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Chapter 1

REPRESENTATION

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Stuart Hall and the “Politics of Signification”

Christopher P. Campbell

Stuart Hall, the Jamaican-born British Studies cultural critic whose work heavily influenced a generation of scholars' examinations of race and the mass media, died only a few months before the infamous 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a Ferguson, Missouri, police officer. Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African-American man, was shot by a white police officer. After the shooting, some news organizations included in their immediate coverage of the event a photo of Brown taken from his Facebook page. In the photo, Brown stands in a tank top, unsmiling and flashing a peace sign (misidentified by some of those organizations as a gang sign). Later, other photos from Brown's Facebook page surfaced that presented a less incendiary figure. Within a few days of Brown's death, a hashtag—*#IfTheyGunnedMeDown* (as in, “If they gunned me down, which photo of me would the news media use”)—“trended” on social media applications like Twitter and Tumblr. Young African Americans posted two photos of themselves, one in which they appeared less than angelic juxtaposed against a photo that reflected them in a positive light, for instance in a graduation gown or military uniform.

These postings reflected an insight into the notion of media *representation* that likely escapes many Americans who view with regularity news coverage of black men who have been arrested for (or victimized by) violent crime. That is, the young African Americans who posted the photos intuitively recognized the problems inherent in the dominant media representation of black people as pathological criminals, a representation that goes largely unchallenged in the journalism industry and affects both racial attitudes and public policy decisions.

Stuart Hall would have been quick to recognize the meaning of the social media postings that followed Brown's death. His work challenged the “preferred reading” of media texts, and he described the cultural power of those meanings as the “politics of signification” (1980: 138). Hall used the term *representation* to describe the complex ways in which the mass media not only *present* images, but how they are actually engaged in *re-presenting* images that have multiple meanings, especially when it comes to meanings about race and ethnicity. For Hall, the analysis of media representations is key to unlocking the power of the dominant meanings ascribed to those representations, meanings that serve

the interests of the wealthiest and most powerful members of a society. His believed his notion of representation was transformational and

a way of constantly wanting new kinds of knowledges to be produced in the world, new kinds of subjectivities to be explored and new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operation.

(Quoted in Jhally 1997)

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the work of Hall and others who have examined race and media through the lens of representation and how powerful meanings about race and ethnicity are generated through media texts.

“Reading” the Media

As Fiske (1992) explains, “The definition of culture as a constant site of struggle between those with and those without power underpins the most interesting current work in cultural studies” (292). He cites Hall’s seminal essay, “Encoding/Decoding,” as a “turning point” in cultural studies, as it

introduces the idea that television programs do not have a single meaning but are relatively open texts, capable of being read in different ways by different people. Hall also suggests that there is a necessary correlation between people’s social situations and the meanings that they may generate from a television program.

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Hall described “decoding” media texts through three levels of analysis. The first level is the denotative or “preferred” reading—that which was intended by the producer—and is followed by connotative (“negotiated” and/or “oppositional”) readings of the same message. Hall explains:

The domains of “preferred readings” have the whole social order imbedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs; the everyday knowledge of social structures, of “how things work for all practical purposes in this culture,” the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions.

(1980: 134)

What Hall would describe as a “negotiated” reading of media texts allows for analysis beyond the meaning intended by their producers. According to Hall, such a reading requires a recognition of the “dominant ideology” that is at work and how that ideology is “shot through with contradictions” (137). Hall writes, “Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power” (137). For Hall, the denotative, commonsense meanings of the stories are insignificant without the connotative, interpretive readings.

Similarly, Fiske and Hartley (1978) say these deeper levels of analysis allow us to identify the potential of a message to create larger cultural meanings; they also describe three levels of codes to be found in television messages. Like Hall’s “preferred reading,” the first order is the denotative message and “the sign is self contained” (41). Like Hall’s

“negotiated reading,” the second order calls for the connotative reading of the message, including its potential for cultural myth-making. In this analysis, Fiske and Hartley include the impact of television production techniques to connote meanings: “Camera angle, lighting and background music [and] frequency of cutting are examples” (45).

