

# Cultural Studies and Race

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Issues revolving “race” impact cultural studies in myriad ways, not all of them obvious. An examination of the relation between cultural studies and race might begin with the narrativization of the history of cultural studies itself. In the conventional narrative, “cultural studies” traces its roots to the 1960s work of such British leftists as Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy*), Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society*), E. P. Thompson (*The Making of the English Working Class*), and Stuart Hall, associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded in 1964 at the University of Birmingham. Conscious of the oppressive aspects of the British class system, the members of the Birmingham Centre, many of whom were associated with adult education projects, deployed Gramscian categories to illuminate issues of class, looking both for aspects of ideological domination and for new agents of social change.

## Some Precursors of Cultural Studies

With all due respect for the extraordinary achievements of the Birmingham School, it is also possible to see a more diffuse and international genealogy for cultural studies. Although the by-now-ubiquitous catch-all term “cultural studies” must be credited to Birmingham, one can also posit a more international lineage for the movement in the work of figures such as Roland Barthes and Henri Lefebvre in France, Leslie Fiedler in the United States, Frantz Fanon in Martinique, France, and North Africa, and C. L. R. James in the Caribbean. Indeed, their writing casts suspicion on the Anglo-diffusionist narrative that cultural studies “began” in England and then spread elsewhere. In our perspective, when James Baldwin spoke about black preaching and the differentiated reception of films like *The Defiant Ones*, when Roland Barthes spoke of the “mythologies” of toys, detergents, and *Le Guide Michelin*, when Leslie Fiedler anatomized the myth of the “vanishing Indian” and found homoeroticism in *Huckleberry Finn*, when Henri Lefebvre analyzed the politics of urban space and

everyday life, and when C. L. R. James analyzed cricket and *Moby Dick*, they were all doing “cultural studies” *avant la lettre*.

Indeed, one could carry this archaeological project even further, going back to the 1920s and Bakhtin in the Soviet Union and Kracauer (e.g. *The Mass Ornament*) in Germany. One could even call attention to some completely unsung heroes of cultural studies. My personal candidate for most neglected precursor would be the brilliant Brazilian essayist/poet/novelist/anthropologist/musicologist Mario de Andrade. A man of African, indigenous, and European ancestry, de Andrade was a key participant in the Brazilian modernist movement in the 1920s. In his writing, he mingled a wide spectrum of references – the surrealists, Brazilian indianism, popular music, Afro-Brazilian religion, nursery rhymes, Amazonian legends – in a splendid tapestry of analysis and creation. In my opinion the equal of his contemporary James Joyce, his major “mistake” was to write in a nonhegemonic language: Brazilian Portuguese.

Before speaking more generally of cultural studies and race, I would like to highlight just one “proto-cultural-studies” figure: Frantz Fanon. A contemporary rereading of Fanon reveals him to be an important precursor for a number of currents within contemporary cultural studies. Although Fanon never spoke of “Orientalist discourse,” for example, his critiques of colonialist imagery provide proleptic examples of anti-orientalist and postcolonial critique. Although often caricatured as a racial hardliner, in *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon anticipated the anti-essentialist critique of race. In Fanon’s relational view, the black man is obliged to be black “in relation to” the white man. The black man, as Fanon put it, *is* comparison.” Nor was colonialism essentially a racial matter; colonialism, he argued, “was only *accidentally* white.” (Ireland, as the first British colony, was subjected to the same processes of otherization that other, later, epidermically darker colonies also suffered.) For Fanon, racialized perception was inflected even by language; “the black will be the proportionately whiter . . . in direct relation to his mastery of the French language.” Fanon thus saw race as languaged, situated, constructed. As someone who was seen as black by white Frenchmen, but as culturally European (i.e. white) by Algerians, Fanon had a clear sense of the conjunctural, constructed nature not only of racial categorizations but also of communitarian self-definition. Fanon thus anticipated the “constructivist” current within cultural studies, yet for Fanon the fact that race was on some level constructed did not mean that antiracism was not worth fighting for. His was a mobilizing sense of construction, one which embraced fluidity and ambivalence but without abandoning the struggle for such “constructs” as black solidarity, the Algerian nation, and Third World Unity.

Fanon worked at the point of convergence of anti-imperial politics and psychoanalytic theory, as Diana Fuss (1995) points out, finding a link between the two in the concept of “identification.”<sup>1</sup> For Fanon, identification was at once a psychological, cultural, historical, and political issue. One of the symptoms of colonial neurosis, for example, was an incapacity on the part of the colonizer to identify with colonialism’s victims. Fanon was also a critic of the media.

“Objectivity” in the news, Fanon pointed out in *The Wretched of the Earth*, always works against the native. The issue of identification also had a cinematic dimension, one closely linked to later debates in film theory, which also came to speak of identification and projection, of narcissism and regression, of “spectatorial positioning” and “suture” and point-of-view, as basic mechanisms constituting the cinematic subject.

