Public Scholarship in Literary Studies
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My first foray into public scholarship was motivated by brazen, shameless self-promotion. I had just published a book that seemed timely—*If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* (2016)—and I wanted to promote the book to a potentially wider audience beyond English professors and other academics. In the book, I argued that since the 1970s, the unexpected political emergence of the Christian Right had been the crucial context, though sometimes an invisible one, for religiously interested US fiction of the last half century. The argument involved reading some novels that were obviously responding to Christian fundamentalism and its conservative politics, like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, but it also involved rereading other texts that spoke to the resurgence in roundabout ways and by indirect address—novels like Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, and even Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. The book seemed timely when it was published in the spring of 2016 during the election: the Christian Right didn’t seem to be disappearing, as some prognosticators envisioned, and was slowly but resolutely coalescing around what seemed like an unlikely hero, Donald J. Trump.

My experience in trying to draw a wider audience’s attention to my scholarly (but, I hoped, accessible) monograph provides some lessons for what literature scholars’ roles can be when communicating with a broader reading public. These lessons include where to place material, how to
shape writing for a nonacademic audience, techniques for framing literary analysis in terms of a broader “so what?” set of questions, and a rationale for why this might be important for us. “Public scholarship” is not a new phenomenon—academics have long written newspaper and magazine articles and “popular” books, done exposition on the Internet, and given talks to public audiences. For those of us teaching at public institutions receiving tax dollars from different levels of government, I think it’s also a responsibility, part of our larger mandate, to communicate with the public and, as our granting agency in Canada puts it, effect “knowledge mobilization.” But even if it isn’t new, it’s worth reviewing the practice and sharing the methods and strategies with others who are interested in speaking to a larger audience. In what follows, I concentrate on public writing for a general audience in online publications, though I have put some of the lessons drawn from this experience into the public lectures and discussions I’ve done over the last few years. This public writing is scholarly because it is research based. Of course, journalists do research as well for the purpose of investigation and reporting. What distinguishes public scholarship to my mind is that it is often work based on years of research into one’s disciplinary field, most of which will not be communicated to the public. In this respect, think of public scholarship opportunities not as starting from scratch on a new research question but rather as shaping into a very small form an idea that you happen to know from your years of research experience.

Public scholarship is not just a matter of individual self-promotion. It can also be a matter of bringing hard-earned expertise to bear to counter widespread misunderstanding on the parts of the press and public. In our own era, a widespread religious illiteracy in society and in journalism manifests as incomprehension about how white evangelical Christians could support the irreligious pathological liar and serial adulterer Trump. Part of this incomprehension is due to the incorrect but simple assumption, even among the irreligious, that authentic and “real” Christianity couldn’t possibly be authoritarian, racist, or unprincipled. Literature specialists are especially poised to comprehend and explain the four-century history of Christian white supremacy in the United States. The authoritarian will to power, its frequently violent expression, its unwillingness to share power or brook dissent—we who have read Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs on slavery, or Richard Wright and James Baldwin on the church, or Mary
Rowlandson’s fantasy of God’s pedagogy, or read about the exile of Roger Williams, who contended that Puritan settlers needed to treat with Indigenous peoples—we know about the long reach and persistence of Christian white male supremacy. Responsible religious studies scholars can likewise contribute a critique of the popular but unearned wisdom that religion is naturally benevolent unless twisted by nonreligious outside forces. After four decades of white evangelical political resurgence, it has become clear that mainstream professional journalism—itself a profession under siege, which is part of the problem—lacks religious literacy in general. Journalists sometimes don’t understand what religion is or how to write about it and some bring suppositions with them like the one previously mentioned, what we might call the pretense theory of religion (Douglas, If God 1–2), wherein religious expression, especially about power, is imagined as being “really” about something else. In this sense, journalism in the age of the Christian Right requires a supplement of publicly engaged scholarship because of the widespread misunderstanding about religion that is only just beginning to get addressed, as we’ve seen by the plethora of why-are-white-evangelicals-supporting-godless-Trump articles over the last four years. Doubtless there are other widespread unearned assumptions in other fields. Public-facing scholarship has public value.

In terms of practical counsel, my first piece of advice is to get used to rejection notices and silence. If you think publishing academic articles and books at journals and presses involves lots of rejection notices, steel yourself. There will be lots of nos from editors to pitches and pieces but, more than this, oftentimes just nonresponses from online magazines and established outlets. For a while, I kept a spreadsheet so I could track which outlets said no to which piece of public scholarship I’d sent or pitched, but after a year and a half, it just got too long and I abandoned it. My favorite rejection story is that a deceased editor at The Times Literary Supplement rose from the dead—twice—to reject two of my pitches, one on the friendship between Marilynne Robinson and Barack Obama and another on David Foster Wallace’s depiction of evangelicals. (Obviously, someone at the paper was monitoring their late colleague’s email address, but it was fun to think that my pitches were so awful that they called forth a dismayed repudiation even from the afterlife.) Fortunately, the rejections (or silences) from online outlets happen faster than in academic publishing cycles, giving authors a chance to shop ideas or essays faster.
The Occasion and the Pitch

My first attempt at public scholarship, a four-thousand-word essay on the creationism-evolution debates that were the context for Carl Sagan’s composition of his science fiction classic *Contact*, was rejected by the online magazine *Religion Dispatches*. It was too long, its argument too detailed and complex—too reminiscent, in other words, of an academic journal article. But, intrigued by my take and the subject of my book, its editors proposed interviewing me about my book, using their “10Q” format of ten standard questions I answered. The resulting interview (“Untold”) was in some sense my first foray into public scholarship.

