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RIE

PRE

SENT



Studies of Diversity
and Popular Media
Culture

ACADEMIA
PRESS

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Introduction

Rarely has a television adaptation been anticipated as much as *The Last of Us* (HBO, 2023–present), based on the post-apocalyptic and dystopian video game with the same name from 2013. The American series is set in a world coping with the consequences of a deadly pandemic caused by an infection of a Cordyceps fungus. To manage the pandemic, the United States has been turned into a police state with uninfected people living in quarantine zones across the country. The series recounts the story of Joel (Pedro Pascal), a middle-aged man, and Ellie (Bella Ramsey), a teenage girl. Joel is tasked with bringing Ellie safely to a faction of Fireflies, a revolutionary anti-government group. Since Ellie is the only person known to be immune to the infection, she is seen as the key to developing a vaccine. Besides being lauded by critics and fans, the series succeeded in drawing domestic and international audiences, becoming “the most-viewed title ever on HBO’s subscription streaming service in Europe” (Vivarelli, 2023).

The series also made headlines with ‘Long, Long Time’ (season 1, episode 3). Television critics hailed the idiosyncratic episode, describing it as “groundbreaking” (Chilton, 2023a), “absolutely magical television” (Welch, 2023), and “tout simplement miraculeux” [simply miraculous] (Bordages, 2023). Although the series is a fairly faithful adaptation of the video game, the series creators took their liberties with this particular episode. Largely a stand-alone episode, it narrates the backstory of Bill, a side character in the video game. Thanks to his mistrust of governments, Bill (Nick Offerman) survived a government-organised mass execution of his fellow villagers of Lincoln, Massachusetts. Living in a self-barricaded neighbourhood surrounded by booby traps, he managed to create a safe area inaccessible to uninfected or infected humans. One day, a man named Frank (Murray Bartlett) accidentally falls into one of his pits and convinces Bill to allow him some food before continuing his trip to Boston. What starts with a dinner of rabbit stew, paired wines, and a heartfelt moment around the piano turns into sex and romance (see figure 1). The episode stands out for its decision to depict key mo-

ments in Bill and Frank's sixteen-year-long relationship. The scenes range from everyday moments of bliss (e.g. growing strawberries), episodes of intense stress (e.g. Bill getting shot in the stomach), and celebrations of their love for one another (e.g. by getting married in an alternate world where Massachusetts had not recognised same-sex marriage) to the moment Frank's degenerative neuromuscular disorder becomes insupportable and he has to ask Bill to help him die.

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The decision to create a stand-alone episode that sidelined the series' main characters in favour of a compelling romance between middle-aged men can rightfully be considered groundbreaking in the history of LGBTQ representation on the small screen. Although historical analyses have revealed how television in Western society featured references to LGBTQ culture from the start, albeit coded, stereotypical, or used for humoristic purposes (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Tropiano, 2002), it has been a slow process toward diverse representations of LGBTQ people on mainstream television. Only since the 1990s, mirroring the implementation of progressive policies and a broader social recognition of LGBTQ people, has Western television increasingly provided well-developed characters who identified as lesbian or gay and, to a lesser extent, bisexual (Kooijman, 2019; Porfido, 2009; Streitmatter, 2009). As most of these depictions have (for a long time) been rather bland, modest, heteronormative, and limited to soap operas, sitcoms, drama series, or lifestyle formats (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Ng, 2013; Shugart, 2003), any series that took LGBTQ identities seriously and challenged genre-related expectations (e.g. by introducing LGBTQ heroes in science fiction or police procedurals) contributed to a diversified range of LGBTQ characters on the small screen. Especially the first two decades of the twenty-first century have brought us series that revolve around an LGBTQ character (e.g. *La Théorie du Y* [The Theory of Y] (RTBF, 2016–2022), *Please Like Me* (ABC/ABC2, 2013–2016)) or take place within LGBTQ communities (e.g. *The L-Word* (Showtime, 2004–2009), *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000–2005)), the mainstreaming of drag queens thanks to RuPaul and the Drag Race franchise, and well-rounded trans characters performed by trans actors in *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019), *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–present) and *The Politician* (Netflix, 2019–present).

