

Media Literacy, Education, and a Global Pandemic: Lessons Learned in a Gender and Pop Culture Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks writes that “to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries.” Hence, this paper explores, through narrative dialogue, teacher and student perspectives on the pedagogical impact of the global pandemic on the process of engaging with and learning about media literacy. By naming and narrating teacher and student experiences and perspectives from a course on gender and pop culture that took place during the Spring 2020 semester, the paper aims to demonstrate the way that crisis can both expose certain pedagogical issues as well as generate pedagogical opportunities. It narrates and reflects on the ways in which moments of crisis create opportunities for educators to think differently and more expansively about pedagogy by demonstrating its occurrence in one course, and how the combination of factors specific to the crisis required both the instructor and their students to re-situate themselves in relation to the course content. Through a teacher-student meditation, the paper argues that media literacy is a subject that leads to increased pedagogical deliberation and experimentation in the study of pop culture. It suggests that the experiences described might provide wisdom for further pedagogical development on the subject of media literacy, more broadly, positioning and inviting educators and students to engage in dialogue in order to shift paradigms according to the moment of crisis at hand. The broader aim of the article is to encourage educators to follow the example of the students in the gender and pop culture course who felt empowered to create innovative and social-justice-focused media literacy projects as a way of exercising agency, and of confronting and dealing with the harsh realities of global circumstances.

Keywords: Media literacy, media, pedagogy, pop culture, pandemic, education, gender, gender studies, gender and pop culture

A GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

“Media literacy” might have been a burgeoning pedagogical buzzword during the last decade, but in 2020, without much notice and under the urgency of a global health crisis, the term became a conceptual umbrella into which the entire education system was enfolded. Describing the position of pre-pandemic media literacy, Dr. Hans C. Schmidt states that “for all the media technologies that have come to be used as tools in education, there has continued to be surprisingly little time devoted to actually teaching about media. Such educational experiences—related to both media production and analysis—are particularly important in higher education” (“Media Literacy in a Post-Pandemic World”). When the pandemic began, however, media literacy took center stage, as nearly all education moved to online forms of communication (Schmidt). At this time, teachers and students were collectively crunched into a position wherein media literacy was crucial to the survival of education and a subject of concern and discourse. It was also a pedagogical occasion to which teachers were asked to rise and on which they had to focus their energies. For some, this meant communicating over email with students more frequently and learning to communicate and disseminate information to students via platforms that were familiar but perhaps under-utilized, such as Zoom or Google Hangouts. For others, this meant learning to communicate in entirely new ways, on new platforms, or by using unfamiliar media technologies, such as WebEx and Panopto, and interacting with both materials and each other in the midst of a steep learning curve and in an unfamiliar media terrain.

Regardless of the shape that this crash course in media literacy took during the pandemic, there was an immediate need for educators from all different backgrounds to enhance their media literacy (Schmidt). Accordingly, educators, administrators, students, and parents had to confront the question of media literacy – whether that question was about the gap in media literacy or about the best resources to use to make media literacy part of the curriculum. It follows that a (re)new(ed) consciousness about media literacy arose during the pandemic –a growing awareness of the role of media in our lives and the need for the development of media literacy skills– the momentum of which persists and will continue to do so after students return, full-time, to the physical classroom.

Primary, secondary, and post-secondary educators have, in previous decades, been encouraged to be “critical consumers” of media and to use caution and care when selecting media to support their instruction (Silverman and Keane). In her introduction to *The Gender and Media Reader*, Mary Celeste Kearney explains why the study of the relationship between gender and media matters by emphasizing “the media’s extensive presence in most human lives today” (3). But she acknowledges that this “extensive presence” and our collective everyday exposure to it does not result in critical “knowledge about media production, representation, and consumption” (Kearney 3). “Media studies,” she writes, “provides us with the tools we need to become more media literate... in a media-saturated society” (Kearney 3). Kearney makes an important point: our collective immersion into media culture does not necessarily correspond with media literacy and with the tools needed to be critical media consumers and analysts. The pandemic put the media’s “extensive presence” in our lives into overdrive across the board and compounded it for every educator and student in every virtual classroom. In our undergraduate gender and pop culture classroom, in which a primary part of our work was to attend, with critical analysis, to various representations in popular media, this shift into overdrive and crisis mode placed us in a unique position to attend to media literacy through the lens of the current crisis. It made it evident that the widespread plunge into online learning and the (re)new(ed) consciousness about media literacy produced by the pandemic needs to be considered critically, theoretically, narratively, and interpersonally. In this regard, this paper focuses on the experiences and lessons learned in a gender and pop culture studies classroom during a global crisis and aims to contribute to pedagogical knowledge derived by lived experience on the subject of media literacy. Our paper is written with the recognition that “media are sites of considerable ideological negotiation and contestation, that is sites of struggle over meaning and value”

(Kearney 3). The pandemic brought our attention acutely to these sites of struggle over meaning and value, as we encountered them through and with the media, and some of these struggles are what produced this dialogic essay.

This paper chronicles some of the effects of the pandemic on the course in which both of the authors of this paper were involved in the Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University at Buffalo. Sections of the paper included under the heading of ‘teacher perspective’ were written by Jessica Lowell Mason (at the time, a third-year Ph.D. student and teaching assistant); those written under the heading of ‘student perspective’ were written by Ebehitale Imobhio (at the time, a graduated undergraduate student). The paper was co-constructed in a dialogic format: each of us wrote and shaped our sections independently, but responsively and interactively. For example, a teacher segment was written and shared with the student, who formulated a section after reading it, somewhat in response to it and somewhat as an independent formulation. After a student section was written, a teacher section was written, added to, or re-shaped, partly but not directly in response to the act of reading the student’s section. In other words, we formulated our sections while in the process of reading each other’s work, and this was a form of readerly-dialogue.

The way we formulated our dialogue into an essay, and the way the smaller essays came together to form a dialogic essay, follows the guidance offered by feminist educator and theorist bell hooks in the tenth chapter of *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. The chapter is titled “Building a Community: A Dialogue” (129). At the start of this chapter, hooks writes that it is “crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in discussion that crosses boundaries and creates space for intervention” (129). We “occupy different locations within structures” and our goal in engaging in this dialogue is to map out what hooks calls “terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern with teaching practices” (130). In coming together, as student and teacher, we are deliberately collaborating, crossing boundaries and dismantling the power structure between teacher and student to create space for pedagogical awareness and change. The radical statement made by bell hooks, that “to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences” (13), is the way we pedagogically justify producing our dialogue as an academic and cultural text, despite our awareness that it pushes the boundaries of what is considered an “academic text.” We hope our reflexive and collaborative dialogue will provide a basis for understanding how and why the global health crisis allowed us to engage afresh with media literacy, for using media literacy in the service of understanding social justice issues, and constructing new meaning around the concept of media literacy, especially as it relates to pop-culture-as-social-justice pedagogy. We also hope it will encourage other educators to involve their students in the pedagogical reflexivity process.

PANDEMIC-HEIGHTENED ATTUNEMENT TO MEDIA LITERACY

Teacher Perspective

Before the pandemic unfolded, I was invested in helping students engage with the subject of gender and pop culture by placing my focus on the use of gender-focused theory to guide and inform the process of analyzing popular cultural representations of identity. The upper-level gender studies course I was assigned, titled “Sex: Gender and Popular Culture,” afforded me the opportunity to take a broad subject area and to tailor it to my own pedagogical philosophy, an opportunity that inspired me to think about how media literacy can and should be brought into a pedagogy that focuses on pop culture and gender. But media literacy had not been the focus or foundation of the course, but instead was a branch of it prior to the pandemic. Previously, media literacy had been something that I taught in the composition classroom, without announcing it as such,

because it was interwoven in subjects I taught, related to rhetoric, writing, gender, and more broadly, identity. Accordingly, in the composition classroom, the focus on media literacy was not something I identified, named, or reflected on; it was something I inadvertently utilized and addressed.