Fanon was also one of the first thinkers to bring Lacanian psychoanalysis into cultural theory, including film theory. Fanon saw racist films, for example, as a “release for collective aggressions.” In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon used the example of Tarzan to point to a certain instability within cinematic identification:

Attend showings of a Tarzan film in the Antilles and in Europe. In the Antilles, the young negro identifies himself de facto with Tarzan against the Negroes. This is much more difficult for him in a European theatre, for the rest of the audience, which is white, automatically identifies him with the savages on the screen.

Anticipating many of the concerns of cultural studies, Fanon here points to the shifting, situational nature of colonized spectatorship: the colonial context of reception alters the processes of identification. The awareness of the possible negative projections of other spectators triggers an anxious withdrawal from the film’s programed pleasures. The conventional self-denying identification with the white hero’s gaze, the vicarious acting out of a European selfhood, is short-circuited through the awareness of being “screened” or “allegorized” by a colonial gaze within the movie theater itself. While feminist film theory later spoke of the “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Laura Mulvey) of female screen performance, Fanon called attention to the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of spectators themselves, who become slaves, as Fanon puts it, of their own appearance: “Look, a Negro! . . . I am being dissected under white eyes. I am fixed.” Although Fanon never used the talismanic phrase “cultural studies,” in sum, he can still be seen as its proleptic practitioner. Already in the 1950s, he examined a wide variety of cultural forms – the veil, trance, language, radio, film – as sites of social and cultural contestation. Although never part of an explicit cultural studies project, he certainly practiced what now goes by that name. It is also no surprise, therefore, that some key figures in cultural theory – Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Diana Fuss, E. Sam Juan Jr., Isaac Julien, Kobena Mercer – have turned again to Fanon.

### The Raging of Structuralism

Another way in which race impacts cultural studies has to do with the always already raced nature of its theoretical influences and antecedents. For example, two major influences on cultural studies were the related movements of struc-

turalism and semiotics. But these movements too were also “raced,” in a double way. Although the practitioners were constructed as “white” and first world, third worldist thinking was a strong influence within these currents. Both structuralism and third-worldism had their long-term historical origins in a series of events that undermined the confidence of European modernity: the Holocaust (and in France the Vichy collaboration with the Nazis), and the postwar disintegration of the last European empires. Although the exalted term “theory” was rarely linked to anticolonial theorizing, structuralist thinking in some ways merely codified what anticolonial thinkers had been saying for some time. The subversive work of “denaturalization” performed by what one might call the left wing of semiotics – for example Roland Barthes’ famous dissection of the colonialist implications of the *Paris Match* cover showing a black soldier saluting the French flag – had everything to do with the external critique of European master-narratives performed by Third World Francophone decolonizers like Aimé Césaire (*Discourse on Colonialism*, 1955) and Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961). In the wake of the Holocaust, decolonization, and Third World revolution, Europe started to lose its privileged position as model for the world. Lévi-Strauss’s crucial turn from biological to linguistic models for a new anthropology, for example, was motivated by his visceral aversion to a biological anthropology deeply tainted by antisemitic and colonialist racism. Indeed, it was in the context of decolonization that UNESCO asked Lévi-Strauss to do the research which culminated in his *Race and History* (1952), where the French anthropologist rejected any essentialist hierarchy of civilizations.

Poststructuralism as well is indebted to anticolonialist and antiracist thinking. Césaire’s and Fanon’s anticolonialist decentering of Europe can now be seen as having both provoked and foreshadowed Derrida’s claim (in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 1966) that European culture has been “dislocated,” forced to stop casting itself as “the culture of reference.” Both the structuralist and the poststructuralist moments, in this sense, coincide with the moment of self-criticism, a veritable legitimation crisis, within Europe itself. Many of the source thinkers of structuralism and poststructuralism, and thus of cultural studies, furthermore, as Robert Young (1995) points out, were biographically linked to what came to be called the Third World: Lévi-Strauss did anthropology in Brazil; Foucault taught in Tunisia; Althusser, Cixous, and Derrida were all born in Algeria, where Bourdieu also did his anthropological fieldwork.

In England, cultural studies began by being more oriented toward issues of class; it came to engage issues of gender and race relatively “late.” In 1978 the Women’s Study Group lamented the “absence from CCCS of a visible concern with feminist issues.” And in the 1980s cultural studies was challenged to pay more attention to race, under the pressure both of internal critique and of US cultural studies, which had always focussed more on gender and race while too often downplaying class. But all these issues must be seen within a much larger historical, geopolitical, and discursive frame. What all these currents have in

common is their democratizing, egalitarian, and antihierarchical thrust. British cultural studies, in this sense, subverted the high-art elitism of literature departments by extending sophisticated methods of analysis to “low” popular arts and practices. At the same time, British cultural studies in its early incarnations was somewhat less attentive to other forms of hierarchical oppression. “There was no black,” to paraphrase Paul Gilroy, “in Raymond Williams-style cultural studies.”

