

***Are we centering the adult in youth media education?  
Decolonizing the reception of youth-produced media texts***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article asks media educators to consider how the assumptions and values we hold are reflected in our reception and circulation of youth-produced texts in ways that colonize youth interests, sensibilities, and aesthetics. Drawing from experiences facilitating youth media workshops and focusing on two videos produced by teens in foster care as case studies, I demonstrate how youth media programs overlook the value of “just for fun” youth-produced media texts. Although media educators value play as part of the media production process, I argue that the media we choose to circulate and celebrate are texts that resonate with and reflect adult values; this is because playful media texts are less likely to legitimize adult institutions and pedagogies. I propose that a youth-centered reading of playful youth media requires us to: acknowledge that the adult reading is not the dominant reading, validate memetic literacies, and legitimize embodied playfulness and pleasure. Circulating illegible youth media shifts how media educators read and articulate the values of playful texts.

**Keywords:** *youth media, foster care, memes, literacies, youth voice, media workshops.*



## INTRODUCTION

### Youth-produced Video #1: *Is Anybody Listening?*

In the opening of this music video, we hear the beats of a song start to play as an off-screen teen girl speaks, “You know, one thing about foster care is, that no matter how loud you scream, it seems that nobody is listening.” The rap begins, accompanied by a montage of images of a girl witnessing violence in her home and subsequently being removed by child protective services. We see her moved to and from different foster homes; scenes where she appears weary and confused by her situation and the ways in which she feels ignored by the system and adults in her life. The chorus is accompanied by close-up shots of a teen girl’s mouth,<sup>1</sup> vivid with pink lipstick, as she uses the song to express her anger and exasperation, “Is anybody listening? Cuz I’m crying out. Lord don’t you know. I can’t take it no more. Will you please hear me out?” The video has a high production value that encompasses many different styles to clearly communicate the narrative and to demonstrate visual literacies and competencies. The affective song and accompanying images evoke empathy for the character, ending with statistics and a voice-over that implores audiences to get involved in the lives of teens in foster care. The teen who wrote the song and co-produced the video wanted to express her anger and hurt in a way that helped people outside of foster care to better understand her experiences and perspectives.

### Youth-produced Video #2: *Oh Gee Jamie*

In this video, we see Jamie,<sup>2</sup> a short, thin Latinx boy, wearing a giant eagle mascot head.<sup>3</sup> He uses a green screen to create a comedic video that loosely follows the format of a sketch show. Parodying a weather report, with snow on the green screen, he makes a joke about a summer blizzard in the Sahara. The video cuts to images of Big Chungus, a fat Bugs Bunny meme. Big Chungus balloons in size until he eventually explodes on screen. Jamie stands in front of the green screen for a full minute and repeatedly screams “oh my god” and “take cover.” There is a humorous “commercial break” that is ad-libbed. Unsure of what he is selling, Jamie asks someone off screen to “gimme a shoes.” The camera pans to another studio camera, where we see the teen camera operator take off his shoes and kick them toward Jamie who then mumbles something about a sponsor of the show before loudly shouting his personal affectation “yeeep!” The screen cuts to scenes from the video game Fortnite. Jamie dances to the images while repeatedly yelling “oh my god” for about two minutes while we observe seemingly random scenes of the first-person shooter game. The video demonstrates use of video curation and live multi-camera editing, and is at times humorous, parodic, and entertaining, but also often nonsensical, mumbled, and chaotic. It is deliberately random, senseless, and playful. According to the group of teen boys who created it, it intentionally lacked a narrative structure or clear message, instead they wanted it to be “just for fun.”

<sup>1</sup> For privacy reasons, she could not show her entire face in the film.

<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym.

Both of these videos were co-produced by youth in a summer media literacy and digital storytelling workshop for teens experiencing foster care in north Texas. The workshop took place in the media arts and studies department of a large public university and was facilitated by current college students, recent university alumni, and two faculty members. Based on the brief descriptions, which video would you be more likely to screen as an exemplar of a media education program? Which would you more likely show to a room of funders? What about to the university that supported the program? Or to parents, mentors, and caregivers interested in learning about foster care?

In most cases, media educators are likely to circulate the first video: it has a powerful message and affective visuals that demonstrate the presumed goals and outcomes of a media literacy program. Whereas the second video leaves the adults a bit perplexed and at times uneasy: it is silly, lacks a cohesive narrative, does not rely on recognizable generic conventions or formats, and at times is intentionally absurd, disorienting, brash, and nonsensical.

It is easy to applaud the merits of powerful high quality videos such as *Is Anybody Listening?* Youth media texts that allow for adults to more clearly relate to and connect with young people’s experiences and perspectives are understandably and justifiably celebrated in media education scholarship and via the ways we enthusiastically circulate them. But it is actually the seemingly nonsensical and playful texts that serve as the impetus for my inquiry here. Taking up Podkalicka and Campbell’s (2010) call to “focus on the reception rather than the production side of the communicative cycle” (p. 210), I ask: What does our uneasiness and tendency to dismiss or trivialize playful media reveal about the ways media educators value particular youth voices? What modes of creative expression are considered valuable and therefore circulated by educators? By dismissing playful media texts, are we actually peripheralizing young people’s subjectivities and sensibilities even within supposedly youth-centric spaces? In other words, I am inviting us to consider how the assumptions and values that media educators hold are reflected in our reception and

<sup>3</sup> While the eagle head adds to the playfulness of the text, it was initially a creative way to hide Jamie’s face, as was required by Child Protective Services.

circulation of texts and how they might colonize youth interests, sensibilities, and aesthetics within youth media education.

