

***Media, making & movement:
Bridging media literacy and racial justice through critical media project***

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Peer-reviewed article

Citation: Trope, A., Johnson, DJ, & Demetriades, S. (2021). Media, making & movement: Bridging media literacy and racial justice through critical media project. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 13(2), 43-54. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2021-13-2-4>

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Received: March 1, 2021

Accepted: July 12, 2021

Published: September 10, 2021

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a theoretically-grounded case study considering the role of Critical Media Project (CMP) as an educational initiative and intervention that sits at the juncture of media literacy and social justice. CMP fills key gaps in media literacy education by using a critical media literacy frame to foster critical consumption, critical creation, and cultural competencies around seven key social identities (race and ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ+, socio-economic class, religion, ability and age). In turn, through a media-rich website, curriculum and other programs, CMP helps youth imagine a better future with the requisite tools, resources and power to challenge dominant systems and structures of power.

Keywords: *critical media literacy, pedagogy, antiracism.*



Journal of Media Literacy Education

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION (NAMLE)

Online at www.jmle.org

INTRODUCTION

In 1926, Langston Hughes wrote his now famous poem, “I, Too” in which he simply but powerfully reflected on what it means to be an American — specifically a Black American. The poem calls out Hughes’ experience of racial marginalization while also envisioning a future of inclusion and belonging through occupying a proverbial seat at the table. For Hughes, a seat at the table means more than simply being “there” — being visible; it signifies that he (as a stand in for his race) is recognized as “beautiful,” that he is valued and *worthy* of his seat. The poem continues to resonate as it touches on key issues that BIPOC (Black Indigenous and People of Color), and especially Black, individuals in the United States still face as victims of racism, discrimination, and violence while simultaneously struggling for belonging, visibility, and social, political, and cultural power. Over the ensuing years, this poem has been widely cited and repurposed to similarly call out and reimagine who belongs or “counts” in national as well as more localized and institutional contexts.

In education, the struggle over racial and ethnic belonging, visibility, and power surfaced with particular force in recent years as institutions, individual faculty and students, as well as media outlets called out marginalization and discrimination on campuses across the United States. In 2014, social media campaigns across the country followed in the footsteps of students at Harvard who had invoked Hughes’ poem in an “I, Too, Am Harvard” campaign highlighting Black voices and experience at the university (Butler, 2014; Lee, 2014). One year later, a University of Missouri student Facebook post citing racial and anti-gay sentiment spurred protests, sit-ins and boycotts among students, faculty, staff and — strikingly — the entire football team (Tracy & Southall, 2015). Such events, which gathered nationwide attention during the fall of 2015, served as a clarion call inspiring similar demands for change at other universities across the country. Many university leaders, fearful that their own football teams might stage copycat boycotts, leading to potential scandal and decreased revenue, scrambled to address racial tensions and “fix” their respective university cultures. These efforts and calls for change, some of which led to administrators stepping down as was the case with University of Missouri’s President, continued over the subsequent years. However, as the visibility of protests dwindled given the lack of media coverage, there seemed to be a corresponding shift in prioritization of these issues among university administrators.

Five years later, in May 2020, the urgency returned as we collectively witnessed the brutal killing of George Floyd at the hands of four Minneapolis police officers, one of whom knelt on Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes as he cried for help and struggled to breathe. The violent and callous nature of Floyd’s killing brought into high relief the individual and collective experiences of many other Black Americans whose racialized bodies continue to be overly surveilled and perceived as inherently and overtly threatening. Years after #BlackLivesMatter gained prominence as an urgent and hopeful rallying cry, the pervasive and persistent Othering of Black bodies like Floyd’s seemed to preclude Hughes’ hopes for a seat at the table. At the same time, Floyd’s death precipitated yet another (arguably more impactful) calling out of a long-overdue reckoning with systemic injustice and racism across a broad swath of American institutions, from politics to the justice system, from entertainment to education.

We see some of the same conversations recurring, especially in education, where many of these racial tensions had regularly surfaced over the preceding years. At the macro level, educational institutions are continuing to grapple with often lackluster diversity, equity and inclusion agendas as well as outdated curriculum and pedagogical practices, while at the micro level, students and faculty are calling out institutional and interpersonal discrimination and bias through social media channels such as Black@ Instagram accounts. With Floyd’s killing serving as a tipping point exemplifying police brutality against the BIPOC community and galvanizing a new wave of activism, the need to address and foster antiracist pedagogy and learning is being powerfully reaffirmed and reasserted.

