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Social Justice, Diversity and the Arts: Giving Voice to Diverse and Unexpected Groups

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Today, I had the job of evaluating a candidate who will lead the institution where I teach in diversity issues. She spoke forcefully about how diversity is seen in the classroom, but not necessarily in the cafeteria. The stubborn re-segregation of people into groups of people who “look like” themselves has resisted many attempts for a truly inclusive diversity (Hurtado, 2010). Social justice is the poorer for this failed attempt.

Many have questioned whether our institutions – of education, of commerce, of the arts - are truly capable of being socially just (Norton, 2015).

At the same moment that diversity has become a watchword, it has come to be a more inclusive term itself. For years, “diversity” meant primarily racial diversity. Gender diversity, diversity of ableness, of age, of ethnicity, of viewpoint – these utterly valid aspects of diversity were often afterthoughts (Williams, 2013). But in recent years, “afterthought-of” groups have become more insistent in their desire to be part of the national conversation and yes, the artistic conversation (Williams, 2013).

A close friend of mine has spent most of her adult life being involved in what she calls access-based theater. She concentrates on the inclusivity of people who are differently abled and she provides theatrical opportunities for them. But she doesn’t stop there. She actively and consistently insists that her casts be diverse, including not just persons with disabilities, but also persons without, and including people of different racial heritage and of course, gender.

This issue of the *Creative Strand* of Ubiquity is dedicated to non-traditional notions of diversity, and how this is interpreted with respect to creativity. Recently, the staggering drop in price in the technological affordances of video and audio has meant that literally anyone – anyone from any group – can create works of moving and still pictorial art of impressive accomplishment (Anderson, 2003). And art itself has been diversifying; some “serious” artists

are taking their cues from the growth of mass art and popular art, and repurposing clothing, furniture and high-tech tools to achieve surprising results.

In this issue, Olena M. Marshall crafts a scenography of the myth of Chiron and Achilles, with background artwork and toys borrowed from her children. These are photographed in tantone by her, and create a humorous, yet powerful modern evocation of elements of Greek mythology.

In “Hospice at Home,” by Renée Schatteman, a young man never completely at peace with himself must struggle with cancer and its inevitable progress on his body, as he is surrounded by his family.

In our video piece in this issue, Randy Johner and a group of differently abled students discuss what inclusivity has been, is now, and could be in the future, in a sharply observed, darkly humorous and poetically conceived video piece.

In the wake of the Parkland shooting, we are as a nation struggling with the twin specters of mental illness and eight million assault weapons and what to do about each. And who is leading the charge and forcing change? Another diverse group that hasn’t been heard from before – teenage school kids.

In art as in politics, we must listen, mingle with those who don’t look like us and...change.

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Author Bio: J. Patrick McGrail is Associate Professor of Communication at Jacksonville State University. He teaches media literacy, television news and video production. Prior to his career in academia, McGrail worked in television and radio as an actor and director. He also has a keen interest in poetry and music production, and he holds a number of musical copyrights himself.