### Questioning playful media

The goals and outcomes of media education programs vary across diverse populations, geographies, and contexts. Nonetheless, most media programs are unified by a common ideology to enhance and support young people's development of creativity and self-expression within participatory, mediated, and networked spaces (Buckingham, 2003; Doerr-Stevens, 2015; Gauntlett, 2018; Hobbs, 2019; Jimenez et al., 2021). Youth media workshops strive to create opportunities for young people to express and celebrate their youthful subject positions, to give them tools to critically analyze power structures and media industries, and to positively effectuate change in their communities (Berliner, 2018; Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010). In most cases, there is an intentional effort to position young people at the center of youth media education, production, pedagogy, and practice (Goodman, 2018; Grace and Tobin, 1998; Soep, 2006). But have we succeeded? Are young people's values and sensibilities actually privileged within youth media education programs?

Although playful media may hold value for the young people who create it, as it did for the boys who produced *Oh Gee Jamie*, adults are less likely to enthusiastically circulate and celebrate such texts. Parnell and Patsarika (2014) note, "The discourse surrounding children's and young people's participation and voice [reveals] that *playful* [emphasis added] voices have been largely neglected" (pp. 100-101). Similarly, Buckingham (2003) suggests that there is a general distrust of young people's mediated pleasures. Media educators – as well as other adults – tend to celebrate particular styles of youth-produced texts while grappling with the transgressions and discomfort of others that are less legible or deemed inappropriate for adult audiences.

In their study of youth media production with younger children, Grace and Tobin (1998) recount how children respond with humor and camaraderie to problematic or inappropriate videos they create, whereas the teachers exchange uneasy glances. "For the children, these moments of curricular slippage and excess provided the opportunity to produce their own pleasures, on their own terms, in the classroom.

Yet these same moments posed questions and gave rise to tensions for the teachers" (p. 32). The distinction between adult and youth sensibilities is evident in both the production process and via the reception of a text. For example, when *Oh Gee Jamie* was screened to a room of teens and adults as the culmination of the three-week media workshop, it elicited bouts of excessive laughter from the young people in the room, and looks of discomfort and confusion from the adults. Why is that? Is it just a reflection of different tastes and sensibilities between youth and adults or do the reactions reveal a deeper relationship between play, pleasure, and media literacy?

In order to address these questions, I identify articulated and unarticulated adult assumptions of media pedagogy – both in how we structure curriculum and in the kinds of videos we circulate – as a way to reveal how young people's media literacies and subjectivities are valued and legitimized within media education. Acknowledging the kinds of texts that media educators value is necessary if we wish to learn from the texts that do not adhere to or resonate with our own adult-centric ideals of what "good" youth media looks like.

Questioning our reception of youth-produced playful media texts, I identify three adult assumptions that structure our media pedagogies: 1) media give youth a voice, 2) having a voice is empowering, and 3) media texts can be read as a stand-in for the production process. When considered holistically, the three assumptions reveal particular values that inextricably underpin particular modalities of media pedagogy. I will demonstrate how media educators value: 1) legible affective messages, 2) youth as future adults, and 3) texts that legitimize our pedagogies and institutions. These three pedagogic values inevitably prioritize particular modes of youth expression at the expense of others.

Next, using the two videos in the introduction as case studies, I problematize these assumptions and presumed values that we attach to youth media texts in order to highlight how adults often prioritize adult values – and therefore peripheralize youth sensibilities and subjectivities – even within purportedly youth-centric spaces. I then attempt to re-situate the value of playful texts by reading *Oh Gee Jamie* from a youth-centric perspective that acknowledges memetic literacies, embodied playfulness, and peer connectedness. I conclude by

making a case for de-colonizing the reception and circulation of youth media texts.

## **PEDAGOGIC ASSUMPTIONS THAT SHAPE MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION**

### **Assumption #1: Youth-produced media give youth a voice**

In a context in which professional capitalist media cultures tend to overlook, trivialize, exploit, or problematically misrepresent young people's voices, experiences, and cultures, youth media literacy programs are constructed as a corrective to the problem of youth disenfranchisement. Media pedagogies are often predicated on a belief that youth-produced media and storytelling are vehicles for otherwise disenfranchised young people to make their voices heard and to tell their own authentic stories (Goodman, 2018; Hobbs; 2019; Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010).

The assumption that youth-produced media can "give youth a voice" is overtly articulated and identified in the ways in which the objectives, outcomes, and curriculum of youth media programs are structured (Berliner, 2018). Indeed, in my own work facilitating youth media workshops for teens in foster care, I pitch the program to both adult caregivers and youth participants as an opportunity for young people to use media to share their unique experiences, knowledge, and perspectives.

