

# Chapter 46. Privileged Entanglements

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As editors of the collection, *Adequate: Rewriting the Logics of Success in Rhetoric and Composition* (2026), we have occasionally been tasked with articulating—sometimes by friends, sometimes by contributors, often by ourselves—what gives us the right to talk, or be the editors and thus gatekeepers of a collection, about labor, success, working conditions, and working inequities. Especially a collection that seeks to reclaim mediocrity, laziness, and unproductivity as subjectivities full of agentive possibility. Does the world really need a collection edited by two white guys declaring their intention to do less?

Fair enough.

If you say it like that, we can see that we should account for ourselves in some way. And we think that we have done so. In our introduction, we lay out our vision of adequacy informed by Black feminism and queer theory, describing our collection as an addition to the already well-trodden economic critiques of higher education's labor practices by exploring the particular intertwining of neoliberalism and the affective demands of Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline. As we explain, it is precisely through our field's collective sense of responsibility to students and our extensive knowledge of best practices in teaching writing that we get cajoled into seeing ourselves as inadequate. Institutions exploit our internalized sense of inadequacy to do more with less in the name of helping students, and we see a real need to call attention to it and work, with collaborators, toward finding solutions on how to reject these expectations. That finding those solutions—or embracing them—might be easier for us because of our various positions in social hierarchies *is* a feature worth drawing attention to, not hiding from.

Part of how we do so is by discussing our own positions in the academy—positions that can feel adequate. We are doing the work we need to maintain both our employment and a vision of ourselves in the profession. And yet, our perspectives on work in the academy come from listening deeply to those with longer career experiences telling us that the university will never love us back. Timothy was told early in his career that academic management's job is to ask people to do things. He has said “yes” when he didn't want to, but he's learned how to say “no” better and more frequently. Joshua's perspective on work and labor is informed in many ways from his working-class background, where the idea of “love” and “labor” being in the same sentence feels like an error of grammar more so than a

reasonable aspiration. For him, academia is a way to pay the bills—a more enjoyable way of paying the bills than working in the Pennsylvania coal mines he grew up near, he assumes, but a way of paying the bills all the same.

And yet, we find ourselves in positions where the constant call to compensate for institutional failures is profound—a call that, we think, comes both from inside the house as much as from the nameless bureaucrats, capitalists, and administrators that are usually blamed in collections about labor. To what extent, we ask, can we reject the call to do more work in the first place? To take up adequacy is to challenge the demand for greater production. Our hope is that adequacy could become a coalitional possibility by which we as laborers can pivot from simply refusing to do work, which more often than not displaces work onto another body, to a more structural question: asking “does this work *really* need to be done?”

As we crafted our CFP and began reviewing proposals, we noticed that many of our potential contributors were haunted by the question of who can be adequate. Interlocking systems of oppression make the decision for adequate work a complicated question. One way for contributors to exorcize this haunting has been to ground their perspectives in a recognition that they/we are privileged. Privilege statements—typically couched as positionality statements—often take on direct comparisons between the writer, usually the person professing more privilege, and some imagined group that is generally assumed to be less powerful than the writer. In the proposals we received and in the first round of chapter drafts, our contributors were earnest and eager to mark their understanding of their own privilege. For example, a very well-published and well-resourced contributor stated that they have more privilege than contingent faculty. One contributor—whose underpaid tenure-track job seems deeply exploitative and psychologically unsustainable—acknowledged that she at least had it better than her comparatively lesser paid NTT colleagues and grad students. Multiple straight, white folks talked about how they knew queer folks and people of color had it harder. Such rhetorical gestures make sense given what we know to be true in our discipline: standpoint and positionality (informed in no small part by the work of Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought*) shape reception and production of knowledge. Where we stand dictates the truth claims we produce. Privilege statements are a way to foreground experiential knowledge and indicate for others our awareness of these limits.

And yet, as we read manuscripts and considered the privilege statements in context with the authors’ own arguments, something about their rhetorical positioning struck us as odd. The privilege statements did not seem to advance the ideas within the writing. Rather, it seemed to us that these acontextualized privilege statements were emerging out of an anxiety of experiential knowledge and not a nuancing of truth claims. There’s something stable, possessive, and anti-relational about privilege statements that function as rhetorical buttresses against potential attack rather than as epistemic throughlines into an argument. That is to

say, we worry that by describing positionality as merely a limitation of one's own knowledge, we undermine the more complex relationship positionality has in developing our ideas. The rhetorical work of the positionality statement does not strengthen an idea or an audience's ability to understand how an idea was arrived at, but instead abdicates responsibility to account for the multiple ways privilege affects how we think.

Privilege, as an aspect of positionality, is especially complex because it has the markings of truth while also occluding more difficult realities. For example, many of our contributors wanted to mark their whiteness as a privilege in an inherently white supremacist higher education economy. But what does this mean in context? We can imagine a space where our whiteness creates barriers to our understanding; drawing attention to one's whiteness does not overcome that barrier, nor does it free one of the culpability to do anti-racist work. Without attending to a contextualized argument, positional statements are theatrical. This theater suggests that I can see beyond the harms of my privileges without evidencing requisite action necessary for transformation.