### Multiculturalism and Eurocentrism

In racial terms, cultural studies can be seen as a surface manifestation of a larger seismological shift – the decolonization of global culture. In the 1980s, “multiculturalism” became one of the buzzwords to evoke this decolonizing attack on white supremacist institutions and modes of thinking. Although Neoconservatives caricature multiculturalism as calling for the violent jettisoning of European classics and of “western civilization as an area of study,”<sup>2</sup> multiculturalism is actually an assault not on Europe (in the broad sense of Europe and its affiliates spread around the world) but on Eurocentrism – on the procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of progress, as the world’s center of gravity, as ontological “reality” to the rest of the world’s shadow. As an ideological substratum or discursive residue common to colonialist, imperialist, and racist discourse, Eurocentrism is a form of vestigial thinking which permeates and structures *contemporary* practices and representations even after the formal end of colonialism. Eurocentric discourse is complex, contradictory, historically unstable. But in a kind of composite portrait, Eurocentrism as a mode of thought might be seen as engaging in a number of mutually reinforcing intellectual tendencies or operations. Eurocentric thinking attributes to the “West” an almost Providential sense of historical destiny. Like Renaissance perspective in painting, it envisions the world from a single privileged point. It bifurcates the world into the “West and the Rest”<sup>3</sup> and organizes everyday language into binaristic hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe: *our* “nations,” *their* “tribes”; *our* “religions,” *their* “superstitions”; *our* “culture,” *their* “folklore.” A “plato-to-Nato” teleology sees history as moving North-by-Northwest, projecting a linear historical trajectory leading from the Middle East and Mesopotamia to classical Greece (constructed as “pure,” “western,” and “democratic”) to imperial Rome and then to the metropolitan capitals of Europe and the US. In all cases, Europe, alone and unaided, is seen as the “motor” for progressive historical change: democracy, class society, feudalism, capitalism, the industrial revolution. Eurocentrism appropriates the cultural and material production of non-Europeans while denying both their achievements and its own appropriation, thus consolidating its sense of self and glorifying its own cultural anthropophagy.

For Cornel West (1993), Eurocentrism superimposes three white-supremacist logics: Judeo-Christian racist logic; scientific racist logic; and psychosexual racist logic. A multicultural view critiques the universalization of Eurocentric norms, the idea that any race, in Aimé Césaire's words, "holds a monopoly on beauty, intelligence, and strength." Needless to say, the critique of Eurocentrism is addressed not to Europeans as individuals but rather to dominant Europe's historically oppressive relation to its external and internal "others" (Jews, Irish, Gypsies, Huguenots, peasants, women). It does not suggest, obviously, that non-European people are somehow "better" than Europeans, or that Third World and minoritarian cultures are inherently superior.

On one level, the multicultural idea is very simple and transparent; it refers to the multiple cultures of the world and the historical relations between them, including relations of subordination and domination. The multiculturalist *project* (as opposed to the multicultural *fact*) proposes an analysis of world history and contemporary social life from the perspective of the radical equality of peoples in status, intelligence, and rights. In its more co-opted version, it can easily degenerate into a state or corporate-managed United-Colors-of-Benetton pluralism whereby established power promotes ethnic "flavors of the month" for commercial or ideological purposes, but in its more radical variants it strives to decolonize representation not only in terms of cultural artifacts but also in terms of power relations between communities. It is the need to ward off co-optation that generates all the qualifiers on the potentially innocuous word "multiculturalism": *critical* multiculturalism, *radical* multiculturalism, *subversive* multiculturalism, *polycentric* multiculturalism.

A radical or polycentric multiculturalism calls for a profound restructuring and reconceptualization of the power relations between cultural communities. It sees issues of multiculturalism, colonialism, and race not in a ghettoized way, but "in relation." Communities, societies, nations, and even entire continents exist not autonomously but rather in a densely woven web of relationality. As Ella Shohat and I argue in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, it is possible to distinguish between a co-optive liberal pluralism, tainted at birth by its historical roots in the systematic inequities of conquest, slavery, and exploitation, and a more radical *polycentric multiculturalism*. The notion of polycentrism has implications for cultural studies because it globalizes multiculturalism. It envisions a restructuring of intercommunal relations within and beyond the nation-state according to the internal imperatives of diverse communities. Within a polycentric vision, the world has many dynamic cultural locations, many possible vantage points. The "poly" in "polycentrism" does not refer to a finite list of centers of power but rather introduces a systematic principle of differentiation, relationality, and linkage. No single community or part of the world, whatever its economic or political power, should be epistemologically privileged.

## Race and Racism

But to further talk about the relation between “race” and “cultural studies” requires us to sketch out what we mean by such notions as “race” and “racism.” An emerging consensus within various fields suggests that although “race” does not exist – since “race” is a pseudo-scientific concept – racism as a set of social practices most definitely *does* exist. There is no race, then, but only racism. By analogy, there is no “other,” but only processes of otherization; no exotics – no one is exotic to *themselves* – but only exoticization.

Racism, although hardly unique to the West, and while not limited to the colonial situation (antisemitism being a case in point), has historically been both an ally and the partial product of colonialism. The most obvious victims of racism are those whose identity was forged within the colonial cauldron: Africans, Asians, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas as well as those displaced by colonialism, such as Asians and West Indians in Great Britain, Arabs in France. Colonialist culture constructed a sense of ontological European superiority to “lesser breeds without the law.” Albert Memmi (1968: 186) defines racism as “the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser’s benefit and at his victim’s expense, in order to justify the former’s own privilege or aggression.”

