A Counter-Narrative of Academic Job-Seeking International Scholars:
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Abstract

This article interrogates the complexities of immigration encountered by international scholars working in higher education. Drawing on life history and lived experience, the article examines issues of marginalization, inequality, and discrimination. It draws from Black Feminist Care ethics to channel ideas for how to build resilience in the face of unrelenting restrictive policies that shape the daily lives of international scholars in the academy and jeopardizes their ability to succeed.

In the winter of 2019, on the campus of Oakland University in southeast Michigan, Dr. Felicita Arzu Carmichael and I were taking a walk in the University's Rec Center, as outside Michigan winter was manifesting a combination of heavy blowing snow and dangerous wind chills. Dr. Carmichael was then newly hired in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. Her hire had taken place

while I was on sabbatical, so I had not been as actively engaged in it as I normally would have. I was, in essence, getting to know her at this time.

Dr. Carmichael is from Belize. I am from Uganda. So, on paper, we really have nothing in common. But in reality, she and I share a lot of attributes:

> We are Black women.
> We came to the US as international students.
> We attended graduate school in the state of New Mexico, albeit at different institutions.
> We were the only two Black tenure-track faculty in the department.

There was a lot we could talk about.

On this day, however, our conversation drifted to the issue of hiring and international scholars. Dr. Carmichael disclosed that she was motivated to apply to Oakland University because it was among a handful of institutions whose job ad did not specify that only those candidates who were "authorized to work in the US" could apply.

As I listened to her share her story, I recalled my own experience on the job market 5 years prior. I remembered vividly how I would start an application and then fail to advance past the question: "**Will you now** or in the **future require sponsorship** for employment visa status?"
Let me pause here to express my gratitude to institutions that do not have that prerequisite language that would impede a candidate at the application process.

In response, I said, "That would be an excellent paper to write."

To which she enthusiastically responded, "Really? How?"

"Well, you and I both know that the language of sponsorship does not capture the essence of US Labor hiring policy in the least. We know that it is not necessary for a candidate to already have a work visa before they can apply for a job. We know that it is the job offer that triggers the paperwork to process the work visa. Institutions using this language are tying up candidates in technicalities at best. It is an unethical form of technical communication," I declared.

Thus began our investigation of exclusionary practices in academic hiring. We specifically wanted to focus on rhetoric and professional communication positions because of our disciplinary identity. Dr. Carmichael came up with the title, which I thought captured the essence of what it was we were trying to understand. Rather than take a grounded theory inductive approach, this work was informed by our prior awareness of "existing knowledge and the literature" of hiring as it pertains to international scholars (Walls, Parahoo, & Fleming 2010). My disciplinary background in technical communication, along with our shared training in language and rhetoric, provided a starting point for articulating the problem, posing the research questions, and mapping the themes and patterns we identified in the data. Moreover, we intentionally used our own experiences and knowledge of the process as both rhetorical strategy and as evidence.

That investigation culminated in a paper published in *Technical Communication Quarterly* titled, "Are You Authorized to Work in the US.? Investigating 'Inclusive' Practices in Rhetoric and Technical Communication Job Descriptions." We both wish to acknowledge the editors of *TCQ* and the peer reviewers whose feedback enabled us to grapple critically with this question.

The Non-Immigrant Visa and Its Discontents

If you came to the US on a student visa, you instinctively know the terms and legal invocations pertaining to international scholars. As scholars of language, compositionists, rhetoricians, and technical communicators, we are uniquely qualified to examine the ways in which words embody and disseminate meaning. We know that language can marginalize and exclude.

Norman Fairclough (2015) has shown in his investigation of the relationship between language and power that given its "decisive social functions," we who work with language cannot afford to ignore it (4). We have to see how language conveys the sense of exclusion. And we can see that upon further examination, exclusionary discourse is based on what may be considered "commonsense" assumptions embedded in a word like "difference," which has long been an accomplice in [US immigration debates](#) (National Research Council 1997). Such commonsense assumptions convey *a fait acompli* and imply that resistance is futile. But as technical communicators, we know that our role is not to simply point out injustices (Walton, Moore, and Jones 2019); it is also to advocate for change (Bowdon 2004).