The Sagan piece took another year to place, for a reason that provides another object lesson for publishing public scholarship: editors and outlets often want to know what the occasion for the pitched article is. Editors ask this question from the potential audience’s point of view: when potential readers see the title of your piece on a homepage, or on social media, what will get the reader to click the link, read the piece, and hopefully share it with their networks? Why is the author talking about this idea, at this time? Journalists have to make pitches all the time. As figure 1 suggests, the *Conversation*—an excellent online publication tailored to academics trying to disseminate their research more broadly—in invites authors to think about a potential piece in terms of “timely, evidence-based analysis of what’s making the news” (https://theconversation.com/ca/pitches) (though other possibilities exist as well). I finally managed to get my Sagan piece published (“Contact”) at *The Conversation* by following this advice and tying the analysis to the twentieth anniversary of the film version of *Contact*. As you can see if you read the piece, the “occasion” in this instance—the twentieth anniversary of the film version of a novel—is pretty flimsy, since the bulk of the article is actually about the conflict between science and religion in the novel, not the film. The lesson here is: be creative about what makes something timely or relevant. Anniversaries of publications or events, birthdays of authors, an older treatment of a theme that is relevant today, a film or television adaptation, a local performance (Douglas, “Darwin’s”), and so on.

*The Conversation* knows what other newspaper editors and publishers know: readers often don’t finish the entire article, so the most important material is placed first, followed immediately by the most important evidence, details, or context. *The Conversation* knows this because it measures how far readers scroll down its pages and, hence, whether they get to the
end of the articles. This Sagan piece was drastically shorter and reorganized compared to the four-thousand-word essay I tried to shop to Religion Dispatches. It was now just fourteen hundred words long, with many fewer details and a slimmed argument. What was particularly difficult for me to learn as I worked with the editors at The Conversation for this piece is that its model for academic journalism is the newspaper article, not the academic journal article. An academic article often (1) frames a research question or problem, then (2) reviews previous scholarly treatments of the question, after which it (3) begins to provide detailed evidence leading to its (4) overall big idea and conclusion. But a newspaper article proceeds almost in the reverse way, beginning with the big idea or conclusion. This form of organizing one’s ideas in argumentative writing was not easy for me, with my academic training, to learn to do. Fortunately, the editors worked with me to learn the new format as well as remove jargon and dense prose (as Sarah Bond counsels [“Vox”]). The result is a trade-off: this public scholar-
ship on Sagan is simplified and shorter, but it’s been viewed over twenty-three thousand times and shared on Facebook over twenty-three hundred times. In addition, The Conversation publishes its articles in an open-access model that allows free reproduction with attribution, and my Sagan piece was also run on the Web sites (but not print versions) of five local and national newspapers. The Conversation is a good place to start if you’re thinking about pitching a piece of public scholarship (https://theconversation.com).

A third outlet I cultivated over time, Marginalia, which is a literature and religion “channel” of the Los Angeles Review of Books, has a slightly more academic tilt without the newspaper article organization of The Conversation. Marginalia prefers a sense of timeliness as well (though somewhat less), and so I had to think about the occasion for my article on the mutual admiration between Marilynne Robinson and Barack Obama, a kind of liberal Christian literary partnership we might think of in opposition to that of the Christian Right literary partnership of George W. Bush and Left Behind author Tim LaHaye. The occasion was relatively recent: the year before had witnessed the extraordinary literary event of a sitting president interviewing a living author, which had been published in a two-part New York Review of Books article in late 2015. I argued in the piece (“Literary”) that Obama’s and Robinson’s literary politics laid in their shared romanticizing of Christian abolitionism, which was a little strange given that Robinson’s most famous novel Gilead seems committed to forgetting Christian abolitionism’s antagonist, proslavery Christianity.

Marginalia later published a piece that brings me to another lesson for literary critics looking to publish public scholarship: don’t be afraid of popular, non-“serious” literature. I wrote a short essay on the way the bestselling evangelical novel The Shack had tried to rewrite the Biblical book of Job, with about as much success in explaining the problem of evil as the original Job (“Job”). Though The Shack piece might appear, and is sort of framed as, a movie review, the bulk of its “scholarship” content was actually an analysis of the complicated authorship of Job that the novel problematically revisited. Again, I used a film adaptation to finesse the question of the occasion for the piece. The Shack is a decidedly middlebrow evangelical bestseller but it has sold over twenty million copies worldwide, and it was made into a 2017 Hollywood movie featuring Sam Worthington and Octavia Spencer. Its influence, in other words, is far greater than the highbrow Christian-left writer of the present Marilynne Robinson, though not quite as great as the
fundamentalist *Left Behind* series. It is academically sound to examine popular literature if we are trying to create a more complete literary history of religiously interested literature in the present. This is a lesson my Medievalist and Early Modern colleagues have taught me: if we are trying to draw an accurate map of the territory, as it were, we must include popular genres, low art beside high art. Fortunately, our attention to the popular can give us more occasions to bring our academic expertise to bear on a cultural history of the present in the form of public scholarship.

