



SACRED WRITES
PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP ON RELIGION

Activity: Getting Started

(by 7 August) Share a few links to some of your favorite public scholarship, on religion or otherwise. Which format(s) appeal to you and why?

(by 12 August) check out your podmates' examples and let them know what you thought. What stood out to you about their suggestions? Could you see yourself doing this kind of public scholarship?

Feel free to let us & the rest of the cohort know what you thought about these examples:

[@Sacred_Writes](#) #SmartInPublic

Megan

recent faves include [Sara Ahmed](#)'s interview on "Secret Feminist Agenda" because both Sara Ahmed and Hannah McGregor are amazing -- they've really shaped how I think about public scholarship and what is possible to do with your research outside traditional venues. (We'll be hearing from Hannah later in the fall!)

I also really like [this piece I did with Yohana Junker](#) for *Feminist Studies in Religion*, because it responded to another piece of really provocative public scholarship and because it started as a traditional op-ed/response to a newshook and became a collaborative reflection on what decolonizing the academy might look like.

I feel pretty comfortable in both written and audio formats. It's possible to cover more, I think, in a written piece; but many audiences that wouldn't read an op-ed on religion might listen to a quick interview about an interesting book. I like covering all the bases.

Suzanna

I've been a long-time admirer of the work done by the folks over at [Religion Dispatches](#) (mentioned in the timeline and in the podcast) and [Religion and Politics](#). At R&P, [Rachel Lindsey](#) recently published a great piece on Trump's photo-op with the Bible after tear-gassing peaceful protestors. In the essay, Rachel does an excellent job of distilling the argument of her first book and the research that she is currently conducting for her second book into a short, persuasive take on the power—and danger—of the photograph as a cultural artifact, particularly in the context of religion.

A recent piece that's slightly farther removed from the "translating your scholarship into a public facing article" model but that is nonetheless outstanding is [Kathryn Lofton's essay](#) on "The Profound Horror of the Mass Grave." In the essay, Katie combines history, current press coverage, and a kind of religious lament to discuss loss and memory in the time of COVID.

I prefer the written format to other kinds of public engagement, but another public scholarship medium I really enjoy are documentaries that interview scholars. That said, the thought of having to distill complex histories and ideas into a few sentences to comment on the content of a documentary sounds terrifying and fraught—a mildly paralyzing fear I hope to get a better grip on as a result of this training.

Abel

Some of my favorite forms of public scholarship have been podcasts. These feel really accessible, even more so than written pieces because we can listen to them on the go. Within the realm of the topics that I research and pay attention to, one of my favorite podcasts is [All My Relations](#), hosted by Dr. Adrienne Keane (Cherokee) and photographer Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip). Two of my favorite episodes include an interview with Dr. Kim TallBear (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) about [decolonizing sexuality](#) and with scholars and poets Joshua Whitehead (Ojibwe & Cree) and Billy-Ray Belcourt (Driftpile Cree Nation) about [Indigiqueer identities, politics, and literature](#).

TallBear is also part of the [Media Indigena](#) podcast, a weekly roundtable where Indigenous scholars discuss issues impacting Native communities, especially in what is now called Canada. One interesting episode examined '[Looting' in the context of Black Lives Matter protests](#). Another looked at the [history of the term 'Indian Country' mentioned in a Trump tweet](#).

A more recent example, and closer to my own research on California Indian communities was an online panel, [Toppling Mission Monuments and Mythologies Conference](#). The Zoom panel brought together California Indian scholars and allies to speak about the controversy regarding the removal monuments to Junipero Serra, the founding figure of the Catholic mission system along the California coast that devastated many tribal nations.

As much as I love the audio format, it seems like so much more work and technical skills are needed than creating a written piece. I see myself as more apt to contribute something written, but perhaps I will be convinced to step into podcasting through the process of this training.

Ericka

Marian Wright Edelman is the President Emeritus of the Children's Defense Fund and in her blog entitled "A Cruel Abandonment of the "Least of These," she writes about the marginalization of children in the US context. She uses biblical imagery and phrases such "Least of These" to call out abusive political policies and practices, especially the separation of children from their parents at the US border, emphasizing the taxing consequences on the children's health and identities.

