


RESEARCH ARTICLE

How to Podcast

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(Received 01 September 2024; revised 17 November 2024; accepted 30 November 2024)

Abstract

In this article, we reflect on our experiences co-producing a podcast about literary books mostly written by women of color. We describe how and why we started the podcast and how our podcast provides a model of skills that are key to doing humanities, and offer some practical advice about making podcasts.

Keywords: collaboration; podcast; public scholarship

Over the past seven years, the three of us (the co-authors) have recorded and produced around 50 episodes of a podcast we call *The Drip*, where we discuss literature by writers of color. Each episode focuses on one book (and occasionally a film) and our conversations focus on our reactions to and questions about the book, informed by our academic expertise and personal experiences as scholars and people of color. Our listening audience isn't huge by popular podcast metrics, but it is significant for us and is consistent. The show's individual episodes generally average around 100 downloads during their first month and they continue to accumulate listeners over time. The first episode we ever recorded, in the fall of 2017, on Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, remains our most popular podcast with over 450 downloads and counting. As of November 2024, the show has surpassed 10,100 total downloads.

We started this podcast after the three of us and another initial contributor had an in-depth conversation that summer about a book we all had recently read – *Hunger* by Roxane Gay. Our conversation about *Hunger* at a local coffee shop invigorated us and deepened our understanding of the book and of each other. At one point, Todd joked that our conversation was so amazing that it was a shame that other people couldn't hear it...and not too long after, we were in the midst of recording our very first podcast episode of *The Drip* (named after the *drip, drip* sound of coffee brewing), talking about Octavia Butler's visionary science fiction novel, *Kindred*.¹ It's clear in that first episode, we were definitely novices at the format – we dove into discussing the novel and Crystal had to interrupt and remind us that we should probably tell the audience what book we were discussing!

¹ Chikkatur et al. 2018.

Since then, we have developed a more structured format of the podcast: we begin with an introduction to the podcast, ourselves, and to the text and author we're discussing, and we end by sharing recommendations about something we've been enjoying. While we did not initially conceive of this podcast as being a public humanities project, over time we have come to see how it can model several goals of humanities and liberal arts education, for our students and for the general public: how to communicate effectively, how to read critically and deeply, and how interdisciplinarity can deepen our understanding of texts. It has also allowed us to develop our creative chops and imaginations for what is possible within other collaborative work that we each do in our own spheres. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it has brought a sense of joy to our lives, especially as we navigated the social isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, the racial justice uprisings in Summer 2020, and the daily grind of working in predominantly white spaces.

The podcast addresses several key aspects at the intersection of humanities scholarship and public life. First, we see the podcast as providing a model for how to have in-depth, face-to-face conversations about human experiences, social issues, literature, politics, and history. One goal of a broadly humanistic education is to help us develop communication skills, including those of listening deeply to others, and we hope to model these listening skills in our podcast. Todd and Anita have noted a greater need to build these kinds of communication skills among their students after the isolation and distancing that was necessary during the first part of the COVID-19 pandemic; research studies have started to demonstrate these impacts as well.²

A complementary skill that is valued in humanities classes is reading broadly, deeply, and critically. Rather than merely joining the chorus of complaints about how "people, especially young people, these days just don't read,"³ we want to encourage in our listeners the habit of reading for pleasure and knowledge through our conversations that we hope are both fun and informative. We also posit that the range of academic backgrounds on the podcast team demonstrates what it means to examine the same source through different disciplinary lenses. As a historian, a literary scholar and folklorist, and an educational studies scholar, we bring our disciplinary, professional lenses to the books we read, which allows for rich interdisciplinary conversations. We have gotten informal feedback from some of our colleagues who tell us that they've used our podcast with their students to supplement their readings of a particular text. What might be useful for those students is that they can hear us trying to figure out what we think as we listen to each other and dig deeper into the text together in real time. While we usually decide on a few topics we want to address before we start recording, our conversations are unrehearsed and unscripted. You can often hear us become excited about what another person shares because it gives us new insight into the text. Sometimes you hear us argue about our interpretation of a particular line – as Todd and Anita did with one crucial sentence in a short story in Deesha Philyaw's beautiful collection of short stories, *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*.⁴ Close reading can be fun!

