Critical Education

The Media and Black Masculinity
Looking at the Media Through Race[d] Lenses

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Abstract

This paper is a response to the efforts made by educators, scholars, and concerned citizens on creating educational spaces that discuss State violence against young Black people. From the standpoint that the media is a salient contributor to the racial contract, this paper discusses the following: (1) the connection of the racial contract to news media; (2) the intersectionality of Critical Media Education and Critical Race Theory; and (3) the need to develop the Critical Race Media Literacy of students and citizens.

The news media, defined as the sources and presentations of news and information through print, electronic, and Internet sources, has the obligation to communicate valuable information that heightens our awareness of cultural, social, political, and economic issues. This distribution of knowledge is essential to provide us with the intelligence we need to participate and make informed decisions as democratic citizens. Yet, as Malcolm X once proclaimed, the media is one of the most powerful entities on earth that could make the innocent guilty and the guilty innocent. When applied to Black males, this sentiment seems to hold true. Take for instance the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, John Crawford, and Eric Garner. These incidents have not only rehashed public conversations about U.S. race relations but also the role and responsibility of the media. All these young men were Black, ranged in ages from 12- 43 and at the time of their demise, unarmed and save for Martin, were killed by White police officers. Yet, many news media outlets focused on the victims and their actions as instigating factors that caused the violent transgressions against them. Whether it was the selling of loose cigarettes, wearing a hoodie in the rain, brandishing a toy gun, or even being just a large Black man became the crimes that justified the loss of life. Although these cases were tried in the legal system, a public trial with Black bodies at the center of the news media played a salient role in the public perception of these young men.

This paper is a response to the efforts made by educators, scholars, and concerned citizens on creating educational spaces that discuss State violence against young Black people (Cassily & Clarke-Vivier, 2016; Chatelain, 2014; King, Warren, Bender, & Finley, 2016; Taylor, 2016). As an example, the Ferguson syllabus has been a wealth of information not only in compiling news stories that archive the timeline of events but providing classroom resources for teachers and students including films, books, and sample lesson activities that guide and encourage teachers to discuss notions of race and racism in their classrooms. While my approach is not to provide a tangible lesson plan, my contribution to this movement is to expand the theoretical and practical thinking regarding the role of the media in the construction of Blackness.

I have two purposes for this paper. First, I situate the media as a salient contributor to the racial contract (Mills, 1997) designed to maintain White supremacy and because of this, my second goal is to promote a more racialized rendering of critical media education through the theoretical positioning of Critical Race Theory. Building on Yosso's study (2002), *Critical Race Media Literacy: Challenging Deficit Discourse about Chicanas/os,* I expand on the call for the need of Critical raced perspectives about media in classrooms. The paper discusses the following: (1) the connection of the racial contract to news media; (2) the intersectionality of Critical Media Education and Critical Race Theory; and (3) a conclusion on the need for Critical Race Media Literacy.

The News Media's Racial Contract

The news media is an appropriate place of analysis concerning the construction of Black bodies. It is no secret that the news media plays a formative role in shaping ideas around race and racism (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Larson, 2006). Scholars have documented the nuanced ways race and media intersects and how all persons are influenced by the stories they hear and see. I want to expound on this notion but with different terminology for educators and researchers to consider. In order to understand the news media's role in constructing Black imagery, we have to understand the institution as part of the racial apparatus governed by rules of the racial contract.

I propose that the news media is a salient partner within what Charles Mills (1997) has deemed the racial contract. The racial contract examines the racial dimensions of civil democratic societies in which Whites regulate, control, and construct the moral, political, and epistemological dynamics of White supremacy. The contract is a tacit arrangement only for those who classify as White. Non-Whites, on the other hand, do not consent to the terms of the racial contract because they are "simple objects rather than subjects of the agreements" (Mills, 1997, p. 12). The established set of formal or informal rules are created and maintained by the dominant culture to appoint non-Whites as inferior. According to Mills (1997) the purpose of the contract is "always the differential privileging of the Whites as a group with respect of non-Whites as a group" (p. 11). Therefore, the benefit of White privilege allows for the exploitation and denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities for non-Whites to flourish without recourse.

For the racial contract to work, there needs to be set of rules that govern the bodies to enact these policies in different spaces or apparatuses. The racial apparatus serves as an organizing principle that categorizes and catalogs how various institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures enhance, maintain, and exercise power and oppression over certain racialized bodies. The news media's role within this space is to construct stereotypical images (Wynter, 1995) of Black bodies. This process of racialization is akin to what sociologists Omi and Winant (1994) have called racial formation. According to the scholars, racial formation is "a sociohistorical process by which categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed" (p. 55). The news media, therefore, is a racial project maintained through society's racial apparatus that preserves racial hegemony and stratification. The news media's role is to transmit the cultural representation of people, in this case Black people, which aligns with socially constructed norms of race. This is a major feature in coverage, as the narratives around these incidents seem to tell a specific story related to the Black community and notions of Black masculinity. This idea contends that despite what happened to Black victims, Blackness always finds itself on trial and assumes some level of guilt.

