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## Postracism: A Theory of the "Post"- as Political Strategy<sup>1</sup>

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Postracism is the perfect elixir to help society forget about the icky historical abomination known as racism. It is one part cultural condition and one part political strategy, a creative solution to help free the mind of racism once and for all.<sup>2</sup> A seemingly innocuous milquetoast tonic, postracism often promises that those consuming it will take a magical and nostalgic trip back to places like the good old early 1950s, when race relations were just really not so concerning. In a sense, postracism beckons its unknowing subjects to embrace and live within a mental habitus of preracial consciousness. As romantic as all that might seem to some, its effects are both to embolden efforts to reverse the gains of antiracism and civil rights struggles and to continue old-style racism garbed in new clothes.

Yet, postracism is not the only cultural condition around, and its effectivity as political strategy is not absolute. Because postracism largely operates unconsciously, it can be challenged and ultimately changed (indeed, one could label it a *conditional* political strategy), but not without a critical project to investigate it, make it visible, and offer ways of understanding the world that go beyond what contemporary media (especially commercial media) so often give us. Much like "manifest destiny" was a fantasy—a trick of the imagination—that the west was unoccupied and thus was "there for the taking" (despite the fact that indigenous peoples lived there long before Europeans ever imagined the West as a place, let alone occupied it) Shohat and Stam, 1994; Ono, 2009), postracism, too, is a fantasy that racism no longer exists. Postracism disavows history, overlaying it with an upbeat discourse about how things were never really that bad, are not so bad now, and are only getting better.

In this essay, first, I elaborate on the notion of postracism as a political strategy. Second, I call for a scholarly project that aims to study postracial discourse. Finally, I provide a brief analysis of *Mad Men*, a media text that operates within and is

reflective of certain aspects of postracial politics, and place it in the context of recent Hollywood films to gesture toward what a rhetorical critique of postracial discourse might look like. Through its representation of race, *Mad Men* works strategically to displace and deny racism, resituate whiteness as progressive and heroic, and recycle and repurpose stereotypes of people of color. Because shows such as *Mad Men* are contemporary and may appear at first glance to be different from the problematic racial discourse of the past, and because it maintains a purportedly antiracist stance, its participation in postracism may initially be elusive, but its elusiveness is part of postracism itself.

## Postracism as Political Strategy

It seems almost impossible to unlink the concepts “postracism,” “postrace,” or “post-racial” from Barack Obama’s presidency, given how often they are associated with him. We all know Mr. Obama’s election did not automatically and instantaneously end racism; yet, for media Obama cannot be dissociated from postracial times. For example, it is not unusual to hear people participate in what journalist Mary Valbrun called the “I-Love-Obama-thus-racism-no-longer-exists phenomenon.” That a Black man<sup>3</sup> became the president of the United States implies that past racial barriers to occupying that office are now gone. Racism is passé. Today, anything—even tremendous political and international power—is possible.

The example of a postracial interpretation of Obama’s presidency illustrates one of the major functions of postracial discourse: to minimize the reality of racism. This should not surprise those who have studied racism’s history. Processes of forgetting go beyond single instances of denying racism and its effects. Denial is a transhistorical and psychological phenomenon, usually manifested in processes of sublimation, transference, or repression, and is therefore constitutive of oppression, itself.

One form of minimization is the suggestion that racism might have been important historically but is no longer so. In this sense it is passé, part of a bygone era, an anachronism, and continuing efforts to eliminate it appear “trapped in the past” and misguided, rendering social policies explicitly attempting to redress racism out of place, indeed existentially alien.

Going further than suggesting racism is no longer important are those who deny history and its significance altogether. Holocaust denial comes to mind, but deniers of the Holocaust are often popularly regarded as misguided historical revisionists or charlatans; whereas, those opposing reparations for slavery, for example, are often considered to be pragmatists.<sup>4</sup> Reparations opponents who argue “slavery is over” obstruct the recognition of the systemic, transhistorical, long-lasting. Continuing effects of slavery. The lack of acknowledgment of the transcendent consequences of the colonization of the Americas functions similarly (Ono, 2009). In this mode, postracism suggests historical racism and colonialism have been remedied or eliminated or perhaps never were that bad to begin with.

