

EDITORIAL: Media and “Race”

Sandy Watson

University of Melbourne, Australia

The mediation of racism via mass media of all kinds is not the only source of its devastating impact, but it also operates in a molecular and penetrative fashion throughout the capillaries and pores of today’s world... Likewise, the endless routines of media flows put daily flesh on ethnic identifications of oneself and one’s visualized community.

-- Downing and Husband¹

The relationship between media and the animation of racisms is complex, as Downing and Husband intimate. Media in all of their institutional, cultural and democratic permutations have been intimately connected with the shaping and challenging of narratives of “race” and ethnicity throughout history². These corollaries have if anything gained complexity over the past three decades, with the proliferation of user-generated media technologies pluralising and democratising media content on the one hand, and advances in global media networks on the other.

This ‘Media and “Race”’ issue of PLATFORM sets out to explore the imbricating relationship between media and broader cultural and political discourse in re-vivifying the essentialisms that underpin racial thinking, whether these masquerade in the language of culture and ethnicity or in the imperatives and determinisms of the market and economy. This is a timely discussion, given the paradoxes of the past decade which, on the one hand, saw the United States described as “post-racial” following the 2008 election of President Barack Obama (Edge, 2010), and on the other, saw racisms remain prominent in headlines around the world: the banning of Islamic face veiling in France and Belgium in 2010; France’s repatriation of Romani gypsies throughout 2010; and the 2005 Cronulla Riots in Australia being three recent examples.

These events illuminated the innately chameleonic and resilient nature of notions of “race” and racism. This transformative capacity of “race” is not new. The discursive transmutations of “race” and racisms through varying epistemological prisms such as religion, biology, science, social Darwinism and culture over the past five hundred years have been abundantly explored (see for example, Goldberg, 1993; Hollingsworth, 2006). This adaptive quality, as Stuart Hall elucidates, is the very essence of race, in that it “is not a permanent human or social deposit which is simply waiting there to be triggered off when the circumstances are right. It has no natural and universal law of development. It does not always assume the same shape (Hall, 1978: 26, cited in Hollingsworth, 2006: 45).

The seemingly incontrovertible disavowal of “race” by the middle of the twentieth century, largely in response to the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust where racial science provided predication for genocide (Lentin, 2008, p. 495), has also served to emphasise the ongoing resilience of racial thinking. Race was expunged from public discourse and scholarly focus, and judged by newly self-proclaimed “race neutral” or “colour

blind” modern liberal states as a discredited mode of thinking. What occurred as a result, as van Dijk, Stratton, Goldberg and others describe, is that discourses of tolerance worked to deny the issue of “race” as having any contemporary relevance, based on the presupposition that the legislation against racism, the expunging of outdated racial science, and implementation of policies and programs promoting ideals of tolerance, affirmative action, equal opportunity and egalitarianism, meant that the injustices and inequities of race had been laid to rest (van Dijk, 1993; Goldberg, 2002, 2009; Lentin, 2004, 2008; Stratton, 1998).

“Race” was not dead, however, merely different, as French philosopher Etienne Balibar demonstrated with his enunciation of “neo-racism”, the post-second world war emergence of a culturally expressed racism. As Balibar describes, “a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but ‘only’ the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions” (Balibar, 1991a). The work of scholars such as Martin Barker (1982) and Robert Miles (1993) generated a snowballing in awareness of these new, cultural variants of exclusion and differentiation, and of their more sophisticated, subtle modalities compared with the tabooed racisms of the past (Dijk, 1993).

The dichotomy between denunciations of “race” and yet ongoing racisms has lent momentum to an increase in theoretical approaches examining the relationship between racism and, respectively, the state and globalisation. The proliferation of new policies apparently utilising racial thinking under the imprimatur of protecting national boundaries has seen scholarly attention refocus on the state. Critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg (2002, 2006, 2009) has argued influentially that the foundational classificatory status of “race” in the state’s formation continues to exert an influence in modern democratic governments (see also Lentin, 2004; and Amin, 2010). As Goldberg elucidates: “The apparatuses and technologies employed by modern states have served variously to fashion, modify, and reify the terms of racial expression, as well as racist exclusions and subjugation” (2002: 4). This is similar to French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault’s conceptualisation of race as a technology of power. Foucault argued that biopower was inherently a racialising form of power, conceptualised and made possible through a central normative and normalising function that strives to manage, administer, and survey biological forms of life as a way of inherently managing these areas of life (Foucault, 2003).

