

SLF Portolan Project

Interview with Scott Woods

Columbus, Ohio, November 2019

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So this is Mary Anne Mohanraj. I'm here with Scott Woods. We're at the Parallels Writing Conference in Columbus, Ohio, just held at the Streetlight Guild in November 2019. I was really delighted that I could ask Scott to sit down with us. I first met him at a writer's retreat where he and I were both working on novels. And at some point I'd love to talk more about his writing. But today, I wanted to ask him about his arts organizer work, and what he's been doing to help build up Columbus arts culture, really kind of created. So you've been working here in Columbus for 20 plus years, right as an artist, so maybe if you could talk a little bit about what it was like when you started in terms of arts culture and what you've been doing.

Scott Woods: Thanks for having me. Columbus, when I started... well, let me backup. I've always participated in some kind of writing or art or music. I've always done all the things at the same time, when I started to venture out into the public sphere, say like in the early, mid 90s, there wasn't really a place for break-in, low-end learning your craft. Black writers find a way into that then. That all changed in about '96 or 7, when one venue opened up called Snaps & Taps. And it was these three guys who used to just throw parties and they started renting out a building. And they said, Well, let's just do this all the time. And so they asked a friend of mine if she would start an open mic every week. She asked me to help. And that's pretty much how I got into the game. And so we've been running that mic, still weekly, for just over 20 years.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Does it have a name?

Scott Woods: The Writer's Block Poetry Night.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Nice.

Scott Woods: That's not how it started. We had to learn the hard way to brand-own your name.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. Yeah. And it was at Snaps & Taps. But how long was it there?

Scott Woods: For the first few years. And then we bounced from venue to venue after that. We are in our most recent venue, Cafe Kerouac, which we've been there, I think about 10 years now.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Nice. Scott, we're here at a local brew pub. Is that fair? In Columbus, and Scott's paying the bill right now having just taken out his writers for a last lunch before we leave town. So he's a little distracted.

Scott Woods: I'm so sorry. [Laughter].

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But it's my own fault for squeezing in this interview at the end of a long, intense weekend of workshopping that he's hosted. So, alright there we go, bills taken care of. So it moved from there and did it then move again to the Streetlight Guild or? No, there's more stuff in between.

Scott Woods: So basically there were... after Snaps & Taps there were five other venues before we got to Cafe Kerouac.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh wow, okay.

Scott Woods: Sometimes we would be at a venue for a few months. Sometimes we'd be there for a year. Finally, and there were a lot of years when it was not working. A lot of lean years, a lot of empty rooms. Some years it would be great depending on the venue, and then it would die, or something would happen. Finally, I just started to apply all of this math to the situation. Where are we at? What is it that people are really coming here for? Are they coming here to be poets? The answer, largely, was no. It was that they wanted to express

themselves and you know that by the turnover rate of the people who are coming, based on the options they have to go to other places. So, for instance, people would show up at open mic for awhile, and they might be there for, you know, six months, a year. And then they would go away and they wouldn't go to another reading; they would just stop writing poetry. I'd say like, okay, starting to notice the trend here. Half of the people who come out are not long term writers. And so I really try to key into the value of the person walking in the door. That helped me a lot in terms of turning the show around and making it successful. Which is something else I hadn't learned. How do I define success? Is it a head count? Is it that my show costs, you know, five bucks to get in? Is it the money? Is it the number of poets as opposed to the number of audience? What is it, you know? So I had this tendency to do that math for myself.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Yeah, there's a classic thing at sci fi conventions, where if you have a panel, and there are more people on the panel than in the audience, you would adjourn the panel and everybody goes to the bar, [laughter] and you just have a conversation instead. Right?

Scott Woods:

Yeah. That sounds fair.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

So it's a constant problem in the arts. And I do think there's a couple things I'm hearing out of what you're saying that made for success is, one is persistence. Even when the years were lean, you've kept doing it and you kept working the problem and thinking it through and just showing up. I think a lot of artists give up, they get frustrated. They're not seeing the success that they thought would come right away. And if it's not instant gratification, maybe even more so in today's world, if you don't get the quick hits, people are like, oh, this isn't for me. We did a lot of research at Strange Horizons about who would submit to us, and how often they submitted before they got accepted, we would look at the numbers. And one thing we found that other research has shown is that people from marginalized communities, people

of color, women, etc, tend to stop much sooner than the majority community. So the white men who submitted to us and got a rejection would for the most part, submit again and again, and eventually many of them we would end up finding something we loved and publishing. Women writers, people of color would often submit once, maybe twice, and then stop. And we didn't know if they were going elsewhere or just not writing anymore. But regardless, they gave up their chance to be published with us. And there's some research that shows, in some ways, it's a survival strategy. If you are in a position where you have limited resources. Sure you assess the situation, you're like, oh, this venue isn't for me, I'll go elsewhere. I can't afford to keep trying and not succeeding. But that's death in publishing. You actually have to persist.

Scott Woods: Yeah and for me, and I define success now, as the room is packed every week and I don't advertise it

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's amazing.

