

## **Cultivating the Futures of Popular Culture and Pedagogy: A Celebration and Critical Examination of 10 Years of *Dialogue***

### **POPULAR CULTURE IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

Popular culture remains one of the most important and powerful mediums to discuss, critique, and take seriously popular representations of gender, sexuality, race and the social dimensions/ideologies animating such representations (e.g., racism, sexism, queerphobia, classism). It intersects and weaves into our everyday lives both through formal educational spaces and within informal ways. Across numerous generations, popular culture has been an important outlet for artists and every-day people to express struggles, often related to important social issues of the day. Popular culture ranges broadly, from traditional written literature to creative endeavors expressed through music, television, film, and other forms of visual art. Popular culture and media help us express what we see as needing change in our society. We learn from those whose perspectives and lived experiences may differ from our own. We are given the opportunity to be seen through various lenses; we see others who share our pain. This takes place daily through people's engagement with popular culture and media.

This year we begin a year-long celebration of publishing 10 years of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. In this issue, *Cultivating the Futures of Popular Culture and Pedagogy: Celebrating 10 Years of Dialogue*, we trace our past as well as look to the present and to the futures of popular culture and pedagogy. The articles, reviews, and Musings featured throughout our first ten years showcase new approaches and critical ways of engaging popular culture that can engender social awarenesses and material changes to help build a more equitable and inclusive world.

We celebrate the past decade of publication with *Dialogue* and reflect on how we may cultivate the future of the field in more robust ways. The Journal has and continues to feature early career and established scholars and practitioners whose work has advanced innovative pedagogical approaches, intellectually rigorous popular culture research, and the practical intersections of these. In particular, we have been working to cultivate *Dialogue* to extend discussion and scholarship of essential critical insights that speak to the ever changing nature of our world, and the challenges faced in education and in our daily lives.

### **CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF POP CULTURE AND PEDAGOGY**

Over the past ten years, popular culture has increasingly been used by teachers in the K-12 classroom, as well as in higher education institutions. Popular culture and media can play an integral impact on culturally relevant pedagogies. These texts provide students a way to understand how various historical, political, and cultural events have been perceived through the eyes of the every-day people who experienced them. Forms of popular culture can be used as powerful tools to engage students in culturally relevant teaching practices,

as they provide diverse lenses from which to evaluate events and issues across generations.

### **Challenges Faced to Culturally Relevant Practices**

Culturally relevant teaching practices, however, are increasingly under fire by local and state politicians, both at the K-12 level as well as in higher education. For instance, politicians in the state of Texas (USA), have made headlines related not only to the utilization of practices that could be viewed as promoting critical race theory (CRT) and social justice, but to punish educators who endorse embracing classroom practices that would provide a voice to students from diverse cultural perspectives.

Additionally, politicians and current state office holders in the state have recently indicated a state-level push to eliminate particular politically charged topics to be addressed in public institutions (McGee, 2022; Zahneis, 2022). Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick held that those educators who teach topics related to critical race theory should be denied tenure, or have their tenure revoked, and at this time after his reelection is pushing forward with plans to implement ways to penalize institution that provide courses that address these topics (Nietzel, 2023). Additionally, the state released a list of 850 titles from children's and young adult literature that are proposed as becoming banned, which include what would be considered politically-charged topics, including, but not limited to, issues related to Black Lives Matter, racial and cultural inequalities, and LGBTQ experiences (Chappell, 2021, Oct 28). Subsequently, many school districts in the state, and across the country, have begun to increase the number of books banned for use in their schools (Moses, 2022). The state of Florida has also made national news with their legislation targeting schools and educational practices. Called the "Stop WOKE Act," the legislation limits the ways that race and gender can be addressed in schools and by employers (Taylor, 2022). The intent of this political movement is to put a stop to providing students with literature and course materials that these lawmakers feel would "indoctrinate" students in what they deem as inappropriate behaviors and beliefs.

