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Maisha T. Winn, Hannah Graham, and Rita Renjitham Alfred

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Decoding (a Woman’s) Diaries: The Transcribe-A-Thon as an Undergraduate Public Memory Project

Jessica Enoch, Katie Bramlett, and Elizabeth A. Novara

There is little doubt that the field of rhetoric and composition has come to see the value of archive-based pedagogies within undergraduate rhetorical education. Indeed, scholars such as Jean Bessette, Wendy Hayden, Deborah Mutnick, James P. Purdy, Pamela VanHaitsma, and Jessica Enoch have made clear the archive’s pedagogical import, asserting that pedagogies that engage the archive “support” the “development of [students’] critical consciousness” (Mutnick 375), “hold relevance” for students’ “inquiry and composing” practices (VanHaitsma 35), “afford” opportunities for “rhetorical listening” (Bessette 73), and enable students to “adopt a more nuanced approach to information literacy” (Hayden, “AND” 135). Projects that allow for such learning often range from students using archival artifacts to craft their own historical arguments, analyzing the archive for its rhetorical properties, or even building archives themselves. Additionally, as Enoch and Jack, Hayden, and Jen McDaneld claim, archive-based pedagogies often offer special opportunities to scholar-teachers interested in feminist pedagogies and the recovery of women’s rhetorics. Hayden in particular cites two ways archival pedagogies enable such

Jessica Enoch, lifetime member of NCTE, is associate professor of English at the University of Maryland, where she directs the Academic Writing Program and teaches classes in rhetorical education, feminist rhetoric, and feminist memory studies. Her book Domestic Occupations: Spatial Rhetoric and Women’s Work will be out in fall 2019. Katie Bramlett is a PhD candidate at the University of Maryland, where she teaches classes in writing and feminist memory studies. She is currently a writing center administrative assistant and the graduate assistant to the directors of the 2019 Rhetoric Society of America Institute. Her research works at the intersection of Asian American rhetoric, public memory, and transnational feminism. Elizabeth A. Novara is the American Women’s History Specialist in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. She was previously the Curator of Historical Manuscripts at the University of Maryland Libraries. Her research interests include the history of women’s political activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the intersections of feminist theory and practice with the field of archives and special collections.
feminist work. First, they allow teachers and students to “creat[e] collaborative relationships with students” and “focus on local histories.” Second, students can leverage archives toward feminist rhetorical ends as they “recove[r] lost voices” by “(re)reading the archive as a source of public memory . . . and creating archives themselves” (“AND” 134).

This essay extends and redirects this conversation by exploring pedagogical connections between the archive and women’s public memory. Here, we build on the writings of Michael Neal, Katherine Bridgman, and Stephen McElroy, as well as Tammie Kennedy and Angelika Walker’s work found in Jane Greer and Laurie Grobman’s excellent edited collection Pedagogies of Public Memory to shift pedagogical attention regarding students’ archival work. Rather than asking students to research in the archive, we ask them to craft a public memory project using archival artifacts. More particularly, we consider in this essay the efficacy of an assignment that prompted students to think critically about the specific rhetorical strategies and memorial genres that could bring a woman’s historical artifact into the public imagination. We designed this archive-based project for our collaboratively taught course, Women and Public Memory in Digital and Material Worlds—an upper-level undergraduate course that was cross-listed in English and women’s studies and offered in spring 2017.

The task for this specific project was for the fourteen students who enrolled in the course to host a transcribe-a-thon—a public memory genre that we discuss in more detail later—in which they invited community members to participate in the crowdsourced digital transcription of Margaret (Madge) Preston’s personal writings and then supported these participants as they transcribed Preston’s writings at the event. Students titled their transcribe-a-thon “Decoding Diaries: Transcribing Women’s History Together.” As instructors planning this assignment, we believed students could draw an interested audience for Decoding Diaries because of the relevance of Preston’s writings to our community and of the important sociopolitical questions her work raised. Preston was a white, middle-class woman who was local to our university (she resided outside Baltimore, Maryland); she also lived in a slave-holding home during the Civil War period, and she was a survivor of domestic violence. Though Preston did not address these topics on every page of her diaries, we believed students and the public would find value in both the pedestrian accounts of daily life in nineteenth-century Maryland as well as what might be seen as the more compelling and troubling references to slavery and domestic violence. Thus, the hope was that this public memory event would enable both students and participants to learn more about Preston herself; her raced, classed, and gendered experiences; and women’s wartime writing practices. In relation to archive-based pedagogies, our goal was for students to expand their understandings of what can happen
in an archive, for in this project, students came to see digital transcription as an emergent archival research practice and a public memory genre. That is, students learned that the archive could be a place for both feminist recovery and public memory production. To the latter point, by putting on the transcribe-a-thon, students increased public access to Preston’s writings by inviting and enabling participants to make her diaries more readable through their transcriptions.

We assert that this project gains significance within our field’s conversations because it centered on two important pedagogical goals that we believe are critical components of a rhetorical education based in archival exploration of and engagements with public memory. For this course assignment, we aimed for students (1) to sharpen their rhetorical acuity by identifying the range of texts necessary for the success of the Decoding Diaries event and then to produce these materials, and (2) to evaluate this genre of public memory, exploring how the specific format of the transcribe-a-thon shaped participants’ archival experiences and interactions with a woman’s past. Our analysis proceeds by explicating and elaborating on these two outcomes. Our findings are based both on our experiences teaching this assignment and on the student writing produced for it, which as we will detail, included not only the materials for Decoding Diaries but also students’ reflective essays that they composed after the event for the purpose of analyzing their public memory work. Ultimately, we see this meditation on the assignment and students’ responses to it offering a heuristic for readers to think through how they might invent from this example to create archive-based public memory projects for their own students. As we readily admit, this assignment was far from perfect. However, it did enable students to consider what it means to take women’s archival writing “public” by identifying the rhetorical strategies necessary to do so and discerning the efficacy of “going public” through the genre of the transcribe-a-thon.

