

Aca-Media, Episode 51: “A Culture of Access”
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The following is an “intelligent verbatim” transcript of the episode. Please alert us to any errors by emailing info@aca-media.org.

[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

[music]

Christine: Welcome to *Aca-Media*. That’s it. Welcome to *Aca-Media*.

Michael: That’s it. Welcome.

Christine: Here we are, Chris Becker.

Michael: Kackman. We can try that again.

Christine: Welcome to *Aca-Media*.

Michael: Brought to you by –

Christine: The *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, which is part of the society for – oh, see, that’s confusing. That’s what’s messing me up. It’s the “for” in one and the “of.”

Michael: Prepositions, man, they’ll screw you up.

Christine: They will, and they’re such tiny words.

Michael: They’re so small, and –

Christine: It’s like tripping on a pebble.

Michael: Maybe even a sticker that’s a picture of a pebble.

Christine: Oh wow. All right. This is not a pebble. This would be – all right.

Michael: Here we go. It must be October.

Christine: Yes, here we are, a little bit giddy. This is an afternoon, mid-week, week eight of the semester. And we’re just starting to lose it a little bit. I wasn’t sure I should bring this up, because this might make people mad, but we are on the verge of our fall break, and I know not everybody or maybe many people –

Michael: I can feel the mads.

Christine: – get a fall break. So we get next week off, which of course is never off in our lives. Like I was just telling Michael, I've got an entire book manuscript to read that I've been putting off. So there will be work, but the idea of not having to show up a certain times and certain places – it helps. And we clearly mentally need it, so sorry to all of you who do not get such a luxury. It's an incredible –

Michael: Which is 95 percent of the people here.

Christine: Yes. You know, there is spring break. Everybody gets spring break. Why does not everybody get fall break? It's a no-brainer. It's not like you're less worn out in the fall.

Michael: It's true.

Christine: So let's start a movement. Let's start a petition.

Michael: We can come back and then have a conversation about how we're teaching on things like Labor Day.

Christine: Right, exactly, and Martin Luther King Day, although now we get a half-day. We get lunch hour off. Okay.

Michael: All right, moving on –

Christine: Moving on, back to work –

Michael: We've got some stuff in this episode.

Christine: We do, some special stuff, yes. So we have a guest interviewer, Elizabeth Elcessor is interviewing Margaret Price here about experience of disabled faculty in academic careers, a really important interview, I think.

Michael: Yes.

Christine: And then I have an interview. This is left over from summer so you'll hear – no.

Michael: Saved.

Christine: Saved, right, no leftovers. Everything here is fresh.

Michael: That's right.

Christine: But I spoke with Catherine Grant about - this is the five-year anniversary, five-ish, of the launch of *[in]Transition*, the journal for videographic work; and we interviewed her and a few others five years ago. So we revisit that and see –

Michael: Yes, it's nice to come back to it.

Christine: Yes, see how things are going five years later. All right, so let's, without further ado –

Michael: We're going to turn things over to Liz Ellcessor.

Christine: Yes, and just real quick, bios of the folks you're going to hear: The interviewer is Elizabeth Ellcessor. She is assistant professor and director of graduate studies in the Department of media studies at the University of Virginia, and she conducts research on access to digital media technologies and cultures, particularly with respect to disability and bodily difference. So she's the author of a book called *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation*, from 2016, NYU, and co-editor along with our very own Bill Kirkpatrick of *Disability Media Studies* from NYU in 2017. And her current work explores how digital technologies are changing the conditions of access and civic engagement for emergency media services such as 911.

So she is interviewing here Margaret Price, who is associate professor in the Department of English and director of the Disability Studies Program at Ohio State University. Her first book is titled *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* from University of Michigan Press. And she's at work on what you'll hear about in this interview, a mixed-methods investigation called "The Disabled Faculty Study." It combines survey and interview data to uncover more about the experiences of disabled faculty in higher education. She's also at work on a book titled *Crip Spacetime*, which reports findings from that study and proposes a new way of thinking about access in higher education.

We have a hall of famer here. In August 2017 she was inducted into the Susan M. Daniels Disability Mentoring Hall of Fame.

Michael: All right. Let's give it a listen.

[music]

Elizabeth: Hello, and today I'm here with Margaret Price. Margaret Price is an associate professor of English and the director of Disability Studies Program at the Ohio State University. She's the author of *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. Recently Margaret has been conducting a multiyear study known as "The Disabled Faculty Study" along with Stephanie Kerschbaum of the University of Delaware and Mark Salzer and Amber O'Shea of the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion. This project

combines survey and interview data to learn more about the experiences of disabled faculty in higher education. Welcome and hello, Margaret.

Margaret: Hello, thanks so much for having me.

Elizabeth: Yes. Well, we were hoping to talk to you today to get a lay of the land about something that many of us don't know much about, which are the experiences of disabled faculty in academic careers. So could you maybe start off by telling us a little bit about what prompted the disabled faculty study and how it was conducted?

Margaret: Absolutely. The disabled faculty study grew out of my first book project, which is titled *Mad at School* and looks at the intersections between mental disabilities and academic life. When I set out to write about mental disabilities, I was mostly thinking about mental illness, but I discovered as I went along that there's a whole group of disabilities that are imagined to be mental. These could include cognitive disabilities, ADHD, autism, physical conditions that affect your ability to think clearly or quickly or just think the way you usually do.

So I started grouping everything together under this concept of mental disability, and I noticed a lot of things about the ways that business as usual in academia isn't just hard for people with mental disabilities. Academia actually seems to be designed against folks with these particular kinds of disabilities. So after that first book came out, I got a lot of email from various people in academia – especially graduate students, faculty, and staff – describing the situations they were in, describing things like accommodations they couldn't get, accommodations they wished they had, treatment on the job that was really unfair but also really subtle and hard to put a finger on.

And I started deciding, I really want to collect some data about this. *Mad at School* – some of it is the result of a qualitative research project, but most of it is just me doing a broader discourse analysis of academic discourses at large. So for this second study, the disabled faculty study, I started out with a quantitative interview that was designed to be quite large-scale. And then the second phase was in-person interviews with disabled faculty.

Elizabeth: Can you speak about a couple of themes that emerged from either the surveys or the interviews?

