

# Introduction to the Special Issue:

## Language, Access, and Power in Technical Communication

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This special issue contains articles, reflections, and discussions stemming from the 2021 Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) Virtual Conference, which was themed “Language, Access, and Power in Technical Communication.” This theme was originally set for the 2020 ATTW Conference. When the conference co-chairs Ann Shivers-McNair and Laura Gonzales originally developed the theme for the 2020 ATTW conference, we drew inspiration from Dr. Cecilia Shelton’s (2020) call to “shift out of neutral” in our technical communication practices. At that time, we reflected on the ongoing racial violence perpetuated through police brutality across the world, on the border crisis that kept separate, and continues to separate children and families, and on a violent government administration that reflected the hatred too long ingrained in US nationalism. We knew that technical communicators could not and should not sit by idly and pretend to embrace a stance of neutrality amidst so much injustice.

In first drafting the conference Call for Proposals, we could have never imagined what 2020, 2021, and now, 2022 would bring: A pandemic that continues to disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; the ongoing murders of Black people on our nation's streets and private residences; the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, Adam Toledo, and too many others; the Black Lives Matter uprisings that continue to fuel important change, including the rightful conviction of Derek Chauvin in 2021; the tragic murders of our Asian and Asian American siblings founded on wrongful discrimination during a global pandemic that has claimed over 1 million lives in the US and over 6.3 million lives worldwide, including consistently under-resourced countries, such as India and Nepal; ongoing reminders of the constant violence inflicted upon Indigenous communities worldwide, as evidenced most recently by the remains of 215 Indigenous children found in one of many residential schools in Canada; the sanctioned murders of children fueled by unrestrictive gun laws and white supremacy, as most recently seen in the Uvalde, Texas, massacre; and ongoing attacks on reproductive rights, as evidenced by the recent overturn of *Roe v Wade*. Thus, as we moved from the canceled 2020 conference to the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference, our call to move beyond neutrality to grapple with the intersections of language, access, and power in technical communication remained urgent.

In planning the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference, the ATTW Executive Committee decided that it was important to use this year to invest in their membership. Rather than holding a "business as usual" conference in a virtual space, the committee wanted to provide members and conference attendees with a space to process, heal, and build community. It was at this point that the committee reached out to Dr. Khirsten L. Scott, who joined our team as our conference strategist and helped us innovate a virtual conference space that invited reflection, joy, and rest.

Through Dr. Scott's work, the 2021 ATTW Virtual conference resulted in a series of events that provided attendees space to write, reflect, and learn. The conference kicked off with an accessibility workshop led by Dr. Dev Bose, who provided conference attendees with practical strategies for making their conference materials and presentations accessible. On the first day of the conference, attendees had the opportunity to engage in a writing group facilitated by Digital Black Lit (-eratures/-eracies) and Composition (DBLAC), which allowed conference attendees to set intentions and build community. The conference included keynotes and presentations by academics as well as community members, including keynotes by Dr. Josie Walwema, Dr. Rachel Bloom-Pojar, and Maria Barker from Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin. The conference also included networking hours where attendees came together to listen to music (provided by DJ Dr. Victor Del Hierro), share ideas, and enjoy time together. Throughout all of these events, we strove to keep accessibility at the forefront by working with CDJ Interpreting, who provided ASL interpretation in all sessions, and ALaCarte Connections, who provided captioning for the sessions. Being intentional about accessibility was important and challenging. We had to communicate to everyone how to work with ASL interpreters and captioners. We also needed to respect these professionals' time and expertise, and we're not sure we got it right, but we're glad for the effort we made and for the support of ATTW executive committee in making this possible.

At a time when virtual conferences were relatively new, the organizing team wanted to ensure that we were doing our best to establish a space that was accessible, justice-driven, and focused on community. Khirsten also infused and modeled being intentional about how we are and how we act in spaces, including virtual spaces that don't always feel like a space. That, too, was important and challenging as we realized how much we may have been on autopilot mode in conference spaces in the past. Being intentional

also means being “mindful of the space you are taking up as it relates to privileged embodiments, especially in academic spaces,” as we asked of participants in the conference community guidelines. In addition to being mindful and responsible, there was also the need to be focused on the world we are working toward.

Toward that end, Khirsten had the idea of extending the conference space into this special issue, which is intended to showcase how conference conversations can continue beyond a single event. In collaboration with *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*, we’re excited to share this special issue and to continue imagining what language, access, and power in technical communication entails in our shifting world. Therefore, in what follows, we share our process for the special issue, an overview of the special issue contents, and a concluding invitation to readers.

## **An account of the special issue process**

We began the process for this special issue by circulating a call for proposals at the end of the 2021 ATTW virtual conference, soliciting manuscripts and reflections that would expand the work of the conference and help our community continue putting our conversations into action as ATTW continues expanding and sustaining its commitments to anti-racism. We invited scholars who participated in and/or attended the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference to reflect and build on the work that took place at the conference with an emphasis on continuing dialogue, reflection, and community-driven learning.