Postracism both relies on and reproduces the age-old mythology of American exceptionalism under capitalism: that by pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps,

working hard, acting ethically, playing fair, and not asking for help it is possible to achieve the American dream of success. Again, Obama's election comes to mind, for it can be understood to illustrate that all barriers to American success have disappeared. The postracial version of Horatio Algerism is that racism no longer hinders progress for people of color, specifically. The logic goes: If in America anyone can become President, because Barack Obama became President, and because he is Black, then racism can no longer be used as an excuse for not succeeding. The underlying message here is: Quit complaining, "be like Barack" (reminiscent of old "Be Like Mike" campaigns featuring basketball phenom, Michael Jordan), and get over it.

Another function of postracial discourse is to suggest that, if racism does exist, it is primarily, if not entirely, carried out by those opposing racism, such as in the case of opposition to affirmative action, where affirmative action is characterized as privileging people of color over Whites. Since the 1970s, despite variability of legal and political remedies for racism and efforts to diminish racism as well as intermittent successes (e.g., affirmative action), a progressive backlash to civil rights era protests and policies has also been underway. Political and legal events such as the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), which concluded that Alan Bakke, a White applicant to the University of California, Davis's, medical school, was unfairly denied admission on the basis of race, validated a discourse of "reverse discrimination."<sup>5</sup> The late 1990s and early 21st century witnessed state referenda leading to the elimination of affirmative action in such states as California, Texas, and Michigan. All of these examples suggest a retreat from at least some state policies that explicitly aim to remedy racism and racial oppression.

Postracism can be used to turn the racial tables, so to speak, and, by doing so, allow not only for a denial of racism but also for a claim that those challenging racism themselves are "racist" and that their racism is negatively affecting those who want to forget racism or who embrace color neutrality (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Thus, "victims" of reverse racism—said to be perpetuated primarily by people of color—effectively displace racism onto the oppressed, thereby performing strategic racial moves that help to avoid and ignore racism's past and present effects, *including their very own performances*.

Postracism strategically draws attention away from existing racism. By suggesting racism no longer exists and has been solved, postracial discourse functions as a *discourse of distraction*, filling up blogspace, airwaves, and screens with visions and messages of progress, hence keeping legitimate information about contemporary and historical racism at bay. The strategic project of postracism, as unconscious as it often is, is to create a context in which messages that justify disavowal of racism undermine consciousness of racism and racism's historical effects.

## A Critical Study of Postracism

While a more comprehensive study no doubt could develop many more dimensions of postracism than I address here, using these ideas as a starting place, I call for a project

designed to respond to postracism through the critical study of postracial discourse. My essay here merely gestures toward this project in part through a critical analysis of *Mad Men*. Scholars in other fields, such as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, have demonstrated forcefully that racism continues to exist. A critical project must be both sociological and historical, aware of racism's present and past. Yet, the project of critical communication scholarship is neither primarily sociological nor historical, but rhetorical. The focus of a rhetorical project on postracism draws on the history and sociology of racism but emphasizes both critiquing discourse in order to make the invisible visible and addressing racism as neither always intentional nor necessarily as part of some larger plan, scheme, or project.

Building on the work of Stuart Hall, who suggested that racism is not always overtly observable but is often "inferential," new tools for investigating racism, ones specifically designed to study the contemporary racial formation (Omi and Winant, 1994) are necessary. Not only are such tools needed to explain how racial discourse and logics have changed over time, but they are also required to identify racism that is no longer primarily manifested through explicit and dramatic events such as lynchings, violent raids on villages and townships, or people being firehosed in the streets.

