

**(RE)MEDIATING NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY
IN US CIVIL RIGHTS DISCOURSE:
CMDA AS A PEDAGOGIC TOOL**

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***Abstract:** Current revisitations of identities and achievements in US civil rights discourse have inspired pedagogically-oriented digital media projects. More importantly, they have also highlighted the need to rethink the role of Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CMDA) and its pedagogic applications in order to stimulate greater awareness of the effects of repurposing historical discourses. The case-studies investigated are the 2020 Pulitzer Prize winning 1619 Project – a podcast series whose account of Black America’s history conflicts with mainstream views – and the history section of BrainPOP, an animated educational site for primary school children, which monumentalizes relatively less well-known civil rights heroines.*

***Keywords:** BrainPop, Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CMDA), master narratives/ITFs, (re)mediation, The 1619 Project, US civil rights discourse*

1. Introduction

The digital age has brought with it an interest in re-reading the past through easily accessible, (re)mediated repertoires of historical documents and testimonies. This is especially the case with revisitations of identities and achievements in US civil rights discourse. Yet, particularly at this moment in time, re-reading the past is fraught with dangers. Language educators feel the need to provide their students with tools and safeguards against the distortions and manipulations potentially involved in ‘excesses’ such as fake news, hate speech, and, more recently, “cancel culture” (e.g. Duque, Rivera, LeBlanc 2021) – a form of ostracism, enacted mainly through social media, whereby public figures or celebrities are stigmatized, boycotted, or even ousted from social circles or cultural institutions because of their behaviour or for sharing questionable opinions on the Web. If supporters of cancel culture see it as closely connected to social justice and accountability, as well as to powerless people finally being heard, it must be acknowledged that, from a pedagogical point of view, this phenomenon is prone to excesses and raises the rhetorical question as to whether the ultimate aim of Education is still to get learners to critically engage with, support and/or discard alternative epistemological positions and ideologies.

Indeed, if revisitations of the past contribute, on the one hand, to building up learners’ civic conscience and, more generally, to the resurgence of civil rights movements, they are, on the other, liable to contribute to uncritically debunking the myths about civil rights heroes and heroines, or, vice versa, to perpetuating, not

only at school, but also in popular culture, some fake news on which those myths were originally built. A good case in point is the transposition into popular culture and amplification of the fake news surrounding the death of Bessie Smith, “the Empress of the blues”: on September 26, 1937, Smith was critically injured in a car crash between Memphis, Tennessee, and Clarksdale, Mississippi. According to her death certificate, she was taken to the G.T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital in Clarksdale, where she died without regaining consciousness. After her death, a story circulated stating that she had died as a result of having been refused admission to a whites-only hospital in Clarksdale: this fake news was amplified by the account published by jazz writer and producer John Hammond in the November 1937 issue of *DownBeat* magazine. Over 20 years later, it formed the basis for Edward Albee’s one-act play *The Death of Bessie Smith*. As recently as 2020, it was reinforced in Episode 16, Season 2, of the famous NBC medical drama *New Amsterdam*, which monumentalizes the struggle against the US healthcare system’s unfairness by a team of doctors working at the most ancient public hospital which still performs a large percentage of pro-bono treatments. In the Episode mentioned above, African American neurosurgeon Floyd Reynolds, suspected of willingly performing fatal surgery on a white supremacist terrorist, admits to his fiancée that he decided to be a doctor when he learned about Bessie Smith’s being denied medical assistance. On these false premises, he assumes the identity of the mythical hero completing the journey from the instinctive rage and drive for retaliation of the ‘enemy-within’ the civil rights movement to the mature compassion and non-violence of the civil rights activist.

Against this backdrop, the main aim of this paper is to illustrate the role and pedagogic applications of a critical multimodal discourse analysis (henceforth CMDA) perspective in the study of civil rights discourse and new media practices. This perspective is crucial when ideology, power, agency and responsibility are involved, because it gets students:

- a) to think critically about multimodal texts (i.e., the ‘norm’ in digital media) as a system of options;
- b) to develop an awareness of multimodal texts as social action operating in a specific context of situation and culture; and
- c) to feel empowered by mastering analytical tools and strategies that develop a habitus for monitoring the pragmatic/communicative, and indeed social effects of multimodal choices, and by ultimately discovering, demystifying and dismantling manipulative narrative practices.

More specifically, the paper will argue that a CMDA perspective is needed – one which has the potential for unveiling manipulation and distortion – when investigating:

- a) how US civil rights discourse is framed, multimodally constructed and (re)mediated for educational purposes;
- b) where and how, in attempts to (re)construct historical events, manipulation and distortion become manifest in (re)mediated discursive and/or pedagogical practices, and finally,
- c) which pedagogic approach and strategies might prove useful for raising critical awareness and fostering students’ empowerment.