In addition to soliciting manuscripts from the keynotes and president’s address, we solicited two types of contributions from conference attendees and presenters: 1) reflections on the conference and conference sessions that attend to conversations about the theme of “language, access, and power in technical

communication” across presentations and sessions in order to build anti-racist praxis, and 2) manuscripts from sessions that share individual or collaborative research. In the call, we shared our commitment to following an anti-racist peer review process for the manuscripts that privileged open dialogue and collaboration among the editorial team, authors, and reviewers. We also shared our commitment to prioritizing graduate students, early career scholars, and scholars from marginalized positionalities for publication consideration.

To support contributors and the special issue’s commitments, we recognized, thanks to the leadership and example of Dr. Scott and DBLAC, the importance of making mentorship material—in other words, creating dedicated shared spaces for conversation and support, and being responsive and responsible to what contributors need and want. We solicited interested contributors through a brief survey (distributed to all ATTW conference attendees and presenters) through the summer of 2021 and, in the fall of 2021, we reviewed the responses and invited interested contributors to attend a series of DBLAC writing workshops for the special issue led by Khirsten, extending the work and principles of the DBLAC workshop that Khirsten led during the conference. As we shared in our invitations, these DBLAC workshops offered designated writing time where special issue contributors can work on their submissions and share ideas in alignment with our community-building goals for ATTW.

Khirsten structured the first DBLAC workshop conversation to begin by drawing on our memories of the conference and ideas for contributions, then sharing and responding to each other, as a grounding experience. Similar to the conference workshop, we had guided reflection and writing time in both a collaborative document and in our own notes and drafts. The editor team affirmed our commitment to supporting contributors through the process and asked participants to share their questions for us and

what they need and want from us through the process. Responding to what participants shared in the first workshop, we invited interested contributors (including those who were not able to join the first workshop) to join us for a second workshop the next month, which we framed as a shared virtual writing support in this community-centered writing space that will promote forward motion on our projects and reconnect us with the energies we shared during the virtual conference earlier this year. Once again, we had structured reflection and writing time, as well as time for contributors to share questions, ideas, and what kinds of mentoring and support would be helpful going forward.

In early 2022, we received manuscript submissions and conducted an initial round of review with editor feedback, prioritizing a dialogic and collaborative approach, and then in spring 2022, we had revised manuscripts reviewed by members of the ATTW Executive Committee following the *Reflections* journal review guidelines. After this round of feedback and revision, we prepared the special issue for publication, and we hope that the ongoing dialogue, reflection, and community-driven learning in these pages will continue as ATTW and our communities expand and sustain anti-racist practices.

## **An overview of the special issue**

This issue begins with the 2021 ATTW President's Welcome, written by Dr. Angela Haas, which set the tone for the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference. Next, we include articles from two keynote presentations at the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference. Both the original keynote addresses and these articles take up and model the ATTW conference theme of "language, access, and power in technical communication" and ATTW's ongoing commitments to expanding and sustaining anti-racist practice in and beyond our organization: specifically, in our research and community engagement practices, and in our institutional and professional

organization practices. Rachel Bloom-Pojar and Maria Barker's "Rethinking Access to Data and Tools for Community Partners in Research" draws from their work with a group of *promotores de salud* (health promoters) and the *promotores'* work with the 2020 Census to emphasize maintaining *confianza* (trust/confidence) over time with community members who participate in research projects. Bloom-Pojar and Barker offer strategies to guide researchers' engagement with communities and to plan for a "dissemination phase that leaves behind *herramientas* (tools) and does more than simply share information without regard for how community members may want to access and use that information in the future." Furthermore, in "A Counter-Narrative of Academic Job-seeking International Scholars: Keynote Address to ATTW, June 2021," Josephine Walwema draws on Black Feminist Care ethics and lived experience to interrogate the marginalization, inequality, and discrimination that international scholars face in higher education. Walwema offers strategies for building "resilience in the face of unrelenting restrictive policies that shape the daily lives of international scholars in the academy and jeopardizes their ability to succeed."

Following the two keynote articles, the special issue presents three reflections on attending sessions (including keynotes and the DBLAC Anti-Racist Writing Workshop), tweeting, and presenting at the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference. In "What's in a Tweet? A Graduate Student Rumination of the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference" Morgan Banville reflects on positionality and power relations by weaving narratives, tweets, relevant literature, and conference session summaries, and Banville offers a short guide for graduate students, especially first-generation students, to assist with navigating virtual conferences, as well as questions and ideas for scholars/instructors in positions of privilege to support graduate students. Soyeon Lee, in "Languages, Infrastructures, and Ecologies: Toward Rematerializing Activisms," reflects on conference keynote and panel sessions through a social justice

lens, tracing the intersections of language, access, material ecologies, and social infrastructures, and Lee offers ethical pragmatism, defined as “practical approaches grounded in each community’s history, culture, and sociomaterial conditions,” as an actionable takeaway. Finally, in “Encouraging Student Advocacy in Social Justice Classrooms,” Xiaobo Wang, Chalice Randazzo, and Tharon Howard reflect on their experience as co-panelists who had not shared ideas before the conference but who noticed connections across their approaches to social justice pedagogies, even as those approaches also come from different positionalities, and they share social justice pedagogy takeaways for readers that include specific approaches to course structures and daily interactions as well as artifacts (including bibliographies and illustrations).

