

A Roundtable Discussion with Critical Studies Graduates: Elena Bonomo, Mike Dillon, Kate Fortmueller, and Brett Service

The following is a roundtable discussion between Drs. Elena Bonomo, Mike Dillon, Kate Fortmueller, and Brett Service, all recent graduates of the School of Cinematic Arts (SCA). During their time in Critical Studies, all have balanced their independent research with various administrative responsibilities, most notably as Teaching Assistants under the department's employ; they have also worked several times as "Lead" Teaching Assistants with expanded supervisory duties over a course and its staff. Together, their services to the department include organizing the annual graduate student conference, coordinating special events, assisting with course planning and curriculum reviews, and training new staff members, among other efforts. They have also each co-edited a past special issue of *Spectator*:

Spectrums (vol. 31.1), edited by Kate Fortmueller, Brett Service, and Gloria Shin
"F" is for Failure (vol. 32.1), edited by Mike Dillon and James Crawford
Ephemeral Traces (vol. 33.1), edited by Elena Bonomo and Ken Provencher

The conversation begins with an overview of each participant's dissertation project and the particular work habits, research demands, and time constraints that factored into each project's execution. These assessments are framed partially by thoughts on the current state of the field and worries about the scarcity of university positions in film and media studies. Turning to how the respective dissertations reflect the available resources and professional culture of the Critical Studies department, the discussion also addresses the balance between multiple identities taken up by PhD candidates—student, independent researcher, and Teaching Assistant. The discussion also includes thoughts on SCA's relationship to the wider campus life of USC and on several observable changes in the department that impact the experiences of the graduate students now moving through the program.

The conversation took place on July 21, 2014.

Elena Bonomo: My dissertation is about Shirley MacLaine and looks at the various transformations her persona went through from 1954 to the present. I look specifically at how she challenged ideas of stardom during different periods of her life within Hollywood and through her travels, political activism, and New Age spirituality in the 80s to today. My dissertation sort of emerged from a lot of uncertainty about what my project would be. I came in thinking I would be writing about 1980s friendly-monster movies, which is what I wrote about in my Master's program. That didn't really pan out, and then I thought I was going to write about film festivals, then somehow I got onto politically active stars in the 60s. I started researching Shirley MacLaine, and then I realized that there was a lot that was interesting about her in addition to her politics, so I decided to focus on her specifically.

In terms of how our department has facilitated that search for a project, I think, on the one hand, that there would have been some benefits to really cultivating what I came in being interested in. However, I also think that I personally benefited from having the opportunity to let my project emerge as something that reflected my set of interests – instead

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

of something that I thought or knew I was going to do before I came into the program. I was able to use the whole process to come up with something I'm happy and satisfied with.

Brett Service: My dissertation is about the shifts in film archiving and preservation in the wake of the digital technological transition. Primarily, I am concerned with the legal issues that surround this change as they are historically situated and the evolving tension between private ownership and public access over this terrain of preservation and archiving. My project has shifted quite a bit since I've been at USC. I certainly didn't have a grasp on it when I came in as a Master's student, so it was reflective of various experiences here, both in our department and outside of it. A lot of that has been informed by having worked at the Warner Bros. Archives at USC, and having that practical experience as an entryway into meeting and interacting with other archival professionals in LA and elsewhere – that's been kind of revealing.

I don't entirely remember how the project evolved but I was very interested in copyright and legal issues. I wasn't sure what places I would look, but I realized that focusing on these legal dynamics in and through these archives as an institutional place and a critical site was a consolidating factor that addressed all these issues that were of interest to me elsewhere. These issues were partially informed by some coursework opportunities, but a lot of it has been learning on my own. I have had a very receptive dissertation chair and committee members who have been open to a lot of those interdisciplinary investigations. Part of the challenge and part of the interest was that the project didn't align precisely with my training in the curriculum, but that's never been problematic.

