

# Rhetorical Future(s) and Accounting for Rhetorical Debt

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Kellie Sharp-Hoskins

**Abstract:** *This article posits accounting for rhetorical debt as a feminist attitude and practice that acknowledges how our futures are bound to and bound by our rhetorical accounts. The accounts we offer, I argue, construct rhetorical boundaries for our work, which not only point to our rhetorical futures—what is made possible, recognizable, and important by our accounts—but our rhetorical debts. After tracking out the complicated rhetorical affordances (and constraints) of the economic implications of debt, I review feminist and decolonial scholarly practices of acknowledging rhetorical terministic and genealogical debts. Building on this work, I suggest that scholars must acknowledge both explicit debts as well as the conditions of possibility that allow them to emerge.*

**Keywords:** *accounting, credit decolonization, debt, economics, feminist practice, futures, rhetoric*

In the wake of economic collapse and recalibration over the last ten years, scholars in critical anthropology and social theory have begun to demystify debt, questioning, like economist David Graeber, “Why debt? What makes the concept so strangely powerful? Consumer debt is the lifeblood of our economy. All modern nation-states are built on deficit spending. Debt has come to be the central issues of international politics. But nobody seems to know exactly what it is, or how to think about it” (5). Graeber traces the concept’s influence to two myths—primitive barter economies and existential social debt—which combine to mark debt as the logical, and inevitable, conclusion of economic and social progress. But he rejoins the “assumption that debts *have* to be repaid” with “the remarkable thing about the statement ‘one has to repay one’s debts’ is that even according to standard economic theory, it isn’t true” (3). In response to this only apparent inevitability of debt, Graeber asks, instead, what seems a rhetorically motivated question: “What does it mean to imagine our responsibilities as debts?” (67). While Graeber ultimately argues *against* this metaphorization of responsibility as debt, suggesting that the equation is inadequate to explain debt’s conceptual and social ascendance, in the following project I argue *for* a conceptualization of rhetorical debt precisely *because*

of the perspective it offers on responsibility. More specifically, I posit *accounting for rhetorical debt* as a feminist attitude and practice that foregrounds relationships between rhetorical possibilities and ethics. The accounts we offer, I argue, construct rhetorical boundaries for our work. They not only point to our rhetorical futures—what is made possible, recognizable, and important by our accounts—but to our rhetorical debts: how our futures are bound to and bound by the accounts we give.

In this project I engage the concept of debt through multiple lines of inquiry, beginning by discussing the rhetorical force and effects of debt as an economic term. I then trace out rhetorics of debt articulated in feminist and decolonial projects, which ground and give shape to (read: indebt) the ethics of this project by calling attention to differential relations of credit and debt, before investigating the complications of accounting for debt at all. Thereafter I proffer a conceptualization of rhetorical debt that demands an account even as it belies the very possibility of doing so. This *accounting for rhetorical debt*, I ultimately argue, can be a feminist rhetorical practice that not only acknowledges intellectual traditions and relations but admits differential conditions of possibility and recognition for such.

## **Economic Metaphors and/in Debt**

As indicated by my framing here, this work does not eclipse economic metaphors associated with debt, but purposefully draws them out in what I will call rhetorical accounting—which uses debt as a trope to organize and study rhetorical investments. This economic framing has precedent within both economics and rhetoric that range from studies of the rhetoric of economics (McCloskey; Edwards; Ziliak) to rhetoric as economics (Herring and Longaker) to implications of economics on rhetoric (Borkowski; Heath; Horner; Lindquist; Zebroski) and the political economy of composition (as represented by the 2016 special issue of *College Composition and Communication*, for example). As William Rodney Herring and Mark Garrett Longaker argue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “linguistic and economic assumptions” ground both economics and rhetoric such that both “incline toward a belief that value depends on future fungibility” (250, 249). But this framing also—and necessarily—invites critique, especially, as in the words of Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, “States have used their dwindling financial resources as an effective alibi to abet the transformation of universities into commodified knowledge factories or refashion them into extensions of the military-industrial complex” (58). This alibi might be seen at work, for example, in the concept of accountability in education discourses, as explained by Linda Adler-Kassner and Susan Marie Harrington. Accountability, they suggest, “tends to reflect business-oriented definitions that speak to systemized, standardized accounts of ‘value added,’

rather than situating this concept within an institution and its specific students and programs" (85). Indeed, accountability gleans much—or perhaps most—of its traction in public discourses in relationship to markets. Not only do public companies cite accountability to stockholders when justifying practices and policies, accountability is also invoked in political debate on discussions of public programs, which must be accountable to taxpayers. While market accountability in educational and public discourse profits from its associations with transparency and/as ethics, it simultaneously provides coverage for practices and policies that privilege a bottom line above all else, as evidenced, for example, by the complicity of Penn State in the Sandusky scandal, which provided coverage for a sexual predator to protect the university's financial stake in sporting activities (see Giroux and Giroux), or of the accounting firm Arthur Anderson in the Enron scandal, which cost investors their homes, pensions, and even livelihoods. Accountability, like accounting, is neither neutral nor objective, but rhetorical: it takes on meaning and value within particular discourses and logics.

