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**Carrie Jenkins (CJ)** [00:00:08] Welcome to the Ways of Knowing podcast, where we make sense of the world through conversations with scholars and artists. This is Carrie Jenkins, a 2020 Wall Scholar at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of British Columbia. My guest today is Professor Carla Nappi, Andrew W. Mellon, chair of history at the University of Pittsburgh. Carla's website, describes her as a historian of the premodern world with a deep interest in the forum's methodologies and processes that we use to understand and come into relation with the past. She's the author of the just published *Illegible Cities Translating Early Modern China*, published by Oxford University Press in 2021, as well as many other fascinating forms of scholarly and creative writing. Carla is also my longstanding collaborator and co-conspirator and friend and our co-authored *Book of Poetry*, which is called *Uninvited*. *Talking Back to Plato* was published in 2020 by McGill Queen's University Press. I've invited Professor Nappi onto the show today to discuss what happens when academic scholarship and creative art practices collide and talk about her experience of collaborating across disciplinary and other boundaries. Welcome, Carla,

**Carla Nappi (CN)** [00:01:30] Thank you so much for the invitation, Carrie. I'm really looking forward,

**CJ** [00:01:34] So I'm going to just leap straight into our first question here. How do you see the relationship between scholarship and creative practice in your own work?

**CN** [00:01:45] For me, scholarship is a creative practice. My training and my background. We're pretty hybrid. So I got my start as a palaeontologist. I almost went to art school. So kind of from really early on, I was interested in a lot of different kinds of things that didn't all fit together and certainly weren't self-evidently history. So through a series of events and following some questions, I found my way to disciplinary history. I had no plans to be an academic or a professor. That wasn't my goal. I just really loved reading and writing and making things and talking with people and teaching. And just everything that happens in conversation with ideas and making and creative practice and other people and it seemed like graduate school was a way to continue doing that. But I came there and in order to be able to pass, to be able to function, to try to make myself legible in that context, I kind of had to shut off a lot of other parts of me.

**CJ** [00:02:55] I think this is something that might resonate with a lot of people. I know it does with me this feeling that you are expected to shut down certain parts of your more creative side when you decide to become an academic. Can you tell me a little bit more about how you experienced that at the time?

**CN** [00:03:12] So I was told explicitly, and this is a version of something that I was told even in grade school, I was told explicitly by professors in graduate school that I could like I could not do all the things I was interested in. You can either be a historian or you can write fiction. You can either do this or do that. Why are you going to all these discussion groups and philosophy? Why are you doing this? Why are you doing that? They're not relevant. You have to make a choice. Have to make a choice. You cannot you cannot do all of these things.

**CJ** [00:03:44] You have to become narrow.

**CN** [00:03:46] Exactly. You have to become what is recognisable in the spaces in which you are trying to have an identity and you're trying to earn passage essentially.

**CJ** [00:03:58] Right. And it is about that sort of earning of prestige, a level of recognition and so on. I feel like that's an important part of what drives this urge towards narrowness.

**CN** [00:04:08] I mean, it's sort of like when somebody will come up to you after a talk and say, oh, that was fun. And it's like a four letter word. Right? The implication being that if you are entertaining, like if you are performing in a way that is meant to create a certain experience for your audience and attending to that aspect of the experience, that's suspect and that comes at the expense of your scholarship

**CJ** [00:04:34] of seriousness, either fun or serious.

**CN** [00:04:37] Exactly. It's like people have some not, you know, but some folks in our business have a really hard time holding to ideas that seem to them to be contradictory. And you start you start censoring yourself or you start kind of buying into that. And I think for academics, I mean, it is such a difficult business to get into. We are all so precarious for so much of the time that we're trying to find some sort of security like a secure paycheque, health insurance. You're scared. I mean, you convince yourself that in order to get the job, I had to be transforming myself into what I was being told that I needed to be.

**CJ** [00:05:28] This is very resonant with my experience. As I mentioned, this feeling of that one has to become narrow and that's necessary to acquire a position which is necessary for basic things, like being able to live and put food on the table and afford accommodation. If you want to do that as an academic, you have to fit through certain cookie cutter shapes and be acceptable. And this is a form of gatekeeping what the academy is going to look like in the next generation and the next incarnation of scholars. And I think that when professors do this, they mean, well, maybe not every single one, but a lot of the mean to be giving a good strategic advice. And, you know, this is what you would need to do to get this job on this type of a job.

