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Envisioning more equitable and just futures:

Feminist organizational communication in theory and praxis

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### **Abstract**

In this forum, we engage in a reflexive intergenerational conversation regarding the contributions of feminist scholars to organizational communication scholarship, as well as the potentials of feminist organizational communication theory and praxis to address urgent challenges facing our institutions and communities. We also offer critique of this body of work and grapple with its, and in some cases our own, shortcomings. In this article, we highlight four major themes from our conversations including (a) navigating between the center and the margins in feminist organizational communication, (b) making time for intersectionality, (c) reenvisioning academic work based on our feminist values, and (d) imagining feminist futures. We hope this forum will inspire others to join us in exploring innovative ways to advance feminist organizational communication theory, praxis, and pedagogy.

*Key words:* Feminism, intersectionality, queer theory, decoloniality



Upon undertaking this forum article, we (Jasmine and Joëlle) envisioned an intergenerational conversation among feminist scholars in organizational communication, providing an opportunity to discuss the history and legacy of feminist organizational communication, but also an invitation to offer critique and advance theory, praxis, and pedagogy. Our hope was to plant the seeds of new and innovative ways of doing feminist organizational communication. We imagined this project as an informal discussion that would bring forth a variety of voices and feminist approaches (e.g., Black feminisms, queer theory, feminist new materialisms, transnational and postcolonial feminisms).

An initial step we undertook was to brainstorm a list of organizational communication feminist scholars that would meet our criteria. The list had to be varied as far as feminist orientations were concerned. It also had to span across ranks, including a professor emerita and other senior tenured scholars to junior faculty and graduate students in the discipline. We were also concerned about including both U.S. and non-U.S. based scholars. Finally, we wished to be mindful of composition as far as race and ethnicity were concerned, in line with our (feminist) commitments to diversity and critiques of whiteness in the field.

In facilitating the forum, we followed the example of other similar recent forums in the field (Schraedley et al., 2020) and initially hosted this conversation using a private Facebook Group, between June 12 and September 21, 2020. The forum article consists of curated responses from the Facebook group discussion, highlighting the major themes of our conversations. The format of the Facebook group involved the facilitators posing five question sets, or guiding prompts, and inviting participants to reflect on these questions and others generated by the conversation. In the discussion, we also provided ground rules to create space for critique and discourage the mobilization of some of the problematic defensive moves of

whiteness that have been called out in the field (Harris, 2019). We also encouraged exercising care and (self)compassion in light of ongoing multiform crises (e.g., health, economic, racial). We complemented this Facebook discussion with a Zoom conversation in September to generate more insights from participants. The Zoom call lasted approximately 90 minutes and included seven of the authors. It was recorded and transcribed to enable the use of textual excerpts in this forum and for those who were unable to attend to build on the discussion afterward.

Most of the Facebook group questions were adapted from the original call for this special issue. Questions included: What are distinctive contributions of feminist organizational communication to theory and praxis? What are some of the legacies of feminist organizational communication that have been problematic? How have various perspectives diversified feminist organizational communication? What are the big questions in emerging feminist organizational communication theorizing that we have not yet addressed?

Below, we present major themes that emerged from both the Facebook discussion and the Zoom conversation. The quotes selected for this forum are the most representative for each idea and/or theme featured, but do not encompass all that was said by all the forum participants.

### **Navigating Between the Center-Margins**

A first theme pertains to the tension between the center and margins in feminist organizational communication<sup>1</sup>. Our conversations highlighted how some scholarship constitutes the “center” while others inhabit the margins. Thus, this theme also acknowledges margins within the margins as feminist organizational communication remains predominantly Western.

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks initially discussed the relationship between margins and center in feminist theory in *Feminist theory: From margins to center*.

**On (Re)Defining What ‘Counts’ as Feminist Organizational Communication**

*Kate:* There is less feminist work happening in organizational communication if feminism means acknowledging and dismantling white supremacy, being accountable to heteronormativity and transphobia, and disrupting colonialism. And there’s also a lot \*more\* feminist organizational communication scholarship happening if, as I suggested last year (Harris, 2019), organizational communication scholars think more carefully about what counts as organizational communication.

Scholars have critiqued the field’s racism, straightness, ableism, and misogyny. For instance, Cruz and Sodeke (2020) not only identify the persistent Anglo-American frames of organizational communication but also provide a “template for dislodging Eurocentrism through a systematic unearthing of cultural assumptions ... that considers the interlocking of Eurocentrism with other systems of oppression” (p. 15). Similarly, Gist-Mackey and Kingsford (2020) demonstrate the middle- and upper-class bias in interview methods and offer ways to dislodge that bias. The feminist critiques of organizational communication and the critiques of feminist organizational communication are numerous and, like the two pieces I mentioned here, provide concrete concepts, analysis, and theory for organizing differently.

