Costume History Research Through a Critical Lens

Christina Norton

Heartland Community College

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Hello, I'm Christina Norton from Heartland Community College, and I am here to showcase for you a lesson plan I developed for students doing costume history research, which I've done for a couple different theatre classes who were exploring costume design.

It focuses on how to research historical costume; costume design is a creative process and the end goal isn't always to perfectly recreate a historical costume, but if one is going to draw inspiration from a historical period, one should be able to identify accurate examples from that period, and be aware of the social context of the historical costume and therefore the message it will send to the audience.

(Images in the backgrounds of these slides, unless otherwise noted, are images of vintage textiles and clothing; most are from the public domain, and those that are not have attribution and link to the source where possible.)

The context of this lesson plan is that it's a workshop for upper level undergraduate or graduate theatre classes. I think it's more appropriate for this level because those students will have more of a grounding in theatre basics and familiarity with conventions than a Theatre 101 student could be assumed to have.

I have two caveats for this less plan:

Caveat 1: I have never taught this lesson exactly as it is presented to you today, because my opportunities to teach theatre classes have changed. I have taught different parts of this lesson in different classes, but never this exact combination.

Caveat 2: The sustained scrutiny that I've put this plan under has revealed to me a few things that I would probably change when and if I get the chance to teach it again, and I'll address those changes as I go through it.

(Also, the image on this slide isn't linked because I'm a dipstick who forgot the note the URL and now I can't find it again. I am a terrible citation role model. Sorry V&A.)

Materials

- Basic computer lab setup – instructor computer with projector, individual computers for students
- Period-specific shows/plays to use as examples
- Collection of resources for them to search (in a research guide, potentially)
- Worksheet also

Learning Outcomes

- Distinguish between primary and secondary sources
  - Information Creation as a Process – KP2
- Search strategies for locating primary source images
  - Searching as Strategic Exploration – KP2, KP5
- Critical evaluation of image resources and images
  - Authority is Constructed and Contextual – KP2, D3
  - Information Creation as a Process – KP8

Materials for this lesson include a basic computer lab. It also requires period-specific show(s) to use as examples, a compiled list of image resources to get them started, plus a worksheet to collect their thoughts on searching.

Objectives for the session are:

Distinguish between primary and secondary sources – Info Creation as a Process

KP2: "assess the fit between an information product's creation process and a particular information need"

Search strategies for locating primary source images – Searching as Strategic Exploration

KP2: "identify interested parties…who might produce information about a topic and then determine how to access that information"

KP5: "design and refine needs and search strategies as necessary, based on search results"

Critical evaluation of image resources and images – Authority is Constructed, Contextual, Info Creation as a Process

KP2: "use research tools and indicators of authority to determine the credibility of sources"

D3: "develop awareness of the importance of…a skeptical stance"

KP8: "develop, in their own creation processes, an understanding that their choices impact the purposes for which the information product will be used and the message it conveys"

I originally envisioned this lesson and submitted it as a plan for a 75-minute session, but the more I scrutinize it the more I think I would prefer to have it as three separate sessions spread out over the course of a week or two. One, because it's a lot, I just had a lot of learning outcomes on that last slide. And two, because some of the topics I would tackle with the students would go better, I think, if I had more time to establish a relationship and a rapport with the students.

Introductory Exercise

First off, I start with an introductory exercise. I'll just put you through the same exercise, because it's easier to show than to explain.

Who has watched Stranger Things?

Stranger Things is a Netflix series set in Indiana in 1984. This is an image of some of the characters in costume. Do you think these costumes accurately reflect the time period of 1984?

How do you know?

How have you developed your idea of what 1984 looked like?

Primary and Secondary Sources

Stranger Things - Costume Design by Kimberly Adams

After discussing the students' conceptions of the time period and how it was formed, I introduce them to the process of professional costume designers – an extensive article about the Stranger Things costume design is linked here. It shows that the designer used a variety of primary sources from the time period in question to gather her inspiration. (Linked to "Stranger Things costume design" text)