In addition to the spurious connotations of economic metaphors writ large, the concept of debt itself invites sharp criticism from diverse sources that include, for example, the findings from France's Committee for a Citizen's Audit of Public debt that declared 60% of France's public debt as *illegitimate* (Keucheyan). France's audit follows an international trend toward investigating debt, revealing it as a political construction which benefits certain groups at the expense of others. Interestingly, the audit reveals not what debt *is* but what it *does*, its rhetorical and performative functions.

Maurizio Lazzarato theorizes the function—or doings—of debt in *The Making of the Indebted Man* in terms of a neoliberal logic of subjectification. He follows Nietzsche to explain that "The constitution of society and the domestication of man . . . result neither from economic exchange (contrary to the thesis advanced by the entire tradition of political economists, from the Physiocrats to Marx by way of Adam Smith), nor from symbolic exchange (contrary to the anthropological and psychoanalytic theoretical traditions), but from the relationship between creditor and debtor" (39). This relationship, he goes on to explain, is based on a "promise of payment" such that "the task of a community or society has first of all been to engender a person capable of *promising*, someone able to *stand guarantor for himself* in the creditor-debtor relationship, that is, capable of honoring his debt" (40, emphasis in original). Far from creating parity among debtors, Lazzarato argues that "Credit is 'one of the most effective instruments of exploitation man [sic] has managed to create, since certain people, by producing credit, are able to appropriate the labor and wealth of others'" (21). By way of example, we might compare Detroit citizens—whose water was shut off based in July 2014 due to their

“debt” to the Detroit Water and Sewer Department—to the state of Michigan itself, which owes millions to the same company but has yet to see its own water shut off. The individuals’ debt(s) are marked and moralized within a “debts must be paid” capitalist logic that does not—and cannot—extend to more powerful entities.

The relationship between subjectivity and debt is historicized by Graeber, who explains how

[D]uring the ‘70s oil crisis, OPEC countries ended up pouring so much of their newfound riches into Western banks that the banks couldn’t figure out where to invest the money; how Citibank and Chase therefore began sending agents around the world trying to convince Third World Dictators and politicians to take out loans (at the time this was called ‘go-go’ banking); how they started out at extremely low rates of interest that almost immediately skyrocketed to 20% or so due to tight U.S. money policies in the early ‘80s; how, during the ‘80s and ‘90s, this led to the Third World debt crisis; how the IMF then stepped in to insist that, in order to obtain financing, poor countries would be obliged to abandon price supports on basic foodstuffs, or even policies of keeping strategic food reserves, and abandon free health care and free education; how all of this had led to the collapse of all the most basic supports for some of the poorest and vulnerable people on earth. (2)

This brief explanation reveals the historicity of debt as imbricated in global neocolonial projects, which inculcate disadvantaged, oppressed, and vulnerable peoples in a market logic that makes debt inescapable. As economists Michael Kremer and Seema Jayachandran explain of the legal doctrine of odious debt: “sovereign debt incurred without the consent of the people and not benefiting the people is odious and should not be transferable to a successor government, especially if creditors are aware of these facts in advance.” And yet, individuals around the world are not only born into debt but subjectivized and socialized (without consent) as debtors who need credit extended for education, for housing, for food, for life itself. And, clearly, this subjectification reaches and shapes the doors of the academy. As Henry Giroux cites, “Too many students [who] are buried under huge debts . . . have become a major source of celebration by the collection industry because it allows them to cash in on the misfortune and hardships of an army of indebted students.” The effects of this indebtedness are no less than limiting (rhetorical) futures and (rhetorical) lives. Lazzarato explains that while “[t]he world must contain indeterminations . . . that is, a ‘present’ which encompasses possible alternatives, and thus, possibilities of choice and existential risk. It is these possibilities and

these unpredictable alternatives that debt seeks to neutralize" (70). Or, summarized another way: "The logic of debt is stifling our possibilities for action" (71).

As Lazzarato and Graeber (among others) show, debt is entangled in a complex history of privilege and deprivation, assigning value and ownership for some at the expense of others while "plung[ing] us into the existential condition of the indebted man, at once responsible and guilty for his particular fate" (Lazzarato 9). To posit debt as an ethical, feminist, rhetorical trope, then, is risky. But I propose that it is not despite, but because of, its ethical entanglements that the figure of debt—and its attendant econo-centric vocabulary—offers unique possibilities for feminist rhetorical inquiry. That is, I do not (and I cannot) use debt or other economic terms as neutral signifiers, but in order to call attention to this project as implicated in and bound to not only economies of meaning but the economics of material possibility that construct the boundaries of our rhetorical imagination by marking objects, attachments, concepts, bodies, and lives as recognizable, as possible, as livable. In other words, I draw on an economic vocabulary to foreground my own—and this project's—enmeshment in systems and relations of value, which include capitalist logics that sponsor the conditions of recognition for my argument. It is *within* these systems (including discourses of academia, higher education, and disciplinary expertise), that is, that this project can signify as valuable.<sup>1</sup>

My acknowledgement of an implication in economic rhetoric also performs the premise on which this argument for rhetorical accounting rests: that our accounts can never escape the terms in which they are offered. Our use of terms indebts us to their work, to the tokens or fragments of discourse they carry.<sup>2</sup> This is, to be sure, a well-worn argument in rhetoric; to argue that terms do work, name situations, select reality, is one definition of rhetoric itself. But acknowledging terms as rhetorical does not mean that we have adequately accounted for our *use* of terms—particularly those that go without saying, that mark us *in debt*. To wit, we cannot qualify the function and work of all the terms that we use (which would prevent us from engaging in any

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1 To clarify, I am not suggesting that economics, or capitalist logic, alone sponsor the conditions of possibility for value. Rather, as Mike Edwards, I seek a vocabulary motivated by "the rich tradition of economic scholarship that allow[s] for the recognition of possibilities for complex economic agency" (257).

