

## Racialization

Daniel Martinez HoSang and Oneka LaBennett

In contrast to keywords such as “race” and “racist,” “racialization” is relatively new to American studies and cultural studies. The term has a diverse lineage but is most often associated with the work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986/1994), who helped make the concept of racialization a central analytic within both fields. Omi and Winant utilize the term to “signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one” (64). In contrast to static understandings of race as a universal category of analysis, racialization names a process that produces race within particular social and political conjunctures. That process constructs or represents race by fixing the significance of a “relationship, practice or group” within a broader interpretive framework. Working within this paradigm, scholars have investigated processes and practices of racialization across a wide range of fields, including electoral politics, music, literature, sports, aesthetics, religion, public policy, and social identity.

Any use of the term “racialization” requires some account of the theoretical status of race within popular culture and mainstream social science. Inherent in Omi and Winant’s definition are three assumptions common to much of the critical scholarship on race in the United States since the 1970s: race functions as a signifier of social identity, power, and meaning, rather than as a biological or hereditary characteristic; racial meaning is a dynamic, fluid, and historically situated *process* of social and political ascription (James Lee

2009); race can be generative of diverse ideological frameworks that justify many forms of social hierarchy and power. Response to this definition has been varied. On the one hand, some sociologists and historians have questioned race as a theoretical concept and a category that can explain social outcomes, suggesting that any use of the term “race”—or “racialization”—as an explanatory category ultimately serves to reify or legitimate it as a fixed and stable category of human existence (Das Gupta et al. 2007; Fields 1990; Gilroy 2000; Loveman 1999; Miles and Torres 2007). On the other hand, scholars such as Cornel West (1994) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990) reason that race cannot be abandoned as an analytical concept since, as Winant notes, “U.S. society is so thoroughly racialized that to be without racial identity is to be in danger of having no identity” (1994, 16).

All of these deployments of the term “racialization” draw on and diverge from earlier usages that carried different theoretical and normative assumptions regarding the basis of racial hierarchies. As early as 1899, one can find references to the term “deracialization,” a process described as the removing or eradicating of racial characteristics from a person or population. A coinage that emerged from social Darwinism, this usage of the term locates parochial or retrogressive traits as expressions of racial difference that could be eliminated through education, acculturation, or the mixing of populations, thus rendering a “deracialized” group or subject. By the early 1930s, this notion of deracialization as a process of homogenization and incorporation gave way to uses of “racialization” that referenced a process of bodily differentiation capable of explaining the development of distinct “racial stocks” to which different groups of Europeans allegedly belonged. For example, Sir Arthur Keith, a prominent physical anthropologist, conceptualized “race-feeling” as “part

of the evolutionary machinery which safeguards the purity of race" (1928, 316). Keith and his colleagues theorized that nature embedded race within human populations as a means toward the betterment of humankind through differentiation. Racialization thus described a positive and necessary process by which Anglo and Nordic racial supremacy and biological purity could be sustained and reproduced (Barot and Bird 2001, 602-6).

As the scientific imprimatur to claims of white supremacy withered in the aftermath of World War II and the state racism of Nazi Germany, references to "racialization" receded from academic and popular discourse. The term then reemerged in Frantz Fanon's influential *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963/2004). Writing in the context of anticolonial struggles in North Africa, Fanon contrasted social conditions that were "racializing" against those that were "humanizing," demonstrating how racial oppression organizes and constrains a universal recognition of human capabilities (Essed and Goldberg 2000; Barot and Bird 2001; Fanon 1963/2004). In Fanon's usage, racialization, or the hierarchical production of human difference through race, is posed as a necessary precondition for colonial domination and a hindrance to the process of internal self-making among Black subjects. The influence of Fanon's equation of racialization and dehumanization is apparent in a wide range of scholarly work that interrogates the social construction of race, especially in postcolonial scholarship (Said 1978; Bhabha 1994; Rabaka 2010). This work has exposed the legacies of racialized colonial discourses, noting the ways that racial meaning structures the construction of "the Orient" in western European artistic, literary and political discourse and interrogating how the emergence of the United States as an empire has depended on an array of racial formations: the historical racialization

of Asians as dangerous threats to the nation; the contemporary racialization of the same population as "model minorities"; and the post-9/11 racialization of the "uncivilized" Muslim/Arab as an object of racial terror and as a population requiring U.S. intervention, supervision, and domination (Prashad 2007; Lee and Lutz 2005; Razack 2012).

