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### Title

Whitestream: A Look Into the Subjection and Objectification of People of Color in Mainstream News

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## Abstract

## Acknowledgments

I would like to take this time to thank my faculty mentor Professor Richard Rodriguez for his encouragement during my time working on this project. He was there for me when I did not have a clue what to do and really helped me find my way to figuring things out. If the university is reading this, please give this man a raise.

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## Introduction

I first heard the term “whitestream” when the professor for my Filipino American Culture class brought in author Ricco Siasoco to talk about his collection of short stories, *The Foley Artist*. Students in my class asked him questions about his novel before the discussion moved in a different direction. While the conversation initially focused on his journey of writing his book and the research he conducted to complete it, it eventually turned to his encounter with an article in which the author used the term “whitestream.” “Whoa! What’s that about?” he queried. Although I had already been working on my own research for a while, I didn’t quite know how to appropriately frame my thesis in discussing the politics of race and mainstream representation. That is, the word “mainstream” didn’t accurately capture the way race is both embraced yet dismissed in the dominant media industries. Thus, “whitestream” perfectly brought together the normalization of whiteness and its predominance in the field of cultural representation.

The impetus to pursue this project was ignited by a trend I noticed on Twitter. Whenever a Twitter page for a news channel or another media source would publish their headlines, there was a visual difference in how they presented certain people in the stories they featured. When a person of color would commit a crime, the image shown in news media outlets would differ when the perpetrator was white. While I acknowledge that I’m using the phrase “people of color” multiple times in this essay as a means to highlight the way “whitestream” operates, this trend is more often than not seen primarily in cases regarding an African American individual such as in situations pertaining to police brutality against African Americans. My election to widen the scope of this essay to encompass “people of color” is to illustrate what cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, in his essay “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” calls the hegemonic function of whiteness as an ideological norm.

As I continued to work on this project, more and more examples of the topic I am basing this research project on involved African American individuals subjected to police brutality. I originally had other related ideas in mind but my focus changed and developed over time as more cases developed during the time I have worked on my capstone project. As I write this essay, the most recent victims of police brutality against African Americans include Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and--most recently--George Floyd. My hope is that this project brings greater awareness to the systematic racism imbricated with the media and its significant impact on American society today.

### *Historical Antecedents*

While I was startled to recognize this trend of people of color represented differently, this trend is not new. Its origins are traceable to a number of points in history. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement, the challenge to the dominant media industry has been a central point of contention in the struggle for social justice. That is, when newspapers would publish articles concerning protests during the Civil Rights Movement, it was not uncommon for the press to not only embed false information within the text but the accompanying photos would also cast African Americans in a questionable light. In the Kerner Commission's *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, the commission criticized current news outlets at the time for "insubstantial coverage of the black community (Hrach 4). When the so-called "riots" started during the Civil Rights Movement, the narrative perspective was shifted in a biased direction and therefore contradicted what truly happened. Such a perspective, arguably one told from a decidedly "white perspective," illustrates how the whitestream functions. Given the ownership of such media agencies and the investment in holding on to a perspective that cast

Blacks as “troublemakers,” the ideological norm around racial difference remained intact. As Hall argues, “In modern societies, the different media are especially important sites for the production, reproduction, and transformation of ideologies” (Hall 19). Thus, the uses of the words “riot” and “protest” in the media produce, reproduce, and (negatively) transform beliefs about people who are not conventionally represented as constituting the norm, and therefore those associated with such terms--namely African Americans and other people of color--are cast in a light that makes them different from those whose lives are untouched by such words. In other words, when a group of people of color, particularly African Americans, gather to speak out against injustice and marginalization, their protests are often rendered as disruptive of peace and therefore cast as “riots,” a term fused with a negative connotation. Yet when a group of white people gathers together to protest, it is often unclassifiable as a riot but rather taking a stand for freedom. For example, during the current COVID-19 pandemic, many armed white people appeared on the news protesting the virus at various state capitols, including in California, Michigan, and Texas. News outlets referred to these gatherings, in which mostly white groups of people expressed their beliefs against the COVID-19 virus, protests. Yet during Black Lives Matter protests, such as those protesting the murder of George Floyd during the pandemic, news outlets referred to their activism as “riots” despite the fact that most protesters were unarmed and aimed for a peaceful protest. In the 1990s during a resurgence of Asian immigration to the United States, headlines including phrases such as “Asian invasion” made their way onto the front of newspapers with one even reading “There Goes the Neighborhood” (Wilson 118). In what Wilson refers to as the “Threatening Issue Phase” of news, headlines such as these support an “Us vs Them” whitestream ideology which shapes a narrative featuring people of color as the



enemy of white people. While many news outlets are being criticized for their whitestream shaping of headlines, this issue is one that has been built within the news media system itself.