While 2020 helped to refocus public attention on such antiracist interventions, the need is hardly new. Similarly, the need to address media literacy in our US education system is not a new imperative that suddenly arose at the start of the Trump presidency in 2016. With the widespread rhetoric around “fake news” emanating notably from President Trump’s Twitter account, the field of media literacy, the origins of which date back to the 1960s and 70s, is also having a moment of renewed attention. In response to the newfound appreciation of media literacy education’s potential to tackle so-called “fake news,” media literacy discourse across the United States has pivoted almost exclusively toward questions of veracity and credibility. Indeed, when politicians at the federal and state level call for media literacy education, they often frame it in the narrowest of terms, obviating and potentially marginalizing a media literacy

education that examines the ideologies and representational politics embedded in all forms of media. Without this representational lens, we lose an ability to use media literacy education as a way to explore social identities, see across our differences, tackle bias and hatred, and pursue social justice for all. While unlikely bedfellows, these events – the multi-year attacks on so-called “fake news” and ongoing police brutality against the BIPOC community — made visible and put into discourse stark pedagogical gaps and challenges our educational system needs to collectively address at a crucial juncture – one where racial justice and media literacy meet. In this regard, sustained and systemic change in education requires introducing and expanding media literacy as it is routinely defined and practiced.

Education in the United States was historically and fundamentally designed as a civic project aligned with democratic principles and access for all (Dewey, 2004). As a 21st century system, however, it does not fully or consistently operate equitably or inclusively in relation to curriculum, pedagogical practices, or the lived experience of those on campus. Education scholar Tara J. Yosso contends, “The school system and media are closely related and continually transmit their delusional ideas about race back and forth. This ‘double madness’ persists because both schools and media teach to a mass audience, using curriculum informed by racism, sexism and classism” (2002, p. 275). What would it mean to reimagine education so that it directly addresses this “double madness,” grappling with social identities and further encouraging students to think about questions of belonging, visibility, and power in relation to media consumption and production? What would it mean to use media and popular culture as a conduit to address these questions in order to foster student engagement, agency, self-efficacy and empowerment while pushing back against a one-size fits all mass audience approach?

These questions are central to the work of Critical Media Project (CMP) — an educational initiative and resource for instructors and youth that sits precisely at the juncture of social justice and media literacy. Critical Media Project was founded in 2013 to fill a gap in US high school education and student learning around media and representation. Its multi-pronged mission speaks to the need to reimagine media literacy education in relation to social identities. As indicated on the website’s mission page, CMP aims to foster *exploration* (observing and becoming cognizant of messages about identity that surface in everyday media and culture), *expansion* (understanding and gaining perspective on

the historical, social, and political contexts of media representations of different identities), *excavation and explication* (critically decoding and developing skills to analyze the meanings and ideologies behind various representations of identity across media genres and platforms), and *expression and engagement* (developing and deploying strategies and skills to create one’s own representations, tell one’s own stories, and create counter-narratives). It is through these specific identity frames and objectives that we explore CMP and its programs as a case study to demonstrate how our work addresses gaps in education as well as media literacy education.

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY: INTERROGATING THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

While media literacy has been incorporated into K-12 education for several decades in many other countries, the United States lags behind, refusing to make media literacy an educational priority (De Abreu, 2017; Galician, 2004; Kubey, 2003; McDougall et al, 2018; NAMLE, 2019). Until recently, there has been little, if any, federal or state support for media literacy efforts in primary and secondary education. For educators seeking to incorporate media literacy, there are several resources and organizations such as the National Association for Media Literacy Education, Media Literacy Now, Center for Media Literacy, and Media Education Lab. However, most public-facing media literacy organizations typically center their efforts on advocacy and provide text-only guidance and resources that remain largely descriptive in nature. Such resources are certainly important to the field and provide essential grounding in core principles and questions driving media literacy writ large, including how media is produced (authorship) and consumed (audiences) as well as the varied meanings and interpretations within media messages. These resources, however, typically do not include or offer a critical lens on *actual* media. Furthermore, they reflect a significant blind spot in the field as a whole; they lack an intentional and explicit integration of a justice, identity politics or antiracist frame. Responding to this gap, Critical Media Literacy emerged in the last two decades as a distinct subset of the media literacy field focused on the politics of representation (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Kellner & Share, 2007b; Pennell, 2019; Robinson et al., 2021), and “analysis of how historically disenfranchised groups are represented in media” (Share et al., 2019, p. 18). The

