

Where We Are: What's Next for (Publishing in) Composition & Rhetoric?

Pushing Through: Moving Beyond Revision to Achieve Substantive Change

Sheila Carter-Tod

What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?

What if our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor?

What if all the mothers who came before us, who survived genocide and occupation, slavery and Jim Crow, racism and xenophobia and Islamophobia, political oppression and sexual assault, are standing behind us now, whispering in our ear: You are brave? What if this is our Great Contraction before we birth a new future?

Remember the wisdom of the midwife: “Breathe,” she says. Then: “Push.”

Now it is time to breathe. But soon it will be time to push; soon it will be time to fight — for those we love — Muslim father, Sikh son, trans daughter, indigenous brother, immigrant sister, white worker, the poor and forgotten, and the ones who cast their vote out of resentment and fear.

—Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, xiii

As part of the “Where We Are” segment of this anniversary issue, we were asked to contemplate what’s next for the discipline and the journal. Before contemplating such a concept disciplinarily or even from the perspective of *Composition Studies*—as an African American female in the United States, in higher education, and in the discipline—I can’t help but consider all of the darkness and the labor I and others like me experience nationally, institutionally, and disciplinarily. Any reflection draws my thoughts back to

the latest news reports on the ways in which an extremely flawed legal system attempts to hold perpetrators accountable for the racial violence against African American men, women, and children. I also must consider the structures and systems that reinscribe racist practices in higher education institutionally and disciplinarily. Each act of violence, be it overt or covert, is a symptom of darkness that needs to be disrupted, reimagined, and recreated for any real substantive change.

Recent news articles bear witness to the darkness of a racist legal and justice system. News of convictions and acquittals illustrate situational adaptations or accountability. Most recently, a March 2022 article describes how “three white men in Georgia were convicted for committing a hate crime when they murdered Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man jogging in their neighborhood.” The article describes how “[d]ays later, three former Minneapolis police officers were convicted of violating George Floyd’s civil rights when he died in their custody, a death that previously led to a murder conviction for a fourth officer . . . [and how] in nearby Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, a police officer was convicted of causing the death of Daunte Wright when she mistook her gun for a Taser” (Carrega). But such systemic racist structures, as they exist, can only provide limited situational equity and justice. The darkness and the labor within these systems remains. Earlier headlines described how Brett Hankison, the ex-Louisville police officer who shot and killed Breonna Taylor, was acquitted. And yet another March Associated Press article describes how “[n]o charges will be filed against the Chicago police officers who chased and fatally shot 13-year-old Adam Toledo and 22-year-old Anthony Alvarez within days of each other last year, prompting sharp criticism of how the department handles foot pursuits, a prosecutor announced Tuesday” (Burnett and Babwin). While the aforementioned cases that did end in conviction provide some justice, the other acquittals simply reiterate what we know hasn’t changed, and that is the deeply embedded systemic inequities when it comes to race, policing, and the US legal system.

Much like the legal system, the institutions of higher education in which we work are founded on, and in many cases continue to function within, practices and policies that are deeply rooted in the darkness of systemic racist structures. It is therefore not surprising that we see the same darkness in incidents of violence against African American and other students and faculty of color, all with similarly uneven patterns of accountability. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) keeps a running tab of events, illustrative of the darkness in institutions of higher education. From the many bomb threats faced by HBCUs after the return from winter break to “Racist Graffiti Found on the Campus of Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts,” to the “[p]eople dressed up in Ku Klux Klan outfits [who] were seen in a residential hall at the

University of Utah trying to recruit students for a white supremacist group,” violence against African Americans and other people of color has been handled with varying degrees (if any) of justice.¹ These headlines still exist. Even with on-going Diversity and Equity initiatives in higher education, deeply embedded institutionalized systems of inequities remain the same without fundamental disruption and recreation.

Now, turning to a focused reflection on the previous half-century of *Composition Studies*, I have to consider how all academic journals inhabit a space situated in the concentric circles of national racism, racism within racist institutions of higher education, and then in the much smaller contained circle of our discipline. Contributing scholars, editors, and reviewers of academic journals within writing studies struggle to find a way to navigate these spaces in an equitable way. While I could easily note that historically, as a journal, *Composition Studies* has pursued institutionalized means of equity through author representation, diverse subjects, position statements of allyship, scholarly coverage, and content that both illustrates and challenges the existing inequitable structures and practices (both disciplinarily and nationally), I have to question whether, moving forward, these same methods will be effective in justly and equitably representing and navigating the “range of professional practices associated with rhetoric and composition: teaching college writing; theorizing rhetoric and composing; administering writing related programs; preparing the field’s future teacher-scholars.”²

