Black Media Literacy and the Pedagogy of Healing

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for *Dr. Jennesia Pedri* Communications 120W course *Creativity and Communication Across Media.* The assignment asked students to apply their knowledge of media literacy to address or intervene in a specific issue. The paper uses APA citation style.

This paper explores the transformative potential of media literacy as a liberatory tool for Black communities in North America. Media literacy offers a protective mechanism for Black media consumers of all ages, acting as a shield against the pervasive internalization of harmful stereotypes perpetuated in mass media. Proficiency in media literacy and production strengthens Black communities' self and group esteem by providing agency to create empowering counter-narratives through authentic self-expression, subverting dominant narratives. Media literacy serves as a tool to combat internalized anti-Black racism and enrich the pedagogy of healing.

Dominant narratives of Black people in mass media today stem from tropes used to justify transatlantic slave trade and a subsequent "system of racial domination" (Bogle, 1994; hooks, 1992). These racist tropes morphed over the years and persist through systematized policies, culture, and media. As active media consumers and creators, Black communities have historically found ways to create counternarratives for themselves and the international community. Critical media literacy can be applied to combat internalized anti-Black racism and enrich the pedagogy of healing in Black North American communities.

Michael Hoechsmann and Stuart R. Poyntz (2012) define media literacy as "a set of competencies that enable us to interpret media texts and institutions, to make media of our own, and to recognize and engage with the social and political influence of media in everyday life." The analysis of media literacy is interdisciplinary, drawing on many cultural and social science fields (Koltay, 2011). Media literacy encourages citizens to actively engage in the public sphere (Poyntz & Hoechsmann, 2012). Aufderheide (1992) says that "a media literate

person…can decode, evaluate, analyse and produce both print and electronic media." (Koltay, 2011).

Media literacy is politically-charged, and can be used as a tool for liberation (Livingstone, 2004). It is so powerful that, historically, media literacy was gate-kept by dominant groups to subjugate oppressed peoples. Throughout the transatlantic slave trade, traffickers were intentional in capturing West Africans from a diverse range of ethnolinguistic groups and mixing them on plantations to disrupt their ability to connect and plan emancipatory revolts (Briggs, 2022). Land-owning white men across North America also banned enslaved people and white women from reading and writing (Briggs, 2022). The criminalization of literacy was a deliberate effort to prevent them from empowering themselves. Just as media literacy was weaponized, Black communities have also used it as a means for emancipation.

There is great diversity within Black communities in Canada and America, and this paper predominantly focuses on the descendents of enslaved Africans. Black American identity and experiences are nuanced and complex, and can vary depending on factors like "an association with racial consciousness, class status, socialization practices, and proximity to group members" (Stamps, 2021). However, the bombardment of anti-Black mass media messaging negatively affects all Black and African diasporas, including people of immigrant and refugee backgrounds (Baker-Bell, 2017). Intersectional identities negotiate meaning differently and prefer various media based on lived experience like ability, religion, gender, culture, etc. Depictions of Black people in mass media can strengthen or weaken Black viewers' "self-esteem, group esteem, and perceptions about one's group in society" (Stamps, 2021).

Baker-Bell (2017) describes "the pedagogy of healing" as "two sets of tools: (1) tools to heal: acknowledging that the wound exists and identifying its culprit, and (2) tools to transform: responding to the wound using a tool that works to transform the conditions that led to the wound (e.g., critical media pedagogy, urban debate, critical language pedagogy, hip-hop based pedagogy, critical race pedagogy)." Black communities have always discussed and practiced collective healing from trauma inflicted by colonization, enslavement, and ongoing systemic oppression under white supremacy. Discourse emphasizes the need for a multi-pronged approach to Black healing, including but not limited to: reparations, political reform, cultural practices, psychoanalysis, and somatics (Herschthal, 2022).

Media literacy skills can be used as a protective mechanism, where Black people critically analyze and deconstruct media messages, recognizing the subtle and overt ways in which stereotypes are perpetuated. Contemporary media, through TV, news, social media, reinforce stereotypes of Black people being criminal *'dangerous others'* (Mahiri, 2004). Most discourse of media literacy's application in combating racism is focused on how stereotypes portrayed in mass media impact non-Black audiences' perceptions of Black people (Stamps, 2021). However, it is important to understand how Black audiences consistently being exposed to negative imagery affects self and group esteem. Contemporary scholar and activist bell hooks (1992) talked about Black peoples' dejecting experience with mass media that maintains a "system of racial domination". She explains:

> "For Black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted. Constructing images that promote racial inferiority contributes to a lack of empathy for Black life. Because of this lack of empathy, society becomes desensitized to Black suffering and Black humanity. These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair enter." (p. 4).

Critical media literacy skills play a pivotal role in combating internalized racism and dismantling the damaging effects of negative media (Erba et al., 2019). Throughout her life, hooks discussed internalized racism, which is racially oppressed groups' adoption of white supremacist mentalities. It can appear in the forms of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour believing stereotypes and/or loathing their own racial group (Nittle, 2021). By understanding the power dynamics within media, questioning the framing of narratives, and discerning the underlying biases that contribute to negative representations, Black audiences can be more self assured knowing that these depictions are not accurate reflections of themselves. Black people with higher media literacy skills are less likely to show signs of psychological distress or negative esteem in response to negative media (Stamps, 2021). Media literacy acts as a shield, enabling individuals to resist the internalization of harmful stereotypes and fostering a sense of agency over their own narratives.

