

Survivor Skills: Authenticity, Representation and Why I Want to Teach Reality TV

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ABSTRACT

This paper will consider the pedagogical potential in constructing a class on the phenomenon of reality television by exploring the possibilities and pitfalls of a shared viewing of these “texts” as a site of critical engagement with popular culture. A course on reality TV would require a deep analysis of the topics of representation, authenticity, and audience reactions. The course I would like to teach would also consider the ways that reality TV is simultaneously emblematic of, and contributes to, the foregrounding of neo-liberal discourses. This paper addresses some of the pedagogical implications of an analysis of reality TV by considering the above themes in greater detail.

I see the creation of a post-secondary class on reality TV as pedagogically radical in both form and content, as a site where new ideas can be applied to shifting and unstable terrain. In challenging the primacy of high culture as the only worthy area of analysis, in viewing one of the most debased forms of popular culture as academically rich, I hope to help my undergraduate students build bridges between what they think about in school and what they do at home. I see such a class as an exciting explosion of the binaries of high and low culture, public and private space, and truth and fiction.

KEYWORDS

Reality Television, Engaged Pedagogy, Popular Culture, Representation, Authenticity, Neoliberalism, Social Work, Critical Discourse Analysis

As an avid consumer of popular culture and a teacher of critical social work, I am always on the lookout for how these two domains overlap. Yet the overlaps should, in fact, be fairly obvious. In teaching my students how to “do” social work, I do my best to help them deconstruct their lives and their worlds. Yet one of the single biggest impacts on the public imaginary of my students, popular culture, is often curiously absent from social work education. An examination of popular culture gives a particular lens to understanding the specific interests and structural factors that aid in the creation of their surroundings. As always, however, the pedagogical lesson begins with personal moments and experiences.

Many years ago I went to school to achieve a Master’s in Social Work. Our cohort, like many before us, bonded through the frustrations of graduate school and the often-difficult emotional work of confronting our own biases and specific life circumstances in order to become qualified and self-reflexive social work practitioners. We found a unique way of blowing off steam at the end of the day. While we heard that the law students would gather round the TV to watch *Law and Order* and assumed that the med and nursing school pupils had a weekly date to watch *ER*, the social work students in my cohort would group together to witness a strange new phenomenon: reality TV, in particular the spectacle of the show *Survivor*. In watching the specific interpersonal challenges of groups of people uniquely selected for their capacity to engender conflict and be subjected to contrived situations of privation and stress, we laughed, analyzed, and shouted at the TV every Thursday night.

When I look back at that period of my life, there are tangible lessons I can remember from being in the classroom and powerful insights I can draw from my experiences in the field. At the same time, I recall less specific moments of learning that resonated with me and that changed my approach in both my private and professional life. Those Thursday nights have stayed in my memory as a particular way that my fellow students and I could take our formal learning and apply it to an analysis of popular culture, specifically to reality television. Our watching allowed us to simultaneously assess the same artifact and learn, to our alarm and delight, that we were often experiencing the “same” moments very differently. It allowed us to discuss human emotions and stressors very specifically in ways that our student placements—each at different agencies, and bound by both laws and ethical constraints of confidentiality—could not. Yet our analysis went further: those Thursday night goof-off sessions allowed us to see dominant discourses of racism and whiteness, of gender and sexuality, and of the ways that stereotypes are easily embedded in neo-liberal notions of individual agency. Those Thursdays remain an example of some of the most critical and delightful learning I have undergone. As I grow as an educator, and as I now observe my own students in social work classrooms and field placements, I wonder if there is a way to harness the magical critique of those early heady days of reality TV and apply them to the glut of reality television that has followed since the millennial days when *Survivor* was a strange and new media artifact.