I also worry that the processes determining what is or is not “organizational communication” let feminist organizational communication disengage from robust, nuanced feminist work. For instance, some folks might classify Dar et al.’s (2020) work on racism and business as not “communication” and Nakayama’s (2020) forum on whiteness and communication as not “organizational.” This dismissal requires feminism to speak constantly to the “center” of organizational communication rather than doing the organizing, disorganizing, and reorganizing that requires both organization and communication to change.

So there's a lot less \*and\* a lot more feminist work happening than we might imagine. Feminism remains an aspiration, not a set of embedded values lived out in the subdiscipline's organizing. Feminist organizational communication doesn't exist until organizational communication is feminist. And whether organizational communication is feminist depends on how scholars draw the lines around "organization" and "communication."

**Patricia:** I love Kate's take and want to expand on the necessity of constant feminist critique and doing "the organizing, disorganizing, and reorganizing," that effects change. I've had several "critique" pieces that do the "speaking to the center" work. One was the *MCQ* forum I did with Diane Grimes that called for seeing "organizational communication as a decolonizing project" (Grimes & Parker, 2009). A more recent offering called for decolonizing the academy, through critical/feminist methodological and institutional changes (Parker et al., 2017). I've done these pieces because I think critique lays bare "certain practices" that keep the center in place. It has been as much for the benefit of scholars, like myself, who want to do the actual organizing/disorganizing work and need to name the thing, as it is for those at the center who may lack the vision to see oppressive practices. The center holds for as long as it can or until it falls apart.

For me, organizing/disorganizing work has been liberating and has operated hand in hand with critique of the center. In 2007, with the founding of the Ella Baker Women's Center for Leadership and Community Activism, it was liberating to focus on Baker's philosophy—studying her on her own terms and seeing the linkages to Black feminisms and traditions of bridge leadership, and then applying what I was learning in a community with Black girls and their allies learning and practicing those traditions. The products of our work were intergenerational projects that were community-defined and community-led; and conferences to



catalyze other youth-serving organizations with the Baker-inspired learn-teach-lead model for intergenerational organizing (Parker, 2020).

### **On (De-)Centering the West**

**Ziyu:** Feminist organizational communication remains U.S. and Western centric. As an international scholar trained in the United States, Western feminist theories have given me the lens and language to conduct communication research and have shaped my teacher-scholar identity. However, as I embark on research projects to understand how post-80s women in urban China resist and conform to gendered career ideologies (Long, 2016), or how Chinese women tech entrepreneurs legitimize their career choices and navigate various challenges in their local institutional contexts (Long, 2020), I wonder what I miss when my analytical framework draws primarily from Western feminisms. I wonder if the assumptions underlying key feminist concepts (e.g., patriarchy, femininity-masculinity, domination-marginalization, emancipation) are the same across contexts. I also wonder what is lost in translation, and to what extent I am perpetuating colonial structures.

**Fitri:** I am picking up from the points above on non-Western perspectives. Currently my work is on non-Western femininity, and I agree that feminist organizational communication has not explored its potential to analyze these issues. Many studies examining non-Western gender and organization are coming from postcolonial views. While I realize that the way gender identities, discourses, and organization have been studied (in Ashcraft's 2004 review of this area) hold potential for non-Western contexts, I also feel that organizational communication in general is U.S.-centric.

**Joëlle:** I echo the points made by Ziyu and Fitri about the absence of non-Western perspectives in feminist organizational communication. As I developed my dissertation project awhile back, I was seeking to conduct work involving African women. While I was reading feminist organizational communication, I was struck by the absence of work on African contexts. I sought mentorship outside my department and specifically in Sociology and Women and Gender Studies, where I found a mentor who was an African feminist expert. I doubt that I would have been able to flesh out my dissertation project without this interdisciplinary support. I think many of us doing work on non-Western perspectives have to turn outside of organizational communication, compile our own reading lists, and find external mentorship.

**Samira:** Disciplines are “imagined” in the same way nations are (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007). Over contextualizing non-U.S.-based research while drawing universalizing conclusions on U.S.-based ones, or normalizing Western theories to analyze feminist organizing ‘elsewhere’ while never imagining ‘elsewhere’ as a location of theory formation in analyzing Western organizing, perpetuate epistemic hierarchies and recenter the West despite aiming for the opposite. Disciplinary boundaries, and broadly, fragmentation of knowledge, contribute to the absence of certain perspectives in the field. Feminist organizational communication inherited the U.S.-centrism of the field of communication studies and centralized White experiences. A more robust exchange with broader feminist scholarship and problematizing normative Western concepts can invite greater engagement with transnational, decolonial, and women-of-color feminisms.

It is important to consider whether calling American feminist organizational communication as feminist organizational communication sustains U.S.-centrism, because the conversations in and out of this forum mostly—if not exclusively—refer to scholarship produced in the West. Feminist organizational communication might have a different face in another part

of the world and not be in a similarly acute need of de-Westernizing—it might already be pluriversal. In that case, a problem of scarcity proves to be a problem of gatekeeping, which raises the question of whether sufficient attempts are made to make publishing spaces more accessible for non-Western scholars. Academic programs use gatekeeping practices to bar diverse voices in the field by not enrolling international students in doctoral programs, keeping diversity fellowships limited to domestic students of color, and sustaining policies that pit domestic students of color and international students against each other in terms of funding and resources. The Eurocentrism in the field's literature is a reflection of these structural issues.