First, then, we explore how students identified and made use of a rich set of rhetorical strategies that enabled them to craft invitations, publicize Decoding Diaries, and support participants in their transcription work. Using Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber’s concept of rhetorical ecologies as a guide, students composed large- and small-scale rhetorical texts that together created and sustained this public memory event. In “Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric,” Rivers and Weber argue that students should look past the single, isolated, and momentous rhetorical achievement. Instead, students should value and produce the “multiple, mundane” (189) and “interrelated” (192) texts that catalyze change in the world. For their transcribe-a-thon project, students in our course learned how to build their own rhetorical ecology that included texts ranging from emails and Facebook pages to t-shirts and signage, and these interrelated rhetorics not only advertised and invited participants to this event
but also guided participants through Decoding Diaries once it was underway. By producing and reflecting on their composition of these texts, students pursued questions of audience, message, delivery, modality, and circulation, and they considered how all of their texts needed to work together and in service of their public memory event.

While we wanted students to gain rhetorical experience in and knowledge about the various texts necessary for public memory production, we also identified another rhetorical problem for them to explore. Students’ second major task was to think critically about what specific genres of public memory do. Certainly, all memory events are not the same, and as indicated by the title of our course, a priority for the semester was for students to come to know various modalities of public memory that teach audiences about women’s pasts and gendered experiences. The transcribe-a-thon project was one such modality; museums, monuments, and major motion pictures were others. By holding the transcribe-a-thon and then ruminating on it in their reflective essays, students evaluated this public memory genre, considering its successes and failures and exploring how it taught participants about Preston and her writings, as well as the work of crowdsourced digital transcription. Through this process, students thus wrestled with many of the complex questions archivists encounter. In particular, their evaluations constellated around four major points of consideration when assessing the efficacy of their transcribe-a-thon: participant engagement, community and collaboration, expertise and accuracy, and ethics.

It is also important to note how this course project exemplifies Hayden’s claim regarding the feminist inflection within archive-based pedagogies. Critical to this pedagogy was our (the three authors’) interdependence and collaboration as we worked together throughout the execution of this upper-level undergraduate course. Jess and Katie, a faculty member and graduate student, respectively, in rhetoric and writing studies, team-taught the course. Together, we designed the course syllabus and individual projects, and we collaborated on everyday lesson planning, taking turns leading class discussions and activities. Students therefore saw both of us as co-teachers for the course. Liz, a curator of historical manuscripts at our institution, also helped to design the course and its archive-based projects. More specifically, though, she led a session at our university’s archive, guided the students in their own transcriptions as preparation for the transcribe-a-thon, and helped to plan the Decoding Diaries event itself. Though our collaboration was essential to the teaching of this unit, it was the students’ collaboration that was imperative for the success of the transcribe-a-thon. Decoding Diaries was entirely student driven: together, students imagined, crafted, and carried out almost every aspect of this event. And, of course, the impetus that propelled these collaborations was a feminist one: the recovery of
and engagement with a local woman’s writings, as complex as they may be given their sociopolitical content. Our students were challenged to consider how a transcribe-a-thon could bring a woman’s writings from the past into present-day conversation and why such an event would be important for our community.

In the introduction to *Pedagogies of Public Memory*, Greer and Grobman urge teachers to “invit[e] students not only to analyze the arguments advanced by museums, archives, and memorials but also to invent those arguments themselves” (2, emphasis ours). Such invention opportunities, they assert, allow students both to “expan[d] their rhetorical repertoires” and to “deepe[n] their understanding of the processes and powers of remembrance” (2). In the two major sections of this essay that follow, we add depth and dimension to Greer and Grobman’s claims as we draw from our course experience and our students’ writing to explore the specific ways that the transcribe-a-thon assignment and event sharpened students’ rhetorical awareness and enabled them to assess this genre of public memory. We hope our assignment and analyses provide guidance for those contemplating similar projects. Before delving more deeply into these two pedagogical objectives and to students’ experiences with this project, we offer a more detailed explanation of transcribe-a-thons as a genre of public memory, the course, and the digital transcription project under examination.

**Transcribe-A-Thon as Public Memory Event and as Course Project**

Transcribe-a-thons are events that galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) are increasingly hosting as a way to engage the public in their holdings, offering new modes of interaction with digitized archival collections. Such projects evolved from crowdsourcing events like *Wikipedia* edit-a-thons that revealed both the willingness of the public to engage in practices of “content fostering, knowledge generation and problem solving” and the power of the public’s “collaboration and co-creation” (Biella et al. 1280). For many GLAMs, transcribe-a-thons occur over a discrete period of time (approximately 3 to 12 hours) when an institution advertises, invites, and supports participants in their transcription of a specific set of artifacts. Digital scholars such as Elissa Frankle define these crowdsourcing projects as a kind of “citizen history” and praise them for the new relationships they create with the public and the work they do for GLAMs. As Frankle suggests, through the crowdsourcing labor that happens at events like transcribe-a-thons, citizens contribute to a large-scale transcription task that would be difficult if not impossible for one person to do alone, with each user helping to make handwritten materials searchable at a faster speed, accelerating access to holdings that might otherwise be hidden from public
view or only usable to those with the means and time to visit an archive. While
crowdsourced digital transcription might be available to interested citizens at any
time, transcribe-a-thons are mainly cast as celebratory events in which people
meet physically in a GLAM space or transcribe remotely for a discrete period.
The intention is for GLAMs to highlight a specific set of archival holdings and
for participants to discern their value through their transcriptions.³

From our perspective, planning and carrying out a transcribe-a-thon seemed
like an excellent opportunity for students to engage the major questions of the
course. As the syllabus for Women and Public Memory in Digital and Material
Worlds details, the overarching theme for the semester was for students to “ana-
lyze and take part in the production of public memory texts dedicated to women
in digital and real-world contexts, such as memorials and monuments as well as
digital archives and online exhibits” with the intention of exploring “how, why,
and in what context women are remembered.” By the time students were tasked
with creating the transcribe-a-thon event, they had already engaged questions
of public memory, archival research, and even digital transcription quite deeply.

