

Benjamin Thevenin

## Making Media Matter. Critical Literacy, Popular Culture, and Creative Production

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**BENJAMIN THEVENIN**

# **MAKING MEDIA MATTER**

**Critical Literacy,  
Popular Culture, and  
Creative Production**



**ROUTLEDGE**

# MAKING MEDIA MATTER

This book is an essential resource for media educators working to promote critical thinking, creativity, and civic engagement through their teaching. Connecting theory and research with creative projects and analyses of pop culture, it models an integrated and practical approach to media education.

In order to prepare learners to successfully navigate rapid shifts in digital technology and popular culture, media educators in both secondary and university settings need to develop fresh, innovative approaches. Integrating concepts and practices from the fields of media studies, media arts, and media literacy, this book prepares teachers to help their students make connections between their studies, uses of media, creative expression, and political participation. As educators implement the strategies in this book in their curricula and pedagogy, they will be empowered to help their students more thoughtfully engage with media culture and use their intelligence and imagination to address pressing challenges facing our world today.

*Making Media Matter* is an engaging and accessible read for educators and scholars in the areas of media literacy, media and cultural studies, media arts, and communication studies.

**Benjamin Thevenin** is an Associate Professor at Brigham Young University's Department of Theatre and Media Arts. His studies focus on the relationships between youth, media, and civic engagement; particularly, how we can better prepare young people to become thoughtful citizens, consumers, and creators of media. He teaches classes on creativity, children's culture, emerging media, and media literacy.



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# MAKING MEDIA MATTER

Critical Literacy, Popular Culture,  
and Creative Production

*Benjamin Thevenin*



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# INTRODUCTION

## Is Everything Awesome?

As I was doing the bulk of my research and writing for this book, I thought about *The Lego Movie* (2014) a lot—and not just because my three young boys and I were at home building lots of Legos (and watching the movies and playing Lego video games, and so on). But because the battle over our critical capacities and creative energies represented in the movie seemed to be playing itself out in the real world.

Set in a brightly colored world of Lego figures and bricks, *The Lego Movie* begins by following the “everyman” hero Emmet as he goes about his day “following the instructions”—a list of rules enforced by the tyrannical Lord Business (“president of the Octan Corporation...and the world!”).<sup>1</sup> Emmet and the other citizens of Bricksburg obey these commands to “shower,” “put on clothes,” “drink overpriced coffee,” and “listen to popular music.” Throughout their workday, seemingly everyone in the city happily complies, even engaging in a never-ending sing-along of the song “Everything is Awesome!” which is broadcast throughout the city on a constant loop. The admittedly catchy tune includes the lyrics: “Everything is awesome. Everything is cool when you’re part of a team. Everything is awesome, when you’re living out a dream ....”<sup>2</sup>

The only members of this Lego world that see through Lord Business’s manipulative machinations are a select group of “Master Builders”—heroes like Wonder Woman, Abraham Lincoln, Shaq, and others—who have taken the metaphorical “red pill” and use their creative capacities to resist this hegemonic power, building cool new inventions and starting a revolution. When Emmet discovers the “piece de résistance” and is believed to be “the chosen one” who has been prophesied, he attempts to lead these Master Builders to end the

## 2 Introduction

sinister plot to super-glue all of Lego World in place, which would (literally) cement Lord Business's rule (and his rules) forever. But this exceptional collection of super-talented Master Builders fails miserably. And in the end, it is not until Emmet's comrade Lucy (aka Wyldstyle) seizes control of the television and radio station and interrupts the constant stream of propaganda that the tide turns. In her broadcast, Lucy calls upon all the citizens of Bricksburg to use their creative energies to literally deconstruct the world around them and create the means to resist Lord Business's evil army. And they do! Together, this community of citizens and creators takes the power back from their oppressors and literally builds a new, better world.

In recent years, we have been faced with some incredible challenges—including a global pandemic, a particularly contentious US presidential election, devastating consequences of climate change, and a series of tragic deaths of Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement. Amid these challenges, we have seen two sides of humanity come out. On the one hand, we have witnessed (and many of us have participated in) an explosion of creative output. Artists and activists have poured their energies into advocating for racial justice with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Feeling isolated in their homes and anxious about the events in the world, creators have collaborated online to make web series like *Some Good News*, documentary films like *Life in a Day 2020*, live-streamed comedy specials, concerts, and so on. And even more folks have used this time stuck indoors to explore creative hobbies, from breadmaking to woodworking, songwriting to DIY at-home theme park design (really!). At our house, my family and I finished reading the *Harry Potter* books, watched all of the *Steven Universe* TV series, drew a lot of pictures, played a lot of dress-up, and (of course) built a lot of Legos. For a time, I even designed some mini media literacy activities as part of our boys' remote-learning curriculum, each exercise introducing a different concept—like “Creators,” “Devices,” and “Collaboration”—and inviting the kids to be more reflective on their own engagement with media during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the same challenges that have encouraged some to engage with the world in new, creative, productive ways have prompted others to be more destructive or at least distracted. Faced with lockdowns and social-distancing measures, many of us retreated into binge watching and doomscrolling instead of using media as a means of connecting with each other and engaging with the challenges facing our society. During this increase in political and societal tension, network news coverage and social media discourse have arguably become more divisive. Disinformation has circulated like wildfire, and in response, many people not only have accepted it but also have actively spread it within their communities, demonstrating a terrifying lack of critical thinking. Groups that had previously existed on the margins of society—including conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, and white

supremacists—have been given mainstream media attention and their numbers and influence have increased exponentially. There was even a plot from a sitting President to prevent the citizens from exercising their rights and to retain his rule indefinitely (sound familiar?).

This incredible contrast—with expressions of creativity and political praxis on the one hand, and examples of propaganda, divisiveness, and prejudice on the other—clarified for me that, while we may not be living in the surreal, apocalyptic plot of *The Lego Movie* (not yet, anyway), we have been presented with a similar dilemma. Are we going to band together like the citizens of Bricksburg and use our creative energies to make ourselves better and to build a better world? Or are we going to remain divided, distracted by the message that “Everything is awesome,” and allow false information to circulate unfettered and injustice to remain unchallenged?

## Making Media Matter

The comparison of such a pivotal—and in many ways, terribly tragic—moment in history to a kids’ movie featuring talking toy blocks may seem ineffective, maybe even inappropriate. My intention is not to make light of the real-life challenges that we have been confronted with recently and that we continue to face now. It is the opposite. I want to illustrate how media—even silly, colorful, comedic media meant for children—really matters. The title of this book, *Making Media Matter: Critical Literacy, Popular Culture, and Creative Production*, is a variation on a bit of a catch phrase that periodically pops up in studies of culture and society. Similar to Cornel West’s book *Race Matters* and the name of the non-profit media literacy organization *Media Matters for America*, this book’s title relies upon the double meaning of the word “matter” to suggest both a topic of consideration or discussion and something of importance or significance. This book—and the discourses of media studies, media arts, and media literacy education from which it draws—reiterate the claim that media, the arts, and popular culture are significant and worthy of our consideration. Things like *The Lego Movie*, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, crowd-sourced online art, and even the so-called fake news play an increasingly important role in our culture and society, and we need to talk about and make sense of their meaning and impact.

Where *Making Media Matter* varies a bit from this pattern of titling things “[Blank] Matters” is my inclusion of the term “making.” This word, “making,” is meant to suggest two things. First, although media are always already significant and worthy of our consideration, the fact that media do matter so much is because of the time, efforts, resources, and attention we spend on them. *Media matter because we make them matter*. Depending on how we exercise our agency as audiences, authors, and artists—including what we choose to do with and make of these modes of expression and communication—media’s

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impact can be remarkably good or unbelievably bad. When we watch, read, play, interpret, discuss, like, share, create, and so on, we play a pivotal role in how and why “media matter.” Second, I use the present continuous verb tense of “making” to suggest that our efforts to make media matter are an ongoing process. We do not get to check “made media matter” off our to-do list when we change our profile pic in solidarity with a social movement or when we finish an undergraduate media literacy course or when we complete our documentary film. Critical thinking, engaged citizenship, creativity, and media literacy are not skills that are acquired or objectives to be achieved. Instead, they are activities in which we should be engaged continually.

The objective of this book is to help us more effectively participate in this process of “making media matter.” You will notice that each of the chapter titles begins with a different present continuous verb: *integrating, teaching, processing, engaging, making, authoring, creating, playing, celebrating, valuing, developing*. My intention with each of these chapters is to try to model many different possible approaches to “making media matter.” And while I anticipate that my readers will find helpful ideas and practices in this book to implement in their personal engagement with media culture, because my target audience is media educators, my primary objective is to better prepare those teaching in both formal and informal educational settings to share these ideas and practices with their students.

Returning to the metaphor of *The Lego Movie*, if we really want to “make media matter” and make our world better, it cannot be just us Master Builders (those who study, teach, and make media) leading the revolution. Like Lucy, we need to empower all of the people around us to exercise their critical thinking, practice their creativity, demonstrate caring, and actively participate in civic life. And like the citizens of Bricksburg, we need to look around us and make use of every means available to us—ideas from different thought traditions, examples from the arts, entertainment, and pop culture, a range of different creative processes, aesthetic approaches, media technologies, and so forth—so that together we can build a culture and society characterized by expression, communication, and collaboration rather than division and injustice.

### Breaking Down This Book

*Making Media Matter: Critical Literacy, Popular Culture, and Creative Production* consists of this Introduction, nine chapters, and a Conclusion. [Chapter 1](#), “Making Media Matter: Integrating Media Studies, Media Arts, and Media Literacy Education” reviews each of these traditions, citing relevant research and practice in each field and commenting on each approach’s affordances and limitations. It describes the benefit of developing an integrated approach

to media education and engagement that emphasizes the strengths of media studies, media arts, and media literacy. And it introduces how this integrated approach provides the foundation for the remaining chapters, particularly in their focus on critical literacy, popular culture, and creative production.

**Chapter 2**, “Teaching and Learning in a New Media Age” provides a pedagogical framework for the book, drawing upon relevant research and practice in traditions such as critical pedagogy and democratic education as well as examples from pop culture and my own experiences as an educator. It highlights key concepts that may help readers most effectively implement the arguments made in the book in their educational efforts, as well as their personal engagement with media culture. And last, it describes how this pedagogical approach is present within the remaining chapters of the book.

These first two introductory chapters are followed by a series of seven chapters—each of which introduces a lens through which we can more critically and creatively engage with media culture—and then a concluding chapter. **Chapters 3 through 9** each include three sections. The first section introduces and synthesizes concepts from a range of scholarship related to a particular theme and uses examples from media, the arts, and popular culture to illustrate these concepts. The second section demonstrates the practical application of this analytical framework in an in-depth look at a popular cultural text or phenomena. The third section introduces a creative activity that is designed to help learners make connections between theoretical concepts, critiques of popular culture, and their own creative practices. The goal of these chapters is to model for readers ways they might (1) synthesize the strengths of media studies, media arts, and media literacy education, and (2) integrate the cultivation of critical literacy, engagement with popular culture, and participation in creative production in both their educational efforts and their personal engagements with media.

**Chapter 3**, “Processing Pop Culture,” is the first of these chapters. It introduces readers to the process of actively interpreting popular culture, including: (1) the creation of a media text; (2) its aesthetic, narrative, material, and thematic elements; and (3) audience’s engagement with and interpretation of the text; as well as (4) the broader social and cultural contexts of which it is a part. The first section demonstrates this process through an integration of concepts from traditions such as cultural studies, political economy of communication, aesthetic theory, narratology, and media ecology. It also draws upon examples from pop culture, including Roald Dahl’s novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, hip-hop music, and Spider-Man. The second section uses these concepts in an analysis of the work of Donald Glover, specifically in the production of the television series *Atlanta*, the audience-generated #donald-4spiderman online campaign, and the depiction of issues of race and violence in the song and music video “This is America.” The third section introduces

an activity called Glitch Art, in which participants use a glitch aesthetic to modify an existing image. The activity encourages participants to experiment with a new creative process while also reflecting on how media texts are made and interpreted.

Chapter 4, “Critically Engaging,” explores the power of story in our society and argues that while pop culture often functions to distract and pacify the public, we can potentially use media to address pressing political issues and build a stronger society. The first section integrates concepts from scholars like Marshall McLuhan, Chimamanda Adichie, Aristotle, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno. It draws upon examples from culture, such as the work of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, the political performances of the punk-rock group Pussy Riot, and the silent films of Soviet filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein. The second section uses these critical theoretical concepts in an analysis of indie videogames produced by LGBTQIA+ developers, specifically in the use of queer experiences, perspectives, and aesthetics to challenge misogyny and heteronormativity within the gaming industry and culture. The third section introduces an activity called Radical Games in which participants critically engage with games—and the world around them—through a process of inquiry, creativity, and play. The activity involves designing a social issue-oriented game and encourages participants to understand play as an approach to critical inquiry and games as a potential site for positive social change.

Chapter 5, “Authoring Identity,” introduces readers to various analytical perspectives on the concept of authorship, as well as the role of culture in our personal development of a sense of self. The first section explores the concepts of authorship and selfhood, drawing upon traditions from Romantic literature, the Auteur Theory, post-structuralism, and fan studies. It references examples from children’s book author/illustrator David Macaulay and filmmaker Agnes Varda. The second section uses this framework in an analysis of the *Star Wars* franchise and its fan cultures. The third section introduces an activity called Textual Poaching, in which participants remix a piece of popular culture as a means of deconstructing the media’s representation of some characteristic or community with whom they identify. The activity encourages participants to reflect on how they have been represented in media culture as well as how media has contributed to their identity formation.

Chapter 6, “Creating Community,” explores the role culture plays in creating and maintaining community, from the oral traditions of old to novels and movies to social media today. The first section demonstrates how pop culture functions as a means of socialization and connection within communities using concepts from scholars like John Dewey, Jack Zipes, and Manuel Castells. It draws upon examples such as Greek tragedy, the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, and the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements. The second section uses these frameworks to explore how the African-American folkloric tradition has historically helped sustain the Black community in the

United States. The section specifically engages with stories such as the Ibo Landing Myth and the tales of Br'er Rabbit, as well as film adaptations of African-American folklore like *Song of the South* (1946) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). The third section describes an activity called the Community Collaboration Curation (or C<sup>3</sup>), in which participants create a web-based project curating contributions collected from their social networks. The activity encourages participants to explore the possibilities of social media and the Internet for creative collaboration while also seeking to learn something new about their community.

**Chapter 7**, “Celebrating Diversity,” explores the subject of difference. The first section demonstrates how the lack of diversity in mainstream media and the prevalence of stereotypes in pop culture contribute to the dehumanization of marginalized groups, and it explores the potential for alternative media to challenge these damaging representations. It draws upon concepts from scholars such as Chinua Achebe, Simone de Beauvoir, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Stuart Hall, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Butler. And it references examples from pop culture including Dylan Marron’s YouTube channel “Every Single Word” and his podcast “Conversations with People Who Hate Me.” The second section uses this framework for understanding difference and promoting diversity in an analysis of comedy: specifically, the television series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, the podcast *2 Dope Queens*, Sarah Cooper’s satirical TikTok videos, and Hannah Gadsby’s standup specials. The third section introduces an activity called Conversations About Difference in which participants create a podcast that addresses challenges related to difference and emphasizes diversity, equity, and belonging. The activity encourages participants to practice engaging in civic discourse as part of their creative production and to reflect on the potential for art to help us recognize and celebrate both our differences and what we share in common.

**Chapter 8**, “Playing with Place,” discusses the significance of space and place in communication and expression and further explores how play can be used as a mode of critical inquiry. The first section demonstrates the potential of critical play using concepts from Walter Benjamin, Mary Flanagan, Ian Bogost, and Guy Debord as well as examples such as the film *Do the Right Thing*, the videogame *Everything*, and a designed experience called Museum Hack. The second section uses this framework in an analysis of Disneyland, specifically exploring the ways in which the theme park both facilitates and inhibits visitors from playing in that place. The third section describes an activity called the Derivé in which participants design a site-specific experience that is intended to help users to discover new possibilities in familiar places. The activity encourages participants to understand place as a text that can be analyzed as well as a potential site for critical play.

**Chapter 9**, “Valuing the Arts,” explores how media, art, and culture are powerful means of sharing our values and empathizing with others. The first

section demonstrates the power of art and story to help us find meaning in our existence, make connections with those around us, and improve ourselves and our world. It draws upon concepts from writer Ursula Le Guin, scholar Larry Grossberg, and woodworker George Nakashima as well as examples such as the StoryCorps project, the radio program *This I Believe*, and the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The second section uses this framework in an analysis of the animated films produced by Studio Ghibli. The third section describes an activity called Stories from the Heart in which participants create a picture book that conveys a belief or value they hold.

Chapter 10, “Developing an Integrated Model for Media Engagement,” concludes the book with a summary of the book’s primary arguments, including the necessity for us to be continuously engaged in improving both our educational efforts and our personal engagement with media in an effort to promote critical thinking, creativity, civic engagement, caring, and kindness. It imagines potential applications of some of the principles and practices modeled in the book and anticipates new directions in the study and practice of media education.

### Acknowledging Some Limitations

While the book intends to address a number of existing gaps in the discourse and practice of media education and engagement, it still has its own limitations. First, in my conceptualization of [Chapters 3–9](#), I attempt to address a range of key issues related to media and popular culture. But in organizing the book into discrete chapters that address only a handful of topics, I may unintentionally imply that these are the most significant or pressing themes media educators need to address in their classrooms.

While I have chosen topics including authorship, identity, community, diversity, place, and so on because I feel that they are salient and relevant, the book might as well have included chapters on a number of other topics. For example, while issues of the political economy of media are addressed to an extent throughout the book, the absence of a chapter about media ownership, production, and distribution reveals a bit of a bias toward cultural studies perspectives on media and less engagement with the role that economics plays in media culture.

Other topics that are addressed to some degree but might have warranted their own dedicated conversation include aesthetics, history, interactivity, globalization, remix, the intersection of news and entertainment, and the materiality of media. Suffice it to say that these are all topics in which I have an interest and that I attempt to address in my research, teaching, and creative and interpretive engagement with media. So, in my forthcoming scholarship (a follow-up book, perhaps?), I may attempt to balance the scales and shift my focus to some of the topics I have emphasized less in this book.

On a related note, the organization of the book into chapters on specific themes might also suggest that these topics, and the discourses around them, are discrete rather than overlapping and interrelated. I have made an effort to make connections between the chapters—for example, by revisiting scholarship, terminology, and examples from pop culture, which I have introduced in the preceding chapters. My objective is that each chapter might stand alone to some extent so that, for example, an educator who is looking for help designing their curriculum related to a certain topic can pull a chapter without necessarily having to be familiar with the entire volume. But ultimately, these topics are thoroughly connected and the ideal reader would engage with each chapter within the larger conversation I am having in the book. For example, I strongly recommend that an educator who draws from a specific chapter—“Celebrating Diversity,” for example—also reads the introductory chapters that emphasize the value of integrating multiple approaches to media education and the importance of developing a deliberate pedagogical approach.

Next, while the book makes a special effort to cast a wide net, referencing the work of scholars, authors, artists, and activists from a range of different contexts and backgrounds and including examples from media, the arts, and pop culture that range from Greek tragedy to children’s picture books, indie video games to theme parks, there is bound to be some blind spots in terms of the voices, perspectives, and experiences represented in the book’s content. It is a challenge to choose which scholars and which examples from popular culture will stand in for all the ways of interpreting all different types of media. And as an educated, white, straight, cis-gendered man I feel a special obligation to make sure that the content I include in the book does not simply reinforce dominant ideas about and examples of media and popular culture.

While I am deliberate in my choice to focus the book on media culture in the United States, within this specified context, I attempt to reference scholarly ideas and creative work that represent a range of communities, experiences, aesthetic sensibilities, and theoretical traditions. But there are absolutely blind spots. My hope is that while there are undoubtedly groups or perspectives that I have fallen short of adequately representing within the book, that readers—especially those who feel overlooked by my choice of content—will be able to still relate to and find significance in something within the mix of scholarly and creative work that I have included here.

This is all to say that while this book is intended to be thorough—rigorous in the conceptualization and articulation of its arguments and wide-ranging in the ideas and examples it draws upon—it is also incomplete. This is, I suppose, inevitable, but it is also intentional. My project has never been to provide an authoritative answer to what I see as the challenges we face in media education and engagement. Rather, I simply want to contribute what I can to the conversation. And I hope that *Making Media Matter*, with all of its limitations,

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sparks new discussions, asks some new questions, maybe (hopefully) answers some others, and ultimately encourages those interested in more critically and creatively engaging with media to keep up the good work. Like the citizens of Bricksburg in *The Lego Movie*, let's work to build a better world together and then maybe *everything* will not necessarily be *awesome*, but at least we will be trying our best together to make it so.

## Notes

1 Miller & Lord (2014).

2 *ibid.*

## Reference

Miller, C., & Lord, P. (Directors). (2014). *The Lego Movie* [Film]. Warner Bros. Entertainment.

# 1

## INTEGRATING MEDIA STUDIES, MEDIA ARTS, AND MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

In recent years, we have witnessed changes in culture that, more than ever, require us to engage with media in critical and creative ways. Online social movements, “fake news,” pandemic-caused remote learning and working, and just the increased presence of media and technology in our daily lives are all phenomena that we need to be prepared to navigate. And yet, media education’s objectives, theories, and practices vary widely and are even sometimes hotly contested. As a media scholar and educator, I feel like every couple of years a new articulation of media education and engagement is introduced (*news literacy*, *digital citizenship*, *21st century skills*, and *data literacy*, to name just a few), each with a different emphasis—including technological proficiency, information analysis, aesthetic appreciation, personal expression, community building, cultural participation, and so on. Sut Jhally and Jeremy Earp describe media education as

... a fragmented field, a series of splinter groups united by a common belief that media are a worthy subject of analysis but divided by fundamental differences at the level of basic definition. The history of media literacy in the United States is, in many ways, a history of competing ideas and assumptions about the very nature, value, and purpose of media, education and literacy itself.<sup>1</sup>

While the many groups agree on an overall objective—*making sense of media*—the complexities of what this objective entails and how to best achieve it get a little messy. In fact, there is a good deal of scholarship devoted to identifying divisions in the field and labeling the different approaches to media education.

## 12 Integrating Media Studies, Arts, and Literacy Education

In 1980, James A. Anderson articulated four competing theoretical constructs of what he calls “critical viewing education”: *intervention* (drawing upon media effects research), *goal-attainment* (drawing upon uses and gratifications research), *cultural understanding* (drawing upon cultural studies), and *visual literacy* (drawing upon semiotics).<sup>2</sup> A decade or so later, at the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, a group of stakeholders in the growing discipline met to find some common ground among the disparate understandings of and approaches to media education. They noted that while they all shared a common objective of a “critical autonomy relationship to all media,” the approaches to achieving this objective varied widely, “including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1998, the International Communication Association held another media education-related symposium, in which scholars from competing paradigms (including William Christ, W. James Potter, Renee Hobbs, Sut Jhally, David Buckingham, and Paul Messaris, among others) continued the conversation. Each scholar voiced a unique perspective on the aims and methods of media education. For example, Hobbs’ contribution to the symposium, “The Seven Great Debates of the Media Literacy Movement,” explicitly highlights certain divisions within the field, drawing attention to debates surrounding the conceptualization of media education as protectionist, the involvement of media production as part of media education, the ideological or political underpinnings of media education, and so on.<sup>4</sup> And then another decade later, Hobbs reflects on how the debates evolved and names some new disciplinary approaches to media education—*ICT literacy*, *media literacy*, *critical literacy*, and *media management*.<sup>5</sup> While the field has certainly continued to move forward in the years since, media education continues to be a big, varied, and often divided field, with a variety of competing perspectives and practices.

### Recounting My Media Journey

Personally, I find Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share’s explanation of the different approaches to media education to be a particularly skillful slicing of this long-picked-at pie. They describe four approaches to media education that include *the protectionist approach*, *media arts education*, *the media literacy movement*, and *critical media literacy*, each of which has played some part in my own journey as a media consumer, creator, scholar, and educator.<sup>6</sup>

I have always loved media, art, and pop culture. Like many kids, when I was growing up, I loved to draw, read, and listen to music. I collected comic books, recorded my favorite songs from the radio on cassette tapes, and wore out my VHS copies of movies like *Ghostbusters* (1984) and Disney’s *Aladdin* (1992). Raised in a conservative, religious household, though, my exposure to media was closely monitored. I wasn’t allowed to watch TV on

school days, see any R-rated movies, listen to songs with explicit lyrics, or play violent video games. When AOL introduced our family to the World Wide Web in the mid-90s, I was a young teenager, and my parents quickly installed software that allowed them to control the content I was exposed to online. When I was in high school, I took classes in video production and screenwriting, and continued to exercise my creativity by writing scripts and making little movies with my friends. My engagement with media was broad and enthusiastic, but uncritical. The media education I received was limited to my parents' and church's warnings about "inappropriate content" and the classes at school where I learned basic technical skills and conventions of storytelling.

In college, I majored in Media Arts and minored in Humanities. My studies helped me develop a more informed appreciation for the arts, teaching me about history and theory, the aesthetic, narrative, and thematic elements of cinema and other artistic traditions. I was introduced to international and silent film, documentary, as well as classical art and literature. I started off as an undergrad excited to become a screenwriter but ended up loving teaching lab sections for the university's Intro to Film course. I spent less time working on student productions than many of my classmates, but I still managed to direct a short film before I graduated. With the encouragement of some incredible faculty mentors, I decided to pursue graduate studies and a career in academia. My undergraduate education emphasized formal analysis and visual storytelling and it encouraged me to consider the aesthetic, narrative, and thematic aspects of both the media I viewed and my own creative work.

During my Master's Degree in Interdisciplinary Humanities, I continued to study media but within the context of cultural studies. I learned about ideology critique, issues of representation, and the role of media in broader social and cultural processes. I didn't have too much time to pursue my own creative work, but I developed as a teacher—working as a TA, an adjunct instructor, and an arts educator, teaching drawing, painting, and video production to people with disabilities. When I went on to my doctoral studies, I shifted disciplines once again, this time to a Media Studies program housed within a Journalism School. While a PhD student, I continued to expand upon my approaches to analyzing media, taking courses in rhetoric, remix, and Marxist Critical Theory. On some rare occasions, I was able to continue my creative practice, convincing some of the faculty to allow me to submit a video, audio, and other creative work in place of some traditional, written assignments. My graduate education introduced me to the world of media studies theory and research and provided me with experiences to develop as a teacher, both in formal and informal educational settings.

While still a grad student, I began working for the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* reviewing submissions and preparing them for publication, and I began paying attention to media education as an object of study itself. For

my dissertation, I piloted a media literacy and social justice-oriented after-school program at a high school with a large refugee population.<sup>7</sup> As part of the project, students from China, Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Libya, as well as from Latinx and Native American backgrounds, made art and media to express their perspectives on and raise awareness about the challenges facing their specific communities. Some of my students even appeared on a local talk show to discuss their learning and the value of using media to advocate for positive social change.

When I received my PhD, I returned to work in a faculty position at the same institution, in the same Media Arts program, where I received my undergraduate degree. In my time there, I have taught courses on Children's Media, Creativity, and Media Literacy Education and continued to research media education as part of my scholarship. I have also rekindled my love of making, both producing my own work and mentoring the efforts of students to create web series, games, VR, web comics, podcasts, films, and so on. During this time, I have attempted to balance my efforts as a scholar, educator, and creator, finding ways of integrating the emancipatory politics of Critical Theory and cultural studies into my media arts classes. I have created a scholarship in the form of media and published traditional written research on me and my students' efforts to merge theory, creative practice, and civic engagement in the classroom (and beyond). And as a parent of young children, I have tried to empower my own kids to engage with media in both critical and creative ways.

However, implementing the many valuable concepts and integrating the varied approaches I've learned over the years into my own efforts has been (and continues to be) a long, challenging learning process. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, as a university student and now a parent and a professor, I have experienced versions of the approaches to media education articulated by Kellner and Share: the *protectionism* of my family and religious community, the *media arts education* of my undergraduate program, *critical and cultural studies* of media in my graduate education, and my advocacy for *media literacy* as a parent, teacher, and scholar. My engagement with media has ranged from fan-boying out about my favorite movies to examining the ideological, aesthetic, and other elements of media, art, and pop culture to mentoring my students in their development of media literacy to making my own creative work to simply coloring, playing video games, and reading books with my kids.

### **Taking Inventory of Media Education and Engagement**

My situation is not unique. The multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory relationship I have with media is something that I imagine many readers can relate to. But it illustrates the challenge that this book seeks to address. A difficulty we face as media scholars, educators, creators, and audiences is

that—in such a media-saturated society, as part of a dispersed and sometimes divided field, with so many potential ways of teaching both ourselves and others to engage with media—it is difficult to know if we are truly learning from our past and from each other, if we are doing our very best or making any discernible progress.

To be clear, my intention with this book is not to overemphasize or lament the divided nature of the field, nor does it claim to make any attempt to finally unify the existing fragments of media education under a singular banner. Actually, I am unsure how such an effort would be possible and whether such a result would be beneficial. But I do believe that understanding the different approaches to media education—and specifically, the affordances and limitations of each—may prove beneficial to our efforts to “make media matter.” In the following sections, I review three traditions within media education—*media studies*, *media arts*, and *media literacy education*—and identify each tradition’s particular strengths and weaknesses. Then, I propose an integrated approach to media education and engagement that has at its center *critical literacy*, *popular culture*, and *creative production*.

## **Media Studies**

Media studies is a multi-disciplinary study of mass communication, media, technology, and popular culture that includes a number of distinct theoretical and methodological approaches. The origins of the field are commonly traced back to a few different (but not unrelated) historical contexts including: the Frankfurt School’s application of Marxist Critical Theory to analyze the “culture industry,” social scientific research in the early 20th century that addressed the impact of “mass media” (including propaganda, advertising, cinema, and journalism) on audience’s attitudes and behaviors, and the Birmingham School’s examination of popular culture as a site of social struggle and meaning-making. In each of these cases, scholars and researchers applied existing theoretical and methodological frameworks (including Marx’s dialectical materialism, Freudian psychoanalysis, experiment-based social scientific research, and so on) to study what would become known as *media*. Since then, this handful of efforts to study media (along with a host of other approaches) has become a discipline in itself, taught widely in institutions of higher education and producing qualitative, quantitative, historical, and theoretical research that explores issues including ownership, representation, ideology, technology, audiences, and so on. Laurie Oullette describes the field as such:

To approach the study of media critically involves situating media within economic, political, cultural and social contexts and addressing its relationship to capitalism, labor, citizenship, gender, race and class dynamics, inequalities, sexuality, globalization and other issues that are

both larger than media, and intertwined with the production, circulation and use of media texts, images, sounds, spaces, artifacts, technologies and discourses.<sup>8</sup>

The affordances of media studies are its interdisciplinarity, its emphasis on rigorous and relevant research, and its engagement with media within broader cultural, social, and political contexts. However, like any field of study, media studies also has certain limitations: the discourse is dominated by academics and relatively inaccessible to the broader public, and the discipline often emphasizes research over practice.

While media studies research is theoretically grounded, rigorous, and relevant in its engagement with popular culture, the discourse in the field is somewhat inaccessible. Media studies' presence is strong within institutions of higher education, constituting countless courses, academic conferences, and scholarly publications. But the informed, nuanced, and generative conversations conducted in these spaces only sometimes make it into the mainstream. Because public discourse about media culture is rarely informed by media studies research, it is often reductive and reactionary. While media studies scholarship may come to important conclusions that concern the greater public's participation in media culture, most non-academics are unable to access and/or understand the research and are therefore unable to benefit from this new knowledge.

The second limitation of media studies is related to the first. As a theory-heavy, research-driven discipline, media studies often falls short of effectively connecting knowledge with practice, whether in policy, pedagogy, creative production, or even personal participation in media culture. For example, Kellner argues that media studies' tendency to emphasize critique over any kind of transformative change is a problem that extends back to the origins of the field. He writes

The Frankfurt School, for instance, developed a powerful critique of the cultural industries and the ways that they manipulate individuals into conforming to the beliefs, values and practices of the existing society, but the critical theorists lack theories of how one can resist media manipulation, how one can read against the grain to derive critical insights into self and society through the media, and how one can produce alternative forms of media and culture.<sup>9</sup>

While there are certainly exceptions to this argument, the gap between theory and practice persists within media studies today. Too often, practice (in the classroom, the studio, in our legislation, and our personal lives) is not as informed by theory and research as it might be. And the reverse is also true—media studies scholarship is too often uninformed by practice. “Good art theory

must smell of the studio,” argues arts scholar Rudolf Arnheim.<sup>10</sup> By extension, we might argue that good media theory must do the same. To be as substantive and impactful as possible, research in media studies needs to both be informed by and lead to positive, practical implementations in education, production, and our personal participation in culture.

### **Media Arts**

Media arts is an artistic and educational discipline that understands media primarily as platforms for creative expression. Media arts is informed by (and often overlaps with) disciplines within the arts and humanities, including visual arts, music, literature, theater, and so forth, and it makes use of contemporary media, including digital, networked, and interactive technologies. Media arts often includes sub-disciplines of film, video, and animation; sound design and music production; graphic and digital arts and effects; scenic, costume, and make-up design for screens; performance involving media technologies; video games; interactive, web-based, and networked media; virtual and augmented reality.

Arguably the most significant characteristic of media arts is its emphasis on creative expression, rather than the communication of information or ideology. Media are understood as sites where artists make deliberate aesthetic choices to realize their intentions, share their experiences, and engage in a type of creative conversation with their audience. While there is no authoritative definition of “creativity” used in the tradition, typically media arts processes include some version of the following:

1. *Cultivation of creative capacities*—Developing one’s artistic sensibilities or “taste,” practicing aesthetic appreciation, and learning to draw upon various sources of inspiration and artistic influence for one’s work.
2. *Conceptualization of creative work*—Experimenting with different approaches to conceiving, organizing, revising, and connecting one’s creative ideas with the intention of developing these “brainstorms” into some kind of coherent design for artistic work.
3. *Acquisition of technical skills*—Learning the technologies, practicing using the tools, and mastering the techniques specific to the discipline so that one can effectively realize one’s designs within the given medium.
4. *Familiarization with language and convention*—Becoming comfortable with and conversant in the forms and stylistic traditions within one’s chosen medium, mode, and genre.
5. *Deliberate development of form and content*—Integrating stylistic, narrative, thematic, and other elements of one’s work so that the final product reflects unity and purpose.

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6. *Revision and refinement*—Receiving constructive criticism, engaging in critical self-reflection, and then responding to these critiques by revising the work (oftentimes in multiple iterations) before it is “complete.”
7. *Audience engagement*—Sharing the completed work with others and interacting with a community of artists, critics, and consumers that share an interest in the work.
8. *Critical analysis*—In addition to the analysis that is part of the creative process, interpreting the works of other artists in relation to history, ideology, representation, genre, aesthetics, and so on in order to develop a knowledge of and appreciation for the contributions of the larger artistic community.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding its affordances and limitations, media arts is almost an inverse of media studies. For example, while media studies exists largely in academic contexts and sometimes struggles to practically apply the knowledge produced in the field, media arts emphasizes creative practice within not simply school settings but also extra-curricular contexts, professional industries, and informal learning spaces. While media studies theory sometimes lacks that “smell of the studio,” media arts clearly values the creative, and often collaborative, work done on film sets and design studios, in hobbyist groups and online arts communities. But of course, media arts has its own set of limitations: it often emphasizes practice over theory and values personal expression over larger social and cultural issues.

While media arts emphasizes expression, experience, problem-solving, and project-based learning, it is often not sufficiently informed by theory and research. Media arts education, for example, often focuses on developing technical skills and learning the language and conventions of a particular mode of expression. Steve Connolly and Mark Readman note that in media arts education, “theory” is seen as a bit of a bad word—“an unwelcome ‘other’ that has to be accommodated grudgingly in order to legitimate a piece of assessed work,” rather than a set of ideas that inform and guide practice.<sup>12</sup>

Among the consequences of this divide between practice and research is that while media arts education prepares learners to learn the tools of the trade and to integrate them into established traditions and existing industries, it does not always empower them to think critically about these ideas or institutions or to improve them in any way. Kellner and Share write:

Many of these programs tend to unproblematically teach students the technical skills to merely reproduce hegemonic representations with little awareness of ideological implications or any type of social critique.<sup>13</sup>

While media arts education emphasizes practice, it oftentimes fails to acknowledge the political implications of one’s creative practice—whether personal or

professional. And as a result, making media is understood in terms of creative expression rather than cultural participation or social activism.

### **Media Literacy Education**

Like media studies, the field of media literacy education includes varied origins, traditions, and concepts. The media literacy movement in the United States—exemplified in the work of scholars like Renee Hobbs and Henry Jenkins as well as organizations like the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) and the Center for Media Literacy (CML)—sees media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication” and thereby meaningfully participate in today’s media-saturated society.<sup>14</sup> The goal of the movement is to implement innovative pedagogical approaches in formal and informal educational settings to facilitate (especially young) people’s development of these capacities, preparing them to be more critical and creative as media consumers, creators, as well as citizens.

The affordances of media literacy education are clear. First and foremost, the field emphasizes active inquiry, helping learners ask questions about the significance of media in their own lives as well as in society more broadly. The Center for Media Literacy articulates five “Key Questions of Media Literacy,” along with corresponding concepts that are commonly emphasized in media literacy initiatives.

1. Who created this message? [All media messages are constructed.]
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? [Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.]
3. How might different people understand this message differently than me? [Different people experience the same media message differently.]
4. What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? [Media have embedded values and points of view.]
5. Why is this message being sent? [Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.]<sup>15</sup>

As this list of questions and concepts indicates, media literacy education (like media studies) involves inquiry into issues such as authorship, technique, representation, interpretation, and so on, but unlike media studies, this approach makes a deliberate effort to be accessible to a broad audience. For example, the key questions reference theoretical concepts within media studies (i.e., *ideology*) by using more commonly used and understood terminology (i.e., “values, lifestyles, and points of view”). And the reasoning for this emphasis on accessibility is clear—advocates for media literacy understand it as a *movement* that requires broad and active engagement from not just

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cultural or intellectual elites but also learners of varied backgrounds, levels of education, and experience.

Educational approaches within the field vary by context, but they generally value pedagogy that explores media's power and that emphasizes critical inquiry and active engagement so that learners can effectively navigate these power relations. The National Association for Media Literacy Education articulates six "Core Principles" that are intended to inform the objectives and methodologies used by media educators.

1. Media Literacy Education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create.
2. Media Literacy Education expands the concept of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) to include all forms of media.
3. Media Literacy Education builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages. Like print literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive, and repeated practice.
4. Media Literacy Education develops informed, reflective, and engaged participants essential for a democratic society.
5. Media Literacy Education recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization.
6. Media Literacy Education affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.<sup>16</sup>

Like media studies, media literacy education emphasizes critical analysis ("active inquiry and critical thinking") and situates this analysis within social and cultural contexts ("media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization"). Media literacy education is committed to practice ("the messages we receive and create"), but not simply in the form of personal expression, but also civic and cultural participation ("develops informed, reflective and engaged participants is essential for a democratic society"). It is accessible ("learners of all ages") and invites learners to draw upon their own experiences to actively participate in media culture ("use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages"). But of course, the field also has its own set of limitations: despite defining itself as a "movement" the field is disorganized, its practice is often uninformed by theory and research, it struggles to engage with pressing social and political issues, and it lacks diversity.

The media literacy community is composed of educators, librarians, researchers, media-makers, and activists who work in primary, secondary, and higher education as well as for non-profit organizations, research institutes, and within the media industries. The movement draws upon and overlaps with a variety of scholarly traditions, including critical cultural and communication studies, media effects research, media ecology, faith-based educational

initiatives, edtech, library sciences, and digital citizenship. This plurality of stakeholders and contexts might be considered strength of the movement, but without a shared theoretical tradition or a central repository for resources, the field is somewhat disorganized and the discourse lacks coherence. While organizations like NAMLE, CML, and others have published some widely referenced documents outlining the key questions, concepts, and principles in the field, the community is still working to establish a central place where relevant research, curricula, and other resources are aggregated for the use of the community.<sup>17</sup> And while approaches like *critical media literacy*<sup>18</sup> and *creative media literacy*<sup>19</sup> have made impressive efforts to bring together some of the strengths of media studies and media arts within media literacy education, much of the field remains divided on these issues.

Perhaps in part because of this disorganization, the approaches employed by the different groups within the movement might be described as “ad-hoc” and their efforts are only sometimes grounded in theory and research. Often, self-taught, all-star teachers, librarians, and non-profit organizers are simply doing their best to integrate the few widely shared ideas about media literacy into their particular disciplines and contexts in an effort to address what they understand to be pressing issues related to media culture. This ingenuity is worthy of recognition, but relying on such a varied group of people to piece together their own approaches to media literacy that draw from such a variety of traditions and definitions is not a sustainable way of forwarding the movement. As more media literacy scholars contribute theoretical work and rigorous research to the field, the efforts of the educators on the ground will be more likely informed by their scholarship.<sup>20</sup> But it is likely that the movement’s struggle to gain ground—in public education in the U.S., for example—is due in part to the lack of a clear theoretical foundation and a solid scholarly tradition.

Over the past few decades, the lack of coherence within the field has contributed to some significant disagreements among stakeholders and divides within the community, including the debate over whether the media literacy movement should espouse a mission of social justice. For the most part, the movement has sought to stay politically neutral,<sup>21</sup> but in recent years—specifically, in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the explosion of “fake news” surrounding the 2020 US presidential election and COVID-19 pandemic, as well as an increased awareness of the global climate crisis—a growing segment of the field has begun to see the potential of media literacy education to empower the public to effectively intervene in pressing political issues.<sup>22</sup> However, as a relatively new direction for the movement, the scholarship and practice connecting media literacy to social justice is still developing.

The media literacy movement’s increased interest in social justice has also illuminated a related challenge for the movement: its lack of diversity. In a

2018 State of Media Literacy study conducted by NAMLE, of the members of the media literacy community who were surveyed, 85 percent identify as white.<sup>23</sup> These results suggest an alarming lack of representation among racial minorities within the community, which has likely contributed to the movement's hesitancy about weighing in on pressing political issues as well as its failure to attend to issues of representation, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The same 2018 study calculates the most commonly addressed topics in media literacy initiatives, finding that less than a third of respondents teach about "Representation" in their courses or programs.<sup>24</sup> While a select group of "critical media literacy" scholars<sup>25</sup> have long advocated for media literacy education to address issues of social and environmental justice, the field has quite a bit of catching up to do—in terms of the topics it addresses, the communities it serves, and the perspectives and experiences it privileges in its scholarship.

### **Developing an Integrated Approach to Media Education and Engagement**

As mentioned before, most media educators are innovative and continually looking for opportunities to improve their objectives and methods, including learning from the successes and failures of existing traditions, including media studies, media arts, and media literacy education. So, this book's attempt to integrate these traditions is not intended as some sort of groundbreaking discovery as much as it is my contribution to the ongoing efforts within the field to improve the ways we teach about and participate in media culture. I believe we might benefit from an approach to media education and engagement that combines the theoretical rigor of media studies with both creative practice and civic participation. We would do well to try and integrate the aesthetic appreciation, skill development, and creative expression from media arts with the critical inquiry of both media studies and media literacy education. We would be served by an approach to media education that combines the accessibility and active inquiry of the media literacy movement with the commitment to social justice that often informs media studies.

In an effort to help us focus on integrating the strengths (and overcoming the limitations) of existing traditions of media education and engagement, I have chosen to orient my approach around three core concepts: *critical literacy*, *popular culture*, and *creative production*.

#### ***Critical Literacy***

As the previous sections have suggested, central to my integrated approach to media education and engagement is an emphasis on helping ourselves and

others to practice critical inquiry and active meaning-making of not just media texts but also larger cultural, social, and political contexts, with the intention of improving ourselves and our world. *Critical literacy* is an approach to education that shares this objective, emphasizing “the relationship between texts, meaning-making and power in order to undertake transformative social action that contributes to the achievement of a more equitable social order.”<sup>26</sup> The perspective draws upon the traditions of democratic education and critical pedagogy, references the work of progressive educational and social philosophers like John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks, and is informed by cultural, social, and environmental activist movements. The use of the term “critical” is specific. While most educational philosophies include among their objectives the development and practice of “critical thinking,” critical literacy’s use of the word “critical” is more specifically defined. It references Max Horkheimer’s “critical theory”<sup>27</sup> and Freire’s “critical consciousness”<sup>28</sup>—the ability to recognize the contradictions within our society and use our intellect, creativity, and active interventions to overcome these contradictions and contribute to positive social change.

Critical literacy is significant in that it envisions (and actively works toward) an education that is empowering and emancipatory. Vivian Maria Vasquez, Hilary Janks, and Barbara Comer articulate the key aspects of critical literacy as follows:

- Critical literacy should be viewed as a lens, frame, or perspective for teaching throughout the day, across the curriculum, and perhaps beyond, rather than as a topic to be covered or unit to be studied ...
- Diverse students’ cultural knowledge ... their funds of knowledge ... and multimodal and multilingual practices should be used to build curriculum across the content areas and across space and place ...
- Students learn best when what they are learning has importance in their lives; as such, using the topics, issues, and questions that they raise should be central to creating an inclusive critical curriculum ...
- Texts are socially constructed from particular perspectives; they are never neutral ...
- The ways we read texts are never neutral ...
- From a critical literacy perspective, the world is seen as a socially constructed text that can be read ...
- Critical literacy involves making sense of the sociopolitical systems through which we live our lives and questioning these systems. This means critical literacy work needs to focus on social issues, including inequities of race, class, gender, or disability and the ways in which we use language and other semiotic resources to shape our understanding of these issues.

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- Critical literacy practices can be transformative. They can contribute to changing inequitable ways of being and problematic social practices ...
- Text design and production, which are essential to critical literacy work, can provide opportunities for transformation ...<sup>29</sup>

In this book, critical literacy is employed in the following ways. In [Chapter 2](#), I lay out my teaching philosophy that applies these key concepts of critical literacy to our efforts as media educators in contemporary society. In [Chapters 3 through 9](#), aspects of critical literacy inform the three sections that comprise each chapter. In the first section, I introduce the chapter's theme and weave together concepts from different theoretical traditions to create an integrated analytical framework that educators (and their students) can use to critically engage with media culture in both their interpretive and creative practice. In the second section of each chapter, I model how to employ this framework in an in-depth analysis of a particular pop culture phenomena. In these case studies, I make an effort to contextualize my critical interpretation of media texts within a larger project of social, cultural, and political critique. Finally, the creative activities that appear at the end of each chapter are deliberately designed to help participants integrate the theory and criticism from the previous sections into their own efforts as media-makers. The activities are even more effective learning experiences when educators encourage participants to include a written artist's statement to accompany their finished project, allowing them to critically reflect on their efforts to integrate theory and practice in their work. In order to demonstrate the value of this type of reflection, I conclude each chapter with a discussion of creative projects developed by me and my students and share some insights into our creative process as well as some things we learned from completing the project.

### ***Popular Culture***

While I use terms like “the arts,” “entertainment,” “communication,” “expression,” and (obviously) “media” in various contexts through this book to describe my object of study, I find the term *popular culture* to be particularly effective. Popular culture is an expansive concept, allowing me to fill in some of the gaps left by these other terms, and even more importantly, it acknowledges that culture is a site of struggle over meaning.

“Media” is a term employed throughout this volume, including in its title, but the term is not without its limitations. For example, the phrase “the media” is commonly used to refer to “the news media,” which privileges journalistic content over other types of messages. Even more problematic, “the media” is increasingly being used by alarmists, skeptics, conspiracy theorists, and other reactionary figures and groups as a sort of catch-all, straw-man, scapegoat at which they direct their dissatisfaction with specific ideological perspectives

circulating within the public sphere. In this case, the phrase is used to describe what the speaker perceives as disinformation, propaganda, or anything sensationalized, exploitative, or corrupt within culture. And at last, there is also the challenge that, for many, “media” is synonymous with “technology,” which fails to attend to the human intentions behind, uses for, practices with, and interpretations of these technologies.

Throughout the book, I periodically refer to “the arts,” “expression,” “entertainment,” and “communication.” These terms are helpful in reminding readers of the range of purposes media are used for—to please or provoke, inform or inquire, reveal or represent, and so on. But this handful of terms is limiting in that they may reinforce distinctions between different types of texts and perpetuate divisions between the audiences for these texts. For many, terms like “the arts” and “expression” are associated with classic literature, cinema, visual, plastic, or performance, including dance, music, and theater whose audience is limited to critics and cultural elite. On the other hand, “entertainment” is commonly associated with viral videos, blockbuster movies, pop music, video games, and more, and its primary market is the masses, the public who is paying to be pleased. “Communication” is associated with an exchange of information—for example, in contexts like education and journalism, but even more often, through social media and person-to-person digital messaging. But in actuality, there is so much overlap between these categories and audiences that these terms are, at best, ineffective at describing the complexity of culture and, at worst, used to reinforce divisions between socioeconomic and cultural communities as well as the so-called high and low cultures. And in addition to perpetuating these divides, these terms often imply an emphasis on the content itself (paintings, comics, news, text messages, and so on) rather than situate them as texts within larger contexts that include production, reception, lived culture, and social relations.

This book’s emphasis on popular culture is my attempt to attend to a variety of different technologies, modes, and genres, as well as communities, classes, and cultures. In the following chapters, I reference such disparate phenomena as online social movements, animated movies, music videos, stand-up comedy, hip-hop, superhero comics, children’s books, social media, fan-campaigns, remixes, cable news, theme parks, and so much more. In addition to its inclusivity, the term *popular culture* allows me to explore these texts and contexts as sites of negotiation, places where we engage in conversations and, together, try to make sense of ourselves, each other, and the world around us. Larry Grossberg’s explanation of popular culture is especially relevant here. He writes:

Cultural studies has always argued that popular culture cannot be defined by appealing to either an objective aesthetic standard (as if it were inherently different from art) nor an objective social standard (as if

it were inherently determined by who makes it or for whom it is made). Rather it has to be seen as a sphere in which people struggle over reality and their place in it, a sphere in which people are continuously working with and within already existing relations of power, *to make sense of and improve their lives*.<sup>30</sup>

My examination of popular culture is intended to demonstrate how media—in their many forms, with their myriad purposes and audiences—matters, specifically because they are places of interpretation, critical self-reflection, creation, and action.

In this book, my engagements with popular culture include brief examples referenced in the first section of each chapter, typically used to illustrate a particular theoretical concept related to the chapter's theme. Then, in the case studies, I delve into a particular pop culture phenomena in greater depth, evaluating it using the analytical frameworks introduced in the first section of each chapter. These analyses of pop culture are intended to inform the creative activities at the conclusion of each chapter. And, because many of these creative activities involve adapting, remixing, or curating existing media texts in some way, pop culture plays a significant part in the participants' creative process as well.

### ***Creative Production***

In a 2006, a group of researchers led by Henry Jenkins published “Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century” in which they discuss the role of emerging media technologies in today's shifting cultural landscape and envision an approach to media education that emphasizes the development of new critical capacities and creative skills. In what Jenkins terms “participatory culture,” nearly everyone has the ability to use media to express themselves, communicate with others, and participate in civic life in ways that are historically unprecedented. Jenkins writes:

For the moment, let's define participatory culture as one:

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. With strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Where members believe that their contributions matter
5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).<sup>31</sup>

Given the centrality of creative production to today's participatory culture, it becomes especially necessary that our approach to media education not only prepares learners to critically engage with new media but also empowers them to actively participate in popular culture, making and sharing their own media with others. Jenkins continues:

In such a world, many will only dabble, some will dig deeper, and still others will master the skills that are most valued within the community. The community itself, however, provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation. Historically, we have valued creative writing or art classes because they help to identify and train future writers and artists, but also because the creative process is valuable on its own; every child deserves the chance to express him- or herself through words, sounds, and images, even if most will never write, perform, or draw professionally. Having these experiences, we believe, changes the way youth think about themselves and alters the way they look at work created by others.<sup>32</sup>

As media educators, we likely have students pursuing careers in the arts and media industries, and so, emphasizing creative production in our pedagogy will be beneficial to those aspiring media-makers as they develop their creative skills and sensibilities. But this book's emphasis on creative production is not intended to simply serve those with particular career goals; rather, it is intended to appeal to a broad audience with diverse interests. Like Jenkins, I believe that creative production is "valuable on its own" both because it allows us new opportunities to express and communicate and because it helps us understand ourselves and others in new ways. Regardless of a learner's specific skill sets, interests, or career goals, they benefit from trying their hand at expressing themselves creatively and making some media.

In this book, *creative production* is addressed in the following ways. In the opening section of each chapter, when I draw upon different theoretical traditions to sketch a framework for analyzing popular culture, I often reference ideas like authorial intention, aesthetic traditions, media technologies, language, and convention—all of which contribute to our understanding of and engagement in creative production. During the case studies, I often return to these same ideas in my interpretations of pop culture. In the third section of each chapter, my emphasis on creative production is most evident. In these creative activities, I encourage participants to draw upon the concepts and case studies from the previous sections in their efforts to make media. These exercises vary widely and include podcasting, remixing, game design, and more. To help illustrate these activities—as well as cement my own personal commitment to creative production—these sections end with examples of

my students' and my own creative work. I share our glitch art, augmented reality games, web comics, online art projects, and so on, with the hope that these examples will help motivate readers to embrace the concept of creative production, including it in their curriculum but also developing their own creativity capacities.

## Notes

- 1 Jhally & Earp (2006), p. 240.
- 2 Anderson (1980).
- 3 Aufderheide (1993), p. 9.
- 4 Hobbs (1998).
- 5 Hobbs (2008).
- 6 Kellner & Share (2007a).
- 7 Thevenin (2012).
- 8 Oullette (2012), p. 2.
- 9 Kellner (1995), p. xiv.
- 10 Arnheim (1971), p. 5.
- 11 See Thevenin (2019).
- 12 Connolly & Readman (2017), p. 250.
- 13 Kellner & Share (2007a), p. 61.
- 14 National Association for Media Literacy Education (n.d.).
- 15 Center for Media Literacy (2001), p. 1.
- 16 National Association for Media Literacy Education (2007).
- 17 See National Association for Media Literacy Education (2019), p. 10.
- 18 See Alvermann & Hagood (2000); Alvermann et al. (1999); Hammer (2006); Kellner & Share (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2019); Jhally & Earp (2006); Luke (1994); McLaren et al. (1995).
- 19 Connolly & Readman (2017).
- 20 The scholarship cited throughout this chapter provides some evidence of an increase in media literacy-related research. Additionally, the International Media Literacy Research Symposium, held in 2014 and again in 2018, is another indication of an increased attention to research within the field.
- 21 See Hobbs (1998, 2008); Kellner & Share (2007a); Rogow (2004).
- 22 The prominence of politically oriented research and practice from media literacy scholars such as Abreu, Lopez, Mihailidis is an indication of this shift in orientation within the field. Arguably even more significant is NAMLE organizing their 2021 conference around the theme of “Media Literacy and Social Justice.”
- 23 National Association for Media Literacy Education (2019), p. 4.
- 24 Additionally, the survey did not even ask specifically about topics like race, gender, sexuality, class, and so forth.
- 25 For example, Denise Chapman, Jayne Cabbage, Stephanie Flores-Koulis, Sut Jhally, Douglas Kellner, Antonio Lopez, Justin Lewis, Andrea Quijada, Jeff Share, and so on.
- 26 Janks & Vasquez (2011), p. 1.
- 27 Horkheimer (1972).
- 28 Freire (1970).
- 29 Vasquez et al. (2019), pp. 306–307.
- 30 Grossberg (1997), p. 2, emphasis added.
- 31 Jenkins (2009), p. 5.
- 32 Jenkins (2009), p. 6.