Given the state and national push against topics related to critical theory and thought, educators may be experiencing new pressures related to how to choose materials for classroom instruction and how to approach topics that touch on societal issues, with a concern for how this would affect their employment in the public school system and higher education institutions.

### **UNCOVERING NEEDED DIRECTIONS IN POPULAR CULTURE AND PEDAGOGY**

Working with the Southwest Popular / American Culture Association (SWPACA), Lynnea Chapman King, Ken Dvorak, and I (Anna CohenMiller) sought to fill the gap in the field to uncover current practices, insights and needed directions to move forward at the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy. Over the years, the Journal has benefitted from the excellent work from Managing Editors including Kurt Depner, Kelli Bippert, Kirk Peterson, and Karina Vado.

For example, from the very first issue, the editorial team has welcomed special issues addressing thought-provoking topics, such as Kristen Day's and Benjamin Haller's, *Classics and Contemporary Pop Culture*. More recently, unique special issues have been led by Kathryn "Kate" Lane and Roxie James around the topic of *Criminal as Heroes: Problems and Pedagogy in Popular Culture*, and Timothy Ray and Julie DeLong's double issue: *Teaching and Learning with the Grateful Dead*. For this year, we are pleased to announce a special issue call for papers led by Robert Vest and Roxie James titled, *Unreliable Me: Constructing and Inventing the Self* (see the end of this issue for details on the special call for papers).

During our first ten years, scholars and practitioners have shared about a range of innovative approaches and ideas around pedagogy and popular culture. For example, audiences have learned about the pedagogical dimensions of postapocalyptic fiction in "Girls, Guns, and Zombies: Five Dimensions of Teaching and Learning in *The Walking Dead*" and the generative intersections of media literacy and queer pedagogy in "I am

a Conversation”: Media Literacy, Queer Pedagogy, and *Steven Universe* in College Curriculum.” Practitioners have also been challenged to consider the politics of representation in popular culture, and in curricular and syllabi design. Researchers have, moreover, been offered examples for studying popular culture within their own classrooms as well as ways to unpack readings, music, poetry, tv, and film, in articles such as “Visuality of Race in Popular Culture: Teaching Racial Histories and Iconography in Media,” “Don’t Sweat the Technique: Rhetoric, Coded Social Critique, and Conspiracy Theories in Hip-Hop,” “Crossing Over: The Migrant ‘Other’ in the Marvel Cinematic Universe,” and “Afrosurrealism, Aristotle, and Racial Presence in Netflix’s *Luke Cage*.”

Furthermore, recent studies and explorations in popular culture and pedagogy are speaking to key social issues. For instance, a study was conducted in Fall 2022 exploring the decision-making factors that instructors perceived as influencing their ability to teach in their disciplines, both in the K-12 setting and higher education (Bippert, 2023). The participants were students who had been teaching at the K-12 level or in a higher education setting. As a culminating project, students were required to present a critical theory through popular media, which included music, videos, films, and visual art from popular culture. Based on the students’ interactions through weekly reflections, studying critical theory relevant to teaching assignments, tentative findings indicate that while there does appear to be substantial pressure to move away from utilizing culturally relevant pedagogies, the students indicated that their experiences with students and as educators have shaped their understanding of students’ needs, suggesting a willingness to support students’ identities and including their voices through literature and discussion in the classroom through culturally relevant practices, regardless of outside pressures and influences.

One way we are extending our emphasis on critical approaches is through a new section of the Journal - reviews focusing on critical media literacy within children’s media. Moreover, we have been asking ourselves and colleagues questions to consider the future of the field. As the official journal of the Southwest Popular / American Culture Society, we reached out to the Chairs of the conference study areas to get their insights. The following are a few responses:

*I last taught in the Fall of 2021, and the course topic (Contemporary Horror Film) seemed darkly appropriate for what we had all just lived through. What was exciting to me as a teacher was to watch my students rise to the challenge when I asked more of them in terms of their contributions to class via group exercises. Their skills may have been rusty, but they were eager. It reminded me of how much students of popular culture have to offer in terms of analysis and curation. Pop culture content continues to increase and push the boundaries of what defines pop culture, and it was exciting to see how the students were responding to it and how they were evaluating it.*

