

DECOLONIZING MEDIA HIGHER EDUCATION: BUILDING CRITICAL MEDIA
LITERACY PRINCIPLES
THAT ADOPT UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE BODY AND PERFORMANCE

Alexis Romero Walker

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Hussman School of Journalism and Media

Chapel Hill
2021

Approved by:

Barbara Friedman

Tina M. Harris

Daniel Kreiss

Trevy McDonald

Benjamin Thevenin

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ABSTRACT

Alexis Romero Walker: Decolonizing Media Higher Education: Building Critical Media Literacy Principles that Adopt Understandings of the Body and Performance
(Under the direction of Barbara Friedman)

Media Education can provide positive change in the media industry. Media educators have the responsibility to ensure all students feel comfortable in the classroom. Here, I propose for media education to instill positive change in the media industry. An objective of decolonizing media education is necessary by integrating diversity and inclusivity in the higher education classroom. Using an autoethnographic approach, I reflect on my experiences as a student and educator with an intersectional identity. I consider the gaps in understanding among media education programs for making their courses more equitable. By reflecting on my past experiences, expanding on some of my teaching methods, demonstrating materials and lesson plans used in classroom action research, and proposing additional principles and frameworks for the higher education media classroom, I further engage with what decentering whiteness and heteronormativity in the classroom could look like. To decolonize media education, I propose an ambitious start: By dismantling current classroom norms and rebuilding from the perspective of performance as it is connected to the bodies of those in the classroom and the field, a refashioned critical media literacy (CML) framework contributes to equitable education. This adjusted CML framework provides an accessible model that educators can use when designing their courses and populating them with content. When educators include important principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity in their classrooms the greater likelihood that students will bring those skills with them into the field to bring equity and inclusion to media production.

*To the beautiful lives that have been lost
because hate was justified more often
than love was given.*

*I love you.
We love you.*

Rest in power.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have received more support than I can possibly acknowledge in a few short pages. I would like to share my appreciation of my fabulous advisor, Dr. Barbara Friedman, who has helped me learn how to write and express myself in a way that I never thought possible. I thank her for her mentorship, patience, and care. Though she has helped me grow in my scholarship and in my teaching, she has also helped me grow in my confidence, and as a person in general. I would also like to thank my committee members for their support, not only in the completion of this dissertation, but also in my progression in this field and in my education. Dr. Benjamin Thevenin has witnessed me grow since my undergraduate education and has been a beacon of light in my journey. When doubting myself today, I still think of a time when I was disappointed in what at the time felt like a lack of creativity, to which he said, “Alexis, your work is freaking cool and you are so talented.” A small remark then has pushed me forward in my *many* moments of doubt. I am in awe of Dr. Tina M. Harris and the work she has done to make communication spaces and classrooms more equitable to all. I hope someday to have the ability to be as influential as she has been. Dr. Trevy McDonald was my first mentor at UNC, and when I felt lost because I suspected my interest in teaching and diversity was not valued in scholarship, her attention to my teaching and work reminded me that my thoughts and interests were important. She always treated me as both a colleague and a friend, and I am forever grateful for that. Dr. Daniel Kreiss has additionally been a rock for me during my doctoral work. He has always cheered me on and emphasized the importance of my work. I am grateful for his confidence in my work and in me as a person. So, thank you all, for everything.

I additionally want to thank my advisors throughout my education—Mr. Tom Lefler, Dr. Bill Yousman, and Dr. Anne Johnston. Thank you all for your endless support to this day. Thank you also to my classmates, who have taught me so much. Your work is important. Thank you especially to Ashley Hendrick, who has spent hours reading over my work as my dissertation buddy, and to Tegan Bratcher, my Ph.D. sis that has been there through ups and downs and will be a forever friend. Thank you to all of my educators from kindergarten to my final class in my Ph.D. program. A special thanks to Dr. Lori Bindig-Yousman, Dr. Sharon Swenson, and Courtney Russell, who were the female mentors I needed to know that this journey was possible for me. When life at home was tough, school was always a place where I could focus on learning and growing, and I know this would not have been possible without dedicated educators. Thank you to the lunch ladies and school nurses, who took care of me in ways that I needed more than I can ever explain.

I have gratitude to my family that may not necessarily understand what it is that I am doing, but fully cheer me on and support me in my journey. I know that they believe I am breaking a cycle by making it this far in my education. I hope that they know that they also broke cycles, and without that there's no way that I would be here. Thank you for the work you put in to survive and to help me survive. I love you, and if you are unsure at all, I forgive you. I thank my family for giving me the best they could, and for always teaching me to be an independent free thinker—that alone has moved mountains. I thank my friends who have listened through my tears, and who have celebrated my victories. Thank you to Marisa Levario, Josey Sargent, Bethany Hoffman, Erin Comstock, Sydney Nicolla, Melody Chow, Sara Wejebe and Noëlle Mouton for being my go-to foundation. Thank you to supportive church members that have lifted my spirit when it was falling, and thank you to my Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother who

have loved and cared for me even when my faith was lost. I want to express my appreciation to my healthcare workers who have helped me take care of myself and heal through this process. My body and brain quite literally could not have done this without you. Thank you to *all* healthcare workers and essential workers for taking care of all of us during this awful pandemic, and thank you to the activists and political leaders that have fought for justice in this time of dread and hurt—you are the reason that change and progress continues.

Thank you to my partner, who has also sacrificed so much so I can achieve this dream of mine. He has loved me and cared for me more than I ever thought I deserved. He has listened to my rants, held me during my lows, and been my biggest source of support along the way. I am endlessly thankful. And thank you to our little (and big) doggos for the unconditional love. We really don't deserve dogs.

Lastly, thank you to my body for keeping us going. Thank you for healing, and for telling me when to slow down. Thank you for carrying me even when I did not treat you as I should. Thank you for lifting me even when I did not like you very much. Thank you for doing what you needed to do, so I could learn to love you. We achieved more than the world ever told us we could. We made it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
How Can We Do This?.....	5
The Autoethnographic Approach.....	9
CHAPTER TWO: MOVING FORWARD.....	15
Decolonizing Higher Education.....	17
The Body and Performance	18
Critical Media Literacy as a Framework.....	24
Equitable Pedagogy.....	25
Organization of Chapters	27
CHAPTER THREE: CONVERGING THEORY WITH PRACTICE IN THE MEDIA SKILLS	34
Theoretical Framework	38
Decolonizing the Classroom	38
Decolonizing Education in the Media Classroom	40
Equitable and Critical Pedagogies: Strategies to Decolonize the Classroom	41
Media Literacy in Media Skills Curricula	44
Conceptual Necessities for Visual Skills	47

Connecting Theory with Practice in the Media Skills Classroom	53
A Classroom Example: Three-Point Interview Lighting	55
Introducing New Critical Media Literacy Principles	61
CHAPTER 4: PERFORMANCE AND ORIENTATION IN THE CLASSROOM	65
Performance Theories and Orienting the Body	68
Queer Theory and Performance of the Body	69
Performance and Race in Education	72
Embodied Identities and Classroom Performance	75
Monster Films and “Othered” Bodies in the Media Classroom	77
Methodology	79
Action Research	82
Procedure	83
Analysis	85
Findings	89
<i>Arrival</i> : Introducing the Course with Aliens	90
<i>The Shape of Water</i> vs. <i>A Portrait of a Lady</i> <i>on Fire</i> and Discussions of Queerness	93
Intersecting Queerness and Non-normative Perspectives: Responses to Other Films in the Course	96
Student Participants’ Take-Aways and Suggestions	99
Results and Suggestions	100
Limitations and Future Directions	102

CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION	104
Revisiting the Problem	108
Interpretations from Findings	113
Refraining from Additive Approaches to Diversity in the Classroom ...	114
Body and Performance as Critical Media Literacy Principles	117
AFTERWORD	129
APPENDIX A: DEPARTMENTAL DIVERSITY WORKSHOP: EDUCATING EDUCATORS WITH BEST PRACTICES	130
APPENDIX B: LIGHTING THE WAY: LEARNING INCLUSIVE LIGHTING PRACTICES IN MEDIA SKILLS COURSES	142
APPENDIX C: MONSTER FILMS FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT	152
REFERENCES	165

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Schedule of topics and films for six-week undergraduate Media Literacy course	84
Table 2 – Potter’s stages of media literacy development	87

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Intel advertisement with visual production that has racist undertones	50
Figure 2 – Modified critical media literacy principles model	122

*A day, when light veers dark,
that is justice.
When shades of brown, of caramel, of burnt sienna,
are celebrated.
When the taste of fresh squeezed oranges
zests the body,
And the sunset brings warmth
to the fields that are carved
with our family's name.
That is when I see equity,
in people and in place,
On our skin and in our hearts.*

-Alexis Romero Walker, Colors of Equity, 2020

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I sat anxiously outside the conference room with a small group of classmates from my media arts program, tapping my foot uncontrollably as I re-read the script I wrote. I wasn't really planning on proposing this script to be made into a senior capstone project. Well, that isn't entirely true—I was planning on proposing the production of that script but decided not to because I had just directed a gender-swapped Robin Hood web series the previous semester. At the time, I felt that it was selfish of me to want to additionally produce my own capstone after

having that experience. However, at the last minute I realized that my script had a lot of what the web series (and the productions that came out of the department in general) did not have—people of color. I realized I was not being *selfish* for wanting to make something that was inclusive and told a story that was not so entrapped in narratives of whiteness. On the contrary, I knew I had an important contribution to offer my history, my culture, the department, and media. As a member of multiple minority communities—queer (I did not know then this was the word I was looking for to describe myself), lower-class, a first-generation college student, Latin(x), Mormon, woman, with a confusing mulatto complex and mental health disorders and trauma—I realized that stories such as mine (or stories about individuals with rich, complex identities) were not being represented in film, and that I could be the one to tell those stories.

As I sat waiting, I looked around at the others who would be proposing their stories to be told. These were my friends—I loved them dearly. I wanted all of our productions to be chosen. But still there was something about each of them that was blatantly different than me and my story: They were white. Of course, looking at me, you might think the same—I am an extremely white-passing Mexican woman. However, at a university with an 82% white population, most people would look at my facial features and notice there was something “a little off.” I had been stopped by strangers on campus and asked, “Where are you from?” “California,” I would reply. “No, I mean, like where is your family from,” they persisted.

Generally, though, in a group of people, my skin is white passing. This particular feature of mine has made me privy to situations in which speakers do not stop to consider derogatory phrases and racial inequities before offering them in their conversation and teaching. Additionally, I am a very feminine-performing queer person, which also creates for me a fly-on-the-wall exposure to homophobic and transphobic slurs. All to say, this complicated,

intersectional identity that is me makes life disorienting, and it makes instances of sitting in a hall with a group of middle-class, heterosexual, abled, white individuals, extremely apparent. This is what I saw in my department, in my university, and in the media in general. So, that day, I decided that my project mattered, and I would propose it.

The script I was proposing was lovely—I was really proud of it, which is saying something because my anxious, imposter-syndrome little 21-year-old self was not very confident about anything. The script featured a Mexican protagonist, an eight-year-old boy. The script was essentially a love letter to my *abuela*, depicting the little boy as he forges a relationship with his immigrant grandmother whose husband recently passed away. A nearly silent film, the narrative explored the experiences of having an immigrant grandparent dealing with both grief and loss of culture. It also explored the experience of being a child yearning for compassion and care in a household where those qualities are easily neglected, unable to communicate due to language and cultural barriers. The film explored the realities of the experiences of many second-generation immigrant children. The script meant a lot to me, and I knew it would mean a lot to the media arts department, which desperately needed better ways to speak to and care for its few minority students.

“Alexis Romero.”

I walked into the room and sat at the end of the conference table. There sat a table full of white men and two white women—all professors, administrators, and mentors I had developed strong bonds with in my time in the program. I enthusiastically gave my presentation on my story. I explained how and where it would be filmed. They asked why I decided to propose the capstone belatedly, having passed on the opportunity weeks before, to which I echoed my thoughts of how stories related to diversity needed to be more effectively included in the

program and in our productions. I felt good about my answers until a particular question (posed by my program advisor) nearly shut me down.

“But where are you going to get actors? Where are you going to get Mexican actors?”

I do not remember how long it took me to answer this question, but in my head, I remember it feeling like forever. Did he really just ask me where would I get Mexican actors? Other members of the panel, my previous instructors, were quiet, and they turned to me, awaiting my response. Insensitivity aside, the question was a stunning show of ignorance: Some 400,000 people in Utah are Latinx, with a large portion of that population living in the city adjacent to the college. I was going to get my actors the way that everyone else got their actors—issue a casting call and hold auditions. That is what I wanted to say, but in an effort to remain calm and not be “sassy,” I responded gently: “I will contact casting agencies to get actors that fit the demographic that I need.”

My film was not chosen. Two other, wonderful films were chosen instead, which explored important issues of disability and divorce. I do not know exactly why my film was not chosen—it could have been for a variety of issues. Nevertheless, I left that room defeated, knowing that in the eyes of some of those in the room, the story of a Mexican family using a Mexican cast was not viable in the state of Utah.

My experiences in higher education have been fairly difficult, primarily because I have not been able to completely figure out where my body fits, and I am not sure if I ever will as I advance a career centered inside of the higher education classroom. My body has felt the push toward normalized notions in the classroom and in academia—it has molded itself in some ways and deflected in others. Even in proposing this dissertation, my committee advised me to eliminate an interview section and instead take an autoethnographic approach, to which my first

thought was “They don’t think I can do *real* social science, do they?” (an initial feeling that has since passed). Even in my hyper-vigilance of the ways in which the institution tries to mold my body—do this, don’t do that—I fall victim to it sometimes. And I know that, as I go through the process of academia with tenure-track procedures, student evaluations, peer evaluations, publication requirements, and conference expectations, I will continue to meet this wall of normalized institutional practices, being in a body that often does not naturally orient toward those norms built on modes of heteronormative, abled, male, whiteness. I also know that in my classroom, with my students, I will be read. I will be (and already have been) read by some students as a biased, liberal woman who cares too much about inequity; and by others I will be read as an ally and person that they feel comfortable talking to about their difficulties in academia. My body will not be free from these orientations when I am no longer a student; it will continue in the classroom, in the workplace, and in the field. I just hope that I can push more often than I mold, and that I can help students that similarly come from “Othered” groups be able to learn in ways that work for them, and that helps them contribute their stories in the classroom environment, and in the media field.

How Can We Do This?

When I ask how can *we* do this, I speak directly to us as educators. As educators, we create the classroom environment, and there is an immediate assumption from students that we are the ones in charge. It is our responsibility to adjust the learning environment in ways that will make the classroom more inclusive, inviting, and equitable.

The experience described above is a significant one that lends itself to an intricate storytelling format. However, I (and many others) have everyday experiences that can be related in just a sentence. For example, a professor’s one-liner that was particularly offensive, or a piece

of media used in the classroom without recognition of its sexist message (which, in my experience, led to a professor having an inappropriate conversation with a student that nearly ruined her entire study-abroad experience). It is these everyday assumptions and norms that we must work on improving as part of a broader transformation.

A pedagogical miscalculation obvious to me as a student and educator involves the uses of theory in media curriculum. As students enter media departments in their universities, they learn many important concepts in their required theory courses. Yet, in my experience, those theories were rarely used in student media productions, and were *never* taught in media production skills courses. Students often complained about needing to take the theory courses at all: “I’m never going to use this stuff.” In my experience as a student, it was this attitude, and the lack of conceptual discussions in skills courses, that led to a lack of diversity in student productions, as well as the perpetuation of normative cinema skills (such as the adoption of the male gaze). My skills course instructors were not implementing theoretical concepts in their own productions, so of course they were not implementing them in the courses they taught, instead reinforcing media norms that were outdated and exclusive. This is just one example of a pedagogical misstep that could easily have been adjusted in course curriculum for the benefit of all.

One way to start creating a more inclusive media classroom is by providing greater emphasis on how theory and practice can combine in media education to shape media producers who are more critical and more empathetic (Green, 2013; Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016; Zettl, 1998). If we implement critical-cultural theories that address topics such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, then we will produce students that are more thoughtful in their media creations and will work harder to better represent all communities.

If we want narratives to be representative, then we must provide students with an array of perspectives and experiences, incorporating works from women, people of color, indigenous populations, and those from the LGBTQ+ community (Chesler, Wilson, & Malani, 1993; Lawrie et al., 2017), for example. One way we can work toward this is through the content used in the classroom. There can be an assignment of critical-cultural works for reading and discussion in the classroom (Alemán, 2014; Giroux & Simon, 1988; Green, 2013; Lescure & Yep, 2015), for example, and the application of critical-cultural lenses to analyze media content (Dhaenens, 2016; Murphey & Harris, 2018; Solis, 2007). The use of these approaches would ideally be the creation of alternative media production by students that showcases critical perspectives that are representative and thoughtful, and creates a classroom environment that is more inviting and equitable (Alemán, 2017; Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016; Tordova, 2016). For example, Alemán (2014) explains that she uses critical race theory, as it “contests majoritarian ideologies of colorblindness, meritocracy and objectivity, exposing them as façades that reinscribe white supremacy and white privilege” (p. 112). This then works to contribute to course assignments in “counterstories,” which deconstruct “dominant discourse, subverting the status quo, and exposing white privilege” and she explains “counterstories also build solidarity amongst members of disenfranchised groups, nurture community cultural wealth, and strengthen resources for resistance and survival” (p. 113).

There is additionally a need for educators to expand on the emphasis of how learned performance (specifically the norms of how students should act in particular spaces) of students affects classroom expectations and environment (Alemán, 2010; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Pineau, 2002). One way to address this is to eliminate norms and expectations of conformity (Fassett & Warren, 2007) and whiteness in the classroom (Alemán, 2010; hooks, 2003). One can

also combat expected performances by creating a resistive space (Alemán, 2014; Johnson & Bhatt, 2003) and applying methods of storytelling and student experience (Connolly & Readman, 2017; Knaus, 2009; Lawrence & Bunchie, 1996), as opposed to a standardized banking method of education—that is, the process of depositing knowledge into passive students, being the banking model of teaching, as per Freire (2018).

My focus on media classrooms acknowledges them as important ideological spaces in which media educators are gatekeepers, influencing the inclusion and exclusion of content, the ways that students think about their work and, ultimately, the media produced and circulated in the classroom. In turn, their students may take those same ideas and ideals into the professional world. Media are influenced by dominant ideologies that work to subordinate marginalized communities through dangerous, negative and untruthful representations of those communities (Davis, 2016; Hall, 2011; Jacobs, 2016; Milkman, 2017; Patterson, Howard, & Kinloch, 2016). Whereas this characterization of media is not a recent understanding (Stabile, 2006), contemporaneous events lend this project some urgency.

Media institutions continue to participate in the misrepresentation of the Black Lives Matter movement and of Latinx and indigenous communities. Further, misinformation and disinformation continue to be spread regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, and QAnon-sponsored conspiracy theories, to name just a few areas of concern (Hannah, 2021; Hatcher, 2020; Treen et al., 2020). This material feeds a 24/7 news cycle that pays more attention to the *amount* of content produced than to the *thoughtfulness* of the content produced. As media educators, we are helping mold and shape the next generation of media producers; this is an important time to teach our students to treat one another with care, and to show them how to

create and distribute positive media representations and messages. We are each capable of doing this, through the content we choose to teach, and the classroom environment we choose to create.

The goal of implementing each of these adjustments to higher education in our media classrooms is to create a space that is inclusive and equitable to all students. In an overview of inclusive education research since 2010, authors identified its main concerns: that pedagogies should meet all students with a diversity of needs with attention to not creating barriers for particular students or groups; that pedagogies should be accessible, multimodal, and flexible while maintaining academic standards; and that there should be a more holistic and comprehensive approach for supporting teaching and learning for diverse groups of students (Lawrie et al., 2017). In this dissertation, I address these needs specifically for media classrooms in higher education with the goal of making students' educational experiences better than my own. With that, I think a personal and emotionally engaging approach works best to relate my experiences in higher education and demonstrate the need for changes based on those experiences.

The Autoethnographic Approach

My first experience with autoethnography was reading the book *Lose Your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman (2008) in a course on transnational feminism. The book was an expression of research, but it was also a piece of art—and it tore me to pieces. In the book, Hartman follows the Atlantic slave route in Ghana in an effort to trace her ancestry. Along this journey, Hartman ultimately concludes that she is a stranger—that her family line of slavery is made of strangers. She is unable to find any survivors of her lineage, or any corresponding records—and sits with the upsetting truth of their lost stories. Her thoughts and encounters in the book are raw and riveting. She wrote:

The bridge between the people of Gwolu and me wasn't what we had suffered or what we had endured but the aspirations that fueled flight and the yearning for freedom. It was these shared dreams that might open a common road to a future in which the longings and disappointed hopes of captives, slaves, and fugitives might be realized. If an African identity was to be meaningful at all, at least to me, then what it meant or was to be meant could be elaborated only in the fight against slavery, which, as John reminded me, was not about dead people or forts built by white men but the power of others to determine whether you lived or died. A name was just a call for freedom, a rallying cry against the imperial states and their soldiers, an admonition to steer clear of the merchants of death and the rich men cannibals, a lament for your dead. And this loss and desire gave meaning to the world *we who become together*. (p. 234)

I might argue that my experience is not as profound, but that could be the imposter syndrome speaking. I do believe that my experience of feeling like an outcast in the classroom is actually the experience of many. Those of us who found a sense of home in the classroom (I am speaking of those of us who were able to eat because of school lunches, got to escape abuse while being at school, had teachers that quite literally looked out for our health more than our parents, and so forth) still dealt with issues of conformity that did not quite make sense in our minds and bodies. I am here to talk about this nearly universal experience that follows us even when we enter the coveted spaces of higher education.

In this dissertation, I am specifically talking about the media education classroom because that is where my expertise lies, and because media also have major influence all over the world. The students in our classrooms are the ones that enter the field and start producing media, and we need to make sure that we are helping our students gain the tools needed to create the

most equitable and inclusive media that they can. Therefore, I propose some changes to curricula and the classroom so we can achieve that goal, and much of these changes emerge from my experience as a student, producer, and educator of media. And, because the disorientation of my body has influenced my educational and professional experience, I will be using concepts of the body and performance to reevaluate how higher education classrooms reinforce expectations of whiteness and heteronormativity. I will then propose curricula changes using original critical media literacy principles I've developed that will work to decolonize the classroom. Importantly, I am a media literacy scholar. I know the use of media literacy principles can help us reach this goal of a more equitable and decolonized classroom, but the media literacy literature is not there yet. I hope to also work to build media literacy principles that have a goal of decolonizing education to further progress the field of media literacy so that those principles can be used in the equitable classroom. The autoethnographic approach acts as the appropriate method that can work to showcase my research findings *and* my personal experiences within the same medium.

Autoethnography allows for a more personal and experiential form of writing. It additionally satisfies the stance and purpose of the dissertation—to escape normative forms of institutionalized education. Autoethnography seeks to “describe and systemically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). It also works to challenge “canonical ways of doing research and representing others” (Harwood & Eaves, 2017, p. 146) while carrying “a social-political agenda that seeks to move research away from the dominance of white, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper class, Christian, able-bodied perspective[s] via a stance that acknowledges the impact of race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, class, education, and religion [in] research” (Andrew, 2017, p. 5). In this way, the dissertation takes on a methodological perspective that

exemplifies the general goal of the research, which is to escape colonial processes of education in hopes of creating a more equitable curriculum and environment in higher education media classrooms.

Autoethnography is increasingly being adopted as a method in a variety of disciplines (Harwood & Eaves, 2017). Autoethnography is reflective pertaining to the situation and is positioned within particular discussions. More than writing about first-person stories, the methodology follows a set of characteristics that distinguish it from personal work. Harwood and Eaves (2017) describe four characteristics that typify autoethnography: “purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices; making contributions to existing research; embracing vulnerability with purpose; and creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response” (p. 146). This shows that the distinction between an autobiography and an autoethnography, then, relies on purpose, cultural importance, author/audience relationship, and contributing to the field, similar to most research practices (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). With this method then comes the ability to “bring together the concrete detail of the personal and the power of theoretical frameworks that help us understand how stories animate and become the change we seek in the world” (Holman Jones & Harris, 2016, p. 1-2). After all, this dissertation uses current theories and concepts as they are connected to my experience and aims to improve the ways in which the higher education classroom functions, with the goal of change that brings about equity both in the classroom and in the media field.

Additionally, autoethnography recognizes intersectional understandings due to intersecting power relations and, in turn, illuminates diverse perspectives—it is through this methodology that a range of voices can be heard. It is these diverse voices, both individual and

within communities, that reveal “the lived experiences, needs, and desires of an ignored people to the rest of society” (Pensoneau-Conway, Adams, & Bolen, 2017, p. 38). Therefore, this method itself aims to give a voice to the disenfranchised, and also works outside of established norms of the academic field on behalf of change through experiential and observational research (Harwood & Eaves, 2017). Harwood and Eaves (2017) describe the benefits of this method as disrupting norms of research practice, using the researchers’ inside knowledge, working through confusion and uncertainty to make life better in some way, breaking the silence and reclaiming voice, and making the work more accessible. The authors explain:

In other words, autoethnography provides the opportunity to express that which does not fit within traditional social science research practices, to offer enriched descriptions and insights, to handle difficult situations, to challenge taken-for-granted attitudes, to bring to light sensitive and/or hidden issues and to engage with different audiences. (p. 146)

With that, autoethnography provides a range of opportunities in which researchers can escape traditional expectations of research reporting to address sensitive topics that are often “closer to home.” It is a methodological approach that invites exploration of the myriad ways that social, political, and cultural attitudes are a part of everyday life—especially for members of non-dominant communities. The method seeks to move research away from the dominance of white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied perspectives to better acknowledge the impact of race, gender, sexuality, and ability on the research (Andrew, 2017). It is this goal of the method of autoethnography that so clearly aligns with my goals of moving normalized classroom curricula and environment from these same dominant structures to better acknowledge the impact of race, gender, sexuality, and ableness in the media higher education classroom and institution.

With this method, I can vividly and authoritatively describe the pain and anguish that a minority student endures when their professor tells them to choose a “safer” emphasis in the program over a path routinely taken and achieved by their white, cis-male counterparts. Or when a Latinx and Black¹ graduate student preparing to teach for the first time as a part of their fellowship enters a room of 36 adjunct faculty colleagues to realize that there are no other people of color in the room, and only three other women. Or when a graduate student teaching an introductory course at the university holds a crying Black student in her arms as that student explains that none of her other professors understand the difficulty of attending class when she has to pass by a group of rallying white supremacists on the way to the building. Those are experiences—culturally influenced and environment-defining experiences—that can only be properly told and assessed through a methodology that depends on the reflexive process of relaying the experiences of higher education for those that do not naturally “fit the mold.”

¹ The Associated Press, which governs news style, states that the word “Black” (when referring to race and culture) should be capitalized, but not “white.” In justifying the rule, AP editors stated, “White people in general have much less shared history and culture, and don’t have the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color” (Bauder, 2020, para. 2). Therefore, within this dissertation “Black” will be capitalized and “white” will be lowercased.

CHAPTER 2: MOVING FORWARD

As an educator now with the experience of writing syllabi and adjusting curricula, I recognize that media education has a long way to go in creating equitable classroom environments with inclusive content that encourages students to engage deeply in critical thinking that, in turn, will be reflected in their creative works. Some of the questions I explore in this dissertation concern how we, as educators, can encourage students to produce media content that better represents all communities equitably. I believe that by adjusting how the classroom functions we can work toward that goal, and with those adjustments, we can work to decolonize education for our students (Sleeter, 2010).

Therefore, this dissertation asks how can educators identify and challenge the normative assumptions that govern the way that media classrooms are “supposed to” work, in an effort to make the classroom work in a way that is more inclusive and equitable? With that, how can we adjust classroom content, as well as the physical classroom environment, to be more equitable, and built outside of normative expectations? Specifically, how can the media classroom be adjusted so that students from minority communities feel represented and comfortable in their bodies, and how they perform in their bodies, within the space? I propose an ambitious start: By dismantling current classroom norms and rebuilding from the perspective of performance, as it is connected to the bodies of those in the classroom and in the field, we can build a critical media literacy framework to decolonize education and produce an equitable classroom space. Students

in turn can channel those principles to be more responsible media creators as they train and enter the field.

