Making the Invisible Visible through Popular Culture

Popular culture possesses a hidden power that can be easily overlooked. It shapes and frames how we see the world and ourselves. The things we watch, read, listen to, and play impact the organization of our internal and external worlds. Over time this relationship with our popular culture artifacts creates reverberations that blur the line between input and output.

While this has been true for generations, as our society continues to move online, especially in light of COVID-19, there is a growing necessity to embrace new paradigms. We can see that human activity is changing; we are engaging with popular culture through image, stream, computer game—texts— in a *mediated* meeting place per se, the new living room. Thus, in the pandemic and post-pandemic digital gatherings, holiday dinner and cocktail parties are online and the media *product* is centralized. For example, we can consider the changing nature of engaging with popular culture through the new "Watch Party" feature on Amazon Prime Video or the 11 million people meeting for Island Tours on *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Zhu, 2020). Moreover, we can see new developments in storytelling through collective discussion amongst groups on specialized, digital distribution apps such as *Discord*. Sharing images and debating ideologies on social media platforms is nothing new, but in light of recent events, online calls for collective action and representation seem more immediate than ever before (Pinckney & Rivers, 2020).

These evolving relationships reveal a unique opportunity for reflection. For instance, *how can we as scholars and educators leverage the multivalent lenses generated by these deep conversations between people and media? How can we better understand such cultural products to learn for ourselves and also to teach others?*

For those of us who critically engage with these ideas, it is easy to take for granted the ways in which popular media works to influence points of view or disseminate and process vital, sociocultural information. In general practice, long-held and long since disputed assumptions about the functions and utility of films, television shows, video games, etc. can impede a person's ability to see these materials as fertile ground for identifying the encoding of culture. For many folks, the concept of *passive consumption* continues to cast these important items of reflexive messaging as bits of mindless entertainment.

Often there is an urge to dismiss intent or agenda as a one-way process, perhaps even perpetrated by canny advertisers or authors. Yet, as we know, the consumer/producer/audience relationship is never linear (Fiske, 2010). People shape popular products they engage with whether consciously or unintentionally, by applying their own worldviews to an image or message. From this perspective, we are all in a teaching and learning relationship with popular culture.

Along these lines, the contributors for volume seven, issue three of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* speak to central questions of popular culture: *How to activate the teaching and learning relationship in meaningful ways? How to intentionally integrate and interrogate popular culture artifacts within our pedagogical practice?* And *what can be gained from such an intentional approach?* The common thread across the articles is about making the invisible visible. Each author questions this binary of visibility by critically exploring the spaces where popular culture intersects with constructions of identity

and ideology. There is a deceptively simple take away from these discussions: popular cultural texts have a lot to teach us about what we learn from popular culture texts.

In the first of the full-length articles featured in this issue, *Visuality of Race in Popular Culture: Teaching Racial Histories and Iconography in Media,* Joni Boyd Acuff and Amelia M. Kraehe address the long, repeating history of racist imagery in visual media and culture. The authors identify an absence in visual arts education often resulting in the reproduction of problematic iconographies that reinforces constructions of racial difference and social value in popular media. Uncritically perpetuated by cultural producers and accepted by consumers, these visual representations continue to code white supremacy as the normative socialization standard. Employing Critical Race Theory, Acuff and Kraehe investigate visual texts illustrating these processes and respond with practical pedagogical steps designed to support students in interrogating racial portrayals in popular culture, as well as their own racialized ways of viewing. As the authors explain, "Because popular culture is contested terrain, students can learn to be race-conscious consumers of popular culture today. A deeper awareness of visual codes and conventions can foster critical interpretations and creative responses to popular racial constructions." To this end, Acuff and Kraehe provide a series of media site-based learning activities encouraging students to identify, analyze, react to, and reflect upon visualities of race as both consumers and producers.

The next article similarly addresses the previously unseen, this time to reposition gender analyses of literature in the college classroom. Ramón J. Guerra and Joan Latchaw discuss how their experiences teaching Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* to undergraduate students led them to consider what representations of gender-based social oppression in literature can reveal about masculine navigations of destructive patriarchal structures. In *Unmasking Male Voices in Woman Hollering Creek: Contributions to Pedagogy and Masculinity Studies*, the authors centralize treatments of male characters in Cisneros' texts to address often overlooked gaps in commonly applied historical and analytical frameworks. They reflect on a revision of their undergraduate course including explorations of "masculinity effects," putting Cisneros' work in conversation with Rigoberto González's collection of stories, *Men without Bliss*. According to Guerra and Latchaw, "Such an approach would work to uncover the network of relations (history, geography, social structures, identity politics, personal values, family), that is, the context that explains gender construction and performativity. It also means avoiding essentialisms and moving away from the all too common fallback of hegemonic masculinity." The outcome for scholars and students alike is a reconsideration of Latinx literature focusing on the intersectional realities of lived experience.

