

(Dis)Embodied Difference in the Online Class: Vulnerability, Visibility, and Social Justice

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate critically the design and delivery of online course which address issues of race, culture, difference, or globalization. I use critical insights about how race functions in the online classroom to provide strategies for incorporating social justice into online curriculum in communication studies. I begin by summarizing key insights into the two general pedagogical issues of interest to this paper: critical intercultural communication studies and online course delivery. The first part of this essay addresses the advantages and possibilities associated with online delivery of such courses as intercultural communication. The second part teases out some of my misgivings concerning the viability and usefulness of online courses concerning communication and difference. Finally, I conclude by offering some strategies for designing antiracist and socially just classes in the online environment.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy; Race online; Intercultural communication; Antiracist pedagogy; Global justice

If learning is understood as something that happens mainly (or only) in the brain, or cognitively, then online learning is easy to imagine as a digital translation of face-to-face learning. However, when considering learning and knowledge as *embodied* experiences or phenomena, then the differences between face-to-face and online learning become more pronounced. Much current research and writing about online instruction is preoccupied with the asynchronous nature of online learning (Chen, Shang & Harris, 2006; Harris & Parrish, 2006; Suthers, Vatrappu, Medina, Joseph & Dwyer, 2008; Thorpe, McCormick, Kubiak & Carmichael, 2007). This research implicitly positions temporal concerns as the central problem for online education. In other words, as online educators attempt to develop courses and curricula that are as (or more) effective as traditional classrooms, the biggest stumbling block is often assumed to be the fact that students and instructors are never (or rarely) engaging the course material at the same time. Online teaching guides provide numerous suggestions for how to manage and make the most of the asynchronous nature of online courses, but few of these guides provide strategies for managing the disembodied nature of online education. This omission troubles me in a general sense because it perpetuates the Cartesian division between mind and body, but even more troubling is the way that ignoring bodies makes it difficult to engage critically with issues of culture, difference, and social justice.

In this paper, it is argued that concepts from critical intercultural communication studies can provide a foundation for thinking about online education as a “space of possibility” for critical interrogations of race and difference. Precisely because online education erases the question of bodies so effortlessly and pervasively, in this essay I argue that this “erasure” can provide a starting point for talking about and reworking our understanding of how raced, classed, gendered bodies learn, travel, and interact online. This essay extends the conversation started by [Valk \(2008\)](#) about the ways in which virtual environments are imbued with power relations, and does so by drawing from literatures in online pedagogy, critical whiteness studies, and critical intercultural communication studies.

Critical Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication studies is increasingly shaped by two intersecting conceptual themes, and I argue that fusing these two themes provides a foundation for building a social justice orientation to

intercultural communication. Drawing from cultural studies and critical theory, researchers (cf. Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama & Yep, 2002; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Mendoza, Halualani & Drzewiecka, 2002) have developed the emerging field of critical intercultural communication studies. A critical approach to intercultural communication highlights the power dynamics that structure and shape our experiences as “cultured” bodies. In other words, from a critical perspective, intercultural communication is not simply a benign moment of encounter between two different individuals, but is instead a contingent, dialectical, historically-shaped negotiation of (oftentimes competing) meaning systems. From this perspective, bodies are not the source of cultural meaning, but rather are infused with meaning through social, communicative practices. In addition to this critical perspective, intercultural communication is increasingly “globalized” as researchers (e.g., Collier, 1998; Shome & Hegde, 2002a) draw from postcolonial perspectives that highlight the historical and geopolitical influences that shape contemporary experiences of identity, difference, mobility, and encounter.

Fusing these two critical orientations provides a foundation for developing a pedagogy committed to global social justice. Communication researchers have increasingly focused on and articulated their commitment to social justice (Broome, Carey, De La Garza, Martin, & Morris, 2005; Lee, 2006; Rodriguez, 2006; Shome, 2006a), yet a clear theory or pedagogy of social justice has yet to be solidified. Instead, scholars argue that, broadly, a commitment to social justice compels research that privileges – and finds ways to make possible – connectedness in the service of progressive change. Similarly, social justice research and teaching in communication studies strives to find ways (for students and researchers) to critique unequal systems of oppression. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on online pedagogy particularly as it relates to intercultural communication courses and to provide strategies for incorporating questions of social justice in the online communication curriculum.