And yet, advocacy falls once again on the immigrants themselves—those whose very essence is governed by these laws and can thus critically parse the language to point out the inherent contradictions that are conveyed in phrases such as, "[does not discriminate on the basis of national origin](#)" (US Dept of Justice).

I begin with this anecdote because … this talk rests on several interrelated premises:

- Research projects can begin in very innocuous ways.
- Our multiply-intersected lives, roles, positions, and identities are intricately and inextricably bound up in our

research processes, which means our lived lives are no less valid sources of knowledge than knowledge hatched in laboratories (pun intended).

- Finally, there is extensive documentation of TPC scholars engaging stories as both data and discourse, as Nancy Small (2017) observed. Indeed, Small goes on to cite other TPC scholarship that has interwoven narrative as both data and discourse, such as Dorothy Winsor (2003), Bernadette Longo (2000), and Steven Katz (1992). Since that work, there has been an explosion of scholarship that has elevated narrative as a basis for inquiry.

In what follows, I systematically address these interrelated premises, first by outlining the genesis of this project, then analyzing (with examples) scholarship that is demonstrative of narrative as data and discourse, and then pointing out the depth and added value to that work.

Contestation of TPC

Robert Connors (1982), who chronicles a historical progression of technical communication, shows us the connection between technical communication's roots in "wartime technologies" and its current iteration as a "peacetime" form of written communication (185). Along with that progression was the "growing awareness for rhetorical considerations" giving us the imperative to consider audiences as having different levels of technical expertise (187). Thus, we see how the growth of written technical communication precipitated by the move toward industrialization in the late-19th and early 20th centuries led to a shift from the pre-industrial era that emphasized the worker to the postindustrial one dominated by technology (Johnson 1998, 179).

Still, we do well to recall that the knowledge of everyday practice, the type embedded in the voices and the stories of people, still

exists. As Bob Johnson (1998) wrote in *User-Centered Technology*, even though knowledge of the mundane has become a lot more tendentious, is subject to doubt and disbelief, and is perceived reductively, it is still embedded in users who are the drivers of technology. As Johnson (1998) argues, the role of technology is to benefit end-users. Thus, we should always make decisions that move technology towards improving our lot as humans.

I consider this an ethical imperative.

Workers and their experiences are still the principal sources of knowledge about human-technology interactions. As l learned recently from the Netflix documentary *[High on the Hog](2021)*, rice growing in Charleston, South Carolina, was made possible by the technological know-how of enslaved people (Williams 2021). Judith Carney (2009) credits "rice culture" – a heritage that encompassed the West African agricultural communities and their knowledge of seeds and cultivation techniques and the technologies of hydrology and soil mechanics as well as the processing and storage of rice with making South Carolina the biggest grower and exporter of rice pre-Civil War. This rice culture and knowledge cultivation were curated by generations of [Black] women (108). This rice culture helped transform "tidal swamps into productive rice fields" using a deft ability to control flooding, "skilled observation of tidal flows," and "the manipulation of saline-freshwater interactions" (90). All these were technological practices and processes characterized as knowledge work within communities of enslaved people. After the Civil War, when enslaved Africans were freed from the rice plantations, they departed with their expertise, and with it came an end to rice growing. It doesn't help that planters' vehement opposition to enslaved people's literacy meant that they failed to consider nor encourage documenting this knowledge.

This talk is, at some level, a counter-narrative in which I name the collective reality of international scholars and entrench our voices

in the debate surrounding academic job-seeking experiences. When investigating notions of power, positionality, and negotiating insider/outsider status scenarios, we are bound to uncover inequities. The talk traverses from autoethnography to "collective autoethnography"— defined by Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2012) as "simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic" (17) in that it pools together mine and other international scholars' (composite) stories of immigration to generate a coherent whole. Collective autoethnography is a fitting approach to understanding the culture or, in this case, the precarity of international scholars in the United States whose difference between legal and illegal status can be very thin. I do not presume that international scholars are a homogeneous group adhering to a monolithic worldview. I do, however, recognize that they are a diverse group with distinctive yet common experiences related to their status in the United States.