Earlier assignments in the course asked students to visit and analyze muse-
ums and memorial exhibits and examine public memory films such as Iron Jawed
Angels that are focused on women’s history. The transcribe-a-thon project was
the fifth project of the semester, and importantly, the assignment previous to
it had asked students to develop their own expertise in transcription work. It is
critical to note that for both transcription projects—their individual work and
their transcribe-a-thon event—students depended on a digital transcription
site Transcribe Maryland, a platform for transcription built by the University
of Maryland’s Libraries Special Collections to support such coursework and
public outreach.⁴ For the fourth project of the semester, students had familiar-
ized themselves with the Transcribe Maryland site by transcribing five pages of
Preston’s diary on their own and then collaborating with classmates to resolve
transcription concerns and address together questions ranging from discerning
Preston’s difficult handwriting to grappling with ethical issues.⁵ Additionally, for
that project, students visited the archive where Preston’s materials were held,
handled the physical diaries themselves, and Liz led a discussion on the topic of
archival collections and the digital transcription efforts at our institution. To
deepen their understandings of Preston’s writings and sociopolitical context,
the class read selections from Virginia Beauchamp’s A Private War: Letters and
Diaries of Madge Preston, 1862–1867, as well as an overview of her life and writ-
ings on the online finding aid to the Preston Family Papers on the Transcribe
Maryland site. Students also studied scholarship on women’s diary writing in
the nineteenth century, feminist historiography, crowdsourcing, and archival
research methods.⁶
Before embarking on the transcribe-a-thon project, then, students had already developed a rich exposure to Preston, her diaries, the work of transcription, and the Transcribe Maryland site. Students were thus ready to embark on the six-week unit that tasked them with hosting their transcribe-a-thon event and reflecting on their work. The assignment for “Taking Madge Public” went as follows:

Project #5 builds on and extends Project #4 because here we will consider how to “go public” with Madge Preston’s diary beyond our individual transcriptions. On Wednesday, May 3rd, we will host a transcribe-a-thon at McKeldin Library, where UMD students, faculty, and community members can participate in the transcription process you have just completed. Your work for Project #5 is twofold. In part 1, you will work in groups to compose a publicity document for the event. You may choose to create a Twitter feed and tweet in anticipation of and during the event; you may decide to design a flyer; you may decide to send emails, or you might create a poster. The genre for your publicity document is up to you. Whatever you choose, the work is to use that genre to write to an audience persuading them to take part in the event. In part 2 of the project, you will compose a 3-page reflection essay that focuses on the transcribe-a-thon and your publicity document. Two sets of questions should drive your reflection: (1) What are the opportunities and challenges in generating audiences for participation in public memory events? How did you evaluate your group’s rhetorical work? What strategies did you use to reach your audience? (2) How did you evaluate the transcribe-a-thon as a public memory event? What were its successes and failures? As you think through these questions (and others), consult the scholarship we read in this section of the course to guide and invigorate your thinking and writing.

The following sections describe how students carried out and evaluated the archive-based public memory event by responding to this prompt. More specifically, we display the expertise they gained in building rhetorical ecologies that supported Decoding Diaries and the understandings they cultivated as they analyzed their public memory work and contemplated the complexities of bringing a woman’s writing into the public imagination.

**Rhetorical Ecologies**

The transcribe-a-thon assignment asked students to take on the role of GLAM leaders as they imagined, planned for, and carried out their event. Their work was multifaceted: students identified audiences and produced the promotional materials needed to reach them. They orchestrated the event itself, mapping out what participants would do and how they would take on the work of digital transcription, and they decided on details ranging from location and room layout to the spending of the small funds Jess received from a departmental pedagogical
grant. Throughout the planning phases, students composed multimodal rhetorical genres ranging from lists and room plans to emails, Facebook pages, and posters—all contributing to the rhetorical ecology that enabled Decoding Diaries to come into being. As teachers in the course, our goal was not just for students to create these interrelated texts. Rather, we wanted students to discern the texts’ individual and collective role in conveying a particular message about the event to the intended audiences.

To aid students in achieving these ends, we assigned Rivers and Weber’s essay “Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric” as a way for students to gain a capacious understanding of rhetorical ecology as a concept. This theoretical grounding became the framework for them to build their own network of everyday texts necessary to “navigate and negotiate” the rhetorical problem before them: the transcribe-a-thon (190). The end result, we hoped, was one in which students would come to know—through production and reflection—the “affective, social, distributed, and coordinating guts of public rhetorical action” (202). As we guided students in composing their ecologies for Decoding Diaries, though, we also emphasized a more global point: the necessary connections between public writing and public memory work. As Greer and Grobman note, GLAM workers “have long capitalized on the power of multimodal communication” and, we would add, rhetorical ecologies (11). Below we separate our discussion of students’ rhetorical ecological production and their intellectual gains by focusing first on the “pre-event” texts composed to invite audiences to and generate interest in Decoding Diaries and second on the texts composed for the event itself.

Pre-Event Texts

Students’ initial task was to address “big picture” questions about the transcribe-a-thon such as these: What should this event look like and do? How do we tailor a transcribe-a-thon to the contexts of Preston’s materials and our institutional and community context? What audiences would be interested in the event and how can we reach them? As they began to explore these questions, students soon realized the need to name the transcribe-a-thon, and this project alone prompted them to exercise their rhetorical thinking regarding how audiences would encounter and find interest in this event. Though we, the instructors, suggested that the term transcribe-a-thon be integrated into the title, students did not believe that term would appeal to their intended audiences, which, they had decided, would mainly be other students. Thus, several discussions revolved around what we should call our event, and students deliberated the best language to reach a wide audience and represent our task.
These in-class discussions required students not only to negotiate and collaborate but also to consider that the event’s nomenclature would likely affect audience response and expectations. Naming the event involved a dynamic brainstorming session that began simply. Students first suggested uncomplicated titles such as “Remembering Women” and “Come Transcribe with Us.” But they realized that these titles lacked substance, and they wanted the title to convey the experience participants might have by taking up this transcription work. Shortly thereafter, more innovative suggestions were bandied about such as “Cracking Open Women’s Diaries: Transcribing History Together,” “Preserving Women in Memory: A Transcription and Public Memory Event,” “Help Create a Female Historical Narrative! A Transcription Event,” “Recording Women’s Voices: A Primary Source Transcription Event,” and “DUI: Diaries Under Investigation.” The class ultimately settled on “Decoding Diaries: Transcribing Women’s History Together.”

