#AUPresses21 | Opening and Closing Plenaries

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A post from Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications.

In this series of reports, members of the Elephant editorial collective recap selected panels from the 2021 AUPresses Virtual Annual Meeting held June 7–18, 2021. We welcome further discussion of issues raised by the panelists via the Reply box below each post.

The opening plenary of the 2021 annual meeting of the Association of University Presses (AUPresses) featured Nikole Hannah-Jones in conversation with Pulitzer Prize-winning Black studies scholar Jeffrey Stewart, moderated by Wayne State University Press Director Stephanie Williams. Dr. Stewart praised university presses’ “fealty to the scholarly journey” and their commitment “to create paradigm shifting work.” Hannah-Jones shared that she “couldn’t do any of my work without university presses,” and has always been a reader of books published by academic presses over popular histories published by trade presses. Hannah-Jones also called for continued work to address the lack of diversity in the industry, suggesting that it is not diverse enough because the industry does not reflect the world we live in.

Much of the conversation focused on Hannah-Jones’ 1619 Project and legislation banning Critical Race Theory being taught in schools. Although the controversy surrounding Hannah-Jones’ unjustly being denied tenure at UNC did not come up, the panelists did address many systemic issues that would contribute to such a decision. For instance, she spoke about her goals for the 1619 Project, which she hoped would directly engage with national memory and national mythology. She wanted to put the year 1619 into the national lexicon and show that slavery was not a historical wrong but rather is woven into the fabric of the nation and contemporary US life. Her wildest ambition was that everyone know the date 1619, the year that the first enslaved Africans were brought to the English colonies. Responding to debates about the project, she vigorously agreed that the project should be debated, noting that those fighting to discredit it only affirm the power and merit of the project to examine the history it highlights.

Among other questions, moderator Stephanie Williams asked how publishers can best support the type of work that Hannah-Jones and others are doing. Hannah-Jones’ advice was to “trust people coming from the experience.” White people don’t have to worry about all the people that come after, she said, putting them in a different position. Encouraging publishers to take chances on Black and Brown writers, she said that the predominantly white editors and publishers need to let go of some of their power as well as empowering Black and Brown editors, citing circumstances when Black authors chose not to publish if no one who is Black and has decision-making authority was on the editorial team. In wrapping up, Hannah-Jones shared a comment that I, for one, will not forget soon: “The only thing that I could control in my career is my own excellence.”

The two-week-long AUPresses conference was perfectly bookended with a closing plenary on “Cripping Literature: Disability Justice Writers Destroying and Remaking the Literary World As We Know It,” moderated by Duke University Press Journals and Collections Marketing Manager Jocelyn
Dawson. *Guernica* writer and co-publisher Lisa Factora-Borchers introduced featured speaker Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, an award-winning author, cultural worker, and educator who is disabled and femme (and uses she/they pronouns). She spoke compellingly about experiences with disability justice and strategies for better incorporating inclusive practices.

Disability justice is being in the body you have, and Piepzna-Samarasinha demonstrated this by inviting the audience to do what they needed to do during the talk—whether that was get up and stretch, or use the restroom—without waiting for permission. They named two colleagues who died before their books were out, and called on the publishing industry to center disabled lives and disabled literature, and in the process, change the world. In that transformed world, those people would have had their books in print while they were still alive, because they could have overcome the challenges of multi-marginalized identities that sometimes create hurdles in getting projects accepted, revised, and produced.

Piepzna-Samarasinha then invited attendees to close their eyes and picture who they think of when they imagine disabled writers and literature. How many of the listeners actually knew any disabled writers or their works? She acknowledged that many people may only think of her, or perhaps of mostly white disability studies scholars, or they may be wondering if a certain identity counts as “disabled.” There are few formal classes that focus on disabled literature, and the disabilities of some well-known authors aren’t always recognized. Poet Audrey Lorde, she pointed out, was born blind and died of cancer. Piepzna-Samarasinha gave a fantastic genealogy of writers who were or are disabled, and often queer and of color as well. Being aware of this rich literature can help publishers recognize and support disabled authors and their readers, too. If we realize that disabled people make up between 20% and 40% of the world’s population at any one time, and we’ve just had a global disability event with the COVID pandemic, “crip realities are something that almost everyone is dealing with.” The market is substantial.

Piepzna-Samarasinha shared several experiences to show how publishers can do better, reminding us that “it is all the small choices that change the cultural product that comes out.” For instance, editors should keep in mind that “my everyone is not your everyone” in identifying viable projects and coaching authors. Publishers should strive to use inclusive BISAC codes, for instance choosing a disability code instead of health. A crippled out publishing industry would include an author questionnaire that asks what an author’s access needs are, would be flexible in its editing processes to ensure the author can participate fully (for example, using Google Docs versus Word for copyedited files), and generally be open to small changes that can make a big difference. These tactics would help overcome ableism by normalizing accommodation for everyone’s comfort—“accessibility” may turn out to be easier for us all.