Identity and Lived Experience

Feminist thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) have posited positionality as a concept that acknowledges the complex and relational roles of race, class, gender, and, in this case, immigration status as identifiers. Because positionality both describes an individual's worldview and the position they adopt in a given situation within its social and political context, the ideas that individuals construct to understand the world and how they perceive themselves to occupy a particular location within the reality they construe are key. Individuals' epistemological assumptions and assumptions about human nature are bounded in their outlook. Collins (2000) outlines the language of power as being framed by four interrelated domains, namely *structural*, where social institutions enforce certain norms; *disciplinary*, where bureaucracies regulate through rules and practices primarily surveillance; *cultural*, where ideologies are constructed and shared;

and *interpersonal* where social relations between individuals in everyday life domain that shaped (72). At any given moment, one is bound to be ensnared by one of these domains.

Moreover, a few of us in this debate experience what has been termed "triple marginality" ([Hernandez et al. 2015)](#) given our positions as female faculty who are obviously foreign because of our skin color, our cultural mannerisms, and the ways in which we speak (Choi and Lim 2020, 104). Because when we open our mouths to speak, we "put our business in the street" as James Baldwin (1997) once said. We have "confessed our parents, our youth, our school, our salary, our self-esteem, and, alas, our future" (5). These "intersecting oppressions," as Patricia Hill Collins (1999, 22) characterizes them, compel us to speak out and seek redress.

Let me illustrate.

On a recent stroll through the woods alongside Lake Washington in Seattle, l came across an older man, a white man holding a pair of hedge clippers. As we were still being required to socially distance ourselves from individuals outside our households to curb the spread of Covid-19, I stood aside and waited to see if he noticed me so he'd let me walk past him. After I'd been there for perhaps a minute, though it seemed longer, l cleared my throat and said, "whatcha doing there?" Notice my choice of Americanism reduction. I think I was signaling that I am part of the in-group? He looked up and saw me.

He explained that he regularly comes to the trail to trim the brush. I commended him for such an altruistic service to the public, upon which he said, "l detect an accent. Where are you from?"

I thought to myself, here we go again. I had determined that he was at least over 80 years of age. So, l indulged him. "Uganda," l said. "Born and raised." I thought then that he'd let me go on my way.

But it appeared I had just given him an opening. He proceeded to tell me that he has a friend who knows a Black man, who had been a reporter for the *Washington Post* for years. This reporter first reported in Africa – Africa is a country, don't you know!—and then in Japan.

"Oh," l said. "And was this Black man African."

"No, African American," he said.

Silence.

"Would you like to know what this man said about his experience reporting in Africa?"

He then answered his own question: "He said, 'I'm glad my ancestors were taken from Africa and brought to the United States,' he continued. 'I am glad they were not taken to Japan.'" He waited for some tacit approval, I suppose. Like a comedian who had just delivered a punchline.

Not knowing what to say to that, I asked, "Why is he glad his ancestors were taken from Africa and brought to the US, and why not Japan?"

His response: "Because the political turmoil in Africa was worse than the racism in the US, but the racism in Japan was unfathomable."

I let that sit with me for a minute, staring right at him. I'd like for you to ponder this for a moment. Normally I would have chuckled and gesticulated my discomfort. But not this time.

As I pondered what this man had just said to me, I recognized the racist trope Kendi (2016) has characterized as "assimilationist": The

assumption that people of African descent are culturally or behaviorally inferior but can be developed by their proximity to whiteness. I saw that he was not only rationalizing but also glossing over the horrors of the Middle passage and of enslaving thousands of human beings. I saw that he had trivialized a voyage marked by the callousness of enslavers and their indifference to human suffering; he had downplayed 400 years of chattel slavery and reduced Jim Crow and systemic racism to "Black people are better off in the US."

Moreover, the trial of Derrick Chauvin—a police officer who murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis, sparking one of the biggest outcries of racial and anti-Black policy brutality—had just concluded. And the anguish in the voice of the mother of 20-year-old Daunte Wright, also a victim of a fatal Minneapolis police shooting not long after the death of George Floyd, was still ringing in my ears. At the very least, l owed it to these and other victims of the horrific consequences of racialized policing in America to say something. I owed it to the Black Americans whose struggle for civil rights made it possible for me and other immigrants to come to this country.

