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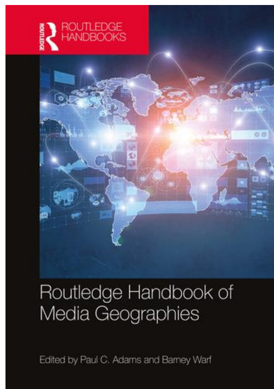

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16

RACE, ETHNICITY AND THE MEDIA

Absence, presence and socio-spatial reverberations

Douglas L. Allen and Derek H. Alderman

Race/ethnicity and media (geographies) are inseparably intertwined. Media, in various forms (e.g. music, news media, film, social media, literature), work to internalize, diffuse, and legitimize particular racialized visions of social and place difference. Media are sets of practices, technologies and places for communicating (and exchanging) narratives, images and even seemingly innocuous information—all of which socially construct people's identities in uneven and sometimes unjust ways (Craine 2007; Leszczynski 2015). The media does more than reflect racial and ethnic categories and hierarchies, but actively participates in their (re) production by selectively constructing and disseminating stories that essentialize the meaning of people, their lives and the places they inhabit, use and claim—often in ways that obscure the very social-spatial relations responsible for racial privilege and subordination.

The identity-constructing capacity of media is never realized outside an understanding of space. Prevailing conceptions of racial and ethnic difference are often tied to the different and often moralistic manner in which the media represents places associated with certain racial and ethnic groups. Indeed, media "functions as an act of communication… by and through which geographical information is gathered, geographical facts are ordered and our imaginative geographies are constructed" and made real (Craine 2007, 149). Media geographies, then, are implicated in the circulation of socio-spatial meanings about race/ethnicity and the symbolic and material production of place and landscape. This chapter draws attention to how this circulation of socio-spatial meaning through media is deeply imbricated with race, racism and anti-racism.

The relationship between race/ethnicity, media and geography is a complex one, encompassing at least four major dimensions. First, the media produces racial and ethnic exclusions (or inclusions) within its representations of society and space, and these images frame public thought, values and debate. Second, the landscape itself is a communicative tool, demonstrating that the media consists of geographic modes of circulating and institutionalizing ideas about racial/ethnic and place differences. Third, these media circulations are always embedded within wider social and spatial conditions and racial/ethnic power relations. This context shapes not just what we see, hear and read in the media but importantly the different ways we interpret it within our own racial/ethnic/place-specific worldview. Fourth, because

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public interpretation and reaction is so important to the meanings constructed in the media, messages about race, ethnicity and place have socio-spatial reverberations or significant material consequences or effects for people, places and the wellbeing of both.

There is an iterative relationship between media and the production of race and ethnicity as well as racial/ethnic geographies. Media are both shaped by and in turn shape racial projects (Omi & Winant 1994) that contribute to the production of racialized geographies (Schein 2006). Media spatializes racial (mis)representations through the dissemination of stereotypes, helping to assign meaning and (lack of) value to places and people. From the perspective of critical race studies, media geographies participate in the dominant storytelling undergirding the construction and reification of white privilege, if not outright white supremacy (Solórzano & Yosso 2002). These master narratives perpetuate a "discursive violence" against marginalized populations (Jiwani 2009). Importantly, storytelling is not disconnected from lived realities and inequalities. Discursive violence produced through media is part of wider patterns of social, economic and physical trauma. The power and harm of these hegemonic narratives are readily evident, for example, in the use of various media to label particular neighborhoods as ghettos or slums and to label people within particular communities as dangerous or violent, ultimately opening them up to urban "renewal" and removal practices (Anderson 1987; Wilson & Mueller 2004; Nelson 2008; Hankins et al. 2012). This is exacerbated by how media are used, after-the-fact, to erase the harms and displacements resulting from media-aided gentrification (Zukin 2010). Because the media has participated in creating and concretizing racialized visions of society and place, it too often has been used to oppress and marginalize people of color (POC) by silencing their voices, erasing their presence and claims to space, and misrepresenting their lives and communities.