To illustrate, studies conducted by Dixon (2008), Entman & Gross (2008), Entman & Rojecki (2000), Larson (2006) and others have found that the news media constructs:

- Blacks and Latinos as more likely than whites to appear as lawbreakers in news—particularly when the news is focusing on violent crime.

- Depictions of black suspects as more symbolically threatening than those of whites accused of similar crimes.

- In the ubiquitous "perp walks," blacks were twice as likely as whites to be shown under some form of physical restraint by police—although all were accused of scary and generally violent crimes.

- People of color as more likely to be subjected to negative pretrial publicity.

- Black victims as less likely to be covered than white victims in newspaper coverage of crime while Whites are overrepresented as victims of violence and as law-enforcers.

- Whites as overrepresented as victims of violence and as law-enforcers, while blacks are underrepresented in these sympathetic roles

- Blacks in criminal roles that tend to outnumber blacks in socially positive roles in newscasts and daily newspapers.

- Persons of color as most frequently and disproportionately associated with poverty (Entman & Gross, 2008; pp. 98-102).

Entman & Gross (2008) contend that these "depictions contribute to a stereotypical association between blacks, criminality, and guilt that can influence evaluations and behavior" (p. 102). Therefore, in terms of the racial contract, the news media is doing its job in enforcing the subpersonhood status of Black people and allows for the rationalization of killing of unarmed Black bodies.

Since the media is a key dynamic in exploring the roles of race and racism, it is important for educators to provide a heuristic to students to be able to read race. While it might be obvious that Blacks are overrepresented in negative news coverage, but for some in society, it makes sense giving the sociohistorical construction on Blackness. Students and the general population need more than a critical media education but a critical race media education that expands on what race is and how it looks within news media spaces. The following sections expound on notions of Critical media to Critical race media.

Critical Media Literacy

For little over three decades, scholars have called for educators to provide media literacy in both K-12 classrooms and teacher education programs (Buckingham, 2013; Hobbs, 1996; Schwarz, 2001). According to Renee Hobbs (1996), media literacy is "the process accessing, critically analyzing media messages and creating messages using media tools… that promote autonomy through the development of analysis, reasoning, communication and self-expression" (p. iii). According to the Center for Media Literacy, five basic questions and concepts should be considered when analyzing news media. This framework allows persons to become more aware of the socially constructed nature of the news media, embedded language and specific lexicon use, media biases, differentiated individual responses, and the capitalist intent of the media to serve not the public but powerful institutions (see Table 1). Scholars have also noted that media education has several benefits to students and teachers including its constructivism approach to education pedagogies that favor inquiry, hands-on activities, cooperative learning, and critical thinking.

Table 1. Key Questions for Media Inquiry

Keyword	Core Concepts	Key Questions
Authorship	All media messages are "constructed."	Who created this message?
Format	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.	What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
Audience	Different people experience the same media message differently.	How might different people understand this message differently than me?
Content	Media have embedded values and points of view.	What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in; or omitted from, this message?
Purpose	Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power.	Why is this message being sent?

Source: Adapted from the Center for Media Inquiry

While media literacy education has positive attributes in teaching and learning, some scholars posited that a more critical approach to examining media is needed. For example, Kellner and Share (2005) called for a critical media literacy education that builds on traditional media education concepts but expands them to promote multicultural literary, self-expression, and social action. Their conception of critical media literacy focuses on teaching critical thinking, participatory democracy, and social transformation. Lewis and Jhally (1998) stressed that media literacy should be more than a space to analyze and deconstruct media text but be more political in scope. They stress that students and the public need to examine the "institutional, cultural, and economic condition in which media is produced" (p. 111), or what they call a contextual approach to media education. Yosso (2002) stated that CML should be used as a pedagogical tool that "facilitates students' becoming critically conscious to themselves in relations to the structure of power and domination in their world" (p. 59). Critical media literacy, therefore, does not have a set definition but has various conceptual understandings including pedagogies that promote social justice, democratic learning and values, critiquing authority and political systems, transformative practices of educational and social conditions, self- reflection and promoting positive identity (Pailliotet, 2001).

What I am concerned with in this paper is critical media literacy that explores and exposes the politics of representation, which examines the nexus between identity and power. The news media is a key contributor in shaping identity and teaching society how to respond and treat various groups. While research has approached the topic of race in the media, very few

have provided a language to understand race and the media in nuanced terms. The key questions and concepts as purported by the Center of Media Literacy do not explore the dynamics of race or provide a racial lexicon. To be able to think about news media through raced lenses, Critical Race Theory is needed to provide a lexicon of thought and a level of racial analysis that provides media literate students an opportunity to explore race.

