

Production Studies of Race and the Political Economy of Media

The turn towards production in media and cultural studies, and the focus on what Herman Gray calls “race-making practices,” has reinvigorated race and media research that is seemingly forever stuck at the level of the text and the question of representation.¹ Textual study of a film, television show, music video, or web series can certainly produce valuable insights about the nature of racial ideology, at least in terms of the version of reality produced by the text in question. However, the absence of contextual detail—and particularly the lack of concern for how such cultural goods are the end result of industrial, rationalized, and bureaucratized processes—is a significant blind spot.

Most production studies of race work within the cultural studies tradition of media research. Cultural studies is generally associated with the study of texts and audiences, but as Timothy Havens underlines—referring to Marxist theorist Raymond Williams’s famous dissection of the base-superstructure relationship through the case of television production—an interest in production was present in the field from the very outset.² Cultural studies of production analyze the social worlds through which cultural commodities are made. This entails midlevel analyses that

1 Herman Gray, “Precarious Diversity; Representation and Demography,” in *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*, ed. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 249.

2 Timothy Havens, “Media Industry Sociology: Mainstream, Critical, and Cultural Perspectives,” in *Media Sociology: A Reappraisal*, ed. Silvio Waisbord (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014).

unpack the dynamic between economic and cultural forces shaping cultural production. One must pay particular attention to the agency of creative workers, how they are constrained by and work against commercial pressures, and how this impacts the form and nature of cultural commodities.³ In the context of race and media research, the focus has been on how the industrial nature of cultural production impacts the representation of race, often in reductive ways.⁴

While studies of race and production have provided original and much needed empirical insight into the dynamics that shape race-making practices in media, in this brief essay, I argue that production studies of race would benefit from a greater engagement with the political economy approach to media. In the past, cultural studies and political economy traditions have been placed in a false dichotomy, although thankfully most scholars have rejected this.⁵ There are many reasons critical media research would benefit from fusing cultural industries and political economy approaches, but I argue that production studies of race need to incorporate political economy analyses of capitalism in order to formulate more effective political strategies that can disrupt the reproduction of racial stereotype.

Production studies of race within cultural studies tend to focus on the question of ideology rather than structure. The danger is that racial ideology is conflated with capitalist ideology; that is, they are regarded as one and the same. If we were to ask the question, is capitalism more interested in extracting surplus value or reinforcing racial hierarchies, the answer for many critical race scholars would be an easy one: capitalism does both. But is it as simple as that? While scholars of race have rightly challenged the economic reductionism of a vulgar Marxism that states that the only way to eliminate racism is to dismantle capitalism through class-based politics alone, there is a danger in assuming that eradicating racial ideology is enough to overcome the exploitative effects of capitalism. Instead we need—in the cultural studies tradition—a conjunctural analysis that understands racial ideology and capitalist ideology as two separate forces that are inextricably intertwined. As sociologist Ben Pitcher states, “racism is not and has never been intrinsic to capitalism. Racism is a phenomenon that has always been contingent on wider social, cultural and institutional practice.”⁶ Pitcher argues that racism is not natural to capitalism, but he does not consider it a mere by-product of capitalism either. Rather, racism is an independent force shaped by capitalism in particular ways in specific historical moments.

Such an insight highlights the need for production studies of race to adopt a historical analysis in order to better understand how at different moments of crisis, economic, social, cultural, and political forces come together in very specific ways to shape race-making practices.⁷ Put another way, a concerted engagement with racial capitalism produces a deeper analysis of how media makes race and why race comes

3 Timothy J. Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009): 234–253.

4 Alfred L. Martin Jr., “Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms,” *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7 (2015): 648–663; Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018); and Clive James Nwonka, “The New Babel: The Language and Practice of Institutionalised Diversity in the UK Film Industry,” *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 17, no. 1 (2019): 24–46, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2020.0506>.

5 David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2013), 59.

6 Ben Pitcher, “Race and Capitalism Redux,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 46, no. 1 (2012): 1–15, 8.

7 David Hesmondhalgh and Anamik Saha, “Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Production,” *Popular Communication* 11, no. 3 (2013): 179–195.

to be represented in the way that it does.⁸ A famous example of the historical analysis that I am calling for is Anne McClintock's study of "commodity racism" in British advertising of the Victoria era.⁹ In her analysis, McClintock defines a new trend that she calls "commodity jingoism" and features advertisements based around "racial hygiene and imperial progress" that "helped reinvent and maintain British national unity in the face of deepening imperial competition, and colonial resistance."¹⁰ McClintock effectively describes how the growth of capitalism and the consumer industry coupled with imperial anxieties abroad facilitated a shift from the dominant paradigm of scientific racism to a new cultural form of racism.

