

**Response:**

Writing, Rhetoric, and Composition in the Age of Obama

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In November 2008, just a couple of days after the election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States, my essay, “Literacies and Identities,” was published as part of the CCCC blog series. Taking advantage of the historic nature of the presidential campaign, I asked a series of questions to frame the expectations that might accompany what seemed to be at the very least a moment of hope when the United States might move toward coming to terms with its racial legacy, especially given the extraordinary speech, “A More Perfect Union,” that Obama delivered earlier that spring to address the controversy over his relationship to Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Focusing on the discourse of diversity, I wondered how our ideas and meanings about diversity might shift, what impact this would have on English studies classrooms, and how we locate ourselves across communities, whether these are constituted by culture, identity, language, or place. When I reflect on that earlier essay and compose a response to this special issue, “Reimagining the Social Turn,” I want to consider the work of writing, rhetoric, and composition in the Age of Obama, and whether the theoretical framing that has informed research and teaching in the field has undergone a paradigm shift as reflected in changing material conditions, emerging technologies, and new social relations that seem to characterize our world today.

I invoke the Age of Obama not to assign any transformative power to Obama, or to suggest that what we might understand to be significant changes in the social, political, and cultural landscape is bounded by his terms as president. Rather, I use this expression as a way to capture what has been rapid change—sometimes

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ephemeral and at other times structural—in systems that affect many different areas of our lives. For example, we have seen a potentially transformative social policy, the Affordable Care Act, offer hope to the uninsured or cause fear for those who see a threat to personal liberty. We have seen the rise of movements such as the Tea Party or Occupy Wall Street challenge what have been stable structures that have institutionalized power and wealth. And we have seen a move toward marriage equality from very local sites to state government to federal policy and law that perhaps embodies this sense of change in the most profound way where the social, political, and material come together for consequential effects. In this sense, the social turn in composition studies has existed and been experienced in similar ways as scholars have developed innovations in methodology, have identified and expanded areas of study, and continue to bring together theory and practice in order to understand how language works and reflects these realities.

What has become apparent in current composition research and teaching is an attention to the way various economic systems and conditions, ideological structures, and institutional expectations and requirements inform the work and assessment of writing. Whether it is the shift from viewing literacy as an individual development to viewing literacy as an economic development, as described by Deborah Brandt in *Literacy in American Lives*; examining how new media technologies facilitate communication across time and space (and allow researchers to trace this movement); or situating the work of writing within economic models of production and consumption, composition as a field has tried to deepen its understanding of the social by making visible the systems in which writing takes place, broadening its scope of who writes and for what purposes, and considering how writing is valued.

In this special issue of *College English* we are presented with work that helps us begin to unpack the effect of the social turn in composition studies, to help us understand what might persist, and to provide us a sense of what might be next. While I organize my discussion of the essays included here by focusing on some key terms that capture what seem to me to have been important moves in the field as an enactment of or response to the social turn, I certainly do not want to suggest that these essays are limited to addressing only these specific dimensions. In fact much of this work reaches broadly across multiple dimensions that, as Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander write in their introduction, “foregrounds deeply contextualized action and radical possibility” for the field (486).

**Making/Material**

The attention to social experience as constitutive of language use was part of the emergence of the social turn in the human sciences, a shift that foregrounded the social construction of knowledge, situated individual subjectivity within broader
social contexts and actions, and made identity a key dimension in understanding composing practices (Trimbur). In this sense, the idea of making one’s activity visible or material within a network of social relations and contexts shifted our views of individual agency to one of collaboration and co-construction of knowledge. And yet the materiality of such epistemological work often remains ephemeral and located within human cognition and experience.

In her essay “Writing Material,” Laura Micciche argues for a new materialism that recognizes “writing as radically distributed across time and space, and as always entwined with a whole range of others” (489). As Micciche points out, the attention to the social and the methodological tools that were developed (textual and linguistic analysis; ideology critique) has “narrowed the scope of what counts as the social by foregrounding the constructed nature of texts, objects, activities, and bodies with little attention to how such constructions interact with natural systems, biology, animals, and other forms of matter” (488). In particular, if we always locate writing in this limited understanding of the social, we also elide the ways in which writers interact with nonhuman agents or objects that may serve to “sponsor” their literate activity as well as make assumptions about what those relationships are and how they function. We also limit what we understand as the materiality of writing if it only exists as the result of human activity. In examining the genre of “acknowledgments,” Micciche suggests that in making their “debts” visible, writers start to document how their writing practices are “enmeshed in varying partnerships with others, organizations, animals, feelings, sound, and places” (499). Ultimately, what Micciche offers to the field is a challenge to look at writing in unfamiliar ways, to identify its unfamiliar relationships, and to see its “radical withness” (502).

