

media reform  
article

## **New Beginnings: Racing Histories, Democracy and Media Reform**

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Elaborating on some of Edward Said's key theories on writing, this paper interrogates the historical periodizations that serve to constitute communication and antecedents of media reform. Critically examining the concept "critical juncture," a term utilized by Robert McChesney to describe a transformative moment in the history of communication in the United States, this paper explores the relationships between and among deployments of history, claims to democracy, and processes of agenda-setting in the media reform movement. I argue that many characterizations of communication, and the crucial historical moments that constitute it remain fundamentally partial in order to derive a necessary rhetorical force to support a media reform agenda that takes U.S. national policy as its primary focus. Particularly attentive to U.S. black racial formation and activism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this paper examines what may be some "critical disjunctures" between Africana studies and communication, racial justice and media reform. I first examine each of McChesney's critical junctures, paying particular attention to the specific sociohistorical processes that shape and construct black racial identities during these times. The second part of the paper considers the values of historical claims in the service of positioning democracy as a progressive social project in the United States. I conclude by offering several epistemological and practical changes that might serve to incorporate racial justice models in the media reform movement.

Keywords: Media Reform; Civil Rights Movement; Democracy; Black History

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Dan Berger, Deborah Thomas, John L. Jackson, Jr., Luther Riley, Jasmine Cobb, and Mecca Jamilah Sullivan for comments on this paper.

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Date submitted: 2008-02-01

Edward Said, in his *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, argues that a dramatic shift occurred in 20<sup>th</sup> century writing, the result of which was a new understanding of language “as an intentional structure specifying a series of displacements [sic]” (Said, 1985, p. 66). Said suggests that this shift moves from a period of understanding language as “dynastic, bound to sources and origins” to one, which could be described as displaying “complimentarity and adjacency; instead of a source we have the intentional beginning, instead of a story a construction” (ibid.). This paper expands Said’s theory to evaluate and re-theorize conceptions of history and their impact on notions of democracy and media reform. Explicitly looking at U.S. black racial formation and activism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this paper seeks to interrogate historical claims and rhetorical instantiations of democracy, inasmuch as they serve as validations for a media reform movement primarily interested in national policy change.

Mass media, and particularly journalism, have often been referred to as the “fourth estate,” developed from theories by Thomas Carlyle who argues that “printing . . . is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, [and] Democracy is inevitable . . . . Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority” (1905, pp. 349-350). For Carlyle, the press, much like any other branch of the government, derives its authority by holding the attention of its readers. However, media reform advocates and scholars rightfully warn that corporate concentration and hyper-commercialism have had a grave impact on mass media, such that it is unable to serve its democratic aim or community interest (see e.g., McChesney, 2000, 2004 & 2007; Klinenberg, 2007). Free Press, a national organization working for media reform and co-founded by Robert McChesney, Josh Silver and John Nichols, asserts in its materials that a freer press will lead to “a more participatory and accountable government and to more sustainable policies and practices regarding national and global development” (freepress.net). This assertion is partially based on a philosophy about social change, but also, as evidenced by McChesney’s vast works, a particular understanding of history.

In his *Communication Revolution: Critical Junctures and the Future of Media*, McChesney offers the concept “critical juncture” to explain the history of media and communication in the United States. According to McChesney, a critical juncture occurs when at least two of the following conditions coincide: a new communication technology undermines a current system, the content of the media system is discredited, and a major political crisis reveals a severe social disequilibrium and the necessity for reform (McChesney, 2007, p. 10). Employing the concept of critical juncture, McChesney argues that the field of communication was constituted in reaction to three such moments in the past century, namely the Progressive Era (primarily the 1910s and 1920s) and the development of professional journalism, the 1930s and the advent of radio, and the 1960s and 1970s, which witnessed the rise of popular social movements. For McChesney, it appears that there is little connection between each of the time periods he describes aside from the criteria he lays out, and McChesney’s measures do not account for the legacy of personal and popular activism that ineffably mark the period between the Progressive Era and the 1960s and ‘70s, often referred to as the Great Society Era. Historians of black political and social movements have characterized this period as encompassing the long civil rights movement (see Singh, 2004; Hall, 2005). Failure to consider this more expansive view of histories of social change obfuscates the tenuous relationships marginalized communities have endured with the American government and media.

