

## *Teaching critical race media literacy through Black historical narratives*

Christine McWhorter

*Howard University, USA*

Tiffany Mitchell Patterson

*Independent researcher, USA*



### Peer-reviewed article

**Citation:** McWhorter, C., & Patterson, T. M. (2023). Teaching critical race media literacy through Black historical narratives. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 15(3), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2023-15-3-1>

### Corresponding Author:

Christine McWhorter  
[christinemcwhorter@gmail.com](mailto:christinemcwhorter@gmail.com)

**Copyright:** © 2023 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Bepress and distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. JMLE is the official journal of [NAMLE](#).

**Received:** November 18, 2023

**Accepted:** June 19, 2023

**Published:** December 28, 2023

**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

### [Editorial Board](#)

### ABSTRACT

On the 400th anniversary of American enslavement the New York Times (NYT) 1619 project launched an interactive digital experience including a popular podcast centering the contributions and narratives of Black Americans. This study sought to understand how HBCU students responded to learning Black music history through what we term a “pop culture podcast.” This study explored the ways in which this particular podcast could support the development of Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) based on a media discourse at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU). This study employed survey research and focus group discussions with HBCU students in two courses. The study found that by having students recognize and challenge the dominant narratives, pop culture podcasts focused on Black narratives can be utilized to help students develop Critical Race Media Literacy. While students indicated a stronger preference for learning through podcasts, there was no difference in the amount of knowledge attained through either platform (print vs podcast). Further, Finally, the authors outline key considerations for educators interested in using podcasts to teach Black history.

**Keywords:** *critical race media literacy, popular culture, podcasts, Black music history, HBCU students.*



## INTRODUCTION

Pop culture podcasts that are provocative and historically accurate can function as an engaging educational resource. The New York Times (NYT) 1619 project is an example of a pop culture podcast addressing various aspects of Black histories and culture which sparked national discussions on race and racism. The NYT 1619 project has become both popularized and politicized leading to discourse about which version of history should be the prevailing narrative of American history. By centering Black history, the NYT 1619 project disrupted the master narrative that has been taught in the mainstream curriculum of American history. We consider pop culture podcasts to be those that tackle prevalent societal issues and cultural topics of the time. Pop culture podcasts like The NYT 1619 Project can serve as an avenue to explore issues and nuances of power, race, and racism.

Gathering HBCU students' learning experiences regarding Black histories is a significant endeavor because HBCUs are a historical hub for Black learning. In fact, a foundational mission of HBCUs is to bolster Black cultural identity and situate Blackness as a primary source of inspiration and pride (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). Students at HBCUs are likely to have a different learning experience than their peers at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) because the environment prioritizes learning about Black contributions and juxtaposing Black cultural education with the whitewashed instruction students likely received in the years prior to attending. It is vital that these students understand how the media has been informed by these power structures.

### Critical Race Media Literacy

Many scholars believe that increasing consumers' media literacy, defined as the ability to analyze, access, evaluate, and create media, will help them navigate the complex layers of information they encounter through media (Aufderheide, 1993). Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) is a subset of media literacy that addresses the nuances in media literacy that are specifically related to improving critical comprehension of systemic racial inequities depicted in various media channels (Agosto, Karanxha, & Roberts, 2016; Cubbage, 2022; Yosso, 2002). While generalized media literacy education is becoming more commonplace, specific education targeted toward Critical Race Media Literacy remains obscure.

This article is rooted in the theoretical principles of Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML). The pervasive nature of media in our society makes it imperative that students attain access to instruction that prepares them to critique media in several forms. Critical Race Media Literacy is derived from three theoretical perspectives. The first is Critical Literacy, which refers to the "use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (Luke, 2012, p.4). The process is based on Freire's (1970) foundational work, which paved the way for critical, post-structuralist, and feminist approaches to reading texts.

The second foundational theoretical perspective, Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework related to Critical Literacy, addresses racism, sexism, and classism in societal structures and systems of power. Finally, Critical Media Literacy (CML) is a subset of media literacy that centers on the ability to decode and critique mass media texts including popular culture platforms of television, film, music, and journalism, with a focus on "ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 6). Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) merges the three perspectives to provide an avenue for students to grapple with systems of oppression and the multifaceted ways in which it functions in the media with a close attention to race and racism (Cubbage, 2022).

CRML is essential in the process of empowering students to confront and remedy the racial injustice that has occurred through the media. Through CRML, this study seeks to equip students of color with the knowledge and skills they need to challenge the social systems that are portrayed in the media by educating them about the media and how it functions as a hegemony. Current scholarship positions CRML as a basis for investigating approaches to improve critical comprehension of systemic racial inequalities represented in diverse media platforms (Cubbage, 2022; Yosso, 2002). Several disciplines have facilitated the critical inquiry of these systems by integrating the *pillars* of CRML as outlined by Hawkman and Shear (2017). The pillars are as follows: *Confrontation* transpires once students encounter questionable media portrayals. During confrontation, teachers encourage students to become aware of long-held internal dispositions that are often biased. *Interrogation* is the next stage. In this stage, teachers guide students as they challenge their own deeply entrenched racial views.

*Navigation* is the last step. In navigation, newly empowered students use the information learned in the confrontation and interrogation stages to counter dominant narratives.

The development of a holistic understanding of racism is vital to critically examining systems of power in how Black histories are presented in media, specifically pop culture podcasts. “When messages are filtered through a CRML perspective, students understand racialized institutional inequities that result from cultural norms, practices, and beliefs” (Mitchell Patterson & McWhorter, 2020).

