Sexual Harassment Effects on Bodies of Work: Engaging Students Through the Application of Historical Context and Communication Theory to Pop Culture and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Rarely do professors have the opportunity to branch out and create a course that is literally shaped by the day's news. The mediated unveiling of sexual predators in the summer of 2018 provided an opportunity to teach an honors seminar that wrote itself over the course of five weeks. Professors from the communication and history disciplines drew on theory commonly used in the communication discipline and used historical readings to frame a discussion of popular culture and its relation to current events. Each week, a film was incorporated for discussion and student projects were drawn from examples of popular culture, creating a course that allowed a historical and modern popular culture to collide. Students articulated the significance of both the historical context and rhetorical relevance in a fractured society. The course and its content continued to be discussed well after it ended.

Keywords: sexual harassment, Orwellian, LGBTQ+, #MeToo, framing, terministic screens

BABY, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE

The #MeToo movement went viral in October 2017 after Harvey Weinstein was accused of numerous accounts of sexual abuse. Alyssa Milano encouraged individuals to tweet #MeToo, the phrase coined by Tarana Burke in 2006, to demonstrate the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace (Garcia, 2017). The movement generated conversation about the treatment women endure, particularly in Hollywood, leading to allegations about other prominent celebrities, including Matt Lauer, Louis C.K., Charlie Rose, and Kevin Spacey. Bill Cosby was arrested in 2015 with an ongoing criminal lawsuit as the #MeToo movement gained traction (Ember & Bowley, 2015). What became clear from the allegations was that women, and men to a lesser extent, regularly endured abuse in Hollywood to avoid career-ending consequences in the form of blackballing. Consequently, two professors from two different disciplines, talked and texted each other about the latest news daily and a course idea was born.

As a professor of history and a professor of communication respectively, we both study and use popular culture in our classrooms, and so we started critically assessing our media choices. Should we exclude Bill Cosby despite his clear importance to television sitcoms and black actors in general? Should our movie collections shun the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, Roman Polanski, and Woody Allen with their known predatory offenses? Conversations with friends and family members revealed that while some were culling their collections, others viewed this as a non-issue. As we mulled over our responsibilities as educators, we realized that the tools for critical engagement present in uncertain times were exactly the type of application we wanted to provide students. Given the media's potential for shaping attitudes, it makes sense to have students engage in critical assessments of not only the media but the people behind its creation including the actors and actresses, directors, producers, and everyone in between. As prominent entertainers fell one-by-one to the #MeToo voices that would no longer be silenced, it brought up several pedagogical questions that became the focus of a five-week honors summer course, *A Wrinkle in Time: Sexual Harassment Effects on Bodies of Work*. The course wrote itself as the movement grew and articles questioning bodies of work appeared. Suddenly, an entire generation of John Hughes fans was disillusioned by the sexism and harassment normalized in popular films. Although this was our starting point, other media issues organically entered our course discussions.

WELCOME TO THE SHOW

The course began by introducing students to various theories commonly used in communication to frame the course and materials. Any number of theories could be chosen for this type of course, depending on the discipline, but we chose the overarching challenges of power (Foucault, 1982) filtered through media framing (Scheufele, 1999), and terministic screens (Burke, 1966). We also included cultural and queer studies.

Each week was designed for consistency in content. Mondays were theoretical foundation days, mainly in a lecture/discussion format. On Tuesdays, we would discuss the readings for the week, including chapters from Ursula K. LeGuin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* and bring in current events. Wednesdays were reserved for media think pieces, which were probably our favorite parts of the entire course. Thursdays were for film viewing, which was debriefed the following Monday.

The assignments were meant to incorporate the similar types of media we were assessing while asking students to reflect on the cultural implications of the #MeToo movement, #BlackLivesMatter, and similar social justice issues arising after the contentious election of 2016. Students created a weekly journal of current events, presented weekly media think pieces in class, developed a podcast and wrote a final paper over LeGuin's novel. There are many great writers, films, and scholars from which to choose, so this discussion reflects our biases but acknowledges other directions that could be taken for a similar course.

THE HEAT IS ON

The first week encompassed a brief overview of the theories and readings to be discussed in the course. Media framing explicates how media socially construct topics, shaping how the audience interprets and discusses public events (Scheufele, 1999). Essentially, by discerning what is highlighted in news stories, the media creates a lens through which a particular event is to be viewed. Importantly, the acceptance of these frames is dependent on individual frames of events. The course embodied this distinction as students were asked to examine media frames, and through critical discourse, analyze those frames via their own schema. The students also explored factors leading to particular media and individual frames.

