

Popular Media and the Rhetoric of Colorblindness

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Catherine Squires. *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the 21st Century*. New York University Press: 2014. 243 pp.

Written in a time when public deliberation is suffused with conflicting discourses and representations of race, Catherine Squires's *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the 21st Century* deftly interrogates how the increased popularity of the post-racial narrative of "colorblindness" intersects with the material conditions of systematic racism. Deploying a variety of research methods and analyzing cultural artifacts such as mainstream news media, network TV programs, and online political commentaries, Squires cogently argues that popular post-racial discourse serves the interests of white voters and consumers, while masking structural and systematic racism. Employing mixed-method research that includes data mining, focus group interviews and content analysis, Squires demonstrates that what she calls "post-racial mystique" is in fact conjured simultaneously by institutional racism and popular media texts that deny inequalities. In order to combat popular narratives that seek to erase or dismiss racial subjugation, Squires advocates for "a community-centered multi-racial approach to public memory [that] exposes both the democratic and undemocratic processes in our past" (206). Overall, engaged with critical race and media studies scholarship, *The Post-Racial Mystique* is a timely contribution that critically engages with both oppressive and potentially empowering discourses on race in the U.S.

Driven by the increased popularity of the term "post-racial" in popular media, the book explores how such a narrative is conjured, deployed, and used at "the juncture between the entrenched effects of institutional racism and the media texts that deny—or purport to resolve—racial inequalities" (5). Situating post-racial discourses in the current sociopolitical and cultural context, Squires argues that such narratives align with the neoliberal concern of the individual over the systematic. As a result, the effects of racial inequalities—such as unemployment, single parenthood, and incarceration—are commonly constructed ahistorically as individual irresponsibility. Organized into five main chapters, this book analyzes news discussions, Christian media, network TV, social media discourse, and finally, racially-aware and anti-racist independent blogs and websites that "move fluidly between identity groups, pop culture

and politics” (14). Throughout the book, Squires demonstrates her intellectual commitment to an anti-racist project by deploying a myriad of research methods over a large amount of primary data; that, in turn, serves to illuminate and debunk the different components that construct and perpetuate institutional racism through post-race discourse.

In the first chapter, Squires diligently traces the rise of the term “post-racial” in mainstream news media from 1990 to 2010. Connecting post-racial discourse to demographic change and electoral politics, Squires demonstrates how the color-blind narrative forecloses productive public discussions on institutional racism by recasting racial identity, practices and performances as merely a matter of personal choice and responsibility. Exhaustively sifting through news articles that have mentioned the term “post-racial,” Squires critically engages with a large amount of primary data and performs careful close reading of 300 relevant articles. Her rigorous research process thus allows her to persuasively argue that post-racial discourse continues to operate on existing racial stereotypes: even supposedly “post-racial” black politicians, for example, are constructed “as the other side of the binary—the angry black politician who plays ‘the race card’ and ultimately wants to punish white” (44). Most importantly, this chapter demonstrates how post-racial discourse masks existing racism in electoral politics by positing the invisibility of race.

Drawing on the intimate connection between electoral politics and religion, the second chapter examines the way candidates and religious leaders mobilize post-racial discourse to redirect the voters’ attention from racial identities to a supposedly more all-encompassing national identity. This chapter explores how white evangelical churches argue for post-racial political cooperation based on shared religious value. In particular, Squires examine “how they reframe histories of racist exclusion and/or domination of those publics” in order to convince their black audiences and voters. After performing rhetorical analysis on the third *Justice Sunday* religious conference, Squires presents data she has collected in a focus-group study with 11 religious African American students who identified as practicing Christians. Her study demonstrates that despite the post-racial strategies deployed by politicians and church leaders, African American voters remain suspicious. Ultimately, Squires cogently argues that “this post-racial strategy may really be for the benefit of white voters, for it provides them with a post-racial means of imagining solidarity with black people” (95).

After spending two chapters poignantly interrogating and criticizing the use of post-racial logics in politics, Squires directs her focus to network TV—particularly the series *Parenthood*—and viewers’ subsequent responses to the representations of the interracial family. In Chapter Three, Squires offers a critical content analysis of *Parenthood*, especially series’ portrayal of interracial relationships and the way race intersects with class and gender. She argues that “in the post-racial imaginary, the [hetero-

sexual] interracial couple (with whom no one has a problem) serves to bridge the gap between the racial past (which forbade such unions) and the future (when this won't be an issue)" (105). The problem of such representations, however, is that it overwrites racial struggles and presumes that racism no longer exists. In addition, Squires also argues that the series privileges the perspective and experience of the white father, while portraying the black mother through racial stereotypes. Post-racial portrayal of interracial relationships, in other words, only serve to dismiss systematic racism by encouraging viewers not to notice persistent forms of oppression and discrimination.

Since *Parenthood* is a network TV series popular amongst both white and black audiences, Squires sets out to explore audience responses across different interpretive communities. To do this, Squires collects, codes, and analyzes discussion threads on the show's Facebook page, particularly threads relating to the main characters' interracial relationships. While many white audiences evoke and reinforce racial stereotypes when discussing the show, Squires also finds members of the audience who contest such representations. Drawing on personal experience, their own interpretations of the show, and media history, certain discussants challenge their fellow viewers for either perpetuating racist representations or for "not seeing" racism. In addition to illustrating audience investment in the representation of interracial relationships on TV, Squires's study demonstrates that negative stereotypes about black women—together with misunderstandings related to the ways interracial families look and behave—persist. The series' attempt to be post-racial, in other words, obscures the circulation of knowledge concerning the forms of racism that many people of color continue to experience on a daily basis.

Exploring alternative racial discourse in popular media, Squires turns her attention towards narratives in independent web-based news and opinion resources, such as *ColorLines*, *Racialicious*, and *The Black Snob*. Juxtaposing these racially aware news sources with the mainstream post-race media, Squires is interested in how independent writers define the term "post-racial" as part of an anti-racist campaign, and how they intervene in a dominant racist culture that promotes color blindness. After discussing the way how these bloggers of color connect their personal experience to structural racism and the larger sociopolitical context, Squires argues that it is necessary for the public to develop a different orientation towards racial citizenship: one that does not see race "as a destructive and divisive mode of identification" that belongs to the private domain (167). Ultimately, Squires points out, "these bloggers illustrate how people of color, GLBT, and white allies share similar experiences with and analyses of racial hierarchy, discrimination, and abuses of power. It is through these shared experiences, they argue, that shared investments in organized struggle develop" (185).

In her conclusion, Squires forcefully restates the danger and downfall of post-racial discourses: she argues that “the dominant white-oriented ‘progress’ narrative attends only to triumph and glosses over the pain, struggle, and losses—losses that are the product of white supremacist domination” (196). By telling the story that racism no longer exists, post-racial discourse found in mainstream news media, entertainment sources, and political representations threatens to rewrite the social imaginary and collective memory of racial struggle. At the end, Squires poignantly calls for “a community-centered, multi-racial approach to public memory [that] exposes both the democratic and undemocratic processes in our past” (206). Passionately written and painstakingly researched, Squires’s *The Post-Racial Mystique* is productive not only to communication and media scholars, but also to researchers interested in the connections among citizenship, race, and representation.

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