Media-created geographies assist in perpetuating racist social relations, but they also carry the potential for resisting exclusion (Schein 2006). Again, in the parlance of critical race studies, media can be deployed as a form of "counter-storytelling," making visible and heard the often-ignored identities and place-based experiences of those discriminated against (Solórzano & Yosso 2002). These counter-stories are embedded within wider traditions of political, social and economic activism. While much of the attention in media studies focuses on news media, resistant racial/ethnic geographies of media also arise through art, literature, film, music, internet blogs and social networking sites. These media shape our understandings of and engagements with the world and our sense of self, community and place. Thus, while media have been used to oppress racially marginalized communities, they also provide a means of expressing and asserting a sense of belonging and affirmation of being (differently) in the world (Woods 1998; Allen 2020; Allen & McCreary 2020; Brock Jr. 2020).

In this chapter we discuss the ways in which media, race and geographies are mutually constituted within the United States, focusing specifically on examples centering Black communities. We use a framework of absence and (affirmative) presence to show how media are implicated in both racial marginalization and racial liberation movements, as well as the production of places and landscapes that attend and shape those processes.

Media(ted) absences and presences: Media as a tool of erasure and misrepresentation

The media are often implicated in erasing the bodies, voices and knowledge claims of marginalized racial and ethnic groups, thus erasing the contributions of these communities to producing place and landscape and positioning them as outside of local, national and global imaginaries and normative codings of space. These absences in media and media spaces

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perpetuate a consequential amnesia, rendering POC as forgettable by (white) privileged communities. However, the media also works to give racially marginalized groups a negative, abjected-presence that reduces them to stereotypical depictions. The images of particular racialized bodies and communities are heavily mediated through a distorting, white spatial imaginary that leave the actual voices and lived complexities of the community absent even while they are visually present. In this section, we expand upon absence and abjected-presence within race and media, showing that socio-spatial media are implicated in this erasure and illustrating the socio-spatial reverberations of this erasure.

Absence: Erasure within media

Racial disparities in representation exist within various forms of media, particularly TV, film and news media. We are decades removed from the 1968 Kerner Report's call for greater representation of POC in media content and media production spaces, but these inequalities continue (Negrón-Muntaner et al. 2014). This lack of affirmative presence in media has socio-spatial consequences, "symbolically annihilating" the identities and experiences of those made invisible and producing a whitewashed vison of place (Alderman & Modlin 2008). The under-representation of Latinx and Black communities in media programming excludes these groups from the local and national imaginary of citizenship. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) reminds us that the "struggle for recognition is the nexus of human identity and *national* identity" (p. 4, emphasis added).

This struggle over identity is evident in various forms of (spatialized) media. Carolyn Finney (2014) finds African Americans largely invisible within Great Outdoors narratives espoused by the US media. This Black invisibility is connected to the project of nation-building and the exclusionary way ideas of national cultural and natural heritage are narrated. In this way, the erasure of African Americans and their bodies and voices from our understandings of environmental histories and contemporary environmental movements is a form of environmental racism that marginalizes these communities' claims to national identity "and the rights and freedoms that come with that identification" (p. 42).

This absence is not just about visual representation but is also about obscuring the issues and concerns faced by POC. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) diagnoses this erasure through post-racial discourses, explaining that "new racism relies more heavily on the manipulation of ideas within mass media. The post-racial discourse presents hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism is over" (p. 54), limiting rhetorically what gets to "count" as racism. Black people (and one might include other POC as well) are thus put in danger because of the increased difficulty challenging racial projects that position Black people as "problems to their nation, to their local environments, to Black communities, and to themselves" (p. 54). This color-blind racism, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) has defined it, seeks to shield those in power from accountability and justify disparities produced by structural racism. This has dire socio-spatial consequences for these racially marginalized communities that can become ignored during crises in which they disproportionately bear the burden. We see these consequences in the slow response of national media during the water crisis in Flint, Michigan (Jackson 2017). Or, how the delayed reporting of racial data on COVID-19 cases and deaths by local, state and national governments and late demands by the media for this information led to a long silence on the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Black and Latinx communities (Kendi 2020). This absence was only exacerbated when the Trump Administration's Surgeon General, Dr. Jerome Adams, insinuated (not so subtly) that it was self-destructive Black behaviors that contributed to the disproportionate impacts while remaining largely

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silent on how racism in housing, employment, healthcare and transportation contributed to these impacts (Aleem 2020). These silences about the impacts of racism disproportionately play out spatially, positioning particular communities as expendable and justifying their continued exploitation.