And yet, despite this progress in terms of representation, the simple matter of depicting two men in love in *The Last of Us* led to an online backlash. This was most apparent in the audience ratings that appeared on IMDB (Internet Movie Database), an online film and television database that collects information about audiovisual products such as cast, producers, and directors, and allows audiences to rate films and series. As media critic Louis Chilton (2023b) pointed out, the episode received twice as many votes as the other episodes, resulting in the second-lowest rating (8.1/10). He suspected the episode fell victim to 'review bombing', an online practice whereby users rate popular culture products exception-

nally low to voice discontent. Acknowledging the often large number of votes posted in a relatively brief time span, it is likely that these review bombings may have been purposively organised (e.g. through online forums or blogs).



Figure 1. On-set photograph from *The Last of Us* (2023–present). Bill (Nick Offerman) plays the piano for Frank (Murray Bartlett). Photo credit: PlayStation Productions/Sony Pictures Television/Album, © Imageselect/Alamy.

This act of review bombing should not be seen as an isolated incident. It is part of a tangled web of events that revolve around identity, sociocultural diversity, and popular media culture. Also part of this web is the effort made by several Western European public service media to produce and programme content more tailored to the increasingly diverse society they are expected to represent. A commonly used strategy is ‘mainstreaming of diversity’, which refers to the inclusion of characters from sociocultural minoritised groups into popular programmes like soap operas or sitcoms (Saha, 2018; see Chapter 3). Another strategy concerns the practice of reconsidering content that public service media produced and/or distributed in the past. For instance, the British BBC and Belgian VRT experienced a public backlash over the decision to remove episodes of popular sitcoms – respectively *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1975–1979) and *FC De Kampioenen* [FC The Champions] (VRT, 1990–2020) – from their online platforms due to the inclusion of racial slurs and harmful stereotypes. Under pressure from vocal fans online – who found the removal among other things an act of censorship and ‘cancel culture’, an attack



CHAPTER 1

**CONCEPTS,
DEBATES,
AND
APPROACHES**

1. IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY IN WESTERN SOCIETY

1.1. *About identity*

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Identity is ubiquitous in people's everyday lives. People use several markers or labels of identity to make sense of who they are and how to present themselves to others. For instance, they may see themselves as 'male', 'bisexual', 'black', and/or 'Hindu'. Some of these terms were attributed to people. Think of how many persons were described as 'boy' or 'girl' when born, solely based on their sex characteristics. In other instances, people may use certain identity categories for self-identification. When, for example, a man experiences sexual desires for people of the same sex or gender, this person may identify as 'gay' or 'bisexual'. The instances illustrate how bodily traits (e.g. skin colour, biological sex characteristics, sexual desire, capabilities, age) have been used as a basis for identity categories. Similarly, sociocultural features (e.g. nationality, religion, social class) have also led to identity markers (e.g. Dutch, Muslim, working class). For instance, when someone is raised in a blue-collar community¹ and a household with little to no discretionary income, the person can be seen as part of the working class.

The examples outlined above reveal how identification works. According to sociologist Richard Jenkins (2014), identification is "the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities and between individuals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference" (p. 19). As a result, identity "denotes the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities" (p. 19). For instance, a person may self-identify as *gay* because he experiences his sexual desires as *similar* to how people who are described and/or who identify as *gay*, *homosexual*, or *queer* experience sexuality, and as *different* from how people who are described and/or who identify as *heterosexual* experience sexuality. Besides, Jenkins stressed that individual and collective identities "are as much an interactional product of 'external' identification by others, as they are of 'internal' self-identification" (p. 204). For instance, a person may self-identify as a woman because she has been repeatedly identified by others as a woman and has learned about being a woman since the day she was born. However, ideas about womanhood, which inform the process of identification, do not emerge out of thin air.

1 Blue-collar worker is a term that refers to someone within the working class who generally performs manual, physical labour.

As Jenkins underscored, identification is also shaped by and dependent on culture. It is in culture, which encompasses cultural artefacts (e.g. books, clothing), practices (e.g. rituals, habits), and norms and values (e.g. proper behaviour), where people encounter discourses and representations of identities.

