

On Confronting Identity and Global Challenges through Popular Culture and Pedagogy

How can we make sense of the world? How do we reconcile who we are with global socio-environmental and socio-political issues? Popular culture offers us one direction, a guide towards unpacking an understanding of ourselves and for making sense of the world. In formal setting, instructional practices can support diverse perspectives, facilitating equity and inclusion (CohenMiller et al., *forthcoming*). As Jubas and colleagues note (2023), adult learning can be seen individually and collectively in formal and informal ways through “everyday engagement with popular culture” (p. 168).

The articles in this issue grapple with concerns that are at once very modern and as old as popular culture itself. In previous issues of *Dialogue*, we have seen a depth of discussion around zombie literature and shows (e.g., Crowley, 2016; Gartley, 2018; Neely, 2014; Nuruddin, 2019; Strickland, 2019) as well as an exploration into coming of age themes (e.g., Antuna et al., 2018; Johnson-Guerrero & Combs, 2023). Yet, when we speak of zombies, coming of age, and ways of learning, we confront concepts of identity and global events. As such, in the following volume 11, issue 2 of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, “On Confronting Identity and Global Challenges through Popular Culture and Pedagogy,” we are pleased to share a robust set of works including four full length articles, two book reviews, a film review, a game review, and a Musing, unearthing a simultaneity of topics familiar yet *ad* examined in new ways.

Within the issue, we get a chance to explore familiar topics in new ways, seeing the continued expanding potential for teaching and learning through popular culture. These topics are treated in a way both strikingly fresh and strikingly germane to the hyper-politicized current moment. Metaphors abound, and readers will find not just messages borne of authorial intent, but also parallels to their own experience in our delicate 21st century.

The first article of the issue begins with Nayoung Seo’s “Revising *Paradise Lost* Through K-Pop: A Global Approach to Teaching Writing.” In it, ideas of coming of age and sociopolitical tensions are explored through considering Korean youth culture. Seo writes that “Young students are taught to honor older people’s opinions as part of their culture,” which is certainly respectful—but that it also “lead[s] to the silencing of their new ideas or thoughts due to the cultural expectation to defer to parental or teachers’ suggestions.” Seo proposes that when K-Pop group BTS pushes back on these strictures through their music in film, they surmount the more-typical intimate interpersonal tension and push this ideological clash into mainstream global awareness:

Milton depicts how the lost innocence of Adam and Eve does not lead to an absolute downfall; rather, their newly obtained knowledge becomes a resource for experiencing God’s grace through the coming of the Son of God. Through this paradoxical message—growing through loss—BTS encourages youths to expand their edges by growing through the innocence of strict South Korean social norms and the competitive educational environment imposed on them by the parental and adult generations.

Readers will notice through Seo's insightful work that the old and the new are indeed a bridge—a chance to move beyond a binary.

Continuing with a theme of coming of age, in the second article, “Examining Adolescence and Agency in the Midst of International Crisis: Pandemics, Pandemonium, and Zombie Young Adult Literature,” Hunter Strickland emphasizes the potential for meaning for youth in making sense of crisis. The link between the COVID-19 pandemic and zombies is sharply depicted. Strickland addresses how teachers can help their students through this natural tendency of turning to “modern tragedy lit” by working to dismantle assumptions about students, and by empathizing more with their struggles. Strickland writes:

Breaking down the stereotypes of youth is a great benefit of studying YAL at large, but one of the most important reasons for studying ZYAL during the time of the national pandemic is the overwhelming message of hope amidst struggle that so many adolescent (and adult) readers long for.

Showcasing a means for facilitating youth through struggle, Strickland offers insight through a highly sought after genre into formal and informal learning within and beyond the classroom.

Then in the third article, themes of youth continue as Jose Ardivilla discusses “Ways of Decoloniality by The Painted Lady: *The Last Airbender's Katara* Demonstrates How to Revive a Community in Ecological distress Brought by the Colonial Expansion of the Fire Nation.” Ardivilla explores difficult cultural cross-sections through a deceptively accessible medium of TV cartoons. The unpacking of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*” and how it interfaces with analogized cultures touches on perhaps one of the show's more sensitive story arcs: the character of Katara helping a small fishing village by assuming the personage of its people's revered deity, the Painted Lady. In the show, this choice becomes touchy for the anticipated reasons, but it also allows viewers to get beyond their comfort zones and ask hard questions about how they think belief systems ought—and *not*—to operate. Ardivilla writes,

Katara's experience with the Fire Nation's atrocities [toward her own people] provides her an arsenal for decolonizing and disruption . . . In her donning The Painted Lady, she is transmuting her informed ways of defiance to suit the needs of the fishing village.

