

Discoursing the Grateful Dead: Scholars, Fans, and the 2020 Meeting of Southwest Popular/ American Culture Association

Nicholas G. Meriwether

The Haight Street Art Center

San Francisco, CA, USA

nicholasmeriwether@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Academic conferences serve many functions but at heart they are pedagogical enterprises, designed to teach, share, and refine knowledge. This paper uses the 2020 meeting of the Grateful Dead area of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association to explore some of the issues and challenges that define the pedagogical and scholarly work of a conference section. The 2020 meeting offers a useful lens for discussing the area's contributions and problems within the larger framework and history of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association and the broader field of Grateful Dead studies. The experience of the Dead area illustrates issues in conference dynamics and organization as well as in the development of discourse communities, especially those with popular constituencies.

Keywords: Conference organization; popular culture studies; media fandom; Grateful Dead studies; discourse communities.

In 2020, the Grateful Dead area of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association held its twenty-third meeting, part of the larger organization's forty-first conference. Both events represented achievements, given the swiftly changing currents of academe and popular culture. This themed issue of *Dialogue* offers an opportunity to reflect on the area's meeting and assess its contributions to and relationships with the communities it serves, from the informal group it represents to the larger conference that hosts it. As an interdisciplinary scholarly conference area, the group's scholarship is fundamentally pedagogical, not only teaching its participants and spectators about its subject but also developing a praxis that facilitates the daunting challenge of communicating across diverse disciplinary divides. That challenge extends more broadly as well: as an area defined by the larger conference's focus on popular culture, the area has also had to address the divide between professional and nonprofessional, and scholar and fan. While conference assessments usually do not focus on a single area, the Dead area has a sufficiently well-defined focus and established history to merit discussion. The 2020 meeting was noteworthy for two additional reasons: it was the last to feature a printed program, a rarity for any conference area, as well as the last one held prior to the incorporation of the Grateful Dead Studies Association, an organization established by area participants to address issues the area could not address. Those events also make the forty-first SWPACA conference a useful lens for surveying the work of the area and the issues it has faced.

Although earlier meetings of the Dead area have been reviewed, primarily in various publications associated with the area, no review has appeared since 2014, and none have appeared in a mainstream academic journal.¹ Rather than provide a typical conference review, focused on papers and sessions, this essay approaches the area pedagogically, discussing its contributions and problems as a conference area and scholarly community. My perspective is subjective, as someone who has presented papers to the Caucus regularly since its second meeting and served as chair or co-chair of the area for fifteen meetings, though my thoughts have benefitted from oral histories conducted with four other chairs, an email survey of area participants in 2019, and extensive feedback from presenters and guests over the years, both at the conference and via email and telephone afterwards. While the area has grown and evolved during its perhaps surprisingly long tenure, the problems it has faced have been recurrent and in many ways emblematic, ranging from interdisciplinarity and rigor to diversity and inclusion, issues complicated by its appeal to fans. More broadly, the experience of the Dead area usefully raises issues in conference dynamics and organization as well as in the development of scholarly discourse communities, especially those with popular constituencies.

CONFERENCES AS RESEARCH SITES

Assessments of conference areas are rare, but that lacuna is part of a larger void. Conference reviews are common but closer analyses remain challenging, as one recent study observed. "Conferences are actually so self-evident that very little research exists analysing what takes place at conferences, why people attend them in the first place, and essentially what the conference does to delegates as participants" (Edelheim et al., "What Do Conferences Do?" 94)