Erasure also operates through spatial mediums such as landscapes. Landscapes are "discourses materialized" (Schein 1997, 663), spatial mediums that produce and circulate socio-cultural imaginaries and meanings through society (Schein 1997; Dwyer & Alderman 2008; Mitchell 2008; Allen et al. 2019). They hold the capacity to materialize values, histories and visions of place and society, and in privileging some imaginaries over others, they can have the effect of making absent the contributions of marginalized communities. Landscapes often reflect and reify the interests of the empowered, those with the material and social capacity to concretize their visions on the land (Mitchell 2003; Allen et al. 2019). The histories and visions of racially marginalized communities are often rendered mute through their absence and erasure in the landscape, replaced by a predominance of white narratives and white socio-spatial visions, particularly within Euro-American settler-colonial nations.

Abjected-presence: Misrepresentation within media

The portrayal of racially marginalized social actors and groups within the media often (re) produces inequality by constructing and perpetuating stereotypes. These misrepresentations obscure more than they reveal, reaffirming the privileged status of dominant classes and justifying the othering and exploitation of racially marginalized communities. Produced is an abjected-presence, where marginalized communities are visibly present but their voices and visions are occluded and the complexities of their lives are reduced to caricatures. These caricatures regrettably take on the power of social fact, gaining in authority as they circulate geographically and socially within and through public media (McElya 2007).

Contrast, for example, media coverage of the "War on Drugs" and the recent "Opioid Crisis." Media portrayals of Black communities and drugs position these communities as dangerous havens for criminals and legitimize discourses and tactics of war against these communities and their residents. The recent opioid crisis, however, which mostly affects white rural communities, has largely been depicted in the media as a health crisis that requires compassion for those suffering from an addiction not of their own doing (Nethernland & Hansen 2017; Shachar et al. 2020). While such representations of Black communities are, no doubt, partially a product of the absence of POC within media spaces as journalists, producers, writers and executives, the stigmatization of Black communities is also part of a broader national consciousness and discursive system, institutionalized and systemic to the point that increased diversity will most likely not be enough to remove the stigmatization of Black communities from media portrayals. Media are products of contextualized societies and geographies. While media certainly can and do challenge societal discourses, media more often reflect societal discourses, amplifying dominant, often marginalizing, narratives of race already circulating within society. These representations have social and material effects. Historical and continued depictions of Black people, particularly Black men, as dangerous criminals mediate how authorities view and treat them in space. Purse clutching in public, stigmatization for simply "shopping while Black" within commercial spaces, and police hyper-surveillance and violence in Black communities are products of an anti-Black national rhetoric circulated through the media, resulting in fear of Black men and perpetuating anti-Black violence (Oliver 2003; Day 2006; Smiley & Fakunle 2016; Brooms & Clark 2020).

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This stigmatization of place accompanying media images often (re)produces harmful stereotypes about racially marginalized communities by situating these particular communities within landscapes of blight, criminality and despair. TV shows and films may increasingly make POC more visible but they nonetheless obscure and distort the socio-spatial conditions that racially marginalized communities are made to endure and the ones they create to resist. For example, according to George Lipsitz (2011), the edgy HBO show *The Wire* reifies the white spatial imaginary even as it has tried to depict the consequences of the "War on Drugs" within Baltimore, Maryland. Black people and real Black communities certainly have *a* presence in this show, but as Lipsitz argues, the misrepresentation of systemic conditions impacting the lives of Black Baltimoreans leaves *The Wire* "with the default positions inscribed in the white spatial imaginary: that people who *have* problems *are* problems" (p. 112). The absence of voices of the marginalized communities being portrayed and the absence of a Black spatial imaginary belie the presence of Black bodies and Black communities on screen. These abjected-presences subject racially marginalized communities to social and corporeal violence, enacted by individuals, society and the state, and show that this abjected-presence has spatial reverberations that are both social and material.

