When I began teaching at Georgia State University, I took on GSU1010: New Student Orientation, courses for incoming freshmen in need of supplement material lacking from their background. Most of these teenagers, gathered from the heart of Atlanta to Georgia’s rural perimeter, were the first in their family to pursue higher education. Many emerged from a schooling system that emphasized passivity and discipline, a hurdle distinct for teenagers already socialized to see themselves as part of the dialogue between production, consumption, and citizenship. Recognizing the cultural contexts students inhabit remains beyond the scope of most school and after-school programs, along with teaching media as a discourse in which the youth are already fluent. These factors combine to produce a disconnection between what students experience in school, and what is demanded of them in the job market.

After teaching student orientation courses, I worked with the Alonzo A. Crim Urban Center’s “Careers in New Emerging Media Areas,” or CINEMA program to teach design and media philosophy to low-income individuals aged 18-24, providing skills related to Information and Communication Technology. There, I learned it is not enough to solely emphasize highly transferable "life skills" to aid at-risk youths, but one must also highlight the systemic roadblocks in their way. Media, industry, and history function as launchpads for discussions on the hazards of capitalism and the systemic inequality it necessitates, such that they may better invent ways to navigate this obstacle course. I expected my freshmen to act like Marc Prensky’s digital natives, technically savvy and motivated through autonomous play and exploration. What I found were students able to navigate the walled gardens of their phone but not a desktop PC, lurking on the internet without actively participating in the discourse. While the relatively small number of successful YouTubers or Twitch streamers suggest creativity is at once a highly sought after yet exceedingly rare trait, My students have demonstrated there are an abundance of stories left untold by those who do not feel empowered to tell them. I lament a society that filters such experiences from mainstream discourse, as it leaves us creatively impoverished.

During a time in which life online encourages segregation according to marketable, targetable groupings, it becomes imperative to impart strategies for decoding the "shorthand" that media-forms use to persuade and obfuscate. Confronting media in this way requires acknowledging the reality that the production of such forms largely lay in the hands of masculine, white heterosexuals. White supremacy, the patriarchy, and capitalism all naturalize the argument that some groups of people deserve more rights than another, but a critical exploration of media can expose these perspectives as mere cultural constructs. Delving into textual and rhetorical strategies, students engage with the ways media forms naturalize enduring categories for humans, and how this is affected by socio-cultural structures of the period.

For example, on my course on comic-book to film adaptations, I explored *Black Panther* (2018), because while the Marvel Cinematic Universe has many unassuming entries, I witnessed fans in Atlanta’s responses as overwhelmingly enthusiastic. I asked students to decode the film as a media form by studying the ways producers encode meaning, exploring dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. We contrasted the dominant reading of a utopia free of white supremacy with negotiated readings that questioned why patriarchal and capitalist structures remained intact in the fictional Wakanda. Creating spaces for minority students to express their critical perspectives enables them to construct stronger arguments making use of textual evidence for support. To prevent the needless reproduction of standard models of Western canon, I teach students methods to critically explore media no matter how meaningless, trivial, or apolitical they may appear.

Historically, the acquisition of literacy in the culturally dominant medium is vital for those marginalized groups demanding human rights and political recognition. While learning to read and write remains a necessary skill, it no longer represents the media dominant today, a hyper-fragmented landscape of digital television, film, podcasts, apps, video games, and platforms. With pervasive language surrounding the immateriality of the digital, from liquid capitalism to the cloud, the medium flattens one's perspective into something understandable on a two-dimensional screen. I incorporate a holistic view of media literacy which combines technological proficiency with critical engagement of the digital as material practice. While many media literacy programs address some of these elements, leaving one unexplored canmake students vulnerable to otherwise easily avoided challenges, such as how emphasis on technological proficiency renders students reliant on specific and soon-to-be obsolete software.

Rather than technicians, I encourage students to see themselves as storytellers across myriad formats. Whether such content is persuasive, descriptive, or narrative, each tells a story. The storyteller encodes their content via countless decisions across an extended and nuanced process, all of which shapes the way audiences decode the final product, influencing how many walk away with dominant versus resistant or contested readings. Logistical, financial, and artistic decisions across a production team inform the language and grammar embedded in the medium as a whole. Students must experience the multiple layers of media production themselves to fully achieve critical literacy, allowing them to see the ways an image may be edited or a sentence ellipsed first-hand. Understanding the ways such media has been received historically provides insight into how an encoded product may be decoded with the opposite meaning, and how representations of time and space construct ideological modes of perception. In this way, they move on from viewing media as a clear window to a carefully applied filter. Delineating the ways in which the production of commercial media is influenced by profit-driven imperatives allow students to imagine creative modes of communication beyond viewer count and user score.

Media forms crystalize ideological elements gleaned from the churn of culture; appraising these across a period of time illustrates the evolution of such forms and the social world in which they were produced. Media literacy allows one to understand ideology not as a fixed regime but a set of beliefs undergoing constant negotiation. Branching outward from media forms facilitates discussions on historical, aesthetic, and ideological processes. Students unlock tools to investigate the ways one group of people has represented another according to ability, sexuality, gender, race, and class. For example, by confronting students on why certain readings feel "correct," I ask them to acknowledge their own position within a spectrum of disparate interpretive strategies. They support their arguments by citing textual evidence, learning to take a position regarding the reading of a text and defending it as their own.

It is also my goal to convey that critically evaluating media forms does not reduce one's ability to derive pleasure from their reading. On the contrary, the analysis of media forms and the ideology crystalized within only deepens the experience. It is my mission to educate the next generation of students, to enrich their capacity to engage as literate, active, and aware consumers in an ever-expanding, hyper-fragmented media environment.

Over the past four years of teaching in Atlanta, an unending number of questions foment regarding the problems and possibilities of critical media pedagogy. In the future, I want to explore the ways in which local communities influence media literacy, along with methods for combining media analysis and production to address the challenges young creatives face every day, while emphasizing stories told by outsider perspectives that would otherwise be lost to history. Testing the scalability of such methods across a range of class sizes, embodied, and online, it is my mission to provide the tools necessary for intellectual flourishing at a time when society has never been more social.