Chapter 6
Realizing Race: Media Representations and the Uneasy Adjustment of Asian International Students and African American Males on U.S. College Campuses

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ABSTRACT

Media representations are for most of us a window on the world. We hear, see, or otherwise experience forms of culture through mass distributed imagery, music, news, fashion, and film, among other media. The U.S. is the global leader in the distribution of media, accounting for one-third of more than $30 billion annually in worldwide film distribution alone. Media representations from the U.S. are distinctive and carry signs of the country’s long struggle with race and equality. International college students with little exposure to the U.S. outside of its depiction in exported media come here with racial perceptions that can be detrimental to their own and the college experiences of others, namely African American men. Girded by two qualitative studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, this chapter examines how media representations can flavor cross-cultural interactions, and what implications these interactions may have for campus climate, as well as cross-cultural learning opportunities for both international and underrepresented domestic student groups.

INTRODUCTION

As Lou Jing took a bow after her performance on China’s version of the U.S. talent show, American Idol, Chinese citizens flooded social media outlets with vitriolic racist comments. The 20-year-old Chinese-born woman, who was referred to by show hosts as Chocolate Girl, was the daughter of a Chinese mother and African American father. Her nationally televised performance and the sub-
sequent reaction by viewers sparked a nationwide debate on race. *China Daily* columnist Raymond Zhou said this incident illuminated something deeper in China’s racial landscape: “Lou Jing is not a pure-blood Chinese and anyone who marries a foreigner is deemed a ‘traitor’ (Vines, 2009). Chinese and European mixed children are shown a greater level of acceptance due to the perceived economic status, historical colonial dominance, and aesthetic beauty attached to the West and whiteness. Zhou went on to say: “It is high time we introduce some sensitivity training on races and ethnicities if we are going to latch on to the orbit of globalization” (Vines, 2009).

Depictions of people of African descent in East Asia are often problematic and fraught with stereotypes (Dikotter, 1997; Fujioka, 2000; Johnson, 2007) but Zhou’s words indicate the need for a new page to be turned in East Asia’s history of racism. As East Asian students, particularly Chinese, become a larger portion of the United States’ higher education landscape, it is unclear how relations between these students and African American students will unfold. Additionally, American Millennials (those reaching adulthood around the year 2000) have been called the first global citizens and erroneously the first global citizens in a post-racial society (Apollon, 2011). While race remains a daily fact of life in the U.S., young Americans seem more racially tolerant than any other recent cohort, although it’s unclear whether East Asian students coming to the U.S. to study are as tolerant.

For these reasons, media representations of race, both inside and outside the U.S., do have implications for campus interactions between international and domestic college students in America. These interactions can complicate campus diversity initiatives and affect campus climate (Cuyjet, 2006; Hanassab, 2006; Lee, 2007; Rankin, 2005), and may have implications for how black students view themselves (Roth, 2011, 2014). Together, these perceptions create the likelihood that misunderstandings will persist and be reproduced in the globalizing workplace if not addressed by higher Education.

Girded by two recent independent qualitative studies conducted principally at the University of California, Los Angeles (Ritter, 2013; Roth, 2014), this chapter seeks to examine how media representations can flavor cross-cultural interactions, and what implications these interactions may have for campus climate, as well as the rates of college going among African American men. The latter has been stagnant at 4.3 percent of the nation’s college student body, since 1976 (Harper, 2008). Examples of recent initiatives at U.S. colleges and universities to address cross-cultural issues show that deconstructing media representations and stereotypes are essential to these efforts (Althen, 2009; Chow, 2013; Gordon, 2010; Zuniga, 2002), suggesting that educators find more ways to interrogate media representations across curriculum, given the ever-increasing role that media consumption plays in our lives (Horn, 2003; Kellner, 2011; Stack, 2006). Prescriptive in tone, this chapter calls for greater focus among educators on media critique and literacy, and argues for increased diversity awareness workshops and courses that deconstruct media representations of race, class, gender, sexual preference, and nationality for both incoming domestic and international students.

**BACKGROUND**

The United States is home to some of the world’s best known and prestigious universities (Top Universities by Reputation, 2012). International students travel to America to gain prestige and cultural capital from our renowned colleges and universities (Apple, 2000; Bourdieu, 1988; Kim, 2010). Often, these international students have had limited exposure to U.S. culture beyond their perceptions drawn from news, film, and pop culture, including television, music, dance, dress, and demeanor (Fujioka, 2000; Kim, 2008). As a result, they often arrive with negative racial
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