These cultural discourses and representations about identity are central to this book, as they are being produced and reproduced in popular media culture. On the one hand, they are valuable as they may help people make sense of who they are as a person. They provide stability, clarity, and coherence. Moreover, they also create a sense of belonging when one learns about others who share the same identity. On the other hand, identity labels may hamper people's lives as they also engender normative assumptions about people (Hall, 1996; Moya, 2000; Nicholson, 2010). For instance, when born with male sex characteristics, you will likely be raised a boy and expected to act, walk, talk, and dress 'like a man', even when you feel you want to act or walk differently than what is considered 'normal' or 'idealised' masculine behaviour within a given cultural context (see Chapter 2). Note that these cultural discourses and representations are context-specific and vary widely depending on time and place.

1.2. *Social constructionist perspective*

The postulation that cultural discourses and representations about identity categories differ from one cultural context to another should be understood as a social constructionist argument. Even though identity has been discussed in plenty of academic disciplines, such as (social) psychology, law, or economics, this book relies on the work of social and cultural theorists who reflected on identity from a social constructionist perspective. Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that has become a dominant approach to thinking about identity from the 1970s on. Social constructionism does not dismiss that there is an objective reality (which refers to its ontological position) but argues that how we make sense of that reality is socially constructed (which refers to its epistemological position). Even though many traditions of social constructionism (e.g. historicism, symbolic interactionism, materialist feminism) exist, they all postulate that identities are socially constructed and vary culturally and historically (Brickell, 2006).

Social constructionist thought challenges essentialist thinking. Essentialism is a philosophical doctrine, which assumes that certain identities (e.g. being a woman) are natural, biological, ahistorical, and exist before the birth of a person. Second, it makes the universalist claim that persons with the same identity all share the same feelings and experiences. For instance, if you are a woman, you share certain feelings and experiences with all women, throughout history and across the globe. Third, it considers men and women "inherently different beings who

belong to separate categories” (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, p. 12). In contrast, social constructionism, which is informed by non-essentialist philosophy, argues that how a person makes sense of their identities depends on how, within a given time and place, people make sense of aspects that relate to those identities. Put differently, a social constructionist perspective of gender does not dismiss that there are differences between men and women, but stresses that these differences should be seen as the outcome of *social processes* and *cultural practices* (Jenkins, 2014; Milestone & Meyer, 2012).

1.3. Sociocultural diversity, inequality, and identity politics

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In contemporary Western society, the concept of sociocultural diversity is often used as an umbrella term to refer to the coexistence of people who differ by, for instance, gender, sexual orientation, racial, ethnic, or diasporic identity, social class, or dis/ability. Simply put, sociocultural diversity includes “all kinds of differences between individuals and groups” (Arnesen & Allan, 2009, p. 11). At times, ‘sociocultural diversity’ has been used as a neutral term to imply that there are myriad ways of being and identifying oneself in society and that everyone is treated equally. In this book, however, I demonstrate how discourses about diversity are deeply political and caught up in power dynamics and highly contested sets of norms and values.

To this day, certain identity categories have been discursively constructed in Western society as ‘normal’, ‘mainstream’, or ‘superior’, while other identities have been constructed as ‘abnormal’, ‘deviant’, or ‘inferior’. Think about how in daily conversations, politics, or popular literature, identities have been discussed in binary, oppositional, and, in many cases, hierarchical terms. For instance, men and women are seen as two very distinct categories of people, in which men are granted more power than women. Another discursive practice is the creation of cultural discourses that limit the diversity within certain identity categories. For instance, even though there are many ways to be black or to be a man, only a limited set of behaviours, attitudes, and expressions is considered normal or appropriate for each identity category. By repeatedly articulating these binary, hierarchical, and normative assumptions about people’s identities, Western society embeds, normalises, and obfuscates structural inequalities² in institutions (e.g. education, justice, politics), culture, and everyday life practices.

2 An example of structural inequality is occupational segregation based on gender, as it often results in gender pay inequality. Gendered discourses stipulating which occupations should be practised by women and which ones by men contribute to occupational segregation (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2014).