Discourse is essential to Bonilla-Silva's point that racial inequality continues to exist, despite the fact that Whites continue to deny there is racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 2).<sup>6</sup> He argues that racism continues to exist despite the fact that few people today stand up and proclaim themselves racists (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 1). Whether flying under the flag of "color-blindness," "multiculturalism," or "racial tolerance," contemporary rhetorical discourse (whether intentional or otherwise) masks or cloaks the reality of racism today, diminishing or downplaying its significance, even as quotidian instances of racism, such as the most recent "Compton Cookout" put on by UC San Diego students farcically mocking African Americans through outlandish language, dress, food, and other racialized cultural markers of African American inferiority, followed by the appearance of a noose hanging in a UC San Diego library, remain part of the daily experiences of people of color.

## Postracial Politics in *Mad Men*

The central figure in the critically acclaimed television show *Mad Men*, which has completed three seasons on the cable channel AMC, is Donald, a White man. While the show is what Rick Altman theorizes as a "multi-focus narrative," allowing us to learn about the home lives of several characters on the show, such as Betty, Peter, and Peggy, the show emphasizes Donald and his identity struggles. We learn, for instance, that he is not who he says he is; that he has exchanged identities with a dead military officer, absconding with the man's dog tags after his death; that he was parentless early on and was raised by his stepmother and her husband; that he now regularly has extra-marital affairs with women; and that he monitors his wife's psyche by reviewing her therapy sessions with her therapist over the phone. Even as he is the center of the

show, he identifies with marginalized figures, for example, insisting on talking to the Black wait staff at a restaurant, falling in love with a Jewish woman who heads her father's department store, promoting his White secretary Peggy and giving her tips for surviving in the male-dominated work world, and safeguarding knowledge of Salvatore Romano's sexual encounter with another man. His acts suggest he is a "progressive" in a conservative era, making him a particularly appropriate postracial figure to study.

Yet, at the same time, Donald helps design ad campaigns for Nixon, not John F. Kennedy. He ultimately gives into trying to win the ad campaign for American Airlines, rather than a Mohawk Airlines. And, he works behind the scenes to end his wife's career as a model outside of the home. Thus his postracism is attenuated both by an emphasis on time-period, historical "accuracy" on the show, and by the show's foregrounding of Don's complexity of character. Furthermore, the show does not develop any character of color significantly and even mocks Asian Americans in one scene during the first season. Don and Betty's domestic helper, Carla, while having few lines, reveals knowledge and awareness of her social position beyond her limited time on screen, yet it is precisely the economics of her partial appearance on the show—her cipher-like minimalist caricature—that both promises more than is revealed and yet also denies her depth of character. In essence, then, the show participates in a postracial logic, using knowledge of racial, gendered, and sexual oppression from the U.S. past as part of the basis on which to tell the story of a White man's struggle. Alliances with those marginalized by the society, thereby, draw attention away from Don's position of power and authority, his role within a racialized, gendered, and heteronormative society, and his participation in complex performances and logics of whiteness. Indeed, his identity is developed through encounters with marginal others, using their image, character, and role essentially in order to develop depth in his.

There are numerous additional examples one could mention to make sense of contemporary postracism and postracial strategies in discourse. For instance, the film *Avatar* (2009) reinvigorates a colonial narrative but does so by using computer-generated imagery (CGI) that helps provide the kind of distanciation necessary for the fictional narrative to double for a progressive racial (or species/android) narrative, rather than a neocolonial one. The Hollywood film, *Invictus* (2009), with Hollywood actors, on the other hand, displaces racial politics from the U.S. context onto a South African one, making way for the emergence of a White character who then helps assuage post-Apartheid racial resentment. Finally, *Gran Torino* (2008) allows for the central White male character to become a hero through his alliance with racially exceptional Hmong Americans, against the backdrop of African American, Latino, and Asian American masculine violence, psycho-pathology, and criminality. By taking into account strategies for forgetting racism that work in complicated and often perhaps unconscious ways, understanding the cultural objects that entertain, fascinate, and make money in terms of how they are at once a product of and a contribution to the ruling racial logics of our era, it is possible to disrupt and challenge postracism.

