

# 'Race, Gender and Justice': New Technologies and Student Empowerment

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## Introduction: Content and Contexts for Interrogating "Justice"

As educators at an urban college noted for its commitment to diversity and multiculturalism in curriculum, faculty, and student

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**Field(s):** American literature, African  
American Studies. Religious, studies,  
Womens Studies/Gender Studies,  
Cultural Studies.

**Course:**  
CSP2: Race, Gender, and Justice

**Context:**  
Colloquium in the Cultural Studies  
program for first-year students.  
Course serves Occidental's commit-  
ment to making multicultural issues  
central to its mission. Occidental is a  
private co-educational liberal arts  
institution with an enrollment of  
1,550 students. Intentions: Teach  
about issues of culture, difference,  
and power by fully integrating  
Internet technologies; to help stu-  
dents be more critical about the ways  
they might intervene in multiple loca-  
tions of knowledge-production,  
including, but not limited to, online  
areas.

body, we are aware that wide dif-  
ferences in access to new tech-  
nologies threaten to exacerbate  
existing social inequities. We are  
committed to teaching students  
to think deeply and critically  
about how race, gender, sexuali-  
ty, class, and cultural differences  
create varied experiences in rela-  
tion to justice. Rather than sim-  
ply teaching skills, we seek to  
fully integrate Internet technolo-  
gies with course content. As edu-  
cators and activists, we are com-  
mitted to effecting change in a  
world in which information tech-  
nology plays an increasing role.  
Therefore, we believe that we  
must adopt new pedagogical  
tools that enable students to be  
conscious of their own roles in  
perpetuating or changing social  
inequalities as they participate in  
knowledge productions that  
shape our world.

With these thoughts about rela-

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tionships between education and new technologies in mind, in Fall 1997, we taught "Race, Gender and Justice" (RGJ), the first colloquium in the Cultural Studies Program for first-year students at Occidental College to teach about issues of culture, difference, and power while fully integrating Internet technologies with course content. The course focused on transforming students' understandings and analyses about justice by raising issues of difference and power that shape their perceptions from varying social positions in the U.S. By using Internet technologies to animate engagement with ideas about justice, students became more critical about the ways they might intervene in multiple locations of knowledge-production, including, but not limited to, online arenas where issues of power and access are often effaced.

Occidental College's commitment to making multicultural issues central to its mission opens up possibilities for addressing issues of difference and power at many different levels. Located in multi-ethnic Los Angeles, this small, private, liberal arts college is currently ranked #1 in *U.S. News and World Report's* diversity category for liberal arts colleges. The Cultural Studies Program, required for all first-year students, is designed to teach writing and critical analysis—necessary for successful academic accomplishment—in interdisciplinary team-taught courses, and to develop these courses in the context of Occidental's mission. By housing RGJ in a central academic program for incoming students, we were able to immerse one-quarter of the incoming class in progressive ideas about the construction of difference in contemporary society while also addressing concerns about the "digital divide."

As many other observers have noted, the wide variance in access to new technologies and what the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute in Southern California has called "information barrios" raises new challenges for educational equality. In 1993, Census Bureau statistics showed that only 13 percent of African-American youth and 12.1 percent of Latino youth had access to a computer, compared to 35.8 percent of white youth. In 1994, just three years before the development of this course, surveys indicated a mere 5 percent of Internet users were women. Survey data from October 1998 shows that this disparity still exists; there is a 62%-38% differential between male and female Internet users. Of particular concern to us as teachers was the disparity in access for students. In 1997, 73 percent of white students owned personal computers, while only 32 percent of Blacks did, says *Science* magazine. The latest available figures confirm this trend: there is a twenty percentage point differential between access to computers for these two student

groups. For low-income communities, K-12 schools promise to be the on-ramp to the information highway, yet according to a U.S. Department of Education study, only 20 percent of teachers in the United States say they regularly use *any* communication tool, including the Internet, for teaching.

