

Hell You Talmbout: Mixtapes as method for online environmental justice pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes on the mixtape as a pedagogical method for approaching urgent and critical topics within the undergraduate online classroom. Drawing on two case studies from different sections of an introductory course on environmental and social justice taught in an American studies department, we demonstrate how mixtape-inspired assignments offer a method for theorizing and enacting the connections between popular culture and critical scholarship around injustice in the humanities and social sciences while also altering the space of the classroom to promote deeper student engagement, comprehension, and reflection. We argue that introducing popular culture as both content and method within an undergraduate course not only strengthens student understanding of key concepts and the relevance of these outside the classroom, but also acknowledges the importance of time and context within the space of the online course. Popular culture, a component of this context, enriches the online learning experience and responds to contemporary issues and events that students encounter in the material world. Mixtapes serve as a conceptual tool for understanding the contents of a syllabus and as a pedagogical tool for assessment. The practice of making mixtapes within a course on environmental and social justice opens the possibility for radical expression.

Keywords: mixtape, environmental justice, online classroom, online teaching and learning, popular culture, pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in Fall 2016 and continuing to the current academic year (Fall 2019-Spring 2020), we taught sections of a new 100-level online course titled *Introduction to Environmental and Social Justice* for the Department of American Studies at the University of New Mexico. Based on a previous iteration of a course titled *Introduction to Environment, Science, and Technology*, the structure of the course was part of a larger institutional effort to standardize online classes so that content and assignments would remain the same from semester to semester, regardless of the instructor teaching the course. In the original structure of the course, students wrote three-sentence précis for assigned readings, summarizing each reading's argument, method, and purpose. Over the duration of the semester, students also took three open-book exams made up of definitions for key terms, short answer questions, and five-paragraph essays. In consequence, this paper examines two different approaches to remixing this online syllabus to further engage popular culture as a mode of student learning and engagement.

Given that the subject of *Environmental and Social Justice* combines academic discourse with the embodied and felt realities of the students who take the class, we felt it important to draw on the flexibility and immediacy of the online classroom in order to enhance student learning. Integrating popular culture and current events into the course would help both instructors and students to synthesize topics presented in the assigned academic literature, as facilitated by the online classroom setting. The current global pandemic highlights the necessity for dynamic, high quality online instruction that is not merely a stop-gap substitute for classroom learning, but that adapts and adopts creative approaches to virtual instruction in response to the urgent need for accessible learning for students. Further, the vulnerable populations at the core of discourse in *Environmental and Social Justice* experience the brunt of the impacts of COVID-19 (Newton, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Ahmed, 2020). Adaptive and relevant online learning environments could be one response to the environmental and social injustices associated with the pandemic (Kim, 2020; Gardner, 2020).

This essay includes two case studies that demonstrate how assignments inspired by the mixtape offer a method for theorizing and enacting the connections between popular culture and critical scholarship that revolve around injustice in the humanities and social sciences. We look at two pedagogical approaches to using mixtapes in the online classroom and consider how the mixtape can function as a practice for altering the space of the classroom. Not only does introducing popular culture as both content and method within an undergraduate course deepen student understanding of key concepts and their relevance outside the classroom, but it also highlights the importance of time and context within the space of the online course. Finally, we argue that effective online teaching is attentive to the context in which it is taught, and that popular culture provides an opportunity for students to navigate the current social climate in relation to the course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental justice as an academic discipline owes its origin and development to peoples' movements for economic, environmental, reproductive, and civil rights. Here in Albuquerque, we are fortunate to be in the company of radical figures such as Sofia Martinez and Richard Moore, who are responsible, with many other leaders from around the United States, for the development of principles and documents that are foundational to environmental justice work. These include the "Principles of Environmental Justice" adopted at the First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, and the "Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing," generated at a meeting in Jemez, New Mexico in 1996 hosted by the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ). Our understanding of environmental justice is also shaped by Indigenous movements and organizations such as New Mexico-based Tewa Women United and the Red Water Pond Road Community Association. These organizations take a braided approach to

addressing environmental, economic, and reproductive justice - not as discrete units, but as integrated parts of a whole vision of Indigenous liberation and decolonization (Sanchez, 2019; RWPRCA, 2016).

