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GENDER, RACE, AND  
MEDIA REPRESENTATION

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In our consumption-oriented, mediated society, much of what comes to pass as important is based often on the stories produced and disseminated by media institutions. Much of what audiences know and care about is based on the images, symbols, and narratives in radio, television, film, music, and other media. How individuals construct their social identities, how they come to understand what it means to be male, female, black, white, Asian, Latino, Native American—even rural or urban—is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender. Media, in short, are central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities.

While sex differences are rooted in biology, how we come to understand and perform gender is based on culture.<sup>1</sup> We view culture “as a process through which people circulate and struggle over the meanings of our social experiences, social relations, and therefore, our *selves*” (Byers & Dell, 1992, p. 191). Just as gender is a social construct through which a society defines what it means to be masculine or feminine, race also is a social construction. Race can no longer be seen as a biological category, and it has little basis in science or genetics. Identifiers such as hair and skin color serve as imperfect indicators of race. The racial categories we use to differentiate human difference have been created and changed to meet the dynamic social, political, and economic needs of our society. The premise

that race and gender are social constructions underscores their centrality to the processes of human reality. Working from it compels us to understand the complex roles played by social institutions such as the media in shaping our increasingly gendered and racialized media culture. This chapter explores some of the ways mediated communication in the United States represents the social constructions of race and gender and ultimately contributes to our understanding of both, especially race.<sup>2</sup>

Although research on race, gender, and media traditionally has focused on underrepresented, subordinate groups such as women and minorities, this chapter discusses scholarship on media representations of both genders and various racial groups. Therefore, we examine media constructions of masculinity, femininity, so-called people of color, and even white people.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, given the limitations of this chapter and the fact that media research on race has focused on African Americans, we devote greater attention to blacks but not at the exclusion of the emerging saliency of whiteness studies, which acknowledge whiteness as a social category and seek to expose and explain white privilege.<sup>4</sup>

Our theoretical and conceptual orientation encompasses research that is commonly referred to as “critical/cultural studies.” Numerous theoretical approaches have been used to examine issues of race, gender, and media, but we contend that critical/cultural studies represent the most salient contemporary thinking on media and culture. More important, unlike most social and behavioral scientific research, most critical and cultural approaches to media studies work from the premise that Western industrialized societies are stratified by hierarchies of race, gender, and class that structure our social experience. Moreover, cultural studies utilizes interdisciplinary approaches necessary for understanding both the media’s role in the production and reproduction of inequity and for the development of more equitable

and democratic societies. Cultural studies scholars have devoted considerable attention to studies of media audiences, institutions, technologies, and texts. This chapter privileges textual analyses of media that explicate power relationships and the construction of meaning about gender and race and their intersections (Byers & Dell, 1992). In addition, we draw considerably from research employing various feminist frameworks. Generally, our critical review of literature from the past two decades demonstrates the disruption of essentialist constructions of gender, race, and sexual identities.

### ◆ *Black Feminist Perspectives and Media Representations of Black Women*

A feminist critique is rooted in the struggle to end sexist oppression. We employ feminism as a multidisciplinary approach to social analysis that emphasizes gender as a major structuring component of power relations in society. We believe media are crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies and, thus, in gender socialization. We acknowledge feminism and feminist media studies’ tendency to privilege gender and white women, in particular, over other social categories of experience, such as race and class (hooks, 1990; Dines, 1995; Dines & Humez, 2003). Black feminist scholars have acknowledged the neglect which women of color, specifically black women, have experienced through their selective inclusion in the writings of feminist cultural analysis (hooks, 1990; Bobo & Seiter, 1991; Valdivia, 1995). Black feminism positions itself as critical social theory (Hill Collins, 2004) and is not a set of abstract principles but of ideas that come directly from the historical and contemporary experience of black women. It is from this perspective that we begin our

discussion of black female representation in the media.

Much contemporary academic writing has criticized mainstream media for their negative depictions of African American women (Bobo, 1995; Hill Collins, 2000, 2004; hooks, 1992; Lubiano, 1992; Manatu, 2003; McPhail, 1996; Perry, 2003). Challenging media portrayals of black women as mummies, matriarchs, jezebels, welfare mothers, and tragic mulattoes is a core theme in black feminist thought. Author bell hooks (1992) contends that black female representation in the media “determines how blackness and people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed images” (p. 5). Hudson (1998) and Hill Collins (2000, 2004) both advance the notion that media images of black women result from dominant racial, gender, and class ideologies. Furthering hooks’s discussion of representation, Hudson (1998) argues that “these stereotypes simultaneously reflect and distort both the ways in which black women view themselves (individually and collectively) and the ways in which they are viewed by others” (p. 249). The study of black female representation is informed by whiteness studies and, according to Dyer (1997), “the only way to see the structures, tropes, and perceptual habits of whiteness, is when nonwhite (and above all, black) people are also represented” (p. 13).

Scholars have studied black female representation in a variety of media contexts. Meyers (2004) used discourse analysis to examine the representation of violence against African American women in local TV news coverage during “Freaknik,” a spring break ritual held in Atlanta, Georgia, throughout the 1990s. Her study concluded that the news “portrayed most of its victims as stereotypic Jezebels whose lewd behavior provoked assault” (p. 95). Orbe and Strother’s (1996) semiotic analysis of the biracial title character in *Queen*, Alex Haley’s miniseries, demonstrated how

*Queen* fell in line with “traditional stereotyping of other bi-ethnic characters as beautiful, yet threatening, inherently problematic, and destined for insanity” (p. 117). Larson’s (1994) study of black women on the soap opera *All My Children* found the show consistently embraced the matriarch stereotype. In fact, the image of the black woman as oversexed fantasy object, dominating matriarch, and nonthreatening, desexualized mammy figure remains the most persistent in the media (Edwards, 1993).