Similarly, in their essay “One Train Can Hide Another,” Tony Scott and Nancy Welch argue that rhetorical work that may seem to address what we imagine as public engagement and activist work often obscures political and economic relationships that raise questions about the purpose and investment of such work. In such cases, further investigation into the various contexts or extratextual interests—for example, the historical, political, social, and economic—beyond what seem to be apparent ethical appeals is critical to understanding exactly whose purposes are being served. Building on theories of critical materialism from communication studies, Scott and Welch offer a “critical materialist pedagogy” that “operat[es] on the tracks of both formal and sociohistorical analysis, aims to reconnect discursive and digitized arguments to the extradiscursive interests they serve,” to the bodily effects they can engender (566). What concerns Scott and Welch is the decontextualizing and de-materializing of the writing subject even as the field has embraced the public turn in writing. That is, although the writing subject has been repositioned as an agent within networks and digitized writing practices that have reached instantaneously beyond what was once imagined and that seemingly engage ideas and issues that have
broad consequence, Scott and Welch worry that such practices have the profound effect of “further isolating the discursive field from extradiscursive social relations” (568). In response, Scott and Welch’s theory of critical materialist pedagogy works to defetishize, rematerialize, and reinterpret texts through the body, a process that attempts to make visible the various social relations that inform the work of a text and to offer creative possibilities for moving toward ethical action rather than relying on prepackaged and reified social meaning.

In the work of Micciche, and of Scott and Welch, we see a need for an attention to the material dimensions and consequences of writing, rhetoric, and composition in order to avoid similar theoretical faults that the social turn was meant to address. That is, their invocation of a new or critical materialism is meant to challenge the fetishizing of writing itself that has still occurred in spite of (or perhaps been re-inforced by) the social turn when we continue to valorize and assign value to work because it functions as an expression of identity, does a certain kind of political work, or seeks to maintain ideological positions that result in inequity. What these authors show us is that the making of writing, while socially situated, is also material with consequences that rely on and affect a variety of actors, whether individual human agents, institutions, or nonhuman material objects that function as part of a network of action.

**Agency, Identity, Action**

With the election of Obama, commentators and critics began to speculate about a post-racial era, when the marker of race (and by extension, other categories of identity) would no longer be understood as a limit, might even be acknowledged as agential, but should not figure as a determinant in social relations. However, what became apparent was that a new racialized discourse began to insert itself in the public sphere—from political officials to online commentary sites to town hall meetings—and race as an identification served as a synecdoche for arguments against a variety of policies and practices. The social turn in the humanities broadly, and in rhetoric and composition specifically, provided a framework to understand the activities of individuals within larger social networks; turned attention to communities often marginalized because their work was not viewed as exemplary; and allowed for narrative as a mode of analysis. However, it also helped to foreground identity and agency as important categories of theoretical framing. Particularly in language education, where deficit models often situated individuals and their communities as objects of failure rather than subjects engaged in active language practices, this reframing helped the field understand how writing and rhetoric functioned to achieve specific purposes for these writers. To see students, as well as others who have been perhaps seen as novices, as having agency and a sense of identity in their rhetorical work and as acting within larger social systems was an important move.
In their essay “Rhetorical Education and Student Activism,” Jonathan Alexander and Susan Jarratt examine the rhetorical work of the Muslim Student Union (MSU) on the campus of the University of California–Irvine as it sought to develop strategies for more effective engagement to address social justice claims. Drawing on ethnographic methods and interviews, Alexander and Jarratt paint a complex portrait of students whose rhetorical action was informed by their sense of identity as Muslim and by the understanding that they had agency to act in response to policies and practices that they viewed as unjust and injurious to a Palestinian community that is subjected to Israeli state power. What Alexander and Jarratt unpack is an interesting and important genealogy of rhetorical education, identifying what resources students in the MSU drew upon in order to develop their rhetorical strategies. Although students sometimes identified curricular sources of rhetorical education, what stands out are the extracurricular sources that provided them with these strategies. In particular, the students’ ability to analyze and theorize rhetorical action by viewing other models of protest on sites such as YouTube reinforce the presence of new digital and media technologies as both archives and modes for rhetorical education. Perhaps most important was the students’ identification of the MSU as a site of rhetorical education that served, in contrast to institutional university curriculum, as a place where they could identify, deliberate, and act on their concerns as Muslims in the United States. In this organization, identity and agency served as ethical resources for these students, who could then develop modes of action.