Racism is above all a social relation – “systematized hierarchization implacably pursued,” in Fanon’s pithy formula<sup>4</sup> – anchored in material structures and embedded in historical relations of power. In fact Memmi’s definition, premised on a kind of one-on-one encounter between racist and victim, does not fully account for more abstract, indirect, submerged, even “democratic” forms of racism. Since racism is a complex hierarchical system, a structured ensemble of social and institutional practices and discourses, individuals do not have to actively express or practice racism to be its beneficiaries. Racism cannot be reduced, as it is in the anti-“hate” discourse of public-service announcements, to the ravings of pathological maniacs. In a systemically racist society, racism is the “normal” pathology, from which virtually no one is completely exempt, including even its victims. Racism traces its deep psychic roots to fear of the “other” (associated with a suppressed, animalic, “shadowy” self) and to phobic attitudes toward nature and the body. As Ralph Ellison (another proleptic practitioner of cultural studies) put it, it was the “negro misfortune” to be caught up associatively:

on the negative side of [the] basic dualism of the white folk mind and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience and consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

The paired terms “black” and “white” easily lend themselves to the Manicheisms of good/evil; matter/spirit; devil/angel. And since everyday speech posits blackness as negative (“black sheep,” “black day”), and posits black and white as

opposites (“it’s not a black and white issue”) rather than as nuances on a spectrum, blacks have almost always been cast on the side of evil. It is resistance to this Manichean temptation that has led many – from Franz Boaz in the 1920s to Jesse Jackson in the 1980s – to call for a move from a terminology based on color and race to one based on culture, to speak not of blacks and whites, for example, but rather of African-Americans and European-Americans. (Paul Gilroy’s latest book, revealingly, is entitled *Against Race*.)

Individuals are traversed by social forcefields, and specifically by relations of social domination and subordination. Cultural producers and receivers are not just individuals in the abstract; they are of a specific nationality, class, gender, and sexuality. Much of cultural studies work has focused on these axes of social identity and oppression, the diverse forms of stratification summed up in the “mantra” of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Which brings up the issue of the relation between all these distinct axes of social representation. We have to ask whether one of the axes of oppression is primordial, the root of all the others? Is class the foundation of all oppressions, as canonical Marxism had suggested? Or is patriarchy ultimately more fundamental to social oppression than classism and racism, as some versions of feminism might suggest? Or is race the overarching determinant? Are there “analogical structures of feeling” which would lead one oppressed group to identify with another? What are the analogies between antisemitism, antiblack racism, sexism, and homophobia? Both homophobia and antisemitism have in common a penchant for projecting enormous power onto their targeted victims: “they” control everything, or “they” are trying to take over. But what is unique and specific to each of these forms of oppression? A person can be the victim of homophobia within his/her own family, for example, something far less likely in the case of antisemitism or antiblack racism. To what extent can one “ism” hang out, as it were, with other isms? Sexism, racism, and classism can all tinge themselves with homophobia, for example. What is most important, perhaps, is not to ghettoize these axes of representation, to see the operations of what critical race theorists call “intersectionality,” that race is classed, gender raced, class sexualized, and so forth.

### Stereotype and the Burden of Representation

For our purposes, racism in popular culture refers to all the contextual and textual practices whereby racialized difference is transformed into “otherness” and exploited or penalized by and for those with institutionalized power. The hair-trigger sensitivity about racial stereotypes partially derives from what James Baldwin called the “burden of representation.” On the symbolic battlegrounds of the mass media, the struggle over representation in the simulacral realm homologizes that of the political sphere, where questions of imitation and representation easily slide into issues of delegation and voice. Any negative behavior by any



member from the oppressed community, for example that of O. J. Simpson, is instantly encoded as pointing to a perpetual backsliding toward some presumed negative essence. Representations thus become allegorical; within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community. Socially empowered groups need not be unduly concerned about “distortions and stereotypes,” since even occasionally negative images form part of a wide spectrum of representations. Each negative image of an underrepresented group, in contrast, becomes sorely overcharged with allegorical meaning.

The sensitivity around stereotypes and distortions largely arises then, from the powerlessness of historically marginalized groups to control their own representation. A full understanding of filmic representation therefore requires a comprehensive analysis of the institutions that generate and distribute mass-mediated texts as well as of the audience that receives them. Whose stories are being told? By whom? How are they manufactured, disseminated, received? Cultural studies, in this sense, needs to engage not only consumption but also production. Despite the success of celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby, for example, only a handful of blacks hold executive positions with film studios and television networks.<sup>6</sup>

Film and television casting, as an immediate form of representation, constitutes a kind of delegation of voice with political overtones. Here too Europeans and Euro-Americans have played the preponderant role, relegating non-Europeans to supporting roles and the status of extras. Within Hollywood cinema, Euro-Americans have historically enjoyed the unilateral prerogative of acting in “blackface,” “redface,” “brownface,” and “yellowface.” This asymmetry in representational power has generated intense resentment among minority communities, for whom the casting of a nonmember of the minority group is a triple insult, implying (*a*) you are unworthy of self-representation; (*b*) no one from your group is capable of representing you; and (*c*) we, the producers of the film, care little about your offended sensibilities, for we have the power and there is nothing to be done about it.

