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### Pursuing Social Justice Through Visual Practice: Intro to Part IV

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INTRODUCTION TO PART IV

# Pursuing Social Justice through Visual Practice

Stephanie Beene

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“[W]hat images need to be seen to effect change and alter history[?]”<sup>1</sup>

—Sarah Lewis, “Vision and Justice”

**W**hat is “social justice”? At its most basic, the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines social justice as “justice at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges.”<sup>2</sup> However, social justice is arguably more complex and intertwined with other justice movements, such as restorative justice, transformative justice, reproductive justice, racial justice, environmental justice, climate justice, disability justice, and more. While distinct in their discourse, evolution, and history, each of these efforts is inextricably connected in their common pursuit of justice: *none of us is free until all of us are free.*<sup>3</sup> If we consider these movements under the umbrella of social justice, we might consider such efforts united in their fight for greater human rights protections, liberation, reparations, and the abolition of harmful policies, norms, laws, biases, and systems that are often embedded into societal structures so as to become virtually invisible over time (e.g., white supremacy, colonialism, ableism, heteronormativity).

As of this writing, social justice groups are mobilizing on a variety of fronts. Globally, the world is reeling from a pandemic, with diseases once thought eradicated reemerging due to lapses in public health measures and vaccinations.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, a rise in far-right governments threatens human rights and democracies worldwide.<sup>5</sup> It may feel as though history is repeating itself. Indeed, a little over a hundred years ago, similar struggles unfolded in a 1920 *Atlantic Magazine* book review of *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*,

in which familiar themes abound: references to a pandemic, increasing polarization, glaring disparities between socioeconomic classes, and rising global authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> Missing from its debate on social justice, however, is the driving role of technology. Throughout history, whether in 1920s America or contemporaneously, technology has propelled social change, for better and for worse. Through new technologies, new information has proliferated, working toward liberation on the one hand, oppression and persecution on the other.

This dual nature of technology is centered in the final theme of *The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (VL Framework), “Learners pursue social justice through visual practice,” as well as its role in the creation, dissemination, sharing, remix, and consumption of *visual* information. Through a social justice lens, the VL Framework empowers learners to critically reflect upon various visual information formats, how they are produced and disseminated, and how they change as they are shared and remixed through ever-advancing technological systems. Importantly, it also frames these challenges in terms of learners’ contributions and creations. By framing visual practice as “the creation and consumption of visuals for the purpose of transmitting and building knowledge,”<sup>7</sup> the task force situates visuals within a long discourse on technology and information systems, management, and distribution. Visual practice thus acknowledges fields as varied as arts practices, film and media studies, visual culture, and visual rhetoric, while also recognizing that virtually everyone creates and consumes visuals in their everyday lives, through a digitally mediated existence, thanks to omnipresent technologies such as smartphones and other personal devices, social media, and so on.

While framing these technologies through the lens of social justice and visual practice, this theme also emphasizes the criticality of “consistent work related to diversity, equity, and inclusion,” noting that it “takes continual effort and education.”<sup>8</sup> While this is a straightforward notion, some of these terms may need refreshing, especially because the phrase “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” or its acronym, DEI, has become so ubiquitous as to become a thought-terminating cliché. Separately, each term has a distinct meaning worth wrestling with. Here, *diversity* refers to intentionally representing people with different identities, whereas the term *inclusion* “involves authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging.”<sup>9</sup> *Equity*, then, is “about each of us getting what we need to survive or succeed—access to opportunity, networks, resources, and supports—based on where we are and where we want to go.”<sup>10</sup> Under the rubric of DEI, equity requires the systematic dismantling of barriers faced by underrepresented and historically minoritized individuals and groups through allocating resources and support. Further, it asks us to dismantle systemic oppression through becoming “conscientious contributors to a more just world”<sup>11</sup> by recognizing that greater awareness and action is just one component of lifelong learning and visual practice.

