The
Colorblind
Screen

Television in
Post-Racial America

EDITED BY
Sarah Nilsen & Sarah E. Turner

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Introduction

SARAH NILSEN AND SARAH E. TURNER

During his keynote address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, then senator Barack Obama made the claim that "there is not a liberal America and a conservative America. There is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America: There's the United States of America." These often-cited lines encapsulate the hope of a politician and a people who aspired to move the country past the color line to a time of unity through diversity. Obama himself acknowledges in the opening moments of his speech that his "presence on this stage is pretty unlikely." And yet, America and the world grasped that moment and that image, carrying them to election night in 2008 and again in 2012. Ironically, however, in the country's determination to both hold on to and project the image of a colorblind America, the reality of the country's racialized differences and inequities was overlooked.

Obama's comment invites multiple interpretations. Is he a post-racial president, neither black nor white? Liberals see the speech as a symbol of progress, signifying that America really has escaped its racist past, while cultural theorists might read it as evidence of the problematic allegiance to the ideals of colorblindness. For example, cultural critic and philosopher Cornel West claims that "by necessity, Obama has had to downplay his blackness to appease the white moderates and independents and speak to their anxieties" (33). The interpretive moment

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marked by this speech highlights the complex cultural moment of twenty-first-century America. Despite, or perhaps indirectly as a result of, the election of a biracial president, race still plays a dominant role in this culture, and, as legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds us, "racism is a central ideological underpinning of American society" (1336).

A steady flow of academic studies continues to document the significant racial gaps in equity that permeate the core domains of social life and concrete social behaviors in America, such as housing and segregation, the labor market, close interpersonal relationships, politics, incarceration, and education (see Bobo and Charles). Much of this research has entered into the public discourse through mainstream media. As a survey of recent *New York Times* headlines reveals,[1] even with the recent election of Barack Obama to a historic second term, race relations in this country are far from reconciled. The social contradictions manifested in the celebration of the reelection of the nation's first biracial president and the persistent disregard for the socioeconomic inequities experienced by blacks and Hispanics illustrate the tensions that define what many refer to as post-racial America.

Racial attitudes in the United States have shifted significantly during the past four decades. In twenty-first-century America, the overt racism of the Jim Crow period has been replaced by significant social changes in public attitudes towards race. And yet racism persists amid deep divisions over appropriate social policy responses to racial inequality. Color-blind ideology must be understood as the outcome of a rhetorical strategy deployed in the wake of the modern civil rights movement in the early 1960s. In 1968, then presidential candidate Richard Nixon "pioneered the use of race as a primary weapon of conservative electoral politics [by] relying on carefully selected symbols, rhetorical pronouncements, and 'code words' that appealed to white voters nervous about racial change without alienating moderates who had opposed Jim Crow segregation and discrimination" (Horton 192). Neoconservative politicians insisted that the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had successfully eradicated any remaining structural barriers to the advancement of the African American community. Therefore, any remaining racial inequalities were the product of individual choice rather than social policy; subsequently, concerted efforts to eradicate these inequalities were seen as antithetical to the equal protection clause

of the Fourteenth Amendment. Nathan Glazer, in his influential and foundational neoconservative book on racial issues *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (1975), laid the groundwork for this new conservative position on race that would persist to this day. He argued that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 "could only be read as instituting into law Judge Harlan's famous dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson:* 'Our Constitution is color-blind'" (221). He concluded that "it is now our task to work with the intellectual, judicial, and political institutions of the country to reestablish the simple and clear understanding that rights attach to the individual, not the group, and that public policy must be exercised without distinction of race, color, or national origin" (221).

In the 1980s, under the administration of President Ronald Reagan, the neoconservative revisionist appropriation of the concept of colorblindness would "blossom into a new and heavily promoted conservative discourse that combined an attack on race-conscious policies such as affirmative action with an implicitly racialized attack on social welfare programs for the poor" (Horton 204). Colorblind ideology thus needs to be understood as an ideological rhetorical stance that serves to distort the goals of the civil rights movement by claiming that the movement's objective was the eradication of racial considerations while also reassuring the dominant white culture that colorblindness represents a position of tolerance and acceptance for the equal treatment of all individuals regardless of the color of their skin. As Horton explains:

> Culturally, conservative political ideas have become overwhelmingly dominant. Even the history of the Civil Rights movement has been largely rewritten to support the conservative crusade for color-blindness and against affirmative action. Even more problematically, any memory that the movement was in fact dedicated to building an interracial coalition committed to the joint pursuit of racial and class equity seems to have been completely erased from public consciousness. (228)

The impact of the neoconservative appropriation of colorblind discourse on American society has been richly documented by sociologists who argue that the paradoxical and complex state of racial ideology today can be understood within a colorblind racial framework: a contemporary set of beliefs that posit that racism is a thing of the past and that race and racism

do not play an important role in current social and economic realities. Sociologists have identified the central beliefs of colorblind racism this way:

> (1) most people do not even notice race anymore; (2) racial parity has for the most part been achieved; (3) any persistent patterns of racial inequality are the result of individual and/or group-level shortcomings rather than structural ones; (4) most people do not care about racial differences; and (5) therefore, there is no need for institutional remedies (such as affirmative action) to redress persistent racialized outcomes. (Forman and Lewis)

Even though studies by the American Psychological Association (APA) have concluded that "research conducted for more than two decades strongly supports the view that we cannot be, nor should we be, colorblind," a majority of white Americans espouse a colorblind racial worldview and endorse (at least publicly) the broad goals of integration, equality and equal treatment without regard to race (3).

Colorblindness is a political tool, serving to reify and legitimize racism and protect certain racial privileges by denying and minimizing the effects of systematic and institutionalized racism on racial and ethnic minorities. Television, as the primary discursive medium today, plays a central role in the articulation, construction, and contestation of racialized identities in the United States. Even with the continuing fragmentation of the media landscape, watching TV remains the number one leisure activity that occupies the most time in the lives of Americans. While negative racial stereotypes do continue to circulate within the media, the dominant mode of televisual racialization has shifted to a colorblind ideology that foregrounds racial differences in order to celebrate multicultural assimilation while simultaneously denying the significant social, economic, and political realities and inequalities that continue to define race relations today. This colorblind mode of racial representation on television is not new and can be traced to *The Cosby Show* (1984–92). Sut Jhally's oft-cited 1992 study of the show, *Enlightened Racism,* revealed that the majority of white audiences that viewed the show believed that African Americans had the same socioeconomic opportunities as whites and that racial inequities were a product of individual failure rather than systemic racism.

The overtly negative racial stereotyping of early television programming has been replaced with what Kweisi Mifume, the then president

of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), described in July 1999 as a "virtual whiteout." The television networks' announcements that year of a fall lineup with no people of color in prominent roles led to calls for widespread changes within the industry. And yet the most recent update, in 2008, of the NAACP's reports on the broadcast television industry showed only "incremental progress for African Americans and Hispanics in the industry, little to no progress for Asian Americans and Native Americans, and persistent gross underrepresentation of minorities across the spectrum. . . . Although progress cannot be denied, the entertainment industry continues to be a reminder of America's segregated past" (*Out of Focus* 4). Over the past few decades, television producers have employed a variety of colorblind strategies in order to counter charges of racism and racial insensitivity. One of the most dominant and persistent trends is diversity casting, which showcases a multicultural cast without acknowledging or addressing cultural and social differences. These rainbow casts typically remain supporting players for the overwhelmingly white leads who continue to dominate television programming. The 2012 casting of Kerry Washington in the ABC series *Scandal* was the first time in almost forty years that a network drama contained an African American female lead. Her casting immediately prompted much debate about whether her character represents a new era of "postracial television, in which cast members are ethnically diverse but are not defined by their race or ethnicity" (Vega). Another colorblind trend in television is the casting of actors who are marked as racially ambiguous and therefore removed from any identifiable cultural identity. As Ron Berger, the chief executive of a major trend research company, explained, "Today what's ethnically neutral, diverse or ambiguous has tremendous appeal. Both in the mainstream and at the high end of the marketplace, what is perceived as good, desirable, successful is often a face whose heritage is hard to pin down" (qtd. in La Ferla).

As this collection documents, the dominance of colorblindness in television has been crucial in sustaining and supporting contemporary racial structures by making the reality of "substantial and widening racial economic inequalities, high levels of racial residential segregation, and persistent discrimination experienced across class lines in the Black community" invisible (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 40). The successful dissemination by neoconservatives of a colorblind ideology in

American culture has resulted in a majority of young whites becoming more and more comfortable with racial and ethnic inequality. In their research, sociologists Forman and Lewis have documented a disturbing reality that they label as racial apathy: "White people today often know little about the realities of life for many minorities, and what they do know is full of inaccurate information and mistaken assumptions. This not knowing is not, however, innocent" (180).