Most academic articles, especially about literature, tend to be authored by a single person, and our podcast gives students and our colleagues a way to imagine what critical analyses of texts from multiple perspectives could sound like. It's a way of demonstrating what it means to move toward *dialogue* and not merely debate or discussion.⁵ The format allows us to grapple with the limits of our knowledge and expertise in ways that we hope demonstrate

² Cerutti et al. 2024.

³ Stripling 2024.

⁴ Chikkatur et al. 2021.

⁵ "Comparing Debate, Discussion and Dialogue" 2024.

the importance of humility, another key part of engaging in difficult conversations, especially with people who are not “like” us. A conversation on this topic of “not knowing” led us in our discussion of *Border Less* by Namrata Poddar, to wonder whether we should also question what we can assume about what we know about people who we think *are* “like” us.⁶

We have done this work without much formal institutional support – we have mostly paid for equipment and resources on our own, which has given us a high degree of freedom and flexibility both in terms of content and format. It has allowed us to change as necessary when we meet to record and sometimes go months without putting out a new episode because of our other commitments. For the two of us who are currently in higher education institutions, we see our work on this podcast as one aspect of our public scholarship work, although there is no clear recognition or appreciation of this work from our institutions. We *know* that our conversations have made us better scholars, researchers, and teachers because it has deepened our own listening, reading, and discussion skills.

When we started the podcast, we did not think of it as particularly related to the work that we do as teachers and scholars. It was just a fun thing to do with people we like and respect. And while it continues to be fun, our work on the podcast has come to inform our other community-based work. In the years we have been making the podcast, speaking to the broader community – outside of academia – has become more important and prominent in our individual work. This show has been part of a transition in our lives as scholars – we want to prioritize finding joy in work that we care about and that we want to do with and for the people and communities we care about. We have even done or supported other podcasts because of our experience on this podcast: Todd started another podcast and has encouraged his students to use podcasting in his classes,⁷ Crystal co-hosted a podcast about Black Feminism,⁸ and Anita supported a group of young Somali American women to make a podcast about their experiences living in a small town in Minnesota.⁹

For Anita, this podcast informed a shift in her approach to research, scholarship, and advocacy work in recent years. It has become a way to practice sharing space and ideas, and to ask questions and listen deeply – all skills that matter in the other collaborative work that she does, including supporting participatory action research work in public schools¹⁰ as well as organizing for educational justice.¹¹ It also has given her one more way to work with people of color, something she has found so necessary and nourishing as a faculty member of color in a predominantly white institution. The start of the podcast came at a time in her life, in her career, when she was feeling more keenly the weariness that comes with being a brown-bodied person with a certain set of critical politics in a white liberal space and the podcast, as well as the other community-centered work she has gotten to do has helped her maintain a sense of calm and commitment.

For Todd, working on *The Drip* with Anita and Crystal has confirmed the joys and benefits of working with a team. From the very beginning, we recognized that if *The Drip* was going to have longevity, we would have to share the work of creating it. Having produced over 50 episodes now, we have found roles that suit each of our strengths: Anita hosts the show,

⁶ Chikkatur, Lawrence, and Moten 2022a.

⁷ American Culture & Difference n.d.

⁸ Moten and Klingenberg 2022.

⁹ “Somalis Out Loud” 2020.

¹⁰ Chikkatur 2022.

¹¹ Lozenski and Chikkatur 2023.

doing background research on the authors and writing each show's intro; Crystal handles our website development and social media; and Todd does show production and editing. And it is more than the labor of making the show that we share as members of The All Spoilers Collective. The team serves as an incubator for ideas; we often discuss issues that affect each of us in our jobs – sometimes even making an episode out of our discussions. Take, for example, Episode 41,¹² where we focused on how we think about the use and occurrence of potentially offensive language in the classroom, whether spoken out loud or read in a text. The show has come to occupy an important place in our lives as a place where we have learned from each other, developed ideas together, and grown closer as friends and colleagues. The bottom line is that being a part of a team provides safety, solidarity, security, and support – all of which are in short supply for us as folks of color working and living in predominantly white spaces.

