

# “Side Projects”

## or Why Some People Think I’ll Never Finish my Dissertation

It’s 7 pm on a Friday night. It’s cold, dark, and probably raining.

I’m a couple of months into my research trip in Liverpool. Although there’ve been a few hiccups, everything’s going really well. People are interested in my research. They want to talk to me, sometimes for hours on end. Nearly everyone I’ve reached out to has been generous with their knowledge of the city and the people who live here.

Between archive visits and exhibit walkthroughs, I talk to people. Sometimes these oral history interviews are nicely spaced out, giving me the opportunity to spend a few dedicated hours with one person a day. After these meetings, I get to go home to transcribe the chat and reflect on the day that’s been. Other days, I’m struggling to give everyone the attention they deserve. Running from someone’s flat to get to my next meeting at a museum office in the city centre before then grabbing an evening train to get myself to London for another day full of meetings ... I’m lucky if I get to bed in time for a full night’s rest before I start it all over again the next morning.

My only break in this schedule comes on Friday night. Without fail, I find myself happily at home in my L1 attic apartment (postal codes are the best way to understand this city’s geography), waiting in front of my computer for my weekly call with Danielle Kinsey (Carleton University) and Jo McCutcheon (University of Ottawa). Sure, to be an intellectually stimulating half-hour conversation, it’ll also be a really productive one full of laughter. When we started these calls back in November, they were usually province-wide calls. Now transcontinental, they’re still full of the kind of humour that I don’t think any of us thought possible for an academic service kind of meeting. And that might be part of why we keep prioritizing them.

Maybe I should be out at a pub. I could go experience some of the nightlife that this new-to-me university town has to offer. And the restaurant scene here does have some pretty delicious meals on offer. But, when it all comes down to it, I’d rather be wrapped up in a blanket—off screen, of course—and on this call.

With its focus on the teaching and learning portfolio that I co-hold with Danielle and Jo, we brainstorm how to best direct our work at the CHA to better highlight teaching, learning, and pedagogy by historians in history classrooms across the country. We’re really proud of the developments that are coming together, especially as we get ready to release them.

The benefit that I want to focus on here, though, is just how wonderful it is to get on that call. Every Friday night, I get to speak to two brilliant historians, come up with ideas, and figure out how to put them into practice. It’s the kind of stuff that I miss from my museum days; I get to do good work with some tangible deliverables.

My role on Council as graduate student representative has been such a great opportunity this past year. Like many students before me, I get to be a small part of an organization that represents 900+ historians based in Canada. I get to bring up ideas and listen to what others around the table have to say. And that’s a huge deal

for a junior scholar—especially one who thought she left academia behind years ago.

But it’s not just because I’m graduate student representative that I get to do this kind of thing. I’ve also been co-editing a series on *Active History*. There may not be a weekly call with Krista McCracken (Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre) on the other end, but there has been a constant email stream of pitches to screen and posts to edit. In between our own immediate work, we’re trying to make space for others to discuss the work that museums do as integral to, not divergent from, the work that historians do.

Our fields may not exactly match. And we’d probably be hard-pressed to cite each other’s work in our own. But all of these scholars across both of these projects have been collaborative supports for me.

These side projects aren’t an easy thing to do. That’s especially true, I think, when you’re a PhD candidate working your way through the research, writing, and defense of that unfinished dissertation that’s forever hanging over your head. When you narrowly focus on your dissertation, nothing else seems to be *as important as the work you’re doing*, does it?

But I think that’s the wrong way to look at it.

My dissertation is not why I’m doing my PhD. It’s not why I’m a historian. It’s my current focus. It’s what I spend the bulk of my time doing right now. But it’s not all that I am doing.

Being a historian gives you this wide network of people who are valuable in about a hundred different ways. These calls and emails have, of course, taken me away from my Liverpool-based research. But they’ve also created products that, I hope, will be useful for other historians, whether they be emerging scholars or senior researchers. And, selfishly, these projects have forced me to take breaks in my strict research schedule. Doing so allows me to return to my own work refreshed, oftentimes with new questions to ask.

These side projects are not distractions; they’re actually making me a better historian.

Carly Ciuffo