That is why people have felt the need to unite with others who share the same identity to make visible, question, and overthrow structural and discursive forms of oppression. In these moments, people with the same minoritised identity have formed a group and engaged in identity politics. Chris Barker (2012) defined identity politics as follows: “The forging of ‘new languages’ of identity combined with acting to change social practices, usually through the formation of coalitions where at least some values are shared” (p. 504). However, some standpoints in identity politics have been criticised. Take, for instance, the emergence of social movements organised around gender or race. Among them, there were feminist movements (e.g. radical feminists) and civil rights movements (e.g. Black Power) that aimed to unite women by emphasising a shared women’s culture, and black people by celebrating a shared black culture, respectively (Nicholson, 2010). Post-structuralist and social constructionist scholars, however, pointed out that this shared culture was presented as homogenous and essentialist (Bernstein, 2005; Moya, 2000; Nicholson, 2010). As Paula M. L. Moya (2000) underscored, several social movements ignored or downplayed the “instability and internal heterogeneity of identity categories” (p. 3). As such, they disregarded how the intersections with other axes of identity (e.g. dis/ability, gender, race) can lead to experiences not included in the cultural discourses or representations of social movements.

At the same time, Mary Bernstein (2005) pointed out that emphasising a shared identity and culture could also be seen as strategic as it facilitates the formation of a social collective and a clear and delineated set of political and cultural goals. Her ideas echo Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s reflections on strategic essentialism, which Spivak formulated in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz (1984/85). Spivak argued that one does not have to be an essentialist to make use of essentialism from time to time to achieve common goals: “You pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side” (p. 184). Bernstein and Spivak’s strategic essentialism does not imply that these coalitions or collectives organised around a shared signifier or identity (e.g. ‘woman’) should ignore the diversity within those coalitions. Yet, as the examples above illustrate, some of these temporary collectives have failed to avoid the trap of essentialism and participated in the discursive and material exclusion of people who may share the ‘common’ identity label but differ by other minoritised identities.

Focus on the #MeToo movement

A good example of a social movement engaged in identity politics is the #MeToo movement. It was initially set up as an activist group in 2006 by Tarana Burke, named 'me too' Movement (see figure 2). The goal was to support survivors of sexual violence and other forms of systemic abuse of power, who were mainly young women of colour. Besides, the movement tried to interrupt sexual violence through advocacy and to campaign for policies and laws to prevent these forms of violence and abuse. In 2017, the phrase went viral after Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano used it as a hashtag to call out sexual abuse and to encourage other survivors to make visible the magnitude of sexual abuse. In participating and sharing their experiences on social media, women joined forces to interrupt sexual assault, sexual harassment, and abuse of power and to demand policy changes (Brockes, 2018; metoomvmt.org).

The fact that the abuse reported by chiefly white Hollywood actresses received much more media attention than the young women of colour Burke was concerned with demonstrates the differences among women. One reason for this was that the actresses,



Figure 2. Portrait of Tarana Burke taken in 2018.
Photo credit: Sven Hoppe/dpa/Alamy Live News, © Imageselect/Alamy.

like other privileged high-profile celebrities, hold celebrity capital. With this concept, Olivier Driessens (2013) fleshed out a form of capital different from the forms of capital Pierre Bourdieu had described to discuss social divisions in society (see Chapter 6). Celebrity capital refers to “accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations” (p. 13), which, in this case, the actresses were able to use to call out sexual harassment. The actresses reported being aware of their privileged position and wanting to use their capital to raise awareness, spark debate, and use their privileges to serve others who do not own the means to do so. On the other hand, it cannot undo the fact that women of colour working in precarious positions do not dispose of the same symbolic or material means to call out men in powerful positions as high-profile women do. It also illustrates why it is important to acknowledge the diversity and disparities among women because of other intersecting identities. These forms of inequalities and discrimination have been the subject of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work, which led to the theory of intersectionality.

1.4. *Intersectionality*

In 1991, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined and interpreted the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw is a scholar in law, critical race theory, and civil rights. Her article on violence against women of colour had the ambition to advance the knowledge on the topic by exploring the racial and gender dimensions of such violence. This exploration had a particular set-up. She wanted to challenge the way identity politics were practised. On the one hand, she valued that identity politics exposed practices of oppression as social and systemic instead of isolated and individual, something that often happened in the framing of violence against women. Further, she found identity politics to be a source of “strength, community, and intellectual development” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242) and able to unite people around a shared identity and cause. Yet, she took issue with how identity politics did not take seriously intra-group differences. The discourses used in identity politics were focused on challenging either racism or sexism but rarely acknowledged the intersectionality between both minoritised identity categories. Consequently, to tackle the issue of violence against women of colour effectively, she argued that this issue had to be understood as “the product of intersecting patterns of both sexism and racism” (p. 1243).