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# 2

## TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A NEW MEDIA AGE

In 2014, I was invited to participate in a panel discussion as part of the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Titled “Educators in the Evolving Industry of Digital Media,” the conversation included myself and a handful of local media educators—from higher education, vocational schools, and non-profit organizations in Utah—and was focused on the theme of preparing aspiring media-makers to navigate the shifting landscape of media today. This topic continues to be relevant, especially considering the incredible growth of streaming platforms and social media, the emergence of technologies like augmented and virtual reality, and the increased overlap between film, television, apps, games, social media, and so much else. During the panel, we shared our efforts to develop innovative educational approaches that make use of emerging technologies. It was a fun and productive exchange; though, during the conversation, I sensed a concern among those in attendance. Underlying our conversation was an unspoken anxiety about how we as educators could possibly keep up with today’s ever-evolving media landscape.

This is a fair concern, and one that I have felt myself. For many of us teaching about media, our education pre-dated the emergence of TikTok and Twitch, virtual and augmented reality, maybe even social media and the Internet. When we received our degrees, the word “media” still meant movies, television, broadcast news, print journalism, and the radio, not viral videos, animated GIFs, and memes. For some media educators, our anxiety about adapting our teaching to keep up with the times stems from our lack of experience with these new platforms and practices. So, before we can successfully teach students how to actively participate in this new media landscape, we need to learn how to engage with it ourselves, and that can be a daunting task.

Even when we do feel prepared to teach about these new modes of communication and expression in our classes, we may hit another obstacle. Oftentimes, in addition to feeling wary about teaching new media, we also may be unprepared to implement innovative pedagogy. While there are certain benefits of commonly used teaching methodologies like lectures, multiple-choice testing, slide presentations, and so on, these traditional pedagogical practices need to be supplemented with new approaches to teaching and learning that can foster the type of critical thinking and creativity that we desire for our students. In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks notes that “many teachers who do not have difficulty releasing old ideas, embracing new ways of thinking, may still be as resolutely attached to old ways of practicing teaching as their more conservative colleagues.”<sup>1</sup> In today’s participatory culture, students use mobile devices, social media, and the Internet to access information instantaneously, to share, curate, connect, collaborate, and create content themselves. If the content of our curriculum reflects changes in culture and technology *but* we continue to rely on approaches to teaching and learning that do not account for the type of active participation our students engage in outside of the classroom, then our pedagogy will prove insufficient at preparing our students to navigate the new media landscape.

## Re-defining Pedagogy

“Talking about pedagogy, thinking about it critically,” writes hooks, “is not the intellectual work that most folks think is hip and cool.”<sup>2</sup> I cannot promise that this chapter will make pedagogy “hip and cool,” but I hope it can illustrate why giving pedagogy some extra attention may be worthwhile. Henry Giroux and Roger Simon call pedagogy a “subordinate discourse” because, as hooks notes, thinking and talking about (let alone practically implementing) effective teaching methodologies often seems secondary to creating curriculum content.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, evaluating our efforts as educators can be challenging and, for many, not especially interesting. During my time in higher education, I have been a part of more than a few terribly boring professional development workshops that intend to improve pedagogy but fail to model any sort of innovative or engaging teaching. And for years, my college’s annual “Assessment Day”—when the faculty and administration review student work and feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of our pedagogy and set goals to improve our teaching—was absolutely dreaded.

Though, perhaps this resistance to critically reflecting on our pedagogy is the consequence (at least, in part) of our narrow understanding of pedagogy. Especially in the definitions of pedagogy we have inherited from the past, the term fails to convey teaching and learning as a dynamic process of discovery. But it is those enlivening moments we experience in the classroom, the collaborative, generative connections between teachers and students, and the joys of trying, failing, retrying, and eventually arriving

at some new knowledge or experience that likely keeps us motivated to continue teaching, despite the challenges we face as educators. Pedagogy is more than just the methods of communicating information, simply “banking” key terms and formulas and so on in the empty brains of our students and waiting for them to regurgitate the content on a test to ensure their supposed comprehension of the material.<sup>4</sup> Pedagogy is even more than a list of methodologies employed by teachers to convey information and help their students accumulate knowledge.

According to David Lusted, a more productive (and in my opinion, more compelling) way of defining pedagogy is as “the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the interaction of three agencies—the teacher, the learner, and the knowledge they produce together.”<sup>5</sup> Pedagogy certainly includes the methods we use to teach, but it also includes the construction of a learning environment, the creation of a class culture, the establishment of relationships between teachers and learners, between learners and the subject matter, and among the learners themselves. Much like our study of media and the arts, our understanding of pedagogy must include attention to form, (“how?”), content (“what?”), intention (“why?”), and context (“where?,” “when?,” “under what circumstances?,” “with what effect?,” and so on).

hooks, Freire, Giroux, and Simon are all a part of an educational tradition called *critical pedagogy*, which challenges conventional approaches to education as (1) serving a particular cultural and political status quo, (2) preparing students to be productive members of existing industry and society, and (3) integrating them into existing cultures and institutions. Critical pedagogy seeks to empower learners to be critical thinkers and active citizens who are able to recognize the contradictions within culture and society and use their intelligence and creativity to find solutions to the challenges facing our world. Perhaps beginning with Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the tradition understands pedagogy similarly to Lusted’s articulation above but places a particular emphasis on the connections between education, equity, and justice. Giroux and Simon write that “to propose a pedagogy is to construct a political vision,”<sup>6</sup> which is to say that as educators organize their classroom space, develop assignments, relate to students, evaluate student work, and so on, they are both contributing to the students’ political perspectives and practices as well as modeling in their classroom a type of politics.

Some critics of critical pedagogy challenge the tradition’s embrace of politics within the classroom and argue that the approach is nothing more than leftist propaganda directed at impressionable young people. The tradition certainly aligns with more progressive political ideologies and explicitly advocates for education as a means toward social justice. But in both its theory and practice, critical pedagogy attempts not to indoctrinate students with particular values, but rather to empower students to critically reflect on the ideas they encounter and actively make meaning, coming to their own conclusions about and implementations of the knowledge generated in the classroom.

I often begin my courses by outlining my own understanding of critical pedagogy with my students—specifically acknowledging how my approach will likely contrast the type of education to which they are accustomed and preparing them for learning that is not only politically engaged but also potentially paradigm-shifting. In class, I share a quote from a 2007 report from Harvard on the purpose of liberal education that effectively articulates that type of transformative teaching and learning I am working toward:

... the aim of a liberal education is to unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them to find ways to re-orient themselves. A liberal education aims to accomplish these things by questioning assumptions, by inducing self-reflection, by teaching students to think critically and analytically, by exposing them to the sense of alienation produced by encounters with radically different historical moments and cultural formations and with phenomena that exceed their, and even our own, capacity fully to understand.<sup>7</sup>

As media educators, we must help our students learn to question information they encounter as well as their own assumptions, to engage with media—and also the world around them—more critically and creatively. In order to do this, we have to continually find ways to improve our pedagogy so that—in the words of bell hooks—we create spaces of “radical openness where [learners are] free to choose—able to learn and grow without limits.”<sup>8</sup>

This chapter takes on the question posed in that Sundance panel I participated in. Drawing from educational theory, examples from popular culture, and my own experiences in the classroom, the following sections outline some key concepts and best practices that draw from the tradition of critical pedagogy and apply them to media education and engagement. Once again, I do not pretend that the suggestions I make are new or definitive. Rather, they are intended as simply my contributions to a long and ongoing conversation about how best to prepare our students as audiences, creators, and citizens in an ever-evolving media landscape.

### Revitalizing Media Education

In one of my favorite scenes from the 1980’s-set TV series *Freaks and Geeks*, a well-meaning but sometimes misguided guidance counselor tries to connect with a group of underachieving high school students by breaking out his guitar and serenading them with an acoustic cover of an Alice Cooper song. In response, the students share expressions of shock and confusion. As they hurry from the counselor’s office, one of the students (played by Seth Rogen) groans under his breath, “I’ve never hated Alice Cooper as much as I do right now.”<sup>9</sup>

In his attempt to remain relevant and better relate to the students, the guidance counselor unintentionally undermines his credibility and appears even more out of touch than he would have had he not broken into song. When Freire argues that we abandon traditional, authoritarian models of education and practice a new pedagogy characterized by mutual respect and productive dialogue between “teacher–students” and “student–teachers,” we may feel a bit overwhelmed. We may struggle to know exactly where to start. We may even catch ourselves reaching for our guitar.

Before we do anything brash, though, we might consider what media pedagogy—informed by the traditions of media studies, media arts, and media literacy education as well as critical pedagogy—might entail. It will likely require us to be creative and reflexive educators. We will need to allow the students to be central to and sometimes even direct the teaching and learning. Our approach will need to extend learning beyond the classroom, to invite students to actively participate in creating new knowledge, to engage both their minds and their bodies, and to excite and enliven them. We will need to show them respect and kindness, promote care and belonging. And perhaps most of all, we will need to draw upon the different strengths and perspectives among our students to come together and work to positively transform ourselves and the world around us.

### ***Creative Pedagogy***

As media educators, working within the fields of humanities, the arts, and communications, we can draw upon our interest in and experience with creative expression to practice creative pedagogy. bell hooks writes

Engaged pedagogy not only compels me to be constantly creative in the classroom, it also sanctions involvement with students beyond that setting. I journey with students as they progress in their lives beyond our classroom experience. In many ways, I continue to teach them, even as they become more capable of teaching me. The important lesson that we learn together, the lesson that allows us to move together within and beyond the classroom, is one of mutual engagement.<sup>10</sup>

The guidance counselor from *Freaks and Geeks* might have missed the mark with his karaoke Alice Cooper, but he certainly earns points for creativity. As hooks notes, being creative means being willing to teach outside of the box, both experimenting with innovative teaching methods and extending teaching and learning outside of the classroom, beyond the semester or the school year.

The following chapters include examples of my own efforts to be “constantly creative in the classroom.”<sup>11</sup> For example, the #ABetterBYU project discussed in [Chapter 6](#) was created in an undergraduate, project-based Civic

Media course. And while, going into the semester, I had a basic objective and general conceptual framework for the class, the students and I collaborated on creating the syllabus, deciding on the readings, selecting the issue we would address in our project, determining what kind of research we needed to do, establishing a division of labor, and so on. In another example, the *Movies as Mirrors* podcast discussed in [Chapter 7](#) was the natural result of an ongoing conversation with my students about using media and education to explore the experiences of marginalized groups. For example, one time in class when we were developing *Radioland* (also discussed in [Chapter 7](#)) a group of students—some LGBTQIA+, others straight, cis-gendered—engaged in an incredibly open and productive discussion about the challenges of being queer in a conservative, religious community. I was inspired by the LGBTQIA+ students’ bravery and honesty in sharing their perspectives and impressed by the other students’ willingness to ask questions, listen with empathy, and bear witness to their peers’ experiences. When we launched *Movies as Mirrors* not long after, I had some of these same students on as guests and continued the conversation.

As media educators, we have such incredible opportunities to be creative with our teaching. As the previous chapter alludes, our field is still developing, and because of this, there are opportunities to experiment and play with our pedagogical approaches. Our engagement with new media technologies, popular culture, and creative production lends itself to novel ways of organizing our classrooms, interacting with our students, developing our curricula, and so on. We are free—perhaps freer than some of our colleagues in more established (and/or “serious”) disciplines—to find the pedagogical potential in social media, memes, virtual reality, reality TV, and so on. In classrooms that often resemble research labs and art studios more than they do lecture halls, we have greater opportunities for student-directed learning that draws upon the interests and goals of the learners, rather than just institutional imperatives. When students and teachers work together to ask questions, discover new knowledge, express our perspectives, and share our stories, we will develop relationships that will naturally extend outside the context of the classroom. We catch a taste of the joy that it is to work and learn together, and as a result, our collective practice of inquiry and creativity will likely continue long after the bell has rung.

### ***Reflexive Pedagogy***

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that the traditional “banking model” of education, in which authoritative teachers deposit information into the empty minds of their students, needs to be reassessed. Teaching and learning cannot be understood as simply a transfer of data, but rather an ongoing dialogue in which students and teachers ask questions, seek for answers, reflect on their discoveries, and continue this process of inquiry. Freire writes

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.<sup>12</sup>

As we struggle and try and fail and try again, continuously recognizing and working to overcome our limitations, we gain knowledge. And this process of learning through “invention and re-invention” discussed by Freire is just as applicable to us as we improve as teachers as it does to our students. When we practice creative pedagogy, we will undoubtedly fall short sometimes—for example, failing to effectively articulate our objectives or to adequately prepare our students for an evaluation, and so on. We may swing big and miss. Or we may not swing big enough, and fail to engage our students at all. What is more, we may not be open or reflective enough to recognize our limitations or to correct our mistakes.

hooks emphasizes the opportunity we have to enlist students in “inventing and re-inventing” the pedagogy practiced in our classrooms. She writes

I could never say that I have no idea of the way students respond to my pedagogy; they give me constant feedback. When I teach, I encourage them to critique, evaluate, make suggestions and interventions as we go along. Evaluations at the end of the course rarely help us improve the learning experience we share together. When students see themselves as mutually responsible for the development of a learning community, they offer constructive input.<sup>13</sup>

My undergraduate Contemporary Screens class (where I have piloted many of the lessons and activities included in this book) is a bit of a sandbox for me, allowing me to get creative with my teaching. But this also requires me to be extra reflexive with my approach. For example, rather than waiting until an end-of-term evaluation to get feedback from my students, we have ongoing conversations in class where we evaluate our performance together. So, at the end of each unit, after the students have read, watched, played, engaged in discussions, made creative work, shared their work with their classmates, and received feedback from me and their peers, we take some time to reflect. The discussion prompts are always the same:

- What did you (the students) learn from this unit? What did you find challenging?
- How might you (the students) improve your efforts going forward?
- How might I (the professor) improve my teaching or the unit going forward?

These discussions are typically quite productive, allowing students to recognize the value of their learning, to identify potential areas for improvement

in their own work, and to help me refine my pedagogy *in process* rather than after the semester.

Reflexive pedagogy is especially important in media education because, if we are ever going to stay relevant and keep up with the rapid changes in culture and technology, we have to learn to be responsive to what is happening both in our classroom and the world outside, reevaluating our approach as we go along. The reflexivity we model as teachers will demonstrate to our students that we are willing to be flexible, learn from our mistakes, adapt to our situation, and constantly reassess our efforts to work toward our goals—skills that are applicable to the work that our students are engaged in, whether it be scholarship, creative work, career preparation, activism, or something else.

### ***Student-Centered Pedagogy***

The 2002 film *Whale Rider* follows a young Maori girl who seeks to fulfill her destiny as the community's next leader despite the objections of her loving but traditional grandfather. In one scene, the girl—named Paikea after the whale-riding hero of the culture's origin myth—approaches her grandfather Koro with a question as he is busy working to get an old boat motor to run. She asks about their people's origins, about her namesake, and in response, Koro uses the motor's pull cord as an object lesson.

KORO: See that there? Look at it closely. What do you see?

PAIKEA: Lots of little bits of rope, all twisted together.

KORO: That's right ... Weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong. Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors, all joined together and strong, all the way back to that whale of yours.<sup>14</sup>

Koro is drawing upon something present, something concrete and familiar to Paikea, to illustrate a little lesson about heritage and community. But a moment later, when Koro yanks on the pull cord, it breaks. Koro grimaces and mutters "Useless bloody rope. I'll get another one."<sup>15</sup> As her grandfather goes to fetch a new rope, Paikea manages to mend the broken one, knotting it together and using it to successfully start the motor. "It's working!" she exclaims with excitement, but when Koro returns, he kills the motor and scolds Paikea for doing something dangerous.<sup>16</sup> This sequence—and the film's overall narrative—encourages us to value the contributions of even the youngest members of our communities in order to allow our cultures to progress and flourish. The "line" that Koro speaks of will only "remain strong" if he recognizes Paikea's strength and is open to the perspective that she brings to the community.

Similarly, our efforts as educators will be effective, our pedagogy will progress, only when we recognize the value of the knowledge and experiences

of our students and are open to their contributions to teaching and learning. As media educators who are constantly trying to keep up with the newest technologies, trending topics on social media and pop culture, it makes sense that we would draw upon our students' expertise. So many of them live and breathe media, likely even more than we do. And while they may still be developing the literacies to be able to critically engage with popular culture, they certainly bring to the table technical skills, familiarity with the platforms and practices, understanding of the conventions of new media culture, and so on. Stanley Arnowitz and Henry Giroux argue that this type of expertise exhibited by so many of our students—while often dismissed in traditional educational contexts as being superfluous or irrelevant—is of special significance. They write, “Popular knowledge, even if it does not possess the same apparatus of inquiry that has marked legitimate academic knowledge, is nevertheless a form of intellectual knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> Our efforts as media educators should take into account our students' interests, experiences, and goals—even when they do not perfectly align with the imperatives of traditional academic knowledge—and we should build upon this foundation to create a pedagogy that is truly student-centered.

For example, I recently mentored a student-directed, media literacy-themed creative project that I anticipated would help students demonstrate their understanding of media literacy principles they had learned in my classes and then use their work to introduce some of those concepts to a broader audience in accessible ways. In preparing to develop our project, I directed my students to YouTube channels like *Crash Course* and *PBS Idea Channel*. But the students felt uninspired, and we floundered a bit in finding an idea to pursue. So, we returned to the drawing board, and I asked my students about media that mattered to them—about art, stories, and expression that have excited them, exposed them to new perspectives, and prompted them to pursue careers as artists, makers, and educators. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students gravitated toward media they had watched as children—in particular, cartoons like *Pokémon*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and the animated movies from Studio Ghibli. And when we discussed the significance of these beloved shows, the students shared how each of these examples were able to present important themes—for example, protecting the natural world, navigating differences between cultures, and challenging traditional gender roles—with both accessibility and artistry.

In the end, the students developed a web series entitled *Animated Activists*, in which they combined their nostalgic affection for these cartoons from their childhood with an analysis of the texts' representation of these pressing social, political, and ecological issues (see [Figure 2.1](#)). Before the project, my exposure to *Pokémon* and *Avatar* was limited to the occasional glimpse over-the-shoulder while my young children watched Netflix. So, while I came into the project assuming we would model our creation after texts with which I was familiar, I quickly recognized the benefit of deferring to my students' interests



**FIGURE 2.1** Ellie Harrison Valle and Aaron Reupena discuss *Avatar: The Last Airbender* as part of the *Animated Activists* series.

and expertise. And as a result, the final product is much more effective. Rather than present a lecture-style presentation of media literacy terms in a more formal, educational format, the students framed the project as a series of conversations among friends hanging out on the couch, reminiscing about their favorite shows and swapping stories on why these cartoons mean so much to them. The audience is invited into the discussion, encouraged to remember their favorite episodes, share the meanings they have made of these beloved shows, and in so doing, develop a greater awareness of the ideas being communicated and the lessons we might learn from the media that matter to us.

### ***Experiential, Embodied, and Exciting Pedagogy***

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks notes that—perhaps, counter-intuitively—practicing a pedagogy that is exciting is actually, unfortunately, outside of the norm. In an effort to be rigorous, to stress the seriousness of our studies, or to adequately prepare our students for the challenges facing them in their future careers, oftentimes educators fail to incorporate fun, experiential, embodied learning into their pedagogy. hooks reflects on her experiences experimenting with exciting pedagogy, writing

Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially dis-ruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essen-tial to the learning process. To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. Not only did it require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not

be generated without a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction. Students had to be seen in their particularity as individuals ... and interacted with according to their needs<sup>18</sup>

hooks notes that in order to excite her students, she learned to be flexible and spontaneous, to move beyond the boundaries (physical and otherwise) of traditional education, to see the students as more than empty minds to be filled but as whole people with specific needs and desires. If we want our students to truly benefit from their educational experiences, we should aim to excite them. We should look for opportunities to extend their learning beyond the classroom into their everyday experiences, and invite them to actively participate in the learning process by moving their bodies, by making things, by bumping up against and learning to grapple with the world around them.

My efforts to model experiential, embodied, and exciting pedagogy take a variety of different forms. For example, when I teach about play, I often dedicate class time to playing board games and video games together. The students and I have fun playing *The Game of Life*, *Jenga*, *Battleship*, *Clue*, *Mario Kart*, *Super Smash Bros*, and so on, and we use these shared experiences as the foundation for our inquiry into concepts like interactivity and immersion, issues like the role of pleasure in learning and connection, and the game as a mode of expression and representation.

A few years ago, my New Media Conceptualization class was presented with an especially exciting educational opportunity when the author Mark Danielewski visited the college and commissioned our students to creatively reinterpret a passage from his book *The Familiar: Volume 4* using our skills in media production. With a mix of computer scientists, visual artists, sound designers, and writers in the class, the students determined that they would try their hand at adapting the excerpt from the book to virtual reality. We deconstructed Danielewski's writing and conceived of a version of the work that we could physically navigate, and interact with. We crafted a scene in which the story's protagonist—an ill-fated but obstinate boar named Bendyl—is surrounded by ravenous wolves in a dark forest. As the user walks around and interacts with different elements of the VR scene, they trigger musical cues, sound effects, and simple animations. When Danielewski visited campus, we demoed the project, everyone taking turns wearing the headset and walking around a conference room that had been virtually transformed into the wild woods.

In addition to playing games and working with VR, I also look for opportunities in which the students can get out of the classroom, experience the world, and have some fun as part of their learning. For example, in my *Space*,



**FIGURE 2.2** McCall McClellan performing a dance at the base of Bridal Veil Falls as part of her site-specific short film.

Place, and Media Arts course, we go on frequent field trips to places including the Bonneville Salt Flats, the Topaz Internment Center, Arches National Park, and Monument Valley on the Navajo Nation. In class, we study the literature, art, history, poetry, and politics of Utah, but on our field trips, we get to actually, physically experience the places themselves—hiking red rock formations, walking through barracks where Japanese-American internees were imprisoned, sitting in a Navajo hogan and hearing from elders about the artistic traditions of the native people. As part of the students' adventures, they create a place-based art project—like a performance, ephemeral sculpture, or process-based piece—that addresses an issue facing the lands and communities within Utah (see [Figure 2.2](#)). Students communicate their messages using the elements within their chosen spaces—including water, rocks, garbage, plant life, and even their own bodies, and their projects address issues including air pollution, overdevelopment, the erasure of indigenous cultures and lands, and so on.

As media educators, we have such incredible opportunities to excite our students, to encourage experiential learning, and to help them use both their minds and their bodies in their critical inquiry and creative work. As we engage with current events, pressing social issues, trends in popular culture, and emerging technologies in the classroom, our students will be excited by how relevant and applicable their learning is to their lives outside of the classroom. When we help our students practically apply the knowledge they have gained from our curriculum—by conducting research projects, producing creative work, participating in civic life, and so on—they engage in praxis and learn by doing. And when our teaching and learning involves

making a sculpture or a dance film, interacting with VR or AR, or taking our civic action to the streets, we connect our intellectual inquiry with our physical activity.

### ***Pedagogy of Care and Belonging***

The 2003 film *School of Rock* follows the shenanigans of the wannabe rock-star Dewey Finn (played by Jack Black) as he poses as a substitute teacher and cons his grade school students into helping him win a local battle of the bands.<sup>19</sup> Dewey's deception is obviously problematic, and it catches up with him in the end. But in the meantime, he actually turns out to be a gifted teacher, helping the kids discover their talents and cope with challenges they are facing in their personal lives. For example, in one scene, Dewey witnesses one of the parents hassling their child and then gives an impromptu lesson about expressing emotions through your music and using rock n' roll to resist authoritarianism and "stick it to the man." In another scene, he empathizes with a student dealing with body-image issues and helps her have the confidence to sing onstage. He even helps the high-strung school principal release some of her anxiety and rediscover her love for her students. Dewey is far from a model educator, but he does make efforts to care about his students as individuals and help them feel a sense of belonging. Because of the kindness and encouragement exhibited by Dewey as well as their shared love of expressing themselves creatively, the characters come together as a community (and rock out in the process).

bell hooks argues that educators who truly care for their students and value diversity, inclusion, and belonging work to "create closeness" in their classroom, "forging a learning community that values wholeness over division, disassociation, splitting."<sup>20</sup> While traditional educational approaches often focus on transmitting information rather than exercising empathy and emphasizing uniformity instead of celebrating diversity, critical pedagogues like Freire and hooks argue that truly transformative teaching involves deeply caring about our students, recognizing and valuing their differences, while also promoting a sense of community and connection within the classroom. In the context of education, caring includes showing kindness and respect to our students, being attentive and receptive to their needs and interests, and working to help them achieve mutually agreed upon goals.<sup>21</sup>

My own efforts to practice a pedagogy of care are ongoing. As mentioned above, I am continually seeking feedback from my classes, learning how I can improve not just my curriculum or teaching methods, but also the ways in which I relate to my students. Sometimes, my student evaluations are direct (and maybe even a bit harsh), but they help me become more aware of ways I can be more thoughtful or understanding. As I have worked to be a more caring teacher, the feedback I have received has been encouraging. For example, one student offered

the following words in my end-of-course evaluation that hopefully—but definitely not exclusively—characterizes my intent to care for my students:

Benjamin will, gently and sweetly, give you the existential crisis you never had in high school. He will call into question all of your beliefs, and throw you into an environment where you can responsibly, carefully, and lovingly reconstruct everything you thought about the world.<sup>22</sup>

Yes, I cherry-picked this evaluation. But limited as the example may be, this student's response is a bit of evidence of my interest in and efforts to practice caring in the classroom.

A pedagogy of belonging overlaps with (but is not entirely encompassed by) a pedagogy of care. To promote belonging includes the same kindness, respect, attentiveness, openness, and investment as practicing caring, but our efforts are more specifically directed at helping traditionally underserved, marginalized, or minority students benefit from their educational experiences and become valued members of the community of learning. Teaching in a predominately politically conservative community at a religiously affiliated university with a student population that is 81% white, my work to promote diversity, equity, and belonging is especially needed (and sometimes particularly challenging). One way that I promote belonging is through amplifying the voices of marginalized students and empowering them to share their stories in their scholarship and creative work. For example, when I mentor student work, I help my students explore subjects in which they are personally invested, that allow them both to demonstrate their knowledge and experience and to introduce the community to diverse ways of thinking and forms of expression. For example, with *Li'i and the Keeper of Secrets*—an interactive children's book I discuss in [Chapter 9](#)—I worked with Aarron to create a story that both documented the Samoan stories his grandmother told him as a boy and expressed his feelings about preserving indigenous cultural practices that are under threat of being lost.<sup>23</sup>

Because I am attentive to their interests, validate their experiences, and encourage them to express their unique perspectives, my students often turn around and use their scholarly and creative work to practice caring themselves. For example, inspired by personal experiences navigating mental health issues, my students Dallin and Cambree developed a stop-motion animated web series *How Can I Help?* that introduces children (and their grown-ups) to conversations about mental illness. In each episode, a colorful claymation animal experiences a different mental health diagnosis (including anxiety, depression, OCD, ODD, and so on).<sup>24</sup> The series presents information about mental health in ways that are accessible to young audiences and encourages children who are watching to seek support from the trusted adults in their lives. More than anything, *How Can I Help?* de-stigmatizes conversations about mental health



**FIGURE 2.3** How Can I Help?

and helps children who may be facing some of these challenges to feel seen and supported. The final episode in the series features Liam the Zebra who, unlike the rest of the characters, does not face any mental health challenges but simply desires to care for and be close to his friends who might be struggling (see [Figure 2.3](#)).

An important thing I ask each of my friends after listening to them is “How can I help?” Sometimes they’ll ask me to help them tell an adult about their feelings. I tell my friends that I will be here for them. It helps them to know that they aren’t alone. I know I can’t make everything better for my friends, but these are some ways that I can help them know that they are loved.<sup>25</sup>

While every teacher should demonstrate caring toward and promote belonging among their students, as media educators, we have specific opportunities to demonstrate this type of attentiveness, respect, inclusion, and kindness in our classrooms. For example, when we value our students’ “popular knowledge” (as discussed above), we demonstrate our interest in their interests and our investment in their enjoyment of the learning process. When we teach about representation in media—in regards to both content and behind-the-scenes—we can model to our students what it means to value differences among people and to celebrate our diversity. When we empower students from underserved groups to express themselves in their scholarly and creative work, we are amplifying the voices of the marginalized. When we study and make media that exposes injustice, promotes connection, and advocates for equity and inclusion, we will prepare our students to practice caring and to promote belonging long after their time in the classroom.

### ***Transformative Pedagogy***

Critical pedagogy—as conceived of and practiced by Freire, hooks, Giroux, and others—emphasizes education’s emancipatory potential. That is, we approach teaching and learning as a powerful means of improving ourselves and our society. Our objective as educators is to help our students develop critical consciousness so that they can recognize the challenges facing our world and then work to overcome them. This pedagogy is transformative both because it facilitates productive changes within us (as teachers and learners), but also because it prepares us to (in Freire’s words) “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which [we] can transform.”<sup>26</sup>

Years ago, I had a first-year student named Scott who—because his experiences and perspectives differed from those of the conservative majority on campus—expressed to me that he was unsure of his place at the university. Sympathizing with Scott’s situation, I provided him with a place to explore his interests, develop his voice as a scholar and creator, and connect with his classmates. Eventually Scott became the editor-in-chief of the student-run *Aperture Media Journal*, and I (as his advisor) guided him through the process of organizing a team of editors and reviewers and overseeing the successful publication of the first issue. When Scott directed his capstone film *Pride & Faith*—a short documentary film that addressed the struggle faced by LGBTQIA+ students at BYU—I (as one of his advisors) helped him voice his perspectives on screen in a way that was both true to his experiences and accessible to the campus audience.<sup>27</sup> Because of his intelligence, thoughtfulness, and perseverance, as well as the mentorship that my colleagues and I provided him, Scott went from nearly leaving the university to becoming one of the program’s most outstanding students.

Years after Scott graduated, I attended a get-together hosted by a local organization for LGBTQIA+ and allies where I met an elderly couple who had opened their home to queer teenagers who needed a safe place to live when their families were unaccepting. When I asked the couple what had prompted them to provide such service, they recalled visiting the university’s film festival years earlier and watching *Pride & Faith*. Scott’s film inspired them to take action, and they had since touched the lives of dozens of young people. I do not take credit for the transformative work Scott and his film did in the community, but I hope that the space I provided him to figure out his path and the support I gave him to express his voice contributed to his development as a filmmaker and an activist.

As media educators, we are committed to helping our students critically engage with both media and the world around them. When we teach them about things like aesthetic traditions, authorial intention, audience interpretation, ideology, representation, and so forth, we help them transform into more

active audiences and conscientious creators of media. And when we prepare them to recognize the challenges facing our society and to address these challenges in their scholarship, creative work, and activism, we empower them to change the world for the better.

At the conclusion of that Sundance panel on media education I participated in, the moderator asked each panel member what they felt like was the most important thing we could do to prepare our students in a time of such rapid change. I recall paraphrasing famed educational philosopher John Dewey in my response. In his book *Democracy and Education*, he writes

As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society. The school is its chief agency for the accomplishment of this end.<sup>28</sup>

If our efforts as media educators are not founded on the desire to help make our students better, and our world better, then what is this all for? We have a responsibility to those seeking learning in our classrooms, and to the broader communities of which we are a part, to embrace the opportunity we have been given as teachers to help “make a better future society.”<sup>29</sup> I believe that as we work to make our pedagogy more creative, reflexive, student-centered, experiential, embodied, exciting, caring, inclusive, and transformative, we have a greater likelihood of being able to improve the lives of our students and improve our world.

## Notes

- 1 hooks (1994), p. 142.
- 2 hooks (1994), pp. 204–205.
- 3 Giroux & Simon (1988), p. 11.
- 4 See Freire (1970).
- 5 Lusted (1986), p. 3.
- 6 Giroux & Simon (1988), p. 12.
- 7 Harvard University (2007), pp. 1–2.
- 8 hooks (1994), p. 207.
- 9 Apatow & Feig (2000).
- 10 hooks (1994), p. 205.
- 11 hooks (1994), p. 205.
- 12 Freire (1970), p. 72.
- 13 Hooks (1994), p. 206.
- 14 Caro (2002).
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 Arnowitz & Giroux (1991), p. 18.
- 18 hooks (1994), p. 7.
- 19 Linklater (2003).
- 20 Hooks (2003), p. 49.

- 21 See Noddings (2003, 2013).
- 22 Anonymous student, personal correspondence.
- 23 <https://keeperofwhispers.com/>
- 24 [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5UJ\\_TUM62pJTsbH5-G98Yg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5UJ_TUM62pJTsbH5-G98Yg)
- 25 How Can I Help? (2019).
- 26 Freire (1970), p. 49.
- 27 Raia (2015).
- 28 Dewey (1916), p. 24.
- 29 *ibid*, p. 24.

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# 3

## PROCESSING POP CULTURE

We live in a culture characterized by *immediacy*. We have become accustomed to instant gratification—eating fast food and then going on crash diets, praising democracy but then getting frustrated when millions of mail-in ballots are not counted in a single day, constantly seeking out quick fixes and life hacks. And contemporary media have definitely contributed to this trend in our society. We live in an era when the answer to seemingly every question is immediately accessible via the Internet, when we have nearly instantaneous digital communication via fiber-optic cables and satellite technologies, when we grow impatient whenever our Wi-Fi connection lags or a video has to buffer, and when we binge watch entire seasons of TV in a single sitting and spoil the endings of movies before they are even made. As new technologies accelerate the transmission of information (and, honestly, every aspect of human life), we grow increasingly impatient with having to wait for anything. At our worst, we begin to sound like Veruca Salt, the spoiled rich kid in the movie adaptation of Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*: “I want it *now!*”<sup>1</sup>

On closer examination, the fact that media technologies have contributed to this culture of immediacy is kind of ironic. Media get their name because these mechanisms—whether they be film or video, the written word, images, or interactive digital experiences, and so on—*mediate* human communication and expression. But the process of translating ideas, intentions, or information into a particular mode of communication or expression and then transmitting this message to others using some tool or technology is anything but immediate. Rather, it requires effort and duration. So, as we engage with media, it might benefit us to think of them in terms of this concept of *process*, asking questions such as: How might we understand the production, circulation, and reception of media as a process? What smaller processes—like editors cutting together

footage for a TV show or fans picking out Easter-eggs in each episode—make up these processes of production and reception? What larger cultural or societal processes—including the evolution of artistic traditions, political movements, science, technology, and so forth—do media play a part in?

### Passively Consuming vs. Processing Pop Culture

Returning to the example of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, in Dahl's 1964 book an eccentric candy-maker named Willy Wonka invites five lucky children to visit his magical sweets factory.<sup>2</sup> Each of the children personifies a different problem with “kids now-a-days” (at least as perceived by the author). Veruca Salt, for example, is a stereotypical spoiled child; another kid, Mike TeeVee, is obsessed with (as you might have guessed) watching television; and so on. As the group navigates Wonka's wondrous workshop, each child's weakness leads them to suffer some sort of mishap. Following each incident, Wonka's workers, called Oompa Loompas, appear and sing a cautionary song. When Mike TeeVee accidentally shrinks himself so he can appear inside a television set, the Oompa Loompas' song scolds parents for allowing their children to watch TV:

*The most important thing we've learned,*  
 So far as children are concerned,  
 Is never, NEVER, NEVER let  
 Them near your television set ...  
 IT ROTTS THE SENSE IN THE HEAD!  
 IT KILLS IMAGINATION DEAD!  
 IT CLOGS AND CLUTTERS UP THE MIND!  
 IT MAKES A CHILD SO DULL AND BLIND  
 HE CAN NO LONGER UNDERSTAND  
 A FANTASY, A FAIRYLAND!  
 HIS BRAIN BECOMES AS SOFT AS CHEESE!  
 HIS POWERS OF THINKING RUST AND FREEZE!  
 HE CANNOT THINK – HE ONLY SEES!<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the song, Dahl explicitly expresses his distaste for the newly emerged media technology and argues that TV distracts and dulls the mind. Interestingly, while each of the children's flaws differ in some regard—Veruca is self-centered, Mike is TV-obsessed, Augustus is gluttonous, and so on—they all share an underlying theme of incessant, insatiable consumption.

In contrast to these depictions of consumption, the novel's hero, Charlie Bucket, is praised by Wonka (and by implication, Dahl himself) for withstanding

## THE LIMITS OF CONSUMPTION

We often use the metaphor of eating to describe what we do with media. For example, we devour a book; we binge a TV series; we consume content. Both processes are parallel in that they involve taking something external and integrating it into ourselves. But the consumption metaphor has clear limitations. Most significantly, digestion is a passive process. Beyond what and how much we choose to eat, we have little control over (and are really only somewhat conscious of) the effects our food has on us. When we listen to a song, play a video game, or scroll through a social media feed, we may do so mindlessly—“HE CANNOT THINK, HE ONLY SEES”—without considering the different elements that make up these expressions, the significance of their themes, or the potential influence they have on our attitudes and behaviors. OR we can choose to be more like Charlie Bucket—being deliberate in our engagement, taking the time to appreciate (and even analyze) our experience with media.

### Discussion Question

*Consider the experiences you have had with media recently and reflect on the nature of your engagement. When are you simply “consuming content” and when are you deliberately engaging with popular culture?*

the impulse to immediately satisfy himself and, instead, to appreciate the wonder and beauty of the world. For example, while Charlie loves chocolate more than anything, his family is so poor that they can only afford to buy him one candybar each year on his birthday. Dahl describes how Charlie “would place it carefully in a small wooden box that he owned and treasure it as though it were a bar of solid gold,” and how over the course of several weeks he “would peel back a tiny bit of the paper wrapping at one corner to expose a tiny bit of chocolate, and then he would take a tiny nibble—just enough to allow the lovely sweet taste to spread out slowly over his tongue.”<sup>4</sup> The deliberate manner in which Charlie eats the chocolate contrasts the alarming consumption engaged in by the other children, and this comparison may prove to be a helpful metaphor for the ways in which we choose to engage with media.

This approach of actively making meanings of our experiences with media requires effort and takes time. It involves recognizing the processes that constitute media culture and the larger historical, cultural, and social processes that media exist within and contribute to. It requires us to consider our own creative processes—the intentions and decisions behind the media we make, post, share, and so on. Developing the ability to deliberately engage, as both

audiences and creators, is a process in and of itself. For example, we might have been taught in school to analyze classic works of literature or fine art, but we still may have some difficulty deliberately engaging with the media that surround us. But as we practice processing pop culture, we can gradually develop the ability to more deliberately and critically engage with media.

### **Bullets, Needles, or Circuits?**

In the mid-20th century, a group of scholars at the University of Birmingham were studying the British people's use of media when they realized that the common approaches to cultural analysis did not quite account for what they were seeing. For example, traditions within literary and art criticism did not consider pop culture a worthwhile object of analysis. And the scholarly traditions that did engage with things like magazines, film, television, and so forth (most notably, Marxist Critical Theory and Mass Society Theory) often described media as simply means of distracting or manipulating the public. But the Birmingham School (including scholars like Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, and others) noted that most people are not either art critics or passive dupes.<sup>5</sup> Most of us engage with culture with more nuance and variety than the existing analytical frameworks allowed for. So, this group of scholars developed the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, devising theories and conducting research to make better sense of the processes by which media operate and how people use culture to exercise power.

The Birmingham School's approach was a response to the popular analytical frameworks of the day including the "hypodermic needle" or "magic bullet" models of mass communication, which understand media as having direct effects on the attitudes and behaviors of the audiences.<sup>6</sup> These models attempted to address the rise in political propaganda during World War II and the growing influence of Hollywood on global culture. They reflected a growing concern about how things like political communication, advertising, popular music, and movies impact their audiences. Thus, these models envisioned media-makers firing bullets and injecting ideological messages straight into the minds of the masses. However, while these metaphors are certainly compelling (and even echoed in some conversations about media today), the Birmingham School scholars found them to be limiting. For example, these models privilege the intentions of the creators over how people were actually interpreting these messages. They emphasize the ideological significance of media texts over their aesthetic, narrative, or material elements. And they imply that media's power is unidirectional, that media messages are transferred without interruption from the creator to the receiver.<sup>7</sup>

In his article "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" Richard Johnson argues that the "direct effects" model (and, really, every existing approach to

analyzing media) are too limiting and, as a result, cannot fully account for the complexity of the meaning-making process. He writes

What if existing theories—and the modes of research associated with them—actually express different sides of the same complex process? What if they are all true, but only as far as they go, true for those parts of the process which they have most clearly in view? What if they are all false or incomplete, liable to mislead, in that they are only partial, and therefore cannot grasp the process as a whole?<sup>8</sup>

Rather than simply criticizing these models (or rejecting them outright), cultural studies scholars have developed a critical, multi-perspectival, and interdisciplinary approach to studying media culture that acknowledges both the strengths and limitations of these different traditions. Instead of a bullet or a needle, the Birmingham School scholars have developed a model for making sense of media that resembles a circuit, situating media texts as part of a process of production, reception, lived culture, and social relations. This “circuit of culture” acknowledges the active role that the audience plays in the meaning-making process as well as the influence that historical, political, economic, technological, and cultural conditions have on this process. Effectively processing pop culture requires us to see the bigger picture, to recognize how the different moments in the meaning-making process are related, and to understand how each analytical approach reveals something different about the “circuit of culture.” We might begin our practice of processing pop culture by reflecting on the media’s origins: Where do media come from? Before we make media, how do we conceive of and develop our ideas? What role do the conditions under which we make media determine the content of our messages?

## The Creative Process

The 2001 documentary *Scratch* follows the development of “turntabilism”—the art of hip-hop DJing—starting from its origins in the 1970s. The film begins with a number of well-known DJ’s (including DJ Premier, Z-Trip, and Rob Swift) sharing the stories of when they were first introduced to the artform (against the backdrop of a ferocious session with Mix Master Mike). Each of the artists describe moments when lightning struck, launching them into their careers making hip-hop beats. Among those who appear in the film’s intro is pioneer DJ Grand Wizzard Theodore who relates the experience when, as a young teenager, he invented the practice of scratching records:

This one particular day when I came home from school—I’d usually go home and practice—I was playing music a little bit too loudly, and my mom came and banged on the door. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM! “If you don’t cut that music down, I’m gonna cut it off!” So, while she was in the

doorway, you know, screaming at me, I was still holding the record and rubbing the record back and forth. When she left, I was like, “Hmm. That’s a pretty good idea.” So, when she left, I experimented with it, you know. A couple of months. A couple of weeks. Different records. And then, when I was ready, I gave a party. And that’s when I first introduced the scratch.<sup>9</sup>

One can almost envision a lightbulb appearing above a young Theodore’s head in that pivotal moment. However, while most creators admit to having experienced a lightning strike, lightbulb, or “Eureka!” moment at least once in their lives, most often the creative process takes a bit longer and is more complex. Albert Einstein describes how, when these sudden strokes of genius occur, they often follow a time of sustained effort, even failure.

When I think back and reflect how my discoveries originated and took form: a hundred times you run, as it were, with your head against a wall in order to lay hands upon and to define and fit into a system what, merely from an indefinable premonition, you sense—in vain. And then, suddenly, perhaps like a stroke of lightning, the saving thought will come to you, and the indescribably laborious task of building up and expanding the system can begin. That process is no different from that by which an artist arrives at his conceptions. Concentration and sustained will power, as well as a sticktoitiveness, lasting over years, will then finally create the work.<sup>10</sup>

The strike of lightning can be sudden, occurring in an instant, but it is only one moment in a longer process. As creatives, we try and fail, we hit our head against the wall a hundred times and must continue to search and struggle to make our ideas reality. The process is often messy and is not easily described with simple metaphors or linear logic. Oftentimes, the creative process looks much more like spaghetti thrown against the wall than it does a lightbulb flicking on.

For example, in a 2011 concert organized by the creators of the Radiolab podcast, performing artist Reggie Watts took to the stage and delivered his unique brand of improvised musical comedy. Watts famously devises much of his material on the spot—drawing from R&B and hip-hop music, stand-up comedy, and performance art—and his distinctive artistic approach has led to a TV career that includes shows like *Comedy Bang! Bang!* and *The Late Late Show with James Corden*. After Watts’s act, Radiolab co-host Jad Abumrad joins him onstage and earnestly asks for some insight into where and when Watts began developing his unique brand of performance. In response, Watts describes how his approach is likely the result of being an only child and having to invent things to entertain himself as a kid. He goes on to paint a picture of his childhood:

Sometimes I used to take models, you know. I’d build an airplane model, like a jet fighter, and I’d put firecrackers inside of it. I’d build it fairly

sturdily, I'd put firecrackers in them, and then I would go into the garage and take a huge paint bucket. I'd put it over the model, and I'd light the fireworks. I'd put the bucket over it, and I'd sit on the bucket. I'd blow up the plane, and then I'd collect all the pieces. And I'd re-glue them together again. And the pieces that were missing I'd cover with tinfoil, and I would paint over it. And then I would suspend the airplane on two bits of fishing line from my garage down to the gutter for the sidewalk. And then I'd take two straws and glue them underneath the airplane wing. And then I'd put a smoke-bomb, some lighter fluid-saturated Kleenex tissue, and some fireworks. And then I'd light the smoke bomb, and I would let the aircraft slide down. And it would end up crashing into a mud-thing. And then, my friends—we would do it for each other. My friends would be in the grass laying down with binoculars pretending like it's a movie.<sup>11</sup>

Abumrad is engaging in some informal media analysis—searching for some added understanding to the performance he just witnessed by digging up some information about the context of the artist's origins and inspiration. In our process of analyzing pop culture, we benefit from doing the same: asking, for example, where scratching records came from, what art influenced our favorite creators, or even researching the origins of our favorite superhero. It is likely that our efforts will not reveal a simple explanation. Rather than a single moment of inspiration, these expressions are the result of a long, complicated process of, for example, crashing partially exploded model airplanes into mud pits. The processes by which popular cultural texts are produced will vary, depending on factors like the creators' background, the nature of the collaborative process, and the conditions in which they are doing their creative work.

### **THE MEANS OF (CREATIVE) PRODUCTION**

While the intentions of the creators, their artistic inspirations, and even personal experiences clearly inform the media they produce, the realization of these ideas happens within specific historical, material, and technological conditions. For example, the record scratch might have been first conceived by a teenage Grand Wizzard Theodore, but the circumstances in which turntablism was developed were key to its emergence as an artform. Specifically, those pioneer DJs were able to mix tracks and scratch records using technology that they already had access to, rather than having to purchase and learn new musical instruments. This issue of access was particularly significant given that hip-hop originated in underserved, urban, communities of color. Overnight, these DJs switched from consumers to producers, using nothing more than their record players and speakers. The “political economy” of media—or, in other words, who has

access to the means of creative production—is key to understanding the role of context in the creation of popular cultural texts.<sup>12</sup>

### Discussion Question

*In a world in which multinational media conglomerates hold near monopolies on the creative industries, but the Internet and social media allow nearly everyone to be a content creator, why is this question of access so important?*

## The Meaning-Making Process

In Johnson’s “circuit of culture,” the creative process engaged in by media-makers (*production*) is mirrored by the interpretive process engaged in by media audiences (*reception*). And while these two moments may occupy opposite ends of the circuit, they are inextricably connected. In his own examination of the meaning-making process, Stuart Hall notes that while the “direct effects” models referenced above identify some fundamental components of communication (including the *sender, message, channel, and receiver*), they assume that this flow of communication is uninterrupted and they do not adequately account for the mediating factors that influence how meanings are passed between producers, texts, and audiences. In an essay titled “Encoding/Decoding,” Hall describes how key to the meaning-making process is (1) how media creators “encode” their messages into media texts—making use of, for examples, the language and conventions of the mode or medium that they are working within—and then (2) how media audiences “decode,” or interpret, these messages. He writes:

Before this message can have an ‘effect’ (however defined), or satisfy a ‘need’ or be put to a ‘use,’ it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which ‘have an effect,’ influence, entertain, instruct or persuade ...<sup>13</sup>

According to Hall, in order for, let’s say, a hip-hop song to “have an effect” on its audience, the listener must decode the track, for example, recognizing the mix of samples from other songs or the sounds of the records scratching not as glitches in the technology but as deliberate aesthetic choices made to create a particular sound.

Hall goes on to discuss that while production and reception might be understood as counterparts, most of the time, the processes of “encoding” and “decoding” are not symmetrical. The message that is encoded by the creator is often not identical to that interpreted by the audience. Instead, the meaning that the audience attributes to the text is dependent upon a number of factors including their own background, education, and experiences, the context in which they encounter the message, the intentions with which they

approach it, and so on. For example, when a copyright attorney listens to a hip-hop track, they derive different meanings from the song than the group of young adults in the dance club. The possibility (or inevitability) of multiple meanings being made of the same message is called *polysemy*. And while it was originally discussed by Russian literary theorists Valentin Voloshinov and Mikhail Bakhtin in the early 20th century, the concept of polysemy is especially important today when media audiences are more vast and diverse than ever before and when communities of fans, aficionados, and critics are constantly sharing interpretations of their favorite media online.<sup>14</sup>

One fun example is the Internet-based fan theory that the 2013 film *Snowpiercer*—a dystopian action movie set on a bullet train that circumnavigates the now frozen planet—is a continuation of the 1971 film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*.<sup>15</sup> Introduced by comedian and cultural commentator Kevin Maher in a 2018 video titled “The Secret Post-Apocalyptic Willy Wonka Remake”<sup>16</sup> and further developed in a video essay from a YouTube personality named Rhino Stew,<sup>17</sup> the unlikely but effectively articulated theory has since gone viral. Similarly bizarre fan theories pop up all the time in comment sections and social media threads where active audiences routinely swap hot takes on their favorite pieces of pop culture. As we process pop culture, we benefit from reflecting on not just our own interpretations of media messages but also how others make different meanings of these same texts.

## DECODING IDEOLOGY

In his discussion of encoding and decoding, Hall outlines three hypothetical positions from which audience members can decode a media text, and in particular, make meaning of its ideological message. From the *dominant-hegemonic position*, the audience’s decoding of the message corresponds with the intentions of the creator, “operating inside the dominant code”<sup>18</sup>. From the *oppositional position*, the audience decodes the message “in a globally contrary way,” rejecting the ideological intentions of the creator.<sup>19</sup> And from the *negotiated position*, the audience decodes the message, accepting some and rejecting other aspects of the dominant code. Hall’s theory accounts for how—in the case of propaganda or advertising, for example—some audiences readily accept the persuasive message in the text while others reject it outright.

### Discussion Question

*Can you think of some examples when decoding media texts in which you operate “inside the dominant code”? How about times when you interpret media messages “in a globally contrary way”? Or when you use a “negotiated code”?*

## Products of Pop Culture: Media as Texts

In his non-fiction, book-length comic titled *Understanding Comics*, author and illustrator Scott McCloud explores the history, language, and impact of the popular medium, and demonstrates the value of critically engaging with comics as texts rather than dismissing them as escapist entertainment for kids. McCloud (whose illustrated stand-in narrates the book) describes how he always recognized the unique power of comics but struggled to be able to articulate it. “At one time or another virtually all media have received critical examination, in and of themselves,” writes McCloud “But for comics, this attention has been rare. Let’s see if we can help rectify the situation.”<sup>20</sup> The first chapter addresses common misconceptions about comics, develops a working definition of the medium as “sequential art,” and discusses its historical development. The result is an intelligent and creative engagement with comics as *texts*. McCloud’s effort to understand comics is an effective model for processing pop culture. Like McCloud’s book, our efforts to analyze popular cultural texts must involve examining how they are *constructed* and recognizing how *content* (*what* is being expressed) and *form* (*how* it is expressed) work together to tell a story or express an idea. When we process pop culture we benefit from paying attention to concepts like *structure*, *mode*, *medium*, *technology*, *aesthetics*, *representation*, and *ideology*.

### **Structure and Mode**

From folktales and theater to movies and TV, narrative has arguably been the dominant mode of human expression and communication throughout history. The definition of narrative is an entire discourse itself, but some of its commonly recognized characteristics include (1) a story’s focus on a character or characters, (2) the inclusion of a beginning, middle, and end, and (3) the dynamic between plot (the events that are explicitly expressed) and subtext (the ideas that are implied by this expression). God creates the heavens, earth, and all living things and then rests on the seventh day. Wiley Coyote attempts to ensnare the Roadrunner but is endlessly foiled in his efforts. Peter Parker is bitten by a radioactive spider, giving him superpowers which he uses to protect New York City. And so on. Narratologists like Aristotle, Gustav Freytag, and Joseph Campbell have observed patterns within the structures of stories that have since been adopted by authors and audiences as narrative conventions: the characters and setting are established, some conflict is introduced, the characters struggle to achieve their objectives, and the story is concluded with some sort of resolution.<sup>21</sup> Processing pop culture involves recognizing how the structure of media texts correspond with (or deviate from) conventional characteristics of the mode.

But narrative can include more than just a fall from grace, a climactic struggle, or a hero’s journey. In fact, media texts do not need to be structured as stories at all. For example, texts like TV commercials, radio news reports, and popular songs may make use of some conventions of narrative to frame their

## CONFLICT OR COMMUNION?

So often, conventional narratives are structured around some sort of tension or conflict and their plots even resemble a straight arrow, rising toward a climax and then ending in some solid resolution. Jedi vs. Sith, Capulet vs. Montague, Cain vs. Abel—these stories so often privilege the masculine protagonist who achieves their objectives through acts of violence. In her essay, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” writer Ursula Le Guin offers an alternative: expression structured not as arrows but as “carrier bags” that we use to collect pieces of the human experience. Le Guin offers that as we move away from structuring human expression like an “arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead),” we will be able to explore new ways of expressing ourselves, to challenge patriarchal understandings of the world, and also to develop greater capacities for understanding and connection.<sup>22</sup>

### Discussion Question

*How might we re-structure dominant narratives in our culture in ways that emphasize communion over conflict, connection over violence? Try re-envisioning a familiar narrative so that it more closely corresponds to Le Guin’s “carrier bag” theory of fiction than conventional linear, conflict-oriented approaches.*

persuasive message, the information being communicated, or the melodies performed, but each of these examples work within different modes and draw upon other specific structures. For example, in a Spider-Man comic, the story told from page to page, beginning to middle to end, is one way of understanding its structure. But also, the fact that the narrative is presented in the form of “sequential art” (as opposed to a written text of a novel or the animated images of a cartoon) invites us also to consider how the story is structured by the characteristics of the medium. And a Spider-Man/fast-food crossover ad campaign may make use of elements from the comic’s narrative structure, but it operates in an entirely different mode with its own form.

### Medium and Technology

When we engage with a media text, we may also consider the specific characteristics of the medium or technology used to create it, acknowledging the affordances and limitations of its particular form. The medium of dance, for example, involves human bodies moving through physical space, while the medium of photography involves using a camera to capture still images via photo-chemical processes. The specific characteristics—and even the

material elements—of the medium determine (at least, in part) what can be expressed or communicated by the text. The importance of acknowledging this “medium specificity” becomes especially apparent when we compare the so-called old media—like dance, photography, and film—to relatively “new media”—including apps, games, augmented, and virtual reality that, because of their technological capabilities, offer new types of experiences.