By using Internet technologies to help frame the content of the class, we were able to address our concerns about the digital divide while resisting the trend to separate technological skills from course content. We designed assignments that had multiple purposes: 1) to strengthen writing and thinking about “justice” through interactions with their student colleagues’ varying perspectives online; 2) to expose them to resources and information not covered in course materials; and 3) to develop Internet skills such as WWW publishing, computer-mediated communication (forum pages), and Web searching. This orientation toward issues of technology, teaching and learning set the context in which RGJ students learned to engage with ideas about “Justice.”

#### **Positionality and Knowledge: Reconstructing Race, Gender and Justice**

The specific content of “Race, Gender and Justice” explored legal, cultural and theoretical issues and contexts that affect how different people and communities conceptualize justice in the United States. We began the course by examining essays by authors who explicitly considered their own situated identities and who also challenged the idea that the meaning of “justice” impacts everyone equally. Writers like Daniel Wideman, Cherrie Moraga, Richard Rodriguez, Chandra Mohanty, Sarah Pettit, Richard Goldstein, Haunani-Kay Trask, Patricia Williams and Audre Lorde all interrogate assumptions about identity, community, language, nation and sexuality. They also raise questions about whose stories form narratives of justice and how these are related to complex meanings of “America.” In their first paper, students wrote about the ways that personal background and social contexts influence how people think about justice. They had learned that identities are mobile, complex and compound. Like the writers whose essays they had read, who they “are” depends on the context in which they find themselves at a given moment; identity is situational rather than static. We asked them to write a 3-5 page essay that analyzed the “multiple positionalities” that informed the writings of two of the authors assigned in this section. The students considered the themes and questions we had discussed in class:

“language/intimacy,” “geography/history/memory,” and “invisibility/hyper-visibility” to help analyze these authors’ multiple positionalities.

In this section, we also examined collective (and situated) “justice statements,” including the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments, the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party, the United States Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and the Platform of the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Bi and Gay Equal Rights. Considering these justice statements together challenges legitimizing narratives of “America” by demonstrating the multiple, contradictory articulations of justice from different social positions. In order to improve students’ Web-searching skills, as well as their ability to evaluate the information they find, we designed a WWW search assignment for which they were required to find each of the six justice statements. We also asked them to find one of these justice statements on two different Websites. They wrote a one-page analysis of how the type of Website (at an educational institution, government office, or personal page, for example), Website design, and surrounding information might give clues about the reliability of the information they found about the documents and about how visual and discursive framing affects their own notions of legitimacy and assumptions about authority and knowledge. In addition, students were asked to find an additional justice statement about an issue that resonated with them intellectually or personally. In class, we discussed how their chosen articulations of justice extended, subverted or parodied the more canonical or counter-canonical justice statements that we had assigned originally.

We then moved on to explore the racialized, gendered, and class-based struggle over the meaning of rights, nation and freedom during the post-Reconstruction Era and transitioned into examining contemporary issues of marriage and equality. Charles Chesnut’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) were our first texts. Questions of (national) inheritance and legal, contractual and cultural relationships provided the bridge to a subsequent set of texts and queries. Here we revisited notions of “equal protection under the law” and privacy that stem from interpretations of the Fourteenth Amendment. We used Supreme Court cases such as *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), and Hawaii’s *Baehr v. Lewin* (1993) to examine the legal policing of private spheres in the areas of mar-

riage, race, gender and sexuality.

Students developed WWW skills by publishing papers that analyzed texts from these two sections of the course, linked to information on external Websites, and made conceptual linkages to their colleagues' pages. For their first publishing assignment, students chose a "character type" (such as "black brute," "mammy," "Southern belle" "neutral white") common to both Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition* and Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. They wrote one page that analyzed Griffith's rearticulation of the type, linked it to another that examined how Chesnutt had subverted it, and a third page discussing an example of the use of that type that they have seen in their own lives. Borrowing from the Web assignments that Randy Bass of Georgetown University and the American Studies Association's Crossroads Project, developed we required students to read their peers' papers and then to revise their Web essays to include both references and links to other students' pages. This allowed students to recognize each other — and themselves — as producers of knowledge, rather than as passive consumers. We required them to read pages of students *not* in their seminar sections in order to expand the number of voices that they "heard" and discovered that students found their colleagues' writing so revealing that they often read more pages than we required. They became very thoughtful about their colleagues' analyses of the persistence of such "types" through which people continue to be perceived and were thus able to expand their understanding of the ongoing power of racialized and gendered scripts that shape lives in the contemporary U.S.