### **On Interrogating Inclusion-Exclusion**

**Jasmine:** Presently, I am seeing feminist new materialist and posthumanist theorizing start to get taken up within feminist organizational communication scholarship, thanks to Kate and colleagues' valuable work (Ashcraft & Harris, 2014; Harris, 2016). While this work offers possibilities, I am concerned about the uptake given critiques of feminist new materialisms related to whiteness (Ahmed, 2017) and the erasure of Indigenous scholars who have been making some of these arguments for a long time (Todd, 2016). As (feminist) organizational communication scholars further take up these theoretical threads, it will be important to interrogate whose work is included and excluded in the process.

**Francesca:** I agree. There is a need to critically interrogate whose work is included and excluded—whose work is added to reading lists and syllabi, who is invited to “keynotes,” whose ideas are regarded as knowledge as opposed to being perceived as “anecdotal.” What is “canonical” work ultimately comforts structural whiteness, sometimes by foregrounding discussions about the experiences of BIPOC via the gaze of white institutions and individuals. Sometimes the established work of BIPOC is (re)presented as though it is the new and original

work of white scholars, who attempt to claim such knowledge as their own. I hope that future feminist organizational communication work ensures that the work and labour of BIPOC are not sidelined or mined in extractive ways, amid current conversations concerning anti-racism and intersectionality.

***Fitri:*** I agree with Jasmine and Francesca. As a postgraduate student, I need mentorship and role modeling. I need to know that there are international scholars outside the United States and West whose work investigates organizational communication processes outside the center. So far, most of my role models have been from the West, many of them being white. I can't help but feel that my research is just a 'particular' study conducted by someone from a developing country. I always doubt if this type of research is publishable in a major organizational communication, communication, or organization journal as it is generally considered "specialised" or "regional."

### **Making Time for Intersectionality**

A second major theme in our discussions pertained to intersectionality and the extent to which it has been taken up or not within (feminist) organizational communication, how people are using it, and which identities are treated as salient.

### **On the Slow Embrace of Intersectional Scholarship**

***Patricia:*** Others in this conversation have paid homage to the work of Brenda J. Allen and Karen Ashcraft for their groundbreaking feminist organizational communication scholarship in the 1990s. That era was a critical turning point in the past 25 years. Allen's work laid the groundwork for the field's entry into multicultural feminisms. Allen was influential for scholars of color whose work came later (e.g., Parker et al., 2017). It is significant because we know the dynamics of the academy—gatekeeping and critical power moves—that can impede this kind of

scholarship. Scholars doing critical feminist work in the field should examine that legacy and feel confident about their own voices. I hope they feel encouraged that their work matters and they should continue to do it and connect with others who are expanding the boundaries even further.

**Jamie:** It seems feminist organizational communication scholarship has been slow to adopt intersectional perspectives. With some exceptions (e.g., Allen, 1996, 1998), most of the early feminist scholarship limited its analysis to gender. This is not unique to organizational communication and was the case in interdisciplinary feminist scholarship. A legacy of the field being slow to adopt intersectional perspectives is the separation between chapters on “gender” and “difference” in most review books, including my co-edited book with Rahul Mitra (McDonald & Mitra, 2019). On the one hand, this separation is justified because there is so much scholarship that only looks at gender. On the other hand, this identifies gender as a form of difference that deserves more attention than race, sexuality, nation, and other differences that make a difference. Moving forward, a challenge is to ensure that gender is always studied intersectionally in a way that breaks down the distinction between scholarship on gender and scholarship on difference.

**Brenda:** One of the things on my mind has to do with this newfound, dare-I-say awareness of “Wow, racism is really a thing,” as well as the emphasis on anti-black racism in the United States<sup>2</sup>. As I think about that and feminist organizational communication, I believe that organization communication has made limited progress when it comes to intersectionality. I often read and see people talking about intersectionality in ways that are about overlapping identities as contrasted with what Crenshaw (1990) meant in her work on intersectionality.

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<sup>2</sup> For context, this discussion took place shortly after the May 2020 police murder of George Floyd, a Black man in Minnesota. This killing brought anti-black racism to the fore.

That's another point we need to look at — we need better work looking at systems, rather than focusing on individuals.