Media as a tool of resistance: Asserting (affirmative) presence

Existing alongside widespread examples of absence and abjected-presence is the appropriation of media as a tool for oppressed people to resist marginalization and assert presence, belonging and affirmation. While the media's role in erasure and misrepresentation must be addressed and challenged, we must also be mindful of how our own research is itself a circulation of knowledge, and thus avoid positioning people and communities as determined by their suffering. Geography, in particular, has a history of rendering invisible and mute racially marginalized voices within the discipline (McKittrick 2006; Hawthorne 2019). As a result, we must highlight and recognize how the (socio-spatial) visions, experiences and practices of racialized communities open up "possibilities for alternative, anticolonial, and liberatory forms of geographic knowledge and world-making" (Hawthorne 2019, 9).

In the following sections, we discuss some important examples of media being a racial liberation tool to assert an affirmative presence, a presence that affirms the humanity and dignity of racially marginalized people in the face of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and other forms of oppression. This affirmative presence not only challenges oppression and the processes of erasure and negative depiction traditionally found in the media, but also creates imaginative space for activists to envision more socially just and emancipatory articulations of society and space essential to equality and wellbeing. In particular, we focus on Black American activism in deploying music and social media to affirm Black belonging in the production of a more inclusive America.

Asserting presence through social media

Social media has become a powerful tool of social justice activism, amplifying activist messages and expanding the scale of local action. Hashtag activism demonstrates how marginalized communities transform social media platforms into resources for racial justice. Social media produce digital counterpublics, relational networks of people fused together around similar interests, issues or experiences that act as their own digital communities and digital spaces of exchange and cultural circulation. In this media space, the hashtag becomes a mechanism to amplify the counternarratives developed by/within the counterpublic,

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rendering them legible by the social media masses and magnifying the impact of this collective storytelling (Kuo 2018; Brock Jr., 2020; Jackson et al. 2020).

Social media has become vital to bringing attention to important racial justice issues and creating a dialogic space for Black people to demand action on issues harming their communities (Brock Jr. 2020; Jackson et al. 2020). Social media posts in the spring and summer of 2020 were filled, for example, with cries against racist violence, particularly state violence throughout the police and judicial system. As Jackson et al. (2020, 124) argue, social media activism is a tool of social movement organizing that can garner such attention that it becomes "an unavoidable issue for mainstream journalists and politicians" to which they must respond. It provides a platform for circulating news, images and videos through hashtags to shine (and maintain) a light on anti-Black violence and facilitates a network of community activists and concerned citizens that can be organized for both digital and traditional activism (Brock Jr. 2020; Jackson et al. 2020).

Cell phone videos posted to social media platforms, for example, have been used as a way of introducing a measure of accountability for the routine anti-Black violence experienced in encounters with police (Richardson 2017) and white antagonists that see "Black as nuisance" within public spaces (Henderson & Jefferson-Jones 2020). Cell phone videos, for example, have been prominently used to document attempts by white antagonists to police Black presence in public spaces such as in the cases of "BBQ Becky" and "Permit Patty" (Henderson & Jefferson-Jones 2020). While these incidents illustrate how Black people are made to appear not to belong in white controlled spaces, they show how Black digital communities can mobilize media to "bear witness" to these encounters and demand public accountability. These participant cell phone videos also seek to resist absence and abjection by turning the tools of surveillance back on those imbued with legal authority, "bearing witness" to police violence (Richardson 2017) such as the killing of Eric Garner in 2014, the shooting of Philando Castile in 2016 and the murder of George Floyd in 2020. These videos, shared on social media, mobilized Black witnesses and white allies to action in the form of digital and physical protests.

However, we must be careful of the uncritical expansion of the surveillance apparatus. Browne (2015) notes that "surveillance is nothing new to black folks" (p. 10) and the media have long been technologies of racial oppression and policing Black presence in public space. Despite the increase in videos of police violence, particularly via cell phones and police body cameras, there has been little accountability for the police officers involved. In addition, the selective leaking of body camera videos requires us to question if more surveillance is for the protection of communities of color or for protecting police departments and officers (Sacharoff & Lustbader 2017). Furthermore, participant videos, images and location data are increasingly used to identify protestors against police violence, illustrating how more surveillance can be turned against those fighting for racial justice (Leon 2020; Leopold & Cormier 2020; Ng 2020). It is not the absolute volume of images and video that will produce accountability, but where power lies in the making, storing and dissemination of these images. Who controls these images and what policies govern their use?

