CULTIVATING THE FUTURES OF Popular Culture and Pedagogy

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

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As the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association enters its 45th year, we also celebrate ten years of Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy, the humble beginnings of which hail from a series of conversations at conferences and the outgrowth of scholarship at annual SWPACA (then Southwest/Texas PCA) meetings. A decade in, Dialogue now includes authors and readers far beyond the boundaries of the Albuquerque conference, continuing the important work of sharing popular culture pedagogy and practice.

Please join us in congratulating Anna CohenMiller and Karina Vado on this landmark issue, as we celebrate them, the collected Dialogue authors, and the community that will continue to benefit from this important work.

Lynnea Chapman King
Founding Co-Editor
Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

Executive Director
Southwest Popular/American Culture Association
INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal focused on the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy. Dialogue is committed to creating and maintaining a scholarly journal accessible to all—meaning that there is no charge for either the author or the reader.

The Journal is interested in contributions offering theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and historical examinations of popular culture and pedagogy, including interdisciplinary discussions and those which examine the connections between American and international cultures. In addition to analyses provided by contributed articles, the Journal also encourages submissions for guest editions, interviews, and reviews of books, films, conferences, music, and technology.

For more information, please visit www.journaldialogue.org or email Dr. Anna CohenMiller, Editor in Chief, at editors@journaldialogue.org.
Editorial Team

Anna CohenMiller, PhD
Editor in Chief, Founding Editor
Anna CohenMiller, PhD, is an award-winning educational leader, TEDx and keynote speaker who addresses systemic issues of gender equity and inclusion in teaching and learning. She has a long-standing interest in the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy, in particular related to how young audiences learn informally from media representations and steps to improve critical media literacy. Dr. CohenMiller was one of the founding faculty of the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University – Kazakhstan, the Co-Founding Director of The Consortium of Gender Scholars, Founder of The Motherscholar Project, and founding member of the Higher Ed Learning Collective. Her contributions can regularly be seen in popular outlets such as InsideHigherEd, Medium.com, as well as in over 90 research and educational journals and books. Dr. CohenMiller was the lead editor for a recent textbook, Leading Change in Gender and Diversity in Higher Education from Margins to Mainstream and is currently writing a follow-up monograph to the critically acclaimed Taylor & Francis textbook, Questions in Qualitative Social Justice Research in Multicultural Contexts. Since 2011, she has been involved with SWPACA in developing Dialogue and then as an Executive Team member.

Karina Vado, PhD
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Karina A. Vado (she/her/ella) is an Assistant Professor of Latinx Studies in the Department of English at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, FL, and affiliate faculty in the university’s Center for Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies. She earned her Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida as well as an M.A. in Women’s Studies from UF’s Center for Gender, Sexualities, and Women’s Studies Research and a Graduate Certificate from UF’s Center for Latin American Studies. Karina’s research interests span the fields of Hemispheric American Studies (especially Afro-Latinx, Chicana, Latin/x American, and African-American literary and cultural studies), Science and Technology Studies (especially Critical Race & Feminist Science Studies), and Science Fiction and Utopian Studies. Her scholarship has been supported by several competitively awarded fellowships including the Florida Education Fund’s McKnight Doctoral Fellowship, the University of Texas at Austin’s Gloria E. Anzaldúa Summer Research Fellowship, and Penn State University’s Diversity Pre-Doctoral Fellowship. You can find samples of Karina’s scholarly writing in edited collections such as Race and Utopian Desire in American Literature and Society and in Human Contradictions in Octavia Butler’s Work. For more information on current research projects and opportunities for collaboration, visit vadokarina.com.

Miriam Sciala, MA
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Miriam Sciala has been teaching Academic English internationally for over 25 years. She holds an MA in Geography from York University in Toronto and an MPhil in Second Language Studies from Stellenbosch University in South Africa. Born in Switzerland and raised in Zambia, she now carries a Canadian passport. She considers writing and editing her second career, having written and published numerous articles and short stories and has a first novel in progress.

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Douglas CohenMiller is a graphic designer and founder of Umbrella Works design studio (www.umbrella-works.com), where he is the principal graphic designer and creative director. His practice focuses on long-term branding and identity for clients in the US and internationally. Since 2011, Doug has been involved with the SWPACA; first spearheading a rebranding effort and helping to launch Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy. Alongside this work, he has been developing unique conference identities and material each year and producing and creative directing each issue of Dialogue. His other clients range from fields of academic institutions, non-profits organizations, as well as small businesses. Currently, Doug is living in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan with his family.

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Robert Gordyn has been an English Language Instructor since 1995, mostly teaching internationally in a variety of countries and regions of the world. Originally from and now based in Canada, he is a freelance editor and part-time English instructor. His academic background includes graduate degrees in Geography and Second Language Studies. Along with being an avid reader of philosophy and history, Robert has ongoing interests in communication, both in terms of the written word and in public speaking.

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Arlyce Menzies was raised in the Rust Belt, educated in the Bluegrass and New England, and now teaches writing in the windy steppe of Kazakhstan. She got her MFA in Creative Writing, Poetry at Boston University, where she enjoyed studying and practicing translation from Russian to English, copyediting for Agni, and honing her writing craft. In addition to teaching at Nazarbayev University, Arlyce facilitates translation workshops through OLS@NU and is an Art Editor for Angime, Kazakhstan’s first trilingual arts and literary magazine.

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<thead>
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Cultivating the Futures of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy
Volume 10, Issue 1 | February 2023 | www.journaldialogue.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Note from SWPACA Executive Director, and Dialogue Founding Co-Editor
Lynnea Chapman-King

Editorial
Cultivating the Futures of Popular Culture and Pedagogy: A Celebration and Critical Examination of 10 Years of Dialogue
Anna CohenMiller, Karina A. Vado, & Kelli Bippert

Articles
The Rhetorical Interlude in Alfonso Cuaron’s Gravity: Suggesting a Model for Examining Rhetorical Discourse in Film
Brent Yergensen & Scott Church

Mixedness Comes of Age: Learning from Multiracial Portrayals in Young Adult TV Series
Marc P. Johnston-Guerrero & Lisa Delacruz Combs

Musings (online only)
“For Me, That Future is Jackson State University”: Travis Hunter’s National Signing Ceremony as a Symbol of Critical Pedagogy for Black Youth Resistance
Travis D. Boyce & Michelle Tran

Book Review (online only)
Decentering the White Narrative: Felicia Chavez and the Anti-racist Writing Workshop
Caroline Malone

Review of Digital Madness: How Social Media is Driving Our Mental Health Crisis - and How to Restore Our Sanity by Nicholas Kardaras
Douglas MacLeod

Special Sections Calls for Submission
Children's Critical Media Literacy
Roxanne Henkin

Book Reviews: The Benefits of Book Reviews and a Note from the Book Review Editor
Miriam Sciala

Musings
Karina A. Vado

Call for Papers
General Call for Papers
Anna CohenMiller

Special Guest Issue — Unreliable Me: Constructing and Inventing the Self
Robert Vest & Roxie James
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 Jame’s 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:

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*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  
Advisory Board - Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

*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 layerenedness 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 Scialla 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?
• 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?
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MLA
The Rhetorical Interlude in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity*: Suggesting a Model for Examining Rhetorical Discourse in Film

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**ABSTRACT**  
This essay advances the concept of the “rhetorical interlude,” a means by which scholars and teachers may examine how rhetorical messages are embedded in films. To illustrate, this study includes an examination of the rhetorical interlude in the film *Gravity* (Cuarón, 2013) as the film’s protagonist, Ryan Stone, is visited by the apparition of her dead colleague, Matt Kowalski, who instructs her on survival in space and on the significance of moving on from personal tragedy. In a pattern of ghostly apparitions appearing in perplexing outer space situations, *Gravity* situates scientific complexity as capable of being transcended with the help of supernatural assistance. We examine the rhetorical purpose of the climactic speech in the film, which is a vernacular reframing of scientific complexity in order to make abstract concepts more accessible. We 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. Finally, we conclude that this method of uncovering the persuasive potential of cinematic speech is an excellent pedagogical tool for higher education teacher-scholars and their students to learn about rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Rhetoric, Gravity, Science, Science Fiction, Film Aesthetics, Film Theory, Oratory
INTRODUCTION

Numerous scholars have employed rhetorical theory to study how films communicate persuasive messages. The relationship between rhetorical theory and film is not new, going back to as early as John Harrington’s (1973) writings about the rhetorical impact of cinema. In more recent years, cinematic rhetoric has been studied particularly in its potential for affect: “The affective experiences elicited by the film are homologous to those of the characters, thus encouraging spectators to share in rather than merely identify with [the characters’] states of being” (Ott & Keeling, 2011, p. 369). This is also what Christian Lundberg (2009) describes as “affective investment” (p. 387). The medium of film transmits affect freely to the audience, moving them into an affective state of being; the combination of film’s use of loud volume, its darkened environment with minimum distraction, its capability for slow motion, and its use of stirring cinematic scores has the potential to create a visceral impact on the viewer.

As traditional and oratorical forms of discourse such as religion began to use media technology, film became a vehicle for rhetorical force (Milford, 2010). The rhetorical power of film in social movements has also been explored (Brinson, 1995; Bert, 2007; Olson, 2013; Ryan-Bryant, 2020). Additional research argues that cinema has the power to influence legal discourse (Schulte, 2012). Scholarship on film and rhetoric contains many ways to understand film as a model for public discourse. For example, Davies, Farrell, and Matthews (1982) constructed a model for linking cinematic discourse to Jungian archetypes: “just as the human psyche—through archetypal symbols…film is similarly a balance between the rational…and irrational” (p. 332). Some studies have applied contemporary rhetorical theory to the study of cinema, such as Barry Brummett’s (1984) exploration of horror films and Robert Terrill’s (1993, 1999) study of Batman, supplemented with Kenneth Burke’s (1969) concept of “equipment for living.” Other similar studies apply Kenneth Burke’s writings to contemporary film (Lundberg, 2009; Ott & Bonnstetter, 2007; Rushing, 1985; Yergensen, 2006) and mediated communication (Brummett, 1984).

