

Best Practices: Ethical Approaches to Representation

Reflexivity (Planning): Reflexivity involves recognizing how our own identity and understanding shapes the stories we tell, especially when representing others. Reflective periods help to make conscious the underlying power dynamics and are a two-fold process. In the timeline, reflexivity is the planning aspect of representation.

First, we need to start by exploring our own bias and unpacking misinformation, misrepresentations, and simplistic or outdated narratives we've internalized over time. Examining this can help to reveal larger structures of power within our society, e.g. structural racism, discrimination, and cultural imperialism, that limit our understanding (or access to understanding) of a marginalized or underrepresented group.

- **Questions for Reflexive Representation**
 - What would you like to say?
 - What brought you to this subject? Why do you want to tell this story?
 - Are you the best person to tell this story?
 - What existing knowledge do you have of the topic/particular group? Where did this knowledge come from?
 - Are you using direct or indirect sources?
 - How recent is your information?
- **Explore (Why ask these questions?):** If all stories are mediated through the lens of the storyteller, then the stories we are told of "others" reveals the level of understanding the storyteller possesses about the 'other'. This understanding is directly influenced by power structures and socio-cultural hierarchies embedded within our society. This is illustrated by Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his groundbreaking book, [Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History](#). For him, stories are the seed of power—whomever controls the narrative holds the power. He argues history is more than just the culmination of stories from the dominant or 'winning' side, but it is also the silencing of narratives from marginalized and oppressed communities that allows power to stay uncontested and knowledge limited overtime. This concept is useful for exploring what information may be missing from our existing understanding because of these power imbalances. *What narratives have been silenced? How do these historical erasures alter our current perspective?*

An example of this is the HBO docuseries, [Exterminate All the Brutes](#) which explores historically silenced narratives from American slavery and the Native American genocide and their impacts on our contemporary perspective. The accompanying resources offer reading materials, interviews, and advocacy resources.

Secondly, understanding how power influences storytelling helps creators approach portrayals of communities different from their own with greater care. Media representations can and do inform audiences' imagination and perceptions of cultural, religious, and/or social 'others', often influencing audiences who may never interact with these communities directly.

- **Ask: Questions for Power Dynamics**
 - What forms of capital and visibility do you have that the groups you are interested in do not?
 - How will you represent their identity and story with dignity?
 - How is harm reduction being incorporated into your overall approach?
- **Explore (Why ask the question?):** Another aspect of power is accessibility to speak against harmful stereotypes. If misrepresentations go uncontested, they may spread and become accepted as fact. Because of this, media producers should consider the power and privilege they hold for directly shaping knowledge and public opinion, as well as the resources they have that the groups being represented do not.
 - "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (Adichie, 2009). Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, illustrates this in [The Danger of a Single Story](#).
 - Religious representation of minority spirituality can be even more nuanced because Western portrayals have often been limited and tend to cater to the Christian majority. Anything outside of that majority tends to be misrepresented and viewed as wrong, evil, or dark. An example is the tropes of voodoo: practicing voodoo was outlawed within the New Orleans city limits due to misconceptions and fear. A famous practitioner, Marie LaVeau, whose [humanitarian work](#) is often erased from the narratives, is depicted in [country songs](#) as an evil, ugly woman. Voodoo's recent representation in Disney's the *Princess and the Frog* associates it with [bad magic](#). This narrative becomes extremely harmful when it shapes the perception of audiences. The best way to ensure we are not continuously reproducing harmful tropes is to assess where our information is coming from and learn directly from practitioners of the faith as much as possible. Vital components of representation include being conscious of the practitioners' experiences and inclusive of their perspective.
- **Engage: Actions to take to facilitate reflexive approaches**
 - Question your existing perspective of the group you are trying to represent.
 - Be mindful of the ways certain stories have been purposefully excluded over time and how that may alter your knowledge.
 - Understand the influence you will have on shaping public perception by checking your power and privilege.
 - What resources do you have access to that the communities you are depicting may not?

