The Mini Syllabus: Locating and Engaging with Black Women in Popular Culture

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Introduction

Over the last several years, Black scholars have curated syllabi and reading guides based on Black popular media texts and current events. This has been coined *The Black Digital Syllabus Movement* by communication professor Dr. Sherri Williams. As Black folx continue to have a dominant presence in online spaces, such as Black Twitter, Williams (2020) explained how the Black Digital Syllabus Movement is derived and influenced heavily from Black digital culture. To that end, Black scholars, who also participate in this Black digital culture, are utilizing the affordances of the digital to continue educating their networks and audiences through curating digital syllabi related to the Black experience. This too becomes an example and extension of digital activism, pedagogical exchange, and engagement for Black scholars that seeks to exist beyond the ivory tower and academic spaces. According to Williams (2020):

The practice of creating a curated list of revered cultural works with profound lessons that relate to contemporary issues and art is one that emerged between 2014 and 2018 as the nation wrestled with racism and experienced a burst of Black creativity. These syllabi, created by Black professors and students, help to bridge the gap between pop culture, politics, and scholarly work and gave birth to what I call the Black digital syllabus movement—a digital phenomenon fusing pop culture, academia, politics, and Black digital culture to connect to the canon of historic Black work to contextualize Black excellence and oppression. These digital syllabi were often prompted by huge Black pop culture moments or grave injustices. (p. 494)

As such, the curation of these syllabi aided in fostering critical conversations in and out of the classroom. Centering the contributions of Black popular culture syllabi, this “labor of love” provides an opportunity for engaged readers to further explore the resources for a more critical and deeper understanding of these media texts and events.

My original teaching activity calls for students to do some critical scaffolding, as they create a “mini-syllabus,” which will include a variety of texts and sources on a specific topic of their interest related to Black women in popular culture. I argue that having students curate syllabi provides them with an opportunity to have a communal learning experience with their classmates. Additionally, I believe this allows me to co-construct learning with my students. By curating a syllabus that examines Black women’s extensive contributions to and representation in popular culture, students will build connections between a variety of relevant and unique contemporary and historical texts and media resources that should be reviewed to critically engage with their lasting influence and impact on our society’s popular cultural content and environment.

This is an engaging and creative assignment that can be tailored for undergraduate or graduate level courses and adapted for various academic disciplines (e.g., communication and media studies, gender studies, Black and African American studies). Specifically, I offer this teaching activity as a way to build a welcoming class environment for courses similar to or that focus on: Black Women and Popular Culture, Communication and Identity, Black Feminisms, Hip Hop Feminism, and Race and Gender in Media.

Lastly, this teaching activity is inspired by the multiple Black digital syllabi that I personally have appreciated learning from as a Black digital feminist scholar and educator, as well as from an assignment I created for my graduate course on communication and identity that
was overwhelmingly successful. As several institutions are offering full-length courses based on historical and contemporary events, people, and lived experiences, this teaching activity could be adapted beyond what I propose here. I would also recommend assigning this teaching activity as a pre-assignment that precedes a final course research paper or media analysis so that students can build upon the resources they curated for their mini syllabus.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will be able to better analyze and critique texts and media artifacts that represent an accurate portrayal of various identities that relate to Black womanhood in and through popular culture.
2. Students will develop research skills for collecting and assessing relevant literature and resources for a narrow topic of interest.
3. Students will learn to use relevant resources pertaining to a narrow topic of interest to practice curating a diverse list of references for future research and project assignments.

Rationale

First, the availability of unique pedagogical resources that specifically center and explore Black women in popular culture, outside of courses that are specifically related to this topic, are scarce. Centering Black women’s lived experiences and cultural content is crucial and necessary. I argue that it is detrimental to Black women to only consume them and their culture, as opposed to valuing their contributions and investing in them. Our subjectivities are often made object, leaving Black women often stripped of their autonomous identities and the visibility of some identities become the catalyst for stereotyping, misrepresentation—and ultimately—misunderstanding. In this current social climate, and over the course and history of popular media culture, Black women are often held to double-standards aimed at controlling their sexuality that adhere to outdated respectability politics. In her book *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women White Feminists Forgot*, Kendall (2020) argues:

> Respectability depends on acceptably performing gender and sexuality in ways that don’t threaten traditional ideas of masculinity. In order to maintain their social and economic status, Black women are expected to manage their identities and sexual reputations in order to fit into a mixture of virgin and vixen constructs. (p. 88)

As such, what we have witnessed is that Black women, like Megan Thee Stallion, are often not granted empathy or given the “benefit of the doubt” when telling their stories of abuse and violence. Instead, they are publicly shamed, critiqued against archaic respectability politics and norms, and portrayed as the conductors of their own victimhood. However, when Megan Thee Stallion was found to be the victim by the court of law, several apologies rang out from her loudest and most vitriol critics, who happen to be Black men, such as: Joe Budden, 50 Cent, and Math Hoffa.

Second, in the chapter titled “Feminist Classroom” in the book *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*, hooks (1989) writes, “To be oppositional in the feminist classroom one must have a standard of valuation that differs from the norm” (p. 52). Centering the influence of popular culture in an assignment is a step in the direction of valuing content that typically isn’t
the “norm” in many classrooms. As mentioned in the Editor’s Introduction of this special issue, we believe educating from popular culture allows us to disrupt and circumvent normative ways of teaching—leading us toward a feminist pedagogical praxis. Popular culture is an important avenue for exploring and understanding the construction and deconstruction of Black women’s cultural and visual representation. According to hooks (1989):

> Every aspect of popular culture alerts us to the reality that folks are thinking about gender in both reactionary and progressive ways. What is important is that they are thinking critically. And it is this space that allows for the possibility of feminist intervention, whether it be in our classroom or in the life of students outside the classroom. (p. 51-52)

Further, I believe that changing the standard of assessment from the norm also leads us in the direction of doing feminist pedagogy. We must reconsider and reevaluate what is important to us in the learning and knowledge sharing process within our classrooms.

