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Introduction

On Wednesday, April 29, 1992, a hazy spring afternoon in Los Angeles, two words leaped forward again and again from the city's electronic media: not guilty, not guilty, not guilty. Within minutes, order was disrupted as some residents of the city took to the streets. Others, trying to make sense of what was happening, monitored television images of rage, hope and despair from the safety of their living rooms.

When the smoke finally cleared a few days later, fifty-one people had died, more than $1 billion worth of property had been reduced to ashes, and thousands had been arrested in what the *Los Angeles Times* described as "the worst riots of the century" (Coffey 1992, p. 49).

News media first informed the world of verdicts in the Rodney King beating case at about 1 pm on April 29. At this time, most people in Los Angeles and across the nation were occupied by the routine demands of day-to-day living. An infinitesimally small segment of these people, of the potential media audience, was present in the Simi Valley courtroom as the verdicts were being read. An even smaller segment had been present over the course of the entire trial. A somewhat larger, but still quite small segment of the potential audience lived in areas the media were to later identify as "riot" areas. In short, only a small segment of the media audience had firsthand knowledge concerning the outbreak of the events or the causes to which they had been attributed by the media. Instead, a large measure of what people "knew" about the events and the conditions leading up to them was undoubtedly based on media depictions.

The events that erupted in Los Angeles undoubtedly meant many things to many people. To the nation's president, the events represented "the brutality of a mob, pure and simple."[1] To the news media, they were "riots," events resembling those that occurred in Watts twenty-seven years earlier.[2] To many observers, they were a direct response to the ten not-guilty verdicts

which exonerated four white police officers in the infamous beating of black motorist Rodney King – fifty-six baton blows captured on videotape. To others, however, these events constituted a "rebellion," the explosion of a powder keg of economic, social and political injustices that had oppressed their communities for years.[3] The verdicts just lit the fuse.

The language of race, of course, permeated most discussions of the events. From accounts of black and Latino economic deprivation in South Central Los Angeles, to the Rodney King incident, to the probation of Soon Ja Du, racial understandings loomed large in the discourses surrounding these events. For example, black–white antagonisms served as a key explanation in the *Los Angeles Times'* analysis: "The attack on Reginald Denny would become the flip side of the attack on King – the unofficial, black-on-white answer to the official, white-on-black beating. Within hours Los Angeles would plummet into chaos" (Coffey 1992, p. 45). Scholarly analyses of the events also tended to identify race as a key factor. As Omi and Winant (1993) explained it:

What does the Los Angeles riot tell us about racial politics in the US? Above all else, it serves as an immanent critique of the mainstream political process, of the political convergence which dominates national politics today. It demonstrates the continuing significance, and the continuing complexity, of race in American life.

(pp. 99–100)

In short, many observers understood the events as a sad commentary on race relations in the United States. But is this how all viewers understood television depictions of the Rodney King beating, an incident that news media have associated with the outbreak of the events?

Goodwin (1992), for example, suggests otherwise. While many viewers might interpret the videotaped beating of King as involving "brutality and racism" (p. 122), he argues, the jury in the case did not see it that way. He suggests that the jury "contextualized the images differently" relative to other viewers (p. 123), that the environment in which the images were viewed (i.e., the trial) and the forms in which they were offered (i.e., edited and "enhanced") facilitated the jury's not-guilty verdict. In conclusion, he noted that "In the wider arena of politics, radicals are onto a no-winner if they choose this moment suddenly to start believing in the simple veracity of mediated images" (p. 123). But while mediation surely makes a difference, is it not possible that the "veracity" of *all* images – "simple" or otherwise – is to some degree determined by what people want or are socialized to see? For example, is it merely coincidental that the jury who arrived at this decision was essentially composed of *white* members?[4] Would a jury containing *black* members have reached the same verdict – interpreted these

"mediated" images in the same way? In short, what exactly is *race*, and how might this factor have influenced television viewers as they sat in their living rooms, attributing meaning to news coverage of the events?

