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**INTRO:** **Beyond the Books** is a podcast from the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures (LLC) at the University of Edinburgh that gives you a behind-the-scenes look at research and the people who make it happen. I'm **Ellen**, your host, a PhD student in French and Francophone Studies, and this is our very first episode featuring the lovely **Rachel Chung** who is a third-year PhD candidate in English Literature. This conversation stayed with me for a long time after we finished recording and I think it feels that bit more poignant now in the current COVID-19 circumstances.

Just a couple of points before we get into the episode. You will hear us mention an earlier interview that I did with Katie Hawthorne, which was recorded before Rachel came in to speak with me. We've decided to release Katie's episode a bit later down the line instead, just in case there's any confusion about that. I also wanted to include a **trigger warning**: in this episode we discuss representations of rape and sexual violence as well as queer and trans erasure in the context of drag on multiple occasions. As always, discretion and self-care is advised. I think Rachel does a really excellent job of unpacking some very complicated issues in this episode, but please note that all views expressed are our own and not necessarily indicative of those of the School as a whole.   
  
Finally, on a more light-hearted note, there are also some fairly big spoilers for season two of Netflix's *Sex Education* so if you're not caught up, I recommend you pause this right now and go and binge watch the whole thing because it's pretty great. Enjoy the episode and remember when we move beyond the books we might have a lot more in common than we initially think. Please be safe all of you and above all be well. Thank you.

[Music]

**Ellen Davis-Walker (EDW):** Welcome to the Beyond the Books. I am here with Rachel Chung. Rachel is a PhD candidate here in LLC and she studies sexual violence in Shakespeare as performed by casts of all women. Rachel's research focuses primarily on productions directed by Phyllida Lloyd and she's working to combine the worlds of Gender Studies and the semiotics of theatre. Hello Rachel.

[Music]

So I know that you have actually come to this research from a science background. You’ve made a big leap - maybe not a big leap, but a leap - from science to stage representations of sexual violence. Can you talk a little bit about that and how you ended up here in LLC?

**Rachel Chung (RC):** Yes, I absolutely can. So my undergraduate degree is actually in Applied Math.

**EDW:** Oh wow!

**RC:** I thought I wanted to be an engineer, and then the next year I thought I wanted to be a doctor, so I did engineering at my American university at the same time as a pre-med qualification, and then I did my masters in narrative medicine with the aim of going to medical school. But along the way I was doing student theatre the whole time and it was really, really time-consuming and I ended up working with the Shakespeare troupe and just fell in love with it and so during my masters I focused on Shakespeare and medicine, and I discovered that I could just do that for my career instead, so here I am.

**EDW:** That's really, really cool. I mean did you always see yourself doing….you said you applied for pre-med, right? I don't really know the American system, but I'm guessing like that's what you need to be able to do practical placements, clinicals and things like that?

**RC:** Yes, so in the US, you do four years of undergraduate, and then you apply to medical school, and you do four years of medical school, and then you do placements. So I never went to medical school which would technically be grad school. So I did my undergrad and my masters and here I am.

**4.04 EDW:** Okay so a caveat for the Non-American listeners about how it works! I guess, I mean my question was going to be “did you always see yourself doing academic research”; but I mean I guess you initially saw yourself doing medicine?

**RC:** Yeah, not at all. Everyone in my family is a doctor and it's not that… they never pressured me to be a doctor, but it was all I knew and they all have very happy, healthy lives and I was like “that's what I want”, but then I discovered that if I went to medical school that's exactly the opposite of what I would get to have. Reading and the humanities were a hobby and math was my career, but my professors during my masters encouraged me to think about a career in the humanities, not because I was like particularly good at it, but because I seemed particularly sparkly talking about it. I get very excited about it…..

**EDW:** [laughs] Yeah so it was a thing that lit you up, it made you sparkle. I'm just thinking of that line in *Sex Ed*…

**RC:** That’s exactly what I was thinking of! That my professor saw me talking about medicine and he was like “that boy doesn't make you sparkle…”

**EDW:** Yeah yep. I'm leaving that in, that’s fantastic.

**5:16 [Music]**

**EDW:** So what kind of dialogues do you think there need [to be], or there should be, happening between Theatre Studies and Gender Studies or semiotics that you aren’t seeing happening already or that you want to try and bring about through your work?