The Strange Things You’ve Accidentally Learned Are Opportunities for Public Scholarship

My most successful piece of public scholarship came from a historically adjacent topic to my main expertise as a literary historian: a piece on the religious “origins” of fake news. Part of my research into the Christian Right’s presence in literature included investigating the wider history of twentieth-century fundamentalism in the United States and the way that fundamentalism had formed itself in reaction to two bodies of academic knowledge emerging from the nineteenth century: the science of biological evolution and the historical-critical method of Bible scholarship that explored the complex authorship, editing, transmission, and translation of the Bible. Fundamentalism rejects both these bodies of expert, academic knowledge, preferring instead an origin story of Adam and Eve in Eden and a notion of the Bible as a divinely inspired, indeed practically divinely authored, book that is without error or contradiction when properly understood. Building on these two constitutive moves, Christian fundamentalism in the United States created institutions of counter expertise to stand against these modern, secular accounts. Investigating the history and discourse of fundamentalism had given me—sort of accidentally and by the way—some insight into the larger frame of Christian Right epistemology in the United States (see figure 2).

Like many, I was stunned by the election in 2016 of an obvious con man and “bullshitter” (Frankfurt) as well as the role that “fake news” and “alternative facts” played in the post truth media environment where a foreign adversary was intervening, especially on social media, on behalf of one of the candidates and parties. I wrote a piece on the topic for *Religion Dispatches* called “The Religious Origins of Fake News and ‘Alternative Facts.’”
In it, I hypothesized that the observed asymmetry in the consumption of fake news during the election—there seemed to be more of it targeted for, and shared by, political conservatives than liberals—could be traced back to the Christian Right’s hostility to academic expertise and professional journalism. For decades, I contended, conservative white Christians had nurtured a skepticism toward these mainstream institutions that established and circulated expert knowledge. More, they had built a network of institutions of counter expertise: Bible colleges and universities, Christian publishers and bookstores, newspapers and magazines, radio and then television ministries, museums and campus clubs together formed a set of institutions that resisted elite, secular, expert knowledge. Religious conservatives had their own alternative information ecosystem that was, with its sister organizations in Republican propaganda organs such as Fox News, Breitbart, and Infowars, actively hostile to mainstream knowledge and which provided what the new president’s advisor eventually called “alternative facts” (https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/22/politics/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts/index.html). We should not have been surprised that the Christian Right’s cognitive training of its members had resulted in an appetite for outrageous stories about the villainy (indeed, sometimes actual Satanism) of Hillary Clinton and the Democrats (Lopez, “Pizzagate”).

The article in Religion Dispatches struck a nerve and was timely, and, importantly, it also led to other professional opportunities. It was picked up
by some ex-evangelical thinkers and writers on social media, who recognized the closed epistemological bubble I was describing as that which they had escaped from, and they shared it with their much larger networks. Eventually, the article received seventeen thousand Facebook shares and hundreds or maybe thousands of tweets/retweets (its counters have since been reset). It was my fifteen minutes of Internet fame. Hofstra University invited me to speak on the topic during their annual Day of Dialogue in October 2017. Meanwhile, the Cambridge Institute on Religion & International Studies (CIRIS), which runs a policy network for European and North American diplomats on the subject of religion and international affairs, had recently polled its members for what their next topic for a research backgrounder should be. The diplomats responded that the role of fake news and religion was very much on everyone’s minds. When the director of CIRIS reached out to a US academic center dedicated to studying media and religion for suggestions, its director in turn recommended my piece. CIRIS subsequently commissioned me to produce a background paper for its diplomatic network on the role that religion and fake news played in the 2016 US election but expanded to include what was also happening in several 2017 European elections. I subsequently discussed the already distributed background paper to a group of Western diplomats gathered at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris (though unfortunately only over Skype). This topic, um, stretched my area of expertise a significant distance from contemporary US fiction.

Don’t Leave History to the Historians

I tell this story because it has a few lessons for those interested in public scholarship. First, public scholarship is not only, or primarily, about altruism and serving the public good. It is also, to go back to my opening line, about “brazen, shameless self-promotion.” It can be all these things at once but it’s best to recognize the self-promotion part. The second lesson here is that we literature scholars should not leave history to the historians. We all (probably) have periods of expertise, and those periods likely entail not just an extensive knowledge of the literary history of the period but also cultural history and its forms of mediation. I learned a lot about the theological, political, and social history of US fundamentalism, emergent since the late nineteenth century, when I was researching the origins of the Christian
Right so I could better understand the literary response to it. I had thus sort of accidentally achieved a kind of expertise about Christian Right history and epistemology, which went beyond (some versions of) strict literary criticism and attention to literary texts and language. (It also helped that I had myself once been a liberal Canadian version of the conservative American white evangelicals I was now studying and had taught at Furman University, a fairly conservative college in South Carolina whose student population was disproportionately white and evangelical.) Many of us know some cultural history, and we should not be afraid to use it for the purpose of public scholarship.