At the same time, consider the following proposition: television news-workers intended for their reports to provide viewers with a *particular* understanding of the events.[5] That is, just as attorneys in the King beating case relied heavily on images to convince the jury of the validity of their competing claims, television newsworkers undoubtedly covered the events with the goal of reconstructing for their viewers *what-actually-happened*. But the definitions, meanings and understandings various event observers embraced regarding what-actually-happened, as I suggested above, were far from uniform. How does this realization square with newsworker efforts to represent the events in terms of a particular understanding? In other words, how much *power*[6] do news media have to advance a certain view of reality in the face of viewer alternatives? Furthermore, in what ways might race figure in viewer tendencies to resist media influence?

These burning questions motivate the present study; they also expose fundamental gaps in the mass media and race literatures. These gaps, I propose, are the unfortunate legacy of discord between two longstanding research traditions.

Old story, new ending?

Once upon a time, in the land of knowledge, there stood two well-built houses. Residents of the first house sought desperately to document the ways in which mass media bolster ruling class power in society; from time to time, however, these residents bickered amongst themselves over the nature of audience resistance, whether "real" resistance to this power was, in fact, possible. Meanwhile, residents of the second house tried to explain how race exerts its influence in society; toward this end, these owners spent most of their time identifying and analyzing what they understood as out-comes of racial group interaction.

Now the first-time listener might suppose that these neighbors fre-quently hobnobbed with one another – that those who studied media, power and resistance were also likely to have been interested in how race enters into the mix, or that those who studied how race exerts its influence in society were also likely to have been concerned with understanding how mass media help construct and reproduce racial subjectivities. But rarely, we find, did these neighbors venture beyond the confines of their own yards.

In the real world of academia, of course, these houses are commonly

known as "Critical Media Studies" and the "Sociology of Race." Assuming for the moment that the point of our little tale is a valid one,[7] we are left with a nagging problem: Just how should one study the *interplay* of mass media and race? How can we avoid treating either concept unproblematically in our analyses, taking its nature for granted? How can we establish – measure, interpret, characterize, demonstrate – not only the social significance of media *or* race, but of their *interaction*? The keys to these questions, I submit, have for too long remained locked inside two houses of knowledge, literatures built for different reasons, with different methods, and in different styles.

Different reasons

It is hardly accidental that researchers working within the Critical Media Studies tradition rarely center race in their analyses.[8] After all, Critical Media Studies grows out of a Marxist theoretical tradition[9] whose main current has tended to treat race as epiphenomenal. Many of the more orthodox proponents of this tradition even understand racial consciousness as "false consciousness," identifying class, instead, as the fundamental analytical category for understanding societal relations.[10]

For example, in her attempt to illustrate how Critical Media Studies differs from more "traditional" media studies, Press (1992) inadvertently reveals the marginality of race in the former paradigm. She begins this comparison by noting that critical approaches are committed to understanding "what might be," while more traditional approaches are primarily concerned with "what is." In other words, Press (1992) rightly argues that Critical Media Studies – unlike traditional studies of the media – embraces a progressive political agenda and couples this agenda to its theoretical one. Underscoring class's dominant position on this consolidated agenda, Press identifies "the relative absence of politically effective working-class movements in the United States" as something she has had to "grapple with" in her work. Note that she makes no mention of the *relative abundance* of racial movements in the United States; it is as if these movements had, and continue to have, little bearing on the Critical Media Studies agenda.

Press (1992), of course, is not alone when she slights race in her discussion. As Gray (1993) illustrates, critical studies of television typically assume that the television apparatus works to normalize, incorporate and commodify differences such as race or gender. But while the work of women scholars such as Press and Radway (1984) has kept the issue of gender up close in the literature, race has been kept at "arm's length" (Gray

1993, p. 192). This situation, it seems, is extremely problematic in a context such as the United States, where race has been, and continues to be, a central axis of social relations (Omi and Winant 1986, 1994).

