

## Racism, postracialism and why media matter

### Abstract

Racism has become both ubiquitous and unrecognisable, precisely as its meanings are subjected to the never-ending and open-ended debates on social media and mass media. In fact, racism is increasingly debated through media events (such as in the case of the Charlie Hebdo), but also ordinarily defined and denied in everyday life (such as in the case of the casual racism in everyday social media communication). This article responds to Titley's (2019) argument that racism is defined through its constant evaluation and contestation in mediated communication – through its *debatability* (ibid.). In engaging with Titley's thesis, the article sets forward a three-step argument on the need to systematically study media in the context of ethnic and racial studies: as argued, media are increasingly influential systems of power and knowledge that matter to politics (through representation), institutions (through bordering), and public culture (through recognition).

An internationally-renown carnival at the Belgian city of Aalst made history. Again. The 2020 carnival parade hosted caricatured Jewish Orthodox characters, including some depicted as ants. As the images went viral on social media and mass media, they spread shock and protest against the carnival's anti-Semitism. More shockingly to many perhaps, the 2020 performances of virulent anti-Semitism multiplied in comparison to Aalst's 2019 anti-Semitic displays, which cost the carnival its UNESCO recognition as a world heritage event. Yet, and while the carnival is debated on Facebook and Twitter, the city Mayor's spokesperson remained adamant that this was not racism: "It's our parade, our humour, people can do whatever they want. It's a weekend of freedom of speech" (BBC 2020).

This event vividly captures the contradictory narratives that surround debates around racism: most significantly, the discrimination and hate speech arguments versus the freedom of speech and "this is not racism" claims. As the Aalst carnival, the Charlie Hebdo events, and so many other online and offline examples show, these debates will not go away anytime soon. Instead, racism has now become the subject of intense contestation of "opinions" and performances of public culture and speech acts that claim or deny recognition of certain groups, of certain acts, but not others. This kind of unresolved and

intensified contestation of racism, its meanings and consequences – what Titley refers to as the *debatability* of racism – are at the heart of *Racism and media*. For Titley, racism is not just a subject of debate but instead the product of “a constant contest as to what counts as racism and whose reality counts in this evaluation, a process that renders it a matter of opinion and speculative churn, not history, experience and power” (2019, ix). As racism then is constantly debated but its meanings become detached from systems of power and inequality, it paradoxically becomes both ubiquitous and unrecognisable as a system of ideas and actions to be documented and tackled.

As the book theorises racism through *debatability*, its media focus comes as no surprise. In fact, the book’s core argument is that the mediation of racism is central to understanding how it takes its meanings within transnational systems of colonial and capitalist modernity. *Debatability*, Titley argues, is a “mode of thinking about racism *in* the media, and racism *and* the media” (p. 3). More specifically, the argument set forward in the book is twofold. First, it is argued, symbols and meanings of racism and anti-racism at present need to be understood at the juncture of “postracialism” and digital media cultures. Postracialism in particular sees “race” as an irrelevant category and racism as an outdated expression of ignorance and extremism that is located either in the past or at the socio-political margin, thus irrelevant to mainstream society and politics. At the same time, the book argues, digital media cultures do not just reflect but they also construct meanings of racism, as racist and anti-racist narratives are constantly shaped on and through networked media, whose affordances allow the vast and constant circulation of information, images and artefacts. The second and consequent element of the book’s core argument is that the changing “size, contours and function” of racism establishes it as the subject and product of *debatability*. This happens as paradoxically “postracialism” comes with constant talk about racism – described, defined and denied – especially within media cultures (*ibid.*). More particularly, racism is fiercely debated through media events (such as in the case of Charlie Hebdo), but also ordinarily defined and denied in everyday life (such as in the case of the casual racism in everyday social media communication).