Margaret: The survey was only with faculty with self-identified mental disabilities or mental health histories, and that's because that was my interest coming out of *Mad at School*. At Stephanie's suggestion we opened up the interview phase to be with faculty with all kinds of self-identified disabilities, and that turned out to be a really great choice and made the study much more interesting. Some of the common themes between the two groups included some things that didn't really surprise me.

For example, I was not surprised to learn that most of our faculty respondents had never been told where they should go at their home institutions to discuss disability or accommodation. It was just assumed that this was something faculty would figure out on an as-needed basis, and furthermore most faculty, we discovered through the study, are not served by their school's Office of Disabilities Services. Typically that office serves students only, and faculty have to go to any one of a number of different offices, including maybe human resources, maybe their school's ADA coordinator – that's the Americans With Disabilities Act coordinator – maybe their own supervisor, their own department chair or their own dean.

And so not only does this place faculty in an obviously awkward position, going to your own supervisor and saying, hey, I have this significant disability; I'm going to need to talk about accommodations; but it also created this weird kind of mystery that faculty had to solve when it had to ask person after person after person until they found the right person. So that ended up being tantamount to disclosing over and over and over again. So that was one of the things that didn't really surprise us. We already kind of knew from reading the literature that that was going to be an issue.

Something that did surprise us a lot is that faculty described and incredibly broad range of ways of disclosing. So once they were in a position where they either needed to disclose, or they found themselves disclosing, or they were forced into disclosure, these happened in all kinds of different ways. Sometimes it was kind of a conventional conversation, as you might imagine; one person saying to another, I have the following disability. Sometimes it was very situational and occurred because something just suddenly became apparent.

For example, one faculty member described getting severely overheated in her classroom. Her particular disability, multiple sclerosis, means that it's very dangerous to be overheated, and she had to abruptly leave her class and search the entire building to find someone who could turn the temperature down in her classroom. That ended up creating a disclosure not only with the person who ultimately helped her but also with her class. But it wasn't exactly a verbal disclosure. It was this whole situation that unfolded.

One faculty member described really wanting to disclose to her classes but not wanting to make an announcement. So one day she wore to class a T-shirt that said, "I'm bipolar; what's s your excuse?" And she just taught class in that T-shirt. So there were just so many interesting stories and themes like those that emerged, and pretty much every major theme that I went forward with analyzing intersects in other ways with topics that are of great interest to scholars really across the disciplines. Themes of technologies were really important. Themes of space and time turned out to be really important. That

ultimately is what I decided to write my next book about. And themes of, sometimes, even metaphor and language emerged as extremely important.

Elizabeth: Can you say more, maybe, about a technical theme?

Margaret: So one of the major - another major finding that emerged from this study is the fact that disabilities are not stable across situations, and accommodations as they're usually practiced in university life are usually pretty poor fit for disabled faculty; because accommodations are designed to be predictable and stable, whereas most disabilities just don't behave that way.

So one faculty member who has a prosthetic leg talked to me at great length about how her prosthetic works and the different ways that her colleagues assume it works versus how it actually works. So for example, her prosthetic wears out. Every five years she has to get a new one, and it's a major purchase. It sets her back financially. It means that she's learning an entirely new interface. It may have glitches or bugs that she needs to figure out and work out while she's learning the prosthetic, and she has to think all the time about how long the power in her prosthetic will last over the course of the day.

So all these factors are quite unpredictable. It's as if someone suddenly took away your laptop that you do almost all your work on and handed you a brand new one with no memory and no history and said, okay, continue your job. That would be understood as a catastrophe. When it does happen to people, we talk about it as a catastrophe. But when someone gets a new complex electronic technology that intersects with their disability, they may be in a very similar position; and yet no one around them responds as if they are having this life-changing experience.

Our understanding of adaptive technologies: A lot of it comes from popular media, and we tend to think of adaptive technologies as these \$6 million-man magical devices.

Elizabeth: Yes. A lot of our understanding comes from science fiction.

Margaret: Right, exactly. You just pop a prosthetic on your leg, and suddenly you're running away. You put in a cochlear implant, and you magically can hear everything, just like a "normal" hearing person might. That's not true at all, of course. Adaptive technologies are like any other technologies. They're complex. They're enmeshed with our fleshly bodies in different ways. They're unpredictable. They break. They do things we didn't expect, and they require learning.

So not only science fiction narratives, but also popular narratives on social media, really encourage us to think of adaptive technologies as miraculous: Deaf person hears for the first time, and there's a video of someone crying –

Elizabeth: I've showed this a couple of times, yes.

Margaret: – and being like, oh this is really – that's really not what disability and adaptive technologies are actually like. They're fascinating and interesting, but they're not miraculous.

Elizabeth: I was also interested to see that one of the outcomes of this project was a guide for promoting support of academic environments for faculty with mental illnesses, and that struck me as such an actionable offering from this research. So I wanted to hear about a couple of the key suggestions in that guide.

Margaret: What a lot of it boiled down to is that we need to stop thinking of disability as something that lives in individual people's bodies, and we really need to start thinking about access more broadly as something that is a culture we create together. Thinking just of academia for now, it's part of departmental culture, and it's part of institutional culture. If we think of access as something that never becomes an issue until an individual problem body suddenly "needs" it, then we're going to continue to have the problems we do with lack of inclusion of people with disabilities, lack of representation, lack of knowledge on the part of schools who genuinely want to do better but realize that they're really screwing it up.

And we have to start thinking of this as something that we work together on systemically all the time. So for example, I'll take a recent example from the - I think it was the Grammy Awards. A musician won Best New Artist, and she uses a wheelchair and couldn't get up on the stage.

Elizabeth: Oh, I think it was the Tonys.

Margaret: Oh was it? Yes, I think you're right. It was the Tonys.

Elizabeth: I think it was the theater. Yes.

Margaret: Yes. So there was this sort of storm of commentary across Twitter where people were like, how shocking; this person couldn't get onstage, and they use a wheelchair, and it's so awful. Well, if you're in academia, you see that tableau enacted over and over and over again because, when people speak to an auditorium, they usually speak from a raised platform that doesn't have a ramp. And so this embarrassing moment occurs when someone can't access that platform by climbing up to it.

Now the conventional way to think about that is, oh my gosh, we have to run and get a ramp; or, we have to carry the person on the platform. But that is not a culture of access approach. That is a fix-the-one-time-problem approach, or what Jay Dolmage and Melanie Yergeau and others call the retrofit.

Elizabeth: Exactly.

Margaret: What we should be doing instead is turning our attention to larger situations and asking questions like, “What kind of spaces would be better for all of us to access together all the time?” Instead of allowing problems to arise over and over again and trying to fix them individually, what would a larger approach to access look like?

Now to some degree that overlaps with the principles of universal design, but I think a culture of access also goes beyond universal design in some ways because it assumes the importance of constant communication and constant interdependence, which is implied in some of the principles of universal design but, I think, rarely really focused on. So for example, let’s say – I’ll take my own academic building where my office is as an example. Let’s say in Denney Hall, the power goes out one afternoon. This is a relatively frequent occurrence. It’s an old building.

Elizabeth: It happens.

Margaret: Right, yes. So instead of each person leaving and then looking around and saying, where’s so-and-so, what if the community thought ahead of time about the fact that some of our colleagues use elevators all the time; and we said, let’s make sure we know ahead of time what we’re going to do if we all need to leave the building; or, if we’re leaving building where had just gone out, everybody checked the whole floor together to say, are we all leaving together?

There’s a principle of access that was offered by Mia Mingus. Her name is spelled M-I-N-G-U-S. She has a wonderful blog, and the principle is, if you can’t go, I don’t want to go. So the idea of thinking about access in terms of a culture of access means, we will be going places together, but we will also be limited together. So there’s a constant learning and listening and feedback loop that needs to be moving through these spaces in order to make that kind of cultural shift possible. And I have some specific suggestions, too, about, how do you actually be a person who’s helping create a culture of access; how do I be a better ally, for example.

But the first thing, I think, is that – in your mind – shift from, am I okay, to, are we okay.

Elizabeth: That’s fantastic, and I love the distinctions you’re drawing between universal design - which really functions as a sort of preparatory; you design something, and then it’s done – and this idea of constant communication as a means of building access together. And that gets to something that I’ve enacted in a lot of my classrooms that I think works along similar lines in that I often talk with

my students about being able to be responsive to their needs rather than to their diagnoses or documentation.

So on the first day of class, I often say, we have different bodies; we have different needs; we have different ways of feeling at different times. So if you come in, and you'd like me to dim the lights because you have a migraine or a hangover, or it's just a really sunny day, that's something that we can do, because we can address these needs on an evolving basis rather than being beholden to bureaucratic structures.

Margaret: Exactly, and the thing that I think is so effective about your approach is, you don't need to ask anyone what their diagnosis is. You don't need to ask anyone what kind of "problem" they're having unless you're having a specific conversation that's arising naturally out of context. So to go back to the fire alarm example, it doesn't really matter if a person can't leave the building because they're terrorized by the sound of the alarm or because they didn't hear the alarm or because they can't get down without the elevator or any one of a number of reasons that could be the issue.

The question is always the same one that you come back to: How are we doing together? And that is a great question to be asking in the classroom as well.

Elizabeth: And I find that it's a place where students, at least, appreciate seeing that model. So I have to spend the first couple weeks saying, I have a cold today and can't speak up very loudly, so we're going to do more online forums.

Margaret: Yes, exactly.

Elizabeth: Right. So I have to show them my own needs in order to make them more comfortable disclosing theirs. I wonder if that's something that comes into play when we talk about graduate or partial disclosures that faculty make to administrators and colleagues and so on. Are there ways that we can be open about our own needs in order to encourage a culture of access?

Margaret: I think so, absolutely; and I should say one more thing about universal design. I've learned a lot about universal design from the scholar Aimi Hamraie. The last name is spelled H-A-M-R-A-I-E. They just recently published an amazing book called *Building Access*, which called something to my attention that I hadn't known; which is, the original concepts of universal design, as they were developed by Ron Mace and others, actually were supposed to be that kind of communicative feedback loop, the way that you describe your classroom working.

But when the idea of universal design was made into more of a seven-part checklist, unfortunately educators and other people did start treating it as this get-everything-set-ahead-of-time model. But Aimi's book is really calling for a

return to that more activist, constant looping, iterative process that universal design was more supposed to be.

So thinking about how an individual person might be part of that feedback loop, thinking again about the classroom, I would love to see all faculty model ways of not powering through. So for example, I do tell my students that I'm disabled, although I rarely list diagnoses for them. I'm much more likely to come in on a given day and ask them to help me run the class the way that I need it run that day. So if I'm not having one my sharper days cognitively, I might tell them ahead of time, okay, during our discussion today, I might periodically ask you to say what you said again, or I might ask someone else to paraphrase what you said. That's not because you said it badly or wrong. I'm just having a really hard time processing speech today; so just to give you a heads-up, that might happen more than usual today.

So when I do that kind of thing routinely, students learn skills like re-vocalizing, paraphrasing each other's words, speaking up when they haven't heard someone; whereas, if the professor or the instructor is just modeling the importance of powering through and never letting anything affect the classroom's smooth operation, they will probably follow that example. And so lots of small disclosures, whether you're saying something like, I've broken my foot twice in two subsequent academic years now –

Elizabeth: Oh wow.

Margaret: Yes. Whether I'm saying something kind of big like, hey guys, I'm not going to be walking around the room at all, so that's what class is going to look like for the next eight weeks; or it's something relatively small, like oh, I really can't see the screen very well today, let's figure out what to do with the blinds together; those kinds of modeling sometimes have to do with my diagnosed disabilities, sometimes with occasional digitally like a broken foot, and often just have to do with how I'm doing that day.

If everybody starts doing that and picking up on each other doing that, the classroom starts to take on that more coordinated, more checking on each other constantly kind of aura.

Elizabeth: Yes, absolutely. So I think we've gotten through most of the things that I wanted to ask about this project. Is there anything else that you think our listeners should be aware of when negotiating their own experiences of disability in academe or hoping to be a better ally to their colleagues?

Margaret: For folks navigating disabilities in academe, I would say definitely explore and reach out to the networks that are available. I have read so many articles by disabled faculty members, some published very recently, which seem to imagine that they are the only person experiencing what they're experiencing.

If Mark's and my very rough predictive counts are right, there are literally hundreds of thousands of disabled faculty, and then even a larger number if you add grad students and staff.

So one of the resources that's online is the #phdisabled, all one word, just one D. And that's particularly for graduate students, but I have noticed that a lot of people who have finished their graduate degree and moved on to be faculty or staff or have alt-ac careers still use that hashtag. Another possibility, if you don't use Twitter, is on Facebook. There's a large group called "Teaching Disability Studies," which is ostensibly about teaching only; but actually people get on there and ask all kinds of questions about disability in academia. So those are two social networking platforms that I think really have kind of loose but large communities of people with disabilities. And they can provide the entryway to finding your people.

For those who are thinking, well, I'm still waiting for that concrete advice she said she was going to give about being an ally, I did write down for myself a few notes of things that people could just keep in mind as they're thinking about being part of a culture of access. One is to really try to resist the popular narratives about disability that we are all presented with all the time. So for example, remember that disabilities are not consistent. Disabled people may not need the same things from day to day or semester to semester.

So really get used to listening to your colleagues, whether you know they're disabled or not, in terms of what they need; and don't assume that, if their needs change, they're faking or just deliberately being difficult. That's just life. Things change from day to day, and all the factors and circumstances they were working with change. And so really try to get into just a believing point of view in terms of, okay, this is what you need right now, can actually foster the culture of access and ultimately foster a good workplace much more than trying to quiz or sharp shoot people on their needs.

I think because disabled people in academia so often have to fight for their needs, there's also a stereotype about disabled professors being angry or very combative. So it's important to be aware of the phenomenon that has been called access fatigue. It was named access fatigue by Annika Konrad, K-O-N-R-A-D, and it's basically the fatigue that occurs when you're dealing with questions of access not just once a day but probably a hundred times a day. So if a person walks using crutches, people comment on their crutches hundreds of times a day or dozens of times a day.

People say things like, what did you do to yourself; which is not meant to be insulting, but if you hear it a dozen times in succession, it starts to sound pretty insulting. People who use accessible parking hang tags but who walk get stared at every time they walk away from their car. So one thing that could be helpful to remember is, if you're trying to be supportive of a person who you know to

be disabled, and they're a little crabby, it's probably not you. It's probably the other hundred times they've already had to discuss this.

And then if you are working with someone who you know is disabled, and you want to be helpful, it's really great to figure out ways to just listen. And it's surprising how hard it is to just listen to someone who you're trying to help. I'm completely guilty of this. If a colleague says to me, for example, oh, I get such bad migraines, it's very likely the next thing I'll want to say is, oh, I had a migraine one time; it was like this. That's probably not what that person needs to hear. They probably need to hear me say, what is that like; or, how do you deal with that; or, what do you need. It's not always an easy time to bust out that question.

So the things that I'm suggesting are very context specific, but I think one thing that's rarely helpful is to say, oh, let me tell you about my experience. And one thing that's often helpful is to say, tell me more about your experience. And finally, it really helps to start noticing ways that people are creating access for themselves. For example, is there someone who always asks for printed copies of the agenda? Start asking along with them. Join in in that effort. Don't make them be singled out every time as the person who has to have a printed copy.

Similarly, if there's someone who always volunteers to take notes and circulate them for the group, see if you can help with that. If there's somebody who's always advocating for something, or you make sure they always have access to that because they're trying to self-accommodate, see if you can be a part of that effort and offer it to everyone. It's important not to do it in an individually heroic way; like, oh, well I know you need this, so I'm going to save you with it. But instead see if the ways that people are self-accommodating are things that everybody might want, and see if there are things that you could offer to the whole group.

And oftentimes I think, once you even just do a couple of small things to start being a helpful ally in terms of access, you'll start to become part of a community of people who think about this all the time. They are probably already there at your school. They're already there in your department, and one of the ways that those of us who think about access find each other is by looking around and thinking about ways that we can create that culture of access together.

Elizabeth: Yes, absolutely. I think those are all really helpful suggestions from the conversational to the more bureaucratic, and all very easy to implement as well. So thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us and bring your project to our audience. I'm definitely going to be including links to the resource guide, Mia's work, Aimi's work, and anything else in our show notes. And I think that just about does it for us. Thank you.

Margaret: Wonderful. Thank you so much for having me.

[music]

Michael: Wow. That was good stuff.

Christine: Really important stuff, yes.

Michael: Oh, it's so good to hear this being worked through, and it's really nice, just as a side note, to hear a conversation between two people who are both deeply involved in the scholarship and in the work.

Christine: Yes, and the expertise and personal perspective going back and forth in that interview, I think, is really fascinating.

Michael: It's really great to hear. I am so struck by the gap between where we are in terms of developing resources for students and accommodations for students dealing with various kinds of disabilities and just the staggering absence of any kind of conversation about that for faculty. It was shocking, and then of course completely obvious in an embarrassing kind of way.

Christine: Yes, we pride ourselves on the student offices to take care of this and, yes, that idea of just not even having anything remotely like that for any kind of faculty needs –

Michael: Yes, basically, go talk to your boss; figure it out. Yes. Good.

Christine: And related to that the point was made about disabilities are not predictable. They're not stable. They're changing conditions, but accommodations are often put in place for one thing, especially kind of a blanket. Well, this will cover everything under that umbrella; and that's not how things work. And so having to adjust to that and put provisions in place that respect that, it's work that needs to be done.

Michael: Yes, absolutely, and yes, just like every other aspect of negotiating the business of what we do, everyone brings something of themselves to their work, and the things of themselves that they bring to their work or that contribute to their work, but also can be obstacles in pursuing their work, are constantly shifting around; and it only makes sense that we should be able to figure out a way to make accommodations work in that way, too.

Christine: Right. Speaking of accommodations, I wanted to note that we will have a transcription of this episode available. It takes a couple weeks to get that going, but we will have a transcription of this entire episode posted to our website. We've gotten a number of episodes already posted. Bill Kirkpatrick has been

spearheading this thanks to money he's gotten from Department of Communication at Denison University. And so we already have a handful of episodes that are transcribed. We picked out the best out of the ones that we thought were most important.

