

# FOREWORD

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*The Centrality of Style* presents readers with a paradox. The editors begin with the convincing argument that style must be regarded as central to the discipline of composition studies. Indeed, the collection's rich diversity of chapters reasserts the prominent place of style in the field from different perspectives, historical moments, and theoretical and pedagogical approaches.

Yet despite the book's claim of style's centrality, it makes an equally forceful case—which may appear contradictory at first—that some of the most exciting new ideas in stylistic study have emerged not from the center but the *margins* of the field—and the margins' intersections with other disciplines, ideas, cultures, and sites of inquiry.

The paradox inherent in the tension of seeing style as both central and marginal is not new to those in rhetoric and composition. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) has described a similar phenomenon in discussing the clash of language's unifying, or *centripetal* forces, and their counterpart—the dispersing, or *centrifugal* forces that often disrupt prevailing norms. In public sphere theory, critical theorist Michael Warner (2005), borrowing from Jurgen Habermas (1989) and others, depicts an identical discordance in the tension between *publics* that dominate social discourse and their counterpart, a culturally less powerful, oppositional group, called a *counterpublic*, which constantly works against that dominance even as it maintains, says Warner, “at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” (p. 119). With respect to counterpublics, Warner says it is the oppositional aspect of their style that “performs membership” (p. 142).

There is no question that *The Centrality of Style* navigates the push and pull of these kinds of oppositions in compelling new ways. The real question is, How does the volume manage to position style in the field as what Frank Farmer (2008), borrowing from anthropologist Victor Turner, calls a *liminal counterpublic*, emanating from the break or rupture of the public-counterpublic relationship that somehow exists “betwixt and between” the two? How, in other words, does style's very centrality depend on its marginalization, lack of power, and sometimes “renegade” status (Johnson, 2003) both inside, and outside, the field?

Some answers to that question, and paradox, can be found in this volume. While there are many examples throughout the collection, here are some of the representative concepts that suggest even larger ideas in *The Centrality of Style* and show the current push and pull of style's liminal status in the field.

## STYLE AS *LINGUA FRANCA*

In his article in this volume, William FitzGerald argues that “[s]tyle has become a contemporary *lingua franca*,” and he gives evidence of the centrality of style historically, in popular culture, and in what he calls “the return of the figurative.” Yet even as he restores style to a pivotal location in composition and rhetoric, FitzGerald makes a parallel move of relocating style at the periphery—marginalized, he says, by the continuing struggle of the figures of speech for disciplinary legitimacy and for circulation among a broader writing public. Thus, in a move widely used by the writers in this volume, FitzGerald shows the value of style as a common language while maintaining its status as marginal in working toward broader recognition. FitzGerald intimates that both moves are necessary in forging a unique place for style in the field, betwixt and between other disciplinary forces and interests.

A similar move in situating style as liminal is made by Keith Rhodes, who argues, on the one hand, for an “aesthetics of style” that he sees as “persuasively influential” but also recognizes, on the other hand, as “problematized by the conserving and regressive power of monologic forms of art.” Thus Rhodes suggests that having an “*art of writing*,” with style at the center, remains elusive, on the margins of the field, as we hesitate to embrace an aesthetics that includes nonlinear or affective influences. Rhodes thus demonstrates the complicated aspect of style as a *lingua franca* for composition studies.

## STYLE AS RESEARCH

In his essay for the collection, Mike Duncan shows how the traditional research paper reflects the centrality of style, especially in the way research “leads to increased control over many styles” and serves as “a door to a multitude of other demanding styles.” Yet Duncan sees competing aspects of the genre as well, connecting some parts of research to the destabilized aspects of style that have historically rendered it powerless, ineffectual: “The generic research paper simultaneously displays all the weaknesses of a rhetoric reduced to ornament.” In his focus on research, however, Duncan not only relegates style to the margins it has traditionally occupied but resurrects it as a vital part of research, showing how the research paper genre can function as “a mastery of style, a way of arguing.” How does this “stylistic dance,” to use Duncan’s words, happen? He intimates, much like Warner (2005) does, that research is located in many sites of inquiry, what Warner calls a “multicontextual space of circulation, organized not by a place or institution but by the circulation of

discourse” among publics and counterpublics (p. 119). It is significant, then, that Duncan locates the very centrality of research in a contested space where style is part of a freely circulating discourse within a traditionally constrained genre.

In her look at style as research, Nora Bacon argues for a similar move in academic writing, showing the way it reflects variation between normalized styles and those that deviate from the norm and thereby demand our attention. In analyzing academic writing whose “style is sometimes ugly, sometimes lovely, sometimes almost invisible,” she includes excerpts that “serve as counterexamples to the idea that academic writing is dry, dull, objective, passionless, or merely utilitarian.” Bacon illustrates the way style draws us in, demanding our attention, by quoting from philosopher Elaine Scarry: “The boy copies the face, then copies the face again. Then again and again. He does the same thing when a beautiful living plant—a violet, a wild rose—glides into his field of vision, or a living face: he makes a first copy, a second copy, a third, a fourth, a fifth.” Bacon uses Scarry as an example of style that calls attention to itself, a move Warner acknowledges: “Public discourse craves attention like a child. Texts clamor at us. Images solicit our gaze. Look here! Listen! Hey!” (p. 89). Bacon shows how academic styles that we might consider most central are, paradoxically, often those most on the margins, centrifugal, dispersing, and as such, capturing our attention by deviating from the norm.

## STYLE AS SCIENCE

Jonathan Buehl begins his piece in the collection with some assumptions about the centrality of style in science when he writes that “specific stylistic foci are often required by programmatic mandates or pedagogical objectives.” In terms of science, we normally think of style as normalizing, yet Buehl, much like Warner’s counterpublic discourse, moves the intersection of science with style to the margins: “Scientific discourse is difficult and ‘strange’ for many students—even students in scientific fields.” Contrary to conventional wisdom, Buehl says this movement is positive because “by reading, writing, and writing about scientific prose, students engage unfamiliar discourse, which encourages them to apply newly learned strategies.” Buehl’s call for “defamiliarization” is the opposite of the impulse toward transparency or clarity usually associated with scientific discourse. Buehl thus works against a notion mentioned by Warner—that “a clear style results in a popular audience” (p. 138)—and instead embraces the kind of defamiliarizing language Warner sees as central to counterpublics and a nonnormative style.

## STYLE AS ASSESSMENT

Star Medzerian Vanguri exemplifies the paradox of style in her chapter on scoring rubrics in composition classrooms. Vanguri's study reflects the way style remains at the margins, sometimes undergoing a reversal of sorts: "We are more specific about those aspects we value least . . . while we are less specific about the qualities we value most." Vanguri goes on to explain the paradox she outlines: "Qualities like eloquence, rhetorical appropriateness, and tone are less quantifiable when placed into the context of a rubric than are the qualities we value least about style—mechanics, sentence structure, documentation, and word choice." Style is thus centralized—and marginalized—at the same time. Style as assessment becomes a lens through which we see a reversal of ideology at work. In the end, we need to see the juxtaposition of the center *and* the margin to understand what we value most.

The examples here offer just a few of the many ways in which the paradox of style plays out in the pages of *The Centrality of Style*. The collection places style at the center of the field. Many of the chapters work within the liminal space in which style serves as both a centralizing and decentralizing force in rhetoric and composition. Clearly, the authors and editors have made an invaluable contribution in their collection by exposing the paradoxical nature of a canon that continues to play a vital role in our disciplinary history.

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