2 Here this language is indebted to Matthew Jackson's discussion of fragments of discourse in "The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness" (*JAC* 2010).

other intellectual, service, and ethical projects); and even if we could attend to every term, we could do so only by way of using additional terms, which would require yet more qualification. Possibility aside, any project seeking totalizing accounts would undermine rhetoric's epistemological commitment to the partiality, contingency, and the vulnerability of language.

Accordingly, accounting for our terms (our signifiers, our tropes, our narratives, our commonplaces) can neither be motivated by absolution nor resolution. Neither can we hope, to use another economic metaphor, for a perfectly balanced ledger—so long as we are using terms, we will be indebted to them, and our debts can neither be erased by the contributions we make back to the rhetorical inquiry, nor blotted out just because we have mentioned their presence. Accounting for rhetorical debts, I will argue in the balance of this article, comes not only as we acknowledge that our indebtedness to the discursive and material conditions of possibility we rely on sponsor our work—that they construct the boundaries that make our work recognizable—but as we do so in the context of a rhetorical indebtedness always prior to and in excess of explicit accounting. Or, in short, to imagine feminist futures we must account for rhetorical debts.

## Acknowledging Rhetorical Debts

Whereas economics—as a concept and metaphor—has invited considerable scholarly interest in rhetorical studies, economic debt hasn't received the same attention. It nonetheless haunts the field, lived out daily in the student debt that pays tuition as lawmakers' fear of debt induce them to slash education funding. It is lived by faculty—tenure stream and adjunct—whose student loans and other debts (personal, medical, domestic) make salaries inadequate to repayment. It is lived differentially, of course. Historic and contemporary gendered, racialized, classed, and colonial inequities inflect who succeeds in academia: who has the credit that merits loans, who can afford to attend school on a small stipend, who has the resources to “go on the market,” who has the affective capital to perform interest and fit for a job,<sup>3</sup> who can afford to move for a job, and so forth. The differential allocation of debt further shapes whose and which projects emerge in the discipline—whose job affords time to publish? Who can take risks in scholarship (with parallel risk to economic security)?

Although these questions haven't been addressed in the field explicitly in terms of economic debts, figures of credit, debt, and indebtedness are

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3 Jennifer Sano-Franchini explores the costly relationships between emotional labor, affective capital, and normative performances of academic job searches in her 2016 article in *College Composition and Communication*.

invoked by a number of scholars in their citation practices.<sup>4</sup> That is, whereas the oft-mentioned image of Burke's parlor as an ideal representation of academic discourse suggests that many scholars in rhetoric studies imagine "catching up" to the conversations of the field but then entering it of their own accord, within a few rhetorical circles, scholars frame their own entrances in terms of the conditions of possibility for such, crediting not only those who preceded them in conversation but how those predecessors paved the way for and/or started new conversations. This form of acknowledgment in terms of debt both draws on and departs from the economic valences of the term. Whereas the economic consequences of debt are ignored by this usage—I found no evidence of acknowledgments to Federal Student Aid, Sallie Mae, or Wells Fargo—the relational aspects of debt are celebrated. This is especially well represented in feminist rhetorics, where scholars explain how their own paradigms and projects were set in motion by—and thus indebted to—the scholars and scholarship that preceded them.

As Andrea A. Lunsford suggests of her edited collection, for example, "The authors of *Reclaiming Rhetorica* hope, then, to add to recent work—particularly in books by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Miriam Brody, and Sonja Foss, and in articles by scholars such as Catherine Peaden, Nan Johnson, Anne Ruggles Gere, Susan Miller, Karyn Hollis, Sue Ellen Holbrook, and others, who are currently carrying on the archaeological investigations necessary to the success of this project" (6). Similarly, introducing her own co-edited collection, Eileen E. Schell suggests: "In titling this volume *Rhetorica in Motion*, we acknowledge the historical image of Rhetorica, a queen bearing a sword. We also acknowledge the work set in motion by Andrea Lunsford and the members of Annette Kolodny's graduate seminar at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) who inspired the volume *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, the first edited collection of women's rhetoric in the field of rhetoric and composition" ("Introduction" 1). Schell also quite specifically indebts the collection to Jacqueline Jones Royster. "In part, this volume," Schell explains, "takes as its inspiration the insightful, self-aware, and self-reflexive approach of afrafeminist research methods and methods of Jacquelines Jones Royster. . . . Her sites of critical regard have inspired me and a number of the contributors to think through our ethical, social, and political choices as feminist researchers" (4). Indeed, Royster's oeuvres itself provides many examples of

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4 Amy Robillard does explain, however, that the pervasive "plagiarism-as-theft" metaphor that underwrites our discourses of citation relies on "social norm[s] of attribution" wherein *credit* is morally, rather than economically, inflected ("Pass" 422). She further argues that "if we reconceive of the object of theft as credit, new ways of doing things become possible" (426).