My analysis of reality TV as a teaching tool thus draws from my own experiences as a student and educator, but it is disingenuous to suggest that my desire to bring this aspect of popular culture into the classroom is borne exclusively of thoughtful pedagogical analysis. Rather, my leisure time continues to be spent in part as a viewer of reality television in many different forms and contexts. On the one hand, my love of reality TV is my dirty little secret, the low culture hiding in my web browser’s history, silently standing alongside the scholarly texts that grace my bookshelf. On the other hand, I continue to observe the ways that viewing reality TV hones my critical lens, allowing me to consider the dominant discourses that shape my world as well as the commerce that foregrounds certain discourses while muting others. It gives me an entry, albeit one that is heavily mediated, into worlds that I could not otherwise see. Reality TV, like my other passions – memoir and blogs – gives me access to raw emotion and takes me beyond my own neighborhood and experiences. I have found that reality TV provides me with tremendous opportunities to apply the analyses contained in those scholarly tomes, to apply the critical theories that I hold so dear.

This paper will consider the pedagogical potential in constructing a class on the popular culture phenomenon of reality TV, suggesting that “reality shows can be seen as significant cultural objects whose production and consumption reflect and reveal norms and ideologies of contemporary culture” (Montemurro 84). I will explore the possibilities – and some pitfalls – of a shared viewing of these “texts” as a site of critical engagement with popular culture. To argue that reality TV provides a useful site of theoretical analysis, however, requires an examination of some of the key themes. A course on reality TV would require a deep analysis of the topics of representation, authenticity, and audience reactions. Finally, the course I would like to teach would consider the ways that reality TV is simultaneously emblematic of, and contributes to, the foregrounding of neo-liberal discourses. This paper addresses some of the pedagogical implications of an analysis of reality TV by considering the above themes in greater detail.

REPRESENTATION

Even a facile engagement with reality TV elicits discussion about issues of representation. If reality TV is meant to showcase reality, I would like my students to consider whose reality is being put forth and through which epistemology such a reality is constructed. Reality TV obviously perpetuates stereotypes and still skews toward the same normative tropes that exist in other sites of popular culture but, alarmingly, it does so under the guise of presenting the truth. Williams suggests that “the line between news and entertainment, documentary and reality TV is constantly blurred and shifting” (550). For many viewers, the clearly mediated “truths” of reality TV may provide as much information about communities and systems as more traditional news media and other expert discourses. For example, Morris and McNerney suggest that seventy-two percent of survey respondents who were pregnant for the first time saw popular pregnancy and delivery shows such as *A Baby Story* and *Birth Day* as important sources of information (134). As the authors go on to show in detail, these shows present a great deal of misinformation and may perpetuate myths about pregnancy and childbirth.

Likewise, dating shows such as *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* suggest that fairy tale love is largely restricted to white middle-class couples (Dubrofsky and Hardy); Montemurro shows that, “among the women contestants, whiteness was privileged and racial others were either exoticized or assimilated, depending on what seemed to best serve the storyline” (96). Reality shows that center on tropes of personal transformation, such as *The Swan*, deliberately seek less normative participants at the outset but with the explicit motive of achieving normativity as the desired outcome. As Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer note:

Plastic surgery shows often select as their subjects a “certain class” of woman, which translates frequently into working-class women. The selection of working-class subjects contributes to the seemingly inexhaustible ideology of the American dream where those of a lower socio-economic class can succeed at becoming middle-class subjects, and the media audience participates in this transformation by tuning in to watch. (266)

This affiliation may be particularly keen for viewers who do not see themselves reflected elsewhere in popular culture. Skeggs and Wood suggest that working-class viewers may find the unpretentiousness of participants “like them” appealing in the absence of many other sites of representation (“Labour of Transformation” 567). Finally, popular “game-docs” such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* purport to pick diverse contestants but generally only manage to achieve “overplayed typecasting ... with their ever present Gay Man, Wild Woman, Single Mom, Yuppie, Everybody’s Friend, Redneck, Slacker, Victim ...” (Kerrigan 22).