More than thirty-five years ago, the miniseries *Roots* premiered on ABC. The series won nine Emmy Awards, a Golden Globe, and a Peabody Award and received an unprecedented Nielsen rating for its finale, holding the record to this day as the third-highest-rated U.S. television program ever. The moment of shared national awareness that greeted the broadcast of *Roots* stands in stark contrast to a more recent television show that attempted to document the structural impact of racism on American society, HBO's *The Wire* (2002–8). Though widely hailed by critics and academics as outstanding, the series never earned an Emmy Award, and it garnered such poor Nielsen ratings by its final season that it barely registered on the ratings scale. As Robert Bianco argued in *USA Today*, "From start to finish, *The Wire* has been one of the best series ever produced for American television, one in which the commitment to honesty and authenticity has never wavered. Despite that quality, its subject matter—nothing less than the failure of the world's most powerful nation to solve the fundamental problems of its urban centers—was never likely to pull in a mass, casual audience." David Simon, the creator of *The Wire,* attributed the low viewership of the series to its predominantly black cast of characters. In a farewell letter to his HBO audience, Simon asked, "Why, if there is any truth to anything presented in *The Wire,* . . . does that truth go unaddressed by our political culture, by most of our mass media, and by our society in general?" Simon explains in his affirmation that "[we] are a culture without the will to seriously examine our own problems. . . . As a culture, we seek simple solutions." The following chapters, then, explore the ways in which the colorblind screen has served to present to viewers an image of the world that secures and encourages rather than challenges that racial apathy and those simple solutions. Central to all the chapters in the collection is the concern with manifestations of colorblindness in media: what each of the authors sees as the role and complicity of the media in perpetuating a comforting, if

problematic, sense of sameness while at the same time enabling the continuation of racial apathy. Moreover, many of the chapters see as central to the idea and ideals of a colorblind, post-racial America the election of Barack Obama.

In the opening chapter, Doane argues the case for a more nuanced view of colorblind racial ideology, one that moves beyond a focus on the denial of racism and instead recognizes the ability to hold simultaneous—and contradictory—positions: for example, that racial inequality and white privilege persist, but that racism is not widespread. This allows for such conflicting phenomena as colorblind diversity, white victimization, the condemnation of racists, and reverse exceptionalism, all buttressed by an overarching belief that American society is fundamentally meritocratic. Throughout this analysis, he draws upon examples from recent media portrayals to illustrate the complexity of racial ideology in the contemporary United States. Mukherjee's chapter follows Doane's and focuses specifically on the evolution of the term "post-racial" and traces the discursive and rhetorical career of the term "colorblindness" to demonstrate how an appropriation of the ideology of colorblindness by the Right led to an embrace of a post-racial ideology. Embracing this post-racial ideology in turn has enabled a nationwide racial apathy and led to problematic policies and politicized rhetoric. Bonilla-Silva and Ashe's chapter examines the discursive strategies utilized by both the media and popular culture in their commentaries on the Obama moment, strategies Bonilla-Silva refers to as a "racial grammar" that serves as a formidable political tool for the maintenance of racial order. Through a close examination of housing policies, he demonstrates the subtle institutionalized impact of colorblind policies and what he calls "post-racial nonsense."

Both Peck and Leonard and Hazelwood give close readings of iconic figures in American popular culture to highlight the ways in which race is read and utilized by audiences, fans, and television programming. Peck examines Oprah Winfrey's thirteen-episode series "Racism in 1992" through an analysis of Oprah's discursive claim that she "transcends race." Peck's chapter highlights the interconnection between the rise over the last quarter century of the neoliberal political-economic project and the emergence of a post–civil rights racial ideology of colorblindness that is part of the fundamental reformulation of thinking about the problem of race in American society. By examining the rhetorical strategies of

