CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Everything Old is New Again

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It seemed like a mirage . . . as if awakening from a bad dream, we opened our eyes to find an African American in the White House . . . But to quote Derrick Bell, “we are not saved.” In the same way that the collapse of formal segregation did not dismantle racial power in the mid-20th century, President Obama’s victory did not signal its defeat in 2008.

Williams Crenshaw,
Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward (2011)

Anyone looking at the media landscape in 2016 could clearly see that racial tension in America was running high. Since Obama’s election in 2008, news in America had included a litany of stories that occasionally caused viewers to question whether they were watching contemporary news coverage or the History Channel. In light of news coverage that includes discord over the meaning of the Confederate flag; unarmed black men being killed by police; presidential candidate rallies that could easily be mistaken for Klan rallies; and the Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter debate, critical race scholar Derrick Bell’s words seem prophetic. When it comes to race and representation in mass media, the view in the mid-2010s is not hopeful or positive.

There is no doubt that mediated messages have played a major role in the current state of race relations in the United States. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a useful tool that can help media and social scholars better understand how we have arrived at this place more than 60 years after the Civil Rights Movement. The critique Critical Race Theorists have outlined over the years described dire concerns about American racial attitudes. In many cases, their greatest fears have become our current reality. Media critics have used CRT (originally a legal theory) to better understand American audiences and the impact of mediated messages on their view of race in America. In Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (2011) notes a major flaw in mainstream media coverage in the post-Civil Rights era. She argues,

The media helped normalize a particular erasure of racial power in its coverage of racial disparities and conflict. By rarely situating affirmative action or any other race-conscious policies within a frame that pointed to the contemporary practices of racial discrimination, the media helped to frame racism as a thing of the past. Those who resisted this interment of race were increasingly positioned as outside the mainstream.
But today it is clear that racism is alive and well in America. It is not just a matter of racist practices and beliefs on behalf of a small group of individuals who remain on the outskirts of society. Institutional and systematic racism are present and evident in the stories presented to audiences on local television news. How is it possible that U.S. citizens (even those in leadership roles) can feel that it is socially acceptable to espouse racist remarks in public spaces? How is this possible in a country that elected an African American to serve as President of the United States? How is this possible 60 years after the end of the Jim Crow era? CRT posits multiple explanations. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how critics can use the theory to explore the meaning behind the images, messages, signs, and symbols that reflect racist beliefs and practices in contemporary culture.

The History of Critical Race Theory

The roots of CRT extend back to the 1970s when a group of legal scholars and activists realized that the waves of change following the Civil Rights era of the 1960s were not having much impact in society. In some cases, America’s justice system even appeared to revert back to its pre-Civil Rights state. Derrick Bell (often cited as the father of CRT), an African American, and Alan Freeman, who is white, were pioneers of CRT. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001) in their book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, “Both were deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States and decided that new approaches were needed to expose and deal with the less obvious, though just as deeply entrenched, types of racism that characterized modern time” (xiii). They note that the theory “considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious” (3). According to Tara Yasso (2002), CRT draws from “a large literature base in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women’s studies” (3). She also notes that “CRT is a framework that can address the racism, sexism, and classism embedded in media” (3).

Mass communication scholars have found the theory to be useful as it aligns with many of the mass communication theories we use, including cultivation theory, agenda setting, and framing. In my own research, *Tales of Two Cities, How Race and Crime Intersect on Local Television News* (LeDuff 2002) and *Race and News: Critical Perspectives* (Campbell, LeDuff, Brown, and Jenkins 2012), I used the theory to deconstruct narratives and imagery in local and national television news stories. In crime stories, the narrative style frequently results in black males being framed as dangerous suspects but rarely included as police officers or informative sources in stories even in cities with large populations of black people. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, news organizations frequently manufactured stories that framed people of Middle Eastern descent as terrorists. They searched local communities and universities for the possibility that students or citizens might have connections to Al Qaeda. As a result, some viewers were likely to equate ethnicity and/or religious beliefs with terrorism.

The news also covered stories in which people who were perceived as Middle Eastern or Muslim (even when they were not) were victims of hate crimes because American citizens viewed them as terrorists. Just as legal theorists found that court cases resulted in the same outcome because judges and juries had preconceived notions about defendants based on their race, mass communication scholars find that audiences are quick to place judgment. They have observed similar stories and have preconceived “pictures in their heads” when it comes to race, guilt, and innocence while reading or watching news. As Crenshaw (2011) argues,
The opportunity presented now is for scholars across disciplines not only to reveal how disciplinary conventions themselves constitute racial power, but also to provide an inventory of the critical tools developed over time to weaken and potentially dismantle them. . . . In short, the next turn in CRT should be decidedly interdisciplinary, intersectional and cross-institutional.

