

# Justice Work In and Outside of Schools

## An Introduction

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**T**HE TASK OF TEACHERS, those obscure soldiers of civilization, is to give to the people the intellectual means to revolt.

Louise Michel, *Mémoires*, 1886

The last decade offers multiple thrilling examples of power generated by people. From students pushing back against the privatization of higher education in Helsinki, Montreal, Chile, and Puerto Rico, and people fighting for access to free knowledge exchange and protection from a prying state through the platform of the international Pirate Party, to undocumented youth in the United States coalescing around calls and acts for immigration reform that leave no one behind, to Occupy tent cities springing up in public parks across the globe, these uprisings have shifted political and economic frameworks and produced powerful pedagogical moments for a wide range of audiences. Workers around the globe Livestreamed and “Light Brigaded” the stand-off in Madison, Wisconsin in 2011 as a Republican governor attempted to strip bargaining rights from state workers; in 2012 youth from across the political spectrum Tweeted to teach each other about the laws that legitimated Trayvon Martin’s murder; in 2013 women of all ages wore their ovaries on their t-shirts when Texas politicians tried to make abortion illegal. Each of these moments and many others are now seared into our collective memories and shape our daily work and future plans. In this special issue of JCT, focused on justice work in and outside of schools, artists, organizers, researchers, educators and other observers and participants in movements for

social change share their commitments, strategies and analyses. This issue of the journal is less a map, though, than a paper trail of imperatives and actions, more a rally and teach-in than a set of standards.

We started to draft our introduction directly after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who shot the 17 year old Trayvon Martin, for being “suspicious” (translation: Black and male) as he walked home from a convenience store with snacks in hand in a Florida gated community. The Call for Submissions we wrote a year earlier noted the energetic mobilizations and pedagogical responses to Martin’s shooting, shaped by righteous anger as well as the possibility, at that point, for some eventual measure of justice. Following Zimmerman’s release fury and despair are more accurate gauges of the national mood, at least in some quarters, and cities across the U.S. are erupting with expressions of these raw and powerful emotions. Quakers and artists, Catholic nuns and queer anti-police activists, Black church folk and DJs, Puerto Rican public high school students and slam poets, we are coming together in cultural and community centers, park houses and student unions, and other public spaces to talk, teach and *feel* with each other about the loss of yet another young Black life and the national insanity of structural white supremacy. This is public pedagogy, educational justice work in and outside of schools, shaped by the ugliness of the circumstance and our need to try something else.

This daily political landscape is never static and often rife with contradiction. Just days before Zimmerman’s trial ended, Malala Yousafzai, shot in the head in Pakistan for trying to attend her school, spoke to the United Nations about the fundamental right for all, and particularly women, girls and boys, to access education; this was followed a few days later by the mass “pink-slipping” of Chicago Public School workers, including over a thousand teachers. The dizzying speed with which these contradictory moments unfold, where gains are usually measured in meters of profound loss, can be overwhelming: How do we remain alert to each new set of specifics, while also gaining an overview and better understanding of structures, links, and tactical opportunities? How do we respond to emerging events, often framed for us as “crisis,” and *slow down*, as each political moment necessitates careful and complete analysis? The possibility of radical potential, of becomings and openings, and the change that results from *collective* praxis, keeps us going. While Lauren Berlant (2011) has warned that this focus on possibility may be a dangerously cruel form of optimism, or hope as “an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24), to us, and we suspect many who have contributed to this issue, committing to imagination and engagement seems like the only path away from despair. Through the engagements shaped by political commitments—protests and rallies, performances and filibusters, posters and memes, and the mobilization and deployments of alternative and social media, including ‘zines, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, Tumblr, Facebook, WikiLeaks, and more—that are registered in these pages, we are linked to and learning from these movements.

This special issue invited contributions from justice workers in a wide range of pedagogical sites; we were particularly interested in work exceeding traditional academic boundaries, including submissions incorporating art and text; curriculum notes, or “How I teach

within this justice movement”; first-person accounts of organizing and origin stories, or “How I became a justice worker”; interviews and roundtable discussions; critical media and book review essays; examples and critiques of radical educating in diverse public places—museums, hospitals, parks, and beyond; research papers that critically evaluate justice-centered interventions and initiatives; wider movement assessment—asking questions like, “What is the state of this particular movement?” and “What is the relationship between justice work and workers organizing globally?”