2. CMDA as a pedagogic tool

The analysis of educational multimodal materials about US civil rights discourse potentially prone to oversimplifications and distortions provided the

basis for the present paper, whose main focus will be on arguing that a CMDA perspective is essential to achieve (at the very least) three pedagogic goals:

a) Firstly, to encourage a general propensity among teachers to avoid uncritical uses of the multimodal repertoires which, in the digital era, are the essence of young people's education; by multimodal repertoires I mean collections of videos, for example, or websites encapsulating different genres, in which the synergic use of various semiotic resources tends to facilitate the (re)mediation and understanding of historically and culturally crucial events. While the use of multimodal repertoires in the classroom has a powerful effect, there is a potential risk of oversimplifying or confusing reality and phantasy, as has been the case with Bessie Smith's story.

b) Therefore, the second relevant consideration is the need to sensitize teachers to adopt and foster a critical discourse analysis perspective, one capable of empowering students to investigate the potential for manipulation and distortion involved in attempts to (re)construct the past and construe identity performance in, and through, verbal and non-verbal language. In Fowler's words (1996: 4) "critical discourse analysis insists that all representation is mediated, moulded by the value-systems that are ingrained in the medium used for representation; it challenges common sense by pointing out that something could have been represented some other way with a very different significance". What critical discourse analysis can do, then, is "investigate which options are chosen in which institutional and social contexts, and why these choices should have been taken up, what interests are served by them, and what purposes achieved" (van Leeuwen 1996: 43).

c) Ultimately, within the wider framework of the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>), CMDA can have a fundamental impact on classroom practice and new literacy development, viz. in promoting "Quality education" (Goal 4), and in fostering "Peace, justice and strong institutions" (Goal 16). CMDA enables students to develop an awareness of language as social action and of language as ideology. Such awareness, it is to be hoped, will be adopted by empowered students in the fight against such rapidly spreading phenomena as hate speech and cancel culture.

2.1. Key concepts in (re)mediating narratives of identity

Before going into the analysis of the selected case-studies, the previous reference to the 'identity' of the civil rights hero/heroine needs to be contextualized and expanded upon. Identity is cognitively constructed, culturally situated and discursively performed in narrative as a "privileged locus for negotiation of identities", in the plural: indeed, identity is a cline, rather than an inventory, of socioculturally-shaped practices and, as Duszak (2002: 2-3) aptly synthesizes, "human social identities tend to be indeterminate, situational rather than permanent, dynamically and interactively constructed" through socio-psychological and discursive negotiation. 'Positioning' one's own and others' identities in discourse and society – in Fairclough's sense (2001: 233) whereby "differently positioned social actors 'see' and represent social life in different ways, different discourses" – is thus a function of "the continuous fine-tuning of one's identity performances in a culturally-defined, yet continuously evolving belief and value system" (Vasta and Caldas-Coulthard 2009: 2). As a result, the concept of identity needs to be framed against multiple and unstable 'timescales'

(Lemke 2008: 23), so that it is impossible to locate (our own as well as others') identity performances purely in the interactive present, the latter being constantly reformulated in the light of "retroactive recontextualization" (ibid.).

As discussed at length elsewhere (Vasta, Caldas-Coulthard 2009: 3),

Situated identity performance will then be both centripetal – instantiated through alignment and membership strategies for in-grouping within a given social community and/or for resisting change – and centrifugal – for affirming one's own individuality within that community, or for identifying 'strangers'. In both cases, doing identity work – in discourse as situated and mediated action (Scollon and Scollon 2003) – will inevitably bear the traces of the ideological tensions between competing worldviews and value systems (Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema eds., 2008; Cortese and Duszak eds., 2005) – a crucial issue in the language-and/as-power debate.

In the final analysis, "it is in narrative that people's individuality is expressed [...] because the purpose of narrating is precisely the creation of an autonomous, unique Self in discourse" (Johnstone 1996: 56).

At the interface of the here-and-now of storytelling and the fluidity of the surrounding sociocultural context in which identities are positioned and negotiated in an interactional collaborative effort, we find what Lemke (1988: 30; 32) calls Intertextual Thematic Formations (henceforth, ITFs) – akin to what Bamberg (2005) terms "pre-existent sociocultural forms of interpretation", or "master narratives". ITFs are common systems of semantic relations to speak of the same things in the same manner, which therefore represent "a community's recurrent saids and dones, [as well as] the semiotic resources for saying and doing" (Lemke 1988: 32). A sociocultural community's typical ways of meaning will be reproduced, resisted or challenged in its ways of saying, or rather its "linguaging" – one of the building blocks of identity performance –, a term that Cortese (2001: 199) derives from the domain of translating and interpreting.

Though instantiated in and through cultural scripts and related verbal and non-verbal languaging practices, ITFs (or master narratives), are not a simple inventory of fixed frames, scripts and schemata to talk about a given topic. Instead, as is the case with identity, they are embedded in a dynamic and inherently asymmetric sociocultural context. Thus, different discursive/epistemic communities will engage dialectically to construct heteroglossic relations of alliance and opposition (Lemke 1988: 40, 48 *et passim*) to impose 'new' (anti- or counter-) narratives (Bamberg 2004) over dominant (or master-) narratives, by shaping and creating alternative frames and contexts for interpretation in which the boundaries between truth and fake news may easily be blurred. At the same time, these dialectic engagements will inevitably reinforce and 'legitimize' power asymmetries, often sustained to enact social control (Vasta 2016) and "ideological common sense" – that is, in Fairclough's (1989: 84) definition, "common sense [which is naturalized and legitimized in order] to sustain unequal relations of power" and distort, marginalize or even silence minority 'voices'. In other words, when power asymmetries are instantiated in discourse, what happens is that powerful agents recontextualize and "favourably position" (Hodges 2008: 501) one representation over another, with the result that they manage to instil their own recontextualization with such value that it becomes "common sense" and produces a "master narrative". This raises fundamental questions as to who 'describes' or 'defines' identity and, ultimately, who decides what the 'norm' is, given that

different ‘descriptions’ may be produced from different ideological positions, while others may be silenced or distorted.

