

2016

The Hunger Games: Understanding postfeminist and postracial ideologies

Sarah Kornfield

Hope College, kornfield@hope.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq>

Recommended Citation

Kornfield, Sarah. "The Hunger Games: Understanding postfeminist and postracial ideologies." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (2016). <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq/vol4/iss4/4>

Teaching Media Quarterly is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

***The Hunger Games:* Understanding postfeminist and postracial ideologies**

Overview

Gender and race co-construct. This means that cultural expectations for masculinity and femininity are imbued with assumptions about race (e.g. expectations for white men are different from expectations for Latino men). Likewise, cultural assumptions for how people from different races behave are shaped by assumptions about gender (e.g. expectations for how a black person or Asian person will behave are shaped by whether the person appears male or female). Since gender and race co-construct, “neither sexism nor racism will be rooted out unless both sexism and racism are rooted out together” (Bederman 1995, 239). That is, since gender and race co-construct, so too do sexism and racism.

Despite well-documented evidence of sexism and racism (e.g. unequal pay and housing discrimination), many students believe that sexism and racism are things of the past. By assuming that society is “post” the need for feminist and anti-racist activism, these students embrace the postfeminist and postracial ideologies that circulate throughout public and media discourse. The following is a discussion-based lesson plan that explores the intersecting forces of postfeminism and postracism by prompting students to critically analyze *The Hunger Games* (2012). Moreover, this class period helps students understand the role of technological surveillance (e.g. selfies and Reality TV shows) and performativity.

Rationale

Within media scholarship, the term “postfeminism” generally refers to the Western ideology that feminism is (or should be) over (Dow 1996; Projansky 2001; Gill 2007; Negra and Tasker 2007). Media entertainment embodies this ideology when it portrays a seemingly empowered heroine while divorcing her from collective feminist activism. For example, feminist media scholars have clearly demonstrated how postfeminism permeates the representation of characters such as Ally McBeal, Buffy, Xena, Lara Croft, and Carrie Bradshaw (Douglas 2010; Dow 1996, 2006; Hill 2010; Inness 1999; McRobbie 2009; Southard 2008). These media references, however, have grown stale with current students: even if they watch reruns of *Sex and the City*, students think of the TV series as a reflection of how things used to be—not a representation of current gender ideologies.

Media scholars often point out that postfeminism intersects with other post- ideologies. For example, Susan Douglas (2010) saw the same principle at work in postfeminist ideologies and postracial (or color-blind) ideologies: both ideologies are built on the principle that oppression is over and—therefore—activism should be over too. Thus, Douglas drew on critical race scholars Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis’s terminology “enlightened racism,” to re-label “postfeminism” as “enlightened sexism.” Although recognizing the intersection between post- ideologies, feminist scholars often focus on gender to the exclusion of other post- ideologies. Indeed, Douglas’ example demonstrates this point. By coining “enlightened sexism,” Douglas focuses on sexism as if gender operates independently from other social identities such as race, class, sexuality, and ability.

Working to help students understand that postfeminism is both a current force in our culture and intrinsically connected to other post- ideologies, this class period is designed to demonstrate how race and gender co-construct and, therefore, postfeminism and postracism also intersect. This is an entirely discussion-based class that gives students the opportunity to develop their own conclusions and so makes the material more relevant and meaningful. Through discussion, students learn to see these ideologies on their own, making it “impossible for them to unsee [them] once they leave the classroom” (Bock 2016, 2).

This discussion-based class period is designed for a class period that lasts between 50 minutes and 1 hour 30 minutes. Since this lesson plan requires students to read a substantive journal article, this lesson plan works best in upper-level courses (such as Gender and Communication, Media and Representation, or Media and Society). Additionally, since this lesson plan focuses on engaging the students in discussion, it works best in a course with approximately 20 students. If need be, instructors can adapt it for much larger courses by having students engage in small group discussions without having every group report back to the whole class. Instructors can also adapt this lesson plan for a longer class period by extending the discussion times and having more groups report their findings.

Students in courses such as Gender and Communication or Media and Representation often find themselves asking how they can enjoy entertainment now that they recognize the oppressive ideologies embedded in entertainment. When this occurs, I remind students of our analysis of *The Hunger Games* to help them understand how we can enjoy some elements of entertainment without consenting to all the ideologies presented by that entertainment. That is, we can relish the spectacle of a powerful female character and/or the excitement of *The Hunger Games*’ action sequences without consenting to the sexist/racist systems at work in the film.

General Timeline

Prior to Class

Students should read Rachel Dubrofsky and Emily Ryalls’ “*The Hunger Games: Performing Not-Performing to Authenticate Femininity and Whiteness*,” published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2014). I list this reading in the syllabus and build excitement for this reading by telling students that it is about *The Hunger Games*. Students should bring the reading and their reading notes to class so they can locate quotes and examples during class discussion.

