

The Symbolic Annihilation of Race: A Review of the “Blackness” Literature

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Abstract

In this review essay, we define the concept “symbolic annihilation of race” and present its scholarly research uses. Most often, the concept is used to describe the problematic treatment of racial groups in media. In our review and subsequent analysis of this concept, we observe that “symbolic annihilation of race” is most useful when it is used to note the absence or trivialization of racial groups in media. As a concept, it is able to capably address concerns beyond media stereotyping.

Introduction

“Criticism of black images,” writes sociologist Darnell M. Hunt, “has typically been leveled on two fronts: either the images are denounced as distorted, or they are attacked for being damaging in some way” (2005, p. 15). This sort of “here’s a stereotype, there’s a stereotype” lamentation, often offered by cultural critics, is valuable in that it not only lays bare the skewed treatment of blacks in media, but also works to pinpoint imagery’s social functions and forms. For example, in his extensive analysis of black representation in American film, Donald Bogle (2001) observes that African American men are often portrayed as over-sexed and savage. Such problematic representation has far-reaching cultural implications. As Hill-Collins (2000) offers, stereotypical images of African American women, such as the welfare mother and the sexually wanton “Jezebel,” provide “powerful ideological justifications [for] intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender,

and sexuality” (p. 69). Likewise, Entman (1990, 1992) argues that American news media perpetuates a “modern racism” in which a rejection of systemic discriminations that plague African Americans is exhibited. Even actress Martha Gibbs, testifying in the 1990s before the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights, concluded “[African Americans] are more or less told who we are, rather than asked... We sing, we dance, we tell jokes – that’s all we are allowed to do. We entertain.” (Monroe, 1994, p. 84).

“Stereotype” versus “Symbolic Annihilation of Race”

A stereotype is defined as a conventional, formulaic, oversimplified concept, opinion, or belief. It describes the promotion of an unvarying depiction of a group that, in a media context, has come to be associated with negative portrayals (Means Coleman, 2000). However, as a concept, “stereotype” is particularly reliant on discourses that actively signify that which is a present and identifiable, constructed image. A stereotype, then, is quite adept at drawing our attention to how individuals and groups are presented, but the concept may not function as well in capturing the meanings associated with absence, omission, or even an inclusion that is not so obviously problematic (negative). As such, in this review of the literature we detail the relevancy of a related, yet distinct concept, “symbolic annihilation of race,” which, we argue, facilitates a deeper look at media as a site of American cultural politics in which imagery is not seen as simply positive or negative, but where “what things mean and how they register” (Gray, 1995, p. 7) focus our attention upon the more complex hegemonic potentialities of media.

Origins of the Concept

The concept “symbolic annihilation” was introduced by George Gerbner (1972). He first briefly referenced the concept without elaboration: “representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation” (p. 44). Gerbner used the concept of symbolic annihilation to reveal how representations, including omissions, cultivate dominant assumptions

about how the world works and, as a result, where power resides. In 1976, Gerbner and Gross presented the same definition for the concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though media audiences, specifically television viewers, are aware that entertainment programming is fiction, viewers adopt a “TV answer” in which content becomes the social reality. For example, if women are represented as nurses on television, then it is women, not men, we expect to see in the nursing profession. This gender role expectation provides evidence that a representational *lack* in media can be just as problematic as a stereotypical presence.

Because Gerbner did not confine symbolic annihilation to any particular group, the concept is now deployed widely. Gaye Tuchman (1978), in her seminal chapter “Introduction: The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media,” applied the term to the treatment of women in a range of media and expanded the concept from Gerbner’s simple definition of “absence” to include imagistic “condemnation” and “trivialization” (p. 17). By way of example, Tuchman observed, “women are not important in American society, except perhaps within the home. And even within the home, men know best.” (p. 17). In Tuchman’s analysis, women may be representationally present, be depicted “positively” as loving and good, and still be “trivialized” when juxtaposed against a depiction of men, who are shown as wise and powerful.