**Jasmine:** Is it fair to say that when we are talking about the slowness of intersectionality getting taken up, it is not just the slowness? It seems like there is also this de-politicalization when it gets taken up within broader communication and organizational communication scholarship. We seem to lose the transformational component. That tends to happen when, as Brenda J. said, the scholarship focuses on multiple identities rather than interrogating interlocking systems of power and oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

**Jamie:** The top paper panel of the Organizational Communication Division at the 2019 National Communication Association (NCA) convention really made me ponder the status of intersectionality within organizational communication. A special forum in *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* does a great job of addressing the panel. I had been so excited for the panel when I saw the papers that had been chosen for it in the convention program. It made me think that the field was ready to take intersectionality seriously and interrogate its whiteness. However, the response made me realize that the field was in fact not ready to do that. In particular, the comment “I don’t have time for intersectionality” dismissed the significant contributions made in feminist organizational communication over the past few decades. Moving forward, we must continue to show how, in the terms of the #ToneUpOrgComm collective, “we only have time for intersectionality” (Cruz et al., 2020, p. 152).

### **On Moving Beyond the ‘Gender-Race-Class’ Trinity**

**Ziyu:** Within intersectional analyses, I find the focus on the “gender-race-class” trinity problematic. Organizational communication scholars have argued that privileging certain categories of difference can dismiss other intersectional power structures and negate the fluidity

and complexity of oppressive systems (McDonald, Harris, & Ramirez, 2020). I'd argue that feminist organizational communication scholars are uniquely positioned to foreground the situated, contextual, and dynamic constitutions of intersectionality.

**Joëlle:** I agree with Ziyu's points, in regards to the "gender-race-class" focus when it comes to intersectional perspectives in feminist organizational communication. As far as I am concerned, "nation" should be fully considered and incorporated in intersectional analyses. U.S. feminist work tends to erase this category (e.g., treat it as ahistorical, acontextual, or a given), which is so crucial to contextualize gender, race, and class. In my work, I have drawn attention to "nation" in the Liberian context, where meanings of gender and class have shifted considerably across time periods (Cruz, 2015). I would love to see intersectional feminist scholarship focused, for example, on the Trump era.

**Fitri:** Ziyu mentioned the "gender-race-class trinity" of differences that seem to be the main categories of analysis. While these categories are valid in the United States and other Western countries, they do not hold the same strength in other countries, where, for instance, the more profound categories can be religion, ethnicity, age, sexuality, ability and so forth. Hence, echoing Joëlle's point above, "nation" should be fully included in intersectional analysis. Feminism has developed distinctly around the world; similarly, individuals' experience of marginalisation and discrimination are very different across the globe. Thus, analysis needs to be embedded in its socio-political-historical context.

**Samira:** There seems to be a significant lack of decolonial scholarship in feminist organizational communication and its overarching disciplines. There is a wider (though inadequate) engagement with questions of race than issues pertaining to coloniality in feminist organizational communication. While scholarship based on critical race theory is an essential addition to the

subfield, the field's U.S.-centrism ends up limiting scholars to concepts of race and racial formations in the West and overlooks the racializing aspects of colonialism and neocolonial invasions elsewhere. At the time of this writing, a web search of MCQ journal publications from 1999 to 2020 yielded 163 mentions of "race"/"racial", 53 mentions of "racialize"/"racialization", 29 mentions of "racist"/"racism", 44 mentions of "colonial" (far fewer appearance of variations such as "postcolonial"/"coloniality"/"colonialism"/"decolonial"), 6 mentions of "decolonize"/"decolonizing"/"decolonization", 1 mention of "Islamophobia", and 0 mentions of antisemitism and xenophobia. Certainly, using a term is not the same as engaging with them; for instance, race can be mentioned only demographically without addressing racism, similar to cursory mentions of colonialism that do not inform the author's argument in any significant way. However, these numbers still show (albeit limitedly) the trends and gaps in the discipline's literature as a whole. Scholars such as Brenda J. Allen (2009) contributed important insights into how anti-racism can be promoted in organizational spheres. Future work needs to build on this scholarship by engaging with the subtle and variant ways in which racism affects marginalized members of an organization differently in combination with Islamophobia, antisemitism, and xenophobia — categories often folded into the analysis of racism despite their complexities.

### **On Queering Feminist Organizational Communication**

*Jamie:* Over the past few years, queer theory has helped to diversify feminist organizational communication by providing theoretical resources that have enabled us to expose and critique heteronormativity. Cristin Compton's work on co-sexuality is instrumental to this (Compton, 2020). Looking back, I find it curious that organizational communication was reluctant to take up queer theory (and interrogate the heteronormativity of organizations) for so long, especially in comparison to critical management studies, where queer theory began to find traction in the early



2000s. In 2003, there was also a foundational special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* about queering communication (Yep et al., 2003). However, the first time that the word “queer” appeared in either a title or an abstract of *MCQ* was in 2018 (Harris & McDonald, 2018).