Claire’s reflections reveal the rationale behind the first half of the title. She writes, the work of transcription is like “decoding and solving a puzzle of what the scribbled cursive is supposed to say.” Claire saw the audience implications in choosing the term decoding for the title: by casting the event in this way, there was “the possibility of drawing in people from all different types of majors such as history majors, English majors, women’s studies majors, etc. It isn’t a task that would only entertain or interest one group of people. It’s open to everyone.” The second part of the title, “Transcribing Women’s History Together,” was equally as important for students. In class discussion, students decided that the word together invited participants into collective work, and the students made it clear that if they were going to ask community members to put themselves into an unfamiliar position by trying their hands at digital transcription, students wanted to ensure participants that they would not be alone; there would be help. Students thus realized that the seemingly simple act of naming the event in this way made an argument to their audiences about what digital transcription was and how it should be accomplished.

Our next step was to generate texts for the rhetorical ecology that would invite community members to participate in the event and garner their interest. At this point students began to understand how and why GLAM workers often see themselves taking on the role of “outreach officer” as a way “to ensure the day-to-day success of their archives” by “ask[ing] of themselves: What is the most effective and efficient way of promoting our holdings without overextending our resources?” (Crymble 126). Posing similar questions to themselves, students began identifying elements for their rhetorical ecology such as email invitations and flyers as well as relevant social media. Throughout this process, students had
to decide what to say, to whom to say it, and through what modality. Workshopping the email and invite lists catalyzed class discussions that centered not just on the importance of Preston’s writings but also on the various ways her work could be cast to different audiences.

As Claire’s comment suggests, students identified possible stakeholders to be their peers in history courses dedicated to topics of slavery and the American Civil War, students invested in women’s studies who would value learning about the domestic life of a white woman of this period as well as the violence she experienced, and English literature students wanting to learn about women’s writing patterns and diary genres. Students in our class also pinpointed local community groups that might be interested in these topics, such as historical societies and women’s groups. To complement the email, students decided to create a flyer that they would attach to the email invitations but could also be posted around campus. Debates about the flyer addressed questions of content as well as delivery and circulation, as students considered the physical places on campus where they could post the flyer and the different mediums that could display it, such as the monitors within campus buildings that could present the flyer digitally.

Students then moved on to choose the social media platforms that would suit their purposes, weighing the value of Twitter, Facebook, blogs, Snapchat geofilters, and Instagram. In class, discussions revolved around the rhetorical effectiveness of one medium over the other, and students decided to produce a Facebook event page and a Twitter feed, rejecting the remaining options because they did not meet the specific exigencies of the transcribe-a-thon event or because they would not effectively reach their intended audiences. Once students settled on the appropriate outreach venues, they then self-selected into groups that took on specific rhetorical responsibilities (creating the Facebook page, crafting the email, composing and distributing the flyer, etc.), with all responsible for both tweeting about the event and posting to and circulating the Facebook event page.

As students discussed emails, flyers, and social media, they decided that a logo should be included on all promotional materials to enable recognition and consistency across the texts within our rhetorical ecology. Students realized that as their rhetorical ecology grew and as materials were circulated and recirculated, tweeted and retweeted, posted and reposted, a logo on all materials would create a sense of unity among all these texts. As the resident artist and design-whiz, Lee created and presented a number of options to the class, with the group choosing the image they believed best fit the event [Fig. 1]. Lee articulates the rationale for the design in this way:
I wanted to convey an eye-catching image to the public, which would engage them visually and leave them interested in the overall event. The thought of a watercolor design came to me after learning about Madge, and reading her physical diaries. Some of my classmates found smudges and tea stains in her diary, a quality which made Madge appear more real to us. . . . It also held this similar quality of humanizing Madge, as it connected her with a vibrant and irregular visual. The paint doesn’t trickle in smooth lines, but looks like an accidental drop of color, blossoming from her silhouette.

Lee’s reflections on creating the logo reveal how students were sharpening their rhetorical skills through this project: Lee took into account the class’s experiences with Preston’s diaries and with transcription and then used those experiences to create a logo intended to reach audiences in a specific way and shape their expectations for the Decoding Diaries event.

As students integrated visual rhetoric in the form of the logo into the event’s rhetorical ecology, they also realized the necessity of material texts in the form of t-shirts, swag, and refreshments. Making use of the departmental grant funds, students worked within their budget to design and purchase t-shirts to wear at the event, and they created “exit swag” in the form of Decoding Diaries buttons to distribute to participants at the event. Furthermore, because transcribe-a-thons are often cast as celebrations and students certainly wanted the event to feel
festive, they decided to play music during the event, and they dedicated funding to refreshments, primary among them was a cake—one that displayed the logo.

Kristiana’s perspective on how the t-shirts in particular fit into our rhetorical ecology is especially compelling. She writes,

The public did not see the effort I put into ordering the t-shirts… They simply arrived and saw that we were all wearing matching shirts and that they had a pretty design that had been used on all the materials. However, these planning stages were very important to the way the event displayed Madge because all of our choices put her in a different light. The choice to get shirts created the atmosphere that this was an official event and not something thrown together at the last minute. The logo and design gave the event an air of uniformity across all the platforms, which enhanced the credibility of the event.

Kristiana’s response indicates her deepening rhetorical knowledge as she zeroes in on an important component of rhetorical ecologies: unseen labor (finding vendors, comparing costs, ordering the t-shirts themselves, making the buttons). Furthermore, Kristiana underscores the rhetorical significance of the t-shirts themselves. Though participants might not think much of the t-shirts, their material rhetoric signaled the group’s preparation, organization, thoughtfulness, and their “credibility.”