<https://www.momsrising.org/blog/users/marian-wright-edelman>

Kenneth Ngwa is a contributing blogger for the Wabash Center. One of the pieces that inspires me most is entitled, "Positively Outraged with COVID: An o`pen letter to the coronavirus." He mixes scripture and poetry in the form of a letter to address the impact of covid and the hopes and desires of creating a more just and sustainable community post pandemic. It is powerful.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/04/positively-outraged-with-covid-an-o-pen-letter-to-the-coronavirus/>

Otis Moss III writes about the intersections between religion, race/ethnicity, and violence. He specifically hones in on prophetic resistance which takes place in the form of protests, lamentations, and "courageous conversations" about race. In addition, he reframes theological understandings of "sin" to include Black suffering and the transgression of constitutional authority as he calls persons to repentance and to ensure justice.

<https://sojo.net/articles/federal-troops-portland-protests-black-lives-matter>

Candice Benbow reflects on the relationship between Black women, the Church, church/religious teachings, religious performance and sex/sexuality. She researches the role of faith in women's religious and sexual expression and their spiritual, physical, and psychological health.

<https://candicebenbow.com/blog/cmbkevonstage>

I have included diverse formats. I like blogs as they afford more creativity as opposed to the often rigid expectations of "scholarship" in the Academy. I also appreciated Candice Benbow's conversational video with Kev on Stage because it was a dialogue that presented Kev and a wider audience to learn more and gain access to resources about Black women in Black church settings from a Black woman and to learn about the impact of the church/theological/ideological claims on Black women's identities. I appreciate Marian Wright Edelman's pieces because she has a strong background in politics, and has created the space through her organization, the Children's Defense Fund, for seminarians, community and church organizations to meet, research and embody advocacy. At the same time, she addresses these relevant issues on a blog that centers mothers. She is galvanizing persons from all aspects of life/community to act justly and to especially to ensure that the most vulnerable among us, children, and cared for, protected, and valued as sacred.

Sarah

Podcasts are Great

Season one of Avery Trufelman's podcast [Nice Try!](#) is a brilliantly researched and critical analysis of what happens when people try to design ideal worlds or utopias. It's from a spatial / architectural lens, but it covers a lot of ground - the first mass-planned suburbs like Levittown, "Germania" on Nazi Germany's spatial strategies, and even literary utopias like Herland. As you can imagine, there are lots of overlap with religion, ideology, and meaning-making. It also compels listeners to ask: How are ideologies and ideal worlds manifested in the spaces I walk through every day?

I've also loved the podcast [Food 4 Thot](#), an irreverent podcast originally produced by Grindr, in which four queer folx talk about politics, identity, and gossip. I'm not sure if these casters would describe their work as "public scholarship," but I've adored the way these poets / memoirists can pivot from talking about their last hook-up to explaining José Esteban Muñoz on a dime. If I could achieve this level of simultaneous mess and brilliance, I'd be thrilled.

Finally, super into Sexing History, and I'm not sure why it's not more popular. Peep our very own Lynne Gerber in [this episode](#).

Reading is Great Too

Often news/media trades on making phenomena seem "new." I like stories that reframe things to show how old they are, like Keisha Blain's recent article on ["The Black Women Who Paved the Way for This Moment"](#) in *The Atlantic*.

It's with trepidation that I gesture to the juicy [exposé](#) on the so-called Gospel of Jesus's Wife written by Ariel Sabar, also in *The Atlantic*. This might fall more securely into investigative journalism than public scholarship, but it was a super educational moment for me as I started my PhD back in 2015. It was a moment that explained a lot to readers about provenance, antiquities, how scholars study ancient texts - and it was a moment that could have been harnessed for good by Karen King, the subject (and, some might say, mark) of the controversy. I love this as a case study in how a reactive, nimble sense for public scholarship might have made use of something like a scandal - but didn't.