I collected myself and calmly said, "Do you know what does not happen to African people in Africa?" I did not wait for his answer as I continued, "the police do not routinely execute people for failing to signal or having a broken taillight, nor do they fire shots at them while they are sleeping in their beds." He pivoted very quickly to discussing police brutality, although I half expected him to tell me to go back to where I came from.

This assertion of belonging, one that suggests that some people belong and others do not based on their race and ethnicity, is something a few of us get from time to time. And it is very much a component of American discourse on immigration.

Atopia and Migration

I read somewhere that being an immigrant is like taking a test you have studied hard for but are constantly failing. And being an immigrant of color in the United States, where your people are simultaneously subdued and held up as models of success, is especially discomforting.

I remember hearing about my great grandfather, who, in the 1800s with the territory under British rule, left his ancestral land to explore opportunities elsewhere. At the same time, the Christian Missionary Society (CMS), an off-shoot of British imperialism, was setting up missions and educational systems in British East Africa. With literacy as one of the leading attractions to Christian converts, these institutions, located mostly along the Kenyan coast, spoke to the aspirations of Africans like my *Kuka* (grandfather). Kuka Kaloli (grandpa Kaloli), born in 1911 and an early convert to Christianity, would travel many miles to seek the literacy associated with mission schools. In 1928 or thereabouts, Kuka Kaloli undertook a trip to one of those mission schools, perhaps located along coastal Kenya, on his own to enroll in a seminary. Intent on becoming an ordained priest, he completed his training. He was, however, never ordained a priest, perhaps because of his being African. He settled for a Catholic lay preacher position instead, which is how he returned home and married my grandmother. In the early 1960s, Kuka Kaloli would send my father Gabriel, his only son, to seek further education in the United Kingdom. As a student at the University College London, my father was among the first crop of African students sent to train in England in preparation to take up administrative duties in post-colonial Uganda. He would serve many years in the Uganda civil service upon his return. This is my legacy. I shouldn't have to diminish myself to make someone else feel superior.

As immigrants and as scholars, we acknowledge the role immigration plays in regulating social, economic, and political life. In the United States, Census data shows that immigrants comprise roughly 14% of the U.S. population. Therefore, broader issues related to assimilation, diversity, and inclusion pervade the dialogue among policymakers and those in higher education. This may explain why job descriptions explicitly invite applicants from a "variety of backgrounds and nationalities." Despite this openness to candidates with varied backgrounds, hiring in higher education has continued to assume the norm:

- that candidates would be of a certain gender and race,
- and would be eligible to work in the United States.

Candidates who deviate from this norm are "accommodated" in these otherwise normative spaces (see Sensoy and Diangelo 2017). Moreover, because international graduate students fall somewhere along the spectrum of diversity, nationality, and national origin, their particulars cannot be neatly packaged.

We recognize that, as a country, the United States has historically excluded its own non-white, non-male citizens from equally participating in the workforce. We know that Black Americans were not included in "We the People" whose rights the law protects (National Museum for African American History and Culture). Indeed, as the 1619 Project and other scholars show, "Black people have been fighting for basic citizenship rights since the inception of the country" (Ta-Nehisi Coates 2017, para 16). Knowing this gives us pause, not just because of our standing on the fringes but because long-standing unequal treatment of Black Americans and others has over the years necessitated new laws and policies. Do we merit protections in light of this? Moreover, academia more broadly is plagued with a lack of diversity. In our field, this concern for diversity prompted the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) to set up a committee, whose

work resulted in a report that set goals to support "diversity within CPTSC as an organization, … and within technical communication faculty" (Jones, Savage, & Yu 2014, 135). And yet faculty and student diversity in technical communication is still anemic (Sensoy & Diangelo 2017).

International scholars find this trend disturbing given that institutions have openly stated commitments to diversity and inclusion in their vision and mission statements, in marketing and promotional documents, and in job descriptions (Dayley 2020). But when we consider that comparable statements showing commitment to Black Lives Matter have failed to translate into actionable change, we realize that this anomaly is not limited to our needs as international scholars. Still, such "problematic practices" should not remain unquestioned. Moreover, technical communication occupies a key role to advocate for the user (see Natasha N. Jones 2016), thus drawing attention to the concepts used in academic job descriptions and their effects on applicants is warranted.