Critical Media Literacy Conference of the Americas has collaboratively conceived the goal of critical media literacy as engaging “with media through critically examining representations, systems, structures, ideologies, and power dynamics that shape and reproduce culture and society. It is an inquiry-based process for analyzing and creating media by interrogating the relationships between power and knowledge.” (Critical Media Literacy Conference of the Americas, 2021). This attention to social identity in media representation and its ties to structures of power is the core of CMP’s work.

The lineage of Critical Media Literacy can be traced to the work of Stuart Hall and others at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University also known as the “Birmingham School” (1964-2002), Paulo Freire’s classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), the New London Group’s conception of multiliteracies (NLG, 1996), as well as the work of critical race theory that developed in United States legal circles in the 1980s (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CMP’s focus on developing critical consciousness among its users calls to the fore the work of Freire, who used education to question and address social problems, thereby allowing students and educators to empower themselves in the process. In order to facilitate and buttress this kind of empowerment, Freire supported a process rooted in “listening, dialogue, critical reflection and reflective action” (Greene et al., 2018, p. 865). Critical pedagogy, in turn, works to “assist people in developing ‘their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world’ and strive ‘for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality’” (Yosso, 2002, p. 54).

Critical media literacy anchors itself in this kind of critical intervention and empowerment both by making visible structures of dominance and subordination while also pushing beyond analysis toward reflective action. As a methodology, then, critical media literacy embraces critical creation and curation as tools of self-identification, agency, and potential resistance (Greene et al., 2018). Tied to its roots in cultural studies and multiliteracies, critical media literacy offers both a theoretical framework and a practical pedagogy (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. xi; Mirra et al., 2018). It is both a mode of inquiry and study, asking questions such as “How do we read and decode the way different identities are represented or marginalized, stereotyped, invisible in media? What do these representations tell us about media power and ownership?” Critical media literacy is also a mode of production, asking “What does it mean

to tell my own story? How can I harness my own media power? How can my media production serve as a form of democratic participation?” The very structure and design of the CMP site work to highlight these two modes; “learning and doing” (as one of the site’s menu options) offers a way to navigate the site while also highlighting its focus on reading and writing, consuming and producing, analysis and making. With this dual approach, we apply a model recommended by Morell, Duenas, and Lopez, where technology needs to be used within the context of “critical frameworks to create learning communities where the use of these tools becomes an empowering enterprise” (2015, p. 14).

Following Freire and drawing on academic traditions and ongoing theoretical work in education, cultural and media studies, critical pedagogy, multiliteracies, critical media literacy, critical race literacy, and civic literacy (e.g., Hall, 1991; Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2016; Kellner & Share, 2007; Mihailidis, 2019; Mirra et al., 2016; Mirra et al., 2018; NLG, 1996; Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Yosso, 2002), CMP pushes beyond a conventional media literacy education paradigm that is protectionist at worst, and neutral, at best, in its approach to media artifacts and the creators and industries behind them (Fry, 2015). First, CMP provides a media-rich platform for directly and productively engaging youth in media literacy. Second, in adhering to tenets of critical cultural studies, CMP’s mission centers on promoting social justice by enhancing young people’s critical thinking about others, fostering understanding, empathy and respect, and building on their capacities as citizens and media participants to advocate for change. CMP both calls out and challenges stereotypical and discriminatory representations while offering perspectives and tools to help youth reimagine their futures, seed their individual and communal power, amplify their voices, and, echoing Langston Hughes, invent their own seats at the table. Through CMP, we strive to facilitate what Scorza et al. identify as “alternative practices that are academically empowering, civically engaging and supportive of positive identity development” (Scorza et al., 2013, p. 17). These alternative practices include the creation of counter-narratives, giving youth opportunities to push back, grow, and rewrite themselves through media creation and the generation of new and revisionist perspectives.

