

Tell Me Sweet Little Lies: Racism as a Form of Persistent Malinformation

Racist/racialized malinformation is the phenomenon of how we are conditioned, socialized, and repeatedly bombarded with racist and negative images and stereotypes. These stereotypes are repeated and normalized until they become malinformation. But how can these deleterious and destructive forces be eliminated? They need to be addressed and battled just as other societal ailments are, and critical cultural literacy can aid in this fight.

RACISM

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George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, and the heinous act was captured on video and broadcast around the world. The mourning, outrage, and desperation were palpable and almost immediately resulted in protests and cries of “Black Lives Matter!” These peaceful protests were impactful but not without their own controversies and attacks from hate groups and ultra-conservative media sources. Despite the fact that 93% of these Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests were [peaceful](#), they were labeled as violent, destructive, unnecessary, and unproductive. However, in reality, the damage and violence at BLM protests came from the hands of bad actors, many of whom were white and members of radical groups, who traveled hundreds and thousands of miles to these protests with the express intention of maligning Black protestors and their [allies](#). **This is racist malinformation.** Even with video and accounts to the contrary, the anti-BLM narrative became loud and hostile and took

over mainstream media, detracting from the racist murder that spurred it all.



Graphic by Jessica E. Boyd

Misinformation and disinformation (mis/dis) are age-old problems, so why are they still a plague on society? Derivatives of [information disorder](#), mis/dis and malinformation are forms of false information that mislead, deceive, and facilitate the racist hierarchies that are crippling humanity. And in the case of malinformation, it has not only deliberately created false information, but

it can literally cost people their lives, health, and freedom. Racism, and the implicit biases, explicit stereotypes, and microaggressions that feed this beast, is part of Western socialization and conditions that convince society that whiteness, maleness, Christianity, affluence, thinness, able-bodiedness and the like are what is desirable at all costs. Anything and anyone else not within these norms are not valuable and should be eliminated; anything and anyone that exists outside these norms are easily marginalized and dismissed.

This is where racism comes into play, especially when it is used to convince the masses of inherently “good” and “right” hierarchies. Part of this malicious and insidious socialization comes through the consistent repetition of malinformation.

Malinformation is false information that is shared with a distinct intent to cause harm, and in the case of racism, to maintain the status quo. This persistent malinformation comes through [media](#), [textbooks](#), [religion](#), [celebrated holidays](#), [pop culture](#), and so many other venues. Malinformation comes through subtly and imperceptibly and is so ingrained it has become difficult to recognize and defeat.

Can mis/dis and racist malinformation be eliminated? Perhaps not, but they can certainly be managed through even more persistent education, specifically, what I have come to call *critical cultural literacy (CCL)* education. So what is CCL and how can it address this current social and educational quandary?

Critical Cultural Literacy

I have done parallel work in social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, and also in critical information and media literacies, and mis/dis. As I developed my pedagogy in each track I began to realize their complementariness and their unacknowledged interdependence. As I explored the commonalities and began thinking about how to merge the urgency of each area, I realized that much more context was needed to better understand the nuances of this amalgamated topic. Critical information and media literacies address relational structures and power dynamics, which is crucial, but that wasn't enough. Even more context and a holistic lens was needed in order to truly understand the convergences that create racial malinformation. We need to understand

history, politics, design, emotional intelligence, cultural competence, and racial dynamics. We need [critical cultural literacy](#).

CCL challenges educators to teach strategies to resist mis/dis and racist malinformation by [using elements of cultural competence](#), [critical information literacy](#), [media and design literacies](#), [historical literacy](#), [emotional literacy](#), [political literacy](#), and [racial literacy](#).

This contextual approach looks at [the larger ecology of mis/dis](#) and situates mis/dis as an ongoing and dynamic phenomenon to be dealt with instead of a transactional static problem to be solved. Racist malinformation is a huge problem, but it is not beyond solution if people are willing to engage and give up some of their existing privileges, power, and comfort.