Given the tenacity of both the stereotypical permissible diversities of much reality TV as well as the very explicit exclusions on many shows, how can these shows serve as a useful pedagogical tool? Leaving aside for the moment issues of authenticity, how can the deliberate selection of specific bodies over others, the deliberate creation, through editing, of specific “characters” associated with stereotypes, provide a launching point for analysis in the classroom? Is there anything to say about reality TV beyond a critique of its obvious limitations?

Using reality TV allows students to consider that “television talk is always a part of the broader conversational culture” (Aslama and Pantti, “Flagging Finnishness” 62). While it is certainly alarming to consider the implications of paternalistic shows such as *A Baby Story* standing in for empowered feminist obstetric knowledge, these shows did not single-handedly create the culture they reflect. Rather, expert-driven and reductionist approaches to information (about childbirth and beyond) are the norm. By amplifying some of the tropes of dominant discourses into sensationalized formats, reality TV may provide a point of entry for students to consider the failings of representation more broadly. As a result, they may develop a critical lens that extends beyond their analysis of these leisure-time shows toward sites that are more concretely presented as truth: an analysis of reality TV may engender a degree of skepticism about reality. Likewise, an analysis of who is missing from many of these shows may allow for a conversation to develop about which bodies are rendered invisible in the public sphere, or only visible in particularly virulent and narrow ways. For example, an analysis of *The Biggest Loser* may allow students to embark upon a more ambitious conversation about size acceptance and the scope of both the ignoring of fat bodies and the ways they can only be seen in the context of transformation (Cooper 35; Murray 155).

If there are lessons to be learned by an examination of the specificity with which particular bodies are represented, there is also pedagogical value in an analysis of people who are presented as simultaneously ordinary and bizarre. The subtype of reality TV shows that purport to provide a documentary lens on ordinary, unusual people has gained great traction over the last decade and provides a paradoxical story. On the one hand, people like JimBob and Michelle Dugger, with their nineteen children (and counting!), “little people” Matt and Amy Roloff and their family, or Alana “Honey BooBoo” Thompson are presented as people “just like us,” suggesting that difference is illusory or only in the eye of the beholder. At the same time, such shows present a latter-day freak show wherein audiences eagerly consume the mundane details of non-normative lives. Andrejevic’s assertion that, “by democratizing celebrity, such programs help reinforce the notion that a surveillance-based society can overcome the hierarchies of mass society” (“The Kinder, Gentler Gaze” 253) resonates here in its presumption that, by learning about difference, we may lose sight of our limitations and biases. Thus, an examination of the ways that non-normativity is specifically taken up in reality TV in deliberate ways may be productive for students grappling with both the limitations of their own experiences of difference and their own titillation by the gentle sensationalizing that occurs in these shows.

Reality TV may be taken up as a useful site of analysis on the basis of race, and significant scholarship has considered the ways that reality TV continues to maintain a commonsense and unyielding whiteness. Bell-Jordan suggests that “race continues to be constructed in superficial, reductive, and often hegemonic ways—and this process has increasingly come to define the genre” (369), while Dubrofsky and Hardy argue that these shows are “recentering Whiteness without calling explicit attention to this fact” (376). There is no question that the performance of race on reality TV is deeply flawed. In examining these flaws, however, many of the abiding archetypes of race (such as Hill Collins’s analysis of the Mammy, Jezebel and the Matriarch [69]) are so amplified that skeptical students may finally have a context in which to understand what many racialized students may have known, implicitly and explicitly in their bodies all along. It becomes harder to deny or minimize racism when its machinations are so explicitly exposed.