The black press, for example, provides a powerful counter narrative to communication practices and governmental policies, as its very existence calls into question whether the media has ever fulfilled Carlyle's idealized theorizations. Founded in 1827, the first black newspaper was "a leader of protest against injustices . . . almost totally committed to the cause" of black liberation (Wolseley, 1990, p. 24).<sup>2</sup> While some scholars have illustrated the relative commercialization of the black press, none can deny the historical and contemporary import of the press as an instrument of black political and cultural expression (see e.g., Detweiller, 1922; Wolseley, 1990; Davy, 1998; Washburn, 2006). Equally important to a study of the relationship between media reform and movements for racial justice is a comprehension of black and other histories, which focus on social justice and serve to illustrate how certain American social movements have sought both to critique imperialist practices abroad while attending to injustices on U.S. soil (see e.g., Edwards, 2003; Von Eschen, 1997). Therefore, I focus on black racial formation, consciousness, and movements during and directly prior to the "long civil rights era," to elucidate what may be some critical "disjunctures" between ethnic studies and communication, racial justice and media reform. Juxtaposing moments in the civil rights movement to McChesney's periodizations of rapid change in communication history — that is, his critical junctures — serves to demonstrate a racial interstitiality, which characterizes the relationship between dominant conceptions of media reform and subaltern, or marginalized, racial histories. The historical moments and figures on which I focus — namely the Black Power movement and its antecedents — are primarily masculinist in nature, or what Hazel Carby (1998) might describe as the tradition of "race men." Notwithstanding the importance of such figures as Ida B. Wells, Angela Davis, and other black women who have made indelible marks on African American history, my discussion of Marcus Garvey, W.E.B Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, Robert Williams and Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrates one alternative history, among many, to the periodizations regarded as constituting the history of communication and media reform in the United States.

Focusing on each of these examples of personal activism demonstrates the ways in which racism has been and continues to be a failure of democracy, and an examination of black social justice

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<sup>2</sup> A year after the establishment of the first black newspaper, early labor leaders established the creation of the *Mechanics Free Press*. Approximately 40 years later, in 1868, two leaders in the women's movement founded *The Revolution*. In his "What Public Journalism Knows about Journalism But Doesn't Know About 'Public,'" Michael Schudson describes the period between 1790 to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a dominant period for "advocacy model" or "party journalism." Schudson argues, however, that, "[t]he advocacy model, despite its long service to American democracy, lies on the scrap heap of history as far as the general circulation mass media are concerned" (Schudson, 1999, p. 120). My argument is not that the black press serves as the only example of the need to assert a voice against dominant norms of the time, but that its longevity and uniqueness as both an advocacy tool and information source for black people demonstrates the ways in which the black press serves to critique popular conceptions of democracy. In the words of Roland Wolseley, ". . . a black press of some sort always will be available in the United States, unless fully integrated means the complete eradication of the black experience, culture, temperament, and personality" (Wolseley, 1990, p. 404). Moreover, as Michaela di Leonardo (2008) argues in her case study of the *Tom Joyner Morning Show*, there is a troublesome lack of attention paid to ethnic media today and historically.

movements and popular culture demonstrates a need to reconceptualize not only our sense of history, but of time, space, and the nebulous concept of "progress." It may also require that we exercise extreme caution in our attempts at periodizations, particularly as they relate to social movements, as these time markers may serve as arbitrary demarcations that unwittingly slice ongoing mobilizations for change. While periodizing, history may make it easier for scholars to interpret change over time, it misses some of the nuances of social change and erases the messiness of political organizing and possible social transformation. Rethinking periodizations with regard to social change, particularly given that social movements are sometimes at odds with each other, requires that we also question the assumptions particular histories narrate about our contemporary moment. Thus, this essay also intends to provide a necessary critique for media reform activists and scholars who assume that democratization and increased governmental control of the media work in tandem with social justice and freedom.