Key voices in exploring the relationship between rhetoric and cinema is that of Brian L. Ott and colleagues (Ott & Burgchardt, 2013; Ott & Keeling, 2011). Ott (2013) draws larger patterns of rhetoric’s potential influence when on-screen, such as potential economic opportunity, as it is shown that film assists in the construction of “cognitive mapping” (p. 259). Ott and Burgchardt’s (2013) findings extend into the film’s potential influence on worldview and lifestyle: “[We] see criticism … as part and parcel of a pedagogical practice designed to engage the lived experiences of individuals and to promote agentive citizenship in an increasingly globalized world” (p. 29).

As seen in the literature, media studies and film scholars have a history of grappling both with film as a rhetorical force and rhetoric as an underlying force in cinematic narratives. Yet, while film and rhetorical scholars have studied cinema’s psychological impact on audiences, the appearance of rhetoric in the speech of the characters has yet to be studied in the film literature. Likewise, the concept of linking the psyche, praxis, and aesthetics in the exploration of rhetorical oration in film remains underexplored in the research and curricula of communication studies, media studies, rhetorical theory, and film theory and criticism. Further, rhetoric in contemporary culture tackles the same social challenges in public discourse as it did in ancient times, as illustrated by Josh Chases’s (2022) treatment of Hip Hop paralleling the work of Roman rhetorician Quintilian. Anciently, rhetoric took on a central form to public life and politics, implying a call for “modern cultural productions to reflect contemporary issues ranging from love and war to narrative technique and gender in a new light” (Day & Haller, 2014). There remains a need, therefore, for a systematic way to explore how film uses rhetoric at diegetic and extradiegetic levels because “the world of popular culture and mass media is a common immersion for most students” (Culton & Muñoz, 2016, para. 3).

This essay explores how rhetorical speech occurs in film. We propose as a method of textual interpretation the rhetorical interlude, a schema through which scholars can examine how rhetoric is used in cinema, taking
into account its aesthetic affordances (visual and sonic) as well as the didactic function of that rhetoric in the advancement of the narrative of the film. The rhetorical interlude is also oriented toward pedagogy—it is a model that helps teachers address oratorical theory, aesthetic form, and contemporary popular culture in the classroom. Further, the rhetorical interlude allows disparate disciplines to be examined together in a cohesive interlinking of classical humanitics theory and contemporary practice in popular culture, offering pedagogical tools in both cultural analysis and media practice, and expanding the “parlor of the 21st century” that otherwise “would be unrecognizable to classical and Enlightenment rhetoricians” (Tinajero, 2020, p. 17). The following essay explores the rhetorical interlude in the context of the 2013 science fiction film Gravity. We believe that the schema may be applied to other films that showcase traditional oratorical forms of rhetoric as well.

THE RHETORICAL INTERLUDE

In theorizing the rhetorical properties of films, critics can look to the cinematic moments of oratory or, when characters deliver speeches to other characters. The technological affordances of cinema amplify the potential of these scenes for persuasion; the production elements that surround these interjection scenes, such as preparation and delivering of acting, visual and sonic aesthetics (Perez, 2019), cinematography, quality screenwriting, and other production values all contribute to their rhetorical power. All of these elements work together to situate a rhetorical interlude, which we define as a key moment of didactic rhetorical discourse that is intended to present opportunities for audience reflection. Rhetorical interludes, in short, are made possible by cinema’s narrative form and production styles. Yergensen (2007) identifies them as narrative loci that “[are] concerned with the cultural and political climate [that] surround the context of a film” (p. 22). More specifically, they are “public address forms of expression within the heart of a film [which] are ripe for micro analysis” (p. 22). Additionally, because rhetorical interludes generally communicate a climactic potency, much of the film must be spent building the ideal conditions for that rhetorical interlude to take place. In other words, the narrative, sonic, and aesthetic elements of the film must work in concert to prime the audience for the rhetorical interlude.

This essay expounds upon and articulates the parameters of a model that has been vaguely theorized but never clearly articulated in the literature. For example, Yergensen’s (2007) initial description is somewhat perfunctory—although it proposes the model, it is lacking a deeper discussion about the ways that rhetorical interludes are iterated in cinema and their related implications. One of the objectives of this essay is to develop the rhetorical interlude as a model for understanding the relationship between dyadic interaction at the diegetic level, the aesthetic affordances of cinema, and the rhetorical dimensions of the performed discourse within that scene. Rhetorical interludes are didactic because they operate in intimate moments, often comprised of moral counsel between characters. These cinematic speeches, then, though ostensibly intended only for the characters who receive them, are also offered by proxy to the audience who is situated to identify with those characters. These interludes are performed dialogues, exuding a strength that is not only limited to traditional, pulpit-style discourse, but also carefully crafted and intimate, dyadic conversation.

THE RHETORICAL INTERLUDE AS SCHEMA

The rhetorical interlude model possesses a number of elements in structure, language, and plot that enable the rhetorical potential of a film. First, the film’s setting is central to the preparation of the rhetorical interlude and the development of the protagonist’s exigency, which can manifest in plot development, cinematography, character development, character relationships, and so forth. Second, the plot will center on ensuring the credibility of the interlude’s orator. Third, the interlude is performed often not by the hero, but
by a character who is associated with them; protagonists as associates or mentors, are portrayed as being in need. As a result, the audience and main character who both receive the rhetorical interlude are summoned for action by someone with more wisdom than them. Therefore, the general ignorance of the protagonist is assumed in the plot and the interlude is the moment when a protagonist experiences crucial epiphanies that will develop the plot. Fourth, the interlude is a behavioral pivot for the main character, and its extent is often measured by how the protagonist responds to being persuaded. Fifth, because the interlude is the pivot point for the character's behavior, it is the moment of alignment between exigencies for the character and the audience. Finally, the interlude introduces a poignant and didactic insight necessary for the main character (and audience) to complete their journey. Further, enemies and villains in the narrative are typically oblivious to the protagonist's newly acquired wisdom, and victory for the protagonist is therefore assured as the plot moves toward its conclusion.

In the following section, we address one of the iterations of rhetoric: its vernacular form. This is important for our pending analysis as vernacular rhetoric is often used to frame the rhetorical interlude in order to make the speech accessible to the viewer.

**Vernacular Rhetoric**

Vernacular rhetoric can be understood as reactionary to the public discourse delivered by the privileged and powerful; its particular brand of power emerges from its communal nature, which is both part of and emerges from its simple and compelling style (Hauser, 1999). It appears especially where the complex language of public policymaking exists and is therefore often impenetrable to the uneducated listener. Vernacular rhetoric employs simple language and a conversational style and its form leads to simple solutions. It is the opposite of the rhetoric of expertise, which can be cold, authoritative, and jargon-heavy. Vernacular rhetorical study presents a fascinating opportunity for analysis when it is supplemented and enhanced by the aesthetic affordances of cinema. As this study demonstrates and as argued by Larsen (2017), scientific complexity complicates and can disturb the relationship between scientific and non-scientific communities, and the significance of providing accessible language for general audiences of scientific processes is portrayed as essential in *Gravity*.

In the following section, we examine how the rhetorical interlude in the 2013 film *Gravity* uses vernacular rhetoric to solve complex technological problems. In the film, the cold, mechanical tone of technical rhetoric signifies danger and dread; this connection is evidenced by the changes of language that are seen as the levels of danger that the protagonist faces change. *Gravity* interweaves personal despair with misunderstanding of technical science, creating a narrative of distrust for technical language and therefore a justified demand for scientific simplicity. We also argue that this rhetorical interlude, in its vernacular form and even with cinematic sophistication and ornamentation, offers an accessible way to transcend what is scientific and technically impossible, and ultimately offers value and relief regarding assumptions of the afterlife.

**TEXT OF ANALYSIS**

*Gravity* (2013) was highly celebrated during the 2014 film awards season; it was nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award and won seven others (Imdb.com, August 7, 2020). The film tells the story of Dr. Ryan Stone, played by Sandra Bullock, an engineer who is isolated in space after the ship she is working on is destroyed by shrapnel from a Russian missile strike. Her only help is Lt. Matt Kowalski, played by George Clooney, who assists Stone in getting back to earth through his heroic sacrifices and through offering instructions, though posthumously, for flying the ship that he gives her as he visits her again after his death. His instructions are a rousing, inspirational speech that he delivers when it appears that Stone's fate is a sad and lonely death. In the interlude he explains how to operate the ship and, perhaps more importantly, inspires
Stone to continue pressing on despite the sadness she feels due to the loss of her daughter. The film takes place as she is simultaneously physically stranded in space and also emotionally distressed in her need to transcend her personal tragedy. Both of her problems are addressed in the film's interjecting rhetorical interlude as Kowalski's speech provides solutions to both problems.

**Science Fiction and Ghostly Visitations**

To understand the context of *Gravity*'s rhetorical interlude delivered by an apparition, the context of science fiction cinema and ghostly apparitions needs to be understood. Specific to this study, we agree that science fiction is the medium for projecting humanity's relationship with technology (Kim, 2019), which *Gravity* also grapples with. Science fiction cinema also often explores the relationship between the mysteries of space and the idea of an afterlife, which is manifest in protagonists' hallucinations as they face the loneliness and daunting mysteries of outer space. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), astronaut David Bowman experiences an end-of-the-film, climatically abrupt confrontation with an older version of himself.

A similar ghostly experience happens in *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014) as astronaut Cooper and his daughter Murphy both realize that the ghostly activity Murphy experienced as a child was actually from Cooper himself when he enters a different dimension of space later in the film. Protagonists' intimate familiarity with visiting apparitions is also shown in Dr. Chris Kelvin's deep space hallucinations of his dead wife in the movie *Solaris* and its remake (Tarkovsky, 1972; Soderberg, 2002). Apparitions serve important functions in films, appearing in scenes that provide direction by offering epiphanies to protagonists and viewers. In a Charles Dickensian way, apparitions in space give direction and clarity to main characters like Jacob Marley's interlude to Ebenezer Scrooge on the importance of living a life of generosity in *A Christmas Carol* (Dickins, 1988). In this same science fiction tradition of needing otherworldly advice, *Gravity* aligns the frustration of incompetence, personal tragedy, and the inherent vulnerability and danger of space, and ultimately shows transcendence over a situation with no apparent way out. The protagonist's crucial assistance comes from a vernacular rhetoric that shifts scientific technicalities into the realm of accessibility.