*Event-Related Ecologies*

In planning the event, students had to decide exactly what participants would do once they arrived, and here students added more texts to their rhetorical ecology. Students identified the need for signs at the library entrance and throughout the building to advertise and direct interested audiences or simply curious members of the community who were in the building that day. Most critically, though, students realized participants could not just walk in the room and begin transcribing. The authors introduced students to the concept of *scaffolding*, which, from the perspective of GLAM workers and digital scholars, means creating a staged process for participants to transcribe so that they feel confident in their work. The key point is that the scaffolding process reduces confusion and complexity so that the transcription task is clear, “simple[,]” and even “enjoyable” for participants (Ridge 439). Part of the students’ scaffolding for the event was textual: they composed posters and handouts that both contextualized Preston’s writings and explained the transcription process. But students also enriched and diversified the event’s rhetorical ecology by understanding that scaffolding could take material and spatial form. As Lee explains, students “foster[ed] accessibility” by engineering the physical space of the room so that participants physically moved through a step-by-step process designed for them not only to have “meaningful
interactions with Madge Preston and her diary entries” but also to experience the environment students were hoping to create.

As a class, then, students worked toward this scaffolding by drafting and revising a number of room layout designs and event flowcharts. The authors supported this work by discussing with students the importance of spatial rhetorics, the ways spaces themselves act rhetorically on inhabitants prompting them to engage the space and the activity set to happen within it in specific ways (Enoch, Domestic). Students, thus, considered questions such as these: How can we configure the room so that it orients and welcomes participants? How can our floor plan and event flow reduce confusion and frustration so that participants know where to go and what to do? The resulting design began with student greeters welcoming participants and explaining how the process would go. Greeters then led participants to a check-in table where they signed a guest list and learned about Preston and her diaries. At this table, another set of students and an assisting archivist sat with the physical diaries themselves, as well as a poster and handouts about Preston’s life. A priority for this station was to ensure that participants had the opportunity to see and handle the diaries as the students themselves had, even though this experience was much more compressed for the Decoding Diaries event. Indeed, attempting to replicate these embodied and material engagements with Preston’s artifacts was crucial for students: earlier in the semester they had found these interactions to make real the gravity of their transcriptions, creating important connections to the digital texts they would encounter on the Transcribe Maryland site.

After learning about Preston and her diary, student guides led participants to transcription tables outfitted with laptops, where another group of students helped participants log on to the Transcribe Maryland site and aided them with their transcriptions. At this point, students also distributed a cheat sheet intended to help participants make sense of Preston’s difficult writing. Finally, class members decided they did not just want participants to leave when they completed their transcriptions. Instead, students set up an exit table where participants could log their work on a poster-sized “transcribe-o-meter” and offer feedback on the event by contributing to a Decoding Diaries exit journal, which students chose specifically because it looked similar in form to the diaries Preston had composed. To add to the festive nature of the event, students assembled a table with snacks, water, and the logo-decorated cake. By deciding on the floor plan and event flow for Decoding Diaries, students’ rhetorical ecology grew yet again, as they considered the spatial rhetorics of their event space, engineering it so that participants could transcribe in an environment that was well-organized and thoughtful.
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Rivers and Weber assert that public writing pedagogies should engage students in the work of building rhetorical ecologies so that they produce texts that, while crafted for “different ends and with distinct audiences,” are still “connected to one another . . . in sophisticated and effective ways” (210). In our class, students created a rhetorical ecology for Decoding Diaries that included a capacious variety of texts—texts that were discursive, digital, material, spatial, and even edible. They also took pains to ensure that all the diverse elements in their rhetorical ecology worked together “in sophisticated and effective ways” so that the event could come into being. The next step in students’ rhetorical education, however, was to evaluate the transcribe-a-thon and to consider the efficacy of this public memory event.

**Evaluating Decoding Diaries**

Throughout the planning process, students, along with the authors, voiced their trepidation about putting on Decoding Diaries. We worried that people might not show up at all, and if they did show whether they would find value in this digital transcription activity. Once our event got underway, however, we—both teachers and students—felt immediate relief and elation. From an attendance and excitement standpoint, Decoding Diaries was by all accounts a huge and quite surprising success. Students in our course guided more than sixty participants in the transcription of approximately one hundred pages of Preston’s writings. The room was packed, with a line often running out the door, and we quickly had to add to the number of tables designated for transcription given this number. In her reflective essay, Maggie recounts her surprise at the attendance and participant interest, writing, “If I am being honest, I did not believe that we would have such an amazing turnout.” But people did turn out—lots of people—and they were excited to take on work the class put before them.

In their reflective writing, students moved past sheer relief to evaluate Decoding Diaries and explore this genre of public memory that aimed both to teach participants about Preston and to harness the power of the crowd to make a woman’s writing public. Though they made a variety of diverse and compelling comments, their arguments about this genre constellated around four major related concerns: (1) participant engagement, (2) community and collaboration, (3) expertise and accuracy, and (4) ethics. Greer and Grobman write that when students take on public memory projects they face possibilities of both “risk” and “reward” (10). They note that, in terms of risk, students open themselves up to “scrutiny in spaces well beyond the classroom” (10). Yet the potential rewards students experience are equally as important: “opportunities for forging new relationships, possibilities for initiating social change, and the sense that one’s
work matters” (10). The following sections elaborate on Greer and Grobman’s claims as they reveal the particular risks and rewards our students encountered when they reflected on the public memory work the produced through their transcribe-a-thon.

**Participant Engagement**

Students were indeed surprised and excited by the number of Decoding Diaries participants and their interest in Preston’s writings. Examining the exit journal in class after the event, students were thrilled to hear that participants found the work of archival transcription “fun,” “awesome,” and even “addictive,” with one participant noting that “the event was an excellent supplement to thinking about women and memory,” another stating they “will continue at home,” and yet another relaying that they “enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about life” in the nineteenth century (Exit Journal). After reading these responses, many students evaluated their work positively. Daanya, for instance, writes, “it was rewarding to see people transcribing an event which I helped to create.” Robin agreed, recalling, “Everyone there was very eager to transcribe the diary pages, they were excited to know who Madge was, and seemed to enjoy the process. It was exciting to see that this was a project that the public wanted to be a part of.” Here, students focused on the engagement that crowdsourcing and transcribe-a-thons in particular foster.