### ***Racing Histories***

McChesney describes the Progressive Era, a period whose end marks the beginning of the long civil rights movement, as a period "when journalism was in deep crisis and the overall political system was in turmoil," (McChesney, 2007, p. 10), a time when "numerous muckrakers and social commentators wrote damning criticism of the antidemocratic nature of mainstream journalism" (p. 26). Citing Upton Sinclair's *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism*, published in 1920, McChesney argues that this time period marks scholars' engagement in issues of media control in the burgeoning fields of journalism and communication. For McChesney, "this was the Golden Age of media criticism" (ibid.), and communication historians John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson (2004) also cite the important works of John Dewey and Robert E. Park during this period. Outside of the academy and in the realm of progressive political organizing, McChesney cites a passage from the compiled works of former Senator and presidential candidate Robert M. La Follette, Sr., "Money power controls the newspaper press . . . wherever news items bear in any way upon the control of government business, the news is colored" (ibid.).<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, the Progressive Era is understood as a time of scholarly writing and organizing for social reform: the enactment of food and drug law, women's suffrage and Prohibition. However, the Progressive Era also marks the conclusion of Reconstruction, scientific racism's reign in the U.S. academy, a peak in lynching, and many local and national politicians garnering popularity around their support for the codification of segregation laws. Notwithstanding certain social reforms, the Progressive Era marked

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<sup>3</sup> While La Follette has been heralded by historians as "one of the most outspoken northern politicians on the race question," he also is criticized for his inability to include race in the platform of his independent progressive party (Southern, 2005, p. 130-131). Historian Philip S. Foner writes, "The Progressive movement had serious difficulties in developing a kind of unity that was needed to overcome these obstacles. Blacks displayed little interest in the La Follette campaign — partly because of their traditional ties to the Republican Party, but also because La Follette and his supporters simply ignored the Negro question" (Foner, 1994, p. 354). La Follette, although noted for his ability to discuss race at all, was unable to practice any particular form of racial justice in his political campaign.

the modern consolidation of white supremacy.<sup>4</sup> Donald Southern argues that the U.S. was “in fact caught up in a powerful tide of white supremacy at home and imperialism against people of color abroad” (Southern, 2005, p. 2). In 1912, for example, Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic candidate championing what we would now call “conservative values,” won a three-way presidential race (beating out La Follette); U.S. Marines landed in Nicaragua to “protect American interests during the revolt”; and European forces completed the divvying up of Africa, leaving only Ethiopia and Liberia independent (Cassata & Asante, 1979, p. 27). The profoundly contradictory relationship between the rhetoric of social equality and racist domestic and international practice, in many ways, sets the stage for the importance of a figure such as Marcus Garvey, whose *Negro World*, established in 1918, brought to an international progressive context La Follette’s problematic formulation of “colored news.”

A year after establishing *Negro World*, Garvey launched the Black Star Line, “which stirred the imaginations of the black people and aroused the hostility of virtually everyone else” (Alvarez, 1971, p. 168). “Through the Black Star Line we will come into trade relations with our brethren on the West Coast of Africa . . .” he told his readers in *Negro World*. The line also would “transport to Liberia and other African countries those Negroes who desire to possess and enjoy the fruits of the richest country on God’s green earth” (ibid.).