Individual frames fit nicely with a discussion of terministic screens acting as filters for our perceptions of reality. Burke (1966) argues, "Even if any terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (p. 45, emphasis in original). Through this lesson, we helped students situate themselves within their terministic screens as determined by their own identities, attitudes, beliefs, social circumstances, and other variables that affected their perceptions of reality. They began to realize matters that seemed of little consequence to their daily lives took shape in what they chose to attend and to ignore. The reflection, selection, and deflection of reality through the use of terministic screens not only resonated with the students, but also affected their discussions throughout the course as they took note of what impacted them and questioned why some things remained off their radar.

It seemed fitting that a course shaped by women finding their voice against patriarchal power would start with Cixous' (1976) admonition to write, to tell their stories, defying those who would silence women. In a metaphor that defines the current straits, Cixous (1976) writes, "We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, we the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bevies – we are black and we are beautiful" (p. 878). *The Laugh of the Medusa* provided the forum for immediately delving into the depths where power silences, harasses, and assaults women, even denying them the rights to their own bodies (and bodies of work). In discussing power over the body, we also focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) representations in the media acknowledging the spectrum of gender and sexual identities.

Given the context of Hollywood, students were shown a segment from *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), a documentary based on the book of the same title providing a history of LGBTQ+ representations in film, including a discussion of the Hays production code that shaped and stifled Hollywood films. Students read Armond White's (2016) piece on *The Maltese Falcon* as an example of early queer cinema, and Daniel J. Leab's (1984) *How Red Was My Valley*, a history of gendered Cold War political repression. These enabled the discussion of *The Celluloid Closet* to segue into a broader focus of how media, power, and gender have intersected historically. Notable examples included Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)*,* and John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), where queer life is cleverly depicted flirting with the Hays code (White, 2016, 2017). The week culminated with the Billy Wilder film, *Some Like it Hot* (1959), about two men who dress as women to join a ladies' band while hiding from mafia hitmen.

While the pretext allowed Wilder to circumvent the code with respect to cross-dressing, the situations and dialog must have upset the censors. Joe E. Brown's character, Osgood Fielding III, for example, falls in love with Jack Lemmon's character, Joe. When Tony Curtis's character, Gerry, points out that this development could jeopardize them both and asks, besides, what a man could possibly offer him, Lemmon responds, "Security!" (Wilder, 1959). After Lemmon finally reveals to Brown that they cannot marry because he is a man, Brown responds, "Nobody's perfect" (Wilder, 1959). This still edgy, always entertaining, comedy allowed time to unpack a great deal of deep discourse while relaxing slightly as the first week came to an end.

As students began their own searches for media representations, the breadth of their research highlighted their pursuit of meaning in very difficult times. Student selections ranged from a satirical take on Harambe the gorilla's death to sexual imagery in advertising. With respect to the latter, we saw the first evidence of how gender can affect perception—men in the class were almost desensitized to the provocative imagery of advertising whereas several women pointed out that this was the burden they lived with every day of their lives and it affected not only how others saw them but, just as importantly, how they saw themselves.

The impact of the course was probably made the most clear through Childish Gambino's video *This is America* and the collaboration of Christina Aguilera and Demi Lovato for *Fall in Line*. Students saw that time and again the struggles of the past had been reimagined for the present.

FALL IN LINE

In the second week, which focused on the *Use and Abuse of Power*, Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* and Michel Foucault's (1982) *The Subject and Power* provided the foundation for discussing both power "with" and power "over" as seen in the kinds of social movements that have dominated headlines over the past few years. Foucault (1982) argues:

> there are three types of struggles: either against forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission). (p. 781)

These struggles are not without a form of resistance to sustaining current power structures. The ultimate creepy attempt to sustain white patriarchy, as presented in Bryan Forbes' *The Stepford Wives* (1975), demonstrated the use and abuse of power in a fashion that left students shocked and horrified. Based on Ira Levin's bestseller of the same name, the film presents a male utopia in which a community of businessmen conspires to murder their noncompliant wives and replace them with animatronic counterparts.