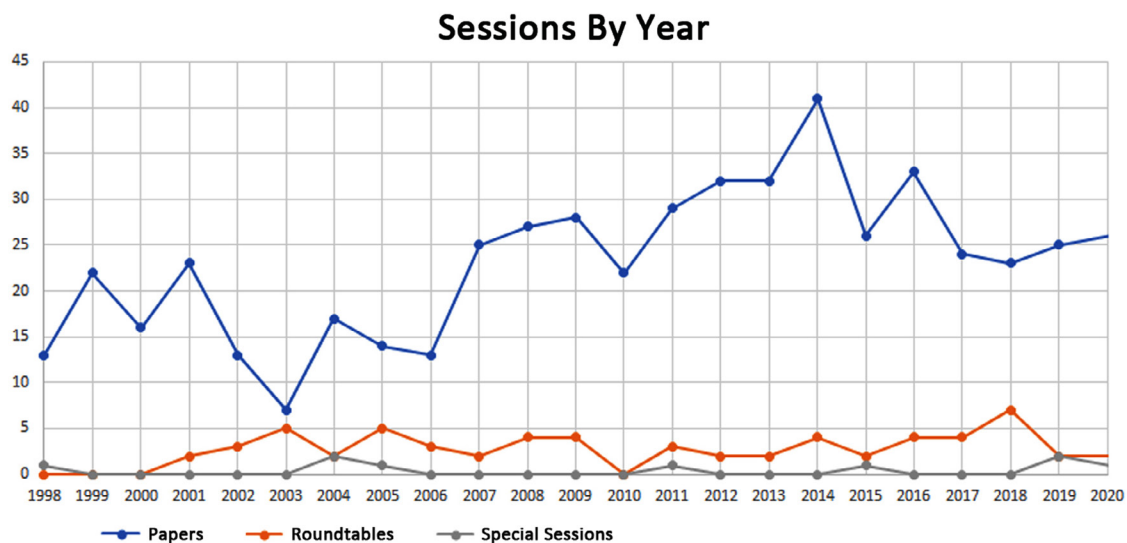
Researchers cite "the well-recognised emotional and social processes of conferences" (Henderson, "Academic Conferences" 914), but note that the work to understand those processes remains in its infancy. That complaint is not new. Fifteen years ago, researchers pointed out that "Little attention has been paid either to developing a theoretically informed understanding of conference practice as knowledge building, or to assessing the extent to which conferences are successful" (Jacobs and McFarlane, "Conferences As Learning Communities" 317). This essay suggests that areas or subject-themed sections of conferences offer fertile subjects for developing that understanding by linking the work of areas to the larger conference, acknowledging "the importance of recognising the connection between micro and macro-scale analyses of higher education" (Henderson, "Academic Conferences" 914).

Assessing specific areas can also contribute to the discussion of how to improve conferences in general, a need scholars throughout the academy cite (Glassberg, Pritchard, and Gunter, “Public Discussion”). But areas can also usefully clarify how the broader mission and domain of a conference translates into discourse—after all, both area and conference are scholarly discourse communities, served by the same event, and that common ground defines both. As one researcher explained, “Planned events can be considered as texts, conveying and interpreting the social order of a community. Academic conferences and conventions also represent a community; they convey and interpret the *academic* community’s social order” (Walters, “Gender Equality”). The idea of social order is a useful way of approaching the Grateful Dead area, as the 2020 meeting shows. That meeting, and the history of the area, showcases how these two discourse communities navigate broadly shared pedagogical missions and events.

THE GRATEFUL DEAD AREA

The Grateful Dead area first convened at the 1998 meeting of the Southwest/Texas Popular/American Culture Association, as it was then called, and remains one of the major areas comprising the SWPACA conference today. That status owes as much to individuals as it does to any scholarly foundation, although the establishment of the area did fit broadly into the mission of the regional popular culture associations. After the formation of the Popular Culture Association in 1969, regional associations followed in the 1970s. These were “an integral part” of the larger push to make a place for popular culture studies in the academy, as founder Ray Browne believed: “The thinking behind the regional associations is a kind of grass-roots, or near grass-roots approach” (Browne, *Mission Underway* 100). The Midwest Popular Culture Association was the first regional organization, launched in 1973; the Southwest/Texas organization held its first meeting in 1979. Providing forums for regional topics with narrower constituencies was one goal of the regional organizations, but their proliferation also allowed niche subjects with no discernible ties to any one region to flourish as well. That explains how a topic like the Grateful Dead could find support among the officers of the Southwest/Texas PACA, despite the band’s tenuous connections to the region. The area waxed and waned over the years, but since 2003, it has been one of the larger areas; Fig. 1 documents the papers, roundtables, and special sessions from the first meeting through 2020, showing an increase over time of papers that spiked in 2014.

Fig. 1. Grateful Dead Area Papers, Roundtables and Special Sessions, 1998–2020



The 2020 meeting continued that trend. There are a maximum of 16 sessions in the SWPACA schedule and the Dead area filled 13; that number does not include two evening sessions that could have been slotted as regular sessions, given their topics, a listening session and a hootenanny, which other areas host as regular sessions. The size of the SWPACA and of the Dead section makes comparing areas difficult. That is true of other areas as well: several of the older areas have their own characters, and one of the largest, “Game Studies, Culture, Play, and Practice,” even devotes its final session to a business meeting. The Dead area’s character and size tend to make its conference experience both all-consuming and self-contained, which also tends to isolate it from the rest of the conference.