Online Course Delivery

As university budgets tighten, and student enrollment increases in many universities, online education is an attractive option for students, departments, and universities. At several universities where I have taught, the online format has unofficially been celebrated as a more profitable option because of the reduced “overhead” costs associated with the course delivery, and departments are encouraged to add much-needed course sections as online options. But perhaps more important than cost, online education has been celebrated by many because of its potential to provide educational opportunities to populations who are unable to attend traditional face-to-face classes for financial, geographical, physical, or family reasons. As technological and pedagogical innovations continue to develop, some researchers have also argued that the online experience can be more rewarding for certain students than a traditional face-to-face classroom environment. As Bender (2003) explains, “online discussion can reach beyond the temporal and spatial constraints of the campus class, and as a result can often add a richer and deeper perspective [than is possible in traditional classes] as students respond when they are informed and inspired” (p. xvi).

Bender (2003) offers another potential strength of the online course format that is of particular relevance to this paper when she argues that the online course space can soothe or counter gender- and race-based inequities in education. She explains that a female student who was generally quiet in the “real world,” “found that online she could respond more frequently as she had a chance to think things through and not be interrupted when she was ready to express herself” (p. 9). Similarly, Bender argues that the normative privilege that whiteness accords in the classroom may also be diffused in the online environment:

My experience, and the experience of many of my colleagues, is that whereas in the campus class, white middle class male students might have the most to say, and might even interrupt a female or minority student, such a thing is not possible online. There can be no interruptions because the class that exists in cyberspace is equally available to all class participants at all times, nor is the online instructor able to favor specific students by looking primarily in their direction. (p. 11)

While the idea of an online post-gender and post-race utopia may be attractive on one level, in this essay I will also consider some of the pitfalls of such thinking, particularly of perpetuating an ideology of “color-blindness” in the online environment. The constitution of the online classroom as a color-blind space free of raced and sexed bodies is one which deserves greater reflection by examining the implications of “disembodying” students and instructors in the virtual classroom, within the context of classes about race, gender, and globalization.

Benefits and Possibilities

Although Bender's optimism about the bodyless space of possibility provided by the online classroom is problematic, I wish to begin this discussion by considering some of the potential pedagogical advantages that arise from a virtual space of interaction. One of the clear advantages of online education for classes about difference and diversity is that the online classroom has the potential to include a more diverse range of students than is possible in many traditional classes. Research has indicated that online education has broadened access to education, and made it possible for people who would normally not be able to join traditional classrooms to participate in online courses (Larwood, 2005; Smith & Ayers, 2006). Because of the significant revenue generated by online classes, *in addition to* on-campus tuition, many universities have aggressively marketed their online programs to "non-traditional," "part-time" students who, in many cases, do not live in the geographic area in which the university itself is located. The benefit of such marketing is that online classes may begin to include a more diverse student body than in-person classes. As Giancola, Munz and Trares (2008) explain, the number of non-traditional students in higher education is growing, and the trends include "more females, part-time students, first-generation students, working adults, and students with one or more dependents" (p. 215). Thus, in classes that focus on issues of difference, it can be a marked advantage for students to be able to engage in discussions with "others" with whom in everyday, face-to-face circumstances they have little opportunity to interact. Yet, there is a danger in over-celebrating this point as it reinforces a construction of the classroom space as "normal" and the automatic marking of certain students as "others" within this space. The question that arises, then, is, to what extent is such marking diminished or destabilized in the "bodyless" environment of the online course?

Yep (2007) describes a common student tendency to imagine that certain professors have "an agenda" about issues of diversity based on their visible gender or racial identities. So, as a woman teaching gender and communication, students may attribute a passion and "invested" perspective to me and presume that I am/will be "unfair" to men, as a result. Similarly, Yep explains how professors of color are negatively evaluated as being "angry" or "militant" about issues of race in the classroom in a way that white instructors teaching similar material are not perceived by students. In the online class, professors and students can choose (to a degree) when, if, and how to represent themselves. When students are not able to use visual cues to construct assumptions about their professor's racial, ethnic or cultural background, they may engage the material (initially) with fewer preconceived notions about the connections between critical questions about race and their professor's own racial, ethnic, and cultural trajectories. Indeed, critical intercultural communication studies increasingly strives to identify multiple identities and positionalities, in contrast to a fixed, stable (often nation-based) notion of culture. Perhaps in an online, "bodyless" environment, it might be easier to engage such issues without being confronted by the "reality" of bodies, upon which students (and teachers) have decades of experience "writing" and "coding" particular, fixed (often stereotyped) meanings and attributes.