acknowledging intellectual debts. For example, Royster suggests that “in my own work, I view forebears such as [Anna Julia] Cooper and [W.E.B.] DuBois, and a legion of others, as having established a legacy of trailblazing, entering uncharted spaces and raising voices of resistance to hegemonic practices” (“Introduction” 5); and elsewhere explaining her afrafeminist ideology, Royster suggests that “we can imagine, as African American women have traditionally done, that the ‘public’ arena is a place where negotiation can be with words rather than with weapons, and we can commit ourselves, as African American women writers have done, to turning our thoughts towards action in making a better world for all of us” (“A View” 231). Connecting her ideology and method to these traditions, Royster positions her work in relation to that which has come before: hers is not a project *ex nihilo*; it is indebted to the traditions and rhetorics of African American women. Making a similar rhetorical gesture, Jessica Enoch indelbts her definition of a Chicana feminist rhetoric—“a rhetoric that infuses rhetorics of/from color with concerns of gender and class”—to three historical women: Maria Renteria, Sara Estela Ramirez, and Astre (21). She, like Royster, posits these women and their work as necessary for the possibility of her own as well as for the argument she makes.

Scholars working in decolonial and indigenous rhetorics also demonstrate their commitment and approach to acknowledging the debts of contemporary intellectual traditions and work, which is especially important as these strains of scholarship contextualize the Western canon as just one of many intellectual traditions that have shaped not only the discourses of the field but the discourses of the Americas. Malea D. Powell suggests, for example, that the intellectual “story” she tells is “anchored in the practices of alliance and adaptation that have been important to the tribal nations of this continent for thousands of years, [that she] must give credit where credit is due” (“Down” 40); and Angela M. Haas “positions American Indians as the first-known multimedia workers and intellectuals in the Americas” (“Wampum” 78). Both scholars investigate the rhetoric and writing practices of American Indians, demonstrating, in contradistinction to the rhetorical canon often taken for granted, that rhetoric studies must acknowledge its debts in far broader terms than those that move from classical Greece through Europe and on to Colonial American and the contemporary university. Articulating the genealogy of contemporary traditions, tactics, and tropes, this acknowledgement of rhetorical forebears also frames an epistemological and ontological relationship to the Americas that contests the erasure and absence of indigenous peoples. Moreover, this and other decolonial work points to the *ongoing* debt incurring as academic and intellectual work ignores its continuing situatedness in colonial discourses that relegate American Indians to historical stereotype, where the “stories being told about them insist on nobility or ignobility, that cannot afford to see



Indian people as humans" (Powell, "Rhetorics" 399). And the debt only increases, we might say following Ellen Cushman, as scholars continuously "reproduce . . . colonizing ideology when we maintain a distance from people" ("The Rhetorician" 11). Disrupting this iteration of colonialism—or, I might suggest, accounting for debt—she continues, "begins with a commitment to breaking down the sociological barriers between universities and communities" (12). This work acknowledging both historical and contemporary bodies and perspectives that have been erased and marked absent—not only rhetorically, but through centuries of systematic genocide, oppression, and disregard—does not merely secure these fields; it also more radically contributes to what Scott Richard Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty, "the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires . . . to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" ("Rhetorical" 77). Linking this concept back to the project at hand, we can observe that in order to acknowledge rhetorical debt, we must recognize rhetorical sovereignty.

Importantly, and in apparent contrast to the ways that Schell acknowledges the debts of feminist rhetorics to scholars and scholarship that authorizes *motion* in the field (crossing borders, breaking boundaries), Lyons's explains that rhetorical sovereignty, "even though thoroughly rhetorical and intersubjective, requires a sense of boundedness or separation. . . . It is not something that is easily meshed. If anything, sovereignty requires the making of a fence, not to keep things out, but to keep the important things in" ("Fine" 79). Although Lyons makes this argument in a particular context—to preserve indigenous language practices and rights over and against hasty calls for hybridity or code-meshing—his explanation is also helpful in understanding rhetorical debts as more complicated than underwriting *moving on* from those who (and whose work) came before. For Lyons, the function of a fence (creating an entry in a ledger, acknowledging a specific history) is not only restrictive in the negative, partially blocking off a view of what lies beyond; it also creates habitable space, provides a dwelling place. As Lyons explains, "neither natural nor permanent, fences can create the conditions for good neighbors to meet" (103). As such, they not only divide; they also create the conditions of possibility for acknowledging rhetorical debts. This boundary work is not only essential, as Lyons argues, to acknowledging the rhetorical sovereignty of American Indians and other groups discursively and materially stripped of their rights, "to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" ("Rhetorical" 77), but, I argue, to define feminist and decolonial rhetorical projects. Rather than simply opposed to the *motion* sought by Schell and Rawson, Lyon's fence-building metaphor helps us identify the

rheterical grounds of feminist and decolonial scholarship, giving it place, orientation, and terms of recognition.