**Jed:** I’d like to advocate for a more direct look at sexuality and sexual orientation within organizational life. As Ziyu addressed, intersectionality work often falls into a pre-existing categorical trap, and scholars often list sexuality/sexual orientation at the end of categorical lists, if mentioned at all. Queer theory provides a potential avenue to forefront sexuality/sexual orientation in feminist organizational communication. Some scholars, including in this forum, have begun this embrace of queer theory (McDonald, 2015; McDonald, Harris, & Ramirez, 2020); however, I notice that scholars often appropriate queer concepts into sanitized (de-sexed) utilities for reified straight organizational culture (such as de-sexualizing the closet metaphor) or address LGBTQ bodies navigating straight organizations (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). While this work makes important contributions, I seek out feminist organizational work that radically brings sexuality to the forefront—work addressing sexuality so directly that it makes readers uncomfortable by confronting them with their own homophobia, cis-sexism, or erotophobic socialization associated with organizational spaces. By using more radical queer theory concepts and researching queer run spaces (not just queer bodies in straight spaces), scholars can find new and exciting (maybe uncomfortable) concepts for organizational communication theory and practice. Hopefully this work can be produced through more intersectional means that broaden queer theory past its heavy focus on white, cis, gay men (Johnson, 2001).

**Francesca:** Feminist organizational communication also has a lot of work to do regarding addressing issues concerning transphobia and the experiences of people with many different gender identities. Sometimes the way that gender is discussed in feminist organizational

communication work perpetuates a dualistic binary opposition that denies the gender realities and experiences of many different people. I hope that the future of feminist organizational communication studies is one that involves more work that deals with this with care and in a sustained way.

### **Feminist Reenvisioning of Academic Work**

A third theme in our discussions pertained to a feminist reenvisioning of academic work and seeking change in and beyond our institutions in the midst of COVID-19 and the (re)surgence of #BlackLivesMatter organizing in response to the murder of George Floyd. Our discussion touched on topics such as mentoring, changing norms around hyper-productivity, and doing activist work.

### **On the Legacies of Feminist Mentors and Role Models**

**Ziyu:** We have probably received and/or provided mentoring (either formal, informal, or spontaneous) that upholds feminist values of care, connection, humility, and equity (Long et al., 2014). These forms of feminist mentoring are an invisible legacy of feminist organizational communication. It is important to recognize mentoring enacted during formal and informal interactions at conferences and workshops, through editorial guidance and reviews of manuscripts, and via emails or social media exchanges.

The legacy of feminist organizational communication gets (re)constructed all the time as we mentor and socialize new generations of scholars. As a result, we need to answer questions such as: How do we define “legacy?” Whose work do we include in our syllabi? How should we teach legacy scholarship in undergraduate and graduate classrooms? How should we engage in conversations about the legacy and future of feminist organizational communication with scholars who are not based in the United States? While mentoring can promote new possibilities

and transformative visions, it can also unintentionally draw discursive closures (e.g., due to power imbalances in mentor-mentee relationships).

**Brenda:** Among the experiences related to how I came to feminism(s) is when Karen Ashcraft — then a graduate student in my department — asked me to sponsor her independent study on Feminisms. I readily agreed, although I had no formal education in that area of study. Why did I say yes? I wanted to support Karen, and I wanted to learn. She did a brilliant analysis and critique of feminisms that provided a solid foundation and framework for my scholarship. Her balanced approach to critique was crucial for how I began to assess theory and practice. Furthermore, I was fortunate to meet and develop a strong collegial relationship with Patrice Buzzanell, who has played a major role in my professional development.

As I became involved with NCA, I met Marsha Houston, a fearless path-breaker who spoke truth to power in ways that I had not witnessed. She became a phenomenal role model for me. To quote a description of an award named for her, she “merged her scholarship with on-the-ground service to improve the ways that the communication studies discipline has re/considered un(der)represented groups.” I participated in many panels about women of color that she led.

**Cerise:** Brenda J., I just want to say thank you for all the work you’ve done in organizational communication. I think you can see it in the forum — people cite your work quite a bit. One of the things I think we do well is mentorship and you’re a good role model for that and how we can pay it forward. When you met me, I was a graduate student and now I’m more seasoned. It taught me to do some of the things that I’ve seen modeled from people who have come before me, and I hope I do that for the folks who are coming up behind me.

**On Resisting Expectations of Hyperproductivity**

**Jed:** Something I struggle with is hyperproductivity. Part of me feels like I won't stop feeling this way until, optimistically, I have tenure. The reality is that more radical work I would love to do is extremely time consuming or difficult to complete. As a graduate student who has four years to try to get X amount of publications and then get one publication every semester to get tenure, I feel like I do not have the time to go down those routes that produce stronger research but are too time consuming to get the data and theorize. So I think a tension is formed between hyperproductivity and the quality and depth of radical work.

**Kate:** I have been thinking a lot about hyperproductivity as part of academia and trying to think about how we create space, starting in graduate school, and even before, to challenge that culture. The artist and activist communities that I'm a part of feel different than academic communities, in part because of their relationships to bodies. Of course, there's a lot of feminist work on embodiment and on that troubling split of the mind from everything else. I am seeing some really interesting conversations around affect theory and related traditions where I see potential for academe to be grounded in bodies and more attentive to feeling. It seems like—and I include myself among this group—academics are so good at not actually feeling and not having emotional competence. Those capacities become limited amidst all the “intellectual” work. I wonder what would happen if the conversations changed to value and prioritize what it feels like to be in academic spaces, because we couldn't continue to have the same kind of hyperproductivity and massive expectations if we valued feeling good in this space.