The readers of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* probably don’t need persuading about the relevance of a book that set forward the above arguments and that focusses on the discursive construction of racism and its consequences. In fact, the book speaks to many debates within and across ethnic and racial studies. For example, inspired by Goldberg

(2015), Hall (2017) and Sivanandan (2002), Titley argues that there cannot be a general theory of racism, but instead racism can only be understood in and through political ideologies, structural inequalities and uneven systems of representation. It is in this context that Titley's emphasis on migration as one of the fundamental domains for understanding racism today matters. Migration, which Titley discusses in detail, is key to the analysis of (cultural) racism in the context of the postcolonial nation state and global capitalism. It is difficult to disagree with the author's claim that understanding racism comes with an analysis of its historicity and transformation, the fact that it "never stands still" (as Sivanandan quoted in the book emphasises).

While the book speaks to familiar and, no doubt, important analyses of racism within ethnic and racial studies, the journal's readers might need some more persuading about the book's claim that any meaningful analysis of racism needs to understand the media. Often debates on the media (and racism) fail to travel beyond the discipline of media and communications but Titley's truly interdisciplinary take opens up avenues for understanding why media matter, and not only to media scholars. As the argument develops in the book's pages, it becomes clear that this is not a specialist's disciplinary approach. Rather, and most productively, the book discusses media as an integral element of systems of power and knowledge that matter to politics (through representation), institutions (through bordering), and to public culture (through recognition). Below, I speak to the role of the media in understanding these three areas in dialogue to the book's analysis.

To start with politics, the question of *representation* is inevitably central: how racism is spoken about and how it gains its position within contemporary systems of knowledge and political culture matters. Like others working at the juncture of media, race and ethnicity, Titley learns from cultural studies and critical media studies research that has tackled media representations as systems that symbolically and ordinarily construct We-ness and Otherness along lines of racial and culturalist binary oppositions. For decades, media have been studied for effectively exercising symbolic power, precisely by representing minorities as the enemy within, not least through the racialisation, pathologisation and criminalisation of ethnic minorities (with the origins of these works traced back to influential works such as Hall et al.'s *Policing the crisis* 1978). Noting how representations as politics are increasingly mediated through digital networks, Titley's analysis shows that media's symbolic power

extends but also transforms within digital media cultures. This is the result of the diffusion and diversification of actors that produce and circulate representations of, for and against race. On the internet, media power is not *only* generated by media institutions, or even only by the platforms. More specifically, digital media affordances generate produsage (Bruns 2008) - the merging of media production and use that turns representation into a participatory, messy and unpredictable space for the constitution and dissemination of voice and action. As Titley puts it "The 'politics of representation' today, therefore, is more than an academic field of textual research. It is a distributed practice increasingly integrated into everyday media engagements with the flow of symbolic content, and honed to contest or accentuate, however ephemerally, the register of representations of race" (ibid. 37). As the constant, simultaneous and horizontal circulation of texts, images and artefacts online destabilises the hierarchical flow of information and communication, citizens turn into actors who both reproduce and contest the hegemonic narratives of race. Through these diverse repertoires of representation, citizens become hyper-visible actors who perform for different publics and, at the same time, digital witnesses (Ellis 2000), who consume the many stories narrated and visualised digitally on, of and against race. Within this environment, where ideas, visualities and opinions become constantly circulated, race becomes a topic of debate within a congested digital public culture. As different positions appear as merely contradictory elements of systems of representation, racism becomes the subject of incomplete and inconclusive debates – with the *debatability* that Titley writes about, digitally defining and denying racism all the time.

Second, the book invites us to think of the institutional framework within which racism is constituted today. An analysis of institutions is an analysis of bordering. Traditionally, state institutions have been the primary holders of bordering power, not least through their determining control over citizenship rights and access to the territory of the nation. Yet, media's *bordering* role has often been overseen in analyses of bordering. Drawing on Silverstone (2007), Titley reminds us of the boundary work done by the media and defined "from the macro-boundary work of addressing and shaping publics, to the micro-boundary work that shapes the everyday flows of representations and constructions of the social world" (p. 36). Media's boundary work has been expanding across symbolic and material spaces, with social media and mainstream media supplementing and occasionally even replacing the state as a mechanism of assorting people and rights. For Europe and the