Broad metrics provide some context. The SWPACA has 71 areas, 69 of which met at the 2020 meeting. These ranged from single sessions with only two papers to the two largest areas, with 16 sessions and 54 papers, respectively. The majority were far smaller: 42 areas held between 1 and 3 sessions. The Grateful Dead area hosted 27 papers in 13 sessions, including one roundtable and one special session, making it one of the largest. Only three areas hosted more sessions, and only four featured more papers: “Esotericism and Occultism” with 16 sessions and 23 papers; “Creative Writing (Poetry, Fiction, Non-Fiction)” with 8 sessions and 29 papers; “Game Studies, Culture, Play, and Practice” with 15 sessions and 54 papers; “Pedagogy and Popular Culture” with 15 sessions and 31 papers; and “Women, Gender, and Sexuality” with nine sessions and 30 papers. Of single-themed areas, the Dead is the largest: “Harry Potter Studies” fielded five sessions and eleven papers, and “Whedonverses: Creators and Texts,” devoted to the works of Joss Whedon, hosted only three papers and two sessions, one of which was a singalong. The Dead area was also larger than the other music area, “Music: Traditional, Political, Popular,” which, despite its more general purview, had just 5 sessions and 15 papers.

Presentations in the Dead area tend to fall into two overarching categories: microcosmic analyses that focus on themes, elements, and individual songs, recordings, and concerts, and broader treatments that link the band’s music and its reception to larger issues or frame them in broader contexts. While most work presented to the Caucus frames Dead studies in larger disciplinary terms, the group also recognizes the importance of microcosmic efforts. These can be scholarly, but they also tend to be where amateurs can make substantive contributions. Musicologists have long recognized the potentially valuable role that fan efforts can provide, for example (Harker, “Taking Fun Seriously”), but the area’s recognition of such efforts, and their origins outside of the academy, have also hampered recognition of the area and contributed to the dismissal of its work (Weir, “Tie-Dye and Flannel Shirts” 138). More thoughtful assessments disagree, even if they admit that the discourse remains largely isolated from popular music and cultural studies scholarship (Flory, “Liveness” 124).

That status—and those relationships—provide the ultimate context for judging the area and its work, but the area is also self-critical, a quality honed by its longevity and continuity. Feedback on the 2020 meeting indicated that most participants found the majority of papers to be thoughtful and useful, reactions that dovetailed with the results of the 2019 survey. That survey codified the informal feedback process that chairs had developed over the years, with questions that directly assessed the caliber of presentations (“Overall, how strong (well prepared and rigorous) do you think the papers and presentations were?”), and their utility (“How useful were the papers, presentations, and sessions to your understanding of Dead studies?”; “If you are an academic professional, how useful was the Dead area for your work?”). For the 2019 meeting, those results skewed high: respondents ranked papers highly, all from 7 to 10 (on a 1 to 10 scale) with most ranked 8; likewise, all were deemed useful for their work and understanding of the discourse, almost half of respondents ranking the papers as a 10, or highly useful, with a 77.5% response rate.

Scholars saw a greater range in rigor in the papers for the 2020 meeting. These critiques were pointed, though most scholars take the variability of contributions in stride, viewing it as a function of the conference: the study of popular culture has always been an uneven field. The Dead area reflects that explicitly: indeed, it grapples with some of the larger definitional and methodological issues that have bedeviled popular culture

studies since the 1960s. Those can also be seen in the conference as a whole. Some papers and sessions, even entire areas, could easily fit into more discipline-specific or more narrowly defined conferences, such as film studies, folklore, or gender studies. For the Dead area, some literary and musicological papers could have easily fit discipline-specific conferences, and two were in fact better suited for other areas.

That ambiguity is also a function of the group's multidisciplinary nature, itself a function of the broader conference domain as well as a distinctive quality of the discourse of Grateful Dead studies. Indeed, from a wider professional standpoint, the group's approach to the challenge of interdisciplinary conversation is one of the area's real achievements. Most area participants share the belief that the nature of the subject itself requires many disciplines to effectively study it. That democratic view has produced some remarkable examples of interdisciplinarity, conversations that participants have singled out as rare or even impossible in other venues. Discussions at past conferences have candidly addressed disciplinary divides that in other forums would likely devolve into rancor; this year, a clash between how historians and religious studies scholars view aspects of new religious movements could easily have produced acrimony, given the debate's roots in foundational tenets and core disciplinary values. Instead, these differences were resolved in informal conversation after sessions and at social events, and the scholars involved have gone on to work together on a joint project.

That kind of difficult but ultimately fruitful cross-disciplinary conversation represents the group's discussion at its best, often called the highlight of the conference by academic professionals. Not all of that discussion is as productive, especially when it involves participants who are not academic professionals. A frequent complaint this year and in years past was the distraction of irrelevant commentary by attendees who are not scholars; this year, one sought to interject irrelevant remarks at every single session, exasperating most participants and all but destroying the discussion for many.