**CN** [00:06:20] Yeah, I think it's a tension that any one who is in a position to be mentoring. Training in a business that they know is unfair. Or is going to be problematic in some ways, I think a lot of mentors probably feel that tension that in telling X person that they should do Y thing, I'm doing that because I know that in my experience. Students who did not do y thing did not get jobs, and I really want this person to get a job. I really want them to get to a point where they can be successful, they can have an income. And so I want to train them to do what they need to do to get that. Based on my experience, any attempt that we make to create a kind of safety or to protect has costs.

**CJ** [00:07:23] I think that's so fundamental and it does come down to that bottom line of security in the capitalist sort of structure that we're forced to to conceive of all this under. That means money. So it really is a question of whether you're going to be paid money to do academic work and what it takes to enter that kind of world. And so I thought it was really interesting that I think at one point you used the word successful. And I wanted to pause on that word for a second, because I think in these contexts, when we think about getting a tenure track position and becoming a renowned academic, success in those terms is very, very often about where the money is because it's about getting paid for your work. It's about securing a certain amount of research dollars. These are the things that will be rewarded by academic institutions and often rewarded with more money. And so none of this is so far at all in terms of ideas, creativity, originality at any of this.

**CN** [00:08:26] And for me, I'm first generation and I'm somebody who is dependent on my paycheque.

**CJ** [00:08:33] Just to clarify what you mean. First generation academia.

**CN** [00:08:37] Yes, first generation academia, first generation college student. And so for me, my particular position was that if I am not getting a paycheque, I cannot pay my bills. People have very different personal situations and socioeconomic status. Your relationship to money does determine or at least shape your relationship to this business and your relationship to this field. So for me, when I say success, I really do mean are you able to get a paycheque so that you're going to be able to do this work and also get paid for it and be able to make a living off of it. So I had shut off effectively a lot of parts of myself and what I was interested in and had for years and years and years. I have other colleagues also who I'm sure at least some people listening to this might identify with this. The sense that I'm doing X, Y, Z work for my job, that I wish I could be doing this other thing. I wish I could be more creative. I wish I could be writing this other. And when I got to the point where I was submitting my 10 year dossier, this was, I think twenty twelve or something. Twenty thirteen is when it came through just the process. And I am not someone who takes anything for granted. I was not a person who was like, oh this is fine, I'm going to sail through. Like even though I had a book published at that point, even though people were telling me, look, you're checking all the boxes, you're not going to be a problem. I was on Monster Dotcom. I was looking into like what qualifications people needed to teach in public schools. Am I even qualified? And at that point, whatever the outcome was, just that experience of basically exposing myself and asking people to judge me and determine my life essentially was really difficult. And that was really transformative. And just the experience of feeling that I was doing that sent me back to questions of, OK, well, what if this doesn't work out? But also what if it does? If it does work out, If I do get tenure, if I've made myself into this version of who I think I need to be in order to do this and it works, what are the consequences of that? Like who am I, what has already been lost and what's recoverable and who do I want to be in my do I want to be that person?

**CJ** [00:11:11] It sounds existential.

**CN** [00:11:13] It was absolutely existential. And I decided at that point, whatever the outcome is, I need to really start pressing pause. I was one of these people who I was just like, OK, ten year dossier's in I've got this year of leave. I'm already going to write my second book. I am going to finish this book. I'm going to get all this done. I press pause on all of that. I just hit the brakes and I started to really look inward and ask what makes me happy? When do I feel the fire? When do I feel alive? When do I feel like this is really something that I'm doing that's meaningful? And it was writing fiction. It was. Warning it was doing a whole bunch of things that I had been explicitly told didn't belong.

**CJ** [00:11:59] That word meaningful, I think is is kind of huge here. When I when I think about sort of similar questions in discussing this with other people, the question of what is the meaning, the point, the the value, the purpose of one's efforts, one's life's work. This is the the question that tends to arise in these existential moments.

**CN** [00:12:20] I can't answer the question even now of meaningfulness. What is the meaningful. I don't know that I have an answer or at all a clear sense of that. But what I do know is I'm here. What am I going to do here? I'm going to try to give to people what I

have to give and try to witness what I have to witness and put it out into the world. And maybe that helps someone and at least it helps me feel like I actually exist.