**PRIMING THE AUDIENCE AND PREPPING THE INTERLUDE**

**Real Time and Repeated Despair**

The right conditions must be created for a rhetorical interlude to maximize its offering to a character and the audience. In the case of *Gravity*, there are several elements in the plot that help prepare the audience for the rhetorical interlude. The running time of *Gravity* is around 91 minutes. This real-time depiction of Stone's life-threatening situation injects a feeling of authenticity into the film because her time sequence is nearly identical to that of the audience. The audience is only made aware of the film's few short jumps in time because of the reports from NASA headquarters that the rapidly moving shrapnel will do its damage every ninety minutes. The potential of shared trauma between character and audience also creates a sense of intimacy. Similar to how cinematic scores can communicate a sense of fear for viewers (Martin, 2019), shared time sequences connect the audience with the film's protagonists, and therefore both the viewer and the character are primed for an interlude.

Additionally, the extensively long single camera shots add to the feeling of authenticity; the trauma cannot be simply ignored as the audience must endure it alongside Stone. The intimate feeling of shared time is bolstered by these long takes. The first shot of the film, for example, runs continuously for nearly fifteen minutes. It follows Kowalski as he floats around his ship-repairing crew. Moments into the scene, Kowalski leads the audience to a view of the earth that recognizes the breathtaking beauty of the planet, and the scene foreshadows his importance as he speaks of the earth's majesty. As Kowalski declares, "You can't beat the view," the camera pans in a circular form, eventually returning back to Kowalski's face. His importance in the film
will come full circle, which parallels his wise, visually circular perspective of the earth. The display of continual long scenes without cutting to new camera angles invites the audience to follow the scenes in real-time, share trauma and burden with the protagonist, and also foreshadow the supporting character’s eventual interlude.

The film leads Stone (and, by extension, the audience) through profound demonstrations of exhaustion and desperation. Stone's drawn-out panicked gasps for air in two early scenes demonstrate her ongoing physical trauma. Later in the film, Stone's failure to operate the ship during an attempted launch sequence compounds the potential audience-engaging interlude. Stone's fear, coupled with her apparent inability to fix the spaceship, further aligns the audience with her; it can be assumed that the vast majority of the film's audience lacks the ability to operate highly technical spaceships. The scene features Stone screaming as a result of her lack of technical skill. Her screaming echoes the feelings of the audience, who also have or can experience a feeling of dread that comes from the fear of imminent death. At a less immediate level, the visceral impact of this scene recalls a larger cultural fear—that of "modernity's gamble," the tension between technical and scientific progress and its potentially devastating risks (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). The communicated feeling of dread creates an impact, not just because of Stone's precarious position, but because it evokes iconic images of technical failures and tragedies, such as the crash of the Hindenburg or, even more relevant, the Challenger explosion.

This dread takes root during the first traumatic scene as the audience accompanies Stone inside her claustrophobic mask as she is first thrust into space only moments after the singular camera shot that provided a breathtaking view of earth and a transcendent accompanying score. The audience is compelled to assume Stone's perspective by viewing the situation from inside her space mask, and therefore experiences the same panic as the protagonist. Through her eyes, Stone, the object of the film viewer's gaze, becomes de-objectified and then humanized as the audience sees her view of a terrifying space that is vast and silent as the scene lacks the comfort of a musical score. The fear associated with being helplessly propelled into space alone becomes amplified sonically as well; her loud, panicked breathing accompanies her view of nothing but open space. In this scene, the earth's beauty can no longer be observed. Stars are unobservable from her view. Her only relief is in the form of Kowalski's voice that eventually comes over the radio.

Audience sympathy for Stone continues to grow as she is further humanized through this shared trauma experience. Early in the film, after the initial hit from the speeding debris that is circling the earth, Stone and Kowalski begin to make their way toward the Russian space station with nothing but Kowalski's jetpack, which is nearly depleted of fuel. During this scene, Kowalski asks Stone about her life and background, which also satisfies the audience's curiosity. This conversation provides essential context for the rhetorical interlude that follows.

Kowalski asks Stone if she has anyone "down there," on Earth. With the soundtrack becoming progressively more somber in this scene, Stone responds, "I had a daughter," then proceeds to describe to Kowalski the tragic death of her daughter. The camera shots intermittently oscillate between Stone's sober facial expressions and the view from Kowalski's position as he looks down at the earth while he is next to her. The mirror view on Kowalski's arm presents him as a divine character, guiding Stone through the perils of an environment over which she has virtually no control. Stone appears small on Kowalski's mirror and at his mercy, as if she were a figurine in his hand. The discussion of Stone's daughter is abruptly put on hold as Kowalski's attention is drawn to their now-close proximity to the space station they are pursuing.

The focus of the film then moves squarely onto Stone's state of mind; her tendency to panic and her lack of confidence in her ability to survive are essential to the film. Ironically, she has very advanced scientific equipment in her hands and yet she is unreachable by others both physically and emotionally, as she has shut down her ability to have relationships with other people. These factors demonstrate the need for discourse that provides relief and direction for Stone. The discussion of her daughter's death and Stone's subsequent state of mind has thus been earmarked for the audience to review at a later time during the rhetorical interlude.
Womb Imagery and Symbolic Weeping

The theme of unconsciousness repeatedly emerges throughout the film, demonstrating Stone’s psychological anxiety and corporeal trauma. The cinematography carefully anticipates the interlude as Stone takes on the symbolic qualities of an unborn baby, floating in the air and seemingly unconscious. After Kowalski is fatally detached from Stone and subsequently floats to his death, Stone narrowly escapes her second disaster and barely makes it inside the Russian space station in time to use the abandoned Russian ship’s oxygen. After removing her space suit, she rests as her body assumes a fetal position, floating in a circular form as the sun shines on her through the window. Accompanying her deliverance from her space suit, gentle music evoking a lullaby plays as she floats in what seems like slow motion. This womb metaphor suggests that Stone is not yet ready to be delivered or to become a new person—she is not yet ready for the interlude.

Her symbolic digression into deeper and more frequent levels of unconsciousness continues throughout the film. Minutes after her awakening from a floating fetal position, the womb and slow-motion imagery returns again when she is knocked unconscious by debris inside the ship. Then, later and just before the interlude is delivered, Stone turns the power off on the ship and prepares herself to die. She has accepted that she is incapable of piloting the ship safely back to Earth. It is in this sleepy state that the rhetorical interlude is delivered. The accumulation of her troubles, despair, and desperation provide the appropriate setting and warrant for the interlude to take place.

Another early element in the film that sets the conditions for the interlude is the accompanying soundtrack. It sonically enhances Stone’s sense of despair as she prepares for death in the scene prior to the interlude. Tender lullaby music accompanies her while she cries, pleads on the radio for rescue, and expresses regret that she was never taught to pray. Her rate of speaking slows down as she folds her arms and appears to embrace death. Like a child being prepared for sleep by a parent singing a lullaby, the music’s poignant tone lulls Stone into her unconscious state. Although this is unclear at first, she enters a vulnerable dream state as the music dissipates. She is prepared at this point to be instructed, and Kowalski is about to miraculously return from the dead to deliver the rhetorical interlude.

Kowalski’s Ethos Derived from Mystical Status

Understanding the relationship between the speaker and the audience is an important aspect of rhetorical potency; in Gravity, the relationship between Kowalski and the audience is important to the story. He provides most of the rare feelings of relief in the film. Kowalski takes on the role of humorist, leader, and sacrifice. His role as comfort-giving agent is disappointingly snuffed out when he dies rather early in the film. This sudden change leaves the audience in the grips of despairing anxiety for much of the film. During most of the film and up until the interlude, Stone is not good company; her terror precludes any warmth or likeability. Her answers to Kowalski’s questions are short and cold. She is emotionally distant and pessimistic about her own ability to solve problems.

In contrast, Kowalski is portrayed as amusing and encouraging—in short, as a nice traveling companion. Early in the film he irreverently plays cowboy music as he helplessly but whimsically floats off to his own death. Then, in his posthumous return, he jokingly celebrates his record for the longest jetpack float in space history while he sips vodka. One character’s anxiety and loneliness is the opportunity for the other’s comfort and mentorship. One character is ineffectual both socially and technically. The other is charming, charismatic, seemingly death-defying, and capable of offering vernacular explanations as he eloquently offers simple answers to technical complexities to Stone and the audience.

In the scene just before Kowalski’s disappearance and presumed death, he encourages Stone to continue to fight for survival. The film leads viewers to assume he dies as he floats out of view while running out of oxygen. Presumed dead but not entirely sure, he becomes a mystery to the audience, floating perilously
somewhere in space but certainly missed by both Stone and the audience. The idea of hearing Kowalski’s voice again is welcome amidst Stone’s relentless desperation and panic.

Kowalski’s return is a spectacle that defiantly challenges the impossible. At the advent of the interlude, Kowalski surprisingly opens the door of the ship to join the discouraged Stone in a move that, were it real, would kill Stone instantly because she is not wearing her helmet. The prelude in which the film spells out the dangers of space is particularly significant: “At 600 KM above planet Earth the temperature fluctuates between +258 and -148 degrees Fahrenheit. There is nothing to carry sound. No air pressure. No oxygen. Life in space is impossible.” This preface to the story clearly shows the impossibility of Kowalski’s return, and the danger of opening the spaceship door in space has been made known to the viewer. Therefore, the setting for the interlude immediately casts doubt on whether it is a conscious, physical conversation.