— **Dr. Alison Macor**

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*We need story more than ever, for its capacity to teach empathy, and popular culture in all its forms provides story in ways that hook students into thinking about how we understand what it means to be human. We can use any stories for this kind of work, but popular culture has two primary advantages in the classroom: first, because diverse voices are more easily found there, and second, because it shows students that the process of constructing culture is ongoing and that we need to think critically about the shape our culture has taken and will take in the future. This relevance helps engage our students and might light the way for taking our work outside the academy to make change, whether through direct action or through our students’ lives.*

— **Dr. Lexey Bartlett**

Fort Hays State University; Chair, Disability Studies Area and Mystery/Detective Fiction Area

*Among the ways popular culture scholars can reach larger audiences within and outside of the academy is through public-facing and applied work. Collaborating with and in service to the community creates opportunities for public enrichment and the tangible improvement of the human condition.*

— **Dr. Judd Ruggill**

University of Arizona; Chair, Game Studies, Culture, Play, and Practice Area

*I'm hopeful that the future of pop culture and pedagogy will include ever more engagement with environmental issues on a global and local scale. I teach eco-composition at a two-year branch of the University of New Mexico, and my students are deeply affected by the creative nonfiction and popular science we read about topics such as extinction, climate change, extinction of local species once used by Indigenous people, and the ways that human thinking about animals shapes our interactions with them. And this is only one small corner of popular culture; cli-fi, animals and plants and settings in film and literature and video games, and the prevalence of anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene in all genres provide fertile ground for promoting students' critical thinking and future paths. I am excited to see how writers and thinkers will explore them in our increasingly endangered world.*

— **Dr. Keri Stevenon**

University of New Mexico-Gallup; Chair, Eco-Criticism and Environment Area

*I hope it [studies of pop culture] continues to lead us into all spaces of society. Popular culture is such a great mirror of society; it shows us what's there but also reminds us to think about what's missing. We can then take that same attitude into the classroom and tackle all sort of important, and entertaining, social issues while always asking "why?", "why not?", and "who's voices are missing?"*

*I think something cool to think about is how popular culture, and our conference, will engage with virtual reality in the near future.*

— **Dr. Robert Tinajero**

University of North Texas - Dallas; Chair, Rap and Hip-Hop Culture Area

*Chairing an area of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association for more than a decade provides a snapshot of larger currents in the study of popular culture. The Grateful Dead area has embraced an interdisciplinary approach that has been remarkably successful, suggesting that popular culture studies work best when scholars work across disciplinary divides to interrogate a subject collectively, without hierarchy. Interestingly, that democratic view of diverse perspectives working together on a single phenomenon also promotes rigor, and highlights the need to ensure that popular culture studies continue to claim mainstream academic status. While that can create friction between scholars and fans, it can also ensure that scholars try to reach non-academic audiences with their work, and help fans better appreciate the ambition and relevance of their interests. Those themes were reflected, both implicitly and explicitly, in the Dialogue issue devoted to pedagogy and the Grateful Dead, which made a welcome and useful summary of much of the area's work, now spanning more than 25 years.*

— **Nicholas G. Meriwether**

Haight Street Art Center, San Francisco; Chair, Grateful Dead Area

## **CULTIVATING THE FUTURES STARTING NOW**

As a tribute to the past, present and future of the journal and the field, Lynnea Chapman King has

written a special invited editorial. The pieces we have gathered in this issue draw attention to the importance of teaching popular culture in a way that speaks to the layeredness and complexities of human experience, especially in the midst of, as Bippert reminds us in her beautifully written and timely editorial, a moment of heightened anti-intellectualism and concerted efforts to stifle freedom of expression (esp. intellectual freedom) in academic institutions (be it K-12 or colleges/universities).