Therefore, the overarching concern of this dissertation is that media classrooms, in both environment and content, are not made equitable because they have not been properly decolonized—this is evident in the many personal experiences I have described as a student at multiple institutions in different geographical contexts. I contend that a primary reason why media classrooms have yet to be made equitable is because of the lack of recognition of the norms expected in the higher education classroom (Cooks, 2003; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Gannon, 2020; Harris, 2017b; Johnson & Bhatt, 2003) *and* the field media (Alemán, 2010; Tordova, 2016) of *all* students (and practitioners) despite their rich backgrounds that have been engraved in their bodies (Cruz, 2001; Knaus, 2009). The field of critical media literacy education, for example, offers suitable frameworks to *begin* discussing critical topics of race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, and ethnicity, but it falls short in addressing normative structures that treat all bodies *equally* rather than *equitably*. Therefore, this dissertation explores how to enhance critical media literacy frameworks to include concepts informed by questions regarding deconstructing and de-normalizing the classroom—to rethink our education spaces—through a deeper understanding of bodies and performance so that educators might have the tools to help all students feel comfortable in the classroom, learn about non-normative methods of media concepts and production, and create inclusive media products as they prepare to enter the field.

The three primary frameworks that will be used to explore this concern are the body and performance (connected to race, gender, and sexuality), decolonial education and equitable pedagogy, and media literacy education. I will provide in this chapter an overview of these

frameworks, and elaborate within the related chapters. It is important to note that each of these chapters is intended as a standalone piece aimed at a specific audience, although they are united by their focus on finding solutions to decolonize media education and building critical media literacy tools that adopt the concepts of body and performance. For reasons of this union, certain literature is applicable to the dissertation as a whole.

Decolonizing Higher Education

What we teach our children embodies what we most value in our society.

The curriculum, in all its complexity, is the culture.

Embedded in it are our values, our beliefs about human nature, our visions of the good life, and our hopes for the future.

It represents the truths that we have identified as valued and worth passing on. (Sleeter, 2010, p. 206–207)

Decolonizing higher education is to evaluate, dismantle, and rebuild higher education institutions, curricula, and classrooms. It is necessary that higher education curricula be reevaluated because “curriculum is one of the great apparatuses designed to produce and reproduce a hegemonic modern(ity) way of existing and thinking” (Paraskeva & Steinberg, 2016, p. 3). With the goal of decolonizing the curricula, educators and institutions can work to escape hegemonic norms of education, and we as media educators have the opportunity for our work of decolonization to not only affect the classroom, but the media field as our students become media professionals. Scholars have begun discussing decolonial practices in education (Alemán 2014; Charles, 2019; Tordova, 2016), but more work needs to be done, especially as it relates to the bodies that students (and educators, and administrators) inhabit. The body is, after all, the site of violence upon which colonialism has operated (and continues to operate).

To decolonize education is to interrogate how power structures that are determined by Western thought dominate the classroom. It is to then recognize the ways in which modes of thought are controlled by those power structures, which undergird inequities for those marginalized (Sleeter, 2010). “Traditional school curricula teach the values, beliefs, and knowledge systems that support colonization,” wrote Sleeter (2010, p. 194). To decolonize that curricula “is to critically examine that knowledge and its relationship to power, recentering knowledge” to escape western norms that dominate the classroom (p. 194). The *Keele Manifesto for Decolonizing the Curriculum* (2019), a document created as part of an initiative by Keele University to act against racism, states that,

Decolonizing the curriculum means creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum, and with respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world. (para. 8)

To decolonize education first requires the understanding that education itself has normalized white, heterosexual culture to the extent to which it is molded in the curricula and the classroom—and this is evident in the expected and constructed norms in media education particularly. I argue, more specifically, that we must recognize how these colonial norms have defined the ways in which bodies must learn and perform within educational spaces.

The Body and Performance

To work toward decolonizing the classroom, we must work toward creating a space that uses content that pays attention to the ways in which bodies are expected to perform in the classroom, and in the field. Members of minority communities are expected to navigate spaces that are discriminatory to them because these spaces have been formed by normative

perspectives, often inhospitable to non-normative individuals (Fasset & Warren, 2007). The classroom is a prime example of a location where social norms and their resulting biases are evidenced (Alemán, 2013; Valle et al., 2011). One way that this is evident in the classroom is through expected performances by students. I include concepts from the field of performance studies, an interdisciplinary field that views “performance” from multiple perspectives, to provide a lens through which I will examine the classroom and recommend strategies to be more inclusive and equitable.

First, however, I must note that in this dissertation I make an explicit distinction between the body and identity, even as the two are closely connected. The body is the physical structure of a person whereas identity is tied to *being*. Because identity is linked to the body culturally, socially, and individually, distinguishing between the two can be complicated. This is especially complex because issues of discrimination, for example, are responses to identity (race, sex, gender, etc.), and those forms of discrimination have a direct effect of violence on the physical body. So, although the body and identity are separate, they are also intertwined. I therefore use the term “embodied identities” to describe these identities that are so interconnected with the body because of social and cultural influences.

We are born in our bodies, and meaning connected to our bodies is constructed by the society in which we live. “Identity is not assigned at birth but rather made possible, accomplished, through communication; it is through repetition that this comes to be seen as natural or inevitable” (Fasset & Warren, 2007, p. 40). We are not born into our identities, however, but identity is imposed and attached to our bodies. Our bodies learn to perform the identities placed on them by communication and repetition—they become categorized and regulated, and we accept these states as normal or “natural” (Fassett & Warren, 2007). In this

way, the body is a “construction” and “a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed,” argues Butler (1990, p. 12). Therefore, gender is performative, and it is the body that is bounded by, for example, sex and gender categories ascribed to it from the moment of birth. Gender then becomes an act—a set of ritual actions that re-establish social meanings imposed by sex and gender binaries. In this case, the body acts as a boundary (Butler, 1990, p. 189). In other words, the body is maintained by social, political, and cultural implications to which it acts according to how it is oriented. Bodies are molded into categories in which they are said to be normal and natural before they have agency. By the time personal agency can be formed, bodies have already been socialized by those norms (Little, 2016). This understanding of body and identity is essential to knowing how expected performances influence normative expectations in all spaces, including the classroom.

An enhanced understanding of the links between minority groups, the classroom, and performance can be used to guide a classroom toward greater inclusion and equity. The definition of performance that I use here borrows from the sociological perspective that examines performance as a part of our everyday lives. “Social behavior is to a certain extent ‘performed’ and different social relationships can be seen as ‘roles’” (Carlson, 2004, p. 32). Performance is a useful site of inquiry for understanding the social world. How bodies perform is shaped by social life; they perform everyday life, learn accepted behaviors, rehearse those behaviors, and act out those behaviors as if they are “normal” (Komittee, 2013). Sara Ahmed (2006) examines bodies and performance in terms of queerness, for example, looking at how one orients themselves in a space. “The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative,” Ahmed writes. “They depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this

repetition” (p. 16). Bodies, thus, act in ways that society deems acceptable, and they do so by repetitive performances that they see, and then repeat those performances themselves. This leads to bodies assuming learned identities that have been molded by social norms.

In 2013, when I started college, I expressed in a journal my frustration with attempting to conform to classroom norms, including that of absorbing “truths” spoken by professors with no room for critical thinking and discussion. Though I was eager for intellectual exchange, I was learning that the student position was always subordinate to the professor, and questioning a professor’s authority was not the way to succeed. I wrote, in part:

Each and every day,

Each and every hour, minute, second,

Is the same thing.

In a state of confinement.

Writing the same passage, solving the same problem.

An opinion is something that should be kept to oneself. (Romero, 2013)

These learned performances, that become concrete through repetition, occur in multiple settings, including media content and media classrooms. For example, media messages present ideals of success—based on what identities (such as race or gender) and characteristics (such as confidence and self-reliance) showcase that quality. Media classrooms communicate expectations for successful performance materially (with documents such as syllabi and grading rubrics), as well as through instruction that reinforces certain principles and values (Fassett & Warren, 2007). The notion of objectivity, for example, anticipates that bodies remain detached or dispassionate as they move through spaces as media “professionals.” More generally, students’ bodies perform in the classroom to meet expectations: sitting attentive in a

chair for hours, raising one's hand to ask a question, and taking notes, for example. These practices are learned and repeatedly performed by students throughout their education, with the hope that these practices will help them succeed, although that success is premised on mundane and habitual classroom expectations (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

But how is this related to intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 2019)? I will explain in greater detail later in the dissertation how whiteness permeates the classroom and disenfranchises students whose identities place them outside of normative and expected bodily identities (such as not being white, not being American, etc.), but will provide relevant anecdotes here. Norms of whiteness in the classroom are evidenced and experienced when a professor tells two students to “stop speaking Spanish” to one another, or they will never learn English (Lopez, 2020). Norms of whiteness are blatant when Black students are cited for dress-code violations based on the ways they choose to wear their hair (Lattimore, 2016). Additional examples, provided by and with the permission of my peers include: a professor asking students to share where they spent summer vacation as part of their first-day introductions; a professor lackadaisically discussing police stops in the classroom without acknowledgement of how the students of color might be feeling; disregard of students' preferred pronouns and/or preferred name when calling on them or taking attendance; and another student presenting on the topic “racism is a mental illness” without objection from the professor or other students in the room. Each of these examples show how one's identity is attacked in some way, and one can also make the connection to how these experiences cause some kind of bodily harm as well. These are just a few examples of how life outside of the classroom clashes with performative norms in the classroom (reverence for the space, deference to the instructor) and disproportionately and adversely affects the realities of students of color and queer students.

Many of these expectations and norms in terms of classroom performance come from a dominant white perspective. Alemán (2013) explains that, within university journalism classrooms, there are “tendencies to normalize white culture and identity, advocate a colorblind ideology, and promote meritocratic and individualistic values” (p. 73). For aspiring media practitioners then, the normalization of a white perspective promotes a specific way of thinking in the field. Until we recognize and acknowledge this within the field, we will not decolonize our classrooms (Elliott, 2016).

This kind of ideological bias is particularly important in media education because media education generally relies on media-creation principles, practices, and content that are outdated and inherently biased—as expressed in scholarship that discusses visual language in technical practices of media (Alèman, 2010; Dyer, 1997; Green, 2013; Miller, 2019; Mulvey, 1975). These teachings mold future practitioners who are likely, in turn, to re-create inequitable media representations and messages. These practices often do not acknowledge the differences of Black, brown, women, and queer people (or limit teaching in accordance to the realities of those that are white). Alemán (2013) further states, “Current journalism pedagogy may be understood as perpetuating whiteness and promulgating a worldview that excludes the perspective of racially disenfranchised communities—even when students of color are enrolled in the classroom” (p. 86). Minority students in the classroom are then taught to perform in the classroom according to norms of whiteness, and are also taught to use normative media-making practices in their personal media creations, even if the learned practices conflict with the students’ interests in positively representing the communities of which they are a part (Alemán, 2010; Fasset & Warren, 2007); learned processes according to a perspective of whiteness go uninterrogated. hooks (1994) explains, “Once we start talking in the classroom about the body and how we live

in our bodies, we're automatically challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutional space" (p. 136-137). In recognizing and addressing how bodies of color are expected to perform in spaces defined by whiteness, my work is directed toward finding solutions to deconstruct the current classroom environment to replace it with a more inclusive and equitable setting.

I aim to challenge the dominant ideologies (white, male, heteronormative perspectives) that have defined the ways that media products within journalism education and popular culture media texts are created and taught, and to propose solutions for decolonized education and equitable pedagogy (Alemán, 2014; Tordova, 2016). This will be done by exploring the ways that bodies (specifically those of marginalized communities) move through and perform in spaces of learning and laboring, specifically, in the media classroom and field.

Critical Media Literacy as a Framework

This dissertation uses critical media literacy to locate solutions to expected normative performances in the media education classroom. Through an understanding of critical media literacy, educators can recognize the ways in which both the media industry, and higher education as its training ground, reflect a privileged perspective (Alemán, 2013; Giroux, 1997; Yousman, 2015; Zettl, 1998). Critical media literacy involves, "ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 8). By incorporating the ideological critique of media content, possibilities for difference can be illuminated and, ultimately, meaningful solutions found to the lack of equitable education in media classrooms and content (Schmidt, 2012; Yousman, 2016).

To participate in this change, I look to a media literacy framework to apply a more critical pedagogy that can in turn help develop a more equitable classroom. Media literacy

includes core concepts such as: all media messages are constructed, media messages use a media “language” made by its own codes and conventions, individuals experience media differently from others, media have particular points-of-view, and media are organized as a means to maintain/gain profit and/or power (Kellner & Share, 2007). These critical perspectives can be implemented when engaging with a text to further dismantle and eliminate social norms, but we must also be reflexive in the process. As educators we might ask ourselves, for example, is the language I use from a normative perspective, and if so, what are the consequences of using that type of language? Am I teaching skills as if they are rules? Do I over-emphasize content considered “canonical” and treat other content as additional or “alternative?” Am I observing how individual students are reacting to content? Am I compelling students to perform in a particular way according to my perception of “normal” classroom rules?

A critical media literacy perspective can help media educators to confront these questions. By shifting media education away from the superficial examination of content for aesthetic pleasure (Jhally & Earp, 2003) to a critical pedagogy that “raises critical consciousness about oppressive social conditions” (Anderson, 2006, p. 327), the classroom is prevented from becoming another site of oppression (Pineau, 1994). With a conceptual focus on bodies and performance, this dissertation builds a rationale and related toolkit for critical media literacy in college-level media and journalism classrooms to deconstruct (with the goal of decolonization) the classroom and implement an equitable pedagogy.

Equitable Pedagogy

The classroom “result” of a decolonized education should then be an equitable pedagogy, which will in turn educate students to be more ethical, equitable, and empathetic in their media productions when they enter the field. An equitable pedagogy reflects: a multicultural approach

to education that champions diversity to expand curricula (Kellner & Share, 2007); a “critical solidarity” that teaches students to engage in the classroom from a humanistic perspective where they develop empathy while being in solidarity with those marginalized or oppressed (Ferguson, 2011); and a democratic classroom where students feel free to share and contribute to the educational process (Freire, 2018). An equitable pedagogy also requires a critical approach that “raises critical consciousness about oppressive social conditions” (Anderson, 2006, p. 327) and is empowering to students and educators. This may sound like an idealized classroom with impossibly perfect students. However, striving to create a classroom like this is how educators move closer to providing all students with an equal education.

“Way too many students,” noted bell hooks (2003) “which often come from diverse communities, never find these democratic educators, lose hope, and drop out because they cannot manage to keep up with the dominant culture in which they are told to ascribe to in education” (p. 48). This is a problem that we, as educators, are responsible for solving. I believe that by addressing the performances non-normative students must enact in their daily lives, using critical media literacy as a framework to critique our classrooms and ourselves, and doing so with the goal of a decolonized equitable classroom, we can make our classrooms more welcoming and inclusive to students from all backgrounds. With these efforts students will, ideally, develop and continue as active citizens, and enter their chosen fields where they will create inclusive media content and foster inclusive work environments.

If we want to deconstruct education in media and journalism higher education to have decolonized classrooms, developing a set of media literacy principles with a focus on the body and performance offer a step in the right direction. My experience as a member of multiple marginalized communities reflects how media higher education often focuses more on the craft

of the field and canonized theories and practices, as opposed to curriculum that discusses the ways in which embodied identities (race, gender, sexuality, disability) are portrayed, reflected, and treated. This is important because without recognition of these topics in curriculum and the classroom environment, culturally blind curricula leads to 1) content created that is neither culturally nor critically aware (and thus it is misrepresentative and misleading), and 2) students from traditionally marginalized communities learning and working in a higher education environment that neglects or further marginalizes their embodied identities and experiences (which could lead to increased student dropout rates, normalized colonial ideologies, and internalized colonial practices that are reproduced in media productions).

Organization of Chapters

Chapter One: Introduction

This dissertation has five chapters and three appendices. Already presented, first was the introduction, which explored my personal experiences in media education as a student and an educator. The introduction also explained the significance of those experiences and why they suggest the need for changes to media education, and it justified the dissertation's use of an autoethnographic approach.

Chapter Two: Overarching Conceptual Frameworks

This chapter followed the introduction and synthesized the goal of the dissertation as a whole. This chapter additionally introduced the conceptual frameworks that are used throughout the dissertation, such as decolonial education, performance and the body, critical media literacy, and equitable pedagogy. The following chapters act as standalone pieces, although they share the goal of a decolonized education by engaging with the lens of bodies and performance. The

chapters also explore further the details of the theoretical frameworks and primary methodologies used.

Chapter Three: Converging Theory with Practice in the Media Skills Classroom

Chapter three addresses literature that speaks to decolonizing the classroom through chosen content and providing recognition of normalized whiteness in terms of learned skills in the media field. Chapter three also discusses literature that explains conceptual necessities to visual media-making including traditional visual and film language and modern-day film theory. It additionally discusses important concepts of race with a particular emphasis of the history of visual representation of race and how canonized media skills were formed according to certain bodies based on identifications such as race.

In the current chapter, I examine further the necessity and benefits of building specific conceptual topics (and theoretical works) into the media skills curricula. This chapter, reflective and autoethnographic, includes examples of canonized curriculum in need of reconsideration. The section also incorporates, for illustrative purposes, observations by other faculty teaching skills courses; these observations are drawn from informal conversations on the topic.

To provide a specific example of the beneficial blending of media skills and theory, I explain why and how lessons pertaining to lighting in skills courses should be changed in response to evidence that canonized lighting set-ups privilege those with white/fair skin. To provide further context for this, I briefly mention literature that explores the ways that people of color have been misrepresented historically in visual media (Hawkins, 1998; Voorhees, Vick, & Perkins, 2007), and further explore the literature that showcases how video lighting contributes to this issue (Del Barco, 2014; Dyer, 1997; Gillespie, 2016; Laflin, 2017). The main topic in this section relates to the three-point-lighting set-up. Using Richard Dyer's (1997) work as a

foundation for students, paired with reading on three-point-lighting set-ups, I show how students can be taught skills to produce adequate lighting for every skin color, and why this blending of theory and practice is meaningful. I explain how I have used this lighting activity in my skills classroom and further describe what decolonial media literacy principle is being used and its significance.

Chapter three helps explain the ways that POC's bodies are portrayed and displayed through the media we produce, and how we often perpetuate use of skills that are inequitable for our students to use. This chapter shows that there is a lack of understanding how even the skills taught in the media classroom are based on colonial practices of presenting bodies on camera. Additionally, I offer as an appendix a lesson plan to teach this theory-informed technique in skills classrooms.

Chapter Four: Performance and Orientation in the Classroom

In chapter four, I delve further into performance literature regarding “non-normative” bodies, particularly in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I discuss scholarship that addresses deconstructing the classroom with regard to its physical environment. This part of the study uses action research; thus, I also explain the methodology used in the process of this research.

This chapter moves into the conceptual classroom in media and journalism higher education programs. In chapter three I argue that skills courses particularly need to be reevaluated as educators are not including concepts that help students operate as critical thinkers while they formulate and produce content. However, this is not meant to suggest that conceptual courses are pristine spaces. In fact, I argue that conceptual courses can often latch

onto colonial and unequitable modes of education due to routinized privileging of canonized works, while treating works of diversity as “additive.”

Additionally, I argue that conceptual courses often maintain a normative perspective of critical analysis rather than being particularly attuned to having non-normative discussions and conversations. The set-up and environment of the conceptual classroom operates with normative education expectations (often with lecturing and brief discussion, paired with students reverently sitting in their seats and raising their hands when they have thoughts). In this section I argue that “queering” the curricula and the classroom can be a way to escape normative expectations of the conceptual classroom to aid in deconstructing the media and journalism higher education classroom. By expanding concepts of queerness, there is additionally a focus on embodied identities, and what it means to exist in a body that is or is not oriented according to socialized and imposed norms.

To engage with the proposed media literacy concept of queering the classroom, I explain how monster film narratives can be used to facilitate conversations about non-normative phenomena. I believe that using these narratives specifically when students begin the course (meaning this would be among the first lesson plans) is important, as using these narratives provides an entry point to talk about difficult *and* current issues one might not see when looking through a normative lens. Historically, creature films have been used as metaphors to engage with timely and/or controversial subjects, as well as social identities—in many of these cases, creature films have depicted these identities as dangerous and bad (Benshoff, 1997; Creed, 2012; Hollinger, 1989; Kennon, 2017). However, I argue that, in a positive shift, most recent creature narratives have focused on empathy and care of non-normative identities.

This section relies on a brief explanation of the significance of two creature films that can be used to queer the classroom and curriculum. I pair these creature films (*Arrival*, 2016; *The Shape of Water*, 2017) with a queer theory perspective. I use literature on creature films, Adams and Pensoneau-Conway's (2019) ideas of queer communication pedagogy, and William Potter's (2012) Media Literacy Continuum Scale (acquiring fundamentals, language acquisition, narrative acquisition, developing skepticism, intensive development, experiential exploring, critical appreciation, social responsibility) to support this argument. I propose additional media literacy principles related to cultural competence and non-normative analysis.

As I explain in this analysis, to a student whose media literacy skills are underdeveloped, creature narratives are read superficially—as a simple series of events, for example. To assist students toward a higher level of media literacy and, thus, understanding, I propose non-normative conversations related to these creature narratives that help bring queerness into the classroom—and include necessary discussion about body and performance orientations and expectations. This works to foster an equitable pedagogy and create a decolonized classroom by escaping the normative and institutionalized classroom structure.

Importantly, to contribute to this section, I used this exercise (as action research) in the Media Literacy course I taught in 2020 at a northeastern university to gauge how students reacted to this curriculum change. After doing so, and receiving feedback from students, I have developed a lesson plan based on my experience, and a reflexive review of that experience, for educators to use in their classrooms. This lesson plan is in the appendix.

Chapter Five: Reflection and Conclusion

Aside from its appendices, the dissertation concludes with reflexive thoughts on the experience of teaching, being taught to, creating, and writing this dissertation.

This section emphasizes and explains discoveries, and proposes new and expanded media literacy concepts that work to decolonize the classroom through the lens of bodies and performance.

Appendix A: Department Workshop, “Educating Educators with Best Practices”

This section includes an example of a plan that can be used to conduct a department workshop/training on how educators in a media and journalism department can work on deconstructing their classroom and curriculum with the goal of decolonization. This is something that instructors can use to *get started* on creating an inclusive and equitable classroom. In this workshop I give special consideration to the fact that adjunct instructors, as provisional faculty, are often not privy to training opportunities.

Appendix B: Lesson Plan A, “Lighting the Way: Learning Inclusive Lighting Practices”

This lesson plan that offers step-by-step instructions in showing how to do the lighting lesson in the skills classroom. The plan includes an overview and rationale, necessary theoretical background, a general timeline, explanation of instruction, questions to discuss, a possible assignment with an attached rubric.

Appendix C: Lesson Plan B, “Queering the Classroom: Using Monsters to Start Conversations”

This item demonstrates step-by-step how to conduct an introductory lesson that uses a creature narrative film to begin “queering” the classroom. The plan includes an overview and rationale, necessary theoretical background, a general timeline, explanation of instruction, questions to discuss, a possible assignment with an attached rubric.

“Advocacy is scholarship,” wrote Fassett and Warren (2007). “Pedagogy is scholarship. Advocacy is pedagogy. Pedagogy is advocacy” (p. 32). These chapters suggest the harms of

ossification among media and journalism programs that center the experiences of white, male, heterosexual, abled bodies, and they champion the possibilities for a countermodel that better advocates for communities that are currently marginalized due to systems of oppression. It offers approaches to creating a space that is inviting to them, and to teaching students to create media from a variety of perspectives in the most equitable way possible. By engaging with content and fostering critical conversations through the perspective of bodies and performance and with critical media literacy tools, we can create an equitable media and journalism classroom. In the end, this dissertation calls on educators to cultivate and nurture an equitable pedagogy motivated by decolonization of the classroom, so that their students may feel welcome in the classroom and ultimately produce positive and representative content as professionals in the media field.

The next section specifically looks to develop critical media literacy principles related to the body and performance within the media skills classroom. I will demonstrate what it looks like to teach media skills equitably with the use of film theory in the skills classroom.

CHAPTER 3: CONVERGING THEORY WITH PRACTICE

IN THE MEDIA SKILLS CLASSROOM

Are we teaching culturally blind?

—University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill professor, 2021

As part of my graduate fellowship, I had the opportunity to teach in the School for two semesters. I was invited to attend an adjunct faculty meeting to review class requirements and learning outcomes so that I would be prepared as the instructor of record for a foundational media skills course.

At the meeting, I sat next to a classmate who would also be teaching. “I think I’m the only Black person in the room right now,” she leaned over and whispered to me. I looked around—she was right. We were in a room filled with white people, mostly men. My classmate and I hoped for some acknowledgment at the disparity that was plain to us, but it never came. Instead, the time was spent talking about procedures and what our program “stands for,” with no apparent connection made by the meeting leader between the programs’ professed commitment to diversity and a striking lack of diversity in the room. The meeting focused on procedures and logistics, such as how to use the printers and where to find the coffee bar—these are not inconsequential things, especially among conditional labor (including graduate students and adjunct instructors). But in a program meant to train students how to pay attention to and

document the issues, events and experiences of a diverse population, why weren't we talking about diversity?²

Our adjunct faculty bring outstanding practical experience to the classroom, but not necessarily teaching experience. The same may be true for many graduate students invited or required to teach as part of their program. They are hired to transmit their hands-on skills, with no particular instruction, for the ways that diversity and inclusion might impact the experience and outcome, and of course, it is necessary that we teach our students the techniques that they need to excel in the profession. In addition, they need the *critical skills* necessary for communicating with, and telling the stories of, people and communities everywhere. Chapter 3 explores the ways in which educators can work to make sure that the content in our media skills classrooms is representative and inclusive, so that students have the opportunity to engage in productive, meaningful coursework. When they complete our program, students should have the know-how to represent all bodies accurately and equitably throughout their careers.

Given media literacy's current significance, and the call to media consumers to engage with media literacy principles as they consume media products (Hobbs, 2006), I look to media literacy principles to help educators work with an accessible framework as they teach media skills. Media literacy is the "ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms" (Center for Critical Media Literacy, 1992) and it is an approach to education that provides a framework to help students participate in critical inquiry when consuming all forms of media. There is currently immense interest in media literacy, especially concerning misinformation and disinformation (Farmer, 2019; Mason, et al., 2018; Padgett, 2017), though I

² A departmental workshop to assist faculty, with special consideration given to adjunct faculty as provisional labor not often privy to training opportunities, is provided as Appendix A.

argue that a media literacy framework has the potential to expand beyond critical analysis *after* media has already been produced, and can rather be used *during* media production (Degand, 2020; Kellner & Share, 2007; Romero Walker, 2020). And, to further work toward equity and decolonization, I propose additional principles be included that pay notice to bodies and performance; both for students being represented by the camera, and students using the camera.

My experience as a graduate student had already shown me the value of learning the “why” behind the “what” (ideally, the why *before* the what), primarily by reading and discussing theory. Decolonizing the skills classroom is essential because how skills are performed translates into how bodies are represented in media. When the focus on skills is to the exclusion of concepts, it becomes an obstacle to decolonizing media education (Alemán, 2014; Green, 2013; Hobbs, 2006; Kellner & Share, 2007). Methods of critical media literacy can aid in this effort toward decolonizing education, if we center our approach on bodies and performance.³

The skills courses I took in my undergraduate program, and even in my master’s program, included “established” techniques that scholars have since identified as archaic and inequitable (Dyer, 1997; Green, 2013; Mulvey, 1975). But if faculty and students are not engaging with that scholarship, how are they to know? When skills that produce inequity are normalized and routinized in coursework, we can assume they will find their way into media productions, where they will reproduce myths and stereotypes about people of color, women, and the LGBTQ+ community, for example (Alemán, 2010, 2013; Dyer, 1997; Green, 2013; Mulvey, 1975). This point seems a crucial one to make in teacher training for skills courses, yet it did not come up.

³ This chapter is conceived in relation to the dissertation’s overarching goal, and written in the spirit of an article submission for a leading communication education journal.

To keep up with a diversified media field and avoid teaching “culturally blind,” as one professor put it (personal communication, February 1, 2021), this chapter proposes that skills courses be fortified with theory. I offer as one example my approach to teaching students how to do lighting set-ups for visual communication purposes—particularly interviews, a typical assignment given to media interns or entry-level employees. I focus on lighting set-ups because the technique is common to introductory skills classrooms, and it is generally taught in a way that has been canonized in the field of visual communication (Dyer, 1997). As a mode of visual communication, lighting set-ups determine how bodies will be represented on camera—what traits will be emphasized and de-emphasized, for example. By pairing critical essays on race with lighting instruction, students have the opportunity to reflect on and respond to the principles informing so-called “best practices” in the field. When students learn these principles and practices, they can be more contemplative about how bodies are represented and displayed, and about their responsibility in performing that work—an adjusted media literacy framework can help students go through this process.