professional sports commentators and writers responding to the NBA lockout and LeBron James's decision to leave the Cleveland Cavaliers, Leonard and Hazelwood explore the role and production of race, specifically black male bodies, in professional sports television programming, as well as in the imagination of the largely white viewing audience. Alsultany and Ibrahim consider the representational strategies post-9/11 television uses to depict Arabs and Muslims. Alsultany's chapter focuses on television dramas that utilize the War on Terror as their central theme. By mapping a list of representational strategies she argues have become standard since 9/11, she examines the means by which writers and producers of TV dramas both represent Arabs/Muslims as terrorists and also seek not to reproduce the stereotype of Arabs/Muslims as terrorists. Ibrahim utilizes qualitative audience studies to analyze the ways in which Arab and Muslim and non-Arab and non-Muslim audiences read and react to contemporary depictions of Arab and Muslim characters on a variety of cable television comedies. In her chapter, Ibrahim argues that the portrayal and subsequent audience readings of Arabs and Muslims on television are never neutral but instead are "always-already" predetermined by both American politics and network bias, and her analysis of the discussion demonstrates how visual and verbal frames are used to determine these "always-already" readings.

The third part of the book considers specific shows and their widespread popularity while problematizing that popularity and the implicit reliance upon colorblind ideology utilized by the writers and producers of these shows in order to inscribe whiteness. Nilsen questions the acclaim *Mad Men* has received for its "supposed" historical authenticity and political correctness. She analyzes the racial discourse employed by the show's creators that creates a narratization of racism in America as constitutive of a distinctive historical moment, the early 1960s, and yet denies the actual social and political significance of the civil rights movement at the time. King's chapter continues the work of the collection—to problematize the role of colorblindness—albeit through a unique lens: he offers a close reading of a series of blogs and discussion posts found on the original and most influential white supremacist site stormfront.org in order to posit the ways in which colorblindness, as a hegemonic formation, nurtures the articulation of latent and emergent political and racialized ideologies that allow white supremacists to proselytize through the

medium of television. Turner's chapter analyzes the "new buddy move-ment" that pairs black female characters in supporting roles with white female leads in two Disney Channel shows, demonstrating that Disney presents diversity in such a way as to reify the position and privilege of white culture and the white cast members. Drawing on recent Pew Center reports that document income inequities along lines of race, her argument suggests that viewers read these shows through a colorblind lens and see diversity without seeing (or understanding) difference.

The final part of the book examines the manner in which interracial relationships are rendered in the media during a period defined by post-racial identity formations. Davé offers a close reading of episodes from television shows that feature Indian weddings such as *The Simpsons* (1989–), *The Office* (2005–13), and *Miss Match* (2003–4) to argue that the twenty-first-century television portrayal of arranged marriages provides a narrative that dissolves rather than emphasizes the foreign nature of the arrangement process in American culture and instead shows a compatibility between American and Indian ideas of matchmaking. Kretsedemas utilizes audience studies and focus groups to examine viewers' ability and willingness to decode racial subtexts in *Ugly Betty*. His findings suggest that while audiences do react positively to the Latina/o main characters, they were unable or resistant to recognize disparities between lighter- and darker-skinned Latina/o characters. Finally, Huh's chapter examines the "supposedly" colorblind and gender-neutral casting of the Sci-Fi Channel's *Battlestar Galactica* series in order to articulate what she refers to as twenty-first-century racial anxiety: racial passing. Drawing on nineteenth-century detective fiction as well as twentieth-century passing narratives, Huh argues that the racial diversity and multiethnic characters of the show both critique and maintain cultural fears of miscegenation and racial erasure in post-racial America. We hope that this collection will contribute to the discourses and discussions around colorblind racism within the field of media studies.

Notes

1. "Hollywood's Whiteout," *New York Times,* 11 Feb. 2011; "Dr. King Weeps from His Grave," *New York Times,* 25 Aug. 2011; "No Smooth Ride on TV Networks' Road to Diversity," *New York Times,* 18 Mar. 2009; AP Poll: Majority Harbors

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Theories of Colorblindness

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Shades of Colorblindness

Rethinking Racial Ideology in the United States

ASHLEY ("WOODY") DOANE

Colorblindness—the claim that race no longer "matters" in American society—serves as the dominant framework for making claims about the role of race in the United States. For many analysts (Carr; Bonilla-Silva *White Supremacy, Racism without Racists;* Brown et al.; Doane "Rethinking Whiteness Studies"; Gallagher "Color-Blind Privilege"), it has become *the* primary framework for understanding race in the twenty-first century. At the core of colorblindness is the belief that because the civil rights movement was nearly a half century ago and white attitudes have demonstrably changed, racism is no longer embedded in the U.S. social structure and no longer serves as an obstacle to success. If racial inequality persists, then it is due to actions (or inactions) on the part of minority group members.

