

15 Years before the Public

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In November 2010, toward the start of my sixth year as an Assistant Professor of English and American Studies at a regional comprehensive state university in Massachusetts, I decided to start a public scholarly daily blog. The factors behind that decision and its timing were both political (specifically the 2010 midterm elections and my sense that Glenn Beck’s “Beck University” had shaped for the worse voters’ understandings of topics like American history) and personal (specifically, my desire to find audiences and communities with which to share my writing and scholarship beyond the conventional path of peer-reviewed publications). But if I’m being honest in my reflections, it was a relatively spur-of-the-moment decision, and certainly not one that I expected would affect and change every aspect of my career over these subsequent 15 years.

It did and has, though, as I’ve moved more and more fully into public scholarly work over that decade and a half in a variety of arenas and forms that I’ll discuss more in a moment. Before I share those experiences and some takeaways from them, however, I want to say two additional preliminary things. First, nothing I’ll write here, nor anything I’ve written or said anywhere, is meant to suggest that work for academic audiences is any less meaningful or worth pursuing than public-facing work. Indeed, I couldn’t do any of my public-facing work without all of the more academically focused research and scholarship that I, like all of us, depend on a great deal. It’s all in the mix, and it all needs to be for any part of it to exist at all, much less be what it can be.

With that said, I also want to note that, in far too many ways, higher education and the profession still undervalue public-facing work compared to peer-reviewed scholarship. That’s especially true of the ways in which work is measured for professional development, including hiring as well as tenure and promotion. Both hiring and tenure are of course more and more embattled for all individuals and institutions alike here in 2025, but to my mind that’s only one more reason why we should be valuing all scholarly work, including work that directly engages with pressing public issues and debates (such as attacks on and other challenges facing higher education). I believe strongly that if we can’t as a profession get better at recognizing, valuing, and supporting all forms of scholarly work, in all arenas and spaces,

we will be even less well-equipped to face those challenges, and less able to make the case for the significance of our work in every setting as well.

I haven't done every form of public-facing writing and work, of course. But over these last 15 years I've had the chance to connect with a number of them, and I want here to highlight and say a bit about five, with a particular interest in takeaways from those experiences related to both their value for us as scholars and what they can contribute to our conversations and communities on many different levels.

Blogging: That daily blog, *AmericanStudies*,¹ was not just my first foray into public scholarship; it remains my most consistent to this day, as this upcoming November will mark its 15th anniversary and it's still going strong. It's not possible for me to overstate how much it has meant for my career by every possible measure, including its relationship to more conventional forms of scholarship (five of my six books, all of those post-dissertation, have started on the blog in one way or another). I believe I never could have kept my scholarly work going during my very busy academic years without this short-form experimental space, and I recommend it to everyone, full stop. But I also would argue that there are few, if any places where our scholarly writing, ideas, voices, interests can more immediately and meaningfully connect to audiences—these days, my blog gets an average of 400-500 discrete daily views, infinitely more than a peer-reviewed article could ever get—and I think I can speak for most, if not all of us, when I say that sharing our work with audiences is one main goal.

Columns: Of course, one's own blog might or might not find its way to audiences, and that process takes a great deal of time in any case. So, finding ways to share our public-facing writing and work in other settings and spaces is also a great goal, and I've been fortunate enough to do that a good deal over these 15 years, including in regular columns with *Talking Points Memo*, the *Huffington Post*, and, for the last seven and a half years, the *Saturday Evening Post* online. That last column came about because of my blog, as the online editor saw it and reached out to chat about opportunities to write for the *Post*. Writing columns has helped me think about how to share my writing, voice, and ideas with very different audiences, which in turn has led to stylistic shifts, among other effects. And it has pushed me to connect my own scholarly interests to current events, generally not in an overtly political way (which isn't the *Post*'s bailiwick), but in terms of contemporary inspirations for revisiting historical subjects (hence my column's name, *Considering History*²).