My approach is premised on equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995), which are strategies to help students “become reflective and active citizens of a democratic society” (p. 152). Equity pedagogy, or what I refer to as equitable pedagogy, asserts that it is not enough to teach students rudimentary skills within the dominant canon “without learning also to question its assumptions, paradigms, and hegemonic characteristics” (p. 152). These practices are characteristic of the work in deconstructing education with the goal of decolonization, which likewise requires confronting “the philosophies, motivations, and worldviews that underlie our consciousness and our work” (Gorski, 2008, p. 516). The following section provides elaboration.

Theoretical Framework

Decolonizing the Classroom

When spaces cater to a dominant perspective, as classrooms and professional settings often do, those of us from marginalized communities are confronted with a difficult choice: fit in or stand out as “Other.” I can think of myriad instances when my body did not “fit” in the classroom (either as student or educator), or when remarks by others made it clear that my body was regarded as Othered. These kinds of experiences are not unique to me; they appear in the research and memoirs of many individuals (Ahmed, 2006; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Tordova, 2016; Westover, 2018).

Most striking to me was that, as a first-year student, I was expected to stand and recite a homophobic phrase as a routine part of class: “Marriage is between a *man* and a *woman*,” a rebuke that my attraction to non-male bodies was not natural. In another instance when a classmate complained that Beyoncé’s barrier-breaking *Lemonade* was provocative and thus warranted removal from our “Women in Film” course, I was crushed. It was the lone film on the syllabus to feature a woman of color, and it occurred to me that if my skin color was closer to that of my father’s, then I might also be perceived as provocative (a common Chicana stereotype), and thus, unworthy of consideration. Standing up and standing out seemed out of the question. I did my best to fit in, but the stress almost led me to drop out.

As a graduate student instructor, I have experienced body disorientation in conversation with my Black female colleague about the negative student evaluations we received. Students found us “too radical and biased.” Apparently, we came across as instructors who “took [themselves] too seriously.” Tell me, how must graduate students of color contort their bodies in the classroom to be less “intense” or less “radical” in order to earn the kinds of teaching

evaluations that will help us on the job market? How can we teach our students of color equitably when we are busy trying to “fit in” among white students who read our bodies “all wrong”?

The classroom is inhospitable to marginalized students as well as to their professors that represent marginalized groups (Cooks, 2003; Johnson & Bhatt, 2003). Tina M. Harris (2017b) described a sense of double-consciousness as a Black woman in academia. “My identity forces me to experience a reality that plays out in both public and private spaces that many of my white colleagues do not have to face. I am faced with the daunting task of managing this intersectionality in unique and difficult ways” (p. 131-132). Harris’s intersectional identity (being both Black and female) creates unique barriers. Students read her body as always-already biased and radical, especially when content is focused on race and gender (Harris, 2017b). These are the norms of the classroom specifically, and of academic institutions generally, that necessitate calls for a decolonized education. As Harris (2017b) explains:

[The] knowledge, classroom management style, commentary, and expectations [of instructors representing marginalized groups] are oftentimes questioned, challenged even, because we do not fit the “norm” of what a college professor should be. ... This scrutiny is heightened for some students when we teach interracial/intercultural communication classes, with students assuming we occupy a biased or subjective positionality that renders us incapable of teaching such courses. (p. 132)

Thus, in the very courses that rely on our lived experiences for content and instruction, intersectional bodies are somehow seen as less than legitimate. How can it be that after years and years of education, with thousands of hours of research behind us, that we still feel unwelcome in our own classrooms? The classroom, so instilled with norms of whiteness (such as stereotypes

about who is an authentic professor, or so-called standards of objectivity that view anti-racist practices as biased), has made it so that *all* instructors are expected to perform accordingly. As a result, whiteness “gets reified and normalized, all while remaining under-examined as a site of investigation” (Warren, 2009, p. 91; see also, Gorski, 2008).

Violating institutional norms carries the threat of punishment—as students, from grades assigned by unenlightened professors, and as faculty, through student evaluations of teaching (SETs) that diminish or discredit an educator who does not satisfy students’ fixed notions of what a professor *should* be or do (Chávez & Mitchell, 2019; Fan, et al., 2019; Mitchell & Martin, 2018). Acknowledging and challenging of these performative norms of whiteness in the classroom (for students *and* instructors) is what can lead to the dismantling of inequitable higher education expectations and to decolonizing education.

Decolonizing Education in the Media Classroom

The work of decolonization should be required of all educators, not made the exclusive purview of the few faculty of color at an institution. “The curriculum and forms of pedagogy are central instruments in the transmission of cultural and social reproduction,” wrote Sleeter (2010, p. 194), showcasing the necessity for *all* educators to contribute to decolonizing curricula to disrupt the reproduction of an accepted culture of whiteness in higher education curricula. Tordova (2016) notes a colonizing tendency in media education: “Indigenous and non-Western views and practices are either excluded or marginalized, exposing neocolonial order, where the worldviews, cultures, needs, and desires of the former colonizer continue to define how information is collected and disseminated in the postcolonial society” (p. 681). In other words, media education is not different from other fields in terms of normalizing colonial content and

performative expectations in learning environments and in sustaining pedagogies that reinforce Western norms and expectations.

This is especially evident when media fields, such as journalism, indicate “official” knowledge systems, or the “rules” of the discipline. Often those rules or expectations (e.g., teaching a print journalism student the principles of objectivity, or a photojournalism student how to photograph according to the rule of thirds) privilege Eurocentric curricula and knowledge systems, while knowledges and experiences of other cultures (that often have different rules and values) are silenced, or “are considered marginal cultural and political practices outside the professional canon of journalism” (Tordova, 2016, p. 676). This is just one way that “whiteness is embedded in journalism pedagogy, inhibiting media practitioners in producing racially balanced and accurate” media products (Alemán, 2014, p. 85). Developing practices and principles to use in the classroom that work outside these canonized perspectives of media and journalism is an important way to decolonize the classroom.

Equitable and Critical Pedagogies: Strategies to Decolonize the Classroom

A first step toward making classrooms more equitable is through content choices. We must ask ourselves continually whose voices, perspectives, and scholarship are missing among course materials—a vital point in critical media literacy⁴ of *who is not being represented* (Saunders & Kardia, 1997). By posing this question, educators can ensure that we expose our students to materials produced by a range of people with a range of backgrounds and experiences. This reflects a multicultural approach to education, which works to “champion genuine diversity and expand curriculum” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 16). This ultimately makes

⁴ Critical media literacy differs from media literacy by including principles that further examine ideology and positions of power (Yousman, 2015).

it so that “groups marginalized from mainstream education learn about their own heritage and for dominant groups to explore the experiences and voices of minority and oppressed people” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 16). Including a diversity of thought in the content required for the courses we teach is essential to helping privileged students broaden their perspectives and to providing an inclusive space for those who embody diverse identities.

In addition to including content produced by diverse academics, we should incorporate the voices of (non-academic) activists and of our students. In her pioneering work in Black feminist theory, Collins (1990) explains that we must consider, in addition to the ideas of academics, the ideas of those of activists and everyday working-class Black women. We should devote ourselves to listening to and regarding the voices of the oppressed as another vital source of knowledge. Critical pedagogy similarly values engagement with voices outside academia to consider how “the symbolic and material transactions of the everyday provide a basis for rethinking how people give meaning and ethical substance to their experiences” (Giroux & Simon, 1988, p. 10). By rethinking the process of meaning-making based on the experiences of individuals who are different from them, students can better understand how power is constructed within and beyond the classroom. Thus, we can include in our official curriculum (or rather, to include in our program’s specific goals and objectives) the experiences and voices of students, especially those whose voices have been overlooked previously or otherwise silenced. Content and pedagogy are not mutually exclusive discourses (Giroux & Simon, 1988).

Critical pedagogy, for example, is another strategy to be used for equitable pedagogy. It provides a space that is not merely interested in the memorization of facts (Yousman, 2015), but imagines a democratic education that draws from the lives of students and their cultural backgrounds (Fassett & Warren, 2007). This perspective further aligns with Friere’s (2018) idea

that a pedagogy of the oppressed cannot be developed and practiced by the oppressors, but must be led by the voices of those oppressed. “The pedagogy of the oppressed ... is the pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation” (p. 53). A pedagogy of the oppressed presumes that a traditional classroom model, which distributes power in particular ways, is inherently oppressive because of the oppressor-oppressed relationship involved. The relationship of the oppressor and the oppressed is defined by “prescription,” writes Freire:

Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness. Thus, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor. (2018, p. 47)

In the classroom where there is a prescribed and performed hierarchy between teacher and student, the teacher acts as the oppressor and the student the oppressed; the rules and expectations are set by the teacher (Fassett & Warren, 2007). A classroom that does *not* maintain the hierarchal teacher-student relationship, but instead allows students’ experiences to be a part of the class content is, by comparison, a democratic classroom.

Additionally, to move toward an equitable pedagogy, we must create opportunities in our classrooms to critique canonized content, exercises that add to a diversity of thought and decenter dominant narratives. This allows for what Ludlow (2004) calls a “contested space ... not necessarily defined by conflict, but which includes room for conflict” (p. 47). A space such as this is “about decentering privileged perspectives” (Ludlow, 2004, p. 41). The contested space acknowledges that “ideologically correct content” (Giroux & Simon, p. 11) often serves a particular privileged perspective. As students learn to be comfortable challenging the ways in which their social and cultural worlds have deemed some social concepts as *normal* or *natural*,

we collectively contribute to a “transformative pedagogy” (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016). In transformative pedagogy, course content and discussion must address the construct of *normalcy* and how it is not harmless, but rather, contributes to injustice. This consciousness-raising around what has been “normalized,” such as how white supremacy and racism manifest in everyday life based on a universal assumption of whiteness, is appropriate and crucial (hooks, 2003). Interrogating culture systems as part of our curriculum encourages sharing by students of *how* some spaces have come to be defined as normal or natural in their lives, and what have been their impacts (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

By using content originating from a variety of perspectives and including in curricula the voices of those oppressed and the voices of students, we have participated in some of the preparatory work to move forward in creating an equitable pedagogy for a decolonized classroom. Media skills classrooms, precisely because the techniques they impart are related to documenting the experiences of diverse communities, would benefit from similar theoretical approaches.

Media Literacy in Media Skills Curricula

One way to reimagine media-skills curricula is by adopting a critical media literacy approach in the classroom. I propose this as a response to my concern voiced earlier, that references to power hierarchies and social ideologies pertaining to equity and inclusion tend to be the purview of conceptual courses, with the assumption that those principles are unnecessary in skills courses. This separation in coursework of the practical and abstract is the norm in professional programs (e.g., journalism), but is, in fact, constructed, with ramifications for students and for hiring and tenure practices. In my student experience, I encountered critical media literacy principles in several conceptual courses, but I never had an instructor that engaged

with media literacy principles in skills courses. Rather, I was taught *how* to film/produce something according to the norms of the field, without any discussion of the origin of these production principles, or consideration of whether and how they should be modified to represent bodies that did not conform to the white, male norm. This separation of skills and concepts was also evident in an informal audit I conducted of syllabi⁵ for media coursework at several US colleges/universities.

Although media literacy is decades old, it is increasingly cited in response to misinformation/disinformation (in politics, health, etc.), but the field falls short in conversations related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and power structures (Kellner & Share, 2007b; Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Advances have been made, such as the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) theming their 2021 conference “Media Literacy and Social Justice,” but there is greater potential for expansion. Celeste (2019) wrote that, amid “a rise of overt racism in media and all social spheres,” media literacy could be a “survival skill for marginalized youth” (para. 2).

While media literacy in its broad definition refers to a set of practices that equips individuals “to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms” (Hobbs, 2006, p. 16), I refer intentionally to practices of *critical* media literacy in the classroom because it adds the lens of power, as it is expressed in media production, content and reception. Kellner and Share (2007) define critical media literacy to include, “ideology critique and

⁵ This informal audit examined syllabi from 10 universities. From each of five U.S. regions, two syllabi were collected, one from a private university and another from a public university. The syllabi collected were from introductory skills courses in journalism and/or media programs. Main findings were that in these media programs throughout the U.S., DEI was not necessarily an explicit component for introductory skills programs, or topics of DEI mentioned in syllabus goals/objectives were generally not elaborated upon in the course schedule.

analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality” (p. 8). Critical media literacy includes all forms of media communication, including the products of popular culture, to deepen the understanding of audiences’ relationship to media. Giroux and Simon (1988) refer to popular culture as a “terrain of images, knowledge forms and affective investments which define the ground on which one’s ‘voice’ becomes possible within a pedagogical encounter” (p. 16). Popular culture is linked to critical pedagogy because it is a vital source for illuminating how social injustices operate in everyday experiences. Critical media literacy “involves cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts,” wrote Kellner and Share (2007, p. 4).

Essential to critical media literacy is the examination of power relations that create social hierarchies in communication that inevitably benefits dominant groups while subordinating others (Yousman, 2015). Scholars have called for a “critical race media literacy,” which fuses critical race theory and critical media literacy to help students examine media representations of people in color (e.g., Degand, 2020; Hawkman & Van Horn, 2019; Yosso, 2002). While critical race media literacy is extremely valuable, it is perhaps too exclusive to race; or rather, it misses an intersectional approach that would additionally include discussions of gender and sexuality, for example. From my perspective, critical media literacy and critical race media literacy miss the mark by neglecting related discussions of *bodies and performance* and the ways in which bodies are regulated according to a white, male infrastructure. Including the concept of bodies and performance within critical media literacy principles can be a key to further decolonizing media education and curricula.

Curricula for skills courses evolves *because technology* evolves. As phone cameras become more sophisticated, for example, students require instruction on the affordances of the latest technology, assuming a school has the means to supply them with the latest technology. In this context, discourses of “inclusivity” are the purview of institutional development offices, since prospective donors and employers seek assurance, too, that schools are preparing students for the “skills of the future,” not an antiquated past (personal communication, February 1, 2021). Cutting-edge technology in the classroom often leads to the hiring of adjunct or term faculty who are current with its operation, but who may not have teaching experience, or training in pedagogy or communication theories (reminiscent of the situation described at the opening of this chapter). But progress in technology skills also needs to focus on inclusivity and equity as they have been theorized by scholars in our field and others. Media production should act as a multistage process, explains Friesem (2020), and I argue that the process should include attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This is especially the case for visual skills, with which media makers are responsible for presenting and representing bodies equitably. The following section will explore the specific educational needs in courses that focus on these described visual skills, leading to an example of how these principles can be applied in the skills classroom.

Conceptual Necessities for Visual Skills

There is power in the visual image. We know this because spectacle presents social patterns through visual communication practices (Dimaggio & Useem, 1978; Watt, 2012). Our field honors visual media through numerous annual awards programs, such as Pictures of the Year (POY). We teach our students how to record and present the visual image as its own media message or in accompaniment to another: a news or magazine photograph, a short video spot for

a company, an interview, and so on. Although the visual medium relies on a language⁶ that can deny audiences the power of meaning-making, the structure and language of the medium can tell a story in a particular way based on a set of skills that are either inherently biased or oblivious to the nuances of, for example, photographing bodies that reflect light and color differently (Dyer, 1997; Lewis, 2019). This canonized visual language should be acknowledged and interrogated in our skills classrooms on the way to deconstruct normative practices of visual image production. By utilizing film theories, a skills instructor can provide students with the means to interrogate norms of visual production. The powerful combination of *theory* and *practice* can help educators engage students with the ideological roots of the visual images that they produce, and their implications.

Acknowledging the established “language” of the visual media is crucial for media production educators so we understand how visual media and film language produces these ideologies and beliefs about “how power is maintained, struggled over, and resisted” (Brummett, 2019, p. 69). These ideologies in turn are reproduced in the creation and distribution of media messages. As media literacy principles state, media carry ideological and value messages, and all media are constructions. By critiquing the language of the cinema, as one might in film studies, we are directly engaging with these media literacy principles (Aufderheide, 2000).

⁶ “Film language” refers to organizational structures and conventional techniques that have been created and sustained in cinema production (Guzzetti, 1973). It uses methods of semiotics through codes, the signified, and signifiers, to examine what film theorists call “natural cinematic language. ...Cinema is a discourse that must depend on codes,” Guzzetti explains (1973, p. 294), and those codes define the relationship of the medium to the message in visual products. Examples of conventional film techniques taught in our classrooms could be: high and low angles, shot-reverse-shot, dolly, “zolly,” the thirds, etc.

Cinematographers, Pramaggiore and Wallis (2011) have shown, “‘speak’ to the audience in visual terms, using images as expressively as writers use words” (p. 130). Choices made during media production affect the ways that audiences “perceive characters, events and objects” depicted (p. 139). For example, a conventional film technique taught to students is the use of high and low camera angles. Camera angles refer to how an image is composed to convey a certain mood or meaning. In a classroom, one might demonstrate that a high-angle shot, for example, with the camera positioned from above and angled down, minimizes the subject of the shot, whereas a low-angle shot positioning the camera below the subject and angled upward, makes the subject look larger and more powerful. A subject literally “looms large” (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2011, p. 142). These film codes project meanings that are often ideological, privileging certain individuals and subjects over others (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Students should learn the implications of what might seem at first rudimentary choices.

High and low angles are often discussed through the objective of storytelling—articulating character motivations and presenting how certain characters maintain dominance over others (Van Sijil, 2005). To introduce the camera angles, production design, and ideological implications, an instructor could identify media content corresponding to the areas of specialization within their program; for example, a broadcast news story, or an advertisement. This 2007 Intel advertisement (Figure 1) is effective for demonstrating these visual techniques.⁷

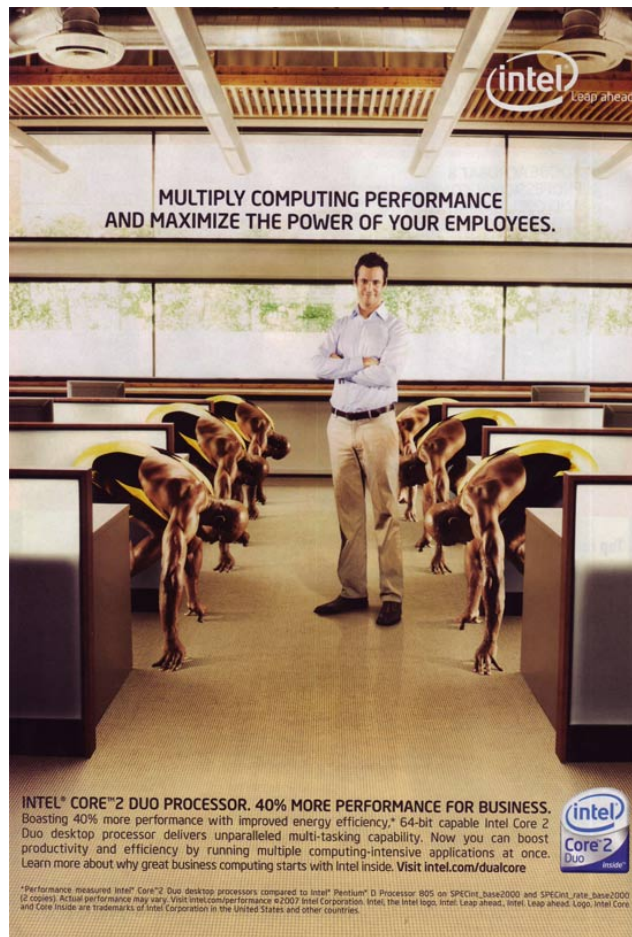
In this advertisement, a white man stands in the center of the image as men of color are lined up on each side of him. The men, who are indistinguishable from one another, are positioned with heads down, poised in a runner’s stance as if they are about to start a race.

⁷ The advertisement was pulled from circulation after it was determined that it had racist undertones. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/12560118>

The POC are separated by cubicles that resemble starting gates, and behind the white man, the sun streams through generous windows. In large text, the ad states, “Multiply computing performance and maximize the power of your employees.” At the bottom near the “intel” logo, the ad reads, “Intel Core 2 Duo processor. 40% more performance for business.”

Figure 1

Intel advertisement with visual production that has racist undertones.



From *Intel Pulls Ad After Racial Backlash* by A. Chadwick, 2007,

NPR, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/12560118>.

Though the angle is slight, the camera is placed below the white subject’s eyeline and is angled upward. The character’s relative position suggests he has the power in the shot. Paired

with other visual techniques, his power is also expressed through the use of the visual convention of a vantage point.⁸ The vantage point, which uses visual lines to direct an audience's view to a particular subject, is used to direct the eye to the white male subject; he is centered in the photo, situated higher than other figures, and has v-shaped visual figures (the POC and the cubicle dividers) to direct the eye of the spectator to him. When the camera is placed in this position, it creates a power hierarchy. Additionally, the phrasing in the advertisement relies on stereotypes of POC as “fast” and “athletic” and proposes that the white man maintains ownership of his POC employees; it is suggested this product will “maximize” the “power” of their “performance.”

When examining this advertisement, it can be assumed the creative team did not fully consider the implications of that hierarchy when they positioned men of color below the vantage point and in running stances; they look as if they are bowing down to the white subject, who has the visual power. Importantly, this photograph meets the technical standards of what is considered a “good” photograph. The subject is lit well, with the bright windows providing a “halo-like” hair-light above him. Given that he is the central subject of the shot, all of the lines in the production design create the vantage point to direct the audience to look at him. The use of a slight angle additionally gives the main subject more power than the other subjects, appropriate because he is the “boss” and main subject of the shot. The use of darker colors below and lighter colors above gives the image a light, positive, lifting tone.

The cultural assumptions evidenced in the ad are an indictment of the creative process, which was presumably more focused on the conventions of what is considered a good photograph. This is why visual conventions (such as high- and low-angles in this

⁸ In photography, a vantage point refers to the point-of-view from which photos are taken.

example) *must* be discussed in terms of the norms of the skill and the profession, *as well as* the cultural values and social systems that define who has power and who does not. By analyzing this ad with students, instructors can emphasize the intertwining of practical skills with critical thinking in the classroom and, moreover, in the workplace. In this case, the advertising team evidently knew the rules of curating a photograph, but they were ignorant of the damaging stereotypes their creative choices perpetuated. That “culturally blind” media product presents an opportunity for additional discussion of the demographic breakdown of ad agency leadership and employees (AIMM, 2018).

So, where are the discussions of how historical notions of race, sexuality, and gender contribute to decision-making about which subjects are deserving of high- or low-angle shots? For the sake of instructional efficiency, they are often left to colleagues teaching conceptual or upper-level classes to explore these motivations and their effects only *after* the content has been produced and distributed. In addition to critical media analyses of the Intel ad, consider, as another example, the barrage of analyses that followed *Time* magazine’s digitally altered cover photo of O. J. Simpson’s mug shot upon his 1994 arrest for the murders of his ex-wife and her friend. As both incidents demonstrate, these ideological discussions are important in the early stages, a necessity to the goal of training students to be responsible media producers. In response to public condemnation of the *Time* cover, which was digitally darkened in a way that exploited stereotypes about Black men as criminals, the editor issued an unconvincing apology after first arguing the interpretations of the work were the source of racism (Carmody, 1994). By assuring course content draws on a wide range of perspectives and creating an environment that lends itself to candid discussions, students might become more aware of their biases and how they are reproduced through media, with harmful results. And in addition, by familiarizing our students

with contemporary film theories, which address many of the techniques taught in media-skills courses, we can help students recognize and *subvert* film techniques that negatively depict individuals and communities, especially those already marginalized based on gender, race, and sexuality.

Although traditional film theories trained their focus on the possibilities of the medium of the cinema (Balázs, 1952; Bazin, 1967; Kracauer, 1960), contemporary film theories have worked to explain issues pertaining to technical practices and methods of film production which perpetuate racism, sexism, and homophobia (Dyer, 1997; Green, 2013; Mulvey, 1975). Feminist film theories, for example, consider how traditional film language invites characters, filmmakers, and audiences to gaze at the female body, participating in acts of objectification and fetishization of women (Mulvey, 1975; Smelik, 2007). Critical race theorists have scrutinized how lighting techniques in filmmaking have focused on white bodies to the detriment of Black bodies, which, when lit incorrectly within the medium can connote criminality or erasure, for example (Crenshaw, 1991; Dyer, 1997). These contemporary film theories combat traditional film language that is exclusionary, and they show us how to make room for a more comprehensive and inclusive set of techniques in the production process. These perspectives are relevant to the work we teach students in journalism/media skills courses.

Connecting Theory with Practice in the Media Skills Classroom

Students in the media arts program of my undergraduate institution are required to take a course addressing the basics of storytelling and filmmaking. We learned the skills required to use the technology with no consideration of the effects those skills would have on the materials we produced using them—that is to say, no space was opened for critical thinking.

In my junior year, I was given the opportunity to teach this lab section, and a classmate friend was assigned to teach the other section. To prepare, we met with the instructor of the introduction course with ideas about restructuring the lab, which the instructor permitted. It was an exciting time for both of us; based on our racial identities, she and I detected a missing connection between the skills that were being taught in the department and methods of critical thinking. We wanted to make sure that our students were learning essential technologies while also reflecting critically on what they were producing. Admittedly, our efforts were a bit superficial, as in “when you change the lighting, this looks like a scary scene, and this looks like a sitcom.” We had no teaching experience, but our lived experience alerted us that these critical conversations needed to be part of the skills coursework.

By now, I have accumulated teaching experience in both skills and conceptual courses. I have concluded that the failure to consistently and effectively blend theory and practice in the classroom content is a significant obstacle to incorporating principles of diversity and inclusivity. At my current institution, “Introduction to Digital Storytelling” is where students learn basic skills: how to use a camera, sound equipment, and computer software, for example. Introductory courses such as this one provide foundational skills for what students will be learning in the rest of their academic program, thus the instructor has a degree of influence over how the norms of the discipline will be defined and applied. Using critical media literacy principles in the skills classroom has aided me in fostering an equitable space; however, in exercising those principles I have discovered some gaps. Here I explore how I have worked to fill those gaps by applying proposed critical media literacy principles that relate to the body and performance.

There are many ways faculty can be more purposeful in expressing notions of diversity in their classrooms with relatively little effort or risk, such as making sure their PowerPoints

display POC (rather than stock images of white people only), and allowing personal storytelling to be a large part of the media-making process. Many of my faculty colleagues do this. But they struggle to articulate exactly how they incorporate inclusivity in the skills they are teaching in the “Introduction to Digital Storytelling” class. It is easier to return to the course objectives: to teach the students the digital and planning skills necessary to the discipline (personal communication, February 1, 2021). Diversity was a kind of embellishment, an after-thought, something to be retrofitted into existing curricula that failed to make room for it in the first place. But at least the students were getting the skills they needed, right?

Important theories are being taught in conceptual courses—these frameworks help us understand the role and responsibilities of media practitioners, and the uses and effects of media content, for example. But their value to the field is significantly undermined when they are not synthesized as part of foundational coursework—the media-skills classes. There is opportunity to deconstruct the ways in which the teaching of media skills has been normalized, but that requires a dedication to inclusion and equity in the *creation* of skills curricula, before the implementation. With synthesis of concepts and skills, students are critically thinking about the media that they produce *before and as* they produce it. The following section explains how I have arrived at doing this in my introductory skills courses. This specific exercise demonstrates the inclusion of Richard Dyer’s theoretical perspective of three-point-lighting as part of a unit on teaching my students how to do lighting set-ups for interviews.

A Classroom Example: Three-Point Interview Lighting

What does it look like to use contemporary film theory to oppose canonized film language? When I taught “Introduction to Digital Storytelling,” I paired the techniques of lighting set-ups with the conceptual frameworks in Richard Dyer’s (1997) text, *White*. Students

are required to take this course, and in it they learn how to use the equipment and software programs necessary for them to succeed in video and web production in the media profession. An expectation of the department is that the instructor will teach students how to do lighting for video interviews, a fixture in broadcast journalism and documentary—the expectation is for three-point lighting. When I taught the class, students were given customary instructions for three-point lighting, and they were additionally assigned to read a section called “The light of the world” from *White*. I use this reading because, in it, Dyer (1997) documents the inequities of film lighting, and how the norm of three-point-lighting is intended for those with white skin: “Stocks, camera and lighting were developed taking the white face as the touchstone,” he wrote (p. 90). Having identified the problem, he offers some instructions on shaking ourselves out of our routines and adjusting the lighting set-up. “It may be—certainly was—true that photo and film apparatuses have seemed to work better with light-skinned peoples, but that is because they were made that way, not because there could be no other way” (p. 90).