Important work has already been done on the ethnic/racial representation and stereotypes in the media. (See Miller 1980; Pettit 1980; Woll & Miller 1987; Churchill 1992; Guerrero 1993; Shohat & Stam 1994; Wiegman 1995.) Critics such as Vine Deloria (1969), Ralph and Natasha Friar (1972), Ward Churchill (1992), Jacqueline Kilpatrick (1999), and many others have discussed the binaristic splitting that has turned Native Americans into bloodthirsty beasts or noble savages. A number of other scholars, notably Donald Bogle (1988, 1989), Daniel Leab (1976), James Snead (1994), Ed Guerrero (1993), Jim Pines (1992), Clyde Taylor (1998), Thomas Cripps (1977, 1979, 1993), Gray (1995), have explored how preexisting stereotypes – for example the jiving sharpster and shuffling stage sambo – were transferred from antecedent media to film and television. Important work has also been done on the stereotypes of other ethnic groups such as Latinos. (See Noriega 1992; Fregoso 1993, Ramirez Berg 1992.)

There is no point in summarizing the work on stereotypes here; rather, I would like both to defend the importance of such work and raise some methodological questions about the underlying premises of character or stereotype-centered approaches. To begin, stereotype analysis has made an indispensable contribution by (1) revealing oppressive *patterns* of prejudice in what might at first glance have seemed random and inchoate phenomena; by (2) highlighting the psychic devastation inflicted by systematically negative portrayals on those groups assaulted by them, whether through internalization of the stereotypes themselves or through the negative effects of their dissemination; by (3) signaling the social *functionality* of stereotypes, demonstrating that stereotypes are not an error of perception but rather a form of social control. The call for “positive images,” in the same way, corresponds to a profound logic which only the representationally privileged can fail to understand. Given a dominant cinema that trades in heroes and heroines, minority communities rightly ask for their fair share of the representational pie as a simple matter of representational parity.

At the same time, the stereotype approach entails a number of pitfalls from a theoretical-methodological standpoint. First, the exclusive preoccupation with images, whether positive or negative, can lead to a kind of *essentialism*, as less subtle critics reduce a complex variety of portrayals to a limited set of reified formulae. Such reductionist simplifications run the risk of reproducing the very racism they were designed to combat. This essentialism generates in its wake a certain *ahistoricism*; the analysis tends to be static, not allowing for mutations, metamorphoses, changes of valence, altered function; it ignores the historical instability of the stereotype and even of language. Stereotypic analysis is likewise covertly premised on *individualism*, in that the individual character, rather than larger social categories (race, class, gender, nation, sexual orientation), remains the point of reference. The focus on individual character also misses the ways in which whole cultures, as opposed to individuals, can be caricatured or misrepresented without a single character being stereotyped. Countless films and TV programs reproduce Eurocentric prejudices against African spirit religions, for example, by regarding them as superstitious cults rather than as legitimate belief-systems, prejudices enshrined in the patronizing vocabulary (“animism,” “ancestor worship,” “magic”) used to discuss the religions. In sum, a vast cultural complex can be defamed without recourse to a character stereotype.

A moralistic approach also sidesteps the issue of the relative nature of “morality,” eliding the question: positive for whom? It ignores the fact that oppressed people might not only have a *different* vision of morality, but even an *opposite* vision. What is seen as “positive” by the dominant group, e.g. the acts of those “Indians” in westerns who spy for the whites, might be seen as treason by the dominated group. The taboo in classical Hollywood was not on “positive images” but rather on images of racial equality, images of anger and revolt. The privileging of positive images also elides the patent differences, the social

and moral heteroglossia, characteristic of any social group. A cinema of contrivedly positive image betrays a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection. It is often assumed, furthermore, that control over representation leads automatically to the production of “positive images.” But African films like *Laafi* (1991) and *Finzan* (1990) do not offer positive images of African society; rather, they offer *African* perspectives on African society. “Positive images,” in this sense, can be a sign of insecurity. Hollywood, after all, has never worried about sending films around the world which depicted the US as a land of gangsters, rapists, and murderers. More important than turning characters into heroes is that they be treated as subjects (not objects). More important than image is the question of agency.

While on one level film is mimesis, representation, it is also utterance, an act of contextualized interlocation between socially situated producers and receivers. It is not enough to say that art is constructed. We have to ask “constructed for whom?” and in conjunction with which ideologies and discourses? In this sense, art is a representation in not so much a mimetic as a political sense, as a delegation of voice.<sup>7</sup> One methodological alternative to the mimetic “stereotypes and distortions” approach is to speak less of “images” than of “voices” and “discourses.” The very term “image studies” symptomatically elides the oral and the “voiced.” A more nuanced discussion of race in the cinema would emphasize less a one-to-one mimetic adequacy to historical truth than the interplay of voices, discourses, perspectives, including those operative within the image itself. The task of the critic would be to call attention to the cultural voices at play, not only those heard in aural “close-up” but also those distorted or drowned out by the text. The question is not of pluralism but of multivocality, an approach that would strive to cultivate and even heighten cultural difference while abolishing socially-generated inequalities.

