



10-1-2011

# Vampires, Werewolves, and Other Humans: Learning from Participatory Responses to the Representation of Native Americans in Twilight

Joanna L. Siegel  
*University of Pennsylvania*

---

Vampires, Werewolves, and Other Humans: Learning from Participatory Responses to the Representation of Native Americans in Twilight

# Vampires, Werewolves, and Other Humans: Learning from Participatory Responses to the Representation of Native Americans in *Twilight*

Joanna Luz Siegel

*University of Pennsylvania*

Over the last decade, Stephenie Meyer's immensely popular *Twilight* franchise—a series of fantasy novels (Meyer, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008) and their film adaptations (Godfrey, Mooradian, & Hardwicke, 2008; Godfrey, Morgan, & Weitz, 2009; Godfrey, Rosenfelt, & Slade, 2010)—has spurred a diverse and complex *participatory culture* (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, 2010) of online commentary from fans and critics alike. This paper will focus on a subset of participatory voices that take discursive stances regarding *Twilight's* representation of members of the Quileute Nation, an American Indian tribe in Northwest Washington. Fictional Quileute characters feature centrally in the plotline and mythos of *Twilight*, and people's reactions to these representations, engaging issues of culture, ethnicity, class and gender, have transformed the cultural meaning of the *Twilight* franchise; these participants have also inserted *Twilight* into an ongoing debate about representations of Native Americans in the media. Learning from this locus of discursive activity, we may usefully re-orient the field of Critical Media Literacy Education (cf. Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Kellner & Share, 2005) around the concepts of *participation* and *reflexivity* as more precise and effective than mere *criticality* in generating a transformative approach to Media Literacy Education.

## Creation Myths

"Do you know any of our old stories, about where we came from—the Quileutes, I mean?" he began.

"Not really," I admitted.

"Well, there are lots of legends, some of them claiming to date back to the Flood—supposedly, the ancient Quileutes tied their canoes to the tops of the tallest trees on the mountain to survive like Noah and the ark." He smiled, to show me how little stock he put in the histories. "Another legend claims that we descended from wolves—and that the wolves are our brothers still. It's against tribal law to kill them.

"Then there are the stories about the cold ones." His voice dropped a little lower.

"The cold ones?" I asked, not faking my intrigue now.

(Meyer, 2005, p. 124)

The *Twilight*<sup>1</sup> series, a four-volume collection of young adult novels by first-time author Stephenie Meyer, has taken on its own mythical status in American popular culture. It has demonstrated an almost supernatural power to attract media attention, generate an ever-expanding universe of dedicated fandom (and impassioned critique), and propel otherwise unknown individuals (Meyer included) into the highest ranks of celebrity. Its own origin story, now well publicized, begins with a dream Meyer had in 2003:

In my dream, the basics of which would become the meadow scene in chapter 13, I can see a young woman in the embrace of a very handsome young man, in a beautiful meadow surrounded by forest, and somehow I know that he is a vampire. In the dream there is a powerful attraction between the two. (Blasingame, 2006)

This “powerful attraction,” which was eventually written into a star-crossed love connection between Bella Swan, a pretty but otherwise unremarkable teenage (human) girl, and Edward Cullen, a vampire who lives with a coven that has sworn off of human blood for its sustenance.

Layered throughout the arc of the Bella-Edward love story is the “historic” tension between the vampires of Forks, Washington (a real town) and the werewolves of nearby LaPush, site of the Quileute Indian Reservation (also real). In a public interview at Arizona State University, Meyer told her audience of students, faculty, English teachers, aspiring writers and young children:

I did quite a bit of research on the Quileutes, the nation that Jacob and Billy belong to. All of the legends in the books are part of their tradition, the werewolves and so on. The only legend that is not a part of the Quileute tradition is the part I devised specifically to fit the Cullens. (Interview with Stephenie Meyer, 2006)

But representatives of the Quileute Nation have clearly articulated that, although wolves are a part of traditional mythology, there is no mention of werewolves or wolf-based supernatural creatures in Quileute lore (Dickerson, 2009). Humans are thought to have been transformed *from* wolves into their current form (as mentioned briefly in the first book and film, cited in the epigraph of this paper), rather than the opposite, as the *Twilight* books and movies depict in much greater detail and at greater length: Quileute boys “phasing” from their muscled (usually shirtless) human bodies into computer-generated, supersized werewolves.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, Chris Morganroth III, a (real-life) Quileute master storyteller in LaPush, empathizes with Meyer’s project:

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will use the terms *Twilight*, the *Twilight Saga*, and the *Saga* interchangeably to refer to the overall franchise as a pop cultural unit. Technically, the first novel is titled *Twilight* and each subsequent book has its own title (*New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*), while the series of film adaptations follow those titles all under the aegis of the *Twilight Saga*. I have attempted to be clear when referring to a particular book or film. The fourth and fifth films in the *Saga* (based on the first and second halves of *Breaking Dawn: a novel*, respectively), had not been released yet at the time of publication.

<sup>2</sup> My own research into available folklorist documentation reflects that, however flawed they may be in other ways, the secondhand reports of Quileute lore made by outsiders are not responsible for providing Meyer with this false information (cf. Farrand & Meyer, 1919; Ruby & Brown, 1986).

We have stories in LaPush that explain events going back to the Ice Age, but science and history people claim that we came across the land bridge much later than that. And her book is a work of fiction. If she needed to make some changes to make it more exciting that is up to her. (Dickerson, 2009, np)

Morganroth points to the important fact that the art of storytelling is meant to cultivate experiences for the audience—regardless of veracity. In the Quileute community, stories told around the bonfire reconstruct the knowledge of how one’s ancestors came to understand the world on their own terms; in the contemporary world, these stories may become part of the way community members define themselves in the context of greater human society.

In the *Twihard* fandom, stories also constitute the very core of a sense of community, and the true story of *Twilight* is being rewritten constantly around the global fire circle of the Internet. This paper will explore how The *Twilight Saga*’s audiences have made sense of the stylized stories they have read and watched about the Quileute Nation, voicing their perspectives online for open consumption and further transformation. These audiences may be composed of Quileute persons themselves, *Twilight* fans of all walks, or avowed detractors of the *Saga*. Their diverse and complex discourses do not always fall under the traditional rubric of *critical media literacy practices*, but they are all critical in reflexively redefining what the *Twilight Saga* means to a multitude of people who draw meaning from it. Although commonly dismissed in academia and the general populace, the discourses of pop culture consumers-cum-producers play an active role in writing a *Twilight* meta-narrative that affects the larger social and cultural landscape. The purpose of tracing the transformation of these readers and viewers into writers, and of analyzing the texts they produce, is to reframe the study and pedagogy of Critical Media Literacy, emphasizing *participation* and *reflexivity* as key elements in the place of *criticality*—an often blurry notion that fails to encompass the nature and function of the valuable media literacy practices flourishing on the Internet and elsewhere today.

### Pop Goes Participatory: A New Media Ethic(s)?

I offer several rationales for this project—the foremost being that the import of pop culture is often overlooked or underplayed in academic literature and school curricula. In this regard, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) describe the dominant viewpoint of mid-nineties British conservatism: “Consuming popular media is seen to require no intellectual or cultural competencies, and thus to develop none” (p. 2). This characterization would seem to echo the current political climate in the United States, which has given rise to a highly standardized English curriculum and such federal initiatives as the “Shakespeare in American Communities” project.<sup>3</sup> Buckingham and Sefton-Green go on to argue that popular media play a larger role in the intellectual lives of students than merely fulfilling standardized curricular goals:

...what students say about popular culture, and the texts they produce, are part of the process by which they construct their own social identities.

Although this process, inevitably, is defined in terms of social power—

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nea.gov/national/shakespeare/index.html>

for example, of social class, gender, ethnicity and age—we would see the meanings of these categories not as pre-determined but as actively constructed in social relationships themselves. (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 10)

Meyer's *Twilight* franchise has spawned a proliferation of multimodal media literacy practices through which an active audience continues to generate discourses both collective and unique, traversing the identity categories mentioned by Buckingham and Sefton-Green in surprising and intersectional ways. In addition to reading the books, viewing the films, and discussing them "the old-fashioned way," fans have created sophisticated web sites and well maintained blogs, prolific fanfictions,<sup>4</sup> YouTube videos, online role-play communities, and nearly infinite Twitter feeds and Facebook commentary. Meanwhile "traditional" media producers have provided *Twilight* video games, mounted conventions,<sup>5</sup> dispatched generous news media attention, manufactured merchandise of every imaginable shape and function, and even curated museum exhibits. I argue that for young people, these texts, spaces and objects engender valuable out-of-school learning experiences, while weaving the fabric of an emerging culturescape that ought to be valued within the classroom as well.

