

Meditations on the Merganser: Administration in Uncertain Times

Lori Ostergaard, Jim Nugent, and Jacob Babb

Grief and resilience live together.

—Michelle Obama

No one needs us to rehearse the brutalities of 2020 and we are, frankly, too overwhelmed to take full stock of this historical moment. As we write this in October 2020, the country is on the verge of an epoch-making election and is experiencing civil unrest, domestic threats, a global pandemic, and an uncertain future for higher education. In this space, we would like to cast some hopeful light against this dark year. There is much to be encouraged about despite the gloom of 2020: the Black Lives Matter movement has led many to face the enduring disgrace of systemic racism; an emerging generation of leaders has shown their commitment to rebuilding this country and effecting positive social, institutional, and political change; and young people are leading the way in efforts to stem the effects of climate change, gun violence, economic inequality, and more. To the extent that our country is tipping toward fascism and white supremacy, we believe that it is equally poised on the edge of positive and lasting social change.

As of this writing, Lori and Jim are at their summer cottage—or camp, in the local idiom—on a bay of Lake Superior in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. The nearest interstate highway is 215 miles away and, although hospital ventilators are scarce up here, the location is very amenable to social distancing. Jacob, meanwhile, is hunkered down with his family at his home in suburban Louisville, Kentucky [and is definitely not jealous of his co-editors’ idyllic lake home —JB]. One day in late August, Lori and Jim noticed an orphan duckling on the lakeshore, a red-breasted merganser that had separated from its brood and was trying to make it on his own. Lake Superior is a cruel home for a lone duckling, of course: the bay’s resident birder warned Lori and Jim to keep their distance and to not get too attached. So they promptly named him Scooter and began keeping an eye on him.



Photo by Jim Nugent.

The red-breasted merganser (*Mergus serrator*) has dwelled on the coastal lands of North America for millions of years. Only one or two days after hatching, mergansers are led by their mother to the water, where they are fully equipped to feed themselves by diving for insects and fish. Mergansers stick together as a brood for about eight weeks, at which point they can fly and are ready for a late fall migration. Although Scooter seemed small, alone, and utterly impermanent, he was actually equipped with some powerful genetic firmware—beta tested and refined over millennia—that made him a tenacious survivor from the moment he hatched. Still, it was nerve-racking for Jim and Lori to watch Scooter each day from their bunkhouse window, eliciting equal parts trepidation and hope. Every Scooter spotting brought joy and marvel at his growth, as well as relief that a predator hadn't yet found him. As his tiny wings expanded and his feathers started coming in, he was inching closer to flight.

Witnessing the merganser, it is hard not to reflect on our lives as educators, administrators, and citizens. We step into institutions that long precede us and, whether we thrive in them or not, these institutions are likely to long succeed us. Against the fact of our own impermanence—and in

the midst of circumstances beyond our control—we labor for survival and we strive to make things better. Scooter appeared on the lakeshore right as Lori was stepping down from a six-year term as department chair and a two-year term as chair of Oakland University's General Education Committee. At the same time, Jacob traded his WPA hat for one as English department chair at Indiana University Southeast and Jim stepped down from a five-year term as director of Oakland University's professional and digital writing major. Faculty who have served in these roles understand the frantic legwork taking place below the surface, necessary to keep our programs afloat and moving forward in the face of uncertainty. And each of us knows the mix of trepidation and hope that accompanies our work in higher education and in the larger society.

As we look back over our last few editors' introductions, we realize that we have been mourning and processing complex emotions even before the challenges of 2020. After months of sheltering-in-place, and with a country on the verge of massive social changes for better or worse, we would like to focus on this as a time for survival, for growth, and for moving forward despite the cold waters that crash over us. To make good on the lessons of 2020, we may do no more in a day than to keep our heads above water and to help our family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and students to stay afloat themselves. Our hope for us all is that when the waves break, we can dive under them; when it's calm, we can rest; and when we get lost, our flock will find us. May we be as tenacious as the merganser, even in the face of our own impermanence.