In the "Mammies in *Marrow*, Bucks in *Birth*" assignment, student Rosie Baldonado argues that in contrast to Griffith's use of the character of Gus to depict "black brutes" as "brutal and animalistic by nature," Chesnutt humanizes Josh, the Black male character in *The Marrow of Tradition* who turns to violent means of resistance. She writes that Josh is allowed to manifest human emotions that result from witnessing the brutal murder of his father; he "acts in a certain manner and interacts with others due to his positionality, shaped by his personality and the experiences that have informed his thoughts and ideals." In her contemporary example page, Baldonado analyzes the use of the "black brute" in debates in her hometown about the development of low-income housing. She writes that some community members assumed that the increased availability of low-income housing would bring predominantly Black newcomers, linking this to increased danger for the town. Yet she also complicates the analysis by critiquing the view of some

townspeople that

this savage-like behavior might be beneficial in other aspects of our town's life. Many argued that these new homes would bring in young teenage black brutes who could actually help the town by contributing their inborn, animalistic, athletic talents to boosting our public high school's failing sports program. (Baldonado)

This student provides a graphic illustration of the link between these elements of the character type by including a video clip of then-Chicago Bull Dennis Rodman's famous "head butt" of a referee during a game. This page also includes an analysis of three other students' contemporary examples that address filmic and media images that continue to shape perceptions of African American men.

For the WWW assignment for the section of the course on gender, sexuality, and marriage, we taught students how to download and republish information that they found in Web searches. Students were required to find a current news article (written within one year) about an issue that illustrated the construction of gender and/or sexuality. Because reading materials for this section of the course showed links between anti-miscegenation fervor as the basis for earlier bans on interracial marriage and homophobia as the foundation for the current ban on same-sex marriage, many students located very recent news articles on activism for the rights of gay men and lesbians to marry. By having students find time-sensitive documents in this section, we were able to emphasize the extreme timeliness of contestations around gender and sexuality which are present in contemporary society.

Our final assignment required students to create their own "epistemography," the term we coined to elucidate the connection between narrative, autobiography and epistemology. They were to do so by examining artist Barbara Krueger's "Love For Sale," a piece that poses questions about national scripts and about who is included and excluded from these scripts. In this piece, Krueger juxtaposes excerpts from the Pledge of Allegiance, the marriage vow, and the testamentary preface with probing questions that challenge the normalized nature of these national Ur-texts. We asked students to create a final paper/Website that linked to a page in which they used legal scholar Patricia Williams' work to contribute to their analysis of the themes embodied in the artwork. We concluded each section with different chapters of Williams' semi-

nal *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* to bring together the theoretical, legal, and personal considerations that characterized our interrogations through the course as a whole. How does Williams' discussion of rights, public and private contracts, positionality, narratives of justice, and other themes enable a critical analysis of the panels in Krueger's work, we asked? Students also created links to relevant, external Websites, such as specific newspaper or journal articles. They then constructed a link to a Webpage that discussed their own positionality in relationship to the themes of the artwork. In what ways do intersecting scripts of race, gender, and sexuality shape your reading of the work, we queried? We asked them to reconsider our opening reading in this last essay, to rethink Daniel Wideman's musing about "burials and forgotten territory and their role in the narratives of justice we tell ourselves and teach our children. How what we leave out is so much more crippling than what we leave in. The dimensions of absence and the territory of silence are the critical spaces in our collective American story." How might your reading be shaped by what you don't know, as well as what you do, we asked yet again? In what ways might Krueger's artwork help you in your challenges to scripts that shape your life?