The literal destruction of women in the film brought to mind the previous week's discussions, in particular those involving the Lavender and Red Scares, which begged the question of how and why, in the 1950s and 1960s, both the U.S. government and the film industry sought to "destroy" through the persecution of alleged gay men, lesbians, and communists. (The class did not miss the "irony" of Roy Cohn, a closeted gay man who led the proverbial charge!) What role did power, for its own sake, play in this persecution? Reading Foucault established, at a minimum, the dualistic notion that those most subject to the whims and caprices of power typically exist in societies that rationalize its imbalance in terms of socially constructed "others." The influence of Foucault was seen in the example of Tzvetan Todorov's (1984) *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, which persuasively explained the mechanisms of abuse, enslavement, and genocide in precisely such terms. Inga Clendinnen's (1987) *Ambivalent Conquests* explained key episodes of church-sanctioned violence against the Mayan Indians in late 1500s Mexico as a horrifying example of social constructs, expectations, and power.

To what extent, then, did America, or any other nation for that matter, differ from 1930s Italy or Germany inasmuch as it willfully created and perpetuated negative stereotypes to justify abuses of power? As discussed in class, not content to stop at the vilification of Jews and communists, Nazis vilified gay individuals and women who pursued careers outside of their marriages and homes. The Lavender Scare becomes particularly troubling in that light. A discussion of power, fear, and the other was in order, along with a healthy dose of political skepticism courtesy of H.L. Mencken and Mark Twain, neither of whom had any use for fools, scoundrels, and politicians.

The assigned Mencken (1949) and Twain (1875) essays might best be described as a cynic's guide to

politics. Both men dismiss the empty platitudes of public service and focus instead on the naked ambition and absence of ethics that leads to corruption. Power, they suggest, is an end in itself, and any amount of lying, chicanery, and/or intimidation is justified in the attempt to acquire, maintain, and increase one's power. In short order, Twain's humor gave way to the deeply troubling implications of Foucault's work, itself hardly inconsistent with Twain's more facetious ramblings, especially with respect to politics, power, and gender.

Iowa State University's (1951) ill-conceived 1950s recruitment film for Home Economics majors is a case in point. The film's sins are many, from its saccharine narration to its assumptions regarding these future graduates' roles in society—teacher, cook, seamstress, and interior decorator would appear to be the limit to which Iowa State administrators believed young women should or could aspire. Worse, the narration not so subtly suggests that both college in general, and such career choices in particular, could help young women to find husbands—in short, their B.A. in Home Economics would naturally lead to the proverbial "Mrs." degree.

Student reactions ran the spectrum from feeling insulted to incensed. Especially troubling, in the estimation of several women in the class, were the film's assumptions regarding gender norms. Worse, as one student noted, the film was composed around very clear, and very black and white (perhaps literally given the complete absence of minoritized students in the film) beliefs about women and their place in the world. She went on to explain that it made one feel as though they were not welcome if they failed to conform to the expectations of the fabled Home Economics degree. Other students agreed. The ensuing discussion revealed that although the students believed universities have come a long way in their diversification and recruitment efforts since 1950, they shared the sense that American society as a whole still objectifies and imposes gender (and racial) expectations upon women.

Student presentations once again drew upon events playing out simultaneously in the news and around the world at the time. Family separations at the U.S.-Mexico border arguably garnered the most attention as multiple media clips served up instantaneous reminders of the week's lessons. In the summer of 2018, students seemed to conclude, the "other" had both a face and a socially-constructed identity as "criminals," "rapists," and "bad *hombres*." Such a suggestion that many asylum seekers might be "terrorists" virtually ensured the abuses that a significant portion of the U.S. tolerated might now be openly condoned.

SOMEBODY'S WATCHING ME

The *Language, Power, and Authoritarianism* unit of the third week built upon the previous unit drawing again on Burke's (1966) terministic screens through Rockler's (2002) critical analysis of the comic strips *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*. Rockler (2002) argued that African American and European American participants interpreted the comic strips through different terministic screens: the former through race cognizance, thus highlighting racial oppression, and the latter through Whiteness deflecting the relevance of racial oppression. An in-class viewing of *The Boondocks* elicited considerable student interest and led to a discussion on the terministic screens of the opposing narratives of current social movements.

