A Race in Mind

The Press in Deed

THE VASTNESS and omnipresence of the press can easily overshadow our mutual dependence: that which exists between the professionals in the press and its outsiders. There are not, to my knowledge, any other entities quite like a "free" press, and while I have surrounded the word "free" in quotation marks here, the presence or absence of that sign of ambivalence is also something that has been the subject of years of deliberation in the press itself. It could not even be a topic in a system in which such deliberations were closed.

But I have not come here to waste your time by flattering you, to paint in even brighter colors your portrait as both the pomp and the circumstance of democratic freedom, but to comment on what I know you understand to be serious problems in the way the press functions as mediator between the experience of life in the world and its narrative and visual representation.

The harshest critics call the press-media a "closed circuit world of spectacle that has no goal other than its spectacular self." Relying like a politician only on vested interests to critique and defend its activities, the press encourages its own journalists to explain and deplore press culpability; these critics are appalled by the sight of journalists behaving like independent experts within the spectacle they have created and have an interest in sustaining, pretending to speak for a public so remote from their lives only polls can allude to its nature, defending

itself from criticism with incoherent but effective lines of defense such as "We are better than we used to be," "This story just won't go away," "We do both sides of an issue."

I can't accept so sweeping a condemnation, yet the claustrophobia one feels in the sheltering arms of the press often seems permanent and conspiratorial. Notwithstanding the promise of more choices and more channels—targeted and consumer-designed magazines, barely limited numbers of cable channels—the fear of being suffocated by eternal and eternally replenished ephemera is real; so is the fear of the complete inability of a public to engage in public discourse. This latter fear—the closing off of public debate—is palpable because there is no way to answer the systemic distortions of the press in a timely, effective fashion and because the definition of "public" is already so radically changed. Homelessness and crime have been recharacterized and redeployed so that "public space" is increasingly seen as a protected preserve open only to the law-abiding and the employed, or rather to those who appear to be. Homelessness has been recharacterized as streetlessness. Not the poor deprived of homes, but the homed being deprived of their streets. And crime is construed as principally black. Neither one of these constructions is new. But as each affects public space, each affects public discourse.

It is clear to anyone interested that when the term "public" has been appropriated as space regulated for one portion of society only, when the "poor" have no political party to represent their interests, then the concept of public service—which is your business, the business of a "free" press—gets altered as well. And has been. The public interest of minorities, farmers, labor, women, and so on have, in frequently routine political language, become "special interests." "We, the people" have become "They, the people."

I am introducing the terms "public," "crime," "homelessness," "unemployment" (meaning poverty) early in these remarks because they segue into my observations on race. Although there are other matters of equal concern to editors, the handling of race seems to me symptomatic of the general wariness, ire, and intellectual fatigue the press continues to cause among so wide a spectrum of the country.

I'd like to begin by posing two questions. First, why is race identity

important in print and broadcast news at all? And second, if it is necessary, why is it so often obscured and distorted at the very moment it is enunciated?

Originally race identification was urged, even insisted upon, by African Americans to make sure our presence and our point of view were represented. That urging assumed that we had a point of view unlike the mainstream one and, certainly, had experience of life in the States different from the legendary one presented in the press. That regardless of its difference or its concurrence, the African American point of view should not be buried underneath mainstream views and taken for granted. That seemed all well and good in theory, but in practice something quite other took place, an "othering" that took two forms: (1) the encoding of race in order to perpetuate some very old stereotypes even while the stereotypes were being disassembled in the popular mind, and (2) the insistence upon underscoring racial difference at precisely those moments when it really made no difference. For example, last June a *New York Times* reporter struggled heroically with the twin demand to be accurate *and* to theatricalize race in an article on immigration in Florida. The piece was headlined "As Hispanic Presence Grows, So Does Black Anger." What could "black" possibly mean in that formulation other than the commonly accepted code word for poor or working poor or economically marginal? We could assume that the Hispanics are also poor, without jobs, homes, and so on, but that would be a mistake because the Hispanics in question are Cubans fleeing Castro for a city heavily populated with middle-class Cubans and so, unlike Haitians, have a welcome mat of social services spread out before them. But whoever they are, they are certainly competing for jobs and housing with any and all. The question becomes, Why are blacks singled out? Why are they not called Miamians or "local." ("As Hispanic Presence Grows, So Does Local Anger"?) Except when they are soldiers, blacks are never American citizens. Why? Because in media-talk we are not local, or general citizens—we are those whose financial security is fragile; those whose reactions are volatile ("anger"—not concern). If the reader knows the code, this headline's use of the term "local" (economically fragile American citizens) could very well be Miami's white working poor.

