

Stepping Off the Expert Pedestal: Theatrical Archaeology and the Importance of Co-production

A conversation with Prof. Kate Astbury

Kate Astbury is a professor of French Studies in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Warwick. Her research primarily focuses on the French 18th and early-19th centuries. More recently, her work has explored the history of Black Caribbean revolutionaries held as prisoners at Portchester Castle during the revolutionary period and has utilised co-production and community collaboration to address issues of social justice.

Could you tell us about your research and some of the methodological approaches you use?

By training, I would consider myself to be a literary historian. That means I look at the context in which a work is both written and published because the politics, the society and the context in which a work is produced is going to have an impact on that literary work. I'll use the French Revolution as an example. I wrote a book called [*Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution*](#). One of the things about the Revolution is that somebody who would be seen as quite radical in 1789 can, by 1792, seem conservative because the Revolution has moved on faster than their own political views have evolved. Therefore, to be able to interpret some of the short stories and the novels published during the French Revolution, you need to understand both the point at which they're written and the point at which they're published, because there might be a mismatch between those two things. Currently for a book I'm writing on theatre under Napoleon, I'm looking very closely at the context in which theatre productions are being staged, rather than necessarily looking at them just as printed texts. Performances are ephemeral. In most instances for this period we have very limited records of how a play was staged. We have snippets from the press; we might have receipts showing how many people watched a particular performance; we might know something



**SPOTLIGHT
FOR SOCIETY
& CULTURE**



about the actors who were playing certain roles. I'm trying to put everything back together again to understand why an audience might have interpreted a particular performance or production in a certain way.

In that respect, I'm influenced by the concept of theatrical archaeology. Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks wrote a book – [*Theatre/Archaeology*](#) – that my research team have used quite a lot as a starting point for thinking about putting things that have been lost back together again. It borrows from archaeology in that archaeologists will take shards of pots, and jigsaw piece them back together to give an impression of what the pot would have been like, or work out the shape of missing pieces from those that are left. So, in terms of methodological approach, we use archival sources to piece elements of performance back together. This might include the manuscript of a play or census reports which allow us to see what phrases the authorities have required the playwright to rewrite. I might use the takings receipts from a

**I'm trying to put everything
back together again to
understand why an audience
might have interpreted a
particular performance or
production in a certain way.**

**UNIVERSITY
OF WARWICK**

particular performance, letters, visual iconography, newspaper reports. I might be thinking about the physical architecture of a particular theatre and what that does to the overall impression of the performance. Ultimately, it's about sticking all those different pieces together to be able to think about how theatre in the early 19th century is being influenced by politics but is also inflecting the political sphere as well.

Could you describe what was it like working in an interdisciplinary team?

I've had quite a number of colleagues working with me on the Napoleonic Theatre project that was

My work over the last three or four years has become more focused on co-production and working outside of traditional academic patterns.

funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It started in 2013 and the team finished in 2017 (but it's still going strong in many respects). It was a great opportunity to work with an interdisciplinary team – I wrote the funding bid specifically so that I could have musicologists work with me because there is no music department at Warwick. I knew that I wanted to understand better the relationship between music, text and gesture in early French melodrama and I didn't have the musical skills myself. The PhD student who introduced me to the prisoner-of-war theatre at Portchester Castle had an art history background. Another PhD student was interested in classical 17th-century French theatre and one postdoc came from an English literature and theatre background. I try wherever possible to bring into my team people who have specialisms different to my own so that I can learn from them. We then come together as a team and bring different perspectives on the way in which theatre was functioning under Napoleon.

How does your work address issues of social justice?

My work over the last three or four years has become more focused on co-production and working outside of traditional academic patterns. Take, for example, the prisoners of war at Portchester: there were two-and-a-half-thousand Black and mixed-race prisoners of war brought over to Britain in 1796. Now, as far as we can tell, that's the single largest arrival of Black people in the UK pre-Windrush, and a really significant number arriving into Jane Austen's Hampshire, and it felt like a story that needed to be widely told. It's one that disrupts traditional narratives around the history of the transatlantic slave trade, because these are free people of colour: some might be formally enslaved, but the French Revolution has abolished slavery, which means they are all free people who now have agency in their own lives and are actively fighting the British to try and ensure that they stay free. It gives quite a nice counterpoint to the usual British narrative about the transatlantic slave trade, which plays down the resistance to enslavement and presents abolition as something graciously bestowed by Britain.

So, with Abigail Coppins, who rediscovered the Black prisoners of war and who has just completed a PhD with me on their time in Britain, I've set about working with English Heritage on a number of projects to bring the Caribbean revolutionaries to a wider audience. We collaborated with the National Youth Theatre and they reworked a prisoner-of-war play and made a really powerful production – [Freedom and Revolution: The Ancestors](#) – about the uprising in Haiti, the lives of the prisoners at Portchester and the role of women revolutionaries in resisting oppression. We had British Academy funding to work with a charity called Photoworks UK on a



**UNIVERSITY
OF WARWICK**

**SPOTLIGHT
FOR SOCIETY
& CULTURE**

project to think about how photography can be used to allow school children to curate their own responses to difficult stories at Portchester, and that was really successful.