The third lesson from this experience of “fake news and religion” is the importance of promoting your own work on social media. For me, this means Twitter and Facebook. This should be done in conjunction with the outlet itself—you should retweet their tweet about your article, and you should get them to retweet your tweet about your article (obviously not at the same time, or even the same day). If you have published a book that is linked to the topic you’ve just published a piece of public scholarship on, ask your publisher to share your public scholarship on their social-media platforms. The same goes for your institution’s media office. Does your department, faculty, and college use social media? Your colleagues? Ask them to share your work. Remember. Brazen. Self. Promotion. I especially direct this advice to younger scholars, women scholars, and minority scholars. Probably not enough people, or no one, is looking out for you. (For one instructive tale of a minority scholar’s challenge in balancing public scholarship and community-engaged activist pedagogy in the years leading to her tenure review, see Few). As a white male, I’ve been socially trained to promote myself. (Over-)confidence is our thing; we invented the Dunning–Kruger effect. If you are a scholar and a woman and/or person of color, unlearn, to the extent that you can, lessons of silence, deference, humility, imposter syndrome. You belong, and your voice and expertise need to be heard. Some great women/minority public scholars whose work I follow closely on Twitter include Mary Dudziak, Jill Lepore, Nyasha Junior, Sarah E. Bond, Moudhy Al-Rashid, Jill Hicks-Keeton, Julie Ingersoll, Elaine Pagels, Andrea Jain, and Nathalie Maréchal. Promote yourself and ask others to do so too. There will be times when institutional offices (and colleagues) politely decline, and that’s fine. My public scholarship has an unavoidable political dimension to it that makes some institutions and people skittish; I respect their boundaries and do not unduly press them to
help publicize my public scholarship. Your institution’s community engagement, continuing education, and media-relations offices can also help you leverage your public and academic scholarship into community-oriented speaking engagements for local, nonacademic audiences—that is also public scholarship. This is their job, but as a public humanist, you’re not as sexy as a climate scientist, so you have to ask them.

The fourth lesson I drew from this episode comes from the fact that the expanded report commissioned by CIRIS for its network of Western diplomats eventually became solicited by and then published in an academic journal, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* (“Religion”). What had started as “public” scholarship had become regular academic scholarship. I think the lesson here is that the line between these modes is fuzzy, and working on writing for one audience can become writing for the other audience and vice versa.

This same lesson came home to me as I was trying, ultimately unsuccessfully, to write a piece for wider public consumption on David Foster Wallace’s depiction of evangelicals in his quite amazing short story “Good People.” In the story, which later became part of his unfinished novel *The Pale King*, a young white evangelical couple tries to figure out what to do about their unwanted pregnancy. In this rich depiction of psychological exploitation and self-deception, the focalizer eventually seems to abandon his manipulation of his girlfriend, whom he has sought to convince that God has seemingly blessed their decision to terminate the pregnancy. What was almost subversive about this sympathetic portrait of evangelicalism appearing in the liberal *New Yorker* in 2007, I argued, is that its readers would have had in mind a recent and spectacular example of evangelical (self-)deception and manipulation: the way the born-again George W. Bush had sold the Iraq War to the US public on the pretense of weapons of mass destruction and ties between Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein.

But explaining this larger context could not be ultimately reduced to the seven hundred- to two thousand-word range that often characterizes pieces of public scholarship. The resulting piece was eventually published in a peer-reviewed journal, but I convinced the journal, as a kind of “advertisement” for the special issue’s topic of postsecularism, to make the article open access as its blog (“David”). While it is still accessibly written, mostly, it is now framed through an academic argument that the literary critical lens of thinking about recent religiously interested literature as postsecular is problematic because the latter term almost entirely dismisses what ended
up being the major religious development of the last half century: the rise to political and social power of white evangelicals. In any case, this is an example of a piece of writing that began as an attempt at public scholarship that could not properly be developed as such and so changed into a more traditional (although still shorter) academic article.

You Have to Tell a Story

My public scholarship thus has fallen naturally into two categories: the Christian Right and literature and Christian Right epistemology. Both offer further lessons about how we might do literature-connected public scholarship. One problem we face is writing for a wide audience who may not know the literary text(s) that is the topic or occasion for the piece. How do we draw in readers unfamiliar with the text since we, like the editors to whom we’re pitching the piece, want them to read the piece as well? I’ve found it useful to give a vigorous two- or three-paragraph plot summary of the novel in question, after an introduction that opens up the piece’s key idea. In my piece on the way Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* was not really a good “map” of the coming Christian fascism in the Trump era, it was necessary to explain in a little bit of detail the strange plot of *Plot* (“You’ve”). As a uchronia, or alternate history, Roth’s novel imagines that the fascist sympathizer Charles Lindbergh runs against president Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 and wins. History changes course: Pearl Harbor doesn’t occur; the Lindbergh administration reaches a diplomatic understanding with the Axis powers; and a renewed anti-Semitism begins to sweep the United States.