Kate Fortmueller: My dissertation looks at the political economy of actors below the level of stars – so, actors, extras, reality performers – from 1913 to the SAG merger in 2012. I would say that, on one level, my project emerged from the basic question that everyone asks after arriving in LA, which is “How do these people not work and still pay their rent?” I spent a lot of time looking at my beautiful neighbors sunning themselves when I moved to LA and could not figure out how they were able to afford their rent while they were seemingly completely unemployed. I also spent most of my childhood hearing stories about my grandfather, who worked as an extra to help his single mother during the depression, which seemed to line up with a lot of stuff we were talking about in a political economy class with Ellen Seiter [Professor of Critical Studies] about precarious labor and piecing together a living. I started thinking about actors and how they fit into all these other types of creative labor. Because a lot of the project emerged out the class I would say that Ellen and that class were really formative for the development of my project.

I have sort of hewed toward studies of labor and institutions, which isn't necessarily part of the Critical Studies curriculum. But you're in LA, and there are ways to find people who are interested in Hollywood labor by virtue of being at USC, working in the industry, etc. I would say that's how the department facilitated my project. I also think that, as an adviser, Ellen has an intuitive sense about her students and how to guide them toward making projects personal and reflective of their interests.

Mike Dillon: My dissertation is about how certain types of film and media genres intersect with and bolster nationalistic or xenophobic social and political reactions to global human mobility—and I look at various forms of that, such as tourism, illegal immigration, and terrorism. I separate this between American and Japanese case studies and look at how, for lack of a better term, “unauthorized” forms of movement across national or social boundaries produce paradoxical ideological responses to globalization.

The original conception of this project was a lot more ambitious, and it covered five chapters, each with a different national or regional focus. The advice I got was that I was spreading myself too thin and that I was going to come across like I was a dabbler in everything and an expert in nothing. Actually, this proved productive because I had original research on areas that were taken out of the project and made into separate articles; the dissertation itself ended up getting reduced more and more to just the two case studies, which focused on the two countries I knew most.

And with that in mind I want to segue into another issue: to what extent did your project take shape or even mutate not only in an effort to keep the work manageable in the time you had to do it, but also in an effort to make it marketable? Did you receive advice at any point to pursue certain ideas or do it a certain way with the eventual job market in mind? In my case, I feel like I was encouraged to think about how best to demonstrate my academic legitimacy in what I would be putting out there for myself. For example, I originally had a chapter on suicide bombings in Sri Lanka. If that

had made it into the dissertation, it would have become knowledge that I would potentially have to account for in a job interview, even though I don't know a whole lot beyond what I researched for that particular chapter. I wonder if, during the process, you guys have had to make some similar choices.

KF: I had a 100% different experience [laughs]. There were times when I felt like “This is insane. It’s a hundred years of history and nobody seems to be stopping me.” Nobody put the brakes on me, ever. No voice in the room saying “Scale it back, scale it back, scale it back!” Instead it was “Do this, and that, and do interviews!” In some ways it was a lot more overwhelming and expansive than constrictive, but even though I was working across film and television, I was within one national context, so I wasn’t responsible for entirely different cultures. I don’t know if that matters per se, but my feeling was that there were no brakes, and I think that was fine at the end of the day.

MD: In my case, I feel like *I* was the one who said, “Look, I’m trying to work through a set of ideas that are global in nature. Isn’t it reductive of me to focus on a narrow selection of national contexts?” In general, the response was “Yeah, maybe, but worry about that for the book. You can add things to expand it later. For now, write what you know.” Of course, this advice had a lot to do with how much you can reasonably get done within a certain timeline.

KF: I think the best advice for a dissertation is that, with a book, you have these deadlines, and maybe a timeline for tenure, etc. The dissertation, on the other hand, can kind of drag on forever if you let it. Your funding from the department stops, but people have other ways of earning money and letting it drag on, and so maybe that’s good advice to put on the brakes. It does limit you a little bit, but it makes the project attainable.

MD: My biggest challenge, I feel, was knowing when to quit. It’s so easy to sink into all these rabbit holes. Some excellent advice I got to this effect was when Priya Jaikumar [Associate Professor of Critical Studies] reminded me to just keep in mind that I’m a film and media scholar *first* and a political theorist or policy analyst a distant second. Recognizing that forced me to reprioritize things in ways that led to some major restructuring, and it kind of granted me the freedom to leave things in footnotes instead of accounting for entire, tangentially-related discourses. I feel like this bit of advice saved it from ballooning out of control.