As an educational intervention grounded in social identity and justice, CMP concentrates on the politics of identity because we live in a society and through a media ecosystem that defines us by and through our varied and

intersectional identities. We also live in a society and within systems of power where inequities and injustices situate us, defining who we are and what we can be. Recognizing these fundamental social constructs and limits, CMP is designed as a social justice engine to identify and tackle systemic and normalized identity constructs that come to us through everyday life and, specifically, our everyday interactions with media. CMP's supplemental curricula and programming are also designed to help youth see and understand across differences — a fundamental necessity for living and engaging in a diverse and multicultural environment. For Kellner and Share, “multicultural education for a pluralistic democracy depends on a citizenry that embraces multiple perspectives as a natural consequence of varying experiences, histories, and cultures constructed within structures of dominance and subordination” (Kellner & Share, 2007a, p. 14). As the authors argue, critical media literacy not only critiques mainstream and traditional literacy frames, but serves as a “political project for democratic social change” (2007a, p. 8).

As a political project, CMP focuses specifically on the following categories of social identity: (1) race and ethnicity, (2) gender, (3) LGBTQ+, (4) socio-economic class, (5) religion, (6) ability, and (7) age. The list of identities is not meant to be hierarchical or definitive. Rather, within each category we identify and explore different sub-categories of identity as represented in specific media examples. For each of the seven broad social identity categories on the site, we offer a text-based socio-historical overview as well as a lesson plan and classroom worksheet to contextualize and complement relevant media examples. For example, in the race and ethnicity category, these materials provide an overview of key historical and theoretical concepts including the social construction of race and ethnicity and the concept of “the Other” as rooted in colonialism, immigration, and diasporic movements. As Yosso suggests, we address race and racism as “an inextricable, central component to the commercial globalization of media” (2002, p. 59). CMP's race and ethnicity topic overview further underscores the role media plays in perpetuating historical and contemporary stereotypes around racial and ethnic identities, asking us to consider the impact of media representation on everyday life and social emotional development. In considering such an impact, CMP takes on a practical dimension upholding and fostering experiential learning and engagement.

Theory into practice: The building blocks of critical media project

While the work of Freire and others on critical pedagogy, critical literacies, and critical race theory is well known and established, decades later we are still trying to determine the fundamental role these frameworks can play in practice in the US education system (Scorza et al., 2013). Indeed, as Scorza et. al. argue, the work of critical pedagogy often stands in direct opposition to neoliberal state and federal educational mandates centered on standardized testing, accountability, and “racing to the top.” Critical educators are often dismissed or criticized or need to work out of sight and on the margins. Our contention is that critical media literacy needs to be part of all education levels from kindergarten through higher education and integrated in a sustained manner so that the framework becomes normalized and a key part of the way we design and value education.

To this end, Critical Media Project was created to bring both critical pedagogy and critical media literacy into middle and high school classrooms, putting these theories into practice with functional, accessible tools and resources. CMP originated as an online repository, providing a curated and accessible selection of media examples that educators and students can use to critically analyze and discuss media representations of social identities. CMP has received an abundance of positive feedback among students and teachers alike, who have demonstrated enthusiasm and hunger for this kind of content. Our recognition of these needs has, in turn, motivated CMP's expansion of curricular resources as well as events and outreach programs with South Los Angeles schools.

Media repository

We believe that the best way to encourage media literacy is to provide the actual media examples for critical analysis, and further use them as models to inspire, reorient, and challenge oppressive cultural and representational norms. CMP's extensive collection of media includes over 600 examples from movies, television and streaming, advertisements, news and documentary, online viral videos and user-generated content. Each piece of media is tagged and categorized by identity (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender, religion) and media type (e.g., advertising, news and documentary, film, television and streaming, online and social media, user-generated content). Foregrounding the

intersectional nature of identity, a single media artifact may be tagged with multiple identity categories. In addition, the site includes a page where visitors can filter all media content by different identity categories in order to surface examples that reflect intersectional representations.

The website brings together and archives a wide array of examples that are historically and culturally contextualized. Each piece of media on the site is accompanied by a short descriptive annotation as well as discussion questions to promote critical engagement and thinking. The questions are designed to follow a “depth of knowledge” (DOK) framework (Webb, 2007), adhering to a trajectory which gains in complexity with each question, starting with observation and identification, moving to analysis and finally having users apply and extend to other examples beyond the specific media text at hand.