Sessions were not the only aspect of the conference that unprofessional behavior affected. An integral aspect of the conference is its social dimension, a vital component of all conferences as well as an organic aspect of the subject: the Dead phenomenon was in many ways defined by the concert experience, a social occasion. That attitude also stemmed from the larger understanding of popular music studies, which scholars have suggested should be leavened by a sense of fun (Harker, "Taking Fun Seriously"). For many area participants, the social aspects of the meeting provided a critical part of their conference experience; that was deliberate—indeed, the effort required to plan those events is comparable to work for the more formal academic component of the conference. For planners, that has been an organic response to the needs of the area, but it also addresses what planners and theorists have decried as the limitations of the traditional, "passive" model of academic conferences, a format criticized for its lack of meaningful interaction (Verbeke, "Designing Academic Conferences"). The Dead area's social functions are part of an informal but deliberate strategy of breaking down those passive, typical aspects of conference organization in order to allow for exactly the kind of meaningful interaction that theorists have called for, requiring "different methods of stimulating the construction of knowledge by conference participants" that scholars consider "very valuable for consolidating knowledge and envisioning future developments in a discipline" (Verbeke, "Designing Academic Conferences" 98).

That strategy has included other efforts as well, some academic, some Deadhead. At the second meeting, the idea of proceedings emerged, and in time, the area program took on those qualities. The program for the 2020 meeting was 118 pages, documenting the presentations, sessions and schedule as well as providing several essays and features. Starting with the area's tenth meeting, posters commemorating the conference emerged as a popular keepsake for participants, not only advertising the area but connecting the group's work to the Deadhead appreciation for concert posters. Both projects proved ultimately unsustainable, however, due to the group's inability to organize a way to fund them. Both efforts were appreciated, even prized, yet the burden for them exceeded the ability of an area to sustain, and 2020 marked their conclusion.

To a large extent, this was a function of the group's status as an area: even the nickname of the group, the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, is a nod to that lack of organization, but that characteristic produced a dynamic that precluded the establishment of even an informal organization to share expenses, provide administration, or ensuring continuity. Indeed, when the idea of creating a more formal structure was discussed at one meeting, it was dropped at the insistence of two participants, neither of whom contributed to the area's administration or expenses. Although a few generous participants usually made donations, and some costs were recouped by charging for posters and eventually for programs, the area never covered its expenses, leaving the chair responsible for the deficit. In early years, that rarely amounted to more than a few hundred dollars, but in later years, it could exceed several thousand. This is a common problem in smaller conferences; the same issue damaged the Midwest PCA in its formative years (Browne, *Mission Underway* 104).

The Midwest PCA's experience highlights the greater challenge that organization presents for areas that operate within larger conferences. For small groups, that challenge is not just to establish practices that promote their own discourse but ones that also support and extend the goals of the larger conference. The Dead area's efforts worked well when it came to social events such as the group's hootenanny, which reflected the inherent democratic musicality of the subject of the group's work as well as the inclusivity the SWPACA prized. But the group's efforts to create an organizational structure were unsuccessful. That failure was not necessarily fatal: many areas of the SWPACA are active, long-running groups with their own distinctive histories and character. But the Dead area's inability to organize itself went beyond a failure to fund and sustain activities, it also produced fissures and problems, some of which proved intractable.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Conference organizations work hard to avoid such issues, especially when they point to larger problems with diversity. Inclusion and diversity are prominent parts of the research on conferences (Walters, "A Tripartite Approach"). Scholars have identified the academic conference setting as "an important site for understanding the implications of outsider-ness" (Oliver and Morris, "(Dis-)Belonging Bodies" 765), and that work has singled out conferences, especially large ones, for failing to create inclusive environments. "The academy frequently claims that it is a champion of social justice and diversity," two scholars observed in 2017. "But the academic conference business underscores the hypocrisy of this claim" (Kirchherr and Biswas, "Expensive Academic Conferences"). Some of this can be traced to the tendency of conference environments to reinforce homophily; while that can reinforce a sense of community, it can also exclude, hampering diversity (Atzmueller and Lemmerich, "Homophily at Academic Conferences"). The broader lessons, however, are critical.