While an analysis of race reveals the dominant discourse of whiteness that invades nearly all reality TV, there is nonetheless a valuable lesson to be gained on the topic of agency and specificity in these shows. Shows that deliberately seek out ethnically or racially specific participants (such as *Flavor of Love* [Dubrofsky and Hardy], the Finnish show *Extreme Escapades* [Aslama and Pantti, “Flagging Finnishness”] or the Canadian version of *The Bachelor*) present their own deep flaws in maintaining stereotypical tropes about the populations they present. At the same time, an analysis of the specifics of these sites opens conversations about insider and outsider presentations, nationalism and globalization, and the ways that the colonizing influence of reality

TV is nonetheless mediated through the specifics of particular populations. Dubrofsky and Hardy highlight this by examining the ways that participants on *Flavor of Love* were held to a very different standard than participants on the “mainstream” romance show *The Bachelor*, arguing that while *The Bachelor* was centered on hegemonic and unselfconscious whiteness, *Flavor of Love* promoted an almost ironic hyper-performance of Blackness. While maintaining an awareness of the limitations of these performances, students may benefit from delving into a more nuanced analysis of dominant discourse and reality TV that complicates a discussion of representation and thus interrupts the idea that all non-normative performers are naïve dupes. Likewise, an analysis of sexual and gender orientations and disability could be usefully undertaken by considering both the agency of particular actors/subjects and the constraints within which such performances occur.

AUTHENTICITY

Despite the generic moniker of “reality” in reality TV, at this stage of its development, it is arguable that few viewers would perceive such offerings as genuinely presenting reality. Indeed, as the prior analysis of representation suggests, much of the offering of reality TV is neatly packaged in response to concerns about production and commerce, leaving “reality” far, far behind. Yet such an analysis relies on positivist notions of reality and does not extend to a more nuanced analysis of authenticity and emotionality as key characteristics that are exemplified in reality TV. As Kavka argues, “reality TV relishes contradictions. It shamelessly mixes the generic attributes of fact and fiction” (179). In so doing, a collective analysis of reality TV begs interesting questions about truth, fiction, performance, and our own assertions of what constitutes the real.

For example, one assumes that critical viewers might see the lives portrayed on MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* or *Teen Mom* as inaccurate and heavy-handed representations of the lives of young mothers and the particularities of their experiences (for example, see Guglielmo). While we are critical of the ways that young motherhood is packaged on these shows, we may nonetheless see through the moralizing discourses to view the real structural challenges experienced by younger mothers. Furthermore, the capacity to unpack the grey area between fact and fiction in a classroom context takes postmodernist and poststructuralist concepts of truth out of the realm of inaccessible theory and instead asks students to consider which truth they would accept as authentic, which story they would deem an adequate representation. In this context, the course might usefully be bolstered by contrasting viewings of documentary films (including those with a reality bent, such as the *7-Up* series) and considering the limitations of subjectivity.

Fundamentally, such an analysis allows students to call their own performances into question. If, as Dubrofsky and Hardy argue, “participants on reality TV shows perform for the camera, either unwittingly or explicitly, just as people perform in their daily lives to suit the imperatives of a given situation” (375), a shared viewing of reality TV guided by critical pedagogy would allow students to tease out their own unwitting and/or explicit performances. This is of obvious value to me in teaching social work students who are not only grappling with more obvious sites of performance such as professionalism but also negotiating with the many performances (e.g., race, gender, and ability) that may be beyond their control. Thus, while students may begin their analysis by taking for granted reality TV as inauthentic, our shared viewing may evolve into a more nuanced reckoning with the notion of authenticity itself. This follows Kavka’s assertion that “discursively, reality TV makes claims about ordinariness, authenticity and the social value of accessing private lives” (179).

