The politics of representation in the politics of anti-racism

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As Gavan Titley states in his vital new book *Racism and Media* (2019), there is a strong sense in race critical studies that a focus on the politics of representation in media, and especially popular culture, has become an 'exhausted enterprise' (2019: 39), that we've said everything that needs to be said about the question of representation. Certainly, as media sociologist Herman Gray (2013: 771) puts it there has been a 'waning in what cultural politics of representation can yield'. Nonetheless studies of the representational politics of race in media texts feature regularly in media and communication journals - and still generate the most intense discussion in student seminars. But there is a cynicism amongst race critical scholars about the value of, say, a textual analysis of a network television drama, at a time where popular nationalism is in ascendency across the globe, determining not just the legal status, but the very existence of those racialised as Other.

In chapter 2 of *Racism and Media*, 'The Politics of Representation in Postracial Media Culture', Titley tackles head-on the question of the value and status of the cultural politics of race in media. This is a much-needed intervention for both media and communication studies and the sociology of race (the intersection of which is where Titley's innovative work is situated). In this chapter Titley considers the potentialities and limitations of the politics of representations of race. But the purpose of Titley's critical discussion is to make a much bigger argument: that the politics of representation is not just an academic debate, but an *intrinsic characteristic* of media culture in the current conjuncture.

To unpack this further we need to relate the politics of representation to the book's central theme around the *debatability* of racism in media. By debatability, Titley is referring to 'the constant contest as to what constitutes racism, as to whose 'definition' and voice counts, and as to the consequences that should stem from these fractious forms of public recognition and denial' (2019: 3). Our airwaves, digital or otherwise, are full of heated discussion on whether a particular incident/individual was/was being racist or not, and has led to the somewhat perverse

assertion that to bring up the issue of race is to be racist oneself. This is exactly what unfolded in the case of the 'celebrity' Laurence Fox following his verbal altercation with academic Dr Rachel Boyle on BBC *Question Time* on the topic of whether the news' treatment of Meghan Markle was racist. This moment is still generating news content in the UK nearly three months later. The point here, and one that will become more important, is that the debatability of racism is a feature of self-avowedly 'postrace' societies; as Titley says, it is 'a mode of thinking about racism in the media, and racism and the media' (ibid.: 3).

What makes the debatability of racism in this way unique to this particular conjunctural moment is the specificity of the communicative environment through which race and racism is mediated, consisting of 'hybrid media systems' (ibid.: 4) that combine traditional and new media. Under such a media system, the production and circulation of media content has reached another level. Time and space have not just become more compressed but have virtually collapsed into each other. The debatability of racism in this instance - specifically referring to the layers upon layers of commentary and contestation that the topic of racism generates - is driven by the 'sheer flow of symbolic content in contemporary transnational, hyper-visual digital environments' (ibid.: 37). In this context racism is both 'a focus of political contestation but also a source of fascination' (ibid.:4). Racism is no longer a problem, but it is also all we talk about.

How does the debatability of racism relate to the politics of representation? As suggested, Titley's central point is that the politics of representation is no longer just academic debate but has been *commodified*, and *structured into* media. In other words the politics of representation has become media content in itself. As Titley (ibid.: 37) puts it, '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'. To get to this point Titley provides a critical analysis of academic debate around the politics of representation. His overview of the field is based on how particular scholars have critiqued the field. This includes methodological issues, such as the over-emphasis on text, ignoring how such texts are commodities, that are in turn a product of the industrialised cultural production and market/public service logics. Moreover while all media scholars acknowledge

the agency of audiences there is still a tendency in studies of representation to underestimate the excess of meaning that texts produce the moment they enter the social world.

Titley's particular concern though is with the limitation of the form in which media-based 'anti-racist' politics generally takes. As Titley points out, too often such politics slip into simplistic valorisations of visibility as an end in itself, or equally reductive notions of stereotypes that need to be properly corrected or *smashed* (as he says 'The focus on "good" and "bad" characterises in image analysis confronts racist discourse on that discourse's favoured ground' (ibid.: 41)). There is also the issue of racial neoliberalism where the politics of recognition, while using the language of social justice, amounts to nothing much more than the demand to be recognised as a legitimate market niche. Then there is the critique that a focus on the politics of representation deflects attention from 'real politics' such as tackling structural inequalities and racial violence, a critique that finds its end point in Adolph Reed Jr's assertion that 'cultural politics is worse than no politics at all' (quoted in Titley, 2019: 43). Titley here acknowledges the critique that representational politics tend to over-valorise/overdetermine moments of cultural resistance in certain media practices, which in turn ignores crucial material issues relating to political economy.

