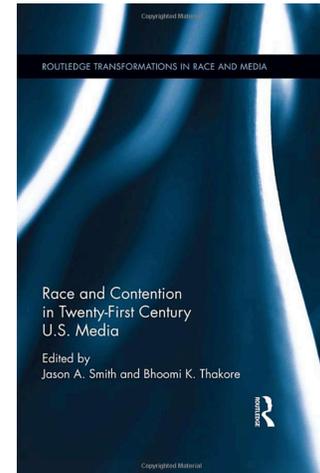


Jason A. Smith and Bhoomi K. Thakore (Eds.), **Race and Contention in Twenty-First Century U.S. Media**, New York and London: Routledge, 2016, 240 pp., \$49.94 (paperback), \$140.00 (hardcover).

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Whether planned or not, the publication of **Race and Contention in Twenty-First Century U.S. Media** is well timed both from an academic and a sociopolitical perspective. One of the editors, Bhoomi K. Thakore, explains its academic value in the conclusion, stating that “there has been limited focus on the role of critical race theory in the world of media” (p. 231). Sociopolitically, the latest events that preceded the book’s publication are dated back to 2013 and 2014, when the case of George Zimmerman agitated TV viewing audiences and the shooting of Michael Brown spurred unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, and other parts of the United States. Current political events continue to keep the issues of race and immigration at the center of sociopolitical discourse shaped by extreme polarization between the supporters of opposite political camps. This is not, however, the conflict that the book authors refer to because such polarization is happening within the system determined by the thriving dominant racial order and maintained by multiple social agencies, including media. Whether watching televised news, reading newspaper features, watching movies and online videos, or generating content on social media, content creators and audiences actively support the notion of color-blind racism. They attribute racism to certain individuals rather than to the structure itself; they, being misled by media representations of “diversity” and “model minorities,” believe in inclusiveness and equal opportunities for all; and they continue to perpetuate the stereotypes of the racial others. The range of such stereotypes widened by the end of the 20th century and the beginning of 21st century by including not only negative, threatening, and ugly, but also more positive views, which, however, still hold minorities inferior to Whites. From different chapters of the book, a reader learns that even when the dominant majority acts in antiracist ways, be it about defending a person of color or cathartically watching a racialized film, producers and audiences place the focus on the goodness of the “White savior,” which serves the goal of further normalizing Whiteness and maintaining its hegemony.

The book goes against one particular naiveté related to the ideas of progress and meliorism. There is a common assumption that society develops in a linear manner, from unjust to more harmonious, by the means of human effort. In the context of mediated racial stereotypes, such historical development could go through five stages: exclusion of the racial others from media products, covering them as a threat, depicting interracial confrontation, disseminating stereotypical portrayals of the minorities, and, finally, achieving integrated coverage (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1985). This process implies naïve linearity, where time appears to be the main actor in solving a complex societal problem. However, *Race and Contention* rejects the simplified notion of abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) and, in particular, meliorism chapter by chapter, showcasing that color-blindness does not make society progress. The perceptions of the present as the “postracial era” lead if not to the silencing of race-related issues then to



giving them less importance, less complexity, and less in-depth analysis in mainstream media (e.g., Vaught, chapter 13). The matters go beyond media production, delivery, and reception to the level of lawmaking that limits the media's role in satisfying information needs of local segregated communities (e.g., Abreu, chapter 1).

Race and Contention is divided into four parts. The first part of the book deals with the structural view of media in the world of media conglomeration, content homogeneity, and commercialization. While chapter 1 describes the challenges lawmakers and policymakers face working toward ensuring the proper functioning of media institutions, chapters 2 and 3 discuss ethnic media as a moneymaking tool and a platform for activism. The significance of chapter 2 is in how it deviates from the mainstream media economy formula where only the majority, White audiences are seen as a commodity for advertisers. Hunter and Proffitt demonstrate that Bounce TV, a network that broadcasts commercialized entertainment content targeting African Americans, can be financially successful. In chapter 3, Riemer shares an optimistic stance in describing new media as a powerful tool of social activism that creates online spaces for marginalized minority voices.

The optimism, however, ends in Part II of the book, which illuminates the lack of racial diversity in media-making circles. In chapter 4, Erigha discusses the exclusion of Asian, Black, and Latino directors from the process of film production. Not only are minority directors underrepresented in major Hollywood studios and make films with lower budgets, but they are also less likely to produce movies in mainstream and, thus, profitable genres of action, science fiction, and fantasy. At the same time, they are more likely to create products in the genres that are stereotypically associated with their ethnic backgrounds (e.g., African Americans directing music videos, Latinos making dramas, and Asians producing horror/thriller movies). Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus on strategies (intentional or not) that media makers of color use to navigate the industry. On one end of the spectrum, there is the exaggeration of racial stereotypical traits demonstrated by the case of Sofia Vergara, who has become "the empty-headed Latina bombshell stereotype" (p. 90; chapter 6, Vidal-Ortiz) to rise to mega-stardom. Then there is the strategy of compromising one's racial/ethnic/national identity to fit "U.S. American imaginary," as exemplified by the story of Los Angeles comedian Carlos Mencia. Mencia's Honduran background makes him "unintelligible" as it does not fall within any existing Latino-related cognitive category. Interestingly, Mencia is criticized not only by those who represent the majority but also by "intelligible" minorities (chapter 5, Cardenas). On the other end of the spectrum, there is a complete, often unconscious, rejection of one's racial self, showcased by producer, writer, and actress Mindy Kaling who appears to be "race-less" in the ways she embraces Whiteness in *The Mindy Project* (chapter 7, Sood).