The concept and practice of CCL aids in the fight against all of the [sweet little lies](#). Librarians and educators talk a lot about information literacy. [Critical information literacy](#) (and now [critical disinformation studies](#)) really gets to the root of the idea that literacy involves recognizing and addressing the various power dynamics and power structures in relationships as information is provided and received. There is also media literacy, which is how information consumers can address messages portrayed by the media and challenge them, looking at the messages with healthy skepticism and a critical eye. In addition to critical information and media literacies, CCL weaves in political, design, historical, emotional, and racial literacies (Figure 1). In order to understand and apply these literacies, one needs cultural competence and cultural humility (cultural literacy) to truly understand that nothing occurs in isolation and everything has a greater context.

Critical Cultural Literacy

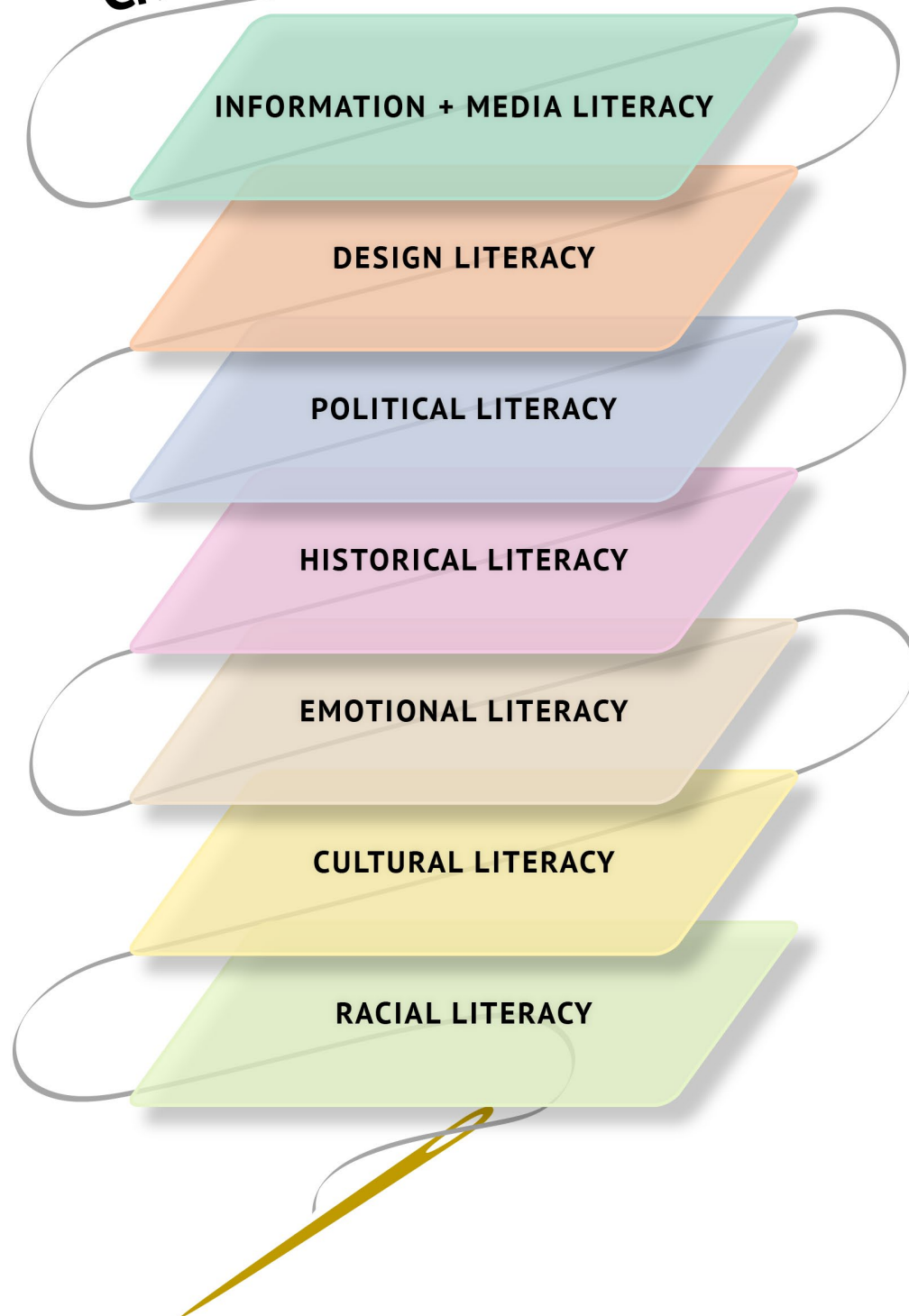


Figure 1: Critical cultural literacy – threading the needle through various literacies to build context. Graphic by Steven Geofrey.

To see how these literacies work together to build critical cultural literacy, we can work through the following example. In school, we were taught that soldiers returning from service in World War II benefitted from the GI Bill, legislation designed to promote educational opportunities for veterans. Despite being “race neutral” in its language, the GI Bill did not benefit all veterans, in particular **Black veterans** (*critical information and media literacies and racial literacy*). After facing racism from fellow servicemen, Black veterans returning to the segregated United States **under Jim Crow laws** couldn’t avail themselves of predominantly white institutions and faced limited options at historically Black institutions (*racial and historical literacies*). In addition to educational gaps, Black veterans could not buy homes because of **redlining** and a lack of home loans (*design/structural, political, and racial literacies*). These gaps in opportunities created long-term and generational inequities and disparities (e.g., generational wealth) that we are still dealing with in 2021 (*emotional and cultural literacies*). We have to have context to understand the big picture. Nothing, especially racism or mis/dis, happens in isolation.