### **Assumption #2: Having a voice is empowering**

There is a seemingly tacit assumption that "having a voice" is inherently empowering and transformative, particularly for disenfranchised populations. If young people use media to find their voice, the logic goes, then they will be more empowered. Media are assumed to be a means for young people's interests to be represented in a democratic and participatory context and a discourse of empowerment justifies or explains the outcomes of youth media education programs.

Although an emerging body of scholarship questions the inevitability of empowerment (Berliner, 2018; Blum-Ross, 2015; Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010; Soep, 2006), media education programs are still frequently framed as safe spaces of empowerment where self-expression and representation are celebrated.

### **Assumption #3: Youth-produced media texts can be read as a stand-in for the production process**

We assume that the texts young people create are – or at least *should* – stand in for the *process* of creating the texts. That is, if the texts appropriately incorporate recognizable media codes or generic conventions, demonstrate critical media literacy competencies and production standards, and meet our stated goals and desirable outcomes, then we assume that the media program itself has accomplished these outcomes as well. The texts young people produce become both an assessment tool we can use to demonstrate that learning (the kind we set out to teach) has successfully occurred and also serve to legitimize the organization that facilitated their production.

## **ADULT VALUES OF YOUTH-PRODUCED MEDIA TEXTS**

Collectively, these adult assumptions shape our pedagogies, the nature of the media texts that young people produce, how adults read youth media texts, and the kinds of media that educators circulate. I am not suggesting that these assumptions or values do not have good intentions, nor do I think they are inherently "wrong," because they aren't. My own experiences in media workshops, as well as media education scholarship, are full of examples of how media production and storytelling can lead to transformative and substantive changes for teens and their communities (Berliner, 2018; Buckingham, 2003; Goodman, 2018; Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010). Nonetheless, I want to draw attention to the ways these assumptions – which are embedded and revealed through our discourses, curricula, and practices – can also work to center the adult in youth media education, and thus inadvertently colonize youth voices, ways of knowing, pleasures, and subjectivities.

### **Value #1: Legible affective messages**

Assuming that media production provides youth with a voice, it is not surprising that adults value texts that we believe allow us to listen to and understand youth voices. We value texts that clearly communicate a message because, at the most basic level, this is a fundamental competency of media literacy: the ability to effectively construct a message for a particular audience. In addition, we

value texts that are affective, texts in which young people effectively emote and make us feel something or feel connected to the text's creator or to a collective youth voice. "The capacity to listen to, learn from, and care for our students is essential to what makes transformative teaching so powerful" (Goodman, 2018, p. 129). This is evidenced through the kinds of texts we celebrate, discuss, and circulate: texts that resonate with our assumptions about authentic youth voices and democratic empowerment.

While an incorporation of pop culture might be encouraged, we nonetheless tend to value texts that do not rely *too* heavily on generational "in jokes" or a peer vernacular that is (often intentionally) indecipherable to adults (Doerr-Stevens, 2015; Grace & Tobin, 1998; Hobbs, 2019). Adults often read these modes of humor, storytelling, and communication as nonsensical, inappropriate, or ineffective. That is, incorporating pop culture and humor is acceptable so long as it is used in a manner that remains legible, appropriate, or meaningful to adults.

### **Value #2: Youth as future adults**

From a critical youth studies approach to media education, young people's subjectivities, experiences, and perspectives are valued and privileged. Nonetheless, democratic ideals of empowerment invite young people to imagine a future world and a future sense of self, one in which they will inherit the adult responsibilities and rights that society bestows upon them with age. As such, we tend to value texts in which young people articulate their future aspirations or in which they acknowledge personal development, resiliency, and growth as they overcome challenges, negative stereotypes, mistakes, or other setbacks.

Narratives or self-expressions that frame personal struggles as lessons to be learned or acknowledge limiting cultural discourses as challenges to be overcome are perhaps even more valued when they are articulated by marginalized or "at-risk" youth. The discourse of "at-risk" youth focuses on identifying young people who, due to systemic barriers and oppressions, are at risk of failing to successfully transition to adulthood. The risk discourse operates as a means of labeling particular populations and then justifying the implementation of institutional interventions, exploitation, surveillance, or protections (Kelly,

2006; Vickery, 2017). We value texts of self-development in which young people acknowledge "adulthood as a point of arrival" (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 148) and youth as a time of preparation for the successful transition.

When young people produce media that communicates resiliency and vulnerabilities (often through an articulation of agency) or media that fit within the neoliberal project of self-reflexivity, the texts themselves become evidence of young people imagining a future adult self, one who is successfully contributing to society. Media education is then legitimized and celebrated as a successful intervention or inoculation against such risks.

### **Value #3: Texts that legitimize our pedagogies and institutions**

Media educators strategically outline how media literacy and production skills can align with core standards of formal education and state-mandated curriculum (Hobbs, 2011; Vickery, 2017). This approach has proven to be a successful strategy for validating media literacy and incorporating it into formal education in the U.S., as well as a rationale to attain financial support for media education as part of structured informal learning environments.