Feminist scholars in rhetoric and composition studies take up this work of fence building/recognizing limits, in myriad ways. Gesa E. Kirsch and Joy S. Ritchie, for example, explain that their “postmodern feminist perspective” prompts them to “continually question our ability to locate ourselves as researchers and to locate the participants in our research” and to “take into account what psychoanalytic, hermeneutic, and postmodern critics have already shown us about the limitations of our ability to fully understand our own motivations and perspectives” (142). Like Lyons, Kirsch and Ritchie demonstrate the inseparability of location and limitation: the locations of a researcher are circumscribed by her limits, and her limits are the debts of her locations. Royster acknowledges her own limits in terms of territory, when she explains how “in forging ahead in uncharted territory, I have . . . had to confront directly, in the rendering of text, my own status as a researcher who identifies unapologetically with the subjects of my inquiries” (“A View” 206-07). This statement demonstrates that Royster recognizes the limitations of her own perspective, limits imposed—debts incurred—by the borders she uses to chart new intellectual territory. Susan C. Jarratt argues quite strongly against those who would refuse to impose limits because they recoil from *mis*representing others:

If, as teachers and scholars we retreated from the risk of representation, punctiliously refusing any occasion of speaking for others ourselves and vigilantly pointing out any instance of metaphoric substitution in others, we would avoid making a theoretical error. But, as Linda Alcoff points out, “the desire to find an absolute means to avoid making errors come perhaps not from a desire to advance collective goals but a desire for personal mastery, to establish a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is master of the situation.” (“Beside” 175)

In the context of her argument about postcolonial feminist writing, Jarratt here enjoins teachers and scholars to commit to the “risk of representation,” which is necessary to engage in ethical work. While Jarratt acknowledges that we “can’t control the processes of representation,” she maintains that locating ourselves and the texts we use in “their geopolitical contexts . . . places us ‘beside, alongside, among, and in common with, with the help and favor or, in the midst of others” (175). In other words, it is only when we risk representation, impose a limit and thereby incur a debt, that we are able to live with others, or returning to Lyons’ words, to meet our neighbors.

In addition to signaling the value of imposing limits vis-à-vis representation, we might also say that in this passage Jarratt alerts us to terministic or representational debts; as scholars track both the authorizing and delimiting functions of the terms they use, they acknowledge debts. For example, historicizing the success of James Berlin's representation of composition studies (in his monograph *Rhetoric and Reality*) over and above its contemporaries, Louise Wetherbee Phelps acknowledges both her own representational work as well as the effects of that representation on her analysis. In the article, "Paths Not Taken," Phelps explains that her analysis will be framed "in terms of the figure of 'a path taken' and its shadow counterpart of unrealized possibilities, or 'paths not taken';" however, later Phelps acknowledges the fault lines of her frame, concluding that "in principle nothing can finally be lost from history as a path to an alternate future" ("Paths" 41, 52). Here Phelps' analysis does not evidence a gap or gaffe, a mistake she made and corrected. Rather, her work demonstrates what many in the field argue is one of rhetoric's most important characteristics: our ability to work with language as always already partial and biased. As Royster explains, "we have deeply vested interests, which, by their very subjectivity, lay claim, not to biases as an abnormal condition but to biases as a normal condition and to levels of commitment to the work that such biases are likely to engender" (*Traces* 276).<sup>5</sup> In effect corroborating this claim, and after having acknowledged her own project's indebtedness to Royster, Schell enacts another example of acknowledging rhetorical debt when she questions the side-effects of scholarly projects in feminist rhetorical research:

A significant component of feminist rhetorical research, especially research in a rhetorical vein, has involved the reclaiming of women rhetors who have been undervalued, lost, or forgotten. In the process of doing this important rhetorical reclamation work, how do we, as feminist rhetoricians, potentially reinscribe normalizing discourses about gender, race, sexuality, and the body? (Schell, "Introduction" 17)

Even as Schell seeks to solve this problem of reinscription by attending to the normalizing discourses that feminist reclamation projects rely on, her question at the end of this passage suggests that far from eliminating (to use Jarratt's words again) the "risks of representation," any and all rhetorical goals—even good feminist goals—demand that we delimit our work such that it necessarily occludes other (good) goals.

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5 In order to alleviate the ablest connotations of "normal," we might now (twelve years after the publication of this text) shift to a terminology of obligation or necessity such that we recognize biases as obligatory or unavoidable rather than accidental or volitional.

Kathleen A. Boardman and Joy Ritchie address a similar point when they discuss feminist rhetorical historiography, explaining that in rereading and retelling composition's past from a feminist viewpoint, many of us are trying to reclaim our own past, and, ironically, that is only partly possible. We have to reread in terms of our vision of the present. Our words about the past now are infused with our postmodern sensibilities about what words mean. (143)

Following this admission of the inescapability of bias, however, Boardman and Ritchie also acknowledge the work this bias makes possible:

Individual, self, voice: words like these we thought of as connections between revisionist teaching in composition and feminist practice in the 1970s. Now, seen through feminist theories of the 1990s, these terms are problematic. The current interest in feminist theory and methodology in composition also alerts us to the absence of explicit and systematic theorizing about gender in the professional and scholarly documents of the discipline in the 1970s and early 1980s. Yet, while the hindsight provided by feminist theory allows us to note these absences, it also enables narratives of composition's *connections with* and *disruption by* feminism. (143-44)

Borrowing Phelps' figure, we might say that Boardman and Ritchie understand the essential connection between "paths taken" and "paths not taken"; they acknowledge that their work—the privileged perspective of hindsight that misrecognizes historical context—sponsors their ability to imagine connections and disruptions as feminist activities. Thus, of their project we might say, in the words of Bruce Horner, that there is "tension (and ambivalence) [that] is felt in how we understand and name who we are, what we do, with whom, and our reasons for doing so" (*Terms* xv).