In his 2001 book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich explores how developments in media technologies have resulted in the evolution of media forms. He argues that while narrative continues to have a presence in “new media,” he has observed a shift in how many of these texts are structured.

A collection of documents and a navigable space, already traditional methods of organizing both data and human experience of the world itself, became two of the forms that today can be found in most areas of new media. The first form is a database, used to store any kind of data—from financial records to digital movie clips; the second form is a virtual interactive 3-D space, employed in computer games, motion rides, VR, computer animation, and human-computer interfaces.<sup>23</sup>

According to Manovich, the “database” and “3-D navigable space” provide the structure for much of the media that we engage with on our phones, computers, game consoles, and smart TVs, in part because these devices are digital, networked technologies. Even if the content is similar to what we have seen in “old media,” these emerging forms of expression and communication are able to offer, arguably, more interactive, immersive experiences for the user. So for example, while we may read a Spider-Man comic and become invested in the story, identifying to some extent with the hero, the immersion we experience is entirely different when we actually play as the web-slinger in a video game. In this case, the medium and technology allow us not only to imagine ourselves as Peter Parker, but to swing across a virtual cityscape as Spidey himself.

## **PLATFORM STUDIES**

While much of our engagement with media often focuses on the content, we must not forget how a media text’s form—and *platform*—play a part in our experience with it. Paying attention to the material and technological components of media is especially important in the age of digital technologies, not only because things like hardware and software fundamentally structure our interactions with texts but also because the seamless design of digital media obscures the presence of these platforms, making them go unnoticed. Emphasizing media’s materiality, Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost have advocated for the inclusion of “platform studies” as an approach to

analyzing media. They write: “just as the serious scholar of film might choose to learn about film production in order to understand the methods by which his chosen medium is created...so the serious scholar of digital media might need to delve deeper into the material construction of software and hardware.”<sup>24</sup>

### Discussion Question

*What are some of the ways that platforms impact our experiences with digital media? For example, how might learning about the programming language used to create a social media app or the hardware of our smartphones contribute to our understanding of something like trends on TikTok?*

## Aesthetics

McCloud’s in-depth analysis of comics is significant because it is among the first notable arguments that the medium be understood as art and appreciated aesthetically. He argues that comics (just like other artforms) are creative expressions that make use of formal elements and stylistic devices to tell stories and communicate ideas with the intent of eliciting some sort of response from the reader. Depending on its medium or technology, a media text may use a variety of formal elements and draw upon a range of different aesthetic approaches. For example, comics use visual devices, such as color, line, and perspective; they make use of the size, juxtaposition, and layout of the individual panels as well as the vocabulary, voice, and type used in the written text. Story-based superhero comics, specifically, will often include brightly colored, costumed heroes, graphic representations of sound effects, and illustrations that give the illusion of dynamic movement in their depictions of action.

As culture evolves and new technologies are introduced, aesthetic approaches change. For example, in recent years, there has been some conversation about the extent to which video games, viral videos, and the internet can be appreciated aesthetically.<sup>25</sup> And as we have begun to understand the internet and digital media objects *as art*, things like the pixel, the glitch, the GIF, and the meme have been adopted as stylistic devices themselves and even employed in fashion, film, visual art, and graphic design. Though, regardless of the specific device or approach, the use of aesthetic elements to help tell stories, express ideas, or communicate messages must factor into how we process pop culture. Returning to the example of Spider-Man, a formal analysis of the comic might include examining how the colors of his costume reference the American flag, or how the use of perspective in the illustrations place the hero above the towering buildings of New York City, or how Spidey’s witty asides demonstrate the character’s smart and playful personality. In each of these examples, the

### **SPIDER-VERSE'S MIXED AESTHETIC**

The 2018 animated film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* follows a teenager from a parallel universe named Miles Morales who assumes the mantle of Spider-Man.<sup>26</sup> Because the film involves several different versions of the superhero (each from a world with its own unique visual vocabulary), the filmmakers had to figure out how to integrate radically different visual styles into a single film. The creative team ultimately developed an entirely new animation technology for the film, which allowed the visuals to reference both 3D animation and traditional, printed comics. For example, in order to create depth of field in certain shots, the animators made use of a type of “analog glitch” from the days of Ben-Day dot coloring printing processes in which the layers of color were misprinted and did not line up properly.<sup>27</sup> Embracing these idiosyncrasies of the traditional three-color printing processes, the filmmakers developed a visual aesthetic in which dramatically different styles could co-exist in a way that feels both familiar and new.

#### **Discussion Question**

*Oftentimes, new aesthetic approaches are the result of necessity—Spider-Verse’s visuals are the consequence of combining different styles of illustration. Hip-hop’s reliance on sampling and scratching records is the result of DJ’s finding ways to express themselves through the creative combination of existing tracks. What is another example of an aesthetic approach that was born out of necessity?*

creative presentation of the content contributes to the representation of the character, the telling of the story, and the communication of a message.

### **Representation and Ideology**

As a majority of media represents or at least references the world we live in, our efforts to process pop culture must include reflecting on the ideological perspectives communicated by or embedded within these texts. Many media texts—whether they be for the purposes of advertising, education, news, or entertainment—are created to communicate some message or theme and to have some impact on us as audiences and our world. For example, the title of rapper Notorious B.I.G.’s song “Mo Money, Mo Problems” states its theme outright—that increased wealth often brings with it new challenges. The many Spider-Man stories told over the years have reiterated the theme of “With great power, comes great responsibility.” And so on. As we process pop culture, we should identify what messages the creators are intending to communicate, assess how they make use of elements like the

structure, aesthetics, and so on to construct these messages, and reflect on how these messages correspond with our own experiences and perspectives.

Though perhaps even more importantly, our analysis of media representations should go beyond the text's explicitly stated intentions and uncover the underlying ideological assumptions that are more subtly, even subconsciously, communicated. As we deconstruct media's *sub-text*, we can see what perspectives about the world they are perpetuating and determine whether these are messages that we find productive or not. For example, Biggie's track reinforces a perspective that privileges the economic over other aspects of the human experience, that positions wealth as a powerful determinant over one's happiness, and in particular, speaks to the conflicted relationship between capitalism and the Black community. Or the fact that so many superheroes—Spider-Man included—are white men working as lone vigilantes to protect the public reinforces ideas about masculinity, whiteness, individuality, law enforcement, and violence. Because these perspectives have been adopted as a kind of “common sense” and are so well established in the conventions of art and storytelling, they often go unrecognized and unchallenged. That is, until media present us with alternative perspectives—for example, a multi-racial Miles Morales as a hero from a parallel universe—and help us recognize the biases within the dominant narrative. As we process pop culture, we are able to recognize the purposes of media, the formal elements used to construct their messages, and the ideological perspectives perpetuated by these messages.

## Pop Culture in Context

In the article in which Johnson articulates his “circuit of culture,” he emphasizes that, while textual analysis is certainly integral to cultural studies, it would benefit us to “decentre ‘the text’ as an object of study.”<sup>28</sup> He writes that analyzing media in relation to concepts like structure, medium, aesthetics, and ideology is beneficial, but when our analysis isolates the text, we may miss the part that *context* plays in the meaning-making process. For example, Johnson argues that scholarly analyses of texts may not properly contextualize individual works within larger traditions and/or discourses:

The isolation of a text for academic scrutiny is a very specific form of reading. More commonly texts are encountered promiscuously; they pour in on us from all directions in diverse, coexisting media, and differently-paced flows. In everyday life, textual materials are complex, multiple, overlapping, co-existent, juxta-posed, in a word, “inter-textual.”<sup>29</sup>

Media texts do not exist in isolation; rather, they are always already parts of a larger landscape of culture, and oftentimes their meanings are determined by their “intertextuality” as well as their unique textual characteristics.

For example, a single issue of a Spider-Man comic series may be studied as a self-contained text. But when we place it within the context of the many versions of the character—from his 1962 debut in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 to the multiple film and TV adaptations to the “Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man” meme and so on—we open up many more potential meanings. When we consider Spider-Man as part of a larger tradition of superhero stories and, even before that genre, as a continuation of the folklore and mythology that existed for thousands of years in oral storytelling traditions, we are able to see Spidey’s significance within a much larger process of cultural expression. When we trace the influence of Spider-Man into the corners of pop culture, we are able to see just how interdependent media texts are and how much their meanings rely on this concept of intertextuality. For example, Spider-Man is among the most commonly referenced fictional characters within rap lyrics, appearing in rhymes from artists, including A\$AP Rocky, Bell Biv DeVoe, Blackalicious, Busta Rhymes, Childish Gambino, Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, MF Doom, Mac Miller, Migos, Too Short, Tyler the Creator, UGK, Wu-Tang Clan, and so on. Processing pop culture involves placing media texts within context, recognizing how they correspond with (or depart from) specific genres, discourses, artistic traditions, and cultural movements, and identifying how their meanings are (at least in part) reliant on references to a web of related texts.

Just as important as locating popular cultural texts within genre, tradition, and so on, is placing them within historical, social, and cultural context. Johnson continues:

Context determines the meaning, transformations or salience of a particular subjective form as much as the form itself. Context includes the cultural features described above, but also the contexts of immediate situations ... and the larger historical context or conjuncture.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, when we process pop culture, we benefit from recognizing the text’s connections not just to other media but also to historical events, social and economic relations, and so on. Media messages simultaneously contribute to and also reflect their specific historical and cultural contexts. For example, *Snowpiercer* carries on the tradition of post-apocalyptic science-fiction narrative and shares some uncanny connections with Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, but it also premiered amid a global reckoning with growing economic disparity. Thus, the film’s themes of class warfare—while present to some extent in both dystopian fiction genre and Dahl’s work—were of particular relevance in 2013 as the world was just coming off of the heels of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Analyzing the film within this historical, and, in particular, economic context, gives us increased insight into the significance of the themes it addresses.

Or returning to our example of Spider-Man one more time, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the resulting “War on Terror” provide some context for the rise in popularity of superhero media in the past few decades. *Spider-Man* (2002) was among the first films to usher in this massive wave of blockbuster media franchises that have repeatedly told the story of costumed vigilantes who save the American (and sometimes global) population from villains wielding various weapons of mass destruction, while often leaving paths of destruction through urban centers like New York City. Scholars and cultural commentators have discussed at length the correspondence between this explosion of superhero stories and the increase in anxiety experienced by the American people regarding national security.<sup>31</sup> These stories seem to speak to a specific need among audiences to feel that, even when intelligence agencies, police, and armed forces fail to protect us, we can find some consolation from superheroic saviors.

The 2002 *Spider-Man* film is an especially interesting connection between superhero media and the “War on Terror” as the movie was re-worked in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center. For example, early trailers for the film included images of Spidey subduing a hijacked aircraft and suspending the villains on a giant web spun between the Twin Towers. But following 9/11, the movie’s release was delayed as the filmmakers removed those sequences, as well as any images of the Towers, and added scenes such as a patriotic image of Spider-Man beside an American flag. As we process pop culture—considering processes of production and reception, examining texts and context—we will develop as media audiences and creators, no longer passively consuming content but actively making meaning of the world around us.

## Case Study: Donald Glover in Pop Culture

While an undergraduate at NYU, Donald Glover had already begun to make a name for himself, co-creating and starring in the sketch-comedy web-series *Derrick Comedy*. His talent for writing and performing eventually earned him a place in the writers room on the sitcom *30 Rock* and then as one of the stars of the comedy series *Community*. Meanwhile, Glover was cultivating a career as a hip-hop artist, releasing mixtapes and rapping at live shows. Glover once described his ambitious approach to artmaking: “I try to make my art, like, bacterial: small, and then grow out.”<sup>32</sup> And in the years since his first viral video, he has delivered on that description. He is now a successful writer, actor, comic, and performing artist with a handful of Grammy and Emmy awards as well as some high-profile appearances in mega-franchises like *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018) and *The Lion King* (2019). But while Glover is a remarkable talent, to be sure, this chapter’s focus on his creative work is, more than anything, motivated by his presence in so many different areas of contemporary pop culture. The following sections examine the development

of Glover's celebrated television series *Atlanta* in relation to the concept of *production*, the impact of the viral fan-casting campaign #donald4spiderman in terms of *reception*, and the award-winning record and music video "This Is America" as a means of exploring both *text* and *context*. This assemblage of case studies will model some of the myriad approaches to analyzing media culture (many of which will be explored in greater depth in later chapters) and will hopefully demonstrate the benefits of processing pop culture.

### **Creating Atlanta**

*Atlanta* premiered on FX in the fall of 2016, the television series starring showrunner Donald Glover as Earn, a Princeton dropout who returns home to the ATL and struggles to stay afloat by managing his cousin Alfred's (Brian Tyree Henry) rising career as a rapper. The episodes loosely follow Earn as he tries to support his ex-girlfriend Van (Zazie Beetz) and their child while navigating the Atlanta rap world with Alfred and their oddball friend Darius (LaKeith Stanfield). On first glance, the series' premise is directly attributable to the creators' backgrounds—Glover, Henry, as well as a number of the writers on the show (including Donald Glover's brother Stephen) have called Atlanta home. Both of the Glovers rap, and among the show's writing room—a group that goes by the collective name "Royalty"—are a handful of music producers and artists. In fact, the series' creators have been transparent about how Earn and Alfred's endeavors to rise within the Southern rap world are directly inspired by their own personal experiences. One of the writers (another Atlanta native) Jamal "Swank" Olori shares: "So much of Atlanta is literally, like, me and Steve [Glover]'s whole life trying to figure out the music industry...Those are all just backstories."<sup>33</sup> Like many artists, the creators of *Atlanta* have drawn from their personal lives to craft stories and communicate their messages.

Though, more than simply reflecting the creators' background, *Atlanta*'s premise and purpose are tied to representing Blackness in ways that media have not in the past. Reflecting on his motivations for creating the series, Glover says, "I wanted to show white people, you don't know everything about black culture."<sup>34</sup> Stephen Glover shares how the all-Black writers' room for *Atlanta* (a rarity in the industry) spent countless hours deliberating over how to make their stories resonate— "We just talked about what are the little shared experiences that black people have, not just in the city, but in life in general, that bring us all together. Not just the tragedy, but the little things that people don't focus on or talk about really."<sup>35</sup> And what better space to showcase the overlooked aspects of Black identity and community than in a story set in Atlanta, a pivotal place in the African-American experience since the days of slavery? Throughout its history, the city's reputation has been tied to Black icons including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., musicians including Gladys Knight and the hip-hop group Outkast, and filmmaker and philanthropist

Tyler Perry. But beyond simply reiterating Atlanta's role in Black culture, the creators see the city as a microcosm for American society as a whole. "I know it's going to be very easy for people to say 'it's a black Mecca,' and it is, but I just think that it's the most American place," says Glover of the city.<sup>36</sup> In this way, *Atlanta* not only attempts to authentically represent Black culture through a story set in a historically significant Black community, but it also endeavors to decenter whiteness from the American experience.

The creators note that they are not entirely successful in this regard—"If 'Atlanta' was made just for black people," says Donald Glover "it would be a very different show. But I can't even begin to tell you how, because blackness is always seen through a lens of whiteness . . ."<sup>37</sup> But acknowledging this dominant perspective enables Glover and his collaborators to turn a long tradition of racial misrepresentation on its head. Speaking of what he wants for the series' white viewers, Glover says

I want them to really experience racism, to really feel what it's like to be black in America. People come to 'Atlanta' for the strip clubs and the music and the cool talking, but the eat-your-vegetables part is that the characters aren't smoking weed all the time because it's cool but because they have P.T.S.D.—every black person does. It's scary to be at the bottom, yelling up out of the hole, and all they shout down is 'Keep digging! We'll reach God soon!'<sup>38</sup>

As a result, each of the creators' creative decisions is determined by this objective—to expose racism in America by telling stories, of both success and suffering, from the perspective of Black people.

Donald Glover is quick to explain that while the creators of *Atlanta* share this objective, they are not interested in being overly didactic in their approach. "I never wanted this show to be about diversity; all that shit is wack to me," he says, criticizing, in particular, television that "preaches" to its audiences as being inauthentic and unimaginative.<sup>39</sup> Instead, the creators of *Atlanta* prefer to embrace ambiguity in their approach—"play[ing] around in the gray areas" and, in so doing, requiring (especially white) viewers to reflect on the mix of laughter and discomfort the show elicits.<sup>40</sup> Glover emphasizes that the series' unique mix of tones is intended to "give people a feeling that they can't really siphon or make into something else," to cause them to "wonder why they're laughing or why that made them feel uncomfortable, rather than tell them like why they're a bad person or good person for feeling that way."<sup>41</sup>

*Atlanta's* mix of tones—including comedy, naturalism, and surrealism—is informed by an eclectic assortment of artistic influences. Glover has described the show as "*Twin Peaks* with rappers,"<sup>42</sup> has commented on the series' resemblance to *Seinfeld*,<sup>43</sup> and admits that it is heavily influenced by the animated TV-movie *Tiny Toon Adventures: How I Spent My Vacation*.<sup>44</sup> This mixture of

David Lynch, hip-hop, sitcoms, and zany kids cartoons gives some insights into the surreal world of *Atlanta* that combines seemingly straightforward stories and situations with strange asides including a magical Nutella sandwich-offering man on a bus, an entire episode parodying BET, and a horror-inspired storyline featuring the now-infamous recluse Teddy Perkins. But the show's combination of absurd and sometimes incredibly raw moments ultimately serve the creators' efforts to speak to the strange, and often tragic, state of America. Giving an interview around the series' premiere in 2016, Glover says, "I mean, Donald Trump is running for president right now. When I was eight I saw him in a Pizza Hut commercial. That's f\*\*ing weird. There are a lot of funny things that are actually happening in the world."<sup>45</sup> As a result of these strange circumstances, *Atlanta* (much like the state of American society in recent years) is less "ha-ha funny" and more "mystifying and bizarre funny."

As you might imagine, a darkly comic TV show with a predominately BIPOC cast and crew (Japanese-American director Hiro Mirai helms most episodes) that employs surrealism to provoke white viewers to consider their own racism was not an easy sell to network executives. On the one hand, changes in television in 2016 did provide new opportunities to creators like Glover to get shows like *Atlanta* made. Glover notes that with the proliferation of streaming services, the increased diversification of audiences, and the growing recognition for the need for inclusive stories, "It's kind of the perfect time to make something that I would want to see ... There's more screens that have to be filled."<sup>46</sup> Thus, with the evolution of media distribution practices and a shift in culture toward greater diversity, there were some favorable conditions for *Atlanta* to succeed.

But even then, *Atlanta* was still a difficult pitch. Donald Glover had made a name for himself with sitcoms *30 Rock* and *Community*, but the rest of his team were new to television. And while FX had experienced some success with other offbeat comedies, *Atlanta* was an even greater departure from typical programming, specifically in its inclusion of Black people both behind and in front of the camera. Among the key findings of a 2020 report on Black representation in film and television is that "Fewer Black-led stories get told, and when they are, these projects have been consistently underfunded and undervalued, despite often earning higher relative returns than other properties."<sup>47</sup> Keenly aware of how hesitant networks would be about them and their show, both the Glovers have since described how strategic they had to be to convince FX to greenlight the project. According to Donald Glover:

I knew what FX wanted from me ... They were thinking it'd be me and Craig Robinson [of *The Office* and *Hot Tub Time-Machine* fame] horse-tailing around, and it'll be kind of like 'Community,' and it'll be on for a long time. I was Trojan-horsing FX. If I told them what I really wanted to do, it wouldn't have gotten made.<sup>48</sup>

By appealing to familiar tropes, the creators were able to sneak *Atlanta* into production, but even then, they were not confident that the network would like the final product or even that a broad audience would get what they were doing. Swank says, “We always had this thing where we said we were going to get cancelled first season because our shit is going to be too outrageous.”<sup>49</sup> Though, the creators’ tentative attitude about how their Black-focused show would be received by predominantly white network execs and audiences reflects not so much a lack of confidence, but rather, a legitimate concern about the place of Black people in the rat race.

In fact, the relationship between Blackness and capitalism is central to *Atlanta*’s narrative—both Earn and Paper Boi’s names perhaps being the most obvious references to the theme. Stephen Glover discusses how the Royalty crew were especially interested in exploring this messy relationship, on the one hand, examining “capitalism in America and how it’s left people out over the years” and on the other, acknowledging how the system “has the power to empower you if you can wield it.”<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, *Atlanta* proved to be a successful venture, for FX as well as the creators. The show’s first two seasons were nominated for a total of twenty-two Emmy awards, and took home five trophies, and the series has gained a faithful following. “I knew if I made something personal it would speak to somebody,” Glover says of *Atlanta*, and it appears that despite the obstacles that might have prevented him from making the show, he is right.<sup>51</sup>

## **FX CANCELS DEADPOOL**

In 2018, when *Atlanta*’s second season was on its way to winning multiple Emmy’s, FX announced the cancellation of an animated series being developed by Donald and Stephen Glover that followed the Marvel superhero Deadpool. While the network made vague justifications for the halt in the show’s development, Donald Glover posted a 15-page mock script for an episode online in which Deadpool (true to form) breaks the fourth wall and openly criticizes Marvel, wondering aloud if the cancellation was race-related. “Do you think they cancelled the show ... cause of racism? ... all the writers were black. And the references were pretty black too. I heard they went over the lunch budget ordering Jamaican food at least once a week.”<sup>52</sup> Whether or not the decision was related to race, it seems the incredible success of *Atlanta* was not enough to secure the Glovers’ place with the FX series, demonstrating just how complicated it can be for artists to successfully produce work within the media industries.

### Discussion Question

*The cancellation of the Glovers' Deadpool series is an example of the potential intersection of issues like race with the political economy of media. Can you think of another example of creators being denied opportunities to tell their stories due to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and so on?*

### **#donald4spiderman, Active Audiences, and Fan-Casting**

In May of 2010, superhero movie fans on the Internet were abuzz with talk of who would be cast in Sony's franchise reboot *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and among the chatter was an article from blogger Marc Bernardin in which he argues that—especially given the lukewarm fan responses to the potential actors to be cast as Peter Parker—it may be time to re-imagine the familiar character as something other than a white kid. “So why couldn't Peter Parker be played by a black or a Hispanic actor? How does that invalidate who Peter Parker is?” asks Bernardin.<sup>53</sup> Readers went to town in the article's comments section—a mix of “How dare you?” responses and excited fan-casting of specific actors who might don the Spidey mask. Among the comments, a reader with the username Rootadoo posted a photo of a bespectacled Donald Glover with the caption “Might I suggest one Mr. Donald Glover?”<sup>54</sup> A number of enthusiastic replies followed Rootadoo's comment, and with that comment, a fan campaign was born.

Following the article and resulting conversation, fans began sharing on social media images of Glover's head photoshopped on the character, the hashtag #donald4spiderman began trending, and multiple Facebook groups were created in support of the fan campaign. Not long after, Glover himself caught wind of the conversation and egged-on his fans on, tweeting:

I'm putting myself in the running for the Spider-Man reboot. I'm actually quite interested to see how far this goes. If this happens, I'll buy each and every one of you a mini cooper #donald4Spider-Man.<sup>55</sup>

Though, the back-and-forth between fans in the initial comments thread was just a preview of the controversy that erupted when the campaign went viral. A vocal segment of the fanbase was angered by the possibility of a Black actor portraying Spider-Man and argued that not only would casting Glover as Peter Parker be unfaithful to the character's origins in the comic books but that it was an example of “racebending.”<sup>56</sup> Cunningham writes on some fans' use of the “reverse-whitewashing” argument in response to the #donald4spiderman campaign:

... many of the responses rejecting a Glover audition ... tended to draw equivalences between the possibilities of a black actor filling a

traditionally white role and a white actor filling a traditionally black role. Frequently, commenters suggested that African Americans would be quite upset if, say, a white actor portrayed a black superhero such as Black Panther or Storm. Indeed, the other meme that emerged from the campaign was “Michael Cera 4 Shaft,” which is based on a comment on one of the comic book forums ...<sup>57</sup>

Glover has noted that the “Michael Cera 4 Shaft” idea (while quite funny) is a ridiculous comparison.<sup>58</sup> This pushback from some fans demonstrates both how protective audiences can be of their favorite properties and how unaware (or unconcerned) many are of how practices like whitewashing and Black- and brown-face have contributed to the misrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in media.

Despite the campaigning of many fans—as well as a word of support from the character’s co-creator Stan Lee<sup>59</sup>—Glover did not audition for the Spider-Man role. But #donald4spiderman has since had a surprising impact on popular culture. First, a few months after the hashtag started trending, the season premiere of *Community* aired, in which Glover’s character appears on screen wearing Spidey pajamas. *Community* creator Dan Harmon later explained the reference as “a cutesy inside wink at the Donald Glover for Spider-Man campaign, and the curious eruption of a previously unknown demographic of racist comic-book readers it ended up uncovering.”<sup>60</sup> When the premiere aired, comic creator Brian Michael Bendis watched the episode. At the time, he had been tasked by Marvel with re-envisioning the web-slinging superhero, and he has since noted that seeing Glover in the costume inspired him to develop Miles Morales.<sup>61</sup>

The half-Black, half-Latino Spider-Man made his comics debut in 2011, gaining a fast following and appearing in a number of comics, TV series, and video games. In 2015, when Morales appeared in the animated series *Ultimate Spider-Man*, he was voiced by none other than Donald Glover. In 2017, Sony re-booted the Spider-Man movie franchise for a third time, and—as another nod to the #donald4spiderman—Glover appeared as a character named Aaron Davis (Miles Morales’ uncle in the comics).<sup>62</sup> But perhaps the most “meta” of connections between Spider-Man and Glover is a blink-and-you-miss-it Easter egg in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*.<sup>63</sup> In one scene, Miles is visiting his uncle Aaron, and an animated version of the Spidey-pajamas scene from *Community* plays on a television in the background. With this shot, *Spider-Verse* creates its own type of multiverse in which an animated movie references a TV show which is nodding to a fan campaign started by an online discussion thread and which itself served as inspiration for a comic book on which the animated movie is based. And it all started less than a decade earlier when some fan posted a pic of Donald Glover on the comments thread of a geek blog.

## **SUPER FAN-CAMPAIGNS**

Superhero media have been a site where fan-campaigns have had quite the impact in recent years. For example, in 2014, someone leaked some test footage from a project in development based on the superhero Deadpool. Apparently, 20th Century Fox was reluctant to pursue the project, but when the video went viral and fans launched a campaign to get the film made, the studio listened and a franchise was born.<sup>64</sup> More recently, the #releasethesnydercut campaign convinced Warner Bros to re-release the poorly received *Justice League* movie, this time giving final cut to director Zack Snyder who had left the project mid-way through production. Both examples demonstrate the potential power of active audiences to sway the decision-making processes of media corporations.

### **Discussion Question**

*Can you think of any other examples of audiences having an influence on the decisions made by media producers? What do phenomena like fan campaigns suggest about the power relations between authors and audiences, especially in today's media landscape?*

Though, more than simply exhibit the power that fan campaigns can have on the media industries, the #donald4spiderman story—culminating in Miles Morales' Spider-Man getting his own movie franchise—demonstrates how audiences take media messages and make them their own. For example, Richard Newby discusses how for decades kids of color, like himself, were able to imagine themselves as the web-slinging hero because, while Peter Parker is white, Spider-Man wears a mask. Spidey's hidden identity allows fans from all different backgrounds, races, and ethnicities to assume the role of hero. But with Miles Morales, these audiences are able to see themselves in Spider-Man even more. Newby writes:

There's a shot in the movie of Miles Morales staring up at a glass display case containing Spider-Man's uniform. It's a brief moment without dialogue, but it resonates as one of the film's most powerful moments because it represents Miles so well, and the tremendous legacy of carrying more than one identity. For all the kids of color who dream of being superheroes, and all the adults of color still grappling with power and responsibility, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* leaves us with a clear message: We could always be Spider-Man with the mask on, but now, and perhaps more important, we can be Spider-Man with the mask off as well.<sup>65</sup>

If anything, #donald4spiderman demonstrates the potential power of audiences to creatively interpret media and, through their active meaning-making, contribute new ideas and perspectives to popular culture.

### ***“This Is America”: Text and Context***

As Donald Glover was gaining recognition as an actor, showrunner, and social media personality, he was also busy cultivating a career as the hip-hop artist Childish Gambino (a name which he got from an online WuTang Clan Name Generator). While Childish Gambino has released a number of mixtapes and multiple studio albums, his most acclaimed piece of work is the single, and accompanying music video, “This Is America.” In May of 2018, Gambino appeared as the musical guest on Saturday Night Live and performed the song while simultaneously releasing the music video online. Within a day, the video had more than 12 million views and set the Internet ablaze with conversations about the themes addressed in the song and the video’s inclusion of some disconcerting depictions of violence. At the Grammy’s the following year, Childish Gambino picked up awards for “Best Record,” “Best Song,” “Best Rap/Sung Performance,” and “Best Music Video,” cementing the track as more than just a viral sensation but a critically celebrated work of popular music.

“This Is America” begins with a pleasant melody played on an acoustic guitar, reminiscent of South African folk music, along with the refrain “We just wanna party/Party just for you/We just want the money/Money just for you.”<sup>66</sup> Before long, though, this melody is abruptly taken over by a forbidding trap beat, and the sung lyrics are replaced by the harsh, rapped rhyme “This is America/Don’t catch you slippin’ now.” Meanwhile, the music video’s visuals further amplify the song’s discordance. It begins with a man taking a seat in a large, empty warehouse and beginning to play a guitar. As the refrain is sung, the camera tracks past the guitar player and finds Gambino who dances along to the melody, gradually nearing the seated man who is now (without explanation) hooded. Then, the moment before the beat change, Gambino pulls a handgun and shoots the seated man execution-style. He pauses for just a second to pose and grimace before spitting the first rhyme: “This Is America.” The weapon is delicately collected in a red cloth, and Gambino continues rapping and dancing through the warehouse.

A series of skillfully choreographed and chaotic scenes follows in which Gambino leads a group of schoolchildren in an array of popular dance-moves against the backdrop of a riot, uses an assault rifle to gun down a gospel choir that has been accompanying the song, and then dances alone on the roof of a car surrounded by other abandoned vehicles. The song ends with another sung refrain—this time a bit more melancholic—that goes “You just a black man in this world/You just a barcode, ayy.”<sup>67</sup> In the final moments of the

video, as the beat slows and the lyrics fade, Gambino frantically races down a dark hallway toward the camera in slow motion, a mob of people chasing after him. An examination of the song and video's structure and mode, medium, aesthetics, and themes reveals how Childish Gambino's "This Is America" uses juxtaposition to comment on the tenuous relationship between entertainment and violence and the precarious place occupied by Black people in an America plagued by racism.

Both the song and music video for "This Is America" generally work within the conventions of their respective forms: the structure of the track more-or-less corresponds with the familiar ABABCB progression, and the video includes typical elements like sung performances for the camera, choreographed dance sequences, and various other cinematic spectacles. Since their inception, music videos have occupied a space between advertisement, musical number, and experimental film, and this Hiro Mirai-directed piece checks each of those boxes. Though, because the primary venue for music videos today is online streaming platforms like YouTube—as opposed to cable television channels of the past like MTV and VH1—most videos today are less like televised promotional shorts than they are memes, spreading virally on the Internet and social media, being turned into gifs and TikTok trends that take on lives of their own. So, while the medium is more or less the same as the film/video used in music videos of the past, the use of digital, networked technologies to view, share, and remix music videos give texts like "This Is America" new dimensions.

Because of its surreal aesthetic—and the fact that Glover, Murai, and those involved in the creation of the song and video have been reluctant to offer explanations of their authorial intentions—"This Is America" is a particularly rich text for interpretive analysis. For example, the use of formal elements (in both the musical track and the video's visuals) can be understood as attempting to represent the contradictions that define the experience of being Black in America. Specifically, the song's structure and instrumentation, the dance choreography, and the composition of the visuals all make use of stark juxtapositions in order to speak to the Black experience. For example, Stephen Kearse writes how the song represents "the tightrope of being black," and he describes the track as containing both "jolly, syncretic melodies and menacing trap cadences" and as swinging "between harmony and discord."<sup>68</sup> This sonic discord is reminiscent of the dissonance experienced by Black people in America, where virtues like equality are celebrated but unrealized, and African-Americans are forced to assume the contradictory roles of criminal, victim, and entertainer.

The music's use of juxtaposition is echoed in the dancing that appears in the video (choreographed by Sherrie Silver), which dancer and scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz describes as "an ironic background for a message about 'America' and its contradictions." DeFrantz writes how the video's "random assassinations

demonstrate a disavowal of black life. But the liveliness of dancing and of a youthful physicality surrounding Childish confirms a “something else” that is still possible.”<sup>69</sup> He argues that the video’s eclectic choreography—which combines contemporary and traditional dance from hip-hop and various African cultural traditions—demonstrates how practices of creative appropriation and artistic innovation have been key to the African-American community’s survival amidst such chaos and oppression.

Lastly, the filmmaking techniques used in the video complement the formal approaches used in the music and choreography. For example, just as the song and video include a stark contrast between the different musical and dancing styles, the cinematography in “This Is America” establishes a similar type of conflict within the frame. Throughout the video, as Gambino dances with a group of schoolchildren in the foreground, a riot involving police and civilians rages in the background. The contrast between foreground and background, dance and violence, once again speaks to the dissonance that characterizes the Black experience. African-Americans are so often encouraged to remain placid and play the role of entertainers, all while Black communities are forced to endure prejudice, poverty, police brutality, and so on.

When placed in the context of certain traditions within African-American culture, “This Is America” yields some additional meanings. For example, when Gambino poses after executing the man at the start of the video, his posture (one knee bent, back arched, and arm extended) recalls that of the Jim Crow minstrel character, thus placing the video within the complicated history of Black artists in American culture and asking how things like racial stereotyping and exploitation are still present in contemporary media culture.<sup>70</sup> The video’s depictions of the artist singing, rapping, and posturing for the camera, groups of back-up performers dancing, and of arrays of automobiles all correspond with conventions of hip-hop music videos. Though, “This Is America” seems more like a dark parody of the genre than it does a continuation of a particular style. And lastly, a number of commentators have pointed out the correlations between the video’s final scene—which depicts Gambino desperately racing down a dark hallway from a gang of pursuers—and the Jordan Peele-directed 2017 thriller *Get Out*. Both the closing sequence and the feature film make use of a stark, surreal visual aesthetic to represent the anxiety experienced by Black people in America (which Peele’s story calls “The Sunken Place”).<sup>71</sup> These examples are just a few of the many, varied intertextual references within the song and video, and each provides a different perspective on the text and opens it up to new interpretations.

Finally, “This Is America” is not only reflective of a particular place (America) and people (Americans, and in particular, African-Americans), it also speaks to a specific historical moment. While there is a long history of racial violence in America and Civil Rights activists have been trying to

address the issue for over a century, the dozens of high-profile murders of Black Americans in recent years have required the news media, elected officials, and the white community to pay more attention to the tragic realities of racism in the United States. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has been instrumental in this increase in public discourse around and public protest of police brutality and racial violence, resulting in a series of massive demonstrations in 2020. This new attention to the violence experienced by Black people and other communities of color provides some context for the music video's brutal depictions of gun violence.

For example, a relatively recent, racially motivated mass shooting at a historic Black church was among the primary tipping points in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In 2015, a known white-supremacist interrupted a Bible study at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, killing nine people and injuring three others. The moment in the music video when Childish Gambino guns down the gospel choir is an obvious allusion to the Charleston church shooting, and the clashes between people and the police in the background during the following sequence clearly reference the ongoing conflict between the police and people of color. What makes the moments of gun violence in "This Is America" especially shocking is that they happen without warning and they are committed by Gambino himself. Is positioning the artist as the perpetrator of violence best understood as an effort to question the complicity of Black people in racism, to allude to the issue of Black-on-Black violence, to suggest through metaphor the negative impact that media have on the Black community, or simply to drum up controversy and generate views on YouTube? Regardless of the interpretation we find most compelling, placing "This Is America" in the context of a country plagued by racism and racial violence provides us with significant insights into the text. As we process pop culture, it is essential that our examinations of media messages take into account both the textual characteristics and contextual factors so that we see media as part of a larger process of cultural expression.

### **Creative Activity: Glitch Art**

This chapter's creative activity both introduces learners to a creative process that they may be unfamiliar with and helps them become more aware of the processes by which media texts are produced, distributed, interpreted, and so on. Participants select an image that they want to deconstruct, and then experiment with editing the image's code until they produce a glitchy version of the image that offers up some new meaning to the original work.

*Start by selecting an image that you're interested in exploring its meanings. It could be an iconic image, something from a piece of your favorite media, a photo you took,*

*or even a meme. The important thing is that the image carries some meaning for you. In order to become more aware of the meanings embedded in the image you select for the activity, take a few minutes to write out an exhaustive list of the associations you have with the image.*

In my case, I might select a photo of the current US president, the cover of a favorite album, a selfie, or that “Condescending Wonka” meme. I might include in my list the time when running for office when the president appeared on a late night talk show or my memory of first listening to the album, the responses I received from my followers when I posted that selfie on social media, or the circumstance in which I texted that meme to a friend.

*Next, download a .jpg file of the image to your personal computer. Using your operating system’s file browser, edit the file name extension, replacing “.jpg” with “.txt” and then open the new .txt file in a text-editor program. Your image will appear in the text-editor as lines and lines of code. Then, play with the code. Cut, copy, paste, add new text, and so on (being careful to avoid cutting it up too much, otherwise your computer will be unable to read the edited file at all). When you feel like you’ve done some damage, save the newly edited .txt file. Then using the file browser, change “.txt” back to “.jpg” so that the file can now be read by as an image. Open the .jpg file and see what happens. Maybe the image’s alterations are barely noticeable. Maybe you pushed it too far and broke the file entirely. Or maybe, the new image will appear with a glitch that makes the image’s significance shift. Repeat the process until your glitchy image sparks some new idea or reveals some new meaning within the source text.<sup>72</sup>*

Here is an example.

### ***a\_glitch\_aint\_01***

In 2016, I did my own glitch art experiment: inspired by the Jay-Z song “99 Problems,” I created 99 glitched versions of the cover from his *Black Album*. I chose to use the *Black Album* as my source material both because the record is among my personal favorites, and I think that Danger Mouse’s *Grey Album* (which combines Jay-Z’s *Black Album* and the Beatles’ *White Album*) is an especially inspired remix. But I also chose the *Black Album* as my source material because I was interested in what an almost entirely black image might yield when put through this process of generating glitches. I was curious how the project might offer up some insights on the place of hip-hop, and Blackness more generally, in American media culture.

So, I started the procedure described above: downloading the image, saving it as a “.txt” file, cutting, copying, and experimenting with creative ways of glitching the album artwork. After going through this process of manually editing the file dozens and dozens of times, with incredibly varied results (and more than a few broken files), I experimented with some glitch generator programs on the internet which helped speed up the process, but more

importantly, opened up some new ways of messing with the image. The result is 99 glitched versions of Jay-Z's album, which I titled "a\_glitch\_aint\_01" all the way up through "a\_glitch\_aint\_99." There are still some traces of the monochromatic, and even moody, aesthetic of the original album artwork that features an almost indiscernible photo of Jay-Z pulling his ball cap over his eyes. Though the variety of colors, patterns, and various levels of alteration from the source material is quite surprising, not only cracking open the original record cover to expose a range of potential aesthetic derivations but also offering up some new interpretations of the album (see [Figures 3.1–3.9](#)).

Especially considering the project's use of abstract imagery, the series can be interpreted in a number of ways. For example, the use of a celebrated rap album as the starting point emphasizes some correlations between the creative processes used in both hip-hop and other remix practices like glitch art. Both involve carefully selecting some source material, and then (through a combination of deliberate manipulation and playful improvisation) deconstructing and creatively re-arranging, re-constructing, or re-presenting the original in ways previously unconsidered. And as both hip-hop tracks and glitch art demonstrate, while the process of "breaking" or "scratching" a piece of existing art in order to generate something new may seem counterintuitive (or even transgressive), this type of subversive creative practice can have some particular artistic potential.

Next, when posting the project online, I noticed that in the process of uploading the glitched images to my website, some of the images would change once again, likely because of the file being read differently by Wordpress' web design software. In this case, the image had undergone two different manipulations, from original album artwork to glitched version and then to the further glitched version on the website. I imagine that Jay-Z explored a number of versions of the album art before he settled on the image we recognize as the Black Album. If we consider those brainstorming, the final album artwork, my 99 glitched versions, and all of the possible interpretations these many text might yield, we get a glimpse of this process of conceptualization to creation to recreation to reception and so on.

Finally, it is interesting that, when put through this process of code-cutting and -copying, the almost entirely black album cover yielded such a kaleidoscope of visual variations. We might interpret this effect as a metaphor for the role of Blackness in American media culture. Because both the amount and range of media representations of African-Americans are still relatively limited, certain texts (Jay-Z's album included) often are forced to stand in for all of Black culture. "A\_glitch\_aint\_01"'s kaleidoscopic visuals allude to the fact that while these few texts may have a richness in themselves, if we dig a bit deeper, there is a potentially infinite variety of expression and experience waiting to be discovered.

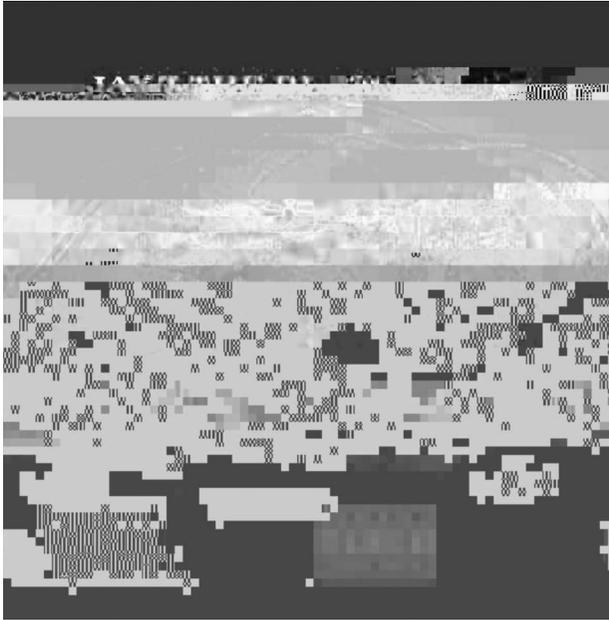


FIGURE 3.1 Excerpted images from the “a\_glitch\_aint\_01” project.



FIGURE 3.2 Excerpted images from the “a\_glitch\_aint\_01” project.

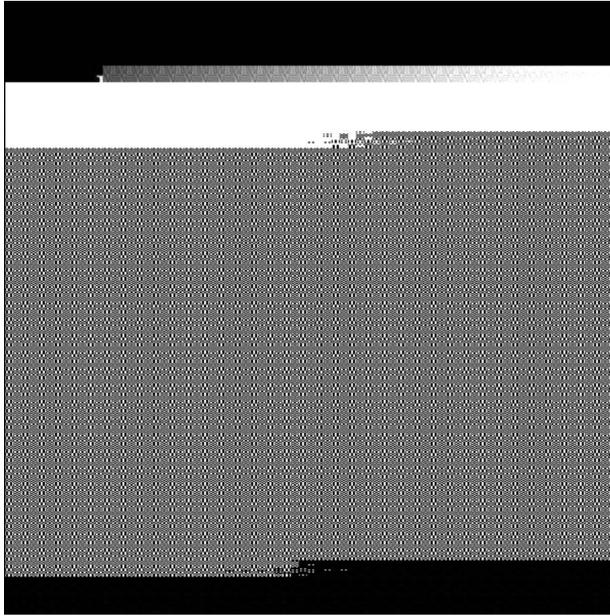


FIGURE 3.3 Excerpted images from the “a\_glitch\_aint\_01” project.

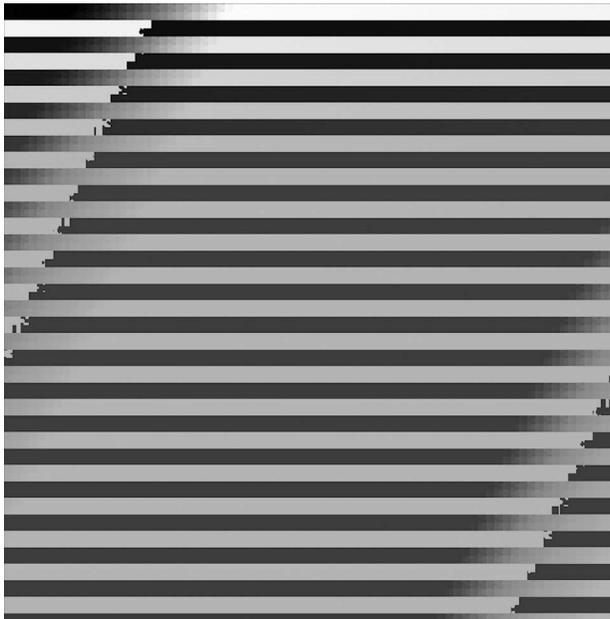


FIGURE 3.4 Excerpted images from the “a\_glitch\_aint\_01” project.



FIGURE 3.5 Excerpted images from the “a\_glitch\_aint\_01” project.



FIGURE 3.6 Excerpted images from the “a\_glitch\_aint\_01” project.



FIGURE 3.7 Excerpted images from the “a\_glitch\_aint\_01” project.



FIGURE 3.8 Excerpted images from the “a\_glitch\_aint\_01” project.

## &lt;3

Marshal's Glitch Art activity involves deliberately deconstructing an image of Adolph Hitler as a means of commenting on the need for us to overcome hate and combat prejudice. Marshal describes his creative process, manipulating the image's code: "I found all instances of the code "h8" (hate) and replaced it with "<3" (heart or love). I also sought out codes like "fr" (fear) or "evl" (evil) and replaced them with other random codes from happy images." Manipulating the code in this way, Marshal is able to deconstruct the image and critique the hate that Hitler represents and that, unfortunately, is still so common in our society. The resulting image is a piece Marshal titled "<3."



FIGURE 3.9 <3

### Discussion Question

*Because they involve literally deconstructing the source text, practices like the glitch can be a creative means of critiquing cultural texts that we find troublesome or damaging. Think of an example of an image that represents an idea or perspective that you find problematic. What are some ways that you could "break" this image? How might this process of creative destruction function as a critique of the source image and the ideas it represents?*

## Conclusion

Underlying our discussion about processing pop culture is the fact that if we intend to be active audiences, critical thinkers, and skilled creators of media, we cannot afford to passively consume media. And we cannot expect that the capacities for critically engaging with pop culture come immediately—rather, this a process that requires effort and duration. While this chapter (and this entire book, even) is designed to review and model some helpful approaches for media analysis, it is not intended to determine the single best approach to processing pop culture for any given reader. This is for you to determine for yourself. As Johnson writes, “Critique involves stealing away the more useful elements and rejecting the rest. From this point of view cultural studies is a process, a kind of producing useful knowledge; codify it and you might halt its reactions.”<sup>73</sup> My hope is that you will steal from me what you find useful, reject the rest, and we can engage in this process together, figuring out the most productive approaches to making sense of media culture.

## Notes

- 1 Stuart (1971).
- 2 Dahl (1964/2008).
- 3 Dahl (1964/2008), pp. 171–172.
- 4 Dahl (1964/2008), p. 17.
- 5 See for example Hall & Jefferson (1976); Hebdige (1979); Hoggart (1957/1998); McRobbie (1980); Schulman (1993); Williams (1958).
- 6 See Lasswell (1938/2013).
- 7 See for example Berlo (1960).
- 8 Johnson (1987), pp. 45–46.
- 9 Pray (2001).
- 10 Lochner (1930), p. vii.
- 11 Abumrad & Krulwich (2011).
- 12 For some introductory discussions of the political economy of mass communication, see Garnham 1979 (1995).
- 13 Hall (1973), p. 3.
- 14 See Bakhtin (1929/1984); Voloshinov (1929/1986).
- 15 Bong (2013).
- 16 Maher (2018).
- 17 Rhino Stew (2018).
- 18 Hall (1973), p. 16.
- 19 Hall (1973), p. 18.
- 20 McCloud (1994), p. 6.
- 21 See Aristotle (1961); Campbell (1949/2008); Freytag (1894).
- 22 Le Guin (1986/2020), p. 34.
- 23 Manovich (2001), p. 214.
- 24 Bogost & Montfort (2009), p. 5.
- 25 See for example Ebert (2010); Heffernan (2017); PBS Idea Channel (2016).
- 26 Persichetti et al. (2018).
- 27 Snyder (2019).
- 28 Johnson (1987), p. 62.
- 29 Johnson (1987), p. 67.
- 30 Johnson (1987), p. 67.

- 31 See for example, Brown (2016); Dittmer (2011); Horton (2016); Jenkins (2019); MacFarlane (2014); Mather (2003); Treat (2009).
- 32 N'Duka (2016).
- 33 Holmes (2019).
- 34 Browne (2016).
- 35 Sandberg (2018).
- 36 N'Duka (2016).
- 37 Friend (2018).
- 38 *ibid.*
- 39 Browne (2016).
- 40 NPR Staff (2016).
- 41 *ibid.*
- 42 Stanhope (2016).
- 43 Friend (2018).
- 44 Holloway (2018).
- 45 N'Duka (2016).
- 46 Stanhope (2016).
- 47 Dunn et al. (2021).
- 48 Friend (2018).
- 49 Bakare (2016).
- 50 Holmes (2019).
- 51 NPR Staff (2016).
- 52 Glover (2018).
- 53 Bernardin (2010).
- 54 Bernardin (2010).
- 55 Qtd. in Cunningham (2014), p. 27.
- 56 "Racebending" is used to describe the practice of changing of a character's race or ethnicity when adapting the work to a new medium, and it was coined by fans of the animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* when a number of the Asian and Indigenous characters in the original show were cast as white actors in the film adaptation. See Lopez (2011).
- 57 Cunningham (2014), p. 26.
- 58 Hartman (2012).
- 59 Marshall (2010).
- 60 Adalian (2010).
- 61 Truitt (2011).
- 62 Watts (2017).
- 63 Persichetti et al. (2018).
- 64 Kit (2016).
- 65 Newby (2018).
- 66 Glover et al. (2018).
- 67 *ibid.*
- 68 Kearse (2018).
- 69 DeFrantz (2018).
- 70 See Lemesurier (2020); Prettyman (2020).
- 71 Peele (2017).
- 72 For an excellent resource on glitch art, see PBS Off Book (2012).
- 73 Johnson (1987), p. 38.

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# 4

## CRITICALLY ENGAGING

### Story and Society

Oftentimes, at the heart of our conversations about media and popular culture are questions related to the power of art and stories: *Does the movie make us laugh or cry? Is the advertisement effective in encouraging us to buy, do, or think something? Does the novel or poem prompt us to see the world in a new way? Is the song a “bop”?* Nigerian poet Ben Okri beautifully expresses the incredible impact that stories can have on our lives and our world, writing

It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are. They do their work in silence, invisibly. They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self. They become part of you while changing you. Beware the stories you read or tell: subtly, at night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world ... Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals or nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.<sup>1</sup>

Since even before the advent of mass communication, thinkers have tried to understand the potential influence stories have on the ways we interact, express ourselves, teach, and learn, as well as the political and economic systems we create and participate in. Only when we learn to critically engage with media, art, and popular culture will we be able to make sense of the power of story and to use storytelling to improve our world.

Conversations about the relationship between story and society have commonly emphasized one of two arguments: The first approach is to focus on how the latest media trends and technologies are *affecting* our society, and these

assessments often skew toward the negative. For example, we have all likely read op-eds or had conversations with friends about the effects of mobile devices and social media on our lives and our world. The Internet and digital technologies now put seemingly infinite numbers of stories at our literal fingertips, which has undoubtedly changed (and according to some, harmed) our ways of life.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the anxieties about the power of story didn't start with TikTok, or even video games or television, rock music, or comic books before them. Since ancient times, opinion-makers have expressed their concern about the potentially negative effects of new forms of communication and expression.<sup>3</sup> For example, in Ancient Greece, Plato expressed concern that a newly developed form of expression would cause great harm to his society. His anxiety centered on the medium of the written word. In Socrates' dialogue with Phaedrus, Plato makes his case:

If men learn [writing], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls: they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks; what you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance; for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing ...<sup>4</sup>

Plato's claim is that our use of writing would fundamentally alter how humans express themselves and even how they understand the world. And while we likely find fault in Plato's claim that the knowledge gained from reading books is "no true wisdom," we cannot deny that the invention of writing fundamentally changed the human experience. Few of us have memorized our friends' phone numbers (not to mention an epic poem), and this is likely due to our increased reliance on writing to remember for us.

### **THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE**

In 1964, media scholar Marshall McLuhan published the now-famous phrase "the medium is the message."<sup>5</sup> His argument states that the *medium*—the means by which communication or expression occurs—is far more impactful than the content which is communicated or expressed. For example, more important than whether we read an epic poem, a Tweet, or the phone book (if they even still exist) is the fact that we are *reading*. Our use of the Internet is far more impactful than whether we use it to look up recipes, connect with old friends, or view pornography. "For the 'content' of a medium is like a juicy piece of meat carried by

the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.”<sup>6</sup> McLuhan’s argument, much like Plato’s opinion about the potential impact of writing, is complicated, if not controversial. How do we recognize the power of a medium or technology while still acknowledging that it is us humans who are creating and using them?

### Discussion Question

*What are some of the strengths and limitations of McLuhan’s argument that the medium—not the content—has a greater influence on our attitudes and behaviors?*

A second approach to understanding the relationship between story and society reverses the flow of power, arguing that rather than *affect* us, stories *reflect* society. This perspective contends that thinkers like Plato and McLuhan misattribute power to things like texts or technologies instead of the humans making and using them. Rather than fall victim to *technological determinism*,<sup>7</sup> the “media as mirror” perspective emphasizes stories as expressions or reflections of humanity’s experiences, values, perspectives, and practices.<sup>8</sup> This perspective argues that power is not located in things but wielded by innovators and storytellers, artists and audiences. We might ask, for example, would the Internet exist as we know it without the efforts of innovators like Tim Berners Lee, corporations like Google, or all of us as near-constant contributors? And what is the content of culture if not reflections of our social, political, economic, and psychological realities?

The power of story to reflect society is especially apparent when we consider the correlation between artistic traditions and the cultural and historical contexts in which they were developed. For example, the development of *montage editing* in early Soviet Cinema provides particularly good evidence for this case. Pioneered by Communist film scholars and makers like Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Vsevolod Pudovkin in the early 20th century, montage was a new language of cinema, and one that was a direct reflection of the politics of their newly established communist society.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Kuleshov and his comrades drew upon Marx’s argument that social progress is only possible through the clash between classes (lords vs. serfs, bourgeoisie vs. proletariat, and so on) to develop a new language of cinema—one that emphasized the communication of meaning via the clash of juxtaposed images.<sup>10</sup> Eisenstein describes this *intellectual montage* as “an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite to one another...”<sup>11</sup> The class conflict central to communist politics was reflected not only in the content of the stories told on screen, but in the methods of storytelling employed by those early filmmakers.