In addition, media literacy and production skills are framed as necessary for young people as future workers in a capitalist society. Although not all young people are afforded equitable access to technologies and literacies, it is nonetheless increasingly common for young people to produce and circulate amateur media via digital tools and platforms. Thus, part of the appeal of media workshops is the opportunity to produce media using expensive and professional equipment. Opportunities to produce high quality media is a motivation – and source of pleasure and excitement – for young people to participate in media education programs. Alongside this though, is the explicit and implicit value of teaching young people marketable skills for future employment and neoliberal entrepreneurialism (see Kelly, 2006).

The texts that we validate through circulation are often the texts that have a high production value, or at the very least, demonstrate an adherence to professional production processes. We are often hesitant to circulate texts that appear "too amateur." Why fund and support media education programs that merely replicate what young people are capable

of producing outside of and without support from media education programs? Instead, we value texts that more clearly express competencies that can be translated into educational, marketable, or entrepreneurial skills. We circulate texts that demonstrate future potential and reify the ways in which we value youth as future adults (and their future adult labor). Neoliberal market values of professionalism, entrepreneurialism, and self-branding shape how curriculum are developed and how programs are justified as educational and therefore valuable (see Greenberg, et al., 2020). Because we assume the text can be read as a stand-in for the process, we value texts that demonstrate professional *processes* and *skills* that serve to legitimize the value of our pedagogies and the success of the institutions that facilitate the programs.

In sum, it is imperative we acknowledge how assumptions of voice, empowerment, and outcomes shape the expectations, purposes, and values that we place on media education and how these are reflected in the texts we choose to circulate, analyze, and celebrate. Adult values and youth values are not mutually exclusive, yet it is important that we consider how adult values can inadvertently function to center the adult in youth media education, reception, and pedagogy.

### LOCATING THE ADULT AT THE CENTER OF YOUTH MEDIA EDUCATION

#### Why adults are more likely to circulate *Is Anybody Listening?*

One reason I think we are more likely to circulate affective videos such as *Is Anybody Listening?* rather than playful videos such as *Oh Gee Jamie*, is because they resonate with adults. The music video was co-produced by Asia,<sup>4</sup> a 17-year old Black teen girl who had been in foster care for almost a decade. She wrote and recorded the song as a way to express her feelings of frustration and helplessness and as a way to address those with power within the foster care system. Her video exemplified all the adult assumptions of what media education programs could accomplish: she used her voice to speak about her experiences in a manner that we can read as empowering, the text communicated media competencies, the message elicited a strong

emotional response, she articulated her ability to overcome challenges, it demonstrated resiliency, and it legitimized the work of the university that facilitated its production.

The music video was meaningful to both Asia and to the college student facilitators and other adults involved with the program. I am not suggesting that adults marginalized Asia's experiences in the production process, nor am I suggesting that Asia felt marginalized through the circulation of her video. At the community screening, she positively reflected on the experience and overtly expressed pride and excitement in her accomplishment. However, there is a reason that this particular video and others like it are the ones that are most likely to be circulated and resonate with adults: because they meet adult expectations and align with adult values.

For example, the children's home I partner with has used Asia's video as part of their volunteer recruitment and training. It is often not appropriate or feasible for young people in foster care to participate in such trainings, but the media young people create can serve as a valuable stand-in for the presence of youth in these spaces. But it should be noted, it is videos such as *Is Anybody Listening?* that resonate and are more likely to be screened than are playful texts such as *Oh Gee Jamie*. Therefore, the texts that can serve as a stand-in for the process – the texts that legitimize the adult organizations and are easily legible to adults – become the texts that are more likely to be circulated, valued, and discussed.

What I'm asking us to consider is how these values may obfuscate or suppress youthful subjectivities, pleasures, and meaning-making that transgress adult pedagogies and values. By privileging adult values – beneficial as they may be at times – I believe that we risk centering the adult within youth media education.

What would it mean to showcase a non-sensical playful video like *Oh Gee Jamie* to a room full of volunteers as part of training? What might they learn about youthful subjectivities from a video that "didn't make sense?" What could the discomfort and illegibility of the video reveal about youth, particularly those who have experienced trauma? I will address these questions in my reading of *Oh Gee Jamie*.

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<sup>4</sup> A pseudonym.

## Adults privilege youth voices that interpellate adults

Dominant ideologies and assumptions mitigate that not all voices are valued equally and that not all voices are celebrated as desirable forms of youth self-expression. In an effort to recuperate *voice* as a term that has suffered from too much conceptual sprawl, Pat Thomson (2011) asks us to consider what “counts as speaking” in different contexts and how “dominant ways of being, thinking, and acting” can constrain speech (p. 28). Although she is not explicitly referencing mediated voices, her questions can be grafted onto the different narratives young people write as well as the media syntax they use to express and produce their mediated voices.

