# Race and Representation

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*Media, Culture and the Politics of Representation: Viewing a Racialized Disaster*

Tonight we continue our effort to be a site of serious multidisciplinary thinking and meaning-making about the catastrophic event that was Katrina. Last session through the remarks of Professors Snipp, Bobo, Camarillo, and Fraga we saw that the tragedy of Katrina had many current structural and political sources as well as deep historical roots. Now we bring together another set of scholars, scholars from the disciplines of linguistics, communications, and social and organizational psychology to think about how we viewed Katrina and how it was represented to us, by whom, and why and how representation matters. Tonight's speakers are Professors Shanto Iyengar, Marcyliena Morgan, and Brian Lowery. I will introduce them more fully before each one speaks.

As we confront Katrina again tonight, it is important to note that most of us did not experience the fear of impending 150 mile an hour winds, the terror of climbing and hacking one's way to the roof to escape rising water, or the panic of not being able to get a hold of family members.

I know that a few of you here tonight were in the middle of these events, but most of us "saw" these events, that is, we viewed representations of Katrina and its aftermath in the comfort of our rooms or homes, or while burning calories on the elliptical. As we ate bagels or ramen, we read how *The New York Times* or *USA Today* represented these events. Or we heard about them on NPR. Or looked at how they were constructed and arranged by CNN.com or Google news.

The question for today's session is the nature of the correspondence between what happened in the Gulf coast and what we saw happen or what we heard or read. The issues to be addressed are included in the title of tonight's session: culture, media, and politics. I want to make three points:

(1) Our experience of reality always involves representation. Katrina was represented reality.

(2) Representation does not just reveal the world as it is; representation takes place with the aid of one's attitudes, expectations, and models of the world, and these frameworks of meaning derive from our social and cultural experiences.

(3) And, as members of a diverse democratic society we should be concerned with who is doing the representing and how we can intervene in this process. Those who control media are powerful because they control the construction of what is real.

None of us experiences the world directly or in an unmediated way. It is impossible to do this, no matter how hard we try. Since no two of us have had exactly the same experience, no two pairs of eyes see exactly the same world. Although it seems that we have only to open our eyes and that we automatically apprehend the world as it is, this is a fallacy. The powerful and immediate sense that we see things as they are is called naïve realism.

In fact, the world we see is a construction, a compilation of many representations, a complex act of meaning-making that occurs so effortlessly, so quickly, so automatically that it typically remains tacit, invisible, and unanalyzed. The outcome of this stealth construction process depends partly on what we perceive, what is out there to be seen, and partly on our frameworks, our schemas, our narratives, our models, our metaphors, our attitudes, our beliefs, and our expectations.

These meaning-making frameworks are not applied only after we perceive the event. These frameworks are active in seeing this world and in fashioning our experience.

In psychology, we often illustrate this point with the following little story. Three baseball umpires are reflecting upon their professional practice of calling balls and strikes.

The first confidently declares, "I call 'em the way they are."

The second ump says "I call 'em as I see 'em."

The third ump closes the discussion with the statement "They ain't nothing until I call 'em."

Think about it. The third ump has it close to right: reality depends on representation.

We learn to see and we learn to see the world as our society sees it, as our family sees it, as our political party sees it, as our ethnic, or racial or religious group sees it, as women or men see it, or as the Stanford community sees it. We teach other to see in these same particular ways. Our representations of an event like Katrina, whether our own representations or those of a journalist or a reporter, derive from some combination of particular representational frameworks.

Many famous studies in psychology underscore this point. In one study (Duncan, 1976), White students observed a videotape of one man lightly shoving another during a brief argument. Sometimes the man doing the shoving was black and sometime he was white. How the students represented this scene depended on their ideas, their stereotypes of likely black and white behavior. When a white man shoved a black man, only 13 percent of the observers rated the act as "violent behavior." Instead most perceivers represented the event as "playing around' or "dramatizing." Interpretations, however, were very different when the scene depicted a black man shoving a white man. In this case, 73 percent of observers said the act observed as "violent." This study reveals that perceivers represented the same slight shove differently depending on the perceivers expectations of black and white behavior. Participants had no awareness of this difference in their representations.

Another famous study (Allport & Postman, 1945) also revealed the way that cultural expectations affect perceiving , remembering, and reporting. In a study of rumor transmission, psychologists showed people this picture of people on a subway. A white man is shown holding a straight razor. Participants in this study were look at the picture and then had them tell a second person about it, who then told a third person, and so on. After six tellings, the razor in the White man's hand shifted to the Black man's What this reveals is that the way seeing and reporting drift toward the culturally dominant framework – black man as perpetrator.