I use Stranger Things because it's still pretty popular right now, but there's always a period piece people are talking about to use instead – Mad Men, Downton Abbey, the 2nd Mamma Mia movie – and there are always, always interviews with the costume designers somewhere, usually on fashion sites. I have never failed to find one.
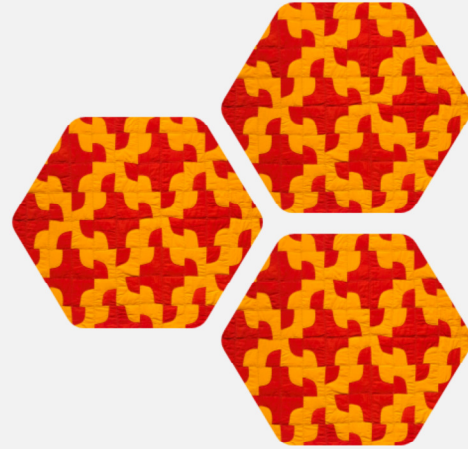
I use this as an opportunity to discuss with them the difference between primary and secondary sources. They may have been introduced to this concept in other classes, but the classification differs according to discipline. I have a little infographic I like to show them to help distinguish between primary and secondary sources in terms of costume imagery, rather than just assume all images are primary sources (linked to "Primary and Secondary Sources" text)

Now it's time to think-pair-share!!!
Depending on class size, split them into groups and assign characters from an example play – preferably also with a strong period component - to each group. Providing a basic description of the character is also useful if they're not familiar with it. I would try to find a play with characters who differ from each other in terms of race, class, and/or gender. For instance, if you use You Can't Take It With You, it has Alice, a well-off young woman working in an office; Wilbur, a male tax investigator for the IRS; and Rheba, a domestic worker who works for Alice's family. Productions may vary, but Alice is generally portrayed as white, and Rheba is generally portrayed as Black.

They'll spend time searching for images representing their characters in these groups
But first, they will brainstorm keywords for their characters.
Because searching for the character name and play title might bring up images of other productions, but not images from the time period, it's a slightly different kind of brainstorming than they may be used to. They have to think about their characters as people in context – what they do, who they are, where they live – because that's who they're going to find pictures of. They think on it, they pair up with someone with either the same character or a different one, depending on mood, honestly, and then hear as a class from at least one person for each character.

Search Time!!!

Using keywords developed during last section/session, search for images they could use to gather costuming information for their characters.

What I/You Provide

- A curated list of sources to start with – museum sites, digital collections, databases or books from the catalog if your collection supports it
- During search time, individual check-ins with students to see how those sources work out and to help brainstorm others based on their character

What They End Up with

- Hopefully, images that can help them form ideas of what their characters would wear
- A completed worksheet showing their thinking with regard to developing their strategy
  - I use questions adapted from "Metacognitive Search Strategies" by Heather Beirne in the ACRL Sandbox

After brainstorming their search terms, I'd like to give them workshop time to actually search. They can do this individually or consulting with as many other classmates as they like. It would be a lengthy time – in my original outline, it was 20 minutes, but I'd do more if I ended up doing it as multiple sessions, or to search outside of class and report back in the next session. I usually have them start searching in a list of general image sources – the Library of Congress, NYPL Digital Collections, the Smithsonian, etc. If I'm at an institution with a print or electronic collection that includes appropriate image sources, like ArtSTOR, I'd include those too. But there are a lot of general online sources that are useful.

A bit after they get started, maybe 5-10 minutes, I'd start going around the room and consulting with each student about how it's going, what's going well, if they're experiencing difficulties, etc. Since characters will vary widely, students in each group will have different stumbling blocks and different avenues to pursue, so this is important.

As they search they'll complete a worksheet provided by me/the instructor, helping them reflect on the choices they're making and how the search is turning out. I like to use adaptations of the metacognitive search strategies activity by Heather Beirne that's in the ACRL Sandbox. They're meant to have answers to these questions by the end of free searching, as well as hopefully a few images that seem useful. (Worksheet is available on CARLI website.)

Post-Search Discussion

Post-search discussion follows two main tracks:

Search Mechanics

- Where they found images
- What tools those sources (websites, databases, etc.) provided to help them locate images
  - Menus, collections, filters, thesauri, etc.
- Keyword choices and modifications
- Evaluating images for accuracy in terms of date, place, content

Critical Resource Evaluation

- Which people were harder to find images of?
- Who created and collected these images?
- How does the un/availability of certain images reflect historical bias?
- How will they consider their own biases when searching for and selecting images?