Edward Said's (1978) classic work *Orientalism*, when paired with Rockler (2002), allowed students to delve more deeply into the mechanisms by which groups socially construct the other. That week, student journals reflected upon their terrifying consequences. Two students wrote about how the demonization of immigrants was enabling the separation and detention of families at the border; another wondered whether this "us" versus "them" mentality was contributing to a perceived increase in incidents of police brutality; yet another asked what it signified that post 9/11, the government itself had adopted such a mindset towards its own citizens, whom it now spied upon with regularity and, apparent impunity.

Although the George Orwell connection is obvious in the form of Big Brother, the very apotheosis of the surveillance state, it was his seminal essay *Politics and the English Language* (1946), along with excerpts from *1984* (1949), that provoked the most discussion. "Fake news" and "alternate facts", for instance, sound

precisely like the kinds of things with which Orwell's protagonist Winston might have dealt with in his struggle against Big Brother. Likewise, the notion of computer screens watching us or listening in on our conversations produced a clear feeling of discomfort in a classroom full of students who live in the world of smart-phones equipped with cameras, social media, and Alexa.

Orwell's emphasis on language juxtaposed well with the aforementioned Said and Rockler pieces. One student provided an item-by-item comparison of how two rival news networks framed very different narratives with respect to the family separations taking place daily at the U.S.-Mexican border. Video clips of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler established the historical backdrop against which Orwell wrote *1984* and led to two student media presentations that sought to define fascism and to determine whether, or to what extent, various television characters (and even the Trump administration) met the threshold for those definitions.

 In *1984,* the government possesses a monopoly on information, with Big Brother essentially being one large, state-controlled echo chamber. Big Brother's resulting ability to construct "reality" by controlling the press and rewriting history struck a note in class. With daily attacks on the press and claims of "fake news" from all parts of the globe and all parts of the political spectrum, the whole notion of a constructed "reality" led to a rapid and widely shared conclusion that sometimes the inexplicable behavior of entire groups of people was a result of their "living in a different reality." *Where* people got their information was now the first question posed by the students. It is also worth noting that questions about language, power, and authoritarianism extended beyond the more recent and prominent political events.

The Pennsylvania Attorney General's release of a damning report on decades of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church triggered a discussion on how the same questions of language, power, and authoritarianism applied to non-state entities. The television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a favorite of several students in the class and the focus of a student media presentation, led to some revealing conversation. Three young women pointed out that the story's setting in a society dominated by Christianity and the Church left them with a feeling of discomfort. As Christian women, they noted, they were seeing what might come of unchecked (in this case religious) zealotry in a setting of absolute power—the very essence of authoritarianism. If Orwell's cautionary tale was too emotionally and/or culturally remote, *The Handmaid's Tale* was a chilling reminder that, as Upton Sinclair once suggested, it could indeed happen here.

Drawing on the themes of language, power, and authoritarianism, the film *Brazil* (1985) is director Terry Gilliam's interpretation of *1984*. As one might expect, given Gilliam's past as a member of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *Brazil's* take on the unit themes took on a more surreal dimension than the original source material in *1984*. During a particularly graphic torture scene, for instance, a guard advises, "Don't fight it son. Confess quickly! If you hold out too long you could jeopardize your credit rating" (Milchan & Gilliam, 1985).

Students found the film difficult to follow. Their comments, though, were sobering. Conversations revealed that *Brazil* still has the capacity to shock, horrify, and confuse, but if filmgoers in 1985 saw only a nightmare worthy of Lewis Carroll, our class saw reflections of the present day. Thus, the differences were ones of extent. To wit, the film's premise that a single bureaucratic error, a typo in this case, could turn lives upside down (evictions, accusations, arrest, torture, and death) has become a living reality for many people in the twenty-first century. At the time we viewed the film, Wells Fargo was in the process of trying to explain how such errors led to thousands of homes being wrongly foreclosed. The plight of wrongly convicted innocent people trying to clear their names in cases that lasted years, if not decades, is no longer a mere work of fiction. If Gilliam's actors inhabited a Kafka-esque world, so too did real people. Students' reactions to the content of this unit, as well as previous ones, added a generational variable to the mix—whereas we, as members of Generation X, expressed a cynicism born of feeling betrayed by institutions, the students in our class represent the youngest of the Millennials and already possessed a very strong and healthy sense of skepticism when they came to the material.