We've also been working with Saint Vincent and the Grenadines 2nd Generation (SV2G). They're a charity based in High Wycombe, and we've been facilitating them gaining the research skills and the confidence to tell their own story of the history of Saint Vincent. Among the 2500 prisoners of war at Portchester, there were about 350 prisoners who were captured on St Vincent in 1796, and, once they were transported to Britain, the British forces in the Caribbean were able to round up the rest of the indigenous population and exile them to an island off Honduras called Roatan. This allowed the British to take over St Vincent and so change the course of the island's history. The Portchester story suddenly intersects with a really important part of the story of the indigenous Garifuna, who are now a diasporic people in Central and Latin America and helps us understand the ways in which the Windward Islands change direction during the Revolutionary decade.

Because of the work that we'd started with SV2G, I was approached by Saint Paul's Cathedral to act as a historical consultant for a [new trail of their monuments](#). Lots of the monuments in Saint Paul's are to military men who at some point had a stint in the Caribbean, but their role in the Caribbean wasn't very well understood. So, Abigail and I worked with Saint Paul's and SV2G to tell the story of the wars in the Caribbean from the Caribbean perspective.

How does your identity as a researcher affect the methods you use?

There's a certain amount of very natural suspicion from people in the Caribbean who are wary of white, British academics coming in and reproducing a colonial set of behaviours. The natural response for

an academic is to tell people your expertise, and that's something that really doesn't work in co-production of research. With co-production, you absolutely have to remove that sense of the academic as expert. I think that's why co-production is so very difficult because many academics are not particularly suited to that way of working because it requires you to remove any sense that what you know is more important. So, you need to be on equal footing with the community group. Now I'm not a Caribbean historian, I'm not even really a historian. But in some ways, that makes it easier for me, because then I can act as a facilitator more easily. Abigail Coppins is a trained archaeologist, curator and archivist so, between us, we have quite a good skill set to work with community groups. We're not trying to impose knowledge but learning side-by-side.

How can researchers shift those perspectives?

That's difficult. All we can do is carry on working in a way that we know is as ethical as it can be. We have to be quite clear in the ways in which we work, ensuring that we're not slipping into a let-me-tell-you-what-I-know mode of working. I think it's also partly about being able to show what the

communities we've been working with have been able to do through working together and allowing the results to speak for themselves. We can't stop people being concerned about British academics coming in, and there is a double awkwardness there because it was the British who removed the indigenous people from Saint Vincent. So there are sorts of all sorts of complications and sensitivities around that. We just have to proceed really slowly and really carefully. Of course, we couldn't do it without Jacque Roberts, who is the CEO of SV2G. She has Vincentian ancestry, and has done a lot of the liaising on the ground with colleagues, and explaining how we are trying very carefully to provide material and ways of working



UNIVERSITY
OF WARWICK

SPOTLIGHT
FOR SOCIETY
& CULTURE

that can allow people on the island to tell the story in their own voices.

How did the method impact you as an individual?

It's all very difficult material, but I'm somewhat removed from a lot of the emotional impact. Seeing registers filled with the names of enslaved people on Saint Vincent is not something that affects me personally: those are not my ancestors. Almost the opposite: in the 17th and 18th centuries, my ancestors were sailing trow boats up the River Severn, bearing sugar and tobacco from the Caribbean to shops in the Midlands. So, my ancestors are people who have made their livelihood out of distributing goods that were produced in the Caribbean by enslaved labour.

For co-production to work, you have to you have to take yourself off your expert pedestal. You cannot be above the people you're trying to work with: you have to work as equals.

That puts me in a very awkward position in some ways, because I am very definitely implicated in the trade of enslaved people and the work on the plantations. So, I think it's just about being aware of my position in all of this. In some ways, I suppose, my work is a very small gesture of giving a little bit back. A lot of what I've done over the last few years has been about sharing the research with the people it means something to rather than it being something that's published in an academic volume that hardly anybody reads. It is difficult material, sensitive material, and you have to be alert to the danger of the people we're working with carrying the burden of the trauma because they're the descendants. We will continue to co-produce research because uncovering together more of the history of St Vincent and sharing that with community groups and school pupils can actually start to make a real difference, but we need to

do it as cautiously and as ethically as we can.

If you were to give advice to a new researcher on using co-production, what would be the most important thing they should know?

For co-production to work, you have to you have to take yourself off your expert pedestal. You cannot be above the people you're trying to work with: you have to work as equals. You have to be able to have a really strong sense of trust with the people that you're working with, and that takes time to create. Proper co-production is not easy because you have to strip away a lot of the things that you have learned to be successful academically, but it can be really rewarding.



UNIVERSITY
OF WARWICK

SPOTLIGHT
FOR SOCIETY
& CULTURE