### **Podcasts**

Podcasts have quickly become a cultural phenomenon with over one million podcasts available in 2020. A decade ago, only 22% of adults in the United States were aware of podcasts, a number that has increased significantly to 75% today (Watson, 2020). As a result of this surge, the content and audiences of podcasts are widely diverse with podcasts written and produced by Black people becoming increasingly popular and mainstream. Black podcasters continue the “legacy of Black entertainers creating for Black audiences outside of the white gaze” (Florini, 2015, p. 210). The rise of Black podcasting is comparable to the Black blogger movement, where “rather than attempting to promote the assimilation of African Americans into the mainstream, bloggers and their readers use the blogs to build centripetally and reaffirm the right of people of African descent to produce art that speaks to and for them” (Gipson, 2019, p. 8). Black histories and experiences are often minoritized and depicted in a historically and culturally inaccurate manner in the media. Black-led podcasts focused on Black culture provide a new space for nuanced discussions of Blackness and Black histories.

Pop culture podcasts serve as public pedagogy, a theoretical construct focusing on learning that occurs beyond formal school settings (O’Malley et al., 2010). Public pedagogy values the “multiple, shifting and overlapping sites of learning that exist within the organized social relations of everyday life” (Simon, 1995, p. 109). Podcasts as public pedagogy lends itself well to what Giroux (2004) refers to as cultural studies:

Cultural studies becomes available as a resource to educators who can then teach students how to look at the media (industry and texts) analyze audience reception, challenge disciplinary boundaries, critically engage popular culture, produce critical knowledge, or use cultural studies to reform the curricula and

challenge disciplinary within public schools and higher education (p. 61).

Media including film, television, radio, and podcasts are spaces for learning that incorporate a diverse representation of voices and perspectives. They are a potential space to critique culture and societal ills perpetuated through that medium. High-quality, well-researched, professionally produced podcasts can positively affect learning about neglected narratives in Black history (Mitchell Patterson & McWhorter, 2020).

Vrikki and Malik (2019) state “podcasts do more than just open public windows of expression; and yet as easily accessible renders them a potentially radical space for counter-hegemonic discourses of meanings of race” (p. 276). Moreover, Educators have used pop culture media in pedagogy for years. The regular use of films, shows, songs, and in this case, podcasts help students understand how to critically challenge media texts featuring people of various backgrounds. In addition, it is an engaging format to teach content and extend learning beyond the dominant, white-washed curriculum. Given the current climate of social unrest, many educators might be seeking ways to incorporate educational resources that focus on racial inequities. Podcasts are a timely resource.

### **Using pop culture podcasts to develop Critical Race Media Literacy**

In this paper, we position pop culture podcasts as a way to develop Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML), which is needed to understand Black history in nuanced ways. Currently, there is a dearth of scholarship proposing accurate, engaging methods to teach Critical Race Media Literacy as means of learning and evaluating Black history in the classroom.

Understanding Black history within the context of the social structures that created and reinforced inequality for centuries requires diverse literacy competencies. Scholars who are proponents of critical literacies argue that these literacies may be bolstered through the use of today’s digital platforms (Mitchell Patterson & McWhorter, 2020).

While there has been a heavy emphasis on generalized media literacy in scholarship and popular media in recent years, other literacies contribute to and work in concert media literacy to help students develop nuanced critical inquiry skills that contribute to holistic analytical ability (McWhorter, 2019). These literacies need to be viewed in terms of their unique characteristics

in order for researchers to measure their effectiveness individually and relative to each other when literacy initiatives have been implemented. Researching CRML will allow scholarship to address the nuances of media genres, platforms, and social structures, which is particularly advantageous for students in the current, changing media environment and social climate.

For the purposes of this study, we employ the framework of Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) to examine the use of pop culture podcasts as a medium for learning and to engage in critical discussions about media, racism, and underrepresented Black histories. Therefore, we posed the following three research questions:

1. In what ways/manner can pop culture podcasts contribute to HBCU students' development of CRML?
2. Considering the challenging aspects related to the racial and historical contexts of Black music history, how do HBCU students experience and navigate the complexities of this subject when engaging with it through a pop culture podcast?
3. Is there a relationship between the learning medium (podcast vs print article) and HBCU students' knowledge of Black music history?

## METHODS

This study examined HBCU students' experiences when learning about Black music history through a pop culture podcast. Using a survey and two focus groups, this study employed both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. A pre and post-assessment was administered to test students' knowledge of Black music history. A Likert scale survey was used to measure student experiences learning about Black music history through The NYT 1619 Project print article American Popular Music (Morris, 2019) or podcast episode Birth of American Music (Morris, 2019-Present). Three open-ended responses from the quantitative survey were analyzed to offer additional insight.

In addition, two focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. In total, thirty-four HBCU students (thirty undergraduate and four graduate) participated in the study. Twenty-nine HBCU students (twenty-five undergraduate and four graduate) completed the survey in its entirety and participated in the focus groups.

## Focus groups

Two 45-minute focus groups were conducted. As HBCU students, participants shared similar educational goals and a collegial classroom community. Focus groups are constructive when the "interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information when interviewees are similar to and cooperative with each other" (Creswell, 2014, p. 226). One focus group was conducted with HBCU students who viewed the NYT 1619 project print material, while the other focus group HBCU students listened to the NYT 1619 project podcast on Black music history. Focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed, and co-analyzed.

## Pre/Post assessment and survey

A survey research approach was used to explore HBCU students' knowledge of the historical content covered by The NYT 1619 Project article, American Popular Music (Morris, 2019), and podcast episode Birth of American Music (Morris, 2019-Present). This episode of the project described the impact of Black music on American pop culture and music. A pre-test/post test measurement instrument was developed using the content of the NYT 1619 podcast and article. The instrument served as a multiple-choice "test" which had one correct answer per question. For instance, one question asks, "Blacks often performed in minstrel shows in Blackface (impersonating the impersonation of themselves). This required a lot of talent but was controversial and degrading. Which of these is NOT a reason black people performed in Blackface?" Potential answers included: "a. They needed the money; b. Minstrel shows were the only outlet in which they could perform; c. White music hall owners sometimes needed them to replace white- blackface performers in a pinch; d. Black performers knew that once white people saw their talent, the racist barriers would slowly fall." Students were scored based on the number of correct answers.

