“This is mud on our faces! We’re not really black!”
Teaching gender, race, and age through humour in
The Golden Girls

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This paper begins from the premise that humour in popular culture is an excellent pedagogical strategy for teaching about the complexities of sexism, racism, and ageism to students in higher education. In specific, the 1980s American television sitcom, The Golden Girls offers the possibility to explore the subjects of gender, sexuality, whiteness, mixed race, interracial relationships, “blackface,” age, class, and familial relations. This paper analyzes one episode of The Golden Girls entitled “Mixed Blessings” in order to consider the ways in which an older/unfamiliar representation fosters critical dialogue in the classroom, which can enable oppression and privilege to become tangible and discussable subjects, while also encouraging learning to be joyful.

All teachers could use more studies about sharing the power of humor as a force in the classroom that enhances learning and helps to create and sustain bonds of community. Working together in the classroom, teachers and students find equanimity when we laugh together. (bell hooks 2010,75)

Introduction: Is this “funny”?

Full disclosure: I love The Golden Girls. I also recognize that it is a cliché that I love The Golden Girls. As a white, straight, femme, feminist, I have watched this sitcom since I was a child. These are four women who I have aspired to be like – sexual, smart, underestimated, and hilariously sarcastic. I also recognize that this is a show that most of my undergraduate students are unfamiliar with. The context of the show—the socio-political climate of the United States in the 1980s—is unfamiliar and the subject matter(s) that the characters introduce are almost non-existent on contemporary sitcoms. I choose to screen this show with the

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knowledge that it will be amusing for some, ambivalent for others, and completely new to most of them. As a feminist instructor, I see my role as providing the students with material that inspires dialogue, critique, and enjoyment.

“I think it’s funny, but it makes me uncomfortable.” This is a common response that I have received from undergraduate students in Ontario, Canada when showing them an episode of the sitcom *The Golden Girls* entitled “Mixed Blessings” (Harris 1985). I have shown this episode in courses such as Sociology of Gender, and Media and Popular Culture. While I will discuss the synopsis of the show in more detail below, for now I will note that this episode includes discussion and stereotypes of gender, race, age, and sexuality, among others. In my work, I often teach about social stigma, oppression and violence using a feminist intersectional lens. These topics are undeniably contentious, as discussions of social privilege and oppression are psychically challenging and can produce student resistance. As feminist sociologist Kathy Davis argues, these intersectional discussions take up “the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories gender/race/class visible... by...deconstructing categories, unmaking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory workings of power” (2008, 74). As these intersectional discussions can be weighty and emotional subjects, finding moments of levity, where appropriate and pedagogical, is crucial to our ability to enjoy the process of teaching and learning.

The vast majority of current undergraduate students were born after *The Golden Girls* originally went off the air in the early 1990s. While *The Golden Girls* is recognizable to some of the students—due to its reruns, cultural resurgence as feminist-icons, memorabilia (via action figures, Lego sets, T-shirts, Internet memes, etc.) and Betty White’s continued television and film presence—the majority of the students that I have taught are unfamiliar with it. *The Golden Girls* episode “Mixed Blessings” incorporates subjects of gender, sexuality, whiteness, mixed race, interracial relationships, “blackface,” age, class, and familial relations. As bell hooks claims “[h]umor can provide a needed break from serious, intense material and discussion” (2010, 72). While much has been written on the subject of teaching critical thinking in the academy (Curry-Stevens 2005; DiAngelo and Sensoy 2009; hooks 1994, 2010; Schick 2000), this paper stems from my interest in exploring the relationship between teaching critical feminist ideas to undergraduate students and humour. The lack of familiarity that the students have with the material provides four pedagogical outcomes that are achievable through in-class screening.
and discussion. These pedagogical outcomes are: combining an unfamiliar representation with familiar tropes; forcing the unspoken to become explicit; enabling oppression and privilege to become tangible and discussable; and, encouraging learning to become joyful. In this paper, I explore how *The Golden Girls* can be used to teach context, political understandings of gender, race, and age alongside a sitcom that is contextually feminist and (some would argue) contemporarily problematic.