David Wallace faces a similar concern as an instructor when he encounters “unwelcome” student work that challenges his agency and identity not only as an instructor but also as a gay male. In recounting his experience with a student who wrote in an essay, “The first people I exclude from my circle [of humanity] are homosexuals” (547), Wallace provides a careful but powerful case for why identity matters, not only in the context of a classroom, but also for the research, theory, and administration we do in composition studies. Though Wallace turns to the work of Vershawn Ashanti Young, Vorris Nunley, and Jacqueline Jones Royster—because “they challenge us to understand that identity, agency, and language are negotiated across boundaries created by systems of difference that have real consequences” (553)—he offers three concepts that provide opportunities for intersectional action. Concept 1: We are (nearly) always talking and writing across boundaries (554). Concept 2: Cross-boundary discourse must be reconceived as more than speaking from one unitary home place to another (555). Concept 3: Engaging in responsible cross-boundary discourse requires reciprocal dialogue in our personal, professional, and pedagogical discourse (557). Embedded in these concepts are the effects of the social turn that have made change in the way we create and distribute knowledge a possibility. However, as Wallace makes clear, change does not happen easily, and although acts of vulnerability may invite conversation, these invitations do not necessarily result in ethical action.
In “Sinners Welcome,” Steve Parks provides us with an argument that perhaps best illustrates the work of this special issue of *College English* in reimagining the social turn. By examining the way rhetorical agency has been theorized in community partnerships and offering a critique that urges us to return to the political, Parks wants to make visible the structural and material relationships that are often obscured by what we think of as social action. In a direct challenge to the field, Parks asks “whether collective political action is even possible under a disciplinary rubric” (507). Taking up Linda Flower’s theorization of rhetorical agency and what Parks identifies as an underlying neoliberal discourse, he suggests that there are possibilities for collective action that do not rely on—and in fact can challenge—existing orthodoxies in the field in order to move toward change and action that is indeed generated by communities themselves, and that produce their own sense of agency rather than simply being a partner.

Parks offers a provocative example of “collective agency” (512) in describing and analyzing the Near Westside Initiative, a complex partnership of residents, various governmental and community institutions, and private interests. Here we see how and where agency is located, how it moves between partners, and whether those members who are often seen as the beneficiaries of such community partnerships can ever really participate and assert themselves within these existing systems. Ultimately, it was only when the residents themselves could identify their purpose, develop practices, and exert pressure on other partners—that is, to move toward collective action—that a real sense of agency was found. In presenting this case, Parks makes a parallel argument to the field, asking us to “move toward a collective voice, premised on coming to understand how community histories can act as the foundational moment for strategic interventions in power networks” (522). He asserts that writing programs, composition instructors, and the students we teach should not see such activism as outside the concerns of the field, but rather that we move from simply locating the work of writing, rhetoric, and composition from the social to the political.

In reimagining the social turn in rhetoric and composition, these scholars have brought to the forefront concerns about the material, the political, and the ethical. I think that while many of us in composition studies would recognize the significance and transformative effect of the social turn in our research and teaching, we should also be mindful that attention to what the social provides should not obscure what material conditions, new relations, and actions may develop in a changing world. The work included in this special issue puts a clear focus on the materiality of the social, and reminds us that we cannot simply take for granted that social awareness itself will describe and explain the work of writing. In fact, as these essays have shown, our research and teaching must continually challenge the work of writing even when we see important and innovative work taking place, are sympathetic to particular positions, or question the efficacy of a specific practice. In the Age of Obama, we
have seen how writing, rhetoric, and composition have worked to make the social more visible, to construct and assert agency and identity, and to call for collective action. However, these essays also implore us to not accept the premise and promise of the social turn uncritically, to be aware that a celebration of the social can actually mask deeper-seeded problems that only continue to injure those who we often assume are provided with new opportunities for expression. If we are to reimagine the social turn and to understand how it has informed the work we do, we must be willing to engage in critical reflection that moves toward collective action, and to accept that our work may be consequential but sometimes in only limited ways or in ways that are unintended.

Works Cited