CCL is not meant to be prescriptive or to provide one-size-fits-all solutions to racialized mis/dis or malinformation. Instead, it is a holistic approach to understanding and disentangling false, misleading, and harmful information. CCL emphasizes and celebrates context, which can vary from situation to situation. It is up to us as information specialists and educators to have the knowledge and cultural humility to ascertain and articulate the larger contexts of the racist malinformation at hand, with the building blocks that have been provided.

Not-So-Sweet Little Lies

Racism as a form of malinformation is so persistent because people are not cognizant of it and once they become aware of it, they are unsure how to move forward and change the status quo. Homogenized Western norms and content are woven throughout history, education, and research, and they compound the pervasiveness of socially conditioned stereotypes and biases. For example,

Black people are frequently [portrayed as apelike](#) in the media or in the most [menacing fashion](#) possible; things that white women do in public, such as breastfeeding, are lauded, but vilified when [Black women do the same thing](#); people still engage in [blackface](#) and [brownface](#) for entertainment purposes; and xenophobia and transphobia are explicitly used as [dog-whistles on television news](#).

Muslims are consistently [misrepresented as violent](#) radicalized terrorists in popular culture; [medical research](#) is rife with examples of Black and other people of color being experimented upon, without their knowledge or consent, in the name of science; coverage of historical events (e.g., [The Tulsa Race Massacre](#) and the history depicted in the [1619 Project](#)) is suppressed in order to deny the racist history of the United States; and [academic theories](#) and discussions are denounced, reviled, and now [outlawed in certain states](#) for the same reasons, resulting in a chilling effect on intellectual freedom and freedom of expression.

Even [Meghan Markle](#) discussed the racist treatment she endured at the hand of the British tabloids. Markle is biracial and identifies as a Black woman; she spoke about a widely circulated story claiming that Meghan made Princess Kate cry, but Meghan claims that the opposite happened, and the palace refused to correct that story. On the surface, this disinformation was hurtful but not life altering. But over time she became suicidal from the constant attention and racist malinformation. Persistent microaggressions and ill treatment can have severe cumulative effects which perpetuate and exacerbate people's feelings of marginalization and isolation.