As students made these comments, they spoke to what Trevor Owens argues is “the single most important reason” why GLAM workers should put digital collections online: “to make history accessible and to invite [the public] to explore and connect to the past.” He continues, “[W]hat crowdsourcing does, that most digital collections fail to do, is offer opportunity for someone to do something more than consume information. . . . [C]rowdsourcing offers us an opportunity to provide meaningful ways for individuals to engage and contribute to public memory.” In reflecting on the event they hosted, students came to contemplate the value it held in introducing the participants to a historical woman’s writing they would not likely have encountered otherwise and enabling them not only to read Preston’s text but make her words public.

**Community and Collaboration**

The majority of students positively evaluated the event on the terms Owens put forth, seeing that Decoding Diaries met the key requirement of public memory outreach: participant engagement. Students moved on in their reflective essays, though, to assess the particular ways this engagement took shape through the public memory genre of the transcribe-a-thon. As noted, Owens focuses on the relationship projects like transcribe-a-thons create between participants and col-
lections, but students also identified how their event forged relationships among the participants themselves. Jane, for instance, contemplated the digital and physical aspects of transcribe-a-thons. Taking part in these events, participants can either transcribe online from anywhere during the allotted time, or they can transcribe at the event within a specific physical, communal space. In reflecting on Decoding Diaries, Jane identifies significant value in the physical gathering in shared space over the digital option from anywhere. She writes, “[D]espite the digital nature of the event, it appeared that [the event’s] biggest attractor was the physical presence of others, in a manner more personal than digital.”

In her reflective writing, Jane offers a number of instances from the event that support her claim. For example, she recalls a moment when participants were seated at their transcription tables and started to have trouble with transcribing their pages:

For our guests, [many of Preston’s] words were very troublesome. Even though there was a brief background on Madge Preston, and even a cheat sheet of common tricky words, there is nothing you can give a person to give them a stylistic understanding of her writing other than experience itself. However, I began to notice something wonderful. As I looked at their work, so would their neighboring transcribers. Everyone was trying to help each other, making suggestions and using each [other’s] ideas to determine what was being said. They were making a combined effort to contribute to this overarching goal which had quickly become a community project.

Jane thus sees that participants transcribing together in the same physical space “fostered a community of dependence and cooperation.” She goes on to suggest how this communal aspect could be “enhanced” if a class hosted a similar event in semesters to come, writing, “I think it would be even more engaging if there was a projector, and we could pull up words people were struggling with and everyone could look at the same time, similar to how we worked on difficult words together in class.” Like GLAM workers need to do, Jane evaluated the different modalities of the event and how each worked, finding more value in the physical transcription opportunity over the digital. “Through my experiences at Decoding Diaries,” she explains, “I have come to realize that one of the most important aspects of engaging the public is allowing the public to engage themselves.”

Expertise and Accuracy

As students delved deeper into evaluating the components of Decoding Diaries, they often compared their experiences with transcription work in the previous assignment and the transcriptions that participants produced at the event. As noted, in the previous assignment, students transcribed five diary pages themselves,
and we worked as a class to identify strategies to make sense of difficult-to-read passages. One particularly useful strategy students relied on was Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch’s “critical imagination.” During that unit, students deepened their understanding of this strategy by reading the chapter dedicated to it in Royster and Kirsch’s text *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*. As these scholars define it, critical imagination enables the researcher first to “gather whatever evidence could be gathered” and then use their imagination to “think between, above, around, and beyond this evidence to speculate methodically about probabilities, that is, what might likely be true based on what we have in hand” (71). In their reflective essays, students consistently discussed the expertise they gained in transcription, often citing how critical imagination aided them in producing accurate work. However, students also pinpointed concerns for accuracy during Decoding Diaries due in part to the speculative leaps participants made when they had neither the time to “gather whatever evidence could be gathered” nor the commitment to getting Preston’s story straight.

For many students, helping participants with their diary pages crystallized for them how much they had learned about transcription and Preston. Nora, for instance, writes that when she started her own transcriptions, she could not “make out a single word,” but as she assisted participants at the event, she “was surprised,” at “how much [she] was able to help people with the transcriptions.” Nora continues, “[W]hen they were asking me to help . . . , it was much easier because I was already familiar with Madge’s handwriting and context.” For Nora, it was her “prior knowledge” that made it “easier.” Daanya had a similar experience. She explains that when she worked on her own transcriptions she felt the work was “incredibly difficult and frustrating,” and she questioned her “authority.” Yet, she explains that these hesitancies were relieved through her work at Decoding Diaries. Daanya states, “I did not realize how much I had actually learned from the transcription process until I began assisting people at the event.” Helping others at the transcribe-a-thon “reinforced [her] knowledge and expertise in Madge Preston and her handwriting.”

Jane also commented on how she leveraged her critical imagination while helping others at Decoding Diaries:

Most of the questions I was able to resolve quickly through context and simple experience. I have transcribed 5 pages of the diary and have gotten used to reading Madge’s handwriting. I have gained enough insight into Madge’s life to be able to easily “critically imagine” . . . what meaning Madge might be getting at in her words.

The expertise students like Jane put to use at the event prompted them to ask some serious questions—questions about how Decoding Diaries was creating an environment for participants to transcribe effectively and accurately.
A key theme in students’ reflections centered on the status of participants as “novices” to transcription and to Preston, and whether or not they were qualified to produce reliable work. In fact, students often articulated their dismay at the mistakes made by the “novice” participants and interrogated the functionality of a crowdsourced transcription project, questioning whether or not it was the best way to achieve transcription of the manuscript documents. Hayley, for instance, reflects on her own dedication to transcribing accurately: “I found that I felt I had an obligation to do my best work for Madge, a feeling that forced me to print out my assigned pages and pore over them with pen in hand. I looked at them while I lay in bed. I felt that I needed to take the time to figure out what Madge was trying to say.” At Decoding Diaries, though, Hayley was disappointed in the transcription work of participants. She writes that she “came face to face with transcriptions that were not only completed poorly, but that the transcriber knew had been completed poorly.”

