

## Thinking Activism at UC Irvine: Remembering Christien “Glitch” Rodriguez

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*Thinking Activism* was prompted as a response to the mass democratic movements of the last few years and their manifestations on local college campuses. Though seemingly innocuous in their methods, these movements have provoked gross police violence, especially at universities, where administrators work closely with campus and local police to implement neoliberal austerity measures that – as Henry A. Giroux notes in his contribution to the volume, “The Disappearing Public Intellectual and the Crisis of Higher Education as a Public Good” – “[treat] knowledge as a product... schools as malls, students as consumers, and faculty as entrepreneurs.” Austerity measures at the University of California (UC) and elsewhere make it all the more crucial that we address the ways in which our own positionality or privilege as members of the academy – tenured members and newcomers alike – is enabled by systems of power that actively work to dispossess people, in explicit ways (as we saw on November 18, 2011 when police at UC Davis responded with pepper spray to a group of peaceful student activists) and in ways that might not be so obvious.

Take UC Irvine, a university that has pursued neoliberal goals at the expense of student education and the California Master Plan’s<sup>1</sup> commitment to the creation of an educated public citizenry, as a case in point. On November 15, 2011, the Executive Vance-Chancellor’s office circulated a “Needs Attention” memo to UC Irvine’s School of Humanities – the same school that housed acclaimed critical theorist Jacques Derrida for twenty years – which faults ethnic and women’s studies departments for failing to meet intentionally vague (and expressly neoliberal) “productivity” measures, citing low enrollment numbers and low faculty-student ratios as evidence of poor performance. The memo targets interdisciplinary

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<sup>1</sup> The California Master Plan for Higher Education was drafted in 1960 by state legislators and academic administrators to guarantee access for all California residents to affordable higher education.

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departments like African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicano/Latino Studies, Women's Studies, and the graduate arm of these departments, the PhD Program in Culture and Theory—regimes of knowledge that, as one student group at UC Irvine, the Ethnic Students Coalition Against Prejudicial Education (ESCAPE) expressed in a counter-memo, “are crucial to the development of critical consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> The ESCAPE counter-memo goes on to note:

We feel disturbed by the severe lack of methods used to determine the “collective role and place” of many of these Interdisciplinary Programs [IDP] on our campus. If the writers of this memo had legitimately researched for qualitative evidence regarding the success of IDPs, they would find concrete evidence and stories of the meaningful impact these units offer students in areas of critical thinking, identity and cultural competency, understanding historical legacies and struggles, and the futures of our diverse communities.

...Not once does this memo provide meaningful solutions to the “low enrollments and low student-faculty ratios” it describes, other than making problematic allusions to consolidating these units. Therefore, we see a disturbing contradiction in the fact that the memo labels these units as “Needs Attention”, without expressing any genuine concern or commitment; this reveals the austerity politics and damaging lack of institutional support from the University in this manufactured time of hardship.<sup>3</sup>

I would add that removal – or, the threat of removal – of ethnic and women's studies education is an indication of how little the public university is committed to research and pedagogy that work to actively critique institutional violence and make scholarship hermeneutically relevant and accessible to students of color and queer students with stories that remain unaccounted for in the ledgers of history.

Interdisciplinary programs like those targeted in the “Needs Attention” memo help students to make sense of the idiosyncrasies and contradiction of their world. As one student in my Winter 2013 Women's Studies class expressed in an email to me:

All I want to say is [that] I found my GE courses pretty worthless until I found this course. ...A few months probably helps your students out for a few decades in understanding society. I know I'm the quietest student and I like it that way and even if I don't turn in the best essays or really show the best of work, everything

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<sup>2</sup> “Needs Attention” Memo and The State of Ethnic Studies at UCI”. *ESCAPE*. 27 January 2012. Web. <http://uciescape.tumblr.com/post/16617070618/important-needs-attention-memo-and-the-state-of>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

that I have learned I talk to family and friends about it because it all makes so much sense to me. Growing up in areas like Gardena and Compton I realized how racist cops are fucking assholes. I'm glad we covered real life situations like this [in class].<sup>4</sup>

Sidelining the student's colorful use of language, we might take seriously his claim that the academy, for the most part, has given him very few tools with which to make sense of his own life. It is the claim of this volume that while activism can take many forms, as an intellectual labor it challenges current structures of knowledge production and has the potential to reinvent the university's role within and against the cultures that sponsor it. Activism, likewise, is not about abstract concepts, but about lived reality—about extending the life chances of bodies that have no rightful claim to personhood, much less to citizenship or to civil “rights”; bodies that police officers frisk and violate at whim; bodies that are exposed to gratuitous acts of violence and humiliation in the illegal barracks of Guantanamo Bay; the bodies of maimed and mangled children in Iraq and Afghanistan that have died so that the United States can assert its exceptionalism; bodies that, we might go so far as to say, were in fact never meant to survive. To *think* activism, then, is to act affectively and professionally in ways that consider and reconsider the discursive and very real violence that haunts these bodies.