**RC:** Yeah this is something that I come across reading the ‘complete works’ anthologies a lot. For reference the complete works anthologies are published by big-name publishers and edited by the equivalent of celebrity scholars in Shakespeare Studies. It's all of Shakespeare's plays put together, and they become the seminal texts for any undergraduate all the way through professional academics studying Shakespeare, and I was looking through one of the plays the other day and I noticed that the editor had cut all of the stage directions that give any sort of indication of how the play should be performed or what it would look like.

**EDW:** Why do you think they did that?

**RC:** I think it's because these volumes are designed for just English classes and just for literature angles. I was thinking about it and I realized that, when I was performing Shakespeare at any level, I never noticed anyone reading out of one of the complete works, which is such a shame because they have such good rich footnotes. The most important thing that English Literature texts and Performance texts can do is just talk to each other and to keep each other in mind, particularly because they enrich each other.

**EDW:** From what you're saying, it sounds like they've been kind of cut so that they're solely objects of study and all we have is this kind of practical, metric exam-focused vision of what these texts are meant to be - they're not meant to be performed and seen, they’re meant to be read and consumed, and we lose a lot that way. Why is it important that we look at these texts as objects of performances - things that are meant to be seen and felt - and what do we gain from that, in your opinion?

**RC:** Well I think that it's the main difference between a play and a ‘not play’. Oh that's a good one… I should have read these in advance! The purpose of a play is to be seen, and on one hand you could argue you know the death of the author etc. etc., but like why bother with that when we know that these are plays, and studying the play as just a literary text is like eating just the appetizer of a meal and why would you do that?

**EDW:** Why would you do that?

**RC:** It’s like a lunch portion.

**EDW:** Exactly, you've got so much more on offer, oh no I completely agree.

**RC:** I’m hungry.

**EDW:** I want a main course. Is that what you guys call appetizers? I never know the difference…

**RC:** So the appetizer, and then the main course is like the entrée.

**EDW:** Oh yeah, so confusing.

**RC:** Starters, mains, appetizers, code-switching.

**Ellen:** Obviously in French entrée is ‘starter’.

**RC:** Oh yeah.

**EDW:** Mind blown.

**8.30 EDW:** I was really struck when I was reading your bio by the use of the word ‘redressing’, because for me I think that brings about connotations of redressing both as an act of restoring justice, and an idea of transforming and disguise. It made me think that in the light of movements like #TimesUp and #MeToo, to what extent are the performances that you study both a form of restorative justice and a literal way of disguising, and why is it important that we make a shift to look at all female casts?

**RC:** That's a great question, and so the reason that I called the project ‘redressing rape’ as you know this sort of punny use of the word first in the cross casting and - cross casting hmm, little local accent coming out there - and the cross-dressing, but as you said also this restorative justice idea. But one of the more interesting things that I've read in like a dramaturgical note in the programme for Richard II at The Globe recently which was all women of colour, of course people are going to ask why they've chosen to do this, and the answer that they gave in the programme basically amounted to “because we felt like it”, and I felt like that was so powerful. I think that part of the restorative justice of #MeToo and #TimesUp is just taking up that space and doing something because you feel like it and making an artistic choice because you worked hard, and you think you deserve it and the fact that these women casts shouldn't feel the need to constantly justify their existence and I think that that's so, so important, so that's why I've chosen that word.

The first one [cast] that I found was actually through the director Phyllida Lloyd, whom you mentioned, and that was actually more incidental than anything. I went to see *The Taming of the Shrew* at Shakespeare in the Park in 2016 and she had on an all-women *Taming* and what I didn't know at the time was that it was kind of a reiteration, a revival of a production she had done in 2003 and later when I went back to view *that* production I noticed it was pretty much all white women and in the iteration of 2016 Kathryn was played by a woman of colour, which was clearly intentional and very thoughtfully done. The production was so galvanizing and I came out of it and the male theatre friend that I went with was like “that was so funny I have so many ideas for how I would want to do this. It’s so witty and Kathryn so funny” and I was traumatized. I couldn't even express, like, what had been awakened, and the other woman I was with felt the same. It was sort of… seeing a woman coded body enacting really explicit sexual violence on another woman to this sort of clowny, farcical laugh track is so horrifying, and I think speaks so vividly to experiences that we all have. Prior to seeing that play, I had kind of written off *The Taming of the Shrew* as like, there's no point in revising it because you can't fix it, you can't change that it exists, and this was the first play that I saw… the first production of it that I felt like I would see again and like I would recommend to other people. So I started following Phyllida Lloyd and I found that she had directed a series of all-women productions at the Donmar Warehouse in London that later transferred to Brooklyn, which I think is what you mentioned. I saw one of… I caught the tail end of the series; I saw *The Tempest*. So I wrote my masters dissertation on that series and then, coming here, I started with that trilogy - the Donmar Trilogy - as my entry point, but since then I have tried to focus on more women of colour directors and a sort of escape the, like, London stranglehold on contemporary Shakespeare, but it's difficult.