If reality TV can be seen as an obvious contrivance of fact, what are we to make, as viewers, of the presentation of emotion on these shows? Can the rage, heartbreak, and passion presented in this context yield further lessons about authenticity of emotion, even as the machinations of editing and production suggest that such raw emotions are slickly incorporated into a discrete message? Skeggs and Wood suggest that “[w]hilst the staging of events on ‘reality’ television complicates any ontological claim to the ‘real,’ it *can* make a claim

to the ‘actual’—the camera tells us this ‘actually’ happened as a response to an unscripted, if contrived, *actual* situation” (“Labour of Transformation” 559). Kavka extends this in arguing that “authenticity is confirmed by the ... emotional intensity of the participants’ interactions” (181). In this respect, reality TV presents an interesting blurring of the public and private in presenting emotions (and, indeed, seeking out these high emotions through inevitably “shocking” twists and turns) that were, prior to the rise of this genre, largely inaccessible in the realm of mass media. Aslama and Pantti suggest that reality TV has resurrected the theatrical monologue, in which a lone character shares her or his thoughts with the audience privately (“Talking Alone” 178). At the same time, they note the inherent contradiction in this style of conversation: “The paradox of an individualized society is that while one is talking alone about one’s deepest emotions, at the same time one is selling one’s authenticity to viewers” (“Talking Alone” 181). Skeggs and Wood argue that this blurring of the public and private has implications for an analysis of traditional gender roles, suggesting that “[r]eality’ television, by sensationalizing women’s domestic labour and emotional management of relationships, displays the new ways in which capital extends into the ‘private,’ in which capital is engaged in the socialization of affective capacities” (“Labour of Transformation” 560) and that “[t]he space and practice of intimacy becomes like other social goods and exchange-values that are socially distributed and allocated” (562).

Students may benefit from having to grapple with both their own reactions to the strong emotions foregrounded in the viewing and with the ways that particular emotions are routinely assigned to particular bodies. Both Pozner and Dubrofsky and Hardy suggest that the aggressive and larger-than-life personalities often assigned to racialized bodies may lead to the inability of such participants enjoying any longevity on such shows. Referring to a feisty racialized contestant on the show *Road Rules*, Andrejevic and Colby argue that “the reason she had to leave was the reason for her being recruited to the show in the first place” (207). In other words, stereotypical racially or culturally ascribed characteristics may bring often-ignored bodies to the fore, but they do so at the price of maintaining stereotypes and cultural misunderstanding. As Aslama and Pantti suggest, “This dilemma of managed and unmanaged feelings can be seen at the core of reality television. However without doubt it also celebrates the loss of emotional control, emotional conflicts and the very emotions that are considered inappropriate in society at large” (“Talking Alone” 171). Arguably, the explicit portrayal of emotion is rarely available for analysis in the classroom, positioned as an unemotional and academic milieu. Yet it is also arguable that viewing a variety of strong emotions, perhaps particularly those that are garnered through contrivance and intersected with dominant discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and so on, is of great academic interest. Certainly, such an analysis would allow our classrooms to evolve beyond a vague analysis of, for example, how service workers may behave, to a tangible discussion of the limits of what we feel comfortable accepting and why. This exercise would remind us that “television participants *and* audiences are located within extended ‘circuits of value,’ helping us to see why it is that vitriolic reactions ‘stick’ where they do, and why certain figures and bodies are loaded with more invective than others” (Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television* 9). These moments may tease out our students’ (and our own) deeply held notions of where lines rest between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in both public and private contexts in meaningful and dramatic ways.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE IMPACT OF AUDIENCE

Students may benefit from examining reality TV as a microcosm of broader cultural discourses. An examination of reality television programming, however, may also expand students’ capacity to undertake discourse analyses. While the underlying goal of critical and transformative pedagogy is always the growth of strong analytical skills, the specific practice of closely examining elements of discourse may sometimes be given only brief space in methodology courses. As a result, students may view their critical research skills as

distinct from their capacity to critically engage with their surroundings. By creating a classroom that can act as a discourse analysis laboratory, students could be encouraged, through both teaching and assignments, to formalize their critical analytic skills. To achieve its transformative potential, however, such a class would need to move toward critical discourse analysis (CDA), which considers both the broader political contexts in which discourses are created and offered and the power relationships between discourse and people's lived experiences: it is, van Dijk argues, "discourse analysis, 'with an attitude'" (96). Furthermore, a true reckoning with critical discourse analysis would empower students to truly consider the ways that discourse is dialogically undertaken. Instead of solely poring over transcripts of programs, thus reducing television to a flat medium, students would be encouraged to consider the implications of audience and the ways that audience reactions are mediated across time and space, and through axes of difference.