Equally problematic in a society permeated through and through by electronic communications, the Sociology of Race rarely centers mass media in its analyses.[11] This literature might be crudely divided into two camps: works whose focus is to explain race *per se* and those whose focus is to explain race *relations*. Scholars who start with an analysis of race relations -- who expend little effort theorizing the *content* of the category itself -- seem to treat race as a mere artifact of more elementary processes. For example, many influential racial scholars share Critical Media Studies' concern with class, conceptualizing the significance of race primarily in economic terms (cf. Cox 1970; Bonacich 1972; Wilson 1978). This observation may seem rather ironic when the failure of these studies to examine mass media is considered in conjunction with our central problem. But then these studies take the meaning of race for granted, defining it once and for all as a rather static category. The shifting complex of meanings that constitutes "race" (Prager 1982; Omi and Winant 1986, 1994), as well as the role that mass media might play in its formation, are defined as marginal concerns by the assumptions of this framework.

In contrast, scholars who attempt to theorize race as an irreducible category -- a category in its own right -- are more likely to recognize it as a dynamic phenomenon, one composed of ever-evolving meanings and significances.[12] Omi and Winant (1994), perhaps, is the exemplar of this approach. This study's notion of racial formation -- "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed" (p. 55) -- clearly implicates mass media as an important player in the construction and reproduction of racial meanings. Unfortunately, mainstream sociology has been slow to develop the connection. This observation, I contend, is due in no small measure to two factors. Firstly, the mainstream sociological discourse on race has been dominated by positivist approaches which conceptualize race in static terms, rather than interpretive ones which center the construction, reproduction and transformation of racial meanings in their analyses. Secondly, the "dominant paradigm" in American communications studies (Gitlin 1978) -- a signature positivist enterprise -- proclaimed in the 1940s and 1950s that mass media have very little effect on social actors.[13] Mainstream sociology, it seems, accepted this proclamation, discounting media as a topic worthy of serious study.[14] Accordingly, "Mass Media" is conspicuously absent today from the list of thirty-five standing sections of the American Sociological Association, and it is given only cursory attention in most introductory

textbooks.[15] Given these observations, it should come as no surprise that mass media are also marginalized in the projects of mainstream sociologists who study race.

Different methods

Over the years, Critical Media Studies concerns with "what is" and "what might be" have generated research questions that seem to demand qualitative analyses of one sort or another. A key concern of Critical Media Studies, as I noted earlier, is the relationship between mass media and societal rule. In order to explore this concern, scholars in the Critical Media Studies tradition devote their energies to one or both of two major projects: exposing the ideological functions of media texts[16] and/or identifying whether and under what conditions real audiences might resist these texts. Neither of these projects has to date found much use for quantitative methodology, a methodology that tends to flatten meaning when it represents complex concepts with numbers.

Text-centered analyses, which continue to dominate the tradition, assume that media are more powerful than audiences in the reception experience. Influenced by a key tenet of Marxist thought – that "[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx 1972, p. 136) – these studies seek to expose the infestation of ruling ideas in media texts.[17] Toward this end, textual analysis necessarily involves the use of interpretive methods, methods well-suited for teasing out the symbols and other narrative devices in a text that work to activate and support ruling ideas. The formal sampling procedures, statistical tools, and reliability and validity measures so central to quantitative methods do not seem very useful to researchers wrestling with the subtleties of meaning. Indeed, it is this fact that prompts many positivists to view critical works as "idiosyncratic" and speculative at best (Press 1992, p. 93).

Works within Critical Media Studies that endeavor to study audiences are on the rise and yet continue to be controversial within the tradition.[18] Typically, these studies embrace Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, understanding the term to describe an unstable order or equilibrium in society predicated on both coercion and consent. The mass media, it follows, facilitate the consent on which hegemony depends. But the process is an unstable one in which ideological cleavages open from time to time, providing space for counter-hegemonic readings and practices. How audiences understand or *decode* a given media message, then, suddenly becomes a meaningful empirical question.[19] Thus qualitative techniques such as ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth and focus-group inter-

viewing are employed to explore how audiences actually make sense of media (cf. Jankowski and Wester 1991), whether and under what conditions they might resist media influence. Again, due to the focus on meaning and interpretation, the research questions in these projects do not lend themselves to easy quantification.

