

Independent Scholar Showcase Dialogue

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Introduction

When we did not receive many submissions for our Independent Scholar Showcase, I worried that we would not have enough material for an issue on this topic. Luckily, we were approached to host the special issue on Black popular culture, which allowed this Showcase to become a supplement for that special issue. Yet even with this fortuitous event, I still thought we needed the opportunity to hear more from independent scholars. Especially now, amid a global pandemic that has laid bare the tenuousness of our current academic system.

Academic labor is rarely properly compensated. For example, all the editors of this journal are volunteers. For the vast majority of full-time academics, any research and scholarship exist outside of their salary, as it is focused on instruction and service to their institution. At my institution, I receive support in the form of travel reimbursement for conference presentations as well as grants I could apply for to support my work. I am immensely fortunate in that regard, as increasingly my colleagues and peers report such financial support being taken away by their administrations. Such support, however, has no direct correlation with the amount of labor I engage in to complete such work.

Writing articles, book chapters, books, reviews, and other means of research communication all fall under more of an affective labor: we do it because we love to do it. For many, it may be the reason we pushed ourselves into and through a PhD program. Aside from the scant royalties a book may provide, however we do not receive financial remuneration. We do the work for our C.V.s and the promise of promotion and possibly tenure provided we work enough.

All that is true only for tenure-track faculty, and tenure is increasingly a tenuous promise, taken away by Boards of Trustees looking for cost-cutting measures. Other full-time faculty do not have the same promises, however tenuous, and contingent faculty such as adjuncts (whose numbers continue to grow) have no such

promises—except that adding to their C.V. may lead to full-time employment. Even then, adjuncts can still claim to be employed in their desired field, if they went to graduate school to be employed in higher education.

Independent scholars may not be employed in their desired field; and, even if they are, it may be in an aspect of higher education or some other field that provides no financial support or promises related to their research and scholarship. While they may have physically and financially left academia and higher education, the desire for participating in scholarly conversations through their original contributions still exists. That fire for exploring, collecting, analyzing, understanding, and explaining still burns, and the only fuel they possess to feed it comes from themselves, from their own financial and energy reserves, with no higher education institution there to replenish even a small part of it.

Their voices matter every bit as much as the voices of researchers at high level research institutions who receive millions in federal grants and corporate partnerships. Academia is not specific to any bricks-and-mortar institution. It cannot, and should not, be contained within ivy-league halls and ivory towers. The “true academic” is not the researcher at the R1 bringing in huge grants; the “true academic” is the person fueled by the desire to explore, discover, understand, and explain.

Though how can we ensure that?

The goal with this dialogue among independent scholars is to start the conversation to answer that question. I structured the dialogue around several questions, each with their own thread on Slack for people to engage with asynchronously. Those questions and their answers are presented here as an interactive document. You can click on the question you are interested in to read how the eight independent scholars reacted to it.

After reading through these discussions, dear PCSJ community, I ask you to consider and discuss this question: what can we do to support these scholarly minds and ensure they are not lost?

To continue this dialogue, please engage us on Twitter @ThePCSJ by using #Academia4All to address how we can better restructure academia to be inclusive of all voices from all backgrounds.

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, PCSJ Editor

Question List

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“What advice would you offer to other independent scholars?”

“What do you see as the benefits to being an independent scholar?”

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“What helps you to complete your research on popular culture?”

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“If you could wave a magic wand, then what would you change to help your work as an independent scholar?”

Biographies

Caleb: My name is Patrick Caleb Smith. (I go by Caleb). I recently completed my Ph.D. in geography as a part-time student, full-time instructor of adult education, and adjunct instructor. I have recently been hired as an instructor of geography and history at a community college. For the past fifteen years, I have been an adjunct instructor at three different colleges while raising a family. I currently live in southern Mississippi and am married with two wonderful kids.

Scott: Scott Manning is an independent scholar living outside Philadelphia with his wife, Dawn, who is a poet and metal smith. He has worked in tech for 20 years and the last half of that in entertainment technology. He is currently the inventor on 3 related patents. Scott is published in *This Year's Work in Medievalism* and forthcoming in *Studies in Medievalism*, with contributions to *Medieval Warfare* magazine and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He serves as the VP of Conference for the Mid-Atlantic Popular & American Culture Association (MAPACA) and as co-chair of the organization's Medieval/Renaissance area. Since 2019, Scott has organized the panels for the International Joan of Arc Society at the International Congresses on Medieval Studies. He is currently under contract with Rowman & Littlefield for his forthcoming book *Joan of Arc: A Reference Guide to Her Life and Works*.