Podcasts: Probably everyone reading this will agree with my long-standing belief that written words are one of the best ways to share our ideas. But, over the last few years, I've come to feel that audio communica-

tion is not only equally valuable for public-facing scholarship, but also complementary in its ability to feature our voices and work in distinct forms. The main audio setting through which I've been able to share my voice has been other folks' podcasts, and every time I've had that opportunity, it has helped me think about and share ideas in new and meaningful ways. This past summer and fall, I created my own podcast for the first time, a narrative history podcast about baseball, Chinese Americans in the late 19th century, and the worst and best of America called *The Celestials' Last Game: Baseball, Bigotry, and the Battle for America*.³ I had originally envisioned this podcast as a book project, and making the shift really allowed me to experiment with what's possible in that audio space and further convinced me of the value of this other form of communication. It also allowed me to receive and incorporate listener feedback into the later episodes, another excellent feature of this particular medium.

Community Lectures and Classes: Incorporating listener feedback makes podcasts a bit more conversational, but they're still generally the creation of one voice and perspective. Conversation is one of my most consistent career goals and remains so in my public scholarly work for sure; so, I really welcome opportunities to share my work in spaces and settings that are more directly and fully conversational. Community talks and lectures do that (although of course they still feature the individual speaker's voice), and every talk or lecture I've done has given me back at least as much as I've put in. But I'm a particular advocate for an even more conversational form of community engagement: teaching classes in adult education (sometimes known as lifelong learning) programs. Most such programs are oriented toward older/retired community members, and in any case, all represent opportunities not just to share our work with students way beyond conventional classrooms, but also, and especially, to hear their thoughts and perspectives—and, I'll add, to directly contribute to communal conversations about any and all topics, a central goal for all of us doing public-facing work.

Supporting Fellow Scholars: If I think back to that November 2010 moment when I started my blog and try to recapture why I made that move, I do believe part of it was my frustration that so much of our scholarly work seems to happen in isolation, or at least how difficult it can be to find consistent community and solidarity (beyond our institutional colleagues if we're lucky enough to have such community there). Over these last 15 years, I've tried to challenge and reverse that trend, whether on the blog (where sharing Guest Posts is one of my most longstanding, favorite things to do) or in any and every other setting (including my many years of work as a Boston Chapter Co-Leader for the Scholars Strategy Network). But it's in the last five years that I've found my personal favorite way to support my

fellow scholars, and particularly public scholars—through my #ScholarSunday threads, which began on Twitter and have since migrated to my own newsletter and also to Bluesky. I began compiling and sharing those weekly threads in the summer of 2020, and I continue to do so each weekend, with more than 220 threads already in existence (and collected in a Google Doc).⁴ Finding, compiling, and sharing the work in these threads has been nothing short of inspiring for me and has only encouraged my own continued public scholarly work. But I believe it has also —and I hope especially—represented the best of what community and solidarity can look like. In every aspect of our careers and work, including but not limited to public scholarship, community and solidarity are more important in 2025 than ever.

I'll reiterate that, in order for public scholarship to become truly possible for everyone who is interested, universities and the entire higher education system have to much more consistently and comprehensively count such work as part of the processes of tenure and promotion (and everywhere else that our work is appraised and valued). The most straightforward way that we can do so is modeled in the Massachusetts State College Association contract, under which my colleagues and I are currently evaluated: In place of a category like Publications or Research, our default category for Continuing Scholarship is "Contributions to the Content of the Discipline."⁵ Now more than ever, we can make such contributions in a wide and deep variety of ways. Starting with a category like "Contributions to the Content of the Discipline" would allow institutions to better assess that variety on its own terms, as presented by the faculty members themselves.

Finally, I'd really love to hear from folks in response, whether with questions or ideas about any of these individual forms and settings, overall interests or perspectives on public scholarship, or any other thoughts y'all want to share. My email is brailton@fitchburgstate.edu, and you can find me at any of the places I've highlighted here as well. Keep the faith, and let's all keep up the good work!

¹ Check it out at <https://americanstudier.blogspot.com/>!

² You can find all the *Saturday Evening Post* Considering History columns here: <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/category/considering-history/>.

³ All episodes are available to listen and download here: <https://americanstudier.podbean.com/>.

⁴ The newsletter is available here: <https://americanstudier.substack.com/>. And here's the Google Doc of all prior #ScholarSunday threads: [#ScholarSunday Thread of Threads - Google Docs](#).

⁵ To access the Massachusetts State College Association Collective bargaining agreements, see <https://www.mscaunion.org/cbas>. The term "Contributions to the

Content of the Discipline” may be found under the 2023-24 Day Contract in Appendix A-1: “Professional Activities and Responsibilities: Faculty (Including Professional Maritime Faculty).