

From: Farhana Sultana <sultanaf@syr.edu>
Date: September 13, 2017 at 5:39:00 PM EDT
To: Farhana Sultana <sultanaf@syr.edu>
Subject: Important: Petition on raising academic publishing standards

Dear colleague,

I wish to bring to your attention a highly problematic practice in academia of not holding scholars or journals to high standards of accuracy, merit, or rigor. This is particularly so when they publish shoddy racist click-bait pieces. Some of you may already be following the debates for the last few days on other forums or online (there's been a lot said on social media), but if you have not, I would be grateful if you could please read through this email and sign the petition below.

Recently, an author published a piece calling for the return of colonization and white supremacy in the well-respected journal Third World Quarterly. [In order to **NOT** raise the view or download metrics of the article or the journal, which will only increase its popularity, please read it for free here instead: <http://fooddeserts.org/images/paper0114.pdf>] The article is full of inaccuracies & falsehoods, misqualifies existing scholarship on the topic, lacks proper citations, is poorly written and conceptualized, and morally reprehensible. It should've been rejected on lacking of academic merit alone, let alone the contents of its argument legitimizing racist brutality. The article seems like a faux 'shock' piece to manufacture controversy and very much conforms to click-bait practices. The piece apparently was rejected in the peer-review process but the journal decided to publish it anyway as a Viewpoint. Even though Viewpoints and Commentaries are usually reviewed by several members of the Editorial Advisory Board in most journals, I have been recently informed that most Members were not aware of this piece. Some only learnt of it after it came out in print. Some members of the Board (e.g. Vijay Prashad) have publicly threatened to resign if the article is not retracted. The Board consists of many distinguished scholars, so we are not sure who authorized the publication of this particular piece or whether it was sanctioned solely by the Editor-In-Chief. Clearly whichever editor or editors who sanctioned the piece did not even bother to read it. Journals should be held to higher standards than partaking in such practices, as otherwise it is a slap to our collective faces as scholars who strive for rigor, integrity and accuracy in our scholarship. We learnt that the journal wanted more 'traffic' to its website through publishing this piece, and thus we are actively discouraging people from giving them that (please view or download it above). We are instead calling for a retraction and an apology from the journal, and raising awareness of such problematic practices.

Here is a petition for this, which already has nearly 3000 signatures in less than 24 hours. Please sign it and share widely: https://www.change.org/p/editors-of-the-third-world-quarterly-retract-the-case-for-colonialism?recruiter=409526319&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=share_petition We will likely close out the petition by end of Friday in order to submit it to the journal and the publisher in a timely way.

The author in question (a political scientist at Portland State University) has published white supremacist drivel in the past disguised as academic scholarship (e.g. supporting ethnic cleansing), and has made a name for himself in doing so. We all know there are plenty of colonial apologists in academia as well as overt and closeted white supremacists who enable/promote/encourage such success; many more support it through silence and enabling such behavior to go unchecked thereby allowing racism to flourish. Perhaps that is why there is an urge amongst many to act now. There are many other sites where meaningful interventions can be made about decolonizing, postcolonial critique, etc. (e.g. recent TIBG special issue on this, etc.). We encourage such endeavors as well. Engaging with this piece does not advance our knowledge of colonialism or anything else, and thus does not serve any purpose. Rather, it amplifies and emboldens horrific ideologies and practices to persist in academia and beyond.

What the journal probably did not expect is this much push-back or threats of boycott in readership as well as in contributing pieces or agreeing to peer review. These are strategies to hold journals accountable in my opinion. The lack of accountability and integrity displayed in this instance (among many others) makes a mockery of the academic publishing process. Accountability, rigor, empirical evidence, sound reasoning, and engaging with existing scholarship are essential foundations in academic publishing, and this particular article did not do any of that. TWQ needs to be held accountable for promoting such practices.

Whether or not the petition we started will encourage TWQ to retract the piece or not is up for debate. Ideally they should. That would send the message to all and sundry that shoddy scholarship, based on racist ideologies, has no place in academia. We were clear to state in our petition that we are not asking for curtailing of academic freedom (whatever that means anymore in the US), but holding the journal more accountable. This way we are not enabling this author to gas-light us and get away with click-bait. We are not engaging with him directly as he wants. We felt that the petition to TWQ and the publisher that produces it would demonstrate that we're engaging the journal itself in order to improve overall scholarship and publishing processes and standards in academia itself. If in the process they do retract the article, then that author and his supporters will have hopefully learnt a lesson. This will put a dent in his dossier, however small. In the process of all this, it'll also raise awareness that scholars and journals are responsible and can be held accountable.

This particular article has caused a lot of stir among various disciplines, groups, and organizations in the last few days. Many folks are writing letters of complaint to the journal about the piece, calling for a retraction and an apology (as which we have done). Even more are tweeting about it [If you'd like to see some of the tweet thread on this, here's one example among many circulating now that contains info on this author's other alt-right pieces, etc.: https://twitter.com/Farhana_H2O/status/907440614144462848].

Personally, I do not want to give any more oxygen directly to this racist fascist author who has written for alt-right websites and published reprehensible material in the past (his piece justifying ethnic cleansing was also published by TWQ and it should have generated pushback then but it did not — I think that emboldened both the author and the journal). We will not be able to change the mind of this man or racist his allies. I also worry about the hundreds of students who take his courses, and wonder what they have learnt. I doubt his university will take any steps to hold him accountable (it seems that US universities only fire professors if they call out injustices and not the other way around), so while many people have left this man, his department, his university voicemails and messages, I highly doubt anything will come of it in terms of reprimands. What we can do is put pressure on TWQ and other journals who enable this kind of behavior to count as 'scholarship' to desist from doing so any further. In my opinion, not doing that is a disservice to all of us for all the labor we put into our own publications and scholarship.

If anyone is interested, my blog post that inspired the petition is here: <https://www.facebook.com/farhanasultana/posts/10101130697230492> It also contains other important information and links. I have been requested by many scholars to turn this into some sort of 'proper' publication or contribution to the Chronicle of Higher Education, which I may do in the future, as otherwise it will 'not count' (again, a feature of our horrible metric-based system where other forms of labor go invisible and unrecognizable — but that's another topic of discussion) :)

Thank you for your support. Please feel free to forward this email on to other disciplinary lists, groups, and people who may be interested. Thank you.

In solidarity,
Farhana

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Farhana Sultana, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Geography
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Research Director for Environmental Conflicts and Collaborations, Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration (PARCC)

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
Syracuse University
144 Eggers Hall, Syracuse, NY, 13244, USA

Email: sultanaf@syr.edu

Web: www.farhanasultana.com

Web: <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/faculty/sultana.aspx>

ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Farhana_Sultana

Twitter: @Farhana H2O

Books:

Eating, Drinking: Surviving <http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319424675>

The Right to Water: Politics, Governance and Social Struggles <https://www.routledge.com/products/9781849713597>