Uses of the Symbolic Annihilation of Race in Scholarship

Symbolic annihilation has been further extended to describe representations of racial and ethnic groups. For example, one notable elaboration of symbolic annihilation into the arena of race comes from Mazon (1984). Though he fails to cite either Gerbner or Tuchman, Mazon explores how Mexican-American, zoot-suiting youth were symbolically annihilated by Anglo sailors during the “zoot suit” riots of 1942. Mazon posits that the specter of World War II induced an emotional state that prompted soldiers to tell tall tales about their aggression against “enemy” zoot-suiters. The

news media went a step further, condemning the zoot-suiters by reporting “these are the type of exuberant youth that Hitler found useful” (p. 79). Therefore, both the soldiers and the media added a rhetorical dimension to the expanding imagistic-centered definition of symbolic annihilation. In reality, Mazon reveals, a relatively bloodless “riot” occurred, which was purposefully ignored by media (i.e., an “absence”).

Others have found the application of symbolic annihilation necessary in deepening our understanding of the treatment of various racial and ethnic groups in media while speculating about its impact. For instance, in 1979, Tuchman cautioned that the term should be employed carefully as, “it too has been used to advocate a naively literal notion of mimesis” (p. 533). However, the concept has become more of an existential observation (e.g., the Chinese are symbolically annihilated through frequent representations as “triad” gang members) or a generic idiom for “stereotyped.” As it pertains specifically to race, symbolic annihilation means that those racial groups who are not presented as fully developed in media, be it through absence, trivialization, or condemnation, may see their social status diminished.

Scholarship focusing on the treatment of blacks in media has relied quite heavily on this definition of racial symbolic annihilation, although the concept is not always explicitly referenced. To illustrate, Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) describe blacks as being ignored, stereotyped, or demeaned by media; their criticism echoes Gerbner’s and Tuchman’s original definitions which include “absence” as well as “condemnation” and “trivialization.” Hooks (1992) argues that African American women have experienced condemnation as they are often relegated to controlling, sexually wanton representations (see also Hill Collins, 2000). Brown (2001) discusses the absence of heroic blackness in comic books. He argues that readers must identify across racial boundaries since the visible racial minorities in most comic books were nameless criminals that white heroes defeated. Means Coleman (2000) draws on the various Amos ‘n’ Andy media offerings (e.g., radio programs, television

series, films, cartoons) to highlight how blackness is trivialized through depictions of a dysfunctional black world, from which whites are absent. She concludes that when whites do enter into the world of Amos, Andy, and Kingfish, they serve the purpose of condemning blackness by being aghast at a black world rife with unfit businesspersons and a citizenry that speaks in malapropisms. Relatedly, Whyllie (1999) uses the term “colorstrution” to reveal how skin color differences within blackness are exploited in media to associate a higher value to those that possess physical traits closer to those of whites. Whyllie posits that the characters in the 1991 film *New Jack City*, created by a black filmmaker, present “a rather obvious color line that separates the more negative dark-complexioned characters [...] from the lighter black ones” (p. 189). For Whyllie, introducing such intraracial warfare is not just about exploiting black as evil in our imaginations. Rather, Whyllie offers that blackness, even in media products such as *New Jack City*, is trivialized and rendered moot, replaced by white supremacy and cultural domination.

Moore (1992) also taps into trivialization and condemnation when he writes that color symbolism and terminology in media can adversely shape thought. For example, in news media blackness may come with qualifying adjectives such as, “an *intelligent* Herero tribesman” (emphasis ours, p. 326). Moore works hard to make clear that such symbolic annihilation victimizes blacks on a global scale. Around the world, reporters have ignored the effects of (neo)colonialism by describing African countries as “third world” and “underdeveloped,” rather than “overly exploited,” while the U.S. and Western Europe have been referred to as “first world” and as “superpowers” (p. 323).

Limitations in Application

As revelatory as the concept of the symbolic annihilation of race is to the study of the treatment of blackness in media, it is not without limitations. In their critique of the concept, Means Coleman and Chivers Yochim (in press) conclude that the concept

of the symbolic annihilation of race is still too frequently reduced in scholarship to “bad representations,” and thus cannot illuminate more complex representational issues. For example, the authors cite the television series *The Cosby Show* as provoking intense debate among black viewers regarding whether the Huxtable family is a depiction of assimilationist “White Negroes.” The symbolic annihilation of race as a concept is less useful, according to the authors, when representational concerns move beyond dichotomies of good or bad, presence or absence. As such, concepts such as “enlightened racism” (Jhally & Lewis, 1992) or classificatory schema such as Clark’s (1969) four-part racial minority participation model (nonrecognition, ridicule, regulation, and respect) are more adept at handling such nuances. Enlightened racism describes the depiction of African Americans as being closely in alignment with idealized white American experiences. Such imagery becomes “racist” and “enlightened” when for blackness to be viewed as positive it must demonstrate unencumbered upward mobility and integration *vis a vis* assimilation.

Clark’s model works to summarize the kinds of participation racial minority groups, such as blacks, are afforded in media. “Nonrecognition” describes being ignored and excluded by image-makers. “Ridicule” is defined as elevating a dominant racial group by subordinating the minority group. Clark’s category “regulation” best illustrates a representational practice that the symbolic annihilation of race is unable to deal with: the abundance of protector roles (e.g., law enforcement) assigned to racial minorities. The casting of black actor Yaphet Kotto provides a relevant example. Almost to the point of type-casting, Kotto has portrayed a ranking law enforcement officer nearly three dozen times, with some acclaim (e.g., *Homicide: Life on the Street*). It may be difficult to conceptualize such characterizations as belonging in the categories of trivialization or condemnation, that is, to cite them as demeaning. However, by limiting the types of roles played by African Americans not only is their access to media limited, but the general public is not allowed to see them in the same range of roles, functions and capabilities as whites. It is much easier to recognize a symbolically annihilating

role for Kotto when you look at the 1973 movie *Live and Let Die* in which he plays “Mr. Big,” a murderous, heroin-dealing, drug kingpin. This role was presented during a period (dubbed “blaxploitation”) when black representations were often relegated to criminality (e.g., *Black Caesar*; *The Mack*). Finally, Clark refers to representations of “respect,” when groups such as blacks are given access to a greater variety of roles, good, bad, or indifferent, but more importantly, less confining.

A Final Assessment

Symbolic annihilation of race, we believe, lends itself quite well to being a stand-in term for “negative representations.” As such, however, it currently presents a limited ability to address more complex representational concerns. For example, some racial minorities have been highlighted in seemingly “positive” news media reports as intelligent. However, these treatments can also be read as promoting certain groups as exceptional – a model minority myth – that pits one racial group against another. To illustrate, a *Sunday Times* article reported, “more than a quarter of the 130,000 adult black Africans in Britain hold qualifications higher than A-levels [...] they are now just ahead of the Chinese, the most academically successful ethnic minority [...]” (Hymas & Thomas, 1994, p. 1). Symbolic annihilation, as a concept, is ill-equipped to address the multifaceted concern of such purported “positive stereotyping.”

While symbolic annihilation is limited in its ability to address more complex issues, it quite capably communicates the inherent problems associated with inadequate media representations. In this context, it has found great potency among scholars. Outside of blackness, Means Coleman and Chivers Yochim (in press) note its increasingly popular application to additional racial and ethnic group analyses. Merskin (1998) and Miller and Ross (2004) found it useful in making sense of depictions of Native Americans that cast the group as savage. Ohye and Daniel (1999) rely on the concept to reveal how Eskimos, Aleuts, and Native Americans are “Othered” by being lumped into a single category and viewed as

interchangeable. Shaheen (2001) notes the representational absence and condemnation of those of Arab descent in film, offering that this group is largely invisible until a terrorist or oil sheikh is needed on the set.

In sum, symbolic annihilation has, thus far, been especially useful when describing representations that fit into dichotomous relationships of presence or absence and to elucidate the destructive consequences of poor or absent media attention (Means Coleman & Chivers Yochim, in press). In the future, before arriving at the provocative conclusion that a racial group has been symbolically annihilated, it may be useful for scholars to deconstruct the notion of race, which has, up to now, not been considered when exploring patterns of symbolic annihilation. Scholars should also interrogate the impact symbolic annihilation has upon groups' social power. Most obviously, scholars should consider how these media treatments can be improved. In the end, it is up to scholars making use of the concept of the symbolic annihilation of race to go where the concept cannot – into the arena of attending to specific resistance and counterhegemonic strategies.

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