RADIO DAYS: REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IN JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVES. A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF RADIO SERIES *THIS AMERICAN LIFE* (1995-2020)

Ileana JITARU
Ovidius University of Constanța

Abstract: *Part of the (un)intended role of the media is that of structuring hegemonic and ideological systems of power, which often causes critiques of media texts. The present paper will investigate how a traditional media genre (radio) favours certain perspectives on social reality over others as a manifestation of ideology. In so doing, the research will try to explain how some socially privileged groups with certain psychographics and demographics (men, white, the wealthy, heterosexuals, adults, middle-aged etc.) are over-represented in the radio program* This American Life *to the detriment of socially marginalized groups (women, non-whites, the poor, LGBT, children, the elderly, etc.). As the American society evolves in relation to media representation and technology, a cultural analysis of radio texts can explain how ideology supports these changes, while cultural studies as a critical approach is able to explain the dynamic reciprocal relations between media texts and the social systems that invisibly support them.*

Key words: *media representation; ideology; exclusion; stereotypes; assimilation;* This American Life*; Ira Glass*

Culture and media culture: features, functions

Under the generous tenants of cultural studies, media studies scholars attempt to understand and explain the way media texts reflect the global events in a partially biased manner and a slanted vision of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, sex. In so doing, they influence the audience's perception of the world from this representational mode of, and focus on, events. Looking at the vastness of the term, Michael Richardson defines culture as:

> the totality of all that characterises us (…), the tools and objects we create, the structures and institutions we fashion, the concepts and ideas we develop, and the way these take shape as customs and beliefs. (2)

An omnibus term, the components of culture become manifest in a cultural surrounding that reveals several dimensions of existence: culture is

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

physical, as it thrives in a certain geographical space through various artefacts[1] that include, among others, media outlets like newspapers, magazines, radio programs, television shows. Media reports include all the time references to such physical objects. The next two dimensions of culture are its ***social*** and ***behavioural*** components. The former refers to social codes and rules that govern the creation of the first category, i.e., the physical artefacts, the practices, or customs by means of which we should/must make use of these artifacts on a day-to-day basis, the habitual conventions by means of which individuals, groups, nations may share their lived experiences. Simultaneously, the latter, the *behavioural* side of culture concerns attitudes expressed by members of a given community, including values, tastes, the polarised trope of right and wrong, religious beliefs, economic systems, in other words, ways to respond to given social mores and conventions imposed by the former category.

These constituents of culture may continue with defining qualities that not only describe culture in general, but also media culture, which is the present area of investigation. To begin with, media culture is ***collective***, since "while individuals may be a part of a particular culture, they can never inhabit a culture on their own" (idem 136); likewise, media culture is collective, too, as it involves collective production often by a team, and targets consumption as a shared experience among a group of people. Furthermore, culture and media culture alike are symbolic[2] given that they are "Symbolic meaning is not directly generated by the elements of culture themselves, but by the associations they embody through the links they make with other cultural forms" (Richardson 4). Media culture is also symbolic as it has its own set of

[1] *Artefact*, also spelt *artifact*, is an object such as a tool, weapon, etc. that was made in the past and is historically important (Longman dictionary definition, www.ldoceonline.com). In the 20th and 21st century, the word expanded its meaning to any "material, human-made object of a culture" (Ott and Mack 135) to incorporate a wider range of manufactured items that the human beings use in their daily interactions, from books, to cars, clothing items, music, food, which are marked with significance and are all markers of identity of a particular group or nation.

[2] In his study *The Experience of Culture* (2001) Michael Richardson explains how elements of physical culture, or artefacts, acquire symbolic meaning when approached in their close context. He brings the example of buildings we see from out windows, which *mean* nothing in themselves, since they are merely constructions of bricks and mortar. They acquire *meaning* only when compared with other buildings and elements of human architecture, when considering also the associations triggered by the different buildings we can see along the street. If we engage into a process of wondering about their purpose and the life of the people who inhabit them, the type of interactions that occur inside that may have a certain significance or symbolism associated to the society these buildings are part of (the porter who serves, the postman who brings correspondence, the guardian that might be in charge with the building) are all descriptors of a symbolic function in relation to the neighbourhood the building is located in.