Black feminist thought also challenges the way some media outlets run by black men engage in misogynistic depictions of black women. Burks (1996) notices the saliency of hooks’s phrase, “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” in many black independent films. She explains that “black independent cinema is not necessarily free of the dominant white, male, heterosexual hegemony that has succeeded, at one point or another, in colonizing us all” (p. 26). Several cultural critics have focused their studies of black female representation on majority-produced and directed Hollywood films (Bobo, 1995; Bogle, 2001; Holtzman, 2000; hooks, 1992, 1994). Many other media scholars have focused their analyses on the way black filmmakers depict black femininity, as part of a trend that Burks (1996) argues leaves mainstream (white) Hollywood producers free to construct the black female image in any way they like and to reach a larger viewing audience in the process.

Black female scholars Wallace (1990) and hooks (1993) both have written extensively on the work of black writer/director Spike Lee’s portrayal of black women. Hooks contends that while Lee is

uncompromising in his commitment to create images of black males that challenge perceptions and bring issues of racism to the screen, he conforms to the status quo when it comes to images of females. Sexism is the familiar construction that links his films to all the other Hollywood dramas folks see. (p. 14)

McPhail (1996) continues hooks's argument and argues that Lee's films "subscribe to essentialist conceptions of race and gender that reify the same ideological and epistemological assumptions that undermine both the representation of race and gender in mainstream media" (p. 127). According to our (Brooks & Hébert, 2004) study of Lee's *Bamboozled*, he creates female characters who become defined by the men in their lives. We claim that although his films fight to challenge racist frameworks within the mass media and society, they simultaneously perpetuate sexist norms as they relate to black womanhood. Although Spike Lee is not the only black male filmmaker who perpetuates negative representations of women, he has garnered the most attention by cultural critics. This is an area of study that requires additional work, as African American filmmakers are moving from the margins of independent films to the center of multibillion dollar studios and networks that are run by heterosexual white males, thus potentially contributing to black women's oppression.

Prime time television has tended to confine black female roles to white models of "good wives" and to black matriarchal stereotypes. Byers and Dell's (1992) analysis of characterization in the CBS workplace ensemble *Frank's Place* demonstrates that it was no exception to this trend. Their study provides an excellent example of a feminist textual analysis of the intersection of race and gender from a cultural studies perspective. Despite drawing inspiration from the situation comedy's association with the feminine, the series worked from a distinctly masculine perspective. Although *Frank's Place* presented a fairly wide range of representations of African American men, it provided a much narrower range of representations of African American women. The attention it gave to inequities in skin color and class was rarely afforded to its female characters. Instead, feminine beauty was related to light skin, straight hair, thinness, relative youthfulness, and middle-class status. Despite the show's conscious attempt to illustrate the social ramifications of the

representation of racial difference, it was oblivious to the ways gender and class inflect race (Byers & Dell, 1992).

Much academic writing has focused on historically situated negative portrayals of black women, and the most recent theoretical trend in black feminist media scholarship is the representation of black female sexuality in the media (Hill Collins, 2004; Manatu, 2003; Perry, 2003). Sexuality is not discussed in reference to sexual orientation but to how popular culture has commodified the black female body as hypersexed. Some theorists (Guerrero, 1993; Iverem, 1997; Manatu, 2003) contend that black women are portrayed only as sexual beings and not as romantic characters, as indicated by Halle Berry's Oscar-winning performance in *Monster's Ball*. It has been argued that she played an oversexed jezebel and tragic mulatto at the same time (Hill Collins). Others assert that the habitual construction of a subversive woman's sexual image may come to define women culturally (Kennedy, 1992; Nelson, 1997).

While the black jezebel mythos is not new to film and television studies, it has found a home in music videos. Much as black music of the 1950s was repurposed by the industry as a new category called rock and roll, and made its way into suburban white homes, popular culture today "draws heavily from the cultural production and styles of urban Black youth" (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 122). It is within this black cultural production, reworked through the prism of social class, "that the sexualized Black woman has become an icon in hip-hop culture" (p. 126). A theory of the body and of how black women are objectified as sexual commodities fuels this debate that has become popular in academic circles. Within this context three primary research interests have emerged: the objectification of black women's bodies for the voyeuristic pleasure of men (Hill Collins, 2004; hooks, 1994; Jones, 1994); the impact of sexual representation and ideal Westernized body images on young black females (Perry, 2003); and black

female sexuality as a symbol of agency (Gaunt, 1995; Hill Collins, 2004; Rose, 1994).

The objectification of black women's bodies in hip-hop music videos, according to Jones (1994), is particularly disturbing because these videos are produced primarily by black men. Edwards (1993) argues that music videos play into male sexual fantasies and that the notion of the black woman as a sex object or whore is always placed in opposition to the image of black woman as mammy. Hooks (1994) warns that while feminist critiques of the misogyny in rap music must continue and that black males should be held accountable for their sexism, the critique must be contextualized. She continues:

Without a doubt black males, young and old, must be held politically accountable for their sexism. Yet this critique must always be contextualized or we risk making it appear that the problems of misogyny, sexism, and all the behaviors this thinking supports and condones, including rape, male violence against women, is a black male thing. (p. 116)

Most academic writing on this subject focuses on black men's portrayals of black women, but we argue that the music videos of hip-hop artists who are not black follow a similar misogynist formula in which scantily clad women surround the artist in a poolside, hot tub, or nightclub setting. Latino artists Fat Joe and Geraldo (otherwise known as Rico Suave), and white artists Justin Timberlake and Vanilla Ice all fall into this category, substituting Latina and white women's bodies for black ones. This discussion becomes more salient as white-centered visual music outlets such as MTV and VH-1 dedicate more programming time to hip-hop culture and create late night programs designed to show so-called uncut and uncensored videos that make clear references to the culture of strip clubs and pornography. As Fiske (1996) contends, "Whiteness is particularly adept at

sexualizing racial difference, and thus constructing its others as sites of savage sexuality" (p. 45).