The plot synopsis became important not just because I wanted to draw in readers unfamiliar with the novel, but because the plotline was the location for a couple of authorial blind spots that were really the point of my essay. The threat of a Christian liberal fascism, as Roth imagines it in the novel, emerges as a set of government programs aimed at making America’s Jews into better Americans, more assimilated to national life. But if the novel was about the rising evangelical Christian tide during the George W. Bush administration (as many reviewers thought), it gravely misunderstood the way evangelical expectations toward Jews are not motivated by the goal of making them more assimilated into the United States. Rather, it is to make Jews into Christians, to convert them—as the premillennial dis-
Pensationalism of evangelical theology holds will continue apace during the apocalyptic end-times, as depicted in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’s *Left Behind* series.

Plot synopsis is also one way of accomplishing what I think is a crucial component of public scholarship and academic journalism: you have to tell a story. In particular, I think it is important to offer a narrative and to construct the occasion for the piece around an “event.” What happened or is happening? And why is it relevant, interesting, and important? In a pair of public-scholarship pieces on Hulu’s adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* for *Religion Dispatches*, for example, I did this on two levels. First was the level of plot synopsis: while many more people were probably engaged in the first season of Hulu’s adaptation than were thinking about or reading *The Plot Against America* in 2017, I still wanted to enjoin readers who may not have read or seen the series. The story on this level is familiar to many but still enjoyable (in a manner of speaking) when retold: in a near-future United States struggling with an infertility epidemic, Christian theocrats mount a coup and establish a Christian dystopia wherein fertile women without political connections are forced to serve as “handmaids” for the supposedly infertile wives of the leaders, bearing children in their place. This plot can be summarized, but I am also talking about supplying a story on another level: what was *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a cultural “event,” a writerly intervention into the religious and political scenes when the novel was published in 1985, and when the adaptation emerged in 2017?

To describe *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a cultural event is to tell the story of Atwood’s contribution to the debates about women’s reproductive rights that were a central part of the 1980s and, in particular, the growing power of the Christian Right’s opposition to *Roe v. Wade*, such that it ended up in part “sorting” Republicans and Democrats into prolife and prochoice parties—and even, eventually, into making one party more religious and the other less. To tell this story is to provide the legal, political, and religious back history to the Christian prolife movement—another instance of not leaving history to the historians.

That story is generally recognized about Atwood’s novel and its adaptation. What is less well known—and this is thus a third way of narrating the “event” of *The Handmaid’s Tale*—is that Atwood was paying careful attention to not just the gender politics of the Christian Right but its racial history as well. Atwood’s Gilead is not just a theocratic dystopia for many of its captive women—it is also a white Christian ethnostate whose racial justifi-
cation reaches back to the theology and practice of Christian segregationism and Christian slavery before that. This is why the novel is saturated by African American enslavement narrative conventions, important intertexts for understanding the way that Gilead has modeled its practice of handmaid slavery on the African American slavery of the antebellum period. Atwood had done her homework, and the novel’s 1985 critique of the contemporaneous Christian Right is that its theological and church-tradition ancestors were white evangelicals who believed in the God-given justification of white supremacy in the form of slavery before 1865 and Jim Crow segregation after that (see figure 3).

But my piece on *The Handmaid’s Tale*, while rehearsing these stories, was really organized around narrating the event of the consequential change that Hulu’s adaptation made to its source material in removing this aspect of the racial ethnostate that was part of Atwood’s previous critique. For the admirable purpose of diversifying the cast, the producers made the narrator’s best friend and husband African American characters. Otherwise, they were faced with building a television show around an all-white cast; it
would have been like a dystopian *Friends*. But making this change, with Atwood’s support, for the good reason of diversity had the consequence of eliminating the racial dimension of Atwood’s critique of the Christian Right. I argued in the piece (“Why Hulu’s”) that the disappearance of this critique of the Christian Right’s white supremacy was particularly disappointing in the Trump era, during which we have seen a reinvigoration of the white resentment and racism that some observers had imagined were the products of a bygone era. To narrate the event in this way is to explain the cultural consequence of an emergent artwork, which also answers an editor’s key question about the timeliness of and occasion for a piece of public scholarship.

