

THE RACE AND MEDIA READER

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INTRODUCTION: TEACHING/LEARNING ABOUT RACE

Racial prejudice and institutional racism remain major problems in the United States today. Whatever advances have been made over the years with respect to racial politics, the United States remains a nation deeply divided along racial fault lines, and race continues to matter tremendously when it comes to the distribution of education, jobs, housing, health care, justice, and political power. These injustices are perpetuated across a wide range of major institutions: political, economic, social, cultural, educational, religious, and otherwise. One of the most important such institutions, though, is "the media."¹ Put simply, "race" is a set of cultural and historical fictions that we tell ourselves over and over again on a daily basis—fictions that help to produce and maintain a hierarchical racial formation—and the media remains one of the primary sets of institutions where such stories circulate.

When I teach my undergraduate course on race and media, I try to underscore just how widespread such narratives are by giving my students a simple exercise. I put them into small groups and ask them to imagine that they've just met someone for the first time. Then I ask them to create a list of all the clues they might use—short of actually asking the other person directly—to figure out their new acquaintance's race. Two things invariably happen next.

First, my students always compile a *very* long list of possible clues. We fill the blackboard with dozens of physical traits, linguistic quirks, cultural practices, occupational characteristics, and other things that

might allow my students to figure out someone's race. To be sure, some of their suggestions are more unreliable (or, perhaps, more subtle) than others, and some of them do a better job of eliminating certain possibilities than they do in pinning down the right one. But my students never struggle to come up with multiple litmus tests that might help them solve the riddle at hand. In this respect, the narratives of race are incredibly easy to recognize and acknowledge.

Second, this exercise always makes my students *profoundly* uncomfortable. Regardless of their own racial/ethnic backgrounds, they recognize very quickly that most (if not all) of the potential distinguishing traits on their lists are rooted in highly dubious stereotypes. They know perfectly well, for example, that not all dishwashers are Latino/a and that not all lawyers are white. At the same time, however, they know that there are significant patterns in how different types of labor are distributed across different racial and ethnic populations. They may not like that those patterns are real. They may not actively want to use these sorts of stereotypes in their daily lives. But this exercise helps to remind my students that such stereotypes still actively (albeit often unconsciously) shape the "common sense" ways that my students move through the world. In this respect, the narratives of race are often exceptionally difficult to acknowledge—especially insofar as they remind my students that the world is not a simple meritocracy and that many of them often benefit substantially from such inequities.

There are several other important lessons about race and media that this exercise helps to convey to my students. For example, the fluency with which my students can spontaneously generate long lists of significant (if imperfect) markers of racial difference demonstrates just how well trained they are in the largely unspoken “rules” of racial and ethnic identification. It’s not a coincidence that, in nearly twenty years of using this exercise, the only students who have ever had obvious trouble contributing to the list-making process have been international students who had been in the country for less than a year. For everyone else—even nonnatives—living in the United States for any length of time is enough to impart an implicit, yet quite powerful, understanding of the existing racial order. We are socialized—early and often—to see racial and ethnic difference and to mentally place the people we encounter into (what we assume to be) their “proper” racial and ethnic categories on a daily basis.

The lists that my students construct also help to reveal how thoroughly our understanding of race—both individually and collectively—is shaped by mediated narratives and representations. Students (especially, though by no means exclusively, white students) who have had little to no actual life experience with racial and ethnic populations different from their own have nonetheless amassed a sizable body of knowledge (flawed though it often is) about those communities: what they look like, how they talk, what they eat, how they dress, what kind of music they like, what kind of jobs they have, and so on. When I ask my students how they “know” so much about a particular racial or ethnic group (even if they recognize, as they sometimes do, that much of their knowledge is actually wrong), they invariably cite television programs, newspaper stories, movies, video games, and other mass media texts as their primary sources of such information. In many cases (again, most often for white students), those media representations actually trump real life experiences, insofar as students will frequently identify their friends of other races as exceptions to the rule (i.e., the dominant media narrative) when it comes to what those racial populations are “really” like.