As it played out, I arranged the course so that rhetorical analysis and Stuart Hall's work on representation would serve as its foundation, and arranged the rest accordingly. Thus, we would first re-familiarize ourselves with concepts necessary for sophisticated visual rhetorical analysis and an understanding of cultural studies and concepts related to representation. Then, using Stuart Hall's work, we would move on to consider gender through a variety of theoretical analytic lenses, each with their own vocabularies to ground our analytic considerations, such as that of considering representation and meaning in utopic and dystopic representations from fairy tales to reality TV. We would, furthermore, consider masculinities using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theoretical work on the subject, the impact of certain gazes using Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze, and the colonial gaze and the spectacle of difference through Ella Shohat's work. These were some of the themed modules in the composition class. Other modules focused on gender and pop culture representations of (and discourses surrounding) cyborgs, and concepts from Haraway's and LeGuin's work provided the theoretical analytic lenses through which critical discourse related to gender identity and capitalism were configured. The final module of the course combined the subject of media literacy with that of intersectionality, and the works of bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw were crucial to leading the way to students' engagements with media literacy that were grounded in intersectionality and part of a social justice pedagogy. This arrangement worked well and had a structural methodological quality to which students, on the whole, responded with a sense of critical agency and empowerment. Critical media literacy was part of the last module, which was titled "From Social Media to Social Justice," but it was unnamed.

This worked well, but my focus was not on media literacy: I was not consciously drawing students' attention to media literacy because I, was not thinking about how the course was functioning as a media literacy course. There is a degree of blurriness between the conceptions of media culture and pop culture because little distinction is made between the two and the two are co-constructive (Trier-Bieniek and Leavy 12). In the introduction to *Gender and Pop Culture: A Text Reader*, editors and sociologists Adrienne Trier-Bieniek and Patricia Leavy explain that the lack of distinction between pop and media culture is a function of the way that both engage with cultural production, but they do not go so far as to equate the two. According to Trier-Bieniek and Leavy, pop culture involves diverse practices through which culture is consumed and produced textually (e.g., in narratives, objects, and mediated images), whereas media culture functions as an "agent of socialization" through which social norms and values are instilled (12-13). This is a key definitional distinction that they have put forward for teacher- and student-readers, which nonetheless still leaves the question of the relationship between media and pop culture open and flexible.

It seems obvious that pop culture can be transmitted through media culture, and in doing so, can act as a socializing agent. This overlap is a key part of the exploration of pop culture in a gender studies classroom because it sets up a premise for understanding gender as a set of norms that are produced through the socializing of pop-media culture. Trier-Bieniek and Leavy's introduction offers an example of the way that media literacy is being taught without being named as part of the lesson's aim. Thus, they don't declare that their aim is to raise student self-awareness and develop their abilities to analyze media literacy, but the book clearly offers students opportunities to develop this media literacy. The way that Trier-Bieniek and Leavy approach media literacy in their text-reader is the way that I was approaching it in my classroom: by inadvertently and not-consciously addressing media literacy through the subjects of media and pop culture. Indeed, media literacy was not part of my pedagogy and course description, and even more importantly, it was not part of the reflexive and deliberative consciousness of my pedagogy.

The vague but important ways that media literacy comes into play in multiple discourses is made evident in Jacquelyn S. Kibbey's essay, "Media Literacy and Social Justice in a Visual World." In Kibbey's essay,

media literacy is, at first, discussed as its own category, but, as was the case in Trier-Bierniek and Leavy's introduction, it melds with the literacy through which it functions, in this case, visual literacy. The mass media mediums that Kibbey describes come to be studied through visual literacy, which, as Kibbey points out, "raises awareness of visual culture" (51). Kibbey articulates the relationship between media literacy and visual literacy in two ways by arguing (1) that mass media is the conduit through which visual culture is created and disseminated and (2) that visual literacy is the "overarching concept, the 'big picture,' into which we infuse media literacy" (51). Kibbey advocates for the inclusion of both media and visual literacy beyond the art classroom and in all subject areas (52). Through the convergence of visual literacy, media literacy, and technology literacy, citizens encounter and "are influenced about" social justice issues (Kibbey 51). The way that Kibbey addresses media literacy, as both part of and separate from visual literacy, might offer an explanation as to how media literacy functioned in my pop culture classroom prior to the pandemic where it was assumed to be part of pop culture, but that assumption made it somewhat invisible as a subject.

Being more deliberate about how pop culture and media literacy relate, how they are part of one another and co-constructive, but also how they are distinct, is an important intervention that the pandemic brought forward. In fact, being deliberate and specific about the role of media literacy in the course is the pedagogical intervention that the pandemic produced. I credit the crisis, my students' openness about their struggles during the crisis, and the work of Jennifer Pozner, whose creative media literacy project suggestions I relied on in the moment of crisis for shifting my pedagogy and creating an opportunity to transform my gender and pop culture class from a course in which media literacy was present but latent to a course in which media literacy was a critical subject of discourse and an area for the development of student agency. Pozner describes media literacy through the lens of consumerism. She writes to her (student and teacher) readers that "being an educated media consumer... requires bringing critical media literacy skills to the news we read and watch; the music, videos, and movies we hear and see; the video games we play; and the print ads, commercials, and billboards that surround us" (Pozner 300). One of the stated goals of her chapter on media literacy projects and games is to "help educators bring media literacy discussions into the classroom," and she encourages educators to adapt the media literacy tools that she provides according to student needs (301). Pozner's chapter enabled me to re-formulate the end of the semester amidst the pandemic in three ways: (1) it provided creative pedagogical activities with a spirit of enthusiasm, (2) it brought media literacy as a subject into focus, and (3) it provided the flexibility that would allow me to connect with and address the diverse needs of students trying to complete a semester during a pandemic.

The circumstances of the pandemic, paired with Pozner's flexible and creative approach to media literacy, provided an opportunity for me to re-conceptualize the course mid-semester. It allowed me to re-consider the content of the course and the assignments, which in turn, led me to think differently about both the assignments and the goal of the course, as well as about the actual meaning of media literacy. It was a reminder of a point that Rebecca Ropers-Huilman makes in her essay, "Scholarship on the Other Side: Power and Caring in Feminist Education," when she writes that feminist teaching is not "pure practice" but, rather, is "affected not only by participants but also by institutions in which it takes place" (40). The teaching context is shaped by several factors, many of them institutional, but a moment of crisis like a pandemic, brings them into more acute focus and raises questions about how that context, and the pedagogy from which it is formed, might be reconsidered and reshaped in the future. Pozner's model of teaching media literacy through creative projects enabled me to reimagine media literacy and its importance as a pedagogical subject and educational tool for both teaching media literacy and supporting students through a crisis.

Representation and media literacy began to matter more during the pandemic, and the pandemic created space for new meaning to be made and for pedagogical reflexivity. We moved from being on the outside looking in at concepts to suddenly being immersed in media and cultural texts in a way that made

our work more alive and palpable. Media literacy became a vehicle of urgency for us to articulate and claim an active role within the space of crisis we occupied, a space that thrust us into media sources and developed a more conscious awareness about it. It became an occasion for disclosure and cooperation. Rebecca Ropers-Huilman urges educators to “share our struggles with students as we negotiate relationships supported and disrupted by power and caring practices” (55). I certainly openly shared my struggles with housing and lack of access to resources that spring semester. The pandemic provided an opportunity for educators and students alike to share struggles and negotiate pedagogical relationships with heightened attention to power and care. It also brought our attention to theoretical frameworks within the course that considered power in immediate and high stakes applications, as both my students and I were immersed in the media we were studying. Media literacy served as a framework for examining our circumstances.