YOU DON'T OWN ME

By the time the class entered the fourth week, the unit's focus on *Media Control* was a well-recognized theme. Born around the time that unscripted television was on the rise with *Survivor* and *Big Brother* debuting in 2000 (Sanneh, 2011), today's students see reality television as normative. What was shocking, then, about *Network* (1976) was not that it is about a network scripting the news, but that the film predicted what was to come. Directed by Sidney Lumet, *Network,* a shocking concept in 1976, is normalized today with the rise of programming that defies scripts and maximizes conflict. Reality television created the celebrity of Donald Trump, elevated a platform for the presidential candidate, and arguably got him elected as his candidacy was an extension of his reality television persona. As Howard Beale, played by Peter Finch, screams "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," so were millions of Americans in search of rhetoric outside of political norms. Perhaps not coincidentally, one of the student media think pieces for the week was from *The Newsroom*, where the character played by Jeff Daniels declares America is "not the greatest country in the world" ("America," 2012). Students noted the irony that reality seemed scripted after all.

The unrest following the election of Trump led to the Women's March on Washington on January 21, 2017, where more than half a million women gathered to fight for the protection of women's rights following his inauguration. Students read Nicolini and Hansen (2018), who analyzed the strategic communication choices of the Women's March and concluded that media outlets were largely influenced by communication from the leaders, but framed the narratives according to audience bias. The Women's March continues to be fragmented and plagued by criticism while still maintaining solidarity for some. The key takeaway for students was the strategic choices available when communicating important messages and the ability of a message to transcend typical outlets. These choices ultimately affect the long-term effectiveness of the message.

In the #MeToo environment, it would be an oversimplification to solely analyze the women of the movement's rhetoric. The critiques of these alone have demonstrated the problems arising from a homogenous view given the discontent of those leaders with disparate views. The fourth week's readings acknowledged that men and the media challenge the discursive nature of the women's movement.

The messages that were geared towards men as the movement gained traction centered on consent and a movement away from a society dominated by a rape culture. The students were introduced to the work of Jackson Katz whose books on masculinity and violence argue that men need to go beyond being good men who help women to being men who see their privilege and use it to eradicate violence against women. Katz had been a speaker on campus the previous spring so one student immediately loaded a TEDx talk given by Katz. In the example, the sentence "John beat Mary" is transformed to "Mary was beaten by John," which after a few additional adjustments becomes "Mary is a battered woman," removing all focus from the aggressor (Katz, 2013). Removing men from the equation removes them from accountability, but it also ignores the fact that men can also be victims of sexual harassment and assault. Another media example from students was Terry Crews testifying before Congress about his own Hollywood assault ("Actor," 2017).

Identifying a place for men at the table became a focal point as students considered how men could empower women to make positive changes. One student brought in the image of the cast in *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*, written and directed by men. The transformed gamers become avatars appropriately dressed for the jungle; except the female character dressed in a tight crop top and shorts (additionally, one female is given a male avatar, thus reducing the number of women by half). The students noted that the gaming world is replete with such obvious gendered differences that often sexualize women; yet, the actress went as far as to defend the costume choice (Cipriani, 2017), demonstrating hegemonic femininity. Another brought in a clip from *Grey's Anatomy* mirroring current events as a foundation leader is guilty of sexually harassing women resulting in a renaming of the foundation. The student asked, "But the real question is, does this act, in addition to giving the women their medical careers back, right the wrong?" Students concluded that men and women need to work together to change the ways that women are viewed and treated.

LAND OF CONFUSION

The last unit of the course had students diving into questions of identity and exclusion as they applied what they had learned. Issues of power and media control were juxtaposed against those of individual identity. Throughout the course, our students had identified as racial, sexual, and gender minoritized individuals so this discussion had become highly personal. Anzaldúa's *La Frontera* resonated with several:

> As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out, yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/ religious male-driven beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 103)

Students brought in videos such as *Being Latino in America Today* (2016) and Michelle Navarro's *Moving Beyond the Chicano Borderlands* (2018), both demonstrating the continued challenge of identity expression and belonging.