The final section of the special issue presents seven articles that share research extending from 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference presentations, taking up the conference theme of “language, access, and power in technical communication” across sites of research, teaching, and practice. In “Scalar Transactions and Ethical Actions in TPC,” Kerry Banazek, Rabiatu Mohammed, Kellie Sharp-Hoskins, Kavita Surya, and Akram Zouaoui theorize scalar ethics as they materialize in particular contexts and events in TPC, and by sharing multivocal, multi-positional cases that address international student enrollment, matriculation, and retention in TPC programs and pedagogy, they illustrate how their concept can help readers “stay attuned to the particularities of embodied experiences as we theorize with unwieldy complex systems.” Relatedly, in “Building an Infrastructural Praxis: Understanding Twitter’s Embeddedness in the U.S.-Mexico Border,” Chris Lindgren and Maggie Fernandez take a mixed-methods case study approach to analyze another complex system: Twitter hashtag activist movements that responded to border wall plans and the zero-tolerance policy separating asylum-seeking im/migrant children from their families. Lindgren and Fernandez model and

call for more TPC research agendas that “learn from social activist networks, so the field can understand its role in shaping the broader media infrastructure.” Dina Lopez also examines media infrastructures, specifically journalism and reports from Puerto Rico, in “‘We Were Cut Off From the Rest of the World . . . And From Each Other’: Advocating for the ‘Whos’ After Hurricane María,” offering a critique of how imperialism infused the U.S. government’s approach to disaster preparation and recovery, and highlighting, in contrast, Puerto Rican residents’ resilient and tactical technical communication strategies that “enact post-Hurricane María political and social changes on the island.”

Next, Stephen Quigley, Samantha Whelpley, Esther Lui, and Joseph Flot examine and enact a critical pedagogical approach to documentation architecture in “Writing Infrastructures: GitHub in the Technical and Professional Communications Classroom.” by offering a critical orientation to GitHub, a project hosting platform and Git-based version control system for developing and managing software and documentation online, followed by narratives of student projects with GitHub and the co-authors’ workshop tools for implementing GitHub in the classroom. Also enacting a critical orientation to documentation, Anisur Rahman models a translanguaging approach to product documentation in “Wikis as ‘Third Space’—Diversifying ‘Access’ for Technical Communication.” Rahman shares and models the process of building a wiki site for a smart Bluetooth speaker, using Bangla and English simultaneously and manifesting transcultural communication values and practices not only in the words but also in the design of the site itself, and Rahman calls for further work highlighting “the dynamic and transformative nature of languaging” in technical communication. In “Extracted and Conflated Foci for Evaluative Information in the UN Displacement of Small-Scale Fishers,” David Robledo offers an analysis and critique of how evidence is used in marine biodiversity policy documents, including the UN’s Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework.

Robledo focuses on two rhetorical moves—extraction and conflation—that result in less effective, less representative, and potentially exploitative outcomes for ecologies and food systems, and Robledo offers correctives for less risky, more ethical communication and practice in policy documents. And finally, in “From Awareness to Advocacy: Using Intimate Partner Violence Awareness Campaigns to Teach User Advocacy and Empathy in a Trauma-Informed Technical Communication Course,” Lindsay Steiner, Bryan Kopp, and Kate Parker describe a trauma-informed, coalitional approach to engaging with intimate partner violence (IPV) awareness campaigns in undergraduate technical communication pedagogy. Steiner, Kopp, and Parker offer their lesson study structure, including preparatory material for students, trauma-informed teaching strategies, and reflections on the lesson that can serve as “a heuristic for instructors to use as they implement and reflect on trauma-informed pedagogy in their own classes.”

## **An overview of the special issue**

If you attended the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference, we hope the articles included in this special issue demonstrate how we worked in community to extend and build conversations beyond the conference. Having a space for reflection and dialogue allowed conference presentations to expand, collaborations to grow, and new research trajectories to be established. If you didn't get a chance to attend the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference, or if you're unfamiliar with ATTW, we hope these articles provide some insight into the community-driven work happening within this organization that aligns so directly with the mission of Reflections journal. We're grateful to all who supported the building of this special issue and of the many relationships encompassed within.

To conclude, we reflect on words from queer Black womanist organizer adrienne marie brown (2017), who says:

“The crisis is everywhere, massive massive massive. And we are small. But emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns, that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (3).

Like we did at the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference opening session, we share brown’s (2017) words to help you reflect on the world you envision, on the healing that we’re undergoing individually and collectively during an incredibly difficult time, and on the responsibility that we all have to each other as we set our intentions for a productive shared space any time we are in a meeting, gathering, or conference space.

## References

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## About the Authors

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