Students used this assignment to explore different aspects of their situated identities and to analyze the intersecting national scripts we had examined in class and that Krueger's work challenges. Ken Davison's first page analyzes the power of the Pledge of Allegiance to serve as an "implied social contract" which binds the nation. Yet he notes that through mainstream acceptance of the notion that liberty and justice prevail, the Pledge is "metamorphosized from a theory to a representation of . . . America's current situation. The document becomes a mask to protect people from having to recognize the prejudiced practices which are prevalent in contemporary America." This student argues that this legitimizes a view of "America" while denying that some people have fewer rights than others, such as the right to marry. Thus the fact that "the manner in which people view the Pledge will be [a]ffected by their differing positionalities and their proximity to certain rights." After publishing a second page that critiques Patricia Williams' failure to acknowledge the multiplicity of positionalities and related scripts that shape people's lives, this student focuses his third page on his experiences as the mixed-race son of a Japanese immigrant mother. After noting the disjunctures between his "Japanese side" and the expectation to conform to scripts of success that are purported to be "white and male," he writes

As a country founded by immigrants, we are all full of differences. It is a horrible oversimplification to say that everyone's positionality is the same. By assimilating to a cultural norm, we are continuing the same idea which is purported by the symbolism of the Pledge of Allegiance, which promotes the idea that everything "American" is right. There is a great danger in accepting notions of American symbolism which face us all of the time. I realize now that by buying into the scripts of a unified nation that the Pledge of Allegiance promoted, I was helping to erase the important past and cultural differences that my mom brought from Japan when she immigrated. I was helping to prolong the continuation of the master narrative of America, through which cultural differences are looked down upon, instead of being accepted. (Davison)

In this way, Ken Davison, like other students, reconsiders the "Wideman Question" and uses storytelling and analysis to challenge the mythology of a unified "America."

A very different kind of student, one who had struggled academically and had had a difficult time adjusting to college during her first semester, turned in a highly original Webpaper that effectively used the visual possibilities of the Web to reflect on how we as a nation assign meaning to language. Though her writing is not as sophisticated as Davison's, her use of visual links to call attention to semiotics, the relationship between language and the meanings we assign to it, was particularly successful. For example, Wendy writes that the Pledge of Allegiance boasts that we are "one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." She goes on to comment this was "very **true** if you were a white **male** during the time the pledge was written. Everyone else who was living here [was] not included in the "all," for they, African-Americans, Native-Americans, and women were thought of as chattel, savages and subordinates." Wendy uses different fonts and colors to communicate the power inequities she questions in her paper. Green is the color she assigns hypertext links which are, of course, also underlined (as indicated in the above excerpt). Wendy deliberately makes "**male**" purple and larger than the other words in the sentence, for instance, as is "**true**" (which is green though not a link), a word she clearly wants her reader to question as a neutral concept that is larger than life in our received notion of American democracy. Wendy's links are purposefully shocking. When one