Hayley’s comparison between her own and others’ transcriptions prompted her to question the efficacy of the transcribe-a-thon as a public memory genre. She says, “One of the major problems with public events and [crowd]sourcing is that when you open an event, and subsequently a person’s life, to the public you are gambling with the public’s investment, responsibility, and level of expertise.” Hayley’s discomfort and concerns correspond with those of scholars such as Carla De Laurentis, Chern Li Liew, and Fern Cheetham, who see that GLAM workers are faced with the dual task of engaging the public while also “hold[ing]” themselves “to high standards of intellectual integrity”—prime among them “accuracy.” Hayley offers a compelling reason for such accuracy problems. When she was working in class and learning about Preston over the course of many weeks in the semester, she “felt obligated” to take on the “time and practice” that good transcriptions “required.” Hayley makes the point that having neither the time nor obligation at Decoding Diaries, participants were not in a position to transcribe accurately. Hayley concludes, “In short, if one does not care to take the time and responsibility for a text, it may be better that they are not left alone to transcribe it.”

Along with Hayley, other students worried about this accuracy issue, especially as it pertained to what students saw as participants’ (mis)use of their critical imaginations—imaginations at work with little contextual knowledge about Preston and her life. For instance, following Jane’s discussion of her effective use of critical imagination when helping participants, she comments that left unaided, participants would have made mistakes: “Our guests, however, did not have the same level of experience [as students in the class] and therefore did not have the same ability to critically imagine what was being communicated.”
Daanya makes a similar point: “As everyday members of the public who have no historical background on Madge Preston, it can be difficult to effectively use critical imagination. This can misconstrue the meaning of the pages and ultimately hinder the remembrance of Madge Preston.” As noted, Daanya assessed Decoding Diaries positively, but she also realized, “These are risks [that] come along with a crowdsourcing public memory project.” Thus, while students might have cited public engagement as an important reward of transcribe-a-thons, accuracy posed a serious concern for students like Hayley, Jane, and Daanya.

**Ethics**

The final major and, we would argue, most important issue that students identified when evaluating Decoding Diaries was one of ethics. Since our transcribe-a-thon brought Preston’s personal writing into the public imagination, her life as well as the sociopolitical realities of slavery and domestic violence were entwined in this project. Students not only questioned the sheer act of making Preston’s personal writings public, they also realized that when there was a transcription mistake or when critical imaginations went wrong, it was Preston’s life that was being misrepresented. These concerns were exacerbated by the domestic abuse she suffered and occasionally alluded to in her private diaries—a topic she did not share in her letters, documents meant to be more public in nature. Additionally, Preston lived in a slave-holding household and referenced her interactions with slaves. Thus, students recognized the inherent conflict in both placing the diaries online and in hosting an event for the public to interact with those diaries in a very casual and even celebratory manner.

Many students therefore asked themselves what “Madge” would think of their work and the Decoding Diaries event. Through answering this question, students gained what Valerie Burton and Robert C. H. Sweeny call a “temporal awareness” in which they considered “how the ‘now’ connects in complex and meaningful ways to the past” (i180). For instance, after identifying major issues with participants’ transcription accuracy, Hayley commented, “Wherever Madge is, I hope she is not having some sort of aneurism. I hope she is glad that her world has captivated so many people, who offered to spend their time making her words available in the digital age.”

Nora contemplated this same question by turning to the diaries and secondary scholarship. Nora notes that Beauchamp, the scholar who worked most closely with Preston’s writing, argues that Preston likely wanted her story to be preserved and told. Nora found great value in Beauchamp’s claim that the fact that “most of the diaries have been saved may imply that Madge imagined a future readership” (xv). And, Nora calls on a line from Preston’s diary, a line
that Beauchamp also references, to prove this point. On February 24, 1865, Preston writes, “I record this fact, that it may, if necessary, be known to others in the future” (qtd. in Beauchamp xvi). Nora thus concludes that the class was right to “go public” with Preston’s writing because Preston wanted us to: “I believe Madge wanted her story to be known one day, which is why she took such meticulous notes on each day. By hosting the Decoding Diaries event, we were able to share Madge’s story with so many people, and hopefully even more people will read our transcriptions when they are in digital format.”

Tara took this question of ethics in a different and critically important direction as she meditates on the disconnect between the celebratory nature of the Decoding Diaries event and the troubling content that was interspersed throughout Preston’s writings. Imagining Preston’s response to the transcribe-a-thon, Tara writes, “We remembered Madge in an informative party-based kind of event that was filled with buttons and shirts to commemorate her. Madge would have probably never thought an event or party would be made to remember her or her diaries.” Tara sees a disjuncture between our event and the content in portions of Preston’s writing, hypothesizing, “the actual mood of her daily life in the 1800s” was likely “vastly different” than the “cheery way in which we chose to celebrate it.” Tara thus centers on an important ethical question: Did the celebratory nature of the event work to erase or ignore the everyday and many times disturbing subject matter of her diaries? This question resonates with Burton and Sweeny’s criticism of archival documents now being placed online for the reason that archives and other institutions are “being forced to justify their existence in terms of users rather than by the intrinsic merit of their holdings” (i184).

The poignancy of Tara’s assessment is one that, especially as we reflect now on the course and the Decoding Diaries event, gives us pause and prompts us to rethink how the event might have been framed or what other options we might have pursued both as a team of teachers and with the class. Indeed, the overarching goal for the public memory project was to garner public interest in women’s writing through introducing them to Preston’s archived diaries. In many ways, this goal was achieved by virtue of the number of attendees at the event and their positive responses to it. But we wonder whether the celebratory nature of the event and the affective register we attempted to elicit during Decoding Diaries worked at cross-purposes to the troubling sociopolitical content interspersed throughout Preston’s diaries. Though it is important to consider that discussions of slavery and domestic violence were not pervasive in Preston’s writing—in fact, a good deal of her entries focused on her daily games of backgammon—we worry that the genre of the transcribe-a-thon centered participant attention more on the discernment of difficult handwriting than on Preston’s
raced and gendered experiences. That is, if participants only transcribed a page or two, which many did, they would likely not have encountered references to slavery or domestic abuse. We thus ask, how might we have worked with our students to better convey the significance of these issues to Preston’s life during the event or how might we have qualified the celebratory nature of Decoding Diaries? To be sure, Tara’s comments, along with Nora’s and Hayley’s, indicate how our students wrestled with the efficacy of the transcribe-a-thon as a public memory genre. In retrospect, though, we see their comments as incentives to think more deeply and capaciously about the risks of this public memory genre. Tara’s words especially inspire us—and, we hope, our readers—to consider how the work of crowdsourced digital transcription could better take up the more global and politicized concerns archival artifacts raise or if the primary purpose of this genre is to center participant attention on “decoding” texts word by word and sentence by sentence.