### A Culture of Participation and Convergence

Beyond their pedagogical or developmental value, these creative media practices merit further attention, because they are the activities through which audiences co-construct the meanings of "original" mass media artifacts, such as the *Twilight* books or films. The contributing voices of the audience have come to influence the semiotic life and collective memory of the artifacts, such that they are not so much original as catalytic. The *Twilight* books, films, and fan-world have become so systematically pervasive<sup>6</sup> and so widely circulated<sup>7</sup> that their characters and stories have achieved a critical mass of recognizability in global popular culture; a reference to the franchise invokes not only the plotlines of vampires and werewolves, but the profusion of tabloid photos and web sites, images of the rush to buy the next novel or get tickets for the next movie premiere, perhaps even conversations one may have had with peers speculating upon the quality, ideological underpinnings, or commercial explosion of media artifacts they have not yet consumed themselves (even as they co-produce their semiotic value).

In fact, the term "audience" becomes problematic in all its presumed passivity. Jenkins (2006; 2010) describes this kind of media climate as *participatory culture*:

<sup>4</sup> Fanfiction is defined by Merriam-Webster.com as a set of "stories involving popular fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted on the Internet." The most active archive of online fanfiction, Fanfiction.net, contained 183,432 entries based on the *Twilight* novels as of June 23, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> "TwiCon," an unofficial *Twilight* convention held in Dallas, TX, was reviewed by many fans as "an epic fail" (Amber, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Starting in 2005, one book was released per year for four successive years, always made available in relatively low-cost paperback editions immediately; starting in 2008, one film has launched each year which will continue until 2012 (the fourth book will be split into two films).

<sup>7</sup> In the first quarter of 2009, the series monopolized the top four slots in highest book sales, and comprised 16% of all books sold (DeBarros, Memmott & Minzesheimer, 2009). The films have broken countless box office records—advanced ticket sales, midnight release sales, etc—and DVD sales have also broken opening-weekend records (summit-ent.com).

“We are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced” (Jenkins, 2010, p. 13). Mass-mediated cultural objects have always been transformed through the uptake of their audiences, but the affordances of new media and the internet allow audiences to match (and perhaps even exceed) the level of media production that was formerly limited to corporations and other institutions. The participatory responses to the *Twilight* series that will be examined in this paper—almost entirely internet-mediated, yet responding to print and film texts of the “old media” ilk—exemplify the kind of *convergence culture* that co-exists with Jenkins’ model of participation:

Consumers are using new media technologies to engage with old media content, seeing the Internet as a vehicle for collective problem solving, public deliberation, and grassroots creativity... On all sides and at every level, the term *participation* has emerged as a governing concept, albeit one surrounded by conflicting expectations. (Jenkins, 2006, p. 169)

## A History of Critique

The “conflicting expectations” to which Jenkins refers involve the competing interests of consumers-cum-producers (i.e. the grassroots contingent) and the corporate entities who would like to monetize their participation in the mass media, whether through advertising, copyright licensing, or increased brand recognition. This tension is not new, either; it lies at the heart of many appraisals of the mass media, exemplified by the Frankfurt School’s post-war critiques of the print media and television as mechanisms of control (cf. Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969; Marcuse, 1964). At times the conflict between traditional media producers and the best interests of audiences has been framed by waves of “media panic,” described by Burgess and Green (2009) in the context of public debates about YouTube.<sup>8</sup> These discourses generated largely by media outlets tend to stoke public fears about the admixture of youth and mass-mediated popular culture, invoking codes of morality and policing perceived youth rebellion with social norms.

While the *Twilight Saga* has rarely come under fire for encouraging subversion—indeed, its ideological underpinnings afford it an image as particularly “safe” and prim—Burgess and Green’s discussion illuminates much of the public debate about the ethics of representation in *Twilight*. Media panics, like the Frankfurt School’s outcry against capitalist brainwashing, invoke codes of ethics, but Burgess and Green (2009) argue that “the ethics of participating in YouTube,” or, I would argue, any new media platform, “should not be reduced to making judgments about whether or not pre-determined moral standards are being lived up to” ( p. 21). Rather than a mode of critique or moral enforcement, Burgess and Green’s approach to the media artifacts on YouTube operates on an understanding of ethics as “the freedom and capacity to act reflexively—that is, to think about the ethical implications of one’s own practice, and to formulate one’s actions based on this ethical awareness, relative to a particular context” (p.21). Media producers are meant to consider the potential impact of their work as it travels (ever more rapidly and

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.youtube.com>, a highly popular video-sharing site.

fluidly) through different situations. Burgess and Green's emphasis on reflexivity and situated meanings speaks to the anthropological—rather than purely critical—approach I will take in the inquiry that follows. This distinction hinges on seeing media artifacts as discursive practices-in-context, as the documentation of forms of participation, rather than as static, freestanding texts.

In light of the aforementioned participatory model increasingly at work in new media platforms, I argue that the traditional “critical” approach to mass-mediated popular culture misapprehends media artifacts such as the *Twilight Saga* as fixed, isolated texts that exert a unilateral effect on consumers. In fact, it is the diversity of audience receptions (and participatory responses) that characterizes pop culture in a new media context. Rymes (2011), also in the context of YouTube, finds that

No matter how massively produced and ubiquitously distributed a product is—and no matter the degree of corporate sponsorship—any text contains layers of semiotic value that are selected for differently by different groups. Moreover, *the more widely circulated and mass-produced a semiotic form is, the more highly diverse the interactions with it will be.* (p. 2, emphasis original)

Tracing a particular music video (“Crank Dat” by Souja Boy) through all of its re-inventions across YouTube, Rymes demonstrates how different semiotic layers of the “original” video are lost or added in each recontextualization. Likewise, the aggregate meaning of the “original” grows and changes for viewers that become familiar with its legacy of spinoffs. As I will explore with specific examples later on, the array of participatory responses to the *Twilight* series reflects and enacts the multitude of meanings that a mass-mediated cultural object comes to bear across contexts.

This perspective alleviates some of the Frankfurt-esque anxiety about corporate interests and social reproduction—that powerful, centralized media outputs disseminate uniform messages across the passive masses—but addressing recontextualization does not account for the question of media ethics, even in its more flexible (or reflexive) definition as articulated by Burgess and Green (2009). Jenkins (2010) confronts the other side of media recontextualization: “Culture travels easily, but the individuals who initially produced and consumed such culture are not always welcome everywhere it circulates” (p. 98). From his perspective, the process of rapid and fluid circulation of media artifacts does not lead to the gradual erasure of cultural difference—the McDonaldization of culture (Ritzer, 1993)—but rather “ensures that we will be provoked by cultural difference. Little about this process ensures that we will develop an understanding of the contexts within which these different cultural communities operate” (p. 98). That is why, alongside his championing of participatory culture, Jenkins supports media literacy advocacy, a decades-old movement to educate the public, and especially young people, about “the ways media representations structure our perceptions of the world...the motives and goals that shape the media we consume, and alternative practices that operate outside the commercial mainstream” (p. 31). He sees the traditional role of media literacy education—teaching youth to deconstruct media stereotypes of race, gender, class, religion, and other forms of cultural difference—as eminently valuable, and perhaps even more important, in the age of new media and its attendant participatory culture. When young people



themselves become media producers, he argues, they should be able to recognize when the content they produce may perpetuate stereotypes or get misinterpreted in diverse contexts.

### Media Literacy Education

There exists a large and growing body of literature on media literacy education (MLE)—sometimes identifying itself in the camp of Critical Media Literacy, and other times maintaining the neutral masthead of Media Literacy with the term “critical” sprinkled throughout its definition and tied to its import (cf. Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Kafai & Peppler, 2011; Kellner & Share, 2005; Koltay, 2011; Livingstone, 2004). The major professional organization dedicated to the field in the United States,<sup>9</sup> the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), defines *media literacy* as “a series of communication competencies, including the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE, and COMMUNICATE information in a variety of forms, including print and non-print messages.... It is the skillful application of literacy skills to media and technology messages” (NAMLE, 2011, np). This definition comes with an additional element that speaks to other “critical” dimensions of the MLE agenda: “Media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using image, language, and sound” (NAMLE, 2011, np). Echoing Jenkins’ paean to the participatory culture in which all media consumers think like, act like, and *are* media producers, NAMLE’s statement reaffirms the importance of dissembling media artifacts to understand what intentions and ideologies may have gone into their construction.