It is precisely in the critical discourse vein of unveiling hidden multimodal meaning-making practices, which can potentially distort historical ‘truths’, that the two educational projects under investigation in Sections 3 and 4 below were selected. When examining their macro-level structures, consideration was given to the main master narratives (chattel slavery; American inclusion; the “oeuvre civilisatrice”; white benevolence; white supremacy) identified by Clifton and Van De Mieroop in their (2016) seminal study of a selection of 26 former slaves’ interviews and narratives. These are included in the Roosevelt administration’s *Federal Writers Project* (FWP) and were published in 1972 to be used as the basis of many school programmes and TV documentaries. The interviews are now available from the Library of Congress (<https://lcn.loc.gov/2004565280>) under the heading *Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed people tell their stories*. However, the FWP poses several methodological problems: for instance, the transcripts are not *verbatim* and the interviews were ‘tidied up’ to make them more readable and to delete ‘racially sensitive’ material; the interviewers were mostly whites, so some interviewees preferred to provide an unrealistic vision of slavery designed to please the white interviewer (see Clifton and Van De Mieroop 2016: 15–38 *et passim*).

It comes as no surprise, then, that some educators see master narratives in US civil rights discourse as collectively serving to

offer a sanitized, noncontroversial, oversimplified view [...], which deprives students of a conceptual lens that would help them better comprehend the world around them (Alridge 2006: 680).

By the same token, according to Carlson (2003: 49), who investigated the monumentalizing of Rosa Parks within multicultural curricula and in popular culture, master narratives ultimately serve a conserving function. Anderson (2013: 117) even goes as far as to state that master narratives sustaining a unitary vision of racial harmony

trivializ[e] and decontextualiz[e] the historical impact of the Civil Rights Movement, [...and] discourag[e] analysis of persistent racial inequalities.

Be that as it may, endorsing Clifton and Van De Mieroop’s concern (2016: 25), not so much with “historical truthfulness, but [with] the way in which identities in talk are constructed in the storyworld of the interviews and in the here-and-now of the recorded interaction”, I have analysed US civil rights discourse through multimodal repertoires such as podcast series, educational websites, and so on. In so doing, I have identified some other interesting master narratives which go beyond the sameness-difference dimension at the forefront of Clifton and Van De Mieroop’s study, and which, for example, frame slavery through the eyes, and from the standpoint of former slaves’ young relatives who manage to lift the veil off their ancestors’ ambiguities and silences. This is done by remediating (Bolter and Grusin 1999), resemiotizing (Iedema 2003) and sustaining – in and through languaging – former slaves’ powerful, myth-like journey towards social redemption and liberation, an endeavour epitomized by the first educational project under examination here, to which my analysis will now turn.

3. Navigating identities: *The 1619 Project* – the fate of Black America

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2020, *The 1619 Project* is a podcast series celebrating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in America, when The White Lion reached the port of Point Comfort in Virginia. The series is hosted by the *New York Times Magazine*'s African American journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, who undertakes a journey into the legacy of her ancestors and is complemented by a set of "resources for afterschool education" developed in 2021 by the Education branch of the Pulitzer Centre (pulitzercenter.org/builder/lesson/1619-project-resources-afterschool-education). The journalistic enquiry is aimed at uncovering what today's African Americans' aged relatives hid about their experience as former slaves.

Podcasting certainly has a contribution to make as regards the construction of social identities, both individual and collective, as podcasts are a medium through which social agents belonging to a specific epistemic community negotiate their identity on the Web. CMDA requires dynamic constructs and measurement indices that reflect social and technological changes. Hence, when exploring the journey from 'traditional' to 'technology-driven' forms of public dissemination, it is vital to bear in mind that, in its relationships with other texts, the 'same' text has the dynamic potential to be remediated (Bolter and Grusin 1999) through a variety of digital practices: from print to digital texts; from oral to official written transcripts; and, more recently, from video and audio recordings to digital platforms for sharing them on social media. The 'same' text can thus be resemiotized (Iedema 2003) through changing contexts of use and shifting cultural and ideological perspectives.