Social media can also project visions of geography. For example, the hashtag #FergusonIsEverywhere is reminiscent of Hunter and Robinson's (2018) remapping of the US as a series of "multiple Souths"; within the lived experiences of Black Americans there is not a region of the US "safe" from white supremacy and racist violence. Such re-envisioning of place reshapes relations of belonging, calling into question which regions/states (and thus populaces) are positioned as racist and which are given a pass. Furthermore, Brock Jr. (2020) notes how Black participation on social media not only challenges white supremacy and erasure of Black digital presence by "decentering whiteness as the default internet identity"

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(p. 5), but also produces digital spaces to "extol the joys and pains of everyday life" in the face of anti-Black racism (p. 6).

Affirmative presence through musical performance

Sound, particularly music, plays an important role in producing and expressing cultural identity, social meaning and geographic imaginaries (Hudson 2006; Paiva 2018; Devadoss 2020). Music creates moments of rupture that can both suspend the status quo and forge a new sense of collective belonging among people and groups. These moments allow for transformative possibilities to the social and spatial order. Social justice movements have long used music to disrupt the socio-spatial norm and reshape power relations (Eyerman & Jamison 1998; Woods 1998; Fischlin & Heble 2003; Orejuela & Shonekan 2018).

Black communities have frequently deployed music as a form of protest and affirmation, resisting racial oppression and celebrating Black life from slavery to the present. The enslaved transformed music into a subversive mode of communication against planter power, using media to slow the pace of work, expressing solidarity with each other (particularly in the aftermath of planter violence), providing directions along the Underground Railroad, and even organizing slave revolts (Cruz 1999). The Blues extended this use of music as a form of resistance. Acting as an "almost exultant affirmation of life" (Richard Wright, quoted in Woods 1998, 19), the Blues was more than just entertainment or cultural expression. As Woods (1998) argues, it was an "evolving complex of social explanation and social action" (p. 29) that acted as an "ethic of survival, subsistence, resistance, and affirmation" (p. 27).

During the Civil Rights Movement, music not only galvanized activists and emotionally sustained protesters (Inwood & Alderman 2018), but it also shaped new "understandings of American democracy and American citizenship" (Rabaka 2016, 3). Artists, like Billie Holiday with the song *Strange Fruit* and Nina Simone in her musical thesis *Mississippi Goddam*, used music as a way of critiquing white supremacy, racist violence and the unfulfilled promises of American liberty. These songs are more than just interesting music; they are analyses and critiques of various spatialized oppressions. Wright (2018) argues that Holiday's song is a way of linking racial oppressions to spatial "systems of containment and exploitation" founded upon "the degradation of life and land" (p. 9). Similarly, Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam* is a forceful critique of the many geographies of oppression Black communities navigate, castigating particularly violent states like Alabama and Mississippi and noting that "this whole country is full of lies." These spatial critiques challenge existing racist visions of the country and posit a less generous, alternative vision of America, and in doing so demand places where Black lives are valued and celebrated.

Colin Kaepernick used the moment of the playing/singing of the US national anthem to critique police violence of unarmed Black people, challenging visions of America that erased its history of anti-Black racism. His actions sparked a wider protest movement of sitting and kneeling during the national anthem, revealing an already existing alternative sense of place experienced within racially marginalized communities across the US, particularly within Black communities. Kaepernick's silent protest (and society's reaction to it) has echoes of the silent, raised fist protest staged by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics during the US national anthem. Aural media play a role in both of these protests. The American national anthem provides the site of protest (a time and space for the resistive act), and these athletes' refusal to engage with the anthem amplifies their critique of the US. Indeed, their silence enunciates the racial oppression in the US national project and asks: For whom does this anthem really play? The activism of athletes during the US national anthem

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reveals that musical performances can become sites of resistance to oppression, providing opportunities to challenge oppressive socio-spatial narratives and assert a Black sense of place often silenced or discredited.