It was sixteen days after his first appearance that Scooter was last spotted for certain. But on the twenty-first day, Lori and Jim saw a brood of ten young mergansers diving for minnows out on the bay. The next day, they saw a brood of eleven. Red-breasted mergansers commonly adopt ducklings from other broods; although we can't say for sure, we're hopeful that Scooter found his way and is no longer alone.



Photo by Jim Nugent.

IN THIS ISSUE

In “Writing Outside of Class: The Untapped Potential of Students’ Non-Academic Writing,” Heather Lindenman and Paula Rosinski present self-reported survey data from students regarding their non-academic writing experiences. They contend that students’ non-academic writing experiences are potential sources of transferable writing knowledge and suggest that bringing discussions of students’ non-academic writing into academic contexts can foster student writing expertise and a deeper culture of writing on campuses.

In “Toward a Rhetorical Model of Directed Self-Placement,” Zhaozhe Wang suggests that our students’ placement decisions may not align with “who we think they are” or how we expect them to engage with DSP practices. Wang begins this article by examining current DSP scholarship through the lens of rhetorical agency. He then proposes a “rhetorical model of DSP” and provides an example of such a model at work.

In “The Affiliate as Mentoring Network: The Lasting Work of the Carolinas WPA,” Meg Morgan, Marsha Lee Baker, Wendy Sharer, and Tracy Ann Morse provide a compelling argument for the potential of CWPA-affiliates to provide mentoring opportunities for WPAs. The article documents how the Carolinas WPA (CarWPA) was created to meet the local needs of isolated WPAs and asserts that “many more WPAs might be mentored through regional affiliates.”

Amy Cicchino's article "A Broader View: How Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition Prepare their Graduate Students to Teach Composition" presents survey data from 38 United States doctoral programs about teacher training practices for their graduate teaching assistant writing pedagogy education. The responses collected in this study shed light on the demographics, timing, goals, components, and methods used to prepare GTAs to teach undergraduate composition.

Meridith Reed's "Enacting Bricolage: Theorizing the Teaching Practices of Graduate Writing Instructors" examines how graduate student instructors act as pedagogical bricoleurs, drawing from several sources to create and enact their own pedagogical practices. Reed's research asks readers to "see new instructors not as trainees but as craftspeople," complicating how we think about pedagogical training.

Andrew Hollinger and Jessie Borgman's article "(Dis)similarity and Identity: On Becoming Quasi-WPA" examines the positions of "non-tenured, part-time or otherwise under-supported" quasi-WPAs, suggesting ways that the uncertain subject positions of these administrators present challenges to their authority, identity, and access to institutional resources.

Sheila Carter-Tod's review essay "The Importance of Documenting Oft-Unspoken Narratives" calls on WPAs to consider the narratives often left out of our scholarship, narratives from black WPAs and those who have been bullied in writing programs. These descriptions of varying experiences serve as needed appeals for us to pay more attention to the operations of power and privilege in our programs and institutions. Similarly, Christine Cucciarre's review "Non-Essential: Adjuncting During COVID-19" examines the tenuous role of adjunct faculty in our institutions at large and in our writing programs specifically, asking WPAs to consider how the pandemic presents an opportunity to redefine labor as it has existed and to create more ethical and fair labor practices moving forward.

THANKS TO OUR EDITORIAL BOARD

Every fall we take a moment to thank our editorial board for their support, insight, and hard work. We know our board members' time and energy is finite and valuable, but their input is essential to *WPA*. We first wish to acknowledge and thank the members who are cycling off of the board. We are immensely grateful to Seth Kahn and Wendy Sharer for six years of service on the journal's editorial board; to Carrie Leverenz for eight years of service; to Mark McBeth, E. Shelley Reid, and Shelley Rodrigo for eleven years of service; to Scott Warnock for ten years of service; and to Susan

Thomas for two years of service. We also wish Susan well in her new role as CWPA's vice president.

We are also grateful to members of the editorial board who are continuing their service: David Blakesley, Beth Brunk-Chavez, Sheila Carter-Tod, Casie Fedukovich, Collie Fulford, Teresa Grettano, Sarah Z. Johnson, Cheri Lemieux Spiegel, Amy Ferdinandt Stolley, and Chris Warnick.