More specifically, from a socio-cultural and socio-communicative point of view, when public-interest discourse like civil rights discourse is disseminated, it undergoes actual as well as potential content manipulation (e.g., omissions or additions), promoting and privileging a given worldview or master narrative. Indeed, in this respect, even *The 1619 Project* has drawn its share of critics, as well as admirers: as *The Atlantic* reports (www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619project/604093/), the Princeton historian Sean Wilentz and three other colleagues wrote a letter to the *New York Times* that refers to "matters of verifiable fact that cannot be described as interpretation or *framing*" and concludes that the project reflected "a displacement of historical understanding by ideology." The *New York Times* published the letter along with a detailed rebuttal from the editor (at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>). Yet, given the stature of the historians involved, this was a serious challenge to the credibility of *The 1619 Project*, one that makes it mandatory for teachers intending to use this, or any other material for that matter, to investigate (re)mediation and resemiotization practices.

The interview with former slave Fountain Hughes, recorded in 1949 and stored, in its oral and transcribed forms, in the US Library of Congress, offers illuminating insights into (re)mediation and resemiotization practices: in Episode 1 of *The 1619 Project*, two excerpts from the original interview, reproduced in Fig. 1, are cut-and-pasted together, post-edited and then embedded, as discussed below, in Nikole Hannah-Jones's narration (Fig. 2). Fountain Hughes' reconstruction of his and other slaves' identities encapsulates and instantiates Clifton and Van De Mieroop's (2016: 73ff) master narrative of THE-SLAVE-AS-CATTLE, as revealed in the transitivity structure (Halliday 1994) of the clause "They'd sell us

like they sell horses and cows and hogs”, by the discursual role of the participant “us” as Goal or, more precisely, Goods: slaves are only an economic asset, with no personal or ethical value. The dehumanization of group members, who are denied any individual identity, is realized discursively in what Bamberg (2011: 106) would refer to as “low-agency marking [which] assists in the construction of a victim role”, as is particularly evident in the clause “They’d put you up on a bench”; in a CDA perspective, this is to be contrasted with at least two ruled-out, alternative wordings: not just with “we were made to stand up on a bench”, but, even more significantly, with “we got up on a bench” – inconceivable under the circumstances, since it would have underscored an agency that was in reality denied to slaves.

As can be seen in Fig. 2, the (framed) original interview is not only re-edited and (re)mediated, but more importantly, repurposed (and thus ultimately resemiotized) to meet the Project’s educational aim of self-discovery by a new generation of African Americans. What was originally a fact-finding interview (or witness statement) recorded in 1949 is embedded in Hannah-Jones’s storyline as a parallel narrative. Once deprived of the original interviewer’s prompts and questions, it becomes one of the many voices within a heteroglossic documentary podcast. Through Fountain Hughes’ voice, the past intrudes into the present and the two narratives intertwine, as if Hughes were the reincarnation of Hannah-Jones’s own grandfather. What is silent here, with respect to the original unmediated interview from which Fountain Hughes’ testimony is derived, is the voice of the original white interviewer, which changes the context of narration and interaction, as well as the ideological values associated with it.

In other words, (re)mediation enables Hannah-Jones, and us together with her, to enter into simulated dialogue with Fountain Hughes as witnesses to a distant past that is recalled and actualized in the present, thereby producing a narrative effect called “the eternal present” (Gallacher 2017): this allows the immediacy of events to be felt independently of their temporal collocation and shifts the narrative focus from the interview’s original function and impact to Hannah-Jones’s personal journey into her identity, and those like her, through a rediscovery of their hidden past (see, again in Fig. 2, Hannah-Jones’s statements reading: “My own thinking started to shift” and “I understand for the first time why my dad was so proud of...”). As Nora (1989: 9) perceptively notes *à propos* of the controversial coexistence of memory and history,

Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it [...]. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. [...] Memory arises from the group that it bonds together [...]. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, and it aspires to be universal. Memory is rooted in the tangible, in space, gesture, image and object. History is only linked to continuity over time, to evolution and to the relationship between things.

It is memory’s legacy, not historical faithfulness, that obliterates the boundaries between past and present, remediates the past and ultimately forms the basis for secondary school educational resources (some examples of which are reproduced as Figs. 3 and 4) through which, for instance, students reflect on “how myths about history are perpetuated [...] and build timelines that illustrate how the fight for racial justice continues in [their] own lifetimes.”

(Re)mediation is a pedagogically crucial construct in the development of digital literacy, in that it presupposes the capability of thinking outside the box about the way texts are constructed and construed, a competence that is enhanced by the adoption of a critical discourse perspective that raises awareness of what is unsaid and of how the same thing might have been said differently under the same circumstances.

In this specific instance, it is important to grasp how the diverse timelines interwoven in Hannah-Jones's narrative can be teased out, managed and manipulated: the Question highlighted in the teaching activity reproduced in Fig. 4 asks the students "Why do you think it was important for the podcasters to include [Hughes'] voice?". Instead of steering their interpretation of the text in an ideological direction (see the section heading "Thomas Jefferson and the hypocrisies of the founding documents of the US"), it might have been more productive, in a critical discourse perspective empowering students to assess historical events, to ask them "How is Hughes' voice (re)mediated and repurposed in the context of Hannah-Jones's journey", so that they could reflect on the relevance of the silent past to the performance of her own identity and those of her kin in the present. The relevance of the past to the present performance of identity is also focal in the second educational project offered for analysis.