Researchers have found that academic conferences tend to reflect the norms and values of their sponsoring organizations, in both structure and dynamics (Egri, "Academic Conferences as Ceremonials"). Here the SWPACA deserves credit: its commitment to equity is reflected in its mission statement and reified by its code of conduct ("About"; "Code"). The 2020 meeting reflected those ideals: "Women, Gender, and Sexuality" was one of the largest areas and at least seven other areas had papers and sessions that represented women's studies, from "Computer Culture" to "Religion." The Dead area reflected this as well, fielding a session on "Feminist Studies and the Grateful Dead," one of several it has hosted over the years. Conference governance also demonstrates that commitment: all of the executive staff of the SWPACA are women, several of whom also serve as area chairs. In all, 35 area chairs are women, or more than half of the areas in 2020 (although that number includes a few areas that also have assistant chairs as well as a few small areas that share chairs).

The SWPACA also strives to be racially and ethnically inclusive. Three subject areas explicitly address race: "African American/Black Studies," which hosted two sessions and four papers at the 2020 meeting; "Chicano/a Literature, Film, and Culture," with five sessions and 18 papers; and "Native American / Indigenous Studies," with four sessions and 14 papers. Race was a theme in several other areas as well, such as "Rap and

Hip-Hop Culture” with four sessions and nine papers, and nine other areas hosted papers in which race was an explicit focus of a session.

One reason for that diversity is the conference’s strategy for preventing bias. Area chairs are instructed not to reject proposals but to alert the program director, who arranges for an alternate session. While that eliminates rejection rate as a metric for the conference’s exclusivity, this policy can be defended as integral to the SWPACA’s mission: popular culture is holistic, and issues of inclusivity, diversity, and equity are fundamental to its formulation. Open acceptance offers a defense against bias that selection metrics might incur. That is especially critical if participant demographics are less than representative.

It is more difficult for areas to reflect the larger organization’s diversity and the Dead area’s record reflects that. Women have presented at the Dead area every year since its inception and are among the most frequent participants. At the 2020 meeting, women gave one-third of the papers. Area leadership consists of a chair with two informal standing committees, for the program and the events; one woman has served as co-chair, and in committee representation, women and men serve equally and have since the committees were first convened. While the area has addressed race directly in a few presentations, only two Native American scholars have presented, and only one other presenter of color. To some extent this reflects the predominately white male demographic of the Dead’s audience, but it is a critical issue for the discourse and the health of the scholarly community devoted to it.² The larger lesson for the area and the field is that however welcoming the group may be socially, and however open the acceptance policy for proposals, those qualities are not enough to ensure a diverse presenter pool. Worse, those characteristics can produce unintended consequences.

FANS AND SCHOLARS

A striking feature of the Dead area is the number of non-presenters who attend. This is unusual: the cost of the conference tends to discourage those without a stake in the professional discussion, but the conference’s open acceptance policy encourages participation from independent scholars and even those who lack professional training entirely. The area’s commitment to interdisciplinarity underscores that inclusivity, and recognizes that independent scholars have made useful contributions to conference meetings. But that ethos, along with the area’s social activities, have made the area a welcoming site for fans. Fan interest in the subject of the group’s inquiry has meant that many presenters appreciate the challenge of communicating with non-academic spectators as well. That ecumenical quality has been both a strength and a hindrance, as it has in popular culture studies more generally, and the issues that has raised have played a major role in the area’s meetings.

The roots of those issues are both historical and theoretical. As the study of popular culture gained professional standing in the 1960s, scholars recognized the role that fans play in defining the phenomena they studied. Ray Browne explicitly formulated his view of the push for popular culture studies as larger than the academy, calling it “One of the most innovative, far reaching and tradition-shattering of academic—and non-academic—movements in the Humanities and social sciences of the last half century” (Browne, *Against Academia* 1. *Italics mine*). Fans are not the only foundation of popular culture, in this view, but they also exercise power: “the only real authority concerning the ‘beauty’ or ‘excellence’ of a work of Popular Culture is the people” (Rolling, “Against Evaluation” 234).

Scholars have also pointed out that the deep interest that fandom connotes can provide “cultural expertise” in a subject (Hertog and McCloud, 2003), and that interest and expertise can be effective prompts for undertaking serious work on a topic dismissed or denigrated by the academy, as several scholars have pointed out is the case with Grateful Dead studies (Meriwether, “Introduction”; Gimbel, “Foreword”). Passion can also provide a buffer against or even a corrective for the condescension that prolonged, deep engagement with a subject, especially an artistic one, can bring, as scholars have long recognized.

Yet the passion that may spur good work can also clash with scholarly detachment. When the Dead area formed in the late nineties, scholars were revising the depiction and understanding of fans and fan culture. Cultural studies reassessed fandom as “an important test site for ideas about active consumption and grassroots creativity,” as one theorist explained. “We were drawn to the idea of ‘fan culture’ as operating in the shadows of, and in response to, as well as an alternative to commercial culture” (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers* 257). This idea had implication for popular culture scholarship as well, allowing scholars to assert that “Older ideas about the authority of an elite minority of qualified critics have given way to more seemingly democratic ideals of audience sovereignty” (Duffett, *Understanding Fandom* 16). As a result, academic professionals could bridge the divide between fans and scholars (Jenkins 2006, 4). “Since the 1990s it has become possible for scholars to be both fans and academics at the same time,” Mark Duffett believes (*Understanding Fandom* 16).