clicks on “white” an image of Adolph Hitler’s disembodied head appears on a black background with the linguistic marker HITLER in large letters at the foot of the photo. When one clicks on “male” the very same image of Hitler appears again. Wendy employs the same visual image as the signified for both “white” and “male,” words whose difference (as signifier) she has highlighted through her use of color and font; still, their shared referent reveals their connection. We use different words, this student implies, that nonetheless symbolize a similar relation to power. Additionally, the self-conscious linkage of meaning (the word “HITLER”) with symbol (the disembodied head) pronounced in the image that Wendy chose to include, itself underscores this student’s semiotic exploration. She furthers this visually-based analysis in the links she creates for “women” and “savage.” Clicking on “women” brings up a bright red flash on the screen that quickly fades to black as the phrase “we say: the future is not yours!” appears in bright red letters. If one waits for 60 seconds the screen fades out to an image of an enchained fist semi-circled by the word “RESIST!” That screen in turn fades out to the organization Refuse and Resist’s Webpage which proclaims “Free Mumia Abu-Jamal,” referring to the international movement to free a U.S. Political Prisoner who sits on death row. When one continues reading Wendy’s page, and clicks on “savages,” which in her sentence is semiotically attached to African and Native Americans, the White Aryan Resistance Hate Page comes up. Wendy purposefully scrambles the meanings we attach to language – calling the meaning of “resistance” into question, and reassigning the word savage to connect it to white male exclusionary power and the fascism that she has already aligned with the symbol of Hitler. Similarly, she connects the exclusion of women (“we say: the future is not yours”) to the resistance movements of African Americans and those who struggle against the power of a police state. This is accomplished in the signifying chain that begins with the link “women” and ends with “Refuse and Resist’s” Webpage, which itself displays the organization’s involvement to counter police brutality and to further reproductive rights. In this way, Wendy used the visual tool that writing on the web opens up to communicate a very sophisticated analysis that she might not have been able to express through a traditional paper, while also engaging her readers to become active participants in making as well as disrupting meaning.

One particularly successful set of exercises for the class as a whole combined large group interactions, student postings on a forum page, and the incorporation of newly gained insights into a

WWW writing assignment. In what we called the “Power Walk” or “Crossings” exercise, we brought students outside to a large open space and assembled them at one end. After instructing them to participate in silence, we read, one by one, a list of statements. Students were to “cross” to the other side of the space if the statement applied to them, pause to allow everyone to see who had crossed and who had not, and then to return to the originating side. Some of the statements included: “I have been pulled over by police for no apparent reason”; “Although English is my first language, I have been told that I ‘speak it so well’”; “I have been harassed because of my sex”; “I have been asked, ‘what are you?’” This exercise reinforced theoretical, historical and literary readings about constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class on a personal, physical and experiential level. After a large group discussion about the exercise, students were required to post reactions to our online forum before the next class. In the initial discussion immediately after the exercise, many students recuperated different experiences of “discrimination” into one generalized form. Some students responded to the exercise by saying that we are all alike because we have all experienced discrimination in our lives. For example, when asked if they had been harassed because of their sex, four men and nearly all of the women crossed. During the discussion, several students commented that because they saw some men cross, they saw that sexual harassment doesn’t just affect women. However, they then suggested that the men who did not cross failed to recognize times that they had been harassed. Several students concluded that therefore we all face discrimination similarly.

In order to counter these overgeneralizations about the nature of “oppression,” we were able to use the 100+ postings as an alternative text that could be analyzed thematically. By looking at postings that remarked on the difficulties of being public about specific aspects of their identities, we were able to talk about differences of power related to *particular* forms of difference. For example, we had students look for postings that talked about what was especially difficult to declare by becoming visible in the exercise. Students noticed that postings about being mixed racially and about sexuality mentioned the difficulty of being visible. In particular, students pointed out one posting in which the writer talked about *not* crossing when asked about being harassed for sexual orientation. This student wrote that although many people in class knew he was gay, he hadn’t been harassed because he had been in the closet. In that posting, the student wrote about the importance

of not hiding; he wanted to make it clear that this was not why he didn't cross. Several mixed-race students also posted messages about the difficulties of becoming visible because they had so often been made uncomfortable by others' uncertainty over "what they are." By discussing these postings that addressed discomfort over often unnamed differences, students were able to move beyond their earlier generalized comments about "discrimination." They were able to link their experiences, as highlighted in the exercise, to the more analytical discussions about the constructedness of race, gender, and other differences. These discussions were further enhanced by comments that appeared in students' subsequent paper/Websites. Students also integrated what they had learned in these activities into their final "epistemography" Web assignments.