What follows are three examples of how media coverage of events potentially shaped the perception of people of color and race relations in the minds of audiences. While scholars have identified a number of important tenets when it comes to CRT, three will be examined in an effort to illustrate the application of CRT to media studies.

**The Important Tenets of Critical Race Theory**

In “What’s Race Got to Do with It? Critical Race Theory’s Conflicts with and Connections to Qualitative Research Methodology and Epistemology,” Laurence Parker and Marvin Lynn (2002) characterize CRT as incorporating three main goals:

a) to present storytelling and narratives as valid approaches through which to examine race and racism in law and society;
b) to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct;
c) to draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination.

The theory also allows researchers to examine race by acknowledging the inherent privilege of “whiteness” and analyzing race from a perspective that recognizes that privilege.

Three contemporary storylines will be critically analyzed to illustrate the goals of CRT as defined by Parker and Lynn (2002). These examples will illustrate that CRT is still an applicable theory when it comes to understanding how audiences may interpret the status of race relations in America if they are frequent consumers of mediated news messages. The examples also show how the news media as an institution is often more concerned with the sensational than telling a story from a perspective that educates audiences about the real issues at hand. Finally, these examples illustrate how media contributes to the perception of America as a nation that is increasingly polarized along racial and political lines.

**Storytelling Narratives**

Mass media audiences are accustomed to narrative style when they read or watch news stories. After all, news reporting is a form of storytelling. When it comes to certain topics, audiences are often accustomed to there being two sides to the story (in the case of crime, a victim and a suspect; in the case of politics, two or more political parties). They have also been trained to anticipate (even if subconsciously) certain groups playing the same roles in those stories.

An example of this in contemporary news narrative might be found in the 2016 presidential election coverage. Looking at the presidential primaries in 2016, it was difficult to remember that less than a decade before many around the world paused with a sense of hope for race relations in America with the election of its first black president.
Derrick Bell’s observation that “we are not saved” seems visionary as audiences watched the showdown that was the 2016 primaries. When compared to Obama’s initial election in 2008, the 2016 election coverage illustrates just how quickly, and how far, the political pendulum can swing in the opposite direction. While racial tension in America had become more and more evident over the course of Obama’s time in office, coverage of the 2016 election indicated that the tension was at a new high. An article on the alternative website thedailybeast.com was headlined, “GOP’s 2016 Festival of Hate: It’s Already the Most Racist Presidential Campaign Ever.” Reporter Dean Obeidellah (2015) explained, “It’s no longer code; it’s now in our face. The GOP’s 2016 platform is that Latino immigrants are coming to rape you, blacks want handouts, gays are waging a holy war versus Christians, and Muslims are not loyal to America.”

After Obama’s election it appears that a new form of racism raised its ugly head in America. Political party affiliation became a signal of much more than politics for many, thanks to media coverage and the polarization that was reflected on television and cable network news, newspapers, and social media. The characters took sides and the narrative was similar in story after story. As a result, an individual’s political affiliation could be interpreted as a sign of personal beliefs about race and power in America. For many, “Democrat” has come to mean someone who sympathizes with minorities and non-traditional values. “Republican” has become synonymous with a preference for white-over-minority ascendency and traditional American values. American media coverage since Obama’s election is partially responsible for this interpretation.

As Crenshaw (2011) observed, “The post-reform trajectory of civil rights discourse has long revealed that modest victories are inevitably appropriated as ammunition by those seeking to limit the scope of racial reform” (1315–16). While many would have predicted that Obama’s election might have been a win for race relations in the country, Critical Race Theorists predicted otherwise. According to Delgado and Stefancic (1997):

Literary and narrative theory holds that we each occupy a normative universe or “nomos” from which we are not easily dislodged. Talented storytellers nevertheless struggle to reach audiences with their message (everyone loves a story). The hope is that well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others.

Unfortunately, those who create the news have not always used the power of media to empower. Just as there are good guys and villains in the fairytales and fables we read as children, the narrative style of telling news stories has resulting in stereotypes of those on either side of the story being ingrained in our psyches. Based on the stories we are told over and over again, black and brown people are often the bad guys and society is protected from them by white heroes. This narrative is not a fair or accurate depiction of reality for those on either side of the story.