Scott Woods: But for me, I kind of use the critical mass theory where if I keep this alive long enough, and I get enough unique visitors, if I understand that only a fraction of them are going to show up at the end of the day, 4 or 5 percent of the people who are aware of the show at any given moment, I just have to hit a critical mass number that's so large, that the 4 or 5 per cent leaves me with a packed room. And so somewhere along the way, let's say about 6, 7, 8 years ago, we were in the right venue at the right time. And we hit that number. So now it kind of basically runs itself.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right, now you're a success. Nothing breeds success, like success. Then the word gets out and people are like, hey, I want to go to the thing I can't get in. It's too popular.

Scott Woods: Well you have to institutionalize it in a way. But institutionalization requires survival. It's hard work. Running an event, especially one that's recurring is brutal work; it's on

your pocket; it's on your time; it's on your ego. It's going to cost you your art.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: You haven't been writing as much as I would like. I want to read more Scott Woods writing.

Scott Woods: Not even close, not even close. Opening the Streetlight Guild-

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's the thing, it's not just a reading series. So talk about the new space.

Scott Woods: We've been talking about the open mic, which is still at Cafe Kerouac. When I opened Streetlight Guild, it was a performing arts venue. It's a two floor building, it has a performing arts space. I'm doing all manner of programming now, I'm doing music, dance, poetry, lectures, workshops. You got a conference. And I'm pretty much spending full time hours on that at this point. And the open mic is still off to the side. It does it's thing, cooking on the back. And the question I used to get a lot was, are you gonna move it to the Streetlight Guild? And I said, absolutely not. The goal is for two things to be happening at the same time and then both succeeding.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So what led you to try to open up Streetlight Guild? It was a process right? It took a while.

Scott Woods: It did. Well, it's interesting. I've always wanted to have some kind of venue. I wasn't 100% sure what that looked like. But space is extremely important to creativity. As writers, we think, Oh, I need to have my desk, my closet, my space where I write. That's true for culture as well. Culture needs a place to learn itself, figure out what it wants to be. And if you don't have space for that, it can't happen, not really. Or it happens under certain restrictions. Or it only happens a certain way that's guided by institutions, organizations or whatever, the city. And so to me, it's important that there's space for culture to happen at a level

that is accessible to people who are just really trying to figure out culture, or the person knows how culture should work, but they don't have the space to try something new. So the band that wants to do it's original work and not just covers, you know, to develop an audience, to record something, to figure it out, to try out the material. We need spaces like that. And frankly, Columbus didn't have it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Can you talk a little more about Columbus arts culture? You got a weekly column in the paper.

Scott Woods: I do, yeah. Which is not about arts at all actually. That's just whatever I want to write, as long as it's Columbus facing. It doesn't even have to be about Columbus, as long as Columbus can derive a lesson from it. So I do that every Wednesday for the Columbus Alive. It's called The Other Columbus. And initially, I had thought that it would be a certain way and now it's just kind of whatever I want to do. So that's in the pot things. But locally, culture here is, to use your word, fraught. Columbus is a fastly developing midsize town trying to become a large city.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: You've got a huge University here.

Scott Woods: We do, Ohio State. But we also have like ten other universities and schools, not that size obviously. But there are colleges and universities around the city. Columbus has about 870,000 people in the city proper, in the metro area it's about two million. So that's a lot of people who have moved here within the last 30 years, give or take, and the culture has not kept up with that development. And the development has not historically been interested in culture.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So it's been a lot of business development or?

Scott Woods: Business and some residential. But it's all obviously gentrification, so it's going up. So it's kind of destroying the middle, pushing the poor out to the edges. Just like it happens everywhere else. We do it too. It's a milder version,

but it's the same thing. But the thing with Columbus is that it's been developing without its culture and now, even the city kind of recognizes we need to broaden our cultural base to continue to do the work that we want to do, to continue to attract people at the rate that we're attracting them. Because ultimately, nobody wants to, (within a certain demographic between 25 and 40), move to a boring city. So if your city only has one art museum, one classical arts venue, one ballet company, one theater company, that's not compelling. Not long term. There was a time when you could sell it that way, but Columbus has outgrown that. And so now the kind of thing that I do is very hot right now. They want independent, not-sure-what's-gonna-come-next art.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'm at a university. Universities can and do a lot for teaching writing, teaching arts, and hosting events. But there's such a different feel to a writing conference held at my university versus coming to something like what you just did at the Streetlight Guild. There's a freedom, there's a different energy. And different voices at the table, honestly.

Scott Woods: I tell people all the time. I'm in the moment's business. There's things that, because I own the space, that can happen here that can't happen in other places. I'll give an example. I'd say like a month ago, I was doing this show called the Harlem Renaissance Remix. I invite local artists to come in and they perform work of Harlem Renaissance, basically recreate the Harlem Renaissance for a night. So a teenager comes in, a 16 year old writer. It was her birthday. She wanted to see some poetry, which was shocking enough. But she had missed the show. And so people were still hanging out post-show. And so I just said, You know what? I own the space. Let's fire the mic back up. There's enough poets just in the audience to do a show. Let's do it. So we threw this show together as we did like another 30 minute show for this kid's birthday. You know what I'm saying? I mean it was awesome. And you can't do that at a place you rent, you can't do that at the university

necessarily. You won't even get that kid at the university. You know?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Can you talk a little bit about, as a Black artist and writer, what are the specific challenges, but also maybe the opportunities? What is it like? What's it like being a Black artist in Columbus? And maybe in the world as a whole? That's a big question though. Take whatever angle you want.