Watching catastrophes unfold through multiple forms of media, and feeling its real effects in our bodies, minds and families was difficult, but rather than compounding the difficulty, media literacy provided us the means with which to confront it. Our concepts were there to help us comprehend and cope with what was unfolding. Mythical gendered tropes that arise out of the colonial gaze, for instance, as described in Ella Shohat’s “Gender and the Culture of Empire,” which we read during the earlier part of the course, offered tools for either comprehending or remaining critical and distant from media coverage. The way that Shohat describes colonizing notions of “rescue” and the “Western imaginary” as “metaphorically render[ing] the colonized land as a female to be saved from her environ/mental disorder” were not just frameworks through which we could study and understand pop culture representation in films (Shohat 95); they were strategies for coping with the real-life events with which we were being bombarded in the media at a moment of vulnerability. These concepts came to have a more embodied meaning, grounded in the here and now, as we lived and studied together through a time of pipelines and assaults on sacred lands, environmental crises, pandemic lock-downs, mass Covid-19-related deaths, political upheaval, anti-Semitic attacks, police and state violence against People of Color, and widespread uprisings against bigotry and racism.

Instead of us having to search out examples in pop culture media contexts, the examples were blasting us every day in the media coverage of the crises associated with the pandemic. “Bushfires in Australia Rage On,” “World Health Organization Announces Novel Coronavirus,” “Trump’s Impeachment Trial Begins,” “Trump is Acquitted,” “Pandemic Triggers Global Recession,” “The Deadliest Mass Shooting in Canadian History,” “Murder Hornets’ Introduced,” “Ahmaud Arbery Video Shocks the Nation,” “George Floyd Killed,” “The Black Lives Matter Movement Ramps Up,” “Another Police-Involved Shooting Grabs Headlines,” “Officer Fired in Breonna Taylor Case,” “Bubba Wallace Situation”: these were just a few of the headlines representing traumatic events that took place between January and June, 2020 (Ganley “2020 in Headlines”). We, as students and the teacher, were embedded within the framework of the media we were studying; we were actors exercising agency within that realm and were deeply invested in the happenings around us at the same time as being subjected to all of the violence and trauma of living through that period.

What we had read about earlier in the course was showing itself and being fought against before our eyes, within our minds, and in our lives. One glaring example of this occurred in March, when Donald Trump referred to the Coronavirus as “the Chinese virus” and “kung flu” (Moynihan and Porumbescu). *The Washington Post* reported that Trump’s use and weaponization of the Western gaze through this incendiary slur was an attempt to shift the blame for the negative effects of the virus away from himself and toward China (Moynihan and Porumbescu). What was clear was that Trump was using pre-existing racist hostility toward China and anti-Asian sentiment, the current symbolic relations in representational colonial discourses, to produce his intended rhetorical effect, which was utilized to increase hatred against Asian people in the United States. We, as students and the teacher, were part of this moment. We were participants in it, primarily through the news and through social media. Our pedagogical shift toward media literacy happened over the

course of a semester of continual crises and events of violence and death, which culminated, toward the end of the semester and the start of summer, in an uprising of people standing together to protest against racism and colonialization some of whom gathered to bring down statues of Columbus, a symbol of contentious meaning and conflicting narratives.

Racism and colonial apparatuses were forcing us to contend with meaning, to make meaning, and to respond in a meaningful way to what was happening to us, and the course content became part of our tool bag for surviving the moment. Because our class was already exploring these subjects theoretically, the students were uniquely equipped to consider and respond to the racial violence and uprisings that accompanied the landscape of the pandemic. These theoretically tools for analyzing popular culture became the ones we used to think about, process, analyze, and respond to. Our media literacy tools were our crisis-management tools. This was an educational opportunity that could not have happened in the way it did without this particular confluence of events, perhaps, but it does offer pop culture educators new directions and possibilities, in terms of what media literacy can do to help students, both in and outside of the classroom. Sharon M. Ravitch would characterize the way that the course was re-shaped by the crisis as part of what she calls “flux pedagogy” (Ravitch). In her article, “Why Teaching Through Crisis Requires a Radical New Mindset,” Ravitch provides a hopeful outlook for the way that the pandemic changed the rules in academia. She writes that “during this time of radical flux, with our daily lives and wellbeing disrupted, COVID-19 has also spotlighted a 400-year pandemic of structural racism; these deep civil reverberations, too, have generated new kinds of accountability for faculty across every field” (Ravitch). Hence, framing the pandemic as a “time of radical flux” helps to frame the pedagogical opportunity it provides to make radical changes, with social justice in mind.

Although reimagining assignments and reimagining the course to centralize media literacy was not something that occurred as a result of following a pedagogical model; it is helpful to frame and understand what happened across the semester using Ravitch’s “flux pedagogy,” which “integrates ‘teaching agility’ and a ‘radical growth mindset’” (“Why Teaching Through Crisis”). She outlines five dimensions to “flux pedagogy,” which include an inquiry stance and distributed wisdom approach, radical compassion and self-care, responsive and humanizing pedagogy, racial literacy, and brave space pedagogy (Ravitch). I did not have this exact model to follow when the pandemic took place, but each dimension of flux pedagogy seems to be what the pandemic was pushing us toward, and it embodies most of what I did, mid-semester, to reshape the course. Realizing that my students were not merely a critical audience to the forms of media they were studying but that were also actors in it, in addition to attending to student needs, first and foremost, allowed me to create, through my collaboration with them, an opportunity to help shape their own media literacy by having them create media literacy projects of their own using the tools provided by the course to make something that was useful and possibly empowering, on much of their own terms.

Student Perspective

As a queer Black woman, my perspective and opinions are always informed by my sexuality, gender, and race. Everything I think, learn, or do is reflective of these identities. Race is especially relevant to my lived experiences because it is the first facet that dictates how I move in the world and how the world responds to me. As a result of this, I can never exist outside the context of race, which has placed me in the unique position of being able to consider how race and racism operate in the media. I am always vividly aware of how Black people are presented in the media— how we are demonized, sexualized, caricatured, and otherwise brutalized by media curators/content creators who do not care to go beyond surface-level recreations and repetitive racist tropes. Black people exist in narrow, negative spaces in the media in a way that no other groups of people do. We are never allowed to be nuanced or fully embodied as real people. Black characters are often some portrayal of a negative stereotype usually written from the perspective of non-Black people. Subsequently, Black people cannot consume media without the awareness that most portrayals we see of

ourselves on screen, usually created by non-Black people, are perspectives we have to take at face value. We are critical viewers of everything we exist in because we have to be prepared to confront people's ideas about us in real life as a result of their unfiltered, unexamined consumption of Blackness in media portrayals. This skill, formed entirely by necessity, is the primary reason I decided to take an upper-level gender studies class entirely dedicated to gender and pop culture because no education on these subjects can be complete without race being part of the discussion.

Before the pandemic started, there were a few assignments where we [students] had to analyze media, looking beyond its surface level. For one of those assignments, I chose to analyze a song by Childish Gambino featuring several other artists, called *This is America*. To an uncritical consumer, this song is just another rap song with no real meaning or message. In reality, the lyrics and video are full of imagery that challenges the viewer to examine America's racism, state-sanctioned violence enacted by police, and social media. In the song and music video, there are several allusions and explicit references to the violence perpetrated against Black people historically, which are present in Gambino's lyrics, the performances, and the choreography throughout the video. Some visual allusions include mimicking the facial expression of minstrel show cartoons and having a representation of a biblical version of Death escorted by police cars. In addition to these, he strikes a Jim Crow pose and features a parallel image of violence against Black people. There is a moment in the video when the virality of Black creativity on social media distracts from the violence going on in the background, which could be a comment on social media being a way to blunt the impact of Black tragedy through distraction. The lyrics reference police violence and refer to Black men as barcodes, implying that they are still viewed as property in the United States. This song and its accompanying video were full of social commentary about the state of Black existence in a country in which we are supposed to be equal and free citizens. It was crucial for me to analyze the messages and symbolism in this song because they can so easily be missed. To me, it was a perfect example of why media literacy is a necessity as it is a perfect example of how being an uninformed viewer allows one to miss the deeper messages in the media they consume.