After they search and complete their worksheets, I use the questions on the worksheet as a jumping-off point for discussion. I ask for volunteers to share their answers to questions concerning search mechanics – where they searched, what tools those sources had available to aid searching, how their keywords worked out, and so forth. Basically just a discussion to illuminate how it went for them as a class, not just individually, so they can learn from each other. I like to try and guide the conversation to also include a discussion of evaluating sources, such as looking for metadata to confirm the time period of the source, where it came from, and things like that, to help them evaluate for basic accuracy of representation.

Then I would swing the conversation to a more critical stance. Ask who had a hard time finding images, and why. Usually marginalized groups are harder to find accurate, non-stereotypical images of. This has been true for all examples that I have tried. The descriptions for some older images often contain keywords that are currently considered outdated and even offensive. I'd ask the questions you see here to try and explore historical bias with them in a civil conversation, offering them the option to write their answers on the back of their worksheets instead of speaking if that was more comfortable.

And I would definitely, if using the Stranger Things example, revisit the inspiration boards from the costume designer to show the lack of Black people in her group images, to see that it's easy to not think about these things, but important to consider.

The assessment for this is largely formative. I try to pay attention to their contributions to the group discussion to see if they show comprehension of the concepts, and adjust as we go if they don't. But, of course, since not everybody can or will speak up in class, I'd also collect the worksheets to see their individual answers. In classes where it seems like a lot of people struggled to answer a question or had questionable answers to something, I follow up with them via email, or create something like a tutorial or an explainer to send to the instructor to share out.