### Culture in the Multination State

Strangely, the practitioners of “multicultural media studies,” on the one hand, and of “cultural studies,” on the other, often seem to go about their business without fully taking cognizance of one other. But what are the implications of multiculturalism for cultural studies? One implication is that in the present postcolonial, globalized yet still racist present day, all cultures are in a sense “multicultures.” Speaking of the Americas, Canadian political theorist Will Kymlicka argues that countries like Brazil and the United States are not “nation states” but rather “multi-nation states,” in that their cultural/racial diversity derives from the presence of three major constellations of groups: (1) those who were already in the Americas (i.e. indigenous peoples in all their tremendous variety); (2) those who were forced to come to the Americas (i.e. enslaved

Africans in all *their* variety); and (3) those who *chose* to come to the Americas (immigrants in all *their* variety). But the other sites of cultural studies, such as England, Australia, and France, are also multicultural. Thanks to colonial karma, England is now also Indian, Pakistani, and Caribbean. British films like *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), *London Kills Me* (1991), *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), and *Bhaji at the Beach* (1989) bear witness to the tense postcolonial hybridity of former colonials growing up in what was once the “motherland”: In the multicultural neighborhood of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, the inhabitants have “lines out,” as it were, to the formerly colonized regions of the globe. France, similarly, is now Asian, Maghrebian, African, and Caribbean. The New Wave has given way to *beur* (“Arab” spelled backwards) cinema, the production of North Africans in France, while African-American hip-hop culture pervades the Parisian *banlieux*.

The popular culture which “cultural studies” examines, in sum, is now constitutively, irrevocably multicultural, mixed, mestizo. Music especially has been the privileged site of syncretism. The falsely open rubric “World music,” in this sense, is just another name for “international music produced by people of color,” just as the falsely closed rubric “best foreign film,” in the Oscar Ceremonies, is really another name for “World film.” The “dangerous crossroads” (Lipsitz) of musical traditions offer mutually enriching collaborations between the diverse currents of Afro-diasporic music, yielding such hybrids as “samba reggae,” “samba rap,” “jazz tango,” “rap reggae,” and “roforenge” (a blend of rock, forro, and merengue). Diasporic musical cultures mingle with one another, while simultaneously also playing off the dominant media-disseminated tradition of First world, especially American, popular music, itself energized by Afro-diasporic traditions. An endlessly creative multidirectional flow of musical ideas thus moves back and forth around the “Black Atlantic” (Thompson, Gilroy), Afro-diasporic music displays an anthropophagic capacity to absorb influences, including Western influences, while still being driven by a culturally African bass-note. In the Americas, musicians such as Stevie Wonder, Taj Mahal, Ruben Blades, Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Marisa Monte, and Carlinhos Brown not only practice syncretic forms of music but also thematize syncretism within their lyrics. The new fluidities of cultural exchange enabled by cable and satellite TV, meanwhile, amplify these exchanges. Rap music has by now become the worldwide *lingua franca* of musical protest. If Martians were to come to earth and listen to the radio, as Robert Farris Thompson once put it, they would conclude that there had been an African takeover of the planet.

Cultural studies approaches to popular media almost inevitably engage issues of race, whether in the negative sense of race as stereotype or as structuring absence, or in the positive sense of media productions which call attention to the raced nature of culture. Since race is a constitutive rather than a secondary feature of American national identity, for example, we should not be surprised to find racial undertones and overtones haunting countless Hollywood films, just as the repressed stories, the sublimated agonies, and the buried labor of

minorities “haunt” everyday social life. In Hollywood musicals, African Americans constituted not only a suppressed historical voice but also a literally suppressed ethnic voice, since Black musical idioms became more associated on the screen with “white” stars, authorizing a Euro-American signature on what were basically African American cultural products. In a power-inflected form of ambivalence, the same dominant society that “loves” ornamental snippets of black culture excludes the black performers who might best incarnate it. These politics of racial representation were not “unconscious,” they were the object of explicit debate and negotiation within the Hollywood production system, a question of the competing influences of Southern (and Northern) racists, liberals, black public advocacy groups, censors, nervous producers and so forth. Thomas Cripps describes the processes by which blackness in films was edited out: the way the African-American music that inspired George Gershwin was gradually elided from the biopic *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), for example, leaving Paul Whiteman to “make a lady out of jazz”; or the way *Lydia Bailey* (1952) turned from a story about Toussaint l’Ouverture and the Haitian revolution into a white-focalized romance.

Another way that “race” impacts cultural studies has to do with the fact that the Anglo-American popular culture that cultural studies tends to analyze is projected around the world. For cultural studies to focus narcissistically only on Anglo-American popular culture, while ignoring the effects of that culture in the world and while also ignoring the popular culture of what is dismissively called the “rest of the world,” is to reinscribe the existing asymmetries of knowledge, rooted in neocolonial structures of power, whereby the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America invariably know first-world languages and culture better than first worlders know theirs.