Several open-ended questions were posed at the end of the survey. This study intentionally analyzes three open-ended post-assessment responses to provide a space for the participants to freely share their thoughts and feelings and to serve as a measure to expound upon the quantitative data collected. For instance, one question asks, "What past methods of learning about Black American musical contributions as Black history have been impactful to you and why"? O'Cathain and Thomas (2004) suggest that open questions may help

redress the power imbalance between researchers and respondents. By analyzing open-ended responses, we are obliged to listen to what they say or read what they write. A thematic analysis of three open ended responses to the quantitative survey was conducted to illustrate the quantitative data and offer further insight. Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2015) found that qualitative approaches to the topic of media literacy education regarding race and ethnicity typically employ open-ended data-gathering techniques and foreground the complex relationships between media consumers and media texts.

### Data analysis

The researchers co-analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data separately, then combined the outcomes. The results were then merged for interpretation in the discussion section. For statistical analysis, SPSS was used to compute the difference between platform scores and generate inferential statistics. To test the data for normality, a Shapiro Wilk Test was conducted on the data via SPSS. The Shapiro-Wilk test is recommended for testing normality of small sample sizes ( $N < 50$ ) (Elliott & Woodward, 2007). Since the data was normally distributed, a t-test was conducted through SPSS to examine the relationships between the platform students used to learn about Black music history and their knowledge level. A second t-test was conducted to discover whether there was a difference between the amounts of knowledge print and podcast learners gained from consuming the podcast.

Through ethnographic content analysis (ECA), this study draws primarily on three open response survey questions and direct quotes from two focus group discussions. Ethnographic content analysis is used to document and understand the meaning of communication as well as verify theoretical relationships (Altheide, 1987; Altheide & Schneider, 2012). For the three open response survey questions, a thematic analysis was conducted. Thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights (King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017).

Focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' permission, anonymized, and transcribed using NVivo software. Organizational categories were used to gather data into broad areas or issues (Maxwell, 2013) related to the research questions. Then the data was coded initially as a starting point to provide the researchers

with analytic leads for further explanation (Saldana, 2015). The second cycle of coding involved making sense of the first cycle of codes. Emergent themes were developed based on the data, using a categorical coding matrix. Triangulation, as a strategy for validation, usually involves checking to see if the inferences drawn from them are comparable to those obtained in the first instance (Bazeley, 2013). Both researchers co-analyzed and discussed in-depth their interpretations of the collected qualitative data. In addition, participants were invited to review, comment and request further anonymization.

### FINDINGS

The first research question explored the ways in which HBCU students acquired or strengthened their Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) skills through the NYT 1619 podcast on Birth of American Music. The three tenets of CRML outlined by Hawkman and Shear (2017), confrontation, interrogation, and navigation were used as organizational codes and then analyzed for emergent themes. In the confrontation stage, HBCU students expressed strong emotional reactions. Focus group discussions maneuvered through both the interrogation and navigation phase almost seamlessly with HBCU students challenging each other about deeply rooted racial stereotypes within the Black community and actively confronting dominant narratives.

The diverse emotional reactions of HBCU students when confronted with material about minstrelsy, Blackface, and Black musical contributions in American popular culture was the first emergent theme. In the open-ended responses, HBCU students predominantly expressed positive feelings of pride and strength (Mitchell Patterson & McWhorter, 2020). As Diana stated, "I am proud of the accomplishments of Black people". However, in a focus group discussion, emotions of shame and anger surfaced:

Denzel: It makes me feel bad that I don't know this.

Lisa: I will say that I was a little ashamed or embarrassed at the thought that other Black people played characters [performed in Blackface] but it was almost a choice being in the light you had to degrade yourself to do that.

Candace: It kind of made me angry, Black people have been fighting for a long time and it wasn't any different in the music industry.

Jessica: It made it worse. I already thought it was bad, but to know how much was stolen, rewritten, and exploited is beyond me.

The focus group setting provided a space for students to collectively share their emotional reactions to the material, particularly of Black people performing in Blackface minstrelsy. The nuanced reactions expressed in the focus group setting highlight the raw emotions students experienced which are counter to the emotions expressed in the open-ended response.

The facilitator then probed further by asking the focus group the following question, “When people call someone a sellout or an Uncle Tom, it’s intended to signal that someone is not being true to what Blackness is and that’s a whole concept, right, a construct. What does that even mean”? This prompt guided students into the interrogation phase of CRML. Lamar began the discussion by sharing his thoughts on the subject matter:

For me, I think especially in film, it was a point where the only way for us to be in a film was to portray ourselves as negative stereotypes. So now it’s become this, if you don’t come from that negative stereotypical environment or if you’re not in that negative aspect then you’re not Black. But that’s not the case because you know, not every Black person comes from a single-parent home. Not every Black person comes from the projects, but now it’s this thing where if you don’t come from that you’re a sellout. Your parents are acting white. You’re spoon-fed. You don’t want to know the struggle or experienced Blackhood, but that’s far from the truth.

The questioning of how Black people are portrayed in media and entertainment led to a robust discussion on the notions of Blackness and Black representation in the media, which emerged as a theme. Lamar’s initial response sparked an exchange in which students shared their personal experiences to address the prompt:

Natalie: There are kids that live in nice places and then they come to the hood where I’m from and try to be like something they are not. They want to be from the struggle but why are you here? You have what I want. You have stuff that I wish that I had. So, it’s like you come in and try to be something that you’re not. You have nice things and I feel like, embrace it. They don’t embrace it. I’m trying to get to where you are and you’re trying to come down here.