In the post-Obama era, we have encountered a unique moment in which we see, on the one hand, the seeping of explicitly racist rhetoric from right-wing/far-right populist movements into mainstream political discourse but, on the other hand, greater demands for racial and ethnic diversity in media, whether in terms of the workforce or media content. While the demand for diversity has been driven by the activism of antiracist campaigners and audiences as well as media itself, one has to ask, To what extent does it fulfill the agenda of racial neoliberalism? Put another way, what do the ascendancy of diversity in creative industries discourse and racial denigration in political discourse reveal about the nature of contemporary racial capitalism? With its focus on the dynamics between culture and the economics within an institutional setting, the study of race-making practices in media can greatly illuminate what is unfolding at this juncture with regard to capitalism and race. Research by film and media scholars Clive Nwonka and Sarita Malik on Black British urban cinema in the 2000s exemplifies this approach, unravelling the connection between representations of Black criminality, UK film policy, New Labour's Third Way policy, and the ascendancy of neoliberalism more broadly.¹¹

Production studies of race demonstrate acutely how media processes themselves lead to the reproduction of historical constructions of Otherness, whether via established commonsense industry knowledge or "industry lore" around Blackness, rigid genre conventions, or standardized industry practices such as formatting that contain within them racialized logics.¹² That being the case, the issue becomes how to transform these processes for progressive ends. This brings us back to the question of political economy since, as media industries are organized according to capitalistic conditions, transforming the representation of minorities necessitates structurally transforming the media itself.

For instance, in British publishing, we have seen a number of individual publishing houses adopt in-house "diversity" initiatives that attempt to tackle the institutional whiteness of the industry, including trainee schemes and mentor programs, the creation of BAME networks, and mandatory unconscious bias training.¹³ Despite

8 Perhaps the most influential version of "racial capitalism" appears in Cedric J. Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). See also Jodi Melamed's "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85; and Gargi Bhattacharyya's *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

9 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

10 McClintock, 209.

11 Clive James Nwonka and Sarita Malik, "Cultural Discourses and Practices of Institutionalised Diversity in the UK Film Sector: 'Just Get Something Black Made,'" *The Sociological Review* 66, no. 6 (2018): 1111–1127, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118774183>.

12 Martin, "Scripting Black Gayness"; Havens, *Black Television Travels*; and Anamik Saha, "The Rationalizing/Racializing Logic of Capital in Cultural Production," *Media Industries* 3, no. 1 (2016).

13 BAME stands for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic and is a policy term used in the United Kingdom to describe those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds.

having run for a number of years, these programs have done little to increase the already low numbers of racial and ethnic minorities who work across the publishing industry.¹⁴ Instead, the strategies that have had an impact in terms of increasing the number of racial and ethnic minority writers have come from attempts to change the political economy of publishing. These include arts funding, including the substantial amount of Arts Council money given to the Good Literary Agency, a literary agency established in 2018 that focuses on developing writers from minority backgrounds, and the creation of new publishing imprints that have placed Black folk in key gatekeeper positions, such as Sharmaine Lovegrove at Hachette and grime MC Stormzy at Penguin Random House.

As political economist Nicholas Garnham states, ensuring cultural plurality requires that we “understand the structure of our culture, its production, consumption and reproduction and of the role of the mass media in that process,” including “the problem of productive and non-productive labor, the relation between the private and public sectors, and the role of the State in capitalist accumulation, the role of advertising within late capitalism.”¹⁵ For Garnham, then, cultural plurality does not come from tackling ideology. However, he may go too far in denouncing the question of ideology altogether, as strategies to make media work “better” for racial and ethnic minorities can also entail political economic forms of address. For instance, if we accept that racial and ethnic minorities are subjected to tighter forms of creative control than their white counterparts, because they are seen as an inherently risky investment, then simply inserting more Black and brown people into media will have little impact because minorities are subjected to greater forms of (self) discipline. Instead, we need to focus on ensuring that racial and ethnic minorities are afforded the same creative autonomy as their white peers. This includes the same freedom to fail; after all, cultural production is an inherently risky business.

Cultural plurality in cultural production, I argue, requires state intervention because its principles are not based on furthering capitalist accumulation but on social democratic ideals of equality and social justice. Thus, we need government regulation to break up media concentration and encourage minority-led production. Smaller media companies struggle in the face of competition from media conglomerates, and as such, minority-led companies should receive public funding to support their work and ensure a level playing field. I even argue that such funds are awarded in the name of *reparations*. After all, if colonialism and slavery entailed a form of symbolic violence as well as physical violence, then one way a government can bestow reparative justice is by providing a platform that allows the subaltern—through their ancestors—the opportunity to speak.

To conclude, I want to stress that I do not subscribe to the arguments of political economists that a focus on ideology is a distraction from the real task of transforming the political economy of media. And I want to underline how political economy, except for a few notable exceptions, has a problematic tendency to sideline issues of race altogether.¹⁶ Instead, as my proposal around the public funding of minority cultural production in the name of reparative justice suggests, we need an approach

14 Equal Approach, “Publishing Industry Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Survey 2018,” Publishers Association, December 2018, <https://www.publishers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Diversity-Survey-of-Publishing-Workforce-2018.pdf>.

15 Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information* (London: Sage, 1990), 44.

16 One such exception is Vicki Mayer, “From Segmented to Fragmented: Latino Media in San Antonio, Texas.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2001): 291–306.

that thinks through how racial ideology intersects with capitalism in all its different forms—that is, capitalism as a mode of production, capitalism as a social force, capitalism as ideology.¹⁷ This is why I argue that production studies of race need to consider how media is a historical phenomenon socially related as part of the general development of industrial capitalism.¹⁸ The (empirical) study of race-making practices in media has already significantly contributed to race and media research by helping us understand the reproduction of historical constructions of Otherness. But only when we contextualize our analyses within the history and dynamics of racial capitalism can we better conceive the strategies needed to intervene in this deeply destructive process.

17 Pitcher, "Race and Capitalism Redux."

18 Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*.