After the pandemic had begun and the world was submerged into chaos, it was hard to miss the importance of having media literacy skills as a media consumer because everything we watch, whether it is a show, documentary, or the news, is presented with intention and we, as viewers, cannot afford to remain ignorant of this. This is especially the case for Black viewers watching portrayals of Blackness in entertainment. In reality TV shows, Black people, especially Black women, are shown to be more aggressive than people of other races and ethnicities (Jacobs, 2018). The intention to present people of color, particularly Black people, in a specific light is obvious in, for example, how Black criminality and White victimhood is overreported in the news and how documentaries of drug dealing feature primarily Black and Latinx people, whereas, in reality, White people are more likely to sell drugs (Gladstone; Ingraham). How Black people are intentionally portrayed as violent, disruptive, dangerous, and criminal would later become more obvious in the media coverage of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests at the end of the semester when the most common narrative of the movement, triggered by the avoidable death of yet another unarmed Black man, would be of violence and destruction despite the overwhelming percentage of protests, approximately 93%, being peaceful (Mansoor).

The deliberateness and intentionality of the media representation of marginalized people were the reasons for my choosing to focus my final project on reality television, since Black women are often depicted as aggressive and destructive, and women, overall, are shown to be catty, petty, and undermining. While watching reality television during the pandemic, I noticed how shows for an assumed Black audience were promoted differently compared to those for an assumed White audience. I knew that with millions of people stuck at home due to the pandemic, television would have a captive audience made up of those whose opinions on people like me would be formed from and informed by sound bites and caricatures in the shows they watched.

PEDAGOGICAL SHIFTS THROUGH THE REFLEXIVITY OF A CLASSROOM IN CRISIS

Teacher Perspective

The changes in my pedagogy, brought on by the pandemic, did not occur all at once but did so within a flurry of tumult, as my and my students' lives were collectively upended. I vividly recall the last day I held class. Here, we expressed our dismay, but in the midst of it, also had a frank discussion and started to try to problem-solve. I asked the students what they thought they might want, prefer, and need if we never met together again in person. I wanted to listen to them and take guidance from them before we were separated. I also wanted them to feel that I had really heard them and taken their feelings, ideas and needs into consideration when re-working the course for distance learning in the event of this happening. Yet, we were having this discussion while *in crisis*. They expressed unanimously that they preferred that I not try to hold classes at a specific time each week, but that I make lecture videos for them to access it whenever and wherever they could. This was our impromptu, in the moment, plan, which then ended up being echoed by my department and the university-at-large, once it was announced, during the following weeks, that we would be moving to remote learning.

My life circumstances changed drastically during those next couple of days and weeks. My students' life circumstances changed drastically, too. Some of my students lost loved ones. Some did not have internet access. One, I never heard from for the rest of the semester. But most of the students sought contact with me, as well as solace and stability in the course, and I believe this was in large part because I allowed the course to change shape according to our circumstances. The course, then, became an occasion for us to work together to problem-solve and struggle together while in crisis. We were thrust by the pandemic into a different way of relating, enveloped by a shared sense of vulnerability.

In an interview with George Yancy, for *Truthout*, Judith Butler reflects on the relationship between the pandemic and resulting vulnerability in a way that speaks to what (re)shaped the pedagogical situation in our course during the Spring 2020 semester. In the interview, Butler expresses that the pandemic "exposes a global vulnerability" ("Mourning is a Political Act"). They write:

Vulnerability is not just the condition of being potentially harmed by another. It names the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives... We are impressed upon by the environment, social worlds and intimate contact... These reciprocal and material modes of sharing describe a crucial dimension of our vulnerability, intertwinements and interdependence of our embodied social life" ("Mourning is a Political Act").

It was thus not just the vulnerability, but the collective awareness of the vulnerability of our bodily and social lives that connected us during the crisis in a way that we had not previously been able to connect in the classroom, even though our bodies were no longer together in it. The shape of our reciprocal and material "modes of sharing" formed our vulnerability and our relationships to one another during the pandemic. In the news media, politicians and healthcare organizations alike referred to groups as "the vulnerable" as those who were the most vulnerable to the negative effects of the pandemic. It is clear, in this context, that vulnerability is a political and social justice issue that involves historically oppressed people and class differences. This attention to vulnerability in the news relates to the attention we can pay to vulnerability within pedagogy. The pandemic brought the nuances of vulnerability into immediate and urgent public and private attention. To have tried to conduct "business as usual" in the classroom would have been as socially unjust as it would have been impossible. To avoid the financial consequences of the disruption, high schools and colleges began an immediate emergency shift to "online learning," but the vulnerability of the moment and the way it disrupted the power structures and norms of the education system were more forceful than efforts to diminish and ignore the moment of mass vulnerability.

In his essay, “On Violence and Vulnerability in a Pandemic,” Michael Bernard-Donals writes, “if the COVID-19 pandemic is teaching us anything...it’s that pandemic does violence to our sense of place, to how we think of respite (where we feel safe and free from violence), and has highlighted our sense of vulnerability in the midst of (potentially infected) others” (225). His essay grapples with the ways in which, in creating new and intensified violence(s), the crisis of the pandemic reveals the violence that comes with the disordered and disordering state of catastrophe, as well as the vulnerability it exposes, which were both there all along (Bernard-Donals 226). In calling the pandemic a form of “violence” in which systems of order are disrupted, Bernard-Donals harkens back to the work of Walter Benjamin to make the point that “the pandemic makes clear not only that there is no respite from violence, but that violence describes the human condition, and that language is its instrument” (226). Benjamin, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” writes, “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (392). Framing the pandemic in this way is helpful for describing the way a (re)new(ed) awareness, or realization, about media literacy and social justice is formed through a period of crisis, and it is also validated by the experiences that shape this awareness. What we saw unfold in the media supports what both Benjamin and Bernard-Donals have observed about the state of emergency in relation to oppression and violence. The violence of the pandemic, carried out in large part through the media, brought simultaneous attention to other forms of violence that had existed long before the pandemic such as racial violence, class violence, and gender violence. The violence of the pandemic intensified our collective awareness of the violence of systems that produce and rely on social injustice. This, in turn, affected what happened in the virtual classroom, as we responded to and participated in a moment of increasing awareness about the way violence is represented and constructed by the media. Our critical engagement with media literacy was intensified by the violence and vulnerability of the pandemic. It was media literacy that helped us to make sense of and deal with the violence of the state of emergency, a violence that was there before the pandemic and compounded to the violence of the pandemic. Engaging with media literacy during the state of emergency was the pedagogical intervention that gave students agency to actively participate in constructing, dismantling, pushing back, or reconstructing the world-in-crisis around them.

Together, as teacher and students, we formed our pedagogical response to the state of emergency. My pedagogical decisions were based on my own experience of the moment of crisis, as well on the responses to the crisis that my students shared with me and the feedback they gave me at the start of the crisis, about what might work best for them. When I revised the syllabus after we were told we would not be returning to the classroom, I cut back on some of the readings, made adjustments for the students who had not given presentations yet, and made the decision to reconceive the final assignment in the course. This last decision allowed me to take into consideration our current circumstances and my own self-awareness around media literacy, as it was becoming the foremost focus of my life during that strange time. I decided it did not make sense to ask students to write a paper analyzing a film, so instead, I wanted them to create a project of their own that would give them room to engage with and construct their own forms of media literacy. This expansion on and shift in the assignment, combined with my decision to build the assignment out of Pozner’s chapter on media literacy, encouraged us to be critical media consumers at a time during which we were consumed with media, yet also feeling so collectively helpless to practice agency. The chapter demonstrated to us what media literacy looks like in action at a time when it could feel empowering to take action during a crisis.