With Kowalski’s credibility already established and enforced by the earlier divine-like imagery of him holding Stone in his hand, along with his sacrificing his life for her as he disconnected his suit from Stone’s and allowed himself to float away from the ship in order to give her enough leverage to safely secure herself to the ship, it becomes apparent that Stone is going to have a conversation with someone who is defying the physics of space. At this point in the film, Kowalski becomes something greater than an experienced astronaut. He becomes a mystical persona with a message of otherworldly significance. The established status for Kowalski further primes the audience for the rhetorical interlude that is to follow.

**THE RHETORICAL INTERLUDE IN GRAVITY**

As mentioned earlier, language related to scientific expertise is complex and often inaccessible to viewing audiences. This creates a divide between speaker and audience as they attempt to explain complex scientific ideas. The technical language in the film relating to operating a spacecraft could appear daunting, leading lay audiences to crave a simplified explanation. As vernacular communication is appealing because it is intimate, engaging, and informal, the scene’s discussion allows for contrast between jargon-heavy complexities and the accessible descriptions in *Gravity’s* rhetorical interlude.¹

The film does not definitively clarify whether Kowalski is dead or alive during the interlude, though it later becomes apparent that he was not physically present with Stone because of his rapid disappearance after delivering his speech. During the interlude it is not apparent to Stone how he arrived to once again join her, what he intends to do, or what is happening during the confusing, surreal scene. This moment creates another moment of convergence between text and audience. Her shocked facial expression upon seeing him again is evidence of her confusion that she shares with the audience. Stone tries to speak to him, but struggles to find the words to make sense of what she is seeing; his mysterious appearance bewilders Stone and audience alike. Kowalski has now transcended his previous role as emotional and physical support for Stone. He is a manifestation of spirit, which will carry meaning for Stone in regards to her dead daughter. Despite this epiphany, Kowalski’s interaction with her carries the same familiar tone of levity as before he drifted off to his death. Without greeting her directly, he first declares humorously, “Call Anatoly, tell him he’s been bumped!,” as Kowalski now supposedly holds the record for longest spacewalk. He chats with Stone, expresses gladness about her survival, and drinks the Russians’ hidden vodka in celebration. At this moment, Stone’s drawn-out despair is starkly juxtaposed with Kowalski’s abrupt confidence that she will survive.

They begin by arguing about the technicalities of operating the spaceship. Kowalski suggests that he is going with her, “We’re about a hundred miles to the Chinese station. A little Sunday drive.” Stone insists that it will not work and that she cannot make the ship function. He continues to prod her, “Well, there’s

¹ Contrast, for example, the vernacular descriptions and overall accessibility of technical concepts offered in *Gravity* to the more abstract and denser descriptions of the physics of space and time in another space film, Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar.*
always something we can do.” This is followed by his assertion that landing a ship is the same as launching, something she tried in simulation. Her rebuttal is additional reasons not to try, “I never got to land the simulator.” Kowalski’s response is simple: “But you know about it.” The argument continues as Stone replies, “And I crashed it every time!” Kowalski interrupts her stubborn responses and forces her to make a decision. As he gives a monologue, he also presents a metaphor, saying that living life is similar to operating a ship: “Listen, you want to go back or do you want to stay here? I get it, it’s nice up here. You can just shut down all the systems, turn out all the lights, and just close your eyes. And tune out everybody.” He then acknowledges how easy it would be to just turn the ship’s lights off:

Your kid died. It doesn’t get any rougher than that. But still it’s a matter of what you do now. If you decide to go then you’ve gotta just get on with it, sit back and enjoy the ride…Hey Ryan—it’s time to go home!

Stone then awakens from this dream-like state and turns to face Kowalski, but he is gone. He was an apparition with a posthumous rhetorical mandate similar to Jacob Marley’s charge to Ebenezer Scrooge in A Christmas Carol, to deliver a message that inspires change, to save the time left in life that can still be used, and to call for attitude and behavioral adjustments despite the protagonist’s tendency to be stubborn.

At the end of the interlude, Stone’s nonverbal reaction is apparent: a disgusted look on her face. This is triggered from Kowalski’s statement, “Your kid died. It doesn’t get any rougher than that.” Kowalski’s interlude has pinpointed a pivotal moment in the film. After Kowalski shows his awareness of what has caused her emotional shutdown, Stone does not open her eyes. She shakes her head at his audacious insertion of himself regarding the pain of losing her daughter. But the interlude has addressed the technical challenges Stone faces, which are symbolic references to the exigency at hand. His metaphor about her state of mind is connected to and intimately parallels her physical exigency of facing death in space. The two become intertwined and both able to be transcended.

Pivot of Behavior: Character’s Newfound Determination

Attempting to use Kowalski’s advice to operate the ship, Stone finds that it works. The effect of his interlude then continues as she realizes that if he is correct about how to operate the ship, then this genuine experience also is evidence of her daughter’s posthumous existence. As Stone prepares the ship for departure, she continues her dyadic interaction with the deceased Kowalski, even though he is no longer on screen and never returns again in the film. She asks him to tell her deceased daughter, Sarah, that she loves her. The result of the interlude’s rhetorical objective has been immediate. The lullaby music that had accompanied her drift toward death just minutes before is replaced with increasingly upbeat instrumental music that represents her newfound instinct to survive. Her resolve comes from the rhetorical interlude, which is simple in style but resolute and stern, and is performed with emotion, humor, and personality. Kowalski’s comforting, vernacular speech makes the complex seem simple, and the overwhelming difficulty of technical processes becomes manageable.

Kowalski’s vernacular approach as a solution to both technical and personal problems becomes Stone’s framework for understanding and coping with her difficult situation. She endearingly speaks of her daughter’s shoes and of taking her “last ride.” Her sentences become short, simple statements with the inflection of her voice rising. She laughs easily and quickly. Her previous dry, unemotional eyes and blank facial expression rapidly transition into a more emotional state as she laughs and speaks with energetic inflection in her voice. Kowalski’s style of rhetoric has impacted her, and so Stone, as post-interlude camera shots take direct views of her face, speaks in the same playful language used by Kowalski. Notably, the technical rhetoric that he could have used with Stone is never referenced in his speech. Rather, he uses a vernacular style, one that the audience can also understand. This choice of language to fit the rhetorical situation indicates that the speech is not just to comfort the protagonist on screen, but also to offer emotional connection for the audience.
The effect of the rhetorical interlude is significant and immediately observable. Stone is witty, brave, and engages in problem solving in creative ways, such as using a fire extinguisher to float directionally in space and navigating buttons labeled in a language that she doesn’t read. Finally, Stone adopts Kowalski’s personality as she begins to retell and finish the story that Kowalski was never able to complete. He tried twice to finish the story but could not because life-threatening trouble arose that demanded his attention. The story is that he was once at Mardi Gras in New Orleans and saw his friend walking with a man, who he then realized was not a man at all, but a hairy woman, whose androgynous identity was initially difficult to distinguish.

After the interlude and as Stone is about to enter the earth’s atmosphere as she has succeeded in operating the ship to return to earth, she attempts to retell Kowalski’s humorous Margi Gras story, but only directly to the audience. It is important to note here that Stone is not connected to NASA or any other astronaut when she attempts to re-tell Kowalski’s story. Her only audience is the film viewer, as she was Kowalski’s only audience. As Stone attempts to finish Kowalski’s story, though she does not know its end, she is cut off by the violent tumbling of the dropping ship. She abandons the story, then declaring as she prepares for her final descent to earth, “I’m ready!” As she takes on his communicative style, it is as if Stone has become Kowalski and the audience has become Stone. Transference of his problem-solving skills and approach to life has been complete.

Supernatural Means of Transcendence

There are also supernatural dimensions to the pivotal speech. Kowalski’s rhetorical interlude never explicitly mentions the possibility of an afterlife, but the implication is clear: if Kowalski still exists, so does Stone’s daughter. If Kowalski is okay in the afterlife, so too is her daughter Sarah. Stone’s anguished feelings related to her daughter’s death is tempered after hearing the interlude because Kowalski presumably still exists. Kowalski’s interlude transcends the technical in both prescribed action and persuasion. Implications include that a beautiful setting cannot always soothe a parent’s broken heart, even when she is placed in space with breathtaking views of Earth, as though Kowalski provided an earlier tour of the Earth. However, visitations from the dead can indeed provide such an answer. Supernatural visitations function to overwhelm and overpower both technology and mortality, and they do so by adopting vernacular rhetoric.

The final scene of the film shows Stone emerging out of a lake after her ship safely lands. As she then swims to shore, she struggles to pull herself out of the water. Then, painfully and falling at first, she stands on her feet. The Oscar-winning soundtrack intensifies as she stretches out her arms, crying in a state of joy. Just before her triumphant struggle to her feet, which is difficult due to experiencing no gravity to being back on Earth, she whispers “thank you.” Whether this expression is directed to a deity or to Kowalski, her reference is back to the moment of interlude that changed her understanding of her deceased daughter, the cosmos, and her capacity for transcendence and survival after loss.

Stone’s brief performance of the evolutionary process as she climbs out of the water at the end of the film parallels her transcendence over the trouble of being trapped into a depressed state of despair. Before the interlude she lacked passion and was emotionally distant from everything around her. Here we have identified an essential theme of the film. Gravity is not an outer-space adventure as much as it is a film about the transcendence over pain due through perceived supernatural intervention. It is a private story. Hope for the afterlife emerges as an epiphany for Stone. Kowalski, an accomplished astronaut, only needs to speak in simple terms to provide resolution. Abstract advice to “just get on with it!” is the means for personal transcendence. The absence of Earth’s gravity, which compels her to physically float in space, functions as a metaphor for her loss of liveliness because of the trauma of death. The overcoming of familial loss and safely flying back to Earth happen only as a result of the rhetorical interlude, demonstrating the birth theme coming full circle as she enters Earth as a new person.

