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Editorial

The Perils of a Politics of Neutrality

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Your silence will not protect you. – Audre Lorde

As a caring profession, nursing enjoys a great deal of public trust, positive regard, and maternal affection. We relish this good will as a profession, even as it might bear scrutinizing from whom and whence it came. This public trust, this good will is extremely useful politically and also serves as a technique of discipline, pointing to the politically-charged character of nursing. And so it is confounding to me, a nurse, a philosopher, an academic, a provocateur, an educator, a dreamer, a citizen of the world, a parent, a care-receiver that nurses and nursing should choose neutrality. Yet so often, we and it does. This special issue was intended to explore the politics of nursing, specifically interrogating the risks of remaining silent or neutral in the context of larger political and social upheaval. From nurses being mobilized as victimized heroes in pandemic times to nursing organizations deferring engagement with critiques of capitalism, militarism, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, and nationalism, with this call we strive to make visible the stakes of politics in nursing. In particular, I was and remain particularly interested in making visible the politics of neutrality *as* a politics with implicit and explicit consequences. I dreamed up this call in late 2024 when it became apparent that the globe, perhaps even the universe, would have to gear up to face the chaos and criminality of another Trump administration while it was also sorting through the ongoing shambles of genocide in Gaza and the ensuing authoritarian responses to protests that reverberated across the United States (Mohammad, 2024). I am mindful here of my own positionality as a US citizen, which focuses my own analysis of and priorities for politics in important ways while also recognizing the international tangles created by US policy.

In the time that has elapsed since this call was issued and the composition of this commentary– just nine short months, eight of which have been entangled with an administration with global designs on destabilization, disruption, and destitution of the very institutions that make life and care possible for so many of us–so much has happened. Ensconced in the 8th month of a second Trump administration, isolationist tariffs push us toward global economic trouble (Alderman, 2025) while the destitution of higher education and its research apparatus present existential threat to the entire enterprise. This is a reality that has global implications given that the United States National Institute for Health is the world's largest funder of biomedical research (Kozlov, 2025), even as it opens up possibilities for shifting the international order of things as students once bound for institutions in the United States choose other destinations for their

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studies including Canada as well as locales in Europe and Asia (Fieldhouse, 2025). Perhaps this intellectual deflation of the United States is overdue and will permit a global plurality that was previously stifled by American arrogance. And this of course is a good thing, even as it is difficult to persist inside the slow collapse of higher education. Add to this morass threats to reproductive health, LGBTQ rights, social safety nets, compulsory education, infrastructure, even the day-to-day operations of the federal government and it is hard to see a way through.

Returning to the concept of neutrality, it is impossible for me to even understand what neutrality might look like in the face of such a political landscape. Neutrality is a slippery concept, sometimes supposed to be a foundational assumption afforded to all, as in liberal political conceptions of neutrality, a sort of necessary precondition for full citizenship (Pierik & Van der Burg, 2014). Scientists might link neutrality to objectivity, suggesting that pure science is somehow distorted by something as base and venal as politics (Harding, 1992). But this neutrality can be diffracted in different ways: exclusive neutrality mobilizes a sort of disregard for the interpersonal difference in favor of approaches to government should not do while inclusive neutrality makes space for cultural, ethnic, and religious difference (Pierik & Van der Burg, 2014). In the sciences, the politics of white cisheteropatriarchy are so normalized as to be institutionalized, doing the work of actually structuring knowledge, ethics, reality, and, of course, neutrality (Harding, 1992). Neutrality is never neutral precisely because it is rooted in the institutions and structures that already exist, already hold power, already structure reality. Insisting on neutrality, whether viewpoint or otherwise, is a de facto deference to the status quo, which is never neutral. The same impulse that demands a politics of neutrality affords every perspective, every point of view, every fringe belief the same legitimacy and substance. It reduces every issue or concern down to a disagreement over *ideas*, which may be the case for folks occupying dominant positions - and it is very much not the case for those who work the margins.

My end game with this call, with my paper in it, with my body of scholarship, with my work in the world, is to invite folks to leave behind pretty, high-minded words and instead do the work of making those words true. This was the aim of my paper in this issue, “Our Silence Will Not Protect Us,” mobilizing the critiques of Audre Lorde (2012) in a call to imagination, reckoning, and action. It was also the aim of “We Have Never Been Nurses” (2020) a paper I wrote with colleagues Jane Hopkins Walsh and Brandon Blaine Brown, a paper I come back to again and again like a talisman to center and focus and remind me of what is at stake. What it takes to actually nurse. And it is clear to me that the stakes are incredibly high - so high that we cannot, as Audre Lorde teaches us, afford to remain silent, to let this moment go by and the next and the next without comment, without action. Not for me, not for nurses and nursing. Our moment requires engagement, passion, vision - none of which are possible without clear philosophical and ethical commitments to making care that then translates into action. Political action. The imperative for nursing to engage politically - now and always.

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