I call on us to reimagine academic job searches in more critical ways, starting with the language of job descriptions, to better account for the material conditions of all applicants.

Shifting Out of Neutral

Universities can shift their institutional hiring practices by first:

- aligning the language of job descriptions with that of US labor and immigration policies
- analyzing the hiring documents to weed out the language of exclusion

- dispensing with imprecise language, such as "accommodation," which lacks attunement to its alienating and marginalizing implications

Universities can recognize how precarious life can be for immigrants for whom neglecting to check a box or failing to meet a deadline can result in a violation of status, which jeopardizes their residency.

In the Academy

The longer I have been in this discipline, the more I have contended with the contested nature of what counts as technical communication. Self-appointed gatekeepers, sometimes in the form of peer reviewers (of which I am one) and other times in public spaces like LISTSERVs and academic twitter, have sought to limit technical communication to systems, processes, documentation, and pedagogy. At times, these gatekeepers have mischaracterized the nature of scholarship that those who deviate from this list seek to pursue. And yet Carolyn Miller (1989), whose work has shaped the field, argued that technical communication scholars should not merely develop theories and pedagogies that replicate existing practices but also engage with industry to evaluate, critique, and ultimately transform those practices for the benefit of the wider human community (68-69). Thus, if technical communication is in the business of solving problems, I think we can all agree that problems are not limited to systems, processes, and pedagogy. As well, the [Society for Technical Communication](#) offers an expansive definition of the field including, "communicating about technical or specialized topics" – language that allows us to examine a variety of specialized topics through the lens of technical communication.

I recall a conversation I had with Natasha N. Jones following the publication of her article co-authored with Miriam Williams (2018)

on underlined election technologies. This article makes apparent how ballot design disenfranchises Black Americans, thereby showing technical communication's complicity in perpetuating those injustices through specific design choices. Similarly, the work of Dr. Lisa Cook (2013), a professor of economics and international relations at Michigan State University, does uncover the effects of injustice on human innovation. Her study of the relationship between violence and economic activity found how an uptick in lynching and state-supported violence against African Americans rendered them vulnerable to constant violence, which in turn led to a dip in their innovation and filing of patents. She deduced that laws, particularly those stemming from the Supreme Court ruling of Plessy V Ferguson, adversely affected Black Americans' access to information (owing to segregated institutions) and the flow of ideas. The ensuing series of restrictive laws not only limited their rights but threatened Black Americans with punitive forms of anti-Black violence. The psychological toll was felt among Black Americans all over the country, a phenomenon similarly observed following the murder of George Floyd where scholars concluded that "seeing a member of one's group killed engenders a feeling of threat and vulnerability" (Melissa DeWitte 2021).

A third example I would like to reference is the work of historian Dr. Annette Gordon-Reed (2008) whose book *The Hemingses of Monticello* examines the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Looking at the same archival data, Dr. Gordon-Reed uncovered a truth that previous historians had skipped over, rendering her findings dramatically different from those of the white historians before her. She writes humanely about Sally Hemings in ways that demonstrate how reasonable inferences get to the truth about Jefferson and Hemings. Her work laid bare the prejudices of the historians who would not countenance a 38-year Jefferson-Hemings story beyond the slavery narrative.

From these examples, I began to see that when you write about what you know and people humanely (as these Black women did writing about day-to-day experiences of Black Americans), you do not consider people as objects to be studied. Instead, you imbue them with dignity and invite others to see their humanity rather than their pathology. When you write about communities you are familiar with, you illuminate issues concerning their lives by drawing from what you know to amplify their knowledge, and, in so doing, become their advocate. As international scholars, we hail from countries and cultures that many in the U.S. have only glimpsed in an episode of *The Amazing Race*. And, because TPC is a mostly North American discipline, we (internationals) have become unwitting ambassadors of our countries of origin. We can write about these countries with care and with grace. We can choose to tell the stories of these communities by paying attention to their interests without eroding their agency.