But that is dismissed at once by the knowing, because the already encoded black-versus-anything-else connotation is what we have been led and taught to believe is the real, the vital, the incendiary story. There is no printable word for "poor" that does not connote "race." Thus, under the guise of representing the interests of black citizenry, the conventional stereotypical oppositions are maintained and useful information is sacrificed in the process.

It turns out to be a very difficult piece of work for this reporter. Consider the necessary contortions language is put through to describe the impact of recent immigration of Miami's Spanish-speaking population on its English-speaking one—which is or ought to be the real point of the story. These are the labels that appear: "Cubans of both colors": "non-Hispanic whites"; "non-Hispanic blacks"; "native-born English speaking blacks"; "Hispanic whites"; "Haitian and other Caribbean blacks." What are "non-Hispanic blacks"? Africans? No. Who are "Haitian and other Caribbean blacks"? Cubans? No. Think how clear the article would have been if nationality and language had been the mark of difference. It would tell us that American citizens were nervous about the wave of immigrants who spoke little English and were after their jobs. But clarity took second place to skin color and race took pride of place over language. The result: the obfuscation of everything but racial identity. "Patterns of Immigration Followed by White Flight." Middle-class blacks out of the loop here.

Even when *within* the race, where differences of national origin *are* information, as in the Crown Heights melee, where the population is predominately Caribbeans who have no history of American black and American Jewish relations, that distinction was subsumed into generalized blackness.

So confusing are the consequences of race stress that it led a CNN reporter to wonder with deep concern if someone who spoke Haitian could be found to help a Haitian pilot who had skyjacked a plane to Miami. French never occurred to him.

Now I would like to follow those questions with one other. Since it seems important in some way to represent blacks, we need to ask ourselves what we are represented as, and why. How can the press

be challenged to represent *any* point of view—white, black, neither, both—that does not evoke a pseudo-world of commodified happiness and unified agreement on what or who is the enemy? The "enemy" seems to be either a diffuse, discursive vaguely black criminal or the angry helpless poor (who are also black).

In discussing the way blacks are represented—notwithstanding the successful examples of the elimination of race bias and some extraordinarily fine reporting of race matters (Hunter-Gault, on the Zulu Nation)—and the highly volatile effects that racially biased representation has on the public, it may be of some interest to locate its sources, because although historical, race bias is not absolute, inevitable, or immutable. It has a beginning, a life, a history in scholarship, and it can have an end. It is often enough pointed out that the popularization of racism, its nationalization, as it were, was accomplished not by the press (complicit though nineteenth-century newspapers may have been) but in theater, in entertainment. Minstrelsy. These traveling shows reached all classes and regions, all cities, towns, and farms. Its obvious function was entertainment, but its less obvious one was masking and unmasking social problems. The point to remember is that minstrelsy had virtually nothing to do with the way black people really were; it was a purely white construction. Black performers who wanted to work in minstrelsy were run off the stage or forced to blacken their black faces. The form worked literally as, and only as, a black façade for whites: whites in blackface. The black mask permitted whites to say illegal, unorthodox, seditious, and sexually illicit things in public. In short, it was a kind of public pornography, the main theme of which was sexual rebellion, sexual license, poverty, and criminality. In short, all of the fears and ambivalences whites had that were otherwise hidden from public discourse could be articulated through the mouth of a black who was understood to be already outside the law and therefore serviceable. In this fashion, the black mask permitted freedom of speech and created a place for public, *national* dialogue. For whites that is. On the other hand, the mask hid more than it revealed. It hid the truth about black humanity, views, intelligence, and most importantly, it hid the true causes of social conflict

by transferring that conflict to a black population. Without going into the growth, transformation, and demise of minstrelsy (a demise that was simply an enhancement in and a transfer to another site—film, for example), suffice it to say that its strategy is still useful and its residue everywhere. The spectacle of a black and signifying difference, taught to an illiterate white public (via minstrelsy) became entrenched in a literate public via the press. It was a way of transforming organic ignorance into manufactured error, so the political representation of the interests of the white poor is and remains unnecessary. Those interests need not be given serious consideration—just rhetorical alliance. My point is that African Americans are still being employed in that way: to *disappear* the white poor and unify all classes and regions, erasing the real lines of conflict.

