

RACE AND THE MEDIA

by John L. Jackson, Jr.



Anthropology in a Mass Mediated World

Anthropology has a complicated connection to the study of racial differences. The discipline was responsible for helping to validate folk assumptions about discrete and hierarchical racial categories in the early 20th century, coating those popular assumptions with the veneer of respectable “science.” Currently, however, anthropology is leading the charge to renounce some of the very same categorical racial distinctions it once canonized.

The American Anthropological Association’s award-winning exhibit (*Race: Are We So Different?*) chronicles some of that sordid history, making a three-pronged argument for why race has never accurately divided human populations into neat, mutually exclusive groups: “Race is a recent human invention. Race is about culture, not biology. Race and racism are embedded in institutions and everyday life.” The exhibit is designed as a form of “public anthropology,” an attempt to demonstrate some of what anthropology can offer to ongoing popular debates about the role of race in our collective lives. This ambitious exhibit enters an overcrowded public sphere where mass media offerings constantly battle over depictions of race and racism, depictions that anthropologists have a hand in crafting and criticizing.

Our understandings of racial differences are greatly augmented by mass-mediated stories, by their ability to accentuate and disseminate racial themes all across the nation and the world. Mass media’s overall structure and ubiquity help to popularize certain understandings of race while rendering alternatives relatively invisible, even unthinkable. The way we gather information in the hyper-mediated 21st century of 24-hour news cycles offers sensationalized coverage of all things racial, from the latest drug bust of a celebrity athlete to the disappearance of white teenagers during Caribbean vacations. It also helps to create a different kind of daily living, with a heightened sense of racial awareness and a rendition of ordinary life that seems threatened by potential race-based eruptions at ev-

ery turn. And those eruptions need not be on our block—or even in our own hemisphere.

Media coverage of everything from South African apartheid to Chinese political upheavals encourages people to see race as a globally self-evident reality, something written on the bodies of human beings all across the planet. The speed of global communication helps to grease the wheels of racial thinking by allowing us to confidently imagine that we can see the same few racial groups no matter where on earth our news crews point their cameras. This makes it easier for us to impose our culturally specific racial categories on groups halfway across the globe, partly because they might look like the “foreigners” who recently moved in next door.

The fast-moving, non-stop pace of our current news cycle combines with an insatiable market in sensationalist and headline-grabbing controversies to dissuade many academics from fully entering the public fray with their research. Some faculty at leading universities feel that their colleagues will consider them less serious, less rigorous, less scholarly, if their work is too “popular,” too accessible, and too *public*. Many anthropologists share these professional concerns, but they also worry about how their work might circulate in popular forums for other reasons, especially since that often means losing control of how their ideas about culture are appropriated.



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That is part of what happened in the 1960s and 1970s with the “culture of poverty” notion that anthropologist Oscar Lewis fashioned from his ethnographic research with poor Mexican families. Lewis was talking about the structural causes of negative cultural adaptations, but by the time his idea made it to Capitol Hill and Bill Clinton’s welfare reform initiative in the 1990s, it was mostly shorn of any discussion of structural forces at all, emphasizing culture as its own original and sustaining cause for poverty among certain groups. That was an object lesson for many subsequent anthropologists, some of whom shrank back from public debates for fear of future misappropriations.

The American Anthropological Association’s aforementioned *RACE* exhibit is an attempt to institutionalize a distinctive voice for the discipline on the issue of race/racism in a mass mediated world where such remixes and re-appropriations are seemingly inevitable. Indeed, the current media landscape of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other ubiquitous social media all easily promote such expropriations.

Sensationalized Media Coverage

We live in a media universe that can not seem to get enough talk about race—and the more sensational the story, the better. The media appear to have several basic modes when engaging questions of race. There are the controversial headlines made when celebrities demonstrate blatant forms of racial insensitivity: Radio personality Don Imus getting fired for his comments about black women on the Rutgers University women’s basketball team; Michael Richards (Kramer from the popular NBC sitcom *Seinfeld*) melting down during a comedic performance and hurling racial epithets at black hecklers; Mel Gibson making anti-Semitic statements to police officers and being recorded on voicemail screaming racist comments in a rant against the mother of his children. These headlines are usually framed such that they shun the culprit for not demonstrating a level of racial enlightenment and decorum on which a post-Civil Rights America prides itself.

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan was criticized for “technological determinism” for his arguments about how the medium used to transmit a message has a fundamental, even central, impact on the message’s meaning and societal impact. I don’t want to sound too much like a technological determinist in my own claims about media representations of race, but, nonetheless, some of the prob-

lems with mass mediated treatments of race/racism today stem from the prominence of visual imagery (of television, film and the web) as the primary vehicles we use to tell popular stories about race. We demand to *see* race and racism in clear and conspicuous ways. Anything too subtle and complicated does not get picked up by the camera. This means that current versions of race and racism, versions less concrete and definitive than, say, “Whites Only” signs above water fountains or bodies in nooses hanging from trees, get passed over for stories that are more easily rendered in shocking still photographs and videos. Of course, this is all connected to a sound-bite culture that arguably privileges pithy quotations over the intricacies of careful and complex social analysis.