Hall describes “oppositional” readings of media messages in which a viewer “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference.” He adds, “One of the most significant political moments . . . is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the ‘politics of signification’—the struggle in discourse—is joined” (138). Fiske and Hartley describe this highest level of analysis of media messages as that which recognizes the “mythology” or “ideology” that hides in the coding of media messages: “This, the third order of signification, reflects the broad principles by which a culture organizes and interprets the reality with which it has to cope” (46).

Other cultural studies scholars have advanced similar notions in interpreting media texts. Louis Althusser (1971), for instance, described the concepts of *hailing* and *interpellation* to explain the way in which media messages “hail” audiences into specific understandings that serve the interests of the message producers. As Fiske (1992) notes, “These terms derive from the idea that any language, whether it be verbal, visual, tactile or whatever, is part of social relations and that in communicating with someone we are reproducing social relationships” (1992: 289). Likewise, Antonio Gramsci (1971) used the concept of *hegemony*—the subtle, unseen political, social, and economic ideology that reflects the interests of the wealthy and powerful—to describe the way in which media representations function.

Like Althusser and Gramsci, Roland Barthes was concerned with the subtle way in which hegemony functioned, almost without notice. In introducing his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957/72), Barthes described his efforts to examine French popular culture through the prism of cultural myths:

The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the “naturalness” with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. . . . I hate seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.

(11)

Barthes was concerned with the way artifacts of popular culture—advertising, photojournalism, studio wrestling, and others—reflect a kind of groupthink that doesn’t allow for more complicated interpretations of events. Similarly, the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, especially his essay “Common Sense as a Cultural System,” is often cited in critical examinations of the media. Geertz (1983) argued,

As a frame for thought, and a species of it, common sense is as totalizing as any other: no religion is more dogmatic, no science more ambitious, no philosophy more general. Its tonalities are different, and so are the arguments to which it appeals, but like them—and like art and like ideology—it pretends to reach past illusion to truth, to, as we say, things as they are.

(84)

Cultural studies scholars have frequently addressed the notion of representation in news coverage, which routinely reflects mythical *common sense* about the events of the day. Fiske and Hartley (1978) identified “myth chains” as one of the ways in which journalistic storytelling embeds ideological understandings, and they pointed out that “news reporting and fiction use similar signs because they naturally refer to the same myths in our culture” (65). Himmelstein (1984) identified the “myth of the puritan ethic” (205) in news coverage that routinely extolled the values of hard work and middle-class life while implicitly questioning the values of the underclass. Richard Campbell (1991a, 1991b), in describing the myth-making capacity of journalism, suggested that the notion of “balance” was itself a “code word for . . . middle American values.” He continues,

These values are encoded into mainstream journalism—how it selects the news, where it places its beat reporters, who and how it promotes, how it critically reports and thereby naively supports government positions.

(1991a: 75)

Race, Representation, and the News

Among the most significant analyses of contemporary racism and the media is embodied in the work of sociologist Herman Gray (1986, 1991, 1995), who has examined both primetime television programs as well as journalism. Hall identified in 1986 the “twin representations” of African Americans in fictional and nonfictional television (304). He contrasted the upper-middle-class life portrayed on the mega-hit sitcom *The Cosby Show* with the underclass black life portrayed in a 1985 PBS documentary titled *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America*. Race as it is portrayed on fictional television, according to Gray, is consistent with the American Dream, and “appeals to the utopian desire in blacks and whites for racial oneness and equality while displacing the persistent reality of racism and racial inequality or the kinds of social struggles and cooperation required to eliminate them” (302).

Gray argues that the underclass black life on nonfictional TV, on the other hand, fails to

identify complex social forces like racism, social organization, economic dislocation, unemployment, the changing economy, or the welfare state as the causes of the crisis in (the urban underclass) community.

(300)

Gray concludes:

The assumptions and framework that structure these representations often displace representations that would enable viewers to see that many individuals trapped in the under class have the very same qualities (of hard work and sacrifices as seen on *Cosby*) but lack the options and opportunities to realize them.