4. (Re)mediated and sanitized narratives: *BrainPOP* and the fostering of critical multimodal awareness

BrainPOP is an "animated educational site for kids, [aiming to] ignite a love for learning that leads to lifelong achievement [and providing] solutions to engage, excite, and challenge every child" (<https://www.brainpop.com/>). The teaching modules relevant to the history of Black America can be found within the Social Studies section, one of the seven subjects available for children aged 8 and over. Particularly interesting for the present purposes is the teaching module on the civil rights activist Fanny Lou Hamer, who promoted voter registration among Mississippi Delta blacks and co-founded the Freedom Democratic Party. At the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, she delivered probably the most commanding of her many powerful speeches, in which she describes the moment she was violently and unlawfully arrested and reconstructs the physical and emotional journey she and others had undertaken for the sake of enfranchisement, specifically their attempt to exercise a legally-recognized right to register as voters at a time full of impediments for Black people.

As emerges from Fig. 5, the first storytelling step is to establish her identity in a way that children find attractive: the now/then question takes children back in time while establishing Tim, a young person, as the narrator of the story. Subsequent steps in the narrator's account (see Fig. 6) describe three of Hamer's real and metaphorical journeys: the first for (failed) voter registration, which ended up, on the way back home, with police stopping Hamer and 17 other volunteers for travelling on a bus that was the wrong colour (yellow, the colour of schoolbuses); the second, a metaphorical journey from various forms of intimidation to the decision to leave home with her children, work with the SNCC (i.e. the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) and become an activist; and finally the journey that led from Hamer's imprisonment and beating for trying to eat in a whites-only restaurant to its climax, the Freedom Summer of 1964, when Hamer and other activists went to Atlantic City, the site of the Democratic National

Convention, to challenge the authority of the delegation from which Black people were excluded. As the narrator reports, “their protest caused an uproar, and Hamer was given a slot to speak on every news program”, as may be seen in the last, bottom-right frame in Fig. 6.

What Tim, the narrator, *should* have said, at this stage, is that it was the *same* speech being replayed on the news for days – something that becomes explicit only towards the end of the animation. No explanation is given to the children watching as to why the testimony was replayed; thus, on the one hand, Hamer’s legendary status is reinforced, but at the very same time the real reason behind what went down in history as the “official”, sanitized narrative is covered up. Ultimately, the real reason lies in the media reaction against President Johnson’s botched efforts to censor Hamer by calling an impromptu news conference in order to make it impossible for the national television networks to cover her testimony live, as reported in *The Washington Post*’s account on the 100th anniversary of her birth (www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/10/06/civil-rights-crusader-fannie-lou-hamer-defied-men-and-presidents-who-tried-to-silence-her).

Leaving the political controversy aside, what is beyond any doubt is Hamer’s undisputed talent as a public speaker and singer:

She was something to watch. Here was this badly educated, wonderful woman who was able to communicate at a most comfortable level with people who were infinitely more educated than she, more traveled than she.... Everybody felt special about Mrs. Hamer. Everybody had that connection with her, and she obviously gave it back to you. She gave it to you and she got it right back. It was that kind of love connection that was her trademark (Mills 1993: 178).

Fanny Lou Hamer showed a rare capacity for grassroots interaction, and in the *BrainPOP* animation she is said to “often break into song to motivate crowds”.

Because of space constraints, only a couple of examples from *BrainPOP*’s mediated narrative and classroom activities can briefly be discussed here in order to show the usefulness of a CMDA-informed approach when teaching young children about the importance of fact-checking and of examining multimodal affordances when making sense of ideologically complex texts. Indeed, as Fig. 7 shows, a key frame in the animation relates to the failed efforts of Hamer and 17 other volunteers to register as voters at the Sunflower County courthouse. Confronting the would-be black registrees is a hostile crowd of white men and women, whose hostility is underscored in the movie by the closed-caption words “an angry crowd”, their animated fist-waving, and booing in the soundtrack.

A cartoon genre is eminently suitable for primary school children, who need constant intersemiotic support and reinforcement. So, embellishments in visual reconstructions are legitimized and motivated by such educational concerns as clarity and memorability; it therefore comes as no surprise that the cartoon faithfully reproduces the shapes and colours of the real courthouse but adds the name “Sunflower County” on the façade, which does not appear on the real building. While the addition of this fake detail is justifiable, the same does not hold true for the next example, which requires fact-checking to be carried out by comparing and contrasting *BrainPOP*’s (re)mediated meta-narrative of this crucial event with Hamer’s original account of the episode. This was conveyed in one of her most famous speeches, *We’re on Our Way*, delivered in early September 1964 at the nearby Negro Baptist School, also in Indianola. In the very first part of her speech, where she recalls the failed registration attempt, no mention is made of a

crowd, or of Whites *versus* Blacks confrontation. Instead, her speech confirms that there were “eighteen of us”, but that, on a day that she says she *never will forget*, she had to face up to *policemens with guns [...] They was standing around*:

When we got here to Indianola, to the courthouse, that was the day *I saw more policemens with guns than I'd ever seen in my life at one time. They was standing around* and I never will forget that day. [...] We stayed in the registrar's office – I'm not sure how long because it wasn't but two allowed in the room at the same time. After we got out from the registrar's office, I was one of the first persons to complete, as far as I knew how to complete, on my registration form. And I went and got back on the bus (<https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/hamer-were-on-our-way-speech-text/>, my emphasis).

