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Teaching Intersectionality and Media: Editor's Introduction

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Teaching Intersectionality and Media: Editor's Introduction

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The U.S. women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s brought access to employment opportunities, abortion and contraceptives, as well as defined and criminalized domestic violence and sexual harassment. Many point to women's efforts to fight for sexual liberation and to redefine their cultural worth beyond their roles as mothers and wives. Yet, throughout these movements—then, and to this day—women of color, poor women, immigrant women, and queer women have grappled with their relationship to feminist claims of “sisterhood” and to the experiences of womanhood that have served as the foundation for mainstream liberal feminist politics and critique. They recognized that many political endeavors of mainstream feminism failed to account for experiences that fell outside the boundaries of white, middle-class womanhood.

Recognizing the complexity of identity and questioning a universal experience of gender, Black feminists in particular have promoted *intersectional* feminism. Intersectionality is a term coined by Critical Race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and has been employed and expanded on by other prominent feminists of color like Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and bell hooks (2000). Intersectionality insists that we examine relations of power and oppression through a lens that acknowledges the various aspects of social identities and systems of power that interlock to establish or intensify relations of inequality. Intersectionality calls for reflexivity and awareness of our own social positions. It makes visible experiences and effects of intersecting systems of oppression that often remain invisible through dominant analytical frameworks which tend to normalize dominant social positions or analyze systems of oppression separately. For feminism, “intersectionality adds nuance to understanding different sites of feminism(s) and the multiple dimensions of lived experience, it lends insight into interrelationships among struggles for liberations [...] and it shifts what counts as a feminist issue and what is included as a gendered experience” (May 2012, 165).

For critical media studies, intersectionality encourages an interrogation of media that acknowledges the intersecting gender, class, and racial dimensions of media representations, or what Hill Collins (2000) calls “controlling images.” Such images sell us limiting portrayals of marginalized groups or teach us which bodies, social positions, and perspectives are deemed valuable. Scholars and students of media studies can employ intersectionality to understand other cultural phenomena such as sexualization in media content, participation in online spaces, representation in media industries, audience analysis, and so on. For instance, feminist scholars and cultural critics have pointed out how popular culture provides limiting portrayals of black female sexuality and has more readily celebrated and articulated white women's display of sexuality with sexual empowerment (see Gill 2009, Lewis 2013, Springer 2008). As such, intersectional thinking reveals the ways in which dominant and stigmatizing discourses of non-white female sexuality have continued to marginalize many women in mainstream feminist sexual politics.



Overall, this special issue is prompted by two observations made by the editors of *Teaching Media Quarterly*. First, we recognize a popular embrace of feminism and even an enthusiastic endorsement of intersectional feminism. Yet, it is evident that embracing the label of “feminist” or “intersectional” does not guarantee a thorough understanding of these concepts. Specifically, we observe that students and educators—even those who identify as feminists and social justice advocates—default to additive notions of oppression or normalize white, middle-class perspectives and values. As such, we echo Vivian May’s (2015) concern about intersectionality being employed “in a token manner to account for a nebulous, depoliticized, and hallow notion of ‘difference’” (8). We think it is particularly important for educators attending to critical conversations about identity, power, and representation to ensure that they and their students have a solid grasp on intersectionality. Fortunately—and the second reason for this special issue—we find that many of our fellow media studies educators are eager for lesson plans that will help them foster a deeper understanding of intersectionality in the media classroom. This issue features three excellent lesson plans that will help educators do just that.

“Always Already Intersectional: Introducing Intersectionality in Large Lecture Courses” by **Nicole Hentrich** and **Annemarie Navar-Gill** offers a framework for teaching identity in introductory media studies courses that foregrounds intersectionality. Too often, media studies classes approach identity through an overview of disparate categories (e.g., race, gender, class), rather than emphasizing how identities interact to produce various experiences and understandings. The authors’ “intersectionality first” framework enables students to foreground the crucial concepts of power, ideology, discourse, and representation, providing the class with an excellent introduction to the core concepts of critical cultural approaches to communication studies. Designed for a large lecture course, but adaptable for smaller sections, Hentrich and Navar-Gill provide a detailed outline for four lectures, including learning goals, media examples, activities and writing prompts. Through an emphasis on active learning in a large lecture course, this lesson plan offers a thoughtful and effective intervention into understanding identity as always already intersectional.

Kathy Cacace’s “Sitcom Moms: An Intersectional Case Study of Gender and Labor” introduces students to theories of intersectionality through the highly ubiquitous figure of the sitcom mom, drawing on examples from popular programs such as *Leave it to Beaver*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Family Matters*, and *Fresh Off the Boat*. These varied media representations offer students examples of motherhood that both challenge and reify popular notions of the ideal mother as white, upper-middle class, and married. Students are asked to identify and articulate the multitudinous identities of the on-screen moms they observe, as well as incorporate examples from their own lives to better understand hegemonic representations of the mother through a meaningful, personal engagement with difference and experience.



Kristi Tredway's "Engaging Students of Intersectionality Through Sports Media: Using Women's Tennis to Teach the Matrix of Domination" engages with intersectional cultural critique through the application of Patricia Hill Collin's "matrix of domination." This lesson plan breaks down each aspect of the matrix: interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural. Tredway draws from well-known events to illuminate how the matrix operates. Then, by taking up women's tennis as a highly mediate domain, the author demonstrates how the sport and media discourses surrounding it can be analyzed through all four domains of the matrix of domination. From discussions of athletes making racist remarks to the U.S. National Championship's earlier regulations that systematically barred many women of color, Tredway's lesson plan encourages students to explore how power and oppression operates at various levels.

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