**Sarah:** I know there are conversations around pausing tenure clocks and providing extended graduate student funding in light of the uneven impacts of COVID-19. I'm inspired by your push, Brenda J., to always say, “What are the feminist commitments in light of structural

problems and what are the specific ways that we could think about pushing within our institutions?” Slowing down tenure and promotion clocks is one option, but why can’t we have the discussion about the reduction of work? Why aren’t we having more critical discussions around notions of productivity and rigor?

**Jamie:** Maybe a question for us is how we can enact feminist principles and values in the neoliberal higher education context. Neoliberalism’s hold on higher education appears to be getting stronger, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating the situation. There are university budget models that use the word “profits.” I agree that we need to rethink our expectations and practice self-care. It seems as though practicing feminist organizational communication in the context of neoliberal higher education is an endeavor that is almost self-defeating, but also critically important. It feels as though our agency to enact change is limited.

**Jasmine:** There are calls and efforts by feminist scholars across academic disciplines to push against hyperproductivity expectations through “slow scholarship” (Mountz et al., 2015). Mountz et al. (2015) argue that “slowing down represents both a commitment to good scholarship and a feminist politics of resistance to the accelerated timelines of the neoliberal university” (p. 1238). At the same time, the ability to “slow down” is a privilege afforded to some but not to those who are situated most precariously within the university. That’s why it is important to explore the possibilities for collective and perhaps intergenerational acts of resistance.

### **On the Challenges of Publishing Feminist Work**

**Sarah:** Last night we read your work in my grad seminar, Jamie — the 2015 queering organizational communication piece and the piece that you co-wrote with Kate Harris and

Jessica Ramirez. We read those pieces along with Joëlle Cruz's (2015) *Women's Studies in Communication* piece, and I noticed that none of these were published in *MCQ*.

**Jamie:** Thank you, Sarah! I published the 2015 piece in *Communication Theory*, but it had originally been desk rejected from *MCQ*. Of course, the original piece that I sent to *MCQ* was not nearly as strong as the piece that ended up being published because the reviewers at *Communication Theory* were so incredibly constructive and the review process made the piece so much better than it was when I initially submitted to *MCQ*. When it was desk rejected, I thought to myself: maybe queer theory is out of the scope of the journal—and, by extension, out of the scope of organizational communication. However, a few years later, Kate Harris and I co-edited a forum in *MCQ* on “Queering the Closet at Work,” which shows that scholarship informed by queer theory had begun to make its way into the journal and the field.

**Kate:** I've been thinking a lot about feminist organizational communication, and its political commitments—Jed, I want to thank you for getting me thinking about this more—in terms of what's the space created for radical intervention? What's the utility of discourses of inclusion, which have been subject to really important critiques and which also have been deployed strategically to make concrete institutional change? I can see in my own scholarship some tough choices around how to navigate that in my writing. If I want a piece to go to a particular outlet, what kind of choices have to get made for it to be intelligible there? There may be more possibility to push back than I imagine, and I hear related themes in our discussion of gatekeeping.

**Cerise:** One thing feminist organizational communication scholars have in common is that we are used to putting our toes in different disciplinary silos. As an activist and as a researcher, I still have to make strategic decisions about where I want the work to go. I've looked back over my

own publications, and I have “privileged” — I use privileged in quotes — publication outlets that seemed more open to intersectional work (e.g., Glenn, 2012, 2016). Part of that is reactions I’ve gotten to my work, but it has also been about where I think the work is going to get read.

**Ziyu:** This conversation reminds me of a discussion I had at the #CommunicationSoWhite: Discipline, Scholarship, and the Media preconference held at the International Communication Association convention in 2019, with a few scholars of color and international scholars. We talked about challenges to publish feminist work grounded in non-Western contexts. Folks shared stories of their work being disciplined in Western academia. Some received desk rejections for their “narrow focus” or “lack of relevance.” Some in the peer review process felt the need to justify their study by offering “exotic” cultural insights. After the work was published, the piece was often cited for its non-Western focus. However, insights that build theory and/or extend methodology were rarely engaged with. This discussion reflects intersectional challenges in publishing feminist work in journals with a general focus.

### **On Reform and Radical Transformation in and out of Academia**

**Kate:** I live in Minneapolis and today, a block from where I live, there’s a pre-trial hearing for the officers who murdered George Floyd. I was walking by there about an hour before this call. There are protests happening and news crews and helicopters are overhead. Locally, folks are having robust conversations and struggles about reforming or radically transforming institutions, including policing and education. And so I’m thinking about how those positions play out in feminist organizational communication. As an individual, I want radical transformation of institutions. As a scholar, it feels like sometimes it’s not possible to stay in the room and in the space while really enacting transformation.