(303)

My own work on race and news attempts to expand on Gray’s examination of the “twin representations” of African Americans (as well as representations of Hispanic and “other” Americans); in describing my approach in *Race, Myth and the News* I wrote, “The danger

of the commonsense claim to truth is in its exclusion of those who live outside the familiar world it represents” (1995: 18). My first study (Campbell 1995) found the racial mythology embedded in broadcasts across the United States represented “a hegemonic consensus about race and class that sustains myths about life outside of white, ‘mainstream’ America” (132).

I’ve identified three myths that appear to be persistent in representations of race in American journalism (Campbell 1995, 2012). In identifying a “myth of marginality,” I argued that people of color are ignored and therefore less significant and *marginalized* in news coverage (1995). I first cited the general “invisibility” of people of color in the news, noting the underrepresentation of minority news sources and the lack of coverage of minority communities in the newscasts I reviewed, including newscasts from cities with large minority populations. Additionally, I cited other studies (including Entman 1990, 1992 and Gist 1990) that provided evidence of the underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of minorities in all forms of daily news coverage. I also analyzed coverage from two cities that I argued provided evidence of lingering “traditional” or “old-fashioned” racism—the kind of racism that most Americans believe to be a thing of the past. The first analysis, in which a TV station in Hattiesburg, Mississippi followed a brief story on the local celebration of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday with a more detailed story about a local tribute to Robert E. Lee, questioned the curious juxtaposition of the stories as well as the symbolic nature of that juxtaposition. I also examined a story from Minneapolis about a fishing rights controversy that pitted white sportsmen against a regional Indian tribe; the coverage was dominated by the opinions of the sportsmen (led by Minnesota sports legend Bud Grant) and failed to include the perception of the tribe. I argued that the two stories represented “a persistence of racial insensitivity that—when compounded by the news media’s general under-representation of minority life—can contribute to a dangerous ignorance about people of color and a continuance of discrimination and injustice” (57).

Second, I identified a “myth of difference,” arguing that in local TV newscasts people of color are routinely represented, in a number of ways, *differently* than white people. I argued that many stories on local television news continued to reinforce historical stereotypes about people of color, including “positive” stereotypes of successful African-American athletes and entertainers as well as the negative stereotypes of people of color (especially African-American and Hispanic men) as violent criminals. I cited other studies (most importantly Gray 1991) that also found such stereotypes to be the dominant representation of African-American men in mainstream media. I closely analyzed several stories that reflected a pattern of subtle racial biases in the newsroom and argued that “however well intended they might be, journalists (and audience members) are likely unaware of the biases and stereotypical thinking that are deeply rooted” in the cognitive and cultural processes in a society that is dominated by white, middle-class perceptions (82).

Finally, I identified a “myth of assimilation.” In my analysis of local television news coverage of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, I described a cherished newsroom myth that represents people of color, especially African Americans, as having overcome racism and fully assimilated into the American mainstream, where equality has been achieved. This is now referred to as “post-racialism.” I found that stories about the King holiday were dominated by a theme of racial harmony, despite the evidence of lingering racial hostility in many of the cities that adopted that theme. As I wrote:

That King Day was covered the way it was is not surprising. The social and professional processes that dictate how news is covered are based on an implicit common sense, a common sense that may have more to do with stereotyped notions about the world than with a true understanding of it. Most Americans would like to believe that their country is a tolerant and fair one, that discrimination does not exist, that equal opportunity is there for all. But what we would like to believe and what actually exists are clearly at odds.

(111)

I expressed specific concern about news organizations creating a mythical world in which racial harmony is the norm when seen in the broader context of newscasts that routinely include images of people of color as suspects in stories related to violent crime. In reflecting on the work of Gray (1986, 1991) and Jhally and Lewis (1992), I expressed this concern: “If our society is the just and fair one that was portrayed on King Day, the constant barrage of menacing images of minorities that more commonly appear on local TV news will undoubtedly fuel racist attitudes” (111). When I worked with colleagues to revisit representations of race on local television news in 2012 (Campbell, LeDuff and Brown), we found few changes to the mythic notions I had identified in 1995; indeed, we found the mythic representations of race in journalism in the age of the Barack Obama presidency to be even more problematic.