Skin colors reflect light differently, a phenomenon that, left unaddressed, undermines all media productions. Latif (2017) explains

There’s a growing appreciation in Hollywood for films and television shows that showcase actors of color. Those works have received major awards, inspired difficult conversations about race and brought a diversity of talents and thoughts forward. The issue remains, however, that [B]lack actors and actresses in particular are often under-lit on camera today, even in big budget productions. (para. 1-2)

The fact that skin colors reflect light differently has ramifications beyond equipment adjustments. Just as relative position in an advertisement connotes power or lack of power, “movie lighting hierarchizes,” Dyer writes (1977, p. 201). It indicates who is important and who

is not. A unit on figure lighting in a media-skills course often is limited to three-point lighting, which does not function well for all people or all skin tones. Thus, inequity is all but assured in the final product. Three-point lighting is known to use three different lights to illuminate the subject of the shot: the primary key light, the secondary softer light, and the backlight to separate the subject from the background (Dyer, 1997). This is the lighting setup that most film, communication, documentary, and journalism students will learn in their skills courses, and this description will similarly be found in most beginning production textbooks. This is the method generally thought to be the most efficient way to set up lighting for interviews and easiest for beginners to learn. Yet, as Dyer explains using a series of case studies, this method is historically biased in its preference for subjects with light skin. Those with darker skin do not benefit visually from this lighting set-up.

Dyer (1997) makes suggestions for lighting different skin tones based on what Black filmmakers have found to be effective, but the solutions are perhaps too vague for introductory production courses. He instructs that when a Black person and a white person are filmed in the same shot, the filmmaker should minimize light on the white person and redirect some light on the Black person. Filmmakers typically, by training, light the shot for only the white subject (who is usually the protagonist) and leave the subject with darker skin in the shadow. Dyer also suggests making use of reflection off of the skin by applying lotion to darker skin, and using warmer lights to provide additional saturation for the skin's undertones.

My method for imparting this critical information about lighting is to first teach students the basics of three-point lighting with a white subject and, after doing so, replace the white subject with a subject with darker skin (getting permission from the POC student first, or requesting a POC colleague to assist me in this lesson). Incorporating the assigned reading of

Dyer, then, we observe and discuss together how the POC subject appears when lit under the same conditions as the person before them—they are often difficult to see, and when we put the lights closer to them, they are overexposed. We go on to experiment using reflections, light filters, and even different backgrounds until we find the best way to light darker skin.

In this lesson, students and the instructor must work together in the process because, admittedly, we are still working on finding the best way to light subjects with darker skin. Many of us were taught three-point lighting when we were in our media education programs, with no alternative set-ups for non-white subjects. But this provides a valuable opportunity for instructors and their students to collaborate in a transformative process. “The students are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher,” as Freire (2017, p. 81) would put it, thus inviting the use of radical and critical pedagogy in the classroom. This collaborative approach might slow the process a bit, but it teaches students that to be competent and equitable journalists, documentarians, photographers, and filmmakers, they must learn to develop the skills to film all of their subjects appropriately and equally. As Dyer (1997) states

Movie lighting discriminated against non-white people because it is used in the cinema and a culture that finds it hard to recognize them as appropriate subjects for such lighting, that is, as individuals ... People who are not white can and are lit to be individualized, arranged hierarchically and kept separate from the environment. (p. 102-103)

While it cannot be assumed that an instructor has been exposed to Dyer’s (1997) work in their academic career, this approach blending concepts with skills is not limited to doctoral-degreed teachers, or, as stated before, the conceptual classroom. It is important for all educators to teach their students to produce media that is inclusive and representative. Teaching basic production

techniques without engaging with contemporary theories of those techniques discourages students from becoming reflexive media makers. As Dyer noted, “It is not technically impossible to film Black people with the same effect as for whites, but ... it is culturally extremely difficult” (p. 101). Lighting technology discriminates on the basis of race because it was developed within a system of whiteness that did not consider non-white people appropriate subjects for lighting (Dyer, 1997, p. 102). By teaching students’ techniques that represent all subjects equitably on the screen, we engage in a critical radical pedagogy—by recognizing, subverting, and dismantling systems that favor bodies that are privileged in education and in the field. Through assigned readings (the conceptual element) and practical in-class activities (the skills element) that incorporate theories of film in the classroom, students can learn how to participate in a more diverse mode of media production—as students and educators, we can rewrite the inequitable language of visual image production.

This exercise has proven successful in this course and others. More than one student has shared with me that my inclusion of this lighting section was one of the first times that they, as a student of color, have seen their identity explicit in course materials. Additionally, a student commented in a course evaluation:

I don’t think I’ve ever had an instructor that so easily and readily discussed diversity in a class—many times Alexis brought up issues of diversity in the film industry and even taught us techniques to address these (for example, techniques to properly light and film people of color). Alexis made this class interesting, relevant, and inclusive!

The arrangement of the student’s comment suggests to me that the conceptual lesson registered—about diversity and equity—and in turn informed her recognition of the problem of entrenched lighting practices, and her understanding of adjustments to assure the technique was

inclusive. A lighting technique is something that can easily be taught with little to no mention of diversity or inclusivity, but when those concepts are synthesized with skills instruction, the results can be powerful. Importantly, the concepts should outlast the technology.

This lesson in lighting offers one approach for instructors seeking to incorporate diversity and inclusivity into their skills courses, but certainly there are other ways to do this. Introducing skills-focused students to Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze has been a productive way to talk about the techniques and implications of camera composition. Our students may aspire to work in fields such as advertising, which has a long history of fetishizing women specifically, and bodies more generally (e.g., Goffman, 1976), yet given the prescribed order of their coursework, they may never be exposed to Mulvey's theory. (Media fields other than advertising are complicit, too, of course.) Layering in theory about sexual imbalance and the valuing of women for their "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 623) provides a simple but striking lesson about equity in visual composition that applies across media fields.

Such a lesson with theory can also provide students with helpful language to confidently express their feelings about and experiences with inequity. For example, after one class, a student asked to speak with me. As a student-activist, she was accustomed to being interviewed, but a recent experience had left her troubled. She'd been asked to be an expert source for a broadcast news story and was interviewed by a faculty member supervising the project. Watching the resulting footage made her very uncomfortable, although at the time she could not articulate just *what* it was that made her feel this way. She wanted to ask that her part of the story be removed, but she was unsure how to explain her position. Our lesson about camera composition was the breakthrough she needed. She realized that as a news subject, she was composed very differently from the men in this particular news story; the camera's point-of-view

and composition lingered on her body rather than focusing on her face. She used these principles to express her concerns to the faculty member and later, to the dean.

This is to say, techniques alone—especially techniques that have emerged from archaic beliefs about race, gender, sexuality and class—are not enough to educate our students about the ways that media perpetuate issues of inequality and how to avoid these practices. Nor are skills alone enough to make our students of color feel a sense of belonging and value in the classroom and, by extension, the profession. By including these lesson plans in my skills-based course that blend technique with theory, I have been able to teach students technical proficiency to progress in the field (thus meeting the basic objective of the course), and introduce the critical thinking necessary for reflecting on the principles of visual equity (thus encouraging the responsible creation of media content). Importantly, these strategies contribute to a space in which students’ lived experiences become a vital part of the course, signaling what’s wrong with our devotion to ‘time-honored’ curricular and professional norms, and ideally, leading us to better practices.

Introducing New Critical Media Literacy Principles

As educators, it is vital that we begin teaching media production courses that are representative and inclusive to all. A blending of technique and theory will help students become more critically media literate practitioners, and it will move us toward the goal of decolonizing media education. In addition, this will provide an environment that invites diversity and inclusion in the classroom. It is a commitment to teaching that communicates to minority students that they matter, and that their perspective is essential to visual storytelling practices. It demonstrates that our academic institution and our media and journalism programs find importance in them being positively represented and are making sure that happens by virtue of the way that we educate *all* our students.

To accomplish this, we need to promote and practice inclusion of concepts and theories into all of our media-skills classrooms; this chapter has focused on their uses in a digital media skills course. The convergence of these theories with the production of media can help students understand when and why it might be appropriate to subvert traditional visual language as they create their own media—creating lighting set-ups that foster equity among subjects is one example. Hooks (2009) explains that marginalized groups struggle with the questions of “aesthetic accountability” (p. 87), while non-marginalized groups do not. All digital producers should be able to explain why they represent their subjects as they do, and be held accountable when they do it in a way that marginalizes or otherwise demeans them (Tuchman, 2000). Engaging with this type of media-skills pedagogy is one way to equip students to enter the media industry as responsible practitioners.

Explaining the canonized film language, in my example using three-point lighting, and then showing students how to subvert that canonized language when it is inequitable is valuable for creating reflexive and conscious media makers. By requiring reading of contemporary critical theories that aid media-making to be more inclusive to minority communities, and then applying those theories through activities and homework assignments, students directly engage with the “how” and the “why” of media-making methods and techniques that work to represent all subjects in digital media production equitably. Additionally, these approaches acknowledge the harms that visual production specifically, and media generally, have inflicted on minority bodies, inviting students to connect what has been to what can be.

Although the basic principles of critical media literacy address ideology and representation, there is inadequate focus on the ways in which media production in action affects the bodies of non-white, non-straight, non-male individuals and communities. Therefore, I

propose that an additional principle—“recognizing bodies”—and the following related questions have an important place in our media skills classes:

1. How am I representing the body of the subject, individual, or community when I am producing media content?
2. What traditions am I following in this way of producing media, and how have those traditions been equitable and inequitable to certain bodies?
3. Should I adjust my method of production to be more equitable, and if so, how?

As for skills educators, I propose they ask the following questions as they engage in course design:

1. What content am I including within my course that invites inclusivity in *all* of my lesson plans? How can I work to decolonize the classroom by including content (including reading, examples of ‘best practices’) that does not assume whiteness?
2. From what traditions do the skills I am teaching emerge, and in what ways do they privilege/disadvantage certain bodies? How do I go about teaching this skill to result in a more equitable product?
3. When I am teaching a skill, how am I regulating the bodies of students that are both producing the content, and bodies of the students that are being represented by the camera, microphone, or in writing?

If we want to decolonize education in media and journalism higher-education classrooms, developing a set of media literacy principles with a focus on the body and performance could be a step in the right direction. My experience as a member of multiple marginalized communities has demonstrated the tendency of media higher education to focus primarily on the craft of the field, less on theories and practices, and still less on the ways in which embodied identities (race,

gender, sexuality, disability) are portrayed, reflected, and treated. This is important because without recognition of diversity and inclusion in our curriculum and the classroom environment, content created by students will be misrepresentative and misleading—“culturally blind,” (as has been seen in terms of gender and race inequity in popular media in the last decade) (Smith, Choueiti, & Piper, 2016). As Degand (2020) explains, “Teachers who lack the skills needed to interrogate the media landscape are at risk of attributing greater importance to white and Eurocentric aesthetics and stories, and accordingly of privileging the work of students that preference those aesthetics and narratives” (p. 97). That norm must be disrupted. Further, teaching according to white and Eurocentric norms means that students from traditionally marginalized communities are learning and working in a higher education environment that neglects or further marginalizes their embodied identities and experiences (which could lead to student dropout rates, normalized colonial ideologies, and internalized colonial practices that are reproduced in media productions) (Alemán, 2010; hooks, 2003). These proposed critical media literacy tools and related questions are accessible to educators that have in their mission to decolonize their classrooms.

While the information and framework provided here for skills classrooms is important, it is also necessary that the conceptual classroom is interrogated regarding its accepted norms of white, male, heterosexual expectations as well. The following chapter builds principles of critical media literacy, specifically to decenter heteronormativity in the conceptual media classroom.

CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMANCE AND ORIENTATION IN THE CLASSROOM

They say finishing school is a rite of passage. It is supposed to be a time when you become an adult and start to mature—a process. Then you go on, prepared for school at a higher caliber. Well, no. It’s more like getting thrown behind a wheel of a car having never driven before. It’s as though everyone expects you to drive through traffic while only preparing you by saying don’t forget which one is the brake and which one is the gas, but they never tell you which is which.

—Alexis Romero, Feb. 13, 2014

As educators and administrators have worked to make media higher education classrooms more diverse and inclusive (Alemán, 2014; Kellner & Share, 2007; Saunders & Kardia, 1997; Tordova, 2016), there has been limited conversation about the ways that media literacy tools can help with those tasks (Kellner & Share, 2007; Tisdell, 2008). While it is true that principles of *critical* media literacy attend to ideology and power structures (Hobbs, 2006; Kellner & Share, 2007), it has not been linked explicitly to the concepts of bodies and performance as they affect classroom engagement and media production. Given current interest in media literacy education, adjusting this framework is both a timely and familiar means to decolonize the media higher education classroom.

Media literacy in the current moment is most closely associated with the frenzy over “fake news” (e.g., News Literacy Project). The spread of misinformation and disinformation, as well as other urgent concerns (Madison, 2019; Lewandowsky 2021) has burnished a decades-old

set of practices to critically assess information (Farmer, 2019; Mason, Krutka, & Stoddard, 2018; Padgett, 2017). But “media” refer to more than news and social media, often the focus of such interventions. Media literacy has applications throughout the communication circuit; a narrow focus deprives students of media literacy’s full potential to prepare upcoming generations of journalism and media communication professionals. This is not meant to minimize the threat of disinformation; rather, it is intended to encourage engagement with media literacy in ways that can make media messages in all forms more responsible, inclusive and equitable. The media classroom is the site of this work.

This chapter aims to explain and fill a gap in critical media literacy—principles and practices that recognize the primacy of bodies and how they perform in the media classroom and media field.⁹ These additional principles can help in the effort to decolonize media higher education and the training of reflexive and responsible media professionals. The concepts of bodies and performance are explained, and then the concepts are applied using monster films. The sub-genre of monster films has provided me with a way to invite students into difficult conversation about Othering (Said, 1995), a phenomenon that resonates in the practices of media communication (Fabergat & Kperogi, 2018; Gittinger, 2019; Thorsen & Skadegård, 2019).

This focus on bodies and performance as a facet of media literacy is informed by my personal experiences in higher education, specifically, instances when my body felt disoriented and out of place. In these moments, my attention shifted away from course materials toward performing assimilation—a dissonance familiar to students from disenfranchised communities (Ahmed, 2006; Fassett & Warren, 2007; hooks, 2003). My undergraduate cohort was primarily

⁹ As a reminder, this chapter is conceived as a standalone article to be submitted to a refereed media/communication education journal.

white, straight, male, and religious. I found myself compromising my mental health and personal identity to meet the expectations of my professors, which were primarily centered around whiteness and heteronormativity. These same professors presumed I had knowledge in subjects that I had not yet learned, and they were difficult to approach. The experience nearly broke me, and I contemplated dropping out. In that 2014 journal entry, I found a metaphor to give form to my feelings: It was the experience of driving, but with no idea *how* to drive. And although everyone assured me that I would be fine, without operating instructions I was *not* fine. This sensation of driving blind will be familiar to many first-generation students and students from disenfranchised communities who often enter college underprepared and with inadequate emotional support (Goode, et al., 2020). As media educators, we have the opportunity to create a classroom environment that is more equitable and inclusive, and an adjusted media literacy framework can help us do so.

This chapter begins with a survey of the literature of performance as it is connected to embodied identities (Ahmed, 2007; Carlson, 2004; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Knaus, 2009; Komitee, 2013). It then presents scholarship on monster/fantastical films as symbols of particular identities (Benshoff, 1997; Creed, 2005; Tortolani, 2016). I propose that these films can aid educators in making their conceptual courses more equitable and attuned to critical media literacy principles that I propose at the end of the chapter. These principles I offer focus on bodies and their expected performances, a valuable lens when engaging with and producing media. I will briefly explain the significance of two monster films, *Arrival* (2016) and *The Shape of Water* (2017), to the Media Literacy classroom. I will demonstrate how I used the monster

films in action research to introduce topics of queerness and non-normative bodily orientations.¹⁰

The purpose of this approach is to de-center heteronormativity to make the classroom more inclusive and equitable. The chapter concludes with specific recommendations for the introduction of additional media literacy principles focused on bodies and performance.

Performance Theories and Orienting the Body

The higher-education classroom environment anticipates and includes performances from the instructor and the students (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Goode, et al., 2020), with the former preparing the latter in terms of performance expectations in the field; that is, what it means to be “a professional.” By illuminating the ways that bodies are already expected to perform in the classroom and the professional field, we can begin to imagine equitable pedagogies that *do not* impose specific performative expectations on students, but instead denaturalize the classroom environment so that students might understand how their bodies register with dominant groups in each of these settings.

Performance studies, as an interdisciplinary field, views “performance” from a variety of perspectives. I borrow the sociological perspective that considers performance a part of our everyday lives (Carlson, 2004). In other words, performance is not just on stage or on camera; we perform as individuals that are part of a larger system in which we are expected to act in specific ways, adopting specific codes that are correlated with social and cultural standards and expectations. “Social behavior is to a certain extent ‘performed’ and different social relationships can be seen as ‘roles’” (Carson, 2004, p. 32). Performance is a useful tool of inquiry to better understand how bodies are shaped by social and cultural norms. As bodies perform everyday life,

¹⁰ A lesson plan for using these monster films in the conceptual media literacy classroom is provided as Appendix C.

they learn acceptable behaviors, rehearse those behaviors, and act out those behaviors as if they are “normal” (Komittee, 2013). Bodies are oriented to accept and perform the norms of gender and heterosexuality from birth (Ahmed, 2007). For example, children learn that femininity is tied to certain bodies, while masculinity is tied to other bodies, and they begin to perform according to the norms ascribed to their specific bodies (Butler, 1990).

Bodies follow a set of rules generally accepted as “normal,” even if those rules have not been constructed through democratic processes. What is constructed as “natural” or “normal” is closely connected to power; power resides with dominant groups often characterized by whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity (Butler, 1990; Guess, 2006; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1994). “Power’s greatest effect on bodies is to make them conform even when no one is watching,” explain Fassett and Warren (2007). “Power works not because we are being watched—but because even when the powerful aren’t watching, we, as educational subjects, still perform on cue” (p. 65). In other words, bodies are self-disciplined to act according to norms imposed by those in power. Educators can use this knowledge of expected performances to better understand how to decolonize media education, and to make their classrooms more equitable and less disorienting to students that belong to groups that have historically been Othered. One way of doing this is by decentering the concept of heteronormativity in the classroom. I propose critical media literacy principles that decenter heteronormativity using concepts of queerness and queer theory, explained in the following subsection.

Queer Theory and Performance of the Body

Queerness is an all-encompassing term that can aid in decentering heteronormativity. Queerness can invite conversations that do not cater to the presumed heterosexual norm, allowing for open discussion about gender, sex, and bodies with regard to their social

constructions. Importantly, it acknowledges the ways in which gender is performed rather than is natural (Ahmed, 2006). Queer perspectives, further, explore ideas that bodily orientation as it is connected to gender is less directed than it is fluid (Ahmed, 2006; Hennessy, 1993).

Media and journalism classrooms are appropriate settings to discuss the problematic role of media in perpetuating gender-conforming practices. “Heterosexuality and homophobia organize structures in which we are immersed, structures so pervasive as to become almost invisible” (Raymond, 2003, p. 104). Illuminating these representations invites a queer pedagogy in which instructors and students can discuss how social formations have devalued queer identities. Instructors can use queer content (or can intentionally “queer” content) to help create a classroom space that is inviting to queer and non-normative identities, and one that engages with critiques of Euro-centric norms. Ideally, students’ resulting work would refrain from reinforcing and perpetuating those norms, thus infusing a more inclusive and social justice-oriented perspective in the classroom (Krywanczyk, 2007) and, ultimately, in the workplace.

Queer theory questions the attachment to stable categories of gender and sexuality that identities rely on (Hennessy, 1993; Rudy, 2000). Media discourses enable that stability at the levels of production, content and audience reception. De Lauretis (1991) noted queer theory’s “double emphasis—on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences” (p. iv). Sullivan (2013) explains, “Queer (Theory) is constructed as a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that have the potential to challenge normative knowledges and identities” (pp. 43-44). Whittington (2012) likewise explains queer theory as a position against dominant and normative epistemologies. Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris (2003) explain in *New Keywords* that queer theory has an emphasis on identity and

performance, while destabilizing the concept of heteronormativity—an essential definition to my utilization of queer theory in the classroom.

Identity is constructed and communicated. “Identity is not assigned at birth but rather made possible, accomplished, through communication; it is through repetition that this comes to be seen as natural or inevitable” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 40). Identity, then, is often imposed and attached to our bodies. Our bodies learn to perform the identities placed on them by communication and repetition—they become categorized and regulated, and we accept those expected performances as normal or “natural” (Fassett & Warren, 2007). In this way, the body is a “construction” and “a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed,” argues Butler (1990, p. 12). Therefore, gender is performative, and our bodies perform according to the sex and gender categories ascribed to them from the moment of birth. Gender then becomes an act—a set of ritual actions that re-establish social meanings imposed by sex and gender binaries (Butler, 1990, p. 189). In other words, the body is maintained by social, political, and cultural norms, and the body is oriented to move through space in a way that is dictated by heteronormative standards.

The lack of recognition and understanding of how bodies perform in the media classroom contributes to a heteronormative environment and expectation. Queer theory helps decenter that heteronormativity. Efforts to undermine heteronormativity do not stand in isolation. They “must necessarily tackle issues of race and its historically and culturally specific relation to sexuality and gender” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 59). As I explain in the following subsection, to have an equitable classroom involves practices of decentering whiteness in conjunction with decentering heteronormativity.

Performance and Race in Education

There exist racial hierarchies in which non-white bodies must perform in specific ways so as to not “disrupt” the ways in which a society is run. Critical race theory helps us understand this by illuminating the banality of racism and its influence on “the typical way in which life in the US is structured in terms of laws, policies, procedures and practices” (Knaus, 2009, p. 142). Critical race theory examines relationships through hierarchies of power pertaining to race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Critical race theory paired with performance showcases the ways in which higher education requires students of color to perform whiteness.

Students of color experience a crisis of performance in the classroom, because many of these students perform their lives within their own community differently from how they perform in a classroom defined by codes of whiteness. Some students feel so uncomfortable with the institutional norms of whiteness in higher education, wrote bell hooks (2003), that they end up dropping out. In their study of the Black-white achievement gap in secondary schools, Tyson, Darity and Castellino (2005) found that high-achieving Black students are sometimes accused by friends and family of color of “acting white” to succeed. The authors found, too, that Black students were often limited in their achievement because of biased school structures—administrators, educators, and counselors—that restrict student potential based on assumptions about Black students who do not adequately perform in a particular way (according to norms of whiteness) in the classroom. This shows that Black student expectations of performance within the classroom and outside of the classroom can create conflict in terms of student achievement.

Many students (particularly Black youth ages 13-20) claim that they perform communication, posture, and overall presence differently depending on who they are talking to, which is based on a person's race, gender, class, and personal relationship (Carter, 2003).

Therefore, race does indeed influence performance, and thus influences the environment of the classroom. If students, and educators, must perform in the classroom according to cultural norms of whiteness, then the classroom is not equitable. On the contrary, the classroom favors the perspectives and experiences of white students, creating a classroom environment that is comfortable and “normal” for them, and uncomfortable and “foreign” to students of color. A more distinct understanding and implementation of critical race theories contributes to eliminating this invisible barrier (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Degand’s (2020) conceptualization of a critical race media literacy reflects the vital contribution of race to the media literacy field. Degand cites the five basic tenets of critical race theory with which to analyze media, including “racism exists in implicit and explicit forms throughout society” and “counterstories about marginalized communities are valuable narratives that can challenge overrepresented perspectives in mainstream media” (p. 98). These tenets “contextualize media experiences and social interactions through statements about our society and the various ways race, racism, and other forms of discrimination influence our lives” (p. 98). While Degand brings much-needed perspective to media literacy, these tenets neglect explicit references to the body and performance. Therefore, I propose that additional critical media literacy principles that consider body and performance with use of critical race theory can contribute to generating a more equitable classroom.

“Critical race theory,” wrote Knaus (2009), “exposes how mainstream schools promote racism through white-supremacist teaching practices, white-based curriculum, and school designs that privilege white culture by ignoring and/or denying how racism shapes the lives of students of color” (p. 142). Alemán (2017) states that 70% of journalism students in the United States are white, and by 2035, 40% of journalism students will be from racially and ethnically

minoritized communities. News and documentaries, as well as entertainment media, continue to misrepresent communities of color, relying on stereotyped images to propose that all POC act in one way—often depicted as violent or grotesque (Alemán, 2014; Alemán, 2010; Hall, 2011; Stabile, 2006; Tordova, 2016). If educators do not transform the way that we think about and teach media-focused students in higher education, then we will perpetuate barriers to entry for POC interested in the media industry.

Intersecting power relations have organized people's lives by affording certain bodies advantages, while others are disadvantaged in social interactions (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Whiteness has long dominated the journalism industry (New Leaders Association, 2019; Women's Media Center, 2019), not just in the field but also in the educational settings that prepare professionals. In 2019, for example, my current institution had 44 full-time faculty, 31 of whom were white (UNC Institutional Research & Assessment, 2019). This sort of composition strongly suggests that norms of whiteness are transmitted in the classroom and sustained in the field. The industry and universities are gradually becoming more diverse, but progress is slow. Yet, expanding curriculum beyond the norms of whiteness is essential. Alemán (2017) explains,

Nearly half of all degreed journalists, and over 80 percent of entry-level reporters, are trained in journalism or communication departments. Consequently, these spaces deserve scrutiny. Much of the research on diversity and journalism education conflates the bodies of students of color as the solution for improved news coverage of racial groups. Because nearly 70 percent of journalism students are white, and are trained predominantly by white professors, the contention is that without students of color embodying an alternative perspective, white students will not develop multi-perspectival views. (p. 74)

Having more diversity in the classroom could be beneficial to having more diverse perspectives, but that is inadequate for sustained changes to news practices or products. “While integration remains vital to journalism education and the industry,” writes Alemán, “it will be ineffective if the ideological components of news writing remain uninterrogated” (2017, p. 74). If whiteness is sustained as natural, and objective, then white bodies and ideologies remain at the top of the racial hierarchy in education and in the field. These norms, reinforced by repetition, inform the underrepresentation and the misrepresentation of POC, and the expectation that POC will ultimately adapt to and adopt those same norms.

Embodied Identities and Classroom Performance

Learned performances that become concrete through repetition occur in a variety of settings, including the media classroom. Media classrooms communicate expectations for successful performance through documents such as syllabi and grading rubrics, as well as through instruction that reinforces particular principles and values (Fassett & Warren, 2007). More generally, students’ bodies perform in the classroom to meet expectations, and these practices are learned and repeated by students for the duration of their education in the hope of a future reward, even if that reward is premised on mundane and habitual expectations (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Knaus (2009) explains that, “As a core function of society, then, education becomes the public process for maintaining the status quo while purposefully not educating large masses (of students of color and low-income whites) that are forced to work as cheap, manual labor” (p. 142). Through the understanding of critical cultural theories such as queer theory and critical race theory, while utilizing a performance lens, we as educators can become better-equipped to confront and eliminate archaic classroom norms based on “objective” knowledge that is in fact subjective and exclusionary (Alemán 2014). To implement equitable pedagogy, we

must be intentional in principle and practice toward the creation of an inclusive classroom environment.

The inclusion of performance studies in this research connected to queered and raced bodies invites “interdisciplinary dialogue, embraces non-canonical texts, and privileges indigenous performance as it emerges in the context of daily human interaction” (Pineau, 1994, p. 9). Drawing on the interdisciplinary nature of critical studies, we can use non-traditional materials to signal to students our intention to engage in dialogue and practices about how to represent *all* bodies justly, challenging the canon wherever appropriate. This encourages critical analysis of media production and content, and the creation of alternative, inclusive media. As a result, we help students feel secure in their bodies in the classroom and, eventually, as professionals in the media workplace. Working these concepts and ideas into newly developed critical media literacy principles can then help educators implement understandings of decentering heteronormativity and whiteness in their classrooms and in their personal pedagogies.

In Chapter 3, I focused on the use and values of theory in the skills classroom. I am not implying that the conceptual classroom should escape critique. In truth, the conceptual classroom can often be a space where Eurocentric perspectives are normalized and taken as canon, while perspectives from POC and queer subjects are treated as additive (Cummins, 2017). When diversity is treated as additive to the curricula rather than an essential ingredient, educators can perpetuate “otherness” in identities that are diverse. Therefore, I propose that engaging students in conceptual coursework using materials that decenter whiteness can contribute to the goal of decolonizing the media education classroom. As an entry point, monster films (a sub-genre of horror) that include themes of empathy and understanding can be used to foster conversations

outside of norms of whiteness and heteronormativity. Monster films are particularly useful in the classroom because of their unique history of representing of minoritized bodies.