The Sociology of Race, in contrast, has spawned countless quantitative studies. This development has no doubt been motivated by the continued dominance of *positivism* in the social sciences.[20] But this development is also the result, as I point out above, of the tradition's tendency to conceptualize race in static terms. Indeed, these two factors are intertwined. That is, because the meaning of race-as-category is predetermined by the researcher, a relevant population can be easily identified and representative (read "objectively valid") sampling undertaken. Accordingly, many of the more traditional research questions involving race – for example, questions of stratification, segregation or attitude – have focused on clearly defined groups that exhibit quantifiable characteristics. While these projects generally share the concerns of Critical Media Studies with social structure and power, many do so from the vantage point of a competing theoretical framework: pluralism. In recent years, the ethnicity paradigm (and concordant images of cultural and political pluralism) has left an unmistakable imprint on social scientific conceptualizations of race.[21] This paradigm tends to equate race with ethnicity, suggesting that race relations should be understood as a competition between a multitude of different ethnic groups who seek to influence societal outcomes in their favor. Accordingly, an important interest that drives these studies is specifying the balance of power or degree of integration present in society at any particular point in time. This enterprise, of course, generally results in the generation and comparison of several socioeconomic measures (e.g., median income, years of schooling attained, mortality rate, employment rate, poverty rate, etc.). Interpretive analyses of racial subjectivity – analyses akin to those Critical Media Studies scholars conduct on texts and audiences – typically receive marginal consideration in these studies. Interpretive analyses, it seems, do not generate the kind of "hard data" popularly associated with the positivist enterprise.

Different styles

Differences in reason and method, of course, generally go hand in hand with differences in the look of manuscripts, in *style*. Works within the Critical Media Studies tradition are characterized by lengthy narratives interspersed with pockets of theoretical reflection and interpretation.

Researchers frequently employ verbatim quotations of text or audience discussion as sources of data to illustrate whatever argument they are advancing. Rarely do we find in these works the tables, graphs or other data presentation devices one would expect to find in "rigorous" positivist works. This stylistic practice, of course, is rooted in necessity: the nuances of signification and meaning that critical works target are frequently lost when reduced to numbers and summary tables.

Meanwhile, studies developed within the Sociology of Race tradition typically seek to uncover representative, quantifiable – replicable – social "facts." Concerns with replication, of course, signal static understandings of concepts, indicators and measures.[22] Accordingly, researchers devote much of the narrative to elaborating on method – defining concepts, operationalizing variables, defending measures. Tables anchor the discussion as researchers attempt to describe relevant social facts in shorthand. Interpretive studies of race (i.e., ethnographies and historical pieces that look more like works in the Critical Media Studies tradition) do exist, of course, but they are part of a small minority. The unstable meanings and significations implied by a concept such as "racial formation" (Omi and Winant 1986, 1994) lead to "messy" analyses, analyses that seem to defy quantification and replication.

Forcing the neighbors to meet

The researcher interested in truly understanding the interplay of media and race, I contend, desperately needs an innovative framework. S/he needs a framework that combines sociological considerations of race with a critical focus on hegemony and "what might be." S/he needs a framework that respects concerns for reliability and validity without reducing complex meanings to static concepts, to mere numbers. S/he needs a framework that appreciates the contribution of two houses of knowledge many treat as irreconcilable, or at best, inconsistent.[23] Above all, s/he needs a *balanced* framework, one that incorporates key insights and leaves unnecessary baggage behind.