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

rhetorical structures, symbolic codes that the audience must decode to master the process of consumption. Irrespective of the subgenre, whether a newspaper, a magazine, a radio report, a news bulletin, a TV show, a film, an advertisement, the media embed a certain type of rhetoric, from content to layout, that must be mastered, deciphered and decoded by the audience when consuming the media product. Also, culture and media culture are ***historical*** since they can be approached in their diachronic evolution. The radio series *This American Life* may be approached as a diachronic progression for the investigative journalism born on paper, as newspapers practice, in the United States at the end of the 19th century. As a final remark, culture and media culture are ***ideological*** as they teach individuals, groups, audiences to see the world in certain ways through a set of behaviour, acknowledged practices of culturally based knowledge. In simple terms, cultures produce ideologies, and these ideologies influence the individuals' perception of the world.

Remaining with the last marker of culture, i.e., ideology, this component structures the social world in four directions, through ***limitation***, ***normalization***, ***privileging***, ***interpellation*** (Ott and Mack 138), and these directions act in a cause-effect relationship from one to the other next, in the following way. A dominant ideology may impose limitations as to the range of values that a person may consider acceptable within a particular cultural context, while supporting certain ideas while devaluing others. This 'blinding' function is easy to spot in certain ideologies when the interpretations they promote are regularly identified as biased or one-sided. The limitations imposed on certain possible perceptions of events by an ideology may lead to an effect of *normalization,* which refer to which social relations seem normal, or which social relations are not so, or which power relations appear customary in the natural order of things. This ideological presumption "that the media are ideologically implicated in the messages they shape and transmit" (Vaughn 121) leads to certain groups having certain normal privileges over other groups. The capitalist economic and ideological structure of American media culture is full of examples of this distinction. It may seem at this point that ideology permeates every aspect of a culture, fashioning the limits of knowledge and influencing power structures at every level of social organization. The fourth function of ideology, ***interpellation,*** was introduced by Algerian Marxist critic Louis Althusser who claimed that ideology is so closely bound to the social structure that it has the power to interpellate members of the social groups, to make them act as social subjects who become aware of their identity through the process of "hailing" (129), by means of which individuals recognize, respond to an encountered ideology and allow it to represent them.

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

Ideological filters in media representation of race and ethnicity on the radio: *This American Life* (host and executive producer: Ira Glass, NPR-WBEZ, 1995 – 2020)

Background to case study: *This American Life* is an American weekly public radio program and podcast with an average a running time of 60 minutes, standing as the first narrative radio format produced in the U.S. Each weekly show displays a theme, explored in a Prologue and One, Two, Three or Four Acts, following the structure of a play; each act is produced by different members of the TAL staff and freelance contributors. Programs begin with a brief programme identification by host and executive producer Ira Glass, followed by a prologue related to the theme. Standing primarily as a journalistic non-fiction programs "Like little movies for radio" (Ira Glass n.p.), each episode includes a story-plot-theme narrative structure, focusing on current political, economic, social events, on ordinary or renowned people, on human interest ideologies. Stories are voiced out as first-person narratives, in various styles and moods varying from gloomy to ironic, from thought-provoking to humorous, from engaging to sarcastic, and include memoirs, essays, interviews, field recordings, original footage. Home stationed by WBEZ Chicago, the show is syndicated on over 500 public radio stations in the U.S. by Public Radio Exchange (PRX), with an audience of 2.2 million listeners each week, and another 3.1 million people downloading each episode as a podcast. *This American Life* is also heard on radio stations in Ireland and Germany, Canada, and Australia. A socially engaged form of radio narrative journalism (at times investigative), this program has repeatedly received several major awards, including the first Pulitzer Prize ever awarded to a radio show or podcast for "The Out Crowd" (episode 688, November 15, 2019), for "revelatory, intimate journalism that illuminates the personal impact of the Trump administration's 'Remain in Mexico' policy'". (https://www.thisamericanlife.org/recommended/award-winners). In the 25-year span of production, Ira Glass has created 728 episodes, from November 17, 1995 1: "New Beginnings" to December 25, 2020 728: "Lights, Camera, Christmas!".