## ONSCREEN CONFLICT

Perh aps the most recognized example of soviet montage is the “Odessa Staircase sequence” from Eisenstein’s 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*.<sup>12</sup> In the scene, images of armed Cossack soldiers are cross-cut with images of innocent civilians falling lifeless on the stone steps, and it is through making sense of these juxtaposed images that the audience is able to truly recognize the violent consequences of class oppression and, thus, internalize the political justifications of the communist cause. Since the introduction of montage editing in the early 20th century, *cross-cutting* has been incorporated into the dominant film language, most notably in its inclusion in advertising, music videos, and blockbuster movies.

### Discussion Question

*What is an example of cross-cutting in contemporary media that achieves a similar effect as the Odessa Staircase sequence—juxtaposing opposing images to provoke a thought or emotion from the audience?*

## The Dialectic

While the perspectives that stories either *affect* or *reflect* our society help us understand the power of storytelling in different ways, both of these arguments suggest that the flow of power is unidirectional (story > society OR story < society) rather than more dynamic or reciprocal. If we hope to understand the power of story, we have to acknowledge more complex circulations of power. In “A Dialectical Approach to Film Form,” Eisenstein argues the value of recognizing the complicated relationships that characterize both art and our world:

A dynamic comprehension of things is also basic ... for a correct understanding of art and of all art-forms. In the realm of art this *dialectic principle of dynamics* is embodied in CONFLICT as the fundamental principle for the existence of every art-work and every art-form. For art is always conflict ... It is art’s task to make manifest the contradictions of Being.<sup>13</sup>

According to Eisenstein, our world is filled with complexity, contradictions, and tensions. So, any art that attempts to engage with reality needs to be founded on some sort of “CONFLICT.”<sup>14</sup> Specifically, he uses the concept of the *dialectic* to describe this way of understanding the world and approaching storytelling.

Eisenstein's explanation of the *dialectic* suggests that when two contradictory elements (moving images, social or economic classes, and so on) come into contact, the tension between the two can be productive, leading to the creation of something new, something greater than either of the original elements. The origins of the dialectic can actually be traced back to Classical Greek philosophy. When Plato expresses his reservations about writing, it is not only because he believes the written word inhibits the exercise of memory but also because writing is more static, less dynamic, less conflict-oriented than discourse or debate. In Socrates' dialogue with Phaedrus, Plato expresses this concern about the written word—

It's the same with written words.: they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever.<sup>15</sup>

Plato champions discourse—question and answer, argument and rebuttal, what we now commonly call “the Socratic method”—because he believes that only through this dialectical approach will we be able to discover truth. And if our pursuit of truth is halted, so are our efforts to improve our world.

While coming from dramatically different historical and cultural contexts, Plato, Marx, and Eisenstein all speak to the value of the *dialectic*—recognizing the dynamic flows of power in our world and the tension between opposing forces as potentially productive in our search for truth, our establishment of an equitable society, and in expressing ourselves through art and story. As we critically engage with media and culture, we develop the capacity to recognize the contradictions in our stories and in our society and thus have the opportunity to use storytelling to make our world better.

## HEGEMONY

In 1926, Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci was arrested by the Fascist State for being a communist and sentenced to 20 years in prison. While incarcerated, Gramsci wrote volumes of social and cultural theory and developed the theory of *hegemony* to describe the process by which the interests of the dominant social group within a given society are accepted by the masses as “common sense” thinking. Gramsci's concept of *hegemony* suggests that the power of the dominant culture is not that it is forced upon the public, but that it is even consented to by the very people who experience the worst consequences of it. “The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population,” Gramsci writes “is ‘historically’

caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position ....”<sup>16</sup> Culture is the place where the ideas of different social groups come into conflict, where they are negotiated, and according to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, the winning ideas typically reflect the interests of those already in power.

### Discussion Question

*What is an example of a place within media culture where the ideas of different social groups compete for the acceptance of the masses? What kinds of ideas get the most play in these places?*

## Art and Activism, Actuality and Potentiality

Throughout history, art and storytelling have played significant roles in social transformation. Sometimes, stories represent the dire circumstances in which we find ourselves and speak to the suffering we seek to overcome. Other times, our stories depict an imagined utopia, a fantastical future world where we are able to escape the troubles facing us in reality. In both of these cases, stories (returning to Eisenstein once again) “make manifest the contradictions of Being.”<sup>17</sup> They expose the tensions in our society, the disparity between “actuality” (what our world *is*) and “potentiality” (what it *ought* to be).

For example, the work of contemporary Chinese artist Ai Weiwei demonstrates the potential for stories to help us recognize the contradictions that characterize our existence and contribute to societal progress.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his career, Ai has integrated art and activism, oftentimes explicitly critiquing the Chinese government’s abuses of power in his work. For example, when a massive earthquake struck China in 2008, Ai led a campaign to expose a government cover-up of the disaster and tell the stories of the more than 80 thousand Chinese citizens killed, many of whom were children attending cheaply constructed public schools. When the government attempted to hide the numbers and the names of those killed, Ai and his “citizen investigation team” visited the communities affected by the quake and worked with the citizens to document the terrible tragedy. As part of a collaborative artwork called *Remembering*, the group conducted interviews, collected stories, and eventually published a massive list of names of the victims, the fine print filling up dozens of pages. Ai writes,

The kind of authoritarian state we have in China cannot survive if it answers questions—if the truth is revealed, they are finished. So they started to think of me as the most dangerous person in China. That made me become an artist, but also an activist.<sup>19</sup>

The printed pages filled with the names of deceased children are a remarkably powerful work of art that highlights the contradiction between the Chinese government's claim to serve its people and its refusal to even say the names of the children who lost their lives as a result of this tragedy. *Remembrance's* power is also evident in the response it provoked from the Communist regime. After the show opened, Ai was attacked by police, arrested, and imprisoned for several months. When the Chinese government finally released Ai, he was forbidden to speak of his imprisonment and even to make art for a time.<sup>20</sup>

### **A PUNK PRAYER**

In February 2012, the all-female protest punk group Pussy Riot held an illegal concert in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. Since their formation the year before, the group of masked musicians and performance artists had grabbed the attention of the Russian media, government, and public with their controversial concerts meant to expose President Vladimir Putin's abuses of power. The group's uniforms included brightly colored balaclavas that disguised their identity and made them look like Riot Grrrl superheroes. Before being forcibly removed from the cathedral and arrested, the women performed a "punk prayer" protesting the Russian Orthodox Church's complicity in Putin's regime and supplicating the Virgin Mary to put an end to the corruption and oppression of women, queer people, and others in Russia.<sup>21</sup>

### **Discussion Question**

*In addition to Ai Weiwei and Pussy Riot, can you think of other creators who mix art and activism? What might be the benefits of using art and story to address the problems we see in our society?*

Ai Weiwei is far from being alone. The history of culture is filled with examples of artists and storytellers—from Bertolt Brecht to Toni Morrison, Bob Marley to Bikini Kill—who have used their creative work to expose contradictions within their cultures and communities and advocate for positive social change. However, storytelling does not always power the engines of social progress. Oftentimes, dominant narratives in our culture work oppositely—interfering with, rather than encouraging, our efforts to critically reflect on our society and enact positive changes within it. Making art or media does not necessarily make change, especially when the stories being told and the perspectives and experiences being represented *cover up* rather than *confront* the contradictions within our society.

## The Culture Industry

During the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, two Jewish intellectuals named Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno left the Institute of Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt and came to the United States, eventually taking up residence in Los Angeles, California. It was there, at the epicenter of the American media industries, that they developed their own argument about the powerful role of storytelling within society. Heavily influenced by the writings of Karl Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that among the primary reasons we still encounter inequality and injustice in our society is *the culture industry*—mass media and popular culture that profit from distracting the public from our troubles and thereby maintaining the status quo.<sup>22</sup> If our minds are occupied with entertainment, gossip, or the latest trends, we are less equipped to recognize the challenges facing our society and work to overcome them. Having witnessed propaganda’s role in the rise of fascism in Europe, Horkheimer and Adorno express caution about the use of story to manipulate the minds of the masses. They identify characteristics of contemporary media that are particularly problematic: the stories “are infected with sameness,” they emphasize “style and spectacle,” and they preserve the “status quo.”<sup>23</sup>

### *Sameness*

In contemporary popular culture—dominated by sequels, spin-offs, re-boots, remixes, covers, memes, and so forth—Adorno and Horkheimer’s description of media as steady streams of seemingly identical stories is especially relevant. So many stories told in media today recycle the same characters and conflicts, settings and structures; or at the very least, they privilege the same set of ideological perspectives.

### **WORLD WAR II STORIES**

If we survey stories depicting the second World War, what titles would likely make our list? They may include: *Band of Brothers* (2001), *Call of Duty* (2003, 2016), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Casablanca* (1942), *Dunkirk* (2017), *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) by Anne Frank, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Maus* (1986) by Art Spiegelman, *Night* (1956) by Elie Wiesel, *Number the Stars* (1989) by Lois Lowry, *Saving Private Ryan* (1988), *Schindler’s List* (1993), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *The Zookeeper’s Wife* (2007) by Diane Ackerman, and so on.

Especially when we consider the most commercially and critically successful titles, certain patterns emerge. For example, the narratives most often focus on military conflict in Europe from the perspective of Allied

servicemen or European Jews; they often feature male protagonists; and they emphasize acts of violence. Of course, there are exceptions to these patterns, though through a careful examination of these works, a dominant representation of World War II emerges.

### **Discussion Question**

*What might explain the similar characteristics of these stories? What characters, settings, perspectives, or themes are absent from the dominant representation of World War II?*

In a 2009 TED Talk titled “The Danger of a Single Story,” Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie reflects on how dominant representations have the potential to shape our perceptions of the world in unhelpful ways.<sup>24</sup> As a young girl and aspiring writer, Adichie read constantly, but much of the literature that was available to her was from the West and featured characters, locations, dialogue, and cultural customs that were unfamiliar to her. When she began writing her own stories, she filled them with these same elements, despite the fact that they were not at all a part of her experience growing up in Nigeria.

Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren’t many of them available, and they weren’t quite as easy to find as the foreign books. But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camera Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.<sup>25</sup>

The problem of *sameness* is that when our culture privileges the same set of perspectives over and over, it reduces complicated, multi-faceted realities to a single superficial story. For example, a lengthy, global conflict is represented by the storming of Normandy beach, or, in Adichie’s case, all of literature is reduced to novels written by Westerners.

### ***Style and Spectacle***

Arguably the most easily recognized example of *sameness* in popular culture today is its reliance on spectacular elements to grab the audience by the eyeballs and distract them from the cares of the world. It is normal and justifiable

to seek out entertaining stories, and style and spectacle have been important parts of our storytelling and artistic traditions throughout history. But when the inclusion of, for example, action sequences, comedic pratfalls, or heightened romance, becomes an end in itself, rather than a means of engaging audiences and communicating ideas, it becomes problematic.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies the key narrative elements of tragedy, and *spectacle* makes the list.<sup>26</sup> Style and spectacle can be powerful means of engaging audiences in the stories and themes. For example, on your list of World War II stories, there are likely some works that make effective use of these elements—for example, Anne Frank’s unique mix of biting humor and youthful optimism or the precision and intensity with which the aerial fight scenes in *Dunkirk* are captured on screen.<sup>27</sup> But Aristotle is careful to qualify his discussion of spectacle, noting that while it can be valuable, it is arguably the least important element of narrative—trailing behind *plot*, *character*, *reasoning* (theme), *diction* (dialogue), and even *song*. “Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own,” he writes “but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry.”<sup>28</sup> Returning to representations of World War II, there are likely other works on your list in which the substance of the stories—themes of the evils of fascism or the sacrifice of soldiers (and whole nations), the messy morality of war or the trauma that survivors of violence carry with them—are eclipsed by thrilling gunfights or a rote romance. Oftentimes, these stories’ heightened style and spectacle are quite entertaining, but they might distract us from pressing issues and enduring questions. In these cases, media become simply an escape from rather than an entrance into engagement with the problems facing our society.

### **Status Quo**

When stories tell the same story over and over, and when those stories privilege style and spectacle over substance, they are encouraging audiences to accept things-as-they-are rather than helping them recognize and overcome the challenges facing our society. For example, week after week, network television’s programming of procedural police dramas (*sameness*) emphasize the sensational, and often violent, acts of its protagonists in law enforcement (*style and spectacle*), thus sustaining the idea that our justice system is populated by well-trained, highly effective heroes who uphold the law and serve all citizens (*status quo*). In recent years, the use of mobile devices and networked technologies to document and share the police’s abuse of power against communities of color have illustrated how the dominant narrative of “police as protectors” is inconsistent with the experiences of Black and brown people who are so commonly mistreated by America’s justice system. But even with the abundance of video evidence of racial discrimination, police brutality, systemic racism, and so on, the common-sense notion of “law and order” retains its power, and criminal justice reform remains an enormous, largely unaddressed, issue in our society.<sup>29</sup>

## Counter-Hegemonic Media: A Way Out?

Some have argued that Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of contemporary culture is too reductive and pessimistic, that while it points to some problematic characteristics of modern media, their argument grants too much power to *the culture industry* and fails to account for the ways that artists, activists, and active audiences resist these conventional ways of telling stories and of understanding the world around us.<sup>30</sup> After all, if the relationship between media and society is dynamic, even dialectical, we must acknowledge the ways in which consumers and citizens challenge media monopolies, dominant narratives, and “common sense” ways of thinking. For example, the cinema of those early Soviet filmmakers was used to illustrate the injustice of the Russian Empire and reinforce the need for a revolution. Ai Weiwei and his followers used his art to expose the Chinese government’s cover-up of the deaths of thousands of school children. Today, activists and even everyday people are recording and sharing videos of racial discrimination and police brutality in an effort to promote racial justice and express the message that “Black Lives Matter.”

Each of these examples is illustrative of “counter-hegemonic media”—that is, stories that are created outside of the established industries, represent

### HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR

The 1959 film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, directed by French filmmaker Alain Resnais, is an example of a story representing World War II that deviates from the patterns present in common depictions of the conflict. The story is set a decade after the war in Hiroshima, Japan, one of the sites where US military forces used atomic weapons against civilian populations. The film departs from the dominant narrative in the content of its story—focusing on the conflict in the Pacific during WWII, following the relationship between a Japanese man and a French woman, and addressing the aftermath of nuclear warfare. But it also challenges conventions in how it tells its story—integrating newsreel footage, recreations, and even artifacts from “ground zero” into the fictional narrative and, perhaps most importantly, refusing to sanitize the violence perpetrated by the American “victors.”<sup>31</sup>

### Discussion Question

*What are the benefits of stories told from alternate perspectives, by marginalized voices? For example, are there stories told by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) or LGBTQIA+ creators that have helped you see the limitations within popular representations of history and reality?*

historically marginalized communities, depart from conventional narrative or aesthetic approaches, and challenge dominant ideological perspectives. These stories attempt to expose the contradictions within society, shine a light on suffering, and promote action and change.

### Case Study: Games for Change

Perhaps because of the pleasure we derive from playing, or the fact that games are often associated with childhood, certainly because of the incredible amounts of time many of us have spent catching Pokémon or stomping Goombas, videogames are often thought of as nothing more than escapist entertainment. When we do talk about the power of games, the conversations resemble the perspectives discussed earlier in the chapter—either games are thought of in terms of the negative influence they have on young people’s attitudes and behaviors or alternatively as a site where active audiences exercise their creativity, making their own characters, worlds, and experiences.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of particular challenges facing the gaming industry and culture. In 2007, game scholars Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacqueline Ford Marie, and Celia Pearce introduced the term “hegemony of play” to describe the situation in which gaming culture had become dominated by a specific toxic type of player—the “hardcore gamer”:

It is characterized by an adolescent male sensibility that transcends physical age and embraces highly stylized graphical violence, male fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualized, objectified depictions of women, and rampant racial stereotyping and discrimination.<sup>32</sup>

Especially as games have grown in popularity and the culture has grown to include far more than adolescent boys, the tension has increased between “hardcore gamers” and anyone they deem as “other,” including women, LGBTQIA+ people, people of color, feminists, so-called “social justice warriors,” and even casual gamers. Historically, the representation of female characters in games has been scant (and when women were present, they have often been scantily clad). The representation of female, LGBTQIA+, and people of color (or lack thereof) in the industry has been even worse.<sup>33</sup> And scores of female and queer gamers and game-developers have reported instances of discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, at conventions, and online.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, “hardcore gamers” gripe about the erosion of their “boys club” culture, evident in the rare occurrences when a developer manages to get a foothold within the industry despite not being a white, straight, cis-gendered male or when the protagonist of a game departs from the archetypal stoic, gun-toting, white hero with the five o’clock shadow.

## ***Gamergate and the Hegemony of Play***

In 2014, this tension erupted into a now-infamous conflict called “Gamergate” in which hardcore gamers, organizing on social media around the hashtag #gamergate, perpetrated an online harassment campaign against female, queer, and other progressive-minded members of the gaming community.<sup>35</sup> Game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, game critic Anita Sarkeesian, and actress Felicia Day were among those targeted with relentless trolling online, death threats, “doxing,” “swatting,” and so on. In the years since, some of the controversy has died down<sup>36</sup> and the game industry has made some efforts to promote diversity among developers and the community more widely,<sup>37</sup> but issues of identity and representation continue to be a source of tension within game culture.

### **FEMINIST FREQUENCY**

Anita Sarkeesian has been a cultural commentator since long before Gamergate, using her YouTube channel “Feminist Frequency” as a platform for sharing critical analyses of gender representation in media and pop culture. In 2012, Sarkeesian announced a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for a series called “Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games.” The campaign was an incredible financial success, raising a total of over 150 thousand dollars from nearly 7,000 donors, greatly exceeding its original goal. But apparently the idea that a woman could publicly critique sexism within games was too much for “hardcore gamers,” and as a result, Sarkeesian experienced a wave of vicious harassment and even death threats. Despite the bullying of the so-called gamergaters, “Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games” was a success, the series amassing several millions of views and becoming a type of cultural touchpoint that has increased awareness of and conversations about issues of gender and gaming.<sup>38</sup>

### **Discussion Question**

*In the “Feminist Frequency” channel, Sarkeesian makes issues of gender representation accessible to a mainstream audience. What are the benefits of combining critical analysis and creative production in order to educate the public about such important issues?*

As these tensions were building over the last couple of decades, a growing number of developers—many self-taught and mostly working outside of the industry—have been engaged in the work of reclaiming and redefining games on their own terms, in ways that confront the “hegemony of play”

and represent a diverse range of interests, experiences, and backgrounds. As a result, there has been an explosion of indie games, serious games, art games, and activist games that are interested in providing more than simple entertainment. During this renaissance of indie game development, innovative game developers have explored games as sites of aesthetic experimentation, cultural subversion, and social activism, as well as means of personal self-expression and community organization. Game-makers (especially those from communities who have been historically marginalized) are employing increasingly accessible digital technologies, collaborating across alternative social networks, and using their unique sets of skills, experiences, and perspectives to shift the conversation and the culture.<sup>39</sup>

### ***The Queer Games Avant-Garde***

For example, there is a growing group of LGBTQIA+ game-makers who have spent years carving out a place for queer stories and representations within game culture and industry as well as re-imagining games in ways that allow for a greater range of expression and experience than the “hegemony of play” allows for.<sup>40</sup> Game scholar Bonnie Ruberg calls the scene where LGBTQIA+ creators push the boundaries of games the “queer games avant-garde.”<sup>41</sup> Ruberg writes of the potential of this community and their approach:

The work of the queer games avant-garde represents far more than video games as we already know them with a rainbow veneer. These are games that disrupt the status quo, enact resistance, and use play to explore new ways of inhabiting difference. Queerness and video games share a common ethos, a longing to explore alternative ways of being.<sup>42</sup>

From focusing their stories on LGBTQIA+ characters to devising gameplay that reflects the experiences of queer individuals and communities, to encouraging a radical re-thinking of the ways we have traditionally conceived of games, these developers are engaged in a type of revolutionary work that resembles past avant-garde movements (including Soviet Cinema and the Riot Grrrls referenced earlier in this chapter). And not unlike these past movements, the innovation demonstrated by the queer games avant-garde is simultaneously aesthetic, cultural, and political. Many of these games shine a light on the issues relevant to queer peoples by dramatically re-conceiving of what a game should do or look like.

### ***A Plurality of Voices***

In her book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back the Artform*, game developer Anna Anthropy compares the work of this

## TWINE

The queer games scene holds conventions and conferences, maintains archives, and online communities.<sup>43</sup> One place that LGBTQ+ gamers have congregated is on the platform Twine—an incredibly user-friendly digital tool used to create interactive text-based experiences. Resembling choose-your-own-adventure stories more than they do typical videogames, Twine games have become an especially fruitful branch on the queer games tree. Games like Anna Anthropy’s *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013), Lydia Neon’s *Player Two* (2013), Dietrich Squinkifier’s *Quing’s Quest* (2014), and Porpentine’s *Howling Dogs* (2012) and *Those We Love Alive* (2017) are all incredibly compelling works made on the platform.<sup>44</sup> While all of these games use Twine to reflect some aspect of the queer experience, each pushes the boundaries of videogames in different directions—games as poetry, therapy, satire, existential meditation, and so on.

### Discussion Question

*Videogames’ use of the written word is often overshadowed by graphics or mechanics. What might be the strength of Twine games that focus on the player’s navigation of text?*

ad-hoc collective of game-makers to the practice of making “zines”—that is, DIY, self-published, small-circulation publications, most often associated with pre-Internet sub-cultures like sci-fi fandom and feminist punk rock. She writes

Send me a dollar and a self-addressed envelope; I’ll send you a book of some stories from my life ... I like the idea of games as zines: as transmissions of ideas and culture from person to person, as personal artifacts instead of impersonal creations of teams of forty-five artists and fifteen programmers ...<sup>45</sup>

Among the most widely recognized members of the queer games avant-garde, Anthropy (also known as Auntie Pixelante) is a transgender game-maker who sees the potential of games as a radically democratic space that allows a vast range of people to tell their stories and contribute to the cultural conversation.

In the past, this de-centering of the industry and more democratic distribution of the “means of production” would have been impossible given the considerable barriers of entry (technological, financial, and otherwise) to making a game and getting it into the hands of players. But as digital technology has become more accessible, game-making software has become more

user-friendly, and distribution methods have moved largely to digital downloads, amateurs and hobbyists—many of whom do not fit the “hardcore gamer” mold—have been able to try their hand at game development.

Anthropy’s approach is representative of an “everyone can make games” approach that many aspiring game-developers (but especially those from historically marginalized communities) have found empowering.<sup>46</sup> Her games are often deliberately lo-fi, using simple graphics or even just interactive text to tell stories and create experiences that often explicitly reflect her experiences as a queer person. For example, *Dys4ia* (2012) is a short autobiographical piece in which she represents her experience with gender dysphoria and hormone replacement therapy through brief vignettes that use an abstract, 8-bit visual style.<sup>47</sup> And Anthropy is far from the only figure within the queer games scene to represent their experiences being transgender.

Transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer characters are at the center of indie games including Mattie Brice’s *Mainichi* (2012), Porpentine’s *With Those We Love Alive* (2017), and Angela He’s *Missed Messages* (2019), and more recently, have found representation within more mainstream studio games like *The Last of Us: Part II* (2020), *If Found...* (2020), and *Tell Me Why* (2020).<sup>48</sup>

## GAMES AS DIARIES

Many of the games produced by the queer games avant-garde when not explicitly autobiographical, commonly draw from the experiences of the creators being queer in a homophobic, transphobic industry, culture, and world. In an interview about the creation of *With Those We Love Alive*, indie developer Porpentine shares the motivation for exploring such personal subjects in her work: “My games are like my diary, just set in some fantastic world. It’s like if each diary entry had a new world generated around it, like the shell of some kind of sea creature. That’s the only safe way to really talk about these things ... The world of the arts is very dangerous for transfeminine people.”<sup>49</sup>

### Discussion Question

*In what ways are games suited to be spaces where we can share such personal experiences, exhibit such vulnerability? How might the knowledge that creators pour themselves into these games influence our perspectives when we play?*

While many of the creators are careful to clarify that simply playing a game does not magically enable straight or cis-gendered players to fully understand or empathize with the experiences of transgender and other queer-identified

individuals, the stories they tell are significant in that they address the lack of LGBTQIA+ representation within games and, ideally, help foster a safer, more inclusive gaming culture and industry.<sup>50</sup> For too long, videogames have been characterized by sameness—the same group of guys making the same games with the same characters and conventions for the same “hardcore gamers.” But there is a growing segment of the culture that imagines a future in which this “hegemony of play” is overcome by a newly empowered, remarkably diverse community of players and developers. Games scholar and founder of the LGBTQ Video Games Archive, Adrienne Shaw, shares the value of this movement, and this exciting moment, within videogames:

... when we go out to the edges of play, we can see that what we know of games thus far is just the beginning, and in changing the conversations we have about games, we can begin to imagine a more inclusive future.<sup>51</sup>

### Activity: Radical Games

This chapter’s creative activity borrows its name from Flanagan’s 2009 book *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*<sup>52</sup> and it asks participants to critically engage with games, and the world around them, through a process of inquiry, creativity, and play. Participants will research a political or social issue that interests and/or affects them personally, then develop a game (in any genre or mode and using any medium or platform) that encourages players to explore this issue, recognize the contradictions that characterize it, and imagine a way forward.

*Start by making a list of political or social issues that matter to you. What aspects of society worry you? Annoy you? Frighten you? Anger you? What causes are you invested in? What problems would you hope to help solve?*

On my list, I might include my anger about white supremacy or economic inequality in the US, my worries about accessible health care for all, my fear of global climate crisis, my hope to help promote positive models of masculinity, and my efforts to help others be more mindful of their engagement with media and pop culture.

*Next, select one issue that you would like to explore in greater depth, and then do some research. Seek out news articles, academic scholarship, statistical reports, documentaries, op-eds, legislation, art, social media posts, and other sources that offer a range of perspectives on your chosen issue. Practice evaluating the arguments they make, the sources they cite, the evidence they offer, the conclusions they come to. Gradually (even if you are not making a conscious effort to do so), you will develop your own perspective on this issue, informed by the arguments around this issue as well as your personal experiences and values. You will identify some “core contradictions” that contribute to this issue. You may even begin developing some potential approaches to addressing this issue.*

For example, this book is some evidence of my research on the issue of media literacy. Its bibliography is full of academic scholarship, but also journalism, art, music, popular films, television, games, and so forth that has informed my perspective on how we might teach others (and ourselves) to more critically and creatively engage with media. Among the core contradictions that I identify is that the study and teaching of media too often separates critical inquiry from creative practice, analysis, and evaluation from pleasure and play, formal education from casual participation. And as a result of these divisions, most people are not as media literate as they might be otherwise.

*Now, devise a game that encourages players to become more aware of and informed about and to engage with a challenge facing our world. One way to begin the design process is to consider the “core contradictions” you identified and then use your understanding of these contradictions to devise both an objective for players to work toward and obstacles meant to complicate their progress. As you imagine different ways of illustrating the power dynamic between objective and obstacles, you will eventually settle on a genre. Genres of games include, but are not limited to: card games, field games, conversation games, word games, text-based games, board games, tabletop games, quiz games, digital games (in their many modes, platforms, and sub-genres), role-playing games, riddles, puzzles, sports, and so on.*

*Once you have settled on these foundational elements—a genre, an objective, and obstacles—it is best to jump in and start play-testing. As you (and those you convince to play with you) try out iterations of the game, you will begin to flesh out specific characteristics of the game, including the list of rules, roles of players, timing of play, space in which the game is played, any objects, items, or aids needed for the game, and so on. These elements should work together to help your player engage with the game, but also to engage with your chosen social issue. Remember that game development is a dialectical process in itself, involving a cycle of “action” (play-testing iterations of the game) and “reflection” (observing each iteration’s strengths and limitations and revising the game accordingly).<sup>53</sup> And as you play and revise and play again and revise and so on, you will eventually determine an optimal way of using the different game elements to prompt your player to critically engage with a particular challenge facing our world.*

Here is an example.

### **Fan Favorites**

As previous chapters have illustrated, I am a big fan of movies, television, music, books, games, and other media. And I often get as much satisfaction out of sharing and discussing my favorite pieces of pop culture with others as I do from the act of watching, listening, reading, or playing itself. As the picture fades to black and the credits roll, my immediate impulse is to turn to whoever is sitting next to me and start a conversation—What did they like? Not like? What was it saying? Was it effective in communicating that message? What about the performances, music, camerawork, editing, and other aesthetic elements? How did this compare to the creators’ other work? What might they



FIGURE 4.1 Fan Favorites.

have done differently? The time I spend “talking through the credits” is due in part to my enthusiasm for pop culture, but it is also a result of my scholarly interests in media literacy. Before we can successfully “access, analyze, evaluate, create, reflect and act” we have to create a context in which we can have conversations and engage in active interpretation.<sup>54</sup>

*Fan Favorites* is a conversation-based card game that prompts players to have critical conversations about their favorite media with the goal of helping them to develop their media literacy skills and have some fun (see Figure 4.1). In 2018, a group of undergraduate students and I developed the game together as a way of integrating our critical analytical skills into our creative practice, specifically to see if we could make some type of media that might elevate the conversations around pop culture among our peers.<sup>55</sup> The students and I reflected on our own moments “talking through the credits”—in our media arts classes, on fan forums, with friends and family, at midnight movie premieres and comic conventions—and we wanted to help folks who were not already studying media or steeped in fan conversations on social media to be able to benefit from some of these same experiences.

At the center of our process was the “core contradiction” that everyone we know consumes media, but few have been prepared to think about or discuss issues like authorship or aesthetics, intention or ideology, narrative, interpretation, and so on. They are likely not even familiar with these terms. We saw a productive possibility in games as a means of media literacy education, using a pedagogy of play to help get people talking about their favorite media with some of these ideas in mind.

The game is organized around open-ended questions intended to prompt players to share the funny experiences, thoughtful takes, or creative commentaries on their favorite media. Each round, a card with a question is drawn from

the deck and all players share their answers. For example, players may be asked to share a song that reminds them of a past relationship, to devise a backstory for an unnamed character from a favorite film, or to describe how a book they have read changed their mind on a specific social issue. At the end of the sharing time, each player awards tokens—decorated with emoji designs representing humor, insight, or creativity—to the other players. Players accumulate these tokens based on how funny, thoughtful, or inventive their responses are. The player with the most tokens at the end of the series of rounds wins.

The value of the cycle of “action” and “reflection” became apparent during the creation of the game: We originally intended *Fan Favorites* to be a mobile game, played on a single device that was passed from player to player. During the development process we were simultaneously building the app while play-testing a paper version of the game. As we went through multiple iterations of the game, the feedback from play-tests indicated that we were ready to migrate our game to the app and test the digital version. As soon as we did, the play-tests stopped being as fun. During the play-tests of the paper version, we observed people laughing, sharing, and reflecting on their own and others’ stories, but when we introduced the mobile version, that dynamic changed.

Ultimately (and ironically) we concluded that it was the presence of the phone at the center of the gameplay experience that was our obstacle. When players were reading the questions and awarding points on a screen, rather than using physical cards and tokens, the connection between them was not as strong and the game was not as effective at achieving its goal. We even observed that when the game was played on the phone, other players were more likely to pull out their phones, become distracted, and not participate as actively in the game. So, we chose to learn from the experience—we removed the presence of digital media from the mix and embraced the analog format of cards and tokens. And our game is better for it.

While the objective of *Fan Favorites* is without a doubt of lesser import than the work of artists like Ai Weiwei or Anna Anthropy, Pussy Riot or the Black Lives Matter activists, it is an effort to make a difference within our

### **HETERO-MORMOTIVITY: A TWINE GAME**

When given the assignment to make a Radical Game in one of my undergraduate Media Arts classes, Devin was inspired by queer developers like Anna Anthropy and Porpentine to use Twine to express his own experience as a closeted gay man in a predominately Mormon community. In his artist statement, Devin articulates a contradiction within his conservative religious culture—those around him claim to love him but too often fail to listen to him or validate his experience. He writes, “My greatest frustration is how quick people in the LDS<sup>56</sup> community are to try to relate to me or to offer

me advice and counsel...without attempting to simply listen to what I have to say. They rarely ask what I think—and even more rarely do they ask how I feel.” Devin’s game speaks to the necessity of real dialogue—sharing and listening—and addresses an absence of representation in his community of LGBTQ stories.

Play the game here > <http://film.byu.edu/aperture/?p=504>

### Discussion Question

*How might games be a means of promoting dialogue? Do you have any experiences when playing a game led to a meaningful conversation?*

small sphere of influence. Not unlike the queer game developers, we identified an inadequacy within our particular discourse and used our creativity (and in particular our love of games) to overcome those contradictions. And not coincidentally, our game helps players recognize the power of media literacy primarily through prompting them to tell stories.

### Conclusion

In the documentary film *Ai WeiWei: Never Sorry* (2012), the director Alison Klayman asks the artist how it is that he can be so fearless in his work. Ai responds, a bit nonplussed, “I’m so *fearful*. That’s not fearless. I’m more fearful than other people. Maybe because of that, I act more brave. Because I know the danger is really there. If you don’t act, the danger becomes stronger.”<sup>57</sup> There are incredible challenges facing our society today, things to be afraid of, and it may be tempting to retreat into our phones or our games in order to hold this fear at bay. But the escape that binge-watching and doom-scrolling provide is nothing compared to the good that we can do when we critically engage with both stories and with society.

### Notes

- 1 Okri (1998), p. 21.
- 2 See for example Alter (2018); Bourq & Jacoby (2018a, 2018b); Carr (2010); Dretzin & Maggio (2008); Dretzin & Rushkoff (2010); Freitas (2019); Koughan & Rushkoff (2014); Lanier (2019); Noble (2018); O’Neil (2017); Orłowski, (2020); Rushkoff (2014, 2017); Turkle (2015, 2017); Twenge (2018); Zuboff (2020).
- 3 For some other historical examples, see Charters (1933); McLuhan (1967/2001, 1962/2004); Postman (1985).
- 4 Plato (1952), p. 157.
- 5 McLuhan (1964/2003), p. 19.
- 6 McLuhan (1964/2003), p. 31.
- 7 The term “technological determinism” is often attributed to American social theorist Thorstein Veblen, but traces of this perspective to understanding history as “determined by laws...rather than by human will” (Bimber 1994, p. 86) can

be found in the writings of multiple thinkers. In recent years, the term has been primarily used as a critique of the extreme argument that “technological change determines social change in a prescribed manner” (Kline 2001, p. 15495).

- 8 See for example Kapuscinski (1999); McQuail (2005).
- 9 See for example Eisenstein (1925a, 1925b, 1927); Kuleshov (1924); Pudovkin (1926).
- 10 See Marx (2019); Marx & Engels (2002).
- 11 Eisenstein (1949/1977), p. 49.
- 12 Eisenstein (1925a).
- 13 Eisenstein (1949/1977), p. 46.
- 14 His caps, not mine.
- 15 Plato (1952), p. 158.
- 16 Gramsci (1971), p. 5.
- 17 Eisenstein (1949/1977), p. 46.
- 18 See <https://www.aiweiwei.com>
- 19 Ai WeiWei (2018).
- 20 Klayman (2012).
- 21 See Lerner & Pozdorovkin (2013); Tayler (2012).
- 22 Horkheimer & Adorno (1947/2002).
- 23 Horkheimer & Adorno (1947/2002), p. 94.
- 24 Adichie (2009).
- 25 Adichie (2009).
- 26 Though he defines “spectacle” a little more broadly than I do here. See Aristotle (1961).
- 27 See Frank (1993); Nolan (2017).
- 28 Aristotle (1961), p. 64.
- 29 See for example <https://ejournal.org/criminal-justice-reform/> and <https://www.splcenter.org/issues/mass-incarceration>
- 30 See Cook (1996); Eagleton (1991); Hohendahl (1995).
- 31 Resnais (1959).
- 32 Fron et al. (2007), p. 315.
- 33 See Anthropy (2012b); Orme (2018); Ruberg (2019, 2020); Vysotsky & Allaway (2018).
- 34 See Fox & Tang (2017); Lorenz & Browning (2020); Orr (2019); Vysotsky & Allaway (2018).
- 35 See Dockterman (2014); Parkin (2014); Wingfield (2014).
- 36 Perhaps as some of the same communities of trolls that made up the “GamerGate movement” migrated to mainstream political discourse in support of Donald Trump’s presidency. See Lees (2016); Romano (2021).
- 37 See Orme (2018); Ramanan (2017); Shaw (2015) as well as <https://gdconf.com/diversity-inclusion>
- 38 See <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7Edgk9Rxp7Fm7vjQ1d-cDA>
- 39 See Gray (2020); Gray & Leonard (2018); Isbister (2016); Ruberg (2019, 2020); Shaw (2015).
- 40 See Anthropy (2012b); Hudson (2014); Keogh (2013); Shaw (2015).
- 41 See Ruberg (2019, 2020).
- 42 Ruberg (2020), p. 3.
- 43 For example, GaymerX (<https://gaymerx.org/>), The Queerness and Games Conference (<https://qgcon.com/what-is-qgcon/>), The LGBTQ Video Game Archive (<https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/>), and r/gaymers sub-reddit (<https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/>).
- 44 Anthropy (2013); Neon (2013); Porpentine (2012, 2017); Squinkifier (2014).
- 45 Anthropy (2012b), p. 9.

- 46 Though scholars like Harvey & Fisher (2015) and Orme (2018) acknowledge how an overemphasis on the democratization of game production relies on a post-feminist politics that tends to disregard the persistent barriers of entry and discrimination within the game industry for women and queer people.
- 47 Anthropy (2012a).
- 48 Brice (2012); Dontnod Entertainment (2020); Dreamfeel (2020); He (2019); Naughty Dog (2020); Porpentine (2017).
- 49 Rougeau (2014).
- 50 See Ruberg (2019), pp. 179–180.
- 51 Shaw (2015), p. 232.
- 52 Flanagan (2013).
- 53 Flanagan’s “‘critical play’ game design model” is a great resource to help guide this process. See Flanagan (2013), pp. 251–262.
- 54 Hobbs (2010).
- 55 Our team included Jacob Carter, Neeko Funes, Max Johnson, Jessica Runyan, Erin Spencer, Jared Wilkinson, David Willian, and Abby Woods.
- 56 LDS stands for Latter-day Saint, a moniker used to describe the culture, institution, or membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
- 57 Klayman (2012).

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# 5

## AUTHORING IDENTITY

### Artists, Authors, and Auteurs

In 1948, French film scholar Alexandre Astruc declared what he termed to be “a new avant garde” in cinema—*la camera stylo*.<sup>1</sup> Translated as “camera pen,” Astruc’s concept suggested that due to certain changes in the film industry, developments in cinematographic technologies, and a rising generation of filmmakers, cinema was developing into a new means of self-expression. Astruc writes of the significance of this development in cinema:

After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving the images of an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel.<sup>2</sup>

Astruc’s essay laid the foundation for what would later be called the *auteur theory* of cinema.<sup>3</sup> Astruc describes how the “artist”—or a film director—wields the “camera stylo” to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences on screen and thereby gains the status of “auteur.”

The auteur theory was popularized by the film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in which Astruc—along with fellow French film scholars and makers Andre Bazin, Eric Rohmer, Francois Truffaut, and others—engaged with movies as art.<sup>5</sup> The group poured over the cinematic works of filmmakers like Orson Welles, Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, and even genre directors working in the big studios like John Ford and Howard Hawks, and they identified what

## WHAT IS AN AUTHOR?

In 1969, French scholar Michel Foucault wrote an essay titled “What is an Author?” in which he states “to this day, the “author” remains an open question ...”<sup>4</sup> Despite the common use of the term, Foucault recognizes authorship not as a given, but rather as a conceptual category used in certain branches of interpretive theory, rooted in particular histories and cultures. So, while we commonly discuss works of art, media, and culture using this term, Foucault wants to highlight the tension around authorship.

### Discussion Question

*What are some of the strengths and limitations of thinking about media and art as creations of an author?*

they termed to be film artists or “auteurs.” This was significant because, as Astruc’s quote above suggests, up until this time movies were considered mere entertainment and the success (or failure) of a film was credited to the studio that produced it. This was due in part to the incredible control that movie studios (especially previous to the landmark antitrust case the *U.S. vs. Paramount Pictures* in 1948) wielded over the industry, controlling the production, distribution, and exhibition of films.<sup>6</sup> But it was also due to a failure of imagination, or perhaps of interpretation. During that time, to think that movies were art—and that a director working within an industry like Hollywood was an artist—was novel, if not controversial.<sup>7</sup>

Later the concept of the auteur was picked up and further developed into a full-fledged theory by American film scholars like Andrew Sarris<sup>8</sup> and Peter Wollen.<sup>9</sup> Sarris, for example, proposed a criterion for identifying an auteur. Organized in three concentric circles, his criterion of value argues that auteurs: (1) Demonstrate a degree of craftsmanship. (2) Develop an identifiable personal style. And (3) exhibit a type of intangible, resonant quality in their films which Sarris describes as “interior meaning.”<sup>10</sup>

## CHALLENGING THE AUTEUR

In response to Sarris’ articulation of the auteur theory, film scholar and critic Pauline Kael wrote multiple scathing critiques of this approach to analyzing film.<sup>11</sup> She argues that the theory is both mystical and inflexible, that it celebrates commercial products over artistic expressions, and, worst of all, that it is immature and misogynist. Kael asserts that the definition of the author that Sarris draws upon in his formulation of the auteur is

one that not only positions the individual as creator and determinant of meaning, but also privileges maleness. And this critique is fair—most of the filmmakers identified as “auteurs” were (and continue to be) men. And since the Enlightenment, the discourse around authorship has very rarely varied from the equation *author = individual = man*.

### Discussion Question

*What are the limitations of defining the authorship as the labor of an individual artist (rather than a collaboration of many skilled creators)? What are the limitations of understanding authors as primarily men or of only paying attention to the creative work produced by male creators?*

The breakup of the Hollywood studios’ monopoly on the film industry in 1948 and the increased accessibility of camera technologies over the next several decades contributed to a system of production that allowed Astruc’s idea of the *camera stylo* to flourish. This new opportunity for filmmakers to enact their creative visions on screen was demonstrated in the rise of independent, documentary, experimental, indigenous, and other “alternative” cinemas in subsequent decades. The boom in home video recording technologies in the 1980s and, more recently, the ubiquity of mobile and networked technologies has made video recording and distributing technologies nearly as accessible as pen and paper. In the age of YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitch, individuals have a greater opportunity than ever to wield their camera to “express [their] thoughts” and “translate [their] obsessions.”<sup>12</sup>

### Origins of the Author

This conception of art as the creation of an artist, author, or auteur is one that film and media inherited from existing cultural traditions within art history and literary theory. The idea that authors are individuals who express their emotions and communicate their intentions in their artistic work originates in the European Enlightenment of the 1600s. It was in this era that philosopher Rene Descartes famously wrote “I think therefore I am”<sup>13</sup> and introduced the idea of the self as an autonomous, rational being. The new conception of the individual had a massive impact on philosophical discourse as well as art, economics, and politics. Because of this new emphasis on the individual, scholars and critics increasingly understood art through the lens of authorship. Artists like Michaelangelo, Mozart, and Shakespeare were celebrated for their contributions to the cultural canon. Art—whether drama, painting, literature, or music—was considered the product of an individual’s labor, creative vision, and authorial intention. As a result of this shift toward the self, interpretations

of culture began to especially emphasize the author's motivations as the primary determinant of an artistic work's meaning.

This author-centric perspective—which was among the dominant approaches to interpretive thought for centuries—is effectively voiced by author Leo Tolstoy who in his 1897 book *What is Art?* writes, “Art begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications.”<sup>14</sup> This emphasis on the individual provides the foundation for much of interpretive theory in modernity as well as the development of other aspects of liberal societies, including capitalism and democracy. So, since the Enlightenment, we have chosen to celebrate the self, understanding culture principally as the creations of artists and authors and (even more importantly) understanding ourselves principally as individuals.

### Questioning the Author

In 1973, author David Macaulay wrote and illustrated a children's picture book entitled *Cathedral: The Story of Its Construction*.<sup>15</sup> The book is a meticulously crafted account of the construction of a fictional (but historically accurate) cathedral in 13th century France. It describes in detail the process of building the edifice—including the architectural plans, gathering of materials, laying of the foundation, fashioning of the stained-glass windows, and so on.

Consistent with this discussion of authorship, Macaulay's narrative begins by identifying those responsible for the cathedral's creation, including the architect, clergymen, patrons, masters of various trades, their assistants, and laborers, and (given that Macaulay's cathedral took close to a century to be completed) this list extends over multiple generations. Macaulay's description of the cathedral's construction is interesting in that it acknowledges the expectation that a work of art is the creation of some sort of author while, at the same time, problematizing that idea. It becomes clear throughout the book that while certain individuals might have played key roles in the structure's conception and construction, it is the community, with its collective labor and craftsmanship, that is probably more worthy of the credit than any single architect or artist. And this makes sense, given the historical context of the cathedral's construction. Previous to the Enlightenment and Descartes's “discovery of the self,” art was often understood in the context of the culture or tradition in which it was a part, as opposed to the creation of an individual. For example, in mythic and folkloric traditions from around the world, songs, stories, plays, and games were developed by the people, shared across communities, and passed from generation to generation.<sup>16</sup> A work as large as a cathedral or a film is arguably best understood in this context, rather than as the product of an individual artist's efforts. Interestingly, film director Ingmar Bergman always resisted the idea of the filmmaker as auteur, and even used the

cathedral as a model of the type of collaboration he aspired to in his work—“I would play my part in the collective building of a cathedral.”<sup>17</sup>

Does the concept of the author have an author? Was it Astruc that originated the idea of the film director as auteur? Or was it film theorist and director Francois Truffaut, when he first advocated for “les politique des auteurs”?<sup>18</sup> Or was it Astruc’s colleague Andre Bazin whose film theories provided the foundation of much of the work published in *Cahiers du Cinema*?<sup>19</sup> Or instead, did directors like Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Agnes Varda and other members of the French New Wave make a collective effort to wield their cameras as pens and approach their filmmaking as auteurs? Perhaps the theory is best attributed not to an individual but to the collective culture of cinema enthusiasts in mid-century France.

### THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY

In 1821, author and scholar Johann Wolfgang von Goethe developed a criterion for evaluating art based on the concept of “authorial intention.” When assessing a work of art, he asks the following questions: “What did the author set out to do? Was his plan reasonable and sensible, and how far did he succeed in carrying it out?”<sup>20</sup> Nearly a century later, literary scholars W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley challenged the idea that the author’s intention is the determinant of a work of art’s meaning or value.<sup>21</sup> Their discussion of “the intentional fallacy” argues that a poem, for example, should be evaluated by examining its characteristics, on its own merit as it were, rather than relying on the author’s intentions.

### Discussion Question

*What might be the benefits of learning about the intentions behind a particular media text? On the other hand, what might be the benefits of ignoring the author’s intentions when interpreting art or popular culture?*

Scholars throughout the 20th century grappled with the limitations of authorial intent as the final determinant of a work’s meaning. In a 1967 essay, literary theorist Roland Barthes challenges the place of privilege that the author has traditionally held in Western culture and emphasizes the active role played by the audience, famously declaring that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.”<sup>22</sup> Barthes argues that in order for us to create a space for readers to actively interpret art and literature, we have to let go of the idea that a work has a “single ‘theological meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God).”<sup>23</sup> This re-thinking of the relationship between authors and readers is especially

applicable in the contemporary media landscape in which the categories of producer and consumer are increasingly blurred.<sup>24</sup> In the age of mobile technologies and social media, audiences have the opportunity not only to actively interpret culture but also to create and share their own work with others.

## Remixing the Self

As new media technologies and practices emerge and thinkers like Barthes introduce new perspectives on the meaning-making process, we are encouraged to reconsider not just our understandings of authorship but also of ourselves.<sup>25</sup> For example, in the mid-20th century, the Birmingham School's studies of subcultures within England explored how particular communities and classes appropriate pieces of popular culture in order to express themselves and construct their identities.<sup>26</sup> In their 1975 book *Resistance Through Rituals*, Stuart Hall, John Clarke, Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, and Tony Jefferson examine groups like punks, mods, and teddy-boys who took elements of mainstream culture and modified them for their own, often subversive, purposes. In addition to highlighting some interesting instances of remix, the Birmingham scholars' research reveals how communities, cultures, and identities are constructed—through a clash of forces that include individual agency, institutional authority, dominant cultures, material conditions, social relations, and so forth. This research reveals how the concept of “self” is not constant or innate (as Enlightenment-era philosophers such as Descartes suggest). Rather, we can best understand our “identities” as an accumulation of experiences, practices, and ideologies that we are continually creating and

### ORIGINS OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Before Jenkins introduced the term “participatory culture” to describe the shifting dynamics between authors, texts, and audiences in contemporary media culture, Michel de Certeau<sup>28</sup> was also interested in these complex relationships. He argues that when we reduce the meaning-making process to media affecting an audience, or a reader simply absorbing the text's meaning, we ignore how the public “poaches”—or makes their own meanings of—popular culture. He writes, “This misunderstanding assumes that ‘assimilating’ necessarily means ‘becoming similar to’ what one absorbs, and not ‘making something similar’ to what one is, making it one's own, appropriating or reappropriating it.”<sup>29</sup>

### Discussion Question

*What is a contemporary example of the textual poaching that de Certeau describes?*

recreating. So, it makes sense that today—when media are integrated into almost every part of our lives—popular culture plays a significant role in our construction and performance of self.<sup>27</sup>

In 1992, cultural scholar Henry Jenkins published *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*, continuing the efforts made by the Birmingham scholars to research subcultures' re-appropriation of popular cultural texts as a means of expressing themselves and creating communities.<sup>30</sup> In the book, Jenkins demonstrates fan communities as active audiences, writing their own interpretations, vidding their own versions, and in so doing, making their own meanings of their favorite media. In the book's introduction, Jenkins describes his project and explains the significance of its title:

Drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, it proposes an alternative conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture. Viewed in this fashion, fans become a model of the type of textual “poaching” de Certeau associates with popular reading ... Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media.<sup>31</sup>

One key emphasis of Jenkins' study is the way that fans “poach” and “remix” these televised texts as a means of not only creatively re-interpreting their favorite media, but also developing their sense of self and their place in society. Jenkins even cites a visit to his first convention “amidst the excitement surrounding *Star Wars*” as the moment when his identities as fan and scholar merged and launched his academic career examining fan cultures.<sup>32</sup>

## **RADICAL COLLABORATION**

In their 2016 book *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, Jenkins, Ito, and boyd explore how networked media technologies facilitate not just individual expression, but perhaps more importantly, radical collaboration—the type that has the potential to transcend geographic boundaries, generational gaps, cultural differences and skill levels. boyd writes, “participatory culture requires us to move beyond a focus on individualized personal expression; it is about an ethos of ‘doing it together’ in addition to ‘doing it yourself.’”<sup>33</sup>

### **Discussion Question**

*How might creative collaboration be a means of fostering individual reflection, personal expression, and interpersonal connection?*

More and more, we form our identities through our engagements with popular media, through the careful construction of our Instagram accounts, the curation of the things we “like” and “follow” on TikTok and Twitter, the interactions we have and the relationships we form online. For example, media scholar danah boyd describes how teenagers use social media to develop their identities and curate a digital space of their own.

Just as many middle-class teens use different media artifacts—including photographs, posters and tchotchkes—to personalize their bedrooms, teens often decorate their online self-presentations using a variety of media.<sup>34</sup>

Today’s kids are similar to those punks and teddy-boys of post-war Britain in their piecing together popular cultural artifacts to present themselves, and yet the materials they use have changed: safety pins and patches have been replaced by profile pics and retweets.

## **AUTHORSHIP AND NEW MEDIA**

New media scholar Lev Manovich explores how the advent of digital and networked media technologies has influenced both our understanding of and approach to creative production.<sup>35</sup> For example, he argues that in the digital age, software plays an increasingly prominent role in the creative process. A program is more than just the medium that a creator uses to communicate their creative vision. Instead, software wields a power of its own through the affordances and limitations it offers the user.

### **Discussion Question**

*How might emerging media technologies that make use of algorithms and artificial intelligence cause us to further question traditional notions of authorship?*

The take-away is that contemporary media has encouraged us to question traditional ideas of both self and authorship. We might be (at least sometimes) rational autonomous beings, but we are also struggling to navigate a sea of shifting cultural trends, institutional structures, material conditions, and social pressures. A work of art might (sometimes) be the creation of a single author whose message is communicated to an audience through the use of narrative or aesthetics or whatever. And/or it may be the product of the collective efforts of a group of artists. And/or it may be a remix, revision, or recontextualization of existing works. And/or it may be a collaboration between the author and their audience, or even, a collaboration between the author and their software. Who knows? Maybe as we continue through the 21st century,

and things AI, VR, and so on, we will face entirely new challenges to our conceptions of author and self.

## What Is a Self?

Despite the clear limitations of understanding media and culture as the creations of individual authors, there are some justifications for this approach. Perhaps among these justifications is our need to make meaning not just of art but of our existence. The first paragraph of Macaulay's *Cathedral* states:

For hundreds of years the people of Europe were taught by the church that God was the most important force in their lives. If they prospered, they thanked God for his Kindness. If they suffered, they begged for God's mercy, for surely God was punishing them.<sup>36</sup>

There is a certain safety in attributing meaning—whether it be of a poem or of human existence itself—to some sort of grand creator, an “Author-God.” With this attribution of meaning to an author comes not only an understanding of the origin of a work but also a surety of self. If we can determine the definitive meaning of a poem, perhaps there is some hope that we can find meaning in our existence. In searching to understand ourselves, validate our interpretations and ideologies, and establish our identities, we often search out “Author-Gods” (real or imagined) and rely upon them for validation of our interpretations of art and our understandings of existence.

On the other hand, as much as we might attribute meaning to these “Author-Gods,” we are also always already engaged in a process of making our own meanings of art, the world, and ourselves through nearly everything we write, read, make, and do. Agnes Varda—one of the key figures in the French New Wave of film scholars and directors discussed earlier—examines the idea of the self through much of her creative work, often turning the camera on herself.<sup>37</sup> For example, in her 2000 film *The Gleaners and I*, Varda explores both the practice of gleaning and her own identity as a “gleaneuse.” Throughout the film, she visits with folks foraging in fields after the harvest, talks with dumpster-divers filling their bellies and making art with refuse, and reflects on gleaning as a way of understanding art-making and her work as a filmmaker specifically. Varda is a remixer, piecing together her experiences, interactions, and impressions to explore an idea, tell a story, and, perhaps most significantly, explore the eponymous “I” (in the title's English translation, at least).

In one scene from the film, she visits a local field after the harvest and questions a lawyer about the regulations that govern gleaning. Varda wanders among the remaining produce and reflects:

I'll walk my small camera among the colored cabbages and film other vegetables which catch my eye. Of this type of gleaning, of images,

impressions, there is no legislation, and gleaning is defined figuratively as a mental activity. To glean facts, acts and deeds, to glean information. And for forgetful me, it's what I have gleaned that tells where I've been.<sup>38</sup>

It is clear that Varda's project is not just to make sense of the ways in which people collect, reuse, and remix, but also to make sense of herself. In perhaps the most poignant, vulnerable, and explicitly existential sequence in the film, Varda returns home from a trip to Japan and unpacks her luggage. She shares souvenirs from her travels—tchotchkes, periodicals, and photographs—each with some special significance to her. Thumbing through photos she took of some Rembrandt paintings she happened upon in Tokyo, Varda reflects in her simultaneously playful and philosophical voice. “Saskia, up close,” she remarks, her camera focused on her photograph of the painting. But as the camera pans, so does the focus of her exploration.

