

*Mel Michelle Lewis*

## **Liberatory Art and Design Education: Engaging Queer of Color Pedagogies for Creative Practice**

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Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom.

—bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

As the first week of the 2020 spring semester at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) begins, I reflect upon what Pedagogy in the 2020s will mean for me and for my colleagues at our institution. MICA is recognized nationally as a premier leader in art and design education, “redefining the role of the artists and designers as creative, solutions-oriented makers and thinkers who will drive social, cultural, and economic advancement for our future” (MICA, 2020). This is our articulated institutional objective. As a professor of Gender/Sexuality Studies in the Humanistic Studies Department, my training in Black feminist thought, Black queer studies, and intersectional critical pedagogies shapes my curriculum and pedagogical approach to teaching makers and to fulfilling MICA’s vision through educational praxis that redefines the role of makers in our society.

This article examines the development of a liberatory queer of color pedagogy for creative practice. This pedagogy responds to new questions at the nexus of interdisciplinary liberal arts and art & design education. Engaging a 2020 turning point perspective, and emphasizing two of my courses, Queer Literature and Theory and Trans/Feminism, I interrogate the successes and pitfalls of employing course materials, theoretical framings, required assignments, and in-class discussions intended to educate and inspire art and design students and support their explorations of gender, sexuality, race, and social justice through the lens of “theory in the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23), centering the lived experiences and material realities of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC).

Engaging in feminist reflexive practice, in both classes I was transparent about the fact that I was not only new to MICA, but also to an art and design institution, having taught for the last fifteen years in state research universities or private liberal arts colleges. I was also “out” to students, sharing that my personal identities as a Black queer intersex feminist and pedagogical investments as a scholar and practitioner of Black feminist thought and Black queer praxis. These perspectives shape my approach to curriculum design in two ways. First, I center a “personal is political” viewpoint, meaning that the content is not taught as theoretical or abstract. Rather, the

course content is taught as embodied, affective, and experiential. Next, although my identities and experiences align with much of the content in the course, I build cultural humility, reflexivity, and self-articulation skills into the lessons so that students are better able to develop their own voices, identify their own perspectives, tell their own stories, and share their own experiences.

MICA students have been very vocal over the last several years, calling for a more diverse faculty, as well as more opportunities to intensively study, race, sexuality, gender identity, and decoloniality. Students were welcoming and open, even as many were challenged by the course, having little to no foundation for the topic of queer literature and theory. The students who were more advanced in the subject area, or had a personal interest, were very enthusiastic about the course.

Central questions that I have for my own pedagogical project include: What happens when makers encounter humanistic studies courses in which queer and trans people of color (POC) author all central texts? How do makers respond to social justice “problem solving” assignments in the context of the 2020 political landscape? How can cutting edge “innovation” in 2020 incorporate foundational knowledges from feminist, civil rights, and gay liberation movements, and influence movements today? I begin with an overview of each course, then I explore these questions as they apply to the content and objectives of each class.

## Queer Literature and Theory

In the fall of 2019, I taught the course Queer Literature and Theory, a 300-level class, with an enrollment of sophomore, junior, and senior students. The course description was a broad examination of queer literary works and theoretical perspectives. New to campus, I had not originally designed the course but was assigned the topic, given that it is one of my subject areas. I took the opportunity to re-develop the class for makers; among the majors represented in the class were large cohorts of Animation, Architectural Design, Illustration, and Game Design students. Given their studio majors (I had access to this information over the summer), I recognized the class as an assembly of storytellers. Thus, I selected texts by queer and trans writers of color that I believed would provide exciting creative inspiration, as well as opportunities to seamlessly engage theory and practice. The central texts for this course included: Gabby Rivera’s *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2019), Kai Cheng Thom’s *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: a Dangerous Trans Girl’s Confabulous Memoir* (2016), and Alexis De Veaux’s *Yabo* (2014). In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks writes:

Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement was to transgress . . . Students had to be seen in their particularity as individuals. (7)

It was excitement that I hoped would drive this transgressive class; each of the texts featured protagonists who were both close in age to the majority of traditional college age students, and who were on their own transgressive queer liberatory journeys. Like hooks, I seek to decolonize the

western teacher-centered model that relies on seriousness and discipline and encourage a passionate, personal, and political connection to the course materials. The response to each text in this class was one of excitement; each inspired students to examine their own abilities to make and/or support queer community, personally and through their creative practice.

The qualitative section of course evaluations at the end of the semester provided insight regarding what I call “liberatory art and design education.” Students responded that learning new theories and hearing marginalized voices helped them to generate “new ideas” and “queer perspectives” in their artwork. Several also indicated that learning about the diversity of relationships and human connection through queer literature complimented their studio practice. A painting major noted that the material “directly related” to some of the subjects in their own artwork, which was affirming and inspiring. Thinking of themselves as storytellers, students responded that they felt it was “crucial” to hear stories and perspectives unique to queer communities. Several students concluded that queer literature and research is “important for any artistic practice,” illustrating that all makers should have access to inclusive education, including queer literature and theory, regardless of their personal identity or medium.

Returning to hooks’ statement above about “seeing” students, being present with them, and engaging their particularity and individuality, one student with a deep interest in queer animation noted that the course offered instruction on the practice of “queering interpretation and critique.” The student felt this skillset was valuable for their own work. This student and others reported that by the end of the class they could more clearly help others interpret queer creative works. This skillset was particularly significant for those makers who identified as queer and/or who identified their creative work as queer. Many of these students indicated that they felt invisible or were unsure how to discuss the queer content they produced during critique in their art classes, when writing descriptions of their pieces, or showing their work publicly. This course offered them language, theory, and a body of queer creative work to reference when translating the queer content of their own work to others.

The final projects for this course helped students to synthesize our textual examinations and apply their own hand to providing a “creative response” or solution to challenges in queer literature, theory, and community. The final “creative response” asked students to reflect upon some of the problems we encountered in the texts throughout the semester, including racism, classism, sexism, cissexism, homophobia, heterosexism, xenophobia, and the challenges of telling queer stories, using an applied intersectional analysis, and responding with a “solution” in the medium of their choice.

## **Creative Practice for Queer Literature and Theory Makers**

The “creative response” project instructed students to present a rigorous and dynamic project of their own design related to the course theme. They had complete artistic freedom regarding the problem and solution, as well as the flexibility to select the medium. Responding to histories of censorship of queer books and educational materials in K-12 schools, one student proposed a

clandestine system of informing students about LGBTQAI+ issues and books that would not appear in the library. Using graphic design and illustration, this student produced small pamphlets, intended for transgressive placement in library books in schools with strict censorship policies. Two other students animated fantasy worlds, queering familiar traditional roles, such as prince, princess, wizard, and witch. Another group of animators and fiber artists composed a complex and humorous shadow puppet show with a message affirming queer and trans young people.

All of the semester's projects featured the work of solutions-oriented makers, yet I was pleasantly surprised by the flexibility and creativity employed by design and architecture students. While reading *Yabo* during the semester, we explored the African Burial Ground memorial in New York City (NPS, 2020), which is featured as a part of the storyline in the text. Archaeological research, excavation, and the construction of a national park service memorial honoring enslaved Africans may not seem to fit as part of a queer literature and theory course, exploring queer time, space, and African ancestors in the text; but, *Yabo* made enslaved Africans and the interconnectedness of Afrodescendants across generations a critical focal point for students who took the opportunity to think about the history of enslavement as both an element of queer history, and a subject of queer art and design. Students used *Yabo* as the inspiration for examining the aesthetics of memorials. Final projects engaged the example of the African Burial Ground memorial and yielded digital designs for queer space and place. One design was fabricated to appear as if a brightly colored square room had access to various other dimensions, below and above, signaling the nonlinear existence of ancestors and the future of the community. Another project provided a blueprint for a mobile education unit featuring digital humanities design for intersex activists to attend events like pride or protests. Final reflections from the class indicated that students felt the creative response project was "very insightful" and encouraged them to "incorporate their artistic practices" while engaging with queer literature and theory. With great success, the students in the Queer Literature and Theory course integrated their knowledge and incorporated their creativity, producing liberatory practices that spoke to them through their mediums of choice.

## **Trans/Feminism**

The fall 2019 semester's run of Trans/Feminism took an intersectional approach to Trans/Feminism, also focused on "theory in the flesh," centering the lived experiences and material realities of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC). This course was a 300-level course with an enrollment of juniors and seniors.

I did not propose or design the original iteration of the course; I used the course description to formulate an entirely new syllabus of my own design, asserting an introduction to POC transgender studies curriculum, focusing on "theory in the flesh" and QTPOC. I utilized Susan Stryker and Talia Bettcher's *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2016) double special issue on Trans/Feminisms and Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton's *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017), as guides for the framing and thematic content of my course reinterpretation.



As Stryker and Bettcher lay out in their introduction, my course “explore[d] feminist work taking place within trans studies; trans and genderqueer activism; cultural production in trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary gender communities; and in communities and cultures across the globe that find the modern Western gender system alien and ill-fitting to their own self-understanding” (7). Highlighting connections between Black feminist thought, women of color feminisms, and Trans/Feminism, I borrowed from Stryker and Bettcher’s framing regarding examinations of feminism. They write:

We want this issue to expand the discussion beyond the familiar and overly simplistic dichotomy often drawn between an exclusionary transphobic feminism and an inclusive trans-affirming feminism. We seek to highlight the many feminisms that are trans inclusive and that affirm the diversity of gender expression, in order to document the reality that feminist transphobia is not universal nor is living a trans life, or a life that contests the gender binary, antithetical to feminist politics. (7)

With this framing in place, texts for the course included readings from *Trap Door* (2017), a decolonial focus featuring talks by Trystan Cotton, poetry by Cristina Pitter, and the article “Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion,” published in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2016). Qualitative research examined in the course included Sean Arayasirikul and Erin C. Wilson’s, “Spilling the T on Trans-misogyny and microaggressions: an intersectional oppression and social process among trans women (2019) and Kevin Nadal’s “A Decade of Microaggression Research and LGBTQ Communities” (2019). Anonymous student evaluations indicated a very positive response to the class.

In the qualitative section of the end of semester evaluations for this course, students reported they gained “a more specific lens” with which to engage the practice of “decolonizing concepts of transness” and attending to hidden trans and nonbinary histories that oppose a colonized binary. Students also named that learning “how to educate about transness” was a skillset they gained in the course. Several students reported that they felt the course offered a “basic understanding of different theories in transgender and feminist studies,” including “intersectional social justice practices” and a critical skillset with which to analyze the colonized academy and educational practices. Students universally responded that they “learned a lot about terminology” and were now primed to identify when communities are left out of or erased from the conversations and histories. In the qualitative comments, only one student of the twenty-five responded that they thought the class would be “more about feminism” and that their expectation included a separate conversation on feminism. Although the course assignments show that most students understood and engaged the overlaps between transgender studies and feminist theory, and the emergence of Trans/Feminism as its own framework and perspective, I recognize that all students may not have understood or affirmed that viewpoint.

### **Creative Practice and Trans/Feminist Makers**

In this course, students produced creative work responding to Trans/Feminism. One group made a satirical skit in which a family was watching television; the students produced the television show

segments and commercials, all featuring storylines or products that provided an analysis of normative masculinity and femininity, gender roles, and trans rights that addressed the 2020 political landscape. MICA offers majors in Film & Video, Animation, Graphic Design, Game Design, and Interactive Arts; using their skills as makers, the students in this group reimaged media representation, designing a humorous, critical, and inclusive news and entertainment experience. Other groups took a transnational approach to Trans/Feminism, examining the queer work and influence of icon Walter Mercado Salinas, the Mexican astrologer, as well as a comparative project of LGBTQ experiences in urban areas and rural communities in China.

Individual presentations in this class included Trans/Feminist-inspired artwork by illustrators and graphic design students. One of these students discussed gender and storyline as it pertained to a superhero of their own design; another offered group photography as a way to think about community, role models, and mentorship. Additionally, a critical analysis of representations of masculinity and femininity in product design yielded discussions of perfume bottles and makeup compacts.

In my assessment as the instructor, the innovation exemplified by the individual and group projects in this class engage MICA's mission and vision to "redefine the role of the artists and designers." Each student took Trans/Feminist analysis and applied their unique creative, solutions-oriented skills as makers and thinkers in order to advance social commentary and political inquiry by incorporating foundational knowledges from feminist, civil rights, and gay liberation movements, and movements around the world today.

### **Love: Liberatory Queer of Color Pedagogy for Creative Practice**

In closing, I will frame these courses as pedagogical enactments of love and liberation. Chela Sandoval writes, "Love as social movement is enacted by revolutionary, mobile, and global conditions of citizen-activists who are allied through the apparatus of emancipation" (180.4). I loved designing and teaching these courses and engaging in teaching and learning liberatory praxis. These courses exemplify new attention to fostering socially engaged artists, designers, and makers.

By engaging "theory in the flesh" as an approach that centers the lived experiences and material realities of queer and trans people of color, the courses Queer Literature and Theory, and Trans/feminism sought to foster MICA's newly articulated vision, nurturing makers and generating "a just, sustainable, and joyful world activated and enriched by artists, designers, and educators who are valued for their leadership and imagination." Pedagogy in the 2020s necessitates a liberatory queer of color pedagogy for makers that can be implemented to meet these goals. Queer Literature and Theory and Trans/Feminism are two examples that I hope will serve as models for future liberatory pedagogical projects in the new millennium.

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