**Jed:** I agree with Kate, because that's something I've been struggling with. This summer, I've gotten involved with a lot of social movements in my area. I've been going to protests and demonstrations, which have made me feel like a bigger part of my community outside of just the university. But then, in the university, I largely focus on dialogue and deliberation, which is about coming together and having these conversations across differences in ways that seem contradictory to protests and demonstrations. I am feeling a disconnect between my professional life and my more radical personal life. I ask myself, "Well, how can I keep advocating for diplomacy while I'm out there demanding radical change?"

**Brenda:** I'm thinking about how our institutions should be doing much more work. In general, we are workers within those spaces — or at least I was, I'm no longer — but I think about how complicit we often are out of almost necessity within our institutions and even within the discipline. We have opportunities through our work to encourage, equip, and empower, especially those who are coming along, like some who are part of this forum. And yet, for the most part, I think about the notion of *discipline* and the discipline. So I feel that we are disciplining ourselves out of really fulfilling the opportunity of the potential of feminist organizational communication.

**Cerise:** As we take on more roles, such as administrative roles, we have more agency to change the marginalizing experiences we encountered as faculty on the tenure-track. One of the most challenging issues I faced in the administrative role I had happened in a meeting with fellow administrators about a university-wide mandate of student evaluations for every course. There are issues with bias in student evaluations, particularly in terms of gender and race/ethnicity (Kite, 2012). There was no conversation about how we address bias in university evaluation processes. It was more of a conversation of, "Let's just do them" but not "Let's do them in a way



that we get good feedback.” There wasn’t a consensus around how they were used. Some areas used them as feedback. Some others put them in your promotion and tenure dossier. Doing that work was way more exhausting than I had anticipated. But to your point, those of us who are in some of these roles do them as activist work in the community. Trying to do that with what Brenda J brought up, self-care, is difficult. I still struggle with taking care of myself as I try to advocate for others.

**Brenda:** Ideas from this forum could include Cerise’s point about how to bring your knowledge, insight, and experiences to bear in your role. We could explore how to share what we have done in our respective institutions—where we have incorporated or applied our knowledge and experiences in ways that affect change in the institution. I published an article about that in *MCQ* entitled “Translating Organizational Communication Scholarship into Practice: Starting Where We Are” (Allen, 2002). Many of us are doing it already, but imagine some of the things that we could generate from this forum from what we are already engaging in to the service and hopefully the betterment of institutions of higher education.

**Cerise:** One of the concerns I have, not just for feminist organizational communication but for all of us who do critical work, is that there tend to be cycles of being super, super excited — like “Here’s our moment!” — and then two years later we forget the moment. What are ways we can embed what we are doing now into institutional practices, so they become part of organizational culture?

### **Imagining Feminist Futures**

A final theme from our conversations involved future directions. This included areas for dialogue and action, advancements in our methods, and calls for work focused on precarious and emergent forms of organizing.

**On Engaging in Dialogue and Building Coalitions**

**Fitri:** Personally, I want to see more dialogue among scholars from outside the United States.

Calás, Smircich and Holvino (2014) state that rapid geopolitical, economic, and cultural changes under globalization and neoliberalism have impacted organising across the globe. Feminist organisational theorising also needs to pursue this direction further to address the changing circumstances. I believe it is essential to understand this issue not only from intersectional perspectives but also from transnational perspectives. Hence, the face of feminist organisational communication needs to be more inclusive and less U.S.-centric.

**Jamie:** I also want to join Fitri in calling for more dialogue with scholars from outside the U.S. Moving forward, I invite us to broaden our conceptualization of what we consider to fall under the umbrella of organizational communication. When making the case for more international/transnational voices, I'm drawn to Buzzanell's (1994) groundbreaking and foundational piece. She made "no attempt to extend generalizations about organizing beyond the United States" (p. 341). That was an important claim to make, as Buzzanell problematized the idea that how we organize in the United States is somehow universal. Today, we need to continue to remember that U.S. based studies are not universal, and broaden our understanding of feminist organizational communication beyond U.S. contexts. In this regard, Joëlle Cruz's and Jenna Hanchey's work on organizational communication in African contexts has been fundamental (Cruz, 2015, 2016, 2017; Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015). I believe that this is the type of feminist organizational scholarship that we need to challenge the U.S. centrism of the field.

**Brenda:** We also need to engage in intergenerational dialogue among scholars where we resist power dynamics common to academia (related to age, role, title, area of study, institution type). We have done this to a certain extent for this forum. We need to focus explicitly on higher

education as a site of oppression and a place where we can effect lasting change—and where we already have done so! This includes formal work we’ve done in leadership, faculty, and staff roles in our institutions and other settings, as well as informal practices. We should share efforts, implications, and outcomes with one another, and disseminate to audiences who might benefit from the information.

**Sarah:** I am thinking about possibilities around coalition building and collectivity and how to concretize that within feminist organizational communication. There’s a lot of potential to think about these questions related to coalition building. I’m thinking about Jasmine and Ziyu’s feminist theory and praxis modeled over the years (Linabary et al., 2017; Long et al., 2020), and Cerise, your recent involvement in the #ScholarStrike. These are examples of powerful forms of collective leadership, connectivity, and community building outside of the normal modes of academic competitiveness.