I recommend hosting a viewing party for *The Hunger Games*, screening the film in a separate class period, and/or requiring students to watch the film on their own or in small groups prior to class. Although the assigned reading is quite descriptive and should adequately prompt many students’ recollection of the film, class discussion works best when the film is fresh in students’ minds.

In preparation for class, instructors should develop PowerPoint slides (or the equivalent) with key ideas and discussion prompts. See the Teaching Materials section for a layout of these slides and their content.

I recommend showing students the official theatrical trailer, which runs 2 minutes and 37 seconds and is available via youtube.com: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfmrPu43DF8>. When discussing the reading and film as prompted by the discussion questions, students often comment on a scene in which Katniss appears on a televised talk show prior to entering the arena. This scene showcases Katniss's "authenticity" through the camera work, muted audio, Katniss's explicit display of nervousness, and the contrast between Katniss's behavior and the glitzy performance of the talk show host, Flickerman. Katniss appears to "not-perform"; she appears authentic. Yet her performance is "authentic" by conforming to specific norms for white femininity. I'd recommend having this scene, which runs 3 minutes and 26 seconds, available on a tab in your web browser so you can show it when students bring it up during discussion. This scene is available via youtube.com at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2sXXG3tTaI>, and Dubrofsky and Ryalls discuss it on pages 398-399. Likewise, students often discuss the scene involving Rue's death and I'd recommend having it available as well. The scene runs approximately 3 minutes and is available via youtube.com at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ed5xIjGdqB4>. In this scene the camera work and lighting treat Rue similarly to Katniss—presenting Rue with a natural glow and tight close-ups on her face and eyes. Yet, as Dubrofsky and Ryalls discuss on page 401, Rue is "let in" to this "white aesthetic" in a way that centers Katniss as the natural and virtuous hero while Rue's character and background are entirely undeveloped.

During Class

This class session proceeds in four sections: First, an opening 10/15-minute discussion in which instructors introduce the key concept of postfeminism and postracial ideologies and then orient students to think about *The Hunger Games*. Second, a 15/20-minute discussion in which students work in groups to discuss how whiteness and femininity intersect. Third, another 15/20-minute discussion during which students work in groups to discuss how racial diversity functions in *The Hunger Games*. Fourth, instructors lead the whole class in a 10/15-minute general discussion of Dubrofsky and Ryalls's argument that *The Hunger Games* reinforces sexist and racist assumptions.

Lesson Plan

Opening Discussion

At the beginning of class introduce the concept of post- ideologies. I recommend Mary Vavrus' (Squires et al. 2010, 223-224) tri-part definition. Using postfeminism as an example, Vavrus explains that postfeminist ideology: first, celebrates the end of sexism, claiming that feminist activism has been successful in the United States. Second, postfeminism substitutes individual empowerment for collective activism. Specifically, it provides role models for female empowerment, but those role models achieve their empowerment by conforming to sexist stereotypes. Third, postfeminist ideologies blame feminist activism for making women unhappy by riling them up against falsely imagined sexisms and by pushing them towards trying to have more than an equal share—trying to "have it all."

Explain that this three-part “post-” ideology can be applied to other social movements. For example, postracial ideologies first celebrate racial equality, claiming that society is “color-blind.” Then, postracial ideologies substitute individual accomplishments for collective activism or broad-scale equality. For instance, a postracial ideology sees Barak Obama, Oprah, and minority athletes’ success as evidence of racial equality. Finally, postracial ideologies argue that people play the “race card” or otherwise use racial politics to rile up minority communities when those communities have no justified rationale to feel aggrieved.

Next, turn to the assigned reading by asking students to consider the Dubrofsky and Ryalls quote: “We begin with the premise that ‘authenticity’ is arbitrary ... not essential, determined contextually and situationally” (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 396). Ask students to briefly discuss this quote with their neighbors, answering the following questions: 1) What do you think this quote means? 2) Can you think of an example where someone (perhaps from another country/culture) was acting “authentically” by his/her own standards but you originally thought his/her behavior was pretentious, exaggerated, or artificial? Or vice versa (where you thought you were being normal/authentic and someone else thought you were pretentious, exaggerated, or artificial)? After students have talked with their neighbors for a minute or two, ask for two to three pairs to share their reflections with the group. As pairs share, reinforce that what is considered authentic (natural) behavior is culturally constructed. Our cultures train us to act “normally” and being “your normal self” is then considered “authentic.”

