10 Accommodation and Resistance on (the Color) Line: Black Writers Meet White Artists on the Internet

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It happened every year. Every year my all-black composition class would write essays about racism in America.[1] And every year when these first-year students discussed one another's first drafts, the classroom sounded like an "Amen Corner." Sharing a language and history, they seldom questioned what was expressed and often understood the unexpressed. Thus, their essays touted unsupported generalizations about race relations in the United States while hiding unexamined assumptions about whites and blacks. For example, one student wrote without the slightest reservation, "The effects of going to a white school are a dislike for and hostility against whites."

To rein in such overgeneralizing, scholars such as Arthur Applebee (1981), Richard Lloyd-Jones (1977), and Lee Odell (1981) would suggest that my students accommodate a critical or uninformed audience. *Accommodation*, as I will define it, is a writer's attempt to meet the audience's needs. It is not the same as acquiescence, for a writer who *dis*agrees with the audience's feedback can still accommodate that audience by mustering stronger counterarguments. On the other hand, *resistance* occurs when a writer has no intention of accommodating the audience. As long as writers *intend* to accommodate the audience, they are accommodating, not resisting—even if they fail to produce an accommodating text.

Most of my students did not accommodate an audience's need for evidence and explanation, even though I had encouraged them to imagine a challenging audience. Classroom discussion revealed that the topic was so emotionally charged, so personally searing, that they could not recognize a hasty generalization, hidden assumption, or even an offensive tone. But why should they have? Their assigned audience was *imaginary*. Research suggests that we cannot rely upon imaginary audiences to elicit accommodation in student writing (see reviews by E. Oliver, 1995; Redd-Boyd and Slater, 1989). I was the only audience my students were likely to accommodate. However, since I was African American, they were liable to assume that I would understand and accept their sweeping claims about racism.

The Internet Project

The problem I have described is one faced by teachers across the curriculum: to produce informative and persuasive writing in the disciplines, our students need to practice accommodating appropriate audiences (see Schriver's 1992 review). Yet often we are inappropriate audiences. During the summer of 1994, I was still pondering this problem when I received a call from Stephanie Newman-James, an art professor at Montana State University (MSU). Newman-James asked me if our students could collaborate on a project that fall, so I suggested that the project focus on racism. Perhaps, I thought, I have found an appropriate audience.

Since I taught engineering freshmen in a computer classroom, I also suggested that we collaborate via the Internet. With Internet access, our students could communicate quickly and cheaply while mastering a valuable technology. As an added advantage, the personal but faceless nature of e-mail might encourage students to write frankly about a sensitive topic such as racism. At the same time, the direct and informal nature of e-mail would make me a less intrusive audience (even though students would copy messages to me).

Thus, we planned an elaborate series of electronic exchanges. My students would write essays analyzing the causes and effects of a racist incident in their lives. Next, they would send their first drafts to Newman-James's students via the Internet. The MSU students would respond by e-mail, and my students would reply. Afterward, my students would revise their essays and dispatch them via the Internet. Then the MSU students would illustrate the essays and forward their graphics over the network. Finally, my students would e-mail their reactions, and the MSU students would revise their layouts. This process would last one month, allowing students sufficient time for planning, drafting, e-mailing, and revising outside class.

From the beginning, Newman-James had hoped that our Internet collaboration would produce a publication, but she did not know whether we would have enough time or money. Therefore, initially, my students wrote only for Newman-James's class; they did not anticipate a wider audience. Later, however, ten MSU students volunteered to design a formal publication for wider circulation, and my students agreed. So the following semester, as an independent study project, the MSU students produced a thirty-two-page booklet entitled *On (the Color) Line: Networking to End Racism*. Printed in black and yellow, the booklet displays selected e-mail messages as well as the essays and illustrations (see sample pages in the Appendix).[2]

Newman-James and I believed that our students could benefit from this exchange because it crossed so many boundaries: geographical, disciplinary, and cultural. Not only could the Internet join composition and art over sixteen hundred miles, it could unite science and art, as my engineering majors discovered

the intricacies of graphic design and Newman-James's art majors explored the complexities of computer technology.