Curated playlists

While the site as a whole serves as a repository or archive, even with the tagging system we’ve found that the sheer amount of media can be overwhelming for visitors — whether teachers or youth. To address this and offer additional guidance to users, we have also developed a selection of curated “playlists” that home in on particular social identities or issues of media representation. Each playlist provides a selection of annotated media examples and discussion questions, which, when viewed in sequence, guide students through key dimensions, trajectories, and controversies in media representation. The structure of these playlists is designed such that they can be used as a stand-alone tool, offering a deep dive into a particular identity or issue area, or integrated as part of an expanded set of lessons. Importantly, they are also structured in such a way as to build through critical understanding and analysis to empowered making, typically beginning with the social construction of the respective identity, progressing through critical analysis of popular media representations followed by examples of activist and grassroots media, and culminating in a section titled “Your Turn!” that encourages students to produce their own media and directs them to media-making activities and resources on the site.

In addition to a dedicated playlist on each of the seven social identity categories previously noted (race and ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, LGBTQ, religion, ability, and age), we also are continually developing new playlists to extend discussion of these

identities in various contexts and respond to major social and political issues. These playlists cover topics such as feminism, immigration and the American dream; playlists on gentrification, the environment, cancel culture, body diversity, gendered violence, among other topics are also being developed in consultation with students and educators.

The CMP playlist on race and ethnicity was among the first created, guiding users through foundational concepts of stereotypes, diversity, immigration, and cultural appropriation related to the social construction of race and ethnicity. Responding to the brutal urgency of George Floyd’s murder and ensuing mass protests, in 2020 we added a dedicated playlist focused specifically on Black protest and social movements. This playlist in particular enacts CMP’s approach to antiracist pedagogy through critical media literacy as grounded in historically and culturally contextualized analysis, discussion-based reflection, and channeling critique into creative self-efficacy and empowerment. Connecting the past, present and future of racial justice, the playlist positions Black protest in the context of a 400-year history of oppression and resistance, exploring how various forms of media have portrayed these movements and the struggles and violence that precipitated them, as well as how activists and creators use media to advance their message and cause. In contrast to other playlists, which largely organize media examples thematically, the media in the Black protest and social movements playlist is organized by genre (e.g., documentary and news, film and television, music video, advertising) to bring into relief the ways different types of media have represented and framed protest and violence against Black communities. Some of the examples underscore divisions and silos among groups, while others focus on inclusion and unity. Examples also highlight different historical moments to show cycles, patterns, and departures in media representations—how we see the same power structures and systems reinforced or challenged over time. These varied portrayals in fiction and nonfiction media ask us to think about the roots of protest — the factors that instigate it — as well as how protest is castigated or valued in the context of social, political, and cultural change.

Among the media examples provided, for example, is the 1965 short film *Now!* by Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez. Pulling together found footage from newsreels and photographs and set to the song “Now” performed by actress, singer, and civil rights activists Lena Horne, the film documents the struggle for racial equality waged by Black people and their allies in the

face of violence, torture and death at the hands of the police and other White-led groups. The playlist also includes a number of user-generated media pieces, such as a viral Instagram video by 12-year-old Keedron Bryant singing an original song titled “I Just Want to Live” about his experience growing up as a young Black boy in America. In context and conversation with other elements of the playlist, such examples offer models of how media can be remixed and reimagined to create new forms of expression that challenge dominant and oppressive ideologies. Building on this trajectory, the playlist culminates in a call to action, providing resources for further reading and urging students to create and reflect on their own use of media.

Curriculum

For educators seeking a more structured pedagogical framework to adopt in full or integrate selectively into existing classes, we have developed an expanded curriculum that extends the core concepts and objectives of the Critical Media Project across 10 lessons. The curriculum encourages students to decode media representations, think intersectionally about who they are and who they can be, tell their own stories, and create their own representations. Rather than telling students what to think or attempting to protect them from media, CMP prompts complex and sometimes difficult discussions, challenging youth to examine questions of privilege and bias by having them consider where and how they and their peers are represented.

Informed by our work with schools since 2015, the curriculum is consciously designed to support educators in integrating critical media literacy in their courses, providing extensive lesson plans complete with prepared slide presentations, readings, discussion questions, and homework prompts. The lessons are particularly well suited to subjects including English Language Arts, social studies, media, and the arts, but they are highly adaptable and can be interwoven in a range of subjects to promote engagement and provide points of departure for existing lessons.