Monster Films and “Othered” Bodies in the Media Classroom

For centuries, monsters and fantastical creatures have figured in folklore traditions and children’s narratives, where they have been used to symbolize abstract themes and concepts. Within these narratives are compelling stories of adventure, or terrifying narratives of destruction, and often they adopt motifs of “Otherness” to define the creatures within the fantastical world. “Otherness” is the counter to an “us” and “them” narrative. “The construction of identity,” explained Said (1995), “involves the construction of opposites and ‘Others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from ‘us’” (p. 332). Difference from the norm is interpreted as “Other.” De Beauvoir (1949) discusses “othering” as a fundamental concept of human thought. She explains that, to know the Other we must understand the construction of social identity because the opposite of that construction is what makes up the Other. Othering is often discussed in terms of identity. As Okolie (2003) explains, “Social identities are relational; groups typically define themselves in relation to others,” and “This is because identity has little meaning without ‘Other’” (p. 2).

Monster films often reflect contemporaneous anxieties (Benshoff, 1997; Creed, 2005; Hollinger, 1989; Kennon, 2017; Kompatsiaris, 2017; Szollosy, 2017; Tortolani, 2016). In the 1950s, for example, monsters in film symbolized “an eruption of repressed sexual desire” at a time when filmmakers could not explicitly depict erotic passion, especially between same-sex characters (Benshoff, 1997, p. 8). George Romero’s 1960s-era zombies provided a critique of capitalism, and Fillol, Salvadó-Corretger, and Sala (2016) trace the zombie archetype to histories of colonialism and slavery. More recently, zombies in European film have been a stand-in for

immigrants because zombies represent a human form that has been adjusted or exists with slight difference (Fillol, Salvadó-Corretger, and Sala, 2016), and in the popular FX series “The Walking Dead,” zombies represent the “savage Others” in a modern western where “masculine agency in liberal modernity might be reimagined and/or reinvigorated” (Sugg, 2015, p. 793).

Scholars have explored monstrous “Others” as implicit representations of woman, feminine beings, queer persons, and different racial categories (Creed, 2012; de Beauvoir, 1949; Kennon, 2017; Tortolani, 2016). The monstrous Other can appear as animal, alien, robot, zombie, witch or vampire, and often represents the fear of a queer, feminine, and racial community. For example, queer Others have been represented as “robots” in monster films, such as the construction of Frankenstein’s monster (Benshoff, 1997). Their imagined relationships with humans represent queerness in that these relationships exist outside of heteronormative gender expectations, such as the intimacy robots in *Blade Runner* (Sprenger, 2020). Science-fiction horror films explore how these non-normative, “dehumanizing” relationships pose a threat to traditional familial values (Szollosy, 2017).

Perhaps more than any other genre, monster films “actively invoke queer readings, because of their obviously metaphorical (non-realist) forms and narrative formats that disrupt the heterosexual status quo,” writes Benshoff (1997, p. 6). Monsters have reflected in film the threat of the “homosexual Other” to individuals and communities. “For many people ... homosexuality is a monstrous condition. ... Like Frankenstein’s monster, homosexuals might run rampant across the countryside claiming ‘innocent’ victims” (Benshoff, 1997, p. 1). This history of the genre thus reinforces the Othering of queer communities. Horror films are replete with women Others, represented as possessed beings, referencing concepts such as the female abject because of her lack of a penis, thus making her more vulnerable to possession and evil (Creed, 2012).

One could say then that “Otherness” is a fixture of symbolic representation in creature films. Historically, these films adopt monster narratives to convey social anxieties of the time, often reflecting a “masculinist bias” (Benshoff, 1997, p. 6) and relating to minoritized identities (Batzke et al., 2018; Bellin, 2005; Beville, 2014). The modern monster films I present here leverage Otherness in a different, more empathetic light, where creatures can be used to show students that non-normative bodies and identities are not ones to fear, but to love and accept.

Methodology

This project uses action research, developed by Lewin (1946), to engage in critique of on-the-ground social realities. Action research focuses on practical application and is applied to interventions from a critical perspective (Koshy, Koshy, & Waterman, 2010). It acts as “research strategies that tackle real-world problems in participatory, collaborative, and cyclical ways in order to produce both knowledge and action” (O’Leary, 2007, p. 2). Given its participatory nature, and its ability to bring about change in specific contexts (Koshy, Koshy, & Waterman, 2010), action research allows me to engage *with* the classroom environment so I can apply proposed inclusive teaching methods to witness how students engage and react to those adjusted methods.

The two monster films used in this classroom exercise are *The Shape of Water* (2017), a romantic fantasy film in which a custodial worker falls in love with a scaled creature held captive in a government laboratory in the 1960s, and *Arrival* (2016), a story about an Army linguist learning to communicate with extraterrestrial aliens who have landed on modern-day earth. These films are categorized as “fantasy” and “science fiction” respectively; however, they belong to the general category of “monster films” because of their use of threatening creatures within a particular narrative structure (Grant, 2018). To explore these films using a critical media

literacy approach, I adopt the lens of queer phenomenology, Ahmed's (2006) explanation of how queer subjects are forced to always negotiate their space in the world, to help students analyze the ways in which these creature films convey empathy and understanding toward non-normative bodies. Ahmed explains, "The work of inhabiting space involves dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar" (2006, p. 7). These films showcase how we can work to normalize the unfamiliar, creating space for bodies that might otherwise be seen as different. In both of the films presented, bodies are forced to orient to spaces that are not familiar to them, which lends these films to being great examples.

Other films, such as *A Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), were used during this six-week course. However, in this exercise I specifically wanted to see whether students would detect queerness as abstraction in the monster films, how they responded in real time, and how interactions with those films affected the remainder of the course. I will provide a modest summary of the two monster films to demonstrate their significance.

The Shape of Water (2017) explores the love story between Elisa and a fantastical creature brought into the government facility where Elisa works as a janitor. The water-dwelling creature is under study by scientists to examine its potential weaponization. Though the creature is considered dangerous by those in power at the facility, Elisa's curiosity trumps her fear, and she begins taking her lunch at the edge of the creature's enclosure. The creature is curious, too, leading to their friendship and eventual romance.

The non-normative relationship between Elisa and the creature serves as a metaphor for intersectional, queer stories. Particularly with the application of queer phenomenology, the narrative allows audiences to recognize the connection between monstrosity and marginalization by the similar way that Otherness is performed and perceived by characters in the film, as it may

be in the real world. *The Shape of Water* acts as a text that opposes the marginalization of those categorized as “other than” the accepted dominant norm, through its opposition of conventional representations of monsters in horror genres. It uses aesthetic and narrative demonstrations—such as the visual use of water, and significant character development—of the queer experience to reinforce the idea of fluidity of love as opposed to rigidity of hate. This film takes the traditional narrative of the experience of a monstrous creature violently taken out of its environment, but through its social implications and focus on gender, sexuality, and race, uses queerness to make alternative points connected to perceptions of these marginalized communities.

As for the film *Arrival* (2016), we see the converse: Heteronormative bodies must try to orient themselves in spaces that are not made for them. This film is told through the perspective of Louise, a University professor and linguist, as alien ships hover over cities around the world. Fearing the aliens are about to start a world war, military officials ask Louise to help them understand how to communicate with the aliens. She agrees, and the film follows Louise’s process, which requires the humans in the film to talk with the aliens inside their spacecraft. Key to this story is Louise’s willingness to understand the aliens. While everyone around her searches for answers and jumps to conclusions, Louise pays special attention to the aliens as individuals. The non-linear narrative, use of inconsistent sound levels, and particular camera movements are rather disorienting for the audience, and for Louise at first, but as she becomes more comfortable with the aliens and builds a relationship with them, those disorienting visuals and sounds cease. By Louise treating the aliens as individuals rather than Others, she is able to break down the rhetorical and physical barriers, thus working to eliminate the “us” and “them” narrative. The

film uses Louise as an example of the possibilities when queerness and non-normative realities are accepted.

These two films, *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*, display valuable messages in terms of queerness and acceptance. As such, I was interested in how students in a conceptual course (specifically, an upper-level media literacy course taught online) might react, accept, and work with these materials that introduce topics of queerness and non-normative social expectations, perspectives, and bodies, to the classroom. I was interested in how this might affect overall classroom environment and student engagement. I additionally was particularly interested in the effectiveness of introducing these topics through the lens of bodies and performance with the materials used being that of monster films.

Action Research

When carrying out an action research project, “researchers will need to develop and use a range of skills to achieve their aims, such as careful planning, sharpened observation and listening, evaluation, and critical reflection” (Koshy, Koshy, & Waterman, 2010, p. 1-2). By doing this research in the classroom, it provides the opportunity for other educators to replicate and experiment with similar teaching methods in their classrooms to continue working toward making the classroom more inclusive. Action research is a method that is used to improve practice, and it is often used in education because it is done *by* educators *for* educators. And because action research is done on a “small scale” and is “contextualized, localized, and aimed at discovering, developing, or monitoring changes to practice,” it provides great opportunity for positive and effective change (Donato, 2003, p. 2). Given that action research focuses on reflection by participants and researchers, application of knowledge, problem solving, and improvement of practice (Koshy, Koshy, & Waterman, 2010), the method itself functions as a

means of critical engagement and can greatly help in creating a more inclusive classroom and developing new critical media literacy principles.

Procedure

This project received the appropriate institutional review board approval. Approval required adherence to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) so that no identifiable student information is shared. Participants, who were students, were recruited as they joined an undergraduate Media Literacy course at a private university in the northeastern United States. Students who were willing to participate agreed and signed a consent form. Twelve students (of 24 enrolled in the course) agreed to be participants in the research. All students participated in the course whether or not they were a part of the study.

The course began with watching the film *Arrival*, paired with readings concerning media literacy and critical media literacy (Kellner and Share's "Culture Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture" and William Yousman's "Who's Afraid of Critical Media Literacy"). Two modules later, students were required to watch the film *The Shape of Water*, paired with readings concerning queer theory (Sara Ahmed's "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" and Anthony Slagle's "Queer Criticism and Sexual Normativity: The Case of Pee-wee Herman"). Students who signed the consent form filled out a short survey at the end of the course with their feedback regarding learning outcomes and their experience in the course.

The course, which was in an online format and took place over a condensed six-week period, had as its goal helping students develop critical media literacy skills, particularly concerning cultural representations in the media. Each week addressed a social/cultural topic for which students read related scholarly articles and watched one or two films related to the topic (Table 1). Given the condensed format of the course, topics were generalized. Students

Table 1

Schedule of topics and films for six-week undergraduate Media Literacy course.

Week	Topic	Film(s)	Description of Film(s)
1	Media Literacy Principles	Arrival (2016)	Dr. Louise Banks works with the government to communicate with aliens when twelve alien ships hover on top of cities throughout the world. Her ability to communicate with them leads to information that can help save the world in the future.
2	Media Literacy, Consumerism, & Public Relations	Merchants of Doubt (2014)	A documentary that looks at pundits-for-hire who present themselves as scientific authorities on media stations and platforms. These “scientists” speak about topics like toxic chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and climate change to cast doubt of these issues despite their lack of credentials.
3	Media Literacy & Queerness	The Shape of Water (2017) & Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019)	The Shape of Water: At a top secret government research facility in the 1960s, a mute janitor forms a friendship and eventual romantic relationship with an amphibian creature being held in captivity at the facility. Portrait of a Lady on Fire: Near the end of the 18 th century on an isolated island in Brittany, a female painter is recruited to secretly paint a wedding portrait of a young woman who refuses to allow painters to create a portrait of her.
4	Media Literacy & Gender	Hustlers (2019)	Inspired by the <i>New York Magazine</i> article, this film follows a crew of savvy strip club employees who work together to manipulate the men of Wall Street.
5	Media Literacy & Race (& Intersectionality)	13 th (2016) & Moonlight (2016)	13 th : An in-depth documentary that looks at the prison system of the United States. The film reveals the nation's history of racial inequity and the role of the prison system in that history. Moonlight: A young Black man grapples with his identity and sexuality while experiencing the everyday struggles of class, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.
6	Media Literacy & Non-Normative Education	School of Rock (2003) & Won't You Be My Neighbor (2018)	School of Rock: After being kicked out of his rock band, Dewey Finn loses any form of income. After answering the phone for his roommate, he accepts the position for a semi-permanent substitute teacher while masquerading as his roommate. While teaching at an uptight elementary private school, he turns his class into a rock band. Won't You Be My Neighbor: A documentary that explores the life, lessons, and legacy of the children's television host icon Mr. Rogers.

additionally had specific prompts for the readings, which they addressed in their discussion board assignments. For the films, students had more general and informal prompts to help with their discussion in the GroupMe chat. Each week students participated in a discussion board where they answered a prompt regarding the readings. They also responded to one another's discussion board posts. As students watched the films, they were able to comment simultaneously in a GroupMe chat, which I had access to as the instructor. GroupMe, a free mobile messaging app, was selected to maintain an informal tone and allow students to make comments and converse as they watched the films. I was also privy to these GroupMe chats, although I did not participate in those chats in order to avoid participants' responding in a way that expressed social desirability rather than their "true" thoughts. Additionally, students wrote two short papers throughout the course and completed a final creative project for which they created a piece of media that deconstructed messages of a current piece of media.

Analysis

An interpretive approach was paired with the use of action research. An interpretive research approach aims, particularly, to examine actions, social interactions, and interpretations as related to communication. Distinctive features of interpretive research, according to Putnam and Banghart (2017), include its attention to meanings, or "how actors make sense of their experiences or reach understandings of their everyday organizational lives," and its processes of analysis involve, thus "making meanings or forming inferences" about a phenomenon (p. 2-3). In approaching meanings, interpretive research can be used to focus on understandings that particular actors (participants, organizations, media, etc.) have over a period of time, or understandings that a group of actors share. In approaching interpretations, this adopts a sense-making perspective that focuses on schemes and frames of models (social, cultural, political) to

understand inferences about meaning—in this way, interpretive scholars may construct the perceived social world in their findings (Putnam & Banghart, 2017).

The interpretive approach, then, is a generic term that aligns with a particular perspective on organizational reality, one based on the belief that reality is socially constructed or made meaningful through actors' understandings and interpretations of events ... interpretive scholars focus on the complexities of meaning as revealed in symbols, language use, and social interactions. (Putnam & Banghart, 2017, p. 1)

Interpretive methodology spans disciplines and emerges from a particular mindset about a “text” or meaning, and then focuses on how the social world is experienced or constructed according to that perspective. In this class, the movies comprised texts to be interpreted.

Interpretive researchers privilege local, situated knowledge that rests on phenomenological hermeneutics (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), or a narrow and more direct approach within a specific text or group that examines written, verbal, and nonverbal communication related to direct experience. Interpretive research designs, for example, are interested in studying a specific concept or role. In using this method, my intent is to evaluate specific settings, media, and individuals (the higher education conceptual media classroom, monster movies, and media studies students) for a better understanding of these spaces, texts, and groups—and illuminate new frameworks in ways that are more inclusive and equitable.

To gauge student understandings of media literacy learning outcomes, I examined their discussion participation (on both the discussion board and in the GroupMe chat) and situated them according to Potter's Development of Media Literacy hierarchy (Table 2). Potter's

Table 2*Potter's Stages of Media Literacy Development*

Stage	Characteristic
Acquiring Fundamentals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn that there are human beings and other physical things apart from oneself; these things look different and serve different functions • Learn the meaning of facial expressions and natural sounds • Recognize shapes, form, size, color, movement, and spatial relations • Rudimentary concept of time—regular patterns
Language Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize speech sounds and attach meaning to them • Be able to reproduce speech sounds • Orient to visual and audio media • Have emotional and behavioral responses to music and sounds • Recognize certain characters in visual media and follow their movement.
Narrative Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop understanding of differences: Fiction vs. Non-fiction; Ads vs. Entertainment; Real vs. Make-believe • Understand how to connect plot elements: by time sequencing; by motive-action-consequence
Developing Skepticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discount claims made in ads • Sharpen differences between likes and dislikes for shows, characters, and actions • Make fun of certain characters even though those characters are not presented as foils in their shows
Intensive Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have strong motivation to seek out information on certain topics • Develop a detailed set of information on particular topics • Develop high awareness of utility of information and quick facility in processing information judged to be useful
Experiential Exploring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek out different forms of content and narratives • Searching for surprises and new emotional, moral, and aesthetic reactions
Critical Appreciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept messages on their own terms then evaluate them within that sphere • Develop very broad and detailed understanding of the historical, economic, political, and artistic contexts of message systems • Have the ability to make subtle comparisons and contrasts among many different message elements simultaneously • Have the ability to construct a summary judgement about the overall strengths and weaknesses of a message
Social Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take a moral stand that certain messages are more constructive for society than others: this is a multidimensional perspective based on a thorough analysis of the media landscape • Recognize that one's own individual decisions impact society, no matter how minutely • Recognize that there are some actions an individual can take to make a constructive impact on society

Potter, W. J. (2019). *Media Literacy*, 9th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 27.

(2019) scale describes eight stages of media literacy development.¹¹ An individual can move back and forth among the eight stages, although the first five stages are typically achieved between the ages of five and nine, according to Potter. Most individuals remain at the fifth stage, intensive development, which involves gaining knowledge and seeking detailed information on a specific topic of interest, unless they receive additional media literacy education to help advance to higher-level skills.

While assessing students' comprehension of course materials using Potter's scale,¹² I was also able to deduce additional media literacy principles that could be added to Potter's scale for a more inclusive and equitable classroom that brings awareness to body orientation and non-normative perspectives. Additionally, to begin this research, I asked myself what about the conceptual classroom environment needed to change to deconstruct the space and make it more inclusive? If the course established a non-normative environment, and worked to decenter conversations around heteronormativity, could it disrupt current classroom structures for a more inclusive environment? Further, could the use of films that disrupt social norms through use of metaphor help create that non-normative classroom environment? These questions were at the center of my analysis throughout the class and helped me choose the materials that would be assigned.

These questions additionally contributed to learning outcomes for students. By the end of the course, I intended for students to be able to 1) describe and explain media literacy and critical

¹¹ Potter's eight stages consist of: acquiring fundamentals, language acquisition, narrative acquisition, developing skepticism, intensive development, experiential exploring, critical appreciation, and social responsibility.

¹² I used Potter's scale for reference as I examined student understanding of media literacy principles throughout the semester. Potter's scale guided me as I inspected student discussion posts and GroupMe comments. This scale was not distributed to the students to read.

media literacy principles and tools; 2) differentiate critical thinking from being critical; 3) analyze and critique content outside of normative perspectives; 4) develop skills to explore and interpret media products through the lens of diversity and inclusivity; and 5) take responsibility to create new media that emphasize equity and empathy toward those who initially seem “different” from them. Once the class began, I focused on the ways in which students discussed classroom topics and the films within their discussion posts, and conversations in the GroupMe app, as those conversations were related to learning outcomes. I paid particular attention to the ways in which they talked about queerness, non-normative bodies, non-normative social expectations, intersectionality, and Otherness.

Findings

Findings shed light on how introducing a topic or perspective early in the class to provide vocabulary and structure for discussions over the length of the course. Findings also suggest that students can excel in achieving learning outcomes of critical thinking (as opposed to being critical) through the use of media texts that employ metaphors to make statements about the social world. To illustrate progression in student conversations throughout the semester, the findings will be discussed chronologically according to the course schedule, as outlined below. I will introduce selected quotes from student posts to illustrate or elaborate upon specific points. Quoted material from student communication is reproduced verbatim; errors in spelling, capitalization and grammar have been preserved.

1. *Arrival*: Introducing the course with aliens.
2. *The Shape of Water* vs. *A Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and discussions of queerness.
3. Intersectional queerness and non-normative perspectives: Student responses to other films in the course.

4. Student take-aways and suggestions.

Arrival: Introducing the Course with Aliens

Simply introducing students to the course by announcing your intent, as the instructor, to create an inclusive environment can, in itself, help students understand that you want to make sure that the classroom is welcoming for all students (Faulkner, Watson, Pollino, & Shetterly, 2020). I aimed to do this through verbiage in my syllabus (referring to divergent perspectives, emphasizing class decorum in terms of respect and overtly denouncing hateful comments) and through verbal introduction, but I also wanted to ensure that I used materials that supported learning outcomes of critical thinking and developing a personal understanding of what it means to be empathetic global citizens. For that reason, I had students watch *Arrival* as their first film viewing of the semester. After reading articles about media literacy¹³ and critical media literacy,¹⁴ students were instructed to watch the film and discuss it in the GroupMe chat—some students arranged a time to watch the films simultaneously, while others participated in their own time when they had the chance to watch the film. In the chat they discussed the underlying message of the film, keeping in mind what they read about media literacy and critical media literacy that week. I was impressed by the responses from students and their ability to understand the symbolism present within the film.¹⁵

¹³ “Cultural studies, multiculturalism, and media culture,” by D. Kellner, 2014, in G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, Sage Publications; and “Debates of Media Literacy,” an infographic I created based on R. Hobbs, 2006, “The seven great debates in the media literacy movement,” *Journal of Communication*, 48(1), 16-32.

¹⁴ “Who’s afraid of critical media literacy?,” by B. Yousman, 2016, in M. Huff & A. L. Roth (Eds), *Censored 2017*, pp. 269-416, New York: Seven Stories Press, as well as a pamphlet I created for the Media Education Foundation discussing principles of Critical Media Literacy.

¹⁵ This type of analysis may be expected for students in, say, film criticism or film studies programs. However, engaging with films such as this in media and journalism programs is less common. I do believe introductory film courses could benefit from a lesson such as this

In the GroupMe chat many of the research participants pointed to the ways in which Louise, the main character, was able to look past others' preconceived notions of the aliens to better understand them and their purpose. One student shared that Louise's character showed that "things aren't always what they seem at first glance. We can learn from each other, keeping an open mind. Determination to go beyond the surface is essential, which is one of the whole points of media literacy." In this case, the student deconstructed the narrative to be one of empathy and connected this insight to understanding a major point in media literacy, the motivation to seek information beyond surface-level understandings (Potter, 2019). Another student cited Louise's ability to be open-minded as a strength. They explained:

Louise was open-minded, treated everyone as equal to her, and that was the only way to comprehend something that was so different. Communication was crucial in understanding the perspectives of others and seeing the world from another point-of-view.

Again, this student insight reflected both a crucial point of media literacy, understanding an alternative point of view, with a lens of empathy and inclusivity. Already, in the first week of the semester, students were engaging with the social responsibility stage of Potter's (2019) scale, which involves seeking moral messages and recognizing that there are actions one can take to have an impact on society—students did this through their analysis of the actions of Louise's character.

Students used additional media literacy skills when discussing the film in the GroupMe chat. They wrote, for example, "It is important to gather all details and information to understand

one, but the goal here is to show how media communication/journalism programs can benefit in significant ways from a lesson such as this.

how things and words are viewed differently by different people” and “It is important when viewing media [that] we understand inclusivity, which is really the first step to learning to be media literate.” Both comments align with Potter’s (2019) stage of intensive development, as these students expressed the necessary motivation to seek out information on particular topics related to the text. These student responses show that assigning a film that uses metaphor—in this case Louise’s empathy for and understanding of the aliens conveyed the need for people to try to understand those different from them—rather than a film or text that overtly describes principles of media literacy can work to teach students essential media literacy tools.

Moreover, a film such as *Arrival* can guide students to understand additional tools of empathy and non-normative perspectives that may not be associated with typical media literacy curriculum. *Arrival* assisted with the learning outcome regarding examining content outside of normative perspectives, as can be seen in student recognition of Louise challenging societal norms. One student explained, “Louise goes against societies expectations by treating those that are different than her with kindness and respect.” Another student shared, similarly, “Louise chose to go against standard protocol” to take charge of the situation in a more effective way, and by doing this “she was accepting them [the aliens] for their differences and was willing to learn how to properly communicate with them.” These students recognized the ways in which rejecting societal norms and working with the aliens in a way that acknowledged and accepted their differences, was the best strategy for moving forward in Louise’s case. (In the film, the need to find a way to communicate with the aliens is made more urgent by the threat of war.) This film shows students that normative expectations in society are not in the best interest of everyone, and in some circumstances, they should be resisted. This perspective contributes to my

goals of implementing media literacy tools of empathy towards those we may not initially understand. This tool is equally useful in the classroom and in professional settings.

Students' general impressions of the film were also positive. Many students that participated in the research stated that they enjoyed the film, and, moreover, that it was one of their favorites. As an indicator of the exercise's effectiveness, students referred to the messages in this film in subsequent discussion posts—they returned the need for inclusivity, non-normative thinking, and understanding others. For example, in later discussion posts, students began to identify Louise's character with queerness after completing a reading¹⁶ about queer theory, where they were able to tie in objectives about acceptance to understandings of queer identities, thus decentering normative structures. This is particularly striking because Louise's character was in a heterosexual relationship, and yet students were able to understand her character as having queer qualities.

The Shape of Water vs. A Portrait of a Lady on Fire & Discussions of Queerness

Week three of the six-week course focused on the topic of queerness, and to better discuss this topic, students watched two films, *The Shape of Water*, and *A Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019). I assigned the latter film so that students could engage with an overt narrative about queerness in terms of sexuality. I had anticipated that students would have difficulty identifying the metaphor of queerness as expressed in *The Shape of Water*. However, I was surprised that students had an easier time engaging with queerness through the monster film, in comparison to Céline Sciamma's French period piece, *A Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, which focused on the romantic relationship between two woman-identifying characters. In their GroupMe discussions,

¹⁶ Ahmed. S. (2006). Orientations: Toward a queer phenomenology. *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12(4), 543-574.

participants' conversations were much more fruitful regarding *The Shape of Water*; they seemed to enjoy the challenge of identifying symbolism present throughout the creature film.

This demonstrated to me that students found it gratifying to engage in the act of “queering” a film narrative, thus demonstrating, in part, Potter’s (2019) stage of experiential exploring, in that they focused on searching for surprises or expressions in the narrative that were different in form, narrative, and aesthetics, but with the additional perspective of non-normative bodies and performances. Conversely, students’ conversations regarding the lesbian period piece were fairly bland, and many explicitly stated that they found the movie to be too “straightforward” and boring. Though I believe *A Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is much less straightforward than students presumed it was, it was easier for them to apply complex topics to something more fantastical, less representative of the real world. This may be a limitation of using monster film narratives—students are applying understandings of empathy toward fictitious creatures, but have trouble applying such understandings to humans—but it can act as a stepping-stone for conversations in the classroom and online spaces about how discrimination and normative social structures affect people in the real world.

A motive to having students watch *The Shape of Water* was to have them scrutinize the topic of queerness beyond its connection to sexuality, and instead to non-normative bodies that do not fit within the expectations of society’s norms. Students were able to talk about queerness as an all-encompassing term that could be applied to a variety of non-normative identities, contributing to a perspective of queer theory being “constructed as a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that have the potential to challenge normative knowledges and identities” (Sullivan, 2013, p. 43-44). Many students applied queerness to a variety of characters in the film (these characters included the creature, Elisa,

Zelda, Giles, and Dimitri, all being essential characters to the narrative). Additionally, similar to their experience watching *Arrival*, student-participants described the power of communication and understanding. For example, one student observed, “This film showed queerness in almost every character.” They continued, “Elisa had queer qualities because she was mute but not deaf, and communicated differently. And Strickland represents society and that ‘straight line.’” Col. Richard Strickland is the director of the lab where Elisa works and where a mysterious creature is being held. He is domineering and cruel. Another student discussed additional characters in the film: “The characters (Zelda, Giles, and Dimitri) embrace queerness and share queer attributes that make them unique, but misunderstood in society.” Most students connected these characters’ qualities of racial difference, disabilities, gender, or sexuality, as identifications that contributed to their queerness and the disorientation of their bodies within their social worlds.¹⁷

Many participants also pointed to the non-normative *actions* of the characters that contributed to their queerness. One student shared, “Here we see a non-normative relationship between Elisa and the creature” when describing Elisa and the creature's romantic relationship. Other participants elaborated, “This movie shows that you can love whoever you want regardless of what the other person looks like.” Concerning Elisa taking initiative to get to know and understand the creature, a student shared, “Elisa went against the norms and gave the creature a chance rather than being scared. She used her compassion to become closer with it.” And in

¹⁷ The prompt given to students before watching these films was: This week you are going to watch *The Shape of Water* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. When watching these films, think about the topic of queerness and non-normative perspectives. Stagle states, “Queer theorists seek to illuminate the ways in which sexuality is a fundamental influence in the ways that human beings behave and communicate” (p. 130). He continues with, “Queer theory is a reaction to: (1) an oppressive, heterosexist, mainstream, and (2) an approach to theory that focuses on social assimilation as its goal and has emphasized an essential notion of identity in order to foster collective activity” (p. 130). Think about the ways in which these films can demonstrate this queer perspective and discuss in the GroupMe chat.

terms of the other characters' risk-taking actions, a participant explained, "When Elisa decides to help the creature escape the lab, I like that instead of questioning her, many of the other queer characters' step in to help ... going against social norms." In each of these statements from students, they equate queerness less with sexuality (which is what many assume queerness to be) and instead evidence a deeper understanding of queer theory and bodily disorientation by addressing non-normative bodies and their need to escape structures created to benefit only those with privileged bodies.