Integral to the VL Framework was the qualitative research that informed its drafting, which surfaced a number of concepts that could promote social justice within visual literacy praxis.<sup>12</sup> In its survey of 113 visual and information literacy experts over two

years (2019–2021), the task force discovered an overarching concern among practitioners, librarians, and educators with the ways in which visuals can reinforce or subvert dominant ideologies, including colonization and white supremacy.<sup>13</sup> Participants voiced concern with a lack of visual representation of ethnically and racially diverse individuals, misrepresentation, and misappropriation. Additional ethical considerations were raised around pursuing partnerships with communities and seeking informed consent when using imagery of or from historically or currently marginalized peoples.<sup>14</sup> Respondents highlighted accessibility and access, emphasizing that visuals should be usable to those with visual, physical, and intellectual impairments; these systemic barriers are amplified by resource inequities such as inadequate technologies and financial support.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the concepts that arose during this research are mentioned as examples within the introduction to the social justice theme in the VL Framework document; they are also explored more in depth in the chapters within this section of the anthology. For example, “improving accessibility of visuals and platforms” is more fully addressed by Kai Alexis Smith and Christine Malinowski in their chapter, “What We Aren’t Seeing: Exclusionary Practices in Visual Media.” The authors introduce readers to a host of interrelated terms and concepts, such as *intersectionality*, *accessibility*, *accessible design*, *universal design*, *ableism*, *critical race theory*, *critical design*, and *disability justice*, exposing readers to the complexities of inclusivity discourse while recommending concrete actions to further disability justice. Readers should find in this chapter a helpful starting point for thinking through a more just future.

Another example referenced in the introduction to this theme, “decentering whiteness, heteronormativity and other hegemonic practices in visual collections and canons,” is more fully explored in Nicole Fox’s chapter, “Reading between the Lines.” Fox explores the narratives that maps weave and those they omit. She discusses considerations for examining maps and teaching with them, explaining the ways in which historical maps differ from the types of contemporary placemaking projects that actively use maps as tools to reassert agency. Both historical and contemporary maps can be interrogated as embodiments of social processes. Fox empowers readers to transform passive map-viewing sessions into active investigations, thus subverting dominant narratives and amplifying the voices of historically minoritized creators and communities.

Meanwhile, the example of “opposing exploitative practices that deprive visual creators of intellectual property control or Indigenous communities of sovereignty”<sup>16</sup> is addressed by Alex Watkins in his chapter, “Engaging Students in the Ethics of Visual Remix and Appropriation.” In it, he explores exploitation and appropriation, asking critically reflective questions in the process: Who benefits from the appropriation? Is it fair? How are they benefiting? Who is being hurt by the appropriation? How would you feel if this had happened to you? What harm was done? Is there a power imbalance between the two parties (e.g., racial, ethnic, social, economic, gender, etc.)? These questions, though posed to students in this case, are highly adaptable to a range of teaching and learning activities for various audiences. Readers may even choose to use them as structured reflection prompts for images they encounter in their daily lives.

Moreover, the introduction to the VL Framework's social justice theme emphasizes the crucial nature of reciprocal relationships with communities, wherein visual literacy learners endeavor to overcome their own biases while also working to better understand those whose worldviews, knowledge, and expertise varies from their own.<sup>17</sup> These notions are examined by Adrienne Warner, Sarita Cargas, and Sarah Johnson in their chapter, "Display of Plenty: Addressing Food Insecurity on Campus," which discusses a student-led exhibit about food insecurity, for which students created and remixed visuals, sought feedback from affected community groups, and achieved greater social justice. Notably, the authors also provide a helpful chart for readers hoping to embark upon a similar project. Similarly, Catherine Tedford explores how visuals can and do motivate viewers to seek out social justice in her chapter, "Street Stickers as Subversive Visual Discourse." Here, Tedford explores the rhetorical power of the everyday, quotidian encounter with street art stickers, their provocative history, and her experiences teaching with them. Additionally, she provides readers with teaching examples that can be easily adapted to other contexts. Together, these two chapters provide potent examples of visuals acting in the world, working within and for communities to enact social change.