It is my contention that the airing of television shows within the feminist university classroom can be a strategic pedagogical choice. In their study of gender and popular culture, Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer contend that the practice of watching television with others, or what they call “collective consumption,” is important because it makes the process of understanding television programs distinct from other types of media, such as the individualized experience of watching media on our smart phones. They claim “[c]ollective consumption is important because it means that meaning production is often a collective process as groups make sense together by talking about what they consume” (Milestone and Meyer 2012, 163). In feminist classrooms, the use of collective consumption is critical to how we can dissect and engage with media in order to unravel its meanings in a forum where we can learn from one another. In my classrooms, I choose to incorporate a wide variety of media so as to expose students to an array of identity representations—particularly of gender and race—that may vary from their current contexts of understanding.

The importance of teaching with humour is one that I also want to emphasize here. As R.L. Garner notes in their study on humour in academia, undergraduate students demonstrated that “humor can have a positive effect on student enjoyment and content retention” by providing a more relaxed atmosphere; humor allows for a “cognitive break that allows the student to assimilate the information” (2006, 179). *The Golden Girls* is an American sitcom that ran from 1985 to 1992. At its peak, the show would have an average viewership of 21 million households (Grant and Hundley 2007). It centres on the story of four older white women who live together in Miami. Dorothy (portrayed by Bea Arthur), an intelligent, sarcastic, substitute teacher and Italian-American divorcée; Blanche (portrayed by Rue McClanahan) a sexually-voracious, art-loving widow from the American South; Rose (portrayed by Betty White), a compassionate, naive widow from St. Olaf Minnesota, and Sophia (portrayed by Estelle Getty) Dorothy’s mother who is spry, blunt, in
recovery from a stroke, proud of her Italian roots and also widowed. The women’s ages are significant as the show consistently focused on how the women were older, but approached this in a variety of ways. While their ages were not consistently presented on the show, Dorothy, Rose, and Blanche are referred to as in their mid-fifties in Season One (with Blanche steadfastly denying her ‘real’ age throughout the entire series), while Sophia is in her early eighties.

*The Golden Girls* emerged as a sitcom at a time when television programming was responding to the lack of strong, employed female characters. The strength of the show was, in part, that it revolved around women and rarely even had male characters delivering punch lines. The women were the comedians; they were clever and captivating. While they embodied recognizable tropes—the dumb blonde, the crotchety old woman, the sexpot, the sarcastic intellectual—they were also subverting tropes that could confine them. These characters were sexual, confident, not defined by the men or lack of men in their life but by their friendship, and their ability to entertain.

**Combining unfamiliar representations with familiar tropes**

The spaces that I teach in have a predominantly white, female, English-speaking, and middle-class population and so the familiarity of whiteness as norm on the situation comedy (sitcom) is a useful representation to use for the students, as it immediately replicates the mainstream representations that are common on Canadian television (which is most often imported American content) (de Silva 2013). When the episode is initially played, students, regardless of their race, see white people represented on television, which is nothing unusual. However, the familiar aspects of the show—white, middle-class women—become overshadowed by their age, how they speak, and the subjects they make explicit.

In “Mixed Blessings,” Dorothy’s son Michael unexpectedly visits and informs his mother that he is getting married. Dorothy is surprised by the news and asks who Michael is marrying. Michael tells Dorothy that he is marrying Lorraine, a singer that he met through his band. Dorothy is stunned by this sudden news, and then Michael tells Dorothy that Lorraine is black. Dorothy is clearly caught off-guard by the news regarding her race, but tells Michael that as long as he is happy, so is she. When Lorraine arrives, Dorothy mistakes her for Lorraine’s mother, as she is nearly twenty years older than Michael. Dorothy no longer approves of the relationship and this becomes a major point of contention between
her and her son. Further, Lorraine’s mother (Greta) and two aunts (also black women) arrive to meet Michael (mistaking Dorothy, who is carrying a feather duster, for the maid). While Lorraine told her mother that Michael was younger, which Greta approved of, Lorraine did not tell her mother that Michael was white.