In her article on intersectionality, she described three forms: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality. Struc-

tural intersectionality refers to “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes [their] actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women” (p. 1245). She pointed out that legislation and policies aiming to challenge gender-based violence have often started from white women’s experiences, thereby ignoring structural hindrances women of colour may experience (e.g. different ideas about family honour, refugee women risking deportation). Political intersectionality is about ensuring that structural intersectionality is acknowledged when conducting politics. In demanding this, Crenshaw challenged the identity politics of feminist movements and anti-racist movements that have unintentionally contributed to marginalising the violence against women of colour. Crenshaw made us attentive to the fact that women of colour who wanted to fight oppression have often been forced to split their energy between two formations (i.e. ‘black men’ and ‘white women’), which have not experienced double subordination. As a result, anti-racist identity politics have led to anti-racist discourses that dismiss questions about gender and sexism. Similarly, feminist identity politics have resulted in anti-sexist discourses that fail to take into account race and racism.

The third form of intersectionality is representational intersectionality, which refers to the cultural construction of women of colour. For the scope of this book, an understanding of this form is pivotal. It concerns the practice of looking at cultural representations from an intersectional lens and asking questions about the sociocultural implications of these representations. To make her case, Crenshaw offered reflections on an American lawsuit against the members of 2 Live Crew, a hip-hop collective whose members were arrested and charged under a Florida obscenity statute for their performance in a sex club in Florida in June 1990. In other words, their performance was considered offensive and obscene. The arrest came two days after a federal court judge ruled that the sexually explicit lyrics in *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* (1989), the band’s third album, were legally obscene. The judge stated that the album was “an appeal directed to ‘dirty’ thoughts and the loins, not to the intellect and the mind” (Campbell, 1991, p. 190, emphasis in original). The album was considered to lack serious literary, artistic, or political value while being offensive as defined by state law. Regarding the live performance, the members were acquitted in October 1990. Yet, the federal court’s decision that the album was obscene was upheld, which meant that record stores in several counties in Florida were not allowed to sell the album. In 1992, the federal court ruling was eventually overturned on the basis that the federal judge had been unable to demonstrate why the album lacked artistic value.

Crenshaw was interested in the public debate that ensued. In particular, she was interested in what was being said about the representation of black women. Two

oppositional positions dominated the public debate. On one side, you had the feminist position, which Crenshaw associated with the writings of a political columnist named George Will. He argued that the music was ‘misogynistic filth’, and engaged in objectifying black women and condoning sexual violence against women. This position was substantiated by referring to the lyrics of the hip-hop collective. The lyrics are not only sexually explicit but also co-construct black women as ‘bitches’, ‘cunts’, and ‘hos’ [sic], whose prime role is to please the men and their ‘almighty dicks’. Looking at the album of 2 Live Crew through a feminist prism, it is obvious why this work qualifies as misogynistic. Yet, an exclusively feminist lens fails to acknowledge how this case was also shaped by race. Plenty of other (white) rock bands have written sexist and misogynist lyrics but were never prosecuted for obscenity. Moreover, the federal court used forms of racism to call out 2 Live Crew’s use of sexism. The court made use of stereotypes of black men to depict the collective as violent, hypermasculine, hypersexual, and aggressive. Another racist attitude can be discerned in the federal court’s position toward the cultural roots of African American hip-hop culture. Particular practices and musical conventions that subvert mainstream white pop music were denied having artistic value.

On the other side, you had the anti-racist position embodied by Henry Louis Gates, a leading scholar in African American culture. He took on the defence of 2 Live Crew. He argued that the collective’s lyrics and mode of address should not be thought of as misogynist but as exaggerations intended to expose the ridiculousness of stereotypes of black masculinity.³ For Gates, this practice may have had a political and cultural motivation. The political argument entailed that 2 Live Crew wanted to advance the black anti-racist agenda by liberating black men from these stereotypes. The cultural argument entailed that the hip-hop collective used these modes of address and words simply to be funny – they were not intended to cause women pain and for that reason could not be seen as injurious. Such a position, however, dismissed the power relations in certain sociocultural contexts. Were the ‘comedians’ punching up (i.e. mocking people with economic and/or symbolic power, who are part of majorities) or punching down (i.e. targeting minoritised groups or groups lacking power) (Pérez, 2013; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023)? The anti-racist prism dismissed the material and symbolic power of men in society, even when they were part of a minoritised group. Hence, despite the fact it concerned intra-group humour (black people joking about black people), it cannot be ignored that it was men mocking women as a means to bond with other men. Crenshaw (1991) rephrased it as follows: “Humor in which women are objec-