**EDW:** It's interesting, I had Katie Hawthorne, who you know, as a guest on this podcast and one of the things we were talking about and thinking about is how city cultures themselves shape, you know, the culture of the play.

**RC:** Oh, she’s so smart!

**EDW**: Oh, she is - Hi Katie! - but also I guess, practically speaking, the availability of, you know, women and women of colour and performers who can be cast, does any of your work intersect with a look at actors or productions in Edinburgh and Scotland? Is it just the US… I mean like, how have you broken out of the London stronghold?

**RC:** I have incidentally not found any productions in Edinburgh. There was for a while, I think… a trend that I found is that I'll do like a broad Google search and find like a cookie crumb trail about a local regional women's group doing Shakespeare, and most of the time they've shut down by the time I find them. So these groups usually last two to four years before going under or moving on to other things.

**EDW**: it's just… I saw this, again I saw this thing on a meme on Instagram recently about Phoebe Waller-Bridge and all, you know, the awards she got for *Fleabag* and everything, and it was like “Congratulations, you have finally been able to pay off the down payment for the fringe venue like all those years back”. And it's just maddening that in the light of...we’re seeing so many examples of what happens when we fund these productions. We were talking about *Emilia* at The Globe…

**RC:** *Emelia*, Six

**EDW:** Pay women

**RC:** Basically my thesis statement is ‘pay women’  
  
**EDW:** Is it actually?

**RC:** I wish it were…

**EDW:** Thesis Summary: Pay Women  
  
**RC:** I’m not that woke. I’m not that cool.

[Music]

**EDW:** We've talked about this kind of informally, but I wanted to bring it up again, this idea of performance moving on beyond the realms of theatre, the performance of gender becoming something that we consume quite openly and readily in popular culture. I'm thinking of, you know, things like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and the link between that performance and queer culture, and one thing I wanted to ask you about is this idea of appropriation or appropriating the political history of drag culture as an act of social commentary and one of activism, and whether shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* “silence any kind of forms of resistance to hegemonic gender binaries that characterize the origins of radical drag” (that's a quote from Caroline Hodes). I wanted to ask you, what do you think about that? What's the line between appropriation and performance and, you know, becoming aware through our consumption and maybe ignoring the political struggles that underline the media that we consume?

**RC:** That's such a good question, which I *did* think about in advance! I think that the most important distinction to draw is between intent and impact, so you know our most optimistic impulse is to assume that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is intended to create a fostering culture for all types of drag, and for all queer people. But what happens when we see who gets cast on *Drag Race* and who wins *Drag Race* year after year, that culture necessitates the silencing of certain types of drag and certain types of queerness, even if that's not the intent. So what that means is that, you know, the intent is a moot point, and what happens is that, you know, trans women and drag kings in particular, and non-binary performers, aren't able to access that type of mainstream ability. A lot of sort of horror drag queens are - it's a great way to enter this conversation as an observer - horror drag queens often say that it's not just an ideological thing, it's an income thing, I want to do this for my job just as badly as, you know, Aquaria but because I'll never be cast on *Drag Race* like I, I just can't do that. And of course, like, there's a lot to be said about the way that getting cast on *Drag Race* isn't a career bet for everyone, so they cast like 14 girls a year. But the fact that that's now a mainstream thing that people want to see is drag queens get casting commercials, they get cast in Super Bowl commercials, they go on international tours. But those tours, and those types of audiences, reward a very, very specific style of drag, and a lot of the time that drag is what Hodes will reference this sort of appropriating and desecrating femininity in kind of a dangerous way.