Additionally, this exercise helps to demonstrate that our fluency in recognizing racial differences is

actually a culturally and historically grounded phenomenon, rather than simply the “natural” by-product of recognizing “obvious” differences. Partially, this is because so many of the distinguishing characteristics that my students come up with are clearly rooted in culture, rather than nature. There’s nothing genetic, after all, about a taste for hip-hop or country music. More crucially, though, this exercise makes it easier to recognize other equally visible traits and characteristics that could be used to place the people around us into distinct identity categories of one sort or another yet somehow manage not to result in the sort of hierarchical social and political order that exists around race.

Handedness, for example, is a real distinction that exists between people that is very easy to spot in everyday public life: simply pay attention to which hand someone favors as they write, or eat, or press buttons, or pick up objects (and so on), and it’s usually obvious if they are right- or left-handed. Yet despite the ease with which we can distinguish “lefties” from “righties,” even in a crowd of total strangers, this is not a skill that most of us have honed very well, largely because handedness isn’t a form of identity that matters in the same way that race does. Though southpaws may claim that the world is still biased against them in noticeable ways—scissors don’t work properly, coffee mugs face backwards, and so on—they also generally recognize that these are not forms of discrimination that dramatically affect their chances to succeed in the world. There are no ghettos where left-handed people reside in disproportionate numbers because the economy and the housing market discriminate against them. Left-handers are not disproportionately stopped by the police, convicted of crimes, or sentenced to death. They are not routinely denied admission to college or turned down for jobs and promotions. Nor are they consistently portrayed in the mainstream media—either in fictional or nonfictional contexts—as more lazy, stupid, immoral, dishonest, sexually “loose” (and so on) than right-handers.

In contrast, all of those inequities (and many more) *do* exist in significant ways when it comes to different racial and ethnic identities. We typically don’t pay attention to handedness in the way that

we pay attention to race, because our social order doesn't systematically disadvantage lefties in the way that it does people of color. Put simply, race is a form of difference that makes a huge difference when it comes to one's opportunities for success and happiness—and this is a byproduct of political, cultural, and historical circumstances, rather than the “natural” order of things.

One final lesson that arises out of this exercise involves the complicated ways that racial identity is both a personal, private, and individual phenomenon (you are who/what you understand yourself to be) and a social, cultural, and mediated phenomenon (you are who/what other people understand you to be). After my students and I spend a while discussing the various issues described above, I always ask them to use their finely honed skills at placing people into their “proper” racial categories to figure out what *my* racial and ethnic identity actually is. Their answers to this question always vary wildly—and are almost always wrong. It is, in many respects, an unfair question to pose, since even someone with a finely tuned sense of subtle racial cues may find it difficult to look past my pink skin and pick up on the full “truth” that I am part black, part white, and part Native American.² While I generally think of (and refer to) myself as “mixed,” this act of self-labeling provides no guarantees for how other people categorize me. It's been my experience that most (though by no means all) strangers and new acquaintances see the color of my skin and read me as white (at least insofar as they let on), even though that's not how I have ever identified myself. Moreover, the process of “outing” myself as “mixed” still frequently leads people (especially those who have deeply internalized the “one-drop” rule of racial identity) to decide that I'm really black. The complicated story of my own racial identity (and its fraught relationship with the dominant narratives of how race is supposed to function) is by no means unique, of course. The world is filled with people whose family trees are just as jumbled as mine. But telling my story to my students helps to underscore the fact that our racial identities are *not* simply roles that we perform from within based on our own knowledge of who/what we “really” are: they're just as much roles that are routinely, repeatedly, and

automatically imposed on us by other people (and, of course, we do precisely the same to them).