The media workshops I facilitate are explicitly framed as an opportunity for youth to “tell their stories” and to “use their voices to change their world.” We watch and teach with examples of other “successful” youth-produced media that (unintentionally) frame the parameters of what is or isn’t acceptable; or at the very least, the examples communicate the kinds of media adults read as valuable and are hoping youth will produce. Because the workshop is offered to teens currently experiencing foster care and living together in a residential facility, certain forms of identity and expression are brought to bear and participants are connected through their shared experiences of displacement (see Berliner, 2018). These structures and experiences shape the context of youth voice and the intentions and modalities they use to encode their texts.

Adult facilitators – myself included – explicitly and implicitly communicated assumptions and values of youth-produced media in such a way that Asia, her peers, and college student facilitators co-produced a text that was legible to adults. I am not suggesting that a text such as *Is Anybody Listening?* is not a manifestation of Asia’s youthful voice, however, I am arguing that it is an iteration of a youthful voice that is acutely aware of the dominant power structures and hegemonic logics in which she is speaking. Her video demonstrates a media literacy that simultaneously reveals knowledge of a society structured by power imbalances and her own subservient position within this culture that requires her to strategically speak in a way that interpellates adult audiences.

What youth say and how they say it is inextricably influenced by knowledge of who is

being addressed; young people often construct messages and communicate affect in ways they think adults want to hear (see Arnot & Reay, 2007). In their study on youth/adult co-produced media, Jimenez et al. (2021) found that young people exercise “the art of youthful restraint” as both a “defensive reaction” and also as “an agentic practice” whereby young people enter into complex negotiations with adults about what is or is not appropriate to express (p. 11). Certainly, teaching young people how to use media to speak to an adult audience can be an effective strategy for fostering understanding and implementing change; adults are often the stakeholders with the power to enact change in the lives of young people. Yet, I am concerned that what gets acknowledged and celebrated as an “authentic youth voice” is often youth speaking to adults, rather than youth speaking to other youth; the latter risks being dismissed as trivial, inappropriate, or illegible.

To clarify, I’m not suggesting playful texts can’t resonate with adults. For example, let’s briefly consider a different playful text from the same workshop; unlike *Oh Gee Jamie*, this playful text easily resonated with adults. As an exercise for teaching point-of-view, narrative, and Foley, we asked groups to produce a short audio piece that retold a well-known fairy tale from the perspective of a different character. One group retold the *Three Little Pigs* from the perspective of the Big Bad Wolf. In their version, the three pigs were siblings in foster care and the wolf was an angry biological child of their foster parent. The pig who built her house out of bricks (and was able to survive the wolf’s efforts to blow down her house) was the only one of her pig siblings to attend college. The use of silly and exaggerated sound effects and funny voices created a playful story that had adults and teens laughing together and praising the story. The story is obviously imbued with collective experiences of the teens in care who produced it. The overt inclusion of a “college helps you succeed” message demonstrated how the teens were echoing back a discourse we had communicated in the workshop. Whether intentional or not, the teens produced media that met the assumptions and values that the adults had communicated and highlights how a youth text can be both playful/youthful *and* meaningful/decipherable for adults.

Both examples – *Is Anybody Listening?* and the re-telling of the *Three Little Pigs* – are legible to and resonate with adults because there is symmetry

between the ways youth encoded the texts and how adults read the texts. Which is to say, youth produced the texts with an “everyday knowledge of social structures of how things work” and with an awareness of the “power and interests and the structures of legitimations” (Hall, 2012, p. 169). While the texts are meaningful to both the teens who produced them and to the adults who continue to circulate them, the alignment of youth encoding and adult decoding belies a centering of adults that structures, legitimates, and can limit the discursive spaces of youth media production. How then can we make sense of playful texts that don’t resonate with adults?

### **Making sense of nonsensical youth-produced media**

When *Oh Gee Jamie* was screened at the culmination of the workshop, there was a clear and visible distinction between how the adults and the teens in the room responded. The adults – including caseworkers, mentors, caregivers, legal advocates, therapists, professors, and university administrators – smiled and shifted uncomfortably in their seats. They whispered words of confusion to each other; they laughed nervously, and simultaneously just stared puzzled at what they were watching.<sup>5</sup> The teens, on the other hand, were laughing uproariously, so much so, that at one point an adult facilitator asked them to quiet down so that they could hear the rest of the film. This was less of an attempt from an adult to try to contain genuine youthful pleasure, but rather, at this point it had become evident that the teens were one-upping each other’s responses in an effort to sustain the loudest and longest laughter. Part of their pleasure from the text was derived from transgressing “appropriate” responses; they were gaining social power with their peers through a juxtaposition of teen pleasure and adult perplexity.

This reaction is not unique.<sup>6</sup> In her research about youth-produced documentaries, Candance Doerr-Stevens (2015) has found that teens “are acutely aware of their audiences and deliberately seek to establish social connections that will

enhance and manipulate audience reception” (p. 165). Similarly, in interviews with media educators, Renee Hobbs (2019) found that it was common for “some students to intentionally transgress in order to provoke adults” and to incorporate “inappropriate” humor to “up their ‘cool’ with their peers” (p. 211). Significantly, Jimenez et al. (2021) argue that youth-adult negotiations about what is or isn’t appropriate to include in a story can “open up opportunities for the development of collaboration, expression, and critical competencies” between adults and youth (p. 6). However, it’s important to consider how these negotiations are influenced and constrained by an adult reluctance to circulate such nonsensical or “inappropriate” texts that don’t resonate with other adults.

