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# Armed through Education

BY MICHELLE MEARLETTE-HERNANDEZ

## VOTING IN BLACK AND WHITE: POLITICS OF RACE AND GENDER IN AMERICAN CULTURE

# Armed through Education

### *THE POWERFUL INTRICACIES OF THE VIDEO-MAKING EXPERIENCE*

**BY MICHELLE MEARLETTE-HERNANDEZ**

**A**S A UCLA UNDERGRADUATE, I had the great fortune to be a student in Dr. Rhonda Hammer's "Critical Media Literacy and the Politics of Representation: Theory and Production" class. As a result of her dedication and organization of a diversity of class components, we gained the skills necessary to speak another language—the language of media representation. To be more effective, the class was divided into small groups based on shared interests, which allowed us to immediately focus on the final class assignment, which was the creation of an alternative critical media production that addressed issues and/or relations rarely depicted in mainstream media (and/or those which many believe are often misrepresented in popular culture.) Given the stereotypes of current students as being literate in new media technology, it is surprising to

discover that the majority of the students in my class had little expertise. No one had experience in video production and editing or in developing a media piece. Hence, the members of my group, which included myself, Darlene Edgley, and Vivian Lealiiee, had doubts about whether or not we would be able to complete our group project. In fact, before taking this class, I believed that filmmaking (that is, media storytelling) could only be achieved by "real" film or video makers.

Since we had to develop a general theme for our production by the second week of class, our group decided that we would take on something "simple" that addressed how consumerism shrouds our nation and hinders too many of us from being involved in the political process. Rather than telling us outright that this topic might be too expansive for a ten-

minute production, Dr. Hammer advised us to use this idea as a general framework for our documentary. She also reminded the class that our project would take on a life of its own and possibly move us in another direction, despite hours of storyboarding, gathering images, and shooting and collecting video. This turned out to be the case with our production, which we entitled Voting in Black and White: Politics of Race and Gender in American Culture.

We became interested in—and kept returning to—issues related to divisions of race and gender associated with voting and voting rights in the United States. Moreover, given our own standpoints and experiences as women of color, we were especially interested in media representations.

For example, because of my non-traditional identity and experiences, I don't fit the ste-

reotypical demographic of the typical college student and am often overlooked at UCLA. I realized that this was due, in large part, to mass-media images of 35 (and older) women as married (or divorced) and/or as mothers whose lives primarily revolve around domestic household jobs. In contrast, my roles were that of full-time caregiver to my chronically ill mother, full-time college student, and full-time worker. Unlike the dominant stereotype, I am also single and have no children. Yet, I discovered that I am, in fact, a positive role model for other women who want to pursue their education and return to school, despite the hurdles of age and other responsibilities. For example, I have encouraged two of my friends to enroll in night classes. In fact, all of the women in my project group lived diverse and non-traditional lifestyles, which hardly matched prevailing media representations, or lack thereof, given our “invisibility” in so many domains of media culture.

It is within this context that an examination of the 2008 contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democratic presidential nomination became especially relevant. This contest provoked us to examine the realities of disenfranchisement in a so-called democratic society, especially in relation to gender and race, which is too rarely addressed in commercial media culture or even within institutions of higher learning. Indeed, these kinds of social movements are even ridiculed in what many (mis)identify as a post-feminist or post-racial society, as is often the case with

portrayals of the suffragist movement of 1848 to 1920. It, hence, became important to us that we include an historical account of some of these struggles in our documentary. This decision was, in part, informed by the emphasis of the course on theory, which included critical media literacy and cultural, antiracist, feminist, queer, and other perspectives that were concerned with representations of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and age. It is crucial to note, however, that an especially unique aspect of Dr. Hammer’s critical media literacy course is that it is not solely a media production course but is designed to integrate critical media literacy and to be inclusive for all levels of video, film, and new media experiences. Hence, it is not surprising that the course attracts a majority of students who are marginalized in different ways and affords us the opportunity to engage and share our own personal perspectives and experiences with one another.

Taking advantage of the classroom forum to discuss the development of our project, we decided to document this monumental event and attempt to capture the importance of this occasion. As this was a significant occasion, as it was the first time in US history that the two leading contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination were a white woman and a Black man. This was, in fact, incredibly serendipitous, given our interests in the intersectionalities of gender and race, and thus inspired us to contextualize this event within the historical framework of what has been called “The Reconstruction Era,” a period that had afforded

such radical changes in relation to rights of Black men, and later women, in that they were finally recognized as citizens. It was within this framework, that we went on to demonstrate, in our production, how these political struggles paved the way for the establishment and support of these two candidates.

## **PRODUCTION PROCESS**

We were surprised to discover how these same issues—related to resisting bigoted views and practices—were actually correlated with events and attitudes expressed during the 2008 Democratic Party primaries. And, as a result of this, our group’s focus took shape. Although the workload was more than we initially anticipated, we found ourselves obsessed with both the topic and process, which spurred us to work weekdays and some weekends, as well as to pull a few all-nighters. Much of this time was spent constructing a number of montages, which depicted the development of the Reconstruction period, juxtaposed with footage and photos from the suffragist movement, political resistance in the 1960s, and the media frenzy surrounding the 2008 Democratic Party primaries. Throughout this process, we learned how to find and download historical film footage photos, which included how African Americans were barred from voting. And even though this can be especially time consuming, we were delighted to discover how much archival footage featuring the civil right movement and other social justice movements of the 1960s is readily available—if you know where to search.

It was through this process that we also discovered and learned more about the struggles of women—many of whom were actively involved in abolitionist organizations. This led us to reexamine and incorporate key visuals and discussions of the political intents of civil rights and women’s liberation movements. We found that relations of bigotry, bias, and discrimination—although hardly symmetrical to that of racism—were similar to the kinds of hostilities and sexism directed at the early suffragist movement, which protested against the gender bias that prevented women from being able to vote. Moreover, given the intersectionalities between race and gender and that it was only African American men who were finally recognized as fully “human,” and afforded the right to vote through the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, we demonstrate in our documentary that it was only through the efforts of the early women’s movement in the U.S. that all women—especially women of color (many of whom were in leadership positions in the movement)—were afforded the right to vote, through the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which, unbelievably, was ratified in August of 1920, fifty years later.

We then went on to combine much of our archival footage with that of coverage of the 2008 Democratic primaries and laid down a powerful soundtrack to accompany these images. To further articulate and strengthen our examination, we cut in historical stock images, including photographs from the civil rights movement, 1960s social justice groups,

and public protests. Rather than employing a scripted narration, we interviewed a diversity of activists and concerned citizens, in order to critically engage the history of bigotry in the U.S. (which many argue continues to exist) and to highlight the kinds of progressive changes, which were (counter to many revisionist scenarios) provoked through political movements, in conjunction with public protests, in a diversity of forms.

Unfortunately, due to the state of contemporary mass media—which is now almost totally owned by large corporations that actively censor and manipulate form and content—massive political demonstrations and people’s opposition to global and national policies and events are virtually ignored. This is especially problematic given that media culture is a powerful force for shaping people’s values and perceptions of the world they live in. Hence, media is one of the most important instruments for the communication of ideas, values, false representations of everyday practices, and so-called common-sense reality to a broad spectrum of local and global audiences. Therefore, having the hands-on experience of constructing our video project from idea to completion—which included carefully selecting video footage, interviews, music for the soundtrack, as well as stock and filmed dialogue and images—assisted us to better understand that what we see in print, film, and television is actually carefully constructed and mostly controlled by those in positions of power behind the camera. It is vital to democracy to represent an all-inclusive spectrum that includes

race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and other marginalized relations and to actively resist the dominant “invisibility” that characterizes much media of the past and present. For, as cultural studies expert Stuart Hall reminds us, inferential racism and sexism is often reinforced through lack of any representation of “othered” peoples in media culture.

On the successful completion of our project, we felt an enormous sense of pride, power, accomplishment in our newfound abilities to tell powerful stories. When we screened our project to the entire class in a festival-type forum at the end of the quarter, we invited our families, friends, and significant others to take part in our successful media production experience. It was also extremely heartening to see a number of faculty and staff in attendance at this screening. I am delighted to report that the audience applauded our project with enthusiasm, which was most definitely music to our ears.

## **IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY**

Our experiences in the “Critical Media Literacy” and “Media: Gender, Race, Class and Sexualities” courses provided us with the necessary skills to be able to critically decipher stereotypical media representations and convey an alternate view that challenged the norm. These two classes provide students with the tools to become critical thinkers, which empowers us to view media and the politics of representation through a new lens. The media’s influential power continues to impart restrictive paradigms

related to race, gender, age, sexuality, and class. As a result, a large portion of society remains invisible and completely erased from view since they fail to fit the norm. These two media classes cumulatively empower students by providing the necessary skills they need to communicate alternative ideologies through technology and media.

As a result of learning more about the complex conscious and unconscious discourse of communication employed in media culture, I am convinced that adoption of critical media literacy classes at all levels of education is imperative, since they provides the skills necessary to communicate alternative experiences, which may otherwise be unheard or invisible. For example, as a career counselor, I hope to organize career development workshops for girls in junior and senior high school to assist them in understanding how gender and career choices often align. I employed media presentations to engage students in this regard, in a UCLA Labor Center Project. My presentation included a female electrician, who discussed her experiences of being a “visual representation” for introducing this relatively untraditional profession to girls and women at career fairs. Many times, she reported, young women would approach her at career fairs and express their interest in becoming an electrician, which they had never considered as a viable option because they had never met or seen a woman working in this field,

This experience has inspired me to continue to educate students in workshops that present possibilities for nontraditional careers

for women. I hope that such media-mediated workshops will provoke women to consider a wider range of employment and professional possibilities. Similarly, Darlene Edgley, who was one of the co-producers of our documentary, is currently working on a critical media project, as part of her M.A. thesis in African American Studies, which will investigate health issues in relation to Black lesbians. Her work will necessarily include identifying media representations or lack thereof. Hence, literacies in critical media and its practical applications have armed us, as videographers and critical thinkers, to educate and cultivate social and political change.

**Michelle Mearlette-Hernandez graduated summa cum laude from UCLA in 2008 with a B.A. in Women’s Studies and Labor and Workplace Studies. She is enrolled at CSU Northridge in a Master’s program in Counseling with a focus on career development. Currently, her graduate thesis project is focused on portfolio Careers. She has also developed Life Tamer, a Los Angeles–based life-management company.**

# Critical Media Literacy Empowering Students

**A screening of excerpts  
from some of the films  
featured in this special  
issue will be held on**

**TUESDAY**

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**4 to 5:30 pm**

**3340 Moore, UCLA**

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