Additionally, many of the participants' responses are ones of empathy and understanding. Students use words and phrases ("simplicity and beauty of love," "compassion," "embracing queerness," etc.) that explain how these characters exhibit queerness. For example, a participant showcased their understanding of analyzing the film narrative through queerness rather than in a "literal" fashion, by coming to the conclusion that the film's message was "how you shouldn't judge something before you fully understand it." They explain that, "Elisa definitely took time to understand the creature and communicate with it despite being told not to" as a way to say more about her queer traits. Students' willingness to participate in conversations about the monster film and queerness, while paying particular attention to messages of empathy and understanding, demonstrate an inclusive classroom environment which invites these more diverse and non-normative discussions.

Intersecting Queerness and Non-Normative Perspectives: Responses to Other Films in the Course

Arrival and *The Shape of Water* were both shown in the first half of the course as a means to establish a classroom environment that accepted non-normative conversations and was inclusive of all identities. By setting that tone early, conversations regarding inclusivity, non-

normative perspectives, and queerness persisted and developed throughout the course. I noticed this especially in week five when students watched *Moonlight*. With this film, students voiced sentiments about intersectionality and how the film brought together many of the conversations we had in the course thus far. “I think topics of gender, queerness, and race definitely overlap in this movie,” one participant noted. Students made the connection between each of the topics in the class and applied them to this film, satisfying learning outcomes of recognizing that people are complex, holding many identities. Another student showcased this understanding with the statement, “Blackness, gender (& the idea of masculinity), and queerness are all being represented intersectionally though subtly, to demonstrate they are all natural. The film doesn’t put emphasis on any *one* of them, they just exist.” This student honed in on intersectionality and recognized that these “non-normative” characteristics comprise the protagonist’s embodied identity; these characteristics are natural to his body.

Students’ understanding of non-normative and queer tendencies deepened as they discussed the last two films of the semester, *School of Rock* (2003), and *Won’t You Be My Neighbor* (2018). Participants had the opportunity to discuss what non-normative learning structures could look like, and how people benefit from those learning structures. (Dewey in *School of Rock* teaches teamwork through rock music, and Mr. Roger’s in *Won’t You Be My Neighbor* uses educational media programming to teach about emotions; these are ways of learning that are different from traditional learning structures of the classroom.) In conversing about *School of Rock*, students noted Dewey’s democratic teaching strategies. “Dewey’s teaching style is non-normative right away because he talks to the kids as equals rather than children,” a student shared. Many students responded to the way that Dewey broke down classroom hierarchies and taught the students valuable skills by involving them in the learning

process, rather than “talking at” them. Students noted that Dewey’s teaching style gave students freedom to make mistakes. For example, a student wrote that Dewey “lets them [his students] know they’re allowed to make mistakes or question the things he teaches them,” and another student explained, “He also teaches the kids they can interpret what they learn and they shouldn’t be afraid to say how they feel & challenge the things they learn.” Participants’ analysis of the film in terms of Dewey’s non-normative classroom model a democratic classroom environment that breaks down student-teacher hierarchies (Freire, 2018).

Students had similarly productive and enthusiastic conversations about non-normative learning reflected in the film *Won’t You Be My Neighbor*. Participants pointed to how Mr. (Fred) Rogers believed in the power of media to engage children, and how he also illustrated the importance of children learning about what they see in media. A student recognized, “He realized children’s growth and exposure to media was important.” Many participants also noted that his approach to talking to children about difficult topics through particular teaching practices (singing and storytelling) represented non-normative teaching. A student explained, “He spoke to the kids in their language and way of thinking.” Another elaborated with, “He used his background in music and ministry to educate in a non-normative way that really helped kids engage in learning and about real-world issues. He also wasn’t afraid to talk about hard stuff like war and divorce.” Similar to students’ previous description of Dewey’s non-normative teaching practices, another student pointed out that “schools tell kids that making mistakes is bad, but Mr. Rogers told them it’s okay to make mistakes and try again.” Participants identified non-normative teaching in Mr. Rogers’ meeting students where they are, using language that they understand, and, importantly, communicating through empathy and understanding.

Student application of theories of queerness and non-normative perspectives in classroom discussion showcase that student participants have a deep understanding of how to engage in non-normative thinking patterns and point to dismantling social constructions that do not include perspectives of inclusivity and equity. They additionally know how to apply that understanding to a variety of texts and situations. Based on this exercise, we can see that some students in a classroom environment are willing to have important conversations about escaping social structures.

Student Participants' Take-Aways and Suggestions

Student-participants filled out an anonymous short survey at the end of the semester that asked for their feedback regarding the course. This survey, which I wrote, asked students what they liked and did not like, what they learned, how comfortable they felt with topics regarding queerness and non-normative bodies after taking the course, and if the chosen films helped them with their understandings of the topics in the course. The survey consisted of five open-ended questions so students could expand on their thoughts as much as they liked.

In stating what they learned, participants shared that they better understood how to meaningfully interact with media. One student stated they learned “how to analyze media meaningfully. The basics of what I can do to help make a difference in the media.” Another student wrote that they gained skills in “how to consume media through a news critical lens.” Others shared that they learned how to progress and grow in the world, be open-minded, and be media literate. When asked if they better understood how to apply non-normative ideas to media and their lives in general, students shared that they did indeed understand this concept and felt that they could use it in their everyday lives. “It’s important to think outside the box,” wrote one participant. “Doing things outside the norm can influence others in a new way with a new

perspective. For that, I will always try to think differently, and take a step back and look at my situation and find the best method to go about it. Even if it is an ‘abnormal’ idea.” Students said they felt comfortable in understanding things that go “outside the lines” (a reference to their queer orientations reading) and challenging normative structures imposed by those with power over them.

Many participants also shared that watching the films and applying these ideas to them specifically helped them better understand topics of queerness and non-normative perspectives. A vast majority of the participants identified watching the films and discussing them in the GroupMe as their favorite parts of the course and wished that there had been *more* time to discuss the films. “Learning to be more critically media literate and watching films to see how things are presented in the media,” one student expressed, “and discussing those topics in the GroupMe was my favorite part of the class.” Based on these responses, the students that participated in the research felt that they had a good understanding of course content and also enjoyed the way that it was presented.

Results and Suggestions

According to the findings of this action research, using queerness and a non-normative perspective can indeed foster a classroom environment that is more inclusive and can break down prescriptive barriers to critical thinking. This possibility is evidenced in participants’ comfort in engaging in non-normative thinking patterns and pointing to dismantling current social structures that do not include perspectives of inclusivity, empathy, and understanding. Additionally, based on student engagement and participants’ responses to what they enjoyed about the course, films that allow for analysis of metaphor and symbolism (such as *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*) did help students engage with content that was diverse and

discussed non-normative bodies and perspectives. Using monster films at the beginning of the course introduced these conversations and implemented critical media literacy strategies to engaging with media.

To indicate understanding of learning outcomes in media literacy, students demonstrated an above-average level of critical media literacy understanding per James Potter's (2019) *Development of Media Literacy* stages. Additionally, I propose that students gained understanding of additional skills not on Potter's rubric, which emphasize understanding and empathy, especially of those that are perceived as "different" or "Other." It is these additional principles that I propose are missing from media literacy literature and can aid in the process of decolonizing media education, making for a more equitable classroom. The stages of media literacy stages according to Potter are: acquiring fundamentals, language acquisition, narrative acquisition, developing skepticism, intensive development, experiential exploring, critical appreciation, and social responsibility. Given that the program imposed a pre-requisite for the course, it was assumed that students had already achieved a basic level of media literacy. In this course, I aimed for students to work in the stages of intensive development, critical appreciation, and social responsibility.¹⁰ I believe that students gained the integral skills for these stages, but I additionally note that students learned about the impact that media constructions have on orientations for all bodies. Therefore, I propose that critical media literacy objectives include principles that call for recognizing the impacts of media representations on bodies. In the conceptual media classroom, for example, students should ask:

1. In media constructions, how are bodies being oriented (per Ahmed's (2006) description of bodily orientation) to act in a particular way?

2. How are the structures of media narratives influencing the ways in which bodies are represented and oriented to perform according to social norms?
3. How are *my* body and the bodies of others being impacted by media representations, social norms, and environmental expectations (including in the classroom)?
4. How can I look at media from a non-normative perspective to be more inclusive?

As for conceptual media educators, I recommend we pose the following questions as we prepare curriculum for our courses:

1. Am I using content in this course that is inclusive of *all* bodies? Does the content take into account changed or changes to understandings about embodied identities?
2. How am I working to dismantle norms of whiteness and heteronormativity in classroom expectations, course content, and classroom environment?
3. How am I being reflexive to the ways in which I am performing and my students are performing according to social hierarchies, both in terms of classroom norms and in classroom learning outcomes?

If we want to work toward decolonizing media and journalism higher education classrooms, developing a set of media literacy principles with a focus on the body and performance may be a step in the right direction. In this research, student-participants accepted perspectives of queerness and non-normative orientations as represented in film, and as demonstrated in their insightful and thoughtful conversations, their comments implied understanding of media literacy principles.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research should be further developed and replicated in more conceptual media classroom environments. There were limitations to this action research, such as it occurring

during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus having to be conducted as an online course. Conversely, this could have emboldened the students to engage with topics that might otherwise have been uncomfortable in a physical classroom setting.) Additionally, because of the course's compressed timeline, topics were more essentialized than I would prefer or recommend (such as topic divisions of gender, race, queerness). For further inclusivity, in its reproduction, educators might avoid a strictly "topical" model so as to not group identities into condensed categories that may further "Other" groups in those identity categories. Future research could experiment with other monster films, such as *Annihilation* (2018) and *District 9* (2009), to see what films work best at applying essential media literacy topics to facilitate a decolonial classroom environment.

Although monster films provided students with an entrée to conversations they might otherwise have been reticent about joining, monster films used this way can risk "othering the Other." This would be of particular concern if students already felt marginalized in the classroom based on their identities. (In this action research, all students in my class were white, as it happens.) One way to avoid this is to have students engage with the filmmaker's intent and, when appropriate, actors' interpretations of their roles. For example, Del Toro has explicitly shared that he intended for *The Shape of Water* to convey a message of empathy for the Other. He explains,

For about two-thirds of the movie, the creature is an empty space where everyone pours what they think it should be, and then it defines itself in the last third of the movie. He is as 'other' as it gets, and he is saved by the others, by the invisible, the silent, the nameless, coming together to rescue him. (Welk, 2018, para. 7)

When a class includes students of color, this can be an important way to re-frame how the lecture is presented so as to not cause further harm during discussion of monsters and "Others."

Now that I have demonstrated exercises of equity, and have proposed new critical media literacy skills that look at the body and performance, the following section will conclude the dissertation. The following section will reflect on the dissertation process, and will sum-up findings and their importance.

CHAPTER 5: REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.

--hooks, 1994, p. 12

We owe it to ourselves and our students not only to point out the vast array of problematic areas of the higher educational landscape but also to offer tangible and meaningful alternatives.

--Gannon, 2020, p. 12

This dissertation began by calling attention to the necessity of decolonizing education so that media higher education classrooms can become more equitable for all students, with an expectation that students' own media practices will begin to reflect that sensibility. I adopted an autoethnographic approach to share my firsthand experiences as student and educator as a way to emphasize the impact of the issues I've addressed and for which I recommend solutions.

The dissertation includes some discrete chapters, but all chapters are united by a common purpose. I began this process pondering how educators can identify and challenge the normative assumptions of the classroom. In chapter two, I posed questions about how to adjust the content used in the classroom, as well as the physical environment of the classroom, to be more equitable. To apply these questions to the important discipline of media and journalism, I explored how *media* classrooms, specifically, can be adjusted so students from minority communities might feel represented and comfortable in their bodies, and with how they perform

in their bodies within the classroom space. In answering these questions, I proposed that by dismantling current classroom norms (in content and environment) using the conceptual frameworks of bodies and performance, equity could be found. I additionally proposed that by building on a critical media literacy framework to include principles of bodies and performance, we could have an accessible and reasonable framework to apply to the media classroom. By bringing these things together, chapter two additionally expanded literature about decolonizing education, the body and performance, and critical media literacy frameworks.

Then, using the autoethnographic approach, chapter three followed my experience of teaching an introductory media skills course with the use of theory throughout. In this chapter I proposed that by combining theory with practice *in the skills* classroom (as opposed to teaching theory independent of skills), students would learn how to implement central concepts of equity in their skills production. As an illustration, I reviewed seminal literature regarding visual theories of media production, and explained how I use that material to inform a common lighting exercise that teaches students how to do proper lighting for interviews. The point is to disrupt professional routines for better results. Using conceptual material on the persistence of whiteness, students were able to grasp that the “rule” of three-point-lighting—an “industry standard”—was routinized by and for people with white skin. In this course, students responded positively to the exercise and shared their appreciation for a course that tied diversity and inclusivity into the curriculum so effortlessly. Appendix B provides other educators details to adapt the exercise to their own media skills classrooms.

Chapter four also consisted of a classroom exercise, but this time through the lens of action research. In this chapter I proposed that using monster films in the media literacy classroom could be a steppingstone to teaching students about difference and empathy. In using

two monster films in particular, which showcased empathy rather than fear toward “Others,” I was able to introduce the students to the course from a perspective that did not privilege heteronormativity. I utilized queer theory so students could participate in critical analysis through non-normative perspectives, fostering a classroom environment that destabilized norms of heterosexuality. Student-participants responded well to this exercise, stating that afterward they felt they understood what it means to be critically media literate and to analyze media beyond customary perspectives. Appendix C supplies educators with particulars of the exercise should they wish to include it in their own media classrooms.

I wish to reflect now on the process of engaging with this research, and then share some important discoveries I made throughout the process, such as refraining from additive approaches of teaching. In this concluding chapter, I will also revisit some of the additions to media literacy principles that I referred to in the dissertation, explaining their significance and contribution. I want to reemphasize how a critical media literacy framework that includes understandings of bodies and performance can help create a more equitable and inclusive classroom space. I am optimistic that this will result in students becoming responsive and responsible media practitioners. The final section of this conclusion discusses limitations and future research.

A purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to an ongoing conversation about decolonizing education, while adding unique features to aid educators engaged in media education, in particular. The questions I have posed are ones to which I will continue to seek answers throughout my career. I hope that other researchers, educators, and curriculum builders will continue to assess opportunities for decolonizing education in their work, building on the principles and tools that I have proposed. This dissertation provides some solutions for the media

classroom, while it also illuminates the many ways that our discipline is entwined with others. Our efforts to decolonize media education fit into a broader pedagogical mission.

Revisiting the Problem

Writing this dissertation has been a whirlwind of an experience for many reasons, but largely because of the emotional labor required to do this work. There is a wide understanding of the emotional labor required of minorities in academia, especially as they undertake the work of advocacy and social justice for disenfranchised communities in white institutional spaces (Evans & Moore, 2015). This focus, because it often takes faculty away from their own research and teaching, can affect decisions regarding their promotion and tenure (Matthew, 2016). Minority graduate students face similar challenges. In a 2018, anonymous article published in *Inside Higher Ed*, a Black female graduate student characterized her experience as a minority at her majority-white university as exhausting. She was committed to being service oriented, but also to meeting the requirements of teaching and research productivity. Additionally, her service work made her feel both hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. She explained:

Historically white departments can rely on the physical and emotional labor of students of color to mask larger racial problems. Graduate students of color are often tasked with recruiting other students of color. We are expected to support undergraduate students of color who are harmed by the racially insensitive curricula. We are tasked with explaining to faculty members (*ad nauseam*), that yes, a student of color on campus faces challenges. Undergraduate students flock to us for care and emotional support. Those of us who study race are called on to help instructors with no experience in the subject to improve their teaching. ... Our service may create the illusion that change is happening.

... But ultimately, our service exempts faculty members from making substantial changes to the structure of the department. (Anonymous, 2018, para. 10-12)

Reading about this woman's experience as I was completing my dissertation felt all too familiar. How could I ever forget all of the students that stayed after class to talk to me about their difficulties navigating coursework while they confronted emotionally draining events on our campus: police brutality, sexual assault, and hate speech in the residence halls regarding their queer identities. As a teaching assistant, I have pleaded with professors to not require students to have their cameras on at all times in Zoom classes, as they might be in situations where they would feel uncomfortable sharing their living conditions on screen. Additionally, I have taught my peers (with another student of color) the importance of being aware of diversity in the classroom—this, in a course about teaching, because our instructor did not include such a lesson in the syllabi.

I have seen graduate students of color increasingly admitted to our Ph.D. program, although when their research interests focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, they did not always have the resources necessary to advance their work, because there were few or no faculty to shepherd their independent research or participate in co-authorship, an expectation in the program. As a result, graduate students were drawn to the few faculty with a DEI focus, which could easily overwhelm those faculty given their many other responsibilities. The program has welcomed new faculty hires since I've been here—but not with a background in DEI, which could have offered those co-authorship opportunities and potential dissertation committee members. More often, we were paired as graduate assistants with faculty who had tenuous, overlapping or no connection to our research interests, which often meant that without the connection in research interests as graduate students there was little opportunity to expand our

CVs, while our peers working in subfields that were perhaps more in vogue, were matched with compatible research faculty and published at an exponential rate as a result.¹⁸ As we entered the classroom to teach, graduate students were left to search for DEI initiatives to include, with little to no guidance. And, in doing our research, many of us looked to other departments and other universities to make up for what our program lacked—thus imposing a burden on those departments. This is to say, as a graduate student studying DEI, I have felt “behind” because of my lack of achievement. But that lack of achievement was, in some ways, influenced by a shortage of faculty resources.

Of course, this issue is more complicated than I’ve made it sound. This is a problem of diversity initiatives and faculty representation at the level of the institution. Griffin (2020) explains, “Faculty diversity strategies have largely focused on increasing the number of individuals entering and completing graduate school,” thus framing diversity strategies with a “pipeline” metaphor to increase the number of women and scholars of color in the field (p. 3). While the pipeline idea (of educating those from minoritized communities so they can enter academia and increase numbers in representation) has some merit, I believe that it might still leave graduate students of color without faculty resources to do their work, especially if the assumption is that all scholars of color focus their research on diversity issues. And, looking to graduate students as the diversity solution might be used to relieve the institution of further responsibility for eliminating exclusionary practices of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Rather, diverse graduate students leave with degrees, and still face structural discrimination even in the hiring process. “While increasing the ‘flow in the pipeline’ is not a panacea,” writes Griffin

¹⁸ This is also influenced by other factors, such as qualitative versus quantitative work, or the norms of the subfields such as health communication versus critical cultural studies. I understand these nuances, though the outcomes are still frustrating.

(2020), “increased diversity in the applicant pool does not translate to increased likelihood of hiring a woman or man of color in a faculty position” (p. 17). Additionally, “when institutions do require search committees to submit formal recruitment plans, the committees are often overly reliant on traditional outreach strategies, such as sharing positions on listservs and sending emails” (p. 18). My point is that the lack of representation and resources is complicated, but it affects women and people of color from the beginning of their academic careers. For me, the emotional labor of day-to-day existence in these environments, and reflecting on these experiences, has been draining, to say the least.

As I prepare to deliver this completed dissertation to my faculty committee and ultimately, to the field, my anxiety is heightened—because scholars have noted that, when people of color give voice to the discrimination they experience, they are often silenced by their white colleagues, many of whom purport to be liberal progressives. And although there is a perception that academia is a safe haven for these kinds of honest conversations, it is often the opposite. (Melaku & Beeman, 2020, para. 2)

Given my white-passing qualities, I also worry that my concerns about these issues will be seen as somehow less “authentic,” as if my body is not privy to the injustices imposed on students of color within the school. Nevertheless, I know that my work is insightful and valuable. I am proud of what I do, and I am gratified by the impact my work has had on the lives of my students and those around me. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve, work with, and learn from my students. They have been essential to my work and my progress, as I hope I have been to theirs.

As I have stated before, this dissertation emerged from my experiences as a student and educator. Given my multi-dimensional identity, and my background of attending universities unique from one another in size and location, I have experienced higher education in many

different forms. And, at each of these institutions, I have been very aware of moments where my body did not fit or where I felt disoriented—like an imposter, as those around me did not understand the harmful impact of their words and actions. Sitting on campus quads in the shadow of buildings named for slave owners and built by the bodies of enslaved people (UNC Libraries, 2005), and others that honor sexist men, such as one who said, “Numerous divorces can be traced directly to the day when the wife left the home and went out into the world of employment” (Kimball, 1977, p. 9-10), also has had a significant impact on my feeling of belonging on these campuses.

I have witnessed many instances where others were treated inequitably, and I struggle with the fact that I did not speak up more often. The majority of instances where I witnessed discriminatory practices were not intentional (although some of them were), but the unintentional racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist microaggressions are what I consider some of the most dangerous comments. I say this because these microaggressions and microinvalidations are the accepted norm of higher education spaces, such as when a professor stated to me, “We should be teaching according to the abilities of our most successful students, not our worst performing students.” I looked around to see others nodding their heads in agreement. Sometimes these remarks are excused as good-natured, when really they are thoughtless. When these casual statements go unreported or unchallenged, as they so often do, the ideologies behind them also get a pass, and therefore persist within higher education environments. Although these environments often purport to value the work of, say, critical race theory and queer theory, colleges and universities still struggle to execute racial equity (St. Amour, 2020) and tend to “resist the queering of higher education itself” (Renn, 2010, p. 132).

I saw this happen in a course where the instructor decided, on a whim, that everyone should share where their ancestry originated. In my own panic, I wondered how or if I should share that my grandparents were illegal immigrants from Mexico. At the same time, I glanced toward the two Black women in the class, who looked equally surprised by the exercise. Was the instructor really that unaware of how uncomfortable this would make the non-white students in the course? As we got to the two Black women, one of them shrugged, “Well, slavery.” As another example, in an undergraduate screenwriting course, I shared a short screenplay I wrote so that I could get feedback from my classmates and instructor. My script featured Mexican characters, and there was a moment in dialogue when a young character referred to their grandmother as *abuela*. The instructor, a white man who learned Spanish late in life, stopped the reading to ask why I used the word *abuela*. “Well, that’s what I called my grandmother,” I replied. No, he corrected me: It should be *abuelita*.

Both of these encounters with microaggressions and cultural ignorance reflect how the institution of higher education has embraced a version of accommodating diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that is more brand than it is engagement. Neither of the instructors seemed to register their ideological missteps despite the responses they got from students. Even after the ancestry debacle, I recall the instructor asking me and another student with “what” ethnicity we identified (“what are you” is a question all too common to me as a mixed-race person), to which I responded Hispanic/Latino. “Wow, Really? Not Latin-*ahh*,” the instructor emphasized the feminine form. Though this might strike others as simply an annoying comment to be shrugged off, these comments are repetitive, and they add up over time.¹⁹ They are continuous reminders

¹⁹ This could be described as cumulative racism.

to minority students that *our bodies* are different, and they do not belong. Importantly, they tell us that even as we are speaking our identities, they are determined by others.

This shared experience for many minority students is the reason that this research is important, and it is why I urge greater awareness (and redress) of the ways in which we, as educators and administrators, expect our minority students to function in the classroom in a particular way—a way that centers whiteness and heterosexuality. The following section shares some of the opportunities that emerge from my findings.

Interpretations from Findings

In each of the chapters, I explained how to adjust classroom practices to better make the classroom content and space more inclusive and equitable to students from minority communities—specifically students of color and LGBTQ+ students. I looked at both the skills classroom and the conceptual classroom, and worked to find solutions for incorporating content within courses that 1) is representative of minority bodies and identities, and 2) invites a classroom environment that does not normalize whiteness and heterosexuality. My specific findings and contribution to the field refer to additional principles for a critical media literacy framework that may be accessible and easily replicable for educators. First, I would like to share an important understanding that I gained while teaching these courses and writing this research—refraining from additive approaches of diversity in the classroom. Including this practice in the media classroom can be valuable and can also be a consideration in syllabus construction.

Refraining from Additive Approaches to Diversity in the Classroom

Alemán (2014) expresses how norms of whiteness dominate journalism in relying heavily on white elites as sources, disregarding diverse individuals and organizations, inaccurate

coverage of racial and ethnic groups (often references violence), and dismissing stories that provide coverage on racism in order to remain objective. Through pedagogies that teach these norms, journalism education works to reinscribe whiteness and its worldviews. This then “excludes the perspectives of racially disenfranchised communities—even when students of color are in the classroom” (Alemán, 2014, p. 86). In maintaining only western colonial norms and perspectives in the classroom and in curriculum materials, we communicate to students of color and non-normative students that we expect them to assimilate rather than create a space where their voices, cultures, and experiences are acknowledged and valued. Further, we reinforce the notion that these norms are constant across spaces.

Efforts made to diversify higher education curricula, certainly, but those efforts are often additive, and when diversity is treated as additive to the curricula rather than an essential ingredient, educators perpetuate “Otherness” in identities that are diverse. This is a frequent mistake, which may be a result of organizational expedience. The syllabi for an introductory seminar in my university’s “Women’s and Gender Studies” department demonstrated this very point. The 15-week course included a single week dedicated to achievements of the feminist movement by women of color. Similarly, the syllabus for a “Race and the Media” course I took featured one week of works by LGBTQ+ voices. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to read and discuss those works, and they remain among my favorite pieces, but why do they represent a fraction of the semester? Rather than arranging readings into tidy categories, wouldn’t it be more meaningful to suffuse the course with the writings of POC and queer scholars? When we restrict the voices of marginalized groups to only one week in our syllabi, we easily run into issues of essentialism, where we ask our students to turn their attention to the voices of POC scholars and activists, or queer scholars and activists, when they express

something about their particular marginalization (Gosine, 2002). While it is important that we hear those experiences (as this dissertation has argued throughout), it is unacceptable when those works are condensed into a single week in the semester, and it is misleading to suggest those scholars' authority is valid only when they speak of a singular part of their identity. Instead, we should demonstrate for our students that minority scholars possess a range of experiences and expertise on which they are qualified to speak and write; their perspectives are valuable beyond the first person.

This additive approach (Cummins, 2017) is even more evident in undergraduate degree programs, where foundational skills and principles are taught in required courses, but to be exposed to ideas beyond the western, white, cis, heterosexual norms that govern those skills and principles, one must enroll in additional coursework (if those courses exist in the first place). Importantly, the additive approach tends not to work in the way its adopters hope. In terms of media education, Alemán (2014) explains that, “Unfortunately, accentuating an additive approach leaves existing training practices intact, faultily relying on bodies of color to assuage the current disproportion and critique of white-dominant news” (p. 76). This approach simply looks to concepts and ideas that reference diversity as something important to think about at specific moments, but not important enough to incorporate as a journalistic norm. When we depend on students of color to assume the “burden” of reporting stories and creating media content for diverse audiences (to be the racial spokesperson), for example, we disenfranchise our students. When we adopt an additive approach (within media departments *or* individual courses) that does not prioritize important topics related to inclusivity and diversity within basic media practices, *all* students are left with potentially inaccurate and distorted views of culture, and thus do not receive a full and productive education (Charles, 2019). These additive conversations

sustain colorblind and heteronormative narratives. They skirt the topic of white privilege, invalidate systemic racism, nullify experiences of violence and abuse against women and the LGBTQ+ community, and uphold white supremacy (Alemán, 2014).

For a more equitable and decolonized classroom and pedagogy, educators must find ways to look beyond additive approaches to diversity and inclusion and work outside of the constructed norms of education; that is how we work at decolonizing curricula. Laura March, a graduate student in the UNC School of Information and Library Sciences who specializes in instructional design, explained the need for “universal design learning,” or a framework to design learning environments that meet the needs and abilities of all students:

You don't have to have everyone follow the same path to learn something. We should make things accessible in levels. We do not need to teach all things in one format, and we need to take an approach of *thematic* education as opposed to *topical* education, which can fall into essentializing. Doing this makes room for cultural student storytelling, which is a way of learning that provides perspective, and benefits the lives of students. (personal communication, Feb. 1, 2021)

To achieve this in media education we have to “embed indigenous knowledge related to media, communication, and journalism across the curricula and treat these epistemologies as equal to the Western paradigms that currently dominate the field” (Tordova, 2016, p. 676). This is to say that decolonizing education will never be accomplished within a week dedicated to diversity. Rather, it requires breaking down colonized structures of education itself as well as the norms of the field in which you are an educator. It is figuring out how to construct curricula and a classroom environment that embodies an all-encompassing nature, rather than one that has canonized a particular perspective connected to a particular body.