This brings us to the representation of Katrina and the powerful role of pervasive cultural frameworks in representational process. In the aftermath of Katrina, in some reports blacks who removed items from stores were described as "looting", while white people were described at finding needed supplies. This difference in representation was so blatant that it became a internet event.

Recent studies by a brilliant professor of psychology here at Stanford, Jennifer Eberhardt, reveal that African American men are only rarely seen as teachers, fathers, and churchgoers. Instead there are so many negative representations of African Americans in mainstream contexts in books, movies, television, magazines, and websites, that in America, black equals crime, and crime equals black. To examine this representation, she showed people a series of either white or black faces, very quickly, too quickly to recognize them. She then asked people to try to identify a series of common objects that had been made blurry. She found that people were quicker to identify blurry crime related objects like guns and knives if the participants had seen black faces first than if they had seen white faces. This suggests that seeing black faces brought images and categories of crime to mind.

It is important to note here that it is not just prejudiced people who show these associations: almost everyone shows these associations. By living in America, all of us pick up these associations and they come into play automatically in making sense of the world because we are so frequently exposed to them. What see in the media powerfully sculpts our views of the world.

It is not just images that are important in representations: words and discourse are also powerful. During the coverage of Katrina there were many discussion of whether the appropriate term to describe suffering people was "refugee" or "evacuee," and whether those still standing after the hurricane be called "victims" or "survivors." This isn't just a matter of semantics. Representation is critical because it shapes our actions such as our willingness to help or contribute money and how we think about our country. A "refugee" to most Americans conjures images of someone not American, foreign, different, not people with whom our destinies are interdependent. Most of all, the talk of refugees and the third world allows people to imagine that poverty and non-whiteness are non-American things (Dominguez, 2005).

The last 50 years of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences converges to teach us something enormously important, yet still underappreciated. The unmediated life is an impossible life. We can add or change our frameworks but we cannot be without them. So we have to be vigilant and responsible for what we see and hear. What representations are dominant in the media we consume? Are there other representations? What has been ignored and left out? In a media-driven society, if we don't see it or read about it, it doesn't exist. For example, some of you noted last time that many American Indian communities were devastated in Katrina, but as far as I know there has been no mention of this in mainstream media.

We might imagine that one major advantage of a diverse society would be diverse representations – many people with different backgrounds, contexts, and points of view, many representations. Yet this is not the outcome, not yet at least. Some representations are not part of our repertoires at all, while some are distributed much more widely than others and gain more prominence than others. Increasingly, people get their news from the internet but when a disaster strikes, people need to make sense and so turn to the television because this is where you find people putting it all together. For example, the Nielsen ratings show that during Katrina new shows were among the top 15 most-watched programs (Bauder, 2005). These figures tell us that it is mainstream network news that will give Katrina its most prominent and probably most lasting and official representation. Does this matter?

From the work in our lab we know that frameworks that people use to to see and make sense of the world vary significantly with cultural context. East Asians, for example, see the social world and explain it differently than do Americans. Within American contexts, people living in working class communities have different experiences and different life circumstances than people in middle class communities, and thus they differ in how they see the world and in how they answer how and why questions. Major new outlets represent the world from frameworks that are common in middle class and white contexts because most journalists and reporters are still white and middle class. This means there is a predominant focus was on the actions of individuals and on how they are feeling. Much less attention was allocated to the conditions that led up to the event or the situational contingencies that scaffold it. In the approach and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the recurring question asked by most reporters and observers of the tragedy was: why did so many people (approximately 1 in 5) stay where they were instead of evacuating? Not leaving just didn't make sense and quickly led to the conclusion that something was wrong with those who didn't leave.. A *Time* random-sample survey carried out in the week following

the hurricane found that 57 percent of respondents believed that the "people hit by the hurricane" bore a great deal or some responsibility for what went wrong with the relief effort after the hurricane (Allen, 2005).