While our students could learn from this cross-disciplinary collaboration, they could also profit from the cross-cultural exchange. My thirteen students were black and mainly urban: all but one of them were African Americans, some from overcrowded schools in the inner city.[3] If by chance they had grown up in the country or in suburbia, they experienced a rude awakening once they hit the hard, cold pavement of Washington, D.C. Living in the heart of a D.C. ghetto, students on our campus saw neighborhoods infested with rats and roaches, winos, addicts, pimps, and gangs. Many students were all-too-familiar with poverty, pollution, and crime.

On the other hand, the MSU students were mainly white and rural. Newman-James described them as follows:

> A surprisingly large number of my students come from one-room schools or had high school graduating classes of less than 10 people. Montana is the fourth largest land-mass state, and the fourth smallest population-wise. This means that MSU students, 90% of whom are Montana residents are often more familiar with land, horses, and cattle than [with] people. According to the 1990 census, less than 0.3% of Montana's population is black. (*On (the Color) Line* 1995, 1)

Because of the cultural contrast, I welcomed the opportunity to bring my student writers "screen to screen" with forty-nine student artists in Montana. While the MSU students gained "live, critical clients" for their artwork, each of my students gained three to four critical or uninformed readers for their writing (*On (the Color) Line* 1995, 1). Such an audience could challenge my students to consider other perspectives as they wrote, while encouraging them to explain their own perspectives vividly and clearly. The MSU students could motivate my students this way because they were a real *rhetorical* audience. According to Lloyd Bitzer (1968), a rhetorical audience consists of readers who are engaged with the topic, readers who might be willing and able to bring about change. Certainly, the MSU readers were rhetorically engaged with the topic, for, as white Americans, they could help eradicate racism in the United States. The MSU students could also motivate my students because they were a *collaborating* audience. Since they were going to illustrate my students' essays, my students needed to express themselves well enough to be interpreted visually.

As I had hoped, when the MSU students received the essays, some challenged my students to consider other perspectives. And as I had hoped, some of my students attempted to provide missing explanations, stronger counterarguments, and more effective language. Thus, in one of his last e-mail messages, Sonny reflected, "It's interesting what ya'll think of my ess[a]y. When I wrote it I saw it only a cer[t]ain way, but after talking to ya'll I see in a whole

bunch of different ways."[4] Likewise, some of the MSU students approached their design task differently after reading my students' drafts and messages. For instance, as she came to know her Howard client, one MSU artist's "figures became less stereotypical and cartoony" (Blumenstyk 1995, 35).

However, several Howard students ignored the MSU feedback. Drawing upon e-mail messages, journal entries, and essay revisions, I began to explore why some of my students accommodated their target audience and why others resisted. Seeing my students' patterns of accommodation and resistance led to the following observations—observations that made me question my prior assumptions about writing for real audiences.

A Question of Authority

When asked to write to a white audience about racism, some African American students might have protested, "What for? They won't understand where I'm comin' from." But none of my students expressed such feelings in class discussions, conferences, e-mail, or their journals. They accepted the MSU audience as a target audience. I had assumed that they would eagerly respond to their MSU audience because they thought a white audience would *need* to hear their side of the racism story. I had also assumed that the students would seek to be understood so that the MSU readers could accurately illustrate their ideas. Thus, I had expected my students to respond to criticism from the MSU audience by strengthening or clarifying their essays.

Sheila reacted as I had expected. In her first draft, she had recorded how some white boys had hurled racial slurs and broken bottles at her mother. After reading the draft, one MSU reader wanted to know how Sheila and her mother felt about the incident. So Sheila added several lines about the pain she and her mother had experienced. Then she reported by e-mail,

> I went back and added the majority of the points you made. . . . I hope you enjoy reading it. Let me know what you think and what else I need to enhance it some more. I want my essay to be well explain[ed] so that your drawings will reflect every detail.