Part III of the book continues the discussion of color-blindness and systemic racism in relation to visual media texts. In the analysis of films with central Asian American characters, Foster (chapter 8) makes it clear that superficial multiculturalism is accepted and can exist in cinematic representations of American society only if the hegemony of White power is not questioned. Furthermore, the author suggests that the analyzed films contribute to the validation of a tri-racial society where Asian Americans "assist the group on top (Whites) in their mission to maintain superiority over the group on the bottom (Blacks)" (p. 129). An excellent analysis of the film *12 Years a Slave* is offered by Mueller and Issa in chapter 9. The authors indicate four strategies to maintain the illusion of harmonious, postracial society.

In the movie, racism is attributed to a group of individuals, a time period, or a location, which deemphasizes the flaws in the system as a whole. The suffering of an exceptional man, Solomon Northrup, is "qualified," that is, is distinguished from that of "implicit Black others" (p. 137). Mueller and Issa write:

Northrup remains unyielding if at times only internally, regularly making his unique status with the claim "I'm not supposed to be here" (i.e., *in* slavery—again, neatly segregated). Still, these continual references raise an ideologically hidden question: Who *is* supposed to find themselves enslaved? (p. 136, emphasis in original)

Further, material foundations of slavery, that is, the economic system based on exploitation, are obscured in the film. Finally, the knowledge of past atrocities is expected to become the essence of antiracism as if it is enough for the White viewer *to know* in order to eliminate the guilt and proclaim egalitarianism. Going through Part III of the book, the reader realizes that visual texts and reactions to them are predetermined by the dictatorship of the White viewer. This theme is elaborated in chapter 10 (Brunsmas, Chapman, and Lellock) in the analysis of Electric Daisy Carnival online promotional videos. Despite the culture of electronic dance music, which promotes universal values of peace, love, unity, and respect, the analysis shows that racial minorities are greatly underrepresented in the promotional videos and, if shown, they are used to perpetuate the dominant racial ideology determined by "gazing White men."

The chapters in Part IV continue with the discussion of the media's role in supporting the dominant racial order. Here the focus is on information and opinion gatekeepers who select, frame, and analyze cultural products and sociopolitical events, be they professional film reviewers, TV program hosts and experts, journalists, bloggers, and social media users. Once again, it is argued that the era in which we live is perceived as being "postracial." Gonzalez-Sobrino, Goss, and Hughey (chapter 11) indicate that while the presence of the racial others is acknowledged in society and their perception as being a threat have greatly diminished, awareness of other groups' interests has become nonexistent. Bringing insights from the reviews of racialized films from 1990 to 2004, the authors discuss how film reviewers react to racial clichés used in cinema, exhibit political correctness surrounding racialized issues, and minimize the importance of these issues through color-blind expressions. Ballinas (chapter 12) expands the notion of race and racial stereotyping by analyzing the stories of two successful young Americans, Sebastien de la Cruz and Nina Davuluri, who received insulting feedback on social media after their public performances. Derogatory tweets, however, are not the objects of analysis. Ballinas investigates two themes that emerged from media coverage and commentary about the incidents: (1) diverting attention from systemic racism by focusing on a small group of racist Tweeter users, and (2) reducing the depictions of American citizens of color to being n-generation immigrants (still, *The Other*) who have achieved the American Dream. In chapter 14, Shahin comes to a similar conclusion examining how Western mainstream media make sense of complex phenomena like the Islamic punk subculture taqwacore. Using the framework of Orientalism (Said, 1978), the author reflects on American and UK media coverage that questions the authenticity of the taqwacore movement and represents it as the rebellion of "good," second- and third-generation Muslims against "bad," backward, traditional first-generation Muslims. Chapter 13 by Vaught reads like a culmination of the book, an anti-ode to the "postracial" era. Although the number of African American experts invited to national television networks has grown over the years, their commentary

often lacks "intellectual depth of analysis" (p. 199). Black studies scholars who could offer such analysis are rarely invited by mainstream media to comment on significant public events.

Race and Contention offers a systematic investigation pertaining to several areas of study: normative, media production, text interpretation, and message reception. While the authors extensively use Internet-based media as sources of information about audience reactions to racialized media texts, what the book could benefit from is firsthand evidence from the media audience. Further, the editors note in the conclusion that the new generation of media users (Generation Z) is not only the most tech-savvy and connected, but also characterized by its short attention span. Thus two future questions that are yet to be answered are (1) how attention deficit and ubiquity of new media alter lived cultures, and (2) to what extent the process through which meaning is derived from mediated racialized texts depends on specific situations in which constantly distracted individuals consume media.

Another aspect that the book could have covered in more detail is related to the role of new media in contemporary, seemingly "race neutral," American society. Film and television are well-established types of media, and so are newspapers, even if they publish content digitally. To what extent does the analysis of these media reflect the novelty of functions that the digital world offers today? It is important, thus, to put more emphasis on what Internet-based media bring to the table. Promotional and other videos posted online, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media, websites, and Wikipedia, among others, provide abundant information about the publics' reading of racialized content, but do these media have the power to lessen systemic racism? Only chapter 3 touches on this topic, discussing new media's potential in serving as a platform for social and political activism.

Overall, the book occupies a unique niche in media studies and related fields by looking at the production, content, and reception of racialized mediated texts through the lenses of critical race theory. The authors use a variety of theoretical approaches and methods to come to the same conclusion: Although incidents of overt racism are not that common nowadays, the existing social order is far from just. But nobody chooses to talk about it anymore.

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