More than simply a reflection (or critique) of society, music is a creative media that seeks to bring into being visions of society and space yet to be fully realized in practice. It serves as a way of asserting affirmative presence and refusing abjected-presence. Music festivals and parades, for example, have transformative potential and provide glimpses of more inclusive visions and enactments of community, society and space (Delgado 2016; Allen 2020; Allen & McCreary 2020). While music festivals can marginalize and solidify already existing exclusions, they also "can be sources of innovation and creativity… bringing rhythms that transform urban spaces" (Delgado 2016, 119). Analyzing the Lunar New Year Festival in San Francisco's Chinatown, Delgado notes how festivals shape community identity and produce broad relations of belonging that extend beyond local boundaries and that bring "recognition to this community's presence" (p. 163).

Allen (2020) finds similar dynamics in his research of Florida A&M University's (FAMU) homecoming parade. A historically Black College/University in Tallahassee, Florida, FAMU's homecoming remains one of the most significant events for FAMU and the broader Black community within Tallahassee. Allen shows how this parade, and particularly the Marching 100's participation in it, helps transform the vision of the city and for whom it matters. This parade has historically been a way of suturing together Black neighborhoods (Frenchtown and Southside) into a broader Black Tallahassee community, and FAMU's homecoming disrupts the dominant white spatial imaginary, allowing for a Black sense of place to emerge throughout the city. The parade affirms Black life and highlights the multitude of contributions of Tallahassee's Black community, contributions typically veiled and muffled in the narrative of Tallahassee. This socio-spatial transformation of the affective atmosphere of Tallahassee into an affirmation of FAMU and the Black community allows for different relations of belonging within the city that, for some FAMU students, allows for a mobility throughout the city they do not usually enjoy. The city feels safer, more inviting and more affirmative, reshaping the circulations of capital, people and discourses within the city (including within news media).

Johnson (2013) claims that "a right to visibility and mobility (in physical spaces) and demanding recognition and respect (in discursive spaces) addresses and redresses the injuries enacted by systemic spatial isolation and racism" (p. 168). Festivals and parades, like those highlighted by Delgado (2016) and Allen (2020), create ruptures in the status quo that assert a "right to visibility and mobility" (and one might also say audibility) for racially marginalized groups. They transform the socio-cultural vision and experience of the city and even alter material flows within the city. They constitute what McKittrick (2006, 137) has called a "participatory soundscape" through which a racially marginalized community "can say itself and its history." Festivals and parades, then, like the music utilized within them, can be viewed as socio-spatial media that provide opportunities for the "sayability" (or perhaps playability or audibility) of racially marginalized communities' affirmational counter-narratives.

Conclusion

Though media, race and geography are indelibly imbricated and inextricable, we have relied on a large number of studies outside of the discipline of geography, and a socio-spatial analysis requires extending the central argument of these scholars. This is because, while many

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geographers studying media engage race at times and many scholars of race and media engage geography at times, there is little sustained engagement with race and media geographies as the central focus of the study. The literature feels largely sutured together, using an array of disparate research that, at times, requires a reinterpretation and conceptual extension of the original work to tease out the geographic and racial implications. It also demonstrates the importance politically as well as conceptually for geographers to engage scholars, particularly scholars of color, in race and ethnic studies. As a result, we call for a more sustained and deliberate focus on the socio-spatial implications of race and media. While many disciplines have engaged in research on race and various forms of media, geographers must take up this research and agenda to highlight the ways in which geography facilitates racial media projects through spatial circulations and the way racial media projects circulate socio-spatial meaning. We have presented one framework (absence/presence) through which to approach race and media geographies, but we recognize and wish to highlight the necessity for more theoretical and empirical engagement with the socio-spatial implications of race and media.

Future research trajectories should address: (1) the ways in which white spatial imaginaries are circulated through media resulting in the (neo)colonization and exploitation of local communities as well as nation-states; and (2) the ways in which racially marginalized communities resist these encroachments by asserting their own spatial imaginaries through various forms of media. Such an explicit study of race within media geography research will deepen our understanding of the circulations of racialized meanings and how these meanings are communicated through spatial mediums and attached to socio-spatial imaginaries and actual material landscapes. Furthermore, research that focuses on the ways racially marginalized communities use music, literature and other forms of media to assert and affirm alternative ways of being in the world offers scholars and activists insights into affirmative resistance practices as well as ways to adapt media for liberatory goals. Media geographies of race remain a compelling and under-researched, under-theorized field of geography, one that holds potential for producing insights for scholars and activists alike.

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