This, including in that category as most important – we will get this episode transcribed. So check out our social media. We'll post when we've got that up on our Facebook and our Twitter, which is Aca something.

Michael: Something like that –

Christine: @Aca_media. Website is aca-media.org. on Twitter we are Aca_Media. There we go. So we'll send announcements when the transcription is available.

Michael: But then we also get to hear more from you, not a rerun.

Christine: Exactly, no, not a rerun. This is fresh content.

Michael: Fresh but safe –

Christine: Yes, and I might sound a few months older right now compared to this. I will sound much colder right now compared to this. This was in London when it was 100 degrees. They were setting records. So I think at the very beginning of the interview I comment on how hot it is, so right now it's 40 degrees out. So you'll just have to pretend, those of you who are in cool places, that it's just that hot.

Michael: It's just another part of the word picture.

Christine: Exactly, right. So yes, here I'm going to talk with Catherine Grant. So we talked with her and a number of other folks five years ago with the launch of *[in]Transition*, which is the first ever peer-reviewed journal of videographic film and moving image studies. So we talked with them at the launch of it. So here we are revisiting this five years later, and Catherine Grant herself is basically one of the premiere scholars and practitioners of digital forms of multimodal publishing. So she is the expert in this.

I'll just give you a little bit of background on her. She's a professor of digital media and screen studies, as well as the interim director of Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image. This is in the Department of Film, Media, and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck University of London, and much of her research in the last decade has been on these digital forms of multimodal publishing. And just to give you a few of these benchmarks, in 2008, she created Film Studies for Free, and incredible web archive of links to film and moving image studies resources.

In 2012 she was the founding editor of REFRAME, an open-access academic digital platform engaged in the online practice, publication and curation of internationally produced research and scholarship. She managed that for five years, and then in 2014 she cofounded *[in]Transition, the Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*, and award-winning collaboration, I will note. SCMS gave the journal an award, and she continues to co-edit that. So this is part of our conversation about *[in]Transition* five years later and the state of video essay, videographic work five years after *[in]Transition* launched.

Michael: All right, take it away, past Chris.

Christine: Boom.

[music]

I am in London – very, very hot and steamy London – with Catherine Grant. Thank you for joining us, Catherine.

Catherine: You're welcome, Chris. It's great to have you here.

Christine: Yes. I'm extremely happy to be here, just in general in London of course. It's always amazing to be here, but I'm really glad we got a chance to sit down, and especially we've got nice timing. We are nearly five years after I last interviewed you at the launch of *[in]Transition*. So I thought it would be a nice idea for us to sit down, talk about *[in]Transition* in general, also the state of videographic criticism in your own work, and get a scope on where the video essay stands right now.

But let's start with *[in]Transition*, then, because we're five years out from when you launched that, and it's still going strong. So I'm curious, then, thinking back on these last five years. How would you say it has evolved? What are some of the highlights? What are some of the challenges or lessons that you've learned along the way?

Catherine: Yes. So I think it's a really good time to catch up right now, for a bunch of reasons; one of which I'll come to. But yes, we've been going for nearly five years now, and that's five years of four issues a year. I think when we spoke last time we were talking about the fact that we'd chosen to have a year of curating issues. We didn't get right into the nitty-gritty of peer review until our second year, but the first year just allowed us to look at what was out there and think of norms and get people used to us before we started commissioning peer reviews from people.

But that process started, and most of the issues that we've published since then have been subject to our quite unusual public open peer review system. We

have a couple of special issues that have chosen the curatorial approach, but apart from that we've engaged in this experiment on quite a big scale; and a good time to catch up, because I think it's had some really great consequences that we predicted, the main one being that we chose that system for ethical reasons – I think we're all into open scholarship – but also because we wanted to openly generate some discourse about the value of the videographic work that people were reviewing.

So not only were individual authors making claims in their accompanying written statements about the new knowledge that their videos generate, but also the peer reviewers were doing that publicly. And of course I think we know this of written scholarship, but we certainly know it about video essay scholarship. Those forms of new knowledge may be different. People can see different things in the work from the author. The author doesn't know everything about the work. And so that's been really interesting, seeing people making very strong claims for the work.

But yes, that was the intended consequence. And then I guess the unintended consequence is just operating what is quite a complicated system, and I would say even now, five years on, four years on from this choice, we're still finding that peer reviewers find it quite hard, I think. I think they're not - first of all they may be finding it hard to write about video essays, especially if they haven't done that. Normal practice would be that we would typically select a video essayist peer reviewer, somebody who's *au fait* with the genre, maybe making it themselves; and then always try and have at least one subject specialist, and usually we have two.

But if there's only one subject specialist that we can get with who maybe doesn't have video essay experience, we've seen it's pretty important to try and have someone who we know is very positive about the form. But yes, people - I think they find it challenging, first of all, to write about video essays. But that's great. They overcome it, and we publish their work. But I think the other thing is about open peer review. I'm not sure that anyone has engaged in quite such a thoroughgoing experiment with open peer review as we have.

Our system is non-anonymous, and other journals have open peer review, but they still maintain the anonymity of the reviewers. And I think that that's been an additional interesting factor that we've had to really work with, and it takes quite a lot of time, I think, to try and get that right. And I don't think we've always got it right, but I think we've learned so much about that system now, and I think we're still very in favor of it.

And I guess if there's one huge benefit of it, it's that getting a senior scholar to say, with their name attached, what they liked about your work is still, I think, really great for contributors. So that's happened quite a few times, so sometimes

those struggles that we have with this system - we feel it's all worth it when it works out really well.

Christine: Yes, and there's such an interesting dual function of the site then, because it's not just a home for videographic criticism. It's also a home for experimentation with peer review.

Catherine: Exactly. I think it's an experiment on a number of different levels, but yes, it's very much an experimental scholarly publication, and we would have all thought at the outset that what we were really experimenting with was experimenting short-form works; because most of what we publish is quite short. But in fact it's been this much more complex experiment with what you might call a kind of critical constellation; because even on our page, you look at the way that things were arranged, and it produces a certain kind of effect; almost, one would say, of co-authorship of the general range of new knowledge that might be produced through the work, some of which will be directly coming through the video and some of which may well be articulated in the writing around it.

