

Negotiating and Mediating Constructions of Racial Identities

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While pedagogy is often related to issues of democracy, citizenship, and the struggle over the shaping of identities and identifications, it is rarely taken up as part of a broader public politics—as part of a larger attempt to explain how learning takes place outside of schools. (Giroux, 2001, p. 128)

The relationship between moral argument and public opinion, the moral force underlying second-best public policies, and the moral connection between results and process are all central to the democratic project. Focusing on the challenge that race consciousness poses for democracy simply brings these issues into sharp relief. (Appiah & Gutman, 1996, p. 14)

Since the 1981 release of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, there has been a strong push to extend the boundaries of progressive pedagogy, to visit the sites of abandoned learning in our everyday lives. As the epigraph by Giroux implies, the purpose of doing so is to comprehend better social and civic responsibility in our irrefutably highly regulated democratic society, while keeping an eye on how identities are constituted and reconstituted in the process. On a daily basis, pedagogy inhabits spaces such as music, television, film, and the press, and each medium has contributed to academic interpretations as well as textual definitions of race. Cultural critics no longer hesitate to comment upon public and popular spaces where racial identities are mediated. On the contrary, critical theorists are now engaging the broader spaces as well as the interstices where we live rather than leaving them in splendid isolation from "true" academic discourse. This is evidenced in the works of Henry Giroux, Patricia Hill Collins, Michael Eric Dyson, bell hooks, Robert McChesney, Douglas Kellner, Lawrence Grossberg, and others. Following in this tradition, this essay will focus on three sites of public racial pedagogy—history, politics, and media. These sites will be informed by the following works: Dexter Gordon's *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Nineteenth Century Black Nationalism* (2003), Mason Stokes' *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (2001), Jennifer Simpson's *I Have Been Waiting: Race and U.S. Higher Education* (2003), Paul Kellstedt's *The Mass Media and the Dynamics of*

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American Racial Attitudes (2003), and Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki's *Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (2000). Before doing so, it is useful to offer a few contemporary examples of how race has exposed itself in our contemporary context. Later, I will examine how it has been historically imagined.

Engaging Race and Race Consciousness

It is 2004 and there are countless news stories, events, initiatives, and celebrations of the 50-year anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Monuments have been constructed, commissions established, and national historic sites prepared. Additionally, dozens of universities across the nation including Columbia University, Harvard University, Oregon State University, and several parts of the University of California system are remembering this case. Each memento and each headline concerning this historical moment begs deeper reflection on the status quo, particularly regarding how race consciousness challenges democracy, as noted in the epigraph by Appiah and Gutman (1996). Associated Press news headlines read: "Woman who was a part of Brown v. Board of Education case says bias effects linger"; "Landmark Supreme Court decision is theme of Black History Month"; and "Blacks divided over use of civil rights imagery to describe gay marriage push." There are multiple democratic implications and extensions of the decision for contemporary American life. Certainly after being argued and re-argued in the district court of Kansas in 1952 through 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision came to be known as a landmark case concerning school desegregation, but it was also about equality of opportunity for all American citizens. In this case, opportunity and equality were defined with respect to equal access to educational facilities of the same caliber. It was determined that separate and segregated schools were inherently unequal.

Now imagine if we temporarily applied that same logic to all American institutions including the various mass media—television, film, radio, print, and electronic. To take this a step further, imagine if equal access meant equal opportunity to produce positive images and representations of individuals of different racial and cultural groups rather than stereotypical depictions. This opportunity appears almost utopian to historically underrepresented, disenfranchised, and otherwise marginalized groups. Yet the moment power distance is reduced and hegemonically inscribed identities are placed in a position of vulnerability, there is likely to be havoc as institutionally-induced discursive practices entangle themselves in crises of public moral representation and political agenda-setting, and as visible racial economies are reconstituted to reflect private ingroup constructions of an already tattered set of identities.