It was the 2016 ATTW CFP on Citizenship and Advocacy in Technical Communication that motivated me to investigate a non-profit in the Global South. The organization GiveDirectly was disbursing aid directly to individuals in Kenya, and, later, Uganda. To do this work, I found myself doing interdisciplinary research in fields ranging from development economics, foreign aid, banking and finance, and telecommunication studies. I was able to argue for the human rights and dignity of the individuals involved in this agency, both donors and recipients alike. This article won the 2021 Cs award, and I am so grateful to the then-editor of *Technical Communication*, Sam Dragga, who believed in the article, and to the reviewers who challenged me to be more rigorous and critical in doing this research. This is the kind of scholarship that we, as international scholars, can bring.

The Pervasiveness of Injustices

Perhaps you have seen the 2020 Netflix documentary *Coded Bias*. One of the researchers featured in that documentary, Joy Buolamwini, recounts how she was inspired to begin a movement for algorithmic justice after experiencing firsthand that algorithms have not accounted for individuals of her skin tone. Individuals like me. At the MIT Media Lab, where Buolamwini was trying out different facial recognition software for an art project, she discovered that she could only be fully detected if wearing a white mask. Like a good researcher, she launched a study from which she learned that machines are not neutral. One reason for this bias was because the dataset that trains AI systems happens to be predominantly white and male. The machine then learns that faces are white and male, which is a skewed representation of the world. As a result, facial recognition is accurate for white males 99% of the time. Conversely, the darker one's skin, the higher the error (up to nearly 35%). These findings have large implications for society. They make the difference between who gets hired or fired, who gains admission to what institution, and how easily one can be let back into the country through customs and border control as well as policing and court sentences. You might have seen stories of Black people wrongfully detained based on faulty AI.

Boulamwini, born in Canada to immigrants from Ghana, has stated that she was inspired to do this work because of her positionality as a Black woman and AI researcher that was personally impacted by this biased algorithm. And lest you think it's only Black people being disadvantaged, because of her work, we have learned that machines can be trained by our own biases. The clearest example is the case with Amazon's AI recruiting tool that had been taught to prefer resumés of male candidates trained at ivy league schools over non-white candidates (particularly associated with HBCUs) and female candidates.

A final note on the academy. Consider what it means for you to have acquired a tenure track position. Know that you have entered into a tenure-track contract, but that is not a guarantee of tenure. What it does mean, however, is that you are eligible to be regularly reviewed leading to tenure according to a contractually set number of checkpoints. Therefore, beware of the *hidden curriculum* that is part of the tenure and promotion process. As women, as people who are not white, and as immigrants, we are often unaware of the "real" requirements for tenure and promotion. Because, despite meeting the tenure and promotion requirements outlined in the promotion and tenure document, do not be surprised when a committee renders judgment on you on immeasurable unwritten qualities like "your scholarship is not good enough," "you are not *a good fit*," or "you are not engaged enough." Worse, when, after you have cleared all those hurdles, the Board of Trustees overturns your recommendation for tenure, as happened to Nikole Hannah-Jones at UNC-Chapel Hill[1]. Hannah-Jones' case became public. And after some contention, Hannah-Jones was granted tenure. She declined. I think in declining this offer, she demonstrated, as someone recently told me, that you owe it to yourself to rise to your full stature according to your abilities as a scholar, as a professor, and as a human being. Do not diminish yourself to appease someone's fragile ego.

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[1] *As some of you may recall Hannah-Jones, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer for the New York Times Magazine and creator of The 1619 Project, was appointed Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism at UNC's Hussman School of Journalism and Media. Hannah-Jones underwent the rigorous tenure process that culminated in her case being overwhelmingly supported by the school's tenure and promotion committee. The board of trustees, however, declined to approve her tenure and instead offered her a five-year contract with a proviso to assess her for tenure at a later date. This decision was without precedent, and so naturally it caused waves. In her statement, Hannah-Jones wrote, "I did not want to face the humiliation of letting everyone know that I would be the first Knight Chair at the university to be denied tenure" (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2021).*

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Josephine Walwema is with the English Department at the University of Washington, in Seattle, WA, USA. Walwema investigates ethics of agency as well as inclusion and exclusion as social justice concerns in the Americas and the Global South. Her work has been published in major TPC journals including *IEEE Transactions*, *JTWC*, *TC*, and *JBTC*. Her most recent work "Black Women Realizing Liberated Futures" was published in *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and her guest-edited special issue on "21st Century Ethics in Technical Communication" was published by *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*.