**CJ** [00:12:53] It's not so much that you feel like, you know all the answers to the meanings of your life. But you can follow those clues, those cues. Of where it might take you,

**CN** [00:13:05] I have an internal sense of when I feel alive, when I feel like something's something's wrong.

**CJ** [00:13:11] Yes. Can you say more about that? How does it feel? Do you experience this in your body? What's the difference between when something feels like the way to go or not?

**CN** [00:13:21] Well, how do I describe this and where is this is the first time anyone ask you that question and it's such a good question.

**CJ** [00:13:27] I'm honoured to be the first one to ask the question. I realise this is this is a tough one. But I also think these kinds of questions are actually super valuable for folks who are in a similar position, maybe not so far along their trajectory, because it really is the question of how to know what's leading them in a good direction.

**CN** [00:13:47] I often have a sense of what is really working. When I'm in a period where something's not working, I am living with anxiety and depression in various ways. But I find that when I feel myself really low, when I feel myself getting really anxious, often it's because I haven't been making time for regular writing practise because of the other demands and responsibilities that I perceive that come from my job.

**CJ** [00:14:20] So I want to just touch on one thing he said, that which is living with anxiety and depression, which I do too. One of the things that that I hear you saying is that there's a value to listening to that.

**CN** [00:14:32] It's like an internal barometer, a balance, a compass

**CJ** [00:14:36] you just mentioned to this sort of demands of the institution and the way that can interact with this internal compass barometer. Tell us more about your experiences of that.

**CN** [00:14:52] When you're in this position, the kind of position I think both of us are in, right with our jobs, you are responsible to lots of different kinds of people. And when you multiply all of that or add all of that together, you could be spending 30 hours a day just doing things on behalf of other people. That's one of the most challenging things at this point that I find to balance. It's like being in an aeroplane, put your oxygen mask on first before you can help other people. If I'm not committing to a regular creative practise, I'm not able to to really be what I want to be in the relationships that I'm in for my job. But there's a finite amount of time and energy in the day. And if you add up all the time and the energy it takes to not just do our creative scholarly work, all of the administrative work, the service work, the teaching work, but also the work of pleasure and the work of scooping the litter box and the work of making myself dinner. That's really a challenge and that's a challenge that I haven't figured out a path through yet.

**CJ** [00:16:05] You could spend three hundred percent of your time on all the parts that are not really the one that you're there for.

**CN** [00:16:14] I think there is a narrative in our business of self care is really important. You should take care of yourself, make sure you're prioritising your well-being at the same time as the individual requests that you get are like, well, but can you please do this one thing for me? But we really want you on this committee because your perspective is going to be valuable. Can you do this because it's just one and anybody asking you to do those individual things for them, it's one thing for you. It can be like 20 or 30 or 40, no exaggeration.

**CJ** [00:16:46] The expectation that the the responsibility for well-being rests on the shoulders of the individual who is not doing well is one that I find really troubling, just becomes an additional piece of burdensome work for you to solve the problem of you being overburdened with burdensome work. This is the resilience narrative. So I want to ask just a little bit about what does the work look like for you? What is the process that you go through?

**CN** [00:17:14] I work with writing. I'm a I'm a writing person. I'm a language person. Mostly what I'm making and what I'm the kind of material that I'm working with is language. So I work in short fiction. I work in poetry. I work in creative non-fiction. These days when I'm writing, I am carving out a space in my day. Maybe it's an hour, maybe it's more than that. Maybe it's 15 minutes where I'm sitting down at my desk and I am starting to read something, one sentence and just going into the zone where I'm free associating, having thoughts about it, thinking about what it means for me, and letting myself just explore as widely as possible and take notes and kind of create it like a verbal painting of my experience of even like a sentence or word, a paragraph. I've been thinking about decomposition and rot and specifically decomposition is the form of composition. What I might do and what I did do. One morning I sat down, I wrote down decomposition as a form of composition, looked at that word, decomposition. OK, what do I think of when I'm thinking of decomposition coming apart? What has come apart? I'm thinking of my own history in palaeontology, specifically what comes to mind? What am I interested in? I was really interested in bog bodies, Google bog bodies. Oh, Tolland man. That's really interesting. Google that Seamus Heaney wrote a poem about it. Let me listen to that. That takes me into a palaeontology textbook that might take me into something else. Then I'm reading about Seamus Heaney. Then I'm in a Paul Mode Muldoon poem. Then I'm writing three paragraphs about what I think about bog bodies and peat moss.

**CJ** [00:19:02] It sounds like it's a conversation between your subconscious and Google, which I honestly think is sort of like a collective subconscious.