There has also been an aggregation of scholarly works examining the relationship between global changes and racialisation, including the argument that changes in economic, labour, social and cultural relations work to maintain relations of privilege and underscore divisions of racialisation (Bhattacharyya, Gabriel, and Small, 2002). John Gabriel (1997) has argued that global changes such as the growth of global institutions and trading blocs, migration, new technologies and transnational corporations have mobilised fears and anxieties resulting in a re-assertion of old identities based around racialised and national lines. For Stephen Castles (1996), these anxieties converge around local experiences of poverty and unemployment. Increasingly fluid and migratory population movements locate disgruntled workers in more intimate contact with migrants workers who, previously sought after for their ability to fulfill specific labour requirements, are now stigmatised along cultural and ethnic lines for taking what are deemed as local jobs, contributing to a rise in racially-based discourses which is at times actively encouraged by politicians.

Whilst these theories of state, biopolitical and globalised racisms all have their own analytical assumptions and foci, they emphasise a number of research priorities. The first is

that they acknowledge the pragmatic, quotidian categorisations that continue to breathe new life into the stereotypical thinking that underpins racialisations. This draws attention to the importance of continuing to undertake research that examines the local and historical contexts within which these occur. Equally they also highlight the crucial relationship between normative discourse and the materialisation of distinctions. This speaks to the need for sustained critical examination of the ways in which normative discourse is shaped, including the innumerable interconnections between prevailing (and countervailing) political discourses, media and other cultural forms. And, specifically, for persistent scrutiny of how culturally and economically sanctioned ideas provide carriage for redefinition and renewal of distinctions and exclusions of difference.

MEDIA, "RACE" AND RACIALISATIONS

As John Fiske summarises, media play a pivotal role in "the social circulation of discourse and thus play a formative role in social and political change" (1995, p.10). This can be usefully seen in relation to discourses of whiteness, as highlighted by the literature on racism and globalisation. As John Gabriel articulates, media is intricately connected with the "mercurial" nature of whiteness and its continual re-definition against a notion of "otherness" which shifts in historical and geographical circumstances (1997, p. 48). Two notable examples in which this relationship is examined are in the mapping of media's role in the racialisation and assimilation into whiteness of the Irish and Jewish communities at differing historical conjunctures. The authors show how newspaper commentary and the representations of the Catholic Church were vital in constructing and normalising the re-positioning of the Irish within discourses of whiteness in the United States during the eighteenth century (Bhattacharyya et al, 2002; Gabriel, 1997).

Similarly, media and other institutions have been vital in the articulation of the Jewish throughout history, as Bhattacharyya, Gabriel and Small (2002) describe in relation to the "Jack the Ripper" murders of prostitutes in London's East End in 1888. As the authors describe, the police released a "cartoon-type caricature" of the murderer which was "clearly meant to establish his Jewish, east European origins", playing on fears and repressed desires of white masculinity, and serving to articulate gender and sexuality into anti-Semitism, linking notions of "deviant racialised sexuality" and "fallen white femininity" (2002, pp. 18).

Hartmann and Husband's early work also highlighted the function of mass media and local press in constructions of white beliefs and attitudes around immigration debates in the British press in 1971. They identified a "prioritization" of the "immigrant" frame in British news media in relation to coverage of people or communities of "colour", which continued to paint "coloured" immigrants as problematic despite the fact that emigration at the time exceeded immigration by more than 20,000 people. The authors concluded that the media "uncritically reproduced the persistent perception that 'coloured' immigrants were a problem even though the facts did not support such a construction" (Hartmann and Husband, discussed and cited in Gale, 2005, pp. 20-21).

During the OJ Simpson trial, media played a formative role in the "dislocation" of "race" and perpetuation of a normative but hidden whiteness (Fiske, 1996). As John Fiske describes, "Racism is dislocated when it is apparently to be found only in the behaviours of a racial minority and never in those of the white power structure. Dislocating racism thus maintains the racelessness of whiteness" (1996, p. 272). Not dissimilar to the cultural enunciations described earlier, racial "dislocation" refers to purportedly nonracist racism in that it avoids the overt descriptors and characteristics of race, but nevertheless perpetuates

their distinctions. The prominence of racial issues throughout the trial made it difficult for media to avoid commenting on them, however, media coverage focused consistently on the composition and racial configuration of the jury. “Dislocated racism” occurred in that racial issues were exclusively identified with the “Black” side of the case (Fiske, 1996, p. 273).

Similarly, the articles and interviews in this issue all circumnavigate issues of media and whiteness. David Bates examines media’s role in reproducing racialisations in his article “Making The White Folk Angry: The Media, “Race” and Electoral Politics in the United Kingdom in 2010”. Bates contextualises the prominence of discourses of whiteness in relation to the resurgence of parties from the far-right and examines the role of media in promoting an exclusivist “white” identity in immigration debates, arguing that invocations of “race” became a “meaningful category in relation to immigration debates” during the 2010 election.