These instances of malinformation, which appear across media types, are becoming more explicit and aggressive, and all serve to uphold racism and [white supremacy](#). The racist themes of malinformation are not new, just now being spread with more [sophisticated technologies](#). Japanese people were forced into internment camps during World War II, but in many "official" photos from the government they were all smiling, propaganda at its finest. The global Covid-19 pandemic yielded extreme violence and hatred towards people of Asian descent because a former politician referred to Covid-19 as the "[Chinese Virus](#)" or "[Kung Flu](#)", which should be considered racial slurs.

Deliberate disinformation and misinformation are hard to dispel because people are exposed to them repeatedly and become invested in the ease of scapegoating their fears and insecurities onto others. It is incomprehensible that people have been stabbed, attacked, and hospitalized because of racist malinformation. These examples demonstrate how stereotypes and biases trickle down over generations and turn into everyday racism. Everyday racism is destructive and maintains the status quo and societal inequities. How can this vicious cycle of socialization be stopped?

Resisting the Lies

The numerous examples of racist malinformation across media platforms emphasize how common and ordinary this type of information really is. Information consumers may not be cognizant of it, but they are surrounded by malinformation and need to be aware and proactive about the racist malinformation that ravages their environment. It needs to be called out, it needs to be corrected, and parents and educators need to be having these conversations with their children and students. This socialization and conditioning begins when we are small children. Children know what racism and racial difference are even if they can't define them. There are historical examples that demonstrate this, such as [The Brown Doll Test](#) conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark. In this test, children of color and white children were presented with four dolls — two with fair skin and blond hair, and two with dark skin and dark hair — and allowed to select which dolls they wanted to play with. Inevitably, all of the children, both white and Black, selected the white dolls. Dolls with white skin were seen as better, or nicer, or whatever positive values the children have been conditioned to associate with white skin. Dark skin was bad and definitely not worth selecting.

Similarly, Jane Elliott conducted the [Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes Experiment](#) in 1968. Elliott told her third grade students with brown eyes that they would receive extra perks and privileges because they were special; the students with blue eyes would not receive the same perks. As might be expected, the blue eyed children were outraged, as were their parents and the community. However, the students with brown eyes were easily convinced that they deserved things that children with blue eyes did not deserve. These experiments demonstrate the depth of the conditioning and the socialization that leads to the perpetuation of racism, stereotypes, microaggressions, and implicit biases. If children are constantly bombarded with the stereotypes that they are less than or better than others based on their skin color or physical characteristics, they will eventually begin to believe that malinformation.

Information professionals and educators need to say that this is no longer acceptable, and we need to figure out how to reverse this trend. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings proclaims “[we teach what we value](#)” and this also applies to what is researched. This becomes a continuous cycle of being socialized and conditioned with Western values and its resulting stereotypes and biases. We need to

decolonize education and socialization and prioritize different and diverse perspectives and voices. This should become the new norm.

Thinking again about Meghan Markle, one of the things her husband [Prince Harry said about the UK tabloids](#) was, “unfortunately, if the source of information is inherently corrupt or racist or biased then that filters out to the rest of society.” Similarly, “when narratives are controlled by the powerful, diverse information and perspectives are omitted, or even lost or not valued” (Cooke, 2020, p. 13). The narratives in classrooms and in daily lives need to change and stop the glamorization and worshiping of Western norms.

So, What Now?

Let’s revisit our earlier example. It’s possible that the person or [celebrity in blackface/brownface](#) didn’t know the [history of blackface](#). Now, if they continue to participate in blackface, that’s another issue, but people do enact and perpetuate offensive stereotypes because they are not aware of the history or context or understand how their actions will make someone else feel. By understanding, teaching, and promoting CCL and its component literacies, educators and information consumers will be in a better position to resist racialized malinformation and talk about it in a more nuanced fashion, breaking down some of the stereotypes and focusing on the systemic barriers and inequities that produce them. Critical cultural literacy can address this problem. Let’s step through the following examples, each of which suggests ways to interpret the example through the lens of different literacies.