**Race and Power**

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), one paradigm held by Critical Race Theorists may be defined as realism or economic determinism. They believe that “though attitudes and words are important, racism is much more than having an unfavorable impression of
members of other groups. For realists racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status” (17). In the 1990s, a common theme examined in mass media research was the criminalization of black people in the news. Over-reporting of black-on-black crime (particularly black men killing black men) and negative depictions of African-American life and culture in both entertainment and new programming were common themes in mass communication research. Christopher P. Campbell’s Race, Myth and the News (1995) was filled with examples of such negative news coverage of minorities from across the country. Audience members with little real-world exposure to black people might be led to perceive African Americans as dangerous. But the true danger enters the picture when these perceptions affect people’s treatment in the real world.

The stories of black men’s deaths have taken a strange twist in the mid-2010s. The following lives ended under similar circumstances in a relatively short period of time: Trayvon Martin in 2012; Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice in 2014; Eric Harris and Freddie Gray in 2015. All these unarmed black males died at the hands of white police officers. In many cases, no charges were initially filed against the officers and even when they were, some were curiously found innocent. These black men were perceived as dangerous and threatening and, in the name of the police officers’ perceived self-preservation, they were killed. Though some of these men were completely innocent, others may have been guilty of minor crimes, but none were guilty of crimes that should have resulted in the death sentences they received without trial.

Protestors flooded city streets and in cities like Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland. The protests occasionally turned violent and media coverage was reminiscent of coverage of protests and riots in the pre-Civil Rights era. The #BlackLivesMatter movement was born as a response to the series of senseless killings and was quickly countered by smaller and white-led campaigns, including “#BlueLivesMatter” in support of police officers and “All Lives Matter,” suggesting that #BlackLivesMatter includes an implied “only” before it. Perhaps Corey Robin summarizes it best in a June 2015 article for Salon.com:

Since the 1960s, when law and order became the rallying cry of the country’s rightward turn, particularly around issues of racial inequality, the notion that safety and security are the primary political goods has migrated across the ideological spectrum. People of comfort get freedom and security. . . . People of color and the poor get neither. . . . Not only has the discourse of protection contributed to the racist practices and institutions of our overly policed and incarcerated society, but it also prevents us from seeing, much less tackling, the broader, systemic inequalities that might ultimately reduce those practices and institutions.

When Civil Rights activist and prominent African-American judge A. Leon Higginbotham (1996) identified “The Ten Precepts of American Slavery Jurisprudence,” which included “Inferiority” and “Powerlessness,” he argued that mainstream America seeks to “keep blacks—whether slave or free—as powerless as possible so that they will be submissive and dependent in every respect, not only to the master but to whites in general.” In addition, he says, the goal is to “limit blacks’ accessibility to the courts and subject blacks to an inferior system of justice with lesser rights and protections and greater punishments” and to “utilize violence and the powers of government to assure the submissiveness of blacks.”
The stories of the killing of black men by white police officers rose to prominence in American media in 2015 and 2016, but was it the result of a sudden influx of such events? No. Situations similar to these have been happening for decades. But with a few of these stories reaching national prominence in close succession, the media latched on and the stories found a primary place in the minds of viewers. How the media told the stories sometimes depended on the political leanings of networks on which they aired. While conservative media outlets like Fox criminalized the victims, more liberal outlets like MSNBC focused on the outrage and protest. The vast difference in the way mainstream media outlets covered the stories suggests a schism among viewers they attempt to appeal to. Conservative and predominately white audiences gravitated to the coverage that framed the victims as guilty and the officers as simply fulfilling their roles: to protect and serve. Liberal media outlets sympathized with the victims, their families, and the fact that black and brown Americans now have to live in fear of those who are supposed to protect them. American journalists continue to look for “the big scary story” that will attract viewers and readers. CRT suggests that in this case the black male has been vilified and feared for many years in the news narratives that filled local and national news. But now the black male is sometimes portrayed as the victim and the white male the villain, leaving audiences grappling with the pictures and narratives in their heads after the stories they have been told for years are suddenly challenged—unless they choose to stick with ultra-conservative news sources.

**Race and Other Axes of Domination**

News is not the only place in the mass media where CRT is a useful tool. The 2016 Super Bowl half-time show served as an example of how CRT is applicable in places where entertainment and news collide. The Saturday before Super Bowl 2016, mega pop star Beyoncé, who was set to be one of the half-time show attractions, released a new video for her song “Formation.” The words and imagery featured in the video alone elicited an interesting response from audiences and media critics alike. The backdrop for the video was New Orleans and more specifically New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina. The city and the disaster served as a reminder of the inequity that exists in America between black and white, rich and poor. The lyrics in the song and images in the video address a number of issues, including racism, police brutality, skin color politics within the black community, sexuality, and gender. In the *Washington Post*, Jeff Guo observed that “Formation” was “a late entry into the dialogue about black lives, and it largely sidesteps the politics. Still it feels essential. After grief comes anger, and after anger comes action—and here comes a literal rallying cry from the queen of empowerment anthems. The release of its music video this weekend sent shockwaves of glee through social media.” But not everyone had a positive response.