Introduction to Environmental and Social Justice draws on the radical activist roots of environmental justice to illuminate the links between environmental and social injustices. We assemble the work of key thinkers in environmental justice scholarship, such as Robert Bullard (2018), Laura Pulido (2000), and David Pellow (2007), introduce essential themes such as pollution, garbage, and climate change, and bring these key thinkers and themes together with scholarship, movements, and mediums that push boundaries and definitions of environmental justice as a disciplinary category. For example, we draw on critical theoretical developments by movements such as Black Lives Matter, scholarship from critical prison studies and critical Indigenous studies, and mediums such as podcasts and music videos (Dillon and Sze, 2016; Gilmore, 2007; Whyte, 2017). In this way, we create a mix and remix of environmental and social justice issues that pushes student understanding of the boundaries of environmental justice without losing sight of the genealogy of environmental justice as a discipline.

Our theory and practice of environmental justice pedagogy is inspired by scholarship that initiates conversations about what constitutes environmental justice and how we can shift what students perceive and understand as being “environmental.” In Spring 2017, when we taught sections of this course for the second time, we assigned Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze’s 2016 essay “Police Power and Particulate Matters: Environmental Justice and Spatialities of In/Securities in U.S. Cities.” Students read it shortly before the semester midterm, in tandem with a 2006 essay by Rose Braz and Craig Gilmore on prisons, policing, and pollution titled: “Joining Forces: Prisons and Environmental Justice in Recent California Organizing.” We hoped that this pairing would help students perceive movements such as Black Lives Matter as key actors for environmental justice, while also honoring the long history and significance of Black studies and critical prison studies to environmental justice activism and scholarship. In the first half of the semester, students struggled to move beyond conceptions of environmental activism as movements for an awareness of individual efforts such as recycling, riding bicycles, and “ethical consumption.” Many struggled with the articulation of the term *racism* in environmental racism. But upon reading the essays by Dillon, Sze, Braz, and Gilmore, students began to grasp the relationship between environmental and social justice and between environmental injustice and systemic racism. What clicked for the students, as evidenced in the short essays they wrote on the midterm exam, was Dillon and Sze’s analysis of the conditions of Eric Garner’s death and the ways in which Garner’s words “I can’t breathe” articulated not only his choking at the hands of a police officer, but also the racialized exposure to environmental conditions that caused and exacerbated Garner’s asthma. Through their own engagement with everyday popular culture and current events, students were already familiar with the story of Garner’s death and with the use of “I can’t breathe” by the Black Lives Matter movement. Situating course concepts within this moment of public consciousness gave students a place from which to approach other readings, videos, and podcasts assigned in the course.

Moved by students’ immediate connection to and grasp of Dillon and Sze’s analysis, we decided to explore further methods of using popular culture to teach environmental justice. In addition to the scholarship of Dillon and Sze, we found particular inspiration in Min Hyoung Song’s paper presentation at the 2016 annual meeting of the American Studies Association on the visibility of climate change. While playing the first episode of the first season of *True Detective*, Song challenged common assertions that it is difficult for people to believe and grasp the concept of climate change because it is not visible. Song pointed out that images of the over-industrialized landscape, poverty, and racialized and gendered violence permeate the opening credits of *True Detective*. He argued that climate change, its effects, and the affected are constantly visible, both in our everyday experiences and in popular culture.

While *True Detective* might not resonate as a tale of environmental injustice, Song’s analysis remixes

the series for viewers interested in environmental justice, finding a relevant story that undergirds the narrative arc. Storytelling is an essential practice of environmental justice scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. In their chapter in *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Justice*, Donna Houston and Pavithra Vasudevan write: “Environmental justice storytelling is a particular form of political intervention that envisions socio-ecological transformation and produces more hopeful futures by narrating the environment as intimately connected to human well-being” (Houston and Vasudevan, 6). For Houston and Vasudevan, environmental justice storytelling enacts connection, recognizes emergent realities that may not yet have been measured through scientific data collection, and makes sense of narratives, data, and experiences that have been obscured.

MIXTAPE AS METHOD IN THE SPACE OF THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Many academic fields commend the possibilities created through the introduction of the mixtape to the classroom. For Black studies, the mixtape serves as a radical response to the capital-driven world of popular music culture. Jared Ball, in “FreeMix Radio: The Original Mixtape Radio Show: A Case Study in Mixtape ‘Radio’ and Emancipatory Journalism,” identifies the mixtape as “source of emancipatory journalism” (Ball, 617), one that disrupts the powerful and predominantly white corporate-owned media. It calls out and replaces a colonial voice. The process of sampling, excerpting, rearranging, and perhaps adding commentary within the mixtape medium can create radical creative forms from familiar content, challenging media forms that see present music as settled, fixed, and mastered. George Ciccariello Maher argues that “mixtapes represent an often overlooked source of hope for escape from what has been characterized as a zero-sum dilemma of dissemination” in “Brechtian Hip-Hop: Didactics and Self-Production in Post-Gangsta Political Mixtapes” (Maher, 139).