This hypothetical example illustrates the complexity of identities, which by nature are constantly being socially constructed and negotiated. Despite the recent claim that "government is [now] seen, at least in the minds of many, as a tool to protect minority interests from discrimination" (Kellstedt, 2003, p. 4), minority interests still go unprotected. Minorities must still contend with racial profiling and daily stereo-

typical inscriptions of marginalized bodies in popular culture and mass media (Jackson, in press). Yet, sadly there are those who believe racism is passé and that the hypothetical example given is not at all fictitious. Instead, they have chosen to believe that structural inequalities induced by a welfare state are endemic to communities of people who have consciously chosen to be nihilistic and hopeless (Appiah & Gutman, 1996; Sleeper, 2002; Steele, 1990). Cultural critic Henry Giroux (2003) explains:

A majority of Americans now believe that anti-black racism is a thing of the past, since it is assumed that formal institutions of segregation no longer exist.... For many conservative and liberal intellectuals, the only remaining remnant of racist categorization and policy in an otherwise color-blind society is affirmative action.... The importance of race and the enduring fact of racism are relegated to the dustbin of history at a time in American life when discourses of race and the spectacle of racial representations saturate the dominant media and public life. (p. 192)

Despite the mainstream sentiment that racism has been expunged and equal access is not only guaranteed but ready to be granted, disproportionate healthcare, unemployment, and poverty have stricken marginalized group communities (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Moreover, we find the disparaging statistic that “the United States has the highest percentage of children living in poverty of any rich nation: 20.5 percent ... Very young children are particularly badly off: For those under six years of age, the poverty rate is 23 percent, which means that over 5 million preschoolers now live below the poverty line” (West, 1999, p. 342). This statistic, when coupled with the proliferation of the welfare state, demands a reconfiguration of power and political agency. The question is: why hasn’t that reconfiguration been developed with all due deliberate speed? This query demands a historical reply.

History as a Site of Public Racial Pedagogy

So, as Stokes (2001) proposes in *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy*, in his discussion of Hinton Helper’s 1867 racist manuscript *Nojoque*, the objective of these types of pseudoscientific white supremacist treatises was “not to burn, lynch, vote, chase, terrorize or otherwise harass ‘the Negro’ out of America; rather, intends to *write* ‘him’ out of America” (p. 3). So, historically, the power of the written word accompanied by visual depictions of non-Whites led to the forced calcification of oppressive ideologies in every area of public life. When the most celebrated writers, such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1899/1956), penned books like *The Philosophy of History* that indicated that without the White man, Black people would have no culture, the espoused views were likely given additional credence. This, of course, posed tremendous challenges to Black writers like Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. DuBois, as well as non-Black sympathizers like Charles Chestnutt who resisted these debilitating public discourses. There was and still is power in choosing not to surrender to these crippling

epistemologies and proactively to produce transcendent rhetorics. This can accurately be characterized as the power of agency.

Consequently, to answer the previous query about why power and political agency has not been reconfigured with all due deliberate speed, we must first know that historically, marginalized groups have struggled to retrieve custody over meanings, especially those meanings pertaining to race. Agency has never been willingly handed to traditionally underrepresented groups. Second, we must be aware of the recovery politics in operation (Gresson, 1995). In his book *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Nineteenth Century Black Nationalism*, rhetorician Dexter Gordon (2003) explains that Aaron Gresson's rhetorical analysis of U.S. racial politics identifies two primary losses: White Americans' loss of moral hegemony and Black Americans' loss of the myth of racial homogeneity. The natural response to loss is recovery, so with respect to the first loss mentioned, Gresson argues that White Americans have the option of exercising hegemony morally. In an otherwise rather insightful book, this is a point of contention that, surprisingly, Gordon briskly overlooks. In fact he notes that "[a]ccepting these themes as central to African American discourse enhances my effort to examine the ideological struggle inherent in the rhetorical process" (p. 21).

Hegemony is a term developed by Antonio Gramsci, an inmate under the rule of Mussolini from 1926 to 1937. Gramsci (1971) wrote *Prison Notebooks*, in which he explains that class hegemony occurs by consent of the dominated, yet the dominated remain partly blinded to the epistemic violence to themselves to which they implicitly consent. Within the hegemonic arrangement, the dominated working class gradually comes to accept that they are different to the dominant class, and that their difference leads to the decline of the social order. This stimulates a flip of consciousness on the part of the dominated, who then begin vigorously to pursue the life and identities of the dominant class. Naturally, this process requires negotiation, if not forfeiture of one's indigenous worldview. Hence the term "moral hegemony" is a paradox, which presupposes that a dominant class can remain accepting and appreciative of difference while forcibly imposing its ideological will upon a subaltern group.