Persuasion and instruction takes a traditional, oratorical form in our age when everyone is an orator via social media. Gravity represents a case for the vernacular availability of discourse to take on interpersonal
style, and the performance of persuasion is shown in the narrative and the protagonist’s acceptance of the interlude. The personality of Kowalski’s relatability, combining with Stone’s new practicality amid scientific complexity, resolve the personal and technical exigencies threatening survival. The interlude in Gravity is manifested in the last words of the film as Stone revisits the interlude, the brief oration is crystalized as she has accepted her new purpose. Immediately following her verbalized “thank you,” Stone steps in a small puddle of water, causing a splash onto the camera lens, which invites the audience to be impacted as was Stone. The transference of the rhetorical interlude’s didactic potential is offered, an identification between Stone and audience becomes more apparent, and the rhetorical potential of the film becomes more pronounced.

**MODEL FOR POPULAR CULTURE SCHOLARSHIP AND PEDAGOGY**

The rhetorical interlude in Gravity offers a contrast to more common forms of public discourse analysis. It is dyadic rather than oratorical. Amidst complex technical language and the perils of nature, it offers a place for problem solving, allowing for emotional distance from once-paralyzing exigencies.

Gravity’s rhetorical interlude possesses a combination of brevity and style that appeals to the contemporary audience. Humor trumps articulation, wit surpasses complexity, and the colloquial challenges eloquence. It should also be noted that, ironically, this austere rhetorical style collides with Gravity’s expensive and detailed production quality. While the film explores the gamble of modern technology, it is nevertheless technically exceptional, having won the Academy Awards for Best Cinematography, Best Visual Effects, Best Sound Editing, Best Sound Mixing, and Best Production Design. In this analysis, we align the technical and authoritative with the practical and vernacular, although the latter is accompanied by the faith-driven hope for an afterlife.

It is important for higher education teacher-scholars of popular culture to be able to explicate both rhetorical function and aesthetic form, largely driven in the rhetorical craft as observable for both scholars and students in the screenwriting process. The rhetorical interlude model intertwines pedagogical priorities in both classical rhetorical theory and contemporary practice in media production, enabling historical humanities to obtain the respective role that it has echoed over the ages of human inquiry.

While Kowalski has died, Stone continues to converse with him even after the interlude. She also fully accepts her Dickensian rebirth as a real experience and therefore begins to operate differently, both personally and in the way she operates the ship. In the intimacy of the rhetorical interlude, the film suggests a need for exploring the reality of death and the possibility of life after it. These existential answers are accompanied by skills and knowledge that are transferred during life-threatening exigencies, both technically in the physical setting and in the emotions of life’s traumas, all of which are resolvable in the cinematic rhetorical interlude.

The rhetorical interlude is a portable tool for scholars and teachers. The need for rhetorical interjection is underscored by opportunities for persuasive discourse to frequently occur in cinema. Rhetorical interludes, then, are crucial moments for cinematic meaning. The scholarly importance of rhetorical interludes is that they allow for exploration of efforts for the promotion of change, establishment of nostalgia, enforcement of public memory, issuing of public warning, promotion of conscience and counsel, and the prescription for solace, among others. Scholarly analysis can be focused on the contexts of films, and subsequently rhetorical interludes’ strategic structures can be understood as rhetorical effort worthy of scholarly attention. Additionally, acknowledging and examining the rhetorical interludes that exist allow teachers to discuss the potency of persuasive messages in films. In conclusion, when teachers address this method of textual interpretation, it reminds students of the larger point that films are more than “mere entertainment”—they are containers of rhetorical meaning.
REFERENCES


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APA

MLA
Mixedness Comes of Age: Learning from Multiracial Portrayals in Young Adult TV Series

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ABSTRACT

Representation in literature, popular culture, and media has been shown to influence identity development and belonging as exemplified in the enduring hashtag #RepresentationMatters. However, mixed race representation on television has received little attention in research and scholarship. Hence, this essay examines how multiracial characters are portrayed in coming of age and young adult storylines from four TV series (All American, Charmed, Trinkets, and Dear White Peoples) representing two different networks (Netflix and The CW). Through a close reading of dialogue within the context of larger story arcs, we identify and critique common tropes in order to further multiracial literacy and inform pedagogical practice in the classroom. Specifically, three analytical themes are explored: (a) the perceived promise of racial mixing toward transcending Blackness, (b) the boundaries of Blackness, and (c) the grappling with identity and what it means to claim Blackness. Our discussion illuminates the need for more deliberate considerations when constructing mixed race characters on TV so that their portrayals reach the full potential of multiracial representation. We conclude with recommendations for more critical portrayals of multiracial young people and the intentional usage of such media in pedagogical efforts within college classrooms.

Keywords: Multiracial, Mixedness, Young Adult, TV Series, Coming of Age, Representation, Portrayal, Blackness
MIXEDNESS COMES OF AGE: LEARNING FROM MULTIRACIAL PORTRAYALS IN YOUNG ADULT TV SERIES

Representation in literature, popular culture, and media has been shown to influence identity development and belonging (Besana et al., 2019), as has been exemplified in the perennially trending hashtag #RepresentationMatters. Indeed, the famous quote by Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund, that states “you can’t be what you can’t see” has been internalized by those seeking enhanced representation across various fields, positions, and genres. Despite some critiques of this phrasing as being potentially exaggerated, both the demand and need for better representation persist. Therefore, we situate this article in relation to Rudine Sims Bishop’s (1990) lasting metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, particularly as we consider young and new adult media audiences. The importance of seeing oneself reflected (mirrors), learning about others (windows), and having entryways to new worlds (sliding doors) cannot be understated, especially for an often-overlooked population like multiracial youth. This population has seen considerable growth over the past few decades, with recent Census data projections noting “the share of children who are Two or More Races is projected to more than double in the coming decades, from 5.3 percent in 2016 to 11.3 percent in 2060” (Vespa et al., 2020, p. 4). Indeed, the 2020 U.S. Census found that while 10.2% of the total U.S. population identifies with Two or More Races, this percentage increases to 15.1% of all children (defined as under the age of 18) (Jones et al., 2021).

Despite this population growth, research and scholarship on representation for this multiracial demographic have not kept pace (DaCosta, 2007; Larson, 2016). And while multiracial-focused research is burgeoning in education and the social sciences (Gabriel et al., 2022; Johnston-Guerrero & Wijeyesinghe, 2021), the connections between popular cultural representation and pedagogical implications for this population remain under researched. One significant exception comprises an undergraduate honors thesis by UC Berkeley student Paloma Miya Larson (2016), whose investigation of multiracial characters on Disney Channel shows has demonstrated how characterizations of mixed race personas within the media contribute to a false narrative associated with a post-racial society. We build on Larson’s analysis to examine how mixed race characters are portrayed in coming of age and young adult storylines across a broader range of networks. This desire arose from the following observation: there have been increases in mixed race portrayals on TV, corresponding with an entire series dedicated to the topic (ABC’s *black-ish* spinoff, *mixed-ish*). Yet, as we consumed these media ourselves and realized the college students we were teaching in higher education were also consuming them, we questioned whether the portrayals of mixed race characters accurately address demands for further representation.

Here, we make an analytical distinction between portrayals and representations. According to Oxford University Press (n.d.a), portrayal is defined as “the act of showing or describing somebody… in a picture, play, book, etc.”, whereas representation can be defined as “The action of standing for, or in the place of, a person, group, or thing, and related senses” (Oxford University Press, n.d.b). Thus, we see representation as a more powerful action versus portrayals, which solely describe an individual. But if this distinction plays out within TV series, at what point do portrayals become representation? As mixed race people, do we see ourselves as powerfully and holistically represented versus just portrayed a certain way? In seeking answers to these questions, this article aims to expose common tropes related to multiraciality that can be useful for higher education and student affairs educators to become more aware of as they teach about racial dynamics.

ANALYZING MIXED RACE PORTRAYALS IN YOUNG ADULT TV SERIES

To answer questions around mixed race portrayals vs. representations, we examined multiracial characters from four live-action TV shows (*All American, Charmed, Trinkets, and Dear White People*)
representing two different networks (Netflix and The CW). The inclusion criteria included recent shows (having aired or been concluded within the past five years) that feature at least one multiracial young adult character and where mixedness is discussed in some form. Multiracial characters were defined as having parents featured on the show who are of different racial groups or who deliberately acknowledge their mixedness. We omitted *mixed-ish* from our analysis because the show itself feels like an outlier given its purposeful engagement of mixedness as a central storyline. Similarly, Netflix’s *Ginny & Georgia* also centrally engages the storyline of an interracial family and multiracial identity; thus, we omitted that series as well. Across the four shows that we selected, we found a total of six multiracial or mixed race characters that fit our inclusion criteria. Table 1 contains the important information, demographics, and focal episodes that we utilized in our analysis.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV Show</th>
<th>Character(s)</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Portrayed by</th>
<th>Focal Episodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Charmed</em> (CW)</td>
<td>Maggie Vera &amp; Macy Vaughn</td>
<td>Black dad/Latina mom</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Sarah Jeffrey &amp; Madeleine Mantock</td>
<td>Season 1, Episode 18: “The Replacement” and Season 2, Episode 12: “Needs to Know”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dear White People</em> (Netflix)</td>
<td>Samantha White</td>
<td>Black mom/white dad</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Logan Browning</td>
<td>Season 1, Episode 1: “Chapter I,” Episode 7: “Chapter VII,” Episode 10: “Chapter X” and Season 2, Episode 8: “Volume 2: Chapter VIII”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Trinkets</em> (Netflix)</td>
<td>Tabitha Foster</td>
<td>Black mom/white dad</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Quintessa Swindell</td>
<td>Season 2, Episode 5: “Works in Progress”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our analysis focused on identifying and critiquing common tropes of multiraciality to further multiracial literacy for college educators who may wish to utilize such media as pedagogical tools. Through our analysis of dialogue within the context of larger story arcs, we found three main themes: (a) the perceived promise of racial mixing toward transcending Blackness, (b) the boundaries of Blackness, and (c) the grappling with identity and what it means to claim Blackness. We outline these themes below and integrate each one with related literature. Additionally, we wish to acknowledge our positionalities and that although the six characters in our analysis were identified as having a Black parent, neither of us identify as Black. We are two mixed Filipina/o American and white scholars attempting to analyze Black representation and anti-Blackness, yet we recognize the potential limitations we have as outsiders to Blackness, while still being insiders to mixedness.