Media and cultural studies scholars investigate how the racial ideologies in a culture help determine the angle of focalization of media texts like newspaper articles, magazines and journals, radio talks, television shows, films, advertising. The scholars analyse these texts with a view to understanding how the media reinforce ideological hierarchies, systems that usually provide privilege and power to white individuals at the expense of non-white individuals. These scholars strive to explain how media texts reflect hegemonic ideologies of race, concentrating on the ways these texts invite consumers to accept whiteness as the norm in relation to issues of race. In line

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

with Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek's syntagm "strategic rhetoric of whiteness" (296), the radio program and expanded podcast "Nice White Parents" (712: July 31- -August 20, 2020), explores the 60-year history of the School for International Studies, a public middle school in Brooklyn New York, founded with the support of white parents in late 1950's. The five episodes in the program trace the history of this school from its foundation to the present day, with an emphasis on the influx of power of change coming from the involvement of white parents that turned a shrinking school in 2014 into a high-rated one in only two years. The discourse in the episodes makes a visible point that 'white' becomes an overarching norm, a privileged non-race against which all other races are measured and compared:

> *Public schools, he believed, would be the great equalizer. Rich and poor would come together and develop what he called "fellow-feeling," and in so doing "obliterate factitious distinctions in society." For that to happen, you need everyone in the same school together (…) White parents have been involved all along, all the way back to the very beginning of this school half a century ago, doing the same kinds of things I'd just seen. It happens again and again, white parents wielding their power without even noticing.* (Joffe-Walt 57:06-57:31; 59:15-59:33)

The reporter Chana Joffe-Walt reinforces the privileged place of whiteness at the center of our understanding of race, even with everyday activities that interpellate both white and non-white members of the community ('blacks' and 'browns', as they are recurrently called discursively in the five episodes), and make them take action as social subjects who become aware of their identity: in so doing, the white power makes possible the better cause of desegregation in the American public schools a success story.

Scholar literature regarding the media representation of race is generous, but the studies within this domain can be conceptualised into a group of key terms that explain how media texts operate across ideological lines within the context of American culture. These concepts are exclusion, stereotyping, assimilation, othering (Ott and Mack 151).

Exclusion

A dominant representation of race in American media is better characterized as an *absence* of representation or *exclusion***,** a process by which various cultural groups are symbolically annihilated, erased through constant under-representation in the media. If the media were an actual reflection of race in American culture, then one would expect to see a clear ratio between the size of a racial population and its visible population in news report, advertising,

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

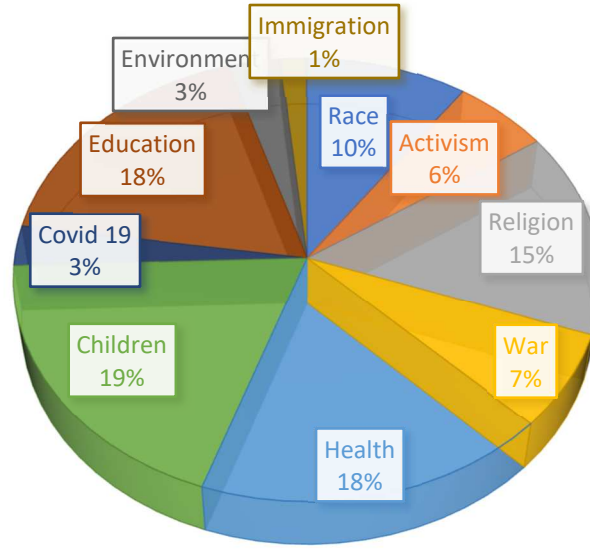
television, or films. Research in this area points out that the relationship between the number of population and the visibility in mainstream media visibility is obviously reversed. In other words, racial minorities simply do not exist in much of the media that we consume every day, and this absence reinforces ideological power structures by over-representing the dominant white group in media texts.

To understand the process of racial exclusion, we could compare the Hispanic, Latino and the Afro-American population in the USA against the total American population, and then its representation in mainstream American media. Hispanic plus Latinos (16,7%) and Afro-Americans (13%) count together around 30% percent of the total US population in 2020. In relation to this ratio and despite the obviously large numbers of Hispanic, Latino and Afro-American individuals living in America, representations of the lives and issues of Latin American people are often absent from mainstream American media. Turning our attention to the radio program *This American Life*, in its 25-year production span only 84 programs, out of a total of 728, discussed race-related topics, slightly over 10%, while themes that concern the American nation at large like education, health, children received about 18% each (see Chart 1).

