An Interview with Martha J. Cutter, Former Editor of *MELUS*

by Rebecca Devers

Martha J. Cutter, Ph.D., is Professor of English and Africana Studies at the University of Connecticut. From 2006-2014 she served as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States (*MELUS*), and from 2004-2006 she was the editor of *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers.* She has published two books and over thirty articles on American literature. She is currently working on two book projects, one on illustrated antislavery books and another on the role of passing in America.

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https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue3/interview-martha-cutter-14

Abstract: *NANO* assistant editor Rebecca Devers interviews Martha J. Cutter, the former editor of MELUS, about the complexities of processing, reviewing, and publishing a journal that receives in over 300 submissions each year. Cutter is a firm believer in the value of blind peer review for both the reviews and the authors. And she shares her views on the merits and concerns of open access and on four ways that journals are under assault.

Keywords: MELUS, Martha Cutter, Interview, journal editing, peer review

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Rebecca Devers: I'd like to start by asking you about peer review at *MELUS*. Can you summarize the process for submissions to the journal?

Martha J. Cutter: At *MELUS,* we start by reading the essay in-house to make sure it is up to our standards. If it does not have a substantive scholarly argument and a strong bibliography indicating that the author has read previous criticism on his/her topic/subject/author, we reject it with a short report. If it seems to have these things, we send it to two specialist readers. If there is a split decision (or two votes of accept) it then usually goes to a third reader. At this point, the reports are all on my "desk" (electronically), and I make a decision.

RD: Have you found this process to be generally successful, frustrating, or some combination of each?

MJC: It's a very good process, especially with our use of Manuscript Central/Scholar One, which speeds things up. It works well, and our average time to decision is now around 60-90 days, which I think is very good.

The only issue I have with this process is that sometimes you have two or three dissenting reports: one says accept, the other reject; or you get one that says accept, another that says reject, and then another that says revise and resubmit. So you have to read the essay carefully and all the reports. I don't want to give someone false hope by saying "Revise and Resubmit" if it is unlikely that the article will ever meet our standards. We currently get almost 300 essays a year submitted and can only publish 28-38, so we have to be pretty picky. And someone may write "Revise and Resubmit" when what they really mean (based on the content of the report) is "Reject," but they are trying to be polite and not say this. So, in a nutshell, a lot of essays that are on the fence fall back into the editor's lap for a final decision.

The other issue I see is that the Manuscript Central/Scholar One interface tends to mean that some evaluators do slightly shorter reports—even just a few sentences. There's this little box on the website in which you are encouraged to type. The evaluator can, of course, create a word document and then attach it, or cut and paste it into the box. But I think that people don't do that as often, and there is a slight tendency therefore to be briefer than in the past, when people sent us the Evaluator Form as an attachment. I'm curious to know how other editors may have worked against this tendency—the tendency to be brief due to the electronic interface.

RD: How did you select Manuscript Central/Scholar One? Were other models considered, like the open peer review models that might remove anonymity of author and reviewer?

MJC: Manuscript Central/Scholar One is double blind review, and we never considered any system that was not double blind. I can't imagine people being honest about work without double blind peer review. We did look at some systems that were free, as well as a few less

pricey options. But, in the end, our publisher, Oxford University Press, uses Manuscript Central/Scholar One, so they provided free set up, which helped a lot with the expenses.

RD: Beyond *MELUS*, and perhaps you can consider your own experiences as a scholar, how would you characterize the role of peer review in academics?

MJC: Peer review is vital to good scholarship, and I have gotten some of my most thoughtful peer reviews from journals, as well as from academic presses. I can say that my scholarship would be much weaker if it were not for the many anonymous peer evaluators who took the time to give me good, tough feedback on my work.

However, peer review is under assault in many ways these days. First, we are encouraged to publish, publish, publish. This means that every time I am asked to review an article or book, I have to think, "Will this interfere with my ability to publish something I am working on in a timely fashion?" Second, everything we do is tied into our departmental merit ratings, and we don't get much merit for evaluating other people's work—my department gives 2 merit points for reading for a scholarly journal for a whole year, and 3 points for evaluating a scholarly manuscript for a university press (these are usually 300-400 pages). If you compare this to the 6-10 points for publishing your conference paper in a non-refereed conference proceedings volume or the 15-20 points you get for publishing in a refereed journal, you can see what the problem is—too little merit is assigned to peer review. Finally, many universities like you to engage in activities that have high name recognition (writing books, articles, blogs, even appearing on talk shows) and of course peer review is anonymous, so there is absolutely no name recognition. In short, there is strong push to do the scholarly activities that will get you name recognition, and this works against the desire to do peer review. Furthermore, journals themselves (a primary engine for anonymous peer review) are under assault in a lot of ways, but perhaps that is another subject!

RD: Do you think peer review would carry more merit were it to be less anonymous? If readers' reports included the readers' names, or—as in the case of some open review models—if the review itself were publicly available, would such an increase in visibility help or harm peer review?

MJC: As I said above, I think fair and honest peer review would not be possible unless evaluators' names are kept out of the picture. People have actually been sued for just writing a negative review of a book, so I can't imagine that people would be honest if their name was attached to an evaluation, especially when they are reviewing a truly bad essay. And this is a profession in which what comes around goes around, so if you were to reject someone's article because it isn't strong and they knew this, sooner or later there is a really good chance that this will be paid back in kind. Frankly, I wouldn't do peer review of journal articles unless it was anonymous for this reason, and I think most scholars feel this way. Second, I don't think that universities would reward it more if it was less anonymous. Really, universities just want you to publish, publish, publish. Peer reviewing of journal articles is considered service, not scholarship, and such items tend to be devalued in universities that are research-intensive.

RD: Can we return to the idea of journals being "under assault"? I think this is an important part of this subject, especially since budget cutbacks at university presses have made the monograph an even more elusive accomplishment. Can you say more about the challenges that journals are facing? As a new journal, what should *NANO* look out for?

MJC: That's a huge topic. But, as I see it, journals are under assault in four ways. First, as I said above, scholars are increasingly encouraged by their universities to privilege publication and research, and editing a journal, evaluating for the journal, and being on the editorial board, are considered "service," and so people are reluctant to take this on. Of course, a journal can't function without an editor, an editorial board, and evaluators. Second, universities themselves are increasingly reluctant to fund journals in the humanities and this leads to journals operating on low budgets. Third, there are a lot of new publishing platforms out there which are disaggregating journal content, so the whole idea of a "journal issue" becomes rather tangential to the field. I don't think this means that journals will disappear—but only that (as has happened with television) they will need to compete in an increasingly fragmented market. For example, you now have standalone journal articles on Amazon, essays that can be viewed through Project Muse but not downloaded, essays that are reprinted in electronic books, and so on. Journals need to figure out how to best marshal these new publishing platforms so as to make their content widely available and still pay their bills. Fourth, faculty are being encouraged by Open Access initiatives at universities to deposit free copies of their articles in university repositories, which can cut into any revenue a journal is collecting from Project Muse, JSTOR, etc. I do think Open Access is the way of the future, but it will take some time for journals that are currently behind pay walls to figure out how to get to this future. Instead of making this transition, I worry that some journals will fold, leaving even fewer places to publish one's work.