It is also important to recognize that—as Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued in their seminal book *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986)—racial ideologies are constantly being rearticulated in response to political and social challenges. And as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva observes, the "loose character" of the elements of colorblind racial ideology "allows for accommodation of contradictions, exceptions, and new information" (*Racism without Racists* 10). This means that colorblindness is not static—that it can adapt to new situations. Moreover, while colorblindness can be described as a dominant or hegemonic ideology in the United States in 2012, it is certainly not monolithic. I would suggest that it is

opposed (at a minimum) by a perspective that claims that racism *is* embedded in the social and political institutions of the United States (a perspective that—following Feagin—we might refer to as "systemic racism") and a perspective that articulates an overt form of white supremacy or white nationalism. In short, colorblind racial ideology is continually evolving or changing in response to both changing social and political circumstances and counterclaims made by proponents of opposing ideologies.

As I have noted elsewhere (Doane "What Is Racism?," "The Changing Politics," "New Song"), this political struggle occurs via racial discourse— the collective text and talk of society in terms of issues of race. Public and private discourse serves as the link between macro-level racial ideologies and the micro-level understandings of groups and individuals— it is how our ideas about race both spread and evolve. Contemporary racial ideologies are communicated and contested through various media both print and electronic. In the twenty-first century, the ubiquity of the screen (television and computer) and the speed (and accessibility) of the Internet both mean that racial discourse occurs at an increasingly rapid pace. If we think of racial discourse as a political arena, one in which ideologies are rearticulated as actors respond to both the challenges of racial events and the arguments of their ideological opponents, then we need to acknowledge that it is undergoing constant evolution.

For the purposes of this book, it is also useful to consider the relationship between the media and colorblind racial ideology. In general, the media can be viewed as an institution, a set of social arrangements whose main role or function is to transmit information among and between social groups. Yet institutions reflect the divisions of wealth and power and the dominant ideologies of the larger society (Herman and Chomsky). Because the contemporary media exists in an increasingly globalized, postindustrial capitalist society, media outlets are increasingly consolidated under the control of a few large corporate actors (McChesney). This also means that media is a *product* and that decisions regarding programming and news coverage are driven, or at least shaped, by profit considerations (ratings, circulation, advertising, competition). Stories are followed not only for their newsworthiness but also for their presumed marketability. Individual actors—writers, directors, producers, editors, and reporters—find that their roles (and their career prospects) take place within this context.

What does this mean for colorblind racial ideology? As the dominant explanation for the role of race in the United States, colorblindness shapes the lens through which the media presents racial issues to the larger society. To the extent that colorblindness downplays systemic racism and claims that racism is an individual issue, the media will then reflect this perspective. In particular, this would mean that news coverage would focus more upon individual acts of racism (e.g., hate crimes or racially insensitive language) than subtle systemic issues (e.g., the disproportionate impact of mortgage lending on blacks and Latinos).[1]

My goal in this chapter is not to attempt a reanalysis of the nature of colorblind racial ideology—although we do need to recognize that frames and storylines are constantly evolving. While Bonilla-Silva (*Racism without Racists*) has called attention to the fluid nature of colorblind racial ideology, I believe there is a general tendency among analysts to focus upon the structure of colorblindness rather than the ways in which it adapts and changes.[2] I argue the case for a more nuanced view of colorblind racial ideology, one that moves beyond a simple focus on the denial of racism and instead emphasizes the ability to hold simultaneous—and contradictory—positions—for example, that racial inequality and white privilege persist, but that racism is not widespread. This allows for such conflicting phenomena as colorblind diversity, the condemnation of racists, minority racism/white victimization, racial awareness in a "colorblind" society, and reverse exceptionalism, all supported by an overarching belief that American society is fundamentally meritocratic. I conclude with the assertion that colorblind racial ideology is best understood as a fluid set of claims about the nature of race in the United States.

Seeing Color in a Colorblind World: Colorblind Diversity

Contrary to its name, colorblind racial ideology is *not* about the inability to see color or the lack of awareness of race. Even the often-used line "I don't care if they are black, white, purple, or green" demonstrates both an awareness of color/race and a centering of the black-white binary.[3] The point of colorblindness is how we see color/race: in a "colorblind" world, race is most often (but not always) defined as a characteristic of *individuals* in a world where racism is no longer a major factor and race plays no meaningful role in the distribution of resources. In essence,

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