Yet that obscures or elides the very real obligations that professionals must meet. While scholars of media fan studies may be increasingly comfortable with a hybrid identity that embraces their fandom, their professional engagement still provides the ultimate arbiter of their work. Fans have no such framework. Researchers note that “fan discourse works to create a specific kind of community that becomes more important than the object of fandom itself. Fans are also motivated by self-invention, in which fandom provides an opportunity to live in and through a set of symbols that are expressive of one’s aspirations rather than ‘reality’” (Harris, *Theorizing Fandom* 6). Fans seek to validate their experiences and affirm their identity as fans; these motives and readings have no stake in the ideals and standards of professional scholarship. However sincere their devotion, fans are not motivated by a scholar’s commitment to an ethical, critical reading of the object of their fandom.

This explains the problems caused by the unprofessional conduct of some fans at area meetings. Behaviors that made sense to fans conflicted with the norms of professional conduct— even the most basic requirement of paying registration. Deadheads prized the practice of giving tickets away, “miracles” for those less fortunate. This benevolence could shade into less ethical practices, such as “stubbing down” within venues, allowing fans with seats in one area to migrate to another, or even fence-jumping or otherwise finding a way inside without paying admission. Several participants cited this as justification for not paying registration or else paying only a reduced, one-day fee although they attended the entire time, made possible by the sheer size of the conference and its location in a publicly accessible hotel. Those behaviors created friction within the group and between the group and conference administrators, who were not accustomed to attendees attempting to skirt registration fees.

More difficult was the challenge posed by serial presenters whose papers lacked basic familiarity with the subject as well as the rudiments of scholarship. This was not a case of fans providing at least the semblance of academic trappings to their musings, a complaint that described some amateur efforts. For several papers, this amounted to academic fraud, in which clearly factually inaccurate claims advanced were later defended by their presenters as vetted and substantiated, both by their “membership” in the area and specifically as “peer-reviewed” presentations. None of these allegations were true. The SWPACA’s open acceptance policy precluded peer review and neither the SWPACA nor the Dead area were membership organizations. The waste of the area’s time was a concern, but more troubling was the publicity these presenters courted, which contributed to the dismissals of the field as amateurish and the area as lacking rigor. While this did result in the extraordinary step of the chair receiving permission to reject such papers, prompting the creation of a program committee to vet proposals, the negative publicity was damaging. Aside from the waste of the group’s time that these presentations represented, the misuse of the conference setting and abuse of the open acceptance policy posed grave problems for the group’s integrity and highlighted its fragility.

Those problems were brought home when these behaviors were challenged. Faced with censure, these participants attacked the area and several participants, alleging serious violations of professional ethics

