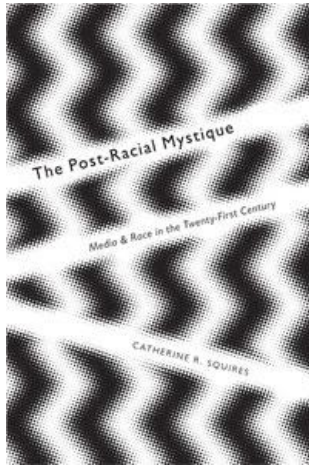


Catherine R. Squires, **The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014, 243 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Mary Beltrán

University of Texas at Austin, Texas, USA



Catherine R. Squires' *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* sheds timely and cogent light on a confounding subject as she interrogates how ideals of postracialism have been deployed in U.S. politics and in print and popular media in the last decade and examines the impact of this rhetoric on media audiences. Notions that we have entered a post-racial era, she notes, have influenced entertainment media and conservative politics and have convinced some Americans that race is no longer salient in relation to U.S. social divides. Simultaneously, however, she reminds readers, disparities with respect to socioeconomic status and such issues as incarceration and unequal political representation continue unabated. Through a series of well chosen and meticulously analyzed case studies, Squires illuminates how postracialism came to be part of the national imaginary and makes a convincing argument for why it ultimately cannot camouflage the ways in which race still matters in U.S. social life.

In the first chapter, "Post-Racial News: Covering the 'Joshua Generation,'" Squires decisively illuminates her subject through a content analysis of when and how the term post-racial has been deployed in the print news media, tracing it back to its first usage in 1976, when it was used to describe then-presidential candidate Jimmy Carter's approach to his campaign. She finds the term was not commonly used, however, until the 1990s (it was applied to golfer Tiger Woods), and that it grew in popularity in the 2000s. Squires traces the rise of what she terms a conservative postracialism taken up by Republicans in the early 2000s. As she notes, Republicans, in an attempt to restore the party's image, positioned themselves as the "post-racial vanguard in politics due to [the party's] rejection of race-aware politics and appreciation of individuals of color based on merit" (p. 32). These ideals were also embraced by conservative pundits such as George Will, who began to imply in his columns that any focus on the "racial" was in fact racist. Unsurprisingly, Squires found the largest spike in the usage of "post-racial" in 2008, alongside discussion of the campaign and election of Barack Obama as U.S. president. Commentary in this period often declared Obama's election proof that the United States had overcome previous problems of racial inequities. This reframing of U.S. race relations typically did not include discussion of social or political inequity, she found. This was followed the next year by discussions that challenged those assumptions, however, as well as increasingly ironic or pessimistic usage of the term by journalists. Squires finds the dream of post-racial politics fading in the print media by 2010, but reminds readers that mixed-race celebrities and films with diverse ensemble casts, "post-racial people and cultural artifacts" (p. 54), have continued to be foregrounded within popular culture, in large part as reminders of the dream.

In the book's second chapter, "Brothers from Another Mother: Rescripting Religious Ties to Overcome the Racial Past," Squires turns to another way in which the "postracial" has been pursued, as political affiliations have been forged across nonracial lines through encouraging ties strictly based on religion, nation, or conservative values. To hone in on this topic, she analyzes and conducts a reception study of *Justice Sunday III*, a nationally televised and Web-cast event sponsored in 2006 by the Family Research Council, an organization with close ties to the Republican Party, conservative think tanks, and Christian organizations. She also conducts a reception study of African American viewers, who later watched the televised event in focus groups. Staged at an African American church in Philadelphia, *Justice Sunday III* showcased speeches by several black conservative leaders, including Dr. Alveda King, an anti-abortion proponent who is the niece of Martin Luther King, Jr., and white Christian Right leaders and politicians such as the late Jerry Falwell and Edwin Meese (who as attorney general in Reagan's administration tried to do away with affirmative action legislation). Notably, in her reception study, Squires finds that participants enjoyed the speeches by African American speakers fairly uncritically, but responded to the white speakers more skeptically. While Squires' research in this regard is limited in focus, her findings offer a window into the potential strategies and success of efforts by Republicans in the 2000s and early 2010s to encourage nonwhite voters to join them in a post-racial conservative Christian agenda.

Two other chapters of the book turn to examination of the meanings ascribed to mixed-race families in entertainment television through focus on one couple, Crosby and Jasmine, on the sitcom *Parenthood* (NBC, 2010–2014) and study of how viewers responded to these characters. As Squires argues in "The Post-Racial Family: *Parenthood* and the Politics of Interracial Relationships on TV," while mixed-race families and figures on television and elsewhere in popular culture are often held up as proof of racial progress, it is important to examine each example closely. She finds, for example, that *Parenthood* is ambiguous at best in its treatment of Jasmine, who is African American, as she and Crosby, who is white, negotiate a relationship; this is precipitated by Jasmine surprising Crosby with a son, Jabbar, he didn't know he had fathered five years prior. In narrative choices that Squires describes as post-racial, issues of race and racism tended to be downplayed in the treatment of the couple and Jasmine's family within the series, even while the couple's status as interracial was highly visible as a narrative device. Squires' analysis underscores how traditional stereotypes and postfeminist discourses of motherhood influence the construction of mixed-race families on television, and in relation, how some mixed-race families appear to be more palatable to television viewers. She comes to these findings also based on her audience study in the subsequent chapter, "Post-Racial Audiences: Discussions of *Parenthood's* Interracial Couple." In this study, Squires explores how *Parenthood* viewers discussed Jasmine and Crosby in online forums. The wide range of responses that she found included viewers who appeared to judge Jasmine harshly in relation to racialized stereotypes and others who used these discussions as moments to challenge such views and "subtly call out their fellow viewers for continuing to not 'see' racism or sexism" (p. 142).

In her last chapter, "Not 'Post-Racial,' Race-Aware: Blogging Race in the Twenty-First Century," Squires makes a novel and useful addition to scholarship on post-racial rhetoric by turning her lens to bloggers on racial politics who have critiqued this rhetorical turn. In analysis of commentary on the blogs *Racialicious*, *Colorlines*, and *The Black Snob*, she finds that these "race-aware" discussions consistently

and persuasively reminded readers about the realities of lived experiences by marginalized groups in the United States “in ways that refocused attention on power and privilege, not post-racial visibility and individualism” (p. 178). This study serves as an important reminder of the multitude of opinions that may be accessible to American media audiences as they make sense of discussions of race and national identities.

Ultimately, Squires makes a strong and convincing case for the continuing hold of post-racial mythology on U.S. culture and particularly U.S. politics. She concludes that this has been enabled in part by selective collective memory that supports notions of the “racial innocence” (p. 201) of white Americans, even while it is more and more clear that this in fact prevents understanding of disparities that still exist along racial lines. One of the major contributions of *The Post-Racial Mystique* is that Squires helps readers pinpoint and understand ways in which this rhetoric has been deployed in the media, and its short-term and long-term impact—no small feat.