If we aim to decolonize the reception of youth-produced media, we should be just as willing to celebrate and circulate *Oh Gee Jamie* as an example of a successful youth film precisely because it resonates with youth audiences. This requires us to engage with illegible and playful media texts in ways that privilege, seek to understand, and connect with playful youth voices.

### **Why adults are less likely to circulate *Oh Gee Jamie***

I propose there are at least two reasons we do not circulate playful texts such as *Oh Gee Jamie*: 1) they are “just for fun” and 2) they don’t make sense to adults. Because it is largely assumed that playful texts are “just for fun,” it is also assumed that they do not serve a greater purpose and/or cannot serve as a valuable representation of youth voices beyond the context in which they are produced. To be clear, I know that media educators value fun and playfulness in the *process* of creating media, however, I believe that we are less likely to value the *outcome* of that playfulness.

If a text doesn’t fit our presumed goals or outcomes – that is, if adults can’t read it as successful – then we might try to demonstrate its value by explaining how the process of creating it was a success. For example, we try to make the case that that there actually *is* a deeper meaning

but rather, there was a film that didn’t make sense to adults or was intentionally pushing boundaries of what adults would find appropriate. These were films that we had to work to explain to adult audiences or we felt the need to provide context for prior to screening.

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<sup>5</sup> I have screened the film at conferences and for adults in other settings; the reactions are remarkably consistent across contexts.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in graduate school I volunteered for weekend kid film workshops. There was always at least one “unsuccessful” film each year. I do not mean a film that didn’t come together in the way the kids had intended,

embedded in the ways young people play with and respond to popular culture beyond “just for fun.” But in so doing, we risk “colonizing students for our own purposes” as Buckingham (2003) suggests, by “re-inscribing what counts as valid knowledge” (p. 6). This need to explain or justify playful texts reveals our own distrust with youth pleasure.

In his influential work on creativity, David Gauntlett (2018) challenges conceptualizations of creativity that prioritize the outputs of a creative process and a privileging of expert validations. Although media educators might be reluctant to admit that we focus on outputs or adult (expert) validation, the assumptions and values of youth-produced media that I introduced in the beginning of this article highlight how we focus on the end product as a stand in for the process and on texts that validate the legitimacy of our programs and pedagogies. Therefore, texts that are produced “just for fun” fail to sufficiently validate the expectations of media workshops, which can mean less interest in funding programs (or writing academic articles about films!) that are “just for fun.” We expect outcomes that are transformative, but often overlook the transformative nature of play and the ways in which play facilitates social connections.

Second, illegible playful youth-produced texts do not rely on recognizable media syntax or narrative structures. Instead, they incorporate seemingly nonsensical codes and conventions that are derivative of unique youth cultures. The perceived illegibility is predicated on an assumption that the adult interpretation of the text is the dominant reading and that the producer has failed to properly encode the message in a decipherable manner. To return to Jimenez et al.’s (2021) study, they found that one reason adult facilitators would intervene in the storytelling process was “when elements of stories that young people wanted to tell were deemed to be potentially problematic for an adult audience” (p. 7). Similar to *Oh Gee Jamie*, the example in their study was about a humorous element that the youth producer and adult facilitator read differently and thus had to negotiate if and how to include it. As Jimenez et al. note, these necessary negotiations are productive sites of analysis to understand youth agency and empowerment in spaces of media education.

I’m not suggesting that adults shouldn’t be part of these negotiations or that we should greenlight every youth idea. However, I am asking us to consider how our (unintentional) privileging of texts

that incorporate speech, gestures, humor, and media languages that are legible to us as adults run the risk of centering adults. At times, we may unintentionally place the burden on young people to create media that can be interpreted by adults, instead of placing the onus on adults to negotiate a reading that privileges young people’s emerging media grammar, memetic syntax, peer culture, and embodied playfulness.

### **A youth-centered reading of *Oh Gee Jamie***

I propose that a youth-centered reading of playful youth media requires at least two things: 1) an acknowledgement that the adult reading is not the dominant reading and 2) a legitimization of pleasure. To address the first, media literacy education often centers young people’s playfulness in curriculum and during the media production processes. However, I am suggesting that we peripheralize youth and therefore center adults through our *reading* of youth-produced media texts. If we wish to decolonize our reading and circulation of youth texts – and if we wish to move “towards the demands of dialogue and understanding” (Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010, p. 210) – then we must position youth as the dominant reader/reading and the adult as peripheral and our reading as negotiated (Hall, 2012).