**Joëlle:** I could not be more excited about the possibilities of coalition building in feminist organizational communication. I have always been inspired by Black feminist praxis and the [Combahee River Collective](#) specifically. I continue to draw inspiration from Womanism and Alice Walker’s garden (Walker, 2004), which I see as a real space for praxis. I envision the garden as a space carved out through coalition-building amidst dire circumstances; it is reprieve, togetherness, and resistance. I see our work as feminist scholars and practitioners as creating these garden spaces anywhere we go, even when things seem impossible, even in desert landscapes.

### **On Expanding Our Methods**

**Patricia:** I think the exciting work is methodological. I would love to see more emphasis in organizational communication on intersectional analyses of power and advancing social justice.

Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color are forging alliances that the field needs to amplify and advance through publications, cluster hiring to support key areas of research, and other resources. Across feminisms a compelling call is to “write back,” to create spaces where people living and resisting the effects of extreme capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, can tell our own stories and, especially for poststructuralist feminisms, begin to destabilize and transform knowledge hierarchies. BIPOC scholars (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) have already begun this work (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

*Jasmine:* I would also like to see further development related to our research methods. By that, I mean further attention to what feminist theorizing means not just for what we study but how we study it. This should encourage us to ask important ethical questions about our research relationships, who benefits and in what ways, what risks might be differentially experienced, and what key assumptions we might be making (e.g., Linabary & Corple, 2019). It should also encourage us to explore new and creative ways to engage with and alongside communities.

*Jamie:* I’d like to echo what Jasmine and Pat wrote about the importance of further developing research methods. One methodology that I think has a lot of promise is (organizational) autoethnography. Autoethnographic work seldom appears in our major outlets such as *MCQ*, yet it is particularly well suited to feminist and queer scholarship (McDonald, 2016, 2017).

### **On Reconstituting the ‘Organization’ in (Feminist) Organizational Communication**

*Jasmine:* Several times in this forum discussion ideas have come up about the need for and value of feminist scholarship that expands or questions the boundaries of what counts as ‘organization’ and ‘organizing.’ That’s an area that I find really exciting too. A lot of the work I have done has been about how we organize outside of formal structures, whether it is online or in communities. That includes how we build coalitions across difference, including national boundaries, like my

work on transnational feminist networks (e.g., Linabary, 2017). I have also been doing local organizing around food insecurity and justice in my community prior to and during the pandemic. I believe there is a lot of value going forward in learning from organizations that are actively striving to create more inclusive futures and more equitable or just futures.

**Sarah:** Your points here are right on. One of the contributions of feminist theory has been to challenge what “counts” as work and labor. This work critiques binaries between productive/reproductive labor, formal/informal market and challenges assumptions organizational communication implicitly or explicitly makes about what constitutes organizing/organization (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012). For me, this rich tradition challenges notions of what counts as work as well as the status of ‘alternative’ economies (Bryson & Dempsey, 2017). What would a greater engagement with theories of social reproduction and reproductive labor look like within feminist organizational communication?

**Francesca:** I would also welcome seeing more research that involves a robust analysis that equally attends to matters related to race, gender, class, ableism, and other intersecting issues related to oppression. Sometimes there seems to be more of a focus on the experiences of individuals in roles that are regarded as “professional(ized)” than the experiences of people who deal with precarious forms of employment, work, and labor. I am encouraged by the scholarship that involves a critique of racial capitalism and white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and which does not solely foreground organizations that are societally regarded as “elite” and/or “formal(ized).”

**Samira:** One critique of works that center oppression or difference is their preoccupation with damage-centered epistemologies. The introduction to Eve Tuck’s (2009) open letter defines “damage-centered” research as “research that intends to document peoples’ pain and brokenness

to hold those in power accountable for their oppression. This kind of research operates with a flawed theory of change: it is often used to leverage reparations or resources for marginalized communities yet simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless” (p. 409). There is an implicit epistemic violence that occurs when certain communities are repeatedly studied on account of what destroys them and not what builds them, in a way that hails subjects from those communities to always identify as oppressed first and human second. In contrast to damage-centered approaches, a “desire-based” research ethic calls for centering what marginalized people desire and achieve and how they can make us fundamentally reconceptualize normative understandings of work and organizations.

**Joëlle:** I am looking forward to work at the intersections of alternative organizing scholarship and feminist organizational communication. Feminist organizational communication was a precursor of alternative organizing scholarship, thanks to a discussion of feminist organizational forms and values. Exciting work remains to be done in various contexts in relation to neoliberal capitalism. I have been compelled by Mikki Kendall’s (2020) book on hood feminism, which discusses the significance of Black women organizing around basic needs (food) under racial capitalism. African and U.S. based contexts share some commonalities from a transnational feminist perspective; Black women across both contexts survive, thrive, and resist by organizing alternatively, in spite of the violence of capitalism and neoliberalism at the margins.

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