Gordon's (2003) oversight of this foundational principle of his book is perhaps most damaging as he considers "the way alienation functions rhetorically" (p. 23) within the Whipper-Sidney debate of 1840–1841 as well as the nineteenth century Black nationalist rhetorical standpoints of Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delaney, and Frederick Douglass. Although Gordon seems to approach the subject of slavery abolitionism meticulously, his concluding explanation of liberation is tainted by the foundational principles he embraced early in the book. This is, in part, attenuated by his reiteration of how rhetoric has served to shape identities and political positions while simultaneously helping to reshape collective Black memory and White supremacy.

The second loss described by Gresson (1995) is about Black authenticity. In the race to take agency over how blackness gets defined, the public narrative has been that Blacks are overly anxious to set parameters around what gets to be defined as characteristically Black or Black culture. The result is essentialism in which the

anxiety or fear is that Blacks will either lose the essence of culturally Black identity(/ies) or that they will indiscriminately define Blackness in ubiquitous terms so that what blackness is disappears in the montage. Gordon, at times uncritically goes along with the sentiment that Molefi Kete Asante's development of afrocentricity is a totalizing discourse that seeks to replace eurocentrism by universalizing blackness. Gordon's silence on this debate, except to present differing opinions, is frustrating given his foundational interest in constitutive rhetorics, which permit the critique of ideologies that disempower collective subjects. As Freire (1981/2000), Stokes (2001), Giroux (2003), and others have made transparent, race is about naming and subjectivity. If we focus solely on authenticity or naming practices, we have only accented the accessories. The real and primary concern is the extent to which underprivileged or subjugated groups are able to gain agency by moving from margin to center, from object to subject, and from Other to I.

The historical lesson discovered at this site of public racial pedagogy is that since knowledge (even self-knowledge) is socially shared, and since identities are socially constructed, there is no single propriety over definitions of the self. As a result, it takes work to unravel institutionally encrypted and publicly understood self-definitions. Against the force of hegemony, cultural workers labor for an energizing social transformation that will embrace truly democratic politics as well as a radical progressive pedagogy.

Politics and Media as Sites of Public Racial Pedagogy

The social and political landscape has shifted since the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. Public opinions about the role of government have changed and we are invited into a more sober universe of discourses about racialized bodies. Nonetheless, we are unmistakably plagued by the silence of racism. While Jefferson, Cuvier, and Hegel could openly assert their xenophobic positions regarding race during their lifetimes, contemporary society has made these pronouncements less popular and acceptable. In fact Kellstedt (2003), a political scientist, argues in his dissertation-turned-book *The Mass Media and the Dynamics of American Racial Attitudes* (2003) that there is a very active liberal contingency among present-day American citizens that expects the government to lobby on behalf of minority interests. He explains: "Whereas whites formerly viewed government as a mechanism to insulate white society from blacks, today government is seen, at least in the minds of many, as a tool to protect minority interests from discrimination" (p. 4).

In his tracing of public opinion over approximately the last 50 years, he uncovers broken trends in thinking about race among the public, and he maintains this is evidenced in the media. After perambulating about racial attitudes in the first chapter, in chapter two he takes a media framing approach to exploring three concepts longitudinally: egalitarianism, individualism, and poverty. His principal investigative concern is with what the media tells us about race and what core values are established in the minds of readers through recurring themes, headlines, and

stories. The raw counting of recurrences, though drab at times, offers some interesting insights into how feelings about school segregation and busing, racial discrimination, employment competition, social individuation, ghettos, and poverty have shifted over time.