The other half of this statement, to “empower...critical thinkers,” begs the question of what exactly an “empowered” critical thinker does, even of what it means to be “critical.” In the humanities and social sciences, the word “critical” can be (recontextualized as) loaded with associations to critical theory, Marxism, and in the specific discipline of education, Freirian approaches and Critical Literacy theorists. In other words, the term “critical” is often invoked to index a particular political ideology—for whatever reason, this is often a leftist ideology—as the source of critique. Regardless of one’s political stance, these associations can blur or betray the discourses of participatory media makers. They can also detract from MLE’s real potential to make new meanings and cultivate thoughtful, independent-minded media makers. Moreover, the nature of producing a text with an explicit critique-based orientation implies that there is a discrete originary text against which the critique is being leveled. The notion of critique becomes problematic in the context of participatory culture, where contributions from “readers” of texts are integral to an ever-transforming web of meanings associated with the supposed “original,” and where debates are not linear or back-and-forth but aggregate.

Participatory voices are not necessarily oppositional, but can be, and can be political or politicized, but don’t have to be—but, they often live up to the other

<sup>9</sup> Other major MLE organizations include the Media Education Foundation (<http://www.mediaed.org/wp/about-mef>), which produces documentary films to teach media literacy, and the International Media Literacy Research Forum, whose goal is “To provide a platform for professional researchers, policy-makers/regulators and practitioners from across the world to share knowledge and expertise in the field of media literacy” (<http://www.imlrf.org/united-states>).

half of NAMLE's dictum that consumers think like designers. The internet has proliferated a rich tradition of satire, parody, irony, and countless other techniques of transforming discourse through humor or creativity (Willett, 2009), all forms of media autonomy. I would venture that what MLE proponents really seek to instill in students is not necessarily *criticality*, or the ability to critique, but rather *reflexivity*: the possibility of engaging with a text in full awareness of its constructed, socially situated, and mutable nature. In the terminology of linguistic anthropology, this kind of engagement would constitute a *metapragmatic* discourse (Agha, 2007), one that not only does something in the world but that talks about what discourses do in the world—thereby participating in the construction of what that discourse means to the world.

### Histories of Representation

The special case of reflexive, metapragmatic discourse that cropped up around the *Twilight Saga* involved talk about how its cast of characters represents racial, ethnic, and cultural categories. As we will see, the multifarious participatory voices surrounding *Twilight* invoke ongoing debates related to issues of representation in the media, often taking these conversations in new directions. Certain ways of representing the identities of and dynamics between characters—especially along the axes of race, gender, and class—are often seen as shaping the beliefs and stereotypes that audiences possess about others, and importantly, themselves (Ewen & Ewen, 2006). Likewise, these modes of representation can have a real impact on the lived experiences of people who identify with, or get identified as, the social types being represented. For the purposes of this paper, the historic practice of racializing and (mis)representing Native Americans in the mass media is particularly salient. Because identity work is always intersectional, such images are also built from representations of gender, class, and culture.

Focusing on race for a moment, it is worth mentioning the practice of *racebending*<sup>10</sup> in the context of this discussion. This term refers to the practice of casting an actor with different phenotypic traits than those of his or her character, and adjusting for the difference with makeup, hairstyling, suntanning, etc. Typically white actors would be cast to play people of color, such as Daniel Day-Lewis in *Last of the Mohicans* (Mann, Lowry, & Robinson, 1992) or any number of white actors who wore “blackface” in unfortunate filmic mockeries of African Americans. These practices were much more common in decades past, but it is important to note how and when they persist.

For example, when Taylor Lautner was cast to play the primary Quileute character in the *Twilight Saga*, Jacob Black, his resume described him as having European heritage. The rest of the actors who were eventually cast to play Quileute roles had direct affiliations with First Nations or indigenous American groups—despite tabloid speculation that further racebending would occur to include better-known names on the roster. At some point during the filming of *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, the following question was posed to Lautner: “Some people have said things about this being an Indian character and you’re not Indian, are you?” To which he responded, “I have some Native American in my distant background” (Murray, 2008). During another interview around the same time at Comic-Con in

<sup>10</sup> cf. <http://www.racebending.com>

San Diego, CA, Lautner was asked a similar question and described his genealogical discovery with a bit more detail: “We learned that through [preparing for] this film. I’m French, Dutch and German, and on my mother’s side, she has some Potawatomi and Ottawa Indian in her” (Carroll, 2008). Whether Lautner’s ethnic makeup is considered specious or merely a fair-weather reference, he has positioned himself in a liminal space with respect to racebending; he is not culturally Native American, but identifies as—partially—*racially* Native American.<sup>11</sup> This distinction ends up having different value for different kinds of fans and other participatory voices. It also demonstrates the awareness of Lautner, and possibly the production team of the *Twilight Saga* films, that there would be a reflexive interrogation of how Quileute characters were being portrayed, and by whom.

### Beyond Race

Along these lines, emblems and traits other than the race-bent skin of Native American people have been noted as recurring features in media representations: colorful feather headdresses and other inaccurate but recognizable forms of exotic dress, a stylized terseness of speaking similar to that of the *Tarzan* comic book character, alternatively a violent and unpredictable hostility or the pastoral contentment of living in harmony with nature. The Media Awareness Network, an online resource for media and digital literacies based in Canada, observes that “the new climate of ‘political correctness’ has combined with a genuine effort to counter some of the more overt forms of racism in films and television—but subtle vestiges of Native stereotyping still remain” (Media Awareness Network, 2010). Their page on “Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People” categorizes four types of “common stereotyping traps” that they see persisting in the media: *romanticization* (through stock characters such as Indian princesses, Native warriors, and noble savages), *historical inaccuracies*, *stereotyping by omission* (especially omission from participation in contemporary life), and *simplistic characterization*. Some of the stock characters they point to are the wise elder in *Little Big Man* (Millar & Penn, 1970), the drunk in *Tom Sawyer* (Lighton & Cromwell, 1930), and Tonto, the loyal sidekick of *The Lone Ranger* (a film and television character dating back to 1933 who still makes appearances on reruns). The web site notes that Aboriginals are “the only population to be portrayed far more often in historical context than as contemporary people” (Media Awareness Network, 2010). Some fans believe that this stereotyping trap, the sealing-off of Native individuals and culture in a romanticized, bygone era, is one stereotyping trap that was decisively avoided in the *Twilight* series; other participatory voices (fans or not) have accused Stephenie Meyer and the directors of the film adaptations of one or more of the “stereotyping traps” listed above, among others. I will address these responses in more detail shortly.

The chorus of critiques of these Hollywood tropes emerged long before the *Twilight Saga* came on the scene (cf. Churchill, 1995; Howard, 1970; Kinkaid, 1992). However, it appears that Meyer’s series has renewed and expanded this

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps overdue is a reflection on my use of the term “Native American” in this analysis: in engaging the history of stereotypification and racialization through media representations (and other socio-political factors), I refer to the constructed category as such, realizing (perhaps even emphasizing) that it is a generalizing and less-preferred label for a diverse array of cultures, ethnicities, and languages indigenous to the North American continent. I have attempted to refer to the particular heritage group, such as Quileute, when appropriate.

conversation—or at least stands as prominently co-present with it. One recent example in this branch of participatory culture is a video called “Native American Actors” produced by Multinesia, a small media production company that supports and generates films by indigenous peoples worldwide (Multinesia, 2010). This particular video was created for the Screen Actors Guild Presidential Task Force for American Indians,<sup>12</sup> emphasizing the positive promotion of contemporary Native American actors over the negative promotion (or demotion) of films that exclude or objectify them. In the video, uploaded to YouTube March 11, 2011, a series of actors from different Native American communities describe their personal histories of arriving to and working in the entertainment industry. Some describe the frustration of starting out getting typecast into “token Indian” roles, others describe the difficulty of early life on a reservation, and several discuss the overlap between the storytelling traditions of their Native cultures and the art of dramatic storytelling they practice as a television or film actor. But the emerging sense the video gives is that there is a growing foothold for Native American actors in film and television; from this perspective, the *Twilight Saga* can be seen as problematic if it is perceived as (re)producing media stereotypes about Native Americans, but it can also be seen as a platform that launched the careers of nearly a dozen Native American actors.