Lamar: I was saying I came from the same type of neighborhood where every kid in that neighborhood wanted to be what they saw on TV. Some of you got three floors in your home but you rather, sag your pants and do all of this because you’re told that’s what Black is. But just cause you didn’t sag your pants doesn’t mean you’re not Black. Just because you talk a certain way, you carry yourself a certain way doesn’t mean that you aren’t Black or you are trying to act like them. It’s the media but we make each other feel like that all the time. And so now, it’s a massive identity crisis for people when we don’t even know who we are. So cause I mean that’s how they show us all the time.

Natalie: I don’t know where you all are getting that it’s cool or Black to sag your pants, but I hear you.

Terry: You know what, I saw all the African American kids from IB [International Baccalaureate] trying to be like hood like

Natalie was saying. Oh, I’m this. I’m that. But It’s like, that’s not really who you are, but at the same time when they’re around other minorities and the bigger population, they’re told that who they are is bad. So that’s when they tried to conform to what Black culture - or what we’re told Black culture is in the media which are stereotypes. I think that’s why people try to act “Blacker” and cause they’re told by Black people that they’re too white.

Lamar: Then other cultures want to come to us cause that’s why we’re talking about it because we’re the ones who create like all the music, the great moves, or anything that is Black.

Natalie: It’s great music and moves. Everybody wants to be Black.

In this exchange, HBCU students grappled with complicated notions about what it means to be Black, who is considered Black, and how Blackness is determined and maintained through the media and in Black communities. This focus discussion highlights students’ engagement in the interrogation and navigation processes of CRML, as students are not merely questioning but also challenging dominant narratives.

In the open-ended response and focus group discussions, HBCU students explored how this content shaped their view on society. Students’ responses reflected their engagement in the navigation phase of CRML, in which students directly countered whitewashed dominant narratives of American popular music that intentionally erased Black historical music contributions. CiCi shared, “It has made me even more well informed on the racist realities of American culture”, to which Semaj responded, “It has informed me that White America has stolen everything”. Similarly, Noel shared “It showed me once again White America has stolen everything from Black people and tried to make it its own”. Tina identifies the erasure of Black musical contributions, “America falls back on the Blacks but just don’t want to say it”.

Some students expressed hurt and anger that this information has not been shared with them. For example, Trinity shared, “It made it worse that this information has been held from me”. Diana agreed, “I never really knew about who Jim Crow was, minstrel shows, or the history of our music”. Charlie expressed, “I now know that their music (really our music) is much more powerful than I originally thought”. Lisa agreed, “I realized African Americans have come a long way. Others shared that learning about Black musical contributions only fortified their beliefs. E shared, “My view hasn’t changed, America is still the place of stolen dreams, ideas, and contributions”. Monique also felt the content, “Reinforced my view that America as a whole

is always open to opportunities that will create wealth and minimize the social and cultural empowerment of other races”. HBCU students were able to place the newly learned information on Black musical contributions in the context of their view of America. All three stages of CRML, confrontation, interrogation, and navigation were evident in both the open-ended responses and focus group discussions.

The second research question further illuminates the quantitative findings by exploring HBCU students’ experiences when learning about Black music history through a pop culture podcast vs the print article qualitatively. HBCU students provided additional context by sharing their perspectives on learning through print and podcast through open-ended responses and focus group discussions.

The first emergent theme is that students who listened to the podcast felt like they learned more about the racial issues in media than they would have if they had read it. The facilitator probed by asking students about their sensory reactions to the podcasts and whether they believed it helped them understand the racial issues that exist in music media. Shane shared “adding music into it really brought a light to us and really helped us focus on what he was saying because the music was a guide”. Denise replied that this podcast kept her more engaged because it felt like you were talking with someone. She shared, through podcasts “I can kind of sit back and listen and not really worry about myself as a viewer. I found that I was able to engage more with the speaker. Maybe it’s just a different way of approaching the learning process, trying to shut yourself down and really focus on the audio process.” Several students mentioned that their enjoyment and learning directly connected to the host’s delivery of the content through this medium. According to this brief discussion within a focus group of HBCU students, delivery matters:

Denzel: Yeah, the guy who’s actually narrating the podcast, he wasn’t boring or anything with the monotone and was like, it seemed like he actually cared.

Lamar: He was cool.

Marie: He seemed really energetic.

Lisa: And he actually knew what he was talking about.

Imani: He was into what he was talking about. He was passionate and entertaining.

Students even used music as a metaphor to describe the moment of realization (the CRML confrontation pillar) that in music media, white artists tend to receive

credit and Black artists are often left out. “It’s like a beat drop,” said Lisa.

The second emergent theme is a preference for learning through pop culture podcasts. Based on their feedback, more HBCU students preferred learning through podcasts as opposed to traditional print articles. This finding is bolstered by the fact that in the print article focus group, more HBCU students expressed mostly negative thoughts toward print media. More HBCU students expressed positive emotions towards learning Black history through a pop culture podcast such as the NYT 1619 project as opposed to a traditional print article. For example, Natalie shared, “well podcasts are more popular now. People listen to podcasts all the time. It’s a good way to learn” in the podcast focus group discussion. Several students shared their reactions to how the NYT 1619 podcast, *Birth of American Music (Morris, 2019-Present)* engaged them in the learning process:

Imani: I was going to say, cause the way he read it, his voice will probably keep you in tune to the podcast. Keeps you animated.

Lisa: I was going to agree basically with how the storyteller kept me intrigued.

Others commented that the use of music in the podcast to convey the message was appealing and engaged listeners. Charlie shared “you could feel it, when you read something, you could read it and it doesn’t really have any effect on you, but when you listen you can feel it”.