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The goal of this reader is to provide an introductory survey of some of the major issues and debates about the role that the media plays in the ongoing struggles around race and racism in the United States today. One of the major principles I used in selecting specific authors and essays for this volume was to insist that the various chapters focus on questions of *racism*, rather than just race. Put simply, race only matters enough to make it the focal point of a university course because it remains an issue that is politically charged, fraught, and deadly serious. To teach race without teaching racism is to pretend that the world is somehow a level playing field or that race is nothing more than a matter of incidental curiosity, rather than one of the primary mechanisms by which US society is sorted, separated, and structured into the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the central and the marginal. The essays collected here come from a wide variety of disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological perspectives. They focus on a broad range of media practices, racial and ethnic populations, and historical moments. But they all treat race as a fundamentally political phenomenon that matters deeply when it comes to how the world is organized.

As a topic, “race and media” covers an exceptionally large and diverse territory, and no single volume can possibly do justice to the full range of scholarship and criticism encompassed by such a label. The first draft of the table of contents for this volume was almost twice as long as that for the book you now hold in your hands—and, even then, I had already passed over dozens of other worthy essays in whittling that preliminary lineup of readings down to a not-quite-manageable size. I wish this collection could be longer and more exhaustive in its coverage than it is, but the economics of publishing militate against 700-page anthologies.

The clustering and ordering of these essays is both purposeful and (almost) arbitrary. While I've placed the individual pieces into thematic sections

that speak to major analytic concerns with respect to the study of race and media, many—perhaps even most—of the essays collected herein speak across more than one of these themes. Kembrew McLeod's essay on sampling and hip-hop, for instance, has just as much to say about issues of race and technology as it does about the politics of appropriation. Grant Farred's analysis of the challenges that Yao Ming poses, as a Chinese national, to the NBA's "post-racial" branding strategies could fit just as easily in the section on globalization as it does in the section on institutions. And so on. As is the case with race itself, the attempt to craft neat, discrete identifying categories—and then to impose those categories onto a world that is inevitably much messier than that—is inherently flawed.

It is also worth remembering that while racism is certainly not a problem that is unique to the United States, racial formations (see chapter 2) also vary significantly across both geopolitical borders and historical contexts—enough so as to place sharp limitations on how well specific analyses of race and racism travel across either space or time. While some of the readings collected here come from (and speak to) racial formations elsewhere around the world, the full range of global variations with respect to race and racism is far beyond the scope of this project.

I'd like to close this introduction with a warning that I always give to my students at the start of my course on race and media: there are no easy answers to the problem of racism in any of the essays collected here. There's a recurring tendency in US culture to try and reframe difficult issues so as to make them seem much cleaner and easier than they really are and to offer up simple solutions that do more to wish the problem away than to actually resolve it. The classic sitcom episode about racism, for instance, tends to reduce the subject to nothing more than a

matter of easily correctable personal prejudices and pretends that most racial conflicts can be solved in twenty-two minutes (leaving time for commercials) with a few simple clichés ("What we learned today, children, is that people who look different from us on the outside are really just like us on the inside."). It's sweet. It's happy. It gets us to the next commercial break without upsetting the sponsors. But if racism were truly that simple, it would have disappeared ages ago, and there would be no need for anyone to teach (or learn) about how racism works.

Notes

1. In colloquial usage, "the media" is an exceptionally loose and baggy term. It encompasses everything from blockbuster Hollywood films seen by tens of millions of people to pirate radio stations with audiences that (on a good day) number in the hundreds, from dance-pop divas with massive promotional machines behind them to independent blogger-journalists who rely solely on word of mouth to attract readers. In many—perhaps even most—contexts, when people talk about "the media," what they *really* mean is "the mainstream media": i.e., the various institutions that occupy (and, in many ways, create) the ostensible center of the culture, most of which are wholly owned subsidiaries of the handful of multinational conglomerates that control the majority of the world's media outlets. This volume uses the term in its much broader sense, to include the full range of media outlets: big and small, powerful and weak, central and marginal, dominant and oppositional.
2. To be clear, this description is itself a problematic fiction, since it depends on the false notion that race is a simple genetic trait that is passed on from parents to their children. To the extent that this form of bad science lies at the root of how race is most commonly understood in the United States, however, mapping out my heritage with these types of fractions is the "proper" way to try and fit my racial identity into the standard narratives of how race works.