Beyoncé chose the moment to make a political statement and it was not necessarily complimentary, especially in the eyes of white America. It was not by sheer coincidence that Beyoncé chose the Super Bowl, an event that attracts those that cultural critic bell hooks might define as America’s “white supremacist capitalist patriarchs” in droves. Beyoncé realized that she would have a captive audience that dedicated time and resources to watch the game and see her. Her message in the songs suggests her greatest revenge as a black woman is the money she makes while entertaining the same people who oppress poor black Americans. Her reference to being a “Texas Bama” and having “hot sauce in my bag swag” suggests that audiences should not be fooled by her fame; that in essence she
is just the same as the average black American being discriminated against and stereotyped by the media. For those who may have missed the actual music video, the message was reiterated loud and clear during the Super Bowl half-time show.

To add fuel to the virtual fire, Beyoncé made her Super Bowl half-time appearance dressed in all black and followed by an entourage of black women in dress reminiscent of what members of the Black Panther Party wore in the 1960s. In response to this display, audiences were again polarized and the media was quick to point it out. While many black viewers watched the display with pride, many white viewers were outraged. According to BET.com, “Ever since Beyoncé’s Black Panther-themed Super Bowl 50 halftime performance, some white conservatives have been up in arms, saying that the superstar is promoting violence against the police.” There appeared to be an assumption in the coverage and the buzz on social media that Beyoncé spoke for all of black America as she made her statement during Super Bowl 50. While some applauded her actions, Sean Trainor of Salon.com wrote, “Is ‘Formation’ the last word on anti-racist feminism? Of course it is not. . . . To demand Beyoncé be a ‘spokesperson’ is among the most insidious forms of racism. When we start pillorying Toby Keith or the Insane Clown Posse for misrepresenting white America, please get back to me.”

As an African-American woman from the South, Beyoncé chose to make a political statement about the status of race relations in America. As a result she was criticized for her actions. Only time will tell how this move will impact her celebrity and sales of her music. But what was most interesting was how the dividing lines were drawn when it came to those who supported her message and those who were against it. There was a clear mix of interpretation, depending upon how audiences and commentators interpreted her and her message. A quick search of responses to the video and her Super Bowl appearance indicates that people saw Beyoncé speaking on behalf of blacks and black feminists, while some went as far as to see her message as anti-police. It is difficult to imagine that viewers would dissect a message from a white male on so many levels. This is an example of the complicated intersectionality that Critical Race Theorists identify.

**Conclusion**

How did we arrive at this place in America? A place where a Republican Presidential nominee can publicly humiliate black and brown people and garner cheers and ultimately votes from potential voters? A place where protests in response to the senseless murders of unarmed black men led to protestors being handled by police in a manner that is eerily reminiscent of the way protestors were handled during the Civil Rights Movement? As Crenshaw (2012) explains, “Although the celebration prompted by Obama’s victory was indeed monumental, his breakthrough did not open up a raceless space beyond the glass ceiling” (1312). We as a society cannot say that we were not forewarned. Critical Race Theorists saw the writing on the wall early on. In some ways the initial response of society and media coverage of life in the early years after the Civil Rights Movement gave the false impression that racism was over. The media perpetuated the myth by avoiding the stories that indicated the true price of oppression. Instead they focused on sensational stories to increase their viewership and for ratings. Unfortunately, hegemonic thoughts and practices in relation to race persisted and festered, and today it seems that many of the old challenges that society faced in pre-Civil Rights America are coming back to haunt us with a new and different twist.
During Obama’s presidential campaign, the media focused on the narrative that many in this country were excited because we were on the verge of “change” and had “hope” in a post-racial America. But it wasn’t long before the counter-narrative of racist backlash entered the picture. This is not to suggest that this is the fault of the president, but instead the magnification of the lack of effort on behalf of our society and American media to address the true ills that are so ingrained in our society when it comes to race relations. Those in the media profession continue to make the same old mistakes. The recent incidents described here are indeed reminiscent of the struggle that those who fought during the pre-Civil Rights era faced more than half a century ago. Today there is a new platform, social media, which allows huge audiences to voice their thoughts, opinions, and ideas. It is a platform where we see discussions play out in response to many of the stories that audiences across America first learn about through mainstream media. This technology, which was once touted as being almost utopian, has instead become one of the places where we can witness first-hand the great divides among race and class in modern society.

References


Further Reading