While many students shared positive reactions to learning through this particular pop culture podcast, not all students found the podcast to be engaging. A few students noted the challenges with learning through this platform. For instance, Natalie shared that she struggled with sustaining focus because “you can hear it but you can also tune in and out”. She further explained her first comment by saying, “I cannot sit and listen to podcasts like this, and just learn the content. I need to read it myself”. Imani suggested a video format would’ve been even better such as an “animated video with words on it”. Lamar and Charlie agreed with Imani that a video with him talking would have further increased student engagement.

Conversely, students in the print article focus group shared nuanced negative reactions about learning through print. While many appreciated the product, some found the format, rather than the content, to be prohibitive to their learning. Marquia shared her reaction when she first saw the print article, “I looked at the paper and it’s a whole lot of pages and the words are

really small. To be honest, it's just too much work to read all of that". Another student, Tee, built on MarQuia's point by saying, "my mind just doesn't work that way. Generation Z has everything at their fingertips so reading all of this is too much to expect of us". Monique stated, "technology makes us lazy and we just never have to read anything like this. We can go on our phone and find the answer. While this is a really good paper, I did get discouraged and stopped". Theresa said, "I looked at this and it isn't an ordinary paper, very laborious". While many expressed their apprehensions to engage in print media, others shared the importance of it. For instance, CiCi expressed concern about what will happen to print materials in the future. She shared, "I am scared because 60 years from now I don't think television, newspapers, or even radio will be around because we have become so dependent on technology - and that is really scary because there is a lot of misinformation on social media."

Students were also aware that their aversion to print-based learning might be received negatively. Hayden was mindful of the stereotypes that could emerge as students shared their reluctance about reading the print article. Hayden expressed, "it's not that Black students are lazy, don't want to read or do the work, that isn't true, at least not for a lot of us". This is an important consideration that HBCU students felt the need to provide a disclaimer in order to safeguard what their peers were feeling. They are acutely aware of stereotypes about Black people, literacy, and work ethic that even in the context of this study the student wanted to ensure that their authentic feedback didn't contribute to the stereotype. This caveat shows that even in research Black participants can't respond freely without directly engaging dominant narratives and prevailing stereotypes.

A third emergent theme is a familiarity of learning Black music history through entertainment. In the open-ended survey responses, 41% of respondents noted entertainment and media (i.e., documentaries, films loosely based on the lives of Black musicians, music, and television) as the most impactful method of learning about Black music history. Others included specific African American courses offered at the HBCU (26%), learning at home through family (11%), extracurricular activities such as band or choir (2%), and some respondents were unsure (20%) about which method of learning about Black music history was the most impactful for them. In an open response, Judie recalls, "This history is never in the textbook. So, watching movies based on people helped me to do my own

research". Amassa also found movies based on true stories to be an important learning tool. Similarly, Denise stated, "I have learned about Black American musical contributions through various documentaries". Many cited movies and documentaries but others noted the role of music in their Black historical knowledge development. Theresa shared "Contemporary music gave me the ability to learn about music that came before it. Television shows, such as Teen Summit and 106 & Park on BET provided the platform for me to be educated". Others agreed that music was a pathway to acquiring Black musical historical knowledge, for instance, Charlie said, "My father had me listening to music and was teaching me about it". Denzel noted the radio as a primary way to gain information about Black musical artists.

Through focus groups, HBCU students had an opportunity to engage in a discussion about the way they learned about Black music history. The following excerpt of both discussions highlight their experiences:

*Podcast focus group*

Amassa: I didn't learn this in public school. I have personally learned from entertainment.

Lisa: I do feel that history should be told from a visual standpoint. I learned about Black American music through different documentaries and television on my own and sometimes documentaries were shown in classrooms.

Charlie: Yeah, movies and televisions.

*Print focus group*

Kasie: I grew up in St. Louis and what you don't know can get you in trouble. So, I watched documentaries, plus I love documentaries.

B: Even, via YouTube. That is where I learned about it.

Monique: I trust documentaries because they have been researched and confirmed. Ashley: Honestly, we can choose what information we want to receive.

In both focus groups, entertainment and media appeared to be primary vehicles for learning Black music history. This may be a reason why more HBCU students in the study preferred learning through a pop culture podcast as it is closely aligned with the method of learning about Black musical history students might be more familiar with.

The third and final research question asked whether a relationship exists between the HBCU students' learning medium (podcast vs print article) and their knowledge of Black music history. Two t-tests were conducted to address this question. The first t-test sought to discover the difference, if any, between the post-test scores of podcast and print learners. While the raw mean score of podcast learners was higher than the raw mean



score of print learners, the t-test did not show a significant statistical difference between the mean test scores of podcast ( $M = 6.79$ ,  $SD = 1.762$ ) and print learners and ( $M = 6.25$ ,  $SD = 1.669$ ) conditions;  $t(20) = -.70$ ,  $p = .86$ . Podcast and print learners answered roughly the same number of correct answers on the post-test.

A second t-test was conducted to discover the difference, if any, between the amounts of knowledge print and podcast learners gained from listening to the podcast. The quantity of knowledge gained was calculated by subtracting the pre-test scores from the post-test scores for each group (print and podcast) of learners. There was no significant difference between the mean scores of knowledge gained by print and podcast learners,  $t(20) = .932$ ,  $p = .362$ , despite podcast listeners ( $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ) attaining higher scores than article readers ( $M = 1.37$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ). Print and podcast learners gained about the same amount of knowledge overall.

The absence of a significant difference in both t-tests (post-test score and the amount learned between print and podcast learners) indicates that podcast learning of Black music history was just as effective as traditional print-based learning. However, as noted in research question two, the podcast group seemed to progress further in their development of CRML, as their discussion of the topic was more robust. Students were able to describe and explain their experiences with Black music and the ways in which it had been taught to them previously. Additionally, the podcast learning group displayed higher raw scores in both categories, which suggests the podcast group scored slightly higher than the print group, indicating a possible slight advantage of podcast-based learning.