In the Flesh

I've been so impressed with two key initiatives.

[Soulforce](#) has revamped in the last few years to offer in-person and virtual education around queer theology that's a little less defensive and more joyful than its previous iterations. Its whole staff is incredible, but I'm thinking particularly of Alba Onofrio, who's taken up the public persona of Rev. Sex to talk with people in the US and Latin America about queer theology. They're also working on some great curricula.

Harvard Divinity is gathering some accolades from student endeavors to offer a free school in Cambridge, but I'm pretty sure the efforts were **all** the students'. Najha Zigbi-Johnson and Lesedi Graveline harnessed the resources they could grab / hack from Harvard and offered [Freedom School](#), a seminar on Black thought, culture, liberation, and creativity that turned into a zine after COVID hit. The seminar was free and open to all, and there was no professor.

Connie

I like podcasts a lot. The series [History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps](#) has more recently branched out into [Indian philosophy](#) and [African philosophy](#), which are really important additions to what is, generally speaking, a field dominated by a bunch of white European dudes.

In my own little corner of Buddhist studies, Wisdom Publications has really started to branch out in interesting ways. They still publish a lot of really important academic work on Buddhism and Buddhist-related topics, but their rebranded website, called [The Wisdom Experience](#), features a podcast, lectures, and videos. Some of what they offer is paywall-protected, which is kind of annoying, but I also get that they're a publishing company, and they have to pay the bills somehow. :/

This is mentioned in the Timeline on the SW website, but the [New Books Network](#) – along with all of their related religious studies channels – is really awesome. (Full disclosure: I've hosted a few episodes of New Books in Buddhist Studies.) For friends in this cohort, they're always looking for new hosts, and it's very easy to get started. Plus, you get to have fun conversations with interesting authors, and you can usually get free books out of the deal.

Ambre

_____ My favorite piece as of late is [The Magic of Black Girls' Play](#) by Kyra Gaunt. The way she's able to weave her research on how young Black girls develop a sense of community and identity through games that many overlook as insignificant with current discussions on the particular struggles that Black women face, COVID-19, and the exploitation of Black people's cultural output is just *chef's kiss*.

I also love love LOVE [this piece](#) Dr. K.T. Ewing wrote for the Association of Black Women's History's blog. In her reflections of her grandmother's collection, she teaches that "home archives deserve a similar scholarly reverence to that which we confer upon oral histories in Black communities." While, yes, speaking to historians, her writing is also accessible to wider audiences, particularly those who may or may not recognize the treasures that lie in their own homes.

While I highlight public writing here, I also love podcasts and community initiatives. I appreciate the ways that many outlets like [this one](#) and [this one](#) develop resources for K-12 education.

Shaily

Some of the most interesting pieces of public scholarship happening within my field are in [Eidolon](#). Lately, they've really been interrogating how scholarship of the ancient world is both a reflection of and re-entrenchment of white supremacy. To that end, I really loved "[Black Athena, White Power](#)" because it so effectively draws attention to issues of historical erasure, gatekeeping, and Classics' complicity in white

supremacy. How do you get *all the things* into one piece? I don't know, but Denise Eileen McCoskey surely does.

I'm also digging into the historical trajectories that underlie white evangelical persecution complexes. Historians of early Christianity have long known that Christian persecution at the hands of the Romans wasn't as widespread or as systematic as our ancient texts suggest, but despite this, persecution became central to the Christian identity. Candida Moss wrote a public-facing book all about this: [The Myth of Persecution](#) (not that I expect y'all to read the whole thing). In America, these old school persecution complexes get tied up with white supremacy and nationalism, and we're left with a brand of white evangelical Christianity that feels endangered (and ready to do something to protect itself). There are lots of scholars working on this, but I really loved a recent episode of *Becoming Less Racist* with Simran Jeet Singh featuring [Kelly J. Baker](#).

As to what forms appeal to me, I think I'm most comfortable with writing. Part of my reason for wanting to join the cohort is to get more comfortable with other forms of engagement. I like the informal, conversational tone of podcasts a lot. I also like the convenience of getting some free education while I'm grocery shopping, so I'd be interested in exploring podcasts and other forms of audio.