These initial interactions in the episode provide a framework for using an unfamiliar example—funny, sexualized older women on television in the 1980s—which allows teaching about context and shifting social climates. This episode is particularly compelling, as the discomfort with the mixing of identities, both racial and age, is made explicit by the characters. There is very little ‘political correctness’ being displayed, which amplifies “humour as a form of interpersonal bond-making and line-drawing” (Longo 2011, 119). The “line-drawing” aspect of humour traditionally positions an insider as one who ‘gets it’ versus an outsider who misses the point of the joke entirely. In addition to the unexpected bluntness of the jokes, many students cannot connect with all of the levels of humour being deployed in *The Golden Girls*, as some of the references are context-specific and demand cultural capital that they are unlikely to have. As one student noted during the class, “I think it’s really funny, but sometimes I didn’t know what they were talking about!” (Teaching Notes 2015). These explicit moments force our classroom dialogue to confront the students’ own varied Canadian contexts and compare them to those that were present on television and in the women’s movement that was occurring three decades ago.

The significance of context is best exemplified in a scene that appears mid-way through “Mixed Blessings.” Throughout the episode, Rose and Blanche use beauty regimens to prepare for a romantic cruise that they are going on with their boyfriends. When they walk out of the kitchen, Greta, her sisters, Lorraine, and Dorothy are all standing in the living room. At this point, Greta still believes Dorothy is the maid. Before Lorraine has the time to explain to her mother who Dorothy is, Blanche and Rose emerge from the kitchen with brown mud on their faces.

[Time index 13:52]
Greta: You must be Michael’s parents.
[Laugh track].
Lorraine: Mama, put your glasses on.

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1 As I have been studying teaching and pedagogy through my academic career, I have always kept pedagogical notes from important lectures. In this paper, I have relied on some of these notes to further demonstrate the points that I am making.
Greta (holding her glasses up to her eyes): Oh my Lord. [Laugh track].
Rose (pointing at her face): This is mud on our faces. We’re not really black! [Louder laugh track].

In this scene, the writers are harkening back to what was an incredibly popular 19th century tradition of blackface minstrelsy entertainment - where white actors painted their faces with “burnt cork or grease” and were dressed “outrageously” in “oversized and/or ragged ‘Negro’ costumes” to mock and produce racist caricatures of black people (Lott 1995, 3). This is an example that few students will be able to recognize immediately, since the characters themselves do not make overly explicit why the scene is additionally uncomfortable. The writer’s inclusion of the phrase “this is mud on our faces” points to the embarrassment of the characters and the racialized narrative of the scene. The explicit uncomfortability of this exchange creates teachable moments where we are able to go back to the scene to work through how this interaction could be read, what was implied by the language the characters used, and what it means in the larger conversation that the episode offers.

It is important to note that students have never questioned this uneasy racialized representation in classroom discussion. Through my follow-up (and re-watching the scene), a few students expressed shock and surprise that “black face” was a practice that existed, while others had some peripheral understanding of it from other sources. One student raised his hand during our debrief to say “When they looked black [with the mud on their faces], it seemed shocking that they included that. It was funny [lowers voice], but, like, racist, no?” (Teaching Notes 2015). These sorts of historical references rarely happen on extremely popular, modern-day American sitcoms that students currently watch. While there are moments of racial discourse on, for example, The Big Bang Theory (Lorre 2007) when someone pokes fun at Rajesh “Raj” Koothrappali and his “Indianness,” these are not critical conversations about the ideological beliefs that people hold about race and racialization or the ideologies that we, as a society, still have about race, gender, sexuality, and age. As Ang-Gee Lee notes in his work “The Androgyny of Rajesh Koothrappali (2015), Raj’s character is used as an effeminate, Orientalized, and exotic foil against which the other white, male characters can assert a more

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2 For example, there are three sitcoms currently ranking in the top 30 shows in Canada, The Big Bang Theory, Modern Family, and Kevin Can Wait (Numeris, 2016).
masculine embodiment. As Dustin Kidd notes in his study of racial television representations in the United States,

White overrepresentation not only persists, it has increased [over time]. I found that whites accounted for 81.8 percent of prime time roles in 2010–2011. Representation of whites in prime time has increased during a period when the white proportion of the population has decreased, to 63.7 percent. The increase in white representation is largely explained by the decline of black representation, which is down to just 9.6 percent (Kidd 2014, 49).