A companion piece on Hulu’s adaptation had fewer narrative levels, beyond a similar short reiteration of a plot summary. The story I told took us back to the novel, and the event might be said to be an authorial blindness in imagining the Christian Right’s rise to power as coming through violent revolution rather than a wholesale symbolic investment into the mythic apparatus of the United States. What I meant by that is that the Christian Right has generally sought to embrace and reimagine American identity: its history, institutions, and discourse. For all the brilliance of Atwood’s novel, I argued that it missed the way the Christian Right has adopted and transformed the Republican Party and the United States. The Christian Right is authoritarian but repentance, return, and reformation mark its discourse—not revolution, for the most part—even if not all citizens are willing (“Why America’s Handmaid’s Tale,” 2017). This piece thus narrates two events: the Christian Right’s deliberate mobilization within US institutions in the twentieth century and the way Atwood’s otherwise-incisive critique of this movement nonetheless misapprehended its methods and strategy. I am no longer confident in this argument in 2021, following years of conservative white Christian authoritarian voter suppression and antidemocratic agitation culminating in the failed January 6th insurrection.

**When Public and Academic Scholarship Overlap**

Narrating an event like an authorial blind spot, or an adaptation, or reviewers’ misunderstanding a work—elements that make a piece of public scholarship timely—is likewise a way of solving what I suspect may be an obsta-
article to some academics considering public scholarship: the interface between one’s academic, peer-reviewed publications and one’s outward-facing academic journalism. Since there is ideally an overlap in content between these two areas, how does one handle the question of copyright and reprinting? How should we work with material that we’ve already published in an academic vein, and how do we publish in an academic outlet content we’ve already published in a more popular venue? Outlets often do not want to “reprint” a section of an already published academic book or article (except if you have a lot more fame than I do). Similarly, presses and journals may shy away from wanting to publish a peer-reviewed piece that expands a kernel that has appeared online (see figure 4).

The example of Kevin Kruse might help answer this question. A historian, Kruse works on the religious right in the United States and rose to some prominence when he published One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America. This book itself, while not quite public scholarship—it’s got extensive footnotes and an index, etc.—is outward-facing and accessibly written for a larger audience. The book seemed to sell extremely well for an academic book (published by Basic Books), and in the years since its 2015 publication, Kruse has published public scholarship in online and print magazines and has a large (for an
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academic) social-media presence (four hundred and seventy thousand followers on Twitter, about four hundred and sixty-nine thousand more than me). Indeed, social media is also a particular site where Kruse’s public scholarship takes place, in the form of Twitter threads on US religious and racial history. He has recently tangled several times, in long Twitter threads (@KevinMKruse) with conservative propagandist and dissembler Dinesh D’Souza who promotes the fake history that Republicans have been the (recent) party of civil rights. The issue for us, though, is the question of the overlap in subject and details between his published book and his online writing: if they aren’t exact reprints, how are they not de facto excerpts (“Most”; “How”)?

I think the answer here is that historical facts and the interpretation of them can’t really be copyrighted, and while each piece of public scholarship may run over some of the same details and echo previous interpretations, it is also occasioned by different things and targeted toward different audiences. The same holds true with public scholarship emerging from literary criticism. The details of a piece of literature are not copyrighted except in the literature itself and can be paraphrased or quoted repeatedly in different contexts, for different occasions and audiences. For example, in my piece on the theologically difficult subject matter of Cormac McCarthy’s famous Blood Meridian, I used the (again somewhat flimsy) occasion of the often-rumored-but-never-commencing film adaptation of the novel. The immediate “event” here was the difficulty in casting its vastly evil central antagonist Judge Holden for a film adaptation. But the more abstract “event” was how theology has struggled unsuccessfully to grapple with the problem of evil—both in terms of evolution but also in terms of a larger, almost one thousand-year set of theological developments among ancient Jews and Christians struggling to understand why the world could seem to be going wrong if it was governed by a single benevolent God. The piece thus told the story of the development of Jewish, and then Christian, apocalypticism in the ancient world—a hugely consequential theological development that continues to animate the moral dualism of the Christian Right—and then the even stranger, upside-down world of ancient gnosticism, which came to the not unreasonable conclusion that God might not be so good after all. This is a huge story that can only be briefly summarized in a piece of public scholarship. My piece in The Conversation (see figure 5) argued that it was actually these very strange and disturbing theological trends that ultimately would make the novel uncastable and probably unfilmable (“Unfilmable”).
This take echoed some of the details and argument in my book *If God Meant to Interfere*. But, analogous to Kruse’s public work, it discussed established historical developments—twentieth-century theology grappling with evolution, ancient theology grappling with a world gone wrong—that are not copyrightable. In addition, it reframed these questions as they pertain to the novel by the occasion of the lack of progress on its film adaptation. Readers of Kruse’s book and public scholarship will find significant overlap of historical facts and ideas—the latter in a much less detailed way, without an academic apparatus. I think of my sometimes-overlapping work in the same way. We’re not reprinting (our own) copyrighted material, though we are running over some of the same ground in new contexts and occasions for different audiences. A similar situation held for my piece responding to Kurt Andersen’s excerpt in the *Atlantic* from his book *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire—A 500-Year History*, where he attributed America’s current post-truth madness to the influence of new age hippies and academic postmodernism. Responding in *Religion Dispatches*, I argued that there was little evidence of conservative thought leaders ever reading, let alone adopting, academic postmodernism, but there was a lot of evidence that the Christian Right’s particular epistemology accounted for much of the hostility to the “reality-based community” that Andersen was describing (“How”). (Andersen later responded to me on *Twitter* that *The
Atlantic excerpt was actually the exception in the book that paid much more attention to religious influences [@KBAndersen].) This piece rehearsed some of the historical facts and ideas from my book, now repurposed for the occasion of a critical review of Andersen’s think piece, but it did not reprint copyrighted material. In the one instance in which I repeated a specific idea—that we actually did witness in the twentieth century the development of a “Christian postmodernism”—I duly gave attribution to the book itself.

