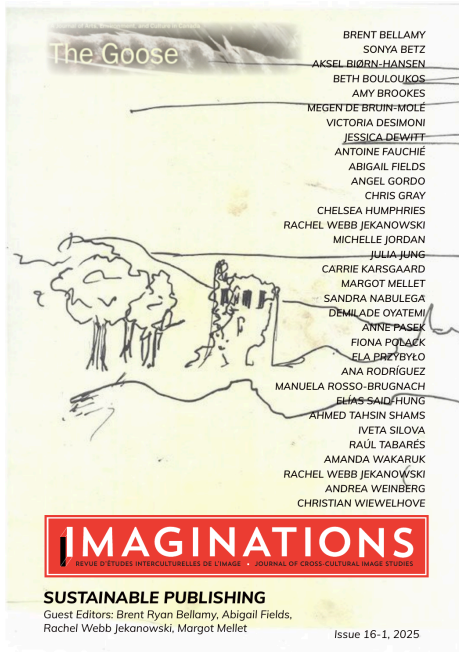


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REIMAGINING ACADEMIC PUBLISHING: COMMUNITY,
KNOWLEDGE, AND THE FUTURE BEYOND ACADEMIA

JESSICA DEWITT

I originally joined the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE) in 2014. I was in the third year of my doctorate program, when I was offered the position of social media editor. Although I was excited about the opportunity, I had no idea at that time how much this chance moment would change the trajectory of my career. Over the past decade, I found my passion: public scholarship and digital knowledge dissemination. When I finished my PhD in 2019, I made the conscious choice to leave formal academia to better focus on this passion and work adjacent to the academic institutions that no longer served me. Today, I am a NiCHE executive member and editor-in-chief of our blog, *The Otter*, and the rest of our website where our team of over twenty editors publish nearly every weekday. Although I hold other contracts, NiCHE is, as Rachel Jekanowski describes in “Editing the Environmental Humanities” (this issue), my personal “labour of love.”

NiCHE is a Canadian-based confederation of scholars of environmental history, environmental humanities, and historical geography from both within and beyond Canada. NiCHE began as a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Cluster grant project in 2004, led by Alan MacEachern. From the outset the goal of NiCHE was to mobilize knowledge through the building of community. The website and blog were only part of this, and a relatively small part in the first decade. But it has grown, particularly after the SSHRC funding ran out, and even more since 2020 and the start

of the pandemic. Our readership has more than doubled in the past decade, as have our contributor numbers. Our articles and other content are viewed around 20,000 times a month, and our annual readership in 2024 was nearly 150,000 (220,000 views). Over the past 21 years, NiCHE has become one of the premier environmental humanities publications in the world. At the core of this success is the continued commitment to community.

NiCHE's blog—or online magazine, for those, like myself, who feel we've moved beyond the 2010s term “blog”—is revered internationally and cited in academic scholarship, but continues to be undervalued by the formal academic institution.¹ We are well over a decade into the prominence of academic blogging in knowledge dissemination and democratization, and yet our institutions continue to not recognize this labour financially or in regards to promotion and hiring practices, leading these important publications to serve as symbols of academic precarity and inflexibility.

At Active History's “The Future of Knowledge Mobilization and Public History Online” workshop in August 2024 at Huron College, representatives of the leading history blogs in Canada gathered to discuss some of these issues. Participants brainstormed possible ways forward, including requiring peer review in order to gain more middle- and late-career contributors and be taken more seriously by the academy. I also attended the Sustainable Publishing Atelier in July 2024—which was attended by individuals primarily from peer-reviewed publications—where our visioning boards emphasized dreams of the end of peer review and prestige-chasing and universal open access. Ironically, having been at both events, I found that the academic blogs wanted to be more like peer-reviewed publications, while peer-reviewed publications wanted to be more like the blogs!

Two main points bind these groups of publishers together. Firstly, both groups found strength and fulfillment in community and recognized that it was this community that needed to be prioritized above all else moving forward. Secondly, for both groups, it is the very academic institutions that we rely on for funding and standing that hinder the work we want to do and the nourishment of this communi-

ty. The challenge then, for all of us, is to imagine academic publishing, and ultimately all education and knowledge-building, beyond the academy. This is no easy task. And, if taken to its final conclusion, could mean the dissolution of the academic system that currently provides structure to our disciplines and ways of being in the Western world. The disbandment of academia will, of course, not happen overnight, or perhaps never in our lifetimes, but each of us has the power, to varying degrees, to make space for the future that we want, to push back against institutional hegemony, and to prioritize, at the individual relational level, community and care.

NOTES

1. NiCHE does publish a long-form, peer-reviewed, open-access publication, *Papers in Canadian History and Environment* (PiCHE), but it accounts for only 1-3 publications per year on the website.↔