If I achieved my dream of having this be a multi-session lesson, or even an embedded one, I'd have them do a vision board with links to sources, like a visual annotated bibliography, and have them briefly explain their search process and evaluation for each one. This would probably necessitate them keeping a research log so they could remember how they found each one, and criteria for how many they could take from each place, but in dreamland I have lots of time to figure that out.
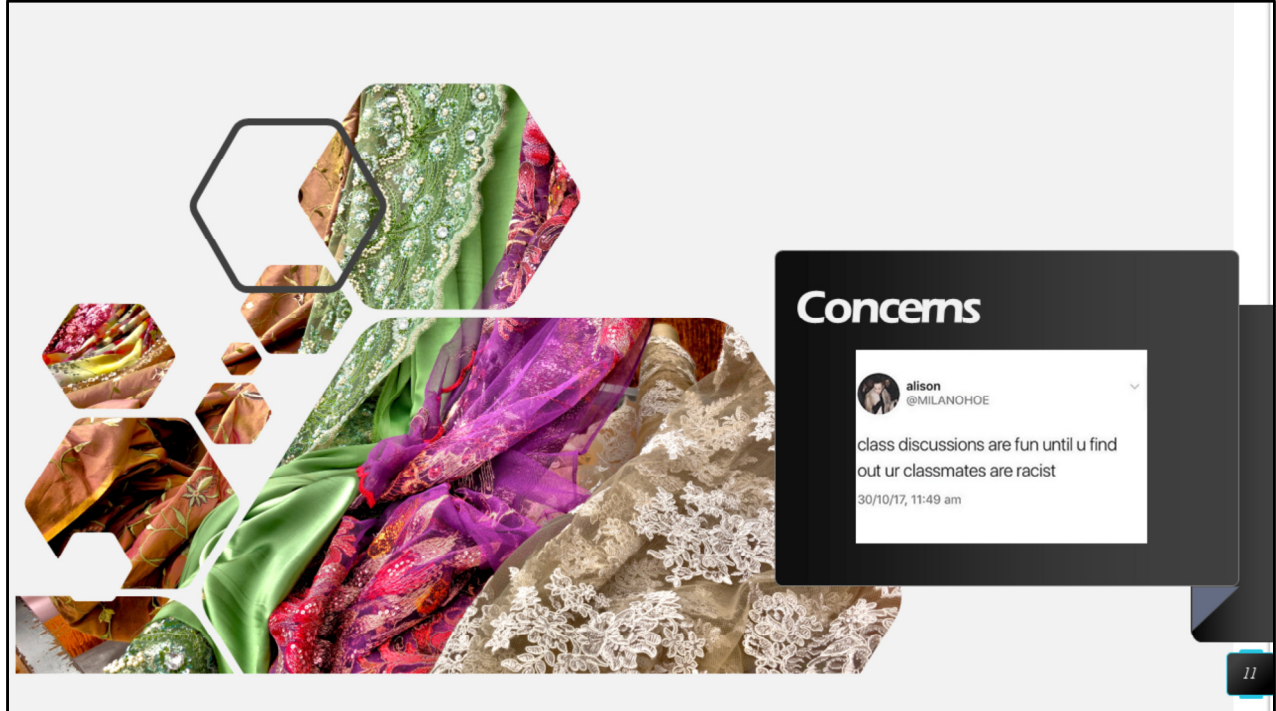
I said I haven't taught this lesson as is, but I have taught parts of it and similar lessons in other contexts, and I do have some concerns about it based on those experiences, outside of just having enough time to cover it all. Mainly, having conversations about sensitive subjects like race, gender, class, and representation in a one-shot feels like opening a door, throwing in a live hornet's nest, and then shutting the door and running away. I've done it and it's tense to have people grapple with these things in a group setting, where the racists show themselves and students who belong to marginalized groups have to re-experience their marginalization, to some extent. So I would want to have a multi-session lesson with the students not only to move more slowly on learning concepts, but also in order to hopefully establish a relationship with them, so that discussion can come from a place of trust. But I honestly don't know exactly what it would take to make that trust and respectfulness achievable, and I sometimes regret trying to tackle things like historical bias in the meantime.
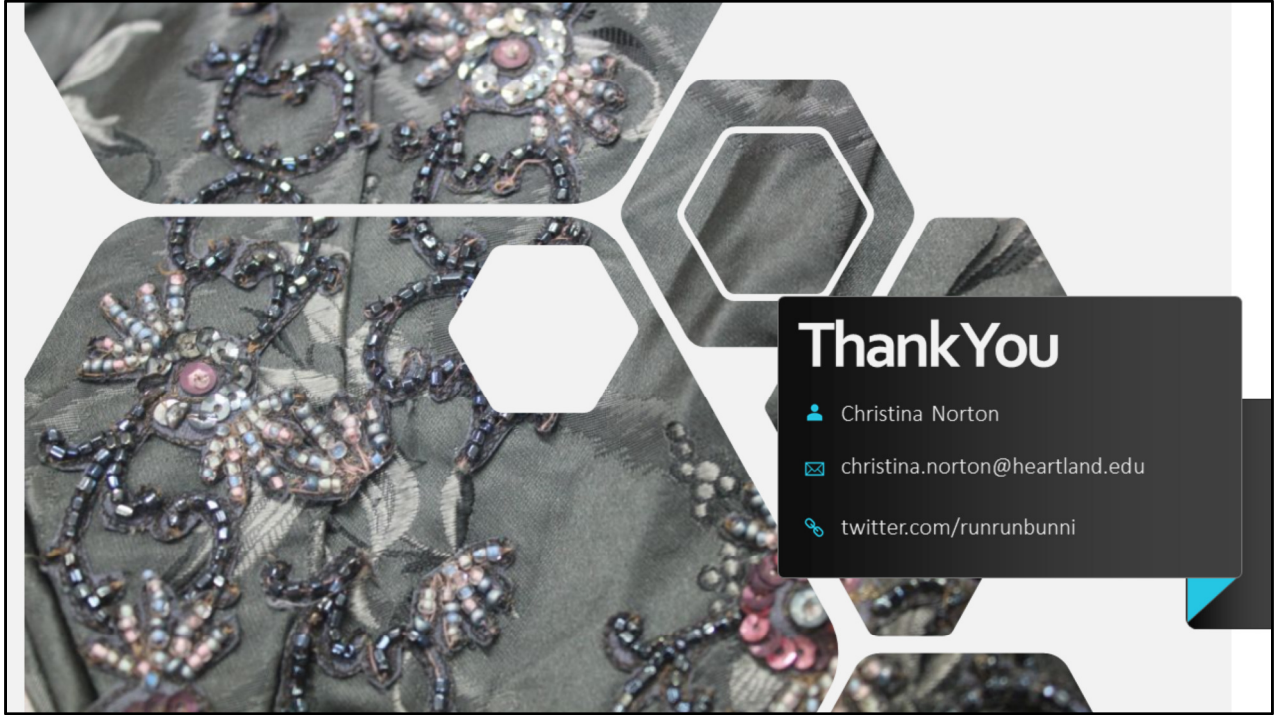
That's all I have, hopefully I've finished this on time and can take any questions anybody has, thank you so much for coming.