The 10-unit curriculum begins with a reflection on the impact of media in our everyday lives, followed by lessons on core concepts, challenges, and opportunities at the intersection of identity, power, and representation. In subsequent lessons, themes and topics progress through identity, intersectionality, power and ideology, stereotypes, media visibility, belonging and displacement, global perspectives, finally closing with a unit focusing on storytelling for awareness and social

change. Concepts and terms are grounded by extensive use of media examples, which are embedded throughout each lesson to illustrate ideas and prompt discussion and reflection. In line with CMP’s emphasis on bridging critical analysis and reflective action, each lesson is also paired with an assignment that allows students to put concepts into practice. The introductory lesson on media in everyday life, for instance, is paired with an assignment that asks students to prepare and reflect on a log of all the media they use and consume over a 24-hour period, building a more mindful awareness of media use at the individual level that then helps to inform and frame the rest of the curriculum. In the unit on belonging and displacement, students are asked to create a personal map of their communities that highlights spaces of inclusion and exclusion. The curriculum culminates with a video project prompting students to represent or advocate for an issue impacting themselves and their communities.

CMP’s “I Too Am” programs

In addition to our curricular interventions, we have established public programs that extend the outreach and impact of CMP. We selected the moniker “I Too Am” in order to directly reference Langston Hughes’ poem, and use it as an entry point to engage and highlight youth voices and experiences. CMP’s “I Too Am” programs include critical making activities tied to environmental education, public exhibitions, and cross-school collaborations. “I Too Am: Teens, Media Arts and Belonging,” brought the experiential and project-based learning of CMP to environmental education, taking youth from three South Los Angeles high schools to different locations and ecosystems around Los Angeles to reflect on the ways place shapes our identities. These critical explorations of place were aligned with critical making prompts, inspiring youth to create their own media meditations on place, power, identity and belonging. Youth created photo essays, soundscapes, and short-form documentary and experimental videos.

This program culminated in the “I Too Am” Media Festival that broadened the scope of participation by offering channels for youth from high schools throughout Los Angeles County to showcase and disseminate their media projects, which also examined identity in relation to larger structures of power — institutional, industrial and geographic. The “I Too Am” Media Festival offered hands-on workshops in zine making, storyboarding and music production. There were two guest speakers who spoke about their creative

and organizing efforts as youth activists. A public screening of media projects and numerous networking opportunities throughout the day rounded out programming for the event that was funded by a grant from California Humanities.

As of November 2020, we have been working virtually with four Los Angeles schools and one after-school program to implement our third initiative in the “I Too Am” series – the Critical Makers Lab, a six-part media-making workshop anchored in CMP’s curriculum and focusing on key themes of identity, place, belonging, visibility, stereotypes, and advocacy. Student media projects from the schools and after-school program are housed in a public-facing website where students can view the work of their classmates and peers from other institutions, thereby enriching our critical and creative community and strengthening our cross-school collaborations.

As part of the expanding CMP universe, these programs bolster our efforts to provide opportunities for youth that align with emerging formulations of 21st century civic education and literacy. No longer simply manifest in public debate and voting, today’s civic participation calls for justice-driven frames that focus on interrogation and civic innovation as well as agency and empowerment (Garcia & Mirra, 2020, p. 7). For the youth in our programs, the act of leveraging creativity and imagination to make media that interrogates social constructions while positing their own viewpoints and experiences is in itself a vital form of civic engagement in the digital age. It is with this mindset of civic engagement tied to social justice that our youth think, create and collaborate.

The struggle for racial and social justice necessitates a belief that change is possible, that a better world is not only desirable, but attainable. Through critical media analysis and critical making, youth are primed to engage the civic imagination, defined as “the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political or economic institutions or problems. Put bluntly, one cannot change the world unless one can imagine what a better world might look like” (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. 29). Through its various platforms and associated programs, CMP strives to develop self-efficacy in young people that supports robust civic participation in the modern sense.

As media and cultural theorist Henry Jenkins argues, “One also can’t change the world until one can imagine oneself as an active political agent” (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. 29). For many young people like those in our programs who have seen themselves, their families and

communities be systemically and systematically disenfranchised, believing in one’s ability to be an agent of change can be an incremental process. We believe, however, that the “act of defining and telling their own story or counterstories, through language, image and art is a potential first step toward creating the conditions for agency and voice” (Greene et al., 2018, p. 864).

