

Critical Rhetorics of Race

reviewed by Jeffrey Aaron Snyder — January 10, 2012

Title: Critical Rhetorics of Race
Author(s): Michael Lacy & Kent Ono (eds.)
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It turns out that the so-called “post-racial” era has provided very fertile ground for those scholars who study race. Since the election of President Obama, academics across the humanities and social sciences have been publishing books about race in the United States at a remarkable pace. These are books with titles like *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, *The Myth of Post-Racial America: Searching for Equality in the Age of Materialism* and *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race*. *Critical Rhetorics of Race* joins these and many other books in contesting the idea that race no longer matters in American life. “This book,” Lacy and Ono announce, “describes and illuminates multiple vectors of race to explain the persistence of race and racism in a context in which media constantly presage the end of racism” (p.13).

Part of NYU Press’ Critical Cultural Communication Series, *Critical Rhetorics of Race* is a collection of thirteen essays written from “a variety of humanistic, interpretive and social science” perspectives. With an emphasis on news coverage and feature films, the different chapters in the book interrogate public and media discourse about race and racism, demonstrating that this discourse “represents race in ambivalent, contradictory and paradoxical ways” (p.1). The book is divided into four different sections—Racialized Masculinities; Whiteness; Vernacular Resistances; and Racialized Complexities and Neocolonialism.

What unites the different chapters, according to the foreword, is “a critique of domination” (p.ix). This critique goes hand-in-hand with the unmasking of “racial hegemonies,” especially the exposure of systemic white privilege and persistent anti-black racism. In “Quentin Tarantino in Black and White,” for instance, Sean Tierney argues that Tarantino’s embrace of “blackness” is a sham, with his public statements about African American culture signifying “the very racism he claims they help dismantle” (p.82). Rachel Alicia Griffin and Bernadette Marie Calafell examine the National Basketball Association as a “site of struggle over meanings of race,” contending that NBA Commissioner David Stern embodies “white, hegemonic masculinity” in a chapter called “Control, Discipline and Punish” (p.119). When Stern instituted a player’s dress code in 2005, the authors assert that he “utilized his white male identity to assert power, maintain control and reinforce the status quo of whites as the brain trust of the organization, while blacks were confined to their bodies and positioned at the mercy of whites” (p.128). In a chapter about the film *Blood Diamond*, which was widely heralded for raising awareness about the brutal trade in illegal diamonds, Marouf Hasian, Jr., Carol W. Anderson and Rulon Wood tell us that that the film nonetheless “manifests latent racial and ethnic tensions that reproduce material and symbolic disparities, which directly affect the residents of Sierra Leone” (p.235).

If the authors share an interest in revealing hierarchies of power and privilege, they also share a conviction that one cannot understand race in isolation from other analytic categories. Race, gender, sexuality, class and so on all intersect and the interactions between and among these variables are highly significant. Although her name does not appear in the index, historian Elsa Barkley Brown was one of the first scholars to highlight the importance of intersectionality in a series of essays dating from the early 1990s. “[A]ll women,” Brown proclaimed, “do not have the same gender.” Being a woman is “not extractable from the context in which one is a woman—that is, race, class, time, and place” (1992, p.300). The same, of course, can be said about being a man. In a chapter about the Minuteman Project (“Patrolling National Identity, Masking White Supremacy”), Michelle A. Holling looks at how race, gender and a xenophobic super-patriotism interact to create the Minuteman rhetoric. Confronted by an increasingly multi-ethnic American identity and fearing the prospect of becoming a numerical minority, losing one’s job, etc., Minuteman Project members patrol the borders in “an effort to ameliorate white masculine pain” (p.100).

The cover of *Critical Rhetorics of Race* features a striking photograph of six people wading through waist-deep water outside the Superdome in the wake of hurricane Katrina. It is a happy coincidence then that one of the strongest chapters

in the book focuses on post-Katrina media representations of New Orleans' African American residents. Michael G. Lacy and Kathleen C. Haspel demonstrate that major newspapers resurrected vicious stereotypes of African Americans as "primitive racial Others, non-American refugees, threatening aliens and criminals" (p.27). "Such rhetoric," Lacy and Haspel maintain, "justified the control, mistreatment and even violence against the black evacuees" (p.30).

For a collection that advertises itself as being on the cutting edge of the communication studies field, this reader was sometimes frustrated by the complex and esoteric language used by many of the authors. "We argue," one representative passage begins, "that the use of familiar movie plot lines that rely on hegemonic audience expectations about multiculturalism create enthymematic situations that allow for the domestication of filmic critiques..." (p.245). Too often I had the sensation of hacking my way through a thicket of jargon in an attempt to locate the author's main point.

I raise the issue of abstruse language not to be nitpicky but rather because the editors claim the book advances a critical model of scholarship intended "not only to understand and navigate [the] world but ultimately [to] change it" (p.3). The goal, according to Lacy and Ono, is nothing short of "inspir[ing] others to deconstruct, dismantle, alter and expose racial hegemonies and control" (p.5). It seems to me that any serious effort to dismantle racism will require addressing a larger public than that of one's peers in communication studies. Perhaps not surprisingly, the tricky question of how academic scholarship in the "critical-rhetorical" vein might propel real-world change remains unanswered.

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