Like Sheila, Jameela was ready to accommodate her target audience, even when the feedback was negative. Three of her readers accused her of overgeneralizing about the white race, even though she had used hedges such as "most" and "some." For example, one observed, "You have contradicted yourself throughout your piece. I find that your general message was to state that the white race should not generalize the black race, but the problem is that you have generalized the white race throughout your entire essay." Another student remarked, "I react to the 'blanket statements' made about all whites, or white society. Perhaps this is the experience in your area, but it's hard for me to handle when I don't hold these viewpoints about blacks."

Despite the negative feedback, Jameela responded to the criticism, refuting some points and conceding others. On the one hand, she defended her use of the phrase "working past our abilities." She explained via e-mail, "Yes, I meant to say 'working past our abilities' in the sense that every individual has certain things they can and can't do and each black person would be working towards developing higher than there [sic] own individual abilities." On the other hand, instead of singling out whites for blame, in her second draft she included other racial groups or omitted race altogether. For example, she changed "some whites" to "some people" and the finger-pointing "you" to "they." In her journal she confessed:

> As I read my readers' responses and took a second look at what I had written, I somewhat had to agree with them. . . . Having the Montana State students to reply to my essay was beneficial. It made me realize my mistakes. I made sure to apologize to those students whom I offended and let the others know that I didn't intend to offend anyone. At the time, I was just reacting to my own experiences and allowing the pain to come out.

Unlike Sheila and Jameela, a few students dismissed the MSU feedback. Their resistance would not have been unusual had the MSU readers merely been classmates reviewing their assignments. Studies of classroom peer groups show that sometimes writers do not value their classmates' feedback (Berkenkotter 1984; Freedman 1987). However, the MSU readers were a target audience, readers my students sought to influence. If, as Aristotle (1984) and Chaim Perelman (1969) suggest, the primary goal of rhetoric is to influence the audience, the target audience commands a certain authority: what the audience thinks—right or wrong—is at least worth *considering*. But this was not the case for Arnice.

Initially, Arnice welcomed the MSU readers' feedback because she did "not really like" her first draft. Thus, in an early e-mail message, she wrote to the students, "If you think of anything that is unclear or you do not understand please write me and let me know. When I am writing I appreciate the help."

However, after a student said that the essay needed more facts and less emotion, Arnice announced via e-mail, "Dear fellow students I am very happy with your suggestions and techniques for revision, but I am pleased with my essay now and I intend to keep it the way it stands." Later, in her journal, she explained her decision: "These people are critiquing my paper and they have no experience in criti[ci]sm."

Arnice's position is surprising because she had so openly accepted the MSU students as her target audience. Indeed, in her final journal entry, she lamented, "I tried to write well for these students so they would like my writing." But as her comments reveal, she questioned her target readers' authority. Since they were not professional critics (e.g., English teachers), she questioned their right to critique her essay. Ironically, even though they were the readers who mattered, what they *said* no longer mattered.

Revision or E-vision

Arnice did not attempt to change her readers' opinions about her essay during their e-mail exchange. But some of her classmates used e-mail to debate with the MSU readers prior to revising. During these e-mail debates, the students could learn more about their audience because they had more opportunities to receive comments on their essays. Crafting e-mail messages also gave them more opportunities to *write* for their audience and receive a response to *that* writing as well. Thus, I had assumed that the e-mail dialogue would stimulate revision, as indeed it did in the case of Kevin.

E-mail allowed Kevin to prewrite his revision: in his e-mail he agreed or disagreed with each point that his readers had raised, and many of his responses found their way into his essay. For instance, one MSU reader asked him how his friends reacted after a cab driver snubbed them and picked up some white students instead. In his e-mail Kevin replied, "Your comment on exploring the thoughts of my friends is a good one; I didn't think about that. During the ride back my friends were rather quiet." This last line reappeared in his revision as "During the ride back home we were all quiet."