## DISCUSSION

Educators can employ pop culture podcasts as a way to recenter narratives that are traditionally silenced. When historically accurate pop culture podcasts are used, individuals of all backgrounds can connect with characters, feel proud of their heritage, and enjoy a new and exciting way to learn underrepresented Black histories (Weinstein, 2007).

The first research question asked how pop culture podcasts contribute to HBCU students' development of Critical Race Media Literacy. The podcast and the discussion that followed helped students engage in each stage of Critical Race Media Literacy including confrontation, interrogation, and navigation. Each stage in the process allowed students to grapple with ideas

including media representation of Black culture, inequity, stratification, and identity construction. Based on the media that was presented, these discussions fostered deeper

conversations about their lived experience (Alvermann, 2002; Daniels, 2012; Deal et al., 2010; Garrett & Schmeichel, 2012; Kellner & Share, 2005; Mathews, 2010). In this study, using pop culture podcasts with targeted questions and discussion helped students to confront previously held ideologies and become aware of problematic issues in media texts specifically centered on Black histories. Critical Race Media Literacy provides a framework for HBCU students to analyze their lived experiences, juxtapose them with media depictions, and understand the societal and structural formation of mainstream narratives with attention to challenging them when necessary.

The second research question asked, "What are HBCU students' experiences when learning about Black music history through a pop culture podcast?" Gathering HBCU students' learning experiences regarding Black histories is a significant endeavor because HBCUs are a historical hub for Black learning. In fact, a foundational mission of HBCUs is to bolster Black cultural identity and situate Blackness as a primary source of inspiration and pride (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). Students at HBCUs are likely to have a different learning experience than their peers at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) because the environment prioritizes learning about Black contributions and juxtaposing Black cultural education with the whitewashed instruction students likely received in the years prior to attending.

This study found that one of the most noteworthy experiences students had was that although the amount of Black Music History that the students learned was the same in both groups, students in the podcast group seemed to progress further in the CRML development process than those in the print article focus group. Both groups engaged in the Critical Race Media Literacy development process, but the podcast group focused more on issues of media and society in their discussion.

A second noteworthy experience was a general preference for learning via podcast over print methods. Many students in the print group found the article difficult to read, tedious, and uninteresting, while most students in the podcast group not only learned the information but remained engaged throughout the lesson. Several students verbally expressed their preference for learning via the podcast medium and

highlighted the importance of the podcasts' high production value.

The third research question asked whether a relationship exists between the learning medium (podcast vs print article) and HBCU students' knowledge of Black music history. Neither t-test conducted showed a significant difference between learning medium and knowledge level. This indicates, at least in this instance, that learning through podcasts was just as effective as learning via the print article. Furthermore, the raw mean test scores for podcast learners were higher than those of print learners, indicating a modest increase in learning for podcast users.

While some researchers have found podcasts to be a hindrance to student participation and learning (Gray et al., 2012; Kazlauskas & Robinson, 2012), our study adds to the body of research that exemplifies the robust learning experience that students can gain through podcast exposure (Back et al., 2017; Gosper et al., 2010; Lonn & Teasley, 2009). The NYT 1619 Project podcast retained students' attention even though the information was not presented in narrative form. The podcast provided a lecture-style lesson that captivated students for more than 35 uninterrupted minutes. The fact that the students were able to engage with the podcast more deeply than with the article underscores its potential to be used more widely with racial issues that are often difficult to address. In a media environment that is driven by digital and social activity, many students feel comfortable doing much of their information gathering and learning through audio/visual means. Students were able to recall key concepts and information about Critical Race Media Literacy from the podcast. They demonstrated their understanding by explaining the main ideas and concepts of CRML. Further, they applied their knowledge by analyzing implications of what they learned, identifying patterns, biases, and stereotypes present in their previously consumed media.

With the knowledge that the incorporation of high-quality podcasts will not decrease (and might even increase) learning outcomes educators can feel confident using pop culture podcasts to teach multilayered subjects such as Black histories.

### **Limitations**

Although a sample of twenty-nine is sufficient to conduct t-tests, a larger sample size would have been optimal in order to increase the statistical power of the analysis. As such, we are able to draw conclusions about

the students we tested, but our results are not representative of any larger population. Still, the research question and subsequent findings provided the opportunity to conduct an exploratory analysis that lays the groundwork for future study. Implications of future research would be to repeat the analysis with a larger sample size, which would allow generalizability. Moreover, and possibly, more importantly, the analysis could be the foundation of a quantitative Critical Race Media Literacy measurement scale.

Additionally, while the 1619 Project has received significant acclaim as a groundbreaking and influential work on the analysis of America's history, it is important to note that it is not without its detractors. Criticisms have been raised regarding the project and its publisher, the New York Times. Although the present study is not the appropriate venue for a discussion of the ongoing dialogue among historians on this matter, we recognize and acknowledge the existence of critiques directed towards both the New York Times and the 1619 Project.

### **Implications for educators**

We found that providing students with opportunities to develop Critical Race Media Literacy through pop culture podcasts has several advantages. First, investigating familiar pop culture formats in a new way helps develop a critical consciousness of media. CRML encourages audiences to examine relationships between media, society, and power structures while enabling students to understand pervasive ideologies that hinge on power and are seldom confronted without critical guidance. Students deepen their awareness of issues concerning the hegemonic distribution of power, corporate bias, and media portrayals of systemic inequality (Silverblatt et al., 2014; Tisdell, 2008). There is also great potential for education development focusing on the media's function in stereotyping to abate the influence of exposure to inaccurate or shallow mediated images of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) groups. Moreover, the

opportunity exists for educators to increase and possibly even enhance the favorable media effects of highlighting non-stereotypical and positive media depictions of BIPOC. Second, developing Critical Race Media Literacy through pop culture podcasts increases participation in students who might not otherwise connect with the material. Given the popularity and widespread use of this medium, developing CRML through pop culture podcasts provides an avenue for

educators to approach issues of racial inequity by analyzing media texts with which students are familiar.