Within the social sciences, mixtapes serve as an analogy for the dialectic process of generating knowledge from within and outside of disciplinary traditions and norms. Sociologist Paul V. Stock looks at how the practice of sociology resembles the creation of a mixtape in “Sociology and the Mixtape: A Metaphor of Creativity.” He argues, “Sociology and the mix tape are products of their historical context and to that end exist in a dialectical push and pull of conventions, cutting edge, newness, traditional classics and personal experience” (Stock, 287). This notion, that a discipline and a mixtape share similar productive approaches, is also important for fields within cultural studies. Before the 2016 meeting of the American Studies Association (ASA), the ASA program committee encouraged meeting attendees to participate in the creation of a mixtape around the annual meeting’s theme “Pedagogies of Dissent.” Attendees were encouraged to submit songs for the mixtape that were “associated with, or inspired by, dissent (in the widest possible sense of the term)” (Program Committee of the ASA, 2017). The mixtape was distributed to attendees before the meeting and was the subject of a presidential plenary session at the annual meeting. At the session, participants focused on the role that music plays in activating, expressing, and affirming dissent, and highlighted music as a pedagogy that produces a sense of intimacy through its compilation and sharing.

This interest in the mixtape extends into theoretical discourse on method, genealogy, and historiography in American studies. In 2017, former ASA president Philip J. Deloria and Alexander Olson published a book on methods in American studies titled *American Studies: A User’s Guide*. Deloria and Olson use the concept of the mixtape as an heuristic to narrate the history and historiography of American studies. They create lists, which they call mixtapes, of essays and books focused on particular strands of American studies, with nods to texts that readers might consider canonical within American studies, and then follow these mixtapes with remixes. In the remixes the content, theme, and method overlap with the original mixtapes, by incorporating more recently published writing – scholarship that might be written outside of American studies yet has

weight in the field, or twenty-first century turns to old-school American studies themes. For example, “Original #4: The American Spaces Mixtape” features Jacob Riis’s 1890 monograph *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, Henry Nash Smith’s 1950 *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Deloria and Olson, 77). The ten selections on this mixtape highlight a variety of primarily North American geographies and ways of thinking about these spaces through the lenses of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and Indigeneity. This mixtape is followed by the “American Spaces Remix: Transnational Spaces.” In this remix, the category of American spaces spans oceans via Paul Gilroy’s 1993 *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*; continents via Melani McAlister’s 2002 monograph *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* and Lisa Lowe’s 2015 *The Intimacy of Four Continents*; and analytics via Brent Edwards’ 2003 *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. (Deloria and Olson, 78). The remix does not negate the original mixtape, but is instead a new take on it with an informal citational practice to mark inspiration, relationship, and perhaps diversion from the original.

Following the success of teaching Dillon and Sze’s essay on Eric Garner within the *Introduction to Environmental and Social Justice* course, we decided to expand upon this opening to further engage students through popular culture. We both incorporated a version of a mixtape into the syllabus of our respective course sections; Caitlin created a mix of her own and Elspeth assigned her students the task of making a mix. Each assignment provided an opportunity for the students to become spatial architects with the assigned materials. As instructors and course designers, we traditionally perform this role while the students navigate the constructed space in an effort to reproduce the nodal concepts introduced throughout the course. In “The Space Between: Mix Taping as a Ritual,” Rob Drew cites the mixtape as an “affectively charged medium of communication” (Drew, 145), and the exchange of a mix functions as “a kind of back channel to face-to-face interaction” (Drew, 151). The act of creating and gifting a mix is a remote exercise. It feels intimate, but as Drew argues, “the practice of making and exchanging mixes can easily be understood as a ritual of distance” (Drew, 147). This is particularly useful in an online classroom setting because we do lack the face-to-face interaction that the traditional classroom has to offer. Distance is an inherent quality of online teaching. Beyond grading students’ work, in an online classroom, the instructor is not always privy to how students receive the literature or how the material engages with their affective, ordinary lives. Conventional assignments that assess student engagement with readings and other sources assigned in a course do not necessarily reveal how a student relates, engages, and applies new learnings to their life beyond the boundaries of the course. Assigning a mixtape works “within the constraints and boundaries, while at the same time challenging those same conventions that create great intellectual breakthroughs, artistic genius and opportunities for students to make connections” (Stock, 280). The mixtape provides an opportunity for students and teachers to revel in the ambiguities that can surround online learning with regards to the boundaries of the classroom and it produces deep answers to questions proposed throughout the course.