The information about *Newsweek's* press coverage of ghettos was particularly interesting, since Kellstedt's study reveals that prior to 1962, the word ghetto was not used in news reports. At first, it was mentioned to suggest that Black voting communities had been galvanized, though it had little to nothing to do with poverty. The word came to be associated with Blacks during the height of the 1960s civil rights movement. A news report from the August 30, 1965 edition of *Newsweek* indicated "He [Martin Luther King, Jr.] came to offer hope to the ghetto..." (Kellstedt, 2003, p. 48). A September 23, 1974 issue of *Newsweek* referred to "black teen-agers from the nearby Roxbury ghetto" (Kellstedt, 2003, p. 48). Then 15 years later, *Newsweek* reported, "Urban blacks have seen their fashion fads move downtown before. Inner-city ghettos have long been a creative crucible for styles that later sweep teenage America" (Kellstedt, 2003, p. 49). Only in this latter reference has it been made clear that the word ghetto transitioned from a simple reference to Black collectivity to a name for urban enclaves. The implication is clear: inner-city Black neighborhoods are usually poverty-stricken, but great places for the emergence of Black popular cultural production. In this framing of ghettos and their symbiotic relationship to poverty, the welfare state became easily associated with Blacks despite the fact that the primary constituency served by public assistance programs is Whites (Chideya, 1995; Hecht et al., 2003).

The identity politics that lie within this sort of media framing is significant because of what it does to inform public policy. This sort of agenda-setting catalyst may seem clear in books like Kellstedt's, but without a thorough mapping of relevant discourses, American readers are gradually introduced to, perhaps even coaxed by an ideological framework that promotes racial policy preferences and the ideals of the existing state apparatus. Certainly, there are problems embedded in a study that only seeks to track news coverage in one medium, especially the politically slanted *Newsweek*. Also, there are limitations to the explanatory power of a media textual analysis accomplished solely by quantitative means and without regards to the communication literature that would greatly inform the study. However, the political science edge to the study offered valuable insights into political agenda setting and efforts toward the establishment of public policy *vis-à-vis* a racialized discourse about community. After Kellstedt's book, readers should be more skeptical about the information they consume, and how it feeds federal policy initiatives that try to circumvent issues of poverty, dilapidated schools and housing, and the steady embrace of the welfare state.

Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki's (2000) book *Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* presents a communication-based analysis of mass mediated images of Blacks. Where Kellstedt's book was lacking in both uniqueness and information about mass media in general, Entman and Rojecki's book compensates by presenting an array of media critiques ranging from television shows and

films to print news and advertising, as well as television commercials. Early on in this most accessible book, the theoretic frameworks associated with information processing and public opinion are discussed and used as a catalyst for exploring various media. Perhaps one of the most exciting dynamics of *Black Image in the White Mind* is the authors' triangulated approach to the study of stereotypical images. The general path of the book moves from their own research on contradictory White racial attitudes in Indianapolis to a review of literature concerning White racial opinions. This is followed by analyses of media content as found on network television, local television, print news, television shows, advertising, and Hollywood films. In each of these contexts, Entman and Rojecki focus on the codification and commodification of Black images and representations. For example, in chapters four, five and six, they analyze news coverage and the production of stories to illustrate how both local and network news show Blacks as poverty-stricken, criminally-minded, intellectually deprived, uncivil, urban-dwelling menaces to society.

This is in contrast to the findings presented in chapter 10, where the authors explain that Blacks appear in over a third of primetime advertisements, yet seldom if ever are shown in ads for luxury products. Despite Blacks appearing in several non-stereotypical roles (which is a significant advancement), the fantasy vacation or high-end jewelry commercials are reserved for Whites. This situation is splendid when compared to Hollywood films where negative stereotypes abound. Each of the minstrel figures—mammy, buck, uncle tom, coon, and jezebel—can be found in contemporary films fairly frequently. The skin color politics attendant on these representations only exacerbates the insult. In fact, in a forthcoming book of mine (Jackson, in press), I found this to be true in films like *Bulworth*, *Head of State*, *Bringing Down the House*, and *Friday*, among others.

Analyzing movie reviews as indices of Hollywood consciousness, Entman and Rojecki discovered that reviewers are hesitant to accent the racial subtext of films with mostly or only a few Black characters regardless of whether these stereotypes resurfaced. *Black Image in the White Mind* is a must-read book that problematizes the mass mediated inscription of Black bodies. It is a wellspring of information about the preponderance of hegemonic, public, racial pedagogies.