Episode 688: November 15, 2019 "The Out Crowd", winner of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for audio reporting, the first ever to receive such this award for audio journalism, describes in a personal, intriguing, troubling manner the experiences of would-be immigrants, asylum seekers to the USA who are forced to wait across the border in Mexico in a refugee camp, under president Trump administration's "Remain in Mexico" asylum policy: "*It's built into US asylum law-- a commonsense humanitarian idea. We don't want to send people back to situations where they'd get tortured or killed. The legal term is non-refoulment*" (DeKornfeld 05:45). Examples like this radio narrative journalism on refugees that escaped the cartels in South-American countries reveal how the temporary inclusion of Latinos and other minority groups in the media reinforces ideological systems of white privilege that construct whiteness as prevalent, multifaceted, normal, and desirable, while reaching the US land is part of the mythical American dream for such disadvantaged groups.

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

Chart 1 Major topics *This American Life* - 728 radio programs (1995-2020)



Stereotyping

A second form of racial representation, **stereotyping** is the process in which the media create a simplistic, misleading representations of a minority racial group, often wholly defining members of the group by a small number of characteristics. The media representation of people of colour is often under the hegemonic power of the dominant major, central group, and include stereotypes of value judgments on the worth, taste, status, morality of another group or culture. In so doing, these stereotypical claims may affect our judgement, actions, assumptions toward members of that group or culture. Although stereotypes usually hold negative connotations, sometimes certain collocations may not always be a negative reflection of a culture: for example the ‘handsome Latino’/ the ‘smart Asian’ are good examples of positive stereotypes. Yet, in general, stereotypes fail to consider the complexity of a racial group and present media consumers with biased, mistaken representations. One withstanding racial stereotype perpetuated by the American media is terrorism associated with people of Middle Eastern descent. Ira Glass’s program includes 48 programs on terrorism (6%) broadcast between September 21, 2001 (194: “Before and After” – interviews with New Yorkers who escaped the 9/11 attack) and June 14, 2013 (497: “This Week” – about the National Security Agency collecting data on the phone numbers the Americans dial). An episode “My Friend the Extremist” (201 Dec. 7, 2001: “Them”, Act One) focuses on Muslim Syrian activist Omar Bakri, who called himself bin Laden's man in London and who preaches: “Bakri: *Assimilation,*

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

integration – these are the worst words. Be a Jew! (…) The United States has come under attack: it's exciting". Jon Ronson: "*There are times when I think I've gone too far in befriending Omar*" (Ronson 19:05, 20:02, 21:52). When the media do not depict Middle Easterners as terrorists, other common stereotypes include dirty, hairy, short-tempered individuals who cover primitive duties – serving beautiful aristocratic women (*Aladdin*, dir. Guy Ritchie, 2019), acting as barbaric companions (*The Siege*, dir. Edward Zwick, 1998), riding camels (*Lawrence of Arabia*, dir. David Lean, 1962). The repetitive occurrence of such impersonations diminishes the image of Middle Eastern peoples to a few exaggerated, stock representations. Like the process of exclusion, stereotyping establishes the hegemonic norm of whiteness by largely simplifying and decreasing affirming images of racial minorities "thereby erasing an accurate presence of them from the minds of many consumers" (Ott and Mack 153). A further example is program 712: "Nice White Parents", which induces a stereotypical pattern from the very title by the adjective determiner 'nice' associated to 'whiteness' (white parents). This nominal structure contains an ironic implicature on an account that it was initially meant to be a story about segregation and inequality in public schools: "*I remember one time being guided into a classroom and being told that this was the class for gifted kids and noticing, oh, here's where all the white kids are*" (Joffe-Walt 02:34). But the embedded irony in the title is that the topic was "*actually about the inordinate amount of power that white parents had at this one school in Brooklyn, New York*" (Glass 00:24). In a subtle engaging reporting style, journalist Chana Joffe-Walt describes how the fate a mediocre ordinary public middle school changed in 2014, when the influx of seventy white sixth graders joining the already thirty-sixth graders - most of whom Black, Latino, and Middle Eastern - raised the school to high educational standards owing to the wealth, power, influence of white parents that got involved in fund-raising to ensure better education to their and Other children in the school. The implicit stereotype concerning the limitations of the non-white parents is prevalent throughout Act One of the audio report, in a style and tone which is neither arrogant nor self-opinionated nor overconfident; yet the entire account has the ability to made the audience perceive it as such: "*There is so much reporting on people of colour as people of colour, and so little reporting on white people as white people, even when they're at the heart of a story, as they are with this one*" (idem 01:23).