Such tension and ambivalence can prompt us to consider the paths taken—and not—in scholarly projects and to question which and how debts have been acknowledged, articulated, and accounted for (and not) in our disciplinary ledgers. Rather than submit what Mary Soliday and Jennifer Seibol Trainor critique as "audit culture," however, wherein exchange is the only measurable value, rhetorical accounting can call into relief how rhetorical debts fund our rhetorical work. These debts can include genealogical and terministic debts—as represented by the scholarship cited above—as well as material debts: political, physical, and fiscal. In her 2014 *College English* article Laura R. Micciche introduces material "writing debts" as represented in scholarly acknowledgments, for example, which "begin to sketch a reality of writing perhaps more true to lived experience than existing models of writing have yet recognized: writing is part and parcel of the dwelt-in world" (501). So articulated, these debts not only reverberate with the field's recent interest in new

materialisms but echo a longstanding American Indian intellectual rhetoric of, in the words Gabriela Raquel Ríos, “Indigenous relationality [which] recognizes that humans and the environment are in a relationship that is co-constituted and not just interdependent” (64). As renowned scholar and activist Winona LaDuke, “Native American teachings describe the relations all around—animals, fish, trees, and rocks—as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas” (2).

Although Micciche cites numerous scholars who indebted their work to non-human forces and things, however, and both new materialist and American Indian rhetorics call for acknowledging “all our relations” (LaDuke), explicit instances of acknowledging economic debts are scarce in rhetoric and composition studies. This might be attributed to, in Tony Scott’s words, “the spread of neoliberal policies,” wherein

More of human life becomes economically rather than politically governed, and realms of human life that were formerly seen as public and political have been conceptually cleaved away from politics. So problems like income inequality or rising debt have been seen and treated as individualistic and not related to larger interdependent, ideologically constructed, and changeable “political” economies. (15)

Even in a field ostensibly well-equipped to consider the subjectivizing effects of economics, then, scholars nonetheless themselves matriculate and publish in a political economy in which “Debtors are alone, individually responsible to the banking system . . . [and] [d]ebtors interiorize power relations instead of externalizing and combatting them. They feel ashamed and guilty” (Lazzarato, *Governing* 70). Lazzarato explains how this individuating effect of debt “is the technique most adequate to the production of neoliberalism’s *homo economicus*” (70) and, more damningly, how “the American University is the ideal realization of the creditor-debtor relationship” (64). As reported by *Forbes* in 2017, “Student loan debt is now the second highest consumer debt category—behind only mortgage debt—and higher than both credit cards and auto loans” (Friedman).

While the adjunctification of composition and realities of the academic job market are receiving increased scholarly attention (see, for example, Cox et al.; Daniel; Sano-Franchini; and the *College English* Forum on Issues about Part-Time and Contingent Faculty), the impact of economic debt remains a seldom-acknowledged guarantor of our discipline and profession. Student debt not only sponsors our own degrees but our enrollments, our writing programs, our majors, our graduate programs; or, as Lazzarato argues, “Students’ debt mortgages at once their behavior, wages, and future income” (70). Combined with other economic debts—personal, medical, auto, and home loans, to

name a few—student debt sponsors academic life writ large (see also Daniel, “A Debt”).

In this context of debts that includes the material, rhetorical, and relations between them, any simple call for acknowledging rhetorical debts becomes unanswerable, impossible even. Horner provides a telling example in his attempt to consider what it means to study the materiality of writing:

the materiality of writing . . . may be understood in terms of writing technologies. . . . Or it might be understood more broadly to refer to a host of socioeconomic conditions contributing to writing production. . . . Yet more broadly, the materiality of writing might be understood to refer to networks for the distribution of writing, controls over publishing (in whatever forms), and global relations of power articulated through these. . . . Similarly, the materiality of writing may be understood to include social relations . . . physical classroom conditions . . . the teacher’s physical health and office and library resources; clerical support, teaching load, salary and job security; intra- and interdepartmental relations between composition staff and other faculty; characteristics of the student population; relations between the academic institution and the state and commercial institutions; relationships among the Composition ‘profession’ and between those member and other organizations and constituencies; and teacher’s lived experiences of the histories of these relations. (xviii-xix)

Working from a cultural materialist perspective, Horner corroborates that “as these lists suggest, no representation of teaching or writing can exhaust the full range of their materiality but must be understood as focused, and thus partial and selective in all senses” (xix). In other words: to name all of the debts that sponsor academic work is unimaginable. Consider, for example, just one of material debts of this article: electricity. Although I can recognize and name its importance in lighting my office, supplying energy to my computer and printer and mini-fridge, I lack the language, expertise, and time to account for all the ways electricity has sponsored this work. Where would such a description start? Where would it end? What level of detail and description would mark it sufficient? Any attempt I might make to offer such description necessarily selects specific matter at the expense of other selections and frames such descriptions with vocabulary that directs attention to some matter(s) and not others.<sup>6</sup>

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6 Here I draw on, combine, and indebt this work to Kenneth Burke’s articulation of terministic screens alongside Richard Lanham’s work on *The Economics of Attention*, which helps frame selections as debt.