Most media and individual accounts reflect a middle class view of the world. They assumed that the sensible response to the impending hurricane was to evacuate, and thus by implication, that those who stayed made poor choices, didn't take control of their circumstances and bore responsibility for their plight. This focus on problem individuals and victim blaming was very prevalent in mainstream media in the first week of the coverage. There were almost no efforts to understand why evacuation strategies were stratified by income (Fussell, 2005) or to represent Katrina from the point of view of those who could not evacuate. For the most part, Katrina was constructed as Hollywood would see it, as a spectacle that divides people into villains and heroes and reveals their true natures (Alexander, 2005). Because of exposure to Hollywood, it is not surprising that such frameworks are very accessible in our mean-making tool box. More complex frameworks focusing on structural and historical factors that gave rise to neglect are typically more abstract and pallid and also less emotional and entertaining. We are exposed to them less, we pay less attention to them when we are, and we don't learn to invoke them.

By the end of the second week, some other representations did begin to appear. Bill Clinton, known for his engagement with black and working class worlds, noted "you can't have an emergency plan that works if it only affects middle-class people up…A lot of [poor people] in New Orleans didn't have cars. A lot of them who had cars had kinfolk they had to take care of" (Shenon, 2005). He also pointed out that some people live from paycheck to paycheck and didn't have money to leave and also that a lot of people didn't want to leave their belongings unguarded and there was no way to take them along. By Clinton's framework, the people in the Astrodome were not just people who failed to plan and made suboptimal choices in the face of crisis. Instead, many were people who had no choices or an array of choices among bad alternatives. This is a different way to see and understand the actions of those who did not evacuate.

In the last month, reporters who stayed on site have began to provide more nuanced accounts of how a hurricane and a flood came together to reveal an infrastructure weakened by decades of neglect and corruption. Whether the images of misery that represented Katrina will serve in the long run to highlight class and racial inequality remains to be seen. That so many asked how with surprise how the events of Katrina could this happen in America reveals that the 37 million Americans (i.e., 13 percent of 290 million Americans) who live in poverty are mostly unseen and regarded as non-American because the America we typically represent is white and middle class (Dominquez, 2005).

My guess is that unless deliberate efforts are made to re-represent Katrina from multiple perspectives and to see from different vantage points, the images that were stockpiled in American popular imagination during events of Katrina will serve only to reinforce prevalent negative stereotypes. Without such intentional meaning-making and efforts to change our representational habits, in the popular and official retelling of Katrina, the razor will drift from the hand of white man to the hand of the black man, and many will again see what they believe.

On the optimistic side, however, research suggests that it is possible, however, to become aware of the mediated nature of our experience. We can also become more intentional and self-conscious about our habits of representations and require more comprehensive and diverse representation from our media. Such representations should train a wide-angle lens on the dramatic events of the devastation of the Gulf coast and focus not just the struggles of individuals, but include within the frame, the historical factors as well as the current structural

and political conditions that are the basis for extreme poverty and social disorganization. In a Hollywood world, such representations go against the typical explanatory frameworks and to be at all influential they must tell a particularly compelling and emotional story. Such work is not easy because as perceivers and meaning-makers, we appreciate best those representations that fit our favorite frameworks – they seem true and right. But an effective diverse society should be one whose citizens demand more diverse and multi-faceted representation from its media. To paraphrase Professor Fraga's comments on government last week, unless as consumers we take more responsibility, or we will get the media we deserve.

Introductions

Let me introduce our distinguished panel. We have, in the order they will speak:

Professor Shanto Iyengar is the Harry and Norman Chandler Professor of Communication, Professor of Political Science, Director of the Political Communication Lab, and Director of the Co-terminal Masters Program in Media Studies. He is the leading authority on the role of television on the political process. His books include *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*, *Do the Media Govern?*, and Is *Anyone Responsible: How Television Frames Political Issues*.

Professor Marcyliena Morgan is in Department of Communications. She is the director of Stanford's Hip-Hop Archive and she founded the Hip-Hop Archive at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University while she a faculty member there. Her research focuses on youth, gender, language, culture and identity, sociolinguistics, discourse, and interaction. She is author of *Language, Discourse, and Power in African American Culture*. And the editor of *Language and the Social Construction of Identity in Creole Situations*. Her most recent book, to be published next month, is entitled *The Real Hiphop – Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the Underground*.

Professor Brian Lowery is in Organization Behavior in the Stanford School of Business. His research interests are on how non-conscious cognitive processing affects behavior and decision-making and on social stereotyping and prejudice. He is the author of numerous important papers on the how unconscious racial attitudes influence behavior in a wide variety of domains. His work has shown that negative stereotypes about various racial groups bombard every day in the mass media and that they deposit their residue deep into our minds, often without our realizing it, and that this occurs even among the most well-intentioned. His studies also show that through relationships with people who hold egalitarian ideals, we can change these associations.

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