African Americans and Covid-19

Traditional information literacy: After refuting the [misinformation](#) that [African Americans cannot contract the coronavirus](#) that results in Covid-19, it is further revealed that African Americans and other minority communities are actually suffering disproportionately to the virus.

Critical information literacy: Minority communities routinely suffer more severely from illnesses, so it stands to reason that the same would be the case with Covid-19.

Critical cultural literacy: Minority communities have long been predisposed to underlying conditions such as hypertension and diabetes that make them more susceptible to illnesses like Covid-19. Also, minority groups, especially African Americans, have long term trust issues with traditional medicine because of a systemic lack of access to treatment, medical racism and biases that preclude them from getting the same treatment as non-minorities (e.g., the maternal death rate is significantly higher for African American women), and the legacy of experimentation and maltreatment from the medical establishment (e.g., the Tuskegee experiments). Consequently, there are still many people from minoritized communities that experience vaccine hesitancy.

Once we understand that African Americans are suffering disproportionately from Covid-19 we can put that into the category of traditional literacy. If we take it a step further and look at it through a critical literacy lens we know that minority communities routinely suffer more severely from illnesses, so it stands to reason that the same will be the case with Covid-19. Think about the lack of healthcare options for minoritized communities, or the medical professionals who think that people of color don't have the same tolerance to pain as white people, and the power imbalances these deficits create. This is critical literacy.

If we bump this up even further and think about the historical context, the different cultural norms and expectations of minoritized communities, and the fact that they have long been predisposed to underlying conditions, this is critical cultural literacy. African Americans and other people of color have long term trust issues with traditional medicine, because of the systemic lack of access to treatment and medical biases that preclude them from getting the same treatment.

AAPI Hate During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Traditional information literacy: Chinese people, or others from the Asian diaspora, are not responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic, even if elected officials repeatedly assign blame to them.

Critical information literacy: The "catchy" phrases associated with this scapegoating of Asian people are in fact racist stereotypes and caricatures, and research can uncover a multitude of reasons for not using racial slurs or directing hatred and

violence towards entire populations of people.

Critical cultural literacy: People of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) descent have been overwhelmed with extreme violence and harassment during the Covid-19 pandemic, but mistreatment of AAPI people is also not a new phenomenon. As an example, Japanese and Japanese American people were incarcerated in internment camps between 1942 and 1945, considered inherently more dangerous than German Americans or Italian Americans.

Similar to the example of African Americans and Covid-19, there is a progression from traditional information and media literacy where the goal is essentially to know how to fact-check claims with vetted and credible sources. There is absolutely a place and need for this kind of literacy, but it has to be acknowledged for what it is: addressing mis/dis in the moment and in isolation. If the real goal is to effectively push back and repudiate mis/dis and racist malinformation, then contextual and consistent education — critical cultural literacy education — is what is needed.

Fighting the Lies

We are in a malinformation crisis. We are bombarded with racist/racialized malinformation and conditioned to think that it's normal and acceptable. It is not. Not at all. The persistent repetition and normalization of negative stereotypes and biases — that begins when we are children — turns them into malinformation that is passed on from generation to generation. The cycle of malinformation needs to be urgently addressed just as any other crisis would be tackled. CCL is a tool that can aid in this fight.

CCL requires critical self-reflection and the desire for equitable information and non-racist perceptions of others. We have to reexamine and reimagine everything we've been taught and ask ourselves "What perspectives and voices are missing from what I think I know? How can I do better and learn more?" When we examine our own identities, privileges, and disadvantages, we are better positioned to have empathy for others and do the work of dismantling racist malinformation with CCL. Part of this work involves pushing back against the media, publishing, and other entities that produce racist malinformation and are chronically

resistant to change (because change typically involves a loss of revenue and power). But if we are diligent and take the time to explode siloed echo chambers of racist malinformation, we can slow and maybe even reverse this crisis.

[Read the author's reflections on what inspired this essay](#)

[Discussion questions for reading groups](#)



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