**EDW:** Why do you think it's dangerous?

**RC:** Well, that brings up a lot. Lindsey Ellis talks about appropriation as a culturally neutral term, but when appropriation becomes dangerous is when it punches down, and so the type of drag that for example *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* will *occasionally* champion is the type of drag that punches down, not always - with, you know, Yvie Oddly winning, and with Peppermint making it to the finals - we are starting to see non-cis, white, skinny Queens be championed on *Drag Race*. I saw a really, really funny tweet about *All Stars Four*, when there was a tie between Monét X Change and Trinity Taylor. At the start of the season, when there were only two white Queens in the line-up, people were like “this is so exciting, em, we've never seen a season like this before” because of course drag is originated, and in many ways belongs to black trans women. So people were pretty hopeful. But I saw a really funny tweet that said ‘Ru Paul: I’ve only got two white queens on this season, but you bet I’m gonna find a way to crown one of them’.

[Music]

**EDW:** It’s the same thing, the violence of absence and erasure that loops back round…

**RC:** Right. It’s not that all cis-male drag queens hate women, but that culture capitalizes on a systematic exclusion of trans women and lesbians from the gay community in the 80s and 90s in New York that you can forget but you can't erase, and we still feel those aftershocks today, and it still happens today.

**EDW:** Yep, again coming back to your previous point - even in “safe spaces” (I'm using air quotes that our listeners can't see) safe spaces like performance spaces, theatres, venues…

**RC:** It circles back to what you were saying about funding. Unfortunately, things cost money, even things that we don't think *should* cost money still cost money, which is upsetting. I think it can still… all of these things can coexist, because shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* are reductionist in ways that can become violent and erasing… erasive? But not necessarily. With the advent of shows like *Dragula*, with the sort of resurgence / continuation of the ball scene internationally, I think that there are communities out there that are working really, really hard to be inclusive, and to be mindful, and to remind participants and observers that drag comes from trans women of colour, you know as far back as the 1800s, early 1920s. When we watch *Ru Paul’s Drag Race*, and we see a queen referencing voguing or using lingo from *Paris is Burning*, to remember that we have trans women of colour to thank for that.

**EDW:** Yeah, and to remember we have a responsibility to educate ourselves on the origins of that. There was a thing that, um, that struck me about… again about your description of *the Shrew* and your cookie trail, your cookie crumb trail, to these regional troops of women. The extent to which the emotional burden of reliving sexual trauma, of staging sexual trauma, of seeking the funds to try and spread awareness and put a stop to despicable acts of violence, again comes back onto the shoulders of the very people who have experienced it and who should be being lifted up, but are having to find ways to claw and fund themselves to a place where they are just heard and believed. How do we… how do we redress that?

**RC:** This brings me back to when we mentioned *Sex Ed*. There's that scene where, after the girl’s assaulted on the bus, her friends find out and - even though they all kind of hate each other - they meet her in the morning and take the bus with her.

**EDW:** I cried my eyes out. Wept.

**RC:** I can't even think about it too hard right now or I'm gonna start again… but that idea is so powerful. That it didn't take a huge amount of money or huge press intervention for these women to make a difference to one woman. The power of a show like *Shrew* coming to Shakespeare in the Park was that male theatre critics in New York were forced to confront that, and you know ‘women's theatre’ - quote-unquote - didn't exist on just the fringes anymore. That the director of the Public [Theater] felt that it was a viable money-making expenditure to put an all-women cast up for one of two summer slots at Shakespeare in the Park which, to be fair, is free, but that even… even that effects so much about who the Public Theater is for, who donates to the Public, who is a patron of the Public. And since then they've made a lot of efforts to make the Public more inclusive, more reflective of New York's community. Whether that's performative or genuine is always up for debate. Only Oskar Eustis himself knows. But I think that we can point back to shows like Shrew, you know four years ago now, and identify a noticeable shift in who Shakespeare in the Park is for.

**EDW:** One of the questions that we talked out with Katie was this idea of online spaces in theatre performance, and a kind of a shift towards technologies and new modes of kind of streaming and accessing performance. I'm just wondering if this is something that you've witnessed through the shows you've been working on, and with the troops you've been working with?