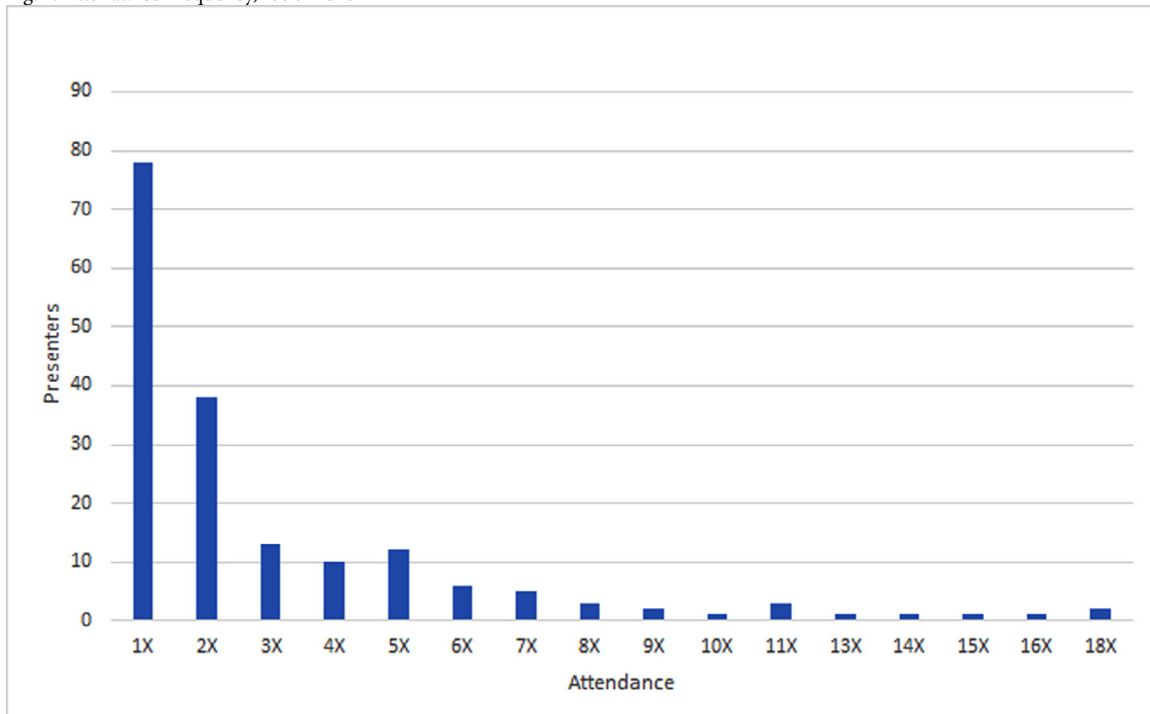
and personal misconduct. While the professional attacks were dismissed, the personal ones were more consequential, alienating many scholars and sullyng the reputations of others. These consequences illustrate the damage caused by what might otherwise be dismissed as simple boorishness and unprofessionalism, and its prevalence, though largely the work of only three troubled attendees, caused many scholars to write off the area as worse than merely amateurish.

The larger lesson is that these individuals were approaching scholarship in the way they approached their fandom. Like all fans, Deadheads value knowledge of the subject of their fandom, but fan identity frames that knowledge in personal terms. Fan culture prizes passionate pontification, not reasoned, self-critical, dispassionate analysis. When fans sought to participate in the area's conversation, it could help scholars refine their arguments to reach a wider audience, but in conference sessions it often simply distracted from the hard work of interdisciplinary discourse. At worst, fan participation conflicted absolutely with the area's goals, alienating professionals who trusted it to provide a reputable, rigorous, and ethical site to refine their arguments.

These behaviors derailed session discussions but exercised their most destructive potential in social settings, both at conference meetings and after. In time, some participants chose to avoid area social events in order to avoid encounters with these individuals, but even that was part of the larger pattern of the friction between fan identity and scholarship. A hallmark of the area's conference meetings is civility: the most serious critiques, and often the most constructive criticism, tend to take place outside of sessions. Yet for fans, any insinuation that their work could be improved was a personal attack that threatened their fan identity. The broader lesson is that what may look laudable, even critical, from a fan perspective collides painfully with the world of professional scholarship.

Significantly, in the twenty-three year history of the area, unprofessional behavior was the single largest category of complaints, and the major reason cited by those who did not return. This also explains why, despite the generally deep engagement of presenters with the subject, the overwhelming majority of presenters only came once, as seen in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. Attendance Frequency, 1998–2020



This corroborates studies that have found that incivility exercised a defining and destructive impact on conference satisfaction (Settles and O'Connor, "Incivility"). For a niche area such as the Grateful Dead, that dissatisfaction removes the only reason for attendance, given the high cost of conference attendance and the fact that Grateful Dead studies is viewed with skepticism in most departments and disciplines, the two most prominent barriers to conference attendance (Stevens, Bressler, and Silver, "Challenges in Marketing"). The fact that misbehavior by a very few attendees continued for many years marked the greatest failure in the group, which was unable to censure the offenders. Area chairs have very limited power; the creation of a program committee enabled the area to reject papers, successfully discouraging several chronic offenders, but not all. Even the establishment of a conference Code of Ethics, prompted specifically by one attendee's behavior, did not curtail the problem, although it did produce a formal disciplinary warning by SWPACA administration.

The failure of that warning speaks to the problem, and even that disciplinary step was rare. When this same individual had threatened SWPACA officers with (baseless) legal action at an earlier meeting, they considered dropping the area entirely, finally opting instead to relegating the area's sessions to a satellite hotel at the next meeting (Weiner "The Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus" 13). Chairs cannot censure or ban individuals: although complaints made to the chair were conveyed to conference officials, second-hand information is not actionable, regardless of the egregiousness of the violations and the distress of the complainants.³ This, too, speaks to the gulf between the standards governing professionals and their behavior and those of fans: professionals were reluctant to bring complaints directly to conference administration, which would compel participation in disciplinary proceedings that at the least are time-consuming and distasteful, and at worst could damage their professional standing. Fans have no such compunction: their amateur status provides immunity from any professional repercussions. The area's inability to censure those individuals and their behavior proved to be its Achilles' Heel; the larger lesson is that unchecked, unprofessional behavior undercuts scholarly communication and undermines academic communities.