Despite these critiques, Titley makes a case for why a politics of representation still matters. As he points out cultural politics cannot be divorced from political economy issues - that the representation of race is not a mere superstructural phenomenon determined by the economic base. Rather, the symbolic and the material are inextricably intertwined and shape each other. In light of this, studying media and representation retains value but only when grounded within a historical, or indeed, *conjunctural* approach - that situates the making of race within its particular historical, social formation. Titley in particular draws attention to the need to search for change and continuities in racist discourse, and the way that discourse fixes race, giving real life to a floating signifier. In this sense discourse produces strong material effects. Moreover, this discourse takes different forms in different historical moments; for instance see Anne McClintock's (1995) on commodity racism in the Victorian era, Stuart Hall and colleagues (2013 (1978)) on the racialisation of mugging during the economic and social crisis in

1970s Britain, and to take Titley's (2019) own example, 'ironic' or 'hipster' racism in the present. But running through these conjunctural shifts is a 'chain of equivalences' (ibid.: 52) which ensures historical consistency. Titley draws from Ash Amin's work in particular to describe how racial debris from the past still litters the present - as illustrated in Titley's powerful case study of Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands. Thus, a more productive approach to the politics of representation entails recognising that racist discourses take different forms in specifically historical contexts, and moreover, understanding that they are undergirded by a chain of equivalences that ensures the fixity of racial hierarchies throughout history. As Titley suggests, the value of a *critical* politics of representation is how it provides deeper understanding of political formations in heavily mediated societies, that rejects the simplistic notion of 'capitalist media as a superstructural distraction, *tout court*, from the underlying political real' (ibid.: 45).

But to reiterate Titley's concern here is no so much about how we can better grasp representational politics (after all, as he shows, Stuart Hall and Frantz Fanon already provide us with the tools to do this). Titley's actual argument regards the 'hermeneutic overspill of circulation and commentary' (ibid.: 48) around media representations of race, which in turn has become 'structured into the economic and operation of contemporary "news-as-comment" culture' (ibid.: 48). As stated, in a new media environment whose very commercial existence is dependent upon a never-ending stream of content produced from both the top (producers/symbol creators) and the bottom (audiences/users), the politics of representation has immense value, in terms of generating news content and layers upon layers of commentary and counter-commentary that can be monetised. Indeed when *comment-is-free* the politics of representation has immense profitability. In this regard the debatability of racism does not just serve an ideological function but an economic one too.

The question then becomes, what does this insight, that captures the complexity of representational politics, mean for media activism? In his exploration of Zwarte Piet Titley draws attention to examples of media *detournement* where Dutch media creators export the blackface of Zwarte Piet abroad to shine a different light on the practice from an outsider perspective. Titley draws attention to how such interventions create a 'space of 'intersectional social justice

4

activism' (ibid.: 62) that undermines the fictions of 'white innocence' (ibid.) that characterise Dutch racial politics. But Titley also demonstrates how the particular examples that he draws upon are not themselves without problems, including being based on white privilege, such as the very use of blackface as satire (albeit to make a point). It goes without saying that media activism is itself ambivalent, much like the politics of representation itself. But rather than take this ambivalence seriously, too often, anti-racist media politics slip into simplistic goals around visibility as outlined above, based upon the mode of *media must represent truth*. Indeed, when teaching issues of race, media and social justice one of the biggest challenges is in getting students to broaden their sense of media activism that, crucially, *does justice* to the complexity of the politics of representation.

There is not the space to explore what such an anti-racist politics in the context of media looks like. But building on Titley's work I propose two things. Firstly, a normative framework is needed - that goes beyond benign notions of 'diversity' that characterise cultural policy. In recent times we have seen an increase in moral economy approaches to media, that foregrounds issues of social justice, thinking through how media can produce forms of solidarity, community and commonality (Banks, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Oakley et al, 2018; Meville, 2019). Mark Banks' (2017) notion of 'creative justice' is of particular value here. Banks draws attention to several facets of creative labour that necessitate values that go beyond the financial and enter the realm of the moral/ethics, recognising the cultural value of media. This includes respecting creative work itself in terms of distributive justice and a critical examination of who has the most prestigious cultural education and privileged access. Secondly, drawing from Nancy Fraser he considers the 'parity of participation' as a normative frame, 'developing the cultural industries as democratic arenas where minority and marginal groups can advance their own fair representation and secure a more equal share of the public communicative space.' This brings us onto my second proposal for an anti-racist politics: a strategy that attempts to put the means of cultural production into the hands of racialised minorities. This entails political economy measures, including regulation that breaks up media concentration and provides financial subsidies for minority-led media. In recent times there has been a mushrooming in black and

brown online platforms, often explicitly intersectional, that has helped pull cultural hegemony into progressive directions in the context of war of position. Such platforms require public funding in order to operate and sustain its workers, I argue, in the name of reparative justice.

Note here that the strategies I outline are operationalised at the level of the political economic, rather than the level of representation. As Hall (1994: 444) says on the politics of representation in his landmark 'New Ethnicities' essay, 'Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism'. In other words a politics of anti-racism based on representation alone will always exist in a precarious position and is always up for contestation. In *Racism and Media*, Titley provides an absolutely urgent and insightful critique of such a politics that in fact feeds rather than extinguishes the flames of debate around racism. This is a crucial observation that needs much more attention, not least for the way that representation-talk has become the very material of contemporary media culture as Titley argues. One of the reasons that race and media research has stalled in my view, is because of the ultimate limits of research solely interested in the symbolic rather than the material. In that regard *Racism and Media* not only helps to renenergise this field, but sends us into more productive directions.

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