By contrast, in the narrator's (re)mediated, multimodal account of this event (see Fig. 8), the first of the three frames visualizes the fist-waving crowd, while the voiceover “anticipates”, so to speak, the identity of the other participants that the crowd is to meet, but that is visually represented only in the second frame. This is what, in Kress and van Leeuwen's visual semiotics (1996: 181), is called a *non-transactive, disconnected reactional process*, in which there is only a Reactor looking at something or someone, called Phenomenon, left outside the picture frame. The Phenomenon is the 18 volunteers; what is more, the participants in the two disconnected frames are positioned in opposite (right vs. left) portions of the screen and thus appear to represent spatially contiguous, logically complementary realities. In the children's minds, this is triggered as a cause-effect script, as confirmed in the immediately following shot (see Fig. 8, third frame). In short, from a multimodal standpoint, this (re)mediated narrative constructs and construes the original historical event as an act of intimidation, whereas, in Hamer's own words, hers is a rather different perception of where the threat is coming from. To put it differently, there is an evident mismatch between the metanarrative level (the narrator's reported speech) and the authentic narrative level (Hamer's free direct speech), at the expense of truthfulness and adherence to reality.

The following example shows how the systematic application of CMDA as a pedagogic tool to arouse children's multimodal awareness may be crucial in such cases. The listening exercise reproduced in Fig. 9 asks pupils to decide what the function of Hamer's singing to the crowd “during speeches” was. I want to suggest that this is a tricky question because, in order to choose the only ‘correct’ answer (letter C, “inspire”), children need to be able to exclude one of the intended distractors (i.e., letter A, “soothe”) by distinguishing between the two references made in the *BrainPOP*'s movie script to Hamer's singing.

The first mention is in relation to *reporting a single, specific event* (i.e., the failed attempt to register, followed by the registrees being arrested and getting so disheartened that Hamer started singing to *soothe* them):

On the way home, their bus was stopped by the police; they said its yellow color was illegal. Hamer *sang to keep the group's spirits up* until they were let go.

The second textual reference in *BrainPOP* to Hamer's singing (the one that should lead to the right answer, *inspire*) occurs in the context of a more *general statement about Hamer's idiosyncratic habit* of singing to motivate crowds – a possible cue to answer C being the lexico-grammatical cohesion between Question and Answer, realized by the repetition of “motivate the crowd”/“motivate crowds”:

She knew what poor black families endured because she'd lived it! That first-hand experience made her a powerful speaker: she would *often break into song to motivate crowds*. Before long she was as well known for her singing voice as her activism.

Despite this, the Question remains tricky, not only because it takes for granted that children should be able to process two different temporal frames and timelines and therefore distinguish between a specific event and a general habit. The possible confusion is also caused by the grammatical construction of the quiz Question, where the Circumstance of Location (“During speeches”) is foregrounded as a marked Theme. Selecting the correct answer relies primarily on the recognition that the Circumstantial element (“On the way home”) in the first mention of Hamer’s singing (Answer 1, Fig. 9) does not match the Circumstantial element in the Question. The confusion in the children’s minds might also have derived from the greater affective impact, as well as psychological salience and emotional resonance that the adverse events in Hamer’s life, recounted by the narrator, produce. These events, especially when narrated in the showing mode, are more likely to be retained in children’s memory than the positive information conveyed in the telling mode, as emerges from several psychological studies (e.g., those collected in Biocca (1991), viz. Lang’s, on televised political advertising) on emotion and memory responses.

Incidentally, *BrainPOP* maintains that “on the way home [i.e., after the failed registration attempt], Hamer sang to keep the group’s spirits up”. For the sake of truth, it must be said that the singing took place *before* rather than *after* the attempt at registration, as testified in a video interview entitled *Fannie Lou Hamer and the Power of Song* (YouTube: https://youtu.be/M78izlHM_mw) with Bob Moses, another civil rights icon and co-founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, who was on the bus with Hamer on that occasion. The interview also reveals, in passing, that Hamer sang to “drive away fear”, i.e., to soothe the volunteers.

A remedial strategy, especially with older children, that a test designer trained in CMDA might have deployed to avoid confusion is the use of “would often sing”, instead of “often sang”, in the Question, so as to draw the children’s attention to the *habitual nature* of the information sought, rather than to the emotional impact (and hence greater memorability) of the images (also see Vasta and Trevisan 2017; Vasta 2020). Besides, had the question focused more on the holistic functions of singing in the cultural context of the journey *towards* freedom (soothing, inspiring, allaying fears), rather than on the stereotyped representation of the activist as an inspiring leader, it would have been not only more truthful, but also more consistent with the exploration of the master narrative of the activist performing her individual identity according to circumstances, e.g. to recruit followers to her cause, foster group cohesion, or fight against the “enemy-within” the Civil Rights movement, as the case may have been. Finally, greater attention to fact-checking would have been consistent with encouraging a capacity among young children to understand what activism is, and to make critical judgements about the characteristics and merits of specific activist campaigns, including violent ones by other Civil Rights leaders.