### Intersectional Identities: Gender & Class

Thus, the *Twilight* books and films stand before a cresting history of debate over representations of Native Americans in the media, but it is important to observe how factors beyond race and culture—namely gender and class—also operationalize these axes of representation. For example, some have argued that the *Twilight* books should be shelved not in the Young Adult section or the Sci-Fi/Fantasy section of bookstores, as they usually are, but in the Romance section (Miller, 2008). The basis of this argument is that the series’ core plotline plays squarely into the literary trope of an innocent and pretty—but otherwise unremarkable—young female who meets a superhero-caliber male hero who falls desperately in love with her simply because he wishes to protect her. This is the general trajectory of most mass media romance novels and Victorian gothic novels (Miller, 2008). In fact, all of the scholarly literature that I could find on Meyers’ *Twilight* books to date came from a Gender Studies perspective (cf. Bode, 2010; Fleur, 2011; Kokkola, 2010), focusing heavily on the gendered dynamics and sexuality of Bella’s and Edward’s characters—without considering the extreme masculinization and sexualization of the Native American male characters.

It is worth noting that these scholarly voices, in response to the *Twilight* series, have discussed gender without acknowledging that they are discussing a certain kind of gender—an implicitly racialized set of gender norms. Their critique does not encompass the intersections of Native American and gendered identities, which interact in the construction of characters (and the stereotypes generated). Similarly, socioeconomic class is an important ingredient in the total image of Quileute-ness built by the *Twilight Saga*—the meager means of the LaPush families contrasts with the stylish opulence of the paper-white Cullen family; the Quileute reservation is depicted as remote from Forks, WA through marginalization, and

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.sag.org/content/american-indian-task-force>

the Cullen home as remote through wealth. The elements of class and gender in media representations are easily overlooked amid the more vocal debates about highly explicit emblems of Native American stereotypes such as race and cultural objects, although they are also important components of a reflexive assessment of the *Twilight* texts.

### Methods

Now that I have laid out some of the historical and topical dimensions of analyzing Native American representations in the media at large, I will give a brief word on my approach to the forthcoming analysis of the *Twilight Saga* in particular. Burgess & Green (2009) expertly sift through the complex issues presented by an overwhelmingly large pool of potential data, attempting to characterize the mass-mediated phenomenon that is YouTube.<sup>13</sup> To dissect their methodological orientation in terms of discipline, their approach is at once a historical, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, sociological, journalistic, and Comparative Literature hybrid. I have attempted to mimic their catholic approach, thus far romping through historical, Media Studies and Cultural Studies perspectives. I will go on to synthesize the media practices and discourses of *Twilight* commentators into a discussion that, I hope, will allow them to tell their own story to a greater degree than a loaded “critical” approach would. I began with broad, exploratory internet searches for any joint mention of *Twilight* and “Quileute” or “Native American.” I have included most of what I found in these searches and the hyperlinked trails they sent me down, roughly grouping responses according to their stance with respect to representations of Native Americans in the franchise. Finally, I will take a look at the current events involving stakeholders in this network, to explore how participatory discourses about pop culture may have a real bearing on everyday life for people in the world. My conclusion will reflect on how these cycles of text and context, media production and reaction-through-production, may fit into the realm of Media Literacy Education. In these ways, I hope to strike something close to a balance between a *youthy*—or anthropological, practice-focused—approach and an *educationy*—or top-down, text-focused—approach to mass-mediated popular culture (Rymes, 2011). In the spirit of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), I also intend to distribute my attention somewhat evenly between traditional media “producers”—Stephenie Meyer and those responsible for the *Twilight* films—and participatory audience receptions, reactions, and recontextualizations.

### Analysis: Participatory Stances

#### Pure Fandom: The Face-Value Stance

The most ubiquitous kind of a response to representations of Native Americans in the *Twilight* series is an extension or reification of what exists in the books and films. What I will call face-value stances are not universally unreflexive as a rule, but they appear to laminate, or collapse, depictions of Native Americans in *Twilight* and the identities of real Native American individuals in the world. In

<sup>13</sup> In contrast to Willett’s (2009) deliberately non-representative sampling of parodic practices on YouTube.

line with my earlier discussion of Buckingham & Sefton-Green (1994), as well as such perspectives as Black's (2008) on the value of popular culture for writers of fanfiction, I believe that the literacy practices surrounding fandom and popular culture are inherently valuable—with or without reflexive stances. But in the context of this inquiry, there is a difference between the kind of participatory voice that interrogates modes of representation for the impact they may have in different contexts, and the kind of response that takes the representations in the *Twilight* series for granted, accepting them at face value.

The latter involves less of what Jenkins (2010) calls simulation: “the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes” (p. 41). He counts this as one of the core concepts for media education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; a firm grasp of simulation makes an audience member think like a designer, imagining alternative scenarios and possible outcomes of design choices. In the case of *Twilight*, the media object being designed is largely a fictional world populated by characters, and the choices that go into constructing those characters have consequences beyond the page or screen that may go unnoticed by face-value participants, who admire (or deride) the face of the thing without looking to what ideas lie behind it in the brain or what impact the limbs are making in the world.

Many of these face-value responses are the pure stuff of fandom, that which has made *Twilight* a pop cultural phenomenon of historic proportions. Countless blogs and web sites exist in honor of the franchise, not to mention YouTube fan videos and digital artworks of various forms—too many to hone down and cite here.<sup>14</sup> Many of these sites serve as news sources for other fans, chronicling any piece of text, image, sound, or video that has to do with a fan's favorite character(s) or the franchise writ large. On one of these sites, I found a radio interview<sup>15</sup> with Chaske Spencer, who plays an important supporting role in the Quileute “wolfpack”; the DJ-interviewers on this show seem to epitomize the face-value response by fixating on how “manly” Spencer is in various respects, from his sixpack to the innate “manliness” of werewolves over vampires (neither of which is human in the internal logic of Stephenie Meyer's fictional world, but both of which get coded anthropomorphically, as evidenced here). Spencer plays along and responds often with laughter, at once embarrassed and amused. He defends his co-star Robert Pattinson's “manliness” (and six-pack) during the course of the conversation, an interesting move that shines a light on how fetishized his own, and his character's, masculine qualities are within the overall associations attached to Quileute werewolves in *Twilight*, in comparison with non-Quileute characters.

Another face-value response comes, surprisingly or not, from a self-proclaimed and notable critic—A. O. Scott, the *New York Times* film reviewer. Scott works in a tradition of film criticism that pays special attention to aesthetic and narratological concerns, which sometimes but not always attends to the sociopolitical impacts of those conventions. Contrasting the relationship of Bella and Edward in the *New Moon* film to “the slightly more conventional mammalian match between Bella and Jacob” (Scott, 2010), Scott ventriloquates the animalization of Jacob's character in a neutral manner. He goes on:

<sup>14</sup> Google the word “Twilight” and you will find that the first entry not related to Meyer's books or films doesn't appear until the end of the third page.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.twilightlexicon.com/2010/09/09/goom-radio-interviews-chaske-spencer/>

Jacob makes a pretty strong case, both that he is more suitable for Bella —“With me, it would be as easy as breathing,” he says — and, more boldly, that she really wants him, even if she can’t admit as much to herself. And while there are the usual arguments about which of these guys is better able to protect Bella, what is really at stake is each one’s theoretical ability to satisfy her. (Scott, 2010)

He notes the elements of simplicity and carnal sexuality in Jacob’s character—arguably elements of stereotyping according to the Media Awareness Network’s rubric. Jacob’s recurring emphasis on physical contact and sexual desire contrasts markedly with Edward’s Edwardian-era<sup>16</sup> ideals of abstinence before marriage. This dynamic is linked to Stephenie Meyer’s Mormon faith, and can be recontextualized in a number of ways when the exemplary chaste character is white (not just Caucasian, but literally quite pale as an attribute of his vampire status) and the Casanova figure is (portrayed as) Native American. Furthermore, Jacob’s character serves simultaneously as the most prominent representative of the Quileute Nation and the sore loser in the central love plot, incapable of truly “satisfying” Bella. Scott’s commentary is a good example of a stance that reproduces modes of representation that start in Meyer’s book, transform into live-action scenes in the film, and are not transformed any further by his face-value reading of them.

