

ENGL 1650: Philadelphia Workshop – Open Cassette Mixtape Session

On Wednesday, October 30th, I attended the open cassette mixtape session at the Iffy Books Bookstore in downtown Philadelphia. When we arrived we were greeted by the instructor who was excited to have us there to create the mixtapes. I was immediately fascinated when our instructor mentioned that the mixtapes we were using were old and reused cassettes that were donated to the bookstore. To begin, he asked us if we were familiar with creating mixtapes, which we were not, so he walked us through the simple process. He explained the basics of recording onto mixtapes, starting with careful preparation required to make sure the cassette was ready to capture new music. We had to rewind the cassette fully, making sure the clear tape was shown, so we could start fresh. This consisted of turning the small reels until the tape was fully wound to the starting point. By winding the tape to the beginning, we established a clean slate for the mixtape and therefore a better listening experience.

After ensuring the cassette was ready to record, we began selecting songs to play from beginning to end. I was very particular about which songs I chose; I wanted there to be a theme and I didn't necessarily want to play just a bunch of random songs. I found an old playlist that my sister made for me and used some songs from it; the playlist reminded me of when I was younger, driving around in the car with my older sister blasting these songs on repeat. The cassette had a bluetooth setting, so all I had to do was press play on my phone off of Apple Music and the tape would start to record the song. As I pressed play and record, I felt very excited to hear the song coming out of the cassette. My friends and I began to sing along to each song that was being played. We also made sure that each of us got the chance to play songs individually. Keeping background noise to a minimum so we could fully appreciate the music together. When each song was finished we would stop recording and rewind so we could listen to the song on the cassette. The quality of my mixtape turned out to be really good, but some of the tapes had muffled background sound. It was interesting, especially since we didn't know the history of the reused tapes and where they had been previously.

This mixtape session allowed me to think about the role of digital archives, which we discuss very frequently in class, and how they compare to non-digital, or analog, forms. Cassette tapes are non-digital forms that have a very unique and authentic quality, by capturing sound or music in a tangible way. On the other hand, digital archives aim to preserve cultural artifacts, by scanning or digitizing certain collections; the goal of digital archives is accessibility and longevity. Digital archives end up being widely accessible throughout time, unlike physical analogs like a mixtape cassette. Non-digital forms ultimately bear signs of use and can become worn down, just as a mixtape can have scratches on it or a muffled sound.

This distinction between digital and analog forms emphasizes the different experiences that each form can provide. Digital archives provide easy access, but may lack historical context and personal connection to non-digital forms. Mixtapes, for instance, definitely have imperfections, as I experienced when I rewound my first song and I heard a voice that I didn't recognize, giving music lessons. The instructor ended up telling us that the mixtapes were actually donated by an old music teacher. This was so fascinating because it added a layer of history and shared

experience to the recordings. This highlighted how analog media can provide an engaging and authentic connection to the past in a way that complements the storytelling of digital archives.

