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Critical Media Literacy, LGBT Representation, and Blurred Realities

BY SHANTE ESPERICUTETA (WITH LAURA NAVA)



INSIDE THE DIGITAL CLOSET WAS SCREENED AT THE 5TH ANNUAL DAVIS FEMINIST FILM FESTIVAL IN 2010.

I N 2009, I enrolled in Dr. Rhonda Hammer's Critical Media Literacy course because I was interested in media literacy and wanted the opportunity to produce a video documentary. On the first day of class, I was apprehensive and even had second thoughts about staying, especially after the students from the previous year presented their projects. These were amazing, especially taking into account the fact that most had never produced before taking this course, and I doubted that I could ever accomplish a similar feat. Yet, a year later it was the short documentary made by my group, called Inside the Digital Closet, which received similar acclaim. It was only then that I truly appreciated the empowerment of this experience and realized that the critical theories and skills

I had learned in this course were practically applicable to other projects, assignments, and events and activities in everyday life that are not necessarily related to media because I came to realize that there is no one absolute truth but rather different and multiple realities and standpoints.

My group learned how current media creates problematic and often harmful stereotypes that are essentially oppressive to the community. Our group decided that the central topic of our project would be the misrepresentations of queer people in the corporate mass media. We wanted to distinguish between the meanings of what it is to be queer and queer theory with that of LBGT (Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Gay, Transgender). Unlike much of gay and lesbian

studies, which focus on the “recovery of gay experience,” queer theory “builds upon critical challenges” to the idea that gender is part of the essential, normal, primarily biologically determined self, rather than being largely, “a social construction of sexual acts and identities” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_theory). As cultural critic Alice Echols (*Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks*, New York: Columbia University, 2002) describes it: “Queer theory calls into question the conditions by which binary oppositions (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) are produced” (140). In other words queer theory and activism “contests the idea of sexual identity as stable” or fixed (p. 140): “Whether in the political or academic arena, queerness involves a critique of normalization” and what is often labeled as peculiar or even deviant (p. 141). I feel confident that we accomplished our goal, in that our short documentary examines ways in which current popular media misrepresents the queer community relating to issues such as promiscuity, ridicule, and abnormality. We integrated clips from real-time television as well as from scripted shows to illustrate these stereotypical portrayals and included interviews that help to define, analyze, and further question these portrayals.

When we presented the project in the final class, in front of our fellow students, family members, friends, professors from the Departments of Education and Women’s Studies at UCLA, and Dr. Hammer, I was anxious but confident that it would be well received, but it was only after I saw it on the screen with an

audience—and heard their applause and praise for the project—that my nervousness subsided. Considering the praise that *Inside the Digital Closet* had received, Dr. Hammer encouraged us to enter it into festival competitions. We had intended to do so but never found the time. Nonetheless, Dr. Hammer took it upon herself and entered it into a festival, and for her efforts on our behalf I will be forever grateful! One year after its production, we were surprised and excited when she informed us that *Inside the Digital Closet* was one of the 19 chosen—out of more than 150 submissions from around the world—for public screening at the festival.

Although the festival was a bit of a trek to attend, I could not have missed seeing our film played on a big screen. I was anxious as to how the other filmmakers would receive it. In spite of the butterflies in my stomach, my heart was pumping with adrenaline in both anticipation and excitement. I was introduced to Michelle Yates, the festival’s director, then to other filmmakers and artists from the community. They were all eager to hear about my experiences in Dr. Hammer’s class, as they had heard about it from other students who had presented the festival. I had no idea that this festival was so prestigious, and I want to stress how this screening has opened up further opportunities for the group, given that we were now considered to be successful video/filmmakers. At the opening of the festival, I was introduced to the audience as a first-time filmmaker, and I beamed with pride as I stood up and waved to everyone in the auditorium. The director of

the event praised Dr. Hammer and her course, which is widely respected within the progressive film community.

After a few films were screened, the opening scene of our film appeared. The butterflies disappeared and were replaced by a feeling of accomplishment and intense joy as I viewed our film in the company of hundreds of people. I will never forget the applause and praise, including that from my friends who seemed impressed by the quality of the production, which they knew was my first attempt. This experience further revealed to me how privileged I was to have gained the skills to create a film that examines a topic that is too often considered taboo. I can honestly say that creating this film and seeing it on the big screen at a film festival stand as the proudest moments of my academic career. For that, I am forever grateful for the opportunities that taking this class has provided me. Taking this course was a life-changing experience for me, and I plan to employ and pursue critical media literacy in my future endeavors.

A recent graduate of UCLA, Shante Espericuteta holds a B.A. in Sociology and Women’s Studies. Planning to pursue a career in social work, she is currently applying to graduate programs for Fall of 2011. She works full time for Victoria’s Secret as an intimates category manager, volunteers at her local YMCA as a day-camp coordinator and enjoys training for half marathons.