In line with theories of the body that say the mass media promotes images of "an ideal body type," Perry (2003) explains that the messages these videos send to young women about their bodies are harmful. She argues that "the beauty ideal for black women presented in these videos is as impossible to achieve as the waif-thin models in *Vogue* magazine are for White women" (p. 138). In addition to the black body ideal of large breasts, thin waist and round buttocks presented in videos, many of the black women featured depict a Westernized beauty ideal of lighter skin, long hair, and blue or green eyes. Edwards (1993) takes the concept of a beauty ideal one step further and contends that the black women featured in music videos exemplify physical characteristics of the tragic mulatto. According to hooks (1994), racist and sexist thinking informs the way color-caste hierarchies affect black females. She contends:

Light skin and long, straight hair continue to be traits that define a female as beautiful and desirable in the racist white imagination and in the colonized black mindset. . . . Stereotypically portrayed as embodying a passionate, sensual eroticism, as well as a subordinate feminine nature, the biracial woman has been and remains the standard other black females are measured against." (p. 179)

The other side of this discussion about negative sexual imagery concerns black female sexual agency. Hill Collins (2004) notes that many African American women rappers "identify female sexuality as part of women's freedom and independence" (p. 127), maintaining that being sexually open does not make a woman a tramp or a "ho," which is a common term placed upon women in hip-hop. Rose (1994) demands a more multifaceted analysis of black women's identity and sexuality within rap

music, while Perry (2003) asserts that any power granted to female rappers based upon their being labeled attractive in conventional ways limits the feminist potential of their music.

*MULTICULTURAL FEMINIST  
PERSPECTIVES AND MEDIA  
REPRESENTATIONS OF  
ASIAN, LATINA, AND  
NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN*

Acknowledging Valdivia's (1995) assertion that feminist work has focused on white women as ethnic and race studies have focused primarily on African Americans, we seek to include other "women of color" in our analysis of stereotypic female representation. As we stated in the beginning of this chapter, our analysis relies primarily on black women, as that is where the majority of scholarship on race, gender, and the media focuses. However, we agree with Hill Collins (2004) that many of the arguments made previously about black women also apply to women from India, Latin America, Puerto Rico, and Asia, "albeit through the historical specificity of their distinctive group histories" (p. 12).

Asian women and Latinas are often portrayed in the media as the exotic, sexualized "other as well. According to Tajima (1989), "Asian women in film are either passive figures who exist to serve men as love interests for White men (lotus blossom) or as a partner in crime of men of their own kind (dragon ladies)" (p. 309). Pursuing this lotus blossom/dragon lady dichotomy, Hagedorn (1997) argues that most Hollywood movies either trivialize or exoticize Asian women: "If we are 'good,' we are childlike, submissive, silent and eager for sex. And if we are not silent, suffering doormats, we are demonized . . . cunning, deceitful, sexual provocateurs" (pp. 33-34).

Much academic writing surrounding Asian female representation in the media is steeped in postcolonial theory and Orientalist discourse, both of which are

concerned with otherness. The global other, in media terms, is always paired with the West as its binary companion (Ferguson, 1998). Shome (1996) explains that when whiteness is comfortable in its hegemony, it constructs the other as strange or different and itself as the norm. Drawing from Said's study of Orientalism, Heung (1995) says, "The power of the colonizer is fundamentally constituted by the power to speak for and to represent" (p. 83). Furthering the discussion of an East/West binary, the West is portrayed in the media as active and masculine while the East is passive and feminine (Wilkinson, 1990).

Though the number of female Asian characters represented in the media, especially television, is miniscule, the way they are portrayed in the media is crucial because stereotypes of underrepresented people produce socialization in audiences that unconsciously take this misinformation as truth (Heung, 1995; Holtzman, 2000). Thus, the portrayal of Ling Woo, Lucy Liu's character in the television series *Ally McBeal*, garnered much scholarly attention. Although Woo breaks the submissive china doll stereotype, she is the epitome of the stereotypical dragon lady when she growls like an animal or enters a scene to music associated with the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* (Sun, 2003). She is knowledgeable in the art of sexual pleasure, which is unknown to her Westernized law firm colleagues, with the exception of Richard Fish, her white boyfriend who experiences it first hand. Patton (2001) explains that the Woo character is particularly detrimental to Asian and Asian American women not because the oversexed seductress reifies existing stereotypes, but because "she is the only representative of Asian women on television (besides news anchors and reporters), leaving no one else to counteract this prominent mediated stereotype" (p. 252).

While it is difficult to propose more work on Asian female representation when the number of females in the media are sparse, an obvious place to begin would be

to look into production studies to find out what producers are looking for in casting an Asian female. Can she not play a detective or attorney on one of the three *Law and Order* series? Can she be a strong and funny mom on an Asian American sitcom? And is she just as discontented with her suburban life as white women such that she could be considered for *Desperate Housewives*? That popular program has a Latina and has added an African American character for the fall 2006 season, but it features no Asian women as of this writing.

Although most of the academic literature regarding black and Asian media representation focuses on historically situated stereotypes, this does not hold true for Latinas. While there has been some reference to Latinas being portrayed as exotic seductresses (Holtzman, 2000), as tacky and overly emotional (Valdivia, 1995), and as the hypersexualized spitfire (Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004), the majority of literature on Latino/a representation has focused on men. Jennifer Lopez has made her mark in Hollywood, but her films have both reified stereotypes of Latinas as domestic workers (*Maid in America*, 2003) and broken them when she has played roles that are not ethnically marked (*The Wedding Planner*, 2001; *Gigli*, 2003; *Monster in Law*, 2005). In these roles, however, Lopez is always paired with a white male love interest and, because she rarely plays characters true to her ethnicity (except of course when she played a maid, a role that emphasized it), she becomes an assimilated character who does nothing to negate Latina stereotypes. Molina Guzmán and Valdivia assert that Lopez is most often allowed to perform whiteness, which renders her seemingly raceless and cultureless.

