



Independent Scholars Meet the World

Christine Caccipuoti & Elizabeth Keohane-Burbridge (eds.)

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[Independent Scholars Meet the World: Expanding Academia beyond the Academy \(Rethinking Careers, Rethinking Academia\) : Christine Caccipuoti \(editor\) & Elizabeth Keohane-Burbridge \(editor\): Amazon.co.uk: Books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Independent-Scholars-Meet-the-World-Expanding-Academia/dp/0700629916)

Review by Amanda Haste, first published online 2 August 2023.

This book first crossed my radar when I was asked to provide an endorsement for the cover, which I was pleased to do. This volume comprises a collection of essays that not only provide personal accounts of contributors' journeys towards independent scholarship but also "urges scholars of all sorts to reconsider what truly divides – and unites – us in our work" (p.vii).

As editors Christine Caccipuoti and Elizabeth Keohane-Burbridge discuss in their Introduction, the term 'independent scholar' (IS) has been variously defined, for instance as "those who did not have an advanced degree but who had become a specialist on their own" (p.3) or those with an advanced degree "who – by choice or necessity – specialize in a topic that fits within an academic field and yet work outside of the tenure-track professoriate" (p.4). The authors confined their choice of contributors to North American scholars who "have advanced degrees in their fields but have not entered the tenure track (for any reason) and who are currently working in a role that is not traditionally academic but is still related to the field for which they attended graduate school" (p.5).

Although the authors had imagined an inclusive

diversity of race, creed, gender identity and sexual orientation, despite their best efforts this volume is dominated by cis men and (predominantly) cis women, and the authors draw two conclusions for this. Firstly, that more women are likely to be ISs, the strictures of parenting and other caring roles being among the possible reasons, and secondly, that male ISs "are fewer in number and may not be as comfortable in taking on this stigma" (p.7). Indeed, "more than one [male IS] we solicited declined in part because they felt that academia would be retaliatory if they described their experiences" (ibid.).

The Introduction contains a brief overview of the history of academic tenure in the USA, and the adjunctification of academic labor, which has consigned vast numbers of PhDs to juggling insecure temporary contracts, often for many years. Indeed, the NCIS definition of 'independent scholar' includes adjunct faculty, and it is noticeable how many of the contributors have been subjected to the 'gig economy' throughout their careers. The authors also discuss the concept of 'Alt-Ac' for Alternative Academia, and their preferred term – 'Expanded-Academia' – within which the eleven contributors "are happily using the skills they learned in their graduate studies in their new



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careers” and “are doing it on their own terms” (p.19).

Following an illuminating (and entertaining) foreword by Ben Raphael Sher, the volume is divided into three parts. In Part 1: Independent on Campus, classicist Alison Innes relates the issues of pursuing her research passion while coping with a disability, and revisits the important question of the loss of her traditional academic identity. Medieval historian Joshua Hevert openly discusses his ambition to teach at university level, and the pressures on himself and his marriage of his secondary teaching post, while still feeling “emotionally attached” to his research (p.71).

In Part 2: Leaving the Ivory Tower, four essays examine their authors’ transitions from academia to pastures new: medieval history to museum education; medieval studies to primary school art instructor/archaeologist; history to making history podcasts; art history to managing community-based projects. In ‘*Footnoting History for the Public*’ Caccipuoti and Keohane-Burbridge’s details their respective journeys towards their successful history podcasting platform *Footnoting History*⁴⁵⁶ which has “allowed us to maintain our scholarly presence, expand our areas of expertise, hone our business skills, and educate the public” (pp.134-5).

In Part 3: Family Life and Scholarship, we encounter three essays from (you guessed) mothers who have juggled their parenting responsibilities with their intellectual life. Danielle Slaughter left college teaching and founded the Mamademics website in 2012 to chronicle her life “as an academic and first-time mother” (p.162), and relates the sense of community of “finding other Black women in the academy” in similar situations to her own (p.167) which led to her role as an influencer through her Mamademics Academy.⁴⁵⁷ In ‘Burn it Down: From Adjunct to University Staff to Stay-at-Home Mum to Beauty School’ Katherine Anderson Howell explains how she has published books and poetry while coping with her own disabilities and bringing up two children with special needs. In ‘Being a Full-Time Parent and a Part-Time Scholar’ historian Valerie Schutte relates how she chose to be a part-time

scholar while staying home with her son and has published regularly. She says “I have no regrets” as “I spend every day with my son, focus on my own publications, and only work on projects that I find meaningful” (p.200).