While the previous week's readings introduced Katz's insistence that men be included in the conversation about violence against women, this final week's readings looked at male identity more holistically. As with women, men have similarly been let down by societal expectations; expectations that, as the #MeToo movement has uncovered, have resulted in a violent culture. Rebecca Walker's (2004) *What Makes a Man* addresses the creation of male identity, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity through a series of essays from various authors. In Walker's (2004) essay, *Putting Down the Gun*, she explains the idea for the book, which was to recognize the expectations placed on her son to morph from a creative, empathic soul to a metaphoric and actual soldier ready for battle: "don't feel, take control, be physically strong, find your identity in money and work, do not be afraid to kill, distrust everything that you cannot see. Don't cry" (p. 4). The students were challenged to think about the social construction of identity; and specifically, how their own identities had been, and continue to be, socially constructed.

Challenges to identity expression are not just in relation to gender and racial markers, but also emerge from within the political environment. An assigned excerpt from Slavenka Drakulić's autobiography involved a chat with her censor, "'I don't look like what I am,' said the man's voice on the telephone, a little nasal but pleasant" (Drakulić, 1991, p. 76). It is curiosity that draws Croatian born Yugoslavian writer Drakulić to meet with Inspector M of the state security police (SDB) in charge of the press. Imagining something like the KGB as represented in film, Drakulić is eager to separate reality from myth. The SDB made sure media representatives fell in line with party expectations, but also created an auto-censorship whereby journalists questioned their every move, making the censor's job easier. As a class, we could not escape the parallels to a world where freedom had more to do with positions of privilege than an equitable right.

Representing government control and censorship, Francois Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) had students imagining a world of government control and censorship. Oskar Werner plays Guy Montag, one of the totalitarian regime's firemen charged with destroying all literature. As his supervisor reminds him, "You see, it's . . . it's no good, Montag. We've all got to be alike. The only way to be happy is for everyone to be made equal" (Truffaut, 1966). Montag is simultaneously the oppressor and the oppressed as the viewer discovers Montag's own obsession with books, an obsession that eventually has him switching allegiance. Returning to Foucault (1982), the class discussion turned to the destruction of books as, ultimately, the destruction of knowledge, and thus power, leading to complete subservience to the regime. Montag's subjugation ends with

a shift in his identity from fireman to one of the book people dedicated to keeping literature alive. Especially disconcerting to our students was the realization that they themselves, with their smart hand-held devices, had unwittingly given up the privacy Montag (and practically the whole cast of *Brazil*) so desperately desires.

As the students critically evaluated the readings and media representations presented in class, we challenged them to create a podcast consistent with the expression of their identity. They paired up to create a conversation via a 30-minute podcast that reflected their interests and style. Requiring students to share themselves creatively can unnerve the strongest of students. One dyad even labeled theirs, "Dr. Viz, you can't make us listen to this so we're leaving the room when you play it," (they didn't). Due to time constraints, we played approximately 5 minutes of each podcast and allowed for a discussion about their formats and topics. At the heart of our questions was how each student's identity was represented in their performance, which is very personal, yet important for considering how to move forward with the complex matters tackled in the course.

BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

A reflective paper based upon LeGuin's 1969 science-fiction masterpiece *The Left Hand of Darkness* served as the final assignment of the course, which allowed students to draw tentative connections and conclusions with respect to the various issues discussed over the previous month. We felt that this novel's use of fluid gender categories presaged current discussions of the extent to which gender is itself a social construct. In addition, LeGuin covered similar ground to that of previous readings. Despite, or perhaps because of, its roots in the Cold War, Vietnam, and the counterculture, *Left Hand*'s central themes of gender, identity, fear, and power resonated surprisingly well nearly half a century later.

The story follows Genly Ai, a diplomat from earth who travels to the planet of Gethen, the inhabitants of which live in monarchies, possess virtually no knowledge of other civilizations, and, most importantly, have no fixed sex. Rather, Gethens follow a monthly cycle called *kemmer* whereby they become increasingly male or female until such point that they may reproduce. Having borne children, Gethen "females" then become "male." Either partner can switch reproductive and gender roles during *kemmer*, such that there is no fixed gender identity. The Gethens, for their parts, view the cisgender Genly as a sexual deviant. To say that *Left Hand of Darkness* is a work about culture-shock would be an understatement.

Students quickly noted that LeGuin, like her protagonist, struggled due to the limitations of vocabulary. LeGuin, for example, used the terms "bisexual" and "ambisexual" almost interchangeably. Both suggest an underlying sexual dualism that fails to fully reflect the Gethens' sexual fluidity. The class pointed out that even a term like today's "pansexual" would have offered LeGuin much greater linguistic clarity and that today's understanding of gender as a spectrum (rather than binary) would have been a boon to Genly and LeGuin alike. One of the students, who identified as pansexual, led the way in showing that LeGuin's efforts notwithstanding, the author really struggled to successfully present a non-dualistic world.