Then focus on *The Hunger Games*. I recommend playing the trailer and reminding students that it was first a bestselling trilogy and then mega blockbuster movies. *The Hunger Games* was the third highest grossing film of 2012, beating out that year’s *Twilight* film. Instructors can then point out that Dubrofsky and Ryalls clarify that the fictional “Panem” is a futuristic, post-apocalyptic North America (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 396). Leading a general discussion, ask students if they had noticed that Panem is North America when reading or watching the *Hunger Games* series. Typically, fans of the series are aware that Panem’s geography maps onto North America, with the “The Capitol” located in Colorado. Leading a general discussion, ask students why it might be important that *The Hunger Games* is set in a futuristic America.

Finally, highlight the ways in which *The Hunger Games* capitalizes on technological and media surveillance. Here, instructors can lead a general discussion of what Reality TV series students watch and how we can understand “The Games” with their constant surveillance, spectatorship, and audience interaction in relation to Reality TV series such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother*. I recommend spending no more than ten minutes on this opening discussion.

Discussion Groups: Postfeminism

Ask the students to break into groups of about four people for the next discussion prompts, ensuring that each student contributes to their group’s conversation. Display PowerPoint slide two, with its questions regarding “performing not-performing” and its connections to whiteness and femininity. Inform students that they have approximately seven minutes to discuss these prompts before reporting back to the whole class. While the groups organize themselves, finding quotes and examples and thinking through these questions, the instructor should visit groups answering any questions.

After approximately seven minutes, call the class back together and ask one of the groups to explain how they answered the prompts. If there is a need to manage time, rather than having each group subsequently report, ask subsequent groups to provide alternate examples or to elaborate on the ideas already presented. As the groups report back, instructors should keep a list of key ideas on the whiteboard by writing up key terms from the quotes and the different examples groups cite from the film's scenes.

The instructor should then briefly summarize the key findings. Working in small groups students usually arrive on their own at the following key ideas: Katniss “performs not-performing” by acting naturally or instinctively even in artificially contrived settings (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 398). Students often refer to her as a “girl next door” type of character. This “performing not-performing” is linked to her whiteness and femininity by the ways in which Katniss *effortlessly* embodies the standards of white feminine beauty (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 400). That is, Katniss does not engage in extensive grooming; instead, she is naturally beautiful and unaware of her own beauty (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 404). Unlike Effie whose skin is buried under white foundation (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 402), Katniss appears not to wear makeup. The media production elements (lighting, staging, etc.) ensure that Katniss is literally glowing and bathed in sunlight throughout the film—visually linking her to nature, goodness, virtue, and innocence (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 401). Allow approximately seven minutes for the groups to report back and for your brief concluding summary to these prompts. As you conclude this discussion, remind students of how the film portrays a postfeminist ideology: *Hunger Games* offers viewers an “empowered heroine” who hunts, fights, and wins without a second thought for her appearance. Yet, the film's narrative firmly grounds Katniss's motivation in traditional femininity through her maternal instincts towards Prim, and the production elements (camera work, lighting, etc.) continually emphasize Katniss's traditionally white-feminine beauty.

Discussion Groups: Postracism

Then, move on to the third PowerPoint slide, asking the students to form new groups and to again find a quote from the reading and think of an example from the film, but this time regarding how diverse skin tones *function* within the film. Again, ask the groups to spend approximately seven minutes preparing their answers.

Draw the class back into a full discussion, asking groups to report on their findings; as groups report, develop a list of key ideas on the board. Again, allow approximately seven minutes for groups to report and for you to briefly summarize their key findings. In my experience, students typically note that the presence of racial minorities sets a tone of “everyone is equal” or “race doesn't matter” in the film (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 400). Minority characters, however, are cast in stereotypical and sacrificial supporting roles and a white actor portrays Katniss' character (which was not definitively white in the book versions—the descriptions of her fit a mixed race, Latina, or Middle Eastern individual) (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2015, 400-402). Thus, the film feels post-racial but ultimately maintains the racist hierarchies in which white people represent heroes and people of color represent sacrificial and/or stereotypical secondary characters. Ultimately, by incorporating many diverse skin tones, the film feels (to many white viewers) like a picture of diversity while it maintains racist hierarchies.

Closing Discussion

Finally, move to the fourth discussion slide. With the remaining ten minutes of class time, lead the class in a general discussion of these three questions. I recommend briefly addressing the first question (Katniss is always already a mother through her relationship with Prim, and her heroism is derived from her desire to protect Prim rather than a desire for communal justice or a revolutionary spirit), and then asking students to take a minute or two to jot down notes and ideas for the next two questions. This gives the students time to gather their thoughts before sharing their ideas with the rest of the class.

During this final discussion, students tend to connect the dots, recognizing an interweaved system of oppression: Katniss appears in U.S. culture as a postfeminist, postracial role model but *The Hunger Games* recreates familiar systems of oppression by portraying female “goodness” as derived from maternal instincts and whiteness. Through this discussion, students recognize *The Hunger Games* as a type of “Trojan horse,” since it appears as a pro-women and pro-diversity story but ultimately affirms existing systems of sexism and racism.