### Classic Critique: The Oppositional Stance

To counter A. O. Scott’s review of *New Moon*, situated as it is in the comfort (or confines) of the mainstream news media, a blog called *American Indians in Children’s Literature* demonstrates the classic critical stance described earlier in this paper. Debbie Reese, the blog’s author and a member of the Nambe Pueblo tribe in New Mexico, writes of watching the *New Moon* film with her daughter: “Sitting next to each other in the dark, we heckled, rolled our eyes, and laughed in the wrong parts. Not wanting to draw the ire of others in the theater, we weren’t obnoxious. We kept our critiques relatively quiet” (Reese, 2009). Reese points to the factual liberties taken with Quileute knowledge as a prime source of her annoyance, as well as the racialization of the werewolves and their Quileute human halves: “I don’t recommend the [*Twilight*] books or the film for many reasons. Of course I make that statement based on the Native content of them, but there are other reasons as well. This is a good analysis: Running With the Wolves—A Racialicious Reading of the Twilight Saga”<sup>17</sup> (Reese, 2009). Reese articulates frustration—common throughout the oppositional responses I found—with representations of Quileute cultural history made by non-Natives with liberal doses of misinformation and racial stereotyping. This participatory stance importantly connects these modes of representation with the reality of social inequality and racism in the lives of Native American peoples.

Reese’s critique, coupled with the original texts or films, creates a new bundle of meanings that demonstrates how these (mis)representations come to exist and

<sup>16</sup> He became a vampire age 17, some 108 years prior, trapping him at that age forever.

<sup>17</sup> The “Racialicious” blog post Reese references is also a key exemplar of the classic critical stance. (<http://www.racialicious.com/2009/11/26/running-with-the-wolves-a-racialicious-reading-of-the-twilight-saga/#more-4336>)

reproduce. Perhaps on the contrary she should recommend the books and films to all of her friends, as long as they are coupled with reflexive conversations about representation that equip young people to problematize the face-value readings prevalent around them.

The Native American Legal Update, an online resource for “current legal developments” (Guedel, 2009) run by a law firm that specializes in Native American issues, responded similarly to the release of *New Moon*—the chapter of the *Twilight Saga* in which werewolves are introduced. A long and biting post titled “New Moon—old stereotypes?” (Guedel, 2009) touches on racebending, blatant inaccuracies in representing Quileute myths, the tension surrounding a potential interracial relationship between Bella and Jacob, and the ubiquitous bare chests of the wolfpack:

Jacob spends a good portion of the film without a shirt, in accordance with the longstanding cinematic stereotype that Indigenous people like to forego clothes—even in chilly Forks, which has nearly the highest annual rainfall on the continent. Alas, Jacob and Bella’s powerful but tortuous attraction to each other cannot truly be required—because unlike those of Native communities, the cultural traditions of Hollywood must be respected. (Guedel, 2009, np)

Interestingly enough, the comments below this review reflect a mixture of approval and disagreement with this kind of critical stance. A commenter named Derrick states: “First off. I’m Native.<sup>18</sup> Born and raised on a reservation in Minnesota. I’m 26 and i enjoy this series. I would also be the first to put them on blast if they hit a nerve in stereotypes or any other negative depiction” (Derrick, 2009, np). He goes on to justify the shirtlessness of the wolfpack (their high body heat, part of the rules of Meyer’s fictional world, as well as the simple fact that their clothes rip apart whenever they “phase” or shapeshift into wolves), defends their status not as mere savage beasts but as nearly invincible protectors of their tribe, and hails the innocence (rather than the fetishization) of the story’s interracial relationship. Several successive comments agree with Derrick’s retort. Derrick affirms his capacity for reflexivity (and demonstrates it in his comment on how an interracial relationship could have been portrayed otherwise), but also embraces the fictional context in which the books and films operate. This is the kind of fan-generated embrace of simulation that Reese’s protective critical stance must contend with.

Several comments later in the chain, participants with usernames such as “concerned” or “Yes We Can” question the blitheness of Derrick and the other counter-critical responders. “Concerned” writes:

“It is great to see Native people in such a blockbuster film”. Really? Is that really the best we can hope for in 2009? We can’t ask for dignified representations, we should just be satisfied that Native people are merely in the film? Here’s a fact—the longer you’re willing to tolerate undignified treatment, the longer you’re going to get it. (Concerned, 2009, np)

---

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that Greg Guedel, who wrote the article and presides over the Native American Legal Update blog, is not Native American.



Already we can see the kind of dialoguing that occurs in online participatory debates—voices advance competing discourses with which to recontextualize the object in question, in this case the *Twilight* series, so that their re-imagined semiotic bundle wins out as the authoritative reading. But inevitably, the semiotic layers contributed or stripped by different participants shape the full meaning of a mass-mediated cultural artifact. Readers who have come to this site to read Guedel's critique will also be exposed to the other voices in the comments (if they read that far), all of which contribute to their understanding of *Twilight* in the context of their own experience.

The critical stance, which may take its object of criticism as a fixed entity and therefore a threat, sometimes swells to a position better described as the *outraged* stance. In the February edition of a newsletter called *Native Village Youth and Education News*, the featured story is a call to action titled "Native Americans Outraged over *Twilight*" (Native Village, 2009). The author relates the dismay of Native Americans over the rumored casting decisions for *New Moon*. At the time, a well regarded young Apache actor, Solomon Trimble, had recently been dropped from his role as Sam Uley without much explanation to the public. The newsletter's author explains, "Sam Uley's character has been re-posted onto the Hollywood-casting breakdown, and it is obvious that Hollywood is now looking for a more marketable teen heartthrob celebrity actor to play the more substantial and very desirable part" (Native Village, 2009).<sup>19</sup> The article takes a highly critical stance of Taylor Lautner's dubious "discovery" of distant Native American blood, dismissing the relevance of the discovery even if it were true. That a Filipino actress, Vanessa Hudgens of *High School Musical* fame (Schain & Ortega, 2006), was being considered for the only prominent female Quileute role was also found deeply insulting as another example of racebending and exclusion. Given its particular timing, this newsletter provides insight into the kind of critique that could have been more prevalent had the directors of the *Twilight Saga* not made such a concerted effort (or strategic decision) in the end to cast (almost) all Native American actors in the Quileute roles.

This "classic" critical narrative of the casting process, like Reese's precautionary blog post, plays its own role in reshaping the media culture getting produced. In a participatory model of cultural production, convergence occurs not only between "old" and "new" media platforms, but also between texts and events. Whether or not this newsletter affected the casting choices that were eventually made, it reflexively recast the actions of the filmmakers into a debate about social justice and representation. For all those who did read the newsletter, these issues have become a part of what *Twilight* means—and moving forward, they may reflexively transform future media objects (of their own or others' making) in similar fashion.

Jesse Wentze, a Canadian aboriginal film curator and critic, wrote a blog post comparing *New Moon* to James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar* (Cameron & Landau, 2009) for its representation of indigenous figures. He describes how watching these films "brought back some of the emotions [he] felt when revisiting films from decades past" (Wentze, 2010). He takes his "classic" critique beyond

---

<sup>19</sup> The actor eventually cast to replace Trimble was Chaske Spencer, who grew up on several reservations and who has gone on to become a staunch advocate of the *Twilight Saga* for its support of Native American actors and deviation from Native American stereotypes.

the staple critiques of Native representations—visual, physical, and cultural emblems—and further into the postcolonial realm:

More worrisome than a group of shirtless, flexing Native men is the original conceit of the treaty signed between the Quileute and the vampires. While the violation of the treaty is at the centre of the story the narrative never makes an allegorical connection with the history of treaty rights in North America. (Wente, 2010)

Wente goes on to interpret the treaty—an agreement made after a 19<sup>th</sup> century encounter between the Cullen family and a group of Quileutes, stipulating that the vampire coven could remain in Forks if it hunted animals instead of humans. The treaty also banned vampires from entering LaPush land (now an official reservation in real and fictional life), in return for their exemption from death by werewolf. Wente argues that by “suggesting a treaty between the two, *Twilight* has the effect of fictionalizing Native people and their history. In doing so, *Twilight* absolves much of American history of its treatment of Native people—after all, they’re the same as vampires” (Wente, 2010). Wente’s argument is reflexive on many levels; he considers the sociopolitical impact of the *Twilight* narrative as it has been designed, and imagines alternate scenarios that could have been included.