Simon: Simon Bacon is an Independent Researcher living in Poznań, Poland. He has edited books on various subjects including *Gothic: A Reader* (2018), *Horror: A Companion* (2019), *Monsters: A Companion* (2020), *Transmedia Vampires* (2021), and *Nosferatu in the 21st Century* (forthcoming). He has also published a series of books on vampires in popular culture: *Becoming Vampire: Difference and the Vampire in Popular Culture* (2016), *Dracula as Absolute Other* (2019), *Eco-Vampires* (2020), *Vampires from Another World* (2021), and is working on the next *Unhallowed Ground: Emergent Terror and the Specter of the Vampire on Screen*.

Penny: I'm Penny Wickson. I am an Art Historian focusing on the long 19th century in Italian painting. I also focus on fashion and dress as well as collage. I work as a full-time teacher/Head of Department. I also have a major interest in underground dance music and culture and this is now taking an academic direction too. I have published exhibition reviews and a major article in an academic journal.

I am currently working on a book proposal that is based on my PhD and new research. I have chaired the school's Subcommittee of the Association for Art History and presented papers at major academic conferences.

Monica: My name is Monica Geraffo. I have an MA in Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, and Museum Practice from the Fashion Institute of Technology, and a BA in Screen Arts and Cultures from the University of Michigan. I've worked professionally both before and after graduate school in the film industry as a costume designer (*Strive*, *Disfluency*, *Those Who Walk Away*) and costume assistant (*Inventing Anna* [Season 1], *Madam CJ Walker* [Season 1], *TURN: Washington's Spies* [Seasons 3 and 4]), and have held internships in the costume and textile departments of the FIDM Museum in exhibition installation of the Art of Motion Picture and Television Costume Design (2017, 2018, 2019), the Merchant's House Museum in collections management (2017), The Valentine in exhibition installation (2016), and Colonial Williamsburg in historic trades interpretation (2014).

I am an emerging scholar, with two upcoming publications in the *Film Fashion Consumption Journal* with Intellect, an upcoming chapter with Routledge, and an upcoming chapter with University of Mississippi Press. My work recently received an honorable mention with the Comics Studies Society Hillary Chute Award for Best Graduate Student Presentation for my 2019 San Diego Comic Con Presentation with the Comics Arts Conference for "S&M: Sex and Marvel: The Use of Fetish Gear in the Uncanny X-Men." My research focuses on representations of dress within popular culture, especially superhero fashion in comics and its film and television adaptations. I like to think that my professional tactile experiences help to inform my theoretical approaches to dress as pieces we wear rather than simply material artifacts.

Jason: I am Jason Kahler. I have a PhD in Composition and Rhetoric and an MA in Creative Writing. I am currently a freelance writer. My research areas are writing pedagogy, writing technology, and popular culture, primarily film and media studies and comic books. I have a poem forthcoming in *Analog*, a recent essay in *The Journal for Prison Education and Reentry*, and I am working on a number of reviews for scholarly publications. I've written about and made presentations discussing *The Walking Dead*, Daredevil, disability in comic books, and Twitter in

the Composition classroom. I will be discussing Doctor Aphra at this year's NEPCA conference, safely distanced via the computer, of course!

Zélie: I'm Zélie Asava and I'm a Screen Studies academic, focused on representations of race, gender and sexuality. I've been faculty, adjunct, full time and part-time at universities across Dublin, Ireland, and am currently working as a film classifier. I'm the author of *Mixed Race Cinemas: Multiracial Dynamics in America and France* (Bloomsbury, 2017) and *The Black Irish Onscreen: Representing Black and Mixed-Race Identities on Irish Film and Television* (Peter Lang, 2013). My work on Irish, French, Francophone African and US cinema/television has been published in a wide range of journals and books, including: *Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture: Tiger's Tales* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Cinema and Media Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2013); *The Universal Vampire* (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013); *France's Colonial Legacies: Memory, Identity and Narrative* (University of Wales Press, 2013).