And then my hand up close. I mean, this is my project: to film with one hand my other hand. To enter into the horror of it. I find it extraordinary. I feel as if I am an animal, worse, I am an animal I don't know.<sup>39</sup>

The art that Varda collects and the art she makes certainly communicate who she is to the world (not unlike the social media profiles of today's teens). But perhaps more important is how these photos, paintings, periodicals, as well as the work she has produced over her long career as a filmmaker, reveal to her who she is. Gleaning these bits and pieces of her life, filming her hand with her other hand, taking this footage is a means of taking inventory of who she is and what has made her so. Returning to the photos of the paintings, Varda adds one last thought: “And here's Rembrandt's self-portrait, but it's just the same in fact. Always a self-portrait.”<sup>40</sup>

Answering Foucault's question “What is an author?” is challenging because as we attempt to provide some explanation for the origins of works of media, art, and culture, these explanations are tenuous, a tower of cards waiting to be toppled. But perhaps the concept of the author is so difficult to pin down because to do so would require us also to define the self. Who are we? Who am I? An autonomous rational being? A fan? An artist? We collect, curate, analyze, and create media and art with the intent to see ourselves in these works and gain some sense of self.

### Case Study: *Star Wars*

With the critical acclaim of films like *THX 1138* (1971) and *American Graffiti* (1973) and perhaps more importantly, the overwhelming commercial success of franchises like *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*, it is fair to include George Lucas among the most significant filmmakers of all time. The success of *Star Wars* has made him not only the subject of a whole field of film scholarship and

of numerous biographies<sup>41</sup> but also somewhat of a celebrity himself. Lucas is synonymous with *Star Wars*. The author and his story have become one. His identity is bound up in this work.

Scholars following in the tradition of *Cahiers du Cinema* have made the argument that Lucas can be understood as an auteur.<sup>42</sup> The success of his films speaks to his level of craftsmanship. His angsty, adventurous heroes and familiar-almost-to-the-point-of-self-parody use of the “wipe” as a transition between shots signal a signature style. And the themes of loss and escape followed by growth and freedom found in his films (beyond being consistent with traditional narrative structures in film and literature before it) might be understood in relation to Sarris’ “interior meaning.” Though, to simply argue for Lucas’s inclusion in the pantheon of great directors is to miss the point—the authorship of something as significant as *Star Wars* deserves a bit more attention.

### ***A Disturbance in the Force***

As discussed earlier, the celebration of Lucas as an auteur and his characterization as the sole author of something like *Star Wars* has clear limitations. Not unlike Macaulay’s fictional cathedral, a film like *Star Wars* (and the empire<sup>43</sup> it has become) is not the product of the labors of a single individual. To credit Lucas as the author of *Star Wars* would ignore the efforts of screenwriter Lawrence Kasdan and directors Irvin Kirshner and Richard Marquand, the performances from lead actors Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher, the achievements of teams of special effects artists, and the contributions of the rest of the cast and crew. And that still does not take into consideration the individuals who were responsible for making the movies into a franchise, complete with toys and games, novels and comic books, theme park rides, spinoffs, and even that infamous holiday special.<sup>44</sup>

Analyses of *Star Wars* and accounts of the development of the series have also explored at length how in his authorship of *Star Wars*, Lucas pulled from existing films and books, historical events, and philosophical traditions. His space opera combines aesthetics borrowed from Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, plot and characters from Kurasawa’s *Hidden Fortress*, the tone of *Flash Gordon* serials, villains from Nazi Germany, themes from Eastern philosophies like Buddhism and Shintoism, along with conventions of fantasy literature, western films, and others.<sup>45</sup> *Star Wars* may be one of the most impactful franchises in film history, but it may also be understood as the most successful mash-up video, and the man credited as its creator, the most successful remixer.<sup>46</sup>

Since the acquisition of Lucasfilm by the Disney Corporation in 2012, this understanding of Lucas as the Author-God of this universe has become even more complicated. New directors have now been given a seat in the captain’s chair, helming the franchise for a bit. But actually it may be studio heads like Kathleen Kennedy, who became president of Lucasfilm when it was acquired by Disney,

who is most likely the master of this universe nowadays. As brand manager for *Star Wars*, Kennedy runs the shop that has developed not only a new trilogy of films, but also multiple spinoff movies, animated and live-action television programs, multiple web series, mobile applications and video games, and entire galaxies within the Disney theme parks. And the much-publicized reshoots of the Gareth Edwards–directed *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016)<sup>47</sup> as well as the replacement of Phil Lord and Chris Miller for Ron Howard as director of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018)<sup>48</sup> and Colin Trevorrow for J.J. Abrams on *Star Wars: Rise of Skywalker* (2019)<sup>49</sup> suggest that while Truffaut, Artaud, and their crowd celebrated directors working within the system as auteurs, Hollywood today is not unlike the studio system of old, in which execs ultimately call the shots. It could even be argued that *Star Wars*, more than simply drawing upon the characters, narratives, and themes of myths and legends, is among the most popular mythologies in American (and perhaps global) culture.

### THE AUTHOR WITH A THOUSAND FACES

Among the texts Lucas and his collaborators “poached” in their creation of *Star Wars* are the writings of narratologist Joseph Campbell.<sup>50</sup> Campbell is known for developing a grand theory of narratology he calls “The Hero’s Journey.” According to Campbell, there exists a specific story structure that provides the framework for nearly all mythological narratives. The specific character types and plot points that Campbell identifies are recognizable in Luke Skywalker’s journey because Lucas deliberately crafted the space saga with “The Hero’s Journey” in mind. This cinematic homage to Campbell’s work developed into a genuine friendship between the two men, and Lucas has even referred to the scholar as “my Yoda.”<sup>51</sup> When Lucas screened the original trilogy for his friend, Campbell reportedly remarked, “You know, I thought real art had stopped with Picasso, Joyce, and Mann. Now I know it hasn’t.”<sup>52</sup>

#### Discussion Question

*How might an author’s use of genre conventions or traditional narrative structures complicate the conception of art as personal expression?*

### *Star Wars as Myth, Interpretation as Authorship*

This status of *Star Wars* as myth suggests a further complication of our understanding of its authorship. Lucas himself has referred to *Star Wars* as a “fairy tale.”<sup>53</sup> While we often credit mythological and folk narratives to individuals—Homer’s *Odyssey* or Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little

Mermaid”—the oral traditions that produced these tales are not adequately accounted for by discussions of authorship. Folklorist Jack Zipes notes that while certain individuals might have played a role in a story’s dissemination, folk and fairy tales are perhaps more accurately attributed to the communities and cultures in which they circulated:

According to the evidence we have, gifted narrators told the tales to audiences who actively participated in their transmission by posing questions, suggesting changes and circulating the tales among themselves.<sup>54</sup>

If we are to understand *Star Wars* as a modern myth, we might also identify George Lucas as the “gifted narrator” Zipes refers to. But it is *Star Wars*’ active audiences who, through their questions, changes, tellings and retellings of this mythology, have claimed some ownership, if not authorship, over their favorite franchise.

The *Star Wars* fan community’s claim to the franchise has expressed itself in a number of ways since *A New Hope* was released in 1977. For example, returning to *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins describes how in the early 1980s *Star Wars* fans came under fire when Lucas threatened to prosecute publications that featured erotic fan-fiction related to the films. Interestingly, the president of the official *Star Wars* fan club at the time defended Lucasfilm’s right to maintain control over the use of *Star Wars* characters. When the president communicated this defense in a letter addressed to the fan community—“You don’t own these characters and can’t publish anything about them without permission”—it was met with resistance from the *Star Wars* slash-fiction community.<sup>55</sup> This group of mostly female fan-fic authors voiced their opposition to Lucas’ claim over the meaning of the series in fan-zines and continued writing and circulating their stories undercover.

During the decades that followed, the fandom for *Star Wars* only grew larger and stronger. While no new films were released in the decade following *The Return of the Jedi* in 1983, *Star Wars* remained a significant presence in American popular culture. Conventions were held. Fan-zines were circulated. Books and toys sold. Disney partnered with Lucas to develop theme park attractions Star Tours and Captain EO. In the 1990s, Lucasfilm re-released the original trilogy in theaters and home video, Lucas having made a number of changes to the films, supposedly as a means of modernizing some of the visual effects and renewing audience interest in the franchise in preparation for the release of a trilogy of prequel films. So, it was no surprise that when the first of these prequels, *The Phantom Menace*, was released in 1999, it was described by some as “the most anticipated event in modern movie history.”<sup>56</sup>

But while the film broke box-office records at its release, it was not warmly received by a large segment of its audience. Not only was the film panned by film critics, but even some segments of the series’ devoted

fan-base expressed dissatisfaction with the film. Complaints included that the story was overly simplistic or even inconsequential to the *Star Wars* mythology, the writing and acting was poor, the introduction of “midi-clorians” was dumb, the alien characters were obnoxious and, most regrettably, relied on racial stereotypes. And given that the *Star Wars* fan community was larger, more organized, and—especially since the advent of the consumer Internet in the mid-1990s—more equipped to express their opinions, they let Lucas have it.

At the heart of the wrestling match between Lucas and his fans is not really an issue of intellectual property ownership, or even of authorial intention versus audience interpretation. Rather, the conflict is over identity formation. Those female fan-fic writers resisted Lucas’ exercise of authority because they had re-appropriated these characters and narratives for their own purposes, to make some sense of themselves. In response, the author (and a male one, at that) was threatening to take that aspect of their identity from them. In the 1990s, the fans who complained about midi-clorians and Greedo shooting first were certainly upset by Lucas’ alterations of these elements of their favorite films. But more importantly, they resisted the idea that Lucas could reach back into their childhoods and revise something that they found magical, something that (like the fairy tales of old) expressed their values and contributed to their development as individuals.

### THE PEOPLE VS. GEORGE LUCAS

In 2010, filmmaker and *Star Wars* fan Alexandre O. Philippe released a documentary titled *The People vs. George Lucas* that explored the relationship between Lucas and the franchise’s fans. Over the years, the *Star Wars* fandom, as devoted as they often are, has been the source of some serious criticism of the series. From the debate over who shot first (Han or Greedo), to the backlash against Jar-Jar, to more recently, the often-vicious attacks against the cast and crew of *The Last Jedi*, vocal fans have made their discontent with the franchise known. One of the fans interviewed in Philippe’s doc effectively articulates the conclusion the film arrives at saying, “It’s tough to put George Lucas on a level with Shakespeare and with Homer right now, but you know what? It’s not about the author. It’s about the culture that embraces it. It’s about what that author evoked.”<sup>57</sup>

#### Discussion Question

*What are other examples of fan communities claiming ownership—and authorship—of their favorite media?*

And it should come as no surprise, especially considering the central themes of *Star Wars*, that when the “Author-God” exerted his control over the myth they found so magical, the fans resisted. Zipes writes that “the best of folk and fairy tales chart ways for us to become masters of history and of our own destinies.”<sup>58</sup> And even George Lucas himself has described the central ethos of his films as one of empowerment:

Most of my movies are about the fact that you’re in that little place, it’s the little prison in your brain—the door’s open but you can’t leave. But all you have to do is walk out and say, ‘Hey! I’m gonna do this.’<sup>59</sup>

If *Star Wars* fans have learned anything from the series, it is the idea that a moisture farmer from Tatooine can be the one to restore the balance to the force and a rag-tag band of rebels can come together and challenge an empire.

### ***May the Force Be with Us***

Multiple generations have now grown up with *Star Wars*. Some of my earliest memories were of playing with Boba Fett and Chewbacca action figures in a makeshift lair fashioned out of a discarded cinderblock. Today, my own children continue this age-old battle between the Light and the Dark Side. And yet to them, *Star Wars* is not just the feature films, and certainly not simply the original trilogy. To them, the meaning of *Star Wars* is inextricably bound to the Star Tours ride, the *Star Wars Rebels* television series, and *Angry Birds Star Wars* mobile game. But even beyond the franchise itself, my kids understand *Star Wars* to include the many memes that feature “Baby Yoda,” the viral video of the laughing mom wearing the Chewbacca mask, Bad Lip Reading’s “Seagulls” song, and perhaps most importantly, the drawings of Vader on their wall and the Jedi games they invent on the playground. There is little to no distinction in their mind between authorized and unauthorized versions of the *Star Wars* story. Though to my kids, authorship is not inconsequential as much as it is a forgone conclusion—it is *them*, not George Lucas (of whom they are completely unaware), who determine the meaning of *Star Wars*.

With the digital and networked media technologies available to audiences today, every fan with a device can create and disseminate their own take on the mythology. From re-cuts of the prequel trilogy to elaborate theories that claim Jar Jar is a secret Sith Lord, fans are using their phones, laptops, and social media to not simply actively interpret their favorite films, but also shape and share their own *Star Wars* stories. Similar to the oral traditions of old, today’s fan communities converse and critique the tales; they create and circulate their own versions. And the fans’ shaping and sharing of their own versions of *Star Wars* is significant because it requires us to shift our focus away from those who

have traditionally been credited as creators and acknowledge the role that popular culture plays in the process of authoring one's identity.

### Activity: Textual Poaching

This chapter's creative activity—borrowing its name from Jenkins and de Certeau—explores how taking media and remixing it might be a means of better understanding and expressing oneself. Participants remix a media text that represents some aspect of their identity, revising it in ways that demonstrate their negotiation between dominant representations and their personal understanding of self.

*Start by making a list of words that you would use to describe yourself. What characteristics do you have? What are your interests? Who do you identify as? What defines you?*

In my case, I might define myself as a teacher, as a cis-gendered male, a movie-lover. I'm white. I'm a father. And so on.

*Next, choose one of these descriptions of self and find an example from popular culture that represents this aspect of your identity. The representation can be new or old, in any medium or mode—television or literature, advertisements or news, whatever.*

In my case, Ben Stein droning on about “voodoo economics” in the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* may represent my “teacherness.” *He-Man* may represent my “maleness.” *Amelie* may represent my love of visiting the movie theater. And so on.

*Now, examine the representation of this aspect of yourself. What elements of this representation correspond with your perspectives and experiences? What contradicts your perspectives and experiences? Locate a productive tension between your understanding of this aspect of yourself and the media's portrayal of yourself.*

For example, I feel that *Ferris Bueller's* representation of educators is unfortunately true in a lot of cases, and among the reasons I chose to become a professor and study media education. Or I may admire *He-Man's* green and yellow armored tiger companion Battle Cat but feel a bit insecure about how muscular *He-Man* is compared to myself. You get the idea.

*Now, remix or remake the media you've chosen in a way that your new creation demonstrates your negotiation between this aspect of your identity and how it is portrayed in media.*

Here is an example.

### **superMEN**

As mentioned above, I identify as a cis-gendered man, and use he/him pronouns. Among the most prevalent representations of masculinity in popular culture in my lifetime have been superhero comics, movies, and other media. In many ways, these superhero stories have shaped my identity, and specifically my understanding of masculinity. My mother tells the story of how, as a young

child, I would ask her to read to me at night from the DC Superhero-themed dictionary before bedtime. As a slightly older child, I collected *He-Man* and *Star Wars* action figures and watched *Batman* and *Ninja Turtle* cartoons. When I was old enough to earn an allowance, I visited the local comic shop weekly, consuming titles like *X-Men* and *Daredevil* as quickly as they were published.

In my adulthood, I have enjoyed the explosion of superhero films and television. Even as an adult approaching middle age, I celebrate my birthday nearly every year seeing the newest installment of the Marvel Cinematic Universe with family and friends. And as a father, I now spend a lot of time playing superheroes—videogames and board games, dress-up, and make-believe—with my young sons. And this last experience has caused me to reflect on the role of these representations in my understanding and performance of maleness, including how they are shaping, directly or indirectly, my sons' perceptions and performances of gender.

One thing I have observed is that while my experience as a father is closely tied to my understanding of masculinity, the men in superhero comics are rarely represented in this role. And in the rare case of the superhero father-figure (Mr. Incredible and Logan, for example) their performance of their gender maintains problematic understandings of masculinity. These “superMEN” are defined by their strength and aggression, their use of violence to resolve conflict, and their position as “protectors of women.” Just consider the gendered division of super-labor in the Incredible family—while father and son are blessed with the powers of strength and speed, the girls are left with flexibility and invisibility.

So, while I am drawn to some of these representations of masculinity, I also recognize how problematic they are. I find the vision of masculinity articulated by social activist Cooper Thompson to correspond with my aims as a man and as a father:

What, then, could we be teaching boys about being men?

- To accept their vulnerability, express a range of emotions such as fear and sadness, and ask for help and support in appropriate situations.
- To be gentle, nurturant, cooperative, and communicative, and, in particular, learn nonviolent means of resolving conflicts.
- To accept those behaviors and attitudes that have been traditionally labeled as ‘feminine’ as necessary for full human development—thereby reducing homophobia and misogyny.<sup>60</sup>

What if I re-wrote the stories of some of the biggest super-powered men in popular culture as fathers? And what if in these representations, I made an effort to challenge the toxic masculinity that these characters so often exhibit? In 2013, I collaborated with an illustration student named Cody Robles, also a dad, to create a series of short web-comics following Wolverine, Batman, Iron Man, and Superman, and the result is *superMEN* (see [Figures 5.1–5.4](#)).





## ROSIE REMIXED

When assigned the Textual Poaching activity in one of my undergraduate Media Arts classes, Melissa chose to explore her identity as an American, and settled on the World War II era image of Rosie the Riveter as the media text she would engage with for the assignment (see [Figure 5.5](#)). But as she studied the poster, it was its representation of femininity, not Americanness, that impressed her most. In her artist statement, Melissa writes, “This poster has come to be a symbol of feminine strength, power and independence.” And yet Melissa noticed a disparity between this representation of female empowerment and how she sometimes feels as a woman. “There are all these expectations that we are supposed to live up to, but I don’t always—usually—feel capable of living up to those standards,” Melissa adds. To visually represent this tension, Melissa remixed the image by cropping out Rosie’s raised bicep, adding dark circles under her eyes, blemishes on her skin, and tears running down her face. The caption—in the original, an assertion of strength and will—was revised to account for the obstacles that women face in attempting to achieve the type of success or realize the goal of female empowerment that Rosie represents.



FIGURE 5.5 Rosie Remixed.

### Discussion Question

*What are the limitations of the traditional idea of authorship's implication that the author is cis-gendered, white, heterosexual, middle-class, male, and so on?*

## RONNIE THE RIVETER

In the spirit of the myths and folktales that were told and re-told, another of my students, Noah (who completed the Textual Poaching assignment a different semester than Melissa) also chose to remix Rosie (see Figure 5.6). Like Melissa, Noah also focused on the image's significance in representing gender equality, but identifying as male, he chose to shift his focus to men's involvement in the feminist movement. Like Melissa, he changed the caption to read "Can We Do It?" but does so with the intention of challenging men to be more engaged in efforts to empower women. "Shouldn't everyone be able to have the courage to work hard for moral causes and help everyone else to do the same, regardless of gender?" Noah writes in his artist statement. "It's sometimes hard to 'be a man,'" Noah writes in his artist statement. "It has a lot more to it than shooting things or picking up heavy objects. Supporting women in their ambitions is just as manly as anything."



FIGURE 5.6 Ronnie the Riveter.

### Discussion Question

*What are other examples of re-makes or re-mixes in which the new author's perspective and background bring new potential meanings to the text?*

## Conclusion

In 1957, filmmaker Francois Truffaut imagined what the future of cinema looked like, writing

The film of tomorrow appears to me as even more personal than an individual and autobiographical novel, like a confession, or a diary. The filmmakers will express themselves in the first person and will relate what has happened to them: it may be the story of their first love, or their most recent; of their political awakening; the story of a trip, a sickness, their military service, their marriage, their last vacation ... and it will be enjoyable because it will be new and true ... The film of tomorrow will resemble the person who made it and the number of spectators will be proportional to the number of friends the director has. The film of tomorrow will be an act of love.<sup>61</sup>

While this quote articulates Truffaut's personal theory of filmmaking (which he would explore in several semi-autobiographical films), it also prefigures the work of independent and documentary filmmakers who, in the latter half of the 20th century, would pick up cameras and tell stories that mattered to them personally. But his conception of the film of the future is most interesting, prophetic even, when applied to the culture of video on the web today. The channels vary—YouTube, Twitch, and TikTok, stories, reels, and viral videos—but the pattern is clear. The dominant form of cinema today is that produced by the person on the street, using their mobile device, piecing together their own experiences with pop culture memes, to share with “the friends the director has.” And as a result, when we take inventory of our many identities, we may need to include “remixer” and even “auteur” on our list.

## Notes

- 1 Astruc (1968).
- 2 Astruc (1968), pp. 17–18.
- 3 The first use of the term “auteur” to describe the film director is generally credited to Francois Truffaut, arguing for a “politique des auteurs” (a policy emphasizing directors) within the *Cahiers du Cinema* (Truffaut, 1957), though similar celebrations of the film director as artist can be found in the criticism of Walter Julius Bloem (Bloem, 1924), James Agee (Agee, 1958), and others.
- 4 Foucault (1977).
- 5 See Bickerton (2014); Browne and Hiller (1989); Graham and Vicendeau (2009); Hiller (1985, 1992); Neupert (2007).
- 6 See McDonald et al. (2015).
- 7 See MacGowan (1965).
- 8 See Sarris (1962–1963, 1963).
- 9 Wollen (2013).
- 10 Sarris (1962–1963).

- 11 See Kael (1963, 1971).
- 12 Truffaut (1957), p. 223.
- 13 Descartes (2008), p. 24.
- 14 Tolstoy (1960), p. 50
- 15 Macaulay (1981).
- 16 Zipes (2012).
- 17 Bergman (1954).
- 18 See Truffaut (1954, 1957).
- 19 Bazin (1957).
- 20 Goethe (1921), p. 140.
- 21 Wimsatt & Beardsley (1954).
- 22 Barthes (1977), p. 148.
- 23 Barthes (1977), p. 146.
- 24 Jenkins (2006).
- 25 See boyd (2014); Buckingham (2008); Gardner and Davis (2013); Ito et al. (2009); Turkle (2012).
- 26 Hall and Jefferson (1993).
- 27 See Goffman (1959); Rosenberg (1986).
- 28 de Certeau (1984).
- 29 de Certeau (1984), p. 166.
- 30 Jenkins (2013).
- 31 Jenkins (2013), p. 23.
- 32 Jenkins (2013), p. 5.
- 33 Jenkins et al. (2016), p. 181.
- 34 boyd (2014), p. 47.
- 35 Manovich (2002).
- 36 Macaulay (1981), p. 1.
- 37 See Varda (1969, 1976, 1988, 2004, 2008); Varda & JR (2017).
- 38 Varda (2000).
- 39 *ibid.*
- 40 *ibid.*
- 41 See Baxter (2016); Champlin (1992); Jones (2016); Pollock (1999).
- 42 See Larsen (1993); Lewis (2003); McDaniel (2004); Von Gunden (1991).
- 43 Pun intended.
- 44 See Star Wars Holiday Special (2021).
- 45 See Berger (2012); Brode (2012); Charles (2012); Deyneka (2012); Kaminski (2012); Rubey (2012).
- 46 See Ferguson (2016a, 2016b); Wickman (2015).
- 47 Kit (2016).
- 48 Kit & Ford (2017).
- 49 Kit & Galuppo (2017).
- 50 Campbell (1949/2008); Deyneka (2012).
- 51 Seastrom (2015).
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 Zito (1977), p. 13.
- 54 Zipes (2006), p. 7.
- 55 Jenkins (2013), p. 31.
- 56 Eller (1999).
- 57 Philippe (2010).
- 58 Zipes (2006), p. 21.
- 59 Marotta (2015).
- 60 Thompson (1985).
- 61 Truffaut (1957), pp. 223–224.

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# 6

## CREATING COMMUNITY

Do media connect or disconnect us from each other? Are our uses of media empowering us to create and maintain strong communities? Do media facilitate creative collaboration and civic engagement? Or do media simply distract or divide us, preventing us from creating meaningful discourse and connection? These are not new questions, but since the advent of the Internet and social media, conversations about the role that media play in our creation of community have taken on special significance.

As this book demonstrates throughout, media do not do just *one thing*; they are not just *one thing*. Media are a myriad of things, and are put to a variety of uses, “good” and “bad.” They allow me to stay connected to friends and family who live far away, to keep up with conversations about my interests, to become involved in campaigns for social justice, and even to continue to more effectively teach my students. And at the same time, the use of these same media technologies has been linked to an increase in feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression; they have been used to foster organizations defined by bigotry and xenophobia, to wage malicious online harassment campaigns, to plan a siege on the US Capitol, and to coordinate acts of terrorism around the world.<sup>1</sup>

In his 1954 book *The Public and Its Problems*, educational philosopher and social theorist John Dewey discusses what he sees as a crisis in contemporary social life. He writes

The local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so vast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complexly indirect in operation, that they are, from the standpoint of the members of local social units, unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Dewey specifies that *mass communication* is chief among the “vast forces” that have complicated the ways we understand and participate in our communities. But rather than simply lament this supposed disintegration of community, Dewey argues that as we recognize and embrace the potential for mass communication to connect us, we will be more capable than ever to create a unified society. He writes, “Communication can alone create a great community”—a community defined by active and equitable participation, that fosters substantive human relationships, promotes discourse, celebrates diversity, and causes individuals to gather around a common good.<sup>3</sup> The connection between the concepts *communication* and *community* makes sense—after all, they both share a *common* root.<sup>4</sup> Only when we are able to listen to each other, to recognize our shared values and experiences while also celebrating our differences, will we be able to create a cohesive public. Dewey challenges us to use media to come together and, even more, to deepen cultural participation, facilitate creative collaboration, and help construct a more just and equitable society.

### Myth Makers, Community Builders

Before we are able to use social media, mobile devices, and the Internet to create stronger communities, we may benefit from reflecting on how, throughout history, humanity has used various modes of communication and expression to connect with one another. For example, the layers and layers of cave paintings in Lascaux and other sites illustrate a tradition of human expression dating back an estimated 17,000 years. In nearly every known civilization, creative practices including song, dance, performance, the visual and plastic arts, and so on have long been methods of communal cultural participation. And oral traditions from all over the globe demonstrate the storytelling’s significance in human civilization since before recorded history. Folklorist Jack Zipes writes of the role of these traditions in the creation of community:

Once there was a time when folk tales were part of communal property and told with original and fantastic insights by gifted storytellers who gave vent to the frustration of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes in the folk narratives. Not only did the tales serve to unite the people of a community and help bridge a gap in their understanding of social problems in a language and narrative mode familiar to the listener’s experiences, but their aura illuminated the possible fulfillment of utopian longings and wishes which did not preclude social integration.<sup>5</sup>

According to Zipes, communities used oral storytelling traditions to articulate their values and express their anxieties. One example is the well-known story of Little Red Riding Hood which likely originated in France in the late Middle Ages and was famously first recorded by Charles Perrault in 1697.

The familiar tale stresses the safety of children (and especially adolescent girls) and warns of the dangers of both hungry beasts and violent, predatory men. Such tales were shared across generations and geographic locations and functioned as a common culture that members of the community could share.

More than simply represent a community's ideals though, folk stories also functioned as agents of socialization, teaching (especially young) members of the community how to think and behave so that they successfully integrated into the group and so that their society might survive. In his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses the importance of these tales in a child's education about their community, and the world.

Through most of man's [sic] history, a child's intellectual life, apart from immediate experiences within the family, depended on mythical and religious stories and on fairy tales ... [S]ince these stories answered the child's most important questions, they were a major agent in his socialization. Myths and closely related religious legends offered material from which children formed their concepts of the world's origin and purpose, and of the social ideals a child could pattern himself after.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to the example of Little Red Riding Hood, not only did the tale articulate the community's values and anxieties, but it also functioned as a teaching tool—introducing young listeners to the dangers of the wild, the realities of hunger and violence, and the necessity of community to survive such harsh circumstances. More specifically, Red's story warns young women about the threat of sexual abuse. For example, the earliest known versions of the story have Red choosing to take the path of “needles” rather than the path

### SHADES OF RED

This early version of Red Riding Hood's story, sometimes called “The Story of the Grandmother,” contrasts other well-known versions of the tale which often present problematic (if not outright damaging) understandings of female sexuality. The ending of Perrault's version, for example, includes Red being devoured by the Wolf followed by a lengthy “moral” in which the author cautions “pretty girls” to “stay on guard against all sorts of men” or else they will experience the same fate as Red.<sup>9</sup> In the Grimm Brothers' version of the story, Red is eaten by the Wolf, only to be rescued by the Woodsman. While each of these versions of the tale is derived from the same tradition and teaches something about girls' safety from sexual violence, the specific lessons taught and the particular representations of female sexuality deviate from those of the original story.

### Discussion Question

*How might the differences among the versions of the tale—for example, Red’s escape in the early version, her demise in Perrault’s, and her rescue in the Grimm Brothers’ telling—teach different lessons to listeners about female sexuality and the experience of sexual violence? What might these different versions indicate about the values and fears of the communities that told them?*

of “pins”—an indication that Red had come of age and begun her apprenticeship in needlework.<sup>7</sup> This reference serves as a subtle indicator of the character’s sexual maturation; so when, later in the story, the Wolf invites Red to throw her clothes into the fire and join him in bed, there is no mistaking the tale’s warning against predatory sexuality. In this early version, Red ultimately escapes the Wolf’s advances. This tale—which was most likely shaped by and shared among generations of peasant women—is a demonstration of how communities use storytelling in order to protect their members.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, the #MeToo movement has picked up the issue of sexual violence that the tale of Little Red Riding Hood addresses, but rather than promoting problematic (and often victim-blaming) ideas about female sexuality, the campaign has sought to uncover systems and behaviors that have contributed to sexual harassment and assault of women in particular. In 2006 activist Tarana Burke first coined the term “me too” on social media to promote empathy for and among survivors of sexual abuse.<sup>10</sup> The hashtag became particularly popular in 2017, when widespread allegations of sexual abuse against movie producer Harvey Weinstein (as well as many other male figures in the media industries) made global news. Actress Alyssa Milano took to Twitter, writing “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” The tweet went viral, the hashtag was posted by millions, and a community of survivors of sexual harassment and abuse emerged.<sup>11</sup>

This community of, mostly female, survivors of sexual abuse has utilized media technologies like the Internet and social media to express their values and fears, ones that resemble those alluded to in the tale of Red Riding Hood (safety and survival, violation and violence, respectively). And the phrase “me too” has since been adopted into the cultural lexicon, functioning similarly to the folktales from the past: communicating a shared set of principles and a sense of solidarity. Just as the peasant women who created and circulated the original “Story of the Grandmother” to empower young girls in the Middle Ages, in recent years, the #MeToo Movement has provided a community for survivors of sexual abuse. Perhaps even more importantly, the movement has led to measurable, positive changes in culture and policies surrounding sexual violence that have resulted in safer conditions for women in society (and in

the media industries in particular).<sup>12</sup> “The Story of the Grandmother” and the stories of the many, many survivors who used the #MeToo hashtag on social media are part of a long tradition of using communication and expression to forge social bonds and promote safety and solidarity in our communities.

## Shared Experiences

Each year in ancient Athens, the Greek people celebrated the Dionysia, a large festival centered around theatrical performances in honor of the god Dionysus. While we recognize the Greeks for first developing the concept of democracy, their society was actually quite divided—women, children, foreigners, and slaves were denied the freedoms afforded to free Greek men. However, there is evidence that during these festivals the social hierarchies were eased and the audiences of these performances (likely numbering in the tens of thousands) included both the community’s privileged and marginalized.<sup>13</sup> Watching these performances, individuals from different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds were brought together, if only for a brief time.

Among the highlights of the Dionysia’s communal experience was the performance of tragedies. Similar to the folktales discussed above, these plays drew upon long mythological traditions, making use of familiar characters and settings to speak to the fears and reinforce the values held by the community. Aristotle notes that tragedy in particular has a special ability to evoke emotions of *pity and fear* from its audience.<sup>14</sup> It is significant that this *catharsis* was not experienced by individuals in isolation, but by the diverse crowd watching the performance together. And through this shared experience, those in attendance—men and women, children and foreigners, slaves and so on—came together not just physically but also emotionally. Scholar Marina McCoy discusses the significance of these shared emotional experiences:

Watching Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, a play that raises serious questions about the legitimacy of enslavement, would be a particularly intense experience if a slave were watching the tragedy along with his master. In such cases, spectators may not only be engaged with their own responses to the staged events, but also with how others in the community are responding to them. A spectator’s συμπάθεια [sympathy], in such cases, would be not only for the enslaved women on stage, but also even for his own slave. . . . We see then the possibility of theatrical experience as a way of mediating social and political relationships through its production of συμπάθεια [sympathy] and dissonance, especially to the extent that Athenian theatre was a gathering of many in the larger community, across social differences.<sup>15</sup>

Because tragedies like *Trojan Woman* addressed issues facing members of the community in Athens, these performances had the potential to foster a greater

understanding among these different groups and even potentially lead to positive changes within the community. Whether gathering around the fire to listen to a folktale or congregating to view a drama performed onstage, throughout human history these communal practices have functioned to bring members of the community together and strengthen social bonds.

A scene from Francois Truffaut's 1959 film *The 400 Blows* offers an especially demonstrative (and delightful) example of these communal experiences in a more contemporary context.<sup>16</sup> The film's protagonist Antoine Doinel and his friends are hanging out in a theatre among a large audience of young children. In the sequence, the film abandons the interaction between the main characters to focus on the faces of the other kids as they watch the story of Little Red Riding Hood told with puppets. The camera captures in close-up the children's wide eyes as they watch the Wolf sneak up on Red and then cuts between their elated expressions when Red beats the beast away with a rolling pin. The young audience is united by their shared experience of enchantment. Among the crowd of smiling, shouting kids, the camera finds two children in particular who giggle at the puppets and exchange excited glances. When the Wolf is finally defeated, one of the two young children rests his head sweetly on the other's shoulder.

In my undergraduate media arts classes, when I teach about the potential of media to help us create and sustain community, I frequently screen this scene from *The 400 Blows*. And while I love seeing the delighted faces of the children in the film, sometimes I prefer (like Truffaut's camera) to turn around and observe my students as they watch the scene. Oftentimes, the

### ENCHANTED OR ENTRANCED?

Interestingly, this same approach of filming the faces of the audience members as they watch is employed by documentary filmmaker Godfrey Reggio, but with the opposite intent and effect. In both *Evidence* (1995) and *Visitors* (2014), Reggio does not celebrate the shared experience of enchantment, but rather, he critiques our tendency as individuals to become entranced by media. These films imply that the power of these stories (and really, these *screens*) is to distract us rather than connect us.<sup>17</sup>

### Discussion Question

*What are some key differences between the practice of listening or watching in isolation on a phone or tablet, versus attending something like a concert or a movie premiere with a crowd? What are the affordances and limitations of mobile devices in sharing experiences with art and media with others?*

expressions on their faces mirror those of the children, and my view in the darkened classroom of an audience of eager, excited young people is remarkably similar to that pictured onscreen. After watching the clip together, my students and I reflect on the depiction of this shared viewing experience, and then I note the scene's parallel to the experiences we have watching, enjoying, and discussing media in our classes. We recognize the pleasure we feel being part of an audience—perhaps in part because of our particular interest in studying and making media, but also because we recognize the power of communication and expression that invites us to share our laughter and tears, shrieks, and smiles with each other.

### **Communicating and Collaborating Online and In Real Life**

In the age of the Internet and mobile devices, how we make use of media to create community looks a bit different than it has in the past. Gratefully, the practice of attending plays, movies, concerts, and other cultural events has not ceased entirely yet. But increasingly, we express ourselves and communicate with each other using personal, digital devices on screens designed for an audience of one. On the other hand, we are finding ways to use emerging media technologies to increase our interactions and deepen our cultural participation in certain respects, allowing us to connect with our communities in ways that were not previously possible.

In his examination of oral traditions, Zipes writes how folk traditions are an especially effective means of bringing people together not just because of the tales' content or because they are shared in communal settings, but also because oral traditions invite active participation among audience members. The line between the authors and audience is blurred as listeners become the narrators themselves. Community is created not simply through gathering people together or sharing a set of values; rather, social bonds are created when individuals connect with one another and contribute to something bigger than themselves. Those varying versions of Little Red Riding Hood are the result of the tale being told in different contexts, by different narrators, over generations, and across cultures. People introduced their own variations on the tales, thus contributing to an ongoing process of creative collaboration. When we consider the possibilities of today's participatory culture—in which the division between author and audience has collapsed and nearly everyone is a content creator of some sort, making memes, remixing audio and video, sharing and curating their favorite bits of culture with their online communities—we might remember that this tradition of communal creative collaboration is nothing new.

In his 2012 book *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, social theorist Manuel Castells argues that while throughout history humans have banded together to sustain their societies, introducing new ideas and practices using whatever means at their disposal, there is something

## HITRECORD

Since 2005, actor and producer Joseph Gordon-Levitt has led a collaborative, media production company called hitRECORD, using the Internet to allow creators around the world to come together and collaborate on all sorts of multimedia art projects.<sup>18</sup> Members of the community post “records,” or starting points for creative work including drawings, songs, poems, video, audio, and so on, and then Gordon-Levitt and his network of collaborators develop these records into fully developed pieces that have included albums, books, short films, a TV series, and so on. A hitRECORD project that is particularly relevant to this chapter’s conversation is their re-imagining of Red’s tale. An interactive stage performance turned collaborative online project turned picture book, “Little Red Riding Hood: Redux” is a contemporary, feminist exquisite-corpse-by-way-of-the-Internet that re-envisioned Red as a knife-wielding hero rather than victim.<sup>19</sup>

## Discussion Question

*If you could re-write the story of Little Red Riding Hood to reflect your values around gender and sexuality, what changes might you make to the familiar tale? What might a collaborative re-telling of the folktale—that draws upon the experiences, perspectives, and skillsets of your classmates, group of friends, or online community—look like?*

unique about the way that we connect, interact, and organize in the age of the Internet.<sup>20</sup> In the past few decades, movements like #MeToo—but also Occupy Wall Street, the 2017 Women’s March, and especially Black Lives Matter—have come about because people have used these new networks to come together, no longer simply “sharing their sociability” but rather “sharing their outrage, their hope and their struggle.”<sup>21</sup> These movements are characterized by their commitment to equity and democracy; they are not bound by geography; and they thrive on many-to-many communication by which members share stories and contribute to the cause of the community.

This is not to suggest that contemporary media are being used solely to strengthen social bonds and further freedom. There are still substantial divisions within our society, some perpetuated—even exacerbated—by our uses of new media technologies. While the “accessibility gap” is gradually closing as underserved communities increasingly gain access to digital devices and networks, the “participation gap” remains a real challenge, as many of these same communities lack sufficient resources to educate people to effectively use these technologies for civic practice, cultural participation, and individual

expression.<sup>22</sup> Significant divisions exist between the corporate powers that run social media platforms and their users whose privacy is increasingly infringed upon and whose data is sold to advertisers. And in an age of alarming ideological polarization, divisions between political factions are worsened by algorithms that funnel social media users into echo chambers, isolating them from the diverse range of experiences and perspectives represented across the community at large.

And yet, in recent years we have seen how when people are motivated by a common emotional response, share an objective, and have access to digital media, they can create communities on a scale that was previously unimaginable. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations sparked by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other Black men and women developed into the largest protest movement in US history.<sup>23</sup> These protests, which involved somewhere between 15 and 26 million participants in the United States alone, dominated the news for months and developed into a worldwide phenomenon united in advocating for the lives of Black Americans and ending racial violence. This massive, global movement began with the introduction of a hashtag by three women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—who in 2013 harnessed the power of social media to increase awareness about the tragic consequences of police violence on the Black community.<sup>24</sup> Today, the Black Lives Matter movement is sustained by a vibrant community of activists around the world who come together both online and in person to share stories, engage in discourse, and pursue their goals of racial justice. Castells writes of the necessity of coming together in order to sustain community and create a better world: "... [I]t is through togetherness that people overcome fear and discover hope."<sup>25</sup> If we are to overcome the divisions that are damaging our society and to create communities that are characterized by discourse, democracy, and equity, we need to learn to use media to come together.

## FOLKTALES AND POLICING

The conversation about race and policing began long before the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, or even the modern Civil Rights Movement. During slavery, tales of the "tar baby" were circulated among Black folks as part of a rich oral tradition brought over from Africa. While the "tar baby" appears in a number of different stories, perhaps the most well-known tale involves the trickster Br'er Rabbit who is ensnared by a figure covered in tar and very narrowly escapes being eaten by his would-be captor Br'er Fox. In his memoir, Frederick Douglass describes how tar was among the policing strategies used on the plantation—the fence around the garden was painted with the sticky substance to prevent slaves from eating the

fruits and vegetables, and anyone caught with tar on them was lashed.<sup>26</sup> In his study of the folktale, historian Bryan Wagner writes that “The tar baby ... showed that culture’s purpose under slavery was practical, and even political, as stories like the tar baby taught slaves how to push back against their masters.”<sup>27</sup>

### Discussion Question

*Think about a story that you were told as a child—maybe the fable of the fox and the grapes or the scriptural story of Jonah and the whale, the tale of John Henry and the steam drill or George Washington and the cherry tree. Consider how the story informed your view on the world. What are the story’s political implications? How does it frame the individual and the community?*

### Case Study: African-American Folklore

Using communication and expression to create and sustain community has been especially important for communities who have been marginalized and oppressed. The African-American community provides a particularly illustrative example of this connection between communication and community. For centuries African peoples were enslaved and brought to the Americas; they were unloaded on the docks of the sea islands of Georgia and the Carolinas and sold as property; they were denied the rights granted citizens; they were mistreated, abused, and killed. And after the abolition of slavery, the Black community’s circumstances did not significantly improve. Even with the advances made during the Civil Rights movement, we have far from achieved racial justice or equality in America, as evidenced, for example, in the seemingly endless string of police violence against African-Americans. Throughout this oppressive history, the Black community has used oral traditions and shared cultural practices to help create and sustain solidarity.

A popular story told during the time of slavery was the Ibo Landing myth. Grounded in some historically documented occurrences, the story tells of a group of enslaved men, women, and children from the Ibo tribe (alternatively spelled “Igbo,” from what is now Nigeria) who, after landing in the Southern United States, chose to walk into the sea and drown rather than be subjected to a life in slavery. Julie Dash, writer and director of the 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, which is set in a Gullah community living in the fictional Ibo Landing after the end of slavery, writes of the salience of the myth.

... in my research, I found that almost every Sea Island has a little inlet, or a little area where the people say, “This is Ibo Landing. This is where it happened. This is where this thing really happened.” And so, why is

it that on every little island—and there are so many places—people say, “This is actually Ibo Landing”? It’s because that message is so strong, so powerful, so sustaining to the tradition of resistance, by any means possible, that every Gullah community embraces this myth. So I learned that myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and to move forward into the future.<sup>28</sup>

The repetition and appropriation of the Ibo Landing myth by each of these Gullah communities demonstrates the powerful role that folktales—and this story of resistance in particular—played in the community’s survival during such terrible hardship.

Though, perhaps the most often recited stories both during and after slavery were the tales of Br’er Rabbit. Derived from a mix of African, European, and Native American mythologies, these folktales were set in a pastoral setting (presumably the American South) and focused on the exploits of characters like the trickster Br’er Rabbit as well as Br’er Fox, Br’er Bear, Br’er Terrapin and others. Author, activist, and one-time director of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson, cites these tales as among the greatest artistic achievements of African-Americans.<sup>29</sup> In many of the stories, Br’er Rabbit outsmarts the animals above him in the food chain, using his wits to overcome their threats of violence. Similar to folktales like Little Red Riding Hood and myths like that of Ibo Landing, these animal tales were means of expressing the values (safety, survival) and fears (inequality, oppression, violence) of the Black community.

In his foreword to *The Annotated African-American Folktales*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes of the subversive role that folklore played during and after the end of slavery, and the hope that it provided.

... the slaves had developed what Booker T. Washington (and much later, Marvin Gaye) would call the grapevine even before the American Revolution. So not only did the captured Africans bring their own languages, their music, their gods, and many other salient features of their cultures along with them, they quickly learned to communicate with each other across language barriers not only on their own plantations and other sites of enslavement but across longer distances as well. And the telling and retelling of folktales from Africa, as well as those retold and, in the process, creatively reinvented from African and European sources, along with those invented on the spot, were crucial components of identity-formation and psychic survival under the harshest of circumstances, key aspects in the shaping of an “African American” culture, a culture built on both African and European Old World foundations, yet one original and new.<sup>30</sup>

The tales served simultaneously as teaching tools and compensatory fantasies, providing both education and escape to the community. And similar to Zipes’

description of folk and fairytales' active audiences, the tradition of telling these animal tales involved folks gathering, conversating, sharing space, experiences, and stories. Historian Lawrence Levine writes that the audiences for these tales "would comment, correct, laugh, respond, making the folktale as much of a communal experience as the spiritual or the sermon."<sup>31</sup> Though, despite its long history and cultural significance, the tradition of African-American folklore would struggle to survive with the introduction of mass communication technologies like the printing press, and even worse, the appropriation of these oral traditions by and for white people.

### ***Uncle Remus: Adaptation or Appropriation?***

In the late nineteenth century, the Br'er Rabbit tales were adapted to the page and published by journalist and folklore hobbyist Joel Chandler Harris. A white man from a rural, working-class background, Harris spent much of his youth working on a plantation in Georgia and interacting with those forced to labor in the fields. It was then that Harris began to hear, and develop an appreciation for, the tales of Br'er Rabbit, so that years later he published his interpretations of these stories.

While folklorists generally agree that the tales published first in the *Atlanta Constitution*, and later in collections like *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880), *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1883), and so on maintain key elements of the African-American oral tradition, Harris's versions also include some significant deviations from the early iterations of the Br'er Rabbit tales.<sup>32</sup> Most notably, Harris frames the stories using a narrator of his own invention named Uncle Remus—a mixture of the West African griot and an Uncle Tom stereotype who happily shares the animal tales in an exaggerated dialect of the Deep South. While derived from his personal experiences interacting with storytellers on the plantation, Harris's characterization of Uncle Remus nonetheless perpetuates negative portrayals of African-Americans during Reconstruction as ignorant yet somehow possessing visionary wisdom, free and content while also longing for the Antebellum age in which they were enslaved, pacified and domesticated but ironically still resembling the wild animals in the tales more than the white folks reading them. Harris's views on race relations were undoubtedly more progressive than the majority of Southern whites during the time—he often published on the necessity of racial integration and the horrors of racial violence that continued to plague the country. And yet his characterization of Uncle Remus still represents a paternalistic and patronizing perspective on race relations.

More than simply perpetuating a harmful stereotype, Harris's publication of his Uncle Remus stories might be understood as a "theft of meanings" from the community in which the tales originated.<sup>34</sup> First, by publishing the tales

## THE LAUGHING PLACE

Among the Br'er Rabbit tales are mentions of "The Laughing Place"—a type of utopia that Br'er Rabbit describes with pleasure and uses to lure his antagonists into a trap. Scholars have noted that while Harris's version represents this place as wholly imaginary—representative of a type of escapist fantasy used by Blacks to find momentary reprieve from their enslavement—the oral tradition suggests a more concrete definition. More than a symbol of hope for emancipation, "The Laughing Place" was a code for The Underground Railroad, an actual physical path toward freedom. But this definition was lost on Harris and only exists as subtext in his version of the tales.<sup>33</sup>

### Discussion Question

*Harris's misinterpretation of "The Laughing Place" speaks to the limitations of an author from outside the community publishing authoritative versions of such cultural significance. In addition to the issue of authenticity, what are some other reasons that it would be preferable that historically marginalized communities be afforded the opportunity to tell their own stories?*

under his name and then using Uncle Remus as narrator within the frame story, Harris adds multiple levels of separation between his readers and the tales as they were actually told. While retaining much of the content, the stories were taken out of context and, in a way, taken from the community in which they were told and for which they had so much significance. Author Alice Walker shares the effects of this theft on her personally, as well as on the community more generally, writing

Joel Chandler Harris and I lived in the same town, although nearly one hundred years apart. As far as I'm concerned, he stole a good part of my heritage. How did he steal it? By making me feel ashamed of it. In creating Uncle Remus, he placed an effective barrier between me and the stories that meant so much to me, the stories that could have meant so much to all of our children, the stories that they would have heard from their own people and not from Walt Disney.<sup>35</sup>

As Walker argues, if Harris took the Br'er Rabbit tales and translated them to be more amenable to white audiences, Walt Disney's film adaptation of Harris's Uncle Remus stories is an even greater theft, further distorting the oral tradition and separating the tales from their origins.

### *Song of the South*

When Disney's *Song of the South* premiered in Atlanta in 1946, the movie was met with divided responses. Audiences and critics, black and white, generally appreciated the animated sequences that depicted the adventures of Br'er Rabbit, and many praised James Baskin's performance as Uncle Remus.<sup>36</sup> The film's integration of animation and live action was especially innovative for the time—most notably in the engaging musical number “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Da,” for which the movie is most often remembered today. Though, despite these successes, Disney's film pushed the already concerning racial politics of Harris's work into even more controversial territory. Walter White, an Atlanta native and director of the NAACP at the time, released a statement in response to the film's release, in which he laments how it “unfortunately gives the impression of an idyllic master-slave relationship which is a distortion of the facts.”<sup>37</sup> And *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther, published a piece titled “Spanking Disney” in which he scolds Walt and the studio for the movie's regressive politics.

For no matter how much one argues that it's all childish fiction, anyhow, the master-and-slave relation is so lovingly regarded in your yarn, with the Negroes bowing and scraping and singing spirituals in the night, that one might almost imagine that you figure Abe Lincoln made a mistake. Put down that mint julep, Mr. Disney!<sup>38</sup>

The literary versions of the Br'er Rabbit stories feature Uncle Remus as simply the narrator, but Disney takes this already problematic element of Harris's work and makes it the primary focus of the movie.

Even worse, the live-action storyline—in which Uncle Remus actually plays second fiddle to the film's white, child protagonist Johnny (played by Bobby Driscoll)—embraces the stereotypical elements of Harris's Uncle Remus. For example, despite their dramatic difference in age, Remus and Johnny are paired together as pseudo-peers. Remus appears often in shadow, his face barely visible against the dimly lit background, making him appear as a grotesque minstrel caricature. And Remus frequently, and quite fondly, reminisces about a simpler time from the past, presumably before the end of slavery. Just before singing “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah,” Uncle Remus waxes nostalgic about the-way-things-were:

Now this here tale didn't happen just yesterday. Nor the day before. T'was a long time ago. And in them days, everything was mighty 'satisfactual.' The critters, they was closer to the folks. And the folks, they was closer to the critters. And if you'll 'scuse me for saying so, it was better all around.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this regressive representation did not seem to bother many white audiences. *Song of the South* was popular enough to be adapted to

picture books, TV specials, and a theme park ride.<sup>40</sup> But the shadow of the Uncle Remus stereotype has hung over the movie since its release, and it's been since dubbed "Disney's most notorious film."<sup>41</sup>

Sadly, the film's negative notoriety might have been prevented, if "Uncle Walt" had made any effort to listen to the Black community when adapting the stories of Br'er Rabbit. Disney reportedly had every opportunity to improve upon Harris's version, rather than double-down on its regressive racial politics, but he resisted requests from individuals like NAACP director Walter White, Alaine Locke of Howard University, and screenwriter Maurice Rapf to write Uncle Remus as a fully-developed character.<sup>42</sup> Black screenwriter Clarence Mus resigned from the project when his ideas for improving the representation of race in the film were repeatedly rejected.<sup>43</sup> Actor Rex Ingram was reportedly offered the role of Uncle Remus, but after reading the script, turned down the job because of the story's racism.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, Disney justified ignoring all of this advice, arguing that some of his would-be consultants were Communist sympathizers<sup>45</sup> and that if the film were to encounter criticism, it would only be from radicals "who just love stirring up trouble

### **BR'ER RABBIT REMIXED**

In recent years, efforts to re-appropriate the tales of Br'er Rabbit have been made by members of the Black community in Chicago. Founded in 1969 by Gus and Mary Rickette, Uncle Remus Saucy Fried Chicken has long been an iconic Chicago institution. The family-run business has reclaimed Remus and given the character new significance. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the restaurant gave over a thousand free meals to community members in need.<sup>47</sup> Around the same time, Chicago-based writer Nate Marshall produced an audio-drama called "Bruh Rabbit & The Fantastic Telling of Remington Ellis Esq." Released as part of the *Make Believe* podcast, the re-telling of the folk story uses the familiar characters to address challenges faced by the black community in Chicago. Marshall comments on his motivation for creating the audio-drama: "I couldn't help but think about Joel Chandler Harris and the way he creates this Uncle Remus character to be the one who's the teller of the stories. I wanted to take back the telling of the stories."<sup>48</sup>

### **Discussion Question**

*Think of some challenges that your community is currently facing. Then, choose a myth, legend, folk, or fairy tale. How might you remix the story so that it reflects your concerns about, and even some possible solutions to, this issue?*

whenever they can.”<sup>46</sup> Disney’s dismissive attitude demonstrates his interest in serving his white audience rather than staying true to the rich, oral traditions developed by African-Americans over centuries.

### *Daughters of the Dust*

Forty-five years after the premiere of *Song of the South*, Julie Dash’s feature film *Daughters of the Dust* was released. Like the Disney movie, *Daughters* draws upon the rich tradition of African-American folklore and represents Black folks living in Georgia in the decades following the Civil War. Both films address the community’s place in post-Reconstruction era America and the tenuous relationship between their present lives and a past defined by enslavement. Otherwise though, *Daughters of the Dust* stands in stark contrast to *Song of the South*. One is a family musical-comedy with animated sequences developed by a large studio (headed by a white man), and the other is a poetic drama produced independently by a Black woman writer-director in collaboration with a predominantly Black cast and crew. But even more significant, though, is the dramatic differences between the two films’ treatments of the Black community and its folk traditions.

As mentioned above, Dash’s film takes place at the fictional Ibo Landing, and its story unfolds on the final day before some members of the large Peazant family say farewell to their Gullah community and travel North as part of the Great Migration. In the film, the Peazants face a similar dilemma as the Ibo people: *How to resist slavery and oppression? What are the means of survival available to African-Americans?* The Peazant family must choose between staying in the sea island or migrating North, just as the Ibo people chose between living in chains or dying by drowning. The shared themes between *Daughters of the Dust* and the Ibo Landing myth demonstrate how the film functions as a type of continuation of the oral tradition.

In fact, in one scene, the character Eula recounts the myth, including an ending that differs from the accounts cited by Dash. Eula shares how her Gran—the matriarch of the family, Nana Peazant—had told the Ibos’ tale:

When they got through, sizin’ up the place real good, and seein’ what was to come my Gran say they turned, all of ‘em, and walked back in the water, every last man, woman, and child. Now you wouldn’t think they’d get very far, seein’ it was water they was walk’ on. Had all that iron on ‘em ... But chains didn’t stop those Ibo none. They just kept walk’ like the water was solid ground, and when they got to where the ship was, didn’t so much as give it a look. Just walk right past it, ‘cause they was goin’ home.<sup>49</sup>

While the versions Dash cites in her research for the film framed the Ibo people’s deaths as tragic while also transcendent, Eula’s telling saves the enslaved people

from death altogether—the community is able to return to their homeland by walking across the water. This alternate conclusion draws upon the Biblical narrative of Jesus walking on water (demonstrating how the folk story responded to the increased influence of Christianity on African-American culture—a tension the film also explores). But it also represents a hope for the Peazants that choosing to leave the islands may be their best chance for survival.