And I think five years ago I was really in favor of this system because I saw it as a way of us being able to publish all sorts of kinds of work. So it may be that the hyper explanatory, almost documentary, form of video essay could be quite stand-alone; and then it would make its knowledge claims within its own duration and form. We do publish work like that, and very successfully. I think they still all benefit from an additional statement. And I think in terms of the searchability of the works, having the metadata in writing is obviously helpful. But it's also enabled us to publish the most crazy, wild, sometimes really short – where the knowledge effect is not completely self-evident, because if people can write about what they thought they were doing and make claims through it separately, then that's enabled us to be able to publish that full spectrum of work that that video essay's been producing.

Christine: Well, and also across the years, this is a lot of work for all of you. And I understand we're going to break some news here on *Aca-Media* that you have new people coming in to help you out.

Catherine: We do, yes. You're meeting very much more a gray-haired person than virtually in our meeting five years ago. Yes, it's been a lot of work. I think if we hadn't all been completely devoted to it, it would have been too much at various points.

Christine: And do you want to shout out your partners?

Catherine: Yes. So when we spoke five years ago, we were the original founding co-editorial team of Christian Keathley, Middlebury College; and Drew Morton, who is now at Texarkana, University of Texas. And we had the project manager alongside your good self of the *Cinema Journal*. We had Jason Mittell who was

working on behalf of MediaCommons with us, a hosting platform. And then shortly after that I think we appointed the fourth editor, Chiara Grizzaffi the IULM, International University for Languages in Milan. Chiara at that point was a graduate student, but somebody who was working on video essays, completed an amazing PhD on them and published that as a book in Italian. The first full-length, properly published book on video essays was by her, and I think it's been translated into English now. So that would be really great. So Chiara's been with us for a few years now, made a fantastic contribution.

And then yes, we decided that four was not enough for this work. So we approached our dream team, and they both said yes to us, which was really great. The first of the two new co-editors is Neepa Majumdar of University of Pittsburgh. Neepa, I think, has been interested in video essays for a long time but was one of the Middlebury College National Endowment for the Humanities funded workshops on scholarship in sound and image that Chris and Jason have run for years now, and I was one of the guest scholars at the Neepa was there.

And then we've also approached and been accepted by the wonderful Kevin Ferguson, who is a very prolific video essayist and experimenter. Kevin's based at Queens College in the Graduate Center for University of New York, CUNY. And so they're coming at this from different places in different ways, but we know they're going to bring great individual subject specialisms to our team, but also the same kind of commitment to the way that we've been running things for a long time now. So it's really great to have them on board.

Christine: Yes, that is. Let me broaden out the questioning a little bit then. You, of course, are perhaps one of the foremost experts on the state of the videographic criticism field. So I'm curious then. The broader scope of the last five years, which is kind of a shortened time but may be long in terms of how quickly things change in terms of technology - what would you say about the state of videographic criticism, both in and out itself and also, I'm curious about - because another thing we talked about or thought about five years ago was, how will this be integrated into academia. So what would you say about the state of videographic criticism right now?

Catherine: Yes. Well, I think it's really moved on. That's an obvious thing to say, but it's probably still worth saying it. I think five years ago I was really happy with what I saw as a continuing overlap between the world of, if you like, online film and TV criticism - so bloggers or professional critics who were beginning to experiment with audiovisual approaches. And really since the birth of YouTube and Vimeo, really, that had been going on. And in a way those people had inspired people like me. I wasn't inspired by academics doing this. I was inspired by film and TV critics doing it.

And it seemed like there was a nice crossover five years ago. I would say that's changed quite a lot. I think that what's happened is that film and TV critics are

getting on with film and TV criticism, and academics are actually getting on with making these forms for themselves. And it doesn't mean that never the twain will meet. The worlds do collide all the time, and there are various moments in the year, like there's been an annual video essay, best of, year-end poll that *Sight & Sound* has run. And if you look back at the selections for that, you'll find works taken from both of those kinds of poles of video essay production.

But I would say that academics have been interested in trying to adapt this for their own world and for their own purposes. And so I'd say that that's a big change now and that there's a lot more academics doing this. There are also more places for them to publish. It wasn't that *[in]Transition* was the only place five years ago, but it was certainly the only specialist place. I think what's happened is, rather than a whole range of specialist journals coming into being – although there has been one; there's a new Spanish journal called Tecmerine, which is a really interesting journal, publishing video essays on Spanish language audiovisual culture.

But there's been a growth in the number of what you might call regular online film and media studies journals that have a space for audiovisual essays that might be part of their regular range of production, including written essays; or it might be willingness to embed audiovisual content to a much greater degree in written pieces of work. And in a way that brings me back to *[in]Transition*, because one of the questions we get asked a little bit now - we get asked about our acceptance rate, which is interesting because it's still not statistically significant to pontificate about that right now. It's such a young journal.

But we also get asked about whether we're registered with any of the scholarly indices for journals in the field and what our ratings are and all that. And that's kind of tough to answer, because those journals are based on PDF content most of the time, and we are really not. You could have a PDF of our content. You could generate it, but it would miss the important thing. And so in a way one of the continuing radical challenges, I think, of video essay work is this notion of the embed and the idea that it can't simply be circulated as a regular scholarly object. So in a way it will probably take quite a long time for us to be in the running for inclusion in those indices.

And then what do junior scholars do? We set up *[in]Transition* for those junior scholars to a certain extent. We wanted them to have a place where they could publish, a place that was in a relationship with *Cinema Journal*, now *Journal for Cinema and Media Studies*, and also with MediaCommons, to have a certain status, a certain accepted, I guess, cachet for them in their tenure reviews or job applications generally. But if we're still running up against this glass ceiling of not being conventional scholarly content, then that's interesting. I don't think it has to stop us doing anything.

But it is nonetheless the case that, if a young scholar is given a choice between doing this thing that is still slightly experimental and certainly not straightforwardly recognized in a very narrow way, or doing this very narrowly recognized thing, then most of us would advise them to do the narrowly recognized thing first but keep making the video essays and come back to that later.