**The Perceived Promise of Racial Mixing toward Transcending Blackness**

In their introduction to the book, *Mixed Race Hollywood* (2008), Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas describe the broad evolution of mixed race characters as a movement from tragic to hero, following changing
ideologies associated with theories of “hybrid degeneracy” emanating from the pseudoscience of eugenics in the early 1900s to more contemporary racial logics. The tragic mulatta trope prominent throughout the 1930s-1950s period eventually changed to featuring “more nuanced and typically more positive representations in film and television” in more recent decades (p. 10). Indeed, no longer just tragic, mixed race characters “have been represented alternately as neutral, ordinary, positive, or even heroic” (pp. 10-11). Ralina Joseph (2013), in Transcending Blackness, takes the evolution from tragic to heroic one step further, arguing how “throughout U.S. history, mixed-race African Americans have been placed, and sometimes place themselves, on a trajectory from tragedy… to ostensible privilege (an excess of sexuality, light-skinned advantage, and straight white male desire)” (p. 157). Across media portrayals, we found an engagement and signifying of biracial characters’ Blackness at various points—but these situations seemed to center around encounters with crime, specifically through encounters with white police or surveilling by white employees. Two prominent examples manifest in the high school-centered shows All American and Trinkets.

In the first season of the CW’s All American, there is a pivotal scene where biracial and ambiguously brown Jordan Baker (Michael Evans Behling), who has a Black father and white mother, has a run-in with white cops (Hardy, 2018). After Jordan and monoracial Black Spencer James (Daniel Ezra) are pulled over by police and Jordan is involved in a hostile encounter with the white police officer, Spencer is shown putting his hands on the dashboard and questioning Jordan, “What are you doing, man? Just give him what he asked for.” After Jordan’s incredulity at the cop’s accusation that he made an illegal turn at a red light, the officer asks, “What are you boys doing in this neighborhood?” clearly hearkening back to Jim Crow-era racist and dehumanizing use of “boys” to refer to Black men (Irons, 2004). Jordan states that this is harassment and claims, “my mom is a lawyer.” Jordan is subsequently restrained and arrested. Spencer, who then tries to help him stay calm, is also restrained and handcuffed. In this experience, Jordan is treated as a Black man similarly to Spencer, despite their phenotypic differences. Even his threat to call on his lawyer mom goes unheard—it is unclear if this is because the cops do not know his mother is white or if they do not care. In any case, Jordan’s proximity and access to whiteness failed to save him from this racist police encounter.

Fast forward in the episode and Jordan later asks his Black dad, Billy Baker (Taye Diggs), “How could you not go off on that cop?” and why didn’t he “have his back?” Billy responds by saying that by getting him home, he did have Jordan’s back, and he asks Jordan why he would even argue with the cop and put himself in that kind of danger. Jordan retorts, “I did what I was taught. I was standing up for myself, ok, Dad?” Jordan’s invocation of “teaching” signals both his upbringing in posh Beverly Hills schools but also the apparent lack of racial socialization from his parents. Within the social sciences, racial socialization has been described as the messages received to “foster an understanding and awareness of race, racism, and racial privilege as well as enculturation of ethnic heritage and culture” (Rollins & Hunter, 2013, p. 141). For many multiracial young people, these messages have been shown to focus more on cultural heritage than preparation for racial bias (Johnston-Guerrero & Pecero, 2016).

We see the distinction between the apparent racial socialization Spencer received and Jordan’s lack thereof when Spencer asks Billy (Jordan’s dad) why he never instructed Jordan on ways to deal with the police, explaining that his mom had already made that clear by the time he was eight years old. Spencer explains, “Cops like that they see my Blackness as a weapon. You know, so you talk slow, you do as they ask, you keep your hands visible, and you never run. How come you ain’t tell him that?” Though Billy says he thought he had more time before Jordan “had to face the ugly side of being a Black man in America” we later find out it might have more to do with Jordan’s mixedness and proximity to whiteness. Billy tries to take ownership of not having had “the talk” (DiAquoi, 2017) with Jordan earlier. Jordan responds by asking, “If I looked like Spencer, would you have had the talk with me earlier? Billy’s answer is telling: “Probably. Yeah, I—I think I would.” Here, we clearly see how Jordan’s parents wished to use his mixedness and proximity to whiteness to transcend race and racism.
This focus on how the biracial character looks in relation to the potential for racial progress happens in a similar manner during a scene in the second season of Netflix's *Trinkets*. Tabitha Foster (Quintessa Swindell), one of the main characters, has a Black mother and a white father. Throughout the first season, there is no mention of race, though we do get to meet Tabitha’s parents: Father Whit Foster (Linden Ashby) and mother Lori Foster (Joy Bryant). In the second season, specifically Episode 5 of the 10-episode season, race is brought up for the first—and pretty much only—time. Early in the episode entitled "Works in Progress" (Chenzira, 2020), as Tabitha is out shopping with her mom, she is racially profiled and followed by a white woman salesperson in the store who accuses Tabitha of stealing. Granted, the show is centered around stealing trinkets, but in this case, when the white woman spots Tabitha putting her own phone away in her pocket, Tabitha has not stolen anything. Two white women salespeople ask Tabitha to empty her pockets, which she refuses to do. When Tabitha’s mother Lori comes over to see what is going on, the white woman starts saying, “We have reason to believe…” and Lori cuts her off exclaiming, “The only reason is racism” and they storm out.

Afterward, when Tabitha and her mother are back in the car, processing the encounter, Lori then shares her own story of this kind of incident happening when she was younger. Tabitha says, “You never told me.” Similarly, to the father in *All American*, Tabitha’s mom responds, “I was hoping things would be different for you.” From this response, it is unclear as to why she believed things would be different as the show does not explicitly tell us. Still, we can assume that, just as when Jordan asked whether he would have received “the talk” if he “looked like Spencer” i.e., was perceived as monoracial Black, that belief was likely because Tabitha looks mixed and thus has closer proximity to whiteness. Later in the episode, Tabitha gets braids as a bold new approach to embracing her Blackness, signaling that she was previously trying to minimize or hide it.

These scenes demonstrate how monoracial parents in an interracial marriage had a perceived hope or promise about their biracial children's experiences with racism, given their mixed identities and phenotypes. Because their children had a white parent and demonstrated more proximity to whiteness in their appearance, there was a perceived promise that their children would transcend Blackness, thus transcending racism. However, both encounters with policing and profiling that Jordan and Tabitha experience respectively exhibit the falseness of this presumed promise, which is not in line with biracial the characters’ lived experiences as portrayed in these scenes. Moreover, as Ralina Joseph (2013) has argued, the parents’ beliefs about the promises of mixedness perpetuate anti-Blackness in their desire to transcend race. That is, they are not transcending race generally; they are trying to transcend Blackness specifically.

**The Boundaries of Blackness**

As we explored the theme of transcending Blackness, we identified another prominent theme related to who could claim a Black identity—or more accurately, who was claimed as Black by other (ostensibly monoracial) Black characters. In these cases, the boundaries of Blackness were sometimes fluid, yet the racial authenticity of biracial characters was often questioned, as has been documented prominently in the literature (Harris, 2017, 2019). We see this in *Trinkets*, *All American*, and *Dear White People*. These examples are often centered on how one looks or their phenotype.

Later in the same racial profiling episode in *Trinkets* described earlier (Chenzira, 2020), the focus on Tabitha’s appearance becomes explicit when she shares what happened with Marquise (Austin Crute), a dark-skinned Black male student. Initially, Tabitha is hesitant to share but responds to Marquise’s emphasis that “there’s only so many of us in this school. We gotta be able to talk to each other.” In this scene, there seems to be tension between how Tabitha is included in the Black community by her peers while recognizing how her light skin color makes her different. Marquise places emphasis on “us” when referring to how few Black students there are in their high school, and so Tabitha should feel comfortable confiding in him. However, he is then surprised that such a racist incident happened to Tabitha because she “passes the paper bag test,” which was a crude custom of measuring proximity to whiteness within African American communities that
could be used to regulate membership to elite Black organizations (Hunter, 1998). Later Marquise says, “our unapologetic Black faces” indicating he again clearly sees Tabitha as Black. These examples demonstrate what Reginald Daniel and Gary Haddow (2010) refer to as “strategic essentialism” for the African American community, which is defined as “a tactic that nationalities, racial/ethnic, or minority groups can utilize to mobilize themselves in order to achieve certain goals” (p. 318). Marquise engages strategic essentialism by creating community with Tabitha when he emphasizes “us” and later seems to include her in “our unapologetic Black faces.”

Daniel and Haddow (2010) discuss the tensions that occur around strategic essentialism when mobilizing across Black multiracial and monoracial communities because it can lead to conflicts regarding different definitions and manifestations of racial identity, which is demonstrated by Marquise being surprised by Tabitha’s experience of racial profiling. Despite this peer perpetuating a monolithic Black experience for those who do not pass “the paper bag test,” this scene does provide some nuancing of mixed race representation. In one interaction/scene, Tabitha is portrayed as being both included (in line with strategic essentialism) and excluded (due to colorism and her proximity to whiteness). Taken together, the scene with Marquise likely signifies a more common lived experience of multiracial young people in line with the power of representation. Yet, neither multiraciality nor mixedness are named explicitly.