However, I discovered that the e-mail stifled as well as stimulated revision. Some students responded to their readers' concerns via e-mail—what I call "e-vision"—but not via their essays. Maurice is a case in point. Maurice received a barrage of negative comments from MSU, especially regarding an incident he considered racist. In his e-mail reply, he attempted to counterargue by citing new evidence of racism:

> Last week while watching the Six O'Clock News I saw a white lady plead-ing for the return of her two sons, who were stated to be abducted by a black man. A few days later, I saw the same lady on T.V. being escorted to court by Policemen, where she was charged with murdering her two sons. Do you think this case would have recieved[sic] so much publicity if the suspected abducter was white?

An MSU student shot back:

> How do you think the media would have reacted if she had said a white man had carjacked the kids? I really believe it would have gotten the same amount of attention. The facts remain—people are outraged at crimes against kids and I feel that that was the main focus of the media.

At this point, Maurice admitted that he was not in a position to answer her question about the media since he—a Jamaican—had lived in the United States for less than a year.

None of this debate ever surfaced in Maurice's revision—no rebuttals, no concessions. In his journal he confirms that he did not try to revise his essay to accommodate the MSU readers: "They did not affect my revision because they

really did not think that my incident was racist." Ironically, if Maurice had had *less* access to his readers, he might have revised more.

Real vs. Imagined Feedback

The most striking pattern of findings began to emerge when I compared Maurice's planning and revising processes: his anticipation of the MSU audience had a greater impact upon his essay than the audience's feedback.

I had assumed that *real* feedback from readers would count more than *imagined* feedback. However, some students' journals revealed that the MSU audience had figured significantly in their plans but not in their revisions. For instance, although the feedback did not affect his revising, Maurice wrote, "Writing for the Montana State University students affected my planning of this essay because I knew that I had to be very specific and detailed." Rashid reacted similarly. According to Rashid, the MSU feedback was "appreciated but not used." Yet writing to the MSU audience proved useful to him because, he explained, "we had to change our way of thinking and adapt our thoughts to go to an all white audience. The fact that they were the audience caused me to adapt some of the words that I would have used because they may not understand." Likewise, Sheldon wrote, "The students['] responses did not alter my essay," but "in planning the essay I kept in mind the reader's attention."

Conclusion

What can we learn from this Internet project? To elicit audience accommodation in student writing, we might heed the following advice:

- Don't assume that a student writer will listen to readers simply because they are the target readers. Assign a well-respected target audience, or announce that you will take into account the target audience's reaction when you grade. After reading the project e-mail, I considered the MSU comments as I evaluated the content, organization, and style of the essays. However, next time I will *tell* my students that the MSU response will influence my assessment, and perhaps Newman-James will do the same. I might even request holistic scores from MSU readers to count as a percentage of the essay grade. After all, the more authority the audience has, the more students will consider the audience's feedback.

- Keep in mind that e-mail can become "e-vision"—an electronic substitute for essay revision. If you want students to revise their essays, ask them to respond to their target audience "by essay" *before* they respond by e-mail. Or ask students to revise for a larger audience (e.g., the whole MSU campus) after soliciting feedback from a segment of that audience (e.g., MSU

design students). Otherwise, after replying by e-mail to a reader's feedback, students may feel that revising their essay is unnecessary or at least perfunctory.

- Encourage students to think carefully about their target audience while planning their first draft. If you plan to publish their work, help students imagine a wide range of possible audiences as well as the final publication's potential uses and the social or cultural changes it may engender. Although some students may not respond to *imaginary* audiences, many will respond to *what they imagine about real audiences*. In fact, what they imagine about a real audience may elicit more accommodation than the actual feedback will.