Critical Race Media Literacy

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed by scholars from critical legal studies (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 2011) to employ, challenge, and influence change to the notions that the legal system is neutral and colorblind. Throughout the last thirty years, CRT has expanded to several disciplines including education (Lynn & Dixon, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998) and is used to expose the invisibility and normalcy of racism throughout various mediums around the globe. CRT resist racial liberal rhetoric that examines race through the individual as a prejudice paradigm; instead White supremacy is scrutinized through systems and institutions that use race and racism to preserve self-interest, power, and privilege that perpetuate the marginalization of people of color. CRT scholars are guided by at least five principles that help individuals think about the nuances of race and racism. These principles include (1) the centrality of race and racism, (2) the challenge to dominant discourse, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) the trandisciplinary perspective (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

As it stands CRT has not been a major theoretical position within media literacy scholarship. A few scholars (Agosto, Karanxha, & Roberts, 2014; Velez et. Al, 2008; Yosso, 2002), however, have used the terminology of Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) as a framework for examining racial oppression through media sources. Yosso (2002) was one of the first to intersect media literacy with CRT. She defines CRML as a theoretical, conceptual, and methodological strategy to examine how people of color are racialized throughout various media platforms. Media is contextualized within the intersections of oppression (race, gender, and class) and deconstructed to account for the nexus between CRT, Freirean critical literacy and social justice (Yosso, 2002). Assessments extend beyond understanding how Non-Whites are portrayed in media spaces but it also challenges persons to "read" racism through media texts, images, and discourses that promote deficit renderings of Non-White cultures and raise social consciousness. While all CRT and CML concepts are useful in examining news media and its portrayal of Black men, combining the concepts to begin to ask new questions and specifically focused on the racial bias of the news coverage is needed. In Table 2, I altered the five core questions developed by the Center for Media Literacy to represent how educators could approach a Critical Race Media education. The five core concepts are intact but the approach to understanding the concepts are centered on CRT principles.

Table 2. Key Questions for Critical Race Media Education

Keyword	Core Concepts	Key Questions
Authorship	All media messages are "constructed."	Who created this message? What are the racially constructed messages conveyed through the news?
Format	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.	What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? Are there different descriptors used for White and Black/Brown people?
Audience	Different people experience the same media message differently.	How are Black people racialized in news media? What racial code words were used and how does that influence how race is viewed by the audience?
Content	Media have embedded values and points of view.	What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in; or omitted from this message? What other news sources present a counter story to the news event? Do Black people own these other news sources? Whose voices are heard in the new story? How is intersectionality conceptualized?
Purpose	Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power.	Why is this message being sent? What underlying message is being conveyed about racialized communities? What are the interest convergences of this media outlet?

 CRML understands the racially constructed norms of news media and how these messages are racialized to convey certain knowledge about communities of color. Traditional news coverage about people of color is largely told by White reporters and ignores the experiential knowledge of persons of color in the communities being covered. Critical Race Media Literacy is helpful for examining the news media because it "brings attention to the role of media in suppressing some narratives while privileging others and inciting some audiences to action on some topics but not others" (Agosto, Karanxha, & Roberts, 2016).

Conclusion

The news media has the ability to affect the ways in which we interpret what we see or hear. It has the power to control the point of views that are expressed and which ones are not. The media forms our image of various groups of people and even tells us which side of an issue we should favor. News headlines and its choice of words and phrasing is only one aspect that enacts this power. While headlines can skew readers' perceptions of news events, the use of photographs that accompany the news provides for another level of racialization and stereotyping. Photographs provide the audience a visual of the actors being featured in the news. Pictures can either add or subtract from the focus on the news. Photographs can also provide different points of analysis in telling the story and allows readers to make judgments based on the outward appearances. These mechanisms of the news may seem innocuous or subliminal but they play an important part in the racial contract.

Ultimately, the media provides its audience with racial common sense. This line of thinking within the racial contract allows the victimization of White police officers when they kill Black male bodies. It allows a discourse that refutes race and racism as red herring to convict hardworking police officers who on a daily basis risk their lives against less than human people. The racial contract and racial common sense speaks to the idea that it is only a coincidental that the victims happened to be Black. A more explicit rendering of the argument lay in the victim blaming discourse. Central to this point is the idea that predominate Black neighborhoods and the men that reside there are inheritably dangerous and any transgressions made by the police officers was justified. The racial contract allows for rationalization of killing Black bodies and purports them as criminals and suspicious. Comments centering around stealing cigars, wearing a hoodie, brandishing a toy gun, playing loud music and because of the size of a teenager made an armed police officer fear for his life.

Black pathology becomes the trial. Black men become voiceless victims and their past and current transgressions become the public trial, which ultimately was seen as the instigating factors to their demise. Through visual images, audio and video recordings, artificial reenactments, and court released transcripts, the media helped construct a narrative about Black masculinity that centered on longstanding questions regarding Black ontology and humanity. While CML provides a framework in discussing these issues, CRML accounts for examining racial questions and providing counter narratives to disrupt racial common sense. CRML helps students understand or provide them a language to explore race and racism in the media.

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