There are a number of pedagogical implications in pulling back the camera further and allowing for an analysis of audience and reception. While students, particularly those in critically reflexive disciplines such as women's studies and social work may be familiar with the exercise of implicating themselves in the consumption of media and discourse, a class on reality TV would take the contrivances of this genre and explore the peculiar alchemy that occurs between the producer's intention and the audience's reaction. Montemurro suggests that "[g]iven the popularity of reality television ... the study of how these programs are consumed is essential" (98), yet it may be tempting to begin an analysis of these programs, as indeed, I have done, based on what "they" "say" or, at most, how we, as individuals, react. As an alternative, a course on reality TV would allow students to explore the dynamism between objects of cultural production and their consumption, to consider how "viewers make sense of these shows" (Williams 541). An exploration of intertextuality would consider the ways that individuals encounter culture, suggesting that "when individuals encounter media texts, rather than comprehending them in isolation, they position these representations in relation to other texts and cultural knowledge" (Williams 543). This would be well accomplished through access to scholarly texts that increasingly consider the implications of audience reaction (for example, Skeggs and Wood, "Labour of Transformation" and Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television*) but also through the tangible exercise of viewing cultural products in the classroom. As students grapple with the nuances of unique programs, the surface themes of representation and authenticity within these programs become complicated, and the deviations between the different ways the programs are offered and experienced may emerge. Skeggs and Wood discerned such differences in their analyses of focus groups of viewers grouped by distinctions of class and ethnicity. Their work suggests that television provides unique opportunities for interactive analyses, "demonstrat[ing] a complex interaction between television texts and subjectivity which was more dynamic than the relationship implied through the analogy of text-reader relations" ("Labour of Transformation" 562). By analyzing interactions together in the classroom, we may evolve beyond generalized discussions to a more targeted analysis of specific moments that may encourage reflexivity on the basis of populations, rather than merely individuals. At the same time, Skeggs and Wood caution us to ensure that an analysis of audience does not devolve into an undermining of the real concerns about oppressive representations within reality TV. They argue that "a great deal more serious attention needs paying to exactly how reality television works not only with audiences but with evaluating personhood more generally" (*Reacting to Reality Television* 233). By engaging in a politically accountable response of the complications of reality TV and the ways in which this genre interacts with systems of capitalism, judgment, and personal value, students may begin to explore the strengths of a critically discursive methodology and the implications of audience and reception.

NEO-LIBERALISM

If, as Kavka asserts, “reality TV is a genre in flux” (182), is there truly value in constructing an academic context for its consumption and analysis? Is such a course merely a means of pandering to students by allowing entertainment to masquerade as education? Ironically, such an argument betrays some of the same political ideologies as reality television itself, suggesting that educational models should emphasize measurability, empirical knowledge, and individual hard work over sites of non-standard, messy, and (heaven forbid!) enjoyable learning. The same ideology that presents a wearying slog as the only valuable form of education is likewise amply exposed in much reality TV: the ascendant and inexorable tropes of neo-liberalism.

