Precarious Relations

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From 2016 to 2018, I taught media studies classes at a private and predominantly white liberal arts college. One class included a vocal Trump supporter and, as I'd later learn, a number of my students identified as part of Trump's "silent majority." I struggled with how to challenge the misinformation this student presented in a way that opened up our discussion rather than fixating on him. I also found myself concerned about the implications of teaching media literacy to the class elite that made up a majority (but not all) of my students.

Here I am thinking about Sasha Torres's use of Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe a "central reversal" in which the race consciousness of the 1960s was situated as anti-democratic by neoconservative think tanks of the 1970s. I assert that this central reversal is fundamentally a right-wing media literacy project aimed to incorporate social justice initiatives into uneven power dynamics through popular appeal. It illustrates the risk of using critical media tools with a disinterest in challenging the status quo. Will my students use critical thinking to challenge the world order, if that might mean undermining their own position? Might aspects of my instruction actually give them the tools to help to solidify rather than destabilize their place in existing power structures? In other words, the central reversal shows us how previous generations have incorporated the challenges to power that critical analysis provides.

These questions emerge out of my ethnography of the reality TV market. A common concern voiced by the producers I interviewed was that characters be "relatable" to the audience. For example, executives discussed certain storylines as more or less believable depending on the race of a character, and that the sense of character and narrative authenticity was shaped in relation to their presumed fan base. Relatability is a useful concept to think about media literacy in relation to the current presidency. Since Trump was elected there have been countless media pieces about what part "alternative facts" played in his election and they often focused the blame on reality television. If only we never had reality television, and its wig-snatching, table-flipping, job-ending fake fights, we would not be in this predicament. But although reality TV tactics were a part of the Trump campaign, to place the blame on reality TV constructs stereotyped scapegoats out of fan bases that are not seen as intellectually, culturally, or economically valuable by the networks.

Fixing reality TV as the straw man for the current political regime buys into networks' own marketing schemes about why reality TV is so popular, pointing to the supposed desires of audiences. The presumptions of character "relatability" casts fans as responsible for the appeal of racism. Thus, powerful networks can avoid representing their stake in the outcomes of power struggles among the elite. Trump's base is constructed through an imagined "relatability" to a racist underclass of reality television

viewers that does not account for elite class influence in structural racism. However, Trump has been a rich racist man deploying power for a long time, well before his rise to televisual fame. Reality television stands in as the bad guy that diverts attention from other representational strategies networks use to reinforce their investment in the hardening of class stratification and the upward redistribution of resources.

Indeed, despite its high representation of people of color, reality television has been described as the "end of civilization" and blaming reality TV for Trump's election continues to treat its fans and participants as dupes. But low-level reality television workers, casts, and fans play with the limits of the genre and open up spots of possibility for representing difference. I am trying to tease out the contradictory dynamic that recognizes how reality television producers craft narratives that rely on sensationalist strategies, but also acknowledges what reality TV actors and fans produce *despite* the limited frames in which they are cast. How do reality TV fans and actors challenge the constraints of so-called relatability to exceed their stereotyped frame?

In the classroom, relatability is a powerful concept for students. They constantly refer to material as more or less relatable and this structures how much they are willing to engage with the material. I ask my students to create analytic questions for discussion each week. Over the course of the semester we develop these from yes/no to complex inquiries that engage deeply with core concepts. But it is a struggle to move their questions away from personal identification. In other words, relatability reigns high in how they form their questions. I will soon begin a new position at a large public university, and I wonder what differences I will have to account for in my pedagogy. But regardless, I am interested in how I can draw on the innovative use of relatability by reality casts and fans in my teaching. How might I help students take what they think they know and explode it into unrecognizable fragments? In other words, make this presumed knowledge un-relatable.