The presentation of Raj as a sexually ambiguous and often emasculated character is not representative of all sitcom representations, but the range of diversity on popular sitcoms—and American television in general—is still incredibly low.

Professors that interrogate the status quo should expect to have various forms of push-back from students in the form of resistance. As I have argued elsewhere, students may often feel “out of place” once their assumptions of the world have been disrupted and this “out of placeness” may be expressed through disillusionment, silence, or frustration (Kannen 2014). Student resistance to this kind of teaching is important as it fosters the feminist pedagogical dimensions that we strive for in classrooms. Each time that I have shown this episode, resistance has been expressed in the form of guilt, specifically white guilt. I have received a wide variety of comments from students who feel guilt for thinking the episode is funny. To put this into context, this episode is shown in class after we have discussed white privilege (McIntosh 1990; Rodriguez and Villaverde 2000), theories of racialization (DeMello 2014; Sastre 2014), and what it means to be an ally (Bishop 2002). Anne Bishop (2002) contends that when people with privilege take on guilt for the oppressions that they have become recently aware of, the guilt immobilizes them and they often feel unable to resolve their personal feelings in the face of larger systemic inequalities. Following these conversations, some students express a belief that the episode is wholly problematic for speaking about race in the ways that the characters do and that some of the students are shocked by the ways in which sexuality and age are presented. Others feel grateful for seeing the kinds of representations that seemed to exist prior to the media that they watch.
As one student said, “I have never seen old[er] women talk about sex like that – it was funny, but awesome” (Teaching Notes 2016).

The students’ comments of resistance point to the complexity of the role that instructors have in their position of authority. Carmen Luke claims, “[a]s a craft and art, pedagogy is seduction and performance: we cajole, humor, invite, persuade, convince, in efforts to seduce students into the knowledges we embody, over which we have authority, and which we want our students to see and grasp in that pleasurable ‘ah-ha’ moment of (en)light(enment)” (1997, 194). While the power of instructors is undeniable, it can be argued that students are technically ‘in charge’. The active engagement of students is crucial to the atmosphere, productivity, and enjoyment that can occur in the classroom space. The clip addressed above is provocative and can be unsettling. It forces students to question how far we have come as a society in addressing explicit and subtle encounters of racism. This supports Srivastava’s claim that, “[i]f one’s identity as feminist, as woman, as Canadian, as liberal, rests on being tolerant and just, then antiracist challenges profoundly unsettle that foundation. Here, as elsewhere, some whites may direct anger and defensiveness at those who have disturbed that imagined identity” (2005, 43). Imparting to the students that these conversations were happening on situation comedies in the 1980s, enables a discussion of context and (non)shifting social climates, which also allows us to enter into conversations about what has changed since that time, what has not, and why.

The unspoken becomes explicit

In Elizabeth Ellsworth’s review of critical pedagogy literature, she concluded that “the goal of critical pedagogy was a critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, and social change – a revitalized public sphere characterized by citizens capable of confronting public issues critically through ongoing forms of public debate and social action” (1989, 300). Teaching The Golden Girls using a critical lens provides an excellent site for considerations of how gender, sexuality, racialization and age come to mean and the forms through which they can be made meaningful within ‘critical’ environments.

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3 I have come to know these insights through students borrowing my DVDs of the series, sending me GIFs that they find online, and asking to watch more episodes in future classes.
Teaching about oppression, racism in particular, is often uncomfortable for white students. In my previous research on the experience of privilege and whiteness in higher education, I conducted interviews with students in Northern Ontario and they conveyed that race was not something we (they would often include me in that ‘we’), as young white people, should even be discussing (Kannen 2012a). At the beginning of the interviews, these white participants would often lower their voices when using the word ‘race’, avoid it as much as possible, and consider race as something outside of them. It was evident to me that the vast majority of student participants who identified as white, discussed issues of identity using a predominantly racial lens as ‘us’ (white) versus ‘them’ (Other). This positioning of me as an ‘insider’ has also been made evident in my teaching. The limits of our language cause white students to speak of ‘normalcy’ as it relates to privilege, which furthers how the prevalence of privilege as racial is overwhelmingly clear in the literature (Ahmed 2007; Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayashi 2011; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Seshadri-Crooks 2000). Yet, I do not believe that it is strictly my whiteness that garners my insider status; it is also my language, regional familiarity, gender, education, and visibly nondisabled body that encourages conversations to happen in the ways in which they do.