KF: Elena, I feel like your process was like a funnel.

EB: Yeah, I was really thinking large-scale, and originally I was thinking about how different media affect how celebrities are positioned politically. I hadn’t really thought “Well, I’ll focus on case studies. I could just do this on everybody at this particular time.” But eventually, that didn’t make sense, so then I picked *three* celebrities. I was going to write about Marlon Brando and Paul Newman as well as MacLaine.

Anyhow, there wasn’t much thought of marketability in terms of how my project panned out. There was more thinking about manageability, I think, and how there were certain types of methodologies I wanted to use. I really wanted to do textual analysis of films and literature—I feel like those are skills I have that I wanted to showcase and this let me hone in on what I was going to use as my primary texts. I started to think, “This is not manageable, and even three people is not manageable. I’m going to narrow on to one person.” And I still have an overwhelming amount of stuff that I won’t ever attend to [laughs].

BS: I didn’t have a lot of concern or feedback about reigning in my ideas. I’ve had a fair degree of autonomy as to how I defined the scope of my project, what form it took, and how the various case studies came together. I’ve had conversations with my chair about thinking about these points of inquiry as part of a larger profile of scholarship and this just being one segment of it. So, that hasn’t localized around distinct chapters but more in a continuum with the larger scope of the project. I feel like it has been a fairly organic process, and a lot of it shifts according to the exigencies and desperations of the moment to reign things in and finish them. I don’t know that it has been a conscious process of thinking about different realms, whether it’s film and television, or digital media, or thinking across different historical eras. I think that’s something that comes naturally to me—to want to speak across those various contexts.

I think the discipline, as a whole, is very accommodating of that kind of fluidity, and I think our department is pretty good about encouraging that. People have different experiences and different relationships to different committees

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

members, but I think that our faculty and the projects that come out of our department are quite diverse. I suspect that, in comparison to a lot of comparable programs, that's a strong benefit that's reflected in the dissertations they supervise. So I have not been hung up on some of these disciplinary purities because I think our discipline is already pretty fluid and interdisciplinary. Of course, that's not the experience of everyone, and it's interesting to hear what those impressions are. When you get a lateral view of the work coming out of our department, it is kind of remarkable – the composition of the committees are coherent even while the projects are quite diverse and multifaceted.

KF: I think it's always interesting when you hear about projects and think, "Oh, you have everyone that is right for a committee on that kind of project." Priya was on my committee, and if you just knew the title of her book [*Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India*], you wouldn't necessarily understand how she fits within the context of my committee. But given her interests in governmentality and institutions, she makes a lot of sense on my committee. So, everyone's project engages faculty work and interests in ways that are sometimes not necessarily obvious to someone from outside the department who might be surveying books by USC faculty or the courses they teach.

BS: There is a lot of diversity in the work in our department, but the way people supplement that with outside members is also an interesting process that people discover in different ways. There are unique challenges to how that works at USC because Critical Studies is a department within the School of Cinematic Arts, and we are required to reach out and interact with other departments on campus. As much as we may value interdisciplinarity, those administrative and disciplinary boundaries are sometimes hard to get across, even though USC has many of interesting people and resources.

The experience in the Critical Studies department within the School of Cinematic Arts is unique, but it's not merely about enrolling in classes or getting to know faculty members. There is a lot of activity in the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, but we are outside of that orbit because of distinctions between the schools. And so, there are interesting conferences and lectures that happen in the American Studies and Ethnicity, English, History other departments that are very complimentary to us. Part of my process of discovery was trying to get out into those other areas, and a lot of that happened after I had completed my coursework. This has evolved over many years, and it's an interesting tension that's in terms of what USC offers, but also in terms of how the School of Cinematic Arts operates with the rest of the university.

