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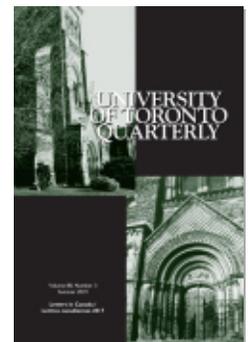
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*Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age* by  
Nicole S. Cohen (review)

Clayton Childress

University of Toronto Quarterly, Volume 88, Number 3, Summer 2019, pp.  
165-166 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press



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Nicole S. Cohen. *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age*. McGill-Queen's University Press. x, 324. \$34.95

The day before this review was filed, *Buzzfeed* cut 15 per cent of its staff. The day this review was filed, in response to a week of layoffs in journalism, *The New Yorker's* Jia Tolentino tweeted:

With every layoff it's not just the sadness of good people losing employment: it's the knowledge that for everyone that struggles to cobble together freelance [income] or has to leave the industry, there's that much less that will be documented & cross-checked ab[ou]t our crumbling ass world.

Headlines, and the examples that spring forth from them, come and go. *Writers' Rights*, Nicole Cohen's exceptionally researched and provocatively written investigation of the changing world of freelance journalism, is, and will be for a very long time, the best and most insightful investigation on this topic.

Cohen, an assistant professor in the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology at the University of Toronto Mississauga, is a former freelance journalist. The fact that she left freelancing for graduate school to find some financial stability does a lot to explain the state of journalism these days. Yet, from Cohen's work trajectory, we get the best of both worlds: an intellectual powerhouse of a researcher with the theoretical chops to move our academic conversations forward, but one who also has the experiences and lived sensibilities that allow us to inhabit the world of freelance journalism as if we have lived in it ourselves.

Relying on mixed-methods data that span Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, Cohen argues that freelance journalists are stuck in limbo; they receive neither the security and benefits of salaried employment nor the freedom of owning the intellectual property that they produce. It is no wonder that some conceptualize themselves as entrepreneurs (despite not owning the fruits of their labour), while others think of themselves as trapped in a job that does not quite exist.

In journalism, the shift to digital was accompanied by a shift to relying on freelancers. It was a form of cost-cutting that coincided with, well, the revenue cutting that also came with that shift. Like all cultural economies, shifts in remuneration lead to shifts in content. In music, when you get paid per play (as is the case with streaming) versus paid per sale (as was the case before streaming), the length of songs gets shorter, which they have. When the wealthy and the Catholic Church are the only games in town, portraits of rich people and Christian iconography will dominate art, which more or less explains the entire Italian Renaissance. When journalists do not work on salary and contracts are not always honoured upon delivery, which piece of journalism gets produced changes too. Per piece, in-depth investigative reporting is rarely, if ever, revenue generating, so it goes, despite its absolute

necessity in a well-functioning democracy; its decline may also be an early sign of how our “crumbling ass world” heads down the chute.

Working within the most useful vein of Marxist theorizing, *Writers' Rights* is not just a story of people being pushed down, but it is also a story of people collectively organizing to push back up. Doing so may be even harder than greybeard Marxists had predicted, given that the collective is spatially scattered and made up of isolated and self-employed “entrepreneurs.” In Canada, collective organization among independent entrepreneurs has worked with some success in the fine arts, and it worked in the very short term in the United States for stand-up comics in Los Angeles in the 1970s (however, as soon as immediate gains were achieved, the collective fell apart). As someone who loves jokes and loves art, I do not tend to say it loudly, but I have historically seen those things still existing without fair financial compensation for their production. We have already seen, however, that the high-fixed costs and high risks associated with in-depth investigative reporting require actual money to make them possible. For Cohen’s case, unlike these others, the stakes of collective action are impossibly higher.

*Writer’s Rights* is the best and most important book I have read this year. I will be passing it along and citing it for a long time.

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Giuseppina Iacono Lobo. *Writing Conscience and the Nation in Revolutionary England*. University of Toronto Press. x, 254. \$75.00

The English Revolution of the 1640s and 1650s might be viewed as giving violent expression to disputes over conscience that reached back at least as far as the Reformation. Was conscience a means of wider Christian fellowship or a more divisively individual self-authorization? Giuseppina Iacono Lobo offers a suggestive contribution to a growing literature with reference to both sides of the political divide, to the many-sided religious discussions of the matter, and to their literary consequences. After a preliminary survey of the issues, where she problematizes her key term “conscience,” Iacono Lobo offers chapters on the writings of King Charles I, Oliver Cromwell, and early Quakers, before turning to more familiar literary–historical readings of Thomas Hobbes, Lucy Hutchinson, and John Milton. The chapters on Hutchinson and Milton best realize the ambitions of this study.

Iacono Lobo’s deft descriptive summaries and critically inflected paraphrases yield much fuller consideration of “conscience” than of “the nation,” the other term in her title. On this evidence, Milton best answers her expectation that conscience and nation should so inform each other, and it is revealing of what is most dynamic in his thought that this should be the