But here I would submit that an economic perspective on materiality is again instructive in punctuating the need for offering such accounts, insofar that it can prioritize—rather than reject or ignore—relations that allow debts to emerge. According to the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB),

Information is material if its omission or misstatement could influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of the financial statements. Materiality depends on the nature and amount of the item judged in the particular circumstances of its omission or misstatement. Given the pervasive nature of materiality, it is difficult to consider the concept except as it relates to the qualitative characteristics of relevance and faithful representation. Thus, materiality is a screen or filter used to determine whether information is sufficiently significant to influence the decisions of users in the context of the entity, rather than as a qualitative characteristic of decision useful financial information. (Par 30)

Materiality in this frame is not an ontological given. It only takes on value and meaning in relation. What matters, what needs to be accounted for—the credits and debts, holdings and debts—emerges in relation. Thus, for example, a \$1,000 discrepancy in the accounts of a small company would *matter* in relationship to a \$10,000 operating budget. Or, in shorthand, we might say it *is* material. But a multi-million dollar discrepancy might be marked immaterial in the context of a larger company or institution; in short, it does not matter. What's more, within financial accounting there is no standard relation or ratio established to mark materiality: it is determined vis-à-vis professional judgment. Materiality takes shape within particular contexts of size, value, and acceptable risk as determined by governing organizations.

The concept of materiality shifts attention to the politics of debt, to how some matters, some paths, some debts emerge as such. As I explain below, this emphasis not only reverses the relationship between accounting and transparency but realigns debt with responsibility. Moreover, rhetorical accounting invites us to question the presence (and absence) of debt(s) in the discourses of our field and performs a decolonial feminist commitment to acknowledging rhetorical debts that extends far beyond balancing any (economic) ledger.

## **Recognizing Debt**

Although the seeming hallmark of accounting, transparency can never live up to its promise of complete disclosure. David L. Wallace enlists Judith Butler to remind rhetoric and composition scholars that we (including our language use) are never transparent to ourselves. Wallace explains that “complete self-knowledge or self-definition is not possible because we are all reliant on

social norms beyond our control not only for our understanding of ourselves and our position in the world but also for the means to engage with that world in meaningful ways" (*Compelled* 6). In other words, any possibility for self-understanding comes through rhetorical debt; in Butler's words, "there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence" (*Giving* 7). For Butler, as for Wallace, accountability is not volitional; it is the condition of social and rhetorical possibility. It is also the condition of social and rhetorical *responsibility*. Butler argues that her "postulation of primary opacity to the self that follows from formative relations has a specific implication for an ethical bearing toward the other. . . . [I]t may well be that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds" (21).

The opacity that Butler theorizes thus offers another necessary qualification to and complication of the possibility of accounting for rhetorical debt. That is, whereas the scholarship synthesized above comes together to ground a model of accounting for rhetorical debts in terms of both intellectual genealogy, terministic analysis, and materiality, the concept of opacity emerging from essential relationality invites us to imagine rhetorical debts that exceed the terms we already complicate, those terms that give us a dwelling place without bearing the traces of our more transparent identifications. And it is with this conceptualization of opacity—the sense that even with our best intentions, utmost care, and developed capacity for rhetorical intervention we still do not completely know ourselves, our work, the effects of our terms—that we must approach the rhetorical futures we imagine, the rhetorical accounts we give.

In other words, rather than succumb to the appealing disciplinary narrative that because we work with language we will always already recognize the effects of our terms, we can enlist the concept of opacity to remind us that our rhetorical debts have not yet been—and never will be—fully accounted for: they will never be paid. We can enlist the concept of opacity to remind ourselves that, borrowing Lynn Worsham's words, "we do not see things that are right before our eyes; we know things before we know them; we forget, if only momentarily, other things as we try to hold together the pieces of a hard-won knowledge" ("After Words" 346). We can further follow Butler to acknowledge that this same opacity signifies the ethical obligations we have to continue to offer accounts, follow Jarratt to take the "risk of representation"; and we can follow Worsham to take up the challenge to "keep working . . . terms, texts, theories, and figures, to keep working the stories we tell about who we are and who we were" (351).

Moreover, we can draw on Diane Davis, who further complicates our understanding of accounting for rhetorical debts, when she argues that "there is



another, prior intersection of rhetoric and solidarity" that precedes any rhetorical activity we participate in. She goes on to explain that

for there to be any sharing of symbolic meaning, any construction of a common enemy or collective goals, any effective use of persuasive discourse at all, a more originary rhetoricity must already be operating, a constitutive persuadability and responsivity that testifies, first of all, to a fundamental structure of exposure. If rhetorical practices work by managing to have an effect on others, then an always prior openness to the other's affectation is its first requirement: the 'art' of rhetoric can be effective only among affectable existents, who are by definition something other than distinct individuals or self-determining agents, and whose relations necessarily precede and exceed symbolic intervention. We are talking here about an intersection of rhetoric and solidarity that would be the condition not only for symbolic action but the symbol-using animal itself. (*Inessential* 3)

In effect offering the inverse argument of Butler's, where accountability acknowledges rhetorical debt to an other, Davis argues that rhetorical indebtedness makes accountability and responsivity possible. From Davis' perspective, rhetoricity—as affectability—is central to our understanding of the "art" of rhetoric, or any rhetorical activity we imagine ourselves engaged in, which means that rhetorical indebtedness founds (and funds) rhetoric itself. Returning to Davis' terms, it is rhetoric's "first requirement," or in the terms of this argument, rhetoric's first debt. Applying this definition to the project (and possibility) of accountancy, our rhetorical debts become not only more opaque (preceding any conceptualization we have of them), but we also become less capable—that is to say, incapable—of erasing them from our rhetorical ledgers. Rather than obviate our capacity to account for our debts, a "fundamental structure of exposure" substantiates the responsibility that we have to do so: we exist only *in* debt.