Showcasing the importance of this, and creating principles to help educators do this, is my goal for this dissertation. By using my knowledge of media literacy principles, media education, film studies and diversity studies, I can assist educators in the process of deconstructing their curriculum and their classrooms to make them more universal and equitable. In efforts of maintaining equitable practices, regular audits of syllabi and curricula can ensure courses continue to include a range of voices and ideas, and that the range reflects contemporaneous reality. Including a diversity of thought in the *practice* of making media is what I did in my skills course, and normalizing the use of traditionally perceived *non-normative perspectives* in my conceptual course (both described in this dissertation), was how I worked to escape an additive approach to diversity. For educators committed in including meaningful approaches to diversity and inclusion in their classrooms, as well as teaching their students to be inclusive and equitable in their own media production and consumption, I invite paying particular attention to concepts of the body and performance in the media classroom. To do this, related principles should be considered alongside current critical media literacy frameworks.

Body and Performance as Critical Media Literacy Principles

Media literacy is familiar already in media and journalism settings, particularly as a response to issues of misinformation and disinformation (Hicks-Goldston & Ritchart, 2019). However, I argue that working within a *critical* media literacy framework is the better choice for fostering an inclusive and equitable pedagogy. Critical media literacy is an extension of the media literacy movement. Media literacy refers to a set of practices that equips individuals, “to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms” (Hobbs, 2006, p. 16), and it emphasizes the learning and teaching of these skills through the use of mass media texts in primarily school-based contexts (Hobbs, 2006). However, the definition of media

literacy continues to be refined as the field develops and new media technologies emerge (Hobbs, 2006). Leading to the stem of critical media literacy, were questions about whether media literacy education should have explicit political and ideological agendas; a critical media literacy perspective would say yes.

Critical media literacy adds to the work of media literacy the lens of power, as expressed in and through the media. The principles of critical media literacy, write Kellner and Share (2019) are intended to, “empower students and citizens to critically read media messages and produce media themselves in order to be active participants in a democratic society” (p. xiii). The link between media literacy and participation in civil society is made clear in critical approaches.

Much of the daily public pedagogy that mass media (which includes social media) teaches about race, gender, class, sexuality, consumption, fear, morals, and the like, reflect corporate profit motives and hegemonic ideologies at the expense of social concerns necessary for a healthy democracy and sustainable planet. (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. xiii)

Critical media literacy includes all forms of media communication, including products of popular culture, to deepen the understanding of audiences’ relationship to media. Essential is the examination of power relations in a society that creates social hierarchies within discourse and communication that inevitably benefits dominant groups while subordinating others (Yousman, 2017). Critical media literacy additionally emphasizes the use of voice in the classroom paired with social justice and activism (Yousman, 2017), critiques of what may be considered objective truths (Romero Walker, 2020; Roth, 2012), and relies heavily on asking questions to advance the learning process (Kellner & Share, 2007; Yousman, 2017).

Concepts of critical media literacy provide a framework for examining media through a political, cultural, and social perspective. I argue that critical media literacy can also foster critical discussions that escape normative constraints in the classroom. It is through adjusted critical media literacy frameworks that we can create curricula that extends outside of normative structures of whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity. One way this can happen, is through being more aware of the ways in which “performance” is present in the media classroom by students and educators, in the media field through techniques and normative expectations, and in media through its representations of people and reality.

This addition of performance and bodies to the critical media literacy framework can then help escape normative ideas and structures in order to work toward making a more inclusive classroom. Additionally, the notion of performance in media classrooms and the media field provides an opportunity to expand the uses of critical media literacy beyond content and curriculum to examine the ways in which ideologies and expectations are imposed on the bodies of students, instructors, and media workers. Social, political, and cultural norms orient bodies to perform in specific ways, and media classrooms within institutional spaces are a site at which those norms are imposed. These norms can be particularly oppressive for minority students, who are expected to perform whiteness and heteronormativity (Alemán, 2014; Cooks, 2003; Giroux, 1997). With critical media literacy in mind, through an adjusted framework, students can critique the classroom and contribute to the structure of the learning environment, and educators can be reflexive and aware of how to make the classroom equitable to all bodies.

Using Kellner and Share’s (2005) core concepts of critical media literacy, I have provided a model that showcases a contemporaneous critical media literacy framework and have included the principle of bodies and performance (Figure 2). This model can be used by

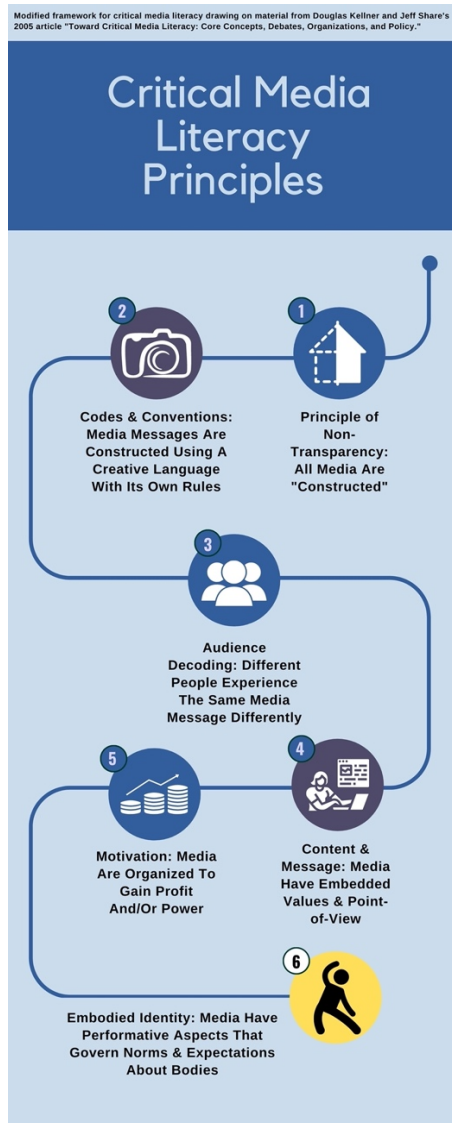
educators and can also be distributed to students. Kellner and Share's (2005) current principles of critical media literacy include:

1. Principle of Non-Transparency: All Media are "Constructed"
2. Codes and Conventions: Media Messages are Constructed Using a Creative Language with its Own Rules
3. Audience Decoding: Different People Experience the Same Media Message Differently
4. Content and Message: Media have Embedded Values and Point-of-View
5. Motivation: Media are Organized to Gain Profit and/or Power

While these principles are essential, incorporating in the framework an understanding of the body and performance can be beneficial for educators in terms of making their classrooms more inclusive and equitable, and for students so they can produce and consume media in a more inclusive and equitable way. Here, I provide a supporting principle that pays notice to bodies and performance, and I provide questions for educators and students to ask themselves regarding this principle. I include questions related to this principle for both educators *and* students because educators can use these tools in creating curricula and syllabi, and students can use these tools while analyzing media and creating media. These questions regarding this principle of bodies and performance were additionally proposed in previous chapters, though I have combined the questions here so they can be combined in an all-inclusive media literacy framework. Providing these frameworks to educators and students supports them in providing them with a tool that is accessible, and easily used in the classroom and in their creation practices. These principles of bodies and performance have not yet been included in critical media literacy frameworks, but

Figure 2

Modified Critical Media Literacy Principles Model



Note: An infographic that explains critical media literacy principles, with the proposed inclusion of a principle regarding bodies and performance.

based on my experiences adjusting classroom content and the classroom environment according to these principles, they are valuable tools and should be included in furthering media literacy research and frameworks.

Questions for Educators:

1. Am I using content in this course that is inclusive to *all* bodies? Does that content take into account changed or changes to understandings about embodied identities? How can I work to decolonize the classroom by including content that does not assume whiteness and heteronormativity?
2. How am I actively working to dismantle norms of whiteness and heteronormativity in classroom expectations and classroom environment?
3. How am I being reflexive to the ways in which I am performing and my students are performing according to social hierarchies, both in terms of classroom norms and in classroom learning outcomes?
4. When teaching skills, from what traditions do the skills I am teaching emerge, and in what ways do they privilege/disadvantage certain bodies? How do I go about teaching this skill to result in a more equitable product?
5. When teaching skills, how am I regulating the bodies of students that are both producing content, and bodies of the students that are being represented by the camera, microphone, or in writing?

Questions for Students in *Conceptual* courses:

1. In media constructions, how are bodies being oriented to act in a particular way?
2. How are the structures of media narratives influencing the ways in which bodies are represented and oriented to perform according to social norms?
3. How are *my* body and the bodies of others being impacted by media representations, social norms, and environmental expectations (including in the classroom)?

4. How can I look at media from a non-normative perspective to be more inclusive?

Questions for Students in *Skills* courses:

5. How am I representing the body of the subject, individual, or community when I am producing media content featuring them?
6. What traditions am I following in this way of producing media and how have those traditions been equitable and inequitable to certain bodies?
7. Should I adjust my method of production to be more equitable, and if so, how?

In the effort to provide additional principles for critical media literacy, this dissertation demonstrates that approaches that take into consideration bodies and performance fill an important gap in media literacy research. Additionally, in terms of decolonizing the classroom, this dissertation exemplifies the need for a better understanding as to how to make the media classroom more equitable in content and environment, and it provides important resources for doing so: a critical media literacy framework, a workshop to help get faculty started on reworking their course(s) to be more inclusive and equitable, and lesson plans for activities in both the skills and conceptual classroom. With my personal experience of teaching, and my action research in the classroom, I have been able to showcase the positive impact for students when their educator is aware of the diversity of their bodies, and the expectations of performance that have been imposed on them in their classrooms.

Although I recognize the influence that individual educators have had on my academic trajectory and my life more generally, to truly decolonize education requires a broader critique of, and rebuilding of, the higher education institution. As Griffin (2020) states, “Institutions must acknowledge how administrators, faculty, policies, and structures create and maintain (un)welcoming campus environments” (p. 3). There is only so much that can be changed in the

classroom. Institutional barriers of education, such as the norms of the university campus and the fear of violence toward non-white/male/heterosexual bodies on campus, undermine feelings of “belonging” for minority students (Sloan, 2018). Scholars have called for a more holistic and representative narrative of education to challenge current models of educational thought (Warren, 2020). Additionally, institutional leaders must take accountability for their words and actions, recognizing when their choices contribute to further marginalization of students from minority communities (Metivier, 2020).

Scholars have written increasingly about the politicization of higher education (Ellis et al., 2020; Nichol, 2019; Warner, 2021) and the growing influence of mega-donors on university decisions (Anderson & Heim, 2021; Marwick & Kreiss, 2021; Scrluga, 2019). At my current institution, the UNC-Chapel Hill Hussman School of Journalism and Media, it was recently discovered that its namesake donor may have exercised his influence to discourage the hiring and tenuring of a Black woman for an endowed professorship (Deschner, 2021). This event is also significant in that only 31 of 998 tenured positions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2019 were held by Black women (UNC Institutional Research & Assessment, 2019), and generally in the United States Black women are among the demographics with some of the lowest percentages of faculty in tenure-track positions (American Association of University Professors, 2020). Walter Hussman Jr., a longtime newspaper owner, did not approve of *New York Times* reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones’ Pulitzer Prize-winning “The 1619 Project,” finding it not to be sufficiently “objective” based on journalism standards he had articulated (Anderson & Heim, 2021). Hussman, who graduated from UNC, expressed to the school’s dean, the UNC chancellor, and other highly placed administrators his reservations about hiring Jones. At this writing, the University Board of Trustees, one of the final committees entrusted with determining

whether a candidate meets the requirements for tenure, has declined for a second time to review her dossier. Jones was offered instead a five-year contract with the possibility of tenure, contrary to white faculty who occupied the same professorship before her (Masten, 2021).

Jones's treatment at the hands of University administrators quickly became international news, and has already cost UNC an accomplished and highly sought-after Black pharmaceutical sciences scholar, who declined an offer to join the Chemistry Department when she learned of Jones's situation (Flaherty, 2021). Instances such as this act as significant barriers to decolonizing education. When white, male donors and administrators control the ability of the university to advance, or commit to professed ideals of DEI (The Well, 2020), it limits what progress can be made in the classroom. This all comes at a time of additional structural and social pressure coming from conservative states and individuals to bar the teaching of Critical Race Theory (Asare, 2021) or even opt students out of history lessons during Black history month (Farzan, 2021). There must be further examination of how to dismantle the exclusive norms of higher education for the top tier of those in power. This will take time, but I believe that when we recognize the direct impact these inequities have on the bodies of our students, we can come up with positive solutions to dismantle the current system and rebuild with equity in mind.

In decolonizing media education, this dissertation proposed an ambitious start: dismantling current classroom norm (in content and environment) and rebuilding from the perspectives of body and performance. Cruz (2001) states that, "The inclusion of the body holds the beginnings of charting new territories in epistemic approaches" (p. 668). This dissertation is an example of that. In this process, I have continued to develop a deep love for my students, as I have worked to represent their bodies in what they learn in my courses. With that love has also

come pain and anguish, as I have seen them hurt from institutional requirements that continue to disenfranchise their bodies and identities. This work is just the beginning, and it must continue. As educators, we can no longer allow the institutional norms influenced by white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, and ableism to rule our bodies, our classrooms, and thus the bodies and knowledges of our students. In bringing together the frameworks and perspectives I provided within this project, I believe we can make higher education more equitable, and I believe that can contribute to a more empathetic world.

I'd like to end with a poem I wrote not too long ago—it reflects on my journey and thought process while diving into academia. I hope you enjoy.

*Days are longer,
loneliness lingers,
as I write another page
inaccessible to those
whose nails were packed with soil
to bring me here.*

*Words written, that sometimes even I
have difficulty understanding.
To bring hopeful change,
even as I remain, currently,
invisible.*

Will my light shine through?

Or will it be another beam that lingers for just a moment.

My ancestors will ask

“Will these broken hands be worth it?”

I don't know.

Will generational labor, and generational trauma,

finally end?

Or will I stand alone,

at the feet of the elite

that “say” they built this country;

Begging for approval those with my blood,

rarely receive?

We will see.

I dream of hope, achieved through knowledge.

How many words can I remember? How many topics can I cram in my brain,

so my success can be measured,

by the number of “correct answers”?

But who defined “correct”? Where did “objective” come from?

And when does knowledge contribute to equity?

To empathy?

To progress?

To change?

Maybe in my hands?

In the hands of other knowledge seekers,

and wisdom givers.

Can knowledge and education

break cycles? Or are barriers too high? Too strong?

And can our light, sun-kissed on

our ancestors' backs from hours of hard work,

radiate through to provide for others what was

not provided for us?

So one day we all can sit, and enjoy the sunset,

so we can finally, give the sun permission

to warm our skin.

-Alexis Romero Walker, A Dream, 2021

AFTERWORD

While writing this dissertation, many lives were lost as a result of police brutality. Many courageous people protested to bring attention to these horrendous events and fight for change. In the act of protesting, also, many people were harmed and lives were lost. Because so much of this dissertation discusses bodies, and the violence and harm directed at the bodies of minorities simply because of their embodied identities, I felt it important to recognize these events. There is much to be said about the racism built into the bones of this country, systemic oppression of the police and prison system, and toxic masculinity that presumes justification for violence, but that is a bigger conversation—and at present, beyond the scope of the dissertation. I do know, though, as media educators and practitioners, we can influence the narrative and make it one of equity and empathy.

APPENDIX A

Departmental Diversity Workshop: Educating Educators with Best Practices

Overview & Rationale

Given that this dissertation argues, in many ways, that instructors should take responsibility in assuring their classrooms are equitable and inclusive, this workshop offers an opportunity for programs to help their instructors learn how to work toward decolonizing their classrooms. I additionally want to offer this workshop idea because adjunct faculty, whose experience lends itself to teaching a program's skills courses, tend to receive fewer resources than full-time professors (Jaschik, 2017). Given that they are entering a teaching position with possibly no training on teaching diverse communities, and that they might be a student's first contact with a major area of study, this workshop is necessary. Here I provide a framework that can help instructors evaluate their syllabi and teaching practices. Instructors will hear from students about their experiences in the classroom, they will hear from accessibility services on how to adjust the classroom for those with disabilities, and they will work with researchers and librarians to ensure that their syllabi represent diverse perspectives and that the rules in their syllabi align with the courses learning outcomes.

The syllabus acts as an important document that is representative of a course, and many refer to it as a "teacher-student contract" (Comer, 2016). A variety of studies have addressed direct language and communicative syllabus design practices (Fitzsimmons-Doolan & Stoller, 2018; Munby, 1981; Nunan, Candlin, & Widdowson, 1988). Something that this workshop aims

to contribute to syllabi construction comes from universal learning design (ULD), which aims to be more accessible and learner-focused (Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman, & Choi, 2017). A 2017 study concluded, through a meta-analysis of literature between 2013 and 2016, that a ULD approach “is an effective teaching methodology for improving the learning process for all students” (Capp, p. 791). Therefore, entering this workshop with ULD in mind can aid in aiming for syllabi that are inclusive and are representative of course learning outcomes.

This workshop example begins with important terms and theoretical background that must be known and understood by those hosting the workshop, and should be properly communicated to those participating in the workshop. I would recommend giving those attending the workshop a document with all of the terms below. After considering important terms, there will be a workshop general timeline, a list of learning outcomes, and a step-by-step of the activities that will occur during the workshop. Instructors leaving the workshop should have produced or updated syllabi to be focused, accessible, and inclusive.

Theoretical Background

- Decolonizing education: To evaluate, dismantle, and rebuild institutions, curricula, and classrooms. To rather critically examine the ways in which knowledge has a relationship with power systems that support colonization.
- Multicultural Approach: Exposes students to materials produced by a range of people with a range of backgrounds. Works to champion genuine diversity and expand current curriculum.
- Transformative Pedagogy: A teaching method used to empower students to challenge the ways in which their social and cultural worlds have deemed some concepts as *normal* or *natural*. Emphasizes consciousness raising.

- Additive Approach: Tends to look at concepts and ideas that reference diversity as an additional concept, rather than a *normal* or canon part of the curriculum.
- Equitable Content: Aiming for classroom content (content students must read, watch, or otherwise engage with) to come from many difference voices and perspectives. Making sure that classroom content is inclusive and representative.
- Implicit Bias: Suggests that people can act on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes without intending to do so.
- Whiteness: Acknowledging whiteness as a race, as opposed to accepting it as the “norm.” Rather, we point to whiteness as a racial identifier.
- Universal Learning Design: A framework for the teaching-learning transaction that conceptualizes knowledge through learner centered focus, emphasizing accessibility, collaboration, and community.

Decolonizing education is a key term to know and be aware of because the media and journalism program itself should have decolonizing their media education classrooms as their goal. To decolonize education means to evaluate, dismantle, and rebuild institutions, curricula, and classrooms; to critically examine the ways in which knowledge has a relationship with power systems that support colonization (Sleeter, 2010). To try to decolonize the classroom, instructors should first reevaluate their own **implicit biases**—their unintended biases or prejudices (Brownstein, 2019)—so they can begin to discover how their personal classroom has been influenced by those biases. It is also required that those involved with the workshop have the understanding that education has normalized white Western culture—that is that **whiteness** has been accepted as the norm rather than a race itself. Whiteness is molded in the

curriculum and the classroom—as is evident in the expected and constructed norms of media education particularly (Sleeter, 2010). Classrooms systemically function in a way that exclude or marginalize Indigenous and non-Western cultures, and our media classrooms do this, as well. For example, by accepting “official” knowledge systems that originate from Eurocentric knowledge, it is easily assumed that whiteness is the norm (Tordova, 2016). Therefore, to decolonize education, we should “critically examine that knowledge [traditional school curricula] and its relationship to power, recentering knowledge” (Sleeter, 2010, p. 194).

The thought of decolonizing education, though, can seem a daunting task. For the sake of helping instructors adjust their classrooms to be more inclusive, it is helpful to provide specific and simple terms so they can get a grasp of what decolonizing education may look like. For example, the workshop should share the perspective of a **multicultural approach** to education, which exposes students to materials produced by a range of people with a range of backgrounds, and has the goal “to champion genuine diversity and expand current curriculum” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 16). A multicultural approach is essential because it makes it so that “groups marginalized from mainstream education learn about their own heritage and for dominant groups to explore the experiences and voices of minority and oppressed people” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 16). Including this approach will help instructors to guide them in how to diversify their course materials. This approach is also very important because it broadens the understandings of privileged students while creating an inclusive space for marginalized students.

Helping instructors understand a multicultural approach can also lead into lessons of how instructors can include diverse materials without simply taking an **additive approach**. An additive approach does include materials made and spoken by marginalized individuals and communities; however, it tends to look at concepts and ideas that reference diversity as an

additional concept, rather than a *normal* or canon part of the curriculum (Alemán, 2014). This approach also tends not to work in the way that instructors hope (which is to provide perspectives from diverse communities), but rather continues practices of othering marginalized communities. Alemán (2014) explains, “Unfortunately, accentuating an additive approach leaves existing training practices intact, faultily relying on bodies of color to assuage the current disproportion and critique of white-dominant news” (p. 76). The additive approach simply looks to concepts and ideas that reference diversity as something important to think about, but not important enough to think of as a journalistic norm. In this case, not only are the students outside of privileged groups not being recognized or empowered, but *all* students are being taught potentially inaccurate and distorted views of culture, and are not receiving a full and fruitful mode of education (Saunders & Kardia, 1997).

To escape these additive approaches, instructors could additionally work to incorporate a **transformative pedagogy** in their curriculum, which is a method used to empower students to challenge the ways in which their social and cultural worlds have deemed some social concepts as *normal* or *natural* (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016). This shows students that they can challenge the hierarchies placed in the spaces they exist in to address that constructed normalcies are not harmless, but rather contribute to injustice. A transformative pedagogy contributes to consciousness raising in terms of students’ surroundings and the universal assumption of whiteness (hooks, 2003).

By engaging instructors with these terms and ideas regarding perspectives of education, instructors can start adjusting their syllabi to be more **equitable** through the **content** they choose for students to read, watch, and otherwise engage with. When aiming to create an inclusive classroom, instructors should ask themselves whose voices, perspectives, and scholarship are

being represented in course materials (Saunders & Kardia, 1997). By doing so with an understanding of the multicultural approach, additive approach, and transformative pedagogy, instructors can be sure that their content is equitable and contributes to decolonizing education.

Lastly, instructors should be made aware the universal learning design (ULD). The ULD is a “Framework for the teaching-learning transaction that conceptualizes knowledge through learner centered focus” perspective, and it works to emphasize “accessibility, collaboration, and community” (Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman, & Choi, 2017, p. 20). This approach allows instructors to look over their syllabi and course materials while acknowledging the course outcomes and take-aways. It then acts as a promising approach to help meet the needs of all learners effectively.

In all, this workshop places emphasis on how instructors can change and adjust their syllabi to contribute to making media classrooms more equitable and inclusive. When talking with a professor at my current institution, she explained that our program works hard at making sure our instructors are up to date in terms of teaching materials and equipment that is current with the context of the time. However, I argue, there is not enough emphasis of staying current per the social/cultural context. This workshop emphasizes how programs can help their instructors keep their classroom content and materials socially/culturally relevant, as well.

General Timeline

This workshop will ideally take place during one three-hour period. The workshop will follow the following agenda:

1. Ice Breaker (10 minutes)
2. Student Panel (30 minutes)

3. Syllabus “Rules” Group Activity with Presentation from Accessibility Personnel (75 minutes)
4. Who is on Your Syllabus Activity (45 minutes)
5. Group Discussion & Questions (20 minutes)

Workshop Lesson Plan

Teaching Materials

Most of the workshop requires that instructors work together to change their syllabi’s. Make sure to tell instructors ahead of time to have their syllabi available as well as their devices so they can edit their syllabi and do necessary research.

Additionally, be sure to have a panel of four students from diverse backgrounds, a representative from accessibility services, and librarians, and/or researchers that study diverse media education. It would also be helpful to have a white board and dry erase markers.

Learning Outcomes

1. Instructors should recognize that even if their materials are up-to-date technologically, they may still be outdated in terms of diversity and inclusion.
2. Instructors should identify personal biases of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability that may arise in classroom rules and expectations.
3. Instructors should experiment with ways to create a syllabus that does not include rules/expectations that could be harmful; and instead, they should focus on making sure that all assignments, rules, and requirements support the courses learning outcomes.
4. Instructors should explore ways to update their class content to be more inclusive and representative, and make sure it is not centered on the assumed norm of whiteness.

Instructors should also be aware of essentializing, so they do not do so when forming their syllabi.

5. Instructors should discuss how to present their course materials in a way that is most accessible to students from all backgrounds.

Step-By-Step Activity Plan (3 Hour Workshop)

Icebreaker (10 minutes) “What Kind of Educator?”

To begin this workshop, start the conversation with a quick icebreaker that allows participants to think about how their personal educator identity meshes with their course syllabi and materials. Start first by writing this question on the board:

“What kind of educator do I want to be?”

Have a handful of dry-erase markers and have instructors come up to the board and write their contribution; it could be a single word/trait, or a phrase describing an outcome, for example. After instructors have done this, offer another white board that has the question:

“What kind of educator do I ***not*** want to be?”

Again, have instructors come to the board and write their contribution. Point to some of the patterns noticed in the answers for each of these questions before moving on to the next activity.

Student Panel (30 minutes)

After the icebreaker, provide a student panel of about four students. Try and be mindful of the diversity of the student panel and put in effort of having students that are POC, LGBTQ+, and come from different perspectives and communities. Be sure to give the students these questions ahead of time so they have had time to ponder their answers. Have students discuss the following topics:

- Are there any particular classroom expectations that make it harder for you to succeed?
- What can your educators do to make the classroom feel safer and more comfortable?
- What things do you like that have been a part of your class content in the past?
- What things do you wish were included in class content?

Syllabus “Rules” Activity with Accessibility Presentation (75 minutes)

This next activity will require the instructors in the room to divide into groups, and they can stay in these groups from this point on. Have the instructors divide into groups depending on what courses they teach. Some instructors will teach multiple courses, and some will teach a course that only they offer. Divide the group in the way that makes it the most even with instructors working with other instructors that match their course teachings and professional skill set. After everyone is divided into groups, have instructors follow these steps:

1. Have them write down or type a list of learning outcomes for the course they teach as they would be listed in the syllabus.
2. Have them list an agreed-on set of rules and expectations for the course as they would be listed in the syllabus (this might be attendance, technology use, eating/drinking, etc.).

After participating in this part of the activity, the groups should pause as a member from the institution’s accessibility services gives a presentation about the ways in which instructors can work to make their courses more accessible for those with disabilities or those that come from disenfranchised communities. In addition to explaining to participants the relationship between accessibility services and the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), and where institution-specific resources are located online, there are a variety of topics that the accessibility personnel might talk about, which may include topics such as:

- Attendance and late policies

- Making PowerPoint materials accessible for color-blind people
- Making Adobe documents “readable,” and teaching students how to have their devices read the documents to them out-loud
- Using the accessibility function on Adobe documents
- How to work with students dealing with mental health difficulties
- Understanding how race and class might affect classroom “performance”
- Understanding confidentiality as it applies to disability-related information

After the personnel from accessibility services discusses these points and answers any questions that instructors might have, the activity can move forward to the second half of the group work where instructors will finish the following steps:

3. Discuss with one another how the rules and regulations on the syllabus do or do not align specifically with the learning outcomes. Discuss if any of those rules and regulations might be, in themselves, influenced by implicit bias.
4. Together in the group, adjust the syllabi so that it is more inclusive and accessible, and adjust so that the rules and regulations of the course contribute to the learning outcomes rather than just being imposed for the sake of being imposed.

Following the discussion within the separate groups, meet together as a larger group and have the instructors share some of the things they noticed and changed when they reworked their syllabi within their groups.

Who is on Your Syllabus Activity (45 minutes)

The final activity of the workshop should continue within the groups that the instructors are already separated in. In this activity the instructors will discuss what content is required for students to engage with according to their syllabi/course schedules, and they will work to change

their syllabi to be more inclusive and equitable. To do this, groups should do the following steps:

1. Have the instructors write/type or highlight all of the content that is required for students to engage with in this course. Most likely, this will be a variety of texts which could be readings, films, documentaries, advertisements, television shows, sports broadcasts, news broadcasts, podcasts, photographs, magazines, etc.
2. Then have the instructors identify what content on that list was written/created/produced by POC, LGBTQ+ people, women, indigenous people, those with disabilities, or those outside of white, heterosexual male identities. When instructors do have a good amount of content that comes from people beyond white, male heterosexual identities, have them look to make sure that all of that content does not fall into one or two weeks that focus on diverse populations to keep instructors from reverting to an additive approach.
3. Have groups work together to make their syllabi more diverse and inclusive. Have these groups pay particular attention to making sure that their course content does not assume whiteness as the norm. Have researchers that study diverse topics and/or librarians present in the room to help instructors find materials that can be useful for their courses.