With these lessons in mind, I plan to maintain the Internet connection with MSU, for it motivated most of my student writers to clarify, elaborate, and persuade an audience. At the same time, it made the MSU artists more responsive to *their* audience. They had to contend with my students' e-mailed questions (e.g., "I like your idea about the scale of justice but what is sitting in the scale?"), corrections (e.g., "The cab driver looks to be oriental. The cab driver of that night was probably east Indian."), and suggestions (e.g.,"I would like to see some Aboriginal art attached."). Regardless of the type of feedback, the MSU artists felt the impact of designing for real clients. "Having a contact," Newman-James explained, "even if the contact didn't say specifically, 'No, I want it this way,' made my students more accountable."

Clearly, the Internet project supported our goals for composition and graphic design. But it accomplished something more. As Hewett and Pattison (1995, 14, 19) discovered in their classrooms, the personal yet faceless nature of e-mail encouraged students to write candidly about their thoughts and feelings. Moreover, because e-mail is direct and informal, it transformed some of my procrastinating essay writers into prolific e-mailers. The frank and frequent exchanges opened several students' eyes, minds, and hearts. Thus, one MSU student wrote to Jameela:

> The experiences you and your friends have gone through is [sic] something I don't have to think about very often and they are startling and painful to read. . . . Your closing remarks seem to acknowledge the basic underlying problem behind racism, namely a lack of knowledge and a basic misunderstanding perhaps on the part of both blacks and whites. . . . I truly hope that being able to work together on this project will result in some new understanding and breaking down of barriers. . . .

And so it did.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. I use the term *black* because a few students were Afro-Caribbean rather than African American.

2. To produce *On (the Color) Line,* my students wrote their essays on word processors using MS Word for Windows 6.0. Next, accessing the PINE mail application, they attached the essays to e-mail messages. These messages traveled over the Internet via the PC-based UNIX system maintained by Howard University's Computer Learning and Design Center (CLDC). Because my students relied on PCS and the MSU students on Macs, sending the graphics over the Internet was more complicated. First, the MSU students scanned their pen-and-ink drawings, using Ofoto. Then, the scanned images were converted to .tiff files, with the aid of Adobe Photoshop. Afterward, Newman-James turned these Mac files into PC files and ftped them to me. Finally, in CLDC I accessed the xz program on a DEC5000 workstation to change the files to .ps files for printing. The following semester copies of the booklet were printed on a newspaper press. Although the technology was available, we did not publish the booklet electronically because the MSU design curriculum focused on hard-copy print projects.

3. One student, Maurice, had grown up in Jamaica.

4. Throughout this article I have used pseudonyms to refer to students.

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Appendix

Two pages from *On (the Color) Line*

"Marvin Donaldson"
<mdonald@cldc.
howard.edu>
Hi Mary, how are you,
it's good to hear from
you. I am sorry that
you felt offended by
my essay, I did not
know that you would
be and I am still try-
ing to determine
exactly why you
were. Personally, I
have not experienced
racism but I do know
however, that it
exists. I am an immi-
grant from
Jamaica,..., where
99.5% of the popula-
tion is black, and I
have been living in
the United States for
about eight months.
The incident that was
outlined in my essay
was adapted..., there-
fore I am simply com-
menting on this inci-
dent which I believe
to be of a racist
nature.

"Mary O'Neil"
<larsn118@gemini.
oscs.montane.edu>
Marvin, Hi and thank
you for writing back
I guess I still don't
see how this particu-
lar incident is related
to racism?... Maybe
she was just afraid
given the lateness of
the evening, the
desertedness of the
street and the fact
that her neighborhood
may be affluent but it
is truly an island in a
very dangerous sec-
tion of chicago... Take
care!