- Be willing and open to different and unfamiliar perspectives.
- **Collaboration/Consultation (Intention):** The most ethical way to tell another person's story is to let them tell it themselves. If you are helping share a narrative of an individual or group who hold identities different than your own, *collaboration and consultation are vital* to ensuring harm is not done, and representation is nuanced, accurate, and authentic to the multiplicity of lived experiences. It is within this process that your intentions for representation are established, and the intentions should be created and communicated in partnership with those you are representing.
- **Ask: Questions to ask when working in collaboration with an underrepresented or poorly represented community**
 - What are the overrepresented stories and harmful stereotypes they encounter in the media?
 - What are the representations they would like to see more of about their community?
 - What self-representational creative work already exists?
- **Explore:** Combating lack of representation requires dynamic partnerships built through collaboration and inclusive work prioritized throughout the production that is mindful of the lack of visibility that exists.
 - A helpful example for understanding the depth of collaboration needed to address issues of representation is the [Missing and Maligned](#) study of Muslim representation in film. The study examines the lack of visibility and consequential misrepresentations (What's missing/the silenced narratives). [The Blueprint For Muslim Inclusion: Recommendations for Film Industry Professionals](#) provides concrete solutions (long, short, and immediate) for improving representation. The blueprint is a great framework for considering practical steps to better representation through collaborative learning and inclusive efforts.
- **Explore:** Understanding how a group has been overrepresented is also an important step for evaluating intentions and to avoid reproducing harmful narratives. An example to think about here is [trauma porn](#)—depictions of traumatic experiences faced by marginalized groups, often created by those outside of those communities. Often, trauma porn caters to the majority, does little to nothing for the marginalized individuals whose trauma is being depicted, and tends to invoke savior complexes in the audience instead of celebrating the resilience of the marginalized.
 - “We need to be more conscious of trauma porn’s creation and consumption, because consistently seeing media where your intersection is being harmed just for people to “sad” or “care” react on Facebook is traumatic in and of itself. We are having to watch ourselves be murdered, raped and/or demonized all for a higher rating on Rotten Tomatoes or IMDB” -[Brittany J. The Mighty](#).

- The safest way to avoid falling into trauma porn is to center those whose identity you are representing—from the production process to the audiences you are producing for.
 - Barry Jenkins' [The Underground Railroad](#) is an example of media that understands how to portray traumatic experiences with dignity.
 - HBOs [Watchmen](#) thoughtfully portrays historical trauma without relying on victimization or exploitation.
- **Explore:** Building from the examples above, representation is deeper than what is visible on-screen. The presence and perspective of those whose identity is being portrayed should be visible in every element of the production including what happens *off-screen*—inclusion in the writing, casting, hiring, technical, set design, public relations, etc.
 - Those who hold the identity you are portraying should be prioritized in the casting selection, as illustrated by the [issues of non-Jewish casting for Jewish Stories](#).
 - However, having a diverse cast is just one step; it's also important that the character is not written by someone who doesn't understand the experience fully or has never experienced it personally. The [#WriteInclusion: Tips for Accurate Representation project](#) is a good reference for understanding this. This lack of diversity in the writing stage often reproduces stereotypes by continuously showing an identity as one fixed thing.
 - For example, only casting native people to play characters based on their ancestors from the imagination of non-natives continues the "[Vanishing Indian](#)" paradigm because we don't get to see them in any other roles that explore their contemporary existence. Native stories are being told by non-natives so often that as a child, Cree filmmaker, Neil Diamond, would argue with other kids over who got to be the cowboys when playing cowboys and Indians, without realizing he was the 'Indian' being referenced. He explores the disconnect between the 'Hollywood Indian' and the experience of Native Americans and indigenous people in the [Reel Injun](#).
- **Explore:** The complex stories you are hoping to tell *about* a group, are most likely already being told in some medium *by* that group. Seek out partnerships that elevate community groups, independent filmmakers and media groups, as well as creatives who identify with the topic of interest.
 - An example of this in action is the award-winning video game [Never Alone](#). It was produced through heavy collaboration and consultation with Iñupiat community elders, visual artists, musicians, and storytellers.
- **Engage: Facilitate Collaboration**
 - Prioritize conversation and learning—make space for curiosity of differences.
 - Listen fully to any concerns or hesitations that may arise.
 - Include multiple perspectives to avoid the spokesperson syndrome—having one person speak on behalf of an entire group is problematic.
 - Be transparent throughout the partnership.