Other contributors wanted to talk about how their position within higher education hierarchies affords them privilege, but this privilege can be local and specific. Tenure at a struggling SLAC that's nearing bankruptcy and which has laid off tenured folks in the past is a worse spot to be in than a reasonably comfortable NTT position at a well-endowed and prestigious university. A unionized NTT position might be more comfortable, more secure, and more powerful than a tenure-track position in a state where legislators are trying to ban tenure and where austerity has meant raises haven't been given in years.

We also note that privilege is fluid and changeable and sometimes contradictory. Joshua, for example, grew up poor and carries with him the trauma of poverty, but also is fully a member of the middle class now, with all of the hallmarks of comfortable middle-class life: stable employment, in a dual income couple, and homeownership in a metropolitan region. He thus embodies middle class privilege *and* working-class baggage simultaneously in his movements, in his ways of speaking and being, in his performance of professionalism. Sometimes it matters and sometimes it doesn't. To pretend as though he's *always* poor would be to deny the reality of his life experiences just as much as denying that he's ever been poor. Timothy has no trauma to report. He grew up in a comfortable, working-class liberal Midwestern United States family. The son of a social worker and a United Auto Workers union committeeman, he remembers being dragged to protests and election days as a kid. But as an adult he goes to protests and votes. He thrived in an environment where other's emotions and feelings weren't threats but opportunities to listen and be in community. So, when he moved from a proto-gay kid to a gay adult to a sometimes queer guy, he did so in the contexts of emotional safety and security and with bravery that comes from a supportive family unit and an ability to run away from unentertaining superficiality. The physical and emotional violence experienced as a result of Timothy's

faggotry wasn't there or, as is more likely, he was just too stupid to notice it. The truth, however, is he knows in a deeply felt way that his effeminacy puts him in danger as he moves away from his chosen families and friends. Sometimes this matters and sometimes it doesn't. To pretend that his effeminacy always puts him under threat is to deny the ways that his movement through space and time has attracted as much as it has repelled.

All told, then, we were worried by our contributors' need to perform awareness of privilege and how it related to their pieces. Privilege is an acknowledgement of experiential standpoint, which can be a great thing to say when it makes a meaningful difference in our arguments, but can also risk being stable, flat, acontextual, and treated as a possession rather than a relationship toward others, audiences, and structures. As editors, we want to discourage writers from engaging with privilege as separate from their practices of writing and meaning-making.

Guided with a deep belief that privilege makes sense in the concrete and specific political economic conditions that surround truth-claims but also aware of the cultural moment we are in, we wanted to create space to circumvent the need for such acontextualized statements of privilege that pit one person against an idealized version of some group they believe to be at a disadvantage comparatively. As a result, in our first round of feedback, we encouraged our contributors to remove any statements of privilege in their revisions unless necessary for the argument they were developing. In exchange, we promised to include a version of this note about privilege in our editors' introduction that read,

As editors of this collection, we saw many links and connections among contributors. One such link was the need for our colleagues to assert their own privilege either via direct statements or by noting how others are less privileged. We brought this insight to their attention and asked them to remove such statements with the promise that we would create this note in our introduction. Each and every one of them recognizes that they have some form of privilege that makes their lives less burdensome. As we noticed these moments in their chapters where they felt the need to assert their privileges, we asked them to remove those lines unless necessary for the point they are making. We did this for several reasons. First, it is our belief that unless you are making an argument about privilege and its consequences, to suggest that one group is less privileged than you can feel defensive or theatrical to many readers. So much of this collection is about asserting our rights to be adequate in an era of unhinged capitalism. We asked our contributors to trust their boldness, and we will defend their experiences and that boldness as worthy and important scholarly contributions. Second, privilege and disadvantage are complicated and relational, felt

by everyone depending on the contexts in which rhetors and their audiences/writers and their readers interact. The arguments and stories herein are of a specific context. If we place any one of these contributors in a different context, their relationships to privilege and disadvantage shifts. As readers we ask for your generosity on this one key point: Contributors know, as we know, the basic and fundamental operations of privilege and understand its effects.

We believe that this statement in our editor's introduction to *Adequate* is the kind of statement we need to see more of in *Rhetoric and Composition*. To our mind, such statements make our editorial values transparent. They hopefully ease the anxieties of our contributors by taking some of the pressure off them to mark privilege while also granting them the right to include it in more nuanced, contextualized ways. Finally, they make requests of readers to sit with the very notion of privilege as a practice of writing. This last part is particularly important as we consider the reception of our ideas. How do we ask for more generous reads even as audiences are under no obligation to receive and respond generously? We acknowledge the risk in asking for better attention to privilege statements. What might it mean to even ask you this question? What gendered, racialized, disabled assumptions are underneath such requests? Sometimes it feels as if we need to have everything perfectly articulated and presented before we can begin to see our ideas circulate. What is ultimately driving our editor's statement on privilege is a call to begin writing like we've learned the thing. We need to not just acknowledge that we know something, but instead write as if we have listened. Unless privilege marks itself as a category of meaningful difference in the arguments we build, we need to risk setting it aside.