Allegra Swift: Please state your name, department, and institution.

Char Miller: My name is Char Miller. I’m the W.M. Keck Professor of Environmental Analysis at Pomona College.

AS: What’s your research area, and are your publications and scholarship online?

CM: My research is multifold—I’m an environmental historian by practice, a cultural historian by profession, or at least by training. And so I look at a couple of places, one of which is urban landscapes and their relationship to the larger natural systems in which they fit. One of those larger natural systems is the mountains, streams, rivers and the like that flow out of many of the national forests in the United States. So I spend a lot of time writing about the U.S. Forest Service, about public lands in general, earthquakes, dams, it doesn’t really matter, I love these kinds of issues. And my research is online—some of it is in blog form and thus available in that way, some of it is pure scholarship (much more boring, but out there!), and so I use scholarship.claremont.edu as one of the sites where I locate pieces that would probably never get read outside of five people I know.

AS: What are the benefits to being a public scholar? You mentioned people reading it that don’t usually have access. Who else do you want to reach?

CM: One of the reasons why I love writing for a larger public is driven by my mother, who kept reading my early scholarship and going “ok, uh huh” and “who’s reading this?” and “why are they reading it?” and “can you think about different ways of writing?” So I credit her with kicking me in the butt to think about not just the academic piece that I was obviously trained to do, but to think about ways in which those ideas that academics generate could actually work their way into a broader conversation with a broader readership. So for me one of the lucky, lucky things in my life was that I started to have these conversations with myself in the mid-1980’s at exactly the moment in which newspapers were starting to open up their editorial pages—and I went “oh, there’s people.” And so I started experimenting writing commentary and op-eds for (I was living in San Antonio at the time) the San Antonio Express News and the San Antonio Light, and then branched out from there so that I got a feel for how one wrote for an audience in a 500 words, inverted paragraph form, where you put everything at the beginning where in an academic piece everything is at the end—it was a different way of doing it. So some of this is about training (self-training), some of it is a conviction that academics really have an obligation to the broader public to speak to them. And that’s something that many historians feel—not everybody does it but many of us feel that what we do may not matter in some bigger sense but we can actually enter into cultural conversations, public discourse, because we can frame things. We understand many of the contexts in which the contemporary debates are unfolding because they’re linked to those things in the past.
**AS:** What has been your experience or interaction with online undergraduate research?

**CM:** The way in which many of my colleagues have made this transition into a public dialogue began to influence what I was thinking about with my students. Until I got to Claremont (or returned to Claremont—I was a student at Pitzer in the 70’s and now I’m back as a full-time member of the faculty) I can tell you where my thesis is, which I wrote in 1974-75: it’s in a file cabinet, and no one has read it outside of me and the three people who were my readers. My son, who graduated from Pomona in 2003, I can tell you where his thesis is: it’s in a file cabinet that no one has read outside of his readers, and his loving parents. My students are required to put their theses online through scholarship.claremont.edu because I don’t want these ideas languishing in a file cabinet, sitting on a shelf with no one reading it. Students have worked their butts off for a full year, in some cases, half a year in others, and what they come up with is pretty important. And so part of it is just to get their ideas out. Part of it is also that those ideas and those who generate those ideas need to be held accountable for those ideas! You can’t just say things and pop it in a shelf, it really needs to go out into the world so that people can critique it—not only just read it, absorb it, and think about it but also go “oh wait a second, why’d you reach that conclusion?” and have that kind of conversation. So I think part of the lucky convergence of things is scholarship.claremont.edu emerged at the exact same time that the EA program at Pomona was thinking about how to make our students more responsible as writers, more accountable as writers, more transparent as thinkers, and also to give them a venue in which their ideas can go into action. And so if you look on the website and you watch the ways in which their pieces are being downloaded, I have no idea what anybody in Ghana or elsewhere is thinking about when they’re reading it, but they’re reading it. And the students, often as alumni, are looking at that and thinking more pride about their work. So for example, one of the things that was really interesting was that in this Spring in 2017 the EA program was having its external review in which outside readers were coming in, and one of the links we sent them was scholarship.claremont.edu and said “go look at our students theses”—they were blown away, case made, the students are doing serious work. But the other part of that is that when we asked prior to the external examiners coming all of our alumni, about 270 of them over the last decade, to respond to a series of questions one of which is “what do you remember of your experience as a thesis writer” and doing clinic projects that we also require of them. And almost to a woman and man they came back saying it was the best experience they’d ever had, and part of that, I’m convinced, is they had to go through this pretty rigorous process where they had to own up to what they were thinking. That blew my colleagues away, who had not been as closely attached to this because I teach the class so I can see some of that. But it’s the reflective notion that really captures my attention—that five years later, seven years later, they’re going that was the turning point for me, whether they go to graduate school or not, that that was the most significant thing they ever did in college. That’s pretty good.
**AS:** Have you ever published with student co-authors, and why?