Assimilation

Opposed to exclusion, *assimilation* is the process by which media texts reflect minority racial groups in a positive light while simultaneously removing them from history or erasing their cultural identities. This form of racial

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

representation where journalistic reports focus on the lives or experiences of people of colour is often displayed in the media.

Often shown to possess equal or better socio-economic standpoints than their white counterparts, the racial or ethnic groups face past events (usually symbolic) or continued political struggle that deny them the right to real equality. This absence of equality makes them easily assimilated into a middle or upper class that largely reflects the perspectives of white individuals. This is the case of program 648: "Unteachable Moment Act One: All the Caffeine in the World Doesn't Make You Woke" June 8, 2018, which is an account about a racial-biased training session to Starbucks employees - mid-level managers from the Supply Chain and Operations, HR and baristas - at the company's Headquarters in Seattle. With interviews from the training day at interspersed throughout Ira Glass's narrative, the material demonstrates that "*people are hesitant to talk about race, at least at first*" (Glass 14:38); yet the training day is an example of assimilation of the black into stories of work success of the white people working at Starbucks. The stages of assimilation are carefully conducted in three sections: first, acknowledging that "*we are all different and talk about what it takes to make people like they belong*"; second, "*recognising bias in ourselves – implicit bias (automatic), structural bias (the way systems and institutions perpetuate inequality)*"; third, Starbucks policies "*the nuts and bolts of running a coffee-shop*" (idem 15:02-15:40). The group discussions recorded and interpolated in the essay narrated by Ira Glass, as well as the entire material, try to demonstrate that although the Afro-American have been excluded from many public spaces (as both employees and customers), this practice is against the social human resources key at the renowned coffee-company, which preaches assimilation as part of their corporate culture. The problems that concern assimilated individuals involve, in this case, occupational issues, not issues of social power and oppression that often inform the lives of racial minorities in the real world. In this way, structures of inequality are hidden behind an apparent face of diversity in these texts.

Othering

The concept of *othering*, the final type of media representation, was constructed from this relationship between 'normal' and 'white', as a process of marginalizing minorities by defining them in relationship to the (white) majority, which functions as the norm or the natural order.

The understanding of "white" as a non-race addressed in the audio material "626: White Haze – Lost in Proud" (September 22, 2017) is both cause and consequence of othering practices. Examples of othering within the media are often difficult to identify because they rely on the unquestioned ideological assumptions about race and culture that we use to make sense of the world. Reporter and producer Zoe Chace interviews actor and writer Dante

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

Nero, who points out that othering was evident in the predominant practice in early Hollywood to have actors of colour play a variety of ethnic characters. The person who organised the Charlottesville rally[3] believes there is a genocide of white people in America, which is called a country of "white people" (Chace 52:01). This case draws a clear distinctions between white and non-white actors, privileging the unique qualities of the former and erasing the individuality of the latter, and the radio narrative insists explicitly on the white versus black historical opposition. Though this may seem an outdated practice, instances of othering still exist today in the social practice:

> *White civil rights, discrimination of white people, white oppression, that language is designed to have power – it took black Americans centuries to enact; we are not partial people, we are not a threat, we are not marginal, we are not invisible. We're people.* (idem 53:20 - 53:44).