Questions & Discussion (20 minutes)

By the end of these activities, instructors should ideally leave the workshop with a syllabus that is more inclusive and representative. Instructors should also leave with a better understanding about the multiplicity of identities that their students have, and how parts of their identities can make a learning process (based on colonial norms) more difficult for them. After going through each of these activities, there should be about 20 minutes left for an overall

discussion between all of the instructors that participated, where they can discuss things that they noticed or questions that they might still have.

Some additional resources for instructors to learn more are:

- The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom by Felicia Rose Chavez
- Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto by Kevin M. Gannon
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Pablo Freire
- Teaching Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy: Critical Reflections Inside and Outside the Classroom by Victoria C. Trinder
- Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Working Toward Decolonization, Indigeneity and Interculturalism by Fatima Pirbhai-Illich, Shauneen Pete, and Fran Martin
- Bell hooks trilogy: Teaching to Transgress; Teaching Critical Thinking; Teaching Community

APPENDIX B

Lighting the Way: Learning Inclusive Lighting Practices in Media Skills Courses

Overview & Rationale

One of the first places media students (journalism, ad & PR, communications, film, media arts, etc.) learn how to adequately use media equipment is in an introductory skills course. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Hussman School of Journalism and Media, that course is “Introduction to Digital Storytelling,” and at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, Media, and Integrated Marketing Communications it’s called “Multimedia Storytelling.” These courses teach students how to use media tools of camera, sound, lighting, video editing, photoshop, and web design.¹ This is essentially where students learn the “rules” to the “language” of media production.

However, these “rules” that have been canonized for us to teach in these courses are inequitable and outdated (Alemán, 2014, Romero Walker, 2020). Creating media following the “rules” also tends to misrepresent individuals that come from marginalized communities because the rules were made to display bodies from a normative perspective (Alemán, 2010; Dyer, 1997; Tordova, 2016). In order to make our classrooms (and our departments) inclusive and anti-racist, we need to address the inequities that take place in these introduction skills courses. As students accept the knowledge they learn from these courses as rules, they continue to produce

and perpetuate media messages that can be harmful to bodies that are not white, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied.

Scholars have illuminated how traditional methods of media making are not necessarily inclusive (Dyer, 1997; Green, 2013; Hawkins, 1998; Mulvey, 1975; Smelik, 2007). Additionally, examples of this abound in popular culture. For example, the disability rights community, and autism community in particular, expressed concern when the pop singer Sia produced a film that they deemed misrepresentative. The singer's response was defensive rather than apologetic (Willman, 2020). Additionally, when Simone Biles was featured on the cover of *Vogue*, critics were upset about the image styling and lighting of the photo by Annie Leibovitz, which left Biles' "dark skin looking flat, washed out and muted" (Cineas, 2020). There are many examples in popular culture in which the canonized language of media production results in misrepresentation, and the same is true in journalism, such as in conversations about expected dress attire for women on camera (Cirilli, 2018). Whatever medium it may be, there are consistent drawbacks to continuing to produce media in the same way that we did when the technology arose. In order to adequately decolonize media curricula, we must address in our classrooms the issues with canonized visual language and teach our students how to rather produce media that is equitable, inclusive, and truthfully representative of all bodies.

Theoretical Background

For this exercise, there are theories that the instructor must understand themselves so they can adequately teach this lesson. Additionally, there are several terms that should be used within the lesson so that students engage with critical theories in the media production process.

- Decolonizing Education: To evaluate, dismantle, and rebuild institutions, curricula, and classrooms. To rather critically examine the ways in which knowledge has a relationship with power systems that support colonization.
- Whiteness: The act of acknowledging whiteness as a race, as opposed to accepting it as the “norm.” Rather, we point to whiteness as a racial identifier.
- Color-blind Racism: An ideology that explains contemporary racial inequality as a result of “nonracial dynamics.” In other words, color-blind racism more casually allows whites to rationalize minorities disenfranchisement as something that occurs naturally as a result of their cultural limitations.
- Representations: Media representation can be described as the ways in which the media portrays individuals, groups, communities, and experiences from a specific ideological perspective. In visual media it could be the visual presentation of that individual, group, or community.
- Critical Race Theory: A theory that originates from the field of the law. This theory examines race and racism as it appears in the dominant culture. This theory works to understand systemic racism as it relates to the cultural perspective of race, racism, and power.
- Three-Point Lighting/Figure Lighting: Less of a theory, but an accepted norm of how to light interviews. Three-point lighting is the standard explanation of using three lights (key, fill, and hair light) to properly light up a scene.

Decolonizing education is a key term for educators to know and be aware of because the following exercise works toward the goal of decolonizing education. Additionally, decolonizing education requires the understanding that education has normalized white Western culture—that

is that **whiteness** has been accepted as the norm rather than a race itself. Whiteness is molded in the curriculum and the classroom—as is evident in the expected and constructed norms of media education particularly (Sleeter, 2010). Currently, classrooms are run in a way that exclude or marginalize Indigenous and non-Western cultures, and one way this is done in media classrooms is through accepting “official” knowledge systems that originate from Eurocentric perspectives (Tordova, 2016). Therefore, to decolonize the curricula, means that we “critically examine that knowledge [traditional school curricula] and its relationship to power, recentering knowledge” (Sleeter, 2010, p. 194). If we do not do this, we are simply contributing to methods of **color-blind racism** in our education system. Color-blind racism, “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (Bonilla-Silva, 2017, p. 2). Bonilla-Silva explains this further with,

Whereas Jim Crow racism explained [B]lacks’ social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as a product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and [B]lacks’ imputed cultural limitations. (2017, p. 2)

Through the lack of recognition of the racial inequities in our classroom, and little to no action put forth to address those inequities, we educators too contribute to color-blind racism in our classrooms. To combat this, we must actively discuss topics such as **critical race theory** and media **representations** with our students.

Critical race theory challenges the banality of racism and its influence on “the typical way in which life in the U.S. is structured in terms of law, policies, procedures and practices” (Knaus, 2009). Critical race theory examines relationships through hierarchies of power pertaining to race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This theory lets us as *educators* think

of how to make *the classroom* more inclusive and equitable, and it can help *students* learn how to make their *media products* more inclusive and equitable. Therefore, paired with understanding theories of representation, that illuminate how presenting bodies of individuals on a screen means representing those bodies in a particular way (Bennett, Grossberg, & Morris, 2005), students can work to be critical media producers that implement inclusive theoretical perspectives in their media products.

Lastly, because this lesson is about lighting, it is essential that both the instructor and the students understand the **three-point lighting** standard. This is the standard that will be critiqued. To properly question and critique three-point lighting, students should understand that it has become the accepted standard of lighting interviews. This lighting consists of a key light that features the long side of the face, the fill light that fills in the short side of the face, and the hair light which gives a halo-light glimmer at the top of the subject's head. This type of lighting has been standardized, but works primarily for those with white skin, thus not including lessons about proper lighting techniques for those with darker skin (Dyer, 1997).

General Timeline

The ideal lesson plan will take place within one 90-minute class session with an additional homework assignment given at the end of the class period. However, this could be produced in a 60-minute class period as well. I will supply the lesson plan for a 60-minute class session and will provide an additional exercise for the preferred 90-minute session.

Students will be presented with the description of the homework assignment at the beginning of the week. They additionally will be supplied with the syllabus on the first day of the course, which will state the required readings for this lesson. After this lesson/workshop during the class period, students will have one week to complete the lighting homework assignment.

The instructor can adjust the assignment requirements according to what fits their classroom best (be that if the instructor teaches within a journalism department, or a film department, their understanding of camera and lighting may have different expectations). Finally, for the sake of time and personal learning engagement, students should complete their readings required *before* this workshop class period.

Lesson Plan

Teaching Materials

Students should be given the following readings to read before attending class:

1. Richard Dyer – The Light of the World (pp. 82-103). <http://www.teachingmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Dyer-Light-of-World.pdf>
2. Anthony Q Artis – The Shut-Up and Shoot Documentary Guide (pp. 162-170). <https://amzn.to/2Z6f44g>
3. Not required for reading before class, but the instructor will also use this Twitter thread from @aundrelarrow to help students experiment with ways to light darker skin colors and tones. <https://twitter.com/aundrelarrow/status/977255014338002946>

The instructor will also need access to cameras, tripods, three-point lighting kits, light filters, and reflection disks. There should be at least three set-ups worth of equipment so students can work in groups. It would be helpful if the instructor had access to a studio setting, or if they are willing to walk the inside of the building and outside of the building to provide students experience of working with different backgrounds.

Step-By-Step

(20 Minutes – Setting-up Three-point Lighting)

The instructor will begin the course by discussing three-point lighting as it was described in the textbook reading. The instructor can choose to present this information in any way that they would like, but it should be presumed that the students read about the set-up, so this should not take very much time. I chose to have a student (or students) go to the board and draw what a three-point lighting set up looks like as I distributed the equipment to groups of students. In a class of 18-24 students, have them divide into groups of six where they will share the equipment and work together to set-up the lights.

After having demonstrated the standard three-point lighting, the instructor should show the students how to use each of the pieces of equipment. Students should set-up their equipment as the instructor shows them how to do so. The instructor should explain how to use each of the lights (key, fill, and hair light), what the lights purposes are, and how to place the lights. The instructor should also show students how to use the reflector disk and color filters. After doing this, all of the students should have their three-point light set-ups completely put together, and they should put another student in front of the camera to see how it looks.

(10 Minutes – Three-point lighting does not always work)

Next, instructors should bring up the Dyer reading students read, and discuss some of the main points in the essay. Instructors could facilitate discussion by asking some of the following questions:

1. Why did we do this additional reading and why is it important?
2. Why do you think people of color have been left out of the conversation of lighting for so long?
3. What have been some of the consequences (especially against bodies) to not adjusting the ways in which people of color are lit on camera?

4. What were some of the ways that Dyer mentioned we can change lighting to better represent people of color?

(30 Minutes – Finding the Right Lighting)

The last part of the 60-minute course should consist of the instructor working with students to find the best way to light people with darker skin. The instructor should ask one of the students of color before class if they would be okay with being the subject on the shot so the class can work to find the best lighting for their skin tone. If there are no people of color in the class that agree to this request, the instructor should see if they can have a colleague or friend come to the course to be the subject.

The instructor will supply students with the Twitter thread by @aundrelarrow to help them create a lighting set-up that works for subjects with darker skin tones. The instructor should be helpful and provide advice, but to instill an environment of a democratic classroom (Freire, 2018), students should work together to find solutions. Students should use methods such as reflecting light off of the walls, applying glimmer to the skin, using warm and cool light filters, and changing the background and location to best match the subject's undertones. After working at this until the lighting showcases the subject well, the instructor and the students will discuss what worked and didn't work in lighting a person with darker skin.

At this point the instructor should further discuss the homework assignment regarding this exercise with the students. If able to do the 90-minute lesson, the instructor would move on to the "additional exercise."

Additional Exercise (30-minutes)

The additional exercise will work on lighting interviews that feature more than one person. To further develop skills to light subjects equitably, one of the subjects should have

lighter skin and the other should have darker skin. Dyer discusses how on many film sets that include a person with light skin and a person with dark skin in the same shot, often the scene will be lit for the person with light skin thus leaving the person with darker skin in the shadows. It is essential that students learn how to light scenes with people with different skin tones, and that they know how to light them equitably. This will be an exercise that specifically requires them to build that skill.

Possible Homework Assignment

If the instructor would like to include a homework assignment regarding lighting practices, they can supply students with the following assignment description:

After class you should better understand the best practices for lighting individuals for interviews. For this assignment you will take still images of your subject(s) in a lighting set-up that you put together according to the following instructions.

1. Take a photograph of a lighting set-up with only three-point lighting for a person with lighter skin.
2. Make any adjustments to that three-point lighting set-up to better present your subject and take a photograph of that new set-up. Make note of what adjustments you made to make the visual better.
3. Take a photograph of a lighting set-up with only three-point lighting for a person with darker skin.
4. Make any adjustments to that three-point lighting set-up to better present your subject and take a photograph of that new set-up. Make note of what adjustments you made to make the visual better.

5. Take a photograph of an interview set-up using a window as a form of natural light to illuminate the image (use the window as the key light).
6. Take a photograph of an interview set-up that has two subjects in the shot. Make sure that you are lighting both subjects equitably as they will have different skin tones.

Include a written paragraph that explains some of the changes that you made to the standard lighting set-up to make the image look better. Additionally, discuss some of the difficulties that you had with preparing the lighting set-ups to take these photographs.

This paragraph should be 6-8 sentences long.

Rubric (100 points)

1. Compose the image in a visually appealing way. 5 pt. _____
2. The image focus is clear. 5 pt. _____
3. Adjust the white balance and exposure to adequately show the subject(s). 5 pt. _____
4. Use the key, fill, and hair light for original 3-point requirements. 15 pt. _____
5. Make adjustments (for points two and four) to better light the subject. 20 pt. _____
6. Use a window as the key light for point five. 5 pt. _____
7. Create adequate lighting for both interview subjects for point six. 15 pt. _____
8. Write a thoughtful reflection paragraph. 10 pt. _____

APPENDIX C

Monster Films for a More Inclusive Classroom Environment

Overview & Rationale

It is essential that we work continually to make our media classrooms more inclusive and equitable. This work is being done by many media educators who want their classrooms to be a space where students feel comfortable while they learn to be critical thinkers (Alemán, 2013; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Gannon, 2020; hooks, 2003; Tordova 2016). And yet, there is room for improvement—I argue specifically that there should be more discussion about the ways in which non-normative bodies are forced to orient themselves in environments that are not inclusive to them. One of those environments is the classroom (Brayboy, 2005). When we introduce the topic of non-normative bodies and identities through the lens of queerness at the *beginning* of a course, I believe that we show students that exist in “non-normative” bodies that we care about them. Additionally, we show all students that our classroom does not adhere to traditional classroom norms of whiteness and heteronormativity; rather, our classroom is a space of discovery and discussion.

In this section I will discuss the ways in which educators (in the conceptual classroom) can use monster films to introduce topics of inclusivity toward non-normative bodies. The monster films that I specifically reference (which demonstrate love and empathy toward the non-normative creatures in the film) showcase through metaphor that bodies we perceive as monstrous are not monsters at all. Using these films at the beginning of our courses also requires

students to engage with literature that discusses non-normativity, such as literature that explores queer theory and the act of “queering” media. In terms of classroom content, this sets the tone of the course, which begins with these rather abstract and non-normative themes and discussions, rather than first relying on canonized topics and principles that are centered from white, male, abled, and heterosexual norms (Pineau, 1994). This section will specifically use the films *The Shape of Water* (2017) and *Arrival* (2016) as creature films which feature important themes of queerness, empathy, communication, and inclusivity.

I specifically use creature/monster films because monsters and fantastical creatures have been used in folklore traditions and children’s narratives for centuries, specifically for the purpose of symbolism to discuss more abstract themes and concepts (Pickering & Attridge, 1990). These narratives beautifully work to express what can sometimes be difficult concepts to grasp, in a way that is accessible and easy to understand. Children’s narratives such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Harry Potter* series, and even *Winnie the Pooh* use creatures that might otherwise be scary, to tell stories of acceptance and friendship (Mizzi, 2019; Wolf, 2009). However, as creature films age up for audiences, they tend toward horror represented in the bodies of creatures. The symbolism in these monsters works to represent those we should fear and regard as the “Other.” Literature has explored how these formed monstrous “Others” have used symbolism and metaphor to stand in for women, feminine bodies, queer people, and raced bodies (Benshoff, 1997; Creed, 2005; Kennon, 2017; Tortolani, 2016). These types of representations are dangerous, and equate non-normative individuals with dangerous monsters and villainous creatures. However, I believe that we are presently in a time where these creature films are shifting to show the monstrous creatures that appear scary and dangerous as misunderstood and deserving of empathy. I specifically use *The Shape of Water* and *Arrival* to

demonstrate this, but an educator could also opt for *District 9* (2009), *X-Men* (2000-2019), *Hellboy* (2004), *Annihilation* (2018), *Ex Machina* (2014), or many others, to illustrate this modern-day trope. It is these films that can help students understand how to develop the skills of being open-minded, understanding, and empathetic in the classroom and in their media work.

I propose that using media that employs metaphor to promote being accepting and having empathy toward non-normative bodies, paired with the use of queer theory, can: show our students that we are working to decenter privileged bodies and perspectives, and help our students to critically analyze media they consume outside of normative critical studies practices.

Theoretical Background

- Queer theory: Aims to break down hierarchies and challenge normative knowledges and identities. Often has an emphasis on identity and performance, while destabilizing the concept of heteronormativity.
- Queer phenomenology: A view of queerness to examine how bodies are constructed through repeated practices that orient bodies to the social world. Looks at how heteronormative spaces require bodies to orient themselves according to heteronormative expectations, and if bodies do not conform to that orientation, they are seen as deviant.
- “Queering”: Emphasizes and uncovers non-normative sexual difference in particular, even if the dominant reading of a text might differ from the queer reading.
- Non-normative: Not conforming to or employing the social/cultural/expected norm.
- Decolonizing education: To evaluate, dismantle, and rebuild institutions, curricula, and classrooms. To rather critically examine the ways in which knowledge has a relationship with power systems that support colonization.

- Close reading: Observe facts and details of a particular text. Participating in a close reading should aim to notice rhetorical features, structural elements, cultural references, or specific selected features of a text. After the observational stage, one interprets those observations to draw conclusions about the text.

For this example, I am relying on the educator's understanding of **queerness** and **queer theory** to drive this lesson. Queer theory acts as a reaction to “an oppressive, heterosexist mainstream, and an approach to theory that focuses on social assimilation as its goal and has emphasized an essential notion of identity in order to foster collective activity” (Slagle, 2003, p. 130). It is true that queer theorists often illuminate how sexuality specifically influences the ways in which people communicate and behave, but the general term of queer theory is much more than that. Rather, queer theory raises challenges in terms of social values and fractured identities (Slagle, 2003).

A more specific sector of queer theory that I use in the classroom and in this lesson is **queer phenomenology**. This term was coined by Sara Ahmed and aims to look at orientation through different sites and spaces when thinking of gender, race, and sexuality. It focuses on the fluid person's experience existing and orienting themselves within spaces and temporalities (Ahmed, 2006). Ahmed suggests that queer phenomenology allows for an alternative view of queerness to examine how bodies are constructed through repeated practices that orient bodies in the social world. She further explains that our bodies are directed to perform and act according to the naturalized norms of the world, rendering queer bodies off-center within constructed spaces. She explains, “The work of inhabiting space involves dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 7). In other words, a queer subject is often forced to live within the space of a straight world and culture, meaning queerness/a queer body is

presented as socially deviant simply by existing in the heteronormative space. The queer body must orient itself within these spaces and exist uncomfortably in order to fit in. This concept is important to understand because it attaches **non-normative** ideas to the body. This theory can allow educators to discuss difficulty of orienting one's body in a space *because* that body is non-normative.

Queer phenomenology gives a word to that individualized experience, and allows students to apply it to the media that they consume. By having students apply this term to media texts, the goal is to help create a classroom environment that invites non-normative bodies and non-normative conversation. The act of applying this to a piece of media could be known as **queering** that piece of media. This means taking a media text and emphasizing the non-normative characteristics of that media piece. Queering works to deconstruct performative body expectations (with particular attention to gender and sexuality) as a social construction, highlighting the complexity of these identity markers (Lescure & Yep, 2015). To participate in queering, students must do a **close reading** of the media text (Brummett, 2019), meaning that they engage in thoughtful and detailed observation; recognizing patterns in language, structure, aesthetics, culture and representation, and specific selected features of the text. After doing so, they interpret the texts and make conclusions (Kain, 1998). In the act of queering the text, they would make observations and interpretations by viewing the material through a queer lens.

In participating in a queer analysis of a media text, this lesson hopes to invite an understanding of non-normative bodies to better decenter whiteness and heteronormativity in the classroom. This complements the goal of **decolonizing education**, and the conceptual media classroom in particular. Decolonizing education evaluates, dismantles, and rebuilds institutions

and curricula as they relate to the classroom (Sleeter, 2010), which is essential to making the classroom environment more equitable to all students.

General Timeline

The ideal lesson plan will allow students to review reading questions at the beginning of the class period, and then have students watch the film together as a class. Then, students should return to the course for a second day of the week and discuss the film together as it related to topics in the reading. This amount of time is not available to everyone, so the lesson plan can be adjusted to what works best for the time allotted, such as by having students watch the film outside of class and on their own time.

Students will be provided with reading and film discussion questions before doing their readings and watching the film together. There is additionally an option for a possible homework assignment if the instructor would like students to further engage in queering a media text.

Lesson Plan

Teaching Materials

Students will watch either *The Shape of Water* (2017) or *Arrival* (2016). Additionally, the following readings should be supplied:

1. Ahmed, S. (2006). Orientations: Toward a queer phenomenology. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12(4), 543-574.
2. Slagle, A. R. (2003). Queer criticism and sexual normativity: The case of Pee-wee Herman. In G. Yep. (Ed.), *Queer theory and communication: From disciplining queers to queering discipline(s)*, (pp. 129-146). The Haworth Press.

If the instructor chooses to watch the film as a class, they should have access to the film to exhibit. If they have students watch the film on their own, it should be made known to students how they can access the film.

Additionally, the instructor should have students download the GroupMe app so they can discuss the film using the chat platform at the same time they are watching it the film.

List of Discussion Questions for the Reading

The following discussion questions listed here are specifically in reference to the readings. These questions should be discussed before engaging with the film(s). I would give these discussion questions to the students ahead of time so they can think about them as they do the readings.

1. Ahmed discusses concepts of bodies and orientations to introduce the topic of queer phenomenology. What do you think she means when she says that bodies are “oriented”? How does she make the argument that bodies are specifically oriented toward “straightness” or heteronormative standards?
2. Can you give a real-world example of how you think our bodies orient according to heteronormative, white social/cultural expectations or “straight tendencies”?
3. After doing the readings, what do you think queerness/queer theory means?
4. The Slagle reading uses an example of a Pee-Wee Herman film to analyze queerness. How did he show that analyzing queerness differs from LGBT studies?
5. Additionally, Slagle explains the idea of a “straight queer” to talk about queerness outside of the bounds of sexuality. What does he mean by “straight queer,” and how did this explanation of queerness differ (or not) from your original perception of queerness and/or queer theory?

Step-By-Step

(20 minutes: Discuss Readings)

First, students should be required to read both the Ahmed and Slagle readings before coming to class. Additionally, I would recommend supplying them with the discussion questions before they do the readings so those discussion questions can help guide them in the note taking process. When students come into class, the instructor and students should discuss the readings and discussion questions. Before moving forward to watch the film, the instructor should be sure that students understand important points about queer theory and queerness in terms of analyzing media from a queer/non-normative perspective.

Instructors should tell students to keep in mind that they should be participating in a queer reading of the media text. The instructor should announce that students think about how they might be able to apply theories/methods from each of their readings to this media text.

The Shape of Water (2017)

The film *The Shape of Water* (2017) is approximately two hours long, meaning there must be enough class time to watch the film in its entirety. If there is not enough class time, instructors can choose an alternative option that works best for their course, such as to have students watch the film on their own time.

Have students download the GroupMe App (this is also something I would recommend be a part of the class regardless. Students like to have an easy and accessible space where they can talk to each other during the period of the course). Students should discuss with one another in the GroupMe thoughts about the film in general, and thoughts about how the film relates to the topic of queer theory, queerness, and non-normative bodies and identities.

(Next Class Period. Discussion should be approximately an hour long)

When the film is finished, the instructor will lead a class discussion about non-normative bodies and identities, and the ways in which empathy and understanding was (or was not) afforded each of the characters from one another.

To ensure a democratic classroom environment, the instructor should act as a facilitator rather than someone ruling the conversation. Allow students to drive the conversation, but make sure they are staying on track. Tell students to keep in mind that Slagle said that queer theorists try to illuminate how sexuality is a fundamental influence in how people behave and communicate to one another. He also said that queer theory reacts to oppressive, heterosexual mainstream norms and has the goal to foster inclusive and fluid notions of identity.

Understanding these points is essential to the process of looking at the film from a queer lens. To help with conversation, the instructor can use the following discussion questions:

1. In what ways did the film aesthetically invite concepts of fluidity and genre-bending?
2. How do we see queerness adopted by the fantastical creature in the film?
3. How did each of the characters demonstrate queer/non-normative attributes?
4. In what way did Mr. Strickland act as a barrier to the other characters? How did his character represent normative structures? And maybe even toxic masculinity?
5. How did the narrative work to help us as audience members gain empathy for the creature, and mistrust toward Mr. Strickland?
6. What do you think was the overall theme/message of the film?

If the instructor does not have the time for students to watch the film in class, they should instead provide students with the resources to watch the film on their own time. Students should still contribute to the GroupMe chat as they watch the film.

Arrival (2016)

Here I provide a second example of a creature film that can be used to help students discuss and understand the concept of queerness and non-normative identities. The film *Arrival* (2016) is approximately two hours long, meaning there must be enough class time to watch the film in its entirety. If there is not enough class time, instructors can choose an alternative option that works best for their course, such as to have students watch the film in their own time.

Have students download the GroupMe App. As they watch the film, students should discuss with one another in the GroupMe their thoughts about the film in general, and thoughts about how the film relates to the topics of queer theory, queerness, and non-normative bodies and identities.

(Next Class Period. Discussion should be approximately an hour long)

When the film is finished, the instructor will lead a class discussion about non-normative bodies and identities, and the ways in which empathy and understanding was (or was not) afforded each of the characters from one another.

To ensure a democratic classroom environment, the instructor should act as a facilitator rather than someone ruling the conversation. Allow students to drive the conversation, but make sure they are staying on track. Tell students to keep in mind that Slagle said that queer theorists try to illuminate how sexuality is a fundamental influence in how people behave and communicate to one another. He also said that queer theory reacts to oppressive, heterosexual mainstream norms and has the goal to foster inclusive and fluid notions of identity. Understanding these points is essential to the process of looking at the film from a queer lens. To help with conversation, the instructor can use the following discussion questions:

1. In what ways did the film aesthetically present both the humans and the aliens? How did it use specific media/cinema cues to disorient us as audience members?
2. What did the theme of “communication” mean in the film? How was this theme important in pointing to messages concerning non-normative/destabilizing actions?
3. How did Louise represent what Slagle called a “straight queer”? Or rather, what about Louise’s character withheld queer/non-normative attributes that made her different than other characters?
4. How did Louise’s approach, as opposed to the approaches of others, lead her to having a different relationship with the aliens, as well as the environment of the alien ship?
5. What do you think was the overall theme/message of the film?

If the instructor does not have the time for students to watch the film in class, they should instead provide students with the resources to watch the film in their own time. Students should still participate in discussion in the GroupMe chat as they watch the film in their own time.

Optional Homework Assignment

If the instructor would like students to further engage in the act of examining media from a queer/non-normative perspective, they can have students complete an additional homework assignment that requires them to pick a film on their own to analyze from the lens of queerness. I would recommend this be a short paper (2-3 pages) where students can engage with this lens of critical thinking using a media production that they enjoy. Following is an example of what the assignment description might look like:

Your short essay assignment should be 2-3 pages APA style (this means double spaced). This short essay is to showcase that you understand the basic principles of non-normative critical analysis. In this essay, I want you to do a textual analysis/close reading of a film of your

choosing. First, define and explain queer theory or queerness, and then I would like you to specifically analyze a film using the conceptual lens of **queerness**. Remember that queerness is an intersectional and non-normative way to analyze a text, which means you can also include discussion of race and class within your analysis. To “queer” something is to examine it outside of normative and general perspectives, so find a way to talk about the film you choose using queer theory and methods of analysis supported by critical thinking. When analyzing your chosen film, be sure to properly cite ideas and content that are not your own. Reference some of the readings that you have done from the course, as well as references from beyond the assigned readings. It is important that you understand how to support the claims that you are making to your audience (even if that audience is your professor). There should be a list of references at the end, maintaining APA style. Include at least four references.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html

Rubric (100 points)

1. Explanation of queerness/queer theory. 20 points
2. Describe a film example and explain how it relates to queerness. 10 points
3. Close-reading (the mindful, disciplined reading of a text to gain a deeper understanding of its meanings) analysis from a queer/non-normative perspective. 50
4. APA Style and References 10
5. Clarity/Spelling & Grammar 10

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