However, this outraged stance reaches some limits by treating the *Twilight Saga* as a unilateral semiotic force that cannot be altered by other voices or in new contexts. Meyer’s texts are somewhat immune to accusations about factuality<sup>20</sup> because they root themselves firmly in the context of fictional entertainment—and there will always exist the fans like Derrick who revel in the fictionality of the *Twi*world, for whom the stakes of Native representation are high but the line between fact and fiction is of little consequence in the context of popular culture. Nevertheless, Wente’s blog post itself, one in a series of posts on a blog dedicated to a recent film, *Reel Injun* (Bainbridge, Fon, Ludwick, Diamond & Hayes, 2009), about the history of (mis)representing Native Americans in film, belies the silencing absolutism that he decries; by adding his voice into the ether, he has helped to rewrite *Twilight* as a site of dissent and reflection, participating in the collaborative process of filling in Meyer’s historical gaps.

### Reflexive Embrace: The Interventionist Stance

#### Keep your enemies closer—The opportunity for correction.

It surprised me to find in my research that perhaps the most prominent *reflexive embrace*—another kind of participatory stance that I will now explore—came from the official voice of the Quileute Nation.<sup>21</sup> The tribal council has cooperated with efforts to organize *Twilight* tourism in LaPush and Forks, endorsing a tour company formerly called *Dazzled by Twilight* (now called *Twilight Tours*

<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, Stephenie Meyer claimed publicly that she included only well researched facts about Quileute culture and mythology—a claim that could be (and has been) disqualified by participatory responses from Wente or anyone else with evidence to the contrary, leaving media audiences with a reflexive understanding of processes that underpin the *Twilight* myths.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.quileutenation.org/>

in Forks<sup>22</sup>). Although they have taken some pains to protect tribal lands from exploitation by tourists—posting a photography policy<sup>23</sup> and Indian country etiquette guide<sup>24</sup> prominently on their home page—they have demonstrated their interest in courting *Twihards* as an opportunity to educate them about their cultural history and, where necessary, to set the record straight. Representatives of the tribal administration collaborated with ReelzChannel, a television network, to produce a special show revisiting the *Twilight* haunts of LaPush. The TV special was publicized as the first ever television network on Quileute tribal lands—but also showcases the Quileute culture beyond that which made it into the books and films, such as “the intimate ceremonies of the drum circle and tribal dances” (Mercieri & Ward, 2009). The tribal spokesperson, Jackie Jacobs, qualifies the tribe’s seeming embrace of *Twihard*-serving TV cameras: “It was very important to this Nation to partner with an organization that we felt understood that the non-fictional Quileute story is more complex, multi-dimensional and sacred than [the one] everyone has been exposed to” (Mercieri & Ward, 2009). While acknowledging the problematic representations of her own people through the *Twilight* franchise, Jacobs embraces the opportunity to reflexively transform the misrepresentation of Native Americans in film by demonstrating what was left out of *Twilight*’s frame.

Similarly, representatives of the Quileute Nation collaborated in the curation of a museum exhibit in the Seattle Art Museum called “Behind the Scenes: The Real Story of the Quileute Wolves,” which was meant to provide a counterpoint to the fictionalized lore offered by the books and movies. The exhibit displayed objects from the films that accurately represented Quileute iconography or handicraft, but filled in the major gaps in the Quileutes’ historical and cultural narrative. “After *Twilight* came out, I got my ears pinned back by some of our elders,” said Ann Penn-Charles, a leader in the Quileute community who dances and shares her culture with her tribe’s youth. “They said, ‘How dare they portray us as werewolves? That’s so disrespectful. I want you guys to go represent us the way we Quileute are meant to be.’ When you get directives from the elders like that you have to honor them” (Briggs, 2010). And so, by facilitating a deeper connection between the *Twilight* franchise and the Quileute Nation, the Quileutes are also taking control of the narrative voice representing them. They treat an initial misrepresentation as an opportunity to gain autonomy and inform a massive captive audience, bloodthirsty for information on all things *Twilight*-related. What was initially only voiced by Meyer as the “story of” the Quileute became a polyphonic chorus of voices. Through discursive practices such as this exhibit, the Quileute Nation took on the role of co-producers of all that *Twilight* says and means.

In fact, the nature and purpose of *Twilight* took another reflexive turn as an opportunity to generate interest in the Quileute tribe and its cultural knowledge—within their own one-square-mile reservation:

Instead of focusing on the liberties Stephenie Meyer took in making up a fictional culture for a tribe and naming it Quileute, the Quileute have focused on getting more of their youth to dance, to know their songs and practice the culture that makes them distinct in the entire world. (Briggs, 2010)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/twilight.tours.in.forks>

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.quileutenation.org/qtc/media\\_policy\\_2010.pdf](http://www.quileutenation.org/qtc/media_policy_2010.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.quileutenation.org/indian-country-etiquette>

Rather than recontextualizing the effects of the *Twilight* series as silencing or fictionalizing the Quileute people, the Nation itself channeled the media object of *Twilight* into a starting point for further discussion and celebration of their “real” identities—which they had a major hand in constructing for themselves.

### **Kill them with kindness—The opportunity for exposure.**

Chaske Spencer, the actor who plays wolfpack leader Sam Uley (the most prominent Quileute role after love interest Jacob Black), has taken on a leadership role in advocating for Native American issues in the wake of his post-*New Moon* instant fame. In two separate and well-circulated journalistic interviews, Spencer has defended the Saga, taking the reflexive stance that the films’ representations of Native Americans actually “squashed” a lot of stereotypes: “We’re part of this pop culture phenomenon, and we’re put in a different light. And the kids see that, and they’re digging on it. They love that vibe” (Dobuzinskiz, 2010). Despite the bare chests of the big-screen Quileute boys, Spencer embraces other subtle ways in which their roles have unlocked the image of the Native American from a hermetically-sealed past; they wear blue jeans, go to high school, and use common youth slang words. For many Native American youth, asserting and being proud of their heritage may be more important (at this stage of their lives) than the finer points of the mythology; this combination of reverence and irreverence is embodied in Jacob Black’s skeptical explanation of his own tribe’s (fictional, intra-*Twilight*) werewolf and vampire myths (Meyer, 2005). Chris Eyre, director of *Smoke Signals* (Eyre, Alexie, Bressler, Estes, Rosenfelt, & Skinner, 1998)—another film that attempts to take a contemporary look at youth life on a reservation—is quoted in the article about Spencer’s interview as saying that “any negative effect has been eclipsed by Native American actors working in a big-budget Hollywood fantasy that will be seen by millions of moviegoers” (Dobuzinskiz, 2010). Eyre and Spencer reflexively embrace the opportunity for Native American characters to be seen as contemporary, “real” people, but also to be seen at all on the otherwise whitewashed big screen. These stances recontextualize *Twilight* into a historical metanarrative in which Native American actors are slowly but steadily gaining ground in the film industry.

Spencer acted in Eyre’s critically acclaimed *Smoke Signals* (Eyre et al., 1998) when he was younger, but had the opportunity to express his frustration with the rest of his early career—a series of typecast, stereotypical Native roles—before the United States Senate. On May 5, 2011, the US Senate held a hearing called “Stolen Identities: The Impact of Racist Stereotypes on Indigenous People.”<sup>25</sup> Although the hearing was convened to address the stereotypes reproduced by Native American-based sports mascots and other media representations, it came at an uncanny moment in the news cycle: with Osama Bin Laden recently assassinated, the world was just learning that Navy SEAL Team 6’s code name for their operation in Abbottabad was “Geronimo.” An instant backlash emerged<sup>26</sup> (Tucker, 2011), and resurfaced in the

<sup>25</sup> <http://indian.senate.gov/hearings/upload/CHASKE-TESTIMONY-5-5-docx.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> An anonymous participant posted the following uncanny metaphor on the Indigenous Languages and Technology (ILAT) listserv in response to the “Geronimo” scandal: “Once a group of people are the enemy...it seems enemy status is perpetuated by degradation. Degradation is perpetuated from adults to the lives of children, even by games. Us children grew up fighting “japs” and “germans” with our green plastic army men and had no idea how prejudice was sinking its fangs into us” (ILAT Listserv,

testimony of many of the guests invited to speak at the May 5<sup>th</sup> hearing—including Chaske Spencer's: "Whether it's intentional or unintentional we need to be more conscious of the associations we make. When we associate Geronimo with someone like Osama Bin Laden, even if it is to depict the courage necessary to capture him, the negative connotations are inevitable" (Spencer, 2011). Spencer reflexively acknowledges the multiple possible interpretations of "Geronimo," encouraging media makers to "be more conscious," or reflexive, about their works' impact.

