

## Traversing Borders, Transgressing Boundaries in Popular Culture and Pedagogy

The concepts of border and boundaries center the way in which we can think about the articles shared in this issue, 8.3, for *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. Borders can extend to the realm of the symbolic. As a popular working image deployed for interrogations of the multiplicity of identity, the border cannot be reduced to a geographical or territorial boundary. Anzaldúa writes in the preface to the first edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* that borderlands “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Preface). Indeed, the very liminality of borders invites us to critically contend with the contradictions and negotiations that emerge from navigating or straddling cultural (ex. language and religion) and social borders (ex. race, gender, sexuality, and class). Yet while the image of borders habitually communicates notions of boundedness, dichotomy, exclusion, and stasis given the violent histories of oppression that belie it, borders, whether real or imagined, are open to contestation, disruption, and transgression. “Borders, after all,” as public intellectual and self-proclaimed nomadic performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña reminds us in his artist/personal website, “are there for us to cross.” In this vein, the four articles presented in this issue, *Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries in Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, deal with traversing and transgressing borders and the myriad possibilities and limitations that such crossings and transgressions invite.

In the first article in this issue, “Halfies, Half-Written Letters, and One-Eyed Gods: Connecting the Dots of Communicative Cultures,” Gregory Stephens traverses the seemingly intractable boundaries between communication studies, ethnographic studies, pedagogy, and popular culture to “distill the theory of communicative cultures as a tool for cultural analysis.” Defining “communicative cultures” as a “a set of shared commitments expressed through cultural means,” Stephens analyzes and explores the pedagogical potentialities of Jamaican writer Olive Senior’s short story, “Country of the One Eye God,” to “illustrate the necessarily unfinished and processual nature of cultural analysis.” In so doing, Stephens attempts to resist static conceptualizations of culture and essentialized notions of identity by enacting a practice of cultural analysis that “accounts for radical fluidity.” Animated by Abu-Lughod’s definition of “halfies” as a key group that, by virtue of their cultural and/or national in-betweenness, often “expose and challenge static concepts of culture,” Stephens adapts the term as a form of cultural analysis. Through this connect-the-dots analytical approach, Stephens suggests that teaching texts such as Senior’s “Country of the One Eye God” invites students to appreciate and “develop a sense of culture as *relational, distributive*, and attuned to the connections and interconnections of lived cultural processes.”

Using *Captain Marvel* and *Avengers: Infinity War* as central case studies, the second article of this issue, “Crossing Over: The Migrant ‘Other’ in the Marvel Cinematic Universe,” bridges media studies with migration studies to analyze how these films “reflect anxiety about the alien (migrant) ‘other’ through difference and

crisis.” Contextualizing these films within our rife sociopolitical climate, one marred by renewed anti-immigrant politics and the increasing militarization of our geographical borders, Casey Walker, Anthony Ramirez, and Arthur D. Soto-Vásquez argue that films/texts like *Captain Marvel* and *Avengers: Infinity War*, while innocuous on the surface, are “symbolic of a creeping right-wing discourse that dehumanizes outsiders, refugees, and migrants in popular culture.” By adopting Symbolic Convergence Theory as their key analytical framework, Walker, Ramirez, and Soto-Vásquez not only perform close readings of the MCU films under consideration but also, and perhaps more importantly, explore how “analyzing texts situated adjacent to fan communities can reveal how meaning flows in our hybrid media environment.” Though Walker, Ramirez, and Soto-Vásquez do acknowledge the film director’s “good intentions” behind the making of these films—they include, for instance, snippets of an interview where the director shares that he sought to emphasize Thanos’ villainous god-complex—the authors foreground the creeping “emergence of Thanos-inspired eco-fascism thinking among well-intentioned people.” In so doing, Walker, Ramirez, and Soto-Vásquez ultimately reveal how the emergence of this Thanos-inspired eco-fascist rhetoric precariously informs the “real world” dehumanization of migrant subjects who are too often deemed “dangerous border crossers.”

The third article in this issue, “Media Literacy, Education, and a Global Pandemic: Lessons Learned in a Gender and Pop Culture Classroom,” explores the pedagogical risks and adaptations that both a student *and* educator took on in an upper-division course— “Sex: Gender and Popular Culture”—that was being offered amid what was then the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic (spring 2020). In response to bell hooks’ invitation in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* to “collaborate in discussion that crosses boundaries and creates space for intervention,” Lowell Mason (the course instructor) and Imobhio (one of Lowell Mason’s former students), offer readers a collaborative and dialogic essay that privileges pedagogical border crossings. Indeed, as Lowell Mason and Imobhio write in their essay, “in coming together, as student and teacher, [they] are deliberately collaborating, crossing boundaries and dismantling the power structure between teacher and student to create space for pedagogical awareness and change.” Moreover, in conceiving their dialogue as an academic *and* cultural text, Lowell Mason and Imobhio argue that they transgress the “boundaries of what is considered an ‘academic text.’” Shifting to a discussion on how an ever-evolving crisis-informed pedagogy prompted a re-imagining of the course, Lowell Mason argues that “being deliberate and specific about the role of media literacy’s role in the course is the pedagogical intervention that the pandemic produced.” Peppering the essay with student media literacy project examples, Lowell Mason ultimately suggests that “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.”

Bringing together video games studies and composition and writing pedagogy, Joy Sterrantino’s article, “It’s Dangerous to Learn Alone- Play This: Video Games in Higher Education, particularly in the Composition Classroom,” focuses on the importance of incorporating texts in the writing classroom that push the boundaries of what is understood as “proper dialects” (or, academic language) and what is considered a “suitable” academic text and/or teaching format. Though video games have, as Sterrantino’s makes clear, their own dialects and lexicons, ones that society oft-times dismisses as elementary and time-wasting, Sterrantino argues that video game dialects may be “the best way to teach students the material and skills we want them to learn.” Indeed, Sterrantino writes that “applying gaming language and structures to a class, a language many students already know, professors can use game structures to make students feel like insiders; students will then be more committed to what they are learning.” Putting to practice calls for the gamification of the higher education classroom, Sterrantino shares a preview of a collaboratively developed composition course where “gaming” elements will be integrated into the course’s content/Canvas page. By centering what game studies has to offer writing pedagogy (and higher education, more broadly), Sterrantino shows how coming

to understand gaming (and its dialects) as a valid pedagogical tool disrupts the idea that students need only “learn the conventions of this [traditional] classroom or leave.”

Across the articles in issue 8.3, *Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries in Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, audiences see the potential for thinking about popular culture and pedagogy through the complicated notion of borders, whether in constraints or the opportunities such as suggested in cultural analysis, in film, and through innovative practice integrating social media, dialogic work, and video game dialects in teaching and learning. As 2021 comes to a close, we can look back and see the challenges we collectively have learned from and moved through, for good, bad, and all the layers in between. This issue was made possible by a strong team of individuals, including the authors and peer reviewers for these articles, Copy Editors - Miriam Sciala, Robert Gordyn, and Arlyce Menzies; Reference Editors – Joseph Yapp and April Manabat; Creative Director – Douglas CohenMiller. We hope that there is something in these articles that encourages you to think about popular culture and pedagogy in new ways, offering potential for traversing border and transgressing boundaries in your thinking and practice.

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*A note from the Editor in Chief*

I would like to thank Karina Vado for her insightful and incredible work across positions at *Dialogue* from Book Review Editor to Musings Editor. For this issue, it was my honor to have her come aboard as Managing Editor, making this a stronger, more robust issue because of her work.

**Anna CohenMiller**

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