Keeping this distinction between academic publication and public scholarship in mind, the latter can be used to publicize the former, especially in tandem with a social-media presence. For example, I published a long and detailed article in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* arguing that in the evangelical bestseller *The Shack*, its author, William Paul Young, had inadvertently rediscovered the ancient Israelite polytheism of three thousand years ago for the simple reason that justifying the gods’ ways to humans is an easier task than justifying God’s ways to humans. Timed for its release, I wrote a companion article for the *Conversation* that tried to distill the argument of the seventeen-thousand-word academic article into a one-thousand-word public scholarship publicity piece for it—he same general argument in much less detail for different audiences (“Popular”). The journal and its editor supported this additional publicity, making the article open access for a time. I engineered a similar arrangement when I wrote a public-facing piece about a special issue of *Christianity & Literature* I had guest edited on “Literature of/about the Christian Right” (“Fundamentalist”) and then used social media to highlight the special issue, with a brief synopsis of each contributor article (Douglas, “In”).

These examples bring me to a final point about literary studies as public scholarship: the advantage of online publications and social media for public scholarship is that they allow extensive use of images, a luxury not often available for academic publications on literary studies. So, my *Conversation* piece on ancient Israelite polytheism in *The Shack* allowed for the incorporation of several striking images of statues of ancient Near East deities. I publicized the *Conversation* article in turn with a *Twitter* thread that featured even more images (Douglas, “I wrote”). This thread was a thread-of-threads because I had seeded, the month before, a series of threads on Canaanite mythology. So, in my thread-of-threads, I was able to point back to the Canaanite stories found on the clay tablets discovered at the lost city of Ugarit: the unlucky human heroes Kirta and Aqhat, and the storm god
Baal’s victorious struggle over Sea, only to be defeated by Death.\(^3\) I would argue that these tweet threads are instances of using social media to do public literary studies: not just in pointing to *The Conversation* article, which is also a form of literary studies, but the tweets themselves telling stories, using images, making comparisons for the wider public.

**On Not Getting Paid: The Economics of Public Scholarship**

As a way of concluding, I’d like to offer a final thought on another issue linked to questions of economics, copyright, and authorship. Namely, that when tenured scholars do public scholarship and academic journalism, we may be doing work that freelancers need and need to get paid for. If one is (as I am) a tenure-track, reasonably well-paid academic laborer without the precarity of underemployed/sessional/adjunct status, we may be doing for free the job that other professionals need to get paid for. (I’ve never been paid for any public scholarship I’ve done and do not expect to be, though I did get reimbursed when CIRIS commissioned me to produce the report for its diplomatic network.) I discussed this question with one freelance journalist, and we agreed that at least one answer to this question is an outlet like *The Conversation*, which is organized for academics trying to broaden their audience, which never pays its contributors, and which is never compensated by other outlets that reprint its content. I think, therefore, that my two pieces appearing there on the religious implications of the film adaptations of *Contact* and *Blood Meridian* are unlikely to have taken away compensated labor from an underpaid freelance journalist. Conversely, my friend Chrissy Stroop (https://cstroop.com/), an underemployed academic specializing in Russian history, gender, and evangelical politics, is in a different situation—being paid by several outlets for what I would call public scholarship and who may be transitioning to an alternative-academic career of academic journalism, public speaking, and advocacy.

Chrissy has become a very important voice in public scholarship on evangelicalism, but she has been pushed to do so by the profound crisis in our profession of the adjunctification of academic labor. Perhaps if more tenure-track scholars engaged in public-facing work, it could be part of a more robust defense of the need for tenure-track humanists instead of the economically exploitative sessional labor pool. Conversely, public scholar-
ship may be an activity that younger scholars just finishing or who have finished their dissertation should not concentrate on: public scholarship cannot replace the value of academic scholarship during a job search. There is good counter pressure at the moment in favor of counting this kind of work toward tenure (see, for instance, Ellison and Eatman’s important report Scholarship in Public), but institutions are conservative, and one can’t currently count on enlightened policies. While passing through editorial processes, sometimes quite rigorous ones, online public scholarship is not peer reviewed. My advice for younger scholars would be that if an opportunity arises that will not take too much time and energy away from an academic publication, take it. It is also easier to do public scholarship—especially of a political kind, as mine is—from the safety of tenure.