### *The Discourse of the Whitestream: A Discussion*

The word “whitestream” is a term scholars have used when referencing the strong connection between the dominance of the white population in the mainstream. In an article on whitestream feminism, Sandy Grande defines whitestream feminism as “a feminist discourse...dominated by white women...also principally structured on the basis of white, middle class experience” (Grande 330). In Grande’s case, the term “whitestream” is used to indicate how the feminist movement sometimes fails to acknowledge the intersectionality of its constituents which leads to problems that directly impact women of color for the way they are either routinely dismissed or questionably regarded. For Grande, in the women’s movement, the ideology of gender is crystalized as normatively white, and therefore the racial and ethnic differences of differently situated members are ignored. In terms of this capstone project, I use the term “whitestream” to reference how a systemically racist white media industry has shaped narratives about race which have generated whitestream representations that have allowed the white population to appear in the news as either fallen heroes or disenfranchised victims, therefore worthy of our abiding attention and sympathy.

### *Baratunde Thurston on Headlines*

Baratunde Thurston gave a TED Talk that gives a basic formula for how mainstream news has formed headlines pertaining to people of color. Titled “How to Deconstruct Racism, One Headline at a Time,” he described headlines being phrased

[subject][action][target][activity] (Thurston 6:08). Thurston breaks down the basic format of headlines to showcase the persisting white supremacy in multiple news headlines. The subject is more often than not a white individual while the target is a person of color, more often an African American individual. During his TED Talk, Thurston showcases how many news headlines frame a white individual as the “subject” and a Black individual as the “target.” Thurston’s diagram highlights how Black individuals are made into the target of white actions in the whitestream news. Thurston flips the script and changes some of these headlines to show Black individuals as the subject and white individuals as the target. Headlines such as “White Man Calls Police on Black Woman Using Neighborhood Pool” become “Black Woman Calls Police on White man Using Neighborhood Pool” (Thurston 8:29). This reversal of roles highlights the illogicality of these actions in the first place. It argues how since it is not a crime for a white man to do something as mundane as using a neighborhood pool, then it should not be a crime for a Black woman to do the same.

### *A Look Into The Whitestream Of News*

When Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman were arrested for bribery in the well-publicized college admissions scandal, the pictures of them published in news articles featured them in nice clothing and cast in a fashionable light. When Tanya McDowell was arrested for sending her children to a different school district, her photos depicted her with darker tints and rendered as “lesser than,” often depicted in a courtroom where she was implicitly made to appear guilty. In contrast, the photos of Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman show them out and about, glamorized and humanized despite their already proven illegal activity. Yet when someone such as Tanya McDowell is instantly charged with a crime (one which is hardly egregious as

Loughlin's and Hutton's), she is presumed guilty given the ideological operations of the whitestream media.



*A tweet from CBS News detailing Lori Loughlin status regarding the college admissions scam*

Feds will seek 4 mos jail time for Felicity Huffman for bribing her daughter into college.

Tanya McDowell got 12 yrs for sending her son to the wrong school district.

Kelley Williams-Bolar got 3 yrs & \$30k fine for sending her daughters to the wrong district.

**#WhitePrivilege**



*A tweet comparing the sentencing of Felicity Huffman to that of Tanya McDowell and Kelley Williams-Bolar*

Even when not reporting on crimes, news outlets tend to adopt blatantly contrasting wording in their headlines for whites as compared to people of color. Even before she married

Prince Harry, Duchess Meghan Markle received much backlash from the media for what were arguably trivial things. This starkly contrasts with representations of Duchess Kate Middleton who did not receive the same coverage based on minuscule concerns. During Markle's pregnancy, *The Sun* published an article criticizing Markle for holding her baby bump as a "Baby Bump Barbie" act (Friel). *The Sun*, however, published another article about Duchess Kate Middleton holding her baby bump in which it praised her for "glowing" (Friel). Even after her marriage to Prince Harry, Duchess Meghan Markle received so much media backlash to the point where she and her husband decided to step down from their royal duties in order to remain out of the public eye. Fittingly, many have gone on to criticize these news outlets pointing out the single, fundamental difference between Markle and Middleton is their racial background.