## Conclusion

*Mad Men*, *Avatar*, *Invictus*, and *Gran Torino* illustrate that we live in postracist times when representation is absolutely central to a racial project that both is an extension of colonial and neocolonial projects and also is a reinvented project of forgetting race and maneuvering and adjusting reality to deny historical and contemporary reality. Examining media helps us to understand precisely how these politics are figured within the cultural landscape. Media participate in the construction of the racialized condition in which we live, and it is often through them that people negotiate identities, ideas, and relationships with other subjects. Investigating and studying the postracial condition and postracial strategies at least allows for an opportunity to redirect lines of power and to move the social order in a direction less premised on denial and forgetting and more aimed at remembering, acknowledgment, and transformation.

Postracism is not an unchangeable, preexisting state of affairs. Cultural politics do not work that way. They do not preexist rhetorical performance, and they are not sacrosanct: they are ever changing. Thus, even as I would argue that postracism is pervasive, cutting across media formats and socially stratified institutions and therefore is already in many ways naturalized, having become part of the landscape of cultural politics in the United States, it is not impossible to change, nor does it remain immune to critique and rearticulation; nor is it a monolith, able to maneuver and undermine in every instance. There are in fact places and moments when change is possible. Indeed, casting a critical eye on this condition, through projects such as my brief discussion of *Mad Men* in the context of other filmic texts, is an important beginning point for shifting power, reshaping cultural politics, realigning political forces, and reimagining selves within the vast network of social, neoliberal relations. Mobilizing to stem the tide of postracial politics has great potential to render this pervasive, yet still incipient, condition publicly changeable.

## Notes

1. I want to thank Catherine Squires and Sarah Projansky for careful readings of early drafts of this essay. Also, I would like to thank my fellow panelists on the “post” panel at the 2009 National Communication Association Convention, whose ideas influenced my own. Finally, I want to thank the organizers and participants of the Mad World conference about *Mad Men* at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, February 19, 2010. My initial ideas there helped me form these ideas, and in turn these ideas will undoubtedly help me develop my larger project on *Mad Men*.
2. While it is not helpful to suggest there are hard and fast pre-postracial periods and postracial ones—since such political conditions neither start *tabula rasa* nor ever fully shift from one period to the next, and because it is possible to have both racial logics operating in the present and to see evidence of postracial politics beginning historically—it is useful to at least suggest that historically there have always been campaigns to minimize charges of racism, such as before the 1950s to 1970s civil rights era.

3. President Obama also identifies as mixed race.
4. For an example of such opposition, which labels calls for reparations “racist,” see Horwitz.
5. While *Bakke* prohibited using race exclusively, it allowed it to remain as one criterion for admissions. Herman Gray has described how Reagan-administration rollbacks from 1981 to 1989 included characterizing Black women as welfare cheats, and largely characterizing African Americans as undeserving of state welfare support. Ideologue and Reagan consultant Dinesh D’Souza’s *The End of Racism* (1995) helped shepherd in a view that racism is no longer important to American history.
6. Another difference between his project and mine is that I see the post- as a broader move than just relating to racism. “Post-feminism” for instance and post-racism are, arguably, backlash concepts of a larger postcivil rights and neoliberal discursive period. Furthermore, Bonilla-Silva tends to see race as an effect of White politics. No doubt whiteness is highly interwoven with racial dynamics and has been so from the start, but it is not just White people but also a system and structure that privileges some while oppressing others that is the basis of contemporary racism. Finally, I position “postracism” as the central term for analysis, not “color-blindness,” because this suggests a veneer of goodwill behind contemporary racism—“I don’t see race. Therefore, I am not racist.”—which is just one strategy of postracism. Additionally, “color-blindness” is an actual physical condition, which makes things confusing and unfortunately positions the discussion in the realm of visibility and metaphors of ability and disability.

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