

Special Editors' Introduction to Issue 3.1

There's a saying, sometimes attributed as a French Proverb: "If you don't do politics, politics does you." This seems a straightforward enough idea. Yet as a field, we seem hesitant to acknowledge our necessary and unavoidable role within political structures. Perhaps out of a sense of professionalism, we place a veneer of neutrality around our classrooms and scholarship that constrains our potential as rhetoricians, public writers, and educators. At such moments, we are reminded of Paulo Freire's "Letter to a North American Teacher": "The idea of an identical and neutral role for all teachers could only be accepted by someone who was either naive or very clever. Such a person might affirm the neutrality of education, thinking of school as merely a kind of parenthesis whose essential structure was immune to the influences of social class, of gender, or race" (211). That is, claims of neutrality are either naive of political conditions or a clever way of preserving an unjust status quo. Breaking free of this thinking allows us to ask what our teaching supports and challenges, what our scholarship maintains and combats. With these questions in mind and a recognition of the need to decide and to act, we developed this special issue.

Indeed, the myth of neutrality was exposed through events too numerous to name as we accepted and reviewed essays. The brutal treatment and arrest of Dr. Ersula Ore on Arizona State University's campus reminds us that universities are not safe from persistent racism and state violence. Dr. Ore, an English professor, was accosted, brutalized, and arrested for walking on a street in front of a construction zone. In this case, organizations like NCTE and CCCC joined thousands of supporters around the country in calling for justice for Dr. Ore ("NCTE").

Acknowledging our critical role in history and our inevitable placement within political systems comes with responsibility. Kiese Laymon's brilliant reflection in "My Vassar College ID Makes Everything OK," published on *Gawker*, emphasizes what is at stake. An English Professor at Vassar who describes many racist encounters with police and campus security, Laymon asks us to consider the connection between our roles in academia and the most blatant abuses of our society, naming those abuses directly:

You have a Michigan State Faculty ID, and seven-year old Aiyana Stanley-Jones was killed in a police raid. You have a Wilberforce University Faculty ID and 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot dead by police for holding a BB gun. I have a Vassar College Faculty ID and NYPD suffocated Shereese Francis while she lay face-down on a mattress. You have a University of Missouri Student ID and Mike Brown's unarmed 18-year-old black body lay dead in the street for four and a half hours. (Laymon)

How do we write and teach about events that cannot be neutral? How do we do justice for the bodies attacked and killed by this state and other states? One thing is for sure—we have to think differently about the place of our scholarship and about the constraints of civility and neutrality. These moves come with tangible risks, as we saw when the University of Illinois rescinded the hiring of Steven Salaita for his unpopular public critiques of Israel's most recent war on Gaza. The administration at the University of Illinois wrote that Salaita's tweets betrayed the "expectation of a university community that values civility as much as scholarship" (Jaschik).

Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and four children playing on a beach in Gaza—all killed as we accepted articles to this special issue—what is our responsibility to them? Their deaths and the systems of oppression tied to them beg us to ask: What good is neutrality when it restrains a clear-eyed view of our social and political conditions? What good is civility when it restrains us from naming political conditions and events that are far from civil? Here it might be worth noting that many great rhetoricians, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Angela Y. Davis, Cesar Chavez, and Harvey Milk, were chastised for being unreasonable in their rhetoric, their actions, and their demands. Today, what might a recognition of material circumstances and a critical view of history draw forth? What might it demand from us as educators and scholars in an age of neoliberalism that encourages us to think that the current social relations are inevitable and normal? How do we do our part to build a society that is peaceful because, as a condition, we have made it just?

Of course, in taking this stance, we are aware of how it might sound—how it could be cartooned into an appeal for ideologically driven scholarship and pedagogy. We would argue, however, that the opposite is the case. To be aware of and write from a responsibility to material conditions and a critical view of history is to maintain the sort of rigor with the facts, research, and argumentative precision that intellectual work requires. To move beyond the veneer of neutrality is to take on a new set of responsibilities as scholars and educators, not a license to take uninformed positions, as critics might have it. Arguing against conventional wisdom is always more intellectually rigorous than maintaining an unjust status quo.

The articles in this collection are evidence of an important combination—the need for rigorous research that is also direct in its political impact, a scholarship that can produce both an informed and blunt response to power. The key challenge will be to understand how we move between these complex demands in a way that not only speaks to the current moment but also prepares our students to be equally responsible and informed actors in their own civic lives.

To this end, we have published essays that represent elements of this blend among an understanding of the current political moment, various forms of social action, and their connections to literacy and composition—recognizing that no one essay, research project, or community program could capture it all. Indeed, one lesson learned from piecing together this collection was that we could imagine *collaboration* and *collectivity* as the hallmarks of any future work. Many methods, strategies, and frameworks may be welcomed. In this way, we present this special issue not with the hope of neutrality but rather with the intention of multiple examples of scholars and citizens who are interrogating positions, decisions, and knowledges in complex and contingent ways.

In this issue, Carmen Kynard and others make clear that we cannot be neutral, or silent, in the face of injustice. Specifically, Kynard shows how racism, while systemic, is also enacted by communities and individuals who should know better, as she names microaggressions and the blatant racism of students and faculty at several institutions. We believe such naming is not just scholarly research; it is a political act—just as it is also political not to mention material circumstances and historical oppressions. She challenges readers to work for racial justice on campus and in departments, even when it is uncomfortable, when it is risky, or when doing so may break academic norms of civility and neutrality.