But luckily we get a lot of people who are not overburdened by that choice, and we've also got a good track record. I think a lot of people who publish with us, and certainly involved in *[in]Transition* more generally, have found it's helped their careers. Certainly Drew Morton has gone through tenure very successfully in the last couple of years, and Kevin Ferguson with his video essay production, same. And Chris and I have been made full professors on the basis of our continuing work in this field. So all I can say is, it's never done us any harm; so try it.

Christine: Right, it's a good rallying cry. Well, it's intriguing, then, that split perhaps with the world of film and television criticism. It really does seem crucial, the notion of platforms and the flexibility of those platforms; because in a certain sense, academic work – especially historically – is relatively narrow. But it's also a space where we do have more freedom, because we're not dependent on, for instance, clicks to make money for feed advertisers or something like that; whereas film and TV critics rely on platforms that do have to get that kind of click.

There's the notion that your average viewer will sit through 10 seconds of a video before they give up. And that's going to be different from someone going to an academic platform, prepared for that. So that seems like academics are in a more beneficial platform than, even, critics who could really benefit from that kind of work. But they just don't have the infrastructure in place that could foster it.

Catherine: Yes, I think that's true, and I also think, if we look at some of the events of the last few years that that understanding is reflected in those, too. So There is not yet a case of any academic publication basing itself on these new forms going out of business, if you like. But there are cases of commercial platforms that tried to create a model that would rely on a loss leader of video essay content and film critical content to bring people in to purchase streaming services. The obvious case is Fandor. Fandor for a long time had, run by brilliant people and the video essay side of things being run by really brilliant people like Kevin Lee – it found it difficult as a platform, I think, to sustain that kind of production and certainly kept increasing demands on people to tailor their content to that context.

And also we're more worried about copyright, I think, and intellectual property, than I would say, we have had to be. I think things are changing. I think

everybody's worried about copyright now. I think that's not a nice, positive, feel-good story looking ahead. I think we're going to have more problems with that than fewer, and therefore it's really important to work with organizations like SCMS, with their fair use policy, and really get everybody educated about that, about what they both should be doing but also what they can demand and what they can expect.

And I think that we in academia have had to rely more on that in a way, that confusion of those commercial platforms: Are they advertising this content, or are they critiquing this content? That's been quite a perennial problem for film criticism, at least. We, of course, are not advertising the content. We are trying not to damage its commercial value, and that's obviously one of the tenets or premises of fair use. But on the other hand we demand the right to be able to rework this content for our scholarly and critical purposes.

Christine: Well, looking forward to the next five years and beyond, it would be great if more people get involved in videographic criticism. I'm certain there's listeners out there who hear these ideas and think, I'd love to do that; but oftentimes I assume they stop, because they don't know where to start. So what suggestions do you have? If someone out there is thinking, oh, I've got this; especially what you were describing earlier, this notion of how you're always thinking about it – I always think of the question all of us get from students early on and the public: Do you ever just watch things for fun?

They think that somehow we segment: This is the stuff I watch for work, and this is the stuff I watch for fun. It doesn't work that way. You're always consuming it. So anyways, getting back to this, I was thinking, the next thing I watch, I'm going to be thinking about how I could make a video essay out of whatever it is. So how would I start? How do people out there get started with this?

Catherine: Yes. I'm really longing for people to think exactly like you just articulated there. I think one of the things that people find get in the way with their enthusiasm for this is having too big an idea to start with, the idea that they can do work that's a bit like the way they go about writing about something. So my advice is always, try and pick something quite analytical, quite formal; maybe looking at something like a gesture or something like a graphic arrangement or something about temporality or repetition, something that's pretty esthetic, ultimately, even if that's not your only interest; and just try experimenting with that.

The simplest thing to do is some kind of – well it's not simple in one sense. Big screens are not the first thing you might learn in a video editing class, but some kind of comparative piece of work could work really nicely. One of the things I teach regularly in workshops is this thing called the epigraphic video, which requires quite basic editing skills; really the selection of a good sequence and

then thinking about what might be a weird quotation to overlay over it and see what happens, those kinds of experiments.

My main piece of advice would be, there's a lot of resources online now. There's free editing tools. Just Google free editing tools, and you'll find some of the latest ones; and they all work in relatively similar ways. It's not like you're going to waste your time learning to edit with one of them. And look out for courses. So those of us who are involved in this, and the people who've come along afterwards are all running workshops internationally. Jason Mittell and Christian Keathley are still running their very successful workshop at Middlebury College, hopefully every year but certainly every other year, I think. So look out for that, and look out for public presentations by people like me.

Most of the time we'll give some practical advice as part of it, and yes, there's just a lot of resources online. People like Jennifer Proctor have been sharing fantastic resources for years. Miriam Ross, the New Zealand-based scholar, did a great how-to guide, which I published at the audiovisual essay website at REFRAME, that you can track down. So there are things you can do to help make it easy for you. The simplest piece of advice is, try not to make a massively long documentary about anything. Just start with something really small.

Christine: It sounds like the development of our own written work. Start with papers. You don't start with a dissertation. You start with smaller things and learn, because especially it seems like learning is both a technical process - I didn't have to learn how to write. I already knew how to write. You have to learn an academic way of writing, but you know how to write. But the basic skills, and then the conceptual elements as well –

Catherine: Exactly. Don't run before you can walk, but try.

Christine: Yes, get up off that couch and go sit in a chair in front of a computer. All right, well thank you so much for this chat, and I'll talk to you again in five years maybe.

Catherine: I look forward to that, Chris. Thank you.

Christine: All right.

[music]

Michael: That's some good stuff. Man, she's amazing.

Christine: She is. She really is.

Michael: She's like a force of nature.

Christine: Yes, and really someday when this kind of work is just as readily accepted, as legitimate as a monograph or a journal article, we're going to have to remember that she was one of the most pivotal people toward making that happen.

Michael: And taking the gamble of staking her reputation and her career on fighting for the importance of that kind of work, and of course she has an incredible body of work that lots of use in classes or just watch because we enjoy them. And so it's really, really nice to see the arc of all of her achievements.

Christine: Yes, and we will post links on our website to all the things discussed in this interview, and that includes a new website she has in the works. The URL is screenstudies.video, which is a pretty badass URL to have. That's great.

Michael: That is really pretty good.