Nicole: My name is Nicole Margheim, and I'm an academic in fan studies, primarily using gender theory, ethnographic methods, and folklore. I have a BA in English and Anthropology and am currently searching for PhD programs to apply to. I have only recently graduated, and so am a brand new independent scholar. My first conference will be the Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference this fall. I'm looking to publish where I can and continue doing research while I wait for the right program and the right time (COVID being the big factor). The way I am solving the issue of database and library access in this gap is using my younger sister's university login, which will last me a few years. I am very excited to learn from all of you, and to grow from this dialogue!

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“What is your perception of the current state of academia?”

Caleb: In a word: bleak. When I first enrolled in graduate school more than a decade ago, publications were a nice thing to have, but people could still obtain academic jobs without a thick CV. Today "publish or perish" is more present than ever. One or two publications are not going to get one an interview, even for a non-R1 job. Several programs in my field (geography) have seen cuts in recent years, but now with a global pandemic, things are looking desolate.

I would like to have my publications tied to a tenure-track position because I fear that I may run out of quality content before I can begin a tenure-track job (I personally think that Imposter Syndrome is to blame for this sentiment). If I do publish all that I am currently working on to build a portfolio, I may "slice the bologna too thin" further down the road, cannibalizing my work and receiving rejection after rejection from publications and possible employers. I am also not getting any younger. The longer I take to produce publications, the older I get and the less attractive I appear to universities who want to hire a researcher who can produce for the next twenty years.

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“What advice would you offer to other independent scholars?”

Scott: Seek out a mentor! It doesn't have to be an official relationship, but you're going to want someone in your life who will answer field-related questions directly and give you blunt feedback about your work. This is not an easy task and by the time I found someone who I felt fits that role well with me, I had given up looking. Once you've found that person, shower them with appreciation and gifts, and be sure to use their time wisely.

Caleb: Stick to it. Times may seem bleak, especially in the throes of a pandemic, but there is always hope. Write, research, present, and connect. Each academic path is a little different, and there is no panacea to reach the goal.

Simon: People malign FB [Facebook] but I found it really good for keeping in touch with a community of researchers...particularly groups that label themselves as academic in some way...been very helpful and supportive

Nicole: I would recommend getting a group of people together who have access to different libraries. Paywalls are a huge issue, so I've made a couple of group chats for students and other researchers I know give each other the ability to keep researching.

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“What do you see as the benefits to being an independent scholar?”

Caleb: The greatest benefit of being an independent scholar is the freedom to research what interest me and what I am passionate about. Some who are financially supported by grants are limited in their scope as they have to serve their financial master. This freedom also allows a more flexible timeline to produce research. Unforeseen circumstances like a global pandemic can delay work, yet being independent means I do not have to apply for extensions or deal with bureaucratic mess when that happens.

Scott: I’m fortunate to work in video streaming, so the job deals with delivering popular culture to millions of peoples’ homes and devices. I have a front row seat to see how people consume video and what shows and movies are popular throughout the year. In addition, I feel that constant access to non-academics have been very helpful. For example, I’ve watched some big movies at work or in the theaters with hundreds of coworkers. There’s something special about getting peoples’ raw reaction en masse after seeing Star Wars or Avengers for the first time. I’m also able to throw out popular culture topics throughout the day and gauge reactions, enlist thoughts, and even get direction. If I’m researching Wolverine, I know who the comic fans are. If I’m researching *Hellraiser*, I know where the horror freaks hang.

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“What do you see as the drawbacks to being an independent scholar?”

Caleb: The main drawback of being an independent scholar is the lack of access to resources, specifically online journals and online texts. When I was a Ph.D. student at an R1, I had access to a wide variety of online books and journal databases like JSTOR, Project MUSE, and EBSCO. Now that I no longer have access to such library materials, I may not be fully aware of what is out there. I recently submitted a prospective article to a journal for publication. All three reviewers stated that this work had already been performed to a degree by other researchers, but I was unaware of their work because I only had Google Scholar and a smattering of online journals to rely upon.

Scott: My experience is similar to Caleb’s. When I was working on my grad degree, I felt like I had access to the world. Now, even when I know a paper exists in a journal, I can’t always get access to it. I’ve relied heavily on Free Library of Philadelphia, which has a great ILL system. However, they won’t request papers or books that are not least one full year old. So I’m left to seek out academic friends with access or other means. You feel like a leech asking—yet again—for access to a JSTOR article.

Zélie: I absolutely agree, the biggest problem is access. Access to funding, resources, colleagues... I also think there is sometimes resistance in the academy to independent scholars. Thankfully it's only a minority, but when you're not teaching some find it hard to relate to what you do and perhaps see it as a hobby, rather than appreciating what a huge challenge it is.