EXAMPLES AND ANALYSIS

Caitlin’s Mixtape Assignment: Navigating the mix of the syllabus

For extra credit at the end of the Fall 2018 Semester, Caitlin provided a mix of five songs, via *YouTube* links, to the students: “Gentrification” by Ry Cooder, “Water Fountain” by Tune Yards, “Hell you Talmbout” by Janelle Monáe featuring Wondaland Records, “Trouble in the Water” by Common featuring Malik Yusef, Kumasi, Aaron Fresh, Choklate & Laci Kay, and “Idle No More” by Pura Fé. She asked the students to choose two tunes and write a 700-1000 word paper using these songs as guides to reflect on the material and ideas they had engaged with throughout the semester. Caitlin encouraged the students to research the songs and seek out

videos of live performances to gain a better understanding of how the music is used in critical movements. Though the nature of the reflection allows the students to take the paper in any direction they like, Caitlin did provide the following guiding questions in an effort to motivate and inspire the students in their writing : Who wrote the song and why? How does the song demonstrate and/or push the content of articles/podcasts/chapters that you read/listened to this semester? How does the song incorporate multiple components of the course and what does that say about the relationship between environmental justice and social justice? Some of these songs are performed in specific locations or at specific events. Why is this important and what does that say about music as a tool for those who experience environmental and social injustices? Is the song a cover song? Has it been covered by others? If so, why? What does that say about the relationship between injustice, time, and space/place?

Each student reflected in a unique way and their approach spoke to how they processed the entire course. Though their work did vary to a large degree, two overarching themes ran through the papers. First, the songs provided an opportunity to bring literature from different modules together to better understand how different places are affected by environmental racism. Second, music videos and live performances shed light on the role of music in the historicized present of current critical environmental and social movements.

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan, represented by the song titled “Trouble in the Water,” resonated with many students and they felt that the song/performance emotively embodied the emplaced reality of Laura Pulido’s 2016 article titled, “*Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism.*” However, the song led to explorations in the relationality of how these concepts exist in multiple places. The environmental racism that fuels the Flint water crisis was analyzed alongside notions of white privilege in Aspen, Colorado (Park and Pellow, 2011), the advantages of capitalism in Malibu, California (Davis, 1995) and the gendered environmental injustice of uranium mining on the Navajo reservation (Voyles, 2015).

The students also paid attention to where the songs were performed. “Hell you Talmbout” resounded on the streets of Washington D.C. during the Women’s March in 2017, in 2015 during a Black Lives Matter protest in Chicago, and in concert venues throughout the country. One student related that the song is also covered by other performers, notably David Byrne, in large concert venues internationally. All of the performances analyzed by the students centered around a call for awareness. For them, this awareness was reinforced by the literature we read in our online class. While the students were able to experience the emotional weight of a live performance, they could do so while being just one click away from scholarly articles and media that detailed each artist’s motivation to create. This type of engagement is unique to the online setting and would not be possible in a traditional face-to-face course.

There are a couple areas for improvement with this assignment. Because it was offered as extra credit, few students completed the task with enough time to ask questions and clear up any confusion about the relationship between music and environmental and social justice movements. One way this limitation could have been curbed to help develop more robust analyses would have been through the introduction of the songs throughout the semester while encouraging the students to engage with their peers and the instructor about the content throughout the course. Also, if the instructor had presented the assignment towards the beginning of the semester, the students would have been encouraged to consider and analyze the songs they listened to and experienced during the course instead of only adhering to the assigned five; they could thus have created their own unique mixtape.

Elspeth’s mixtape assignment: Remixing the environmental justice canon

As a final, cumulative project, Elspeth asks students to create an “Environmental and Social Justice Mixtape.” Elspeth first assigned this mixtape project in Spring 2019 and continues to use it as the final project in her teaching of this course each semester. The assignment has three parts: a mixtape, liner notes, and an album cover. The mixtape is a conceptual multimedia list, which could be made up of songs, essays, book

chapters, visual art, podcasts, videos, or any other medium. The students are required to include at least four sources assigned within the course, as well as four to eight additional sources selected by the creator of the mixtape. Accompanying the mixtape are 600-800 word narrative liner notes to explain what the creator intended to invoke, inspire, and incite through the mixtape. Finally, a piece of cover art represents the creator's mixtape and narrative. It could either be designed by the student or borrowed and cited with documented permission from the original artist.