In terms of our department, I do think that a lot of things have changed in terms of the longitudinal experience of the department. There have been shifts in the exams process, how TA-ships are funded and allocated, greater emphasis on prospectus writing... these changes are all quite dramatic, and a lot of it happened *after* our experience. I don't think I could speak to what the current experience is, although we can assess some of these changes and what they're reflecting. I do think that projects are being conceived at a fairly early stage, and there's fixity there. Given the shifts in graduate education and the job market, I think people are coming into grad school more self aware of what the job environment is like and what the risks are along the way to pursuing a career in academia.

MD: Practically everyone coming through the program now is receiving some kind of guaranteed fellowship package. We're the last generation of people whose funding consisted of TA-ships all the way through, right? That's a significant change, and I feel like the expectations and priorities that were commonplace when we started out aren't comparable to what the experience must be like for the current crop of new MA or PhD students.

BS: I know we kind of facetiously joke about us having this deep institutional memory because we've been lingering around for so long [laughs]. It's not only about our own experiences, but also our experiences with our predecessors in the department, the circuits of gossip and departmental lore, and things like that. I feel like part of this transition is getting us out of the way as well – and our hang-ups and fixations and anxieties...

KF: On some level, we're totally a hindrance to the department. I don't know... there's a point at which you have to let go and say, "This is not my department anymore. It's for other people to make what they want out of it."

MD: Let's talk about being Teaching Assistants a bit more. There is a point at which our relationship to the department transitions from being a student to solely being a TA, which impacts our campus obligations. You're on campus

exclusively to TA, and whatever time you can carve out for yourself is when you're doing your own research or at home, writing. I wonder if we could talk about how your work develops in tandem with those obligations. Has having to be responsible for teaching this material effectively to students affected your approach to your independent work? Or have you kept these things in separate spheres?

BS: I would say my TA experiences have been entirely focused on the undergraduate curriculum, often in very large, general requirement courses within Critical Studies, so my ability to focus on specialized knowledge and interests has always been secondary to whatever the needs of the classes are. My research interests occasionally intersect, but beyond the mechanics of teaching and interacting with the students, it has not explicitly aligned with some of my dissertation inquiries.

KF: I think where teaching has been most useful for me is that it makes you think differently about writing and what it means to write for an educated audience that is not highly specialized in your field. I try to think about this when I have to wade through the more difficult articles with undergraduate students—seeing how a lot of heavy quoting and complex theoretical terms get processed. In some ways, that's the thing I'm most aware of: how a lot of academic writing is not necessarily suited for undergraduate curriculums. In my own writing, I am really trying to think about how things should flow and be clarified in order for me to be someone who's read in a classroom.

I've done enough classes, especially in the last two years, in which students have really struggled with and given up on certain readings, and they get very little out of certain articles. Everyone complains about how little the students are reading, but there *are* academic articles that are really, needlessly difficult given the points they are trying to make. I think that's how TA-ing has been influential on my work—it hasn't changed the content of my work per se, but it has made me more aware of the role of style in academic writing.

EB: I didn't have a film background coming into the department. I did my undergraduate study in English and my Master's degree was in English, with a film studies focus, but that department was still comparatively limited in terms of what aspects of film and media studies it could expose me to. I was on fellowship the first two years as a PhD student at USC and did not TA, and I thought "I need to learn more, and I need to focus on me before I'm ready to TA." But I really feel like TA-ing was my opportunity to take all of the undergraduate courses I hadn't taken before. I don't think I approached it with that perspective, but looking back, maybe not every class I've TA-ed has been directly related to my project. But I needed to fill those gaps about film and the industry and the historical eras, so I definitely benefited from TA-ing because I didn't take those courses as an undergrad.

It's always a juggling act in terms of how much you spend on your own work and how much you spend on your TA responsibilities. I think, being in the program longer, I sort of developed more opportunities to manage that well. In the beginning, it's difficult to see what you need to spend the most time on, and it's very easy to spend all of your time TAing, which is not advisable.