Scrapping the original assignment, I created a new one where students were to use the concept of media literacy, explained so concretely by Jennifer Pozner, our discussion, my lectures, and their tools from the course (the theory and the content we had discussed) to devise media literacy projects that would allow them to act as “problem solvers and agents of change.” Against the backdrop of the stuckness of the pandemic, a stuckness so many of us felt despite our total immersion in media, being able to bring agency to the monotony,

high anxiety, and powerlessness of our perpetual encounters with media was a helpful exercise. Students brought excitement and creativity to their projects. I never would have imagined that, during a pandemic, so many of them would feel supported and anchored by this open-ended opportunity, to quote the assignment, to “participate in the making, remaking, interrogating, and deconstruction of representation.” I asked them to do what Jennifer Pozner urged them to do: to (a) “have fun with media literacy” and to (b) “do something.” How often are we asked to do something, how often are we given a broad command that is undergirded by suggestions, ideas, theory, content, and a deep involvement in a growing self-awareness of media literacy that is developing so explosively and uniquely under circumstances of global hardship? We brainstormed together, and I also worked individually with students to help them create projects that would be meaningful to them and would empower them to feel that they were, not just reflecting on media literacy but also, affecting and practicing media literacy. My students went above and beyond what I could have expected from a group of students in crisis.

What is even more exceptional about this strange collaboration of dire circumstances and educational agency is that the active study and practice of media literacy, when combined during a time of crisis and heightened awareness of the impact of media on our lives, made students more aware of media literacy and deepened their understanding of it. For this reason, I think that the pandemic, despite its devastating effects on us globally and personally, provided an opportunity to nurture a deeper emerging understanding of media literacy and the subjects that we study in relation to it, such as gender, race, class, and ability. My hope is that articulating this fact will encourage educators concerned with media literacy, identity, and pop culture to consider the opportunities that exist to re-conceptualize their pedagogy and assignments through the current moment and through an attunement to the role that both crisis and media play in our lives. I hope educators will feel inclined to follow the example of my students, who so admirably took joy in doing something with their emerging awareness, working with and within the harsh realities of our global circumstances to affect change within the realms of agency available to them.

Student Perspective

When the final assignment of this class was changed from a paper to an open-ended creative assignment that required me to interact with and closely examine media, it felt liberating. During a time where everything seemed to be falling apart, it was gratifying to have something being changed in a way that gave me the agency to shape my education and learning experience. With everything shut down and nothing to do but schoolwork while also feeling anxious about the state of the world, I started to rely more on creative works than I had in recent years. The shift to online school and work had given my roommate more and me more free time but fewer things to do with it, so we used our time doing something we had not had the time to do in years; we sat and watched television. We watched everything from telenovelas to documentaries, from movies to gameshows, and, eventually, when we ran out of things to watch, I turned to watching reality television. I had never been a consumer of reality television because they painted women as petty, sabotaging, and unable to get along despite, and sometimes because of, their individual successes, so this almost felt like culture shock to me. I knew that like me, many people would eventually find themselves exploring media content that they never would have before, some of which would be reality television. I also knew that the only way that I could ever reconcile my objections to reality television and my newfound fascination with it would be through media literacy and analysis.

I did not know what it was I wanted to do or accomplish initially; I only knew that watching the shows made me uncomfortable. I later realized that this discomfort derived from their being created in a way that is meant to draw an unwitting consumer into the narratives of these shows without leaving room for them to deconstruct what they are viewing. I found myself picking sides with the random manufactured issues the women on these shows had and growing to like and dislike the different characters on the shows. Women’s

lives and “realities” were being reduced to soundbites, petty arguments, and vapidly, and they were being presented as commodities for other women to consume, and for a moment, I watched these shows thinking that they were not worth further examination. For a moment, it as if something in me turned off and I became a mindless consumer. When I realized how uncritically I was watching these shows, I became excited at the opportunity to take them apart and examine where my initial discomfort came from and could not wait to see where the project would lead me.

A GALLERY OF STUDENT WORK THAT INVITES PANDEMIC PEDAGOGY


Included in this section is a gallery of student work. It includes images of students’ final projects in the Spring 2020 course, as well as brief descriptions of them. They have been included in the spirit of recognizing the tremendous accomplishments and creativity of the students, as well as to give readers of this essay ideas for directions their students follow for similar projects related to media literacy. All of the students whose work is pictured and described in this section have granted us written permission to share it. The students whose work is anonymous granted permission for their work to be included anonymously, and the students whose work is not anonymous granted permission for their names and their work to be included. The students’ interest in and dedication to media literacy as an avenue for social change will be, we hope, evident in this gallery. As their work reflects, the students are reflective about the role of media in their lives, and they are motivated to use their own understanding of media literacy to bring gender-, race-, and class-focused media literacy to the attention of others.



The image included above is a diagram featuring six titles of assignments that were created by students for the final media literacy project in the course. The intention in including these titles is to offer anonymous recognition for the creative work of the students beyond the examples that are included in the rest of the gallery below.

Game of Thrones and Empowering Female Characters

DAENERYS STORMBORN House: Targaryen



Accolades: *First of Her Name, The Unburnt, Khaleesi of the Dothraki, Breaker of Chains, Queen of Meereen, Mother of Dragons, and too many more names to list. (Also slept with and was murdered by her nephew and committed genocide on an entire capital city of innocent people)*

Empowerment Stats (max: 20, total max: 100):
 Autonomy: 18
 Bechdel Test: 19
 Male Gaze Defiance: 10
 Developed Character/Personality: 19
 Reliability/Realistic: 18
Overall Empowerment Score: 84

ARYA OF WHITEHALL House: Stark



Accolades: *The most skilled assassin and swordsman in all of Westeros. Trained to become a Faceless Man while blind, avenged her family's death from the Red Wedding, bested Brienne of Tarth, executed Lancel Lannister, slaughtered the Night King*

Empowerment Stats (max 20, total max 100):
 Autonomy: 19
 Bechdel Test: 19
 Male Gaze Defiance: 19
 Developed Character/ Personality: 20
 Reliability/Realistic: 19
Overall Empowerment Score: 96

QUEEN CERSEI House: Lannister



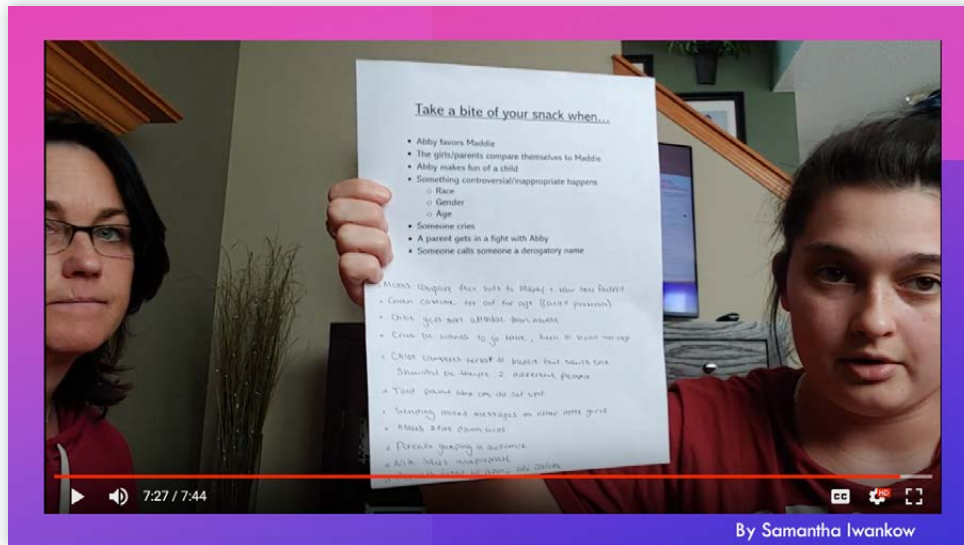
Accolades: *Queen of Westeros (while married to King Robert Baratheon), birthed three children children with her twin brother Jaime, destroys the Sept and the High Sparrow along with dozens of other innocents, first ever Queen Regnant of Westeros, relentless, murderous, vindictive, killed in the attack of King's Landing*

Empowerment Stats (max 20, max total 100):
 Autonomy: 20
 Bechdel Test: 16
 Male Gaze Defiance: 10
 Developed Character/ Personality: 18
 Reliability/Realistic: 18
Overall Empowerment Score: 82

“I chose five different criteria to determine an ‘empowerment score’ for each of the three characters. These five criteria consist of the following: a character’s autonomy, how they apply to the Bechdel Test, their defiance of the male gaze based on both their presentation in the series and their actions, their character development/personality, and their relatability/ realistic-ness. Autonomy in this context refers to a character’s ability to self-govern, be in charge of their own lives and decisions, and their overall self-independence.”