Organizing at a similar time as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, was Garvey who himself was from the Caribbean but spent 11 years organizing a back-to-Africa movement in the United States, represents an early example of a necessary transnational black radical outlook. Or as Robin D.G. Kelley explains, Garvey provides a potent description of how “ethnic nationalism and internationalism were not mutually exclusive categories” (1994, p. 105).<sup>5</sup> By 1924, Marcus Garvey’s organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL), claimed more than four

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<sup>4</sup> In her *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Siobhan Somerville explains that, “a discourse on homosexuality in the United States occurred at roughly the same time that boundaries between ‘black’ and ‘white’ were being policed and enforced in unprecedented ways, particularly through institutionalized racial segregation” (Somerville, 2000, pp. 16-17). Somerville also argues that scientific racism provided an important backdrop for the first medical studies of homosexuality or inversion and the invention of homosexual as an identity category (ibid.). Somerville’s work allows us to see the trouble of stamping an era as “progressive,” and points to what might be the contradiction in certain thinking in media reform overall. The Progressive Era ushers in new repressive technologies of race and sexuality, but some scholars focus on big, short-term and miss the political consolidation of conservative social relations.

<sup>5</sup> Certainly Garvey is not the only black radical to champion the importance of looking outside of the U.S. context to find solidarity with other people of color. There are numerous examples of such black radical internationalisms throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002), C.L.R. James’s *History of Pan-African Revolt* (1969), Michelle Ann Stephens’ *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States* (2005), and Vijay Prashad’s *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (2002) provide interesting accounts of such movements.

million members, truly making transnational black organizing the news of its day (Garvey, M., 1995). While his vision of leading a large-scale return of diasporic descendants to Africa was not realized, Garvey popularized a decidedly pan-African version of black nationalism. His efforts are particularly significant given the political climate for black newspapers and the general sense of state repression at the time, which William G. Jordan characterized as threatening, given the World War I climate, to anyone who put forth any "unpatriotic" assertions (Jordan, 2001; see also Singh, 2004). Garvey was imprisoned for four years and eventually deported to Jamaica in 1927 for his political organizing work in the United States.

The early stages of the long civil rights era were marked by tragedy, as in the case of the Atlanta riots; compromise, as in Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee plan; and radicalism, as in the works of Garvey and other early black nationalists. As many white Americans were contemplating the myriad of responsibilities that accompanied the onset of U.S. modernity, countless black Americans were attempting to survive in a post-Reconstruction era and dreaming of racial equality, which has yet to be fully achieved. Or, as Nikhil Singh argues, "'Negroes' had a separate existence within, and a tortured relationship to, the United States as a nation" (Singh, 2004, p. 2). The 1930s and the Great Depression only served to exacerbate the differences between white and black Americans.

McChesney describes "the overlay of the world crisis of the 1930s and 1940s, with the Depression and the global rise of fascism" as the provocation for the second critical juncture "above all else" (McChesney, 2007, pp. 27-28). These factors, for McChesney, also combined to produce the historical context for the "crystallization of the field" (ibid.). McChesney notes Schiller's argument about the field in the 1930s, "all the elements for a powerful radical critique of propaganda were in place in communication, aided and abetted by a relatively sympathetic political climate, and elites concerned and confused by the world they were entering" (McChesney, 2007, p. 29). However, Schiller's focus on "elites" denotes a clear assumption about the likely origins of "radical critique," one which must ignore the legacies of the black press inasmuch as it, at this time, had a century-long history of critiquing mainstream press; its very existence demonstrating the inequality W.E.B. Du Bois eloquently describes in his 1943 *Chicago Defender* article. Du Bois wrote,

The American press in the past almost entirely ignored Negroes. Very little of what Negroes wanted to know about themselves, their group action and the relation of public occurrences to their interests were treated by the press. Then came the time with the American press so far as the Negro was concerned was interested in the Negro as minstrel, a joke, a subject of caricature. He became in time an awful example of democracy gone wrong, of crime and various monstrous acts. [quoted in Franklin, 1987, p. 240]

Du Bois, a vocal figure in civil rights from the turn of the 20th century as well as a prolific scholar and industrious journalist, wrote extensively on the black press and its relationship to democracy and racial justice. Later, during his tenure as a journalist for the *National Guardian*, Du Bois penned several articles that, alongside his regular reports on the historical and contemporary struggles in Africa, challenged "every honest citizen, whether he be reactionary or radical, rich or poor, capitalist or laborer, to fight [the] attack on the freedom of the press" (Du Bois, 1953, p. 341; see also Lewis, 2001).