This article's focus on decolonization through reinforcing the importance and power of Indigenous belief systems resonates today, as cultures globally continue to face repression and colonization by domineering regimes.

Then moving into the fourth article of the issue, coming of age shifts to thinking about engaging young students in the classroom, exploring identity. Gillian Mertens and Henry “Cody” Miller offer a creative direction for how teachers and students can envision education (and educator identity) through the lens of fictional educators. The authors grapple with the problematic and all too common tendency of popular media to lionize the “white savior” as a teaching ideal. Additionally, Mertens and Miller engage with the inverse side of this focus: how pop culture too often ignores the more insidiously negative side of education, which can harm students without those students being cognizant of the process. The authors suggest, “depiction[s] of education as comprised of ‘saviors’ severely neglects the structural impacts of schooling as an institution to enact social harm.” These ideas—whether foregrounded or shrouded—have an impact on future teachers too, who can easily buy into and perpetuate the favoring of idealism over pragmatism. This becomes complicated, the authors argue, when teachers interface with students. The authors suggest, to wit: “Several students reported an affinity for experienced, calm, expert teachers.” Ultimately, and particularly in our current, fraught world, it can be easy to wish for an idealized educational space modeled on heroic fictional templates. And as Mertens and Miller remind us, mirroring these ideas in the real world is difficult.

In addition to the full length articles, this issue continues its exploration of identity and global challenges,

delving into essential humanistic endeavors such as politics, gender identity, and friendship through Reviews and a Musing. In Fatima Qaraan's review, there is a discussion of the metaphorization and global influential power of superheroes in the review of Mariano Turzi's book *The International Politics of Superheroes*. Qaraan unpacks Turzi's argument that the fictional trajectories of superheroes mimic the global movements of the real world: their changing of self and surroundings "resembles the symbolic path that present nation-states 'seem to be undergoing.'" The second book review, by Marjana Mukherjee, shares insight around the poetry by Manjamma Jogathi and Harsha Bhat, in "From Manjunath to Manjamma: The Inspiring Life of a Transgender Folk Artist." The "transformative power of art" is highlighted through the story of resilience, identity and growth.

Our identity development as navigated and negotiated through and with popular culture continues this issue. In "Cinema in Color," Christina Masuda and Yih Reh offer an unique integrated review of two books, highlighting youth identity development through Giroux (2009) and the idea of "media's powerful pedagogical force, shaping people's understanding of the world." The reviewed book showcase the cross-over between identity and socio-political forces, bringing together Justine Gomer's "White Balance: How Hollywood Shaped Colorblind Ideology and Undermined Civil Rights" and Zachary Ingle and David Suter's "The 100 Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows."

The ways we interact with popular culture is epitomized by the final review of this issue, a game review by Mayank Kejriwal discussing the "immersive fantasy" of *Hogwarts Legacy*. Tensions abound in this review, as Kejriwal intricately details ways young growing up with Harry Potter could be drawn into the entertaining game, while facing global issues such as anti-Semitic themes and weaponized directions.

Lastly, a common theme of this issue around confronting identity can be seen through the topic of friendship as taught within the classroom. In a Musing, David Powers Corwin, Casey Klemmer, and Julia Timpane investigate the uses of friendship as a form of rhetoric. They ask their students, "Why do friendships matter in pursuit of social change?" The authors' students are guided through critical reflection, through reading classic works by Aristotle and contemporaries such as Mia Birdsong and Stephen Braden, come to see cooperation and friendship as a tool more versatile than they may have realized.

Across the articles, reviews, and Musing, the authors of these works provide novel ways to consider popular and pedagogy around themes of confronting identity and global issue through film, tv, literature, poetry, and music. Whether on a personal or global level, world dynamics remain in a state of delicate flux—and the work in this issue is a testament to how we can engage with those shifts.

We're grateful for the robust work of the full team who makes each issue possible, to each of the peer reviewers who offered deeply considered and meaningful feedback to these works, and to each of you who engage with these works. Without these efforts, this issue would not have been possible. Thank you to Associate Editor - Karina Vado; Managing Editor - Barbara Perez; Production Editor and Creative Director - Douglas CohenMiller; Book Review Editor and Copy Editor - Miriam Sciala; Copy Editors - Robert Gordyn and Arlyze Menzies; and Reference Editors - April Manabat, Joseph Yap, and Yelizaveta Kamilova. Welcoming in a new team member, we are pleased to share our new Musings Editor - Elizabeth Gonzalez.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts on this newest installment of *Dialogue*.

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