courses. But also we got to hear about all of the ways that Leigh Mercer and her students [approached] dealing with all of the logistics. Even before the pandemic logistics, there are always, as you said, there's always something to deal with on the fly. In their case, it was working with a curriculum of this high school. So that gave us some insight into how that's always a part of something like this. In a way, whenever I teach–especially a new course–it's always experimental and it's shifting under our feet all the time. In that sense, it didn't feel all that different from the way that any course needs to be adjusted as you go along. It's going to be different from how you imagined it [when] designing it based on who's taking it, honestly. It has to speak to whoever's–to whatever the people, the students enrolled, are bringing to the class.

ANNIE DWYER: Right. As you were saying earlier, that's so common in a small modern language department to have to do that, so maybe anticipating that flexibility, and building in room to make the changes–you don't know what those might be yet–but somehow building it into the course design or the rhythm of the class.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yeah. That's how I tried, in the final project prompt, to give a sense of “These three weeks you're negotiating these things, and then in the next two weeks, you're doing the next phase of figuring it out.” One of the most interesting and productive aspects of teaching the class was seeing the way these four students with different backgrounds came to the idea about what this film festival should be about and different ideas about working on a team and project management…and how to move a project forward to make sure that we had something to pitch at the end. It was great to have that deadline of “We need to have something to present there.” Having that practical aspect to it is interesting. And having to negotiate the personalities was an amazing life skill or job skill.

ANNIE DWYER: It's just so wonderful that there's…a class like yours is an opportunity to learn how to use them. The other thing about collaboration that I loved about your class is the way that you are inviting in–just to pick up on an earlier thread–other faculty and graduate students who had taught or taken publicly engaged classes on film festivals. As somebody who was part of the administration of the Mellon grant, it was really interesting for us to see this cluster of courses emerging around film and film festivals and cinema. You did a good job of pulling on that knowledge, and building a community of practice that extended beyond the classroom, across classrooms. I don't know if you have anything to say about that, but it seems to me that it would be useful to think about how to build in more opportunities for faculty to learn from and talk to each other about the work that they're doing, to visit one another's classes, especially when doing publicly engaged work.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER : Do you have any thoughts about that?

AMANDA DOXTATER: I'm not sure to what extent there was a conscious cultivation of this interest cluster on the part of the Simpson Center, or whether it emerged organically. But there's something about the idea of doing an installation piece or doing a mini film festival or doing another event that's interesting. I could imagine a future collaboration with these colleagues about that. And knowing that there's that interest across campus is lovely.

ANNIE DWYER: Well, we only have…I just want to look at our time and be sensitive to your generosity of time. I'd be curious if you feel comfortable on the podcast talking about coming to teaching public scholarship…the way in which this work makes you assume a posture of humility.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yes. That's putting it so generously. It was so exciting and interesting. I didn't really know what I was getting into, in terms of public-facing humanities. I was encouraged to apply and to design a course because I was new to the university. It was my first year as an assistant professor, and it would be a good way to network, meet people across campus in different fields, and connect with what the Simpson Center was doing and all the amazing work. I didn't have a strong idea of what that would entail. But I knew that the museum was opening and we wanted to do something with the museum. Doing the reading that we did as part of the cohort–about what public humanities was–was so gratifying and fascinating and interesting and thinking about all of the nuance of it and about the ethics and…just giving me the opportunity to think about what I wanted to be as a professor here at the University of Washington, and how I want our department to fit in the community and fit in the university community.

So when it came to teaching it, I was like, “OK. Let's go for this and let's give it a try.” There were mini train wrecks and I felt like “Boy, somebody more qualified than I should be doing this.” When I teach this again or if I taught it again, I would draw on different pockets of expertise in the university and maybe new collaborations to beef up the ethnographic. My colleague Olivia Gunn talks a lot about having beginner's mind as a positive way to be in the world–to know that you don't know anything or everything or to be open to experimenting with things. I always try to be transparent with my students, especially if it's the first time that I've taught a course–especially, the first time that I taught a graduate course: “I’m learning how to do this as I'm doing it, so we'll all learn together.”

ANNIE DWYER : I think having that beginner's mind in public scholarship is so important, no matter how long you've been doing it. The fact that you're modeling that for your students is so useful to them.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Yeah. It's really fun. It was intellectually stimulating and I learned so much doing this. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about this and to revisit it and to revisit the materials. Because when I teach this class again, I'm going to take the things that I think worked well, and then try a whole bunch of new things. What I tried to do was work with what was happening in the moment, and to get the opportunity…the next time I teach it, there'll be a different moment and there'll be a different constellation of people on campus doing different things, and that's exciting. It'll be fun. I look forward to the next time.

ANNIE DWYER : Well, I think looking forward to the next time might be a wonderful way to close our interview, so thank you so much for talking to me.

AMANDA DOXTATER: Thank you!

…

ANNIE DWYER: This episode of *Going Public* was made possible with help from the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities staff, particularly, C. R. Grimmer, who is also the Communications Manager at the Simpson Center; our sound editor, Oliver Gordon; and of course, support from The Mellon Foundation. The Mellon initiative at the Simpson Center, *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration* was led by Kathleen Woodward, Director of the Mellon initiative, Director of the Simpson Center, and UW Professor of English; Rachel Arteaga, Assistant Director of the Simpson Center and Associate Program Director of the Mellon initiative, and myself, Annie Dwyer, Assistant Program Director of the Mellon initiative. We hope you check out additional episodes of *Going Public* on our website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic) and wherever you get your podcasts.