In the final Part 4: From the University to Freedom, neuroscientist Vay Cao’s chapter on ‘Freeing the PhD – Solving an Identity Crisis’ asks “Am I still a scientist? Defining what it means to be an Independent Scholar” and addresses the challenges facing ‘wet lab’ scientists when they lose access to “the fancy equipment, animal facilities, expensive reagents, and institutional credentials assumed necessary to add new knowledge to [their] field” (pp.220-21). She runs an independent enterprise called Free the PhD which supports those transitioning out of academia.⁴⁵⁸

Overall, this volume provides fascinating insights into the challenges facing independent scholars, and the ingenuity and fortitude with which they have faced not only issues with accessing resources, but also mental health issues (often caused by the pressures of trying to maintain their place within academia), coping with disability, and balancing their relationships and family commitments with their scholarship.

Of the themes that pervade this book, I would like to draw out just three: affiliation, self-identity, and transferable skills. Affiliation is something that concerns many ISs, especially when conferences, journals and organizations often demand that we ally ourselves to a known academic institution. As Valerie Schutte says (p.198);

It is not terribly hard to get a university affiliation if you are an independent scholar. The easiest way is to simply affiliate yourself with the institution that granted your PhD. You can still claim them as your home school, without getting any support from them in return.

However, she has chosen (as has this reviewer) “not to affiliate myself with a university, without having an active role at that university” and is living proof that lack of a university affiliation need not hold one back:

⁴⁵⁶ <https://www.footnotinghistory.com/>

⁴⁵⁷ <http://mamademics.com;>

⁴⁵⁸ <https://mamademicsacademy.com/>

<https://www.freethephd.com/>



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"I know that I do not get asked to give guest lectures because I am not affiliated with a university. I am not a 'prestigious' scholar to be called upon to give lectures or even interviews when a new movie related to queenship or early modern English history comes out." [However] "I am proud that I work from home, largely on my own, and that I have achieved as much as I have" (p.199).

This reviewer would add that the only answer to this conundrum is to be the scholar that writes the book (!). As a paid-up member of NCIS I have always given my affiliation as 'Independent Scholar' and/or "National Coalition of Independent Scholars' and this has always been accepted and never (to my knowledge) held me back.

In terms of scholar identity, Ben Raphael Sher realized that he had internalized the "independent scholar stigma" [...] "effectively and painfully" outlined in these essays, but that the contributors to this book "correct that stigma and erasure by persuasively insisting that we have not left academia and our identities as scholars, but expanded them" (p.xix). Ultimately, "leaving traditional academia does not necessarily mean divesting yourself of your identity as a scholar" (ibid). Indeed, our reputations as scholars should be based on the quality of our research, not on a putative affiliation with a university with which we have had no recent contact and which does not support our research.

These essays demonstrate time and again that the skills we acquire as scholars have proved invaluable in the twists and turns of the authors' post-graduate-school careers. Sher realized, on embarking on a career in the film industry, that:

Graduate school had taught me how to balance ten different projects/jobs at once, how to take concepts and present them in a fun and accessible way ... and how to critically analyze films and TV shows" (p.xvi).

As Allyson Schettino says:

"Look past the information you've learnt in the pursuit of your degree(s), and think about the skills you've acquired. Each and every one is attractive to a future employer and is increasingly rare in a world where the vast majority of undergrads are pursuing career-track degrees. The world will always need people with a liberal arts skill set. You have value!" (p.81).

While I have heard mutterings about the dearth of referencing in this volume, based on this second reading I would venture to suggest that the endnotes and bibliography are sufficient. The narratives of these essays may be intensely (and at times painfully) personal, but they provide an insightful analysis of the issues facing independent scholars, and the myriad solutions that are possible if we only care to look further within ourselves.

In short, these eleven honest, pragmatic accounts of scholars creating and maintaining their own academic profile will surely inspire and guide others. This volume demonstrates that *independent* does not mean *inferior* and that high-quality scholarship can indeed be pursued outside the confines of academe.

Amanda Haste is an Anglo-French musicologist and freelance academic translator whose research interests include identity construction through music and language. An independent scholar since 2010, she was adjunct faculty in the Music Dept. and Applied Languages Dept. at Aix-Marseille University, France from 2015 until her retirement in 2023. Her research has been published in leading journals and books by major editors and she authored (with James E. Block) *Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization (Paris: Ex Modio, 2015)*. Her monograph *Music and Identity in Twenty-First-Century Monasticism* was published by Routledge in October 2023, and (with Linda Baines) she is currently working on the NCIS Guide for Independent Scholars, scheduled for publication online in December 2023.