3 This practice has also been described as ‘hyperstereotyping’, a practice discussed in Chapter 2.

tified as packages of bodily parts to serve whatever male-bonding/male-competition needs [...] subordinates women in much the same way that racist humour subordinates African Americans” (p. 1293).

To conclude, Crenshaw suggested that taking on an intersectional approach implies that categories of identities are still valuable (e.g. ‘women’, ‘people of colour’) if they factor in intersectional experiences, which have often been marginalised. Since coining the concept, intersectionality has become a key lens for scholars who understand its value in studying contemporary forms of oppression. Even though there is discord within academia and activist organisations about the reach of intersectionality,⁴ Crenshaw and her research centre (Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies) clarified that intersectionality:

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[...] starts from the premise that people have multiple identities, and being members of more than one “group,” they can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege. Intersectionality sheds light on the unique experiences that are produced when various forms of discrimination intersect with these converging identities. It is a dynamic strategy for linking the grounds of discrimination (e.g. race, gender, class, sexual identity, etc.) to historical, social, economic, political, and legal contexts and norms that intertwine to create structures of oppression and privilege. (<https://intersectionality.law.columbia.edu/>)

Following this description, I consider the term ‘intersectionality’ also helpful in exploring various forms of discrimination (e.g. understanding the ramifications of being a disabled person of colour).

1.5. *And what about woke and cancel culture?*

Since the late 2010s, debates over identity and sociocultural diversity have often been framed as debates over wokeness. Heated and polarised discussions about sociocultural minorities are certainly nothing new, but what typifies these contemporary debates in Western society is the way divergent opinions and arguments about distinct identity-related issues are all labelled as ‘woke’. To better understand contemporary interpretations of wokeness, a brief history of the term is needed. Already in the early twentieth century, the term circulated in

4 For instance, should the concept of intersectionality only be used for studies that consider the experiences of women of colour? Can it help us to think about all kinds of intersecting identities, including minority and majority identities?

African American communities as a reminder to be vigilant and stay alert, since black Americans continued to be the target of discrimination and oppression (Cammaerts, 2022; Romano, 2020). The term was introduced to mainstream American society in 1962, when William Melvin Kelley, a young black novelist, wrote an article for the *New York Times*. ‘Woke’ was prominently featured in the title of the piece, ‘If You’re Woke You Dig It’. The article demonstrated how the language used by beatnik culture – an anti-materialist and nonconforming American subculture – came from black American vernacular and, presumably deliberately, he refrained from explaining what woke meant (Rhodes, 2022; Romano, 2020). According to Aja Romano (2020), however, the article allowed us to indirectly understand the meaning of woke, which is “[...] to be a socially conscious Black American, someone aware of the ephemeral nature of Black vernacular, who might actively be shifting that vernacular away from white people who would exploit it or change its meaning.” African American words such as ‘hip’ had been appropriated and commodified by white Americans, and therefore Kelley may have feared the same would happen to ‘woke’.

Throughout the twentieth century, the term took on different meanings (e.g. knowing your partner might be cheating on you), but the idea of being aware of systemic and social injustice persisted as, for instance, expressed in the song ‘Master Teacher’ (2008) by Erykah Badu (Romano, 2020). However, the 2014 Ferguson unrest in Missouri is considered a pivotal moment as #StayWoke became one of the key political slogans used in the streets and on social media. The protests, in response to the killing of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American man, by a police officer, were intended to bring back attention to race-related inequalities and oppression. ‘Woke’ was also appropriated by Black Lives Matter. This social movement emerged in 2013 as a response to the killing of unarmed black Americans. Using social media and protests in major cities, the different chapters of the movement protested against police abuse, racial injustice, and other systemic practices of devaluing the lives of black and brown people in the United States (Clayton, 2018; Whiteout, 2018). For people involved in Black Lives Matter, ‘woke’ was a way of warning others about police brutality (Romano, 2020).