In a parallel use of the term, scholars of social policy have examined the ways in which debates over issues such as welfare, immigration, crime, reproductive rights, and taxes in the United States have become thoroughly racialized since the 1960s. As the civil rights movement effectively challenged formal policies of race-based segregation and discrimination, the concept of racial "color blindness" became the dominant principle within official legal and political discourse (Gotanda 1991). Within this framework, discriminatory practices and ideals are supposedly inadmissible in policy debates and legal deliberations. But public controversies about whether the government should provide cash assistance to low-income families (Fujiwara 2008; Quadagno 1994) or militarize national borders or cover abortions in publicly financed health-insurance programs (E. Gutiérrez 2008; K. Baird 2009; Richie, Davis, and Traylor 2012) or raise property taxes to improve schools (Edsall and Edsall 1992) or prosecute a "War on Drugs" (Michelle Alexander 2010) all draw on and produce a dense set of racial meanings. The simultaneous withdrawal of public funding for social welfare programs, along with the systematic reduction of property and income taxes perceived to support those programs, is often tied to assumptions about the racial identities of the beneficiaries of those policies. In this sense, these debates are racialized.

Contemporary scholarship has also complicated our understanding of processes of racialization by attending to the intersections of gender, class, age,

and sexuality and by venturing beyond the national boundaries and Black/white dichotomy that has long dominated the literature on race (Crenshaw 1995). Along these lines of inquiry, the meanings attached to the racialized body have led to wide-ranging questions. How can the concept of racialization challenge the double or triple vulnerability of Muslim immigrant women with disabilities (Dossa 2009)? What do the debates surrounding U.S. immigration policies reveal about the racialization of the “illegal immigrant” as a displaced nonperson who embodies criminality (T. Sandoval 2008)? How has the racialization of Black women in the United States depended on notions of the pregnant Black woman’s body as representative of the “undeserving poor” (Bridges 2011)? How does religion structure and articulate processes of racialization for followers of Islam and Judaism and for Hindus (Joshi 2006)? Comparative and intersectional analyses of the colonization of indigenous peoples in a number of regions and the colonization of nations in Africa and the Caribbean similarly link processes of racialization and globalization (Das Gupta et al. 2007). Work in this vein has focused on topics including the globalized production of knowledge about race, the cultural dimensions of globalization, transnational migration, feminism and the politics of decolonialization, consumption, and global economies (M. Jacqui Alexander 2005; Appadurai 1996; De Genova 2005; Ferreira da Silva 2007; C. Freeman 2000; Gilroy 1993; Thomas and Clarke 2006).

A promising trajectory within the current scholarship on racialization explores the ways in which the hierarchies of humanity that the concept of race has historically signified increasingly become articulated through the logics of neoliberalism, militarism, and security. In a discussion of the post-World War II global shift toward official antiracisms, Jodi Melamed

has argued that the “trick of racialization” is that it displaces differential valuations of humans into global ordering systems which yield new, more covert expressions for privileged racializations such as “liberal,” “multicultural,” and “global citizen,” alongside stigmatized racializations such as “unpatriotic,” “monocultural,” and “illegal” (2011, 2). The state’s formal antiracism becomes pressed into service to defend or justify unbridled U.S. military occupation, widening economic inequalities, muscular immigration enforcement, and the expansion of prisons and police authority within the United States (Cacho 2012; De Genova 2012; Singh 2012). These diverse usages of the term “racialization” across a range of fields and disciplines—including sociology, ethnic studies, anthropology, cultural studies, and American studies—will continue to be foundational to conveying relations of power and authority within and beyond U.S. political culture, even as its referents continue to change and evolve.