Finally, Jennifer Follen's chapter, "Using a Trauma-Informed Perspective with Archival Photography Collections," transcends the VL Framework, mapping the dispositions that appear in this theme to the trauma-informed approach promoted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Her discussion examines archival photographic collections, especially those documenting sensitive historical events, but the examples and activities she provides could be expanded to other media (e.g., social media, news media, video, film). Grounding this theoretical work are practical exercises for practitioners looking to enhance their activities, digital collections, or resources with a trauma-informed lens. In this final chapter, Follen calls for information professionals to observe any internal responses to sensitive visual information, to mindfully curate collections, and to thoughtfully create materials, activities, and exhibits around collections and imagery that may contain traumatizing imagery for individuals.

The chapters in this section apply the knowledge practices and examine the dispositions of the social justice theme of the VL Framework through case studies and theoretical investigations that should give information professionals and educators practical ideas for how to implement projects, exhibits, and lesson plans in their own contexts. Each author has thoughtfully examined the challenging questions surrounding social justice, and how it applies to their unique case study and theoretical inquiry. As readers encounter these chapters, I encourage them to think about how they could adapt something similar in their classrooms, library spaces, collections, or institutional settings. What does a more socially just world look like? How does visual media play a role in creating that world? And how might we empower students and patrons to enact change?

## Notes

1. Sarah Lewis, "Vision and Justice," guest editor's note, *Aperture*, no. 223 (2016): 10, 14.

2. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “social justice (noun),” accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183739?redirectedFrom=%22social+justice%22+>. According to the *OED*, “Much of the debate surrounding social justice has been concerned with the precise nature of fair distribution, and to what extent this may conflict with individual rights of acquisition and ownership.”
3. Although variously attributed to Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou, Fannie Lou Hamer, and others, this call to liberation seems to be a modern paraphrase of the 1883 adage, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free,” from Jewish activist and poet Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), who also wrote the “give me your tired, your poor” poem inscribed on the American Statue of Liberty. See the 2020 tweet by Arlen Parsen: “‘None of us are free until all of us are free.’ This is a modern paraphrase of a quote by 19th century Jewish American activist and poet Emma Lazarus. (Lazarus also wrote the ‘give me your tired, give me your poor’ poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.)” Twitter, August 19, 2020, <https://twitter.com/arlenparsa/status/1296282535027245057>. See also David N. Pellow’s discussion of the phrase in his article “Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies: Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge,” on page 232 of *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 13, no. 2 (2016): 221–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X1600014X>.
4. Jeffrey D. Sachs et al., “The Lancet Commission on Lessons for the Future from the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Lancet* 400, no. 10359 (October 2022): 1224–80, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)01585-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01585-9); World Health Organization, “COVID-19 Pandemic Fuels Largest Continued Backslide in Vaccinations in Three Decades,” news release, July 15, 2022, <https://www.who.int/news/item/15-07-2022-covid-19-pandemic-fuels-largest-continued-backslide-in-vaccinations-in-three-decades>.
5. United Nations, “UN Chief Raises Alarm over ‘Backsliding’ of Democracy Worldwide,” news release, September 15, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1126671>.
6. R. B. P., “The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice,” *Atlantic*, April 1, 1920, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1920/04/the-unsolved-riddle-of-social-justice/646772/>.
7. Association of College and Research Libraries, *The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022), 9, [https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Framework\\_Companion\\_Visual\\_Literacy.pdf](https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Framework_Companion_Visual_Literacy.pdf).
8. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 8–9.
9. Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Embracing Equity* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014), 5, [https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF\\_EmbracingEquity7Steps-2014.pdf](https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF_EmbracingEquity7Steps-2014.pdf).
10. Kris Putnam-Walkerly and Elizabeth Russell, “What the Heck Does ‘Equity’ Mean?” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, September 15, 2016, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what\\_the\\_heck\\_does\\_equity\\_mean](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what_the_heck_does_equity_mean).
11. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 9.
12. Dana Statton Thompson et al., “A Proliferation of Images: Trends, Obstacles, and Opportunities for Visual Literacy,” *Journal of Visual Literacy* 41, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 119–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2022.2053819>.
13. Statton Thompson et al., “Proliferation of Images,” 119.
14. Statton Thompson et al., “Proliferation of Images,” 119.
15. Statton Thompson et al., “Proliferation of Images,” 120.
16. See the “pursuing social justice through visual practice” theme for full introduction and list of examples: Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 9.
17. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 9.

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