García Canclini (1995) contends that “the contemporary experience of Latinas, which also holds true of other populations shaped by colonialism, globalization, and transnationalism, is informed by the complex dynamics of hybridity as a cultural practice and expression” (as cited in Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 214).

Hill Collins (2004) calls this color-blind racism and explains that the significance attached to skin color, especially for women, is changing. She argues that “in response to the growing visibility of biracial, multiracial, Latino, Asian, and racially ambiguous Americans, skin color no longer serves as a definitive mark of racial categorization” (p. 194). This notion of hybridity or *Latinidad*, defined as the state and process of being, becoming, or appearing Latino/a (Martinez, 2004; Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Rojas, 2004), is gaining scholarly attention. However, as a social construct it lends itself to an essentialist group identity, instead of acknowledging difference between Dominicans, Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans, all of whom epitomize *Latinidad* (Estill, 2000).

Latinas are also finding a place within the music world and, as with black women, their sex appeal is played up heavily in their music videos. Shakira and Jennifer Lopez are some of the most visible who have enjoyed music/acting crossover fame. One of the most common tropes surrounding these and other mediated Latina hypersexualized bodies within popular culture is tropicalism (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997; Martinez, 2004). According to Molina Guzmán & Valdivia (2004), bright colors, rhythmic music, and olive skin fall under the trope of tropicalism, and sexuality plays a central role. Dominant representations of Latinas in music videos place emphasis on the breasts, hips, and buttocks (Gilman, 1985; Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Negrón-Muntaner, 1991). Desmond (1997) calls the Latina body “an urbane corporeal site with sexualized overdetermination” (as cited in Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 211).

While not enough academic research is conducted on Native American media representation, we would be remiss if we did not mention two studies that examine how Native American women are portrayed. Portman and Herring (2001) discuss the “Pocahontas paradox,” a historical movement that persists in romanticizing and

vilifying Native American women. They argue that Native American women are viewed in the media as either strong and powerful or beautiful, exotic, and lustful and that both images have merged together into one representation through the stereotype of Pocahontas. While Ono and Buescher's (2001) study on Pocahontas examines the commodification of products and cultural discourses surrounding the popular Disney film, they also assert that new meanings have been ascribed to the animated figure, thus recasting the Native American woman in a Western, capitalist frame (p. 25). Ultimately, Pocahontas is no more than a sexualized Native American Barbie. Both Portman and Herring (2001) and Ono and Buescher (2001) agree that the Pocahontas mythos is particularly harmful to Native women because of the way this historical figure has been exoticized by media discourses that emphasize her relationship with her white lover, John Smith.

#### *MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF RACIALIZED MASCULINITIES*

Research on gender and media traditionally has focused on questions about women (and has been conducted primarily by women). In fact, as noted above, the focus on gender in media studies has come mainly from feminists. However, in recent decades the study of gender has expanded to include studies on men and masculinities (Connell, Hearn, & Kimmel, 2005). Feminist scholarship also has produced a proliferation of whiteness studies that include increased research on white masculinity and, to a lesser extent, white womanhood. This work interrogates gender identities and performances while exploring how masculine forms relate to patriarchal systems. Masculinity is defined broadly as "the set of images, values, interests, and activities held important to a successful achievement of male adulthood" (Jeffords, 1989, quoted in Ashcraft & Flores, 2000, p. 3). We agree with calls to refer to these gender roles as

"masculinities" to reinforce the notion that ideals of manhood vary by race and class across time and cultural contexts (Dines & Humez, 2003, p. 733). Cultural studies' focus on white masculinity as the invisible norm, and (to a lesser extent) on black men and black masculinity as deviant, works to reinforce the conception that black is the trope for race (Nakayama, 1994). Yet another intellectual movement inadvertently may have contributed to this notion.

#### *CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK MEN AND BLACK MASCULINITIES*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from critical legal studies in the 1970s as an intellectual response to the slow pace of racial reform in the United States. CRT places race at the center of critical analysis and traces its origins to the legal scholarship of Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who challenged the philosophical tradition of the liberal civil rights color-blind approach to social justice. A central premise of CRT is that racism is an ordinary fact of American life. Although CRT occasionally probes beyond the black-white binary of race, it privileges African American experiences. Much of the critical edge in critical race studies is provided by a combination of legal, feminist, multicultural, social, political, economic, and philosophical perspectives (Delgado & Stefancic, 1999). Despite CRT's focus on legal studies and policy, we would expect that the field's search for new ways of thinking about race, the nation's most enduring social problem, eventually would include media. Unfortunately, media studies scholars have not consciously employed CRT and few critical race theorists have devoted detailed attention to media institutions and their representations.<sup>5</sup>

Herman Gray's (1995, 1989) work shares many of the assumptions of CRT. His ideological analysis (1986) of black



male representations in prime time situation comedies argues that television's idealization of racial harmony, affluence, and individual mobility is not within the grasp of millions of African Americans. In the 1983–84 television season, four programs—*Benson*, *Webster*, *Different Strokes* and *The Jeffersons*, provided an assimilationist view of racial interaction that emphasized individualism, racial invisibility, and perhaps most important, middle-class success. The ideological function of these representations worked to support the contention that in the context of current political, economic and cultural arrangements, all individuals—regardless of color (and gender)—can achieve the American dream. On the other hand, such representations subsist in the absence of significant change in the overall status of African Americans in the United States (Gray, 1986).

In an article on another genre of prime time television, the so-called real life crime series (formerly labeled as “reality” crime shows), Hogrobrooks (1993) argues that this type of programming contributed to the “denigration and dehumanization” of African American males (p. 165). Hogrobrooks quotes a news director who acknowledged that “young black men—the unwitting ‘media darlings’ of the explosion of America’s ‘real-life, prime time crime’ programs—are, in reality, victims of character assassination by a greedy television industry, hungry for higher and higher ratings” (p. 167).