**CN** [00:19:11] That's probably the the truest account of my process, and that's the just kind of getting stuff down, revising and trying to shape something into an object is a different stage.

**CJ** [00:19:25] I can imagine a lot of people who've been trained in rigorous academic disciplinary practises hearing that description and seeing absolutely nothing in common with what they do. Do you think that they're right so that there's nothing in common, or do you think that the dissimilarity might be maybe more superficial than deep?

**CN** [00:19:47] This is what I did when I worked with sixteenth century Chinese medical texts for my first book. You wouldn't see evidence of that anywhere in that book. But this

has always been my process. No matter what I'm working on, it's just now the objects that I'm making preserve more of that process in the objects.

**CJ** [00:20:07] And in a sense, it's almost like a different form of the slicing away of certain parts of yourself in the to take that process and then make it fit into the academic journal article format, let's say, or the monograph, you have to remove a lot of what's happened there. You have to shape it into a certain narrow kind of thing. And that is still a form, but it's just one form that the process could result in.

**CN** [00:20:38] What gives me kind of motivation to to stay in academia and to keep doing this is that the results of that process? This is how I think this is how I have ideas. This is how I figure out what I have to bring. This does help me contribute to conversations that are happening in my fields, in my disciplines and my communities in ways that at least some people find productive or useful. It does help me make stuff. And so it's going to keep going.

**CJ** [00:21:12] More and more over time, a wave, especially amongst junior academics coming into the field of openness to hearing more about what could be possible beyond what we've come to think of as the traditional academic style. And of course, traditional is a really troublesome word because it depends whose tradition and how far back you go and where. But academia has created a sense of what a traditional product. Most philosophers prior to the 20th century would have quite happily written in any number of different creative ways, including fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, the ways that you're describing these processes as conversations, things like a platonic dialogue into focus, where the idea that all of this is about fundamentally about the relationship with other people, whether that's mediated by the voice spoken words or words that are written down on a page at somebody else and later reads and what that can spark in them in in that creative way that you're describing, that free association, that is how all of these products come to be and whether or not we have hidden parts of that messy and and glorious creative process and made it look very tidy and orderly and created a nice, logical narrative for it underneath. Fundamentally, I think the thing you're describing, it's the driver of a lot of creative work, which includes a lot of what we think of as academic,

**CN** [00:22:47] Even though in the spaces in which I move the work that I do and the work that I offer to those spaces often very often looks very, very different in kind from the kind of work that's usually offered in that space. I don't think and I've said this for years, I don't think my process is all that different from what lots of people do.

**CJ** [00:23:08] You're just allowing it to show up the way that it wants to show up, not forcing it into a particular form.

**CN** [00:23:15] I'm not trying to translate it in the same ways as I was trying to translate it before or kind of sanitise it. I used to feel that I needed to argue for the validity or the value of my work in my process, and I used to be willing to do that. I no longer am willing to do that, and I'm no longer interested in that. I just assert this belongs. It's remarkable what you can accomplish when you just refuses to go away.

**CJ** [00:23:49] I know, I know very well. And it's reminding me of one of the principles on which we made our book together, which was not asking for permission from anybody. We did not seek a funding source. We didn't ask whether this would be publishable. We just made it. And now, of course, we had to be in the position of sufficient professional security in all of those senses we talked about earlier to have the privilege of being able to do that.

How does this kind of practise you're describing fit or not fit within the academic institution, the university, as we know it, as it exists today?

**CN** [00:24:32] If by academic institution, what you mean are the systems of evaluation that are used to judge whether or not we get a raise, right, whether or not we are eligible for certain kinds of promotion, certain kinds of positions, at least in my discipline, which is history. Anything that is not a single authored monograph does not count. The book I just published, it is my fourth book. My second and third were both co-authored works of short fiction that spoke to theory or poetry that was in conversation with a classic Text as our book. And they did not count. So I was not eligible for promotion until my second single authored monograph came out. And when I was in my previous job, which will which shall remain nameless. I mean every single year. And I used to podcast regularly, so I had done almost four hundred podcasts by the end of that. And I would hand in and my annual report, this cover sheet that had seventy five entries of miscellaneous

**CJ** [00:25:43] There's no category for what we do.

**CN** [00:25:45] There's not it didn't count. I had someone take me out for a drink and say to me in a way that I think was meant to make me somehow feel better. Oh but we, we now understand that podcasts are a thing. We now understand that the other stuff you do like the poetry, like the fiction, like that, that's beyond the pale. But the podcast. Yeah, like public facing scholarship because it fits in that box.