**RC:** Yeah, so I actually viewed the entire Donmar Trilogy online for my thesis… it's not available anymore, but for about three months it was up online on the BBC for free and they advertised it. So making it available is one thing, but the idea that huge online platforms are beginning to advertise, you know, the Benedict Cumberbatch *Hamlet* alongside Phyllida Lloyd's all-women *Julius Caesar* set in a prison, starring Harriet Walter, is a huge step but it also harkens back to, you know, who these things are for. Something kind of depressing that I found in my survey of all these productions is that the most successful ones - meaning the ones put on by big-name theatre companies, the ones that get huge reviews and get recorded and broadcast - almost always, if not always, star a famous white woman who has already had a career. Then very often, you know, like in *Taming of the Shrew* and the Donmar Trilogy those actresses are supported by other women of colour who are less famous, and then those white actresses who star go on to write books about it or, you know, win Oscars for other things, or have won Oscars for other things, whatever the case may be. But, what I found is that productions who are doing a thing with people of colour, with all women, feel the need - and are in many cases forced to - include a marketing hook, like Harriet Walter, like Janet McTeer. It makes me think about how this crazy musical in New York called *Natasha Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* had to hire, like, Josh Groban to be in it to get people to come to it… which worked, it was incredibly popular!

**EDW:** That was me, raising my eyebrows.

**RC:** He was, he was good.

**EDW:** Okay.

**RC:** Like ‘good… question mark good’, but if you're thinking about like the Donmar, the National Theatre, The Globe. These three houses figure themselves as quite progressive and so any erasure of poor people, of women of colour, of queer people that is necessary for them to be seen they write off as a necessary expenditure… because they're woke so what can… they can't… like they're doing their best. Whereas in New York it’s like “oh well no one's gonna come see this if you don't hire Josh Groban so you might as well suck it up.’

[Music, laughter]

**EDW:** I love the accent.

**RC:** Thank you, can you tell I used to act?

[Music]

**RC:** To me, what’s the point of studying all of that if it doesn’t reach beyond me, and my two supervisors, and whoever's on my viva panel. So I think, moving forward, the way that at least we as academics can support theatre is by doing the research to support it which I know sounds really simple but it's not as common right now. I really live in a Twitter bubble, and right now the London theatre Twitterverse is constantly struggling to get funding to be heard, to be published, because there is an unbelievable amount of resistance in both journalism and academia to publish writers writing about new stuff. It’s like, well, that you should have gotten funding, like what were you thinking?

**EDW:** Yeah, I mean again it disproportionately falls on the shoulders of women or non-binary people, of queer people and people of colour of people from working-class, immigrant, asylum-seeker, refugee backgrounds and it's, it is something that we need to urgently ‘redress’, to use your PhD terminology.

**RC:** There’s huge amounts of job insecurity in theatre and academia that sort of prohibit people from unstable financial backgrounds from entering at all.

**EDW:** It's just another layer of a glass ceiling that we all know is there. Speaking of academic institutions, you sort of led me quite nicely into my last question, and I promise it's the last one this time. It’s a question we ask all of our interviewees at the end - if you could go back in time and talk to first year PhD Rachel, or pre-first year PhD Rachel who was in medicine but thinking that she just loved theatre and it was the boy that made her sparkle. What advice would you give her?

**RC:** Ooh, besides start your Zotero now?

**EDW**: Oh God, yeah do it.

**RC:** I’d tell her that she belongs here.

**EDW:** Oh God, you’re going to make me cry.

**RC:** I know, me too. I was actually made to cry in my first supervision and I’m very… I'm very close with the supervisor now, but that idea really wormed its way into my brain for the first two years I was here: that I didn't belong here. That I wasn't good enough, and that nothing that I did while I was here was going to make me good enough. I felt like it was too late for me to be good. I felt like I had ruined my life, and I started immediately looking at medical school applications again. So if I could tell myself anything it would be to take a breath and remember that you chose this for a reason. You chose it because you can do it; you know because you're a woman of colour you're never going to jump into something that you're not 3,000% qualified for. Like Rachel come on, why would you do this if you didn't think that you could finish it? So I wish that there were a way to help women earlier in their PhD careers remember that strength and that conviction, that this is something that is as good as done, because you're doing it now.

**EDW:** Rachel, thank you so, so much for coming in to talk to me and for that beautiful answer.

**RC:** Thank you for your beautiful questions.

[Music]

**EDW:** Thank you.