KF: I didn't have a film background either. I've TA-ed film, television, international film, and an array of seminars, genres, auteur classes... I've basically covered the curriculum here, and I think that my broad experience will be helpful in job letters. That is one of the things fundamentally different about the path we've taken versus those on fellowships with lighter teaching loads.

Everyone I know who from Critical Studies who has gone off and taught at big universities has had such a better grasp of what to do with a room full of 200 students. On one hand, we're responsible for a lot more students than any of the other departments, and that can be overwhelming. But by the time you get out here—even if you're only an adjunct instructor in a class of 30 people – you know what you need to do administratively. Or, if you're a new professor and you have new TAs for the first time, you kind of know what to do and what to expect; you know what they need to know, what they don't know, how you want to receive grade information, what kinds of comments they should be leaving, what the common pitfalls are, and so on.

BS: Along those lines, I do think that learning how to incorporate technology in the classroom as a TA has been a big process and evolution. It's something I care a lot about, especially in terms of how it matters in subsequent jobs and

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

presentation contexts. As TAs, we spend a lot of time trying to get our peers up to speed about using clips in class. I think that's a big consideration and a skill set that's evolved over the years. It's a big part of the professionalization process that's largely informal and ad hoc and done on our own.

MD: Our increased need to be familiar with that type of supplemental technology has been another aspect of the major curriculum changes going on in Critical Studies. My own sense of the job market—from interviews I've done and advice I've received—is that it pays to come across as very interdisciplinary in your approach to things. There are certain classes here in which you have the opportunity to construct your own lectures or showcase your own materials, as opposed to having your discussion section framed solely by the professor's lecture. We've recently introduced changes to the curriculum that gives TAs a greater degree of this kind of control, which is an enormous shift. Before, the typical class structure entailed hearing the lecture, watching the film, and then breaking for your discussion section... for however much time you had left before class ended.

KF: More importantly, it's not just about "Here's how much time we have left," but also "I *just* saw that movie for the first time with you." Or, you did the reading and had seen the movie before, but you didn't know what the lecture was going to be on—and the lecture covers everything I was going to cover. That's happened: I have a plan for how I'm going to tackle this reading, and then you have a brilliant lecture that completely breaks down and explains everything. "Oh no! My entire lesson plan is gone!"

MD: I'd say, though, that it's a different skill to be able to improvise meaningful content based on the notes you take the day of, during the lecture that precedes the discussion section.

KF: But I don't know if that's necessarily a skill that helps us in our professional lives. For example, being able to construct different, discussion-based activities—like using video annotation software, in which you can essentially annotate analysis onto clips—would be such a great thing to do in section because they all have their laptops. There are all these things you can play around with, but to use the technology you have to have time to plan ahead. You can't just do it on the fly.
BS: Yeah, that's hard, but maintaining composure in a class with limited preparation is also an important thing.

MD: Also, if the material you prepared suddenly becomes unusable, you may have to open up a bit more and let the students guide the conversation. Knowing how to manage an unscripted environment like that and converting their reactions and impressions into something productive and generative in the classroom is, I think, a very important skill to develop.

EB: When you do have those discussion sections right after the lecture, there is something beneficial in that you have to go in more attuned to what the students are going to say. You don't really have time to think through it, but neither do they, and so they could say anything. It makes you have to learn the stuff so quickly, like section becomes an immediate test of the material you just learned.

BS: I think a big part of this professionalization process as TAs and as instructors also includes how you interact with your peers and how you troubleshoot and solve problems. That is particularly beneficial when you're strategizing how best to teach a certain concept. The more diverse and flexible a TA environment is, the more TAs can share their strategies and have opportunities to test things out. I think that's potentially exciting, too, because it's often quite illuminating to see what other people are doing.

MD: Actually, I've been recommending for a long time that TAs drop in on other people's discussion sections at some point in the semester, just to observe how others are teaching the same material. Now that discussion sections are being scheduled separately from lectures and there are more opportunities to do just that, it seems like a useful professionalization resource. I think it would be a shame if people don't take advantage of that.