Media education programs often rely on examples from professional media as a way to teach media syntax, formalism, generic conventions, and narrative structures. Yet, many young people are just as likely to learn media codes, genre conventions, and narrative structures from amateur online videos and playful memes as they are from professional multimillion dollar blockbusters. Looking at pop culture, particularly digitally mediated spaces such as TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, and Instagram, we can see how young people develop literacies that learn from, appropriate, and incorporate semiotic resources to “create a shared space with the values and tastes of intended audiences” (Doerr-Stevens, 2015, p. 166). If the intended audience is their peers, rather than adults, then young people will construct media texts using a specific generational media syntax that deviates from traditional approaches to media formalism.

Playful media texts such as *Oh Gee Jamie* rely on media codes, conventions, and narrative logics that are often unfamiliar to adults. For example, the film, which was produced by a team of ethnically

diverse adolescent boys ages 12-16, incorporates repetitive loops of a first-person shooter game, de-contextualized macro-image memes and emojis, and viral dance moves. A youth-centered reading of *Oh Gee Jamie* recognizes the ways that the film mimics the participatory and memetic logic of polysemy, pastiche, intertextuality, and remix practices that have become emblematic of affinity spaces within digitally mediated youth cultures (see Knobel & Lankshear, 2005; Shifman, 2013).

The lack of a narrative structure and the disjointed and repetitive editing is not a mistake, incompetency, or failure to apply traditional generic conventions. Rather the “nonsense” is a strategic form of media code-switching that the teens used to create a four and a half minute playful meme that parodies adult genres and formats in a manner that alienates adult legibility and privileges a peer reading. The “nonsense” text is encoded with recognizable, referential, and malleable codes, conventions, and signifiers that have been remixed to interpellate young people as part of a unique peer media culture. I believe that in our efforts at adult sense-making, we risk interpreting and communicating our negotiated reading as the preferred reading, thus further positioning the adult reader at the center of the text.

Second, rather than asking what does a film mean or what is the creator trying to communicate, we could ask *what do youth find pleasurable about this text?* To be clear, it’s of course possible that at times there is a deeper meaning embedded within a playful text. But what if some texts do not have a “deeper” (adult) reading? What if the purpose *is* the pleasure of playfully engaging with media for its own sake and the social connectedness the text facilitates? This would mean valuing and trusting playful media texts not because of their adult legibility, but because they express playful and ephemeral youthful subjectivities and forms of pleasure.

In *Oh Gee Jamie*, this pleasure is manifested corporally. There is a lot of movement in the film; 12 year-old Jamie jumps around, swings his arms, and yells at the camera and then back at the green screen. In fact, Jamie is rarely standing still, simultaneously addressing his peer audience in the studio and engaging with the green screen behind him. While I certainly believe in the transformative power of “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 2017) that helps young people connect their individual struggles to larger systems of

oppression (as I have witnessed countless times in my own workshops), I think we tend to overlook the ways in which healing and trauma can be articulated through embodied play (see Carey, 2006).

The boys who produced the video were all experiencing the trauma of ongoing family separation and displacement. Addressing systemic inequalities and the oppressive systems that contribute to foster care (e.g. criminalization of poverty and addiction, lack of access to healthcare and affordable housing, ineffective immigration policies, a white supremacist criminal justice system, etc.) are important ways to help young people process trauma, heal, and create changes. I have deep respect and admiration for the documentary style productions that educators such as Steven Goodman (2018) have facilitated for teens experiencing foster care. I am in no way suggesting we abandon these transformative modes of learning, engagement, and liberation.

Yet, I’m asking us to also consider how young people may use playful media as an embodied articulation of emotions and trauma that they may not yet have the verbal language, emotional maturity, or healing and support structures to express. If we are to listen to teens and meet them where they are at, we must acknowledge their creative capacity to deal with significant challenges through whatever means of expression they can access. In a world in which teens experiencing foster care feel a lack of control, the body can become a site of agency, control, and creative expression; thus Jamie’s focus on dance and movement can be read as a way for him to *feel* playfully in control and exercise agentive creativity while connecting with his peers (both in the studio and at the screening).

Such valuation of playful texts resonates with Gauntlett’s (2018) intentionally broad definition of creativity. In addition to valuing the process of creativity (over the outcome), he also argues that creativity should prioritize *feelings* rather than success. The creative process “may arouse various emotions, such as excitement and frustration, but most especially a feeling of joy. When witnessing and appreciating the output, people may sense the presence of the maker, and recognise those feelings (p. 76). A youth-centered reading of playful media texts validates and celebrates the embodied playful even if the text itself appears illegible. The illegibility of the text can serve to strengthen peer socialization, generational identification, and social connectedness (see Doerr-Stevens, 2015;

Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010). This is evident both in the text itself – in which the audience can vicariously share in Jamie’s silly and exaggerated expressions of play as he dances around with a giant eagle mascot on his head—and in how we, as adults, can witness and appreciate and experience a room full of teenagers enthusiastically laughing at and with a text that they are able to collectively decode.