Frustrated with American racism and optimistic about African liberation, Du Bois chose to live out his last days in Ghana, though he remained hopeful about the possibility for a true democracy in the United States. Du Bois eloquently illustrates the problem of white popular conceptions of the Negro as exemplar of democracy gone wrong, i.e., that the Negro is unable to behave democratically as a citizen. But the condition and treatment of black Americans and others also serves to demonstrate what is wrong with democracy, namely that it functions on necessary exclusions. Conceptions of the citizen in United States history have, historically and presently, served to animate struggles for racial justice. Even if the tide had turned a different way on the issue of media reform in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the social, economic and political conditions for black Americans suggest that few would benefit from such plans. And given the consolidation of white supremacy at this time, we could even speculate that victories in media reform might have bolstered anti-black sentiment and violence.

More broadly, while the Great Depression took its toll on the country, African Americans experienced economic setbacks more acutely. Black people, according to numerous surveys, were 50% less employed than white workers during the period, and unemployment rates for black women were between 50 – 75% (Szostak, 1995, p. 308). In some northern cities, whites called for the firing of black people in any job as long as there were whites out of work, and racial violence again became more common. At the same time jazz, black poetry and fiction were taking national and international stage. Paul Robeson, perhaps, serves to best illustrate this moment. An international actor, singer, and statesman, Robeson found his passport revoked in 1950 for his involvement in the Council on African Affairs. Penny Von Eschen writes,

Robeson connected his own life and history not only to his fellow Americans and to his people in the South but to all the people of Africa and its diaspora whose lives had been fundamentally shaped by the processes that had brought his foremothers and forefathers to America. (Von Eschen, 1997, pp. 1-2)

As Von Eschen argues, Robeson was hardly alone; intellectuals, journalists, and activists in the 1940s, compelled by the “global dynamics unleashed by World War II,” were articulating black American subjectivities informed by analyses of transnational oppression (ibid., p. 7).

In many ways, the Cold War served to ferment and proliferate radical strands of black nationalism. In historian Joseph Peniel's discussion of Richard Wright, a noted author and co-publisher of the radical journal, *Presence Africaine*, he describes Wright as “committed to radical internationalism” with an ultimate vision of “transnationalism humanism that went beyond narrow nationalisms of any kind” (Joseph, 2003, p. 183). At the second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, which included Franz Fanon, Jean Price-Mars and Cheikh Anta Diop, the attendees undertook the task of redefining black culture in a global sense. Part of their thinking was published in *Presence Africaine*, in which they wrote, “The most universal philosophical doctrine or literary work is only valid by virtue of the men who live by it. It is only the people who give it authority and dynamic force” (quoted in Joseph, 2003, p. 183). Strikingly, this formulation of the relationship between writing and power echoes forcefully theories on media as the fourth estate as well as a popular understanding of how democracy becomes legitimated. However, the above passage speaks most directly to the importance for African countries to resist the material and

cultural legacies of colonialism. Thus its articulation of media and democracy must be understood as first and foremost a global anti-imperialist stance.

For McChesney, the popular social movements of the 1960s and 1970s were “much more a global critical juncture for communication than the two earlier ones” (McChesney, 2007, p. 32). Citing both the formation of the New International Information Order (also known as the New World Information and Communication Order) and the United States’ and England’s subsequent pull out of UNESCO in 1984 and ’85 respectively, McChesney argues that this era marks the rise to dominance of neoliberalism as an interstate ideology (McChesney, 2007, p. 33).<sup>6</sup> As a domestic issue, McChesney describes his third critical juncture as a “crisis of democracy” created by “previously apathetic, passive, and marginalized elements of the population — for example, minorities, women, students — becoming politically engaged and making demands upon the system” (ibid., p. 11).