Anderson (2010), however, points out that much can be inferred from students' and professors' names. In a study that examined students' stereotypes of professors, using only names as cues, "students tended to rate professors according to factors that interacted with professors' gender and ethnicity" (p. 469). Anderson's study asked students to rate identical syllabuses and to evaluate the hypothetical professors on dimensions including warmth, competence and difficulty. Interestingly, "even though their syllabuses were identical, the simple presence of a gender identifiable name influenced students' assumptions about the professor" (p. 469). This finding complicates the optimism that the online classroom can be a genderless or colorblind space of possibility for students (or professors).

Despite the persistence of stereotypes, the online classroom may provide a useful space within which to "unhinge" the ideological dimension of race and gender from bodies that are raced and sexed. Here I am drawing on Carrillo Rowe and Malhotra's (2007) notion of "unhinging" whiteness from white bodies, which they describe as a strategy which generates "an opening into new possibilities for antiracism and self-knowledge" (p. 272). They argue that as long as whiteness remains "hinged" to white bodies, the ideological effects of white privilege can not be effectively disrupted. The dangers of hinging whiteness to white bodies is an ongoing "centering" of whiteness rather than a recognition that "whiteness is a process that *we all* negotiate, whether we are white, brown, black, or some combination of the above" (p. 272). Similarly, to unhinge whiteness from white bodies helps to move (us) beyond "frozen" or "fixed" identities. To be sure, the online classroom is by no means an *automatic* site of "unhinging" politics. However, in concert with an antiracist curriculum, students might be able to reflect more creatively about how *everyone* can contribute to antiracist politics. In other words, the linkage of whiteness to white bodies

sometimes makes it easier for white students to feel disconnected from antiracist struggles which they perceive as a politics for “raced” bodies. To combine an active (conceptual and intellectual) project committed to “unhinging” whiteness from white bodies with antiracist consciousness in the online classroom may lay the groundwork for “a space of antiracist possibility that white people can occupy” (p. 293). In other words, because it may be harder to hinge a particular “problem” (such as racism or white privilege) to any specific body/ies within the classroom, this may provide the possibility for greater shared “ownership” of these problems, and of potential solutions.

Finally, the online format provides distinct possibilities for making a “global turn” in courses about culture and communication – especially those that address the complex dynamics of race, identity, privilege, and meaning in human communication. To attempt to make sense of the contemporary ideologies concerning identity or immigration or race *without* addressing the complicated global forces that have shaped and continue to shape our understanding of difference is to sell our students short and ignore the “big picture.” As Shome (2006b) explains, “our regimes of knowledge in the U.S., especially in today’s world, are ‘always already’ implicated in various global flows of violence and justice. Whether (and how) we choose to look beyond the U.S. (or not), our choices are already implicated in other geographies and histories that we cannot or care not to see” (p. 18).

One of the most powerful dimensions of globalization, from a critical intercultural communication perspective and with social justice in mind, is the notion that our lives are fundamentally interconnected with “others” around the world. The more that we pay attention to global forces, the more we are compelled to recognize how our cultural meanings, our material privileges, and our political context(s) are shaped and connected to such features in other communities and countries around the world. While professors can introduce this notion of interconnectedness in face-to-face classes, online classroom technology provides an opportunity for integrating these connections into the online space in a very seamless way.

For example, online courses can be structured to include a cross-university project where students can collaborate with students in another university (in another part of the world). Students could be tasked with designing solutions to a particular global problem or issue, and could work together to implement solutions in multiple communities. Global justice activism is heavily shaped by the use (and appropriation) of new technologies, and students in an online class could connect with local and global activists (through the internet) in order to participate in, observe, or contribute to global activities, such as the World Social Forum or Focus the Nation. Similarly, even in classes where a cross-university collaboration is not possible, the online course format means that instructors can “hyperlink” to various websites and “virtual locations” on the World Wide Web. Assignments and discussions that require students to “travel” to these locations, gather information/observe, and then return to make sense of this information with other classmates actually helps to rework the notion of what knowledge looks like in an era of globalization, and instructors could use the notion of “hyperlinked” travel to raise critical questions about the ideological dimensions of tourism, research, and the consumption of “otherness.”