MacDonald's (2004) analysis of depictions of homicide detectives in television and film represents the more recent focus in media studies on masculinity and race. Specifically, she illustrates the ways in which both the police drama *Homicide: Life on the Street* and Spike Lee's film *Clockers* highlight the struggle of various men to come to terms with their own masculinities. MacDonald argues that these texts offer “new potential” for men of different races to reject traditional stereotypes of masculinity (p. 221). She commends *Homicide's* two black male detectives for offering a cultural

construction of black masculinity that is neither “tokenistic nor predictable” (p. 223). Conversely, *Clockers* demonstrates the failure of the white male homicide detective (Rocco Klein) to develop an in-depth understanding of African American life mainly because of his insistence on performing as a tough cop who resorts to “a desperate use of physical violence, racism, and tough talk in order to reassure himself of his unshakable masculinity” (p. 225). Nevertheless, MacDonald claims that collectively these texts teach viewers that masculinity is a complex idea that coexists with various other complex ideas such as class and race and that these complexities are increasing being portrayed in media culture.

Byers and Dell (1992), in their study of representations of masculinity and femininity across numerous characters in *Frank's Place*, argue that its most important contribution to television programming in particular and American culture in general was the construction of new ways of representing African Americans. Byers and Dell contextualize these constructions of masculinity of race in *Frank's Place* in the historical representations of African American males, where racial and gender hierarchies function to reinforce each other. Such imagery can be traced to slavery when black manhood could not be realized or maintained because of the slave's inability to protect black women in the same fashion that “convention dictated that inviolability of the body of the White woman” (Carby, 1987, quoted in Byers & Dell, p. 196). Further, the historical images of the shuffling Uncle Tom, the animalistic savage (positioned as a threat to white women), and the childlike Sambo function to exclude black men from the category of “true men.”

Unlike the “new black male” constructed in Gray's analysis of 1980s sitcoms, *Frank's Place* made the struggle over race and gender highly visible. The lead character, Frank Parish, propelled the series to simultaneously confront African American male stereotypes and to participate in the construction of the “new man” (Byers & Dell,

1992, p. 196). Despite the absence of the Uncle Tom stereotype, Frank reinforces the caricature of the ignorant, ineffectual Sambo, while his education and drive challenge this stereotype. Frank's character also invoked the image of the sexually aggressive black male without representing a threat to white women. Perhaps most important, by displaying "feminine" attributes such as nonaggressive behavior and sensitivity, Frank—like many white male characters—challenged essentialist, macho notions of masculinity. Ultimately, Frank functioned as a site for the interplay of characteristics traditionally defined as masculine and feminine and offered a way to envision a new black masculinity. In this sense, *Frank's Place*—and to a lesser extent, *Homicide: Life on the Street*—appears to be exceptions to most media portrayals of black masculinity.

Dines (2003) focuses on the image of the black man as a sexual spoiler of white womanhood in cartoons in *Hustler*—a hard-core porn magazine. She locates such depictions within "a much larger regime of racial representation, beginning with *The Birth of a Nation* and continuing with Willie Horton, which makes the black man's supposed sexual misconduct a metaphor for the inferior nature of the black 'race' as a whole" (Dines, p. 456). This racist ideology claims that failure to contain black masculinity will result in a collapse of the economic and social fabric of white society. Specifically, Dines draws on the work of Kobena Mercer in analyzing how the depiction of black men as being obsessed with the size of their penises is one example of how the dominant regime of racial representation constructs blacks as "having bodies but not minds" (Mercer, 1994; quoted in Dines, p. 456). *Hustler* cartoons construct a world populated by white working-class hustlers and losers, where black men possess two status symbols that white men lack, big penises and money.

However, Dines maintains that it is not white men as a group who are being ridiculed, just lower-working-class white men—a class few whites see themselves as belonging to, regardless of their income:

The lower-class, sexually impotent White man in *Hustler* cartoons is, thus, not an object of identification, but rather of ridicule, and serves as a pitiful reminder of what could happen if White men fail to assert their masculinity and allow the black man to roam the streets and bedrooms of White society. (Dines, 2003, p. 459)

Dines points out that although racial codings of masculinity may shift depending on socioeconomic conditions, black masculinity continues to be constructed as deviant.

Orbe's (1998) semiotic analysis of black masculinity on MTV's *The Real World* focuses on the imagery and signification processes surrounding three black males featured throughout the six seasons in the so-called reality (unscripted) series. The images of the three black men work to signify all black men as inherently angry, potentially violent, and sexually aggressive. Orbe argues that when such images are presented as real life they function to reinforce the justification of a general societal fear of black men (p. 35). He also argues that what is notably absent from the six seasons are any considerable representations that "signify Black masculinity in a positive, healthy, or productive manner" (p. 45). Equally important, the mediated images of black masculinity on *The Real World* represent a powerful source of influence because they are not presented as mediated but as real life images captured on camera.

Martin and Yep (2004) demonstrate that black masculine performances in the media are not restricted to black males. Drawing on the work of Orbe and others that locate black masculine identities in angry, physically threatening, and sexually aggressive behaviors and discourses, Martin and Yep utilize a whiteness framework to examine how the white rap artist Eminem has been presented in the media. Whiteness refers to the "everyday invisible, subtle cultural, and social practices, ideas, and codes that discursively secure the power and privilege of White people, but that strategically remain

unmarked, unnamed, and untapped in contemporary society” (Shome, 1996, quoted in Martin & Yep, p. 230). One prominent feature of whiteness is that it is universal, which makes it seemingly devoid of race and culture. Therefore, whiteness studies also pursue strategies for both marking and naming whiteness and exposing white privilege (Martin & Yep, 2004, p. 230). Eminem exploits one privilege of whiteness—the ability to appropriate aspects of other cultures—in this case, black masculinity. And as Martin and Yep note, although black masculinity is not an essential, unified, or monolithic category, in hip-hop culture (which includes rap music) it represents anger, violence, and sexual aggressiveness. Eminem manifests these features in both his lyrics and mainstream media representations.

#### MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF ASIAN AND NATIVE AMERICAN MEN

Research on media constructions of race, men, and masculinity exemplify the black-white binary of racial discourse prevalent in contemporary discourse in the United States. Unfortunately, few studies examine Latino or Native American males in the media. Thus, we know considerably less about constructions of masculine identities within groups of men who are not white or African American. One exception to this trend comes from research on Asian American masculinity. Historically, portrayals of Asian and Asian American men (seldom is any distinction made) in mainstream American media have been restricted to motion pictures. These films represented men of Asian descent as threatening foreigners (Fu Manchu), Americanized detectives (Charlie Chan), laborers and laundry men, and most recently, as (corrupt) businessmen and martial artists. Most often these men are not seen as possessing traditionally dominant masculine characteristics—most notably sexual prowess. Sexuality, like race and gender, is a socially

constructed category of power, and the desexualized or effeminate Asian male stereotype works in conjunction with depictions of Asian women as ultrafeminine sexual objects used by white men to emasculate Asian men. Consequently, Asian American men are redefined as an angry threat to American culture (Feng, 1996). However, the ideological and power relations embedded in the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality warrant greater attention in cultural studies.

Nakayama (1994) addresses this void by examining Asian and white masculinity in the Hollywood film *Showdown in Little Tokyo*. He identifies ways that white heterosexual masculinity is recentered and argues for the importance of spatial relations in constructing identities. The vulnerability of white heterosexual masculinity is apparent in the wake of the emasculating of the United States in Vietnam and its inevitable multicultural future. Nakayama demonstrates how racial and homoerotic tensions are used to “fuel the fire that breathes life into the cultural fiction of white heterosexual masculinity” (p. 165).

One additional study, Locke’s (1998) analysis of comedic representations of Judge Lance Ito from episodes of *The Tonight Show*, disrupts the black-white duality of race so common to critical media/cultural studies. Locke uses John Fiske’s notion of racial recoding to read Ito’s inscrutability as a racial signifier consistent with the legacy of coding Asians in popular culture as people who pose a threat and who keep their motives and means hidden. Locke reads another skit on *The Tonight Show* that ridiculed Ito’s child as exposing “the threat of a racially compromised future: the daughter as the freakish miscegenated offspring of Ito and his white American wife” (p. 252). Even as Locke’s analysis points to the show’s stereotypical visual coding of blackness as an explanation of how the show “desires race” (p. 246), he compels scholars to consider such important issues as how binary racial discourses contribute to what constitutes the

racial, how media texts code a variety of racial groups, and ultimately, how these codes work together within a larger sphere of racial discourse.

Scholarship on representations of Native American males is scarce, but the novel *The Indian in the Cupboard* and the film of the same name have received some scholarly attention about Native American masculinity and paternalism. Taylor (2000) argues that “the image of the Indian as the savage, a paternalistic role for the White protagonist, and an auxiliary role for the Indian as the faithful sidekick” all reify existing stereotypes about Native American males. While Sanchez and Stuckey (2000) agree that the movie was an improvement over the book, they disagree with Taylor and assert that *The Indian in the Cupboard* challenges hegemonic codes and demeaning stereotypes. In line with Hall’s encoding/decoding model, Sanchez and Stuckey provide a negotiated reading of the film and argue that the casting of Native American actors and consultants both lends authenticity and provides a resolution to “the tension between paternalism and interdependence” (p. 87).

#### MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF WHITE MASCULINITY

As the previous discussion illustrates, the fundamental delineation in media research is between the dominant, normative, white, heterosexual, and middle-class masculinity and subordinated masculinities. The crisis in white masculinity is perhaps the most overriding feature of constructions of dominant masculinity, and the most common response to this crisis is violent behavior by white men (Katz, 2003).

Shome (2000) uncovers the way in which the crisis of white masculinity is marked and negotiated in contemporary film. One dominant theme—that of the presidency or the U.S. government in crisis—evident in such films as *Air Force One*, *Murder at 1600*, *Independence Day*, *Dave*, and *The Pelican*

*Brief*, all focus on an “ultimate site” of white masculinity where whiteness, masculinity, and nationhood converge (Shome, p. 369). In these films, the subtheme is that of “one bad white guy” who is outed by a “good white guy” who “saves, salvages, and restores the Presidency and the ‘people’” (p. 369). Another inflection of this theme occurs when whiteness is conflated with nationhood and is marked as being threatened and tortured by aliens (e.g., *Air Force One* and *Independence Day*). The common Hollywood strategy of depicting others (as “aliens”) is significant in this context because “White nationalized masculinity, as symbolized by the Presidency is first represented as being ‘oppressed’ and weakened (by aliens) and through great [violent] struggles—that tend to constitute the major plot action of these films—it recuperates and salvages itself” (p. 370).

Ashcraft and Flores (2000) also examine Hollywood film for ways in which masculine performances offer identity to middle-class heterosexual white men. Specifically, they analyze discursive performances in two films—*Fight Club* and *In the Company of Men*—that provide identity politics to “white/collar men” (p. 1). Each film’s discourse laments the imminent breakdown of the corporate man, “over-civilized and emasculated by allied obligations to work and women” (p. 2). To restore the beleaguered corporate man, the films (re)turn to “civilized/primitive” masculinity wherein the hardened white man finds healing in wounds (p. 2). Ultimately, this tough guy obscures the race and class hierarchy in which it resides by overtly appealing to gender division.

As much of the research discussed above indicates, both whiteness and hegemonic (white) masculinity do not appear to be cultural/historical categories, thus rendering invisible the privileged position from which (white) men in general are able to articulate their interests to the exclusion of interests of women, men and women of color, and children (Hanke, 1992, p. 186). Masculinity—whether black or white—must be uprooted from essentialist thinking that understands

gender—as well as race, class and many other constructs of personal and collective identity—not as biologically determined or subject to universal laws of science or nature, but as products of discourse, performance, and power.

