

# Guest Editors' Note

Ann E. Green<sup>1</sup>, Wiley Davi<sup>2</sup>, and Olivia Giannetta<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Professor of English, Saint Joseph's University (annettagreen@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Professor of English and Media Studies, Bentley University (wdavi@bentley.edu)

<sup>3</sup>Class of 2022, Saint Joseph's University (og701748@sju.edu)

When we applied to be guest editors of *Prompt's* special issue on social justice, we didn't know we would be doing it during a global pandemic. When we wrote and sent out the call for papers, we had no idea that in the spring of 2020, we would abruptly switch from face-to-face teaching to remote learning and struggle to find toilet paper in our respective cities. In other words, we did not realize that 2020 would be both quotidian and historic, both tragic and hopeful.

We are white, feminist activists who have engaged in anti-racist pedagogies, social justice scholarship, and activist work in the classroom for decades, but the last four years has made our quest for social justice even more urgent. President 45's recent ban on critical race theories and diversity training highlights how social justice work is both crucial and contested. As white feminists who work for racial justice, dismantling the global pandemic of racism has always been at the core of what we do. We did not realize that the struggle for social justice would feel so urgent.

We did not know when the call for proposal went out that we would receive so many thoughtful, passionate responses that addressed racism, classism, environmental justice, and privilege. We were heartened by the range, depth, and commitment to social justice writing that our colleagues demonstrated, and our first challenge was to select a small number of proposals to be developed into full-scale articles. This was an excellent problem to have, however, and Susanne and Holly graciously accepted our idea for expanding our single issue to two issues a year apart, loosely organized as public-facing or audience-driven assignments and inward-facing or reflection-driven assignments. In this issue, writers describe audience-driven assignments where students engage in projects that bridge communities and classrooms, considering both global citizenship and local community interventions. These assignments are from business, education, developmental English, health sciences, first-year writing and rhetoric.

When we accepted the initial proposals, we did not know that Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery—young Black people who could have been our students, our neighbors, our family—would be shot while living their lives.

And we did not know that footage of the murder of George Floyd, 46, would go viral and that the ensuing protests around the country and the world would be a clarion call for action to end systemic racism, and we did not know that Tony McDade, a Black trans man, would be shot and killed by police on June 1st during the protests of Floyd's death.

As we write this, over 220,000 people in the United States, many of them Black and brown<sup>1</sup>, have died from complications of COVID-19. While writing assignments that do social justice work might seem like a trickle in the ocean of inequity, fear, and grief that have characterized life in 2020 in particular, and America in general since its founding, we are mindful of Asao B. Inoue (2019)'s question during his chair's address at the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication: "How do we language so people stop killing each other?"

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In these articles, what we have recognized is that social justice is a *process* of seeking equity. On our journey toward social justice, form and content matter, how we assign writing matters, how we respond to writing matters, how we treat students matters. Toward that end, we sought assignments that encourage students to consider systemic inequalities including (but not limited to) racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. We were particularly interested in assignments that encouraged students to move from a consideration of personal/individual injustice to reflections on systemic or structural inequality. In working with authors, we encouraged them to reflect on their own intersectionality.

“How do we language so people stop killing each other?”

The authors implicitly took up Inoue’s question as their drafts evolved and adapted to our present moments. Two writers, Bridget Draxler and Brigitte Mussack, are both located in Minnesota, and their pieces reflect their proximity to George Floyd’s murder. Draxler’s “Designing Publicly Engaged First-Year Research Projects: Protest Art and Social Change,” explores how emerging writers can use protest art as both a subject of research and a heuristic for their own protest art. This multimodal approach illustrates how emerging writers can use their voices for social change at predominantly white institutions.

Mussack, located in Minneapolis, uses her students’ commitment to social justice as a starting point for analysis of corporate mission statements. While business students are often seen as those furthest removed from social justice conversations, Mussack highlights how reflecting on mission statements can help students examine their own ethics and values as they collaborate with one another.