Another recurring theme I have witnessed regarding how people of color are portrayed pertains to the spread of traumatic photos or videos. For example, when Valeria and Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez died as a result of drowning while trying to cross the border into the United States, a photo of their dead bodies was spread not just on the television news channels but also in the form of social media posts circulating in various news outlets. The photos were even further dispersed by individuals that reposted them on social media. A picture of a dead body can be traumatic for someone to see, especially if they share the same ethnicity of the deceased. At its core, the basic concept of this theme is that a photo of three dead bodies is casually being spread on social media, which should already raise concern. This, however, is not unfamiliar to media representations of the Black Lives Matter movement. Indeed, there are cases in which the deaths of African American victims at the hands of police brutality have been recorded and carelessly spread on television news channels and social media platforms. The spread of these videos, especially those related to the Black Lives Matter movement, can inflict

damage on an individual's mental health given their ethnic and racial identification with the deceased represented in the videos. While the justification for the spread of these videos is that they are for the purpose of keeping the public informed, the image of a physically deceased is seldom, if ever seen in cases of white victims. When a little boy died in a tragic accident involving an alligator at Walt Disney World, a photo of the resort was used in news articles and not a photo of his dead body. While the little boy was a minor, the argument could be made that a photo was not posted for privacy and legal reasons. Yet Valeria was also a minor but her drowned body was blatantly shown in news outlets anyway. Even as this essay is being written, the video of a police officer murdering George Floyd in Minneapolis is being spread throughout both social media and television news. In this regard, the deceased bodies of people of color have been normalized as a recurring trauma--served up on a platter for the whites of the media's eyes--while the deceased bodies of white individuals are deeded respect and kept private.

Sometimes, the photos do not even need to be of a deceased victim in order to have some kind of impact. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, many news outlets were guilty of using stock photos of Asian people when talking about the rise of infection and diagnoses in the United States. Author Jenny Han quoted a now-deleted tweet from *Complex*, in which an attached stock photo of an Asian person was included in an article that discussed an increase in people infected with COVID-19. This specific virus has garnered racist nicknames such as "kung flu" and "Chinese virus" since the first confirmed case at the time of this tweet was located in China. The CDC themselves have said that referring to the virus as the "Chinese virus" (as President Donald Trump has repeatedly done) is not only inaccurate it is also

damaging to the Asian community.



*A quote retweet from author Jenny Han of a now-deleted tweet from the New York Post*

### *YouTube Videos*

For this project, I originally planned on making YouTube videos that would act as an alternative news medium in which I would discuss the details of social issues seen on Twitter. However, this plan did not go as intended. I was able to make one video centering on the Amazon forest fires and the lack of clean water in Flint, Michigan in November 2019. The video also featured a discussion of an article in which the transient community in a certain area was being displaced from their living space. For this project, I aimed to create YouTube videos that would act as an alternative news source to mainstream media. My take on these stories would differ from the whitestream news outlets in the sense that I would offer my own commentary as a supplement and a counterpoint as opposed to other news sites that claim to be unbiased yet still subtly retained certain biases in the framing of their news pieces. My vision for these videos

would be that these would be shot in a similar fashion to that of other alternative news shows such as *The Daily Show*, featuring John Stewart (then later Trevor Noah), *The Colbert Report*, and *The Young Turks*. As I like to think of myself as funny at times, my initial plan was to incorporate some comedy into my videos in the same manner as some of these shows do. I ended up not incorporating a comedic aspect because I felt that in my case it made it more difficult to finish planning what I wanted to say as well as the fact that I wanted to focus more on the seriousness of the issues and news articles discussed in my YouTube videos.

I may have only made one video during the course of working on this capstone project, but I still see the fact that I even did it as an accomplishment. In the one video I did make, one of the topics I discussed was the lack of clean water in Flint, Michigan. At the time I recorded my video, Flint, Michigan had not had clean water in five years. A child has literally been born and reached kindergarten age without ever living in a home with clean water. Another topic I talked about in this video is the lack of media attention the Brazillian Amazon fires received until after about 2 weeks after they had started burning. An additional story I had talked about was with regard to one neighborhood that purchased giant boulders to drive out the transient population out of their community. (I should note that while I use the phrase “homeless people” in the video, I have since learned that the more appropriate phrase to use is “transient community.”

The process of making and publishing this video was interesting for me in the sense that I needed to write out what I wanted to talk about in the video before filming. I also had to speak with a certain confidence in order to get my main focus points across. It was also interesting to have to review myself on camera and physically see how I act while on camera. I also learned some editing tricks that I can use for possible future videos. The quality of a video can have an



impact on its overall reception. While I did not do these videos for the purpose of going viral, their intention was to allow me to speak my thoughts and offer commentary on pressing social issues. Moreover, I see that there is room for improvement in my videos in terms of both editing as well as the organization of the narrative.