In short, however useful as an educational tool for raising children’s civic awareness of the journey towards obtaining civil rights, *BrainPop* presents areas for improvement in keeping with a pedagogic concern with the veracity of the information presented and the effort to avoid confusion, distortions or ideological bias.

5. Conclusion

The fundamental impact of CMDA on pedagogy and digital literacy development consists, as I hope I have been able to show, in developing an awareness among teachers, passed on to their students, of language as social action and language as ideology operating in a precise context of situation and context of culture. Both educational projects briefly analysed here strongly suggest the need for teachers to apply CMDA principles to:

a) fact-check against (re)mediated texts, by diachronically retracing the original sources;

b) scrutinize the visual-verbal interface (i.e., multimodal affordances) of ideologically complex texts and investigate their resemiotization practices, especially when different narrative levels and genres are reshuffled;

c) be cautious about devising quizzes, especially those involving historical reconstructions of events.

By the same token, if the above discussion has achieved its intended purpose, the usefulness of CMDA has emerged as a pedagogic tool to get learners to:

a) think critically (especially) about (multimodal) texts as a system of options, wherein what is unsaid/not shown, or said/shown differently is just as important, if not even more important, than what is made explicit;

b) acquire a habitus for monitoring the pragmatic effects of multimodal choices and develop reusable metalinguistic competences, which empower students to produce their own reasoned, critical analysis of a(ny) text;

c) develop an awareness of (re)mediation and resemiotization practices, both so pervasive in the digital era, and the manipulative strategies which, intentionally or not, produce “counter-”/“anti-narratives” and/or fake news. These can be unveiled by enacting explicit metaknowledge of multimodal meaning-making strategies (e.g. through fact-checking against textual evidence).

Such critical awareness and metalinguistic competences are the prerequisite for discovering, demystifying and dismantling inaccurate, historically discordant or intentionally manipulative narrative practices. In this sense, the two pedagogic projects under examination can be said to represent best practices in fostering critical re-readings of the past, a soft skill which is all the more crucial in a society where such dangerous phenomena as “cancel culture” threaten to impose hegemonic, biased and oversimplified frames for interpreting the world and establishing interpersonal bonds.

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Appendix



Voices from the Days of Slavery: Stories, Songs and Memories –Fountain Hughes (transcript)

LC ANNOUNCEMENT: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

FOUNTAIN HUGHES (VO): My name is Fountain Hughes. I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. My grandfather belonged to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather was a hundred and fifteen years old when he died. And now I am one hundred and one year old.

AFC ANNOUNCEMENT: Welcome to the American Folklife Center's podcast series, "Voices from the Days of Slavery: Stories, Songs and Memories." Drawn from the unique collections of the Center's Archive, this series presents first-person accounts of African Americans whose experiences spanned the last years of slavery. They were recorded during the 1930's and 1940's, most often for the large-scale documentation projects sponsored by New Deal agencies during and after the Great Depression. Many of these recordings survive only as fragments and the audio quality occasionally suffers because of the deterioration of the original recorded media. Nevertheless, the compelling voices of these individuals transport the listener to a defining period in this country's history. In this 1949 interview, conducted in Baltimore, Maryland, Mr. Fountain Hughes recounts his memories of slavery times to Hermond Norwood of the Library of Congress.

[omissis... then at 10' 16"]

It was what they call... we were slaves. We belonged to people. They'd sell us like they sell horses and cows and hogs and all like that. Have an auction bench, and they'd put you on... up on the bench and bid on you just same as you bidding on cattle, you know.

HERMOND NORWOOD: Was that in Charlotte that you were a slave?

Fig. 1. Fountain Hughes' original interview tapescript
(https://www.loc.gov/podcasts/slavenarratives/transcripts/slavery_hughes.pdf)

Nikole Hannah-Jones: But it wasn't until I really started researching and reading and thinking about this project that my own thinking started to shift, that I realized my dad understood things that I never knew. I now understand for the first time why my dad was so proud to fly that flag.

Fountain Hughes: My name is Fountain Hughes. I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. My grandfather belonged to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather was 115 years old when he died, and now I am 101-year-old. Now in my boy days, we were slaves. We belonged to people. They'd sell us like they sell horses and cows and hogs and all like that, have an auction bench. Put you up on the bench and bid on you the same as you're bidding on cattle, you know

Nikole Hannah-Jones: So, you kind of have to put yourself in the scene. It is June of 1776, and Thomas Jefferson, at the very young age of 33 years old, has been tasked with drafting the document that is going to declare to the world why the British North American colonies, the 13 colonies, want to break off from the British Empire. He goes to Philadelphia and rents two rooms on the edge of town along the river and sits down to draft what we all know now as the Declaration of Independence.