While we circulated an open call, and were happily inundated with many strong submissions from established scholars and organizers, we also sought out fresh voices to contribute, such as of those working in ways and areas that often do not receive a lot of attention. What we solicited, received, and have included here reflects our specific visions, affiliations, and investments. This is a limitation and challenge that is partially mitigated by embracing collaborations. Through the practice of jointly documenting and engaging with public and political moments, in particular, we find a path away from the “naturalisation of misery, the belief that intellectual work requires alienation and immobility” and “is only something you can do in isolation” that poet Fred Moten (2013) has described as tropes of scholarly life (118). As Moten suggests, loneliness is not the natural price of the mental labor ticket; pain is not proof of analytical quality; and pleasure, action and collectivity are better, more sustainable models for our working lives. The contributions in this journal seek to illustrate these points in a myriad of ways.

When we surveyed the total field of submissions, some patterns in their descriptions of the current terrain of “social justice” in education emerged. Frameworks for analyzing difference and power, such as social justice and intersectionality, circulate in universities dominated by the discourse of liberal multiculturalism, which seeks to manage and assimilate “difference,” not redistribute resources, often with little analysis of power or history. Similarly, the push for civic engagement at universities often translates into calls for scholars to work with community partners. This impetus has resulted in conference presentations and publications, for example, in which it’s uncomfortably common to see professors staking claims to “authenticity” capital from their relationships with students, teachers, parents, poor people, “real” organizers, and so on. In these instances “social justice” or “community partnerships” become window dressing, with solidarity and the awkward and often slow give-and-take of coalitional work sidelined.

“Social justice” also rings hollow as universities race to establish social justice centers, institutes, and programs, and to mint select forms of scholarship, described in ever more obscure and “copyrighted” academic terms, while our day-to-day contexts decline: Attendance costs edge up, as do levels of graduate indebtedness; tenure-line positions contract; non-living wage temporary teaching positions proliferate; the labor that makes our universities run is outsourced and union-busted, or done by work-study undergraduates. Institutional commitments to social justice ring hollow, eviscerated of analyses of power and history, when the house we work in—the university—is excluded from investigation and critique.

Despite this trend and our critique, our submissions clearly indicated the existence of a vibrant pool of writers, organizers, artists, and movement builders, many of whom are working in relation to the university, that are actively struggling to craft the work we need. This special issue explores ideas and practices like social justice, intersectionality, and coalition, looking closely at what happens when they are “mainstreamed” in academic settings. How does this affect their radical potentialities, including that we learn *from*, not just *about*, each other? Yet the inquiries represented here also range beyond academic locations and forms, revealing the richness and depth of thought and action in all our communities. The contributors to these pages highlight the *learning from* part of justice-work, in particular, within five journal sections, *Mobilizations and Interventions*, *Renderings*, *Inquiries*, *Roundtables*, and *Considerations*.

*Mobilizations and Interventions*: This section offers examples of creative and successful organizing and critical analyses from four countries and within cyberspace. Using social media, youth-powered storytelling, renegade translation and grassroots research, among other tools and tactics, these contributors demonstrate how they have mobilized and intervened, and how others can, too.

*Renderings*: The essays and longer articles in this section offer snapshots of political moments, reflections on becoming an organizer and sustaining that labor over the long haul, and fine-grained case studies of justice-work in context.

*Inquiries*: Here, focused in-depth articles exploring the movement-focused and emancipatory practices and results of research focused on policy thinking, schooling spaces, militarized education and white racial innocence in a “post-racial” era.

*Roundtables*: Through dialogs on an intimate scale organizers in different contexts discuss their goals and strategies for building the world we need.

*Considerations*: With assessments and engagements of cultural products, this section offers readers the opportunity to engage with the creative potential in diverse pedagogical sites—museums, films, exhibits, alternative learning sites—and to explore particular political projects at these settings.

## References

- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC. Duke University Press.
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