**CJ** [00:26:14] Now there's funding for that. Now that is recognised in some of ways that makes sense when you're counting research dollars

**CN** [00:26:21] because now public humanities is a marketable thing

**CJ** [00:26:25] and that just had to be people doing it and not going away for long enough.

**CN** [00:26:30] In some contexts, public humanities is translatable very readily into humanities work that solves real problems. And those real problems are real because they come from STEM, or they come from policy, or they come from politics. It's public insofar as it's relevant to public interests, and that's what makes it valuable. I have very mixed feelings about the rubric of public humanities. I super support it, but I think it's it's complicated

**CJ** [00:27:04] in as soon as something does become one of those boxes on that form that determines your worth as an academic, then it becomes parametered and exactly these ways. So these are the topics that there's a demand for of public humanities. And if you're doing one of the ones that there isn't, you still don't count. You still are not ticking the box.

**CN** [00:27:25] I do want to add a positive note, though, because I do think, as you alluded to before, I do think things are changing. Right. I just gave a talk about my most recent book, and it's a super genre bending like history fiction, really very different from a conventional history book I'll just put it that way. Seventy one people came to this talk and it was just people seem to really appreciate the fact that it was doing something different. Yeah, I feel like there is a place. Right. Clearly, there's a place.

**CJ** [00:27:59] I feel like that almost wouldn't be so much resistance to doing it if it wasn't for the fact that at some level the institution understands that if you open this door, there would be a flood. I've started teaching at the undergrad and shortly will be doing at the

grad level creative academic forms to students. So I'm seeing first hand that this is absolutely something a lot of people want to do and are extremely good at and very interestingly engaged with once given an opportunity. How do you see the future of this kind of work and are we sort of at a kind of pivotal moment, is this slow trajectory in some direction? What do you think is happening? Where are we going?

**CN** [00:28:45] I'm optimistic and I think the more of us are in positions to put our cell phone down and hold the seat for someone else. Hold this seat, hold that seat. The more of us who are in the room to hold the space and to make space for other folks who want to do this kind of kind of scholarship as an art practise, creative scholarly work, I'm optimistic. I think there is going to be more and more space for this in the future. Do I think that that's going to look dramatically different in terms of institutional metrics any time soon? The pace of institutional change tends to be glacial, but I think I'm optimistic.

**CJ** [00:29:27] This is making me feel optimistic to what you're describing. Fits into, I think, a broader structural change or reckoning that the academy is going through right now in terms of people being in this space and claiming space within the academy, in their bodies and, you know, as women, as trans people, as disabled people, as black people, as indigenous people in the space, rather than having to kind of cut out all of the identities that didn't fit the established model. The fact that one can bring one's whole self into the academy, or at least that more people are just doing it and demanding that they be recognised and taken seriously and treated with respect, not despite those things, but because of those things or as the people that they are, which includes these things. It makes sense that that comes along with bringing in other modes of how one interacts with the work, because that is part of oneself as well.

**CN** [00:30:36] We're in a world that's coming apart. Mm hmm. We're in a world that's changing, that's coming apart. We are coming apart along with it, and there needs to be space to accommodate that. However, we identify whatever our identities are or were, are becoming are changing. There needs to be space for us to decompose, to come apart. And that's not just for folks who have previously been excluded. That is also for whoever is in this space now.

**CJ** [00:31:08] I think this is necessary. These are these kinds of existential crises, whether they're personal or structural or institutional, are necessary for for change when change needs to happen

**CN** [00:31:20] and we're there we're there, we are right in the middle of it right now.

**CJ** [00:31:25] The perfect note for us to end on Carla, because my scholar cohort at the Wall Institute has been working with the theme of crisis all year. Of course, it's not coincidental that we have landed there. And so let me just wrap up by saying thank you so, so much, Carla, for this very nourishing conversation. This is the kind of conversation that nourishes me and my work, and I hope it will have that effect for others listening as well. And thanks to you, our audience, for joining us. You can find links to materials we've discussed, as well as more information about this podcast and the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at UBC on our website. If you have enjoyed this podcast, please help us to spread the word, tell someone else about it, share it on social media or rate it on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. We welcome your suggestions for future guests and themes. This episode was produced by the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies and hosted by Carrie Jenkins, one of the Wall Scholars currently in residence at the Institute. Until next time.