In other words, rather than a tendency to “justify” the legitimacy of the text and process, we should strive to engage with a youthful playfulness that finds pleasure in the reception of the text itself, and not only the adult-centric values and outcomes we desire. We could, as Silverstone (1999) suggests, validate “pleasure and play as central aspects of our relationship to media” by acknowledging playful media as an “arena to sanction the bodily, erotic, and irrational, even if just temporarily” (p. 9).

Lastly, to return to Gauntlett (2018) once more, screening the playful text makes abundantly evident the ways that young people connect through making. Undeniably, the young boys who made the film connected with one another, as well as with their college mentors and other adults who helped to facilitate the production. I think that media education appropriately values and validates this level of connectivity – the kind that emerges from the *process* of media making. However, I think we struggle to recognize, value, and legitimize the connectivity that is derived from the pleasures of the text itself, one that that is amplified and validated in a shared laughter with peers.

## CONCLUSION

### Valuing playful mediated voices as a strategy for decolonizing youth media education

Obviously there is scholarship that celebrates young people’s playful creativity in media production, however, much of it focuses on the media young people create in their informal, peer, and domestic spaces (e.g., tutorials, pop culture parodies, viral dance videos, fandom, vlogs, etc.). When young people bring these particular tastes and practices into more formalized spaces of media literacy education – spaces with adult-created pedagogies – there is a shift in what both teens and adults value and express. It is the playful videos of formalized media education that we tend to trivialize and it is the mediated playful voice that is contained within the text itself that I am trying to recuperate.

I’m asking us to consider what we may lose when we simultaneously celebrate media production and storytelling as opportunities for selfhood and citizenship, but at the same time meticulously identify the educational, democratic, or market values of these practices and pedagogies. Where is the space to prioritize young people’s pleasures, sensibilities, and subjectivities in media literacy discourses that aren’t entwined in discourses of education, citizenship, and the market? How can our pedagogies reflect the important adult values that I’m in no way suggesting we discard, while at the same time make space for the irreverent, ephemeral, memetic, and seemingly nonsensical multivocality of youth expressions? We can simultaneously continue to celebrate the value of texts such as *Is Anybody Listening?* and expand our conceptualizations of what constitutes successful media production in the context of media education and literacy.

I believe one way to do this is to acknowledge and celebrate the ways in which playful voices and “just for fun” media texts might function as memes that work to create affinity spaces for young people. Knobel and Lankshear (2005) identify a meme as “recognizable cultural information” that is encoded with a “meaningful idea, pattern, or chunk of ‘stuff’ that embodies and/or shapes some aspect of the ways of doing and being that are associated with belonging to a particular practice or group” (p. 3). A memetic reading of playful media texts allows us to consider how young people recognize the text as relevant to their participation in a particular affinity space and how the memetic modes of engagement and production are often legible to youth, but not to adults. Young people’s recognition of the memetic value of playful media indicates a particular way of “doing” media literacy that differs from adults’ social practices and literacies. It requires us to challenge our own assumptions of the kinds of texts we value and instead embrace the “illegible” texts that clearly resonate with youth audiences and media makers.

Lastly, play is not only a pleasurable and affective form of peer communication and self-expression, but can also be a mode of power. As Parnell and Patsarika (2014) contend, “the playful voice invites and cajoles adults into different modes of being and creative exchange” (p. 107). When we dismiss the playful voice as frivolous, we miss opportunities to incorporate and engage with the playful ideas and ephemeral identities young people

are communicating. Through an expression of a playful mediated voice, young people exercise power in ways that temporarily subvert or transgress otherwise myopic ideals of self-expression or empowerment that adults privilege and value.

Rather than expressing a future sense of self, the playful text is pleasurable *because* it is an ephemeral embodied articulation of a fleeting youthful subjectivity. Play becomes empowering in the ways it attempts to maintain control, attention, and engagement from peers and adults who are invited into the imaginary constructs of the playful mediated world. Playful media positions young people as experts of the development of emerging media syntax, memetic codes, and amateur generic conventions. The playful mediated voice temporarily suspends power structures between adult and youth when adults learn to trust and value the pleasures young people express through the reception of playful media texts.

In conclusion, I have made the case that we must learn to recognize and value the pleasure of the playful voice in media education, not only as part of the production *process*, but also as it is *expressed* in the text itself and in our *reception* and *circulation* of such texts. This might require us to re-structure our curriculum by incorporating playful videos as part of critical analysis. This might mean letting go of structures that mimic and prepare youth for professional processes of production. And it might mean challenging our conceptualization of democratic modes of engagement and self-expression.

However, recognizing that some youth are already creating “illegible” playful videos in media education programs that are structured around other values, goals, and assumptions, suggests that maybe we don’t need to change our approach to teaching and literacy. Maybe the problem isn’t our pedagogies; perhaps, instead, the necessary shift is in how we as media educators *read and articulate the values of playful texts*. Instead of trying to prove that learning occurred and therefore the text should be valued – by funders, parents, educators – could simply celebrate and honor the playful and embodied subjectivities that youth entrust us with when they invite us to share in their pleasure. Perhaps sharing in, circulating, and validating a young person’s pleasure in a “just for fun” media text is the simplest way to de-center the adult in youth media education.

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