Jill Dolan’s romanticized notion of education helps expose why educators need to push the boundaries of comfort in the classroom/lecture hall/seminar room: “The classroom is an intimate place... Classrooms are places of longing and loss, in which embodied emotions roil to prompt the pursuit of intellectual fulfillment, a state that can only be attained for a moment. This is the stuff of desire” (Dolan 2002, 147). Instructors who teach with an interest and desire for the messiness of studying identity, as well as reflecting on their own identity struggles, compel critical scholars to confront the status quo within our classrooms and disrupt the unspoken dominance of social privileges.

As previously mentioned, I teach in a predominantly white university and within my classrooms it becomes evident through our discussions that my own whiteness combines with the whiteness of the four main characters on The Golden Girls in order to function in ways that I consider to provide this ‘insider’ status with regard to teaching feminist ideas on identity. This became evident when we watched the following: In the same scene discussed in the previous section, the dialogue continues as Michael enters the room in order to meet Lorraine’s mother and aunts. In this moment, it becomes explicit that Dorothy’s discomfort with their age
difference is no longer the most significant issue facing Michael and Lorraine.

[Time index 14:16]
Greta: This is Michael?
Lorraine: Yeah.
Greta: Uh-huh!
Lorraine: Come on, Momma. We talked about this! I told you he was younger.
Greta: Yes, but you sure didn’t tell me he was white!
[Laugh track].
Greta: No daughter of mine is marrying some skinny white boy!
[Louder laugh track and applause].
[Cuts to Dorothy looking shocked and making eye contact with Rose and Blanche.]
[End of scene].

Presenting representations that subvert expectations of ‘whiteness as invisible’ forces white students to recognize that their racialization matters. As instructors, our bodies speak to the students in a variety of ways (Kannen 2012b), and it is a combination of our embodiments in the classroom space and our pedagogical choices that impart some of the possibilities for discussion on identity. As one student noted in our discussion, “I never thought of myself as white before. I know that sounds bad” (Teaching Notes 2014). I believe that my ability to show this clip as pedagogical—and have a critical discussion around Greta’s reaction to Michael’s whiteness—is made accessible to students through my own whiteness and my insistence on problematizing the dominance of that whiteness.

Students who are racialized have frequently disclosed how important it has been for them to have a professor who accounts for her white privilege. In a personal email I received from a student of colour, she stated “I think the way you teach helps everyone, including me, to feel okay with talking about uncomfortable subjects, like how everyone else at [the University] is pretty much white or not disabled” (Personal Communication 2013). In the clips presented thus far, humour functions to make explicit the characters’ prejudices. These are moments of discomfort with the explicit acknowledgement of the systemic biases that govern the way society is hierarchized. These awkward and uncomfortable moments that inspire nervous laughter also encourage dialogue regarding the presence of diversities in our classroom. My aim as an instructor is to
expose students to subjects that are engaging, surprising, and illuminating regarding the everydayness of racism, sexism, and ageism. It is through these examples that oppression and privilege can become explicit, meaningful, and relevant.

Oppression and privilege can become tangible and relatable

In these feminist classrooms, it is important to convey the idea that each person has both identities of privilege and identities of oppression. Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack address what they call a “race to innocence,” which is when those with privilege who are “challenged about their domination respond by calling attention to their own subordination” (1998, 339). This kind of response is common among students who believe they are being labelled as ‘privileged’. Studying one’s own privilege is often uncomfortable, while learning about histories of systemic inequalities is also psychically challenging. It is important to understand oppression and privilege in a relational mode, i.e. that both are always intertwined and informing our understandings of the other.