Conclusion

As teachers in collaboration, we found that the transcribe-a-thon project created an opportunity for undergraduate students to do rhetorically complex public writing and thought-provoking public memory work. Kristiana’s reflection encapsulates the majority of our students’ assessments:

Throughout this entire experience, I have learned not only so much about Madge Preston herself, but about the importance of bringing this information to the public and how we can do that. . . . In putting on this event, I felt an investment in teaching others about this woman that I have not felt for any other class assignment.

Certainly, the task of putting on a public memory event heightened the stakes of students’ learning. Students not only had to believe but they also had to get others to believe in the relevance of women’s diary writing and the worth of digital transcription as one way to come to know the white, middle-class, gendered, and slave-holding experience in nineteenth-century Maryland. But looking past the positive responses like Kristiana’s, we want to conclude here by identifying the contributions this project and our analyses of it make to scholarship in rhetorical education in general and pedagogies rooted in archival practice and public memory more particularly.

The project we consider here reveals the rhetorical gains students can garner by considering what it means to bring women’s archival artifacts into the public imagination through the genre of the transcribe-a-thon. In particular, our assignment and the Decoding Diaries event moved students through a two-part
rhetorical education that was both productive and analytical. First, students pro-
duced the rhetorical ecology necessary to put on the Decoding Diaries event by
composing various texts from Facebook pages to room designs that would enable
participants to transcribe Madge Preston’s diaries. Second, they evaluated their
public memory work, analyzing what exactly a transcribe-a-thon does for and
to Preston, her writings, and her memory. Thinking on the small-scale, then,
this essay prompts readers to consider how they might (or might not) integrate
transcribe-a-thons or digital transcription work into their own curricula. For
there are other possibilities for students’ crowdsourced transcription that include
and go beyond Transcribe Maryland and Preston’s papers: the University of
Iowa’s DIY History, “Iowa Women’s Lives: Letters and Diaries,” Boston Public
Library’s “Anti-Slavery Manuscripts,” and the Smithsonian’s “Project Phaedra”
are just a few examples.7

More broadly, though, this essay calls scholar-teachers to realize the ex-
citing possibilities for students’ rhetorical invention when courses triangulate
archival research, public memory, and public writing. We have demonstrated
how archive-based public memory projects can be opportunities for students to
identify, experiment with, and fine-tune a full range of rhetorical strategies and
build rhetorical ecologies geared toward a specific end. Additionally and impor-
tantly, this essay also invites teacher-scholars not only to produce public memory
events with their students but also to analyze them, exploring how these projects
work as genres of public memory. Such explorations include reflecting on how
specific public memory genres—whatever they might be—operate: What does
this genre do? How does it affect audiences? How much time, expense, and labor
does it require? What ethical and sociopolitical concerns does it raise? Thus,
we encourage our colleagues to build on this project and our analyses as a way
to broaden our disciplinary conversations about archive-based public memory
projects. As this essay details, our contribution to this discussion underscores
the value of students both producing public memory projects and assessing the
efficacy of their work.

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and supporter John Long for awarding the transcribe-a-thon project with the Beyond the Class-
room grant.
Notes

1. All students quoted in this essay have been given pseudonyms, and they have given permission to use their writing herein.

2. Readers may be interested in the specific framework of the authors’ collaborative pedagogy. As noted, Jess and Katie led course sessions throughout the entire semester. Liz, manuscript curator at our institution’s libraries, supported course goals and student work by visiting specific class sessions, leading a session at the university archive, and aiding in the planning of Decoding Diaries. Liz also assisted in crafting the syllabus for relevant projects related to archival, research, and transcription work.

At many institutions, including our own, it can be difficult to set up equitable structures for team-teaching a course. Jess and Katie created a unique way for Katie, as a graduate student, to teach the course and still get credit for her work. Katie enrolled in a graduate-level independent study that spring 2017 semester. Her learning objectives for the independent study were scholarly (to investigate the topic of feminist public memory) and pedagogical (to learn how to teach an upper-level rhetoric course in feminist memory studies). Jess and Katie carried out the objectives of the independent study by collaborating on syllabus design before the start of the semester and meeting weekly to discuss course day planning. They worked together in all class sessions, taking turns leading activities, etc. Jess responded to and graded all student work, and Katie completed her own graduate-level course work in addition to course readings for Women and Public Memory. Part of her work included mapping out with Jess and Liz a first draft of this essay, and, of course, the three authors continued to collaborate well after the semester ended.

3. A recent example of a transcribe-a-thon is the 2018 Douglass Day celebration. On February 14, 2018, the National Museum of African American History and Culture in collaboration with the Smithsonian Transcription Center and ColoredConventions.org celebrated the 200th anniversary of Frederick Douglass’s birthday by hosting a transcribe-a-thon of the nineteenth-century Freedmen’s Bureau Papers in which more than sixty institutions held local events and support for participants (“Douglass Day”).

4. See “About” page on the Transcribe Maryland site to learn about how the transcription site was created: http://transcribe.lib.umd.edu/omeka/about. The site contains the digitized Preston Family Papers, which, in addition to the diaries, include letters written by Preston, Preston’s husband, and her daughter as well as archival materials pertaining to other eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marylanders. See also Novara and Enoch for a more detailed description of the assignment, transcription site, and collaboration between the author and curator.

5. For a deeper discussion regarding student learning regarding particular project during a different semester, see Enoch (“Rewriting”) and Novara and Enoch.

6. See Bailey, Enoch and Bessette, Griffin and Taylor, Ridge, Steedman, and Sinor. Preston Family Papers finding aid is at this link: http://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/1278

7. “Project Phaedra” invites the public to transcribe Harvard astronomer Annie Jump Cannon’s discoveries.

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