He goes on to explain why he participated in an entertainment industry that insisted on shunting him into "stereotypically native roles":

These were roles I had to take because I needed to work, that at this point I would pass on.... Recently, I have turned down roles that somehow portray Native American people in a negative light. It is a pivotal time where we have a unique opportunity to break beyond the stereotypes.... One of the biggest opportunities that we as Native Americans now have, given the more mainstream spotlight and attention, is to shine a light on issues that have impacted us for decades and in some cases, generations. (Spencer, 2011)

Spencer performs his reflexive embrace of *Twilight*—recontextualizing it as an opportunity for proactive participation in reshaping the public sphere—through his testimony before Congress, in countless other media appearances, and as the director of a non-profit advocacy organization aptly named Be the Shift.<sup>27</sup> His stance is strengthened by the affordances of participatory culture, such as the transformational quality of discourses that insert themselves into conversations rather than bemoaning their place on the sidelines of traditional media production.

However, it is important to note that he is the direct beneficiary of Stephenie Meyer's massively successful commercial enterprise, whereas, say, the Quileute Nation itself is not. In a recent *New York Times* op-ed article called "Sucking the Quileute Dry," Angela Riley brings attention to this crucial discrepancy:

"Twilight" has made all things Quileute wildly popular: Nordstrom.com sells items from Quileute hoodies to charms bearing a supposed Quileute werewolf tattoo. And a tour company hauls busloads of fans onto the Quileute reservation daily. Yet the tribe has received no payment for this commercial activity. Meanwhile, half of Quileute families still live in poverty. (Riley, 2010)

Riley suggests that the Quileute "should be able to have a say in, and benefit financially from, outsiders' use of their cultural property" (Riley, 2010). This novel (though it shouldn't be) but practical stance reflects the marriage of the two kinds of reflexive embrace described here: a re-appropriation of the mass-mediated representation of the Quileute that affords both autonomy for them to voice their own narrative and a financial, or at least promotional, stake in the media success their cultural history helped to produce. Riley's response, through the lens of participatory culture, does not see the *Twilight* texts as fixed entities to be taken at face value or chastised through critique, but rather as mutable features of a media landscape that we participate in shaping.

---

administered by University of Arizona, sent May 5, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> <http://shiffthepowertothepeople.squarespace.com/>

### Conclusion: Toward a MLE of Reflexivity

Any text that we might choose to use in our classrooms will come already surrounded by assumptions and judgments about its cultural value, which students themselves will inevitably articulate and wish to debate. The crux is surely that they should be able to question the processes by which such judgments are made, as well as their social origins and functions, as part of their study of the text. (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 5)

When Buckingham and Sefton-Green wrote this injunction in 1994, the internet was hardly a twinkle in the eye of the average household. Both scholars have since published extensively on the topic of MLE,<sup>28</sup> and the affordances of new media have figured heavily into the emerging literature on (new) media literacy and learning. The missing piece of their statement about what MLE “should be” can be found in Jenkins’ (2006; 2010) model of participatory culture, which he and other scholars see as an ever-growing grassroots phenomenon, as evidenced by the aforementioned examples of participatory *Twilight* fandom and discursive debate. This missing piece involves going beyond the (also crucial) stages of questioning and analyzing media artifacts in context; an MLE of reflexivity would support participation in the form of creative media production, to materialize these analytic judgments in the culturescape, thereby transforming the initial media object and co-constructing its social meanings.

Jenkins (2010) introduces eleven core concepts that he believes “are the skills some youths are learning through participatory culture, but they are also the skills that all youths need to learn if they are going to be equal participants in the world of tomorrow” (p. 34). As I mentioned briefly, one of these core concepts is *simulation*, or the ability to use evidence to see the underlying model of any kind of dynamic system. To unpack the kind of simulations wherein models of personhood are being represented by the mass media, such as “Native American” or “romantic hero,” an understanding of simulation is especially powerful. It allows one to calibrate the integrity of different, often competing, models for representing people—models that converge with the lived reality of those represented (and of anyone else who incorporates those models into their world view).

*Judgment*, another one of Jenkins’ eleven core concepts, operates in tandem with simulation with respect to media representations:

Judgment requires not simply logic but also an understanding of how different media institutions and cultural communities operate. Judgment works not simply on knowledge as the product of traditional expertise but also on the process by which grassroots communities work together to generate and authenticate new information. (p. 84)

This understanding of judgment shifts the authority of knowledge production away from the seemingly transcendent power of “traditional expertise,” traditional media producers and institutionalized sources of information. Where simulation calls for understanding *how* or *why* a model operates, judgment asks *where* it comes

<sup>28</sup> In fact, both are contributors to the recently compiled Manifesto for Media Education, available at <http://www.manifestoformediaeducation.co.uk>.

from and *who* the stakeholders are. Incorporating this kind of emphasis into MLE would contribute not only to the careful evaluation of mass-mediated information, but to the transformation of media consumers into media designers and producers. Recognizing that an author, another human being, lies behind all the media objects one experiences sheds light on the validity of one's own authorial voice.

Jenkins acknowledges that this kind of judgment has always been present in literacy education, but his discussion of it in the context of new media "underscores that judgment operates differently in an era of distributed cognition and collective intelligence" (p. 83). The internet and other new media technologies have shifted the onus of producing and safekeeping knowledge away from the elite expert and toward the self-correcting crowd. A primary example of this shift exists in *Wikipedia.org*, a participatory online encyclopedia that gains credibility as a citable source with every passing day. This image of how knowledge is produced and maintained should inform not only our approach to MLE, but the traditional "critical" media studies and cultural studies approaches to mass-mediated representations of identity. Through the lens of participatory culture, a reflexive stance is more effective than a merely critical one, because it recognizes its own power to act upon the cultural world and does so. Through reflexive media practices, critiques can and often should be leveled, but alternate scenarios are also imagined and materialized. Participatory media production adheres to the object of critique (or admiration), and becomes part of what it is and means in the social world. The *Twilight Saga* has catalyzed many varieties of audience participation, but it is especially worth our attention as a transformative, mutable cultural object whose social meanings are ever emergent and multiply authored.

### *Acknowledgements*

I am deeply indebted to Haley De Korne for incisive and exhaustive editing, and to Dr. Betsy Rymes for valuable advice and inspiration throughout the evolution of this paper. Thank you to my clever colleagues in the Spring 2011 seminar on *Mass Media and Schooling*, for your curiosity and honesty, and to Thomas Deis (for the same, out-of-school).

*Joanna L. Siegel is a doctoral student in Educational Linguistics at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. With a background in comparative literature, she seeks to take an interdisciplinary approach to research in language and learning, examining intersections of new media, creativity, multilingualism, and indigenous issues. Please contact her with questions or shared interests at josi@gse.upenn.edu.*

### **References**

- Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M. (1969). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Agha, A. (2007). *Language and social relations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Alvermann, D. & Hagood, M. (2000). Critical media literacy: Research, theory, and practice in "New Times." *The Journal of Educational Research*, 93(3), 193-

205.