In addition to continuing African-American oral traditions, *Daughters of the Dust* also tries to authentically reflect the community that originated these myths. First, the story centers on its large cast of Black characters, rather using them simply to prop up a white protagonist. In this way, the film both de-centers the conventional white-centric narrative and resists Hollywood's tendency to use a few token Blacks to stand in for an entire community. And by following the stories of many different members of the Peasant family, the film acknowledges that while the community may share some common cultural and ethnic heritage, there still exist significant differences in regards to gender, sexuality, age, class, religion, language, and so on. Kathryn Silva writes of the film's representation of diversity:

There is no singular African American community and Dash's film highlights the specific histories of an African American family in the nineteenth century that traces its past, geographically and culturally, to the moment where we enter: a day in 1902 when the family readies itself to leave the island for the mainland and the uncertainty of the North.<sup>50</sup>

As *Daughters* traces the histories of African-Americans back to this specific time, place, and culture, it acknowledges, and even celebrates, this shared heritage.

Additionally, the film's celebration of the language and customs of the Gullah people—which are likely unfamiliar to many (especially white) viewers—contrasts movies like *Song of the South's* reliance on familiar racial stereotypes. The film actually begins with a title that emphasizes how “the Gullah created and maintained their own distinct, imaginative, and original African American culture,” emphasizing the community's rich, but often unrecognized, cultural traditions.<sup>51</sup> And the structure of the story that follows is evidence of these unique traditions: The narrative is non-linear and multi-layered, intended by Dash to mirror the storytelling traditions practiced by the West African griot in which histories and memories, fact and fiction, past and present are all weaved together into a dense web of meanings.<sup>52</sup> So, not only does the culture represented on screen provide insight into the Gullah community's traditions, but the form in which the story is told compliments the film's cultural content.

*Daughters of the Dust's* success in continuing the oral traditions and challenging conventional cinematic representations of Black people might be attributed to Dash and her collaborators' commitment to the concept of community during the film's development. From a Gullah family herself, Dash grew up

with some familiarity with the language and customs of the people she represents on screen. Beyond that personal experience, she spent ten years preparing for the project, poring over not just myths but also the personal histories and first-hand accounts of Gullah women she collected from the Works Progress Administration's Slave Narratives, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and other archives.<sup>53</sup> While developing *Daughters*, Dash was also an active participant in the rich independent filmmaking community called the "LA Rebellion" comprised of up-and-coming Black filmmakers (mostly trained at UCLA and AFI during the 1960s–1980s) whose work challenged the conventional aesthetic, narrative, and ideological approaches of mainstream Hollywood films.<sup>54</sup> Dash's commitment to authentically representing her community is further reiterated in her selection of an almost entirely Black cast and crew for the film. When *Daughters* was released—actually, the first feature film directed by a Black woman to receive nation-wide distribution—producer Michelle Materre (also African-American) promoted the film by spreading the word through churches and community groups, a distribution technique pioneered by founding father of Black Cinema, Oscar Micheaux.<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, *Daughters* not only received overwhelmingly positive reviews but also experienced unprecedented success at the box-office—churches, schools, community organizations, and, most especially, groups of middle-class Black women flocked to see the film, keeping it in theaters much longer than anticipated.<sup>56</sup> Jennifer Machiorlatti attributes the success of *Daughters of the Dust* to how it

... weav[es] African cultural retention throughout the film, thus connecting viewers to a cultural and spatial homeland; centraliz[es] the role of women as the 'keepers' of cultural memories and re-envision[s] the cinematic iconography of Black women, who previously occupied spaces of negotiation as viewers, rarely seeing images that echoed their lived experiences.<sup>57</sup>

The artistry and authenticity of *Daughters of the Dust* has cemented its place not just in the hearts of this community of Black female viewers but also as a landmark film in American cinema history.

## DUST AND LEMONADE

In 2016, *Daughters of the Dust* returned to theaters for its 25th anniversary and it was received by an entirely new audience who was introduced to Dash's work through the artist and icon Beyoncé. That same year, Beyoncé released an album and accompanying film titled *Lemonade* that, like *Daughters*, engages with themes of Black femininity and community.

In fact, the visuals in certain segments of Beyoncé’s film pay homage to *Daughters*, in its representation of a gathering of beautifully dressed Black women in a sea island setting.<sup>58</sup>

### Discussion Question

*Some have noted the parallels between the folk traditions of African-Americans during slavery and contemporary pop music traditions like blues, jazz, R&B, and hip-hop. How might the work of artists like Beyoncé be understood as a continuation of these historically significant cultural practices?*

### Activity: C<sup>3</sup>

The name of this chapter’s creative activity is a bit of a mouthful—the Community Curation Creation—so I’ve abbreviated it to “C<sup>3</sup>.” The activity encourages participants to see the online communities they are a part of as potential sites for creative collaboration, not unlike the work that the hitRECORD community is doing. Participants begin by posting a prompt to their online social networks—something that encourages their friends and followers to respond with their personal experiences and perspectives—and then they creatively curate the responses they receive.

*Start by devising a prompt that focuses on a particular theme or idea. Effective prompts are accessible while still substantive—not requiring too much of your friends and followers but, at the same time, trying to dig a bit deeper into a question that is of interest to your community. Responses might include some combination of written text, images, audio, video, links, animated GIFs, memes, and so forth. Prompts should provide the community with instructions on what and how to share. And in the case that participants do not use social media, they can adapt the assignment by texting or emailing the prompt to their friends and family.*

For example, I might ask my Twitter followers to reply with a song that takes them back to their favorite concert experience with a short description of that memory. I might text friends and family members and ask them to share a photo of someone they miss along with a brief written explanation of what they miss about them. Or I might survey students of color at my university about their experiences with racial inequality while attending a Predominantly White Institution and ask them to share short videos in which they share a personal story.

*When you have received a number of responses from your community, survey the content they have contributed. Identify patterns that emerge, similarities and differences between the responses, posts that resonate with your experiences, or expand your perspective on the theme explored in the prompt.*

In my case, I might recognize the role that friends and family play in my community’s favorite concert-going experiences—that these memories of

music are bound to the shared experiences they have had with others. Or I might review the photos of those missed and note how it is the mundane moments, the things often taken for granted, that people miss the most. Or I might have a new realization of the privilege I experience as a white person at my university through hearing the experiences with racial prejudice that my students and colleagues have experienced on campus.

*When you have collected the responses from your online community and determined what ideas have emerged through an analysis of their posts, it is time to curate the content in some kind of coherent work. These finished projects can take the form of a short film, video or audio remix, collage, website, photo series, and so on.*

Here is an example.

### **#ABetterBYU**

In January 2021, I led a project-based Civic Media course in which my students at Brigham Young University (BYU) and I used our experience in media analysis and production to engage with a pressing social issue. Having witnessed the global activist efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement in years previous, the class unanimously chose to address issues of racial justice. The students—the majority of whom were white—decided to focus the project specifically on educating the BYU community about the privilege experienced by white people on campus. With a student population that is 81% white, BYU is the epitome of a Predominately White Institution (PWI).<sup>59</sup> This homogeneity, coupled with both highly publicized incidents of racial prejudice and an institutional history of racism, makes our campus a site where conversations and changes regarding power and privilege are especially necessary.<sup>60</sup> In fact, while we were working on the project, the university-appointed Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging conducted a study that examined the successes experienced and challenges faced by BIPOC students at BYU and made a number of suggested changes to more effectively serve marginalized communities on campus.<sup>61</sup> The report includes the following:

Among other important principles we learned in studying these issues, the most consequential and urgent is that many BIPOC students at BYU feel isolated and unsafe as a result of their experiences with racism at BYU. Current systems at the university are inadequate for coordinating services for students seeking assistance with challenges related to race, diversity, and belonging.<sup>62</sup>

My students and I were particularly interested in giving the white majority on campus a better understanding of the challenges faced by BIPOC students at BYU, and by implication, the challenges that white students were unaffected by or even unaware of. Because of the incredible lack of diversity on

campus (as well as the conservative political leanings of the university community), white BYU students are often quite detached from the experiences and perspectives of racial and ethnic minorities and resistant to the concept of white privilege.

In order to address this gap in understanding, the class devised a project that amplified the voices of students of color on campus. We set up an Instagram account (@ABetterBYU), interfaced with organizations at the university that serve minority students, and reached out to our BIPOC friends with an invitation to share personal experiences with racial discrimination at BYU. Our objective was that through hearing firsthand stories with racial prejudice at BYU, white viewers might recognize the significance of the issue, acknowledge the privilege they experience at BYU, and become more engaged in improving race relations on campus. In response to our call, students of color submitted short videos in which they shared their stories in the form of a rhetorical question, thereby prompting white viewers to consider how their college experience has differed from some of their peers'. The submitted videos included students looking into the camera and asking questions like:

“Have you ever asked if you only got into BYU because you were Mexican? Or been asked micro-aggressive questions like ‘Are your parents even legal?’ or ‘You must be one of the good Mexicans, huh?’”

“Have you ever been told that your culture’s expectations of children taking care of their parents when they’re old is stupid?”

“Has anyone ever told you that your skin color is a curse from God?”

“Have you ever had a professor use racial slurs to describe your ancestors and had other classmates join in?”

After asking their question to the audience, each student continued, saying, “Because I have.” While our class was gathering these experiences, we were also conducting research on related topics such as white privilege, the

## **SURVIVORS**

Inspired by the efforts like the #MeToo Movement to harness social media to generate awareness about the prevalence of sexual violence, Jenna chose to focus her C3 project on the experience of survivors of sexual violence at BYU. With years of engagement with the issue, including her active involvement in the university’s chapter of Students Together Against Sexual Assault, Jenna was able to effectively address such an important and sensitive issue. Survivors shared moments from their personal journeys of recovery. In her artist statement, Jenna writes “It is important for everyone, especially survivors, to recognize that sexual assault and harassment

is not a consequence of a victim's behavior. Sexual assault is a terrible symptom of a deadly disease in our society. Having multiple authors contribute to this project seems appropriate and hopefully makes that sense of societal responsibility clear."

View the project here > <https://survivorsgallery.wordpress.com/>

### **Discussion Question**

*What are the strengths of art and storytelling in creating solidarity among especially vulnerable communities like survivors of sexual abuse? How might this type of communication and creative expression especially serve those who have endured some sort of trauma?*

challenges facing students of color at PWI's, and the history of racial discrimination and inequity at BYU. Drawing upon our research, as well as the conversations that we were having with BIPOC students and faculty on campus, we created a short video that provides some explanation of how white privilege is manifested in our community, includes the stories submitted by students of color, and then prompts the audience to become more engaged in existing efforts to promote equity and inclusion at BYU.

### **Conclusion**

In *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey speaks to the incredible importance of our participation in creating and sustaining communities. "To learn to be human," he writes "is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community ..."<sup>63</sup> According to Dewey, we are not fully human until we use the means of communication and expression available to us to come together, to forge social bonds with others, and to meaningfully participate in and contribute to our communities.

### **Notes**

- 1 See for example Asare (2021); Best et al. (2014); Conger et al. (2021); Dewey (2014); Dickson (2021); "Emerging digital technologies entrench..." (2020); Guiora (2018); Mozur (2018).
- 2 Dewey (1954), p. 131.
- 3 *ibid*, p. 142.
- 4 See what I did there?
- 5 Zipes (1979/2002), p. 6.
- 6 Bettelheim (1975/2010), p. 24.
- 7 Zipes et al. (2005).

- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Perrault (1695/2005).
- 10 Kantor (2021).
- 11 Sayej (2017).
- 12 See Beitsch (2018); MacKinnon (2019); North (2019); Pazzanese & Walsh (2017); Seales (2018).
- 13 McCoy (2013).
- 14 Aristotle (1961).
- 15 McCoy (2013), pp. 179–180.
- 16 Truffaut (1959).
- 17 Reggio (1995, 2014).
- 18 <https://hitrecord.org/>
- 19 hitRECORD (2012).
- 20 Castells (2012).
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 232.
- 22 Jenkins (2006); Jenkins et al. (2015).
- 23 Buchanan et al. (2020).
- 24 “Herstory” (n.d).
- 25 Castells (2012), p. 225.
- 26 Douglass (1845/2005).
- 27 Wagner (2017), pp. xi–xii.
- 28 Dash (1992), pp. 29–30.
- 29 Glazier (1970).
- 30 Gates (2017), p. xxxii.
- 31 Levine (1977), p. 89.
- 32 Harris (1881, 1883).
- 33 Mikkelsen (1983).
- 34 Ritterhouse (2003), p. 600.
- 35 Walker (1988), p. 32.
- 36 Foster & Jackson (1946).
- 37 Quoted in Bernstein (1996), p. 221.
- 38 Crowther (1946), p. 85.
- 39 Foster & Jackson (1946).
- 40 In 2020, Disney announced that it would be reimagining the Splash Mountain theme park attractions—which is based on the animated sequences from *Song of the South*—as a new attraction featuring *The Princess and the Frog*, the only Walt Disney Animations movie with an African American protagonist. Before the announcement, an online petition arguing in favor of this change had collected over 20 thousand signatures, demonstrating this segment of the Disney fan community’s shared concern for the attraction’s use of the racially insensitive source material. After the announcement, a second petition was created by another segment of the fan community, this time arguing against the change and defending the attraction, and *Song of the South*’s, representations. This petition has collected more than four times as many signatures as the first, demonstrating just how divisive the film (and accompanying attraction) is, even among ardent fans of Disney.
- 41 Sperb (2012).
- 42 Bernstein (1996); Cripps (1993).
- 43 Russo (1992).
- 44 *ibid.*
- 45 Bernstein (1996).
- 46 Noble (1969), p. 219.
- 47 Chu (2021).
- 48 Marshall (2019).

- 49 Dash (1991).  
 50 Silva (2018), p. 262.  
 51 Dash (1991).  
 52 Alexander (2013); Pozo (2013).  
 53 Silva (2018); Smith (1992).  
 54 Sudhinaraset (2018).  
 55 Gould (2017).  
 56 Brouwer (1995); Hoban (1992).  
 57 Machiorlatti (2005), p. 98.  
 58 Knowles-Carter et al. (2016).  
 59 Reese et al. (2021).  
 60 See Bergera (2013); Collisson (1970); Gardner (2020); Ramirez (2005); Reese et al. (2021); Shepherd (2020); Wilson (2021).  
 61 Reese et al. (2021).  
 62 *ibid.*, p. 4.  
 63 Dewey (1954), p. 154.

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# 7

## CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

When I was a kid, I loved reading, watching, and playing with all sorts of media. The young characters in those books, games, shows, and so on represented us kids, and their stories reflected (at least, to some extent) my own childhood experiences. However, if we survey the most celebrated stories of childhood, a problematic pattern emerges. Within pop culture in the West, the experience of childhood is most often represented through the stories of white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, neurotypical, straight (and so on) boys. *Oliver Twist*, Jim Hawkins, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Peter Pan, Charlie Brown, The Little Prince, Dennis the Menace, Bart Simpson, Harry Potter, Robin, and the list goes on. The chapters in this book have even sampled from this same batch of white boys, referencing characters like Antoine Doinel, Charlie Bucket, and Peter Parker. Because of this pattern of representation, *childhood* has been equated (intentionally or not) with *boyhood*—and a very specific set of boys, at that. So, while as a child I (as a straight, white, cis-gendered boy) was able to easily identify with these characters, the many non-male, non-straight, non-white (and so on) children reading, watching, and playing do not have the same opportunity to see their experiences and perspectives represented in media.

The limitations of representation are inevitable. When we tell stories, as soon as we choose a protagonist or setting, we are making selections that privilege certain people, perspectives, and experiences and marginalize others. But on top of those unavoidable limitations of representation, trends in Western culture have made it even worse—telling the same “single story,”<sup>1</sup> privileging the same people and perspectives over and over. For example, those *Harry Potter* stories are enjoyed by many, and some aspects of childhood are effectively rendered in their pages, but the limitations of that narrative are clear.<sup>2</sup> If we want pop culture to truly, positively contribute to our understanding

of the world, and of ourselves as people, the stories we tell need to celebrate diversity, to emphasize equity, and promote belonging.

## The Problem of Difference

Our discussion of representation is part of a tradition started by 19th century linguists who attempted to understand the systems and practices with which we make sense of the world around us. For example, semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure argues that meaning is always relational—which is to say that when we define a term, rather than trying to identify its intrinsic meaning, we derive its definition from its relations to other terms. de Saussure argues that binary oppositions—black and white, male and female, self and “Other”—are “purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.”<sup>3</sup> According to this structuralist perspective, we only know what *black* is because it is *not white*. We only know what it is to be *female*, because it is different than being *male*. We know who *they* are (Other) because they are distinct from *us* (self).

Decades later, cultural scholar Stuart Hall continues the conversation in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, discussing how our reliance on the concept of “difference” to understand the world (while perhaps unavoidable, as de Saussure argues) comes with some serious challenges. He writes:

... difference is ambivalent. It can be both positive and negative. It is both necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities ... and at the same time, it is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the ‘Other.’<sup>4</sup>

While *difference* might be necessary for us to make meaning of the world, when we emphasize differences among people, we risk creating division and contributing to inequality and oppression. One obvious example of the downsides to *difference* is that the binary oppositions we have used to organize our reality are terribly reductive, incapable of accounting for the complexity of something like the human experience. So, while we often use categories like black and white, male and female, gay and straight to make sense of our differences, the structure of the dichotomy (as opposed to a spectrum or something else entirely) does not allow for much nuance in how we identify in terms of our race, gender, sexuality, and so on.

Next, when we consider the pervasive presence of the patriarchy, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression, we discover that the binary oppositions we use to identify ourselves and others are not so much dualities as they

are hierarchies-in-disguise. For example, in *The Second Sex*, philosopher and pioneer feminist Simone de Beauvoir discusses how the gender binary has been used not simply to establish rigid definitions of “male” and “female,” but more importantly, to keep women subservient to men. Historically, humanity has been defined as primarily male (i.e. “mankind”), thereby privileging masculinity over femininity.

Thus humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being ... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.<sup>5</sup>

“Maleness” is established as the norm while “femaleness” is defined as being abnormal, deviant, or “Other.” de Beauvoir provides a compelling example of our culture’s history of sexism, quoting one of the “fathers” of Western philosophy: “‘The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,’” said Aristotle; ‘we should reward the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.’”<sup>6</sup> de Beauvoir is careful to clarify that it is not just individual misogynists like Aristotle who are to blame for gender inequality. Rather, it is the ideologies and institutions, policies and practices that they represent and of which they are a part. Gendered violence, sexual objectification, and other forms of gender inequality have been justified throughout history based on this hierarchy. And whether we are examining differences related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, culture, class, nationality, age, ability, religion, or political orientation, the false dichotomies on which we have based our understandings of people prevent us from achieving equality and celebrating diversity.

### **DIALOGUE NOT DIVISION**

Russian linguist and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin argues that we create meaning, not through the differences between binary opposites, but through dialogue between ourselves and others. Bakhtin argues the significance of these interactions, writing “[D]ialogic relationships ... are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life—in general, everything that has meaning and significance.”<sup>7</sup> For example, what it means to be American is not fixed. Rather its definition is a negotiation between the vast variety of people within the US along with people from other nations and cultures. Unfortunately, rather than embrace their role in fostering dialogue and shared meaning-making, media often create and perpetuate

division—"us vs. them" narratives that frame the relationship between self and "Other" as competitive or combative rather than productive and collaborative.

### **Discussion Question**

*What are some examples of media that use differences among people to create division rather than dialogue? What might a more productive framing of these differences look like?*

## **Recognizing the Limits of Representation**

In a 1989 article for *The New York Times*, historian and cultural commentator Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses the burden of representation shouldered by Black media. He writes:

Historically, blacks have always worried about the image that white Americans harbor of us, first because we have never had control of those images and, second, because the greater number of those images have been negative. And given television's immediacy, and its capacity to reach so many viewers so quickly, at least since 'Amos 'n' Andy' back in the early 50's, have been especially concerned with our images on the screen. I can remember as a child sitting upstairs in my bedroom and hearing my mother shout at the top of her voice that someone 'colored ... colored!' was on TV and that we had all better come downstairs at once. And, without fail, we did, sitting in front of our TV, nervous, full of expectation and dread, praying that our home girl or boy would not let the race down.<sup>8</sup>

Gates's claims are compelling, and the image of him as a child seated in front of the television in anxious anticipation is especially striking because it speaks to some of the real-world consequences of the misrepresentation of marginalized people in media. Before we can celebrate diversity, we need to recognize the limits of representation and acknowledge their effects, especially on historically marginalized communities.

Gates's argument introduces some of this chapter's principal concerns: Media have failed to adequately depict historically marginalized groups (and continue to do so, presently). This is due, at least in part, to a lack of representation among minorities in the media industries. When minority groups *have* been depicted in popular culture, these representations have often been stereotypical, dehumanizing, or otherwise negative. But in spite of all this terrible inequality and misrepresentation, there is still hope that the future of media can be better, more inclusive, and empowering.

## Acknowledging Absences of Representation

Before we can identify the problems with how marginalized people have been depicted in media, we need to start by identifying gaps in representation. The reason why Gates's mother called the family down to watch television was because it was so rare for Black audiences to see themselves represented on screen *at all*. In their analysis of representations of television, media scholars George Gerbner and Larry Gross discuss the significance of this lack of representation, writing "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means *symbolic annihilation*."<sup>9</sup> According to Gerbner and Gross, we do not truly exist in the social world until we exist in culture. So, when our experiences and perspectives are denied representation, our existence is being denied—we are *symbolically annihilated*.

The correlation between a lack of social power and lack of screentime is probably most effectively demonstrated with the example of Native Americans. A 2020 study from the Nielsen company called "Being Seen on Screen: Diverse Representations and Inclusion on TV" revealed some stark disparities between the rate of representation in television of certain groups and their percentage of the general population. Women over age 50, for example, make up 20 percent of the population, but only make up 8 percent of characters onscreen.<sup>10</sup> Latino and non-white Hispanics make up nearly 19 percent of the population, but get less than 6 percent of the screen time.<sup>11</sup> But the most severe gap in representation is of Native Americans whose share of screen time is *less than a quarter* of their actual percentage of the population (0.4 percent compared to nearly 2 percent).<sup>12</sup> To some, the difference of just a percentage point or two may seem negligible—or at least not evidence of *symbolic annihilation*—unless we consider our history of actual annihilation of Native Americans that preceded their becoming the most consistently underserved population in the US.<sup>13</sup> When we compare the physical displacement and cultural eradication of Native Americans to their marginalization onscreen, there are clear parallels. When on those rare occasions Native Americans appear in pop culture, they are not typically at the center of the story; rather, they exist as stereotypes, sidekicks or supporting characters, antagonists, or just extras in the background. So, while I suppose their limited presence in pop culture is better than nothing, the relegation of Native Americans to the margins of the screen or the story does not allow their experiences or perspectives to be adequately represented. As media audiences and creators, the first step to celebrating diversity is recognizing the limits of representation, including the lack of diversity in media.

## Addressing Gaps in 'Off-screen' Representation

In 1926, scholar and Civil Rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois gave a talk at the NAACP's annual conference titled "Criteria of Negro Art." He begins his talk responding to those in the audience who might be asking why, when

such grave issues are facing people of color in America, Du Bois would choose this subject to speak on in this venue. Du Bois's answer to these skeptics is simple: "until the art of black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human."<sup>14</sup> Long before Gerbner, Gross, and Hall, Du Bois spoke of the power of representation, and like Gates, he acknowledges that in order for representation to be equitable, nuanced, and to contribute to inclusion and belonging, Black people—and for our purposes, marginalized communities more generally—need to be able to tell their own stories.

Historically, this hasn't been the case. While the number of people from marginalized groups working within the media industries has certainly increased over time, there is still a significant lack of diversity "behind-the-scenes." For example, a 2019 study of gender representation in media and entertainment reveals that "While women are well represented early in the career pipeline in media and entertainment, they are a minority at the highest levels, with women accounting for only 27 percent of C-suite [executive] positions."<sup>15</sup> And BIPOC representation in the media industries is even worse. The same study finds that "Eighty-seven percent of TV executives and 92 percent of film executives are white."<sup>16</sup> In the relatively few cases when "off-screen" jobs do go to Black talent, for example, those hires are most likely made by the very few Black people in "above-the-line" positions. It appears that the lack of diversity within media and entertainment is the product of a vicious cycle: Most media execs are white men, and white men are less likely to hire or promote female and BIPOC "off-screen" talent, which makes it unlikely that the demographics among media executives will change. As long as the same, limited group is in charge of movie studios, television networks, social media platforms, and tech companies, there is little likelihood that media will reflect the diversity and depth of experiences and perspectives in our society.

## Recognizing Misrepresentation and Dehumanization

In his 1978 article "An image of Africa," author and postcolonial cultural scholar Chinua Achebe critiques how, within the canon of Western culture, we commonly celebrate artistic works for their aesthetic merits even when they include terrible misrepresentations of historically marginalized peoples. Achebe invites us to question: Should something like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—or perhaps for our purposes, a film like D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* or a radio program like *Amos n' Andy*—be revered as a great work when it participates in such dehumanization. "No, it cannot," answers Achebe. He continues:

I would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall,

such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients.<sup>17</sup>

Sadly, when marginalized people manage to find representation in media, oftentimes they are misrepresented and dehumanized. Their portrayals are partial, inaccurate, and even worse, they obscure these people’s humanity and dismiss them as “Other.” And yet it is common for scholars, critics, and audiences to overlook how these works misrepresent and dehumanize, stereotype, and objectify marginalized people.

### **Stereotypes**

In his book *Gays and Film*, Richard Dyer explores the practice of stereotyping, specifically as it has been used to marginalize and oppress the LGBTQIA+ community. He defines a type as “any simple, vivid, memorable, easily-grasped and widely recognised characterisation in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or ‘development’ is kept to a minimum.”<sup>18</sup> For example, Dyer criticizes cinema’s reliance on limiting—and predominately negative—portrayals of queer people that include “the butch dyke and the camp queen, the lesbian vampire and the sadistic queer ...” and (sadly) the list goes on.<sup>19</sup>

Returning to our discussion of Disney’s *Song of the South* in [Chapter 6](#), many have identified the character of Uncle Remus as a take on the “Uncle Tom” stereotype—jolly, passive, childlike, content in his subservience to his white “master,” and depicted with coal-black skin, bright white eyes, and a gleaming grin. The “Uncle Tom”’s staying-power is evidenced by the fact

#### **STEREOTYPES’ ORIGINS IN MEDIA**

While stereotypes are not limited to media representations—for example, they can be simply images we hold in our minds—the origin of the term “stereotype” can be traced to the history of printmaking. In her examination of stereotypes, scholar Judith Andre notes that the prefix “stereo” in Greek communicates hard, firm, or solid, and the word “stereotype” was actually first used to describe a metal plate used for printing. So, media representation and stereotypes are bound together, both in theory and in practice.

#### **Discussion Question**

*What are some stereotypes that you encounter in your engagement with media and pop culture? How do your examples correspond with Dyer’s definition? What are the limitations of these particular, stereotypical representations?*

that we readily recognize him even though Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel was published more than a century ago. And the stereotype is shown as reductive because it narrowly defines Black men using a handful of characteristics, rather than attempts to account for the range of emotions, perspectives, or behaviors experienced by the Black community.

Even more dangerous than a stereotype's inaccuracy is its use by dominant groups to subordinate people whom they feel do not fall into the norms they have established. Dyer continues

... in stereotyping the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinate groups, find the latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick, or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups' own sense of the legitimacy of their domination.<sup>20</sup>

Stereotypes are not just mischaracterizations of certain groups of people; they also serve as justifications for the oppression of those groups. For example, in recent decades, the "Uncle Tom" has involved into a new, but still similar, stereotype called "the magical Negro." Popularized by film director Spike Lee, the term refers to a Black supporting character who uses their magical powers or uncommon wisdom to aid the white protagonist. Uncle Remus is an early iteration of the type, and more recently, examples of "the magical Negro" have appeared in popular media such as the film *Ghost* (1990), the book and film *The Green Mile* (1996, 1999), and *The Matrix* franchise, and it has been parodied in sketch comedy series *The Chapelle Show* and *Key & Peele*.

The problem with "the magical Negro" stereotype is not that it is unrealistic to portray the characters as having mystical powers. Rather, the problem is that the characters are always depicted as using these abilities to serve the white hero rather than for their own empowerment. In an appearance at Yale University previous to the release of his 2000 film *Bamboozled* (which confronts the history of Black stereotyping in pop culture), Spike Lee expresses his incredulity at the type. He skewers Will Smith's character in the golf movie *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), which takes place in Jim Crow era Georgia, asking

How is it that black people have these powers but they use them for the benefit of white people? ... Blacks are getting lynched left and right, and [Will Smith is] more concerned about improving Matt Damon's golf swing! ... They're still doing the same old thing, recycling the noble savage and the happy slave.<sup>21</sup>

Lee's critique of *Bagger Vance* illustrates Dyer's point—stereotypes like "the magical Negro" function to naturalize certain characteristics within marginalized groups (i.e., Blacks are passive and at peace with the world) in order to

justify their oppression (i.e., because Blacks are passive and at peace, it follows that they are content with being subservient to whites, either as their slaves or their sidekicks).

### **Objectification**

In addition to their reliance on stereotypes, media often misrepresent and dehumanize marginalized groups by objectifying them. Martha Nussbaum defines objectification as the practice “of treating one thing as another: One is treating as an object what is not really an object, what is, in fact, a human being.”<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum goes on to explain that this mistreatment can take the form of denying someone’s subjectivity, removing their agency, violating their physical or emotional autonomy, invalidating their experiences or emotions, instrumentalizing someone for their own purposes, and so on.

Sadly, media have often played a role in the objectification of marginalized peoples. For example, in feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey’s critique of “the male gaze,” she argues that embedded in the cinematic language used by Hollywood films is a type of *gendered subjectivity* that—through both the “look” of the camera and the movie’s narrative—encourages audiences to identify with the male protagonist and to see the women onscreen as objects instead of people. Mulvey writes, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly.”<sup>23</sup> According to Mulvey, because the male gaze reduces females onscreen to things to be desired, used, rescued, or otherwise instrumentalized, cinema perpetuates a gender hierarchy in which the feminine is framed as objectified “Other” and the woman is “tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”<sup>24</sup>

Media scholars have applied a version of Mulvey’s argument to deconstruct dehumanizing representations of BIPOC communities in media as well. The

#### **THE LANGUAGE OF REPRESENTATION**

Film scholars Robert Stam and Louis Spence argue that the objectification of people in media is often manifested in subtle stylistic elements like camera composition and framing, sound design and music, the pace of editing, the use of narration, and so on. They write, “Questions of image scale and duration, for example, are intricately related to the respect afforded a character and the potential for audience sympathy, understanding and identification.”<sup>25</sup> While their argument is specific to cinema, similar aesthetic choices might be made in other media, for example, a podcast or video game. Whose voice is heard (and whose is not) or

which character is playable (and which is an NPC) contributes to whether we see someone as “speaking subject” or “spoken object.”

### Discussion Question

*Let’s apply Stam and Spence’s argument to an analysis of a podcast episode you’ve listened to or YouTube video you’ve watched recently. Whose voices are heard? What backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives do these people represent? Which of these voices do we hear more of? Less of? What backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives might the podcast privilege based on this distribution?*

pleasure derived by white audiences from the objectification of, for example, Black characters onscreen may be erotic (consistent with Mulvey’s argument) or it might serve to satisfy other needs. Justin Lewis and Sut Jhally argue that when Blacks in media are reduced to a type (or worse, *a thing*), it allows white audiences to ease their discomfort around the mistreatment of African-Americans—for example, the long history of police violence against the Black community. They write

In the Rodney King case, an all-white suburban jury acquitted four LAPD officers for a brutal beating on the basis that the person receiving the beating was, in the words of one of the jurors, “controlling the action.” When your image of black people is as subhuman criminals, muggers, drug addicts, gang members, and welfare cheats, then even when a black man is lying hog-tied on the ground, he is still dangerous, and any action to subdue him becomes justified.<sup>26</sup>

The example of Rodney King—and the many BIPOC people who have been dehumanized in news coverage, social media threads, and so on since then—is evidence of Achebe’s concern. When we excuse—and even worse, celebrate—stories that dehumanize historically marginalized people, the impact is more than a lack of diversity in pop culture. When we stereotype and objectify others, we perpetuate inequality and oppression and are incapable of establishing equity or creating belonging.

### Resisting Limiting Representations

*The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) is a revolutionary political manifesto in film- form as well as an early example of the Third Cinema movement. In the film, African French political philosopher Frantz Fanon is quoted as saying that “every spectator is a coward or a traitor.”<sup>27</sup> While Fanon’s words are intended as a critique of

those who stand by and watch as people are oppressed, his claim resonates with cultural critics like Manthia Diawara who are concerned about audiences who passively consume media rather than critically reflecting on the limits of their representations. Diawara advocates for (particularly Black) people to resist being pacified by Hollywood cinema and to seize the means of production, making media that represents experiences, interests, and perspectives that confront the dominant culture. He writes, “One of the roles of black independent cinema, therefore, must be to increase spectator awareness of the impossibility of an uncritical acceptance of Hollywood products.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to our efforts as audiences (regardless of our race, ethnicity, culture, and so forth) to critique the limiting representations of marginalized communities in media, we also need to produce a new culture—communication and expression that values diversity, emphasizes equity, and promotes belonging. In our efforts as media creators, we can become agents of change—deconstructing and decentering, destabilizing, and diversifying the dominant approaches to telling stories.

### ***Deconstruct and Decenter***

While he never explicitly uses the exact term, the concept of *deconstruction* can be traced back to the writings of the Enlightenment-era philosopher Rene Descartes. In the start of his *First Meditation*, Descartes engages in some critical self-reflection, re-examining his past arguments, recognizing and correcting their mistakes. He writes

I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.<sup>29</sup>

Descartes acknowledges that in order to *construct* this revised way of thinking, he first has to *deconstruct* his former ways of thinking. More recently, philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida have used the term *deconstruction* to describe similar efforts to challenge established paradigms and perspectives. For example, Derrida argues that our commitment to truth obligates us to continuously seek out what he calls “the center”—or, the predominant logic by which we structure our thoughts, our culture, and even our society—and question it. By dislocating (or *decentering*) the center, we are able to recognize the limitations of that logic and potentially establish new ways of thinking, expressing, and organizing ourselves.<sup>30</sup>

As we create alternative media that deconstructs and decenters mainstream approaches to telling stories, we can address some of the limits of representation in our culture. For example, Diawara’s vision of Black Cinema engages in deconstruction in how it substitutes a new cinematic language for the

conventions of Hollywood, it includes Black people both on and off-screen, and it confronts and corrects the racist misrepresentations of Black people that have been so common throughout the history of the medium. From Oscar Micheaux's silent films to blaxploitation movies of the 1970s, from the works of writer-directors like Spike Lee and Julie Dash to *Moonlight* (2017)'s historic Best Picture win, Black Cinema has been a place where Black creators tell stories that focus on Black characters and experiences, and in so doing, challenge the white-centrism within the history of Hollywood.

Though, with advances in digital technologies, the means of making media have themselves become decentralized, enabling a much larger and more diverse population to tell their own stories. In the past, movements like Third Cinema and Black Cinema flipped-the-script and featured the experiences and perspectives of people of color; but today, anyone with a cell phone can represent themselves. The popularity of “Black Twitter” and “Queer TikTok” are just a couple of examples of spaces that have been formed on social media in which the stories, issues, and aesthetics of historically marginalized groups are foregrounded and members of these communities post, share, discuss, and connect with each other in ways that mainstream media have not historically allowed.

### **EVERY SINGLE WORD**

One especially engaging example of using social media to decenter limiting representations of marginalized communities is the YouTube channel “Every Single Word.” Created by Dylan Marron (who describes himself as “brown and queer”<sup>31</sup>), the series re-edits popular movies to include nothing but the lines of dialogue spoken by people of color. Marron's cut for all seven Harry Potter movies? Less than seven minutes long. And his video that re-edits every movie directed by Nancy Meyers is even shorter! The project points to the lack of diversity in mainstream movies, but it does so by highlighting the very few diverse voices that are featured in these films. Marron decenters these popular movies by placing the characters who have typically occupied the margins at the center of his videos.

### **Discussion Question**

*Think of the movies that you've watched lately, or that are popular in theaters and streaming online right now. How would they measure up to Marron's metric? If you were assigned to decenter one of these films so that it privileged the perspectives of marginalized characters and communities, how would you approach it?*

### ***Destabilize and Diversify***

In their landmark book *Gender Trouble*, scholar Judith Butler expands upon de Beauvoir's critique of the male/female dichotomy and argues that while simply reversing the hierarchy—or replacing the subject at the center with the Other at the margins—has its benefits in creating equity and celebrating diversity, this approach allows the problematic structures we have used to make sense of people to remain unchallenged. Butler describes their project to destabilize these structures, writing

Power seemed to be more than an exchange between subjects or a relation of constant inversion between a subject and an Other; indeed, power appeared to operate in the production of that very binary frame for thinking about gender. I asked, what configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between 'men' and 'women,' and the internal stability of those terms?<sup>32</sup>

Applying Butler's argument to our discussion of diversity in media, works like Virginia Woolf's *Shakespeare's Sister* or Gordon Park's *Shaft* (1971) challenge traditional ways of conceiving of and representing gender and race, but they do not necessarily dismantle the dichotomies (for example, of male/female, black/white) themselves. Instead, Butler argues that practices like drag performance have the potential to destabilize the structures we have used to make sense of our differences, making room for new ways of understanding people. Butler argues that when someone performs drag, they are not simply reversing gender roles; rather, they are engaging in a "parodic recontextualization" of what we have imagined gender to be, thus revealing the artificiality of the categories around gender that we have constructed.<sup>33</sup>

Butler's description of drag as an act of disruption is something that has since become known as *queering*. When we destabilize traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality, (but also race, ethnicity, class, culture, age, ability, and so on) we acknowledge within our discourse around and performance of identity the existence of "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning."<sup>34</sup> A queered conception of identity liberates us from the categories and dichotomies that we have traditionally used to describe people. It allows us to express curiosity about our differences instead of simply dividing people into groups of "us" and "them." And it empowers media creators to tell a range of stories and express a spectrum of perspectives that reflect the incredible diversity of the human experience. In the end, we do not simply silence the voices or displace the perspectives that have traditionally occupied the center—after all, our cultural understandings of childhood would not be complete without white boys like Steven Universe or Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*. Instead, we open up the floodgates and

## CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE WHO HATE ME

While Dylan Marron received praise and some positive press for “Every Single Word,” the project was also met with some negative responses. Some of the comments on his YouTube videos include personal insults and attacks. But rather than simply be saddened by these negative responses—or worse, engage in an online argument with his detractors—Marron created a podcast out of this problem. Titled “Conversations with People Who Hate Me,” the series includes conversations between Marron (and eventually other Internet personalities) and individuals who have posted mean comments about them online. The objective is to see if, in the context of a conversation, people who do not agree and may not like each other so much, can dispense with the trolling and engage in actual dialogue. “I think we need a different model of what conversations can look like across difference,” Marron says. “But what does it look like to hold a space for someone that you disagree with without debating them? All you can ever hope for is to plant a seed, and that seed, like every other seed in the world, is not going to grow suddenly upon planting it; it’s going to take time.”<sup>35</sup>

### Discussion Question

*What are some of the characteristics of a productive conversation that sees the other person as human rather than simply an Other with an opposing opinion? How might you, as a media creator, facilitate these types of conversations?*

invite in a tidal wave of new (or simply previously unrecognized) representations and experiences. So, we get to keep de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* AND Burnett’s *A Little Princess*, Peter Parker AND Miles Morales.

### Case Study: Diversity in Comedy

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, American media has included some comedic legends who reflect the type of diversity discussed in this chapter. For example, women like Katherine Hepburn, Moms Mabley, Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Gilda Radner, Whoopi Goldberg, Roseanne Barr, Margaret Cho, Ellen DeGeneres, and the list goes on. Women—including women of color, queer women, and women of various ages, backgrounds, body types, and so on and so forth—are often very funny. And yet comedy has been a space where it has been especially difficult for people in marginalized groups (and women in particular) to break into and find success. In recent years, television series like *Hacks* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* have featured stories of fictional female comics

and represented—in amusing and sometimes quite affecting ways—some of the challenges faced by women in the industry. For example, *Mrs. Maisel* follows the titular comic as she navigates the New York stand-up comedy scene of the 1950s and 60s, and in one episode, she is forced to endure the misogynist heckling of a bunch of male stand-up hacks as she waits for her turn on stage. When she is finally able to deliver her set, Midge Maisel expresses the irony of her situation:

All comics are comics because something in their lives went horribly wrong. Something went to shit . . . Men think they are the only ones that get to use comedy to close up those holes in their souls. They run around telling everyone that women aren't funny. Only men are funny. Now, think about this. Comedy is fueled by oppression: by the lack of power, by sadness and disappointment, by abandonment and humiliation. Now who the hell does that describe more than women? Judging by those standards, only women should be funny!<sup>36</sup>

Despite Mrs. Maisel's compelling—and comical—argument, the perception that women aren't funny" persists. This incorrect understanding likely contributes to the lack of diversity in comedy: The vast majority of successful late-night talk shows are hosted by white men, fewer sitcoms and comedy films focus on female, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ characters than straight white men, and the stand-up comedy scene is notoriously male-dominated.<sup>37</sup> This tradition of celebrating white male comics and marginalizing everyone else is gradually changing. In recent years, the stand-up comedy scene has experienced its own wave of #MeToo moments, exposing the extent to which women have been harassed, assaulted, and otherwise mistreated in the industry. As a result of the increased recognition of this toxic culture, we are slowly seeing an increase in opportunities for diverse voices in comedy.<sup>38</sup>

The historical lack of diversity in comedy has likely contributed to the industry's long tradition of privileged comics making jokes at the expense of the marginalized. When women, people of color, queer people, and so forth *have* managed to be represented on the stage or screen, they are often mocked or maligned for the amusement of audiences. For example, there is the enduring stereotype of the uptight, irrational, nagging woman that has appeared in pop culture for decades—from classic screwball comedies to endless sitcoms, stand-up routines, and so on. According to scholars Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant this pervasive and prejudicial depiction can be traced back to a type called the “hysterical woman.” They explore how the concept of “hysteria” functions as an interesting intersection between comedy and the history of gender inequality, writing

Though the term is used to describe brilliant comedy and the laughter it produces, the idea began as a medical diagnosis used to control women. Born in 1760, but not coming into common usage until about 1818,

‘hysteria’ was based on the Greek word *hystera*, meaning ‘womb,’ and described a number of different physical and psychological symptoms that doctors attributed to a blocked or malfunctioning uterus ... [A]nd if you turn from the DSM to the urban dictionary, you find ‘bitches be crazy,’ a slang catchphrase that crosses racial, class, and cultural boundaries in its usages and citations.<sup>39</sup>

Like the “magical Negro,” the “hysterical woman”—whether taking the form of the frigid wife, high-maintenance girlfriend, or overbearing mother-in-law—is an example of a stereotype that despite originating over a century ago, continues to persist today. Sadly, these reductive, pejorative portrayals of marginalized peoples still get laughs.

But perhaps the success of shows like *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* demonstrates audiences’ intolerance for misrepresentations of minorities in media and an increased “awareness of the impossibility of uncritical acceptance of Hollywood products” (and mainstream media, more generally).<sup>40</sup> Perhaps as the industry grows more diverse and there is more comedy that deconstructs and decenters, destabilizes and diversifies conventional approaches to humor, we will find ways to use laughter as a means of coming together and understanding one another better.

## 2 *Dope Queens*

First aired in April of 2016, *2 Dope Queens* is a live-recorded, comedy podcast created by Phoebe Robinson and Jessica Williams in conjunction with WYNC Studios.<sup>41</sup> Developed from the Brooklyn-based stand-up show “Blaria LIVE!” hosted by Robinson and Williams, the podcast aired for two years, eventually spawning an HBO mini-series of the same name and leading to future projects in movies and television. Robinson and Williams are both Black women, and they created the live show and podcast to be a place where comics from a wide variety of backgrounds and representative of a range of identities could come together and be funny. In a 2016 interview, Williams says

Oftentimes I feel like as a person of color, you are the one black person in the room; but for our show, people get to be the stars of their own stories. It’s really cool to give our friends and people of color and different orientations an opportunity to speak for themselves and be the main characters.<sup>42</sup>

And the podcast delivers. Each episode features a mix of established and up-and-coming comics (few of whom are the same old white guys we are used to seeing) interspersed with Williams and Robinson’s witty, off-the-cuff

MCing. While podcasts are another scene that is dominated by mostly straight, white men, *2 Dope Queens* is demonstrating that diversifying the perspectives represented in comedy is something audiences want. The show premiered at number one on the iTunes podcast charts, received an overwhelmingly positive critical and popular response, and got some attention for its departure from the conventional comedy podcast.

For example, in addition to including a diverse roster of guest comics on the show, *2 Dope Queens* goes out of its way to find humor in “the oppression ... the lack of power ... the sadness” (and so on) experienced by women, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups, to which Midge Maisel refers.<sup>43</sup> Robinson and Williams explain that among their motivations for becoming comedians was to have their own experiences represented among the jokes told on stage. They were exhausted, Robinson says, of the same old white-guy-sick-of-his-girlfriend jokes:

Like, any white guy story, I’m over it. They’re like: ‘Everything is so annoying.’ I’m like, Is it? You can get a cab. Things are great for you. You get to date Asian women. You’re fine.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, in the podcast’s premiere episode, Robinson and Williams bond over the difficulty they face hailing cabs, sharing some entertaining (and also pretty awful) experiences with racist cab drivers. Throughout the series, the hosts find humor in a range of issues related to their experience as Black women, for example, making a hilarious case for reparations, skewering the Black BFF stereotype, role-playing a time-travel-trip to the Civil Rights movement, fangirling on Beyonce, and so on.

And the guests who appear on the show do the same, drawing on their experiences as part of marginalized communities. The podcast’s first ever guest, Aparna Nancherla, takes the stage to joke about her experiences being cat-called, and its last guest, Michelle Obama, discusses her famous strategy of “When they go low, we go high” to address prejudice, political divisiveness, and so on. And after two seasons, Williams and Robinson concluded the podcast and left a final farewell to their fans in which they comment on the show’s success and its commitment to diversity:

Our show started in a hot basement in Brooklyn and now we’re selling out theaters across the country. We could not have done it without you. The podcast was created as a space for female, POC and LGBTQ performers to shine ... We — and by we, we mean YOU — showed the world that people want and need to hear more diverse voices.<sup>45</sup>

*2 Dope Queens* decenters and diversifies the traditional white-male-centric comedy podcast, providing comics from marginalized backgrounds with the

## SARAH COOPER AND SATIRE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Because it does not have the same gatekeeping as comedy clubs and television networks, social media like Twitter and TikTok have been a place where diverse comics have been able to find a platform for their work. For example, in 2020 when COVID-19 shut down live shows, TV and movie productions, comics like Sarah Cooper went online to tell their jokes. Cooper's video "How to Medical"—which features her lip-syncing to real audio of then President Donald Trump musing about using bleach to treat people infected with the coronavirus—went viral. She followed the success of that video with several other lip-sync satires and, eventually, talk-show appearances and a comedy special. Cooper's approach is another illustration of decentering—she (a Jamaican-born American woman) takes on the role of Trump and, in-so-doing, highlights the absurdity of his claims. Cooper describes the source of the humor as a take on the "Emperor's New Clothes" tale: "We look at white men in power, and if they're speaking, we give them the benefit of the doubt that what they're saying is smart and truthful ... And you know, someone like me, I don't think I get the same benefit of the doubt."<sup>46</sup>

### Discussion Question

*Both Marron and Cooper's videos remix existing media in order to decenter power and privilege—whether it be Hollywood movies or the president's statements to the press. Why might remixing lend itself to this approach of deconstructing mainstream culture? What are some other examples of remixes online that decenter power and privilege?*

opportunity to take the stage, tell their stories, and bring audiences together through laughter.

### Hannah Gadsby

Hannah Gadsby had been making people laugh for over a decade when she gained international recognition with her 2018 stand-up special *Nanette*. Gadsby's humor is quick-witted, incredibly personal and cerebral, full of clever puns, funny anecdotes, constant call-backs to previous jokes, and a surprising amount of art-history references—like a meticulously and hilariously spun web. And at the center of Gadsby's web of comedy are her experiences as a queer female comic with autism from Tasmania. But at the beginning of *Nanette*, Gadsby is careful to clarify that she is not going to assume the role of disarming, self-deprecating

lesbian who tells her coming-out story and makes light of the tensions of growing up gay in an incredibly conservative culture. She says she has done that before and is done with that now. Instead, Gadsby says she might have to quit comedy. To explain her reasoning, she deconstructs how her self-deprecating humor has been detrimental to her, specifically as someone who has been marginalized.

... do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to discussing how making light of her experiences has not always helped her sense of self, Gadsby deconstructs comedy itself, describing how jokes rely on creating and then releasing tension. But the problem is that when she has told these self-deprecating jokes about her experiences as a gay woman, she has had to omit parts of her story in order to conform to this structure. And these omissions have prevented her from overcoming the tension caused by the trauma she has experienced.

[C]omedy has suspended me in a perpetual state of adolescence. The way I've been telling that story is through jokes. And stories, unlike jokes, need three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Jokes only need two parts: a beginning and a middle. And what I had done, with that comedy show about coming out, was I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes. But unfortunately, that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality.<sup>48</sup>

Because the structure of jokes differs from that of stories, always without an ending, Gadsby's stand-up has her stuck in trauma. In *Nanette*, she exposes this structure and its consequences and wants out.

However, Gadsby is not done telling jokes just yet, and even as she dismantles comedy conventions, she still gets a lot of laughs. She says that in order to keep on as a comic, she is going to stop pushing herself down (and furthering the tradition of joking at the expense of women and queer people) and start "punching up" with what she calls "gentle needling of the patriarchy."<sup>49</sup> For example, at one point in *Nanette*, she takes an old joke about lesbians and turns it on its head, transforming it into a jab at misogyny and heteronormativity in comedy.

What sort of comedian can't even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever. That's a good joke, isn't it? Classic. It's bulletproof, too. Very clever, because it's funny, because it's true. The only people who don't

think it's funny are us lezzers. But we've got to laugh, because if we don't ... proves the point. Checkmate. Very clever joke. I didn't write that. That is not my joke. It's an oldie. Oldie but a goldie. A classic. It was written, you know, well before even women were funny. And back then, in the good old days, 'lesbian' meant something different than it does now. Back then, 'lesbian' wasn't about sexuality, a lesbian was just any woman not laughing at a man. 'Why aren't you laughing? What are you? Some kind of lesbian?' Classic.<sup>50</sup>

In other moments, Gadsby replaces the needles with "jousting poles" and more than just ribbing, she rails against the patriarchy. At one point in *Nanette*, Gadsby addresses the straight, white guys in the audience, creating a bit of tension but not feeling any obligation to release it or put anyone at ease.

I don't think it's an easy time for you fellas. I do feel for you. Very difficult, very confusing time. And you're not coping. Because, for the first time ever, you're suddenly a subcategory of human. Right? 'No, we invented the categories ... We're human-neutral.' Not anymore. I've always been judged by what I am. Always been a fat, ugly dyke. I'm dead inside. I can cope. But you fellas. Bit soft in the belly? You hear 'straight white man,' you're like, 'No. No, that's reverse sexism.' No, it's not. You wrote the rules. Read them. Just jokes. Banter. Don't feel intimidated. It's just locker room talk.

While *Nanette* proved to be a massive success, it was not without controversy as some (including many straight, white, male) critics responded to Gadsby's jokes with anger rather than laughter. Apparently, they didn't find Gadsby's "locker room talk" to be very funny.

In response to this pushback, Gadsby begins her 2020 special, *Douglas*, with a bit of a prologue in which she outlines her entire performance ahead-of-time and talks the audience through how they might respond to her humor. For example, Americans may get a bit annoyed with this, anti-vaxxers aren't going to like this part, misogynists will be angered by about everything in the show, and so on.

Now, if in that bit, you find yourself offended by anything I say in the joke section, please just remember they are just jokes. Even if you find yourself surrounded by people who are laughing at something you find objectionable, just remember the golden rule of comedy, which is: if you're in a minority, you do not matter. You don't. Don't blame me. I didn't write the rules of comedy. Men did. Blame them. I do. It's cathartic.<sup>51</sup>

Gadsby's intro to *Douglas* is in line with her humor in *Nanette*—sharp, self-reflexive, and sick of the patriarchy. But more than that, when Gadsby

breaks with convention and outlines her entire set before she delivers it, she is consciously acknowledging another aspect of her identity that contributes to her sense of humor: her autism.

Now, I will admit, the—the last part of the show there, I will be much more likable than I am in the beginning. Borderline adorable. Now, you’re probably wondering why wouldn’t I start with my best foot forward, adorable guns a-blasting? Why wouldn’t I do that? Why would I start off being a bit unlikable? Because this is a show about autism. And people with autism rarely make a good first impression. And most people tend to write us off because of that.

Structuring her special to mirror her experience with autism, Gadsby defies conventions of comedy in an effort to bring attention to the unique experience of (and humor in) a gay woman with autism from Tasmania (who did I mention has a love/hate relationship with Western art?). The embrace of her intersectional identity in Gadsby’s stand-up sheds light on the inadequacy of the dichotomies of male/female, gay/straight, and so on. In both *Nanette* and *Douglas*, Gadsby is *queering* comedy—not just because she is including “lesbian content” but because she is destabilizing both the conventions of the genre and the categories we so often use to make sense of people and their stories.

I want my story heard. Because, ironically, I believe Picasso was right. I believe we could paint a better world if we learned how to see it from all perspectives, as many perspectives as we possibly could. Because diversity is strength. Difference is a teacher. Fear difference, you learn nothing.<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, Gadsby’s queering of stand-up comedy—much like the *2 Dope Queens* efforts to decenter and diversify comedy—is evidence of the benefits of using laughter to make sense of our differences rather than to simply put each other down. And while comics from diverse backgrounds still face significant challenges in the industry, women like Gadsby, Williams, Robinson, and Cooper are demonstrating the value of listening to everyone’s stories, on the stage and the screen but also just in our everyday lives—especially when those stories are so hilarious.

### Activity: Conversations About Difference

This chapter’s creative activity encourages participants to create a podcast that addresses challenges related to difference and emphasizes diversity, equity, and belonging. Participants develop a concept for a podcast—it can be informational, conversation-based, or story-driven—but it should be guided by ethics of dialogue and humanizing representations. The podcast’s

goal is to help listeners learn to recognize our differences without creating divisions, to strike a balance in which we celebrate diversity while also recognizing our shared humanity.

*Start by choosing a topic related to representation or identity that is of personal interest or relevance.*

In my podcast, I might choose to explore the subject of maintaining relationships with friends and family who have dramatically different political leanings, or the challenges of confronting race at a Predominately White Institution, or the importance of movies that reflect the experience of marginalized communities.