BS: It deserves to be said that the burden of teaching on TAs in Critical Studies is a pretty heavy one, without the opportunity to be the instructors of record. That's my perception of it—we're responsible for a large number of students without actual being in charge of lectures, which, I suspect, is different from elsewhere at the university. Our student

load is quite substantial, and we are dealing with enrollments numbers that are quite high. That is something that is unique to the structure of this school—these large lectures with lots of TAs. I always thought it would be beneficial—though I never had the wherewithal to organize it—to make something like that a part of the mentoring process *a semester ahead* of TA-ing a class. The idea is, if you're a Master's student and you're scheduled to TA next semester, you could sit in on this class, or that class, as part of your training. I think that would be really great.

MD: Even small things—like how much you choose to use the whiteboard, or if you lead the discussion sitting down or standing up—all have an impact on the climate you generate in the room, right? Not that there's a correct way of doing it, but I'm always interested in observing other people's styles.

EB: There may be no correct way, but it seems to be that students do often comment about those kinds of things in their evaluations. On mine, they're always saying things like "Write more on the board." [laughs] Like, what am I supposed to be writing??

KF: I'm a compulsive whiteboard user...

MD: The only time I got a student evaluation that said I should use the whiteboard *more*, it was followed immediately by another evaluation that said I should use the whiteboard *less*. Ultimately, I just assumed the two complaints canceled each other out, and I was performing just fine, thank you very much.

EB: It's not the kind of thing I would have thought would appear on a student evaluation, but that's the stuff I've seen.

KF: "Show more clips from *outside* of the class because those are cool" along with "Show more clips from *inside* the class because we need them to study for the exam." I've had that.

BS: But this is all an interesting dimension of how we get feedback for our work. You might take the students' feedback with a grain of salt, but in the absence of peers or professors sitting in, there are insights to be gained about what their expectations are and what they're anxious about. Those feedback networks are often incomplete and fractured, but there's a limit to how much we can do on our own, and the feedback helps the structure of the curriculum and the assignments.

KF: To go back to our discussion of the job market and interdisciplinarity, I feel like I don't necessarily feel overwhelmed by the interdisciplinarity of job posts, but I do often feel baffled by the combination of things they want you to do. Theory and political economy and international and this and that... that's the thing that feels most overwhelming.

MD: I'm finding myself more and more interested in hearing stories about what non-academic tracks people are pursuing after completing the PhD. Obviously, we're all at that sensitive stage right now—we're keeping aware of what other options may be out there if we have no luck on the academic job market.

KF: I helped program the *Beyond the PhD* conference at the USC Career Center. It's an annual conference that covers academic and non-academic jobs—they want to make sure they're representing an array of options across the university's science and humanities departments. I've done a lot of research and, to be quite honest, the sense I get is that most people who leave the humanities and do other things write a lot of self-help blogs about leaving the humanities and finding careers in related fields. [laughs]

There are a lot of different people who have gone in this direction. I haven't necessarily seen many people who are doing things for which their PhD is an asset, but I see a lot of people trying to figure that out. It's kind of challenging to get the success stories, since you first have to find people who have taken that path, and then, you need to find people are happy with that path.

BS: Or even just people who have a degree of stability and sustainability doing what they're doing. A lot of people figure it out, but non-tenure track academic jobs can often be grant-dependent. Positions phase out in a year, or three...

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

KF: So, I think it's difficult to find people who have taken that "other" route. There's a lot of clamoring for the university to provide some sort of support, but truthfully, I don't think there are a lot of options. I also think that—rightfully—most faculty don't feel comfortable advising students on how to get jobs outside of the PhD because they didn't take that route and don't even know how. It would be nice if people knew how to point you to certain resources, but they can't relate to professions outside the field.

BS: And that's pretty telling. We don't have mentors who have had those non-academic jobs, who can mentor us on what that job environment looks like.

EB: I'm kind of okay with that. I mean, I expect them to help me with academic jobs, but there are always going to be limitations to what any adviser can offer. I think, in some ways, the non-academic job search requires us to apply the creative and critical thinking skills we've developed as independent researchers and writers in other fields.