To understand 9/11 or the aftereffects of Hurricane Katrina—two traumatic national events with particularly racialized interpretations—is to understand how watching such events on television potentially changes the events themselves, as well as the people who watch them. This is a little like the fanciful notion that we are all living in our own private version of *The Truman Show*. In that film, Jim Carrey plays the lead character, Truman, whose every action is part of a television program that he isn’t aware he’s shooting. That isn’t to say that we are all, in a sense, just like Truman. Or at least, that isn’t the only lesson to be drawn. Instead, I am talking more about the kinds of lives lived by those television fans religiously watching Truman’s life as it develops from infancy to adulthood. Do they do so at the expense of their own stories? Does it increase or decrease their ability to empathize with this mass-mediated life? Does it have to mean living life vicariously, in a kind of self-alienated way? We are always seeing ourselves through the images technology helps us to craft, forgetting that images produce mythological reflections of our own culturally specific self-concepts, a point that the discipline of anthropology is particularly good at demonstrating.

In many ways, sensationalized media coverage of race/racism pivots on a version of voyeurism that is reminiscent of *The Truman Show*’s logic. A Louisiana-based Justice of the Peace who refuses to marry an inter-racial couple becomes a Trumanesque character who easily embodies all the negative things about our current commitments to race, negative things that we project onto others in a way that helps to let media audiences off the hook. Don Imus, Michael Richards, Mel Gibson and others provide indi-

vidualized bad guys who depict the story of race in *micro* as opposed to *macro* terms. These same stories offer main characters who inhabit our worst racial selves, characters defined against the grain of America's collective progress on issues of racial inclusion. There are still news stories about racial differences in education, employment, and overall social progress, but these are often told in similarly Hollywood-esque ways: looking for bad guys to demonize and defend against, as though all of society is not complicit in the reproduction of social difference and inequality—another quintessentially anthropological claim.

Race and 'Media Events'

Racial scandals, such as the ones mentioned above, are often popular "media events." Sociologists Danial Dayan and Elihu Katz described "media events" as ceremonial moments when television stations represent the social collective to itself, dramatically and ritualistically. Such events focus on special occasions—royal weddings or presidential funerals, moments when the mass media frame the viewing of major affairs in ways that help to redefine the national and even the international community. Everyone is watching and appreciating that other people are doing the same—people they know and the millions more they do not. Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities*, 1983) has la-

beled this the making of "imagined communities," senses of togetherness and identification fostered by the media and subsequently crafted into politically charged social divisions. The OJ Simpson murder trial was just such a quintessential media event. So was the Rodney King saga. These stories became litmus tests for American assumptions about inclusion and belonging, litmus tests that tended to break along decidedly racial lines.

Even when not trying to proffer particularly sensationalist narratives, the media still cannot help but act as a hothouse for such potential sensationalism, for a kind of feeding-frenzied reporting. If an editor at the *Washington Post* wants to avoid a sensational story that he or she thinks has no real merit, a kind of media-based gravitational force demands that the paper take up the baton anyway—or else. To opt out is to risk accusations of irrelevance or even to create yet another "media event" as a consequence of that very attempt. If NBC does not cover something the way other outlets cover it (because, say, that one network does not think a particular story has real merit, such as some people argued about the continued coverage of the birther movement's accusations about Obama's foreign status), NBC's non-coverage itself will get coverage—maybe even as just another ideological move from "the left-wing media." Resistance, then, might really be futile.



Jackson prepares to field questions from a local news anchor in Philadelphia, PA.

Of course, none of this is to say that the mass media simply gets race wrong or never adds anything of real value to ongoing discussions about race and racism. That is not necessarily true. Even if we can criticize particular instances of media coverage for clear racial biases and sensationalist storytelling, the mass media also serves as one of the few spaces left that consistently forces Americans to talk about race and racism—and not always in polite ways. It is clear that a version of anthropology's argument that race is not simply biology has already permeated the larger public sphere, which is probably a good thing. And the new AAA exhibit will take that message even farther to encourage additional productive discussion.

Getting Beyond 'The Race Card'

A commitment to either/or formulations over-determines contemporary media representations of race. One of the most problematic versions of such an entrenched and unproductive popular debate has to do with accusations and counter-accusations of racism. Those pundits who disparage others for unscrupulously playing 'the race card' have been complaining extra loudly these days, declaiming Democrats in Congress and the Obama administration (not to mention "the liberal media") for crying (racial) wolf at every opportunity. Obama was supposed to move us beyond race, the argument goes, but he has only made us more racially polarized. If minorities—and the white liberals who indulge them—would just stop trafficking in race-based victimization, they say, we all might be able to see that racism is the least of America's current problems. There are many versions of this kind of would-be post-racialism, and they can be found on both ends of the political spectrum.

When a group of Columbia University graduate students, myself included, brought literary critic Walter Benn Michaels to campus in the mid-1990s for a conference on "passing," he made a request that students disavow their commitments to "race" as an effective way of analyzing and organizing social life. For Michaels, it is all about "class." He is particularly skeptical of scholars who challenge race's biological/genetic legitimacy while holding onto its social and political significance, leveling some of his most scathing criticism at anthropologists. Once we stop being duped by "identity politics," this argument goes, we can start mobilizing around the objective material interests that unite and divide us. We can stop making a fetish out of race.

According to right-wing media pundits and self-described "culture warriors," if people would just stop pandering to the rhetorics of race/racism, we could all organize ourselves as patriotic Americans. At the end of last summer, I tried to play with this idea by declaring my own 40-day moratorium on race-talk. I announced this decision in the *Chronicle on Higher Education* and even received a bit of media attention for the stunt. Ultimately, my point was to say that such a position is untenable and to demonstrate the impossibility (even the absurdity) of calls to eschew invocations of race/racism.

Race is everywhere, and we inhabit a global media infrastructure that is particularly good at circulating specific kinds of race-talk. For anthropologists trying to make sense of, and to navigate, the current media moment, our job is not simply to prove or disprove particular instances of purported racism or reverse racism. In many ways, that is a kind of trap that our current media landscape proffers, unproductively, as the only game in town.

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