Ignoring the prior histories of movements among people of color, feminists, and young people, McChesney’s argument fails to link the question of a “crisis in democracy” with his earlier formulation of the globality of the third critical juncture. Moreover, the conflation of “apathetic, passive and marginalized” as descriptors for oppressed groups prior to the 1960s and 1970s maligns the relationship between national and global structural forces and lived experience, or the numerous actions taken in response to earlier globalized regimes. McChesney’s third critical juncture witnessed the rise of Black Power movement, which came to the fore in the mid-1960s. Robert F. Williams, a key figure during the 1950s, began as an organizer with NAACP until he was later forced to flee the United States to Cuba after J. Edgar Hoover placed Williams on the FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list.<sup>7</sup> From Cuba, Williams published his newspaper, *The Crusader* and regularly made radio addresses to black people, primarily in the South, on “Radio Free Dixie,” a station he established with assistance from Fidel Castro (Tyson, 2001). Though the U.S. government aggressively blocked the station’s signal, it was widely known among black Americans as a radical voice against Jim Crow oppression and U.S. imperialism.

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<sup>6</sup> Hamid Mowlana argues that the legacies of NWICO are that “the changes that [previously] appeared impossible to many are now a part of everyday life. The world continues to witness a social transformation that cannot be explained merely by orthodox political and economic theories of social or developmental change. In this era of challenging and chaotic digital transformation, human relations and international politics have met a complex and uncharted world” (Mowlana, 1993, p. 60). Examples I provided from the 1910s and 1940s demonstrate that this world may not be as “uncharted” as it appears at first glance.

<sup>7</sup> In August of 1961, Robert Williams was forced to leave the country when an FBI Most Wanted warrant, signed by J. Edgar Hoover, was issued in Charlotte, North Carolina, spuriously charging Williams with unlawful interstate flight to avoid prosecution of kidnapping. The FBI document insidiously lists Williams as a “free lance writer and janitor” and states that (Williams) “has previously been diagnosed as a schizophrenic and has advocated and threatened violence . . . considered armed and extremely dangerous.” His subsequent exile to Cuba and China marked a time of continued engagement with the Black Power movement in the U.S. with support by Cuban and Chinese leaders (Tyson, 2001).



Black Power activists' critiques were and continue to be largely informed by a belief that assimilation destroys black people's senses of dignity and heritage, echoing and inspired by the views espoused in Garvey's earlier calls to action. Singh argues that the journey of Robert Williams "out of the old southern black belt, and black millennial sectarianism into the geopolitical ambit of decolonization, signaled a return to an earlier emphasis on racialized geopolitics" (2004, p. 191). Singh's argument about Williams highlights two important ways to understand the Black Power movement more broadly. First, the Black Power movement in the 1960s did not simply spring up from thin air, but rather took root at the end of Reconstruction. Second, the political strides made for racial justice, in terms of national policy change, but also invaluable anti-imperialist work — which was tragically cut short due to state repression and violence — makes clear the dangers involved in espousing and practicing a radical, visionary critique. In addition, radical media, such as Radio Free Dixie and others, were crucial to this movement as instruments of self-definition, self-determination, and radical critique.

Black Power activist Charles Hamilton described four categories of Black Power activity: the conforming "political bargainer," the "moral crusader," the "alienated reformer," and the "alienated revolutionary" (quoted in McCartney, 1992, p. 113). Among these four categories, flexible enough to include figures like Rosa Parks and Stokely Carmichael, questions of democracy were of limited, often strategic concern. Rather than making democracy an end game, Black Power activists focused on developing a plan of action that focused on liberation. The full rights and privileges of citizenship in one's national government was only one part of an international strategy that sought to address injustices on U.S. soil and abroad. Also, as many of the previous examples make clear, working within anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist framework often jeopardized one's citizenship status.