CONCLUSION

For most participants, the Grateful Dead area's achievements are noteworthy and significant, perhaps especially in the light of the challenges it has weathered. From the vantage of 2021, the Grateful Dead may not be an established or accepted topic for scholarly study in the most rigorous or conservative redoubts of the academy, but it has made a place for itself in the larger landscape of popular culture studies. Whether that umbrella best suits the discourse can be debated, but it is natural, given the role played by the SWPACA in the establishment of the community of scholars responsible for much of the conversation. Indeed, the scholarly conversation about the Grateful Dead owes substantially to the forum that the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association has provided. Papers presented at the SWPACA have contributed to a substantial body of published work, including articles, chapters, anthologies, and monographs; presenters have also contributed to journalism, radio broadcasts, and podcasts. By those standards, the Dead area has been a success. If that work is uneven, that, too, reflects popular culture studies as a whole. It is also moot: popular culture studies has produced seminal work, just as well-established fields have witnessed their fair share of weak and flawed efforts. And Grateful Dead studies is a young field; the struggle to establish standards is part of the development of all discourses. Its place within popular culture studies refines that process: sloughing off non-scholarly fandom is critical if the discourse is to advance.

The 2020 meeting represented that process in microcosm, mirroring the trajectory of popular culture studies more generally and several of the issues it struggles with still. In his history of the Popular Culture Association, Ray Browne saw the progress of the field as driven by the kind of work that the Caucus has done:

Various academic individuals and groups in several ways have been building out-fires for years in efforts to explore the fringes of our knowledge, discover new fields

of inquiry and new ways of looking at the familiar, with the hope and expectation that many new insights and conclusions can result which can be not only rewarding to the individuals immediately involved but also society at large. (Browne, *Against Academia* 1)

The story of the Dead area, more broadly and especially at this most recent meeting, is part of that effort. Conferences and conference areas are vital to their scholarly communities, “a part of the metastory of their field,” as one scholar put it (Nicolson, *Academic Conferences* 66). That metastory is necessarily professional, a context that frames the area’s struggles in productive ways.

The question that the Caucus raises is more than just a question of who owns the discourse, or how scholarly discourse communities contend with fans. When the area began, the challenge for the group was how to apply high standards and scholarly rigor to the study of this recent and ongoing popular culture phenomenon. Over time, however, the principal question the group’s experience raised was not scholarly but political: what are the obligations of scholars to fans, and what are the obligations of fans to scholars?

The establishment of the Grateful Dead Studies Association by scholars frustrated by the intractability of the problems of the area provides an answer, one that represents a positive resolution to that impasse. At the conclusion of the 2019 SWPACA conference, 30 participants of the Dead area convened and voted to proceed with the incorporation of a professional academic organization (Meriwether, “Organizing”; Meriwether, “Mysteries Dark and Vast”). Interestingly, that response echoes the establishment of the PCA: it arose to fulfill the needs of scholars unable to effectively present their work within the confines of other established conferences and organizations, although here it was academic professionals who felt frustrated by fans, not colleagues.

Conferences are sites that reify the abstractions of scholarly philosophy and professional ethics and reveal how those play out in the messy realities of pedagogy, discourse, and community. The history of the Grateful Dead area at the SWPACA provides a case study of how those processes play out in a conference setting, just as the area’s 2020 meeting provided a distillation of the issues they raise. Fittingly, that conference concluded one of the more colorful and interesting chapters in the metasatory of the discourse of Grateful Dead studies, even as it launched another.

NOTES

1. The last review was of the 2013 meeting; see Meriwether, “A Hundred Verses.” Reviews of the first fifteen meetings comprise Part II of Meriwether, *Studying the Dead*.
2. No scientifically accurate survey of Grateful Dead fan demographics was undertaken, but a number of surveys reached this conclusion; see, for example, Scott, Dolgushkin, Nixon, “Deadhead Survey” 348. For a summary of many of these surveys, see Adams, “Terrapin Station Demographics.”
3. These complaints ranged from minor to serious, such as theft of area material (programs and posters), sexual harassment, libel, and slander.

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AUTHOR BIO

Nicholas G. Meriwether's work has appeared in *Popular Music and Society*, *The Sixties*, *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, *Provenance*, and others. He is Curator at the Haight Street Art Center in San Francisco and Executive Director of the Grateful Dead Studies Association.

RECOMMENDED REFERENCE

APA

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