Finally, this teaching activity is aimed at refining students’ research skills. Creative teaching methods and strategies must attempt to meet the needs of students who can express themselves outside of traditional and often rigid assignment styles and guidelines. Activities such as these encourage students to value and search for resources that are peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed when engaging with popular culture as an area of research inquiry and study. In this context, the environment in which something was created is a necessity to wholly comprehend the topic you are exploring and analyzing.

**Explanation**

For this assignment, students will create a mini “syllabus” that serves as an introductory guide for exploring and learning about an aspect of Black women’s identity(ies) at the intersection of popular culture through a specific media text (e.g., social media, television, film, music video, book series, magazine).

Students should be encouraged to use this time as an opportunity to select a topic that they are interested in learning more about based on class discussions centering course readings, activities, and guest speakers. Additionally, allow students to be creative in terms of their visual presentation and organization of the mini syllabus.

**Possible Topics for Consideration:** Black women and podcasts, Black women social media influencers, Black women and sports media activism, Black female dating and sexuality in reality television, Black women’s gendered subjectivity in hip hop culture, Black girl futures in film and television, Black women in science fiction, Black women at the intersection of politics and popular culture, Black girls’ identity empowerment

Students will include the following components:

1. **A 800 to 1,000 word introduction that should include the following:**
   - *Three* keywords/phrases that capture the essence of the syllabus;
   - *Three* guiding questions that help readers engage with and contextualize the resources;
   - The purpose and context of the syllabus;
   - An explanation of what can readers learn by engaging with these resources;
An explanation of how these resources will help readers better understand how this identity (ies) is socially constructed via the selected media text;

Brief information about each of the resources listed and explanation as to why they were chosen.

2. Syllabus Resources (15 total resources):

- Five academic-peer reviewed articles
- Four multimedia pairings (e.g., podcast, documentary film, tv episode, music video)
- Three fiction/non-fiction novels
- Two social media sources from TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook
- One poem or other creative literature source (e.g., blog, play)
- Clear reference citations and available links to the resources

Debriefing

For instructors, debriefing this assignment with students can include the following suggestions:

1. **Allow students to select one song from their playlist to play for the class.** For access to lyrics, as they can be difficult to translate/hear/understand just by audibly listening to the songs, display them on the projector via PowerPoint and/or have students upload them to a shared folder for the class. Remind students to bring laptops or use their phones to access the lyrics if needed. While listening to the song have students jot down lyrics they hear that relate to their own topics.

2. **Allow students to read a passage from one of the non-academic resources for the class.** During this portion of debriefing in my own experience, students enjoy having an opportunity to share unique and interesting literature and texts with their classmates that they may access later.

3. **Facilitate students sharing their curated syllabus with other students in the class.** Create a class folder on Google Drive or through your institution’s learning management system. This ensures active communal learning and sharing as each students’ topic will be different.

4. **Curate Peer Groups/Pairs to develop their outlines for a larger research paper/media analysis with their curated lists.** As students will have already curated a well-searched list of resources, this should serve as the launching pad for a larger, in-depth research project or media analysis.

Assessment

For assignments such as this mini-syllabus, I take a more basic approach to evaluating and assessing the material requirements as outlined in the Explanation section. I include debriefing in the evaluation process.

1. The introduction is well written (40 points)
   a. Does it address the purpose and context of the syllabus?
   b. Does it explore how the syllabus can be used by readers?
   c. Does it include brief information about the resources listed?
   d. Are the guiding questions clearly written?
e. Are the guiding questions developed in a way that will help readers critically engage with the resources listed?
f. Does it meet the word limit of 800-1,000 words?

2. Resource list (30 points)
   a. Does it include the correct type and number of sources as specified in the explanation?
   b. Do the sources reflect an in-depth search of relevant information to the topic?

3. Overall composition of the mini-syllabus (10 points)
   a. Formatting: Is the syllabus readable, consistent, and well structured?
   b. Organization: Assess the creativity, cleanliness, and clarity of the organization of the resources listed.

4. Debriefing and presentation to classmates (20 points)
   a. Does the student clearly explain the topic, syllabus’ purpose, and context?
   b. Does the student clearly explain the importance of the topic and why it was selected?
   c. Does the student explain and review 3 to 5 of their favorite resources on the syllabus?

Summary

This teaching activity views students as creators, curators of knowledge and resources. Students become the experts, as they are instructed to articulate in detail how each resource contributes to learning more about a specific topic on Black women in popular culture. Through this assignment, instructors can become more aware of the process in which students search for information and the types of sources they find valuable and interesting. The structure of this assignment encourages and values their ability to make connections between various media texts and other sources of information.

Overall, this assignment provides students with an opportunity to do an exploratory search into the past, present, and future of Black women’s influence on and contribution to popular culture. As this special issue is centered on Megan Thee Stallion’s cultural influence at the intersection of feminist pedagogy, this assignment can be utilized to better understand how Black women continue to disrupt and reimagine sexuality, gender politics, womanhood, agency, and power through popular culture and media.

References