Third, CRML increases agency in students. Many of the students came with a particular set of knowledge. CRML gave them the language and framework in which to situate their understanding of how Black narratives are silenced and misrepresented both historically and in the media. When students are empowered to deconstruct media representations of their world, they gain the ability to make their own decisions and develop their own conclusions. They also gain an understanding of ideologies and possibilities to create their own narratives that prioritize their own voices and perspectives (Fuchs, 2011; Morrell et al., 2013).

Finally, a key outcome of developing CRML through podcasts is increased civic engagement. CRML incorporates social justice education that enables students to become active citizens in the democratic process. A critical approach to media empowers students to challenge issues of power centered on the creation and consumption of media (Yousman, 2016). In this study, HBCU students spoke about the ways in which engaging with these materials shaped their view of society. By providing college students with a space to discuss their own concerns and conceptions about issues of power and injustice, they are able to engage with the complexities of democracy and broader society. Increasingly, civic participation, visual protesting, and various forms of societal critique occur through digital and social media platforms. Encouraging students to engage with those media as they occur in the popular discourse could spur them to participate in similar campaigns and social justice initiatives. (Gainer, 2012; Morrell, 2002; Morell et al., 2013; Yosso, 2002).

Recent scholarship on critical media literacy and pop culture pedagogies among students and adults has increased over the past two decades (Gainer, 2012; Guy, 2007; Rodesiler, 2010; Semali, 2018) however, the need for Critical Race Media Literacy teaching and scholarship remains vast. K-12 and post-secondary educators are incorporating these topics into their teaching, future research should emphasize the importance of pop culture texts that emphasize systems of power and ways to critique and dismantle them. Popular culture has been influential in providing another space for Black historical study (King, 2017). The Birth of American Music, a podcast written and produced for the NYT 1619 project by Wesley Morris, reexamines the trajectory of American music by challenging the erasure of Black musicians and Black culture as the foundation of American popular culture. As Monique shared, “I

learned that Black Americans have been the foundation of musical contributions and they have created or influenced all genres of music. That makes me feel empowered because I feel our contributions are powerful and influential.” This pop culture podcasts study provided students with a framework to analyze how Black musical contributions are represented through a Critical Race Media Literacy lens. More importantly, this new knowledge offers students a way to develop a new consciousness about themselves, the tools to analyze the world around them, and emphasizes the importance of seeking Black-affirming narratives in the media.

## REFERENCES

- Agosto, V., Karanxha, Z., & Cobb-Roberts, D. (2016). Critical race media literacy and critical incidents of resisting teachable moments. *Envisioning critical race praxis in higher education through counter-storytelling. IAP.*
- Altheide, D. L. (1987). Reflections: Ethnographic content analysis. *Qualitative Sociology, 10*(1), 65-77. <http://doi.org/10.1007/BF00988269>
- Altheide, D. L., & Schneider, C. J. (2012). *Qualitative media analysis* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Alvermann, D. E. (2002). Effective literacy instruction for adolescents. *Journal of literacy Research, 34*(2), 189-208.
- Alvermann, D. E., & Hagood, M. C. (2000). Critical media literacy: Research, theory, and practice in "new times." *Journal of Educational Research, 93*(3), 193-205.
- Arroyo, A. T., & Gasman, M. (2014). An HBCU-based educational approach for Black college student success: Toward a framework with implications for all institutions. *Journal of Education, 121*(1), 57-85.
- Aufderheide, P. (1993). *Media Literacy. A Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy.* Aspen Institute, Communications and Society Program.
- Back, D. A., von Malotky, J., Sostmann, K., Hube, R., Peters, H., & Hoff, E. (2017). Superior gain in knowledge by podcasts versus text-based learning in teaching orthopedics: a randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Surgical Education, 74*(1), 154-160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsurg.2016.07.008>
- Bazeley, P. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: Practical strategies.* SAGE Publications.

- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Pearson.
- Cross, J. (2014). Promoting autonomous listening to podcasts: A case study. *Language Teaching Research, 18*(1), 8-32.
- Cubbage, J. (2022). *Critical Race Media Literacy: Themes and Strategies for Media Education*. Routledge Research in Media Literacy and Education.
- Daniels, J. (2012). Transforming student engagement through documentary and critical media literacy. *Theory in Action, 5*(2), 5-29.
- Deal, D., Flores-Koulish, S., & Sears, J. (2010). Media literacy teacher talk: Interpretation, value, and implementation. *Journal of Media Literacy Education, 1*(2), 4.
- Elliott, A. C., & Woodward, W. A. (2007). *Statistical analysis quick reference guidebook: With SPSS examples*. Sage.
- Florini, S. (2015). The podcast "chitlin' circuit": Black podcasters, alternative media, and audio enclaves. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media, 22*(2), 209-219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2015.1083373>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.) (Ser. A continuum book). Herder and Herder.
- Fuchs, C. (2011). *Foundations of critical media and information studies* (Vol. 52). Taylor & Francis.
- Gainer, J. (2012). Critical thinking: Foundational for digital literacies and democracy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 56*(1), 14-17.
- Garrett, H. J., & Schmeichel, M. (2012). Using the Daily Show to promote media literacy. *Social Education, 76*(4), 211-215.
- Gipson, G. D. (2019, September 26-28). *Black women are superheroes and wear digital capes' too* [Conference session]. Digital Frontiers Annual Conference, Austin, TX, United States.
- Giroux, H. (2004). Cultural studies, public pedagogy, and the responsibility of intellectuals. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 1*(1), 59-79.
- Gosper, M., McNeill, M., Phillips, R., Preston, G., Woo, K., & Green, D. (2010). Web-based lecture technologies and learning and teaching: a study of change in four Australian universities. *Alt-J, 18*(3), 251-263.
- Gray, H. J., Davis, P., & Liu, X. (2012). Keeping up with the technologically savvy student: student perceptions of audio books. *Scholar: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education, 26*(2), 28-38.
- Guy, T. C. (2007). Learning who we (and they) are: Popular culture as pedagogy. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2007*(115), 15-23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.263>
- Hawkman, A. M., & Shear, S.B. (2017). They're gonna sing the songs anyway: Thinking and teaching with theory and Disney music for social studies. In W.B. Russell, III, & K. S. Waters (Eds.), *Cinematic social studies: A resource for teaching and learning social studies with film* (pp. 55-78). Information Age Publishing.
- Kalludi, S. N., Punja, D., Pai, K. M., & Dhar, M. (2013). Efficacy and perceived utility of podcasts as a supplementary teaching aid among first-year dental students. *The Australasian Medical Journal, 6*(9), 450-7. <https://doi.org/10.4066/AMJ.2013.1786>
- Kazlauskas, A., & Robinson, K. (2012). Podcasts are not for everyone. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 43*(2), 321-330.
- Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2005). Toward critical media literacy: Core concepts, debates, organizations, and policy. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education, 26*(3), 369-386.
- Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). Critical media literacy is not an option. *Learning Inquiry, 1*(1), 59-69.
- King, L. J. (2017). The media and Black masculinity: Looking at the media through race[d] lenses. *Critical Education, 8*(2), 31-40.
- King, N. (2004). Using templates in the thematic analysis of text. In C. Cassell & G. Symon (Eds.), *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research* (pp. 257-270). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Lonn, S., & Teasley, S. D. (2009). Podcasting in higher education: what are the implications for teaching and learning? *The Internet and Higher Education, 12*(2), 88-92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.06.002>
- Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: Foundational notes. *Theory into practice, 51*(1), 4-11.
- Luttenberger, S., Macher, D., Maidl, V., Rominger, C., Aydin, N., & Paechter, M. (2017). Different patterns of university students' integration of lecture podcasts, learning materials, and lecture attendance in a psychology course. *Education and Information*

- Technologies*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-017-9592-3>
- Mathews, J. M. (2010). Using a studio-based pedagogy to engage students in the design of mobile-based media. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 9(1), 87-102.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative Research Design: An interactive approach* (3rd edition). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- McWhorter, C. (2019). News Media Literacy: Effects of Consumption. *International Journal Of Communication*, 13, 19. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10258>
- Mitchell Patterson, T., & McWhorter, C. (2020). Black music is American music: Learning underrepresented aspects of Black history in college through critical race media literacy [Special issue]. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 22(2), 145-162. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v22i2.2451>
- Morrell, E. (2002). Toward a critical pedagogy of popular culture: Literacy development among urban youth. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46(1), 72-77.
- Morrell, E., Duenas, R., Garcia, V., & Lopez, J. (2013). Youth and Critical media Production in the 21st century. In *Critical Media Pedagogy: Teaching for Achievement in City Schools*. Columbia, New York: Teachers College Press.
- Morris, W. (2019, August 14). American popular music. *The 1619 Project—The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>
- Morris, W. (Host). (2019-Present). *The birth of American music* [Audio podcast]. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/podcasts/1619-black-american-music-appropriation.html>
- Nowell, L., Norris, J., White, D., & Moules, N. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- O’Cathain, A., & Thomas, K. J. (2004). ‘Any other comments?’ Open questions on questionnaires – A bane or a bonus to research? *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 4, 25-25.
- O’Malley, M., Sandlin, J., & Burdick, J. (2010). Public pedagogy. In C. Kridel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of curriculum studies* (pp. 697-700). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412958806.n375>
- Rodesiler, L. (2010). Empowering students through critical media literacy: This means war. *The Clearing House*, 83(5), 164-167.
- Saldana, J. (2015). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd edition). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Scharrer, E., & Ramasubramanian, S. (2015). Intervening in the media’s influence on stereotypes of race and ethnicity: The role of media literacy education. *Journal of Social Issues*, 71(1), 171-185. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12103>
- Semali, L. (2018). *Intermediality: Teachers’ handbook of critical media literacy*. Routledge.
- Silverblatt, A., Miller, D. C., Smith, J., & Brown, N. (2014). *Media literacy: Keys to interpreting media messages: Keys to interpreting media messages*. ABC-CLIO.
- Simon, R. I. (1995). Broadening the vision of university-based study of education: The contribution of cultural studies. *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 17(1), 107-114.
- Tisdell, E. J., (2008). Critical media literacy and transformative learning drawing on pop culture and entertainment media in teaching for diversity in adult higher education. *Journal of transformative education*, 6(1), 48-67.
- Vrikki, P., & Malik, S. (2019). Voicing lived-experience and anti-racism: Podcasting as a space at the margins for subaltern counterpublics. *Popular Communication*, 17(4), 273-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2019.1622116>
- Watson, A. (2020, June 8). U.S. Podcasting Industry - Statistics & Facts. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/topics/3170/podcasting/>
- Weinstein, S. (2007). A love for the think: The pleasures of rap as a literate practice. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50, 270-281.
- Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race media literacy: Challenging deficit discourse about Chicanas/os. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 30(1), 52-62.
- Yousman, B. (2016). Who’s afraid of critical media literacy? In M. Huff & A. L. Roth (Eds.) *Censored 2017* (pp. 369-416). New York: Seven Stories Press.