- Amber. (2009, August 3). Twicon review! And it ain't good [Web log post]. *Rob My World*. Retrieved from <http://robmyworld.com/2009/08/03/twicon-review-and-it-aint-good/>
- Bainbridge, C. (Producer & Director), Fon, C. (Producer), Ludwick, L. (Producer), Diamond, N. (Director), & Hayes, J. (Director). (2009). *Reel Injun* [Motion picture]. United States: Domino Films.
- Black, R. (2008). *Adolescents and online fan fiction*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Blasingame, J. (2006). Interview with Stephenie Meyer. *Journal for Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49(7), 630-632.
- Bode, L. (2010). Transitional tastes: Teen girls and genre in the critical reception of *Twilight*. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 24(5), 717-719.
- Briggs, K. (2010, October 21). Exhibition: Quileute separate fact from fiction for 'Twilight' fans. *American Indian News Service*. Retrieved from <http://www.americanindiannews.org/2010/10/quileute-separate-fact-from-fiction-for-twilight-fans/>
- Buckingham, D. & Sefton-Green. (1994). *Cultural studies goes to school: Reading and teaching popular media*. London, UK: Taylor & Francis.
- Burgess, J. and Green, J. (2009). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Cameron, J. (Producer & Director) & Landau, J. (Producer). (2009). *Avatar* [Motion picture]. United States: Lightstorm Entertainment, Dune Entertainment, & Ingenious Film Partners.
- Carroll, L. (2008). 'Twilight' actor Taylor Lautner is eager to deliver 'naked' line, Master Driving. *MTV.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1587744/twilight-actor-taylor-lautner-eager-deliver-naked-line.jhtml>
- Churchill, W. (1995). *Since predator came: Notes from the struggle for American Indian liberation*. Littleton, CO: Aigis Publications.
- Concerned. (2009, November 20). Re: New Moon—old stereotypes? [Web log comment]. *Native American Legal Update*. Retrieved from <http://www.nativelegalupdate.com/2009/11/articles/new-moon-old-stereotypes/>
- DeBarros, A., Memmott, C., & Minzesheimer, B. (2009, April 8). Book Buzz: What's New on the list and in publishing. *USA Today*. Retrieved from [http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2009-04-08-book-buzz\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2009-04-08-book-buzz_N.htm)
- Derrick. (2009, November 20). Re: New Moon—old stereotypes? [Web log comment]. *Native American Legal Update*. Retrieved from <http://www.nativelegalupdate.com/2009/11/articles/new-moon-old-stereotypes/>
- Dickerson, P. (2009, November 29). Twilight fiction doesn't always jibe with Quileute legend. *Peninsula Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.peninsuladailynews.com/article/20091130/news/311309987>
- Dobuzinskiz, A. (2010, June 28). Native American actors see new image in "Twilight." *Reuters*. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/06/29/us-twilight-idUSTRE65J2U320100629>
- Eyre, C. (Producer & Director), Alexie, S., Bressler, C., Estes, L., Rosenfelt, S., & Skinner, D. (Producers). (1998). *Smoke Signals* [Motion picture]. United States: Miramax Films.
- Ewen, S. & Ewen, E. (2006). *Typecasting: On the arts and sciences of human inequality*.



New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.

- Farrand, L. & Mayer, T. (1919). Quileute Tales. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 32(124), 251-279.
- Fleur, D. (2011). Beauty and the beautiful beast. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 26(67), 41-55.
- Godfrey, W., Mooradian, G. (Producers) & Hardwicke, C. (Director). (2008). *Twilight* [Motion picture]. United States: Summit Entertainment.
- Godfrey, W., Morgan, M. (Producers) & Weitz, C. (Director). (2009). *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* [Motion picture]. United States: Summit Entertainment.
- Godfrey, W., Rosenfelt, K. (Producers) & Slade, D. (Director). (2010). *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* [Motion picture]. United States: Summit Entertainment.
- Guedel, G. (2009, November 20). New Moon—old stereotypes? [Web log post]. *Native American Legal Update*. Retrieved from <http://www.nativelegalupdate.com/2009/11/articles/new-moon-old-stereotypes/>
- Howard, J. R. (1970). American Indians: Goodbye to Tonto. In Howard, J. R. (ed.) *Awakening Minorities: American Indians, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans* (pp. 27-36). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Interview with Stephenie Meyer. (2006). *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(7), 630-632.
- Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Clinton, K., Weigel, M., and Robison, A. (2010). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. MacArthur Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.newmedialiteracies.org/files/working/NMLWhitePaper.pdf>
- Kafai, Y. & Peppler, K. (2011). Youth, technology, and DIY: Developing participatory competencies in creative media production. *Review of Research in Education*, 35(1), 89-119.
- Kellner, D. & Share, J. (2005). Towards critical media literacy: Core concepts, debates, organizations, and policy. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 26(3), 369-386.
- Kinkaid, J. (1992, May 03). Who gets to tell their stories? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/03/books/who-gets-to-tell-their-stories.html?src=pm>
- Kokkola, L. (2010). Virtuous vampires and voluptuous vamps: Conventions reconsidered in Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" Series. *Children's Literature in Education* ("Online First"), 1-15. Doi: 10.1007/s10583-010-9125-9.
- Koltay, T. (2011). The media and the literacies: Media literacy, information literacy, digital literacy. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(2), 211-221.
- Lighton, L. (Producer), & Cromwell, J. (Director). (1930). *Tom Sawyer* [Motion picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.
- Livingstone, S. (2004). Media literacy and the challenge of new information and communication technologies. *The Communication Review*, 7, 3-17.
- Media Awareness Network. (2010). Common portrayals of Aboriginal people. *Media Awareness Network*. Retrieved from [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/aboriginal\\_people/aboriginal\\_portrayals.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/aboriginal_people/aboriginal_portrayals.cfm)
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-dimensional man*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- Mercieri, A. & Ward, E. (2009, September 28). Quileute Nation chooses Reelzchannel as first-ever television network on Tribal lands [Press Release]. Retrieved from [http://64.38.12.138/boardx/topic.asp?TOPIC\\_ID=38479](http://64.38.12.138/boardx/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=38479)
- Meyer, S. (2005). *Twilight: A novel*. New York, NY: Little, Brown & Company.
- Meyer, S. (2006). *New Moon: A novel*. New York, NY: Little, Brown & Company.
- Meyer, S. (2007). *Eclipse: A novel*. New York, NY: Little, Brown & Company.
- Meyer, S. (2008). *Breaking Dawn: A novel..* New York, NY: Little, Brown & Company.
- Millar, S. (Producer) & Penn, A. (Director). (1970). *Little Big Man* [Motion picture]. United States: Cinema Center Films.
- Miller, L. (2008, July 30). Touched by a vampire. *Salon.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.salon.com/books/review/2008/07/30/Twilight/>
- Mann, M., Lowry, H., & Robinson, J. (Producers), & Mann, M. (Director). (1992). *Last of the Mohicans* [Motion picture]. United States: Morgan Creek Productions.
- Multinesia. (2011, June 23). American Indian Actors at Autry Museum [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://multinesia.wordpress.com/2011/06/23/american-indian-actors-at-autry-museum-2/>
- Murray, R. (2008). Taylor Lautner Interview – Twilight at Comic Con 2008. *About.com*. Retrieved from <http://video.about.com/movies/Taylor-Lautner-Interview.htm>
- NAMLE. (2011). Official web site of National Association for Media Literacy Educators. Retrieved from <http://namle.net>
- Native Village. (2009). Native Americans outraged over Twilight. *Native Village Youth and Education News*, 194(4), Retrieved from <http://www.nativevillage.org/Archives/2009%20Archives/Feb%201%202009%20News/2-1-09%20I194%20V4/Native%20Americans%20Outraged%20over%20Twilight%20Fraud%20Action%20Alert.htm>
- Reese, D. (2009, November 29). We saw NEW MOON on Friday... [Web log post]. *American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL)*. Retrieved from <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2009/11/we-saw-new-moon-on-friday.html>
- Riley, Angela. (2010, February 7). Sucking the Quileute dry. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/08/opinion/08riley.html>
- Ritzer, G. (1993). *The McDonaldization of society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Ruby, R. & Brown, J. (1986). *A guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Rymes, B. (2011). Deference, denial, and beyond: A repertoire approach to mass media and schooling. *Review of Research in Education*, 35(1), 208-238.
- Schain, D. (Producer) & Ortega, K. (2006). *High School Musical* [Motion picture]. United States: Disney Channel Original Movie.
- Scott, A. O. (2010, June 29). Global warming among the undead. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://movies.nytimes.com/2010/06/30/movies/30twilight.html>
- Spencer, C. (2011, May 5). The impact of stereotypes ["Stolen Identities" US Senate Hearing]. Retrieved from <http://indian.senate.gov/hearings/upload/CHASKE-TESTIMONY-5-5-docx.pdf>

- Tucker, N. (2011, May 3). American Indians object to 'Geronimo' as code for Bin Laden raid. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/american-indians-object-to-geronimo-as-code-name-for-bin-laden-raid/2011/05/03/AF2FZIJF\\_story.html?tid=sm\\_facebook](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/american-indians-object-to-geronimo-as-code-name-for-bin-laden-raid/2011/05/03/AF2FZIJF_story.html?tid=sm_facebook)
- Wente, J. (2010, January 29). Avatar and Twilight: Native representation on screen 2.0 [Web log post]. *Reel Injun Blog*. Retrieved from <http://www.reelinjunthemovie.com/site/blog/guest-blog-jesse-wente/>
- Willett, R. (2009). Parodic practices: Amateur spoofs on video-sharing sites. In Buckingham, D. and Willett, R. (Eds.), *Video cultures: Media technology and everyday creativity* (pp. 115-132). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.