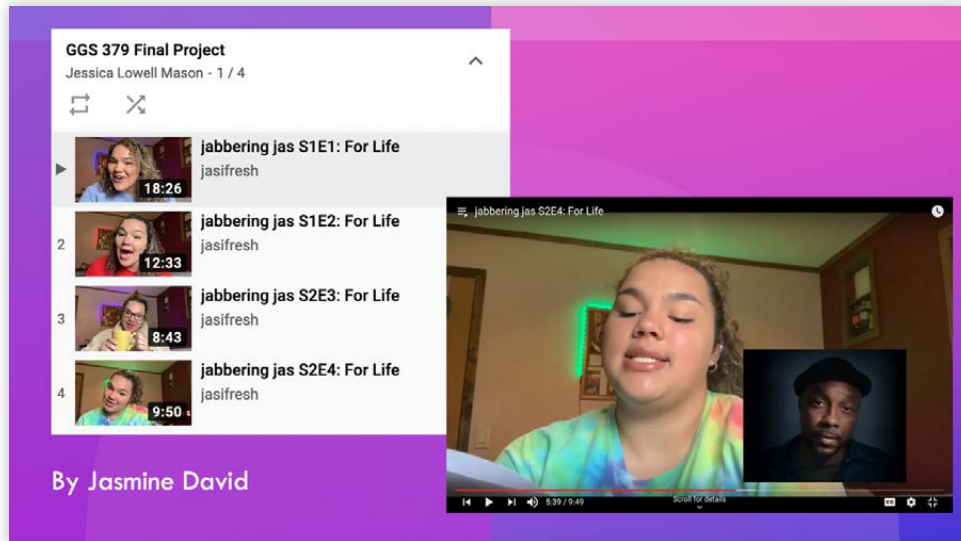
– A Student Enrolled in the Spring 2020 Section of GGS 379

One student, not named here but who has given us permission to include her work, created her own empowerment rating trading cards, styled after Pokemon cards, for female gendered characters on *Game of Thrones*-- giving each character an empowerment statistical rating and ranking them according to criteria devised from theoretical and other concepts they encountered in the course (such as on autonomy, Bechdel Test adherence, male gaze defiance, complex personality development, realistic portrayal level), which they unpacked in a reflection paper.



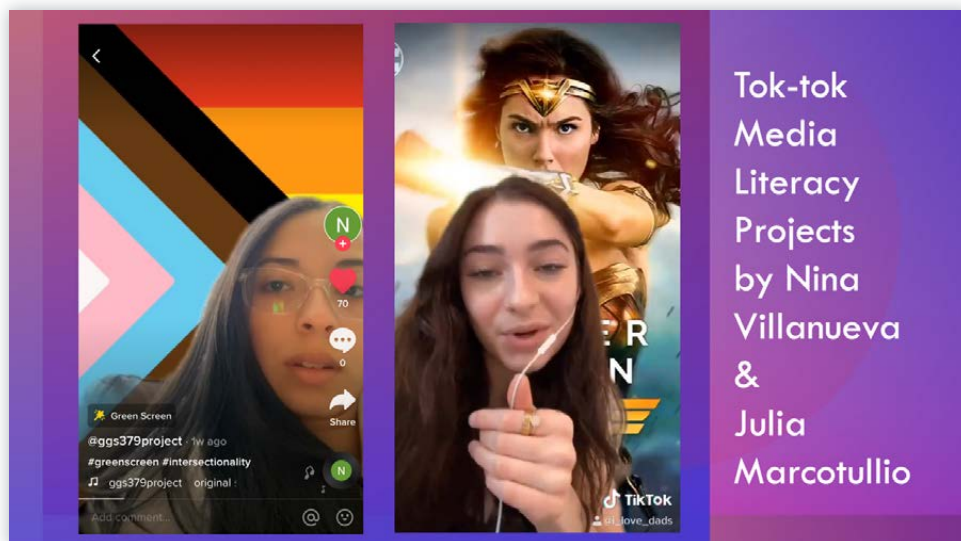
Student Samantha Iwankow made up a social media screening game to play with their mother in which they broke down problematic aspects of the show *Dance Moms* — and then the student made a video with their mother, and together in their media review film, they reflected on what it was like to play the gender-focused media literacy game and offered a critical commentary-dialogue on the show.





Jasmine David created a media literacy talk show series of videos on YouTube in the style of a podcast, in which they provided a commentary on the ABC show *For Life*. The review of episodes of the show was informed by theory related to gender, race and sexual orientation that we engaged with in class, and David demonstrated that it is possible to use the medium of a podcast to enact gender-focused media literacy studies in a way that would appeal to pop culture consumers.

One student (unnamed) made a collage titled “Get Off The Internet,” which consisted of headings of and excerpts from articles about violence against transgender people. The student wrote a powerful paper contextualizing the elaborate collage in its call for a media literacy that demands attention to the media’s portrayal of transgender bodies and an end to violence against transgender people.

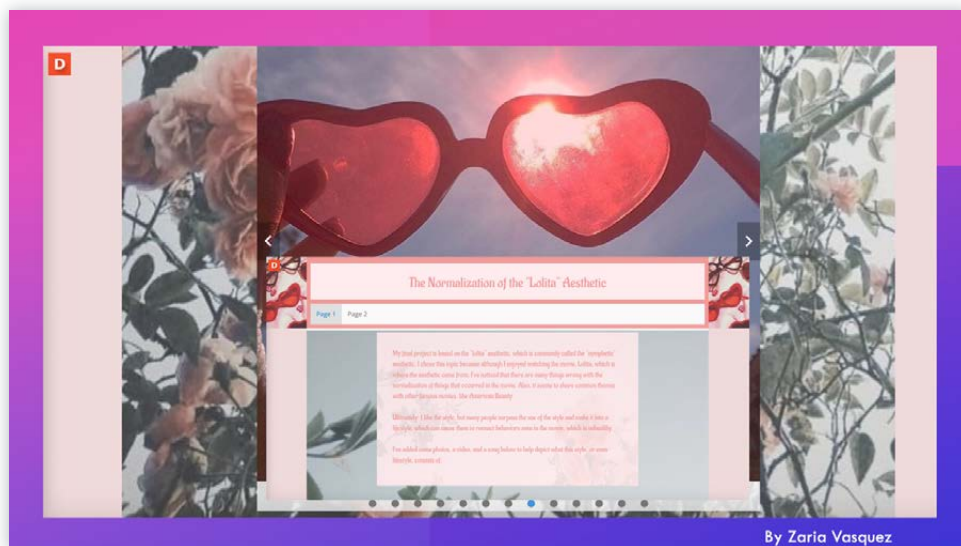




“I focused my videos around trying to open people’s minds to the underlying messages that gender and race representation in film has.”