Finally, we are delighted to welcome the following new members to the board: Nancy Bou Ayash, Chen Chen, Sherri Craig, David Green, Alexandria Lockett, Staci Perryman-Clark, Patti Poblete, James Chase Sanchez, Darci Thoune, and Peter Vandenberg began their service on the board in October. Thank you for agreeing to work with us.

OUR EDITORIAL TEAM

One of the great joys we have experienced editing *WPA* has been working with some amazing graduate students as assistant editors and ads managers. It is a bittersweet moment for us as we bid farewell to the wonderful students who served with us this past year and welcome to a new team. This year, we say goodbye to two of our assistant editors: Rebecca Petitti joined us in 2019 and Kendra Andrews joined us in 2018 as an ads manager and graciously agreed to serve again as an assistant editor this past year. We were fortunate to have these exceptional colleagues working with us. This year Emily Jo Schwaller will join Katelyn Stark and Eric D. Brown as our new team of assistant editors and Megan Schoettler will serve as ads manager. We are grateful to this team for helping with the production of volume 43.

We are also grateful for the opportunity to work with undergraduates at our home institutions. This year, Jacob is working with Richard Stettenbenz, an English major at Indiana University Southeast, and Jim and Lori are working with Elizabeth Bihary and Jaclyn Tockstein, majors in professional and digital writing at Oakland University.

COMING IN SUMMER 2021 . . .

We hope you read that subheading to yourself in the deep voice of a movie trailer announcer. If not, we'll give you some time to do so now.

We are pleased to announce that the journal is publishing a special summer issue in 2021 on Black Lives Matter and antiracist projects in writing program administration, guest edited by Sheila Carter-Tod and Jennifer Sano-Franchini. We originally asked Sheila and Jennifer to edit a symposium for the spring 2021 issue, but they received such an overwhelming response to their call for submissions that a full issue was warranted. We

are grateful to Sheila and Jen for their work on this forthcoming issue and to the CWPA leadership for enthusiastically approving our plan to add a third issue for volume 44.

CALL FOR NEW EDITORS

As we move into 2021, we are thinking ahead to 2022, when our editorship of WPA draws to a close. When we were selected to be the next editors, we had a year to shadow our generous editorial predecessors, Barbara L'Eplattenier and Lisa Mastrangelo. We look forward to doing the same for the next editorial team. Please read the following information and consider applying to edit the journal.

The term is for three years, with a possible two-year renewal. The new editor or editorial team will work with the current team to publish content already in development for spring 2022, shadow the editors as they process submissions in fall 2021 and spring 2022, and assume full responsibility for content and production beginning with the fall 2022 issue.

Interested applicants should have the following qualifications:

- publications and expertise in the field of writing program administration and related areas;
- knowledge of the issues that have preoccupied the field, both historically and in the recent past;
- familiarity with the journal, an understanding of the role the journal plays in the field, and a vision for the journal's future;
- a commitment to diversity and inclusive editorial practices; current membership in and a history of involvement with CWPA;
- strong editorial and organizational skills; and
- prior editorial and reviewing experience.

We especially encourage applications from prospective editorial teams and from BIPOC.

To apply, please submit an application letter explaining why you are qualified for this position and describing any resources or support your institution(s) will be able to provide (released time, secretarial support, startup funds, etc.), as well as resources you will request from CWPA. Applicants should also submit a current curriculum vitae for each member of the prospective editorial team. If you are proposing an editorial team, please explain how you will work together on editing and production of the journal. Upon request, additional information about editorial responsibilities and workflow, journal finances, and production timelines will be made

available to prospective editors. Address queries to Lisa Mastrangelo, Chair of the Publications Committee, at lmastrangelo919@gmail.com.

Please send application materials electronically as a single file to Lisa Mastrangelo at the above email address. The deadline is March 1, 2021. Members of the publications committee will be available for phone and videoconference consultations with prospective editors/editorial teams. We hope to finalize an agreement with the new editor or editorial team no later than May 1, 2021.