The justifications for enslavement became accepted wisdom and a whole race of people became criminalized. This criminalization is as old as the republic and stems from, among other things, the outside-the-law status imposed on slaves—and the dishonor that accompanies enslavement. Its modern formation is the residue, the assumption of criminality flash-signaled by skin color. People who say this is not so, that there is a disproportionate percentage of crime committed by blacks, miss something: the unconscionable, immoral, and dangerous treatment of blacks by the justice system and the press. It is unconscionable because it is racist disinformation. Unless, for example, you can intelligently use the phrase "white on white crime," you cannot use the phrase "black on black crime." It has no meaning and no use other than exoticizing blacks, separating the violence blacks do to one another into some nineteenth-century anthropological racism where the "dark continent" was understood to be violent, blank, unpeopled (the people were likened to nature), an easily available site of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where whites went for self-realization, self-discovery, and loot. Is that white on white crime in Northern Ireland? Bosnia? World War II? (Dan Rather in Somalia.) In this mythic construct it should not be a shock, as it was to me, that the only allegedly raped victim whose face was ever shown in the newspaper and on television to my knowledge was an underage black girl. I have

never seen another one. Why? Because there is no honor or privacy due black women when they claim or protest sexual misbehavior, as recent Senate deliberations regarding Clarence Thomas will support.

This treatment is immoral because it proceeds from corruption—the corruption of accuracy, information, and even truth in the interests of sensation and sales. And it is dangerous because it has nothing to do with the real world of whites or blacks. It has everything to do with mystifying the world—rendering it incomprehensible and assuring the insolubility of its real problems, such as reducing the attraction to and the means of executing crime; such as employing and educating "they, the people"; such as domestic disarmament; such as the health of our communities.

When the mystification of everyday life is complete, there is nothing new or contemporary in the news. It will be, in spite of its up-to-the-minuteness, as archaic, moribund, and unreal as a quill pen, lagging behind the future in order to enshrine deprivation—making the absence of commodities (poverty) the only despair worth discussing. If poverty and criminality can be off-loaded to blacks, then the illusion of satisfaction and the thrill of the hunt might keep the public still and obedient. But for how long? How long can news function as a palliative for despair and counter space for products? It is so frustrating and sad to open a newspaper and find the news literally at the edges, like the embroidered hem of the real subject—advertisement. The media spectacle must not continue to direct its attention to the manufacture of consent, rather than debate with *more* than two sides, to the reinforcement of untruths, and a review of what else there is to buy. Otherwise it will be not out of commerce, but already out of business. When the spectacle becomes "public" in the narrowest sense of the word—meaning available to purchase—the world can buy you, but it can't afford you.

Now I have been talking to you as though you were a single organism that took shape and grew by some immutable natural law outside human decision-making. When in fact, you are people, human individuals with a stake in being so. You have public-spiritedness and dreams of a secure democracy, as well as prejudices that seep through

and shape the tools at your disposal. Boards of directors, owners, and editorial managers are made up of people trying to get profitable, stay profitable, and increase profitability. That must be tough. But if your industry becomes socially irrelevant, it will be impossible.

I suspect that a nonracist, nonsexist, educating press is as profitable as one that is not. I suspect that clarification of difficult issues is just as entertaining as obscuring and reducing them is. But it will take more than an effort of the will to make such a press profitable; it will take imagination, invention, and a strong sense of responsibility and accountability. Without you, by ourselves we can just pull raw data off of our computers; shape it ourselves, talk to one another, question one another, argue, get it wrong, get it right. Reinvent public space, in other words, and the public dialogue that can take place within it. The generations of students that I teach (and my own sons, for that matter) do it all the time.

But, irrespective of the internet's CompuServes, nodes, bulletin boards, Lexus—whatever makes the information highway work—there is something the press can do in language that a society cannot do. You've done it before. Move us closer to participatory democracy; help us distinguish between a pseudo-experience and a living one, between an encounter and an engagement, between theme and life. Help us all try to figure out what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.