– Julia Marcotullio

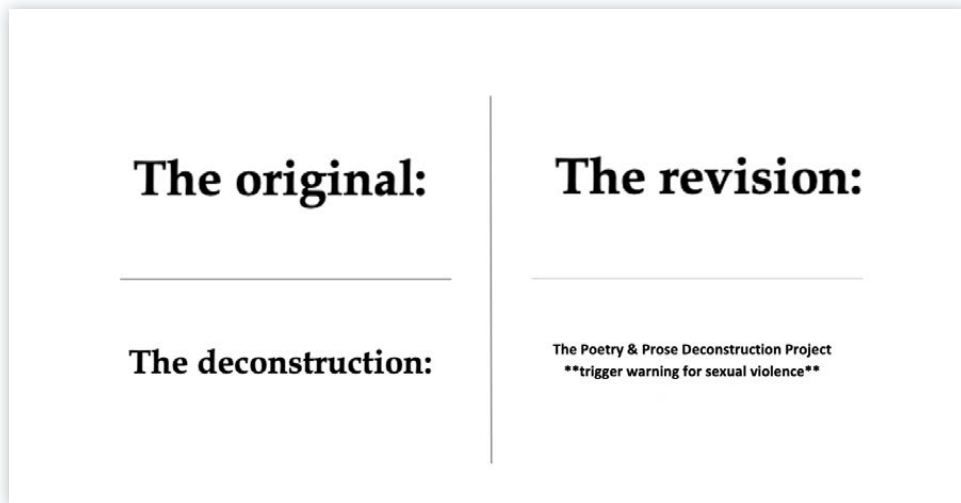
Two students, Nina Villanueva and Julia Marcotullio, made educational TikTok videos on topics of interest to them from the course that are aimed at introducing and promoting gender-focused media literacy to a medium that tends to not lend itself to reflection, introspection, and critical analysis. One was focused on responding to issues that arose on social media, and the other focused on gender representation and film. Both projects incorporated our coursework on re-vamping the hashtag as a tool to provide contextual information.



Zaria Vasquez created a blog dedicated to an examination and critique of the Lolita aesthetic, which appears so often in consumer and pop culture contexts. The blog served as a space for them to gather materials that demonstrate the Lolita aesthetic in different contexts, and the reflection they wrote served as a space for a critical and theoretical critique of it.

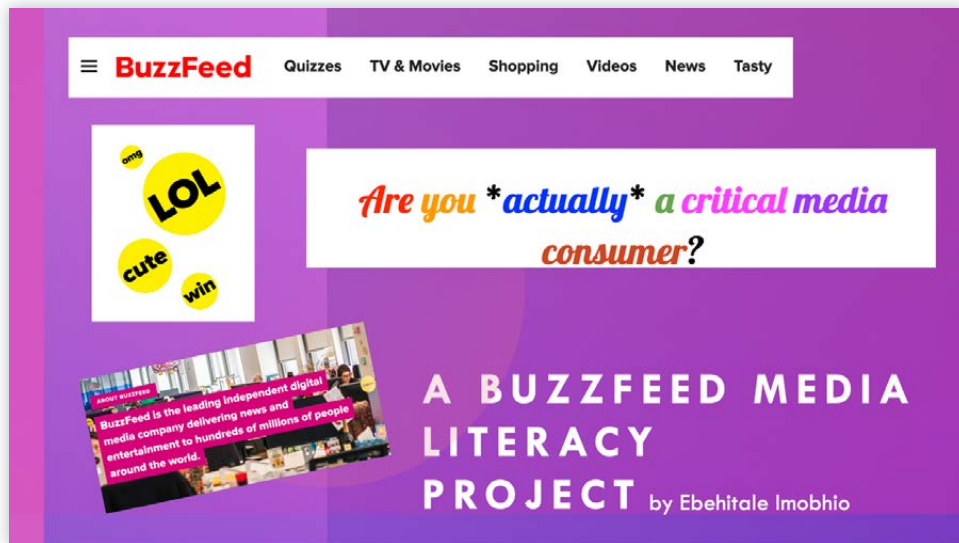


One student, Lucy DesJardins, created a video for their family that was focused on the impact of pop culture media in discovering and constructing their own gender and sexual identity. It was incredibly personal, but the student also included material from the course in their media reflection on their identity. In the video, the student discussed how pop culture influenced their experiences with identity-formation and the concept of coming out. This project demonstrated the power of media literacy to affect personal change within families and empower LGBTQ+ people.



Samantha Whitman deconstructed old poems they had written in the past on the subject of identity, poems that made reference to both media and popular culture. They reconstructed the poems in the present using theories from our course, offering a reflection on each of the de- and re-constructed poems.

Another student took on some of the problematic aspects of the game Cards Against Humanity by creating their own version of the game, called Intersectionality. It reversed the aim of the game; instead of trying to shock players into laughter by political incorrectness, the game's aim was to create awareness around the problems of the tropes used in the game and to use the platform to educate players on concepts related to gender, theory, and media literacy.



The image shows a screenshot of the BuzzFeed website header with navigation links: Quizzes, TV & Movies, Shopping, Videos, News, and Tasty. Below the header is a graphic with the text "Are you *actually* a critical media consumer?" in a colorful, stylized font. To the left of this text are four yellow circles containing the words "omg", "LOL", "cute", and "win". Below the main text is a small image of a BuzzFeed office with a text overlay: "ABOUT BUZZFEED: BuzzFeed is the leading independent digital media company delivering news and entertainment to hundreds of millions of people around the world." To the right of this image is the text "A BUZZFEED MEDIA LITERACY PROJECT by Ebehitale Imobhio".

The Media Literacy Project Intervention

*Are you *actually* a critical media consumer?*

Think of all the times you've watched cringe-worthy reality TV and take the quiz below to see how much of a critical viewer you are while consuming "mindless" content. Feel free to add your own questions or modify this quiz however you see fit

If you watch reality TV shows, how often do you cringe or bite your tongue or feel annoyed when any of the following happens:

By Ebehitale Imobhio

1. A woman attacks another woman by calling her a bitch, slut, hussy, whore, homewrecker, tramp, etc?
 - a. Never! (it's just part of the show, who cares?)
 - b. Never! (they deserved to be called that and had it coming for a long time!! Serves that bitch right)
 - c. Once in a while (but only when they didn't deserve it)
 - d. Once in a while (just cause I don't think it's fair to use that kinda language but it is what it is)
 - e. Once in a while
 - f. Sometimes
 - g. Almost always
 - h. Always
 - i. I have never even noticed this
 - j. I don't consume media that includes things like this

By Ebehitale Imobhio

<p>11. A minority is treated as an accessory or pet or in any tokenizing way</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Never! (they knew what they signed up for) Never! (it's not that serious) Once in a while (but it's not meant in a harmful way so who cares) Once in a while (but you gotta take these things in stride) Once in a while Sometimes Almost always Always I have never even noticed this I don't consume media that includes things like this 	<p>5. A gender-queer or trans character is treated as a curiosity and subjected to invasive questions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Never! (they knew what they signed up for) Never! (they could just leave) Once in a while (but I'm curious too GODDAMIT!) Once in a while (but these are confusing times so I understand/feel their confusion) Once in a while Sometimes Almost always Always I have never even noticed this I don't consume media that includes things like this
<p>6. A non-straight character is treated as a curiosity and subjected to invasive questions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Never! (they knew what they signed up for) Never! (they could just leave) Once in a while (but I'm curious too GODDAMIT!) Once in a while (but these are confusing times so I understand/feel their confusion) Once in a while Sometimes Almost always Always I have never even noticed this I don't consume media that includes things like this 	<p>3. A woman throws a drink at someone else unprovoked, mildly provoked, or just straight up provoked!</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Never! (it's just part of the show, who cares?) Never! (they deserved it and had it coming for a long time! Serves that bitch right) Once in a while (but only when they didn't deserve it) Once in a while (who's gonna have to clean that up! Sheesh!) Once in a while Sometimes Almost always Always I have never even noticed this I don't consume media that includes things like this

By Ebehitale Imobhio

Critical Feedback Media Literacy Intervention

A and B: if you frequently answered in this range, **OOE!** You definitely just take it all in without question, don't you? Why even watch TV if you're not ~~seriously~~ try to be critical of it at all?!