If, drawing on Deloria and Olson, the course syllabus can function as a mixtape, the final projects created by students are remixes on the original mixtape. This assignment functions as a reflection on and synthesis of the key concepts in the course. The students are asked to consider what they would like an imagined audience to experience, feel, or learn as a result of exploring the mixtape. In addition, they are asked to consider the narrative arc of the mixtape, considering whether the audience's experience should be smooth and gradual or a reaction to contrast created between the pieces.

Students retitle and reimagine scholarly monographs as tracks on a hip hop remix, and analyze the theoretical contributions of the lyrics to the field of environmental justice. In these final mixtapes, students juxtapose Dillon and Sze's "Police Power and Particulate Matter" with Kanye West's "New Slaves," Rob Nixon's work on slow violence with Kendrick Lamar's album DAMN. One student created a new title for each item on her mixtape, starting with a chapter from Julie Sze's monograph *Noxious New York*, and re-named it "Clogged Lungs". Another student described the process of staging a photo for her mixtape's album art. She described how, after choosing the theme of environmental racism with a particular focus on how communities of color are disproportionately exposed to the harmful effects of pollution, she struggled to find publicly available images that fit her criteria for an evocative image that both fit the theme and spurred particular emotions in the listener/viewer. Instead, she staged a photo with her niece as a model. In the liner notes accompanying the mixtape, she described the process of obtaining consent from her niece and the niece's parents, collating the materials she used, manipulating the materials to create the image, and listening to the responses from other family members when they saw the final photo. In the image, a child wears a dust mask that is smudged with dirt. The lighting is harsh and the child looks directly into the camera's lens, gaze steady but guarded. The student described how her mother, the photo subject's grandmother, was upset with the photo because she felt it made her granddaughter look abused and sad. The student then described the conversation that ensued between herself and her mother about environmental injustice and her purpose in creating the mixtape and the accompanying image. This student's narrative captures the tension present in many student mixtapes between anger and sadness and a sense of encouragement and aspiration for radical change.

Students initially express hesitation upon encountering a new assignment format they have not yet experienced, particularly with regards to what "counts" as a track on the mixtape. To address this, Elspeth creates a discussion board thread as a space where students can post their questions, emphasize the questions of others which they share, and where both other students and Elspeth can answer questions. Through this board, students quickly learn that almost any type of media "counts" as a track on the mixtape. As they create the mixtape, liner notes, and album cover, they create knowledge and imbue each track with meaning.

CONCLUSION

In 2016, when we began teaching *Introduction to Environmental and Social Justice* online, we were concerned about the possible constrictions imposed by teaching online. However, through collaboration and a shared love for incorporating popular culture into our teaching, we came to realize that introducing a mixtape assignment into the syllabus allowed us to take a creative approach to pedagogy in an online space.

We each had a different strategy: Caitlin created a mix of songs that she felt expressed the affective spaces of the course and asked her students to use two of them as guides in reflection papers where they highlighted

the interconnectedness of the material and concepts. In contrast, Elspeth asked her students to remix the themes and concepts from the course to create a multimedia mixtape spotlighting cultural production outside of the scope of the course syllabus to create an affective listening, reading, and viewing experience through the mixtape, album art, and long-form, reflective liner notes.

We found both approaches to be effective and well received by our students. The mixtape facilitates the experience of students as spatial architects; the students hold the power as they confront the structural limitations imposed by the syllabus. Students can incorporate imagery and music from the shows and albums that they may watch or listen to while they complete their classwork, thereby bringing their individual experience of the online course into the shared experience of the online classroom. Therefore, what is usually considered a distraction in the traditional face-to-face classroom turns into an opportunity to make connections between course topics, cultural production, and current events. While these sorts of connections can also be made in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment, we suggest that integrating popular culture as assigned course material and as student-generated creation gives the online classroom a unique advantage. As students move between tabs on the computer screen, implicit relationships form between current music videos and traditional scholarly texts. Through the mixtape assignments presented here, those implicit relationships become an activated note of student learning.

Finally, both creating and analyzing the mixtape recalls the radical roots of environmental and social justice, creating theory from community movements and practices. In this course, environmental justice theory becomes the method of instruction. As online instructors, we rarely have the opportunity to understand if and how the students are engaged with revolutionary work in their communities. Disruptive and productive, this assignment turns the students into critical creators and provides them with a toolset that was originally fashioned by activists and radical figures.

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