"Bryan Paterson"
<larsn119@gemini.ocs
s.montana.edu>
Greetings at Howard
University, here's the

RACISM IN AMERICA

RACISM IN AMERICA
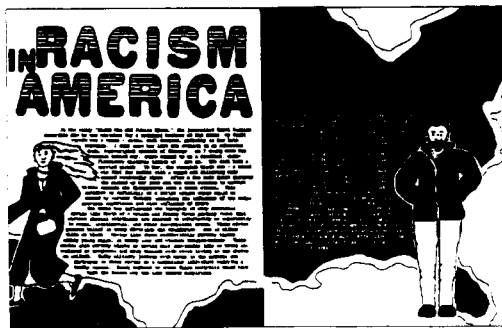
Designed & Illustrated By
Jill Rodgers

Center Spread Designed &
Illustrated By
Mary O'Neil

Essay By
Marvin Donaldson

n his essay "Black Men and Public Space," the journalist Brent Staples describes how he was mistaken for a criminal because of his race. My first victim was a woman—white. well-dressed. probably in her late twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park. a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean. impoverished section of Chicago. As I swung onto the avenue behind her. there seemed to be a discreet. uninflammatory distance behind us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her. the youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair. both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket—seemed menacingly close. After a few more quick glimpses. she picked up her pace and was soon running in earnest. Within seconds she disappeared into a cross street.

This incident is definitely of a racist nature, which could be caused by various factors including the influence of the media, previous experience and also the influence of peers.
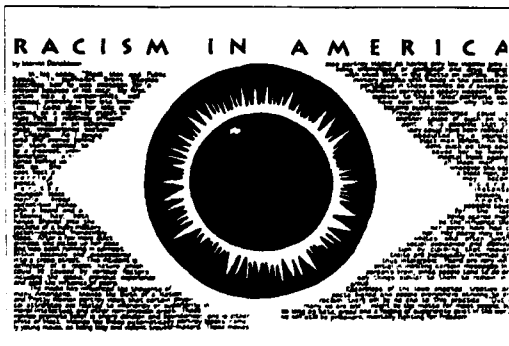
The media have influenced the thoughts of many Americans. Movies like Birth of a Nation and Pretty Woman portray views that certain physical attributes are related to inferiority or superiority in moral, intellectual, and other non-physical areas. These movies promote belief in sharp division and boundaries: one is either white or black. Movies

like these automatically portray blacks, namely young males, as being lazy and violent troublemakers. These movies also portray blacks as having only low-income jobs or being unemployed or gangsters and drug dealers with wives living in the ghetto on welfare. Being exposed to these false portraits could have been the reason why the lady became suspicious.

Previous experience could be another cause of such an incident. It is possible that the lady could have been robbed or assaulted by a youngish black man before. An incident such as this could cause her to have a mental block against all black men, so whenever she sees a black man. she may become scared instantaneously.

Another possible cause for the lady being scared might be the influence that her peers have had on her. Her peers may be all whites who often justify social avoidance and domination by claiming that relevant traits are biologically inherited and thus unalterable. Peers are very influential in instilling certain messages in a person's brain, since people tend to imitate their peers to remain in a group.

Regardless of the laws enacted, treaties and pacts signed and people everywhere striving to end racism, there will be no end to this practice. "Out of many we are one" might be the motto for most people, but as long as hate, greed and a feeling of superiority exist in the world. we will still be prisoners. mentally fighting for freedom.

by Marvin Donaldson
Illustrated by Mary O'Neill

RACISM IN AMERICA

Designed & Illustrated By:
Bryan Peterson

don't think this is a justifiable case of racism. A white man dressed in a military jacket with funky hair would frighten her in the same way... This woman is terrified of being raped, attacked and battered or even mugged. ...the man's skin comes second to the fright or flight. This is only an opinion, it could be wrong, and that's for you to decide... Where are you from? I can't believe you have never experienced or even witnessed racism... I'd like to hear your responses to my comments. Nice job. Until next time.

"Jill Rodgers"
<iarsn120@gemini.oscs.montana.edu>
Dear Marvin, I am grateful for your attempt to relate to racism. ...Where are you from? Being from Montana, I do not see a lot of racism first hand. However, when I read the incident you portrayed, I felt you were being a little harsh... Being a grown woman should allow her to form her own opinions instead of peer group opinions... If I was in this situation, I would have wanted to distance myself from any individual regardless of their race or appearance. I would like you to consider other possibilities, such as safety, instead of assuming racism. I think your conclusion was strong. Thanks for your time.