Fig. 2. The (framed) original interview (re)mediated in Nikole-Hanna Jones's narrative (*The 1619 Project*, Episode 1)



<p>LESSON PLAN</p> <p>SEPTEMBER 29, 2021</p> <p><i>The 1619 Project</i> Resources for Afterschool Education</p> <p>Country: UNITED STATES</p> <p>Grades: ALL GRADES ELEMENTARY MIDDLE SCHOOL HIGH SCHOOL</p> <p>Author:</p>  <p>Pulitzer Center Education LESSON BUILDER USER</p>	<p>1. Introducing <i>The 1619 Project</i> Students analyze and discuss the main ideas of <i>The 1619 Project</i> after watching a video in which Nikole Hannah-Jones introduces the project. They then explore how the legacy of slavery can be seen in modern life through a pair activity, and reflect on themes and issues related to Black history they want to know more about.</p> <p>2. The Idea of America: Celebrating Black Americans' Contributions to Democracy Students evaluate how the values stated in the Declaration of Independence have manifested in U.S. society, and examine what it would mean to reframe U.S. history by considering 1619 the country's founding date. Students read and discuss excerpts from Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones's introductory essay to <i>The 1619 Project</i>.</p> <p>3. Visualizing the Legacy of Slavery: Gallery Walk and Quote Museum Students will learn about the ways in which slavery's legacy persists in U.S. systems and society by examining images and text in an engaging gallery walk activity. They will also practice visually communicating tone and information to others by creating a group "quote museum."</p> <p>4. Fact-sorting Challenge: Examining Common Myths About U.S. Slavery Students learn about common inaccuracies in how slavery is taught and then strengthen their own knowledge and media literacy skills by working together to distinguish myths from facts, using credible sources.</p> <p>5. Analyzing and Constructing Timelines of Racial (In)justice Students reflect on how myths about history are perpetuated, analyze a timeline of racial (in)justice from <i>The 1619 Project</i>, and collaborate to build timelines that illustrate how the fight for racial justice continues in their own lifetimes.</p>
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Fig. 3. Exploiting (re)mediation/resemiotization in the classroom (<https://pulitzercenter.org/builder/lesson/1619-project-resources-afterschool-education>)

10:35-20:25	Thomas Jefferson and the hypocrisies of the founding documents of the U.S.	<p>In what ways does the podcast suggest the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were hypocritical when written? Do you agree?</p> <p>What is some evidence that Thomas Jefferson and some of the other founders of the country were aware of this hypocrisy?</p> <p>This section is bookmarked by the reflection of an elderly Black gentleman whose grandfather was enslaved by Jefferson. Why do you think it was important to the podcasters to include his voice?</p>
20:25- 25:55	Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War	What did Abraham Lincoln and James Mitchell want and expect Black people in America to do once they were freed?

Fig. 4. Activities for afterschool educators that “guide students in the contributions of Black Americans to democracy and exploring the genius of Black innovators and artists” (<https://1619education.org/builder/lesson/1619-podcast-listening-guide>)



Transcript: Tim reading Maegan’s letter

“Dear Tim and Moby, who was Fannie Lou Hamer? From Megan.

Well, on August 22nd 1964 a lot of Americans were asking that same question. That night they turned on the TV to see Hamer on every news program. She looked like a nice middle-aged lady, somebody’s mom or your neighbour, but in her home state of Mississippi she was well known as a fierce voting rights advocate.”

Fig. 5. The narrator’s mediated narrative on Fanny Lou Hamer’s identities



Fig. 6. The official, “sanitized” narrative

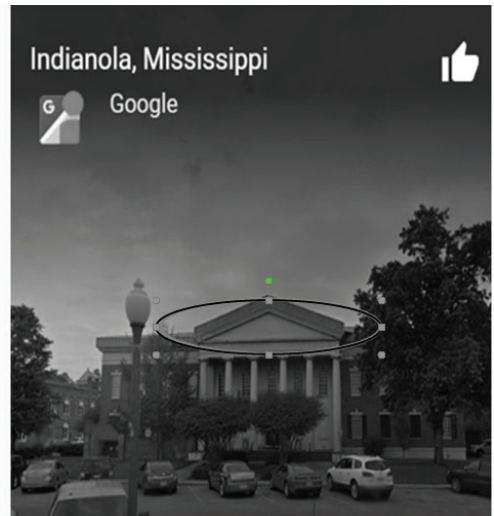


Fig. 7. Fact-checking: justified fake verbo-visual detail



Fig. 8. Fact-checking: unjustified fake report

The image shows a screenshot of a BrainPOP quiz interface. At the top, the BrainPOP logo is on the left, and navigation links for 'Explore Subjects', 'Schools & Districts', and 'Families' are in the center. On the right, there are links for 'Contact Sales', 'Enter Code', and a 'Log In' button. Below the navigation bar, the user's name 'Fannie Lou Hamer' is displayed on both sides of a central arrow. The main content area is titled 'Quiz! Fannie Lou Hamer' and features a cartoon illustration of Fannie Lou Hamer speaking into a microphone. To the right of the illustration, a question is displayed: '6 During speeches, Fannie Lou Hamer often sang to _____ the crowd.' Below the question are four multiple-choice options: 'A Soothe', 'B Distract', 'C Inspire', and 'D Silence'. Each option is enclosed in a rectangular box with a small circular icon on the right side. At the bottom of the quiz area, there are two buttons: 'Review' and 'Graded'.

Fig. 9. (Re)mediation and resemiotisation in classroom activities