Perhaps, at the specific juncture provided by a fifty-year reflection, questions of what is next may lie in a full recreation of the existing structures that have historically constituted the makeup and goals of academic journals. If, historically, the roles of scholarly publications are to disseminate expert knowledge to other experts in the discipline and to serve as a platform for researchers to reveal their knowledge to one another, allowing them to contribute to the development and design of the field, then pushing forward may mean reconsidering what a journal is and what it could be. Is it enough to capture what is happening within the discipline’s “research” for dissemination to others within—and entering—the discipline without reflectively considering what such a journal might look like if it sought to fully disrupt traditional concepts of knowledge, knowledge dissemination, and audience? What would happen if *Composition Studies*, with such a high disciplinary profile and such exclusive acceptance rates, actively redefined what the roles and possibilities of an academic journal might be? What if concerns around traditional, exclusive concepts of rigor and status were set aside to envision what a new definition of academic journal might look like—beyond representation and timely encounters with larger systemic issues?

As is the case when there is a call for any radical disruption in practices, by a product of institutionalized systems that places values on the perpetuation of existing structures, those objecting may see such a disruption as too radical or ultimately leading to the demise of the journal's recognition and reputation in publication circles and larger scholarly debates. What I am suggesting is that moving forward, *Composition Studies* as a journal lead our disciplinary disruption, pushing through what has been done and reimagining what could be done to address larger national and institutionalized systems of inequities and exclusion.

For *Composition Studies*, pushing through practices seen as traditional to academic journals would be a radical extension of what they have been pushing to do for years and would heed the calls for even more disruptions in publishing practices. We see one such call in the 2021 "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors,"³ which in its very creation reviewed and responded to challenges made by Angela Haas in her 2020 ATTW "Call to Action to Redress Anti-Blackness and White Supremacy" and Miriam Williams and Natasha Jones in their 2020 blog post, "A Just Use of Imagination," to address racist, inequitable and exclusionary practices in technical and professional communications. The introduction to "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices" acknowledges the need for journals to lead in the changing nature of publication and disciplinary practices and "invite[s] active feedback, revision, and work to keep [even the guiding document that they have created] up-to-date to account for additional scenarios and perspectives" (2). Grounded in Ibram X. Kendi's concepts of anti-racism in policies and ideas as described in his book *How to be an Anti-Racist* (specifically the first chapter), the authors of the heuristic acknowledge that there is no neutral or non-racist position and present "explicit guidance on anti-racist professional practices in the form of a heuristic for editors, reviewers, and authors involved in academic reviewing" (2). In their heuristic, they say that what editors and reviewers will need to do is to "recognize a range of expertise and encourage citation practices that represent diverse canons, epistemological foundations, and ways of knowing; [r]ecognize, intervene in and/or prevent harmful scholarly work—both in publication processes and in published scholarship; [e]stablish and state clear but flexible contingency plans for review processes that prioritize humanity over production; [m]ake the review process transparent; [v]alue the labor of those involved in the review process; [and...] commit to inclusivity among reviewers and in editorial board makeup" (7-9).

While *Composition Studies* has consciously pushed towards epistemologically inclusive practices when it comes to content, established structures to make review processes clear and transparent, and actively worked to create an inclusive editorial board and set of practices,⁴ this 50-year anniversary reflection

on what comes next should begin with the guidance of the aforementioned heuristic moving to push through any existing practices that can't be fixed and are beyond revision. Moving forward, *Composition Studies* as a journal can and should continue to and find new ways to push, then breathe then push again, to reinvent what the roles and practices of a journal could be and do in achieving substantive disciplinary change.

Notes

1. These headlines are taken from *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE). The JBHE, dedicated to the conscientious investigation of the status and prospects for African Americans in higher education, provides racial statistics on an institution-by-institution basis.

2. <https://compstudiesjournal.com>.

3. To acknowledge the labor involved in this document, I am including the contributing authors. As stated in the document, contributors include Lauren E. Cagle, Michelle F. Eble, Laura Gonzales, Meredith A. Johnson, Nathan R. Johnson, Natasha N. Jones, Liz Lane, Temptaous Mckoy, Kristen R. Moore, Ricky Reynoso, Emma J. Rose, GPat Patterson, Fernando Sánchez, Ann Shivers-McNair, Michele Simmons, Erica M. Stone, Jason Tham, Rebecca Walton, and Miriam F. Williams.

4. Most recently, *Composition Studies* released the “Guide for Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices at *Composition Studies*” for editorial board members to review, revise, and ultimately vote on.

Works Cited

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