The problematic representations explored above are of concern not only because of their overreliance on stereotypical notions of difference but also because they maintain the expectations that communities are, fundamentally, merely groups of individuals “surviving” for individual gain. The laughably popular insistence of reality TV participants that they do not join programs “to make friends” ensures that any collegiality is overlooked in favor of a race to the fittest. Deery surmises that commerce underpins this foregrounding of solo struggle, suggesting that “an individualistic Darwinian struggle produces better drama—and therefore higher ratings and therefore more revenue—than, say, utopian harmony and cooperation” (12). I would suggest, however, that the foregrounding of capital as the primary motivator is itself a value of neo-liberalism. In the world of reality TV, production is pursued to a means of maximum capital, but likewise, in the context of popular “game-docs” such as *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*, monetary reward is what engenders the suspense and narrative push that allows for high ratings (and thus corporate financial gain). This capital spiral rests on another powerful “truth” of neo-liberalism—the notion of a level playing field: “These programs are a retelling, in other words, of the American dream wherein any individual can make it big—which usually translates as rich—never mind their initial circumstances. In tune with this ideology, we notice that these shows assiduously avoid raising any larger sociopolitical issues and instead focus on the personal and individual” (Couldry 13).

Beyond the level playing field, neo-liberalism emphasizes what Skeggs and Wood identify in reality TV contexts as a spirit of indefatigability (“Labour of Transformation” 565). Not only will hard work yield individual reward but also individuals will be praised for the hard work of endlessly aspiring toward the mean, thus negating any critical politics of difference. Pozner identifies this trend in *America’s Next Top Model* in which the narrow beauty myths used to evaluate participants provide limited and inconsequential responses to ethnic and racial diversity (196). Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, in looking at makeover shows, expose a more explicit race toward normativity: “... using a reframed rhetoric of individual choice, technological transformation, and celebration of the body, the individual women featured claim to be freeing themselves of their earlier lives. In fact, what is happening is a more intense policing of the body, a body that is ever more docile as it is literally reshaped according to a set of dominant norms” (263).

While an exploration of the prevalence of neo-liberal themes in reality TV is beyond the scope of this article (and has been well undertaken by Couldry), a viewing of reality TV as an accessible site of exposure of these themes is of great pedagogical importance. By positioning the problematics of representation and authenticity within an analysis of neo-liberalism, students may be challenged to unpack difficult ideologies that inform their lives and social contexts. The rhetorics of neo-liberalism have become so commonplace that they can be as difficult to expose as the air we breathe; arguably, this may be heightened for students in institutions of higher learning that may be even more steeped in neo-liberalism’s mores than the society at large. An examination of reality television thus allows students to begin to view the overarching framework that governs the discursive structures informing everyday life. In other words: though I talk about neo-liberalism and I teach about neo-liberalism, an examination of reality television allows me to stand before my students and say “*That* is neo-liberalism,” not in the context of the difficult-to-understand welfare state or in the realm of social policy, but in the framework of the “mindless” indulgence of last night’s viewing.

While a pedagogical analysis of reality TV may meet students “where they are at” and encourage the development of a critical lens that extends even to leisure activities, I concur with Pozner who suggests that, “... becoming critical media consumers isn’t enough. We can’t afford to see media literacy as the means to an intellectual end. Instead, let’s use it to prepare us to take on Goliath Structural changes are needed to achieve the creative, diverse, challenging media we all deserve, and we’re going to have to fight for such shifts” (325–26). Pozner follows her argument with a list of tangible suggestions for how to respond to the limitations and discriminations present in much reality TV. She also actively encourages the practice of culture jamming, in which a reclamation of primary discourses of entertainment and information is taken up as a form of activism. I see the provision of a course on reality TV as a fun way of being deeply critical, of holding up a magnifying glass to one’s distorted reflection of the broader society, while at the same time holding ourselves accountable for what we see. I would love to see students take up a critical autoethnography of their engagement with reality TV, such as that undertaken by Boylorn, as a final assignment, and would love, in provoking students toward Pozner’s suggestions for culture jamming as transformative change, to “jam” both culture and academy. I see the creation of a class like this as pedagogically radical in both form and content, as a site where new ideas can be applied to shifting and unstable terrain. In challenging the primacy of high culture as the only worthy area of analysis, in viewing one of the most debased forms of popular culture as academically rich, I hope to help my students build bridges between what they think about in school and what they do at home. I see such a class as an exciting explosion of the binaries of high and low culture, public and private space, and truth and fiction.

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