The research discussed above utilizes a variety of methodological and theoretical frameworks to examine intersections of race, gender, and media. This chapter has focused on one of the more prominent perspectives, social constructivism, in which media texts, images, and narratives are seen as intimately connected with broader social relations of domination and subordination. Although studies of representation fuel the majority of this chapter, we would be remiss if we did not include a brief discussion on audience reception studies.

### ◆ Audience Studies

The 1980s saw an emerging interest in reader/audience studies especially relating to women's genres such as romance, melodrama, and soap opera. Some of the works were Ang's (1985) *Watching Dallas*, Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance*, and Hobson's (1982) *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*. In fact, McRobbie (1991) was one of the first scholars to look at how young girls negotiate meaning through magazines. While they did not specifically look at gender, cultural critics John Fiske (1987) and David Morley (1980) have conducted several studies on audiences and television. On a similar note, Rockler's (2002) study of both African American and European American interpretations of the comic strips *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks* revealed blacks' oppositional readings of the comics through the terministic screen of race cognizance. In contrast to African American readings that underscored the relevance of racial politics and oppression, white's interpretations were produced through the terministic screen of whiteness that deflected attention

from racial power structures that privilege white people (Rockler, 2002, p. 416).

Many cultural critics (Bobo, 1995; Clifford, 1983; hooks, 1990) have called attention to the "unequal power relations inherent in the ethnographic enterprise and to the 'objectification' of the subject in ethnographic discourse" (Bobo & Seiter, 1991, p. 290). Thus they argue "the notions of gender difference deriving from ethnographic work with all-white samples in current circulation are reified and ethnocentric," leaving voices of women of color "unheard, unstudied, untheorized" (p. 291). While some authors did devote some time to studies of ethnic media audiences (Katz & Liebes, 1985) leading this call to include women of color in audience research was Jackie Bobo (1988, 1995) and her central work, *The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers*, which first appeared as a single study and later became a book. In this book, Bobo (1995) studied how black women negotiate meaning in two film texts, *The Color Purple* by white male filmmaker Steven Spielberg, and *Daughters of the Dust* by female filmmaker Julie Dash. Bobo discovered that despite *The Color Purple's* patriarchal nature, black women found ways to empower themselves through negotiated readings of its text.

Lee and Cho (2003) looked at Korean soap opera fans in the United States and examined why they preferred the Korean to the American variety. The authors concluded that, despite arguments of cultural imperialism, third world audiences like to watch their own cultural products (Lee & Cho). Two recent audience studies on women of color may indicate a resurging interest in this line of scholarship. Oppenheimer, Adams-Price, Goodman, Codling, and Coker (2003) studied how men and women perceived strong female characters on television, noting that women were more accepting than men of the powerful female characters and that African Americans related better to the strong characters than did whites. Rojas (2004) argues there is a lack of information on

how Latinas consume popular culture and how they interact and respond to Spanish-language media (p. 125). She addresses the point echoed by Latino/a scholars (Desipio, 1998; Rodriguez, 1999) that little or no attention has been paid to Latino audiences as subjects of academic research. She examined how immigrant and nonimmigrant Latinas from Austin, Texas “evaluate and negotiate the content and representations presented in Univision and Telemundo, the two largest Hispanic networks in the United States” (Rojas, 2004, p. 125). As the U.S. population includes more native Spanish speakers, this type of bilingual/bicultural research becomes more significant to communication studies. Although these studies vary considerably by topic, collectively they point to some of the important ways race and gender identities influence struggles over meaning. Further, while the audience studies cited above have provided a strong foundation for future research, women—and especially men—from nonwhite races still remain sorely underrepresented in ethnographic audience studies.

### ◆ *Directions for Research*

With the world becoming more multicultural/racial, there must be further study regarding the malleability of ethnicity depending upon the role being played. As Hill Collins (2004) points out in her discussion of Halle Berry, blackness can be worked in many ways. As noted in the case of Jennifer Lopez, skin color or ethnicity is not a marker of racial categorization. Actresses like Jennifer Beals, who is black, usually play characters that lack racial marking, although she currently portrays a black woman in the Showtime series, *The L Word*. This trend has continued into movies like the remake of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), titled *Guess Who* (2005), which starred Zoe Saldana, a Latina who plays a black woman. Lumping together

racism and ethnicities into one homogenized group ignores the cultural diversity that characterizes human difference.

The multitude of studies on African American representations far outnumbers those on Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. The dearth of representations of these races/ethnicities represented in “mainstream” media makes it even more difficult to examine constructions of these cultures. Studies of media institutions and their production and encoding processes could provide invaluable insights into our understanding of the ways the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality structure media content. We must continue to dismantle the black-white binary that persists in shaping our understanding of race.

One avenue toward this end is Critical Race Theory, which we briefly discuss above, but which deserves additional attention from media scholars. Beyond changing the way we look at and study race, Critical Race Theory’s more complete understanding of human difference offers enormous potential for understanding our multicultural world. Media scholars must join scholars from education and political science and sociology who have broadened this fast-growing field from its roots in legal studies. Critical race scholars have made an important step in this direction by embracing critical race feminism and critical white studies. And critical race theory’s critiques of essentialism and challenges to social science orthodoxies are compatible with the premises of critical/cultural studies.

Another stream of scholarship that we discuss above also deserves more critical work. Hip-hop culture is a central contemporary arena through which to examine mediated intersections of race and gender. While cultural studies have a tradition of examining the cultural engagement with various forms of music, hip-hop culture as constructed in the media and popular culture epitomizes many of the contemporary tensions within U.S. media culture along the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, regionalism, and age. Beyond the misogyny

and heterosexism prevalent in hip-hop culture, scholars must remain vigilant in resisting hip-hop's repeated allusions to certain racial and gender authenticities. As an international movement, hip-hop culture can shed light on postcolonial struggles and a so-called global economy that relegates more than a third of its citizens to poverty and economic despair.