Disadvantages and Lacunae

The first issue that I want to address is one which has been raised elsewhere in critiques of online education. Some have argued that the online delivery of classes and degrees may perpetuate the consumerist trend in higher education (Maeroff & Zemsky, 2007; Nobel, 2002). There are two main problems associated with the consumerist trend in higher education. First, a singular focus on the bottom line to the exclusion of other components threatens the civic and intellectual viability of universities. Second, to equate education with consumerism reinforces Western individualism and cultural solipsism. Rather than address each point separately, it is useful to consider the conflation of commodification with the erasure of difference and diversity within the online education environment.

Teaching tips and techniques for online instruction invariably counsel instructors to act in ways that are “supportive and encouraging, giving ample feedback, being a good role model, being appropriately informal, and eliciting discussion” (Bender, 2003, p. 11). Most researchers of online education agree that instructors should strive to create a climate that is welcoming, supportive, and non-threatening. So, for example, Bender (2003) suggests that in online classes, “feedback must be encouraging so that it stresses the positive of the student’s achievement before mentioning suggestions for improvement” (p. 29). While I would agree with Bender that it is important to create a supportive, safe climate within any classroom whether online or in person, I worry that online pedagogy strives more heavily for “student satisfaction” than critical awareness or intellectual development. This is especially troubling for those who

are interested in teaching about questions of identity and culture from a critical perspective, and to those who strive to support social justice through curricula and pedagogy. To ask students to adopt or consider perspectives which are critical of contemporary norms or practices almost certainly will require a degree of discomfort, if not outright dissatisfaction, as students are required to confront their own complicity within systems of oppression. This is difficult to do in any classroom, but I have found that in a traditional classroom, I can monitor student (nonverbal) feedback, I can “turn up the heat” when students appear to be ready, I can step back and let students take the floor and engage the issues together, and I can constantly and personally reinforce my own “stake” and complicity with these issues. The role of a facilitator in the face-to-face classroom is very much one which requires vigilance, attention to verbal and nonverbal feedback, and a willingness to jump in when necessary as well as to stay on the sidelines at other times.

While consumerist trends may constrain professors and courses who strive to encourage students to reflect deeply and sometimes uncomfortably on their own positions and privileges, there are other elements of online pedagogy that may provide a counter to these trends. For example, the use of threaded discussions can create a dialogue that allows for extended consideration of an idea, rather than being limited to the one-hour (or three-hour) class time. Especially for complex, complicated, or personally challenging issues, the ability to reflect, to read peer ideas without the pressure of having to respond immediately, and to return to an issue/discussion again and again can lead to a deep, dialogic engagement with course material. Rizopoulos and McCarthy (2009) demonstrated that online threaded discussions can help in the “development of higher level thinking skills” (p. 376). Peer feedback has similarly been shown to be an effective pedagogical strategy in online (and on-ground) courses (Lin & Chien, 2009).

But even with these sites of possibility, any attempts to encourage or to celebrate moments of discomfort run up against prevailing commitments to create an “enjoyable” learning space and experience. I would argue that this “feel good” aspect of online education is further constituted and perpetuated by other online activities in which students participate. In particular, students who come from what is increasingly described as the “Look at Me” generation, see the internet as an ideal place to celebrate one’s individuality, and from a narcissistic perspective, one’s worth, appeal and attractiveness (I am thinking in particular about such social networking sites as [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)). Students who are used to using the internet in order to celebrate themselves, their activities, and their lifestyle may find it difficult to reconcile the “climate” of these activities with the more challenging (and non-self-celebratory) climate of the online critical intercultural class. Indeed, online courses threaten to increase student solipsism when they rely too heavily on such strategies as described by Bender: “the optimal way to convey to students that they are noticed is for the instructor to mention each by name when acknowledging a response. . . . It is also beneficial to make each student feel special in some way” (2003, p. 90). Particularly since online courses are growing in popularity, one instructor alone cannot presume to change this overall focus and therefore the expectations of students who enroll in these classes. In other words, a lone critical class in a sea of commodified, “feel-good” offerings may not be able to effectively engage students in the necessary way in order to achieve the instructor’s educational and political goals.