It is in commemoration of one such student that the editors of *Trans-Scripts* offer this volume to the public. Christien “Glitch” Rodriguez, a queer-identified undergraduate student at UC Irvine, was only a few credits away from his bachelor's degree when he took a leave of absence in the fall of 2012. He left the university not by choice; he could no longer afford to stay because student tuition and fees were rising at rates that could not be matched by financial aid or loan assistance. He would kill himself a few months later, on March 8, 2013, in a way that I can only describe as a display of defiance: by throwing himself from the top floor of the Social Science Parking Structure onto oncoming traffic and in front of student witnesses, at approximately 5pm on a Friday afternoon. Christien, a Psychology and Social Behavior major, was smart enough to know the statement he was making when he committed suicide just a few steps away from the instructional buildings that once housed him as a student and that were now keeping him out.

As a student activist, Christien, who minored in queer studies, was endlessly generous in his capacity to describe gender (dis-)identification and the process of transition to cisgender students—to explain and rationalize for them the fact that his body does not “compute”. He narrated himself as transgender or gender-queer; his was a “movement away from an unchosen starting place—rather than [a movement

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<sup>4</sup> Personal correspondence. 11 March 2013.

towards] any particular destination”.<sup>5</sup> Christien had no investment in passing as a man in a homophobic and transphobic world; his was a commitment to changing that world—a commitment that for Christien was never disconnected from the affective labor of making himself an open book from which people might learn about how to live otherwise. He was perfectly comfortable living in the flux of things, as a “glitch” in the system, locating himself in the moments that stopped peoples’ gazes and held their conversations; that is, in the moments before his appearance or habitus could find a referent in language. In a poem dated November 14, 2012 titled, “System Error”, Christien wrote:

What do you do with a ‘glitch’ in the system?  
An incompatibility with a world that has formulated  
its own exemption from inquiry?

...They ask all the wrong questions when I fail to compute,  
When the appearance of my structure resists placement by mocking it,  
When my sign is absent of meaning.

Christien’s activist record indicates a commitment to coalitional politics: he chaired the Irvine Queers and was heavily involved in transgender ally and support groups as well as the Cross-Cultural Center, the Black Student Union, Students for Justice in Palestine, the Chicano student group Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan (perhaps known best by its acronym M.E.Ch.A), and student efforts – like those of “Take Back UCI” – to agitate against the university’s neoliberal agenda in defense of public education. It is from these oppositional and counter-hegemonic groups that Christien drew his lifeblood; these groups served as a reminder that he was not alone—that his was not the only body that failed to easily “compute”.

At a speech on November 9, 2011 titled, “Last Appeal to the UC Administration”<sup>6</sup>, Christien foreshadowed what would be the reason for his own untimely death: the greed of UC Regents and administrators, who, in a gluttonous attempt to fill their coffers, make public education unaffordable for students with modest means or unpredictable socioeconomic backgrounds—students for whom things like SAT test preparation, honors and AP courses, tutors, and the time and leisure to dedicate oneself fully to studying, are unavailable. In his speech, Christien skillfully (and, I might add, poetically) weaves this story of educational disenfranchisement with descriptions of brown and black bodies in the U.S. prison system, homelessness and poverty. Christien exposes these administrators as co-

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<sup>5</sup> Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Seal Press, 2008. pp.1.

<sup>6</sup> See Christien’s speech, “Last Appeal to the UC Administration” (dated November 11, 2011) on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSCWALU933w&feature=youtu.be>

conspirators with the Prison-Industrial Complex, with corporations that profit off of the (free) labor of brown and black bodies. UC Regents and administrators prioritize profits over students; they are people who are so invested in “making more money than [they] could ever spend in [a] lifetime”, as Christien notes in his speech, that they forget – perhaps intentionally so – that their policies result in lived effects.

It was the impossible possibility of hope, of a future that might be otherwise, informed by activism and education, that sustained Christien in a world that was otherwise hostile to the audacity of his unapologetically queer existence. In his speech, Christien remarks, “So many of us have nothing left to lose, and can [do] nothing but fight.”