The concept of *othering* greatly clarifies the manner in which texts are encoded in American media genres. One of the most prevalent forms of othering involves the ideology of *difference*, or the enactment of subordinate and racialized 'others' who become a source of pleasure for US American tourists who attend Sunday masses in a black church in Harlem, New York. In the audio report "695: Everyone's a Critic – Act One: Their Eyes Weren't Watching God" Ira Glass hosts intives B.A. Parker, an Afro-American, to describe her personal experience of attending the First Corinthian Baptist Church in Harlem:

> *There was only one problem. Above me, in the far back of the balcony, were tourists-- the white people in line from outside-- hundreds of them snapping selfies and gawking, hovering like a gaggle of anthropologists studying black Baptists in their natural habitat. Every expression of worship, every tear I shed, every hug I gave, every arm I*

[3] Early in 2017, Charlottesville, best known for being home to Virginia State University, a historically black college (HBCU), created by Thomas Jefferson, had debated for months over what to do with a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee, who led the Confederate army during the Civil War. Sensing that the sculpture was a reminder of a dark time of racism in U.S. history and should be taken down, the Charlottesville City Council had voted to remove the Lee statue and rename the park. A group of white Neo-Nazi nationalists protested the decision in May 2017, prompting criticism from the mayor. The "Unite the Right" rally was scheduled for Saturday 12 August, and what is now known as the "Charlottesville rally" was an act of domestic terrorist attack that occurred when a 20-year-old Ohio man allegedly accelerated his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer and leaving 19 others injured, five critically.

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

> *outstretched to God, I felt like I was on display for them. I felt exposed.* (Parker 11:25)

Activist bell hooks characterizes this pleasure as a process of "eating the other," where white individuals literally representations of racialized others in order to experience positive feelings. She suggests that within such an ideological structure, privileged white individuals act "on the assumption that the exploration into the world of difference (…) will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's familiar racial group" (24).

> *And they see a lot of tourists who are predominantly white in the balcony, because they know history enough to know that that's different, because, historically, it was flipped. Well, that was a practice in this country for years, where African-Americans had to sit in the balcony and could not worship with white people, because African-Americans were relegated to the balcony and could not engage with worship experience. (…) We hugged the visitors, as the church instructs us to do, during the welcome. And immediately afterwards, over 45 tourists upped and walked out before the sermon had even begun. And all I could think was, the audacity. So rude.* (Parker 13:25)

Another common example of difference in contemporary media involves the hip-hop, R&B or gospel music. Although popular musicians in these genres are predominantly African American, and these genres are often labelled in the public mind as 'African American' in style, many hip-hop consumers are young or adult, white, middle-class individuals, just as the visitors to the Harlem church who enjoyed "'70s R&B … secular music" (idem 12:10). Ideologies of *difference* help explain the draw of white suburbanites to this essentially African American form: to consume this R&B and gospel music is to immerse in the other, to transgress racial norms in a mode of self-gratification. While it may seem that actions based on *difference "*reject racial norms in a progressively political light, in reality these moves reduce aspects of minority culture to mere products for privileged white individuals" (Ott and Mack 156). Continuous concerns arise out of this functional perspective center on whether media practices distort, manipulate, their purposes, and whether media practices harm others, including actants in their stories or audiences who consume them.

Exoticism

An expansion of *othering*, exoticism becomes manifest when ideologically-driven circulation and consumption of images of foreign lands throws a

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

romantic or mystifying light on other cultures. An interesting rather atypical case is with episode "694: Get back to where You one belonged" February 14, 2020, which exoticizes not the African-Americans or other ethnical groups, but the very American nation, which is denounced as too racial and abrasive against people of colour. Emanuele Berry - reporter at WBEZ radio – and host Ira Glass watch a Soviet film *The Circus* (dir. Grigoriy Aleksandrov, 1936). A bizarre cameo of an African American baby in an all-white crowd plays in a scene desegregated more than 30 years before interracial marriage was legal everywhere in the USA[4]. This time, it is the Soviet Union that becomes an exotic place loaded with positive propaganda for decades "America is racist, WE are not" (Berry 02.13).

Usually exoticizing a racial group often strips them of contemporary political agency by constructing them as primitive, unintelligent, brutal, but this time it is the American themselves as a whites that are labelled as such:

> *I had a year or two where I really thought about this a lot. I was working as a journalist in Ferguson, covering (…)a community that was in crisis after the shooting death of Michael Brown. And I just had this experience where I felt like I'd just seen some of the worst parts of American racism, from watching people threaten other people because of the color of their skin, to just looking day after day at the social inequalities that exist in St. Louis. And it was kind of hopeless. (…) I would talk to my friends about Ghana, or Central America, or places in the Caribbean. I'm like, do you think it's better there? Would it be better there to be a black person there?* (Berry 05:23 - 5:45)

Though exoticism places non-white groups as socially and cognitively inferior to white, 'civilized' society, the point the reporter is making turns this concept against her very nation, in a kind of mental distancing and inferiority of her white culture over another.

*

Central to recent work on media audiences is an analysis of the ways in which people are supposed to be active in shaping their media culture, contributing to the process of shaping or co-constructing their material and symbolic environments: "the audience (…) is a discursive construct produced by a particular analytic gaze" (Alasuutari 6). At the other end of the broadcasting spectrum, the eye's gaze receives the ear-hearing as a counterpart, equally able to decipher the mechanisms and modes in which a

[4] In the 1920s and 1930s, several African-Americans actually moved to the Soviet Union as the country used to promise them a better life. The boy in the film, that black baby, is actually the son of an African-American who moved to the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

program running on American public radio in the past twenty-five years may and does support certain perspectives over others on facets of society, religion, education, with a racial and ethnic focus as embodiments of ideology. As Ira Glass professes: "*This American Life is produced for the ear and designed to be heard. If you are able, we strongly encourage you to listen to the audio, which includes emotion and emphasis that's not on the page" (https://www.thisamericanlife.org/695/transcript).*

Formulating under the vast label of cultural media studies, the case study attempted an understanding of the ways in which the worldviews of socially privileged groups (men, whites, the wealthy, adults, middle-aged individuals) are over-represented in the media to the detriment of rather marginal groups (women, non-whites, the poor, children, the elderly). As members of the audience, whether we belong to central or more marginal groups, these critiques of media texts become pivotal in turning us aware of the dominant ideologies of power at work and empower us to respond with an engaged mind to the constant changing dynamic between media texts and the social systems that create them.

Works cited

Primary sources:

This American Life (producer Ira Glass, 1995-2020) https://www.thisamericanlife.org/.

Glass, Ira and Jon Ronson. "201: "Them, Act One: My Friend the Extremist". *This American Life*. December 7, 2001. available at https://www.thisamericanlife.org/201/them/act-one, accessed 19 October 2020.

Glass, Ira and Zoe Chace. "626: White Haze –Act One: Lost in Proud". *This American Life*. September 22, 2017. available at https://www.thisamericanlife.org/626/white-haze/act-one, accessed 25 November 2020.

Glass, Ira and Kalefa Sannef. "648: "Unteachable Moment Act One: All the Caffeine in the World Doesn't Make You Woke". *This American Life*. June 8, 2018. available at https://www.thisamericanlife.org/648/unteachable-moment/act-one-6, accessed 20 December, 2020.

Glass, Ira and Aviva DeKornfeld. "688: The Out Crowd". *This American Life*. November 15, 2019 available at https://www.thisamericanlife.org/688/the-out-crowd, accessed 21 December, 2020.

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)

Glass, Ira and and Emanuele Berry. "694: Get back to where You one belonged". *This American Life*. February 14, 2020 available at https://www.thisamericanlife.org/694/get-back-to-where-you-once-belonged, accessed 27 December 2020.

Glass, Ira and B.A. Parker. "695: Everyone's a Critic Act One: Their Eyes Weren't Watching God". *This American Life*. February 28, 2020. available at https://www.thisamericanlife.org/695/everyones-a-critic/act-one-12, accessed 12 December, 2020.

Glass, Ira and Chana Joffe-Walt. "712: Nice White Parents". *This American Life*. July 31, 2020 available at https://www.thisamericanlife.org/712/nice-white-parents, accessed 23 December 2020.

Secondary sources:

Alasuutari, Pertti. (ed.) *Rethinking the Media Audience*. London: Sage, 1999.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Press, 1971, pp. 127-186.

Ott, Brian and Robert Mack *Critical Media Studies - An Introduction.* Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

Nakayama, Thomas and Robert Krizek. "Whiteness: ACritical Rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, August 1995: 291–309.

Dumont, Louis. *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992.

Richardson, Michael. *The Experience of Culture*. London: SAGE Publications, 2001.

Vaughn, Stephen. *Encyclopaedia of American Journalism.* New York and London: Routledge, 2010.

BDD-A31964 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 03:11:55 UTC)