Critical/cultural scholarship on the intersections of race and gender in advertising also deserves further development. The images, narratives, types of products promoted, and stereotypical portrayals (i.e. black families advertising Popeye's chicken, or Asian men shown as the office computer whiz) in both print and electronic advertisements are in need of critical study. In addition, audience interpretations of ads remain understudied. One notable exception is Watts and Orbe's (2002) analysis of Budweiser's successful "Whassup?!" ad campaign. They examine how spectacular consumption by the (African American) Budweiser guys is constitutive of white American ambivalence toward "authentic" blackness (p. 1). Spectacular consumption describes an important "process whereby the material and symbolic relations among the culture industry, the life worlds of persons, and the ontological status of cultural forms are transformed in terms generated by public consumption" (p. 5). Their textual analysis of the Budweiser "True" commercial focuses on a site where gender and cultural performances are conditioned by sports and spectatorship, with masculinity and blackness emerging as key themes in this setting. Watts and Orbe argue that the campaign constitutes and administers cultural authenticity as a market value (p. 3). In terms of spectacular consumption, the force of the pleasure of consuming the other is both directly and paradoxically tied to the replication and amplification of so-called authentic difference (p. 3).

In a related vein, Merskin's (2001) semiotic study of Native American brand names and trademarks explains how advertising uses "pictorial metaphors" to reinforce

ideologies about Native Americans started by whites (p. 159). She argues that companies that use these images are trying "to build an association with an idealized and romanticized notion of the past through the process of branding" (p. 160).

Finally, mediated representations of sports constitute a particularly fruitful arena for scholarly study of the intersections of race and gender. Some work has incorporated the study of sport within broader cultural studies themes such as media and consumption (McKay & Rowe, 1997) and cultural critiques of race relations (Boyd, 1997). Other scholars have drawn from critical/cultural studies to analyze the meanings of race, gender, and sports in specific media texts. For example, Cole and King (1998) analyze the ways the film *Hoop Dreams* reveals cultural tensions about race and gender in a postindustrial, post-Fordist, and postfeminist America. Pronger's (2000) examination of the suppression of the erotic and the narrowing of the concept of masculinity in mainstream gay sports asks who wins when gay men embrace the very cultural forms that have been central to their historical oppression. The most relevant stream in this research is the work that analyzes the variations in media coverage of women's and men's sports as well as constructions of race and gender in sports. Before concluding, we turn briefly to this literature.

Not only do female athletes receive a fraction of the coverage afforded to male athletes, but the traditional trappings of femininity—fashion, motherhood, beauty, morality, and heterosexuality—characterize their constructions (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996). Banet-Weiser's (1999) study of the development of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) examined the gendered and racialized meanings that surround both male and female professional basketball players. She finds that the WNBA

has strategically represented itself in such a way as to counteract the American

public's fears about the players—and thus, by association, the sport—being homosexual. Fans and sponsors are encouraged to see basketball as a sport to be played not only by those women labeled as deviant by dominant ideology but also by those who follow the normative conventions of heterosexual femininity. (p. 404)

Conversely, male basketball players, and especially black men, have been constructed as fetish objects, so much so that personality, glamour, and so-called bad boy behavior have become the central features of the sport. Media portrayals of the NBA represent black players as potentially dangerous and menacing, which in turn allows the WNBA to market itself in positive opposition to these racial politics (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

Finally, two studies can be cited for their illumination of the intersections of gender with race and sexual orientation. McKay (1993) documented the ways the media responded to basketball player Earvin “Magic” Johnson’s revelation that he was HIV-positive by inserting Johnson’s sexual promiscuity onto “wanton women.” Dworkin and Wachs’s (1998, 2000) comparison of media treatment of three stories of HIV-positive male athletes illustrated the manner in which social class, race, and sexual orientation came into play in the very distinct media framings of the three stories.

### ◆ *Conclusion*

Although the research this chapter describes is quite diverse, it is clear that it has enhanced our knowledge of the social constructions of race and gender in important ways. Collectively, this literature has made another contribution that is less transparent: it has dismantled essentialist ways of thinking about and representing race and gender. As a term used to describe the notion that humans, objects, or texts possess underlying essences that define

their true nature or identity, essentialist arguments have little credibility in academic circles. However, essentialist thinking is common in the public sphere as popular notions of what is natural in men and women, or in stereotypes of racial and ethnic groups (Brooker, 2003). The research described in this chapter has exposed the various ways the media construct monolithic notions of race and gender. Several studies have demonstrated how layered representations challenge static constructions, leaving, in turn, ambivalent space for alternative definitions of gender, race, and even sexuality. Our scholarship must continue along these antiessentialist paths, especially in the face of backlash and conservative ideals that seek to promote and implement a regressive politics of difference. Media will continue to play a prominent role in these struggles, making the work of media scholars all the more important.

### ◆ *Notes*

1. For an alternative perspective that argues that biology itself must be viewed as a cultural construction, see Sloop, this volume.
2. Issues of gender, race, and media from a global perspective are discussed in Section 5 of the *Handbook* on intercultural communication.
3. Borrowing from Dyer (1997), we contend the well-intentioned term *people of color* functions to reinforce the erroneous notion that white people do not constitute a race of people.
4. We use African American and black interchangeably in referring to the multiple identities, experiences, and cultures of Americans of African descent. We use white to refer to those of European/Anglo descent.
5. Another feature of CRT is the use of storytelling or narrative style. In this vein, although not deliberately employing CRT, Brooks and Jacobs (1996) analyzed HBO’s televisual adaptation of Derrick Bell’s narrative on race (*The Space Traders*). The analysis focused on the main character, a black man who employed multiracial identities in combating racism.



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