Christine: Yes. She's going to use this to contextualize her work and help explain the aims and approaches of videographic essays and how that work is equivalent to written academic work, like comparisons to article-length or book-length work. So once this is all in place it's going to be a great resource, especially for this question of how to legitimize this work as just as valid as traditional written work. So screenstudies.video, once she has everything posted there, will be a great place for that.

She also has her most recent video essay posted there, so you can go take a look. We'll link to that from our website. Oh, and I also wanted to plug another thing. She was recently interviewed by another podcast. We're going to plug another podcast here. That's fine, and especially, it's called, *The Video Essay Podcast*. So it's a podcast interviewing video essay practitioners, and this is from Will DiGravio who's a video essay maker, critic, journalist, and graduate student.

And so he studied videographic criticism with Jason Mittell and Christian Keathley at Middlebury where he graduated with a degree in film and media culture. So check out the video essay podcast. It's episode two, but technically it's the first full episode. It's an interview with Catherine Grant, so if you can't get enough of her, go check out the video essay podcast and hear some of the other video essay practitioners that Will interviews.

Michael: I loved that bit at the end, toward the end of the discussion, where you were talking about cultivating that sensibility of watching things videographically, imagining how you would use material from something that you're watching, just on the fly, that sort of imaginative way of viewing; which I think we all do, all the time.

Christine: We do, yes; and especially thinking, particularly when you're working with esthetics – that's the obvious one – but you can also think of it in terms of culture and industry and all kinds of ways. This is what our brains are doing anyways. And it's almost, you could argue, unnatural to write it down. It's more natural to make a visual equivalent of it.

Michael: Yes, and of course when I'm prepping a class, I don't write. I don't write out the content. I make sure I have my clips. I've got my material, and I know what I want to do with each one and get them in conversation with one another. But yes, that's actually much more natural way of building a conversation about moving image media.

Christine: Yes. So I'm excited to see the next five years of that work. There's a lot of ground to be gained.

Michael: Yes, no pressure.

Christine: Yes, that's right. Get started out there, everyone.

Michael: So I have to say, I'm super impressed by your new public visibility as co-creator of "The Good Class."

Christine: "The Good Class," which Ted Danson – the Ted Danson, Mr. Ted Danson, television legend –

Michael: There's only one.

Christine: – mentioned on television on the Seth Meyers show. I will link to a clip of that on our website.

Michael: You bet you will.

Christine: Yes. So "The Good Class" is almost done. We're done with all of the class part, and if you don't know what we're talking about –

Michael: I'm sorry. I'm vague-casting.

Christine: Right. Just in case you missed our previous episode where we talked about this, I have just completed a one-credit class on *The Good Place*, the NBC sitcom created by Michael Schur with a philosophy professor named Meghan Sullivan and a fellow FTT professor named Ricky Herbst. We created a one-credit class, a deep dive into the philosophy and television-ness of *The Good Place*. And it was spectacular. It went so well, not only just because Ted Danson mentioned us on the Seth Meyers show. Have I mentioned that, that Ted Danson knows we exist?

Michael: Who's Ted Danson?

Christine: And this means Kristen Bell must know we exist, too. So that's pretty great. And I do have to say, Mike Schur – he actually came to campus to give a talk. I can link to the video of that. The talk was titled “Can Television Make Us a Better Person,” something like that – “Can Television Make Us Better People” – really interesting conversation. He is really, really smart and sharp and articulate and funny, and just a really great conversation that we had; and then there was a separate session where he had lunch with our students. We had a lunch discussion with the students in the class, and that was just really fantastic for them to get to talk with him, ask him questions.

And let me give a shout out to my students who were amazing. This was such a great experience of having – there were 17 students total, all of whom – completely obsessed with the show, just loved talking about it; and from both the philosophy angles and the media studies angle, we wanted to make sure it wasn't going to be a class where - okay, now we've done the philosophy part; let's turn to the television part. We really wanted to integrate them, and that worked out great; and especially because of the students. Everyone was game to give right in and work through the concepts we were bringing up. And so it was a blast. We had a great time.

Michael: Very good. I only went to the one talk. It was great. It was fantastic. It was clear that your students were in it, and Mike Schur was interesting to talk to, too.

Christine: Yes, and I say - we're almost over. The class itself is done, but we're going to get together next semester for the finale, because the show is ending. It's currently in its final season run, the fourth season. And so it will wrap up in whatever, late January, early February. So we're going to have a finale viewing party, and that was maybe some of the most fun I had in the class the last day, where we were talking about endings, how to end television shows.

We read an article by Celie Harrington, which raises the notion of the 600-year-old Christian concept of the good death, the *Ars Moriendi*, and so that notion of applying concepts of good deaths to television shows. And it's a show that's about death itself. It was just a perfect confluence of all the things that we were looking at, so super excited about the finale and how the heck they're going to end that. We'll see.

Michael: Nice. All right. We will have to come back to that conversation later.

Christine: Yes.

Michael: Good stuff. Well you know, *Aca-Media* is brought to you –

Christine: By who?

Michael: Well, *Aca-Media* is produced with the support of University of Notre Dame, as well as the Department of Communication at Denison University. But there are some other folks, too.

Christine: There are. This is a whole team.

Michael: Takes a village –

Christine: And our villagers are Bill Kirkpatrick at Denison University –

Michael: Todd Thompson at the University of Texas –

Christine: Who we thank greatly for putting all these together, composing all the music, doing yeoman’s work in making us sound not terrible.

Michael: He does.

Christine: We also have to thank Stephanie Brown at Westchester University, Joel Neville Anderson at University of Rochester. There’s two -chesters in there, Westchester and Rochester.

Michael: Oh, man. It’s going to be like the hyphens and the underscores.

Christine: And then Frank Mondelli, not at a -chester; he is at Stanford University. But that’s still great.

Michael: It is still great.

Christine: And thank you to this episode’s participants, so big thanks to Liz Ellcessor for interviewing Margaret Price for us, and we’re hoping to do subsequent segments on issues of disability and illness in faculty and graduate students in academia. So listen for those coming up in the future.

Michael: And also thanks to you for your conversation that you put together with Catherine Grant.

Christine: Yes, that was a great conversation, good fun.

Michael: All right. Stay warm out there. Trick or treat. Boo.

Christine: Yes.

[music]

[End of recorded material at 00::]