*After choosing a subject, find a format that lends itself to the issues you want to explore as well as the creative skills and interests you have.*

For example, I might choose to create an informational podcast in which I speak with experts in social psychology, political philosophy, and family sciences about how to navigate conversations with loved ones with different political beliefs. Or I could create an old-fashioned radio-drama-styled series following a student of color who uses their detective skills to uncover their college's racist past. Or I might create a conversation-based podcast in which guests discuss how certain movies reflect their experiences as members of a marginalized community.

*Finally, begin the conversation. Use whatever audio recording and editing technologies you have at your disposal (even Garageband and the mics on your cell phones) to document your conversations and efforts to explore the complexities of diversity, equity, and belonging. Share your podcast using a paid or free podcast-hosting website, YouTube, SoundCloud, or by simply texting or emailing it to your friends and family. Invite your listeners to become a part of the conversation, sending in their questions and comments and sharing their experiences and perspectives.*

Here is an example.

### **Movies as Mirrors**

In 2019, a former student of mine named Max Johnson and I developed a podcast called *Movies as Mirrors* in which we interviewed guests about a movie they felt reflected their experience as part of a marginalized community (see [Figure 7.1](#)).



**FIGURE 7.1** Movies as Mirrors.

The goal of the podcast was to use these conversations to raise awareness about issues of representation in cinema (including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and so forth) and to encourage our listeners to seek out and see movies that accurately depict the experience of someone other than middle/upper-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual, white (and so on) men. And as two middle/upper-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual, white men ourselves, both Max and I had a personal interest in making the podcast: To listen to and learn from the experiences of our guests who (in contrast to our own experiences) have struggled to find characters, stories, and perspectives onscreen that mirror their own lives.

We aired 30 episodes of the podcast before the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic made it too difficult to continue production, but during that relative short run we hosted guests who represented a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (including Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Middle-Eastern, and people of mixed racial heritage), gender and sexual identities (gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender), as well as other underrepresented groups such as immigrants, veterans, children, survivors of sexual assault, people with chronic illness, people who are neurodivergent, who live with mental illness, and others.

Before each recording, the guest would select the film for us to watch and discuss. Our guests selected a wide variety of films that mirrored their experiences—from international cinema like *Once Were Warriors* (1994) and *A Fantastic Woman* (2017) to high-profile Hollywood movies like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) to smaller, independent films like *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018). And in contrast to most movie-related podcasts, our conversations went beyond discussions of the quality of the filmmaking and, instead, explored how the film's characters, plot, aesthetics, and themes resonated with the guest's personal experiences as a marginalized person. The guests reflected on the strengths and limitations of the movies' representations of their community, and together we imagined what even more compelling, accurate, and empowering cinematic representations might include.

While our audience was relatively small (limited mostly to our campus community, friends, and family), we felt that our mission was of particular value to those listening in and around Utah, where the population is not very diverse and where the culture is rather homogenous. For example, in one episode comedian Stacey Harkey discussed his experience watching the 2016 film *Moonlight*. In the episode, Harkey points out the parallels he found between the story of Chiron depicted in the film and his own experiences being Black, gay, and from the American South.

What really resonated with me was every scene that happens on the ocean. It's not a ton, but the ocean plays such a key role in the movie. [Chiron's] first experience with the ocean as a child. A lot of Black people don't

know how to swim—it’s very common for Black people not to know how to swim. So, he’s being taught how to swim at nine, I guess. Anyways, he’s taught how to float. And it’s the power the ocean has to give you that weightless feeling. It’s the power the ocean has to make you, like, to shed the pounds and the weight and to just help you float and exist as you are. Every scene at the ocean has to do with him coming back to who he is in his purest form. And I love that. When I was grappling with my sexuality. When I was in the throws and in the woes of the most intense struggle and the sadness and the confusion, I would go out and find a mountain lookout, or I’d find some part of nature, just away from it all. And I would feel way more grounded ... So, I found that incredibly relevant.<sup>53</sup>

In the predominately white, conservative, and religious community of Utah County—in which many adults avoid R-rated films because of their depictions of strong language, violence, and sexuality—hearing Harkey discuss

## RADIOLAND

Inspired by podcasts like *Welcome to Nightvale* (in which Dylan Marron stars), my students Sam and Abi developed a six-part, audio-drama podcast called *Radioland*, which follows the character Gabe Rodriguez as he tries to uncover the mystery lurking within the little town of Wendell (see [Figure 7.2](#)).



FIGURE 7.2 Radioland.

Throughout the six-episode series, Gabe must expose a sinister plot in which the local radio broadcast is being used to brainwash its listeners. If he fails, he will be sucked into this false reality and be transformed into a lonely scarecrow. Sam describes how his own experiences growing up gay in a conservative, religious community contributed to the creation of the podcast. He and his team write,

We want you to understand the importance of seeing past the broadcast; of taking an active role in shaping the world we live in through engagement with the stories we tell about it; and the importance of recognizing when the accepted narrative is unnecessarily hurting ourselves or others. In other words—whether you’re a Gabe Rodriguez trying to make it on his own for the first time, a woman striving for respect in a male-dominated industry, or queer kid being raised in a conservative religious community—you are not a scarecrow. You’re real.<sup>54</sup>

### Discussion Question

*Have you ever been made to feel “different” or “less-than” because of how other people perceive you? How might creative expression—making movies or podcasts, writing, painting, taking photos, and so on—help you remember your value and celebrate what makes you, you?*

how *Moonlight* resonated with his own experience is significant. First, because many of our listeners do not share Stacey’s background and may struggle to understand the extent of the difficulties faced by BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ members of their own community, but also because this perspective is coming from someone who is somewhat of a beloved local celebrity. Stacey Harkey was one of the principal cast members of the family-friendly sketch-comedy TV series *Studio C* as well as one of the creators of the popular *JK! Studios* YouTube Channel, both of which gained particular popularity within the local, predominantly Latter-Day Saint community and among other audiences who are interested in “family-friendly” comedy. So, to be able to hear Stacey express his feelings about *Moonlight* potentially helped audiences in Utah County to be more receptive to stories and experiences that differ from their own.

### Conclusion

In Chinua Achebe’s discussion of the relationship between art and society, he emphasizes that the stories we tell, the experiences we share, and perspectives

we express have incredible potential. They can perpetuate inequality and oppression—like, unfortunately, so much of Western media and culture have done—by reducing dialogue to “us vs. them” debates and representing people who are different from us as types or things. Or we can use these powerful modes of expression and media technologies to make sense of our differences. Achebe writes,

For poetry surely can only be on the side of man’s deliverance and not his enslavement, for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and not for the doctrines of Hitler’s master races or Conrad’s “rudimentary souls.”<sup>55</sup>

When we challenge the limiting representations in media and empower people—regardless of their gender, race, sexuality, class, culture, and so on—to tell their own stories and express their own experiences, we will be able to create a culture in which diversity is celebrated, equity is emphasized, and people feel like they belong.

## Notes

- 1 See [Chapter 4](#).
- 2 See Jacobs (2020); Marron (2015).
- 3 de Saussure (1974), p. 117.
- 4 Hall (1997), p. 238.
- 5 de Beauvoir (1964), p. xvi.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. xvi.
- 7 Bakhtin (1984), p. 40.
- 8 Gates (1989).
- 9 Gerbner & Gross (1976), p. 182.
- 10 *Being Seen on Screen* (2020), p. 18.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 16.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 13 Smith (2018); Urban Institute (2017).
- 14 Du Bois (1926), p. 297.
- 15 Beard et al. (2020).
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 Achebe (1978), p. 9.
- 18 Dyer (1984), p. 28.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 27.
- 20 Dyer (1984), p. 30, italics added.
- 21 Quoted in Gonzalez (2001).
- 22 Nussbaum (1995), pp. 256–257.
- 23 Mulvey (1989), p. 19.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 15.
- 25 Stam & Spence (1983), p. 17.
- 26 . Lewis & Jhally (1992), n.p.
- 27 Getino & Solanas (1968).
- 28 Diawara (1988), p. 76.
- 29 Descartes (2017), p. 15.

- 30 Derrida (1978), p. 280.  
 31 Ellis (2018).  
 32 Butler (1990), pp. ix–x.  
 33 *ibid.*, pp. xxiii–xxiv.  
 34 Sedgwick (1993), p. 8.  
 35 Dudley (2020).  
 36 Sherman-Palladino & Palladino (2018).  
 37 See Kazan (2015) and Mizejewski & Sturtevant (2017) for some engaging explorations of the challenges faced by female comics in the US.  
 38 Dessau (2020); Hazarika (2018).  
 39 Mizejewski & Sturtevant (2017), p. 1.  
 40 Diawara (1988), p. 76.  
 41 Robinson & Williams (2016–2018).  
 42 King (2016).  
 43 Sherman-Palladino & Palladino (2018).  
 44 Mahaney (2016).  
 45 Robinson & Williams (2018), n.p.  
 46 Turk (2020).  
 47 Parry (2018).  
 48 *ibid.*  
 49 Parry (2020).  
 50 Parry (2018).  
 51 Parry (2020).  
 52 Parry (2018).  
 53 Thevenin (2020).  
 54 Burton (2019).  
 55 Achebe (1978), p. 9.

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# 8

## PLAYING WITH PLACE

In discussions of media, the arts, and popular culture, when the concept of *place* does come up, it is most often in relation to the *setting* for a story. While the setting is fundamental to the narrative, this element is sometimes considered less significant than a story's characters, conflict, and themes. For example, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle includes “*mis en scene*”—location, lighting, set, and costume design—as part of “spectacle,” one of the primary elements of tragedy. However, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#), Aristotle also argues that “spectacle” is the least essential of these elements. He, like many scholars and audiences since, sees *place* as mere background, simply providing context for the real content of the work.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, while we may sometimes overlook the importance of place within art, media, and culture, it is not uncommon (in critical reviews, cultural commentaries, and public discourse) to hear the phrase “the setting is like another character” when describing a novel, film, or some other creative work. This expression's equation of setting with character seems to suggest the value of paying attention to place when making art or media. Whether it be imagined places, like Wakanda or Hogwarts, Downton Abbey or Westworld, or actual locations like the San Francisco of *Vertigo*, the London and Paris of *The Tale of Two Cities*, or Bed Stuy of *Do the Right Thing*, celebrated stories have often privileged place. Their settings are more than mere background. These places contribute to the narrative and the ideas it is trying to express.

### People and Places

Novelist Ralph Ellison writes in his landmark 1952 novel *Invisible Man* “if you don't know where you are, you probably don't know who you are.”<sup>3</sup> The stories that emphasize place often do so to draw correlations between the characteristics

## THE AURA OF ART

In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin discusses how the relationship between art and place has changed since the advent of mass media. While at one time, audiences experienced a play, musical performance, or painting within a given place—the theatre, museum, and so on—new technologies have allowed for the reproduction and dissemination of these works so they can be experienced nearly anywhere. While Benjamin is hopeful of how technology has made art more accessible, he is concerned about the potential consequences of de-contextualizing art from place: “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking; the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place.”<sup>2</sup>

### Discussion Question

*Reflect on your own experiences visiting museums versus seeing reproductions of art online, attending concerts or plays versus watching recorded performances on YouTube. What do you see as the affordances and limitations of the technological reproducibility and mass dissemination of art?*

of particular places and the personalities of the characters occupying those places. Returning to the example of *Do the Right Thing* (1989), the film’s setting in the Bed Stuy neighborhood of Brooklyn serves as more than just a backdrop for Mookie and his neighbors’ stories.<sup>4</sup> Raised in Brooklyn himself, writer-director Spike Lee returned to the neighborhood to shoot the film on location; and it shows. The Bed Stuy onscreen is authentically represented as an almost literal melting pot where characters of various races, ethnicities, and cultures struggle to peacefully co-exist. The film’s crew (including cinematographer Ernest K. Dickerson and production designer Wynn Thomas) designed and shot the locations in ways that amplify this tension between the characters and their respective communities. In one scene, three men hang out under an umbrella on the sidewalk, heckling passersby and trying to find shade from the relentless summer sun. Thomas painted the brick wall behind the characters bright red, and Dickerson set a lit can of Sterno beneath the camera lens in order to create an effect that amplified the sweltering heat. This creative treatment of place contributes to the tension that builds between the different characters and communities as the story progresses. At the film’s climax, when Mookie throws a trash can through Sal’s storefront to protest the cops killing Radio Raheem, the flames that engulf the pizzeria feel like the inevitable consequence of the rising temperatures (literal and figurative) depicted throughout the film. The places depicted

in *Do the Right Thing*—Brooklyn, Bed Stuy, Sal’s Pizzeria, those sidewalks, and street corners—play an essential role in communicating the personalities of and the conflict between the characters in this community.

When we encounter artistic works like *Do the Right Thing* that emphasize the correlations between places and people, we may be inclined to consider our own relationship with place, how our *selves* have been shaped by the *spaces* where we have lived, worked, played, and so on. In a talk titled “The Power of Story in an Age of Consequence,” environmental educator and activist Peter Forbes begins by discussing the personal significance of place. He writes:

Sit back and listen to these words: Bull Run Farm, Devil’s Den, Sages Ravine, Spruce Knob, Dickinson’s Reach, Moosilauke, Arun River Valley, Central Harlem, Cedar Mesa, Chama River, Arch Rock, Drake’s Beach, Knoll Farm. That’s my biography. These words, these places, tell my story. And they mean much more than that to me. These places are the waters, the food, the wood, the dreams and the memories that literally make up my body ... Without these particular places in my life, I would not be who I am. And each of you has your own similar biography.<sup>5</sup>

If we were to write our own “biographies” and reflect on the role place has played in our lives, we might discover how *who we are* is connected to *where we have been*. My biography might consist of Provo, UT where I was born and where I teach; the wooded neighborhoods where I grew up in Houston and Atlanta; favorite camping and hiking spots like Hobbles Creek Canyon in Utah, Jacks River Falls in Georgia, Jenny Lake in the Tetons, Monument Valley on the Navajo Nation, and the redwoods outside of Santa Cruz. I might include the Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg, Austria, a little pub in Doolin, Ireland, and Disneyland in California. These places illustrate aspects of my *self*—my memories of family, my love of nature, my work in education, the pleasure I find in food, fun, culture, and conversation. But even more important, writing my “biography” causes me to pay more attention to the relationship I have with the world around me.

### ONE’S PLACE IN SOCIETY

Ralph Ellison’s book *Invisible Man*, quoted above, explores the ways in which racism frustrates African-Americans’ efforts to develop their identities. The unnamed narrator of the novel refers to himself as “invisible” because of the marginalized place that the Black man occupies within a segregated society. He struggles to find a home where he can be his full self. In this respect, Ellison, like many other Black authors and writers

of color, understands place as not just physical location, but also one's "station" in society, as determined by the dominant culture. Without a place to call home, how can one truly develop a sense of self?

### Discussion Question

*What places do you call home? How does your "biography" reflect your gender, race, ethnicity, class, culture, etc? What places have been open to you, or closed from you, because of your identity?*

## Play as Inquiry

One often-overlooked way to practice paying attention to place is through play. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), the idea of play as a method of critically engaging with the world may seem counterintuitive because we often associate play with leisure and escapism, not focused attention or reflection. But fun-and-games do not have to be all fun-and-games. As pioneer games scholar Johan Huizinga wrote, "All play means something."<sup>6</sup> In his 1949 book *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga argues that humans are drawn to play not just to fulfill some psychological or physiological need for respite or diversion, but because play is among the primary ways we make sense of the world around us. Small children play peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek to learn about object permanence; they play with blocks to develop their fine motor skills and with dolls to practice prosocial behaviors. But the fun does not end there. Adults are also drawn to play—in sports, gambling, crossword puzzles, mobile apps, reality TV, and so on. Through these games (whether or not we recognize or take advantage of it), we can gain a greater understanding of the world.

While we might associate games with simply having "fun," a closer examination of play reveals that there is more to it than just diversion. For example, mastering a turnaround jump shot or devising an epic D&D campaign is not easy. They require deliberate and concentrated effort and involve a mastery of various elements—the court, ball, hoop, the game's rules and mechanics, the players' personalities and physical bodies. When we play, we have the opportunity to engage with the world in a focused (if also fun) way. In his 2016 book *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games*, Ian Bogost writes:

Play is not an act of diversion, but the work of working a system, of interacting with the bits of logic within it. Fun is not the effect of enjoyment released by a system, but a nickname for the feeling of operating it, particularly of operating it in a new way, in a way that lets us discover something within it, or to rediscover something we've found before.<sup>7</sup>

Bogost's description of play is similar to Benjamin's discussion of cinema—both allow us to access the world around us in a new way. Rather than simply escaping the mundanity of “our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories,”<sup>8</sup> we use play to find both pleasure and meaning. Through play we see these places from a new vantage point, discovering their hidden details and underlying logics.

Bogost uses a popular line from the Disney film *Mary Poppins* (1964) to differentiate the type of fun he is interested in from simple escapism. Rather than “a spoonful of sugar [that] makes the medicine go down,” he sees play as *defined by—not devoid of—difficulty*. He writes:

... the things we tend to find the most ‘fun’ are not easy and sweet like the Bankses’ cleanup routine. Manual transmissions and knitting are fun because they make driving and fashion hard rather than easy. They expose the materials of vehicles and fabrics, and they do not apologize for doing so. They make playgrounds in which gear ratios and yarn loops become materials ... *Terror is at work in real fun, the terror of facing the world as it really is, rather than covering it up with sugar.*<sup>9</sup>

When we engage with the world around us with a playful perspective, practicing curiosity and creativity, we learn new things, new truths even, about our world.

## PLAYING WITH EVERYTHING

In 2017, David O'Reilly released a game called *Everything*, in which players navigate a nearly endless three-dimensional space, playing as almost anything you can think of—mammoths, molecules, blades of grass, cumulus clouds, taco trucks, traffic cones, evergreen trees, skyscrapers, solar systems, and so on. The game is described as “a simulation of reality as a phenomenon of interdependent systems. There are thousands of things that perceive, think and interact differently while being driven by the same underlying rules.”<sup>10</sup> *Everything* is so unique, in part, because of the way that it engages with the world of things. Rather than provide gameplay in which things either *enable* (magic mushrooms, crossbows, or bunches of cherries) or *inhibit* (zombies, barrels, or alien spaceships) the player's efforts to win the game, *Everything* defines winning as more thoughtfully considering the world around us.

### Discussion Question

*Have you ever played a game that taught you something? A game that presented you with a fresh perspective? That invited you to engage with the world in a new way?*

Games scholar Mary Flanagan uses the term “critical play” to describe an approach to fun and games that is designed to encourage deliberate, thoughtful engagement with the world.<sup>11</sup> It is “critical” in the respect that it is a perspective that *inquires about the world through play*; but it is also “critical” because Flanagan understands this type of play as *vital*. Flanagan writes:

From war games, in which troops sharpen their skills before battle, to games involving learning about science, to games that help one tease out reactions to phobic scenarios, these ‘uses’ of play are thought to lead to a kind of rehearsal, a practice, a type of empowerment. When taken to the streets, this empowerment can be transformed into a reengagement with the city and thus reclamation of that space.<sup>12</sup>

When we consider these examples, we realize the many uses of games to ask questions, solve problems, learn new skills, and gain new knowledge. We recognize the promising potential to use play as a means of more fully engaging with our world.

### THE MAGIC CIRCLE

Among Johan Huizinga’s contributions to the study of games is an examination of the *playground*, the places where we play. He used the term “the magic circle” to describe how playgrounds—whether they be game boards, tennis courts, the stage, or screen—function as imagined, alternate realities, spaces with their own sets of rules and logics. He writes “All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns.”<sup>13</sup>

### Discussion Question

Choose two or more games (tennis, *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *Pokémon GO*, for example). and consider their mechanics—the places they are played, the materials used, the actions performed by players, and the rules that govern the game. What would happen if you were to subvert the logics of the games, and swap some of these elements (hitting tennis balls at other Pokémon trainers or rolling dice to determine the player’s placement on the court or the use of their right or left hand)? What new possibilities of play might emerge?

## Playing with Place

In the 1950s a group of European artists, philosophers, and activists created the Situationist International (SI), a counter-cultural movement that drew from Marxism, surrealism, and other political and aesthetic traditions. French

thinker Guy Debord emerged as a spokesperson for the group and, in his 1957 manifesto “Report on the Construction of Situations,” he expresses their interest in overcoming what the SI see as the monotony of modern life by injecting it with creativity and innovation. He writes that among their principal tasks is “the invention of games of an essentially new type.” Debord continues, “The most general goal must be to expand the nonmediocre part of life, to reduce the empty moments of life as much as possible.”<sup>14</sup> The Situationists, as they were called, created art, wrote essays and books, made films—all of which combined a spirit of playfulness with avant-garde aesthetics and political polemics. But among their most revolutionary practices was what Debord calls the *derivé*.

Debord describes the *derivé* as “the practice of a passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambiances . . .”<sup>15</sup> The “journey” Debord refers to can be understood figuratively (as a change in ideological perspective) but also literally. The Situationists encouraged the public to imagine a better world by transforming the places they routinely navigate (the city block, their neighborhoods, and so on) into playgrounds. Debord describes practices like hitchhiking nonstop with no destination, wandering in underground catacombs, and trespassing in condemned buildings. Ultimately, the *derivé* is about recognizing and subverting the established flows of power within specific spaces. The SI believed that in order to change society for the better, we need to wake up to the world around us: “Something that changes our way of seeing the streets is more important than something that changes our way of seeing paintings.”<sup>16</sup>

## MUSEUM HACK

With the motto “Museums are F\*\*\*ing Awesome!” Museum Hack hosts guided tours of museums around the US, specifically designed to help visitors see new possibilities for fun in these familiar places.<sup>17</sup> Creator Nick Gray begins his Ted Talk on the project: “I hate museums. I think they are boring. The paintings have nothing to do with me. My feet hurt. Get me out of here. That’s how I felt until about four years ago.”<sup>18</sup> He sees Museum Hack—which combines scavenger hunts, flash mobs, performance art, and some good old-fashioned mischief—as a means of injecting some new life into dusty spaces and opening museums to new audiences through play.

## Discussion Question

*What is a place that you do not like (the DMV, dentist’s office, your in-law’s house)? How might a playful perspective—one drawing upon the ideas of Bogost and Flanagan and the practices of Situationists and museum hackers—help you find fun (and new meanings) in that place?*

The Situationists' playful approach to cultural critique and activist art most immediately influenced the French protesters in May of 1968, but also feminist and gay rights activists, "New Games" advocates, performance artists, and others since then.<sup>19</sup> Since the advent of the Internet, new variations on Debord's *derivé* have emerged, including "flash mobs"—seemingly impromptu, collaborative public performances organized via online social networks.<sup>20</sup> The place-based performative play of flash mobs is an example of the possibility for games to involve a "reclamation of space" as described by Flanagan, even when it just involves choreographed dances in shopping mall food courts. But more importantly, the influence of the *derivé* can be traced through flash mobs to newly developed forms of public protest. For example, The Black Lives Matter movement, Occupy Wall Street, and the 2017 Women's March have all made use of some of the same tactics as flash-mobs—using social media to engage in cultural critique and political organization that has resulted in the occupation of public places, in which protesters oftentimes engage in deliberately performative practices (dressing in costume, using song and dance, and so on) as means of promoting positive social change.<sup>21</sup> As we work to address the many pressing challenges facing our society and to make our world a freer, more equitable, safer place, we will benefit from practicing "critical play," in both our creative expression and civic participation.

### Case Study: Deconstructing Disneyland

In 2019 (before COVID-19 put industries like theme parks in crisis) Disneyland recorded its highest attendance on record: roughly 18.6 million people visited the park that year, averaging more than 50 thousand visitors per day.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Disneyland was so crowded during summer of 2019, that on a number of days, the theme park reached its maximum capacity and was forced to temporarily stop selling tickets.<sup>23</sup> Because of this incredible financial success, it is easy to think of Disneyland simply as an elaborate means of making money and to attribute the theme park's popularity to the franchise properties that are packaged and presented inside. But that would fail to acknowledge the magic that so many visitors experience in the park—called by fans "the happiest place on earth." Within Disneyland there are worlds of fantasy and future utopias, places where guests can journey across the ocean, among the stars, or back in time. "Every society ... produces a space, its own space," writes Henri Lefebvre. "Schematically speaking, each society offers up its own peculiar space, as it were, as an 'object' for analysis and overall theoretical explication."<sup>24</sup> For the US—and arguably the entire world—Disneyland might be understood as the space that best explains who we are, that holds our values. If we visit Disneyland with this in mind, we might get a glimpse of these values; but when we critically play in the theme park, we have the chance to deconstruct this most magical place and the role it plays in our society.<sup>25</sup>

### *America in Miniature*

French thinker Jean Baudrillard devotes an entire chapter of his seminal work of post-modern theory *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) to an analysis of Disneyland. Baudrillard's deconstruction of this "play of illusions and phantasms" is one of the most famous analyses of a place within cultural theory, likely because it so effectively explains the allure of Disneyland and its significance within American culture.<sup>26</sup> According to Baudrillard, Disneyland is America in microcosm: "All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic strip form. Embalmed and pacified."<sup>27</sup> This may be most evident in Main Street USA, located right inside the park's gates. The cheery lane leads visitors into the park through an idealized (and slightly scaled down) version of small-town America inspired by Walt's own childhood hometown of Marceline, Missouri circa 1900. But these "American values" are also present in the park's other "lands" including: *Tomorrowland*, where science-fiction and fantasy stories illustrate a utopic future enabled by technological advancements; *Adventureland*, where park visitors can explore far-away jungle lands; *Frontierland*, a romanticized representation of the Old West; and *Fantasyland*, a bridge between our world and that of fairy tales.

One might think that a place that celebrates, for example, Westward expansion might provoke park visitors to reflect on the representation of America and maybe even cause them to consider the ideologies embedded in such a place. But critically engaging with Disneyland is actually quite difficult. Years ago, I visited the theme park while on a trip to California for a media literacy conference. After participating in three days of workshops and presentations on the necessity of critically analyzing media messages, I finished my stay with a day at Disneyland. As I rode rides, ate turkey legs, watched shows, and spent lots of money, I realized how the park is designed to pacify its visitors to such a degree that even someone primed to *access, analyze, evaluate*, and so on found it challenging to not simply be swept up in the crowd and be entertained by the spectacle of the space.

Louis Marin, another French post-modern thinker interested in Disneyland, writes of the park's uncanny ability to prevent visitors from critical reflection.

But, in fact, this critical process is not possible in Disneyland in so far as the visitor to Disneyland is not a spectator estranged from the show, distanced from the myth, and liberating from its fascinating grasp. The visitor is on the stage; he performs the play ...<sup>28</sup>

We "perform the play" in the park, but *do we play?* With the exception of some less-visited corners of Disneyland that resemble more conventional playgrounds (like Tom Sawyer's Island or Tarzan's treehouse), most of the lands within the park pretty narrowly prescribe what visitors can do and how we

### **“A CONTROL FREAK’S PARADISE”**

In her book *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, Janet Wasko notes an often-overlooked irony of Disneyland—that while the place supposedly celebrates the powers of creativity and imagination, it positions park visitors as absolutely passive, simply providing them with easy amusements. “It can’t be experienced in any way, or yield any meanings, other than those Walt meant it to,” Wasko writes. “If Walt had really wanted our imaginations to soar, he would have given us wings, not mouse ears.”<sup>30</sup>

#### **Discussion Question**

*Based on your experiences or research, think of the types of play that a particular attraction at Disneyland encourages (and discourages)? What might a re-designed version of the attraction, that empowers park visitors to exercise their creativity, look like?*

can play.<sup>29</sup> Visitors are encouraged to look at certain things (and not others), engage in certain behaviors (and not others), enjoy in certain ways (and not others). The result may be fun, sometimes, but the play we are engaged in often discourages the types of meaningful engagement or empowerment that Flanagan and Bogost emphasize.

### ***Playing with the Park***

Both Marin and Wasko identify how challenging it is to engage in “critical play” within the theme park because, in Marin’s words, “the possible tours in Disneyland are absolutely constrained by the codes which the visitors are given ... the makers of Disneyland have excluded any possibility of code interference, of code interplay.”<sup>31</sup> But what if the system was not entirely closed? But what if the visitors were able to develop their own set of codes that deviate from those provided by The Walt Disney Company? A survey of some fringe fan practices in the theme park reveals some possibilities to play with (and make new meanings of) Disneyland.

On any given day in the park, it is common to find Disneyland superfans, for example, swapping collectible pins or spotting “hidden Mickeys” in the meticulously designed environment. Frequent Disneyland guests often trade “park hacks” online that include how to beat long lines and grab the best spots for parades. Perhaps inspired by the piracy celebrated throughout the park, enterprising eBay retailers routinely visit Disneyland to buy out hard-to-find merchandise and then sell them online. More than once, I have

## HORROR SHOWS

In 2012, filmmakers Josh and Jeremiah Daws surreptitiously shot a short, found-footage-style film called *Missing in the Mansion* in Disneyland in which three friends go missing in the Haunted Mansion attraction after being tormented by some malicious spirits.<sup>33</sup> A year later, a feature film *Escape from Tomorrow* (2013), shot guerilla-style in the park, also re-envisioned Disneyland as the setting for a horror film.<sup>34</sup> While the two movies differ in their tone, they both capitalize on the uncanny elements within the Disney parks, presenting a nightmarish perspective on “the happiest place on earth.”<sup>35</sup>

### Discussion Question

*While Disneyland has many fans, it also has its fair share of critics who find the park’s romanticization of America, celebration of escapism, and commercialism to be upsetting. Are there elements in the stories told within the park that trouble you? That do not align with your personal perspectives or values?*

encountered guests gathered together playing Pokemon Go in the park. And online fan communities engage in incredible deconstructions (and reconstructions) of the park—writing in-depth analyses of attractions, developing elaborate fan theories behind random design elements, re-creating the park and its attractions in Minecraft, or even physically building DIY versions of rides in their backyards.<sup>32</sup> Or maybe, they are just little kids playing hide-and-go-seek on Tom Sawyer’s Island, unconcerned with the hordes of people pressing on to the next parade or character meet-and-greet. In each of these cases, park visitors have found a new code, have deviated (at least a bit) from the typical tour of the theme park, and have made their own meanings of Disneyland.

Among my favorite ways of playing with the park involves a bit of puzzle-solving in the Indiana Jones Adventure. At the center of Adventureland, the popular attraction combines a roller-coaster with a traditional “dark ride” in a chase through the subterranean depths of an ancient temple. Park guests board vehicles and follow the titular hero through the stone sanctuary, dodging giant boulders, poisonous snakes, rivers of lava, and angry ancient gods. A close examination of some of the attraction’s more obscure design elements reveals an interesting opportunity for play. And as we play with the Indiana Jones Adventure, we can discover new levels of meaning about some themes the ride (and, really, all of Adventureland) skirt around.

One thing that sets Disney's attractions apart from more typical amusement park rides is the often-meticulous design of their queues. Things like the clever headstones that rest outside the Haunted Mansion or the quippy droids at the entrance to Star Tours seem to ease the time spent in line waiting to board these attractions. The queue for the Indiana Jones Adventure begins outside underneath a canopy of tropical trees, in the courtyard of the Temple of the Forbidden Eye. On the face of some of the temple's faux stone walls are engraved figures called "Maraglyphs," after the fictional god Mara whose temple it is. In the weeks after the attraction's initial opening, park employees distributed decoder cards and encouraged guests to translate the glyphs. But more recently, the cards are only circulated selectively and guests are typically rushed through the sections of the line where the messages can be found. In part because of this lack of encouragement and also because most park guests are eager for the thrill of the ride, it is uncommon to find visitors solving the puzzle of the glyphs and learning the messages being communicated.

When guests do spend the time to solve the puzzle of the Maraglyphs (even sometimes sacrificing their place in that long line to do so), they uncover an irony both specific to the attraction and salient throughout Adventureland. Visitors learn that they are interlopers on the sacred space of the ancient god Mara who grants one of three gifts—wealth, eternal life, or visions of the future—to those who are worthy. However, to receive their wishes, travelers must heed the warnings engraved in the glyphs: "Beware the Eyes of Mara," "Woe to the Unworthy Who Pass Beneath," and so on. Travelers must avert their gaze from the idol of Mara, otherwise they will receive the wrath of the god rather than their reward. But the ride counts on the travelers ignoring (or being ignorant of) these warnings, plunging the travelers into a high-speed chase through the temple. Not having decoded the "Maraglyphs" or paid attention to the attraction's backstory, the riders are likely to attribute their troubles to the irrational whims of a peculiar pagan deity. Were the guests to take the time to play, and decipher the Maraglyphs, they may not be able to alter the path of the ride itself, but they might come away with a new perspective on the attraction and how Adventureland represents unfamiliar cultures.

Across Adventureland, park guests are positioned as intrepid explorers from the West, discovering exotic locales, wild animals, and indigenous people. The land is designed to elicit a feeling of wonder at these supposedly mysterious and potentially dangerous things. In fact, this sentiment is explicitly expressed in Walt Disney's dedication speech for Adventureland:

Here is adventure. Here is romance. Here is mystery. Tropical rivers—silently flowing into the unknown. The unbelievable splendor of exotic flowers ... the eerie sounds of the jungle ... with eyes that are always watching. This is Adventureland.<sup>36</sup>

In emphasizing the exotic nature of the place, Disneyland is making the same mistake as those ignorant tourists trespassing in Mara's temple. The park is in awe of "the unknown"—including the unfamiliar languages, architecture, artifacts, and other elements represented in the different attractions—but it does not bother to engage with them really, to seek to understand them or the places and cultures from which they originate. Instead, the land presents a mish-mash of "primitive peoples" and "mysterious lands" without context, a realm characterized by "Otherness."

As a result, there is a confused sense of space—geographically and culturally—within Adventureland. Statues of deities from a handful of disparate Pacific Island cultures sit side-by-side outside the Enchanted Tiki Room, and the Jungle Cruise takes travelers on a voyage that spans multiple "dark" continents, floating the Mekong, Nile, and Amazon rivers in a single tour. In recent years, Disney has been updating attractions (the Jungle Cruise included) and removing some of the more culturally insensitive elements, so there is some awareness about the troubling depictions within the park.<sup>37</sup> Though, even without the most egregious examples of imperialism, and even outright racism, Adventureland remains a problematic place. Playing in the line for the Indiana Jones Adventure will not solve these problems. But taking the time to engage with the unfamiliar things around us (whether they be fictional, like the

## **DISMALAND**

In 2006, the elusive, UK-based street-artist Banksy created controversy when he snuck backstage at Disneyland's Big Thunder Mountain Railroad and planted a life-size replica of a Guantanamo Bay detainee inside the attraction. The hooded, orange-clad figure functioned as a dose of reality within the fantasy-filled theme park, critiquing the US's abuses of power. In 2015, Banksy returned to the subject of Disneyland, creating Dismaland—a twisted, theme-park themed, pop-up art exhibition with pieces that included a skeletal fairytale castle and other nightmarish versions of Disney characters and attractions.

### **Discussion Question**

*If Disneyland is a place where the American identity is put on display, how might the park reflect some of the more troubling aspects of our society? How might we re-design a familiar ride—the Pirates of the Caribbean, the Haunted Mansion, or Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln, for example—to reflect some of these less idealistic versions of our country and culture?*

Maraglyphs' messages, or factual, like the cultural origins of the “tiki” gods), we might discover the value of seeking to understand new people, places, and cultures rather than simply characterize them as “unusual.”

### Activity: Derivé

This chapter's creative activity borrows its name from Debord and invites participants to use play as a means of discovering new possibilities in familiar places. Creators choose a place they want to set their experience in, engage in close observation and analysis of that place, and then design a game or other play-centered experience that encourages players to understand and experience the place in a new way.

*Start by choosing a place that you have some interest in, familiarity with, or is in desperate need of being deconstructed.*

I might choose the campus where I teach or my hometown, the local art museum or zoo, or higher-profile places like New York City's Central Park or Disneyland.

*Next, spend some time with this place, observing, taking notes, photographs, and video, researching its history, discovering little-known facts. You may find it helpful to modify the “key questions of media literacy” to help you engage with the place in ways that you had not considered before, asking things like:*

- *Who made this place? When was it made? For what purpose? It is likely that this place was not the result of a single creator's effort, that its origins cannot be traced to a single event. Rather, the place has evolved over time, new creators contributing to its development, and it has taken on new characteristics and purposes.*
- *What does the place want me to think, or think about, or do? How do the “intentions” of the place change at different times of day, from day to day, season to season, or on special events?*
- *What designed elements are used to achieve the place's purposes? How do things like architecture, landscaping, lighting, the inclusion of gathering spaces, play places, spots to eat or use the bathroom, etc. create an atmosphere or mood, encourage visitors to act or interact in certain ways?*
- *What ideas, values, information or points of view are privileged in the design of the place? Which are marginalized?*
- *How does the place make me feel? What can I learn about myself through my experiences with and interpretations of this place?*
- *How might different people experience or interpret this place differently from me?*

*After making observations, asking these questions, and spending time experiencing and researching the place, you may find aspects of the place particularly interesting—for example, the place's complicated history or how specific design elements facilitate certain interactions among visitors. These aspects will become the focus of your derivé.*

In the case of Disneyland, this would likely mean pouring over the many behind-the-scenes looks at the park’s development since its opening in 1955, but more importantly, it would involve visiting the “happiest place on Earth” with these key questions in mind. For example, in exploring the creators’ intentions behind the park, I might encounter Walt’s opening-day dedication speeches, recorded on plaques at various locations throughout the lands. I might take notes and photos of design elements—the forgotten people mover tracks that hang over Tomorrowland or the anchor from the ship of real-life pirate Jean Lafitte displayed in New Orleans Square. I would need to record my responses to and reflections on my experiences in the park—my annoyance at the noise and smell of the car engines in Autopia or my discomfort with the depictions of indigenous and other “non-Western” peoples in Adventureland.

*Last, devise an experience intended to prompt participants to engage with the place in a new way. The experience might resemble a flash mob, a scavenger hunt, a variation on an existing game, or some new way of “playing” with the place. Develop parameters for the experience, including specific prompts, objectives, or rules, that both encourage participants to see the place with a fresh perspective and facilitate a fun time.*

Here is an example.

### ***Dark Ride: Disneyland***

In 2015, I led a group of about twenty-five university students, faculty, and professionals to develop a mobile game called *Dark Ride: Disneyland* intended to encourage players to pay attention to how the park presents themes like history, culture, and technology (see [Figure 8.1](#)). The project was inspired by my experience mentioned above in which I visited Disneyland after attending a media literacy conference. Our team of writers, artists, and programmers set out to make



**FIGURE 8.1** Poster of *Dark Ride: Disneyland*.

an app that users could play while in the park and that would include mini-games, character interactions, and fetch-quests in a type of virtual scavenger hunt throughout the different lands.

Before we could devise an experience for players, though, we needed to determine what elements of this place we found especially interesting. So, we read up on the park's creation, the design of the different "lands," the changes that Disneyland has undergone over time, and various fan responses to and interpretations of specific attractions and other elements within the park. We also visited the park as a team multiple times. With printed copies of the "Key Questions of Media Literacy" in hand, we carefully observed the park's various elements, paying special attention to the stories that Disney tells, the themes it explores, and responses it elicits from the park guests.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, we were drawn to specific problems within a few of the park's primary lands. For example, Tomorrowland promises a utopian vision of a better tomorrow through technological advancement, but instead it houses multiple attractions that are defunct or outdated. Frontierland celebrates American history but excludes any representation of Native and African-Americans peoples. And as discussed above, Adventureland introduces visitors to a mish-mash of "exotic" cultures, but it does not bother to specify the origins of the different languages, artifacts, and other things crammed into the land.

We developed a premise for the game in which Captain Jean Lafitte and his band of buccaneers have taken over Disneyland, making changes to the park that make evident these problems within the different lands. In Lafitte's "Disney-er Land," Tomorrowland is renamed Todayland, a place where visitors can escape into worlds of sci-fi fantasy and not be worried about their future. Frontierland is renamed Goldenland, where prominent fictional and historical characters of color—like John Henry and Sacagawea—struggle against the pirates' efforts to force the land's inhabitants to work in the gold mine. And Adventureland is renamed Weird Stuff Land, where Lafitte's band of buccaneers amass the treasure they pillage from different lands and peoples without concern for their cultural significance.

Guided by a mutinous parrot named Baudrillard, players navigate Disneyland, interacting with augmented reality characters including WED the Robot, Davey Crockett, and Hakim the Genie who help them as they collect clues, play mini-games, and learn more about the park, all in an effort to reverse Lafitte's changes. Players go on a series of quests in which they (1) imagine a better Tomorrowland, restoring the spirit of innovation to the land, (2) locate Native American artifacts in Frontierland and learn about roles BIPOC people have played in American history, and (3) discover the cultural origins and significance of various design elements in Adventureland (see [Figure 8.2](#)).

Eventually, players have a final showdown with Jean Lafitte at the base of Sleeping Beauty's Castle. "Baudrillard, my friend," laments the defeated



FIGURE 8.2 Gameplay from *Dark Ride: Disneyland*.

captain. “What have I done?” The parrot replies with his own verse to the song sung in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* attraction:

Some seriously problematic things, Lafitte. And you’ll have to answer for those mistakes. Remember this shanty?

*When gold doubloons and treasure chests  
Get you into this kind of mess,  
Remember how your greed and anger  
Sent you to New Orleans’ anchor  
From fate no one is ever free:  
Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate’s life for me!*

The game ends with Baudrillard praising the player for their efforts to critically engage with this place and reminding them to be thoughtful as they navigate Disneyland from now on.<sup>39</sup>

## DARK DESTINATIONS

When given the assignment to create an experience that would encourage audiences to see familiar places in new ways, Cassidy and Abby (not unlike the filmmakers behind *Missing in the Mansion* and *Escape from Tomorrow*) wanted to transform their hometown of Salt Lake City—often known for its squeaky clean image and conservative culture—into a more sinister space. They developed the concept for *Dark Destinations*, a mobile app that utilizes podcast episodes, geo-location technologies, and social

media to introduce users to local ghost stories. The audience listens to the haunting backstories while journeying to a “dark destination” in SLC and then goes on a mini scavenger hunt to learn more about the place. Users are encouraged to share images and stories from their experiences in the spooky locales with the rest of the *Dark Destinations* community.

### Discussion Question

*Are there any urban legends or local folk stories that center on a specific place in your community? How could you use *derivé* to engage with these stories and spaces in a new, fun way?*

## Conclusion

Next time we are tempted to think of play as simply the “spoonful of sugar” that gives us an escape from the struggles of our world, it may be helpful to remember the possibilities of fun-and-games. In Bogost’s words, “Fun isn’t a distraction or an escape from the world, but an ever deeper and more committed engagement with it.”<sup>40</sup> There is value in paying attention to and playing with place: We see the significance of the places where we set our stories. We recognize how the spaces we have lived or visited have informed our development of self. We identify the tours and the codes that attempt to guide us through the world, and (when we want to have a little fun) we subvert them, finding new meanings and fresh perspectives in familiar places.

## Notes

- 1 Aristotle (1961).
- 2 Benjamin (2008), p. 21.
- 3 Ellison (1947/1995), p. 564.
- 4 Lee (1989).
- 5 Forbes (2008), n.p.
- 6 Huizinga (1949), p. 1.
- 7 Bogost (2016), p. 114.
- 8 Benjamin (2008), p. 37.
- 9 Bogost (2016), p. 79, emphasis added.
- 10 “What is Everything?”, (n.d.).
- 11 Flanagan (2013).
- 12 Flanagan (2013), p. 206.
- 13 Huizinga (1949), p. 10.
- 14 Debord (1957/2006), p. 39.
- 15 *ibid*, p. 40.
- 16 *ibid*, p. 42.
- 17 See <https://museumhack.com/>
- 18 Gray (2015).
- 19 See Butler (2015); Giroux (2001); New Games Foundation & Fluegelman (1976); Plant (2002); Wark (2015).

- 20 Nicholson (2005).
- 21 For example, see Gantt-Shafer et al. (2019); Hannon (2014); Hansen (2018); Kreiss & Tufekci (2013); Lebron (2017); Massey & Snyder (2012); Wrenn (2019).
- 22 Macdonald (2020).
- 23 Martin (2019).
- 24 Lefebvre (1991), p. 31.
- 25 For some more excellent research on the relationship between the Disney parks and education see Greenwood (2020) and Sandlin & Garlen (2016).
- 26 Baudrillard (1994), p. 8.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 8.
- 28 Marin (1977), p. 54.
- 29 See Giroux & Pollock (1999); Wasko (2001).
- 30 Wasko (2001), p. 166.
- 31 Marin (1977), p. 59.
- 32 For example, see Burwick (2020); Jean Lafitte (2010); Lue (2020); Martin (2019, 2020); Nolte (2012, 2013, 2020); Watts (2021).
- 33 Daws & Daws (2012).
- 34 Moore (2013).
- 35 For an analysis of the nightmares within Disneyland, see Wallin (2016).
- 36 "Adventureland," (2019), n.p.
- 37 Asmelash (2021).
- 38 National Association for Media Literacy Education (2014).
- 39 For a more comprehensive summary of *Dark Ride: Disneyland's* theoretical foundations, development process, gameplay summary and educational objectives, see Thevenin (2020) and Thevenin & Parkin (2020).
- 40 Bogost (2016), p. 81.

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# 9

## VALUING THE ARTS

### Imagining and Listening

In an essay entitled “The Operating Instructions,” writer Ursula Le Guin describes what she understands to be the core principles to living a full life. Chief among these “instructions” is that we exercise our imaginations. “I think imagination is the single most useful tool mankind possesses,” she writes. “It beats the opposable thumb. I can imagine living without my thumbs, but not without my imagination.”<sup>1</sup> Since Classical times, humanity has explored the potential of imagination and creative expression to help us discover meaning in the world around us and sustain ourselves in the midst of life’s many struggles. For example, Will Durant summarizes the philosophy of art present in Aristotle’s writings, specifically that “the aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, *but their inward significance*.”<sup>2</sup> In *Making Media Matter*, I have included dozens of references to scholars and creators who understand the potential for media, the arts, and popular culture to contribute to the formation of our identities, to create and sustain community, to help us understand and navigate our differences, to promote positive social change, and so on. This book—and the traditions of art history, literary theory, and media studies from which it draws—rests upon the assumption that we all benefit from exercising our imaginations, expressing ourselves creatively, being receptive to the expressions of others, bonding over shared experiences and values, and practicing vulnerability. These practices are significant because they help us connect with one another, find meaning in our lives, and discover what it is to be human.

Le Guin continues, arguing that in addition to using our imaginations, we must also be open to others’ use of their imaginations, in how they express themselves and how they envision the world. After all, before we learn to

speak, write, draw, sing, dance, and so on we must first learn to see and listen to others. She writes:

What a child needs, what we all need, is to find some other people who have imagined life along lines that make sense to us and allow some freedom, and listen to them. Not hear passively, but listen. Listening is an act of community, which takes space, time, and silence. Reading is a means of listening. Reading is not as passive as hearing or viewing. It's an act: you do it. You read at your own pace, your own speed, not the ceaseless, incoherent, gabbling, shouting rush of the media . . . I know no reason why our media could not create a similar community of the imagination, as theater has often done in societies of the past, but they're mostly not doing it.<sup>3</sup>

Le Guin notes that we can gain a lot from the expressions and experiences of those we trust—who “have imagined life along lines that make sense to us and allow some freedom”—but oftentimes, our engagement with media does not reflect this type of “listening.”<sup>4</sup> Too often, media's content often centers on conflict, not conversation or contemplation. Too often, when we scroll through our social media feeds, play games on our phones, or stream movies and TV shows, we do so not to learn from or empathize with others but to

## THE EMPATHY MACHINE

Film critic Roger Ebert famously described the movies as “like a machine that generates empathy.”<sup>5</sup> He argues that a good film—and for our purposes, storytelling, the arts, communication, and expression—are a window into another's experiences:

It lets you understand a little bit more about what it's like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class, a different nationality, a different profession, different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.<sup>6</sup>

As we are attentive and receptive to the perspectives and experiences conveyed in media and popular culture, these experiences can help us practice empathy for those around us.

### Discussion Question

*Think of an example from media, the arts, or pop culture that helped you identify with and better understand another's experiences. What specific characteristics of this work encouraged you to exercise empathy?*

escape. Rather than wonder at the world's beauty or to make sense of the suffering in it, we use media simply to withdraw.

In 2003, Dave Isay launched StoryCorps, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving humanity's stories. Starting with one audio booth in Grand Central Station in New York City, StoryCorps has since recorded hundreds of thousands of stories, creating the largest single collection of human voices ever gathered.<sup>7</sup> In 2013, StoryCorps created a short, animated special called "Listening is An Act of Love" which introduced the organization's efforts to help people create connection and pass on wisdom through sharing the stories of their lives and sampled a few stories in the archive. In conversation with his nephew Benji, Dave Isay introduces the special and shares some of the history behind the project.

BENJI: So, what were you like as a kid?

DAVE: I was pretty weird. I didn't want to do anything but watch TV, and I spent a lot of time by myself. But I always liked talking to older people like the waitress at the luncheonette near my house or my grandparents. I remember when I was just a few years older than you, your great-grandpa Abe and great-grandma Rose and her sisters came over to our apartment for Thanksgiving. After dinner I found this tape recorder lying around, and I somehow got the idea to interview them. I didn't have a clue what I was doing, but I recorded their voices and stories and I saw how much they loved to be listened to. A few years later, your great-grandpa, your great-grandma, and all her sisters passed away, but I remembered I'd made that tape. So, I went looking for it, but I couldn't find it. Even now, when I go to your grandma's house, I go looking for that tape, just hoping that it's going to turn up.

BENJI: I don't get it. Why do you keep looking for it?

DAVE: Because it would make me so happy to hear those voices again, and I'd love to play that tape for you. You know, doing that recording really taught me something. You can find the most amazing stories from regular people. All you have to do is ask them about their lives and listen ...

BENJI: Do people really want you to ask about their lives?

DAVE: Yeah, they do. Most people love to be listened to. Because it tells them how much their lives matter.<sup>8</sup>

Isay starts the conversation by commenting on how he was a "weird kid" who was obsessed with watching TV (which recalls Le Guin's critique of media). But he also notes how he has always loved listening to others' stories and suggests that listening is itself an act of love. Some of us are probably pretty media-obsessed as well, but hopefully (like Isay) we can also develop an appreciation for talking with, listening to, and understanding those around us. Ideally, as media educators, scholars, and creators, we understand media as more than a distraction, but another means of connecting and empathizing with others.

## Media that Matter to Us

If you are anything like me, it is likely that your interests in teaching, studying, and making media stem from meaningful experiences that you have had with the arts and popular culture. For many of us, these experiences with our favorite media have (like the conversations recorded by *StoryCorps*) been windows into the worlds of others. As we read, listen, and watch, we benefit from hearing the stories of not just beloved family members, but from a vast variety of people from different communities, cultures, times, and places who speak different languages, hold different values, and so on. These media give us a glimpse of the world outside of ourselves. They contribute to our creative sensibilities. They influence the perspective through which we see others.

We might benefit from taking an inventory of the media that matter most to us, as an exercise in both articulating our taste in art and reflecting on which specific works we value and how they have shaped us. This list of artists, authors, creators, works, traditions, movements, styles, and so on is a catalog of our creative influences but also (returning to Le Guin) of those “people who have imagined life along lines that make sense to us and allow some freedom.”<sup>9</sup> For me, that list includes The Beatles, David Bowie’s song “Heroes,” Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*, the cartoon *Batman: The Animated Series*, the radio program and podcast *This American Life*, Russian realist literature, soul music, grunge rock, Southern hip-hop, the poetry of Mary Oliver, the writing of Terry Tempest Williams, the films of directors Hayao Miyazaki, Kelly Reichardt, and Koreeda Hirokazu, and on and on. From this list, I am able to identify patterns

### OUR MEDIA LANDSCAPE

While Le Guin has an unapologetically romantic love of reading, she is not scared of technology. She recognizes that listening and sharing stories can take a variety of forms. “The technology is not what matters. Words are what matter. The sharing of words. The activation of imagination through the reading of words.”<sup>10</sup> In contemporary society, media are ubiquitous. We are surrounded by—bombed by—words and pictures and video and audio. But rather than simply dismiss it all as noise, we can still seek out and benefit from “the sharing of words.”

### Discussion Question

*What are the media that matter most to you? What do you spend your time reading, watching, playing, listening to, and so on? What examples of art, storytelling, communication, and expression have influenced your taste, caused you to think, changed your mind, touched your heart?*

and make connections: for example, my love of the outdoors, my admiration for earnest expressions of emotion, my appreciation for the documentary ethic of finding significance in the commonplace, my commitment as a teacher to promoting creativity, critical thinking, and so on.

As we plot out our investments of time and interest in popular culture, we are articulating what Larry Grossberg calls “mattering maps.”<sup>11</sup> More than just a silly listicle of fan faves, these maps chart out the things we care about, as expressed through the art, stories, and media that we appreciate or enjoy. Further, Grossberg argues that finding meaning in our favorite media can actually help us find meaning in our existence and fulfillment in our lives. To some, this idea that being a fan of a TV show or finding pleasure in playing a video game can help us address existential questions might seem a bit of a stretch. But Grossberg stresses that—considering how meaningless the world may seem at times, how easy it is not to care, how cynical or powerless we might feel—the energy and confidence we express in our engagement with media has more significance than we might recognize.

Such empowerment is increasingly important in a world in which pessimism has become common sense, in which people increasingly feel incapable of making a difference, and in which differences increasingly seem not to matter, not to make any difference themselves. Fandom is, at least potentially, the site of the optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary conditions for any struggle to change the conditions of one’s life.<sup>12</sup>

Grossberg argues that as fans, we invest time, energy, and enthusiasm in our favorite media for different reasons, in different ways. But ultimately, when we imbue them with meaning—when we grant art, stories, and pop culture some sort of personal significance—we are expressing just a bit of hope that our existence has meaning and that we can make some difference in the world.

The 1998 Japanese film *After Life* creatively portrays the connections between media and finding meaning in our lives.<sup>13</sup> Written and directed by Hirokazu Koreeda, the film is set in a way station between life and death where recently deceased persons spend a week reflecting on their lives and selecting their “happiest memory” to take with them into the afterlife. These memories are recreated by the center’s staff and produced as simple, short films so that the dead can re-experience them for eternity. At the end of the week, the staff hold a screening with all those who have passed away. The group watches the memories onscreen, and when the lights come up, the theater is empty, their souls having moved on.

The opening of *After Life* is particularly compelling, not just because it introduces the film’s fascinating premise but because it includes a montage of interview footage that includes a combination of actors reciting scripted stories,

actors recounting their own experiences, and non-actors sharing their most cherished personal memories. During the development of the film, Koreeda reportedly interviewed over 500 people about their memories, to research their responses but also to capture footage for the film and contribute to *After Life*'s authenticity.<sup>14</sup> The resulting sequence is candid and quite charming. The responses include often seemingly unremarkable but personally meaningful moments—the feeling of a warm breeze on a tram ride home or the sight of lovely pink cherry blossoms. One teenager initially selects a memory from a visit to Disneyland but reconsiders and ultimately chooses a quiet moment with her mother as a young child. It seems that both in art and in life, it is not about the “the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.”<sup>15</sup>

While *After Life*'s premise is fantastical, the film is profoundly interested in our real experiences, encouraging us to reflect on how we find happiness and meaning in our lives. And while we may not have the opportunity to re-experience a beloved memory in film-form for eternity after we die, our stories and experiences can live on after us if (like the participants in the *Story Corps* project) we document them and share them with others, allowing them to be passed from generation to generation.