**CM:** One of the interesting things about publications in history is that one never publishes with anybody else, it’s always solo authored, and that’s conceived of and prioritized and privileged as the ultimate expression of scholarship. But once I started doing this work in the Environmental Analysis Program which is a far more collaborative field in some ways, much more like the sciences than the humanities, I started to recognize that, wait my students are doing really interesting work—somebody needs to help them get their stuff out, not just on scholarship.claremont.edu but maybe in broader venues. I’ve just started this process: so Ben Hackenberger, who graduated from EA in 2015 from Pomona, he and I have a piece coming out this week in the Journal of Urban History that started its life as a seminar paper in one of my classes in the Fall of 2014. He morphed that into his thesis in a bigger sense, and then we went back to that original essay, looked at it as the base of an argument about water in this valley, in the Pomona Valley in Southern California, and I attached a beginning and an ending and wove other pieces into it as part of a special issue for the Journal of Urban History on water. And it’s got this comparative component of Australia and the U.S., and it turns out that the Chaffee brothers, who were crucial to the creation of Ontario, California, went to Australia, so that was the hook of the ten essays, thinking about this technological transfer. But Ben’s piece really set up a different kind of argument that I hadn’t seen elsewhere, and so we played around with it and it was accepted and it’s about to come out. Anna Kramer, who graduated last year in EA at Pomona has a phenomenal piece—her thesis was absolutely spectacular—and she and I (she’s coming into town today) are going to work on ways in which she can transform her thesis into an article, a solo-authored article. But I’m beginning to recognize that this is a lot of fun! You can start to work with alumni so they don’t go away and you still have that close relationship. But it’s also a professional one and it’s a professionalizing one, so that part of it is that I get to share what I can understand about the broader world of publishing and they get their feet wet in the process.

**AS:** How would an undergraduate benefit from having their scholarship online?

**CM:** Among the many benefits of publishing online for an undergraduate is that they have to go through a pretty rigorous process of self-analysis. That is to say, look at what you’ve written, know that somebody else is going to be reading it—and not just me, not just the grader—and that you’re not just doing this for the grade, you’re doing this for the ideas that you have generated, to show people the kind of research that you’re capable of, and the ways in which you can make a set of arguments that somebody wants to read: in short, to be persuasive. So I think, as it is for the faculty, it’s a moment in which you get to look at yourself in the mirror and go, “really, that’s what you think?” and have that process unfold. It’s really valuable just as a writer to recognize that what you put on a page matters a lot because somebody else is going
to read it, somebody else you don’t know. The other reason to do it I think is also in this professionalizing mode, that it gets you used to writing for audiences that you don’t know. To try to reach them in various ways, but to reach them in a way that is at once beneficial, that’s smart, that’s effective, that’s efficient in terms of the writing process. But also that you recognize that you’re engaged in a dialogue with a public—maybe even globally, and if you watch the map (which is really cool) for scholarship.claremont.edu you can watch these blips go off around the globe—and that your ideas matter, but you have to be careful about them, you have to make sure that your illustrations have permissions, you have to realize that you better footnote this in some way or other so that people can follow your trail. And what we’ve found in EA is that it has forced our students to write better theses, and in the end that, from the program’s point of view, is a real plus, from the students’ point of view that’s a plus in addition to the fact that it helps them when they go off and apply to graduate school—they can direct the graduate school to their thesis. And so I’m working with a student right now who’s going to do a poster session at the Environmental History Conference later this month in Chicago, I’m setting her up with colleagues from around the country who are really interested in the kind of work that she’s doing, and I made sure that her resume has her thesis with the click on that takes them directly to it because I said “look at what this does!” It makes it so easy for them to see why they should give you a lot of money to come to graduate school. It’s pretty practical.