Similar dynamics also appear in All American. In an episode toward the end of the first season (Shotz, 2019), Jordan is talking with his (monoracial Black) Grandpa Willy (Brent Jennings), who tries to push Jordan to take more ownership and lead his football team in contradistinction to Spencer. Willy says “You’re too comfortable, son. And that’s no fault of yours. You were raised that way. Given a seat at the table. Spencer, on the other hand, had to fight for his seat, as do most of us Black men.” Here, “comfort” might be connected to privilege accorded to Jordan on account of his not being seen as a Black man, which is counter to the police arrest scene. The white cops clearly saw Jordan as a Black “boy” and treated him as such. But Grandpa Willy does not seem to see Jordan as a Black man given his use of “us Black men” which could include Jordan, though in this context, represents an attempt to make a distinction between “most of us Black men” and Jordan’s level of comfort and his not having to fight for a seat at the table as Spencer has. Jordan’s response signals his need to assert that he is part of the group by later using “our” when explaining that Jordan was not taught much of “our Black History” growing up in Beverly Hills. This is another example of how a Black character perpetuates essentialized constructions of what a Black man or person should be. Though, the fact that this scene captures some of the nuance that Jordan might be feeling related to his inclusion/exclusion in Black communities signals a move toward more nuanced representation as opposed to a mere one-dimensional portrayal.

Further, in the first episode of Netflix’s Dear White People (Simien, 2017a), one of the main characters, Samantha “Sam” White (Logan Browning), who is biracial Black and white, converses with her monoracial Black best friend Joelle Brooks (Ashley Blaine Featherson) about dating a white man and how that is connected to her campus activism and racial identity. Sam tries to rationalize “dating white boys” with being biracial, but Joelle retorts “You’re not Rashida Jones, biracial. You’re Tracee Ellis Ross, biracial. People think of you as Black.” This scene is similar to the previous scenes because Joelle is essentializing what it means to be a biracial Black person by limiting this racial identity to two options as modeled by Rashida Jones or Tracee Ellis Ross. This illustrates the extent to which racial authenticity is often questioned and how whether monoracial Black characters claim multiracial characters as part of the race depends on the choices that the multiracial character makes within the show. Moreover, portrayals of multiraciality on TV shows are inherently essentialized, given that shows typically represent one multiracial lived experience (even if there is more than one multiracial character) by solely engaging race from the perspective of just one such character. Therefore, there ought to be deliberate character construction that leads to an accurate representation of the nuances associated with mixed race identities in order to avoid essentializing a singular multiracial experience.
Grappling with Identity: What Determines Blackness?

As the previous examples illustrate, oftentimes, the policing of identity comes from external groups. But there are other shows with characters who grapple more explicitly with their mixed identities and the extent to which they can claim Blackness. Charmed, the fantasy remake that includes college-going young adult Maggie Vera (Sarah Jeffery), tackles questions of racial authenticity when, late in Season 1 (Episode 18), Maggie finds out that she has a different biological father than the one she has always known (Beeman, 2019). And her biological father was Black and not Latino. Maggie later is shown filling out demographics for a scholarship and selects both Black and Latino, which leads her to a screen that reads “specialized scholarships.” She says, “I’m special” but then is unsure when those scholarships are geared toward Black students. After looking at photos of Black students associated with the scholarships, she then searches online, “what determines Blackness?” Maggie has a questioning and unsure expression at first, but her statement about being “special” signals her entryway toward claiming Blackness and that she can be both Black while also unique or special for not fitting a prototypical or essentialized Black identity.

Later in the episode, Maggie says to her sister, Macy Vaughn (Madeleine Mantock), who shares the same biological parents as Maggie, “For 18 years, I have always checked the same box on every form. And now, I am eligible for all these scholarships for Black students. Is it messed up for me to apply?” Macy responds, “Our dad is Black.” Maggie then presses for a definitive answer from her older sister, who has been Black all her life. Macy ends the conversation by noting how hard the question about whether Maggie should be considered Black is when she states, “It’s a hard question. I am sorry that I can’t answer it for you.” This example of needing an external authority to tell her what to do demonstrates how Maggie is still developing into emerging adulthood and establishing her sense of identity and confidence in who she is. This is reminiscent of college student development theories like Marcia Baxter Magolda’s (2004, 2014) self-authorship theory, which have been adapted to multiethnic and multiracial students (e.g., Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). Self-authorship outlines a developmental trajectory from externally defined ways of knowing, being, and constructing relationships to more internally defined ways to do so.

A crucial point of the developmental journey is the crossroads, where individuals question the external formulas they have been following and must now decide what path to pursue next. In this episode of Charmed, Maggie explicitly states she is at a crossroads during the group scholarship interview with other Black students: “I just found out that my dad is Black and I am at somewhat of a crossroads.” Later in the same episode, Maggie is talking with her older sister Macy again, who offers to be a listening board for her newfound identity and associated dilemmas. Maggie shares “I don’t think I will apply for any of the Black student scholarships. It just doesn’t feel right. But, I am going to check out the BSU again... I want to figure out this new part of myself.” This decision exemplifies Maggie’s place in the crossroads and her movement towards an internal definition of what it means to be multiracial and what it means to claim Blackness. Specifically, Maggie demonstrates this by asserting her desire to figure out this new part of herself.

Later in Season 2, we hear Maggie reaching a similar crossroads by signaling to a sense of liminality, which means to occupy a threshold or in between existence (Turner, 1969). In Season 2 Episode 12 (Byrd, 2020), Maggie in reference to white and dark lighters says “the world isn’t black and white. It’s gray.” White and dark lighters are protectors of the witches in the Charmed universe whereby the white represents the good in people, while the dark represents the darkness or evil. Maggie exudes a complex understanding of liminality in claiming that concepts do not have to exist in a binary. Rather, similar to her lived experience, they can exist in a threshold or beyond rigid boxes and definitions.

However, in Dear White People, Sam is not allowed to be in the gray. Throughout Season 1, she must grapple with a choice between being in a relationship with white Gabe Mitchell (John Patrick Amedori) or Black Reggie Green (Marque Richardson). Sam’s struggle to choose between Gabe and Reggie represents
her struggle to choose between the white and Black sides of her biracial identity. This idea is most evidenced in a pivotal scene in Episode 7 (Ganatra, 2017) when Gabe and Sam say “I love you” to each other and Gabe mentions how complicated and a mess she is, calling in tropes of mixed people being confused or pathologizing their identities (Nadal et al., 2011). And later in Episode 10 (Simien, 2017b), Sam says that she slept with Reggie because “I needed to know for sure what I wanted.” However, in Season 2 (Simien, 2018), Sam’s confidence in her Black identity seems solidified as she responds to Gabe during a fight: “Do you think I get to go out into the world half the time as a white girl and the other half as a black girl? I’m black. In this society, that is what I am, period.” This confidence of her identity might be due to her receiving explicitly and expressly monoracist attacks like being called a “half-breed” and her mother being called a “monkey” and, even recalling hybrid degeneracy theory, (Aspinall, 2015) by an attack stating, “your dad ruined you.”

These two examples from Charmed and Dear White People denote the divergent ways multiracial people engage their identities and what it means to occupy a gray space or feel forced to choose between racial identities, thus choosing between two or more parts of themselves. While this complexity is illustrated across two different shows, this complex portrayal falls short within one TV show. One must watch multiple TV shows to see anti-essentialized portrayals of the mixed experience that approach a level of nuanced and powerful representation.

BROADER DISCUSSION: MIXED RACE PORTRAYALS AREN’T ENOUGH

Though our analysis focused on the specific examples of these focal mixed characters who intentionally discussed or engaged their mixed identities, their relationships with parents need further unpacking, especially given recent critiques of Netflix shows like the ones we have been analyzing. Writing for Polygon, a gaming-focused outlet from Vox Media, Petrana Radulovic (2021) critiqued biracial characters’ representations on Netflix because they tend to not show a meaningful connection to the parent of color. However, we found that in two Netflix series included in our analysis, Dear White People and Trinkets, the biracial characters, Sam and Tabitha, respectively, spend the most meaningful time with their Black moms. While there is meaningful engagement of this type in All American and Trinkets, the Black parents failed to sufficiently provide racial socialization, specifically the kind that prepares children for encountering bias (Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Snyder, 2012).

Our findings illuminate the need for more deliberate consideration when constructing both story arcs and mixed race characters on TV. Portrayals are not enough. When people of color state that “representation matters” they never say, “portrayal matters.” Indeed, while portrayal is an essential first step, there must be more deliberate intentionality in the way mixed characters speak to the lived experiences of mixed race people in order to reach the power of being fully represented. Even in the shows with specific scenes that discuss multiraciality, they do not move beyond singular conversations or single episodes. For example, in Charmed, there is a powerful scene about navigating the world as a multiracial person in Season 1. However, there is no follow-up in Seasons 2 or 3 about this lived experience. The show touches upon race in the coming seasons but never returns to this crucial scene between sisters Maggie and Macy.

Our paper continues the discussion on the critical engagement of mixed race Hollywood, and our findings suggest continued and further engagement are needed. As Beltrán and Fojas (2008) noted, “mixed race imagery has been an enduring and powerful trope in U.S. culture, deployed to convey popular conceptions about national identity, social norms, and political entitlement” and we need to continue to “rethink normative discourses about the representation of race and racial categories” (p. 11). In addition to rethinking normative discourses, we must be able to center differential racialization specific to (anti)Blackness in U.S. society. In this regard, Ralina Joseph’s (2013) work is most instructive. Pulling from Valerie Smith’s articulation of how
so-called rules of hypodescent were internalized and converted from externally applied indicators of shame to sources of pride and belonging, Joseph states, “Representations of blackness as something to be transcended fly in the face of the historic embrace of multiracial African Americans in African American communities” (p. 3). Joseph (2013) goes on to critique these types of representations in popular culture because they “believe the complexity of real-life experiences of such subjects, who live simultaneously as black and mixed-race, in a messy multiplicity that is rarely contained in any racialized nomenclature” (p. 3).

WHY FOCUS ON PORTRAYALS OF MIXEDNESS AND MULTIRACIALITY? IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

When focusing on popular culture as a pedagogical tool in the classroom, multiracial representation is critical because it helps to illustrate the complexities of race. Our findings inform recommendations for pedagogical practice for dialogue about race in college classroom spaces. In framing our recommendations for pedagogy, we return to Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors concerning young adult representation while encouraging readers to engage with the scholar’s larger legacy (see McNair & Edwards, 2021). Hence, mirrors represent oneself in the media, windows provide opportunities to learn about others, and sliding glass doors are analogous to entry points from different perspectives. We argue that all three types of representation serve as important pedagogical tools, and because of our focus on higher education, we discuss how our findings inform classroom spaces in college environments.