Conclusions

Extant social instability stems from several factors already discussed—epistemic violence, racial recovery responses to perceived social loss, politically motivated press coverage, and racially slanted media programming—and so, clearly, education is our most significant instrument. There is a daily assault on American citizens, and programs raising racial consciousness, enhancing media literacy, and infusing local economies are among our most important options for radical progressive pedagogy.

Schools are the most obvious sites to launch a progressive racial pedagogy. Even though Giroux, in the epigraph, informs us that pedagogy does not always take place in learning centers, it is the one place where we expect to be taught about racial pedagogy. In the same way that Hollywood movie critics have remained silent about

racial subtexts in films, many educators have conveniently avoided the topic of race in classrooms. The outcome has been that racial identities remain marginalized and some students' stereotypical perspectives on race are validated by the media unless by chance they are interrupted by a cultural worker. This occurs so frequently because many of those charged with the responsibility to educate American citizens have vacated the discussion. This is not just about race, but all aspects of difference that lead to social subjugation (Stokes, 2001).

Radical progressive pedagogy requires honesty, awareness, and sensitivity. Jennifer Simpson (2003) begins her book *I Have Been Waiting: Race and U.S. Higher Education* by recalling what an African American colleague said to her: "*I have been waiting* for the day when white folks start to deal with their own racism" (p. x, italics added). Within one of the most refreshingly candid call to arms I have read in quite some time, Simpson reveals upfront: "Learning to recognize the presence of racism in my life and choices is a daunting and elusive task. Racism is present in my own actions, rises up in my relationships and the contexts in which I locate myself" (p. ix).

In her analysis of White feminists' roles in "cannibalizing" (p. 5) women of color's activist efforts, she lays bare a feminist impulse to disengage the conversation of race, class, and gender. Moreover, she chooses to recognize "an active reluctance of whites to view their bodies as racially significant, and a tendency toward theoretical elitism and irrelevance" (p. 6). These, she contends, are the dimensions of whiteness that must be exposed and expelled if white women are to embrace anti-racist pedagogies.

The histories, methods, epistemological approaches, ontologies, and axiologies of women of color are part and parcel of the scaffold of change necessary for social change. As she seeks to affirm oral histories, auto-ethnographies, interviews, fiction, anthologies and narratives as valid methods, Simpson (2003) courageously asserts that these must all be checked periodically for what they tell us about women's racial agency as well as their gendered or class-based agencies. In asking readers to do this, she reminds us of Audre Lorde's (1984) call to remember that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 110).

In this review of five texts, I have tried to pose and answer three very loaded synoptic questions which have direct inferences for the negotiation and mediation of racial identities: What are some of the primary historical, ideological, and institutional concerns that drive social opinions about race in the United States? What are some of the resident textual practices around race that belie the social landscape? At this historical moment, what does racial progress really mean?

If it is true, as political scientist Paul Kellstedt (2003) asserts, that "media do not make blanket statements about race, such as 'Blacks are good' or 'Blacks are bad,'" (p. 104) and that sustained periods of liberalism are followed by eras of conservatism to the extent that there is no recognizable pattern of public opinion of race outside this binary, then we are confronted with an increasingly challenging problem in the conversation regarding race. The target keeps moving, political orientations are constantly shifting, and race becomes a floating signifier detached from political

ideology, social histories, and cultural legacies. Naturally, this is not as simple as Kellstedt suggests. Social opinions do not simply move within the currents of the mainstream press and other media without strands being attached to other contexts that are simultaneously at work. However, historically, periods of political and social revitalization in the midst of human rights struggle have been both a dilemma and defining principle of social activism and racial progress.

We are left with the same challenge. The only difference is that the media have become more sophisticated, policy-makers are tight-lipped about race, and educators too often hesitate before commenting on race for fear students will cower. In fact, it is the educators who are cowering at a moment in American history when we need educators to be responsive and responsible. We need all educators, regardless of race or culture, to actively discuss how the circuits of power, politics, morality, and race in the United States have produced a spate of self-inventions resulting in what can only be characterized as racial identity negotiation. Without their participation, the future condition of intercultural relationships, democratic practice, and public policy will ultimately be in peril.

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