Chapter 11

A Trans*+ Media Literacy Framework for Navigating the Dynamically Shifting Terrain of Gender in Media:
Considering Assessment of Key Competencies

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ABSTRACT

Of the many identity markers that students claim and encounter throughout their educational journeys, none might be more salient than gender. While much of the European Union seems to be sloughing off the gender binary as a vestige of the 20th century, many educators and students in the U.S. continue to reinforce the binary through explicit and implicit strategies that normalize the cisgender condition while othering those who are trans*+. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the entrenchment of the gender binary in the American post-secondary system, to analyze the media frenzy currently addressing trans*+ identities, and to offer a theoretical framework of Trans*+ Media Literacy, borne of Critical Media Literacy, to address specifically how post-secondary educators and students can create gender expansive and inclusive spaces that might foster the growth of students prepared to think of gender representation and media production that challenge the binary and encourage gender expansiveness to flourish.

INTRODUCTION

Critical Media Literacy, as defined by Funk, Kellner, and Share (2016), "provides a theoretical framework and transformative pedagogy to empower students to question media, challenge hegemony, and participate in society as justice-oriented global citizens" (23). As media increasingly connect individuals globally, so too do they allow students to access an increased variety of entertainment and communicative

tools, and differing ideological frameworks, which could enhance their capacity to engage in a global citizenship that acknowledges and appreciates, not merely tolerates, differences. Of the many identity markers that students claim and encounter throughout their educational journeys, none might be more salient than gender. While much of the European Union seems to be sloughing off the gender binary as a vestige of the 20th century, many educators and students in the U.S. continue to reinforce the binary through explicit and implicit strategies that normalize the cisgender[1] condition while othering or exoticizing those who are trans*+[2]. This chapter aims to explore the entrenchment of the gender binary in the American post-secondary system, to analyze the media frenzy currently addressing trans*+ identities, and to offer a theoretical framework for Trans*+ Media Literacy. Borne of Critical Media Literacy, the Trans*+ Media Literacy Framework seeks to address specifically how post-secondary educators and students can create gender expansive and inclusive spaces that might foster the growth of students prepared to think of gender representation and media production that challenge the binary and encourage gender expansiveness to flourish.

THE GENDER BINARY IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

Gender identity is, arguably, one of the most salient identity markers of college students today. While completing scholarship applications, on-campus housing forms, and myriad requisite forms, university students declare their gender and/or sex assigned at birth repeatedly. With most colleges in the U.S. using sex assigned at birth to assign dormitory living arrangements, the gender binary has become one of the most normalized ideological state apparatuses[3] on campus. Only recently have a handful of progressive universities offered students mixed-gender living arrangements[4] and the common[5] application offered more than two options for sex and gender identity. With only 23 colleges in the U.S. offering gender neutral housing arrangements and non-discrimination clauses protecting trans*+ students, higher education in the U.S. is known for its gender rigidity (collegeequalityindex.com).

The gender binary, reinforced on college campuses through housing arrangements, is also deeply embedded into college athletics. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) requires that trans*+ students, to compete with the team in accordance with their gender identity, must be treated with hormone suppression and/or hormone supplementation of their identified gender for no less than one year (Transathlete.com, 2017) prior to the competition season. This stance regarding trans*+ students reinforces the gender binary, allows for no gender fluidity, and is imposed regardless of the lack of empirical evidence demonstrating the safety and efficacy of hormone treatment[6]. Moreover, it allows no inclusion for intersex students or trans*+ students who may be unable to undergo hormone therapy for a variety of reasons. In fact, recent media coverage of trans*+ NCAA athletes Schuyler Bailar, Kye Allums, and Chris Mosier, rather than taking the opportunity to challenge the gender binary, merely re-inscribe it, by referring to these athletes' abilities to compete as males with other cisgender male athletes.

With the growing media attention surrounding trans*+ issues in the U.S., particularly their inclusion and/or exclusion in dorm life, sports, and various facets of the college experience, now is the time to harness the power of the trans*+ media discourse in the college classroom. To this aim, this chapter now turns its attention to trans*+ identities and how they are typically narrativized in American media.

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