

Style and the Future of Composition Studies, edited by Paul Butler, Brian Ray, and Star Medzerian Vanguri. Utah State University Press, 2020. 274 pp.

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Interest in style continues apace in composition studies. *Style and the Future of Composition Studies* builds on the well-trod and copious path set by T.R. Johnson and Tom Pace's collection *Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy* (2005) as well as previous work from the editors of this collection, including Paul Butler's *Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Study in Composition and Rhetoric* (2008); Mike Duncan and Star Medzerian Vanguri's collection *The Centrality of Style* (2013); and Brian Ray's *Style: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (2015). In those works, contributors historicize and define style, as well as articulate the pedagogic value of deliberately attending to style. *Style and the Future of Composition Studies* extends this previous work by presenting ways in which "style effects change" (3) in various areas of interest to composition studies researchers and teachers, including transfer studies, writing ethics, professional writing, linguistic justice, digital rhetoric, genre studies, legal writing, and creative writing.

Attention to language often must compete with research that focuses on writing with a wide-angle lens, a lens in which writing is understood as a part of a genre system and an activity system. This competition can either lead to a productive tension that contextualizes style—as we see here in *Style and the Future of Composition Studies*—or that leads to the type of eclipse we see in the brilliant but incomplete *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (2015), where language and style are taken only as "Words Get Their Meanings from Other Words," "Writing Involves the Negotiation of Language Differences," and perhaps "Habituated Practice Can Lead to Entrenchment." Much more can and should be said about style. For example, what threshold concepts could scholars of style bring to the table?

Style and the Future of Composition Studies is not explicitly organized around threshold concepts. However, this collection is organized around four "key actions" that style performs (5). It might just be the Univers and Garamond typefaces, but these "key actions" read a lot like threshold concepts and might be productively read as such: "Style Mediates Relationships" (Concept 1: Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity); "Style Conveys Identity" (Concept 3: Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies); "Style Forms Strategy" (Concept 2: Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms"); and "Style Creates and Transcends Boundaries" (this last key action recalls several threshold concepts). *Style and the Future of Composition Studies* is ultimately not a footnote to *Naming What We Know* (though the thought is intriguing).

It does, however, provide a wide variety of stylistic studies to enable new lines of inquiry regarding these issues of audience, identity, genre, and boundaries. The first section, “Style Mediates Relationships,” forefronts questions regarding writer-reader relationships (“Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences,” in *Naming What We Know* parlance). For example, in chapter one Andrea Olinger looks at how an undergraduate in psychology negotiates the different style preferences of her two professors, a cognitive psychologist who writes for the public and a clinical psychologist who writes for academia. In almost all regards, the professors’ advice and lists of preferences are at cross-purposes (“don’t use ‘I’” vs. “use ‘I’”; “eliminate ‘jargon’” vs. “sound sciency,”” etc. [29]). As the student developed a heterogeneous style to take up both perspectives, Olinger notes that the student came to realize that even her professors did not follow their own style rules on all accounts. She came to recognize how style is dynamic and co-created by writers and their readers (31). Olinger uses this case study to argue that more attention to style can provide further insights for transfer studies. While the transfer studies Olinger cites focus on style as synonymous with grammar and mechanics and therefore devalue style or reduce style to ill-defined lists of rules (like the infamous “Be clear” that T.R. Johnson takes up in chapter three), an attention to style as a separate construct can illuminate other discontinuities and thresholds writers experience as they develop writing expertise.

Turning from transfer and developmental stages to ethics, Melissa Goldthwaite’s chapter on epistolary style asks how we can help students recognize how writers encourage metonymic listening through their style. Goldthwaite looks at Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s epistolary fiction through the lens of Krista Ratcliffe’s *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Through their stylistic choices, Adichie and Coates invoke and address multiple audiences and cast the reader as someone with authority to respond and counsel. Here, style is described in terms of “pronoun usage, sentence type and variation, repetition, imagery, and juxtaposition” (37–38). Goldthwaite concludes by providing prompts for helping students learn how to listen rhetorically. In chapter four, Tom Pace provides a series of professional writing assignments based on Erasmus’s *De Copia* to further show how students can be made aware of style as it mediates between audience and purpose.

This concern for audience and relationships carries over into the second section, “Style Conveys Identity.” The section opens with an analysis of Spike Jonze’s film *Her* by Cydney Alexis and Eric Leake. Their analysis highlights the weight of style in establishing and maintaining social relationships. Laura Aull and Zak Lancaster’s chapter on stance is particularly useful. Focusing primarily on metalanguage (transitions, signposts, etc.), Aull and Lancaster describe stance as a matter of attitude, epistemology, and interactional words, phrases,

and other expressions. These stances will reasonably differ across genres and disciplines (102). Through facilitating stance awareness, Aull and Lancaster show a way to instruct writers to see style as part of larger rhetorical situations, rather than simply as a fixed, formalistic construct.

Other chapters emphasize the injustices of perceived identity. Jimmy Butts, for example, explores what we mean when we associate a particular style with stupidity. “The future of writing,” Butts writes, “is inherently couched in an understanding of whatever gets labeled or underestimated as stupid” (115). Through juxtaposing examples of those we are quick to label and those who we defend, Butts suggests that we should ultimately “look past our stupidity with kindness and embrace a more perfect view of pluralities and possibility” (129). Eric House similarly takes on questions of linguistic justice—an issue that should be relevant to all readers and teachers—using the hip-hop cipher as an example of translanguaging practice and pedagogy. House suggests combining this improvised call-and-response practice with Genius, a collaborative annotation website primarily for lyrics. Many other possible pedagogical applications are shared in this and the other chapters—this is not just a theoretical collection.

The third section, “Style Forms Strategy” takes on similar themes, but shifts the focus from interactions toward larger, more pervasive strategies. Take Almas Khan, who draws on applied legal storytelling to consider how humans are represented or “embodied” in writing. In the following chapter, “What Style Can Add to Genre,” Anthony Box considers style as metalanguage, cohesion, and coherence, to suggest that style provides more “nuance and control” than genre alone can offer (195). Laura Aull also returns to consider markers of civil, ethical, listening discourse. And Jaron Slater ponders on the transdisciplinary, sublime aspects of style.

The collection ends with “Style Creates and Transcends Boundaries,” a theme foreshadowed in the first chapters of each section. Jon Udelson leads off with a discussion of what we might call boundary-guarders and boundary-crossers between the disciplines of writing studies and creative writing studies. Style is an ideal boundary object, a point of contact between these two fields. Mike Duncan follows with a discussion of stylometrics and authoring. William FitzGerald then closes up shop by considering progymnasmata for teaching verbal style (drawing on Jeanne Fahnestock’s *Rhetorical Style*), with notes on craft and de-composition.

The ebb and flow of these themes—style and relationships, style and identity, style and strategy, and style and boundaries—emphasizes the flexible arrangement of these chapters. As Butler, Ray, and Vanguri put it in their introduction, “These categories could easily be combined or rearranged to reveal even more possibilities” (5). For example, chapters could be alternatively grouped for style and genre (chapters six, ten, twelve, and fifteen); style

and social justice (chapters two, three, seven, eight, and eleven); and style as a boundary object (chapters one, four, five, and nine). By allowing multiple paths and groupings, this collection reflects the potential of style to contribute to the future of composition studies writ large.

Ultimately, *Style and the Future of Composition Studies* fulfills its promise to introduce ways in which style and the study thereof can effect change. This book will be an important resource for researchers and instructors looking to update themselves on style scholarship and consider how style can speak to change in the many subfields of composition and across disciplinary divides.

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Works Cited

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