The critical media projects that youth have created in our programs confront a range of “isms” — racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, classism, nationalism, homophobia — and the expressions of these biases through social practices that are far too often tied to violence; police violence, teen dating violence, domestic violence and bullying are frequently explored topics in the projects. On an affective level, fear, rejection, loneliness, misrepresentation and being invisible are common threads that bind these works with a degree of universality despite the specific histories and lived experiences of the young creators. It is through this vulnerability — its internal and external manifestations — that youth come to see one another across difference. Understanding, compassion, empathy, faith and belonging rise to the surface, as do profound revelations about their own self-worth and the value and beauty of their communities. They recognize that they are not alone in their struggles, that their voice matters, and that they can use it to advocate for positive social change.

The work of Critical Media Project creates multiple avenues to develop agency and voice amongst its youth through intersecting processes of critical digital consumption, critical digital production, and critical digital distribution. We envision our work and its impact on the social futures of young people as evolving along the lines of a pedagogy of critical digital invention that sees young people, “as not simply masterful and critical consumers, producers, and distributors of digital literacies, but as inventors with the competencies and dispositions needed to dream up digital forms of expression that adults cannot yet imagine,” forms that will disrupt and surpass the “circumscribed boundaries of mass media producers. Such practice is crucial to ensure that creative solutions emerge to tackle the most pressing challenges of the 21st century in compassionate and inclusive ways” (Mirra et al., 2018, p. 17).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION & EXPANDING THE CMP UNIVERSE

CMP is an ever-expanding initiative with a constantly growing archive of media, playlists,

curricular resources and programming. Pondering the initiative's future among our team of faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, has led to many productive conversations with an eye to developing new content, strategic planning, and assessing impact. It has also raised serious questions about how we address antiracist pedagogy among different audiences, and how we can help teachers facilitate productive conversations about identity that do not unintentionally reinforce bias, discrimination, and inflict symbolic violence on their students.

As a research collective, we also are continually struck by the role CMP can play as an educational intervention, a role for which there is urgent need. We opened this article by discussing the impact George Floyd's May 2020 murder and the ongoing police brutality on the BIPOC community have had on institutions across the United States. Within the same year, we can also point to brutal identity-based attacks and the rise in anti-Asian sentiment, the seemingly rampant extremism and white supremacist hate evidenced in the January 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol in addition to the many other BIPOC victims of state sanctioned violence. Reports of hate incidents in K-12 schools tied to race, immigrant status, LGBTQ+ identity and religion, especially anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate meanwhile, have also seen a significant uptick. In 2019, the Southern Poverty Law Center released a report, "Hate at School," in which they argue "schools are not hermetically sealed institutions. They are not immune from the political and socioeconomic forces gripping our nation" (2019, p. 5).

Clearly, it is crucial for educational institutions to address these forces that are engendering bias, discrimination and violence, yet it's also important to carefully navigate our interventions based on who we are addressing. Will antiracist interventions like those offered by CMP work equally well in *all* schools and among *all* populations of youth? Should it, or should we, have a more targeted approach directed at marginalized populations? Yosso argues against the latter approach:

Critical media literacy programs should not only be focused on consciousness raising with People of Color but also with whites. Certainly, issues of stereotypes, microaggressions, and inequality, as addressed in a critical media literacy curriculum, are important for both whites and People of Color to discuss. It is clearly not enough to have a one-time "dose" of critical media literacy. (2002, p. 59)

Following Yosso's logic, how do we reach beyond the "choir" whose lived experience and/or education

have steeped them in antiracist discourses? Do we need to adapt our materials for different audiences? How do we meet the needs of those who may be victims of dominant systems, and similarly connect with those who may benefit from these same systems and the status quo they construct? Another way to think about these questions is to ask whether all students and teachers (as well as families and community members) are ready and willing to embrace an antiracist pedagogy. In response to the August 2020 shooting of Jacob Blake by a Kenosha Wisconsin police officer, a fourth-grade teacher in nearby Burlington attempted to introduce antiracist pedagogy into her classroom. Parents accused the teacher of indoctrinating children, and controversy ensued spurring racist attacks against the school and instructor. This incident along with President Trump's establishment of a Patriotic Education commission alongside a White House Executive Order on "Combatting Race and Sex Stereotyping" (rescinded by the Biden administration's Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government), further raise important questions about (and potential obstacles in) how we introduce antiracist pedagogy, contextualize it, and apply it to promote dialogue and understanding at all levels of society (Fuchs, 2020). These are not isolated instances. The current incarnation of culture wars (also dubbed a war against "wokeness" in popular press) lambast and instill a backlash against identity politics (Tharoor, 2021). Rather than seeing across difference, difference is used as a means to justify discrimination and violence. Alternately, the reality of difference is negated to promote the misguided belief that we *all* have access to the same opportunities. Those who are invested in the status quo benefit from remaining blind to the history of oppression and its current manifestations.

This leads to yet another important question: how can we address the potential resistance and outright hostility (as manifest in the Wisconsin school example) to CMP's initiative and mission? If we cannot address all youth and teachers on an equal playing field, how can we help to ease the transition and seed investment in the value of critical media literacy and antiracist pedagogy? We do not have answers to all of these questions and, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall reminds us, we cannot account or control for all the ways in which the site, curriculum and specific media artifacts are "read" (Hall, 1991). This is also not our goal. Rather, CMP was designed to promote critical thinking and making, not to be prescriptive or tell youth (or their teachers) what to

think or what to create. It was also designed to be a living repository, one that is not fixed, but instead is nimble enough to respond to current events and address ever-evolving issues tied to social identities and media. We are constantly adding new media and resources while adapting or revising our materials.

Our intended goal to promote dialogue, empathy and understanding across difference is not an easy task, nor an easily measurable one. As an extension of CMP's current program, we look forward to expanding on the ways we can directly and more intentionally employ models of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in order to deepen youth-led knowledge building. This approach offers one way we can address some of our unanswered questions and more overtly integrate a model built on co-creation. Educational interventions using a YPAR frame in the last two decades have offered a potential path to rethink how we understand education and youth's role as drivers of change. The YPAR field originated in the early to mid-2000s as a way to develop a youth research methodology that fundamentally questions how knowledge is produced and by whom. For Mirra, Garcia and Morrell, YPAR can be seen as a "strategy to help young people develop critical capital and share their knowledge with society in order to agitate for social justice" (2016, p. 42). These education scholars have used YPAR successfully in practice in local high schools in Los Angeles to engage students in education research and train them in social science methodologies.

While YPAR has been used productively by critical education scholars for more than a decade, we would like to consider how we can use this framework paired with critical media literacy to think more broadly about the role media can play in producing and constituting knowledge among youth. Mirra, Garcia, and Morell (2016) had students engage in research about the education system. This research, in turn, necessarily surfaced questions about race, ethnicity and socio-economic status. What if YPAR was expanded to apply to fields outside of education? What if students were encouraged to use media as a research tool to gather and document data about issues impacting themselves and their communities? Some of this work has been done (as in uses of YPAR alongside hip hop music), but not in any systematic way through curriculum (Levy et al., 2018). Combining YPAR and critical media literacy could offer a productive intervention in which media analysis and media-making are positioned as non-traditional forms of research, writing and advocacy that similarly intersect with and substantiate the value of

identity as a site of inquiry. Paired with other critical approaches that underscore the visibility and import of youth voices, we view Critical Media Project as a creative solution that can proactively and productively address historical and contemporary social justice issues.

Finding, claiming, or inventing a seat at the table is no small task, especially given the way historical and fixed systems of power continue to dominate and shape most of our institutions, including education. To privilege youth voices in research and media-making is to position youth to imagine a better future with the requisite tools, resources and power to move and change these systems. It also allows them to develop a greater degree of self-efficacy and a deeper understanding of their self-worth. To that end, others must see and recognize the power and potential of youth to create a more just and equitable world.

A seat at the table is just the beginning. As one high school participant from our "I Too Am: Teens, Media Arts, Belonging" program summed up in her own "I Too" poem:

I too am.

I too am the people we look over on the streets.
I too am the beats we hum as music blasts on the stereo.
I too am...
The barbeques at the park,
The high school football games,
The short walks to the liquor [store].
I too am proud of where I'm from.
I too am, South Central, LA.

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