In this collection, scholars, teachers, and workers name their material conditions and social locations and describe attempts to work on the side of social justice. In doing so, we also made a point of choosing essays that deploy a variety of research and argumentative strategies and that include a variety of voices. For instance, Tamera Marko, Mario Ernesto Osorio, Eric Sepenoski, and Ryan Catalani question how students, teachers, and campus maintenance workers can interact in productive ways when the political landscape of education affords students the chance to receive an “A” for taking a course and doing writing that puts immigrant workers at risk of being fired. They describe the challenges they have faced throughout the past five years in developing a translingual course at Emerson College that is for both maintenance workers and undergraduate students, arguing that the “political economy of translingual rhetorical mobility” disadvantages the maintenance workers in problematic ways and often renders their experiences and stories invisible.

Locating themes in contemporary social struggles, Shon Meckfessel’s reflections on the Occupy Movement in relation to composition studies and Vani Kannan, Joe Schike, and Sue Doe’s connection of campus labor struggles to theater build upon prior discussions and offer avenues for “new” ways of thinking and of acting politically through our roles as scholars, teachers, and citizens. Meckfessel asks what a composition pedagogy might do to hold space in the face of social antagonism, as the Occupy Movement did. Kannan, Schike, and Doe describe creative ways to stay vigilant within the shifting terrain of campus labor organizing. Also considering campus-based labor organizing, Rachel Riedner describes the need for a more critical look at the laboring bodies at universities in an effort to make visible university employment structures that are both gendered and racialized.

With this issue, we know that we cannot be “new” without knowing our history—the very possibility of political transformation necessitates that we see and understand the current moment as a series of historical choices made by people. Deborah Mutnick and Candace Epps-Robertson provide articles that draw from histories of racism and civil rights, helping us to re-articulate our pedagogy today. Mutnick describes a pedagogy that allows students to identify shifting rhetorics of racism, reflecting on student work in the age of “colorblindness.” Epps-Robertson, looking at the Prince Edward County Free School, describes a moment in education during the Civil Rights era that challenged white constructions of citizenship.

As we look to the past, we also need to take seriously how the tools for political transformation today are evolving, ensuring that scholars, students, and those of us in social movements are ready to work with (or struggle against) the power of such new tools. Caroline Dadas and Justin Jory analyze the pepper spraying of peaceful protesters at UC Davis, showing how people remediated semiotic representations of this event—through twitter postings, memes, videos— in order to disrupt and even challenge a status quo in digital or physical spaces. Analyzing social media activism as both possibility and constraint, Rachael Shapiro challenges a digital literacy myth that too often promotes Western social media technologies as the historical actors in global social movements, instead of acknowledging the ongoing significance of people in the streets. Similarly, Phyllis Ryder provides an example, through considering the representation of Malala Yousafzai’s work, of what it might mean to successfully navigate this new digital media environment to circulate alternative viewpoints. She challenges progressive critiques, which rightly call out the Western media for co-opting Yousafzai’s

narrative but do not recognize how Yousafzai subverts and resists those Western representations.

Other contributions examine roles of civility, critical pedagogy, and competition in composition. John Pell and William Duffy highlight how Freire's work might be re-envisioned given current social tensions, creating classrooms that offer students the ability to name the differences in material conditions that are often a primary cause for social disagreement. Stacey Waite demonstrates how the classroom itself might model an alternative sense of competition to what marks our current "market economy." Waite draws from her experience coaching a high school slam poetry team and explores "the contradictory nature of competition," which provides a means to "challenge the status quo rather than reinscribe it" with the possibilities of "generate[ing] rhetorical listening and literacy communities."

This issue also considers changing contexts and conceptions of literacy. Over the past fifty years, literacy has moved from denoting basic reading/writing skills to including written and spoken dialects to, ultimately, expanding as a framework to understand knowledge in communities. We would argue that this moment demands that literacy in composition studies must include political literacy—an attention to systems of power that informs the production and reception of texts, a deep consideration of the *world* out of which the *word* is brought forth. Christopher Wilkey and Daniel J. Cleary examine literacy in a political and economic context, providing examples of "rigged" literacy games that sustain gentrification and the prison industrial complex. They examine the connection of literacy to systems that involve the removal of people from societies and communities. Through Gabriela Rios' participation with farm workers, she describes a community literacy bounded less by disciplinarity and more by grassroots demands. Together, these articles are examples of a more politically informed and perceptive literacy education.

It seems appropriate to end with an acknowledgement of the breadth of this special issue. With complex social circumstances and histories to consider, with a variety of practices and strategies in classrooms and communities, and with the need both to name specific circumstances and also to embed them in theories and analyses that connect beyond local conditions, we felt compelled to accept a wide range of essays. With such diverse perspectives and contexts, we cannot claim to define some singular "new" form of activist practice. What we offer instead is a collection that includes visions for contemporary and emerging scholarship and pedagogy for a more politically conscious composition and literacy.

Ben Kuebrich - Syracuse University

Jessica Pauszek - Syracuse University

Steve Parks - Syracuse University

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