Using humour is a way to help bridge the tensions and resistance that arise with discussions of privilege and oppression. As hooks argues, “[s]imply put, laughter shared can draw groups closer together. This is especially true in classrooms where there is much that separates, where diversity is the norm, or where the subjects studied confront students with depressing facts” (2010, 71-2). While the students in my courses may not often appear racially diverse, there are always already racial diversities among them as well as diversities in terms of their genders, sexualities, dis/abilities, class backgrounds, religious affiliations, etc.—some obvious, some not—and these diversities can also serve to separate them as hooks notes. In a response paper on “Mixed Blessings,” a student wrote:

There was one scene that was really funny. It had everyone in class laughing. The women were in the living room and arguing over how the couple shouldn’t be together and then the sexy one, Blanch [sic], starts talking about how sex got them together. It made the story even funnier and everyone in the class was having a good time. I forgot we were learning something4.

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The scene that this student is describing is a continuation of the scene where Greta meets Dorothy, Michael, Blanche and Rose.

[Time index: 15.34]
Dorothy (talking to Greta): Look, race is not even an issue. I mean your daughter is twice my son’s age. What can a woman in her forties possibly have in common with a boy in his twenties?
Blanche (interrupts): Sex!
[Laugh track].
At twenty, a man is at his peak and a woman in her forties is also at her peak, so when the two come together - hot damn!!
[Louder laugh track and applause].

In watching this scene, confronting the politics surrounding the notion of Michael and Lorraine as a couple is decidedly uncomfortable, for both the characters and the audience. The inclusion of sexual humour, however, serves to disrupt the heaviness of their disagreements on age and race in order to provide welcomed levity for everyone. According to hooks “both wit and regular old everyday humor could really serve to create a more open atmosphere in the classroom” (2010, 71). This “open atmosphere” is one of the ways to make privilege and oppression tangible in the classroom, while making race, sexuality and/or age explicit by way of humour allows critical content to become more amenable to feminist critique.

Learning becomes joyful

When asking my students to describe representations of older women on television, they are unlikely to come up with terms such as ‘sexy’, ‘vivacious’, ‘independent’, ‘intelligent’, or ‘dynamic’. However, they might think of Betty White (and her contemporary resurgence within American popular culture in the program *Hot in Cleveland*) and say ‘funny’. *The Golden Girls*, and the episode “Mixed Blessings” in particular, make explicit that older women can be sexual; that race and age was and is an issue when we are asked to consider who should be with whom, etc.

In relation to sex, love and romance, Jo Anna Grant and Heather L. Hundley argue that *The Golden Girls* largely do not conform to stereotypes of older women’s roles as “[t]hey traveled, worked, and remained socially active. Romantically, they dated, had sex, got engaged, and married” (2007, 136). These characters enable a dialogue for students that resists the primacy of youth in popular culture and
demonstrates how women can be portrayed as more than the limited representations often put forth in mainstream media. Learning of these possibilities, in relation to the humour that they are witness to in the show, can be joyful for the students.

Nearing the conclusion of the episode, Greta and her sisters return to the house and ask to talk over the disagreements that they had earlier in the day. The women [Dorothy, Rose, Blanche, Greta, and her sisters] gather in the kitchen for some cheesecake.

[Time index 19:52]
[Sophia enters]
Sophia: What’s all the racket? Oh! Martha and the Vandellas are back.
[Laugh track].
Dorothy: Ma!
Greta (laughing): It’s alright Dorothy, I’ve got one [sic] home just like her.
Dorothy: You have one at home too?
Sophia: One at home? What am I, a cocker-spaniel? Why don’t you just give me an old sock to chew on?
[Laugh track].
Sophia (turns to Greta): You know, I’m glad you showed up. There’s something important we didn’t discuss this afternoon and I’d like to get that cleared up before we talk about anything else.
Greta: What is it?
Sophia (lowering her voice slightly): Is it true what they say about black men in bed?
[Laugh track].
[Louder laugh track].
[Blanche appears surprised by her own admission. Every woman in the room turns to look at her.]
Blanche: Oh yes definitely, that is something that I would like to know about too.
[Laugh track].
Dorothy: Blanche! Please! That’s a stereotype.
Greta’s sister: Call it whatever you want, I’m just grateful it’s true.
[All seven women turn to each other and laugh].