1. Why a podcast?

Podcasts aren't hard to make – a fact proven by the over five million podcasts available today worldwide.¹³ Of course, like academia, the podcast world can be fairly undiverse, especially in terms of who hosts the top-rated podcasts. For example, one 2016 article points out that all but two of the podcasts with the biggest audiences were hosted by white men.¹⁴ As Locke notes, “the increased ease [of making podcasts] shouldn't only empower every young, White dude with an idea and a Soundcloud account.”¹⁵ We wholeheartedly agree. Knowing that we will be meeting regularly to discuss some incredible work by authors of color has also been an enriching and joyful experience for all of us. It has provided us with a space of respite from our predominantly white institutions.

Making a podcast as people of color (the current team includes an Asian American and two Black scholars) about books written by people of color also allowed us in our small way to challenge the whiteness of multiple spaces in our society. In 2020, an opinion piece in *The New York Times* noted that out of 7,124 books published by major publishing companies between 1950 and 2018 for which they could identify the author's race, 95% were written by White authors.¹⁶ Their broader argument is that opportunities and resources available to non-White authors are “culturally redlined.”¹⁷ In contrast, 100% of the books we discuss on our podcast are written by people of color, mostly Black women. In fact, this topic of how authors of color are not given the same attention and resources from publishers as White authors even came up in one of our podcast episodes. Toward the end of our discussion about *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*, Crystal notes powerfully, “Black women and their stories and their experiences are marginalized and discounted and people don't think they're worth much...but what if *only* Black women read this book? This book would still be a best seller, [let's not] discount Black women and our literary traditions, we're gonna read this book, y'all!”¹⁸ We read books we want to read – sometimes ones that are mainstream best sellers, sometimes ones our friends recommend to us, and some with covers that catch our eyes as we browse for books in our favorite independently owned bookstores!

¹² Chikkatur, Lawrence, and Moten 2022b.

¹³ “Podcasts Statistics” n.d.

¹⁴ Morgan 2022.

¹⁵ Locke 2015.

¹⁶ So and Wezerek 2020.

¹⁷ Ho 2021.

¹⁸ Chikkatur et al. 2021.

The podcast format has given us a chance to experiment with how to have conversations anchored not only in one text but also in our personal and professional lives. We get to be true to our voices. Our literal voices. In an essay exploring the racialized sounds of public radio, Kumanyika notes how his “natural voice” – the one he uses when he’s around people and in contexts that are most comfortable – does not sound like the “white” sound of public radio.¹⁹ Like Kumanyika and like most people of color in the United States, who find themselves navigating predominantly white contexts, the three of us must be mindful of our tone, our delivery, our syntax...but on the podcast, we get to just be ourselves – our whole complex, contradictory ways of being in the world. And there is something about hearing us that is different than reading the work that we put out there as scholars – “you can only enter [our] world by hearing it yourself,” as Kumanyika says.

2. Some technical notes

Now that we’ve convinced you how amazing our podcast is and how fun the podcast format is in general, we want to chat a bit about how to podcast! We didn’t necessarily know that it would be easy to make a podcast when Todd first suggested we should have recorded our first coffee shop book conversation. It didn’t take long to realize that anyone could make one. When Todd asked a colleague in his department who he knew had a podcast what he needed to record one, the answer was direct: “If you have a computer, you can make a podcast.” We started recording our podcast with a bit more than just a computer. The IT department at Anita’s school had a portable soundboard they let us use. We wanted to record in person on site at a coffee shop, so we brought in this rather large soundboard in a case about the size of a roller travel bag, set some mics on a table, and started recording a show. For a while, the location worked because we had chosen a very quiet coffee shop that seemed to have almost no customers. However, a coffee shop with no customers to make noise in the background is not long for this world and eventually it went out of business. Larger, more successful coffee shops were more difficult to record in. After a while, we realized we just didn’t have the audio engineering chops to record live in public. We started recording at Todd’s house with a much smaller setup: a Zoom HN4 with four mics and a headphone splitter. That setup worked well until the pandemic hit and we could no longer record in person.