I typically close the class period by cautioning students that they are unlikely to find fully empowering or liberating representations in blockbuster entertainment. To be a blockbuster film, a narrative must conform to dominant ideologies with historic, political, economic, and cultural roots. Thus, we should not be surprised that blockbuster entertainment reinforces existing stereotypes and re-creates familiar patterns of oppression.

Teaching Materials*Reading*

Dubrofsky, Rachel and Emily Ryalls. 2014. “*The Hunger Games*: Performing Not-Performing to Authenticate Femininity and Whiteness.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31: 395-409.

Film Trailers and Clips

The Hunger Games: Official Theatrical Trailer. 2012. YouTube.com. Accessed September 28, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfmrPu43DF8>.

Katniss’s Talk Show Interview with Flickerman. 2012. YouTube.com. Accessed December 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2sXXG3tTaI>.

Rue’s Death Scene. 2012. YouTube.com. Accessed December 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ed5xIjGdqB4>.

Additional Preparation Material

In preparation for this class period, instructors may find the following news article helpful:

Stephan Lee. 2012. “*Hunger Games*: A Great Map of Panem—Photo.” *Entertainment Weekly*,

March 22. Accessed September 15, 2016. <http://www.ew.com/article/2012/03/22/hunger-games-a-great-map-of-panem-photo>.

PowerPoint Slides

Slide 1

- Post- ideologies
 - postfeminist ideology
 - postracial ideology
- Authenticity and Performance
- *The Hunger Games*
 - Panem = North America
 - Reality TV and Surveillance

Slide 2

- Answer the following questions by 1) finding a quote from the reading that relates to your answers and 2) choosing an example from the film that exemplifies the concept you're discussing.
 - What does it mean to “perform not-performing?”
 - How do the authors connect “performing not-performing” to whiteness?
 - How do the authors connect “performing not-performing” to femininity?

Slide 3

- Answer the following questions by 1) finding a quote from the reading that relates to your answers and 2) choosing an example from the film that exemplifies the concept you're discussing.
 - What does the portrayal of diverse skin tones do in the *Hunger Games*?

Slide 4

- Dubrofsky and Ryalls argue that “good women are always already mothers” and women’s heroism in U.S. media representations stems “from their maternal instincts and conventional heterosexual [white] femininity” (p. 407).
 - What are some examples of this from *The Hunger Games*?
 - Why do the authors think this reinforces sexist roles, racism, and oppression? Do you agree? Why/why not?
 - Why do the authors think it matters that Katniss is generally heralded as a female role model and pro-women character? Do you agree? Why/why not?

Bibliography

- Bederman, Gail. 1995. *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bock, Mary. 2016. "The News Flip Exercise: Finding Patriarchy, Racism and Other Forms of Bias in Language." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 4: 1-5.
- Douglas, Susan. 2010. *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism's Work is Done*. New York, NY: Times Books.
- Dow, Bonnie J. 1996. *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Chicago Press.
- Dow, Bonnie J. 2006. "Conversation and Commentary: The Traffic in men and the Fatal Attraction of Postfeminist Masculinity." *Women's Studies in Communication* 29: 113-131.
- Dubrofsky, Rachel and Emily Ryalls. 2014. "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-Performing to Authenticate Femininity and Whiteness." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31: 395-409.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2007. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10: 147-166.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2009. "Beyond the 'Sexualization of Culture' Thesis: An Intersectional Analysis of 'Sixpacks,' 'Midriffs' and 'Hot Lesbians' in Advertising." *Sexualities* 12: 137-160.
- Hill, Lisa. 2010. "Gender and Genre: Situating *Desperate Housewives*." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 38: 162-169.
- Inness, Sherrie. 1999. *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Negra, Diane and Yvonne Tasker, eds. 2007. *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Projansky, Sarah. 2001. *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Southard, Belinda. 2008. "Beyond the Backlash: *Sex and the City* and Three Feminist Struggles." *Communication Quarterly* 56: 149-167.
- Squires, Catherine, Eric King Watts, Mary Douglas Vavrus, Kent A. Ono, Kathleen Feyh,

Bernadette Maria Calafell, and Daniel C. Brouwer. 2010. "What is this 'Post-' in Postracial, Postfeminist ... (Fill in the Blank)?" *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34: 210-253.

Biography

Sarah Kornfield
Hope College
Kornfield@Hope.edu

Sarah Kornfield (Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Hope College, where she teaches and studies how gender is constructed, portrayed, and mobilized in public culture. Her research is published in journals such as *Women's Studies in Communication*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, and *Communication, Culture, and Critique*.