Lynne

These examples are a reflection of where my head is at these days and some of the recent(ish) pieces I've been thinking with as I think about how to make my work more public. And they reflect a personal tension I've been sitting with since the emergence of covid between my long-term interests in developing a multi-episode narrative podcast about religion and AIDS in the 80s and if/whether/how I want to bring my research on AIDS into conversation with the current pandemic.

In the multi-episode, narrative podcast vein, which also happens to be directly on topic for me, I've been thinking with [Plague](#), a podcast from *America* (the Catholic publisher) about AIDS and the Catholic church in the 80s. It's produced by a journalist, not an academic, but I'm interested in the questions raised and the structure of the piece. (And I learned some history I didn't know.)

In terms of bringing long-term research to the cotemporary moment, I'm interested in how Sabrina Strings is bringing her work on race and fatness, most fully articulated in her book [Fearing the Fat Body](#), to journalistic spaces. An op-ed she wrote for the *New York Times* that specifically speaks to Covid is [here](#) and podcast episode she did with NPR's Shortwave is [here](#).

A piece I just flat out love is Saidiya Hartman's [An Unnamed Girl, A Speculative History](#) that she wrote for the *New Yorker*. I love it for the writing and its articulation of the hopes and impossibilities of telling the histories of people whose lives can't be found in archives. And the methodological problems of what you can say with what kind of evidence.

And, lastly, a podcast conversation I've been finding myself interested in – even when I find it problematic – is happening at [Conspirituallity](#). It's about the infiltration of right-wing conspiracy ideas in more left-leaning wellness culture (yoga culture, alternative spiritualities). From what I can tell, it's produced by three white men who have deep roots in the wellness culture they criticize and are trying to talk about its vulnerability to conspiracy thinking, racism, and right-wing thought. Some of them seem to have some academic training in religion though they don't primarily identify that way, and some have had deeply problematic experiences in alternative spiritual communities which leads them to use "cult" language more easily than, say, I would. But I appreciate what they're trying to do and I'm listening.

And I'm now adding (late) a podcast I was just turned on to that I think is great and an interesting model for public scholarship. It's called [Crackdown](#) and it's by people who use drugs who are telling the story of the opiate crisis as war correspondents. It's produced by an editorial board that's made up of people who use drugs and are affiliated with activist groups around those issues. And they partner with researchers whose work they use to argue for better drug policy. It's an interesting example of researcher/activist collaboration and accountability. And it's also just really interesting.

Swati

I have eagerly followed the stuff coming out of UVA's [Race, Religion & Democracy Lab](#). In particular, I have enjoyed their podcast series "[Sacred and Profane](#)." The podcasts are all short, conversational (instead of interview- style) and often featuring multiple perspectives, and many give a sense of being in the field instead of the studio. I find them pitched just right-- not talking/ dumbing, but absolutely accessible.

My second example is a pedagogical project: [Archiving COVID19](#) at Georgetown. The archive was built over a semester by students in two of historian Ananya Chakravarti's courses. I find this an inspiring, responsive, and fun example of collaborative student work in our times, and of our times. It effectively merges skill-building with providing opportunities for self-reflection while acquiring immersive domain knowledge for students, and is also a good example of responsible community engagement.

I also follow (and have taught through) the work of journalist [Shoaib Daniyal](#) who writes of quotidian examples of intersection of lived religion with linguistic nationalisms and party politics in contemporary India. My favorite examples are [here](#) and [here](#).

Finally, I would make a pitch for my own fledgling initiative [#himalayanhistories](#) on Twitter! In seasons of 50 threads (M-F for 10 weeks), I do threads on archival finds from the Tibetan cultural region in the 20th century. I share finds from research on interconnected Himalayan histories, especially in Tibetan-speaking regions on the themes of customary itinerancy, monasticisms, citizenship claims, (sub-)nationalisms, cartographic anxiety, exile. Here is the [introductory post](#), and [a good example](#).