I had other YouTube videos in mind for this project which I was unable to create due to pressing obligations and the unexpected pandemic. One critique I wished to make concerned the way in which the announcement of Bowen Yang's casting on Saturday Night Live was handled. Bowen Yang was the first Asian American to receive a position on the cast of the series. His casting was announced with two other actors but his hiring is more noted in the media because of its historical significance. This news was later overshadowed when one of the white actors he was hired with, Shane Gillis, was outed for previously saying racial slurs then later refusing to apologize for them. Shane Gillis' actions would now forever be associated with Bowen Yang's hiring on Saturday Night Live. This fact overshadowed not only the hiring of the first Asian American actor to such a great degree but also the other actor given the preponderance of attention granted to Gillis.

Another video idea had in mind was dedicating a video specifically to the Black Lives Matter movement. In this video, I would discuss a trend that's been noticed on social media as well as what inspired the topic of this capstone project. When a person of color commits a crime, news outlets tend to use a mugshot in the article when they post an article about what happened. As stated previous in my introduction, this is more commonly done with African Americans. When a white person commits a crime of the same or even worse nature, they are posted with a more flattering picture than their African American counterpart. Even further, sometimes when an African American is a victim of police brutality, news outlets tend to publish

articles detailing their past, if any. When Brock Turner was arrested, multiple headlines labeled him as a “Stanford Swimmer.” However, when Samuel DuBose was murdered as a result of police brutality, the CNN broadcast used DuBose’s mugshot but showed his murderer in a smiling photo in his police uniform. The spread of information on a possible criminal past acts as a way to “justify” the murder as well as dehumanize the victim. Most, if not all, of the time, the information has no direct relation to why the white police officer confronted the victim. Through this whitestream lens, Brock Turner (an attacker) is a victim in the crime that he himself committed while Samuel DuBose (a victim) is criminalized by virtue of being black.



**Rammy Davis Jr.**  
@UnkRam

Follow



Killer: smiling photo in uniform.  
Victim: mugshot

This is white privilege.



12:44 PM - 29 Jul 2015

*A tweet regarding the CNN broadcast of the murder of Samuel DuBose*



*An article from The New York Post released after the murder of Ahmaud Arbery by a white police officer.*

A third video I had in mind for this project was discussing the discrepancies in media coverage of climate crisis activists. Greta Thunberg is a seventeen-year-old Swedish climate activist that has recently received more media attention since 2019. Thunberg is known for her school strike for climate as well as raising awareness about the current climate crisis all around the globe. While Thunberg raises some strong points about the climate crisis, these are also points that are related to what other climate activists that are people of color have argued. Little Miss Flint, Mari Copeny, has been trying to raise awareness about the lack of clean water in Flint, Michigan. Other people of color activists that do not receive as much media attention as Thunberg does include Nadia Nazar, Isra Hirsi, Autumn Peltier, and many more. While Thunberg addresses the climate crisis with regard to a global perspective, other climate activists such as Copeny more specifically addressed environmental racism. While Thunberg's activism is of great importance, it should be noted that there have been many other young climate activists

who are people of color that have already been spreading these same messages but with less media attention. This is not meant as an attack on Thunberg, but a critique of the media outlets that have failed to focus attention on other activists doing similar work and spreading equally important messages. The climate crisis is already arguably one of the last issues to be talked about in the media, which means it can be inferred that the environmental racism part of the climate crisis receives even less attention since it amplifies the significance of environmental racism. Even though the messages that Thunberg, Copeny, Nazar, Hirsi, and Peltier share overlap or intersect, these respective activists differ in skin color and the overall politics of race dismissed by the whitestream.

### *Conclusion*

The beginning of this project started with the small idea of making videos based on tweets, critiquing the failure of news outlets to create headlines without a racial bias. It later turned into a project in which I analyzed the structural and foundational issues behind this recurring theme in mainstream news outlets, feeding into what I have called the whitestream. As previously stated, I adopted the phrase “people of color” because I wanted to start out with a broad topic so I could draw on a variety of sources and exemplified the function of the whitestream as a monolithic force that dismissed race in favor of upholding an ideology of whiteness and white normality. I again acknowledge that many of the incidents and examples discussed more often than not impact the African American community in particular, in many ways inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement. While most often identified the “mainstream,” the word “whitestream” more accurately depicts how many news outlets shape narratives focused on people of color to fit a white perspective which has dominated the media

industries for decades and upholds ideologies of race that continue to keep in place the racial hierarchies that circumscribe American society.

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Link to YouTube Video made for Capstone: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1g5VPfDEubgn-nB3N4Hmual\\_qLElJH1yx/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1g5VPfDEubgn-nB3N4Hmual_qLElJH1yx/view?usp=sharing)