Scott Woods: No, no, it's cool. Everybody's gonna have a different answer, here's mine. So for me, it's not bad, right now. It took me 15, 20 years to get to the point where I'm as free to do what I want to do. So the challenges for me historically have been access. I'm also a self made writer. I didn't finish college. I have not done like a bunch of retreats or anything like that.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Which is hilarious cause I would totally hire you to come lead one. But okay, go on.

Scott Woods: [laughter] And I've done them. As long as you understand going in.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But there's all these barriers to credentialing.

Scott Woods: Sure. And so I'm very much a self-made artist, which has been good for me because I love creating. And so, you know, I spent a lot of years just plugging away really hard to learn the craft. It didn't hurt to be working in a library full time, for 20 years. You have access to all that knowledge. And I'm one of the people who actually used it. But it was really hard because Columbus just doesn't know... Here's the thing, Columbus kind of lives in a bubble, culturally and artistically. And so the beauty of Columbus is that you can find your own voice because you're not largely influenced by a lot of movement or a lot of history. Of course, the Curses are influenced by a lot of art, a lot of history. If you are good here, you are either preternaturally talented, or you worked really hard to get good at what you do. And that's not a large pool of people. It's a good size; you can run what I do off of

that pool. But it's really hard to learn and grow because the opportunities as a Black artist here are not significant. Part of that is there were never many Black venues. And largely white venues only booked certain types of things. You can be Black and play rock and still not get the rock club guild. And then you can't go to the Black club if you don't play Black music. Now it doesn't matter because all the clubs are gone. Or they all are jukeboxes. Getting to play live here is not what it used to be. Campus used to have venues all up and down the street, bars where you could play live. You could do a whole week of shows on campus, do it again and do it again. And all of those places are gone. And so Columbus just developed its culture, the artistic culture, out of itself. And it's only largely interested in it now because it needs to sell.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But there is maybe an opportunity now. It seems like the city is perhaps realizing what it's lost and is looking to...

Scott Woods: Yes and no. Yes it's aware of what it needs. But it's a machine. It doesn't know how to not do what it does. It wants these artists, it wants that quote on quote, diversity. But it doesn't know how to not do it the wrong way. It still does it the old way. Now we need to do all this paperwork, now we need you to do this process, we need to attend these things, we need you to fill this out, apply for these grants or die, you know. It was like, Yeah, I just want to create. And the machine isn't designed to really absorb artists and culture that it wants without making them do something that they don't want to do. So my space says we don't do any of that. I either have the money to pay you or I don't. And I have the time and the space and I have all the things that you need, so let's get the book in. And it's awesome. They get to come there. I bring an audience, they bring an audience, somewhere in the middle of the audience is me. Grow, feed each other. It's a beautiful thing to own space. Space is so important.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Because it enables community. I mean, you brought us

together this weekend. It was myself, Nick Mamitas, a host of writers who you brought in from out of town, also your fabulous local talent. And then you created the structure where we could talk to aspiring writers, we could hear from them. Because there's always stuff to learn from them. They ask fabulous questions. They made me think about my own practice. Am I doing what I want to be doing as a writer right now? And then we can talk to each other. Because so often as a writer, you're working in isolation. If you make time to read, great. But there is something to the in-person back and forth exchange of ideas and support. And yes, stick with it. I think you're doing something really interesting. And sometimes you just need to hear that.

Scott Woods:

No doubt. Columbus has a lot of great talent, but it's not honed. It doesn't get a chance to really experience a lot of these hardcore lessons that the conference and people like you are attempting to teach. And as you saw much of the audience for the conference was people of color.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Which was fabulous. I mean most of my audiences at academic conferences and so on are still white. So I actually had to rethink some of the things I typically say because they didn't apply in the same way to your audience. Like, I didn't have to give the diversity speech. [laughter] That was awesome.

Scott Woods:

But they all gotta learn. There's a lot of craft stuff that they need to know. If they're actually going to stick in this game. So I wanted to give that to my city. To me all of these events are a gift. It's what I wish was there when I was coming up. If I had this 15, 10 years ago. By now we would be done. [Laughter].

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

That's right. I wish we had more time, Scott's gonna have to take me to the airport soon. But I hope we can do this again.

Scott Woods:

As often as you need.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'll come back to Columbus next year and do more interviews. But just listening to you, I feel like I just want to call you Papa Woods [laughter] and start talking about the Columbus Renaissance. Maybe it's time to start this off.

Scott Woods: Not yet. Ask me in about five years.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well you're laying the groundwork, right? You're putting down the bones. You're creating this incubator, this space, where artists can come together and start to learn from each other. I think some fabulous things are gonna grow and boom out of this.

Scott Woods: So far, so good. [Laughter].

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Thanks so much Scott.

Scott Woods: Thank you Mary.