My second answer to this question of economics is that public scholars bring to the table a kind of deep context that is unusual for mainstream and freelance journalists. This deep context comes from our disciplinary expertise and is the reason that, while we academics can often only speak with authority about a fairly narrow range of things, we are not starting from scratch when we write public scholarship. Having spent years on a few subjects, we know them deeply in a way most journalists don’t have time to develop. We can also hear the ways our subjects resonate with current events and know the old answers to what can seem like strange and new paradoxes. For example, noticing that public discourse seemed to be full of examples of commentators trying to call out the hypocrisy of Christian Right and Republican leaders for purporting to have certain values one year and then abandoning them when convenient, I wrote a piece for Religion Dispatches explaining that the reason the critique of hypocrisy no longer worked is that it had never worked. The target of hypocrisy critique was not the audience for hypocrisy critique (“Why Has”). It hadn’t been for the master critic of hypocrisy, Jesus, and nor had it been for what might be considered the more proximate context for our questions of Christian Right bad faith, which is the history of Christian slavery, its antecedent. Indeed, one of the most powerful literary critiques of Christian hypocrisy in the American scene had been Frederick Douglass’s indictment of Christian enslavers in his Narrative of the Life of a Slave. His critique of the hypocrisy of enslavers, I pointed out, would never have convinced any of his ethical targets—but it was probably not meant for them. I would suggest that my strategy of invoking this famous literary charge of hypocrisy—Douglass on Christian slavery—in an analysis of the bad faith of the contemporary Christian
Right, is an unusual piece of context and a rare lens that is unlikely to have cost the livelihood of independent, freelance journalists. (There would certainly be exceptions to this rule.)

I brought a similarly unusual context to bear on the question “Can Christians Lie?,” a piece occasioned by the striking ability of White House spokesperson and evangelical Christian Sarah Huckabee Sanders to dissemble (“Can”). The frame of intention and sincerity was too simple to really capture the challenge posed to our institutions by the deceptions and bad faith of Sanders and the Christian Right she comes from, I argued. The deeper function of Christian Right epistemology reaches back to questions not just of fundamentalist Bible reading practices like “harmonization” but also the conservative white evangelical hostility to mainstream expertise that has been developing for over a century. This wider framing of the question of deception in terms of the epistemic crisis that characterizes US religious conservatism today, while not unique, is an unusual historical contextualization of the way in which the Trump administration lied about its policy of separating children from their refugee parents at the border. Performing this kind of analysis, I think, probably does not take away the opportunity for freelancers to earn wages for work too often. If my public scholarship “beat” is the Christian Right, it will be rare to find a journalist who duplicates my two angles of literature and epistemology. Such as it is, it’s this idiosyncratic mix that I can bring to the table. You probably have a similarly rare mix of interests and expertise. What is it?

Public scholarship won’t save literary studies or humanities and solve their various crises. But it can be part of a broader move to demonstrate the value of the humanities to a wider public, a way of gaining trust but also responding to our mandates as publicly supported institutions of learning. Through civic engagement and communication, public scholarship has a role to play in strengthening democracy and promoting the public good, as Nicholas Behm, Sherry Rankins-Robertson, and Duane Roen argue (“Case”). Public scholarship can encourage wider audiences to consider themselves as stakeholders of what we humanists do. One audience member in a STEM-related profession came up to me after one public lecture and expressed surprise at my use of the word research to describe my investigation into how literature was responding to the age of the Christian Right. If the public is not used to thinking of literary studies and literary history as a kind of research activity—let alone a useful one that illuminates the deepest questions of who we are and how we should live—public schol-
arship can help advance our discipline’s visibility and reputation. This is no less true for colleagues in other fields across our campuses who may believe that we “just read books” but learn otherwise when they stumble upon our public scholarship, as they may be more likely to do than come across our publications aimed at a disciplinary academic audience.

Notes

1. Although “academic journalism” has no greater a fixed meaning than “public scholarship,” perhaps the former connotes even more the aspects of reporting, narrative storytelling, and timeliness.


4. That said, their article is a symptom of the polite academic neutrality that condemns political obstructionism and cynical “political theater” but is unwilling to name the fundamental asymmetry of the situation, marked in particular by the Christian Right-controlled Republican Party’s intransigence and the conservative epistemic crisis (Roberts, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/11/2/16588964/america-epistemic-crisis). There is a partisan reason that academics are unable “to make their research on critical topics, such as climate change and evolution, understandable to lay audiences”—one that goes to the heart of the political rise of the Christian Right. As the bipartisan team of Mann and Ornstein (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lets-just-say-it-the-republicans-are-the-problem/2012/04/27/gIQAxCVUlT_story.html) explained,

However awkward it may be for the traditional press and nonpartisan analysts to acknowledge, the Republican Party has become an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition. When one party moves this far from the center of American politics, it is extremely difficult to enact policies responsive to the country’s most pressing challenges.
If public scholarship is to complement professional journalism’s mission to prevent democracy from dying in darkness, it must be able to name this aspect of the problem (https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-washington-posts-new-slogan-turns-out-to-be-an-old-saying/2017/02/23/cb199cda-fa02-11e6-be05-1a3817ac21a5_story.html).

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