Other pieces in this issue also consider place and what Adrienne Rich (1994) called “a politics of location.” Elizabeth Yomantas’s “Respecting, Embracing, and Honoring Cultural Practices through Collective Storytelling” describes how students in “Culturally Responsive Service-Learning” travel to Fiji and, with permission from Fijians, can employ *talanoa* or story-telling in their assignments. Yomantas, using *talanoa* in her own piece, then demonstrates how other service-learning courses with immersion experiences can also develop assignments specific to their cultural contexts.

Leslie R. Anglesey’s “Social Justice in an Online Classroom: A Place-Based Approach to Belonging,” discusses the paradox of online classroom and social justice work. Online classrooms, Anglesey argues, can become locations for exploring home, place, and social justice. Using bell hooks (2009)’ reflections on “home” and belonging, Anglesey theorizes how Web 2.0 technology can create opportunities for students to advocate for revisions to historic markers in order to question the dominant narrative and consider missing Indigenous and marginalized people’s histories.

Debbie Goss’s “Writing for Clean Water and Sanitation: Accelerating Momentum Toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals Through Action Research” describes a pair of writing assignments that ask first-year writers to revise a Wikipedia page based on UN sustainable development goal #6, a goal for clean water and sanitation by the year 2030. By revising a Wikipedia page in a group, students receive feedback from volunteer editors at Wikipedia to help shape and improve their articles. As a follow up, students use their research to write individual opinion pieces for *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development*. Goss’s thoughtful sequence of assignments gives students space to reflect on how they might advocate for the UN goals in their own lives. While Goss teaches this assignment to a large number of international students in first-year writing, she describes how the UN sustainable development goals and the writing assignments could be adapted for literature, environmental science, anthropology, sociology, biology, or business courses.

Finally, Maranda Ward’s article, “Teaching and Assessing Empathy Among Health Professions

Students” explores how ethnocultural empathy or racial/ethnic perspective taking can be embedded in an online course that prepares online students for the health care professions. By asking students to propose a sustainable change in their local communities after speaking with a community gatekeeper, Ward theorizes how students can rethink the position of “expert” in relation to systemic inequities in the health care system, a crucial intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We would like to thank all of the peer reviewers for this issue who made time amid a rapidly shifting landscape to respond thoughtfully to drafts of articles, and who were also, themselves, strong proponents of social justice. In order to break down the traditional distance between authors and editors and in an attempt to make our process more transparent and thus more just, we met with authors via Zoom and offered support for their revisions. During these editing hours, some of the authors met one another as we discussed ways to structure and revise articles; we hope the temporary online community facilitated by Zoom was helpful. In the summer of 2020, as we worked dialogically with the writers on their drafts, the articles brought into sharp relief how our locations and contexts matter and how we are always interconnected. Some of us lost people to COVID, some of our lives were disrupted by wildfire, all of our lives were disrupted by pandemics.

As this issue heads to press, President-Elect Joseph Biden has just mentioned both disability and trans identity in his victory speech (“Read,” 2020, Nov. 7, 9:14 PM CST). This is the first time a president has mentioned both identities and trans women like Jennifer Finney Boylan and Charlotte Clymer have acknowledged this moment on Twitter. We seemed to be poised on the edge of hope, but we cannot forget what the poet Audre Lorde (1994) called “the dead behind us.”

In the summer of 2020, amid the protests after George Floyd’s murder, three Black trans women, Nina Pop, Dominique Fells, and Riah Milton, were killed. While we look forward with hope, we cannot forget the extraordinary high rate of murder among trans people of color. An absence in this issue, among other absences, is a discussion of sexuality, trans identity, and intersectionality. If we are languaging so people will stop killing each other, how can we create spaces in our classrooms for the discussion of sexuality and more intentional discussion of trans identity? Hopefully those of you who are working with trans writing assignments and gender queer writing will submit your assignments to future issues of *Prompt*. To quote Nomi from the Netflix series *Sense8*, what we offer in this issue is the idea that “I’m not just a me. I’m also a we. And we march with pride” (The Wachowskis & Straczynski, 2015, June 5). May you read this issue with an eye toward our interconnectedness and with an idea that we can all work together for justice.

Yours in struggle,

Ann

Wiley

Olivia

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>We’re drawing our language choices here from the *New York Times* discussion of Black vs. brown (Coleman, 2020).

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