The third article in this issue also explores gender and representation, focusing on the dynamics of visibility and change in roleplay and collaborative storytelling. In *D&D Beyond Bikini Mail: Having Women at the Table,* Daniel Carlson considers how the increasing popularity of the fantasy roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons* may be generating opportunities to address issues of representation (or lack thereof) as designers and new players reconsider the white, heteronormative assumptions of race, gender, and sexual identity built into the history of the product. Carlson's research reveals that misogynistic origins, scaffolded by Eurocentric imaginaries, are challenged by new players and product developers as consumers and producers work toward gaming formats privileging inclusivity and collaborative storytelling. For the author, the low stakes, blank-slate nature of character and world-construction essential to tabletop roleplay gives players agency to experiment with representation and to reflect on what and why constructions of identity are commonly normalized, which are often left out. By applying Jacqueline Jones Royster's concept of Critical Imagination to these rhetorical processes, the author suggests that the next obvious step for players is to imagine new representations that bring women, LGBTQ+ folks, and BIPOC players to the table. For Carlson, new initiatives introduced by developers and embraced by fans "have constructed a deliberate feminist intervention on [*D&D*] itself in

order to expand the types of stories that can be told through it, who they are told by, and who they are told for; making it explicit that this game has been designed to provide players the option to play diverse characters that better represent their own life-experiences."

The final two featured articles continue to engage the revelatory power of the media artifact. Both provide practical examples of how popular culture products can situate US political processes and underscore the role that this kind of literacy plays in civic engagement. In *A Heartbeat Away*, Jay Wendland discusses how fictional enactments of the 25th Amendment in television can help students understand the mechanisms of a constitutional process that they might otherwise never see play out. In the run-up and aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, the 25th amendment has been broadly referenced in news media, but sections of the legislation have only rarely been invoked since its ratification. As a result, few Americans fully understand the complexities of presidential power and succession that the amendment addresses or the situational processes essential to its use. As Wendland points out, these same complexities and issues of circumstance make the 25th Amendment a favorite topic for popular culture treatments of political drama. Examples from television shows like *West Wing*, *Madame Secretary*, and *Designated Survivor* illustrate how fictional representations of non-electoral succession processes can contextualize the 25th Amendment's intended function. For Wendland, this is particularly significant in the undergraduate political science classroom: "Traditional college students today do not recall Nixon's resignation in 1974 nor Kennedy's assassination in 1963. By using the depictions of presidential succession in the popular culture narratives... students are able to ground their conceptions of presidential succession in something they are able to actually see." Here, the popular culture artifact explicitly acts as a pedagogical exemplar.

In the last article, Laura Merrifield Wilson also highlights the value of the popular culture product in encouraging multilevel student engagement when teaching political science. In *Pop Culture and Politics: Engaging Students in American Government through Art, Music, and Film*, Merrifield Wilson discusses integrating a variety of media forms into the classroom ecology to bring students closer to a subject that often feels too hard to grapple with or beyond their sphere of concern. Notably, she points out that popular culture has long been entwined with political structures, processes, and actors. Taking this further, Wilson identifies popular culture's often overlooked pedological merit as a site where ideas are negotiated and contested, not unlike the classroom itself. Leveraging this in practice involves making space for popular culture artifacts in all of their myriad forms. As Wilson illustrates, different cultural materials can be differently employed for different outcomes. Songs, sitcoms, memes, and even toys can be analyzed to "demonstrate relevance, serve as a generational translator, expose the bias of experience, and enable an expression of self." The popular culture artifact brings political science concepts into immediate view and allows students to reflect on the social constructions informing their perspectives on civic engagement. This is yet another example of how popular culture can bring students into closer proximity with concepts that may otherwise feel beyond the scope of their lived experiences.

As a whole, this issue is a product of collaboration and a carefully coordinated group effort. During this time, we have made some shifts in the *Dialogue* team, expanding Karina Vado's editorial role to include Interim Musings Editor in addition to Book Review Editor, welcoming in Rheanne Anderson as a new copy editor, and thanking Kelli Bippert for her years of service in editor roles. Thank you to other key contributors of the *Dialogue* team including Creative Designer, Douglas CohenMiller; Copy Editors, Miriam Sciala and Robert Gordyn; and our peer reviewers.

As 2020 comes to an end, we are pleased to share these works in *(Un)Conscious Representation: Interrogating Structures of Race, Gender, Ideology*, highlighting how through popular culture, the invisible can become visible. The works are an exploration of our implicit and explicit constructivist relationships

with popular culture products. Across the articles, we can see a common engagement with what it means to be aware of these connections, to acknowledge that popular culture *teaches* audiences. This implies then that audiences learn, and learning is an active process. Being aware of the role we — and others — play in this exchange allows us to see what's there, identify what's missing, and reflect on what we take away.

Kirk Peterson   **Anna S. CohenMiller**
Managing Editor   Editor in Chief

A word from the Editor in Chief
In this year, our community and many others around the world have faced challenges and heartbreaking times. Your presence and engagement are even more obvious and appreciated at such times. I want to thank you all, the readers, the authors, and the whole *Dialogue* team for your investment, your passion, and commitment. As we move into 2021, I look forward to hearing from you, learning from you, and expanding this incredible community commitment — to understanding better and to sharing with others about the potential of popular culture and pedagogy.

Anna CohenMiller
Editor in Chief

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