### **MOMENTS THAT MATTER TO US**

Memory is a common theme in both Koreeda's documentary and fiction films, and the filmmaker clearly values the meaning that can be gained from reflecting and remembering. In the case of *After Life*, the fantastical premise allows audiences to consider the significance of their memories in a new way. Linda Ehrlich and Kishi Yoshiko recount a conversation they had with the director and write that, when asked about his intentions behind the one “happiest memory” in *After Life*, “he asserted that the placement of a fictional frame around the memory allowed the one chosen memory to be seen from a new perspective, perhaps allowing it to acquire new meaning.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Discussion Question**

*What are the memories that matter most to you? If you could re-experience one moment from your life for eternity, what would it be?*

## **Documenting, Listening, and Caring**

It is perhaps unsurprising that many of the examples referenced in this chapter (*StoryCorps*, *After Life*) are informed by a documentary sensibility—rather than fiction or abstraction, for example—because the documentary tradition is commonly associated with an ethic of inquiry, of listening and caring. When

documentary pioneer John Grierson began using “talking heads” in his films, he did so because he wanted to allow (often regular, working class) people to share their stories and be listened to.<sup>17</sup> Since then, “talking heads” have been adopted as a standard convention of the genre, and their significance has arguably been forgotten by many. But when Hirokazu Koreeda utilizes “talking heads” in the opening of *After Life*, he does so with Grierson’s specific perspective on a documentary in mind. Having produced documentaries for television before becoming a feature film director, Koreeda explains how the documentary ethos informs his work, both fiction and non-fiction.

With documentary, my stance is just to be there with the subject, passively listening, waiting until the subject wants to speak ... I’ve come to realize recently that listening is more difficult than talking, and that *bending an ear to a companion’s feelings and thoughts is becoming a lost art*.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps one of the most illustrative examples of the ethos pioneered by Grierson and continued by documentary enthusiasts like Koreeda is the *This I Believe* radio program. Hosted on CBS Radio Network from 1951 to 1955 by renowned journalist Edward R. Murrow, *This I Believe* included brief essays in which people from all walks of life—from everyday citizens to celebrities, thinkers, and public figures like Jackie Robinson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Mahatma Gandhi—voiced their personal beliefs. Murrow developed the program in response to the pervasive uncertainty felt during that time—specifically, in the aftermath of World War II, during the height of the Cold War and the so-called “Red Scare” within the US. He felt that hearing people talk about the things that give them perspective and purpose might help his listeners have some hope. Murrow’s introduction to the series reads just as relevant now as it did in 1951 when it originally aired:

We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion. A lot of us have traded in our beliefs for bitterness and cynicism, or for a heavy package of despair, or even a quivering portion of hysteria. Opinions can be picked up cheap in the marketplace, while such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply ... It has become more difficult than ever to distinguish black from white, good from evil, right from wrong. What truths can a human being afford to furnish the cluttered nervous room of his mind with when he has no real idea how long a lease he has on the future? It is to try to meet the challenge of such questions that we have prepared these broadcasts. It has been a difficult task and a delicate one. Except for those who think in terms of pious platitudes or dogma or narrow prejudice—and those thoughts we aren’t interested in—people don’t speak their beliefs easily or publicly.<sup>19</sup>

*This I Believe* was intended to give listeners respite from the prejudice and divisiveness that dominated public discourse at the time (and in many ways, continues to do so now). The program provided its audience with an opportunity to listen to, reflect on, and, for some, even share their most cherished convictions. A few of the responses draw upon established philosophies or theologies, but most resist relying on existing doctrines. Instead, they convey more nuanced perspectives on the complexities of human existence based on the speaker's personal experiences.

For example, from 2005 to 2009 (another time of particular political and ideological divide in the US), National Public Radio revived the series, and among the contributors to the program was documentary filmmaker Errol Morris. In his essay, entitled "There is Such a Thing as Truth," Morris shares an experience from his childhood when he unfairly lost a two dollar bet to a bully who refused to admit that Morris correctly located Reno, NV as West of Los Angeles, CA. Rather than admit his loss and pay up, the bully questioned the validity of Morris's map. From this early experience, Morris learned a lesson:

There is such a thing as truth, but we often have a vested interest in ignoring it or outright denying it. Also, it's not just thinking something that makes it true. Truth is not relative. It's not subjective. It may be elusive or hidden. People may wish to disregard it. But there is such a thing as truth and the pursuit of truth: trying to figure out what has really happened, trying to figure out how things really are.<sup>20</sup>

Morris's belief in the existence of truth informs his work as a documentary filmmaker and most especially his 1998 film *The Thin Blue Line*.<sup>21</sup> In the film, Morris investigates a murder case, and because of his commitment to discovering the truth, the documentary uncovered new evidence and eventually resulted in the release of an innocent man from death row. Morris's belief that truth exists and that it is worth pursuing may not have gotten him that two dollars as a kid, but it sparked a long career of using media to ask questions and discover answers.

It may be helpful to note that Morris does not claim that when we believe in and pursue truth we are guaranteed access to some kind of transcendental meaning.

It's not that we find truth with a big "T." We investigate and sometimes we find things out and sometimes we don't. There's no way to know in advance. It's just that we have to proceed as though there are answers to questions. We must proceed as though, in principle, we can find things out—even if we can't. The alternative is unacceptable.<sup>22</sup>

Morris's pursuit is not without complications, and the truths he uncovers are conditional, but he argues that believing in the existence of truth is essential.

After all, in the case of *The Thin Blue Line*, Morris's belief in truth literally saved a man's life. Today we are experiencing such discord and confusion, arguably even greater than that experienced during Murrow's original series. As conspiracy theories and "alternative facts" spread like wildfire, eroding public trust in scientific data and even obscuring the idea of objective reality, media like *This I Believe* that promote sincerely asking questions and seeking answers, is of special necessity.

## Practicing Vulnerability

Media like *This I Believe* require something of us as audiences and creators—rather than encouraging us to sit and passively watch or buy or believe, they engage us in a dialogue about the things that matter most to us. In order for media to really matter, our watching, listening, playing, discussing, interpreting, creating, sharing, and so on needs to reflect the things that matter to us—our experiences, beliefs, and values. And this requires us to be vulnerable. As audiences, we have to be ready to listen. We have to seek to understand. We have to be open and empathetic. We have to use our critical faculties while also paying attention to our feelings, and even more, validating the feelings of others. As creators, we need to be willing to bear our hearts and share our beliefs in our work, while also humbly acknowledging that our experiences and expressions are not the end of—but actually just a contribution to—the conversation.

Educator and environmental activist Peter Forbes emphasizes the importance of practicing vulnerability in both our creative expression and political advocacy. But first, he acknowledges the difficulties that this brings, writing:

[W]e rarely speak of our values because they're perceived as soft and we need to be hard. We rarely tell stories, because we think our job is to prove things and you can't prove a story ... And, honestly, leading with one's values is leading with one's chin. It's not a safe place, is it? If you lead with your values, you will be vulnerable ... You will risk trusting others. There's the risk that you will be misinterpreted and taken advantage of, rejected ... It's the difficulty of speaking about nuance in a culture of pounding fists and elevator pitches. But there are enormous successes: when you lead with your values, you provoke what is real and genuine, you demonstrate your moral voice, and you will actually grow and change.<sup>23</sup>

According to Forbes, when we practice vulnerability—sharing our stories, leading with our values, and really listening to others, we may open ourselves up to misunderstanding, criticism, or rejection, but we also open ourselves up to substantive conversation, genuine connection, and positive change. For example, speaking of *After Life*, director Hirokazu Koreeda shares that after

spending ten years developing the film, he was actually a bit reluctant to share it with audiences, because of how personal a project the film is. “In a sense it became an extremely private film. I’ve recently become embarrassed at the thought of it being released to the public,” laughs Koreeda.<sup>24</sup> One might argue that the reason for Koreeda’s hesitancy about sharing it with others is the same reason why audiences find the film so compelling: *After Life* exhibits incredible vulnerability, asking pressing questions and offering some very personal responses from its creators.

## Seeking Truths, Making Things

The process of imagining, listening, searching, and discovering discussed in this chapter is ongoing. Rather than arriving at some single, authoritative answer or settling on a particular set of values, we benefit from continually searching for meaning, shaping and reshaping our perspective on the world. Because if we allow ourselves to always be open—if we keep imagining and listening as we engage with art, each other, and the world around us—we will always find new truths.

In her 1856 epic poem *Aurora Leigh*, British writer Elizabeth Barrett Browning tells the story of a female artist. Through the eponymous Aurora, Browning voices her own deeply held convictions on life and art, in a way prefiguring Murrow’s *This I Believe* essays. A particularly significant passage

### ART AND ETERNITY

The “biopic” *At Eternity’s Gate*, depicts the life and art of famed painter Vincent Van Gogh. One scene depicts a conversation between the artists and Dr. Paul Gachet, the subject of the painter’s renown *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*. As the doctor poses for the portrait, he asks Van Gogh why he paints. The artist responds that when he paints, he is able to pause and be present. “I stop thinking, and I feel that I’m a part of everything outside and inside of me,” Van Gogh (played by Willem Dafoe) says. “I thought an artist had to teach how to look at the world but I don’t think that any more. Now, I just think about my relationship to eternity.”<sup>28</sup> Even long before Van Gogh’s time, people have used the arts to address enduring questions, share their experiences, and express their beliefs.

### Discussion Question

*What is it about art that allows us to discover new meanings in the world around us? What works of art have helped you find meaning in your life?*

from the poem begins with “Truth, so far, in my book ...”<sup>25</sup> Here, Browning doubly contextualizes her understanding of truth as both ongoing (“so far”) and personal (“in my book”). And with this qualification out of the way, she goes on to bear her testimony, not of any god per se, but of the beauty and significance of the world around us. She argues that, when we are attuned to the superimposition of the “natural” and the “spiritual,” the truths of the world open up to us. “[A] tree, a leaf, a common stone” are no longer just things, but become opportunities for discovery.<sup>26</sup> Browning argues how important it is that all of us—but especially artists and creators—develop our sensitivity to the meanings within the world around us. “Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God,” she writes. “But only he who sees, takes off his shoes ...”<sup>27</sup> In *Aurora Leigh*, Browning leads with her values, but rather than simply defining truth for her readers, she invites us to embark on our own journeys to seek and discover meaning in the world around us.

In his memoir *The Soul of a Tree: A Woodworker’s Reflections*, famed woodworker, furniture maker, and architect George Nakashima contemplates his own efforts to find meaning in the world around him and in his work as an artist. “My life,” he writes “has been a long search across the tumbling scree and mountain slopes around the world to find small points of glowing truth.”<sup>29</sup> Like Browning, Nakashima finds meaning both in the arts and, specifically, in trees—which in his case, are very literally, inseparably connected. His work derives their designs from the organic shapes and patterns of the fallen trees that he carefully selects, saws, and shapes into beautiful tables, chairs, and other pieces. Nakashima suggests that as creators—when we cultivate our sensitivities and skills, envision our intentions, select our materials, and work with wood, pen and paper, a camera, or whatever our medium to realize that vision in the world—we are engaged in a very practical, even physical, process of discovery: “Ours is a search for truth in the most realistic of ways—the making of things.”<sup>30</sup>

Whether we are making movies or podcasts, taking photos with our phones or drawing pictures with crayons, painting or performing, carving wood or creating something else, we have the opportunity to join Nakashima in this search for truth. When we use our art to engage others in conversations about the things that matter most, to express what we believe to be of value, to ask the big questions, and to seek for answers, we are meeting the uncertainty, division, confusion, and chaos in our world with creativity and hope.

### **Case Study: Studio Ghibli and Movies that Matter**

In June of 1985, two Japanese animators, Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki, along with film producer Toshio Suzuki, established the now legendary animation house Studio Ghibli. A year before, the collaborators’ feature film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* was met with critical and commercial success both in Japan and internationally. Using the momentum created by

*Nausicaä*, the three men launched the production company whose name means “hot Sahara wind.” While Ghibli is reportedly also a reference to an Italian warplane (Miyazaki is a known aeronautics aficionado), the word’s original Arabic meaning is not without significance: Following its founding, Studio Ghibli would go on to sweep through the Japanese film industry, pushing the boundaries of the art form and firmly establishing anime as a global media phenomenon. In the decades since *Nausicaä*’s release, Studio Ghibli has released more than twenty feature films, breaking box-office records, winning awards in Japan and around the world, and introducing compelling stories and beloved characters to generations of audiences, young and old.<sup>31</sup> While Studio Ghibli’s films vary in terms of genre, visual style, and thematic interest, their work is recognized for its ability to combine beautifully hand-drawn animation with immersive storytelling and thoughtful social commentary in ways that are both entertaining and thought-provoking. This combination of compelling stories and thematic messages that are both insightful and accessible is particularly important considering the creators’ interest in using art to introduce young audiences to enduring questions and pressing issues facing our world.

Given the ever-increasing economic, social, political, cultural, and ecological crises we are experiencing, it is no wonder that creators like those at Studio Ghibli would feel some responsibility to use their art to positively address these challenges. In a 2005 interview, Miyazaki describes how his hopes and fears for the future inform how he approaches his work.

Personally I am very pessimistic ... But when, for instance, one of my staff has a baby you can’t help but bless them for a good future. Because I can’t tell that child, ‘Oh, you shouldn’t have come into this life.’ And yet I know the world is heading in a bad direction. So with those conflicting thoughts in mind, I think about what kind of films I should be making.<sup>32</sup>

The films made by Miyazaki and his colleagues reflect the thoughtfulness (and oftentimes, the conflictedness) referenced in the quote, and they effectively illustrate the concepts discussed in the first section of this chapter. Ghibli’s work exemplifies Le Guin’s celebration of imagination—both in how the studio creates engaging stories and immersive worlds and in how it envisions solutions to challenges facing our own world.<sup>33</sup> Their films model a type of listening for their young viewers—celebrating curiosity and inviting contemplation. The work produced by Ghibli leads with its values, never shying away from addressing matters like war and ecological destruction while, at the same time, avoiding oversimplification and stridency. And lastly, the animated stories produced by Miyazaki, Takahata, Suzuki, and their collaborators both practice and promote vulnerability—sharing personal stories and insights in

nuanced ways and inviting their audiences to cultivate their sympathy for others and sensitivity to the world around them.

### ***Envisioning Other (and Better) Worlds***

In an interview about his film *Spirited Away*, Hayao Miyazaki emphasizes the importance of imagination, saying:

I believe that fantasy in the meaning of imagination is very important. We shouldn't stick too close to everyday reality but give room to the reality of the heart, of the mind, and of the imagination.<sup>34</sup>

While there are notable differences between Ghibli's two founding directors—Miyazaki is highly productive while Takahata's work schedule is much more leisurely, Miyazaki works within a specific visual style while Takahata's aesthetic approaches vary from film to film—this celebration of the imagination is central to both of their approaches. They both assert that rather than realistically represent the world, art (and animation specifically) should creatively reinterpret reality and, in so doing, spark the imaginations of, especially young, audiences. Discussing his final film *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, Takahata says:

With the advances in 3D, animation films are increasingly going in the direction toward live-action style images. Yet, rather than drawing in every detail and depicting something as if the real thing were there, paintings inherently have the great power to stir up the viewer's vivid imagination and memory when the brush is used sparingly to give an impression of the real thing.<sup>35</sup>

While all of Ghibli's films function as evidence of the power of using hand-drawn animation to render beautiful and elaborate worlds, both historical and fantastical, the painterly aesthetic Takahata employs in *Princess Kaguya* is a particularly fitting example.<sup>36</sup> Based on the ninth century Japanese folktale "The Tale of the Woodcutter," the film tells the story of a princess from the heavens who lives as a mortal, is raised by adoptive parents, develops a close friendship, gets entangled with the Emperor, and eventually, reluctantly returns to her home in the Moon. The visual style used to illustrate Kaguya's story evokes the simple, impressionistic style used in traditional Japanese ink and watercolor paintings. Takahata chose this particular approach to pay homage to the aesthetic tradition within Japanese art history as well as to have the film's form reflect the time period in which the story is set. But *Princess Kaguya*'s almost unfinished imagery also serves to invite the audience to exercise their imagination along with the film's creators, to fill in the pictures on screen with their own ideas, and thus make the fantastical tale their own in some small way.

## ANIMATED REALISM

Despite both Miyazaki and Takahata's interest in fantasy, both filmmakers still share an interest in documenting everyday life in their work. "Anime may depict fictional worlds," says Miyazaki "but I nonetheless believe that at its core it must have a certain realism."<sup>37</sup> While Miyazaki is not a documentarian, his careful observation of the world and interest in documenting its idiosyncrasies is evident in the meticulous representations of everyday life in his animated films. Anime scholar Dani Cavallaro notes Miyazaki's devotion "to the recording of minute details that may often go unheeded in real life," illustrated in blink-and-you-miss-it moments like when Chihiro in *Spirited Away* taps the toes when she puts on her shoes.<sup>38</sup>

### Discussion Question

*What are examples of fantasy stories—in literature, film, or other media—that authentically depict the "minute details" of everyday life in a style akin to documentary? What is the impact of including such moments in a work of fiction?*

While imaginative play and fantastical stories clearly have value in and of themselves, Studio Ghibli's films often demonstrate how they can be used to help audiences engage with the challenges we are facing and envision a better world. Perhaps the clearest example of this practice of imagining better is in another of the films directed by Takahata, 1994's *Pom Poko*. Set in contemporary Japan, the story follows a community of mythical, shape-shifting racoon-dogs called *tanuki*—which appear throughout Japanese folklore—as they attempt to prevent their forests and hills from being developed by the ever-encroaching humans. Throughout the film, the *tanuki* conceive of and execute multiple strategies to save their home from destruction, all to no avail.

Then, at the film's climax, the few creatures of legend who remain determine to use the last of their mystical powers to try one last thing. Together, they conjure a massive illusion, briefly transforming the newly developed town back into the beautiful, verdant landscapes that existed before. "We'll show these humans the right way to transform this land," says Oroku, the community's matriarch.<sup>39</sup> Even though they know that their vision will be short-lived and ultimately futile, the *tanuki* combine their powers to make the land green again. The trees return, along with the wild animals and even the people who lived in the small village that existed long ago. The *tanuki* sob, seeing their home restored, and the humans marvel at the incredible transformation; some are even reunited with their loved ones who lived there before and had since passed away.

In the end, after the animals finally give up their efforts to save the hills from development, the narrator—a tanuki named Shoukichi—comments that while things will never return to the way they were before, the beautiful vision they conjured that day prompted the humans to begin caring more about the natural world, preserving forests, creating parks, and trying to live in greater harmony with the tanuki and other animals. In *Pom Poko*'s climax—but also underlying so many of Studio Ghibli's films—is this idea that using our imagination will not only bring us pleasure but also, at least potentially, allow us to positively transform the world around us according to what we love and value.

### ***Promoting Curiosity and Contemplation***

Perhaps because many of the films' protagonists are children, and because the films' creators share a childlike sense of wonder about the world, the stories Studio Ghibli tells often emphasize themes of curiosity and inquiry. They emphasize carefully observing the world around us, listening to the stories and perspectives of others, and reflecting on the significance of these discoveries.

For example, *My Neighbor Totoro* follows two young girls, Satsuki and Mei, as they move to an old cottage so they can be closer to the hospital where their mother is recovering from an illness.<sup>40</sup> The girls are fascinated first by their new home and surrounding wilderness—the film includes a particularly charming sequence in which Mei wanders around their new yard, picking flowers, observing tadpoles, and collecting acorns. Then, like many of Studio Ghibli's films, the girls stumble upon a bit of magic. Catching sight of a small forest spirit, Mei follows it on a hidden path through the thick greenery to an enormous camphor tree where she encounters the titular Totoro. Mei's discovery is the result of her close observation of her surroundings and her curiosity about things around her, both real and fantastical.

This same spirit of inquiry is shared by the heroines of other Ghibli films including *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Spirited Away*, *The Secret World of Arrietty*, *Ponyo*, and *Earwig and the Witch*. In each of these stories, not only do the characters' interest in and enthusiasm for the world around them propel the plot, introducing them to new situations, characters, even worlds, but their curiosity and openness also function to help bridge the divides that exist between these characters and worlds.

For example, Nausicaä demonstrates the value of approaching the unfamiliar with curiosity rather than fear.<sup>41</sup> When she experiments with toxin-producing plants in her hidden underground lab, Nausicaä discovers that the seemingly threatening plant and animal life that inhabit her post-apocalyptic world are, in fact, simply trying to defend the Earth from further destruction caused by humans. One scene demonstrates Nausicaä's openness especially well: While trying to befriend a frightened fox-squirrel, Nausicaä is bitten. But as the

little creature sinks its teeth into her hand, Nausicaä maintains her composure and calmly reassures it. The little animal (whom she names Teto) releases its hold on her and eventually becomes Nausicaä's companion. Her willingness to see toxic plants, feral animals, and even giant rampaging herds of armored Ohmu as more than threats sets her apart from the rest of her community. And her commitment to promoting peace and understanding, rather than fear and war, eventually helps establish some resolution to the conflict between humanity and the natural world.

As evident in Nausicaä's story, the celebration of curiosity in Studio Ghibli's films consists of more than characters bravely venturing into unknown lands or encountering strange creatures. Their curiosity leads not to conquest, but to contemplation and connection. The characters learn from their discoveries, engage in self-reflection, and take action, making efforts to improve themselves and the world around them.

### **PILLOW SHOTS**

One way that Hayao Miyazaki encourages his audiences to engage in contemplation is by the inclusion of "pillow-shots" in his films. Coined by cinema scholar Noel Burch to describe an aesthetic device used by one of Miyazaki's predecessors, Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu, the term refers to what Burch describes as "cutaway still lifes" or insert shots "which transmit no diegetic information beyond the suggestion of a timeless place or presence."<sup>42</sup> Interspersed throughout Miyazaki's films are shots of, for example, clouds, a hillside, a street corner, and so on. Some have described these shots as a strategy for establishing pacing, a type of punctuation that represents a passing of time or provides a smooth transition from one sequence to another. Not unlike the impressionistic watercolor aesthetic used in *Princess Kaguya*, Miyazaki's use of "pillow shots" gives space for the audience to pause, reflect on, and discover some meaning in what they are watching.

### **Discussion Question**

*What are other aesthetic devices that media can use to invite contemplation? What is an example of a film, podcast, novel, poem, or some other text that has caused you to pause and reflect?*

### ***Stories of Value and Vulnerability***

Studio Ghibli's work stands apart from some other films for young audiences in that they do not shy away from exploring pressing, and potentially divisive, political issues. These films lead with their values. *Grave of the Fireflies*, for

example, addresses the horrors of war, and specifically the tragedies experienced by the Japanese people during World War II. *Princess Mononoke* emphasizes the necessity of overcoming our ideological differences in order to ensure the survival of not just humanity but the planet itself. The films address enduring questions, and the messages conveyed in them reflect their creators' personal experiences and values.

For example, in *Spirited Away*, Chihiro visits a fantastical world inhabited by Japanese spirits called Kami and, while there, works at a bathhouse.<sup>43</sup> When a “stink spirit” visits one day, Chihiro is unable to clean it on her own. So, she enlists the help of the other bathhouse workers, and together they eventually dislodge a mountain of garbage, including a bicycle, from the spirit's slimy form. Having dispelled this incredible collection of waste, Chihiro discovers that her customer is actually a river spirit who had been polluted. In a making-of documentary accompanying the film's US home video release, Miyazaki shares that this sequence was directly inspired by his own weekly visits to the local river, working with other members of his community to clear the water of garbage—including a bicycle, which they pulled from the river as depicted in the film.<sup>44</sup> When *Spirited Away* was nominated for an Academy Award, Miyazaki declined to attend the ceremony. Later, he revealed that his absence was his own personal form of protest to the US's war in the Middle East. “I didn't want to visit a country that was bombing Iraq,” Miyazaki says.<sup>45</sup> The messages about peaceful resolutions of conflict and the preservation of the natural world in Miyazaki's films are evidently rooted in the values he practices in his personal life.

### COMPLICATED CHARACTERS AND REALITIES

One characteristic of Ghibli's films—and Miyazaki's work in particular—is their commitment to representing the complexities of the human experience. While many of Ghibli's films resemble folk and fairy tales in that they are vividly illustrated stories for children that convey moral messages, they resist the tendency of these traditions to oversimplify these important issues or overstate their arguments. The characters in Studio Ghibli's films are morally complicated and do not neatly correspond with the types of “hero” and “villain.” In fact, Miyazaki challenges our acceptance of such terms.

When I say ‘hero’, do not picture someone with strength to fight and conquer evil—because evil is not something that can ever be conquered or defeated. Evil is natural. It is innate in all humans. But while it can't be defeated, it can be controlled. In order to control it, and live the life of a true hero, you must learn to see with eyes unclouded by hate. See the good in that which is evil, and the evil in that which is good.<sup>46</sup>

This value of “see[ing] with eyes unclouded by hate” is, in fact, stated by the protagonist of Miyazaki’s *Princess Mononoke*, Ashitaka, and this commitment to representing the complexities of both humanity and reality is evident in the film’s narrative.

### Discussion Question

*What might be the benefits from resisting moral dichotomies of “hero” and “villain,” “good” and “evil” and representing more complicated characters and realities? What are some other examples of media, art, and storytelling that effectively represent such complexity?*

In addition to being willing to tell stories that convey their values, the creators of the Ghibli films also demonstrate a willingness to be truly vulnerable in their art, drawing upon personal experiences, even trauma, for their films. For example, in *Grave of the Fireflies*, director Isao Takahata incorporates memories of his childhood during World War II.<sup>47</sup> Adapted from a short story by Akiyuki Nosaka, *Grave of the Fireflies* follows two children, Seita and Satsuko, who lose their mother and their home to firebombs dropped by U.S. military forces and eventually die of starvation in war-torn Japan. As a ten-year-old living in Okayama with his parents and six older siblings, Takahata also lost his home to a U.S. air raid. He recalls wandering the streets of the city with his sister, barefoot, in pajamas, as bombs went off around them, engulfing the buildings in flames. In an interview about the making of the film, Takahata shares a little about this traumatic experience.

I was lucky to be alive. My sister was injured, and scars remained. We were reunited with our family about two days later. It was a nightmare. The most horrible experience of my life. I used my own experience of this air raid in the film.<sup>48</sup>

*Grave of the Fireflies*’ depiction of the horrors of war is incredibly compelling on its own, but learning that the film is also informed by the director’s own childhood memories of war makes the film even more significant. Takahata is not simply stating his opinion about the consequences of war; he is drawing upon his own traumatic memories to make his plea for peace. The vulnerability exhibited in Takahata’s telling of this story is impactful and inspiring.

### ***Making Things and Discovering Hope***

A common characteristic in Studio Ghibli’s filmography is the affection for and celebration of making things. Onscreen, characters are depicted carefully

preparing meals, building, fixing, and maintaining machinery, using magic to conjure and create, and relying on their ingenuity and organizing their communities to make change in the world—like the tanuki in *Pom Poko* and Chihiro with the river spirit in *Spirited Away*. Also, the films themselves are demonstrations of their creators' love of making things. Takahata continued working up until his death at age 82. For over twenty years, Miyazaki has been announcing and re-announcing his retirement, only to come back each time and make another film. His work is his life, and this makes some sense, given the attitude with which he approaches his art.

In the 2005 interview with Miyazaki referenced earlier, the director discusses how the tension between his own pessimism and his desire for young people to love life influences the stories he tells. This tension is even apparent in Miyazaki's responses to the journalist's questions. One moment, he laments that, despite his intentions, his films have not had any discernible, positive impact on the world: "Film doesn't have that kind of power ... It only exerts its influence when it stirs patriots up against other nations, or taps into aggressive, violent urges."<sup>49</sup> But the next moment, his perspective shifts, and his mood seems to brighten a bit.

Of course ... if, as artists, we try to tap into that soul level—if we say that life is worth living and the world is worth living in—then something good might come of it ... Maybe that's what these films are doing. They are my way of blessing the child.<sup>50</sup>

Making films seems to be what sustains Miyazaki's hope amid so much confusion and suffering, and even more, it allows him to convey that hope to children in order to help them face life—filled with all its good and evil and everything in between—"with eyes unclouded by hate."<sup>51</sup>

One way in which Studio Ghibli's films inspire hope and encourage their young viewers to embrace life and get to work is the open-endedness of their stories. Whereas conventional narratives (especially those for children) often conclude with tidy resolutions—in which the conflict is overcome and everyone lives "happily ever after"—the stories told by Takahata, Miyazaki, and their collaborators so often end with invitations. For example, at the conclusion of *Pom Poko*, the tanuki Shoukichi pauses and faces the audience. Looking into the "camera," he debunks news reports that claim that local wildlife is simply "disappearing" and asks viewers to consider what might really be happening to those animals who have been displaced because of the development.<sup>52</sup> In the last shot from *Grave of the Fireflies*, the siblings Seita and Satsuko are reunited, but only after they both succumb to starvation. And for the briefest moment, right before the credits roll, Seita (similar to Shoukichi) turns and looks at the audience. He is silent, but his eyes seem to implore viewers to reflect on the story's meaning and, perhaps even to take some action to prevent further tragedies like those depicted in the film.

Even when Ghibli's films do not include this type of Brechtian breaking of the fourth wall, they typically end in a way that indicates to the audience that there is still work to be done, and that they—or more accurately, *we*—are the ones to do it. At the end of *Princess Mononoke*, for example, there is a hesitant resolution of the conflict between humanity and the forest gods, but the greater conflict between industry and nature is left unresolved. The humans and animals on either side of the battle suffer severe losses of life, and even the Deer God who is steward of the forests is dead. Ashitaka will return to the town and help them rebuild, while Princess Mononoke (or San, as she is called throughout the film) will continue to protect the forests. And in the meantime, the audiences are left to consider what they will do. Scholar Susan Napier describes the film's conclusion as

a wake-up call to human beings in a time of environmental and spiritual crisis that attempts to provoke its audience into realizing how much they have already lost and how much more they stand to lose.<sup>53</sup>

But despite the film's somber ending and even more somber reality of Earth's ecological crisis, there still exists some hope. The forest begins to grow again. The townspeople begin to rebuild with new understanding. And even in the midst of mourning the fallen Deer God, Ashitaka is able to find some hope to cling to. He shares this hope with the Princess, saying "He's not dead, San. He's right here trying to tell us something. That it's time for both of us to live."<sup>54</sup> Here is Miyazaki's blessing to the children of the world: He not only creates beautiful, resonant films that address the complex challenges that face humanity, but he inspires his audiences (young and old) to have hope, to make our lives meaningful and our world a bit better.

### Activity: Stories from the Heart

This chapter's creative activity encourages participants to practice vulnerability as creators and make work that is deliberately informed by their values. Participants take inventory of what matters most to them, construct a narrative that conveys why a particular theme is personally significant to them, and then make an illustrated children's story that is both sincere and nuanced.

*Start by taking inventory of the ideas, themes, issues, experiences, and so on that matter most to you. You might begin by thinking of the creative works that are meaningful to you, the most memorable or significant experiences you have had in your lives, the relationships you value most, the lessons you have learned, the issues you care most about, the guiding principles by which you try to live your life. Then, map out the things that matter to you, identifying patterns, common themes, or connections.*

In my case, I might reference films like *After Life* or *Princess Mononoke*, my memories adventuring through national parks with my wife and children, my

love of making things (from tree houses to Halloween costumes to movies to this book), my concerns about climate change, my efforts to promote media literacy, my desire to be a good listener, and so on. Reflecting on my “mattering map,” I might connect my experiences hiking in Zion or visiting the Tetons to my political perspectives on the environment and to the representations of ecological crisis in Studio Ghibli films. Or I might identify how my love of movies and the fulfillment I get from the creative process informs my work as an educator.

*Next, select a specific theme you identified from creating your mattering map and brainstorm potential story ideas that might be used to convey this theme to an audience. Your ideas can be adapted from fables or fairy tales, remix characters and narratives from media and popular culture, draw upon personal anecdotes, family stories, the news, or be entirely original. Ideally, the story idea you settle on is simple and accessible but still nuanced, effectively communicating why the theme you selected is personally significant.*

For example, for my story, I might choose to adapt a story from local news in which a Utah midwife becomes a reluctant environmental activist when she observes a spike in infant deaths in her small, fracking town.<sup>55</sup> Or I might remix the tale of Little Red Riding Hood in which Red’s disregard for the woods’ well-being leads to her demise at the hands (or teeth) of the Wolf. Or I might tell a series of original short stories set in a world where people seek out and share precious stones, symbolic of the stories we collect from media and pop culture.

*When you have settled on a story that conveys the personal significance of your theme, write the story in the form of a picture book, using whatever style or approach suits your story and subject and whatever means you have available to you. The book might resemble a fractured fairy tale with clever rhymes and cut-and-paste collage art. Or it might be a comic with hand-drawn illustrations and realistic dialogue. Or you might even make a screen-based story that incorporates sound design or interactive elements, allowing readers to click through and be more fully immersed in your story. Whatever format and style you choose, it should contribute to the communication of your theme.*

Here is an example.

### **Stones**

In 2019, my colleague David Habben—a professional artist and illustration professor—began developing a project called *Stones*. As lovers of storytelling—in its many forms—we wanted to create something that would emphasize the value of stories to a young audience, while also helping them (and the adults in their lives) learn to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and share stories in today’s media landscape. Our goal was to introduce basic media literacy principles and practices to children in the form of short, accessible, visually compelling stories. We brainstormed the ideas that we wanted to convey to children through our

project—for example, the importance of children seeing themselves in the stories they encounter, the value of sharing stories among friends and family and across generations and cultures, and so on. In order to address these different ideas, David and I determined that rather than telling a single story, we would make a series of short, interrelated stories set within the same world and all corresponding with the same general theme.

So, we devised a world where brightly colored people find, craft, collect, and share precious stones, which are symbolic of stories. Through seven short, illustrated tales, the book encourages readers to consider the significance of stories in our lives. For example in one story, a purple girl joins her friends searching for stones, but while they find stones that correspond with their colors, she is unable to find a purple stone for herself. All of the people around her seem to have found their stone, but she feels left out and grows sad (see [Figure 9.1](#)).

Suddenly, the girl has an idea. She collects a blue and a red stone, and then works in her little laboratory, melting down the two stones and mixing them together (see [Figure 9.2](#)). At the end of her experiment, she proudly holds her new purple stone in the air, excited to finally have a stone of her own.

The story of the purple girl is intended to simply and subtly introduce young readers to the value of seeing ourselves represented in the stories we encounter as well as to encourage them—especially if their experiences and perspectives are not reflected in mainstream media—to exercise their creativity and share their own stories.

In addition to the illustrated stories, *Stones* includes a discussion guide for parents and teachers with key terms, discussion questions, and creative activities that accompany each of the seven tales. With this resource, adults can learn more about some of the concepts explored allegorically through the



**FIGURE 9.1** Children searching for stones illustrated by David Habben.



FIGURE 9.2 The girl crafting a stone of her own illustrated by David Habben.

illustrated stories and then scaffold critical conversations and learning experiences with the younger readers. For example, after reading the tale about the purple girl, readers can learn about terms like *representation*, identify stories that reflect their experiences, and devise stories that convey aspects of their lives that they do not often see represented in popular culture. The hope is that with simple stories and engaging illustrations, along with supplemental

### LI'I AND THE KEEPER OF WHISPERS

Inspired by the family stories that they were told growing up, Aaron, Jenna, and Jessica created a web-based multimedia children's story called *Li'i and the Keeper of Whispers* (see [Figure 9.3](#)). The story, told in five interactive



FIGURE 9.3 *Li'i and the Keeper of Whispers*.

chapters with brightly colored illustrations, original music, and soundscapes, tells the tale of Li'i, a Samoan girl living in the pre-colonial Pacific who must go on a quest to lift a curse plaguing her village and help her community retain the tales and traditions of their culture. Adapted from stories Aarron's grandmother told him as a child, the project intends to help young children—especially from indigenous and other historically marginalized groups—to recognize the value of remembering where they come from and continuing the storytelling traditions of their cultures.

### Discussion Question

*Try to recall a story that has been passed down by your family or community. What significance does this story hold for you personally? What values—held by your family, community, or culture—does the story represent? How might you use your creative skills to continue this storytelling tradition?*

resources that can spark and guide learning conversations, *Stones* will introduce young audiences (and maybe some grown-ups) to the significance of stories and the importance of being thoughtful, deliberate, empathetic, and creative when we engage with media.

## Conclusion

Larry Grossberg notes that our engagement with media, as fans as well as creators, is a place of particular possibility, especially given the challenges that face our world today.

It is in their affective lives that fans constantly struggle to care about something, and to find the energy to survive, to find the passion necessary to imagine and enact their own projects and possibilities.<sup>56</sup>

Sometimes, we may use media, pop culture, and the arts to unwind or entertain ourselves—these are completely justifiable reasons to watch, listen, read, play, and so on. But hopefully, we also seek opportunities to use the stories we are hearing and telling to connect with others, to ask questions, and discover answers. In this way, our search for meaning and our engagement with media overlap in productive ways. And even in those occasions when we do not have a device in our hands (rare, I know), we can live in ways that reflect the hope we have and the values we hold. In a letter to his brother Theo, Vincent Van Gogh shared a compelling (and for us, very fitting) insight: “There’s nothing more genuinely artistic than to love people.”<sup>57</sup> What if we try that?

## Notes

- 1 Le Guin (2019), p. 3.
- 2 Durant (1961), p. 96, emphasis added.
- 3 Le Guin (2019), pp. 5–6.
- 4 Le Guin (2019), pp. 5–6.
- 5 “Video: Roger Ebert on empathy” (2018).
- 6 “Video: Roger Ebert on empathy” (2018).
- 7 “About StoryCorps” (n.d.).
- 8 The Rauch Brothers (2013).
- 9 Le Guin (2019), pp. 5–6.
- 10 Le Guin (2019), p. 6.
- 11 Grossberg (1992), p. 57.
- 12 Grossberg (1992), p. 65.
- 13 Koreeda (1998).
- 14 Ehrlich & Yoshiko (2003).
- 15 Durant (1961), p. 96.
- 16 Ehrlich & Yoshiko (2003), p. 44.
- 17 Grierson (1946).
- 18 Quoted in Ehrlich and Yoshiko (2003), p. 40, emphasis added.
- 19 “Introduction to the Original This I Believe” (n.d.).
- 20 Morris (2005).
- 21 Morris (1988).
- 22 Morris (2005).
- 23 Forbes (2008), p. 4.
- 24 Gerow & Junko (1999).
- 25 Browning (1857), p. 274.
- 26 Browning (1857), p. 275.
- 27 Browning (1857), p. 275.
- 28 Schnabel (2018).
- 29 Nakashima (2012), p. 193.
- 30 Nakashima (2012), p. 194.
- 31 As of publication, Studio Ghibli’s feature films include *Castle in the Sky* (1986), *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989), *Only Yesterday* (1991), *Porco Rosso* (1992), *Ocean Waves* (1993), *Pom Poko* (1994), *Whisper in the Heart* (1995), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (1999), *Spirited Away* (2001), *The Cat Returns* (2002), *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004), *Tales from Earthsea* (2006), *Ponyo* (2008), *The Secret World of Arrietty* (2010), *From Up on Poppy Hill* (2011), *The Wind Rises* (2013), *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013), *When Marnie Was There* (2014), and *Earwig and the Witch* (2020).
- 32 Brooks (2005).
- 33 Interestingly, *Tales from Earthsea* (2006), directed by Goro Miyazaki is an adaptation of a collection of fantasy stories written by Le Guin.
- 34 Mes (2002).
- 35 Lambie (2015).
- 36 Takahata (2013).
- 37 Miyazaki (1996), p. 21.
- 38 Cavallaro (2006), p. 13.
- 39 Takahata (1994).
- 40 Miyazaki (1988).
- 41 Miyazaki (1984).
- 42 Burch (1979), p. 170.
- 43 Miyazaki (2001).

- 44 Zacky (2003).  
 45 Keegan (2013).  
 46 Quoted in Janasak (2015), p. 150.  
 47 Takahata (1988).  
 48 Werenko (2002).  
 49 Brooks (2005).  
 50 Brooks (2005). <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/sep/14/japan.awardsandprizes>  
 51 Miyazaki (1997).  
 52 Takahata (1994).  
 53 Napier (2001).  
 54 Miyazaki (1997).  
 55 Solotaroff (2015).  
 56 Grossberg (1992), p. 59.  
 57 Van Gogh (1888).

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# CONCLUSION

## Developing and Integrated Model for Media Engagement

*Making Media Matter* asks the question: How can media education effectively respond to the rapid development of digital technologies, the increased role of media in nearly every aspect of human life, as well as ongoing social, political, cultural, and ecological crises? The book suggests that, as we confront these challenges, there is particular value in drawing upon a variety of traditions, frameworks, and practices, but it has also been careful not to claim to be some kind of single, authoritative solution to the problems within our field, or our world. My hope is that this book can provide some possible paths forward for media education, modeling ways we might integrate principles and practices from media studies, media arts, and media literacy education, specifically in an effort to help our students develop critical literacies, thoughtfully engage with pop culture, and use media to express themselves, connect with others, and make the world better.

I acknowledge that many media educators have been engaged in this important work for much longer than myself, continually reassessing the effectiveness of our efforts and exploring new ways to help our students practice critical thinking, develop their creativity, and become more active citizens. For example, as I am finalizing this manuscript and preparing it for publication, a team of researchers led by Paul Mihailidis, Srividya Ramasubramian, and Melissa Tully, in partnership with the National Association for Media Literacy Education have published a report called “Equity and Impact in Media Literacy Practice: Mapping the Field in the United States,” which asks some of the same questions and engages with some of the same challenges as this book—What are the strengths and limitations of existing approaches to media education? How can we use media education to more effectively

promote values like caring, belonging, equity, and diversity?<sup>1</sup> My hope is that projects like their report, this book, and so many more initiatives that are being developed by scholars and practitioners in the field will continue to move the conversation forward and help us “make media matter.”

## **Addressing Common Limitations of Media Education**

This book is my contribution to this important conversation, and in it, I have tried to present a model for media education that addresses some of the limitations of existing approaches in our field (as discussed in [Chapter 1](#)). This model balances rigor and accessibility, unites theory and practice, integrates art and activism, values both unity and diversity, and attempts to redefine pedagogy, all in an effort to revitalize media education.

### ***Balancing Rigor and Accessibility***

In the previous chapters, I have deliberately framed and discussed media theory and criticism in ways that are accessible to educators that do not require readers to learn prohibitive amounts of discipline-specific academic jargon to benefit from the knowledge produced in particular fields of study. Further, I have attempted to illustrate these concepts with familiar and relevant examples from media and popular culture. Hopefully, in an effort to introduce readers to what I understand to be especially beneficial ideas from a variety of different areas of research, I have not misrepresented or oversimplified the discourses that they come from. My intention is to provide a ready resource for media educators—regardless of their particular educational background and experience—that can help them address some pressing issues in their classrooms. Going forward, my hope is that efforts like this book will encourage media scholars to see the benefits of expressing themselves in ways that educators “on the ground” (and even the broader public) can understand, while still being careful not to sacrifice the rigor, depth, and nuance that makes their research so impactful.

### ***Uniting Theory and Practice***

This book has also attempted to demonstrate ways that theory and practice can be integrated and inform each other. My organization of the chapters in this book into sections, which address theory, analysis, and creative practice, is intended to help readers make these connections. Having taught versions of these subjects in my classes for several years, I have benefitted from lots of student evaluations and self-reflection and have revised assignment descriptions and revisited my curriculum content and pedagogy countless times—always with the intention of more effectively preparing my students to connect critical thinking with creativity, theory with practice, both interpretive and creative.

Going forward, I hope that we can continue to bridge gaps between theory and practice in our field by fostering dialogue and collaboration between scholars and practitioners, by challenging disciplinary boundaries that separate academic research from professional practice, and preparing new generations of maker-scholars, research-artists, and so on.

### ***Integrating Art and Activism***

Continuing this theme of bridging gaps between disciplines, *Making Media Matter* has attempted to demonstrate that personal expression and civic participation are not mutually exclusive, but can go hand-in-hand with one another. Throughout the book, I have included examples from media and culture that illustrate the long, historical tradition of connecting aesthetics and politics—in Soviet montage, African-American folklore, Star Wars slash-fiction, and so on. And with many of the creative activities—including the Conversations About Difference, Radical Games, and Textual Poaching projects, for example—I have designed the assignments to encourage participants to embrace these connections. The examples of student projects I include in each chapter—including Sam and Abi’s “Radioland” podcast, Devin’s “Hetero-Mormotivity” game, and Melissa’s “Rosie the Riveter Remixed”—all serve as examples of connecting the personal and the political, of integrating artistic expression and civic participation. My hope is that as we make efforts to bridge theory and practice, encouraging students to express themselves creatively while also engaging with challenges facing their communities, we can pave the way for more socially conscious media to be made and more creative civic practices to be pioneered.

### ***Valuing Unity and Diversity***

In each of the previous chapters, I have made an effort to show the affordances of different disciplinary approaches, philosophical frameworks, modes of expression, and aesthetic traditions. The scholarship referenced represents a range of communities and cultures, and the examples from popular culture referenced in the book include a variety of media, modes, genres, and styles that serve different audiences. The book encourages us to engage with a wide range of people and perspectives, recognizing the value of our differences, while also emphasizing that we have more in common than we realize. While I have grounded my arguments in examinations of the *particular*, I have always tried to tie these discussions to the *universal*, so that regardless of a reader’s specific interests, experiences, or background, they will be able to gain something from an analysis of queer indie games, Miles Morales’s Spider-Man, representations of masculinity in superhero stories, and so on.

Ultimately, the challenges that we are confronted with today—addressing pressing societal issues, while attempting to connect with one another and

finding meaning in our existence—are things we must face together. My hope going forward is that our efforts as media educators will be more inclusive, that we will serve a greater variety of students, that our field will be open to a greater variety of scholars and educators, and that we can use media to celebrate our different strengths and perspectives while also working toward some common good.

### ***Re-defining Pedagogy and Revitalizing Media Education***

In addition to drawing upon the strengths of media studies, media arts, and media literacy education, this book also argues that media educators will benefit from developing a pedagogy that is creative, reflexive, student-centered, experiential, embodied, exciting, caring, inclusive, and transformative. In [Chapters 3](#) through [9](#), I attempt to model how educators can help their students:

- Think about the processes of making and interpreting media, and the larger social, political, economic, and cultural processes of which media are a part.
- Consider the ways in which media, art, and storytelling contribute to power relations, including whose perspectives and experiences are validated, whose existence is valued, who is afforded freedom, and who is not.
- Learn how the ideas of the author and the individual have influenced how we make meaning of culture, and recognize the ways we use media and popular culture to make sense of who we are as individuals.
- Recognize the role that culture plays in creating and maintaining connections among individuals and in communities.
- Identify the circumstances in which media contributes to dialogue, and helps us navigate disagreements, acknowledge both our similarities and our differences, but also embrace our diverse strengths and experiences.
- Acknowledge the roles that place plays in both our art and our lives, and embrace play as a potential way of critically engaging with the world.
- Embrace art's potential to help us find meaning in our existence, and practice vulnerability by sharing our values, being open and understanding, and actively listening to others share their own stories.

### **New Directions**

I am hopeful that readers will find some value in the principles and practices I have included in this book. And I am especially excited to collaborate with my readers in discovering directions to take this research in the future.

To jump-start those conversations, I have imagined some areas we might place extra emphasis on going forward.

### ***Decolonizing Media Education***

While for years, voices within media education have been advocating for our field of study and practice to be both more inclusive and more responsive to the challenges facing historically marginalized communities, there is still much work to be done in this area.<sup>2</sup> If promoting civic participation is among our objectives of media education, we must also be prepared to engage with issues of equity and justice, starting with promoting diversity within our field. I do not claim to make a significant contribution to this effort with *Making Media Matter*, but I hope that my inclusion of scholarship and creative work from a range of different communities and my emphasis on media education as a means of promoting social justice are steps in the right direction. My hope is that this book can be a small part of a much larger effort from our community of scholars and educators to question the dominance of white, straight, cis-gendered male, Western, able-bodied (and so on) voices within our field and to recognize the opportunities that we all have to decolonize media education. For example, we must place a greater emphasis on diversity when training and hiring educators. If among our teachers, there is not a range of races, ethnicities, orientations, and cultures represented, how are we to effectively serve diverse student populations? How can we expect to emphasize the value of dialogue and to champion various ways of understanding the world if our teachers all share similar backgrounds and interests, ascribe to the same philosophies, use the same methodologies, and so on?

Decolonizing media education must also include revising our learning objectives, curriculum content, and teaching methodologies to reflect a wider variety of perspectives and practices. This may look like introducing graphic design students to not just aesthetic traditions from the West, but, for example, to the rich history of textile production in certain indigenous cultures. It might mean that instead of tacking on an “issues of representation” unit to our media literacy course, we more thoroughly and meaningfully integrate themes of equity, justice, and so on throughout our curriculum. For some of us (especially white, cis-gendered, straight men like me), decolonizing media education certainly includes recognizing the privilege that we experience in the classroom, academia, and society in general and using our position to question the cultural biases and institutional inequities that have given us this power at the expense of others. It likely involves those who experience this sort of privilege taking a break from sharing our opinions and, instead, seeking out and listening to the experiences and perspectives of those who have been marginalized in our classrooms and communities.

### ***Embracing Interdisciplinarity***

The values of interdisciplinarity have been discussed at length, specifically within the context of media education, but I think that this book might reveal opportunities for us to further strengthen the connection between scholarship, education, and creative practice and to provide our students with an even more well-rounded educational experience. In a very practical way, *Making Media Matter* might, for example, encourage educators working in parallel but distinct fields or subject areas to start conversations and begin breaking down boundaries between their respective traditions and academic units. In a high school setting, this may look like creating a group that includes the art teacher who teaches photography, the technology teacher who teaches coding, the journalism teacher who oversees the broadcast of the morning announcements, the English teacher who advises the screenwriting club, the drama teacher who teaches a film appreciation class, and the librarian who runs workshops on news literacy. As we simply start to talk, learn about what each other teaches, and look for ways in which our individual efforts might complement each other, we are guaranteed to find areas of potential improvement in our curriculum and our pedagogy as well as new opportunities for collaboration. Maybe after one of these conversations, the librarian organizes a special workshop on “race in the news” to coincide with the drama teacher’s unit on Black Cinema in their film course. Or perhaps, seeing how the photography teacher prepares their students to give each other feedback on their work, the English teacher implements some of these same approaches in their screenwriting club.

In the context of higher education, where these disciplinary boundaries are arguably more severe, embracing interdisciplinarity may require even greater interventions. For example, academic units might be encouraged to redesign their major requirements to encourage students to cross these boundaries, taking electives in other, related disciplines, and creating individual courses of study that correspond with their particular interests. So, maybe the film history classes are made available to the students learning 3D animation, so that the stories they tell onscreen can reflect the long history of cinema. Or the advertising majors might be encouraged to take a philosophy class on the theme of aesthetics and politics, so that they can see their work in the context of art and ideology, in addition to commerce. Or the students pursuing media studies are required to learn how to use Photoshop, edit a video, or produce a podcast, so that their research and criticism are informed by their own attempts to produce media in various forms. These examples are not meant to imply that high school teachers never talk to one another and that college students are prohibited from taking electives in different areas; rather, these suggestions are meant to encourage us to determine what the next step toward embracing interdisciplinarity might be, given our particular context and circumstance. And hopefully, when we take these steps, we will see the benefits

of cross-pollinating our curriculum and provide a deeper, and more diverse, educational experience for our students.

### ***Seeking Opportunities for Innovation***

Media education has evolved over the last several decades, engaging with emerging media technologies, making sense of cultural trends, and pioneering new teaching methodologies. Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, media educators around the world have responded to school closures and lockdowns with remarkable ingenuity, developing innovative ways of engaging their students amid the challenges of distance learning. *Making Media Matter's* engagement with emerging media technologies and inclusion of inventive learning activities—including creating glitch art, using augmented reality to deconstruct theme parks, designing Twine games that comment on social issues, and so on—are intended to inspire readers to seek out new ways of reaching their students and helping them thoughtfully participate in a rapidly changing media culture.

Seeking opportunities for innovation means that we keep an open mind. We are observant and responsive to the changes in technology and culture, and then we dig into our toolboxes, our networks, and our imaginations to find novel ways of helping our students make connections between what they already know and the radically new. Maybe, when the middle school students in your social studies class cannot stop talking about Minecraft, you amend a history project to allow them to recreate sites of historical significance in the game and present them to the class (as my child's teacher did during the pandemic). If the undergrads in your documentary course are preoccupied with the student labor crisis on campus, take the students outside and allow the class to converse on camera with those involved in the issue. Or when your library is looking for help organizing a “mixed reality learning lab,” you volunteer, less concerned about your lack of experience with the technology than you are enthusiastic about finding ways of using emerging technologies to better serve your students.

### ***Making It Personal***

It probably is apparent from the content of the previous chapters, but I really enjoy studying, writing about, teaching, and creating media. I am passionate about helping my students discover their creative capacities and use their skills to improve their communities. The concepts, case studies, and creative activities in this book are all reflective of my interests, so there might be times when a particular example from pop culture or a project does not quite translate to your experience or correspond with your interests. My hope is that, if anything, *Making Media Matter* can inspire readers to identify what about media education really matters to them, what examples from the pop culture they are

excited to include in their curriculum, what theoretical concepts and creative practices they are eager to introduce to their students, what goals they want to set for themselves as they move forward.

This means that we have to get personal, drawing upon our experiences and interests, acknowledging our strengths and weaknesses, to develop approaches to media education that we find meaningful. For me, this involves sharing my experiences watching cartoons as a kid, playing games with my students, deconstructing my love of Disneyland, and making art that addresses climate change, among many other things. My hope is that the audio engineer who listens to heavy metal and plays retro video games will find a way to integrate their passions into their educational efforts, that the English teacher who uses social media to organize the clean-ups of the local wetlands can inspire their students to get creative and serve their communities in ways that matter to them, that the librarian who runs the local chapter of an online fan community can draw upon their personal experiences to help their students see media as a means of connection, rather than simply a distraction.

Because when we tap into these core motivations behind our efforts as educators, we will be more likely to help our students recognize what it is about media and education that matters to them. So for example, we might encourage our student who is a refugee and keeps up with the news from back home to channel their energies and express their opinions through the scripts they write in our screenwriting class. Or we guide our grad student to choose a thesis project that allows them to apply their interest in critical theory in order to deconstruct their own success as a minor TikTok celebrity. These are all just hypotheticals. What I am saying is that, based on the endless creativity, intelligence, and goodness that I have witnessed among both my students and colleagues in media education, I am confident that together we will discover exciting new ways to transform education and our world. I look forward to doing this with you all.

## Notes

- 1 Mihailidis et al. (2021).
- 2 See Cabbage (2016, 2019a, 2019b); Lewis & Jhally (1998); López (2008, 2020); Romero Walker (2021a, 2021b); Scharrer & Ramasubramanian (2015); Yosso (2002, 2020).

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