Within this issue, we highlight cutting-edge critical pedagogical perspectives within two articles, a Musing, and two book reviews. The first article, “Mixedness Comes of Age: Learning from Multiracial Portrayals in Young Adult TV Series,” critically examines portrayal of racial mixedness in television series such as *Charmed* and *Dear White People*. By interrogating (oft-times reductive) common tropes of racial mixedness that appear across popular media, Marc P. Johnston-Guerrero and Lisa Delacruz Combs “illuminate the need for more deliberate considerations when constructing mixed race characters on TV so that their portrayals reach the full potential of multiracial representation.” At the same time, Johnston-Guerrero and Delacruz Combs offer useful recommendations for furthering multiracial literacy by integrating, for instance, more expansive media portrayals of young multiracial people in the college classroom.

The second article, “The Rhetorical Interlude in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity*: Suggesting a Model for Examining Rhetorical Discourse in Film,” advances the concept of “rhetorical interlude,” a mode of textual interpretation, through a critical reading of Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón’s sci-fi thriller, *Gravity*. Here, Brent Yergensen and Scott Church argue that the “film offers a practical and understandable answer to scientific complexity, enhancing the film’s themes of humanity conquering mortality and the unknown through vernacular simplicity.” As such, Yergensen and Church reveal that this “method of uncovering the persuasive potential of cinematic speech is an excellent pedagogical tool for students to learn about rhetoric.”

We end this issue with an important and timely critical musing penned by Travis D. Boyce and Michelle Tran titled “‘For Me, That Future is Jackson State University’: Travis Hunter’s National Signing Ceremony as a Symbol of Critical Pedagogy for Black Youth Resistance” and book reviews of *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* by Felicia Rose Chavez, and *Digital Madness: New Social Media is Driving Our Mental Health - and How to Restore Our Sanity* by Nicholas Kardaras, written by Caroline Malone and Douglas C. MacLeod respectively.

As always, we would like to thank our dedicated editorial team, peer reviewers, authors and readers. Thank you to Arlyce Menzies and Robert Gordyn as Copy Editors and Miriam Sciala as Copy Editor and Book Review Editor; April Manabat, Joseph Yap, and Yelizaveta Kamilova as Reference Editors; and to Douglas CohenMiller as Production Editor and Creative Director. We are welcoming to the team this year, Roxanne Henkin into the new role of Children’s Critical Media Literacy Editor, who will be calling for reviews for children’s books, audio, and other media.

As we reflect on the past, present and future of popular culture, we are pushed to consider the important points raised by scholars and practitioners. How far can anti-critical thought legislation related to in-school and academic practices really reach? Popular culture is everywhere, often pushing back against the dominant culture and giving a voice to the marginalized. The push against critical race theory, critical thought, and topics that some have deemed dangerous for our youth is nothing new. Artists need to keep creating, keep striding forward, and keep fighting to be heard. Two steps forward, and one step back; society will move forward, as it has in the past, to provide a voice for all. Popular culture will remain at the front line, pushing forward as it has for generations past.

Considering these pressing challenges in our world and practice, we would love to hear your ideas and what is important to consider as we move forward in the field. Here are a few prompts to get you started:

- Whose voices, issues, and/or topics are missing, invisibilized, and/or misheard?
- What topics are still needed in the scholarship?

CohenMiller et al.

- Where do we hope the future of popular culture and pedagogy will lead us?
- How might we reach audiences, and ideas in ways to engage more deeply within and beyond the classroom and academy?
- What do you hope the future of popular culture and pedagogy lead to, include, address?

We will be publishing select insights throughout the year. You can email a few sentences to us at [editors@journaldialogue.org](mailto:editors@journaldialogue.org) with the subject line: "Critical futures of popular culture and pedagogy."

It has been an incredible journey over these last 10 years working with you all to move the field of popular culture and pedagogy forward. We look forward to cultivating the next 10 years with your insights, innovations and scholarship!

**Anna CohenMiller**  
*Editor in Chief*

**Karina Vado**  
*Managing Editor and Musings Editor*

**Kelli Bippert**  
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