

## ASA News, Spring 2021

### Pandemic Publishing Interview: Michigan State University Press' Caitlin Tyler-Richards

#### 1. How has the pandemic and the broad suspension of in person events impacted publishing?

Scholarly publishing has faced many of the same struggles as other industries, especially those tied to academia. Editors have had to turn their homes into offices; and opportunities for quick or spontaneous conversations have become non-existent. Processes like peer review and manuscript revision have slowed down due to others' overwhelming obligations. There has also been a significant drop in print book sales, and the usual print and distribution networks have been severely disrupted. Fortunately, most presses have weathered the storm successfully, and hopefully many of the wider industry issues will improve as things get back to normal. Then again, it's hard to tell when that will be or what "normal" will even look like. It might be more accurate to say we are only just starting to see how the pandemic has impacted publishing.

On a more positive note, the pandemic has brought some changes to publishing that may bode well for the industry's future. There has been an increase in ebook sales (for this reason, presses are in better shape than, say, brick-and-mortar bookstores), and greater opportunities for entry-level remote work, which means one doesn't have to move to an expensive city to get publishing experience. Also, the switch to videoconferences has facilitated more global scholarly interactions and events. For publishers, this has helped significantly in ongoing efforts to not only seek authors everywhere, but also to identify partners who can help make (locally published) books physically and financially accessible to interested scholars everywhere.

#### 2. What have been the publishing trends that you've seen over the last year? What trends are you most excited about?

Regarding trends in publishing, I am excited to see more presses take an interest in digital publishing and in digital-born and multimedia projects. Thanks to MSU's longstanding commitment to digital scholarship, I can reach out to any number of organizations and individuals on campus for technical advice. However, it is great to be able to talk through editorial issues with other book people. There also seems to be growing institutional support, which will hopefully encourage more scholars to pursue digital projects.

Also, while it is too early to call it a trend, I do think publishers have started taking more seriously their internalization of and participation in anti-Black and imperialist systems. Only time will tell if this translates to actual change. In the meantime, I appreciate that pieces like

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Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ's "White Privilege in African Studies: When You Are Done, Please Call Us" and "The Unbearable Whiteness of Publishing' Revisited" by Shelly Romero and Adriana M. Martínez Figueroa are finding platforms.

If we're discussing publishing trends in African Studies, I would say there is a ton to be excited about. For one, there seems to be a real blossoming in non-western transregional studies, including more intra-Africa comparative studies, more Critical Cold War studies, and deeper investigations into Sino-African relations. I am intrigued by the new approaches scholars across a number of disciplines are taking to built and natural environments, and look forward to some great environmental histories and ecocriticisms in the near future. I am also thrilled to see African queer, African futurist and African DH studies developing into distinct lines of inquiry.

**3. Since we still aren't able to get together, how have book pitches changed and what should our members know about the process?**

It is true the transition to virtual conferences has eliminated the exhibit hall, one of the best venues for pitching scholarly books. However, the actual proposal process hasn't changed much. If you are interested in submitting a proposal to a press, visit its website to see what its proposal submission process is. If you are considering multiple presses or are unsure if your project is a good fit for a particular press, consider sending a query letter to the editor that acquires in your field first. If you are interested in more guidance, I highly recommend the Association of University Presses' new website: Ask UP (<https://ask.up.hcommons.org/>).

**4. What new projects are you working on that the African Studies community should be on the lookout for?**

I only joined MSU Press in October 2020, so I am in the early stages of talking to authors about some great projects. So stay tuned on that front! In the meantime, I invite the African Studies community to join me in getting to know MSU Press's African Studies list, including our three African-focused series: African Humanities and the Arts; African History and Culture; and Ruth Simms Hamilton African Diaspora. I also welcome contact from community members working on born-digital projects or books with significant multimedia elements. Proposals for traditional manuscripts are also welcome!