Clemence Due’s examination of counter-representations of minstrelsy in ““Aussie Humour” Or Racism? *Hey Hey It’s Saturday* and the Denial of Racism in Online Responses to News Media Articles” draws attention to how Aussie humour and its naturalisation as part of the Australian national identity were mobilised to negate claims of racism. She examines this in response to Harry Connick Jr’s accusations of racism after he was asked to judge the *Jackson Jive* skit on the *Hey Hey It’s Saturday* reunion program in 2009. Drawing on van Dijk’s “denials of racism”, her paper provides valuable insights into the way that articulations of Aussie humour were mobilised not only in ways that rebutted claims of racism, but also worked to reinforce particular constructions of the Australian national identity and to shape a view of Australia as a country free from racism.

We also include two interviews with prominent academics in the field of race relations and identity studies. Professor Clarence Walker argues that the discourses of post-raciality surrounding Barack Obama’s election as the first self-identifying black President of the United States, together with discourses of colour-neutrality and colour-blindness, are reactionary discourses constituted in relation to a white-centred historiography that both defines the US history and blackness in relation to a normative whiteness. He argues that the ongoing effacement of race contained within these discourses is exacerbated by the “historical superficiality” of journalism and pop-culture representations. In our second interview, Myria Georgiou shares her own trajectory in researching the intersections between media, diaspora, urban life and identity, including ethnicities and “race”. Georgiou advocates for new media and communication paradigms that, rather than privileging the analytical centrality of the nation-state, with its propensity for reinforcing hierarchical views of the other, instead enable contextualisation of factors such as identity, transnationalism, and everyday experience. Reviewing contemporary work also performs a significant function in graduate scholarly publications like Platform, and we are pleased to publish our inaugural review. Daniel Golding examines the journalistic applicability of videogames in his review of *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari and Bobby Schweizer, 2010).

Whether rendered opaque by the patina of cultural preferences and ethnicity or by the imperatives and determinisms of the market and economy, the naturalisation of narratives (and counter-narratives) which emphasise rather than celebrate difference, continues to perpetuate inequities. It remains imperative that research continues to unearth the local and historical specificities in which chameleonic irruptions of “race” and racialisations become visible. The articles in this issue of Platform have taken up this issue by examining contemporaneous examples of the imbricating relationship between media, culture and

political discourse in shaping and contesting normative and hidden discourses such as that of whiteness. We hope that the articles contribute to an understanding of the multifarious forms in which contemporary identities and ethnicisms are not only mediated but also are given "daily flesh" as a basis for working towards greater social parity and equity.

Endnotes

- 1 Epigraph: Downing and Husband, 2005, p. 25
- 2 Our use of inverted commas denotes "race" as a social construction rather than biologically determined category (see for example Miles, 1993; Barker, 1982)

References

- Amin, A. (2010). The Reminders of Race. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 27(1), 1.
- Balibar, E. (1991). Is there a neo-racism? In E. Balibar & I. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London; New York: Verso.
- Barker, M. (1982). *The new racism: conservatives and the ideology of the tribe*. Frederick, Maryland: Aletheia Books.
- Bhattacharyya, G., Gabriel, J., & Small, S. (2002). *Race and power: global racism in the twenty-first century*. London: Routledge.
- Castles, S. (1996). The racisms of globalisation. In E. Vasta and S. Castles (Eds.), *The Teeth are Smiling: The persistence of racism in multicultural Australia* (pp. 17-45). St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.
- Downing, J., and Husband, C. (2005). *Representing 'race': racisms, ethnicities and media*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Edge, T. (2010). Southern Strategy 2.0: Conservatives, White Voters, and the Election of Barack Obama. *Journal of Black Studies*, 40(3), 426-444.
- Fiske, J. (1996). *Media Matters: Race and Gender in US Politics*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota.
- Foucault, M. (Ed.). (2003). *Society must be defended: lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*. New York: Picador.
- Gabriel, J. (1997). *Whitewash: racialized politics and the media*. Durham, NC: Routledge.
- Gale, P. (2005). *The Politics of Fear: Lighting the Wik*. Frenchs Forest: Pearson Longman.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2009). *The threat of race: reflections on racial neoliberalism*. Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2002). *The Racial State*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Goldberg, D. T. (1993). *Racist culture: philosophy and the politics of meaning*. Oxford, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- Hollinsworth, D. (2007). *Race and racism in Australia*. South Melbourne: Thomson/Social Science Press.
- Lentin, A. (2004). Racial States, Anti-Racist Responses: Picking Holes in 'Culture' and 'Human Rights'. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7(4), 427-443.
- Lentin, A. (2008). Europe and the Silence about Race. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11(4), 487
- Miles, R. (1993). *Racism after 'race relations'*. London; New York, Routledge.
- Stratton, J. (1998). *Race Daze*. Annandale: Pluto Press.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1993). *Elite discourse and racism*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications.