

MICHAEL OMI

In Living Color: Race and American Culture

Though many like to think that racism in America is a thing of the past, Michael Omi argues that racism is a pervasive feature in our lives, one that is both overt and inferential. Using race as a sign by which we judge a person's character, inferential racism invokes deep-rooted stereotypes, and as Omi shows in his survey of American film, television, and music, our popular culture is hardly immune from such stereotyping. Indeed, when ostensibly "progressive" programs like *Saturday Night Live* can win the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations' "Platinum Pit Award" for racist stereotyping in television, and shock jocks such as Howard Stern command big audiences and salaries, one can see popular culture has a way to go before it becomes colorblind. The author of *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (with Howard Winant, 1986, 1994), Omi is a professor of comparative ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His most recent project is a survey of antiracist organizations and initiatives.

In February 1987, Assistant Attorney General William Bradford Reynolds, the nation's chief civil rights enforcer, declared that the recent death of a black man in Howard Beach, New York, and the Ku Klux Klan attack on civil rights marchers in Forsyth County, Georgia, were "isolated" racial incidences. He emphasized that the places where racial conflict could potentially flare up were "far fewer now than ever before in our history," and concluded that such a diminishment of racism stood as "a powerful testament to how far we have come in the civil rights struggle."¹

Events in the months following his remarks raise the question as to whether we have come quite so far. They suggest that dramatic instances of racial tension and violence merely constitute the surface manifestations of a deeper racial organization of American society—a system of inequality which has shaped, and in turn been shaped by, our popular culture.

In March, the NAACP released a report on blacks in the record industry entitled "The Discordant Sound of Music." It found that despite the revenues generated by black performers, blacks remain "grossly underrepresented" in the business, marketing, and A&R (Artists and Repertoire) departments of major record labels. In addition, few blacks are employed as managers, agents, concert promoters, distributors, and retailers. The report concluded that:

¹Reynolds's remarks were made at a conference on equal opportunity held by the bar association in Orlando, Florida. *The San Francisco Chronicle* (7 February 1987). Print.

The record industry is overwhelmingly segregated and discrimination is rampant. No other industry in America so openly classifies its operations on a racial basis. At every level of the industry, beginning with the separation of black artists into a special category, barriers exist that severely limit opportunities for blacks.²

Decades after the passage of civil rights legislation and the affirmation of the principle of “equal opportunity,” patterns of racial segregation and exclusion, it seems, continue to characterize the production of popular music.

The enduring logic of Jim Crow is also present in professional sports. In April, Al Campanis, vice president of player personnel for the Los Angeles Dodgers, explained to Ted Koppel on ABC’s *Nightline* about the paucity of blacks in baseball front offices and as managers. “I truly believe,” Campanis said, “that [blacks] may not have some of the necessities to be, let’s say, a field manager or perhaps a general manager.” When pressed for a reason, Campanis offered an explanation which had little to do with the structure of opportunity or institutional discrimination within professional sports:

[W]hy are black men or black people not good swimmers? Because they don’t have the buoyancy. . . . They are gifted with great musculature and various other things. They’re fleet of foot. And this is why there are a lot of black major league ballplayers. Now as far as having the background to become club presidents, or presidents of a bank, I don’t know.³

Black exclusion from the front office, therefore, was justified on the basis of biological “difference.”

The issue of race, of course, is not confined to the institutional arrangements 5 of popular culture production. Since popular culture deals with the symbolic realm of social life, the images which it creates, represents, and disseminates contribute to the overall racial climate. They become the subject of analysis and political scrutiny. In August, the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations bestowed the “Golden Pit Awards” on television programs, commercials, and movies that were deemed offensive to racial and ethnic groups. *Saturday Night Live*, regarded by many media critics as a politically “progressive” show, was singled out for the “Platinum Pit Award” for its comedy skit “Ching Chang” which depicted a Chinese storeowner and his family in a derogatory manner.⁴

These examples highlight the *overt* manifestations of racism in popular culture — institutional forms of discrimination which keep racial minorities out of the production and organization of popular culture, and the crude racial

²Economic Development Department of the NAACP, “The Discordant Sound of Music (A Report on the Record Industry),” (Baltimore, Maryland: The NAACP, 1987), pp. 16–17. Print.

³Campanis’s remarks on *Nightline* were reprinted in *The San Francisco Chronicle* (April 9, 1987). Print.

⁴Ellen Wulforst, “TV Stereotyping: It’s the ‘Pits,’” *The San Francisco Chronicle* (August 24, 1987). Print.

caricatures by which these groups are portrayed. Yet racism in popular culture is often conveyed in a variety of implicit, and at times invisible, ways. Political theorist Stuart Hall makes an important distinction between *overt* racism, the elaboration of an explicitly racist argument, policy, or view, and *inferential* racism which refers to “those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional,’ which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*.” He argues that inferential racism is more widespread, common, and indeed insidious since “it is largely *invisible* even to those who formulate the world in its terms.”⁵

Race itself is a slippery social concept which is paradoxically both “obvious” and “invisible.” In our society, one of the first things we notice about people when we encounter them (along with their sex/gender) is their *race*. We utilize race to provide clues about *who* a person is and *how* we should relate to her/him. Our perception of race determines our “presentation of *self*,” distinctions in status, and appropriate modes of conduct in daily and institutional life. This process is often unconscious; we tend to operate off of an unexamined set of *racial beliefs*.

Racial beliefs account for and explain variations in “human nature.” Differences in skin color and other obvious physical characteristics supposedly provide visible clues to more substantive differences lurking underneath. Among other qualities, temperament, sexuality, intelligence, and artistic and athletic ability are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of race. Such diverse questions as our confidence and trust in others (as salespeople, neighbors, media figures); our sexual preferences and romantic images; our tastes in music, film, dance, or sports; indeed our very ways of walking and talking are ineluctably shaped by notions of race.

Ideas about race, therefore, have become “common sense”—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world. This is made painfully obvious when someone disrupts our common sense understandings. An encounter with someone who is, for example, racially “mixed” or of a racial/ethnic group we are unfamiliar with becomes a source of discomfort for us, and momentarily creates a crisis of racial meaning. We also become disoriented when people do not act “black,” “Latino,” or indeed “white.” The content of such stereotypes reveals a series of unsubstantiated beliefs about who these groups are, what they are like, and how they behave.

The existence of such racial consciousness should hardly be surprising. ¹⁰ Even prior to the inception of the republic, the United States was a society shaped by racial conflict. The establishment of the Southern plantation economy, Western expansion, and the emergence of the labor movement, among other significant historical developments, have all involved conflicts over

⁵Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt, eds., *Silver Linings* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981), pp. 36–37. Print.

the definition and nature of the *color line*. The historical results have been distinct and different groups have encountered unique forms of racial oppression—Native Americans faced genocide, blacks were subjected to slavery, Mexicans were invaded and colonized, and Asians faced exclusion. What is common to the experiences of these groups is that their particular “fate” was linked to historically specific ideas about the significance and meaning of race.⁶ Whites defined them as separate “species,” ones inferior to Northern European cultural stocks, and thereby rationalized the conditions of their subordination in the economy, in political life, and in the realm of culture.

A crucial dimension of racial oppression in the United States is the elaboration of an ideology of difference or “otherness.” This involves defining “us” (i.e., white Americans) in opposition to “them,” an important task when distinct racial groups are first encountered, or in historically specific periods where preexisting racial boundaries are threatened or crumbling.

Political struggles over the very definition of who an “American” is illustrate this process. The Naturalization Law of 1790 declared that only free *white* immigrants could qualify, reflecting the initial desire among Congress to create and maintain a racially homogeneous society. The extension of eligibility to all racial groups has been a long and protracted process. Japanese, for example, were finally eligible to become naturalized citizens after the passage of the Walter-McCarran Act of 1952. The ideological residue of these restrictions in naturalization and citizenship laws is the equation within popular parlance of the term “American” with “white,” while other “Americans” are described as black, Mexican, “Oriental,” etc.

Popular culture has been an important realm within which racial ideologies have been created, reproduced, and sustained. Such ideologies provide a framework of symbols, concepts, and images through which we understand, interpret, and represent aspects of our “racial” existence.

Race has often formed the central themes of American popular culture. Historian W. L. Rose notes that it is a “curious coincidence” that four of the “most popular reading-viewing events in all American history” have in some manner dealt with race, specifically black/white relations in the south.⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Thomas Ryan Dixon’s *The Clansman* (the inspiration for D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*), Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (as a book and film), and Alex Haley’s *Roots* (as a book and television miniseries) each appeared at a critical juncture in American race relations and helped to shape new understandings of race.

Emerging social definitions of race and the “real American” were reflected 15 in American popular culture of the nineteenth century. Racial and ethnic stereotypes were shaped and reinforced in the newspapers, magazines, and

⁶For an excellent survey of racial beliefs see Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Schocken, 1965). Print.

⁷W. L. Rose, *Race and Religion in American Historical Fiction: Four Episodes in Popular Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979). Print.

pulp fiction of the period. But the evolution and ever-increasing sophistication of visual mass communications throughout the twentieth century provided, and continue to provide, the most dramatic means by which racial images are generated and reproduced.

Film and television have been notorious in disseminating images of racial minorities which establish for audiences what these groups look like, how they behave, and, in essence, “who they are.” The power of the media lies not only in their ability to reflect the dominant racial ideology, but in their capacity to shape that ideology in the first place. D. W. Griffith’s aforementioned epic *Birth of a Nation*, a sympathetic treatment of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction, helped to generate, consolidate, and “nationalize” images of blacks which had been more disparate (more regionally specific, for example) prior to the film’s appearance.⁸

In television and film, the necessity to define characters in the briefest and most condensed manner has led to the perpetuation of racial caricatures, as racial stereotypes serve as shorthand for scriptwriters, directors, and actors. Television’s tendency to address the “lowest common denominator” in order to render programs “familiar” to an enormous and diverse audience leads it regularly to assign and reassign racial characteristics to particular groups, both minority and majority.

Many of the earliest American films deal with racial and ethnic “difference.” The large influx of “new immigrants” at the turn of the century led to a proliferation of negative images of Jews, Italians, and Irish which were assimilated and adapted by such films as Thomas Edison’s *Cohen’s Advertising Scheme* (1904). Based on an old vaudeville routine, the film featured a scheming Jewish merchant, aggressively hawking his wares. Though stereotypes of these groups persist to this day,⁹ by the 1940s many of the earlier ethnic stereotypes had disappeared from Hollywood. But, as historian Michael Winston observes, the “outsiders” of the 1890s remained: “the ever-popular Indian of the Westerns; the inscrutable or sinister Oriental; the sly, but colorful Mexican; and the clowning or submissive Negro.”¹⁰

In many respects the “Western” as a genre has been paradigmatic in establishing images of racial minorities in film and television. The classic scenario involves the encircled wagon train or surrounded fort from which whites bravely fight off fierce bands of Native American Indians. The point of reference and viewer identification lies with those huddled within the

⁸Melanie Martindale-Sikes, “Nationalizing ‘Nigger’ Imagery through *Birth of a Nation*,” paper prepared for the 73rd Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (September 4–8, 1978) in San Francisco.

⁹For a discussion of Italian, Irish, Jewish, Slavic, and German stereotypes in film, see Randall M. Miller, ed., *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups* (Englewood, N.J.: Jerome S. Ozer, 1980). Print.

¹⁰Michael R. Winston, “Racial Consciousness and the Evolution of Mass Communications in the United States,” *Daedalus*, vol. III, No. 4 (Fall 1982). Print.

circle—the representatives of “civilization” who valiantly attempt to ward off the forces of barbarism. In the classic Western, as writer Tom Engelhardt observes, “the viewer is forced behind the barrel of a repeating rifle and it is from that position, through its gun sights, that he receives a picture history of Western colonialism and imperialism.”¹¹

Westerns have indeed become the prototype for European and American 20 excursions throughout the Third World. The cast of characters may change, but the story remains the same. The “humanity” of whites is contrasted with the brutality and treachery of nonwhites; brave (i.e., white) souls are pitted against the merciless hordes in conflicts ranging from Indians against the British Lancers to Zulus against the Boers. What Stuart Hall refers to as the imperializing “white eye” provides the framework for these films, lurking outside the frame and yet seeing and positioning everything within; it is “the unmarked position from which . . . ‘observations’ are made and from which, alone, they make sense.”¹²

Our “common sense” assumptions about race and racial minorities in the United States are both generated and reflected in the stereotypes presented by the visual media. In the crudest sense, it could be said that such stereotypes underscore white “superiority” by reinforcing the traits, habits, and predispositions of nonwhites which demonstrate their “inferiority.” Yet a more careful assessment of racial stereotypes reveals intriguing trends and seemingly contradictory themes.

While all racial minorities have been portrayed as “less than human,” there are significant differences in the images of different groups. Specific racial minority groups, in spite of their often interchangeable presence in films steeped in the “Western” paradigm, have distinct and often unique qualities assigned to them. Latinos are portrayed as being prone toward violent outbursts of anger; blacks as physically strong, but dim-witted; while Asians are seen as sneaky and cunningly evil. Such differences are crucial to observe and analyze. Race in the United States is not reducible to black/white relations. These differences are significant for a broader understanding of the patterns of race in America, and the unique experience of specific racial minority groups.

It is somewhat ironic that *real* differences which exist within a racially defined minority group are minimized, distorted, or obliterated by the media. “All Asians look alike,” the saying goes, and indeed there has been little or no attention given to the vast differences which exist between, say, the Chinese and Japanese with respect to food, dress, language, and culture. This blurring within popular culture has given us supposedly Chinese characters who wear kimonos; it is also the reason why the fast-food restaurant McDonald’s can offer “Shanghai McNuggets” with teriyaki sauce. Other groups suffer a similar

¹¹Tom Engelhardt, “Ambush at Kamikaze Pass,” in Emma Gee, ed., *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, UCLA, 1976), p. 270. Print.

¹²Hall, “Whites of Their Eyes,” p. 38. Print.

fate. Professor Gretchen Bataille and Charles Silet find the cinematic Native American of the Northeast wearing the clothing of the Plains Indians, while living in the dwellings of Southwestern tribes:

The movie men did what thousands of years of social evolution could not do, even what the threat of the encroaching white man could not do; Hollywood produced the homogenized Native American, devoid of tribal characteristics or regional differences.¹³

The need to paint in broad racial strokes has thus rendered “internal” differences invisible. This has been exacerbated by the tendency for screenwriters to “invent” mythical Asian, Latin American, and African countries. Ostensibly done to avoid offending particular nations and peoples, such a subterfuge reinforces the notion that all the countries and cultures of a specific region are the same. European countries retain their distinctiveness, while the Third World is presented as one homogeneous mass riddled with poverty and governed by ruthless and corrupt regimes.

While rendering specific groups in a monolithic fashion, the popular cultural imagination simultaneously reveals a compelling need to distinguish and articulate “bad” and “good” variants of particular racial groups and individuals. Thus each stereotypic image is filled with contradictions: The bloodthirsty Indian is tempered with the image of the noble savage; the *bandido* exists along with the loyal sidekick; and Fu Manchu is offset by Charlie Chan. The existence of such contradictions, however, does not negate the one-dimensionality of these images, nor does it challenge the explicit subservient role of racial minorities. Even the “good” person of color usually exists as a foil in novels and films to underscore the intelligence, courage, and virility of the white male hero.

Another important, perhaps central, dimension of racial minority stereotypes is sex/gender differentiation. The connection between race and sex has traditionally been an explosive and controversial one. For most of American history, sexual and marital relations between whites and nonwhites were forbidden by social custom and by legal restrictions. It was not until 1967, for example, that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that antimiscegenation laws were unconstitutional. Beginning in the 1920s, the notorious Hays Office, Hollywood’s attempt at self-censorship, prohibited scenes and subjects which dealt with miscegenation. The prohibition, however, was not evenly applied in practice. White men could seduce racial minority women, but white women were not to be romantically or sexually linked to racial minority men.

Women of color were sometimes treated as exotic sex objects. The sultry Latin temptress—such as Dolores Del Rio and Lupe Velez—invariably had boyfriends who were white North Americans; their Latino suitors were portrayed as being unable to keep up with the Anglo-American competition. From Mary Pickford as Cho-Cho San in *Madame Butterfly* (1915) to Nancy

¹³Gretchen Bataille and Charles Silet, “The Entertaining Anachronism: Indians in American Film,” in Randall M. Miller, ed., *Kaleidoscopic Lens*, p. 40. Print.

Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1961), Asian women have often been seen as the gracious “geisha girl” or the prostitute with a “heart of gold,” willing to do anything to please her man.

By contrast, Asian men, whether cast in the role of villain, servant, sidekick, or kung fu master, are seen as asexual or, at least, romantically undesirable. As Asian American studies professor Elaine Kim notes, even a hero such as Bruce Lee played characters whose “single-minded focus on perfecting his fighting skills precludes all other interests, including an interest in women, friendship, or a social life.”¹⁴

The shifting trajectory of black images over time reveals an interesting dynamic with respect to sex and gender. The black male characters in *The Birth of a Nation* were clearly presented as sexual threats to “white womanhood.” For decades afterward, however, Hollywood consciously avoided portraying black men as assertive or sexually aggressive in order to minimize controversy. Black men were instead cast as comic, harmless, and nonthreatening figures exemplified by such stars as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Stepin Fetchit, and Eddie “Rochester” Anderson. Black women, by contrast, were divided into two broad character types based on color categories. Dark black women such as Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers were cast as “dowdy, frumpy, dumpy, overweight mammy figures”; while those “close to the white ideal,” such as Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge, became “Hollywood’s treasured mulattoes” in roles emphasizing the tragedy of being of mixed blood.¹⁵

It was not until the early 1970s that tough, aggressive, sexually assertive black characters, both male and female, appeared. The “blaxploitation” films of the period provided new heroes (e.g., *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Coffy*, and *Cleopatra Jones*) in sharp contrast to the submissive and subservient images of the past. Unfortunately, most of these films were shoddy productions which did little to create more enduring “positive” images of blacks, either male or female.

In contemporary television and film, there is a tendency to present and 30
equate racial minority groups and individuals with specific social problems. Blacks are associated with drugs and urban crime, Latinos with “illegal” immigration, while Native Americans cope with alcoholism and tribal conflicts. Rarely do we see racial minorities “out of character,” in situations removed from the stereotypic arenas in which scriptwriters have traditionally embedded them. Nearly the only time we see young Asians and Latinos of either sex, for example, is when they are members of youth gangs, as *Boulevard Nights* (1979), *Year of the Dragon* (1985), and countless TV cop shows can attest to.

Racial minority actors have continually bemoaned the fact that the roles assigned them on stage and screen are often one-dimensional and imbued with stereotypic assumptions. In theater, the movement toward “blind casting”

¹⁴Elaine Kim, “Asian Americans and American Popular Culture,” in Hyung-Chan Kim, ed., *Dictionary of Asian American History* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), p. 107. Print.

¹⁵Donald Bogle, “A Familiar Plot (A Look at the History of Blacks in American Movies),” *The Crisis*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (January 1983), p. 15. Print.

(i.e., casting actors for roles without regard to race) is a progressive step, but it remains to be seen whether large numbers of audiences can suspend their “beliefs” and deal with a Latino King Lear or an Asian Stanley Kowalski. By contrast, white actors are allowed to play anybody. Though the use of white actors to play blacks in “black face” is clearly unacceptable in the contemporary period, white actors continue to portray Asian, Latino, and Native American characters on stage and screen.

Scores of Charlie Chan films, for example, have been made with white leads (the last one was the 1981 *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen*). Roland Winters, who played Chan in six features, was once asked to explain the logic of casting a white man in the role of Charlie Chan: “The only thing I can think of is, if you want to cast a homosexual in a show, and you get a homosexual, it’ll be awful. It won’t be funny . . . and maybe there’s something there.”¹⁶

Such a comment reveals an interesting aspect about myth and reality in popular culture. Michael Winston argues that stereotypic images in the visual media were not originally conceived as representations of reality, nor were they initially understood to be “real” by audiences. They were, he suggests, ways of “coding and rationalizing” the racial hierarchy and interracial behavior. Over time, however, “a complex interactive relationship between myth and reality developed, so that images originally understood to be unreal, through constant repetition began to *seem* real.”¹⁷

Such a process consolidated, among other things, our “common sense” understandings of what we think various groups should look like. Such presumptions have led to tragicomical results. Latinos auditioning for a role in a television soap opera, for example, did not fit the Hollywood image of “real Mexicans” and had their faces bronzed with powder before filming because they looked too white. Model Aurora Garza said, “I’m a real Mexican and very dark anyway. I’m even darker right now because I have a tan. But they kept wanting to make my face darker and darker.”¹⁸

Historically in Hollywood, the fact of having “dark skin” made an actor or actress potentially adaptable for numerous “racial” roles. Actress Lupe Velez once commented that she had portrayed “Chinese, Eskimos, Japs, squaws, Hindus, Swedes, Malays, and Japanese.”¹⁹ Dorothy Dandridge, who was the first black woman teamed romantically with white actors, presented a quandary for studio executives who weren’t sure what race and nationality to make her. They debated whether she should be a “foreigner,” an island girl, or a West Indian.²⁰ Ironically, what they refused to entertain as a possibility was to present her as what she really was, a black American woman.

¹⁶Frank Chin, “Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 1972). Print.

¹⁷Winston, “Racial Consciousness,” p. 176. Print.

¹⁸*The San Francisco Chronicle* (September 21, 1984). Print.

¹⁹Quoted in Allen L. Woll, “Bandits and Lovers: Hispanic Images in American Film,” in Miller, ed., *Kaleidoscopic Lens*, p. 60. Print.

²⁰Bogle, “Familiar Plot,” p. 17.

The importance of race in popular culture is not restricted to the visual media. In popular music, race and race consciousness have defined, and continue to define, formats, musical communities, and tastes. In the mid-1950s, the secretary of the North Alabama White Citizens Council declared that “Rock and roll is a means of pulling the white man down to the level of the Negro.”²¹ While rock may no longer be popularly regarded as a racially subversive musical form, the very genres of contemporary popular music remain, in essence, thinly veiled racial categories. “R & B” (Rhythm and Blues) and “soul” music are clearly references to *black* music, while Country & Western or heavy metal music are viewed, in the popular imagination, as *white* music. Black performers who want to break out of this artistic ghettoization must “cross over,” a contemporary form of “passing” in which their music is seen as acceptable to white audiences.

The airwaves themselves are segregated. The designation “urban contemporary” is merely radio lingo for a “black” musical format. Such categorization affects playlists, advertising accounts, and shares of the listening market. On cable television, black music videos rarely receive airplay on MTV, but are confined instead to the more marginal BET (Black Entertainment Television) network.

In spite of such segregation, many performing artists have been able to garner a racially diverse group of fans. And yet, racially integrated concert audiences are extremely rare. Curiously, this “perverse phenomenon” of racially homogeneous crowds takes place despite the color of the performer. Lionel Richie’s concert audiences, for example, are virtually all-white, while Teena Marie’s are all-black.²²

Racial symbols and images are omnipresent in popular culture. commonplace household objects such as cookie jars, salt and pepper shakers, and ashtrays have frequently been designed and fashioned in the form of racial caricatures. Sociologist Steve Dublin in an analysis of these objects found that former tasks of domestic service were symbolically transferred onto these commodities.²³ An Aunt Jemima-type character, for example, is used to hold a roll of paper towels, her outstretched hands supporting the item to be dispensed. “Sprinkle Plenty,” a sprinkle bottle in the shape of an Asian man, was used to wet clothes in preparation for ironing. Simple commodities, the household implements which help us perform everyday tasks, may reveal, therefore, a deep structure of racial meaning.

A crucial dimension for discerning the meaning of particular stereotypes and images is the *situation context* for the creation and consumption of popular culture. For example, the setting in which “racist” jokes are told determines

²¹Dave Marsh and Kevin Stein, *The Book of Rock Lists* (New York: Dell, 1981), p. 8. Print.

²²*Rock & Roll Confidential*, No. 44 (February 1987), p. 2. Print.