When teaching about privilege and oppression, educators must recognize how these dynamics that are related to multiraciality are contested. We argue that multiracial subjectivity is a marginalized identity that is often viewed as an outlier in society due to the presence of monoracism, a unique system of oppression that operates under the paradigm that people have one racial identity (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Moreover, as demonstrated in our findings, multiracial identity development becomes more complex through the lens of adolescence and coming of age journeys (Lynch, 2022). Jeffery Arnett (2010) asserts the importance of examining late adolescence and emerging adulthood from the perspective of cultural psychology. He characterizes this time in life as an age of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, in between, and possibilities. Additionally, psychology and higher education scholars have examined multiracial identity development amongst adolescents and college-aged students (Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006; Lynch, 2022; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2000, 2004; Williams et al., 2014). This scholarship demonstrates the importance of multiracial identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood; therefore, we have focused our analysis on portrayals of mixed race characters in young adult storylines on recent television shows and recommend this analysis in the classroom through assignments, exercises, and discussions.

Highlighting identity development also informs specific educational strategies and pedagogical practice focused on race and multiraciality. Other scholars in the women, gender, and sexuality studies discipline have recommended utilizing TV and popular culture as a pedagogical tool to learn about social justice, race, and identities (Bronske et al., 2006; El-Burki, 2017; Gonzalez, 2018). Additionally, Pauline Reynolds (2014) discussed implications of film representation, popular culture, and media in higher education settings. In fact, additional attention is needed towards building upon the use of TV and media as a pedagogical tool for teaching issues of identity in higher education. We utilize our findings to recommend tangible pedagogical practice strategies in college classrooms.

When utilizing TV portrayals as a pedagogical tool to educate about multiraciality and monoracism, we recommend intentional nuance and stewardship. Given that it is important for multiracial college students to see themselves (as mirrors) not only in popular culture and media, but in the curriculum and assignments in the classroom, we do suggest that instructors utilize these imperfect representations as tools to discuss
the complexities of race (Wijeyesinghe, 2021). However, it is also imperative that instructors clarify that representation (or mirrors) is not always enough and to encourage students to imagine different possibilities for more accurate portrayals of mixed race characters in media. This particular TV show portrayal could also be paired with clips from the Oprah Winfrey Network documentary, *Light Girls* (Duke, 2015) to further contemplate the connections between multiraciality, monoracism, and colorism. For the focal characters in our analysis, it is also vital for college educators to highlight that the characters in these portrayals are mixed, rather than assuming a monoracial identity. This emphasis serves as an avenue for mixed race students to see mirrors on TV and in the classroom.

Because utilizing these examples of mixed race representation also serves as windows for monoracial students to learn about the multiracial experience, educators must remember to assert that the mixed experience is not a monolithic one. TV portrayals are inherently essentializing because they only illustrate one lived experience. Within classroom spaces, instructors must acknowledge this in order to recognize that these singular discrete portrayals are not sufficient to thoroughly understand the complexities of multiraciality on a systemic level. Instructors can assign additional readings from an increasing body of literature connected to Critical Mixed Race Studies (see Daniel et al., 2014) along with other media clips to more accurately depict the holistic mixed race experience.

Finally, while utilizing popular examples like those in our analysis can serve as a powerful tool for young adults to learn about race, it is also essential to emphasize these examples can be sliding doors or entry points to learn more about multiraciality specifically, for all students. In order to continue learning, instructors should scaffold additional learning opportunities once students walk through that door. The topic of multiraciality should not be regulated within a single lesson plan. Rather it should be integrated for continued engagement, for example, with other forms of media, literature, and scholarship in order to expand students’ knowledge about critical mixed race studies. This recommendation is not meant to negate the importance of mirrors and seeing oneself in media, but instead to expand further nuanced and deliberate conversations about the complexities of race inclusive of multiraciality.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

This study continues to demonstrate more nuanced considerations when constructing mixed race characters on TV and other media. While these portrayals are an empowering and important start, more attention is needed to demonstrate anti-essentialized multiracial experiences. Multiraciality is not monolithic, and the way that adolescents, teens, and college students experience their multiracial identity differs depending on context, social environment, and time (Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006; Lynch, 2022; Renn, 2000, 2004; Williams et al., 2014). However, this complexity is missing from much of the current entertainment landscape. We therefore argue that these storylines must move beyond portrayals and more toward accurate representation for multiracial young people to not only see themselves on TV, but to also see their complex, messy, diverse, and empowering identities more accurately depicted on the screen.

Moreover, our study has implications for pedagogical discussions related to race and popular culture given the ways TV, media, and popular culture can be utilized as pedagogical tools in the classroom to examine complex issues related to social justice (Bronski et al., 2006; El-Burki, 2017; Gonzalez, 2018). Specifically, El-Burki (2017) emphasizes the point that current college students have spent most of their life with mediated representations of race through popular culture and asserts that representations in the media have become cues for understanding race and resulting worldviews. Our analysis calls for the intentional examination of portrayal and representation as a pedagogical practice in the classroom when discussing race and social identities. Dialogue and critique focused on these TV shows may push students to develop more
nuanced perspectives on race and multiraciality. We encourage higher education educators to build upon other disciplines and continue using TV representations as a social justice pedagogical tool, but to do so with stewardship and intentionality.

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**Mixedness Comes of Age**


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THE BENEFITS OF BOOK REVIEWS AND A NOTE FROM THE BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

In Dialogue, The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy, book reviews play a crucial part in the introduction to the public of newly-written books that provide analyses of popular culture and the way it reflects current social conditions. These publications can serve to educate not only the general reader, but also researchers and educators. Indeed, by providing insight into a particular book that goes beyond what the title – be it catchy or not – provides, the reviewer lays out the main components of a book to the potential reader and can be instrumental in convincing that reader to choose that particular book for a future read.

Hence, by describing the main gist and viewpoint on a book of popular culture for our journal, which caters to social scientists/researchers and educators, the reviewer is placed in a position whereby they can reach out to our readers and pique their interest in a book that is pertinent to their interests. For instance, an educator reading one of these books may be induced to translate the knowledge gained from the book into practical methodologies that can be applied to their pedagogy. Ultimately, this will help them guide students towards more salubrious perceptions of social issues and a deeper understanding of the various existences among various social groups, thus engendering a kinder and more tolerant society.

Academics involved in the social sciences also appreciate reading our book reviews as they search for sources to support and enhance their own research. A book review could help them save time as they can then more rapidly decide whether the book in question is suitable for their endeavours in explaining the way popular culture reflects our society.

Writing a review of one of the books on our list would be beneficial to our readers. By helping them to ascertain the genre of popular culture under discussion and the angle in which the information is presented, the reviewer places the readers in a position whereby they can better judge whether reading the entire book would be beneficial to them and whether it could lead to potential applications within their respective fields.

The books on this list have a focus on a specific genre of popular culture, be it fiction, film, television, music, video games or technology. They have been written with the aim of helping the reader understand popular culture and its assistance and limitations towards the generation of a deeper comprehension of society. If you are interested in reviewing one of these books, we invite you to contact us letting us know which book you would like to review. We look forward to collaborating with you.

A note from the Book Review Editor - Miriam Sciala

For me as a reader, or more specifically, as a bookworm from a very early age, book reviews open up possibilities as they guide me to the next set of books on my lengthy “to be read” list. Realistically, though, despite the best of intentions, I never will
read all the books on that ever-expanding list as life is much too fleeting. Therefore, for all those that will remain unread, book reviews serve a different purpose – that of providing a synopsis - a brief description that offers me a view of the author's stance, the context within which the book was written and a few choice details that enable me to gain a sense of the subject matter; in truth, it is a condensed account that nonetheless provides some information, opening a window into the narrative. In fact, a perspicacious review on its own can provide me with a few precious moments of reading pleasure. And after turning that page, I will have gained knowledge and the possibility of applying it in my work.

The act of writing a book review, in my experience, is extremely rewarding, too. This type of writing has done more than afford me the opportunity to read a particular book; it has engendered a perusal with intent – a deeper reading than that done merely for pleasure. Book reviews are my mini-research projects where I approach the book from the angle of the chronicler who endeavours to comprehend and explain the content and point of view of that book, connecting these to the context in which it was written. It is an exercise in objectivity to outline the strengths and limitations that form the features of the book. Penning a book review for the reader activates my creative side as I communicate the salient information appearing in the book to an imaginary fellow reader, albeit without giving too much away, in an attempt to prompt that reader to pick that book up and experience it through their own eyes.

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UNRELIABLE ME: CONSTRUCTING AND INVENTING THE SELF

Wayne C. Booth, in The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961), coined the term unreliable narrator to discuss the “artificial authority” that we as readers assign the narrator that is telling us a story (4). The question, however, comes when the narrator withholds information, manipulates information, or outright disguises or hides the information to fulfill a particular purpose. Perhaps the narrator wishes their reader to believe a particular idea, or they do not want the reader to know something to maintain the image they are creating through their narration. Literature has always played with the concept of narration. From Cervantes to Poe to George R.R. Martin, readers experience narrators that are confused, obscured, illusive, and more.

Dialogue is currently seeking contributions for a special topics issue on the role of the narrator in the construction of both the text and their own identity. This issue will examine the narrator as a potential source of (mis)information in any medium of global popular culture and focus on their role in creating an idealized version of themselves through their narration. Texts themselves may even subvert or challenge the implicit authority of the narrators. This issue also welcomes any contributions that demonstrate how to read past the narrator to understand the meaning of the text.

Potential papers might consider the following:

- The instinctual power and authority given to a narrator;
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- How we teach students to think critically about narrators;
- How we teach students to examine the source of information within a text.

Please send completed manuscript drafts (5,000-7,000 words in length and in MLA format) to Dr. Robert Vest (robert.c.vest@gmail.com) and Dr. Roxie James (dr.roxie.james@gmail.com) by March 10, 2023.
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