This book was inspired by the search for such a framework – one that forces the neighbors to meet. "British Cultural Studies," as practiced by researchers identified with the Birmingham School in England,[24] serves as my theoretical and methodological starting point. This tradition has long recognized the empirical utility of sociological and anthropological tools. Important empirical studies within the tradition bring these tools to bear on slippery questions of culture, meaning and power (e.g., Willis 1977; Morley 1980). But consistent with critical approaches, this tradition has

also sought to discover "what might be" – to couple its theoretical agenda to a more explicitly political one. The concept of hegemony, as articulated by Gramsci (1971), forms a theoretical stronghold for Cultural Studies (cf. Hall 1992). Because hegemony is viewed as an inherently unstable order, meaningful change becomes a possibility, instances of resistance worth documenting and understanding.[25] Cultural Studies scholars understand the context surrounding these acts of resistance to be key; for these researchers refuse to accept the validity of inflexible laws of social behavior. In short, Cultural Studies "rejects the application of a theory known in advance as much as it rejects the possibility of an empiricism without theory" (Grossberg 1993, p. 89).

In the following pages I employ a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques designed to *triangulate* in on an understanding of my object of analysis. At times, my use of verbatim quotations and interpretation give this study the look of a Critical Media Studies work; at other times, my use of quantitative measures and tables give the study a look more often associated with mainstream sociological projects. In this book, style follows function: I borrow key insights and methodologies from two houses of knowledge out of necessity, to chart the complex interplay of media and race. Following the Critical Media Studies tradition, I couple my theoretical agenda to a political one: How might we use the findings of this study to identify strategies for facilitating audience resistance in the future? True to the Sociology of Race tradition, I use a variety of measures to operationalize "race," to document its influence on the social relations under study. Finally, consistent with the Cultural Studies tradition, I present my analysis as one that is contextually specific, *not* as one that uncovers timeless laws about media power and audience reception. The case: the production and reception of local television news portrayals of the 1992 Los Angeles "riots." How much power do news media have to advance a hegemonic view of the events in the face of viewer alternatives? In what ways might race figure into viewer tendencies to resist media influence? How might media experiences contribute to the construction and reproduction of racial subjectivities?

Plan of the book

In pursuit of answers to these questions, this study exposed fifteen groups of friends and/or family members – five "Latino," five "African-American," and five "white"[26] – to a 17-minute extract from local television news coverage of the first day of the "riots." Same-race interviewers then instructed informants to discuss amongst themselves "what you just saw." That is,

interviewers avoided directing/focusing the discussions or defining terms: informants were permitted to set the discussion agenda as an outgrowth of the group interaction process. The study targeted college-aged informants (although some groups were mixed in terms of age) because this age cohort had not yet been born when the bulk of the 1960s "riots" occurred. Moreover, roughly half of the groups originated from South Central Los Angeles, a relatively low socioeconomic status area identified by the media as the center of the events, while the balance of the groups were from the more affluent Westside. Group screenings and the subsequent discussions were videotaped, transcribed, and coded in order to identify patterns that might link viewing behavior, group discussions and race. I was particularly interested in examining the sources of knowledge informants referenced when discussing the selected news extract. (see appendix A for a detailed discussion of the data and methods).

Part 1 of the study – Context and text – sets the stage for this empirical analysis of audience reception. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework from which I examine the interaction of media and race in the meaning-making process. This framework synthesizes important insights from British Cultural Studies, the Sociology of Race, social psychology and ethnomethodology.

Chapter 3 presents my analysis of the selected news extract in order to provide a benchmark against which to compare informant responses in parts 2 and 3. I identify and discuss fourteen major assumptions that were embedded in this extract.

Part 2 – Audience – is largely descriptive, consisting of audience ethnographies for each of the fifteen study groups. Chapter 4 focuses on data from the Latino-identified groups, chapter 5 on data from the black-identified groups, and chapter 6 on data from the white-identified groups. These ethnographies suggest that the screenings and subsequent discussions served as a forum for informants to negotiate and affirm their racial subjectivities.

In part 3 – Analysis and conclusions – I consider ethnographic and experimental findings from the study in terms of concerns with racial subjectivity, and enduring debates about media power and audience resistance. Chapter 7 argues that "raced ways of seeing" indeed shaped the reception experience for informants. Chapter 8 concludes the study by considering the social significance of these findings, by analyzing the relationship between informant meaning-making and resistance.

When all is said and done, the goal of this book is *not* to make generalizations about "Latino," "black," or "white" populations. At the very least, such an exercise would require a larger, more representative sample; it