Nicole: While I certainly echo the issue of access, I have been able to mitigate it by still have many friends at academic institutions who basically send me pdfs of papers. My biggest hurdle so far (I am very new, keep in mind) is my imposter syndrome and fear of rejection. Without the credential of an institution, and without a PhD, I'm worried I won't be taken seriously or let into certain spaces.

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“What helps you to complete your research on popular culture?”

Scott: One thing that has helped me tremendously is discussing my research with non-academics. Often our research will be interesting to those who are consumers of the product we’re analyzing. So if you’re doing a paper on Wolverine, discuss it with comic book lovers. If you’re doing a paper on the circus, discuss it with people who used to go to the circus. Sometimes, you must break the ice with something like, “Can I spend 10 minutes on this whiteboard telling you about my detailed research on depictions of Wolverine covered in arrows?” They’ll laugh, but any fan would be interested and provide you with fresh perspectives.

Also, sometimes the most thorough research on popular culture is not by scholars, but by the fandom who meticulously curates their lore. Running your research by them can open new avenues and prevent you from retreading old paths.

Caleb: The best help for me is journals like this one. The open-access model mitigates barriers of access allowing me to interact with, share with, and learn from other academics like me. It also creates a community of fellow researchers that encourages me to continue.

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“What hinders your research into popular culture studies?”

Caleb: The thing that hinders me most as an independent scholar is the lack of a support from fellow scholars as co-workers. In the independent scholar world, we lack colleagues in a department who are also interested in research and are eager to produce quality work. I have contemporaries I communicate with on Twitter, Facebook, and at conference meetings, but I need face-to-face support. Colleagues who do research encourage me, even if their research is miles away from what I do. I once almost dropped out of my Ph.D. program when I was halfway through it. I attended a conference while I was mulling over the idea of quitting, and the energy of the scholars sharing, interacting, and engaging with one another gave me the charge to finish.

Monica: The thing that hinders me most is the time constraint. I know that professors and other academics are also pulled a million different ways, but I work a 60-hour+ work week that has never had any real intersection with my research. I work in costuming and research dress, but my specialty is superheroes and I'm usually hired to work on period pieces, and never actually hired as a researcher.

Penny: I agree. I am a full-time teacher/Head of Department and time is a huge problem although I do get the long holidays... Even then I have schoolwork to do though.

Jason: For independent scholars investigating popular culture, I think the cost of pop culture artifacts is a pretty big roadblock. Researchers at institutions often have access to funds that allow them to purchase/rent/borrow the material items for their research. While it's true that a lot of pieces exist online, that doesn't always give an accurate feel for how an item exists in the space it occupies.

Scott: The cost to gain access to sources and archives can be high. Some archives are better than others, but it's not uncommon to spend a few hundred dollars just on photocopies in hopes that there's material there worth using. Conversely, archives that do not provide digital services can lead to an expensive trip. We all know what it's like to go dumpster diving in some obscure archive in Normal, IL.

A recent hindrance came from both an archive and publisher unwittingly working in tandem. I had a paper accepted for publication by a journal, which was

exciting. I followed the editor's advice to only include images if necessary, as it's costly to print pictures. However, after acceptance by the editor, the publisher read my paper and asked that I include a relevant image. I was pumped, as it is a paper that would benefit from a photo of the topic. I learned that the archive would provide a high-res digitized image for \$60 and 2 copies of the publication. I was prepared to pay the \$60, but I assumed the publisher could spare 2 journals. Nope. Since journals cost \$120/volume, I'm looking at a \$300 cost just to include the image in my paper. Then you add that to week I took off work and travel cost a few years ago to visit various archives, and the cost just adds up.

“If you could wave a magic wand, then what would you change to help your work as an independent scholar?”

Caleb: If I could change one thing about my work as an independent scholar, I would make my brain focus better. I find a topic and run with it. I have difficulty following through the research from original idea to publication. I usually get bogged down in the writing process. I think that is my real issue: I love doing research, but I do not feel like I have time to write it out to the point where it is a scholarly piece in a journal.

Simon: Magic wand...one of the main things would be access to resources. Not be affiliated to a university can make it highly problematic accessing journal articles etc...and I certainly can't afford to pay subscriptions to Jstor and the like. That said there is a good community in the Horror and Vampire areas I work in on FB and that's been hugely helpful.

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