One final danger or incompatibility associated with the commodified and “look-at-me” aspects of online education include the perpetuation of Western cultural values within the classroom. The impulse to make each student feel special, or to carefully mention each student by their first name comes from a Western tradition of individualism which presumes that self-actualization is in fact something that students achieve individually. Other cultural perspectives, however, privilege and value different notions of the self and the self’s relation to others. While it is not common for classrooms within the United States to construct non-Western climates or norms, there are some attempts, particularly within fields such as intercultural communication, to conduct classes in a more diverse way. The ability for instructors to move away from Western-centric instructional styles is always countered by institutional pressures and norms. As mentioned above, online pedagogy and development have not addressed questions of cultural or racial difference in any significant way, and as a result, the adoption of a Western normative learning environment has occurred in a seamless and uncritical way. To work against this trend will be very difficult for instructors who are interested in developing and supporting alternative ways of relating within the classroom.

One such alternative classroom norm that is centrally connected to the goals of critical intercultural communication is that of student *and* instructor vulnerability and openness. In order to account for and critically interrogate systems which privilege and disadvantage people based on their bodily appearance

(among other markers), students and instructors must be prepared to make themselves vulnerable by opening ourselves (and especially our unearned privileges) up to critique. Vulnerability, as a pedagogical strategy or value receives no mention in the online education literature, and I argue that one reason for this blind spot is because of the corporeal nature of vulnerability. Yep (2007) argues that in order to destabilize whiteness, students' feelings of vulnerability are a good place to begin an "engagement with whiteness" (p. 101). To ask students to make themselves vulnerable is to ask a great deal, and certainly instructors will want to construct a classroom climate similar to those celebrated in the online literature: supportive and encouraging. Yet, there is another piece required here, and this is the opportunity and the gentle requirement that students *make themselves visible*. Yep insists that whiteness functions both in terms of erasure (of otherness and difference) and silence: "whiteness is the invisible standard with which 'others' are judged and declared to deviate" (p. 89). It is not the case that students can *only* make themselves visible in a face-to-face context, but with the current norms associated with self-representation on the internet, there are significant hurdles that need to be overcome in order to critically facilitate and make possible "visibility" on the "bodyless" online classroom.

Bender (2003) speculates that students in an online class may have an advantage over students in a traditional classroom because they can choose when and how to represent themselves, particularly their race, culture, or ethnicity, to their classmates and instructor. In my online classes, I never explicitly ask students to post a picture of themselves or to account for their racial, class, or national background, especially in the context of course introductions. Yet as Anderson (2010) points out, even names without any photographs can lead students (and presumably professors) to employ stereotypes. Even when students post photographs, there are questions about the accurateness or truth of these postings. As has been seen on social networking sites such as [Facebook](#) or video sites such as [Youtube](#), members often "misrepresent" themselves for a variety of reasons, and it would not be unreasonable to image that these trends may carry over into the online class.

Although there is little research that looks specifically at the connection between race, representation and the online class environment, there is some interesting research about racial passing in online chat spaces. Nakamura (2005) conducted an analysis of members' avatar choices in a graphic chat space run by "NetNoir," a "minority-run website" (p. 522). The author makes the case that "the celebration of the Internet as a democratic, 'raceless' place needs to be interrogated, both to put pressure on the assumption that race is something that *ought* to be left behind, . . . and to examine the prevalence of racial representation in this supposedly unraced form of social and cultural interactions" (p. 521). Her findings are fascinating, and she identifies multiple forms of "passing" online, including minority bodies passing as white as well as white (mostly) men passing as "others," a practice she describes as "identity tourism." The author participated in this chat space, and during her first foray into the fantasy world she was originally assigned the "body and face of a young black woman, with fairly dark skin, African features, and short dark hair" (p. 528). This, it turned out, was the "default" avatar, and as she spent time in the chat space she discovered that the only members who had darkish skin were new members who had yet to "trade up" (p. 529). One of the first members with whom she interacted offered her a "gift" of a white head. This member then offered to help the author acquire body spray so that her body color would match her new head. As the author explains, throughout this very helpful and well-intentioned "exchange, no mention of race was made" (p. 528). After spending time in this graphic chat room, Nakamura concludes that "racist ideology operates within role-playing spaces on the Net, creating a social matrix that is both 'default white' and peopled with phantasmatic versions of otherness" (p. 532).