McChesney also describes how the "crisis in democracy," precipitated changes in the scholarly discipline of communication. He argues that "[f]or communication scholars, all the long-standing presuppositions they were trained in, and that were taken for granted in our society, [to] no longer hold" (McChesney, 2007, p.11). McChesney also writes that the results of the 1960s and 1970s were "less tangible for [the field of] communication" as "they were buried by the neoliberal epoch that followed" (McChesney, 2007, p. 10). But scholars like Paul Gilroy (1993) and others make clear how the context of globalization is not always a matter of neoliberalism; rather, he illustrates the progressive potential of transnational (Black Atlantic) sensibilities, produced by global structural forces, communication technologies, and knowledge circulated by black bodies that travel. Historian Michelle Ann Stephens discusses the roles of Caribbean artists and intellectuals Garvey, Claude McKay, and C.L.R. James and their work to shape black consciousness, modeling what she calls, "a global black masculinity" (Stephens, 2005, p. 6). Moreover, many black American artists and activists — such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Du Bois — chose to live for long stints or permanently in Europe or Africa. The life histories of these figures elucidate a pattern of black globality that precedes the current neoliberal epoch. Moreover, black nationalisms, even in their earliest instantiations, were often pan-African in orientation, relying heavily on the circulating knowledges of black intellectuals, artists and activists.

To simply view globalization as a matter of U.S. cultural imperialism or hegemony would serve to undercut the long histories and ignore the victories of international movements for racial justice, women's

equality, and workers.<sup>8</sup> This “disjuncture” between understandings of globalization as it relates to the current reign of neoliberalism as well as the basis for social justice movements across time and space demonstrates the limits of the utility of the term “critical juncture.” Even as “critical juncture” is an effective phrase to capture the enormity of mass struggle, part of the trouble in using it, as a means to describe history is the manner in which it unnaturally and inaccurately slices longer histories, rendering movements static and almost random in their emergence and dissolution.

### ***History's (Over)determination of Democracy***

In *Black is a Country*, Nikhil Singh argues that the history of black activists committed to racial justice necessarily understands their project as having global dimensions. Singh suggests, moreover, that in light of

the round of [imperialist] schemes to perfect the world in America's image, the legacies of America's racial dialectic casts a healthy skepticism on the notion that there exists an universalizing tendency within this nation that inevitably wins out, and instead shows how exclusions of the past are reproduced and transferred to the present. (Singh, 2004, p. 14)

Singh's introduction focuses on contemporary misreadings of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s commitment to racial justice to argue that the “‘King-centric’ account of the civil rights era has become central to a civic mythology of racial progress in late twentieth-century America” (Singh, 2004, p. 5). In a 1998 article in *The Nation*, for instance, political theorist Benjamin Barber takes Martin Luther King's work as an instance of the triumph of democracy. Barber succinctly illustrates what Singh describes as present day “civic mythology” when he writes that, “Martin Luther King, Jr. assailed the American nightmare of racism by embracing the American dream. More democracy” (Barber, 1998, p. 11).

Clamoring for “more democracy” to solve a “crisis in democracy” exhibits a narrow nationalist framework in order to interpret the uneven deployments of democracy in the U.S. past. Barber writes in support of democracy

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<sup>8</sup> Contemporary theorists Hardt and Negri have garnered a lot of attention for their works, notably *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), which also speak to the possibilities for movement building across national boundaries. Many of Hardt and Negri's theorizations, partially due to an emphasis on recent technological development, also overlook a legacy of Pan African organizing. George Katsiaficas (2006) has criticized Negri's focus on technology. Positing his own theory to explain the workings of international social movements, Katsiaficas writes, “The politics of eros infuse everyday life with a content that subverts would-be colonizers and preserves it as a reservoir of the life force. The ‘eros effect’ indicates how social movements are an expression of people's loving connectedness with each other” (p. 221). In contrast to Negri's cyborgs, Katsiaficas views social movements as a mechanism that preserves and expands the human heart and “all that stands opposed to machine culture” (ibid.).