C to E: if you frequently answered in this range, at least you feel some discomfort? You're one soft push away from being with the A and B folks (which is **SCARY!**) and one hard push away from the F and G folks. You're not quite a critical viewer but there's still **hope** yet! You cringe at things but not for the right reasons though. With any luck, you might start to ask yourself the hard questions when you watch these shows and finally start thinking more about just what it is that you're watching.

F and G: if you frequently answered in this range, reality TV **MUST SUCK** for you but hey! At least you can sometimes enjoy it before you start noticing all the ways in which it is problematic again, so yay you...? You are more aware than most which means that you're on your way to critical viewing. You now need to take active steps to consider who is putting out these sorts of content, why, what message is being pushed, and who is the intended audience?


M: if you frequently answered in this range, **poor you!** Watching TV like this must be torture for you, huh? Like with the F and G folks, you are well on your way to **being** a critical viewer. You need to consider the same things as they do and also maybe not watch these types of shows anymore since it seems to cause you pain...?

I: if you frequently answered in this range, **are you sure you're watching reality TV?** Is this quiz for you? Are you okay? Do you need to talk?

J: if you frequently answered in this range, **GOOD FOR YOU!** You're in some way better than most people and you need to teach us your ways, oh wise one! Seriously though, help us! Please! Not consuming this kind of media doesn't mean you don't have to be a critical viewer though. Whatever else you might be consuming should also be done through a critical lens.

By Ebehitale Imobhio

Author's Note:



"For any of you curious, cool cats and kittens that want to be better at being critical media consumers, check out Jennifer Posner's "Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV" for all the ways for a regular Jo or Joe to become more media literate. When you're done with that, think of ways to take action in your life in order to mobilize and make effective real-life changes. Maybe stage letter writing campaigns to bring the attention of media bigwigs to these issues. Show them that you're not ~~seriously~~ keep taking this sitting down."

Remember, patience is a virtue and change is going to take time. Taking down the status quo might seem overwhelming but remember, you're not in this alone. Don't give up hope and don't get discouraged!!

By Ebehitale Imobhio



"In doing this [project], I can start intervening on people's media consumption in a simple way that doesn't come across as preachy and keeps them from being too defensive. It is incredibly important that people be made aware of the layers of problematic behaviors that we engage in when we consume media. This way, we are better able to sort through it and, hopefully, come out better on the other side."

— Ebehitale Imobhio

Ebehitale Imobhio created a BuzzFeed quiz titled "Are You Actually a Critical Media Consumer," in an effort to use a social media medium that is rich in the construction and reflection of pop culture but that often fails to create critical discourse to make readers more aware of their own media habits and of problematic facets of media consumption. She followed the formula of BuzzFeed quizzes but revised the content and educated the quiz-taker on an array of subjects. This project particularly highlights the way that media literacy is an occasion for creating more media literacy: the student practiced media literacy and, while practicing it, educated the quiz-takers on it, demonstrating the way that our reflections on media literacy make us as well as others more media literate and generate awareness around media literacy, which easily and successfully combines with efforts to draw readerly and critical attention to other subjects implicated in conversations around representation such as gender, race, sexuality, and ability.

SEEING MEDIA LITERACY AGAIN AS A TOOL FOR DECOLONIZATION

Teacher Perspective

One of the aspects of the space for dialogue that pairing media literacy and the pandemic opened for me, as an educator, was an opportunity to think about my own pedagogical shortcomings and how to address them. For example, why did I not consider media literacy more thoroughly when I planned the course? Why had it taken this confluence of events to inspire the transformation of the assignment and to pave a (re) new(ed) direction for the course? Why had I not included more representations of current events into the course prior to the pandemic? Reflection by me, as an educator, had become necessary just as it was needed in the education system and across the country. My students were my teachers on this matter.

In recent months, much has come out on the subjects of anti-racism and decolonization that have to do with what the pandemic, social media, and widespread systemic violence brought to our collective attention. As Professor of History Steven Mintz notes in his article, "Crisis-Informed Pedagogy," the pandemic was not

just a single crisis; it was a triple crisis: “a health crisis, a financial crisis, and a long overdue reckoning over racial injustice” (Mintz). Leaders of organizations stepped down to allow for listening and needed changes, including Reddit cofounder Alexis Ohanian, who resigned in June of 2020 and pledged his seat on the otherwise all-white executive board to a Black candidate (McEvoy). University presidents released statements condemning violence, acknowledging the need for change, and promising to put together committees devoted to addressing racial justice. Some government officials promised better leadership and initiatives going forward to address social injustice. Organizations put out statements addressing their commitment to anti-racist justice efforts such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication, which published widely “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice” in July of 2020. The statement, written by six university educators, begins the demand by acknowledging that we are “in the midst of a pandemic that is disproportionately infecting and killing Black people” (Baker-Bell). During the pandemic, students and teachers became immersed in new ways of media technologies while also becoming immersed in a moment of needed awareness and reflection on the way that systemic oppression works and the roles we play in upholding it. The pandemic affected not just our collective view but also our consciousness of the intersectional injustices interwoven into it.

Education is changing because of this, and the more we reflect on and write about our experiences, the more we will be able to utilize them as an opportunity and responsibility to decolonize our syllabi, our curriculum, the way we teach, the way we learn, and the way we come together with students in order to learn. Co-writing this paper with Ebehitale Imobhio is part of my own effort to build on what started in the virtual classroom early in the pandemic and to decolonize my own relationship with paper-writing, with publishing, and with pedagogy. As her insights in this paper powerfully demonstrate, we are part of what Stuart Hall calls a “system of representation” (3); knowing this allows us to deliberate and to be deliberate in the way that we participate in the making of meaning from within spheres of meaning and agency. We are poised to use our pedagogical self-reflection in order to be deliberately decolonizing. That means, for some of us, giving up power, giving up our leadership position as we know it, stepping back, sharing space, and listening. For others, it means stepping into our agency, our power and our wisdom. For others, it’s a combination of both. But for those who currently hold any form of power within the educational system, we have a responsibility to think about it and to act on it.

Student Perspective

There are two lessons any educator who was paying attention in 2020 should have learned: (1) flexibility is vital to the success of students and (2) good representation must be centered in the learning experience. As unprecedented as the events of last year were, they taught us how much room for improvement there is in higher education. They also showed us that flexibility is vital to long-term success. Flexibility is necessary because in times of crisis, we have the room to adjust as we go without losing out on material and experience. Flexible classes give students more agency and afford them the room to be more engaged in the material. We also have to center good representation in our classroom dialogues because just being represented in media is not enough; students need to see *good* representation in their classes, which is when diversity is not an afterthought but part of the creative process, where people who are part of minority groups are active participants. It is when diversity is authentic and real and when questions about the intention or message of media from minority viewers who are seeing themselves being represented on screen are not primarily from a place of hurt. Students from marginalized groups need to see themselves included in this way in their classrooms. It may mean the instructor has to do more work to create this inclusive space, but this is an aspect of what educators already do and is part of ensuring the participation of their students. Education should be the first place where systemic racism, misogyny, misogynoir, queerphobia, and all other types of marginalization are challenged and rebuked. There is nothing in education that has not been shaped by racism

and colonization, and as such, the culture of silence that exists on these topics needs to shift. A media literacy course, one that teaches students how to view, question, and better understand the world and representations within it is an important place for us to dismantle the culture of silence and create better representation.

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