BS: Another way to think about it is to actually track where people are ending up with their jobs. I do think that the conversation about jobs and changes in the viability of tenure in the humanities has been a public discussion in the last few years and over the course of our graduate careers. I certainly don't think I was *completely* naïve about going into grad school without knowing these dynamics, but there has been a dramatic shift about this since we've been in the program.

And I think that's reflected in the candidates who are choosing to go into MA and PhD programs in the humanities. There's an awareness about these concerns that I think is much more visible, and it's reflected in candidates who are much more motivated and aware of these challenges. I'm not saying I would have done things differently, but it would be very different to be starting out and finding yourself surrounded by all of this public discourse, which I did not perceive in any real way before I entered a graduate program. But I would imagine it's next to impossible not to keep it in mind anymore.

KF: The one piece of advice I wish somebody had given me before my dissertation defense is that your defense is when you start getting questions that you would get at a job talk. I never thought of it that way. I thought of it more as a critique of the work, but it's more about framing yourself within the field and where you position yourself in relation to other scholars.

MD: Elena, if you could have gotten advice that would have made a difference, what would it have been?

EB: I took a lot of classes from people who have left, or were postdocs, and I didn't really think about how the classes I chose would also affect who was on my committee and how I interacted with them. Maybe that's obvious, but I did not know it coming in. I just said, "Oh, that class looks interesting!" I'm really happy with the professors who were on my committee, but I also struggled forming it, and I do wish I'd had an opportunity to take classes with two of my three final committee members.

MD: So, the short-term desire to take interesting classes ended up being incongruous with a longer-term strategy of assembling committee members.

EB: Yeah, I guess I just didn't come in thinking "These are the tenure-track professors." And some of it was unpredictable, you know—some people suddenly left the department, etc.

BS: It's also hard to know who's going on research leave. People come and go. I do think that there have been interesting shifts related to the Division of Media Arts + Practice as an autonomous division within SCA. If I were in classes at a different time, I would try to bridge things with them a bit more. Not that I would necessarily have applied to that department, but I'd think more about using those resources. A lot of the conversations they are having are about changes in film and media studies, how to use technology, how you represent yourself and publish in different venues... all of these questions that are really important. These issues are still being addressed over there, but Critical Studies doesn't have as much interaction with them as it could, even though interacting with them without necessarily joining the program seems like a great opportunity. I've had many interactions with MA+P faculty, and I feel they address many areas that Critical Studies doesn't always cover. I think the correspondences between the two divisions could have been

much more vibrant during my time here.

KF: It just didn't exist when we started.

BS: It now has physical and institutional proximity, and that's a great thing. I think if there are places where, instead of taking a production class, you can take care of your production requirement through a digital project of some kind, that's a really positive development. I think a lot of our anxieties about trying to make sense of some of these job posts would be well-supplemented by offerings like that. So, if I were entering now, it's something I would try to prioritize. My projects wouldn't change necessarily, but just learning the practical skills would have been an interesting supplement.

MD: What's the best professional advice you received here?

EB: One of the most helpful pieces of advice I was given was to remember that I was writing my own dissertation and no one else's. Everyone will have an opinion about what your dissertation should be, but it will be a much more enjoyable and manageable process if you write a dissertation that you believe in.

KF: Many people advise PhD students to write everyday (I certainly heard this advice many times during my graduate career). It seems cliché, but, truthfully, it is great advice. Writing everyday makes the dissertation process easier, and it helps keep you mentally active and focused on your project.

BS: The best advice I received as a scholar is to be intellectually generous. In contrast to the impulse toward micro-specialization, it's important to be open-minded about other methodologies, disciplines, and modes of analysis. The continued viability of the humanities depends on openness to these other domains. Intellectual generosity and open-mindedness can foster new opportunities for collaboration and new ways of conceptualizing research and publishing.

Elena Bonomo received her PhD in Critical Studies from the USC School of Cinematic Arts. She received her MA in English from the University of Exeter. Her dissertation, entitled "Channeling Shirley MacLaine: Stardom, Travel, Politics, and Beyond," explores the multiple transformations of Shirley MacLaine's star persona from 1954 to the present.

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