From here on, the term has also been increasingly used to draw attention to other forms of discrimination and social injustice (Cammaerts, 2022; Whiteout, 2018), which, in turn, resulted in mainstream and international attention to ‘wokeness’. One of the first outcomes of this increased knowledge about woke has been the coexistence of the activist interpretation of woke with the emergence of ‘corporate wokeness’ (Kanai & Gill, 2020; Rhodes, 2022). Corporate wokeness refers to “the apparent championing of identity politics” (Kanai & Gill, 2020, p. 11) by corporations like Nike, Inc. and The Coca-Cola Company. Dubbed ‘woke-washing’, these corporations often engage in the superficial act of window dressing, as their

promotional and marketing discourses rarely coincide with a true commitment to social justice. Francesca Sobande (2019) highlighted that marketing managers should understand that the inclusion of minoritised identities does not:

equate [...] with activism or indication of a strong socio-political stance. [...] Thus, brands that are seriously invested in aiding efforts to address social injustices cannot simply do so in the form of marketing content, and instead, must assess their approaches to issues including the principles underpinning their in-house labour practices, production methods and sources and uses of profit. (p. 2740)

30

Another outcome has been the international resignification of ‘woke’. For instance, in the Netherlands and Belgium, news media only started using the English term in 2017. The initial coverage focused on what the word meant in the United States. Gradually, journalists and public figures started using ‘woke’ as a lens to look at local identity politics and social injustice. Akin to the way #MeToo was appropriated by local activists, ‘woke’ became a word to draw attention to local forms of structural inequality and social injustice. Remarkably, moderate and social conservative critics were rather quick in transforming the activist meaning of woke into signifying what they consider to be an excessive form of political correctness. They have used the term in a derogatory manner to signpost a series of practices they found to be an attack on traditional norms and values, established cultural practices, or freedom of speech. Examples of practices include the demand for inclusivity on management boards, the request to address someone with their correct pronouns, the inclusion of a third pronoun in a dictionary, or the demand to change the Dutch word ‘blank’ to ‘wit’ – which, in English, both translate to ‘white’ but have different political connotations (Kanobana, 2021).

In the United States and other Western European countries, woke has also been associated with cancel culture. The concept originates from the demand by activists for accountability of high-profile persons or organisations with prestige, standing, and power in a variety of fields (e.g. politics, business, celebrity culture) engaged in (systemic) wrongdoing. The activists are often part of communities that have been discriminated against or marginalised based on their minoritised identity. This demand for accountability is what has been dubbed or framed as cancel culture, as demands to address and rectify misconduct or oppression are being amplified by requesting “the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues” (Ng, 2020, p. 623). Eve Ng (2020) stressed that “content circulation via digital platforms facilitates

fast, large-scale responses to acts deemed problematic, often empowering traditionally marginalised groups in the moment, but it also highlights the dearth of considered assessments and debate” (p. 625). She argued that the attributes of social media do not create room for nuance, contemplation, and debate. Similarly, Judith Butler (2020, in Ferber), among others, stressed the importance of confrontation and slow and thoughtful debate, as well as acknowledging that people make mistakes and can learn from those mistakes. However, Butler also drew our attention to the fact that these debates over the alleged dangers of cancel culture tend to obfuscate and dismiss the issues (e.g. forms of institutional racism) that underlie media uproars about wokeness and cancel culture.

Therefore, it remains important to understand the role of media and popular culture in these debates. For instance, are journalists discussing the underlying issues thoroughly or are they using a social media backlash over the removal of an episode on Netflix as clickbait? Are representations that feature identity-based stereotypes intended to hurt people or are they used to mock and expose the stereotypes? To what extent are media producers of talent shows aware of their role in perpetuating a climate where sexual harassment is minimised or ignored? These and other questions are not new. Scholars in media and cultural studies were studying these issues long before they were considered ‘woke’. Rather, the identity-related debates point out that social inequalities in Western society persist. Media and cultural scholars can play an important role by exploring and studying how and to what extent media and popular culture have contributed to preserving societal hierarchies (e.g. by reiterating stereotypical representations) or challenging them (e.g. by creating an inclusive newsroom).

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