Race, Representation, and Contemporary Media

Other scholars have examined aspects of representation of race and ethnicity in media across media types and across borders. Evelyn Alsultany, in *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, examines primetime dramas and sitcoms, journalism, advertising, and public relations in identifying both stereotypical and more complicated media representations of Arabs and Muslims that served hegemonic understandings in post-9/11 America and into the Obama era. Her work describes the traditional representations of Arabs and Muslims in which audiences are “primed by the media to equate Arabs and Muslims first with dissoluteness and patriarchy/misogyny and then with terrorism” (9). But she also identifies media portrayals that surfaced after 9/11 that she describes as “simplified complex representations” (8) that reflect the notion of a co-opted “multiculturalism” that is a shallow attempt to counter the terrorist stereotype:

This feature of post-9/11 representations is consistent with Mahmood Mamdani’s (2004) claim that the public debate since the terrorist attacks have involved a discourse about “good” and “bad” Muslims in which Muslims are assumed to be bad until they perform and prove their allegiance to the US.

(14–15)

Similar to Herman Gray’s pleas for more complicated representations of African Americans in the media, Alsultany believes,

If more and more Americans were to see more and more complex portrayals of Arabs, Muslims, Arab Americans, and Muslim Americans on television on film, who knows what the effect would be. Racism is endlessly flexible, resentment of the Other can be easily stoked; stereotyped assumptions are difficult to

overcome. Perhaps the emergence of honest, and varied, and *human* portrayals of Arabs and Muslims would make little difference in a country, and a world, on its viewers. Television shows . . . have the potential for more complexity than we often give them credit for. Perhaps, en masse, they could compel an audience to reject the logics that legitimize the denial of human rights.

(*Alsultany 2012: 177*)

Rolf Halse (2012) reached similar conclusions in his examination of the representations of a Muslim-American family on the hit primetime show on the Fox network in the US, 24. Scholars who view race and the media through the lens of representation have established a significant body of work that helps explain the subtleties of contemporary racism and its impact on cultures around the world. Contemporary examples include examinations of Aboriginal identity in contemporary Australia (Fforde et al. 2013); the predictability of stereotypes of American Indians on primetime television (Fitzgerald 2010); portrayals of migrant women in Korean films (Kim 2009); the “new racism” in popular culture’s representation of African-American women (Littlefield 2008); and news coverage of the Maori Party in New Zealand (Sullivan 2005).

Stuart Hall’s influence on the important body of work that uses the concept of representation as a means of examining the relationship between race and the media will certainly continue well into the twenty-first century; that relationship becomes more complicated daily as the world’s populations shift geographically, socially, and politically. As events in Ferguson, Missouri unfolded after Michael Brown’s death in 2014, American news organizations’ coverage of protests, especially those that erupted nationally after a grand jury failed to indict the white policeman who shot him, continued to rely on problematic journalistic processes that fail to reflect the complexities of contemporary racism. Like the observations of the many cultural critics who have studied those complexities, the young people who contributed to the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown social media campaign that followed Michael Brown’s death recognized the political power of media representations and embarked on a kind of post-modern media criticism that is consistent with the observations of cultural studies scholars. This critique of racism in the media has also spread to other aspects of American popular culture (for instance, by stand-up comedians like Chris Rock or in satiric TV shows like *The Daily Show*), which is a positive indication that that critique is not limited to academic critique. Indeed, as Hall might have observed, “‘The politics of signification’—the struggle in discourse—is joined” (1980: 138).

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Further Reading/Viewing

- Alsultany, E. (2012) *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*. New York: New York University Press. (Evelyn Alsultany’s prescient examination of the representations of Arabs and Muslims in American media.)
- Campbell, C., LeDuff, K., Jenkins, C., and Brown, R. (2012) *Race and News: Critical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge. (Contains six essays that examine race and the journalistic routine and six contemporary case studies.)
- Gray, H. (1995) *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. (Sociologist Herman Gray examines representations of race in primetime television shows from *In Living Color* to *A Different World*.)
- Jhally, S. (Producer). (1997) *Stuart Hall: Representation and the Media and Race, The Floating Signifier* (videos). Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. (These two videos feature Stuart Hall in lectures that address race and representation in the media; other scholars are featured in the Media Education Foundation’s remarkable series of cultural studies videos.)