The trope that the women are engaging in—of black men’s virility—is not an unfamiliar stereotype, but this joke emerging from the mouths of older
women is unexpected. The importance of this point cannot be under-emphasized – these women fuel a racist and problematic stereotype that black men are somehow more virile and sexual than men of other races, that they are grateful for this stereotype (addressing their continued sexual encounters) and thus position their own sexuality in ways similar to that of younger, sexually active straight women. The recognition of this familiarity in women gossiping about male bodies—and then policing themselves for doing so—may allow the joke to feel less uncomfortable to the young female class audience. Having said that, it can also reify a stereotype of black male sexuality for students in the room who may not problematize the discussion that the characters are having.

Like any instructor, I cannot exactly predict how words are received by students. Torok, McMorris, and Lin (2004) found that while college students were overwhelmingly in support of their teachers using humour in the classroom, they also expressed concern regarding its limits. The authors observed that humour can “cross a line” into being offensive towards students and having a negative impact on perceptions of the instructor, especially when sarcasm, or ‘hostile humour’, is deployed. Sarcasm is a contentious issue when speaking to a large group of students. Sarcastic or ironic comments can be like “in jokes” and exclude those who do not share in a more complex and nuanced understanding of the target reference. Also, students whose first language is not English may interpret a sarcastic comment as a genuine one. The complexity of gauging what can be defined as humorous cannot be adequately attended to here. It is important to emphasize that a discussion of humour in the classroom is not reliant upon the ability to tell a joke, but rather it is on creating “a mood of lightness that facilitates learning” (Strean 2011, 189). These moments of reception are not possible for instructors to fully know – as it is not possible for us to ever definitively know how messages are being received; however, these kinds of examples can enable students to engage with the ideas of gender, sexuality, stereotypes of racial difference, age, etc. without overly worrying about saying or doing the ‘wrong’ thing, as the women on the screen have already participated in it and acknowledged the problematics of it.

Conclusion

In classrooms that focus on identity as the foundation to teaching critical pedagogy, the introduction of popular culture is an excellent way to personalize the experience of education and bring “real world” examples
into the classroom space. For example, problematic representations of women and girls, in terms of hyper-sexualization, exoticization, and objectification, are pervasive in Western society. Using examples of these kinds of dominant representations can exemplify sexism, racism, and ageism quite well. The issue with these examples, however, is that they do not enable much critical thinking on the part of the student. Critiquing stereotypical representations within advertisements that over-sexualize and degrade women’s bodies, for example, does not ask students to think very deeply about what they are being exposed to – it is pure objectification and they (often) recognize it immediately. The more nuanced a representation, the more depth of engagement it forces a student to undertake. In my teaching, I use examples from popular culture to enable students to engage with the media that surrounds them. Music videos, commercials, print advertisements, websites, movies, and television shows allow my pedagogy to weave “cool” representations with critical theory. Incorporating media into one’s pedagogy has become a mainstay of teaching within the academy; however, the choice of media genre best suited to teaching about complex issues of identity is by no means standard. Using a variety of media allows students the ability to be exposed to ideas within class that they already encounter in the “real world.”

It is my contention that using popular culture encourages the teaching of critical, and often uncomfortable, subjects to become more enjoyable. Our teaching and reflections upon that teaching should be informed by the belief that student resistance to learning about critical social theory and their own social privileges can be explored far more readily in an environment that makes use of humour as found in popular culture, combined with the seriousness of systemic social inequalities. *The Golden Girls* has become a feminist mainstay in the discussion of strong women on television and their cultural cache lives within the moments of subversion, uncomfortability and disruption of the norm that is required on contemporary mainstream television, but is difficult to source. *The Golden Girls* is a useful example for the aforementioned reasons: It combines an unfamiliar representation with familiar tropes; it forces the unspoken to become explicit; it enables oppression and privilege to become tangible and relatable; and through our watching and discussion of it, helps learning to become joyful.
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