The Gethens' suspicion and demonization of the other, in this case, Genly, was another theme that facilitated considerable discussion. The Gethens took great pride in the virtual absence of violence, sexual assault, and rape in their society, but when Genly subsequently becomes the target of palace intrigue and finds himself enslaved, he learns that such empathy applies only to members of their own community. Those who fail to conform to the sexual mores of Gethen may be enslaved and/or killed simply due to perceived differences. Gethenians face even worse prospects than Genly. While all deviants will be enslaved and worked to death in short order, Gethenians are forced to take drugs that suppress their sexual cycles. Given the centrality of *kemmer* to Gethenians' lives and identities, its sublimation or suppression effectively rendered them non-people.

In short, Gethen is no utopia and, sexual differences aside, the same kinds of divisions that led earth people to murder and wage war with one another existed on Gethen. Three students wrote specifically about such weaponization of fear (of the other) and how it corresponds to the current demonization of immigrants at the Southern border, to the rise of the so-called alt-right, and to attacks on the LGBTQ+ communities. Discussing *Left Hand of Darkness* against the panoply of real-life issues involving transgender individuals, same-sex marriages, race-baiting, and the seemingly ubiquitous daily refusal of some businesses to serve customers based upon their race or sexual orientation made it very easy for our students to forget that they were reading and reacting to something written half a century earlier.

The themes of power and authoritarianism served as similar reminders. Genly's travels take him to two separate nations on Gethen, Karhide, and Orgoreyn. These two kingdoms share a monopoly on information, and both, in varying degrees, view Genly's arrival and otherness as an existential threat to their continued rule. Of the two, Orgoreyn proves to be the more Orwellian as it is complete with a secret police organization to enforce conformity and to make undesirable information go down what Orwell referred to as the memory hole. If Genly's abduction and subsequent death sentence in a slave labor camp are the mechanisms of forgetting, his escape and contact with the earth is the act that undermines the entire political structure.

An excellent example of how *Left Hand of Darkness* served to pull together disparate threads of class discussion, one particular student paper noted that with the exception of its unique sexual politics, Gethenian society was almost certainly modeled upon the fascist regimes of the 1920s and 30s. As such, the aforementioned weaponization of fear, the demonization of the other, and manipulation of language were merely par for the course. The fears of Mencken and Orwell, both of whom wrote against the backdrop of the rise of fascism, had simply been realized. To paraphrase Twain, history does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme, even on the distant, imaginary planet of Gethen.

WOULDN'T IT BE NICE

Swept along by events and logistics, we actually changed the syllabus on the first day of classes as we began to consider the practicality of some of our ideas. Because we felt the students should shape the course, we sought their input and adjusted accordingly. That said, the current event journal and media think piece assignments could have used stronger differentiation and perhaps even some gentle prodding to stay more closely in tune with course themes.

We went into the course determined to make sure various voices were heard; we were, after all, discussing silenced voices. We believe we were only moderately successful as there were powerful yet long marginalized voices eager to be heard in the class, which created a slight groupthink. We slowly got wind of a mild dissenter in the group that we wish we had encouraged more for her to understand that her perspective was equally valued in the course. Early reflection assignments might have made us more aware of various positions to help us better moderate and support all the voices in the room. More discussion on individual frames could also have helped bring dissension to the forefront by generalizing various attitudes rather than attaching them to a personal view. Reflection assignments would have given us a better sense of the class "pulse", complete with all of its idiosyncrasies.

Finally, it would have been useful to spend more time with the readings. The downside to packing so much material into a single course was that not everything ultimately received equal billing. Detailed analysis and discussion of the readings is likely more possible in a full semester. To manage the reading expectations, providing some type of summary or outline of the readings to help students focus on the main ideas might have been more fruitful.

Well after it had ended, the course continued to evoke discussion among the professors and the students alike, as we would see each other on campus and note recent news and points we wish we could have discussed.

This is a fantastic issue to have because the lesson has been given the opportunity to outlive the class, which could solidify the importance of critical assessment in a news-weary world. Potential variations on the theme of this course allow historical and modern popular culture to collide, demonstrating the significance of both in a fractured society.

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