²³Steven C. Dublin, “Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture,” *Social Problems*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 1987). Print.

the function of humor. Jokes about blacks where the teller and audience are black constitute a form of self-awareness; they allow blacks to cope and “take the edge off” of oppressive aspects of the social order which they commonly confront. The meaning of these same jokes, however, is dramatically transformed when told across the “color line.” If a white, or even black, person tells these jokes to a white audience, it will, despite its “purely” humorous intent, serve to reinforce stereotypes and rationalize the existing relations of racial inequality.

Concepts of race and racial images are both overt and implicit within popular culture—the organization of cultural production, the products themselves, and the manner in which they are consumed are deeply structured by race. Particular racial meanings, stereotypes, and myths can change, but the presence of a *system* of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology, seems to be an enduring aspect of American popular culture.

The era of Reaganism and the overall rightward drift of American politics and culture has added a new twist to the question of racial images and meanings. Increasingly, the problem for racial minorities is not that of misportrayal, but of “invisibility.” Instead of celebrating racial and cultural diversity, we are witnessing an attempt by the right to define, once again, who the “real” American is, and what “correct” American values, mores, and political beliefs are. In such a context, racial minorities are no longer the focus of sustained media attention; when they do appear, they are cast as colored versions of essentially “white” characters.

The possibilities for change—for transforming racial stereotypes and challenging institutional inequities—nonetheless exist. Historically, strategies have involved the mobilization of political pressure against an offending institution(s). In the late 1950s, for instance, “Nigger Hair” tobacco changed its name to “Bigger Hare” due to concerted NAACP pressure on the manufacturer. In the early 1970s, Asian American community groups successfully fought NBC’s attempt to resurrect Charlie Chan as a television series with white actor Ross Martin. Amidst the furor generated by Al Campanis’s remarks cited at the beginning of this essay, Jesse Jackson suggested that a boycott of major league games be initiated in order to push for a restructuring of hiring and promotion practices.

Partially in response to such action, Baseball Commissioner Peter Ueberroth announced plans in June 1987 to help put more racial minorities in management roles. “The challenge we have,” Ueberroth said, “is to manage change without losing tradition.”²⁴ The problem with respect to the issue of race and popular culture, however, is that the *tradition* itself may need to be thoroughly examined, its “common sense” assumptions unearthed and challenged, and its racial images contested and transformed.

²⁴*The San Francisco Chronicle* (June 13, 1987). Print.

READING THE TEXT

1. Describe in your own words the difference between “overt racism” and “inferential racism” (para. 6).
2. Why, according to Omi, is popular culture so powerful in shaping America’s attitudes toward race?
3. What relationship does Omi see between gender and racial stereotypes?
4. How did race relations change in America during the 1980s, in Omi’s view?

READING THE SIGNS

1. In class, brainstorm stereotypes, both positive and negative, attributed to specific racial groups. Then discuss the possible sources of these stereotypes. In what ways have they been perpetuated in popular culture, including film, TV, advertising, music, and consumer products? What does your discussion reveal about popular culture’s influence on our most basic ways of seeing the world?
2. Watch *Malcolm X* or another film that addresses race relations, such as *Mi Familia*. Using Omi’s essay as your critical framework, write an essay in which you explore how this film may reflect or redefine American attitudes toward racial identity and race relations.
3. Study an issue of a magazine targeted to a specific ethnic readership, such as *Ebony* or *Hyphen*, analyzing both its articles and advertising. Then write an essay in which you explore the extent to which the magazine accurately reflects that ethnicity or, in Omi’s words, appeals to readers as “colored versions of essentially ‘white’ characters” (para. 42).
4. **CONNECTING TEXTS** Omi claims that “In contemporary television and film, there is a tendency to present and equate racial minority groups and individuals with specific social problems” (para. 30). In class, brainstorm films and TV shows that have characters that are ethnic minorities; pick one example and watch it. Does Omi’s claim apply to that example, or does it demonstrate different patterns of racial representation? To develop your ideas, you might consult Roland Laird’s “*The Boondocks: Carrying On the Tradition of Subversive Black Comedy*” (p. 359).
5. **CONNECTING TEXTS** Read or reread Mitu Sengupta’s “Race Relations Light Years from Earth” (p. 412). Using the categories of “overt” and “inferential” racism as Omi describes them, write your own analysis of the race relations in *Avatar*.