Research on children's development and digital literacy shows that children are not passive consumers, but active creators too (Ching-Ting Hsin, et al., 2014). In an editorial titled *Why Black Girls' Literacies Matter,* Sealey-Ruiz (2016) affirms that "Black girls are taking to social media to self-define and reclaim their identities". Educators and literacy scholars are realizing the importance of supporting all students' digital literacy, especially Black girls' because of their intersectionalities, as they navigate wider cultural and socio-political contexts (Baker-Bell, 2017). Experts are developing curriculum to enrich Black girls' media literacy across modalities (Price-Dennis, 2016).

Although the exact terminology of 'healing' was not popularized until recent decades, Black women throughout history have long practiced self-empowerment and healing through creating counter-narratives, which are alternative framings told by groups that have been historically excluded, marginalized, or oppressed. Mary Ann Shad was a Canadian "educator, publisher, lawyer, [and] abolitionist" born in 1823 who became North America's first ever Black woman to establish a newspaper (Shadd, 2013). It was called *The Provincial Freeman* and it served as a powerful mass media tool to disseminate ideas within the community.

Double consciousness is a concept introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois in his groundbreaking book, "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903), which describes how African Americans experience two versions of themselves - how they perceive themselves compared to how white society perceives and consistently devalues them. Black audiences are constantly negotiating meaning when they consume antagonistic media as they experience double consciousness. Du Bois also states in his book (1903) that "the music is far more ancient than the words", referring to spiritual songs of enslaved African Americans as a form of self-affirmation and resistance.

Double consciousness is still present in contemporary music as Black people battle internal conflict viewing themselves against white dominant hegemonic society. Artists like Kendrick Lamar and Childish Gambino create art about identity and issues like systemic racism, gang violence, and police brutality (Caruana, 2015). In addition to the music, the visual imagery and sound effects incorporated into productions like Childish Gambino's *This is America* video are multimodal ways in which he conveys his messaging and affect. Teyana Taylor is another artist who broke through double consciousness when she produced her empowering song 'Made It' (2020), with the music video celebrating graduations

during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown despite personal struggles and systemic barriers.

Black people are increasingly asserting their presence in production, content creation, and critical analysis as they engage with the media daily. Gray (2005) argues that African-American culture is part of mainstream American culture, and also has an international reach due to American imperial domination of global media production. Representation is valuable, but that alone is not a marker of racial justice progress as there are still issues with misrepresentation and appropriation (Gray, 2005).

Filmmakers like Spike Lee, Shonda Rimes, and Jordan Peele are making history as a few Hollywood's most prominent directors and producers shaping Black cultural formation (Whitten, 2021). Issa Rae is quickly gaining influence by providing authentic portrayals of Black American experiences. Audiences are receptive to her forward-thinking and quirky charm reflected in her hit-series *Insecure*.

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, Black people coped with stress through culturally-specific memes, continuing the tradition of using humour as resistance to oppression (Outley et al., 2020). Humour on social media remains an effective strategy "to reclaim power and control in order to speak their truth all while cultivating individual and collective identity in/through leisure." (Outley et al., 2020).

Social media platforms like Twitter and TikTok provide a platform for social activism, development of culture, and coping through leisure (Outley et al., 2020). "Black Twitter" is a loosely connected online network and practice of Black users that engage in socio-political issues of concern to the community. Over the years, Black Twitter coordinates powerful, yet decentralized, activist movements such as #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) and #SayHerName. According to Pew Research Centre, "Black social media users are especially likely to use these sites for some forms of political activism" (Auxier, 2020). TikTok clips went viral of young people coordinating digital BLM protests on Roblox, a virtual gaming universe, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (@mrsiberiaa, 2023).

TikTok users from marginalized social groups combine their knowledge of social issues, politics, and technology's biases to engage in "algorithmic resistance" (Andalibi et al., 2021). Users regularly change their behaviors in coordinated movements in efforts to subvert the social media platform's suppression of marginalized identities. In the summer of 2021, young Black TikTok creators went on a strike and withheld from producing content in protest

of the app's racial bias. Black youth said that while they were the ones making viral videos and trends, white users were receiving the credit and benefits, while the original Black creators were overshadowed. Using a range of media literacy competencies, Black youth recognized the algorithmic suppression and also situated it in the historic context of cultural appropriation in the music industry and pop culture (Ile, 2022). The youth-led collective effort was effective in generating wide scale awareness of this social and technological issue.

Applying critical media literacy acts as a shield for Black media consumers, enabling individuals to resist the internalization of harmful stereotypes portrayed by mass media. Proficiency in media literacy and production strengthens Black communities' self and group esteem by having the agency to create empowering counter-narratives to dominant narratives. It serves as a tool to break through double consciousness, combat internalized anti-Black racism, and enrich the pedagogy of healing in Black North American communities.

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