US especially, access to the territory and the community of the nation for nonnational, non-white migrants and refugees has become an ordinary biopolitical affair of assorting *the Other* on the basis of racial profiling. This is a symbolic as much as a territorial process in which media are deeply involved. Lillie Chouliaraki and I (2017, 2019) have been writing about *the digital border*, a moral and political space constituted by digital networks and mediated narratives to regulate human mobility by combining practices of securitization, which treat migrants as threats, with humanitarian care, which treats them as victims. Shaping a deeply racialised order of who has the right to cross and under what conditions, the media shape borders in two distinct but interconnected ways: by regulating migrant mobility at and after the point of crossing – the *territorial border* – especially through digital systems of surveillance at land, air and water and through collection of biometrical information; and by regulating their mobility in the countries of destination - the *symbolic border* - through the public narratives circulating in the media and shaping social imaginaries, public opinion and policy debates around migration. Media's storytelling of *the Other*, alongside digital communications' role in "policing the crisis" and the racialised body of the migrant through surveillance, hide as much as reveal the convergence of nationalism and racism within the precarious framework of humanitarian securitization.

The bordering role of the media is directly linked to the third element of media's role in shaping discourses and acts of racism at present: *recognition* of who speaks and who is heard within public culture is intensely mediated. At the present moment, as Tilly also identifies, the migrant has become the figure of the ultimate *Other* – the figure in the centre of contemporary articulations (of the always shifting) racism. In fact, migration has become a terrain to enact "the discriminatory practices performed in the name of race but not taking race for granted" (Paul 2014: 711). As eloquently discussed in the book, anti-migrant politics has gone mainstream and integrated in popular media and party political narratives by systematically avoiding direct references to racial language and signifiers. For example, unlike historically earlier narratives of race, new discriminatory politics identify Otherness along the lines of migrant and minority populations' socio-cultural *deficiencies* – their bad *choices* and limitations, rather than biological determinants. Most importantly these are recognised – or misrecognised – in popular and media narratives on the basis of migrants' religious practices (especially identified as "violent" or "backward" Islam); gender relations (identified as incompatible with the liberal west), or even migrants' subjectivities (especially

identified in the figure of the “untrainable bad migrant” who cannot acquire the identity of a neoliberal subject) (Georgiou 2019). Thus, the narration of the problematic *Other* moves away from narrations of a clearly determined biological difference, though this narration does not abandon the ideological basis of racialised biopolitics. In fact, the Muslim woman’s body remains a hyper-mediated symbol for negotiating meanings of We-ness and Otherness, a biopolitical category for defining the only way in which a Muslim woman can be seen (and almost never heard), but spoken about as the repressed, silent victim.

Of course, recognition, or rather, misrecognition of minorities is a story of situated, not only in time, but also in place racism. Even in the context of the west (which Titley recognises and admits as being the privileged domain through and to which he speaks), symbolic violence of silencing and marginalising merges with material violence. Most significantly, the black body, increasingly alongside the Arab male body, are disproportionately targeted, imprisoned and killed in the urban streets (Coates 2015). In the context of India and the rising Hindutva nationalism, media’s symbolic power merges with material violence in different, but similarly intensified, ways, more specifically with vigilante publics using social media as an extension of space to mobilise and organise against Muslims and others perceived as a threat to a pure Hindu nation (Banaji 2018).

Events than unfold on the ground and across territories as this commentary is being written represent the most powerful evidence of the book’s urgency. As Titley reminds us, racism is neither the past signifier that postracialism assumes, nor the clearly defined and bounded act of violence that can be isolated and fully contained. What this book does not promise is a clear definition of racism or even a clear definition of an anti-racist politics. What it does though deliver is a critical, complex and important analysis of racism, as this remains ever-present but often disguised through the constant debatability, definability and deniability of its meanings within west’s public cultures, cultures that are increasingly imagined and lived digitally.

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