## Accounting for Rhetorical Debts

Articulating rhetorical accounting as a specifically feminist attitude and practice suggests that Butler's and Davis' claims must be qualified and clarified in the context of the scholarship on rhetorical accounting previously reviewed, wherein it is marginalized and oppressed people (women, people of color, and indigenous people) who have born and continue to bear the burden of rhetorical accounting (acknowledging forbears and limits), even though, as Powell and Haas explain, they have also "funded" the debts of colonial, patriarchal, and white supremacist projects. That is, to hastily make the claim that all subjects exist in debt and thus must account for that debt (even/especially when

it can never be repaid) potentially ignores the historico-political arrangement of bodies and scholarship in rhetoric and composition studies whereby ethical responsibilities (including rhetorical accounting) are taken up by marginalized subjects. To argue that all scholars in the discipline must account for rhetorical debt erases the privileges that some scholars and scholarly projects already enjoy at the expense of others. This argument also elides the accounting work already done by those to whom the field stands in debt. Enjoining Butler's concept of opacity and Davis' theory of rhetorical indebtedness cannot begin with a blank ledger: it has already been inscribed by blood, bodies, shame, and violence.

Returning to the feminist, decolonial accounting work cited earlier, however, we can nonetheless understand how debts might come to matter in the larger field. Feminist and decolonial commitments to acknowledging bodies, difference, forebears, and relations directs us to rhetorical practices whereby debts are neither disavowed nor paid but credited, wherein indebted relations are not monetized but contextualized as conditions of possibility for imagining rhetorical futures. Rhetorical debts, from this perspective, exist both on and off the books, and our rhetorical futures are beholden to how we create our accounts.

By way of example, consider (some) of the rhetorical debts of *this* argument—the rhetorico-material credits that make this argument recognizable within certain limits. That is, while the scholars and texts explicitly cited are easily recognizable in this argument (indebting it to the work and intellectual genealogy of specific scholars, publications, and disciplinary boundaries), it also stands in debt to terms and concepts that function as limits of recognition, terms and concepts that generate opacity for this project.<sup>7</sup>

I have consistently relied on, for example, the term “bodies” to indicate individual, human bodies capable of being affected by rhetorical violence. So while elsewhere I might complicate the boundaries of the human to show its emergence and enmeshment in a world of systems and objects and things, here I drew on the humanist connotation of bodies in order to establish the stakes of accounting for debts. This is not a debt that I can or seek to reverse or pay back. It is a feminist investment that makes this project meaningful, giving not only (logical) appeal, but ethics. This project is also stabilized by and stands in debt to “accounting” as a term and concept that gains meaning and value through economic discourses. Of course, accounting, like bodies, transgresses the boundaries of its representation here, but tracing out its financial

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7 My use of the concept of opacity is itself indebted not only to the scholars cited above but to the way it was articulated, in passing, by Steven Katz at the 9<sup>th</sup> Triennial Conference of the Kenneth Burke Society.

and narrative implications allows me to foreground the limits of representation of creating (rhetorical) accounts.

Additional opaque debts include those to my own intellectual forebears: generous advisors and colleagues,<sup>8</sup> those with whom I share commitments, and those whose work helps me identify a fence and with whom this argument is a neighbor. But this argument also stands in debt to systems of privilege and exclusion that funded my education, that allowed applications to be read within frames of recognition that marked them as valuable, allowed loans (federal and private; mortgage, student, and car) to be approved when attached to my name, and allowed my institutions and neighborhoods to be built on colonized lands. Such systems recognitions—carried out by institutions, committees, algorithms, and colonial logics—indebt this work to the applications that were denied and the loans marked too risky as well as to racialized, global capitalist projects that contribute to the conditions of possibility of the US academy.

Each of the debts incurred in this article precipitate—or extend credit for—rhetorical futures: the paths taken require paths not taken, the fences built require and create a particular relation to neighbors. But it is by *accounting for rhetorical debts* that I take responsibility for the paths and the fences, the limits that circumscribe perspective and possibility. A theory and practice of accounting for rhetorical debts commits feminist scholars (and scholarship) to a more robust conceptualization of the emergence of rhetoric, wherein the terms, theories, and concepts that we credit do not function independently of our debts but, rather, allow us to imagine our debts as the sponsor and guarantor of rhetorical future(s), rhetorical life itself.

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8 In particular, this work is indebted to my feminist and decolonial mentors, especially Julie Jung and Angela M. Haas.

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## About the Author

**Kellie Sharp-Hoskins** is an Associate Professor of English at New Mexico State University, where she directs programs in Rhetoric and Professional Communication and teaches courses in critical rhetorics and writing studies. Her research centers on the complex relations between rhetorical imagination and differential embodiment. She co-edited *Kenneth Burke + The Posthuman* (with Chris Mays and Nathaniel Rivers) and her work has been published in *Enculturation*, *JAC*, *Rhetoric Review* and a number of edited collections.