**AS:** Who else benefits? I’m thinking global as well as local, so thinking of K-12, the public, your institution.

**CM:** One of the other set of benefits that come from things like scholarship.claremont.edu is that we’re now a hub—we’re a repository for ideas which did not exist. If every thesis, every faculty scholarship was tucked away in some archive or other, some journal that no one could read behind a pay wall or whatever it is, who would care that we’ve done that work? Well, if the faculty post their material up on Scholarship, if the students post their material up on Scholarship, if group projects go up there, then suddenly Claremont is more than just an idea—it is actually generating ideas that can go out to communities, to regions, to states (in the case of the United States), and then broadly around the world, and I think that has huge consequences. We become a generator of ideas and notions and knowledge—we produce knowledge! It means that we’re producing knowledge not just for the twenty of us who belong to a particular society or bother to read it’s journal but for a much broader audience, and I think that’s invaluable. It’s a way to share information, it makes that information accessible, it makes the process of scholarship, however defined, much more democratic. And that to me is absolutely essential in a time in which the democracy of ideas is being challenged by those who say that ideas don’t matter, that science is bunk, that the past doesn’t have any hold on us when the past is everywhere around us. So it’s a way to be political about what you do, but it’s
also a way to be engaged in this much bigger conversation that is hugely important about why knowledge is critical.

**AS:** How do you respond to concerns, say, for lack of quality or not having a digital footprint, or being scooped?

**CM:** There are a lot of counterarguments to everything I’ve just said, some of which is that, “well, students don’t know what they’re doing so why should we put their names out there to embarrass us?” It’s okay. That there’s a quality issue, that there’s a control issue, that there are possibilities of our ideas—that is to say the faculty’s ideas—being scooped by other people because they can see those ideas reflected in the students’ work. Okay: put your name on it. It’s real simple as a mechanism by which to make sure that other people cite you. And the way in which scholarship.claremont.edu is set up means it’s copyrighted, so the ideas are, in fact, protected. But I would also argue, and sympathetically with my colleagues in the sciences who I understand might have had NSF grants and so there are all sorts of protocols that define what they can do and how they can publish and the like while the humanities, as I am, have a very different feel about this—but I think in the end, the question of accessibility, the question of transparency, and the urgent need, especially now, the urgent need to get our ideas out there as ways to combat those who don’t believe ideas matter at all is absolutely essential. And that’s as true in the sciences and mathematics and computer sciences as it is in the humanities and the social sciences. We have a moral obligation to produce scholarship that can help change the world. Well you can’t hide that in a journal, because it’s never going to get out. And so that’s one of the reasons why scholarship.claremont.edu is so important.

**AS:** Just one more question, this is off-script because you were talking a bit about publication and your experience with non-traditional publication and I was just thinking of EnviroLab Asia and the publications that have been coming out of that. What do you think the benefit is to give undergraduates that opportunity to publish not only in traditional forms like journals and these theses but in these other kinds of way of communicating scholarship that maybe aren’t seen as scholarly or traditional?

**CM:** The Claremont Colleges received an exploratory grant from the Luz Foundation a couple of years ago for a project called EnviroLab Asia. One component of that was for us to get to Asia to see, in this case, the deforestation processes that produced palm oil that then goes into our Girl Scout cookies and things like that. Part of the Luz Foundation’s ambition was for us to take Environmental Studies and start to integrate into that curriculum Asian issues, and for Asian Studies to start to integrate environmental concerns into their curriculum—and it’s worked brilliantly. But part of what we didn’t anticipate was the way in which we would ultimately realize that the writing-up of this process would be really crucial for the students and faculty to experiment with different ways of writing. So, for example, one of the things we encouraged
the students who went off on our clinic project to Malaysia, Borneo and Singapore to do was to write short essay reflections—blog posts, effectively—which we then posted up online as a way to get them out in the world and, again, sort of transparent. Write about the things that matter to you—we also said that to the faculty. We got these amazing pieces from people who are, I'll call them staid scholars (tended to be), and suddenly they realized that the boundaries could be broken and they could write in a different voice—very exciting. And so then we’re sitting around one day going “Well we’ve got all this material, why don’t we think about a different way of publishing it?” And our first idea, classic academics, let’s do a book—a hardcover thing that will sit on a shelf that no one will read. But then we got a little smarter about that, and began to think about the ways in which the Digital Tool Shed in Claremont and using new things like Scalar, other models like this, might actually allow us to take this kind of scholarship, this kind of writing, and reimagine “the book” in a way that would allow us to present this material in a fluid manner in which we have musical compositions, we will have illustrations, we have a photo journalist writing a piece for us who was on the trip, we have all of these blog post-like essays that have all been revised already, and then we’re going to have a series of more scholarly pieces in which faculty and students collaborate. And so when this thing ultimately gains its publication, it’s going to be a very interesting and very unusual project for any of us, because it grew out of this idea that literally grew away from the notion of the book as an object to the book as this living, breathing, and continually growing concept that will allow us not only to post our ideas but allow other people outside the project to post responses to our ideas and sort of grow the conversation. And I think that’s really exciting, and we can only do that now because we have the digital means by which to do it. What we need is the imagination to carry us forward that allows us to understand that those digitizing processes actually can liberate us from old models.