- Integrate space for criticism and feedback into the timeline.
- **Engage: Account for factors that may limit collaboration, feedback gathering, and overall full participation — and plan accordingly**
 - Some factors limiting collaboration could be:
 - Modes of communication—do they have access to reliable internet/communication technologies? Is there a language barrier?
 - Economic privilege—do they have access to transportation? Do they have a strenuous work schedule that requires availability outside your working hours? Will childcare be provided?

Reciprocity Responsibility (Impact): If collaboration is a partnership, all should benefit from it. Reciprocity—giving back to those whose stories you are representing—should be a practice heavily implemented.

- **Ask: Questions for Reciprocity**
 - How are you ensuring that all who participate in the production are benefiting?
 - How is reciprocity being defined?
 - How will the representation impact the group AFTER the production has ended?
- Explore: Minority groups' cultural contributions are frequently used without attribution or reciprocity, (stories, aesthetics, knowledge, etc.) and nothing is attributed in return. In the social sciences, this is known as [Scientific Colonialism](#) and has long been critiqued for its lack of ethics. Applying those critiques to media production, we understand true collaboration must benefit all parties and ensure accountability. Reciprocity should be collectively established and the appropriate form agreed upon.
 - Some examples of reciprocity efforts:
 - Financial compensation and/or employment
 - Investing into the community/supporting initiatives
 - [Neighborhood story project](#) seeks to tell stories of Southern Louisiana by supporting, training, and publishing those who live there
 - Advocacy efforts
 - The documentary [In My Blood It Runs](#), is an example of an educational resource, and advocacy project aiming to change Australian public-school curricula to be inclusive of Aboriginal narratives and to evaluate the impacts of colonialism within the education system entirely.
- **Explore:** Evaluating the impacts of representation is another step within reciprocity. While the production may have ended, the representation will continuously shape perceptions of those who hold the identity you have portrayed long after the media has been released.

Moreover, what has been illustrated throughout this document is that media production is more than the final product, it is the social bonds, cultural nuances, and political undercurrents from which they are born. Ensuring all benefit from the partnership means accountability and acknowledgement of how the representation will affect those elements.

- [The Mulan Controversy](#) is an example for the need to truly understand the impacts of representation of the experiences of those whose identities are intertwined with production. Having reflexive planning, collaborative intentions, practicing reciprocity and impact evaluation are actions that can be taken to ensure this is avoided.
- **Explore:** A relevant case study for understanding the legacy of damage a media portrayal can do—especially for already marginalized groups—is the 1915 silent film, [Birth of A Nation](#). It's violent portrayal of freed slaves in the Reconstruction Era of the South was detrimental to Black Americans for generations to come. The film, praised for its technological innovations, was screened at the White House, sparked a nationwide resurgence of the KKK, inspired violent attacks on BIPOC, and established damaging stereotypes of Black Americans on screen. While there were Black filmmakers producing films that challenged these stereotypes at the time, such as Oscar Micheaux's [The Symbol of the Unconquered \(1920\)](#), their films lacked the resources and social capital (only shown in theatres catering to Black audiences) to reduce the damage done by *Birth of a Nation*.
- **Engage: Practice Reciprocity**
 - Understand the importance of giving back to those whose stories you are telling.
 - Build trust, transparency, and respect by ensuring collaborative efforts will be beneficial for all involved.
 - Have open and honest conversations about what is most valuable within the partnership.
 - Define collectively what forms of reciprocity are most appropriate and most needed:
 - Ex: Employment, financial compensation, community support, advocacy, all the above?
 - Evaluate the impacts of the representation after production.

To learn more about [RepresentingReligion.org](#) and Tanenbaum, please contact info@tanenbaum.org