### **New Technologies and Developing Empowered Students**

In "Race, Gender and Justice," Internet technologies clearly enhanced students' educational experience and enabled them to become more empowered thinkers, learners, and actors—not simply in the technological realm, but also in connection to contexts that create those conditions. By using the Internet, we fostered empowered learners and producers of knowledge who approached their own education with more active engagement. They tended to recognize themselves as potential agents of change in various situations: from refusing racism, homophobia, and sexism in their presence, to challenging methodological approaches and assumptions in academia that reinforce traditional power inequities, to more traditionally activist/organizing roles. Increasingly, students were able to see themselves in relation to complex worlds around them, as evidenced by the sophistication of their analyses on their online and "formal" writing assignments. Their Internet-based communications with each other via forum pages and Websites also increased their interactions with each other's ideas about difference and power in large and small group discussions. Situating concerns about the digital divide in the context of such active engagement on numerous levels enabled students to see themselves as social actors in contexts of racialized, gendered, class-based differential relations to power.

We have seen evidence for students' increased involvement with both ideas and activities in many different ways since the end of the class. In our departmental classes, we have seen former RGJ students do very high level work, delving into deeply theoretical texts that consider cultural analysis. These students have been among

the most active in class discussions. Many students commented that RGJ encouraged them to embrace the difficult process of thinking through epistemological assumptions. Students have told us that they can apply what they learned in RGJ “to just about anything.” In addition, RGJ alumni/ae have constituted a high proportion of organizers and participants in activist events around campus (such as an affirmative action teach-in and panels on U.S. colonization, capital punishment and police brutality). Former RGJ students are well-represented in student organizations. RGJ students of various religions (Muslims, Jews, Protestants and others) participated in organizing a protest of a movie that represents Arabs and Muslims as terrorists. Their protest had a distinctly educational focus: they handed out informational sheets on Islam and talked with people, rather than simply “protesting.” Enthusiasm for the course and student-generated pressure will continue to have an impact across the campus in curricular terms as well. Students left the course with the expectation that their other academic experiences would similarly integrate teaching and learning with technology and would include discussions of how race, gender and sexuality illuminate material taught in multiple disciplines.

Following up on the WWW component of the course, several students have come to our upper-division classes as “technology mentors” to assist us in teaching and supporting other students as they learn how to publish on the Web. Some are currently serving as Teaching Assistants in a smaller version of RGJ, teaching first-year students in a writing seminar how to integrate course ideas with their Web projects. These students are also developing discussion themes and questions for course materials, clearly illustrating their continued development as producers of knowledge. In addition, a large proportion of Student Technology Assistants (STAs) under a Mellon Technology program designed to enable faculty to integrate the Internet in teaching and scholarship are RGJ alumnae/i. One student who had not known how to publish on the Web before RGJ landed a job at the California Institute of Technology with his new skills. In these post-RGJ projects, diverse sets of our students contribute to shaping ideas, as well as the populations involved, with such work.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Relationships Between Technology, Teaching and Learning**

We believe that the success of “Race, Gender and Justice” comes, in part, from our refusal to focus on simply teaching skills

in order to address the specific problem of the digital divide. The technological component enriched student interaction with ideas, fostering deep, critical thinking, and the ability to learn from each other, the ability to see themselves and their colleagues as important sources of ideas and new knowledge. We hope that the high level of engagement we see after the course — not only with ideas, but with the wide variety of “justice issues” that concern them — will continue as they enter new worlds beyond college. Their empowerment means they will have the ability to continue to be actively involved with their communities on a more critical and conscious level. We believe that they will connect their newly discovered skills as producers of knowledge to ongoing engagement as social actors in their wider worlds.

We share our experiences with “Race, Gender and Justice” in order to offer just one example of the impact a course can have in a liberal arts setting when it is truly interdisciplinary and fully integrates teaching and learning with technology. As we plan to teach RGJ again in Fall 1999, we welcome the feedback of interested readers who have explored our course Website at <http://abacus.oxy.edu/rgj>. As public policy that considers issues of power, race and access is increasingly devalued, we are trying to re-direct our students’ attention to those very issues that we believe are central to a meaningful understanding of the rapidly changing world around us; our hope is that they will continue to challenge injustices of many kinds.

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