Although the online classroom is clearly a different space than role-playing chat rooms, Nakamura's findings concerning the intersection of "colorblindness" and "othering" practices raise troubling questions for online intercultural communication classes. Specifically, it is reasonable to imagine that students would share Bender's (2003) notion that not being able to perceive difference within a classroom might "equal the playing field," so to speak. Indeed, without explicitly addressing and making visible both whiteness and racism within the online classroom, online educators risk perpetuating the "universalizing voice that forcefully – often silently and sometimes violently – demarcates and controls the production and dissemination of knowledge" (Yep, 2007, p. 89). Critical intercultural communication scholars have warned of the oppressive effects of a discourse of "color-blindness," and online instructors need to seriously heed this warning and consider ways in which to disrupt its position and power within communication studies and online pedagogy.

Conclusions: Social Justice in the Online Class

Above I have described both advantages and disadvantages to teaching critical intercultural communication online. Perhaps the biggest problem associated with online education is its capacity to perpetuate a Westernized, commodified version of education, *and of difference*. Those of us who teach online classes, and the administrations who continue to celebrate and expand these programs need to urgently address the ways in which online delivery of education erodes the political and critical value of education. Indeed, if, as critical educators we subscribe to bell hooks' notion of education as freedom, we cannot idly deliver courses whose primary benefits include student "convenience" and "satisfaction." Despite these misgivings, I remain optimistic about the diversifying possibilities that new technology brings to the classroom, and in my own classes I have found it to be beneficial to have students who live on a reservation sharing the online space with students who live on campus. They have an opportunity to share their situated experiences and knowledge and interact in ways that would not have been possible even ten years ago. Similarly, I am excited about the role that technology can play in "globalizing" not only my curriculum, but the actual experiences and interactions of students within an online class. Perhaps more critically, I am especially hopeful that, with the right curriculum, the online environment might make it easier to facilitate an "unhinging" of whiteness from white bodies, and ultimately, to carve out possibilities for new antiracist pedagogy, politics, and activism.

What will it take to design online courses that nurture and support anti-racist and socially just learning and practice? My contention is that online educators must find ways to construct online "spaces of possibility" for critical, peaceful, socially just ways of relating to and engaging with the world. The above advantages and disadvantages help to chart a course for how to open up these spaces. Specifically, educators need to find creative, theoretically-grounded, and technologically advanced ways to help students and instructors constitute visibility and vulnerability within the intercultural communication class. I wish to conclude by musing about one possible strategy for increasing both visibility and vulnerability in the service of social justice. I am inspired by Warren and Heuman's (2007) discussion of "performing drag" as a strategy for destabilizing whiteness, and I am intrigued by their notion that "a politics of parody within the study and pedagogy of whiteness [may] work toward subverting racial power" (p. 222). What would a politics of parody look like in the online class? Perhaps we could work from the Nakamura article as a starting point, and then send students off to online chat spaces to participate and observe racialized (both visible and coded) behaviors and graphics. As a class we could design "guerrilla" or parodic scripts that students could then "perform" within online chat spaces in order to disrupt the "everyday doings of whiteness" (p. 222). I imagine this activity as a performative form of "culture-jamming" where students have the opportunity to find ways to arrest and disrupt everyday codings of whiteness, and in so doing help to make visible their own everyday performances and behaviors.

According to Dare (2008), social justice can be usefully understood as a politics of connectedness. From this perspective, strategies to increase and celebrate social justice within intercultural communication studies must highlight and make possible connections between diverse members of a classroom or a community. Drawing from theories of whiteness, pedagogy, and online education, it becomes clear that these connections carry (political) power and potential if and when they are constructed through openness and mutual vulnerability. Thus, online educators who are committed to social justice must continue to strive for ways in which to encourage and nurture vulnerability within the classroom. This vulnerability, combined with a commitment to the politics of visibility that I describe above, lays the groundwork for the development of online courses committed to social justice and antiracist curriculum and politics.

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Manuscript received 12 Dec 2010; revision received 19 May 2011.



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