First, we tried recording with Zoom, but while that app was a revelation for remote conferencing, it wasn’t great for audio quality. Eventually, we started using Squadcast, an app that allows us to talk remotely, and that records each person’s audio locally at their own computer. This feature avoids the audio overlap that often happens with Zoom. Each of us uses a relatively cheap external USB mic and that gives us three separate audio files that are edited using the free, open-source app Audacity. It works beautifully for audio editing, although Garageband and other free or included apps could work just as well. While our show may not always sound like it was recorded in a studio, it definitely sounds good enough for a show that is usually recorded in our homes with very inexpensive equipment. Todd does his best to make the show sound as professional as possible and has learned a lot along the way. The editing process is the most laborious element of making the show, taking 8–10 hours to edit and mix an episode – although new AI technology is starting to provide help on that. Some services such as Squadcast provide AI tools that allow you to upload raw episodes for quick editing and mixing. We prefer to limit our use of AI as Todd has found that some AI tools tend to privilege male over female voices, making the latter sound garbled or unclear rather than enhancing them effectively. Finally, we use Podbean as our distribution

¹⁹ Kumanyika 2015.

avenue; it lets us set up all the audio services you want to send your show out to after you apply to each service. Podbean provides us with basic statistics about the podcast (e.g., how many people downloaded each episode).²⁰

In short, if we can do it, you can do it! We encourage especially those of you with backgrounds and perspectives that have been historically underrepresented in academia to try your hand at doing something creative and collaborative. Our listening audience might be small but we like to think that our podcast is reaching those who need it! It also helps us engage regularly in a kind of community-based scholarship in which we model critical analysis, critical thought, close reading, and cooperative thinking. Our work together on this podcast allows us in one small way to live out what Quechua scholar Sandy Grande describes as a commitment to collectivity or “staging a refusal of individualist promise project of the settler state and its attendant institutions.”²¹ It allows us to be with each other and with the texts we choose in generous and generative ways, to ask those deep and broad questions about humanity, and to do it in a way that invites our listeners to learn and have fun with us.

Anita Chikkatur is a Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Carleton College in Northfield, MN, USA. Her research broadly focuses on how educational institutions can be a supportive and resourceful environment for everyone (students, teachers, and staff). From 2018 to 2022, she was the co-principal investigator of an AmeriCorps-funded participatory action research (PAR) project in Faribault, MN, USA, collaborating with youth, parents, teachers, and administrators. She is currently the principal investigator of a second AmeriCorps-funded grant that focuses on Youth Participatory Action Research in five Minnesota school districts.

David T. Lawrence teaches African American literature and expressive culture, folklore studies, and cultural studies at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN, USA. He is the co-author of *When They Blew the Levee: Race, Politics, and Community in Pinhook, MO* (2018), winner of the 2019 Chicago Folklore Prize. An ethnographer, folklorist, and literary scholar, his work sits at the intersection of identity, narrative, community, and culture. Dr. Lawrence is also the co-creator of *George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Database* and the co-director of the Urban Art Mapping research project.

A south-side Chicago native, **Crystal M. Moten** is a public historian, curator, and writer who focuses on the intersection of race, class, and gender, to uncover the hidden histories of Black people in the Midwest. The recipient of numerous awards and honors, her research has appeared in books, journals, documentaries, and other media. Her most recent award-winning book is *Continually Working: Black Women, Community Intellectualism and Economic Justice in Postwar Milwaukee* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2023).

Acknowledgements. We'd like to thank all the authors we've read over the past few years for writing amazing books that have led us to have some incredible conversations and to all the listeners who have listened, and especially to those who have let us know that they've listened! We'd also like to thank Mandy Duong for developing the podcast website.

Author Contributions. Conceptualization: C.M., D.T.L., A.P.C.; Formal analysis: C.M., D.T.L., A.P.C.; Writing – original draft: C.M., D.T.L., A.P.C.; Writing – review and editing: C.M., D.T.L., A.P.C.; Investigation: D.T.L.

Funding Statement. No funding was received for this article.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no competing interests.

²⁰ Squadcast and Podbean are the biggest costs for us along with internet hosting. Each is between \$100 and \$150 per year, but there are also free options for each that could work for most podcasters. Many academic institutions have IT resources that can help with these aspects of podcasting as well.

²¹ Grande 2014, 61.

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