In a more positive sense, American popular culture bears constant witness to the “dialogue” not only between different marginal groups but also between Euro-American culture and its “others.” Literary analysts point to the (admittedly asymmetrical) dialogue of Crusoe and Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*, Huck and Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby Dick*. Many literary scholars have tried to “desegregate” American literary history. What happens, Eric Sundquist asks in *To Wake the Nations*, when we regard works like Melville’s novella about a slave revolt (*Benito Cereno*) as part of a *black* literary tradition? In film, this dialogue has often taken the alienated form of hero-and-sidekick (the Lone Ranger and Tonto, latter-day avatars of Crusoe and Friday), or of hero and valet (Jack Benny and Rochester), or of hero and entertainer (Rick and Sam in *Casablanca*, 1942). In *The Defiant Ones* (1958) Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier carry a chain-heavy allegory of racial interdependency. The 1980s and 1990s offer more upbeat versions of the biracial “buddy film”: Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder in *Stir Crazy* (1980) and *See No Evil* (1989), Eddie Murphy and Nick Nolte in *48 Hours* (1982), Billy Crystal and Gregory Hines in *Running Scared* (1986), and Mel Gibson and Danny Glover in the various *Lethal Weapons*. Films like *Driving Miss Daisy* (1991), *Grand Canyon* (1992), *Passion Fish* (1992), *White*

*Men Can't Jump* (1992), *Ghost Dog* (1999), and *Black and White* (2000) similarly place black–white dialogue at the center of their concerns. The appeal, including the box-office appeal, of such films suggests that they touch something deep within the national Unconscious, a historically-conditioned longing for interracial harmony. And indeed images of ethnic utopia percolate all through American popular culture, from the perennial Thanksgiving celebrations through the latest multiethnic music videos. One finds echoes of the same utopian trope, at a more advanced stage of development, in contemporary TV talkshows (*Oprah*, *Politically Incorrect*), MTV, soft-drink commercials, TV sports, public service announcements, and in the amiable multiethnic camaraderie of *Eyewitness News*, with its consolatory performance of ethnic harmony (contrasting brutally with the reports of innocent black men slain by white policemen).

In a multiracial society, the self is inevitably syncretic, especially when a preexisting cultural polyphony is amplified by the media. It is no accident that any number of American films stage the processes of ethnic syncretism: white men learning native American ways in films like *Hombre* (1967) and *A Man Called Horse*; Richard Pryor showing Gene Wilder how to “walk black” in *Silver Streak* (1976); young (white) boy David learning Jamaican patois from Clara in *Clara's Heart* (1988); Chinese immigrants learning street slang from Chicanos in *Born in East LA* (1987); Charlie Parker in a yarmulka jazzing up a Hassidic wedding in *Bird* (1988); Whoopie Goldberg teaching white nuns Motown dance routines in *Sister Act* (1992); and a host of black wannabes learning blackhandshakes in *Black and White* (2000).

It is therefore also no accident that many films – *Watermelon Man* (1970), *Soul Man* (1986), *True Identity* (1987), *Zelig* (1983), *Whiteboy* (1999) – play on the trope of racial transformation. Sandra Bernhard, in the opening sequence of *Without You I am Nothing*, sings “My skin is black” and is lit, and dressed, so as to appear black. But the trope is hardly limited to film. The all-white rap group “Young Black Teenagers” speak of being “Proud to be Black,” arguing that “Blackness is a state of mind.” Standup comics, finally, constantly cross racial boundaries through a kind of racial ventriloquism. Whoopi Goldberg impersonates (presumably white) “valley girls,” while Billy Crystal impersonates (presumably black) jazz musicians. These racial metamorphoses reach their apotheosis in Michael Jackson's “Black or White” music video, where morphing scrambles a succession of multiracial faces into an infinity of hybridized combinations. And more and more, American popular culture is a mestizo, dominated by “cultural mulattoes” such as Prince, Madonna, Maria Carey, Michael Jackson, and Michael Boulton, symptomatic of a situation where people transculturally metamorphize into their neighbors. Indeed, any binary grid which pits anglo whiteness against black/red/yellow others inevitably misses the complex contradictory gradations of syncretized culture, in a world where many young Germans fantasize about becoming Native Americans, and where Euro-American youth wear dreads and thicken their lips.

### Whiteness Studies

Cultural studies has both been an infradisciplinary ferment *within* disciplines *and* an inclusive transdisciplinary umbrella *over* disciplines. Cultural studies is sufficiently “hot” that many disciplines are eager to claim, often speciously, that they had been doing cultural studies all along. At this point, it is hard to draw clear and distinct boundaries between such disciplinary fields as media studies, visual culture/studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, diaspora studies, border studies, performance studies, Latino studies, Jewish studies, and whiteness studies, many of which engage, albeit differentially, with the same basic texts and issues. The 1990s have witnessed an attempt to move beyond ghettoized studies of isolated groups – native Americans, African Americans, Latinos – in favor of a relational and contrapuntal approach. The period has also witnessed the emergence of “whiteness studies.” This movement responds to the call by scholars of color for an analysis of the impact of racism not only on its victims but also on its perpetrators. The “whiteness” scholars questioned the quiet yet overpowering normativity of whiteness, the process by which “race” was attributed to others while whites were tacitly positioned as unmarked norm, leaving whiteness as an uninterrogated space. Although whiteness (like blackness) was on one level merely a cultural fiction without any scientific basis, it was also a social fact with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity (Lipsitz 1994: vii). In the wake of historical studies by Theodor Allen and Noel Ignatiev of how diverse “ethnics” (for example the Irish) became “white,” whiteness studies “outed” whiteness as just another ethnicity, although one historically granted inordinate privilege. This movement hopefully signals the end of “the innocent white subject,” and an end to the venerable practice of unilaterally racializing the Third World or minority “others,” while casting whites as somehow “raceless.”

Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Coco Fusco, George Lipsitz, Ruth Frankenberg, George Yúdice, Nelson Rodriguez, Noel Ignatiev, and Richard Dyer are among the many who have problematized normative notions of “whiteness.” Dyer’s book *White* (1997) focuses on the representation of white people in Western culture. The term “people of color” as a designation for “nonwhites,” Dyer points out, implies that whites are “colorless” and thus normative: “Other people are raced, we are just people” (Dyer 1997: 1) Even lighting technologies, and the specific mode of movie lighting, Dyer points out, have racial implications, and the assumption that the “normal” face is the white face runs through most of the manuals on cinematography.

“Whiteness” studies at its best denaturalizes whiteness as unmarked norm, calling attention to the taken-for-granted privileges (e.g. not to be the object of media stereotypes) that go with whiteness. At its most radical, it calls for “race treason” and “abolitionism” in the John Brown tradition, for an opting out of white privilege. At the same time, “whiteness studies” runs the risk of once again

recentering white Narcissism, of changing the subject back to the assumed center – a racial version of the Show Business dictum: “speak ill of me but speak.” Whites, it has been pointed out, cannot divest themselves of privilege even when they want to. Whiteness studies also needs to be seen in a global context where black and white are not always the operative categories of difference but rather caste (in India) or religion (in the Middle East). The important thing is to maintain a sense of the hybrid relationality and social co-implication of communities, without falling into a facile discourse of easy synthesis.

### From Cultural Studies to Multicultural Studies

Given the fact that all cultures are multicultures, it makes more sense to me to speak not of “cultural studies” but rather of “multicultural studies,” as a way of normalizing the syncretic, mixed nature of all popular culture. Various subcurrents mingle in the larger stream of what might be called “multicultural studies”: the analysis of “minority” discourse and representation; the critique of imperialist and orientalist media; the work on colonial and postcolonial discourse, the theorization of “minority,” “diasporic,” and “exilic” art; reflexive and dialogical anthropology, critical race theory; “whiteness” studies; the work on antiracist and multicultural media pedagogy.

And in a globalized world, it is perhaps time to think in terms of *comparative* multicultural studies, of relational studies which do not always pass through the putative “center.” The global nature of the colonizing process, and the global reach of contemporary media, virtually oblige the cultural critic to move beyond the restrictive framework of the nation-state. What are the relationalities between Indian and Egyptian popular culture, for example? At times, even multiculturalists glimpse the issues through a narrowly nationalist and exceptionalist grid, speaking of the “contributions” of the world’s diverse cultures to “the development of American society,” unaware of the nationalist teleology underlying such a formulation. “Multiculturedness” is not a US monopoly, nor is multiculturalism the handmaiden of US identity politics. One of the consequences of Eurocentrism, for example, is that both North Americans and South Americans tend to look to Europe for self-definition and self-understanding, rather than to the other multiracial societies of the Americas. Yet the question of racial representation in North American cinema might be profitably studied within the relational context of the cinematic representations offered by the other racially plural societies of the Americas, with their shared history of colonialism, slavery, and immigration. A cross-cultural “mutually illuminating” dialogical approach would stress the analogies not only *within* specific national film traditions – e.g. the analogies and disanalogies in the representation of indigenous peoples, Africans, and immigrants, but also *between* them, the kind of comparative study which George Yúdice calls for in this volume and which I have attempted in relation to Brazil in my *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative*



*History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture*. How are issues of race and caste formulated in other national contexts? What discourses are deployed? What are the operative terms? How do positive and negative images of blacks vary from culture to culture? How has slavery been depicted in the cinemas of the Black Atlantic? Such studies would constitute a first step in deprovincializing a discussion that has too often focused only on Anglo-American issues and representations.

### Notes

- 1 See Diana Fuss, *Identity Papers* (1995).
- 2 For Roger Kimball, multiculturalism implies “an attack on the . . . idea that, despite our many differences, we hold in common an intellectual, artistic, and moral legacy, descending largely from the Greeks and the Bible [which] preserves us from chaos and barbarism. And it is precisely this legacy that the multiculturalist wishes to dispense with.” See Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics has Corrupted Higher Education* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), postscript.
- 3 The phrase “the West and the Rest,” to the best of our knowledge, goes back to Chinweizu’s *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slaves and the African Elite* (New York: Random House, 1975). It is also used in Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
- 4 Frantz Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” in *Présence Africaine* 8/9/10 (1956).
- 5 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 48.
- 6 See *The New York Times* (Sept. 24, 1991).
- 7 Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, in a similar spirit, distinguish between “representation as a practice of depicting” and “representation as a practice of delegation.” See their “Introduction: De Margin and De Centre,” *Screen* 29(4) (1988): 2–10.

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