America's most promising progressive principles have in fact always been its first principles; for America's first principles (if not its practices) have always been fundamentally progressive. Foremost among these principles is Jefferson's bold claim that the remedy for all the defects of democracy is simply more democracy. (Barber, 1998, p. 11)

Jefferson's relationship to Sally Hemmings or his 186 other slaves notwithstanding, the syntax of Barber's claims belies a self-referential, if not conservative, understanding of progressivism. Similarly, some media reform leaders use "Founding Father" arguments to support a radical communication and media reform agenda; John Nichols and McChesney argue that "a free press is the sine qua non of the entire American Constitution and republican experiment" (Nichols & McChesney, 2005). Implicit in these claims is a commitment to social progress that tacitly reworks history as a narrative of fulfillment of democratic possibility. Or, as Singh explains, the "prevailing common sense of the post-civil rights era is that race is the provenance of an unjust, irrational ascription and prejudice, while nation is the necessary horizon of our hopes for color-blind justice, equality and fair play" (Singh, 2004, p. 11). This logic also allows for racism to have occurred only in the past, and obfuscates the way that white supremacy continues to shape national policy and people's lived experiences.

The Constitution is flexible enough to undo some of the unjust practices of its founders. However, it still remains that the foundation of democracy was built on inequality; in fact the relationship between Republican ideals and racial oppression, as Joel Olson argues, were "intimately linked" (2004, p. xv). While contemporary advocates for democracy surely oppose racial inequality, the concept of race and what Michael Hanchard describes as "racial valuations" — or the "imposition of differentiated degrees of value upon certain types of people" — ought to remain a critical concern for activists and scholars today (2006, p. 16). Democracy cannot be seen as the solution to racial injustice, but rather as being born out of the very condition. For Olson, democracy is a "political problem" as the "question is not just democracy for whom but what kind of democracy; not just who is to be made equal but what kind of equality, not just who is to be free but what kind of freedom" (ibid., pp. xvi-xvii). The media reform movement must also contend with the questions Olson poses — that is, what kind of freedom will be brought about as a result of non- or less corporatized media models. Answering this question requires a broad historical approach to theorizations and deployments of democracy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> C. Edwin Baker addresses some of the key issues Olson outlines. Baker argues that democracy produces competing claims, and the negotiation of such claims is, according to Baker, a "proper subject of policy making" (2006, pp. 146-148). Baker also offers up the concept of "complex democracy" as a theory of governance that emphasizes the importance of counterpublics and subaltern public spheres in order to guard against the "undemocratic domination of smaller, structurally weaker, or otherwise marginal subgroups." Entrusting national governments to facilitate intragroup conflict requires a profound faith in democracy. While Baker is sensitive to the dynamics of domination that democracy may very well produce, more attention must be paid on how to structurally support the voices of the subgroups in "complex democracy."

History, itself, as Arif Dirlik argues, has become a paradox of the postmodern age, such that the "past itself seems to be up for grabs, and will say anything we want it to say" (Dirlik, 1999, p. 1). Citing Georg Lukács's formulation of "the present as history," McChesney argues that nearly every political economic research project contains a historical dimension. However, Dirlik's argument seems to rework Lukács' earlier formulation such that history must fundamentally be a version of the present. Dirlik underlines the point that rather than regarding history as a set of hard facts discovered in archives, it is important to view historiography as a reflexive process, requiring an almost ethnographic sensibility in its deployment in the postmodern present. Reflexive renderings of history also require media reform activists and scholars to acknowledge that any account of social progress is most often incomplete and unevenly deployed.

The problem, which afflicts the media reform movement, is similar to those that plague the some facets of the Marxist Left. Arjun Appadurai argues that "even the most complex and flexible theories of global development which have come out of the Marxist tradition . . . are inadequately quirky, and they have not come to terms with what Lash and Urry (1987) have . . . called 'disorganized capitalism'" (Appadurai, 1993, p. 221). He argues that instead we must understand globalization as a system of disjunctures, which include "ethnoscapes," "mediascapes," "technoscapes," "finance-scapes," and "ideoscapes." Appadurai uses "scapes" to illustrate these interstitial concepts as "deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors" (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> Using Appadurai, we can think through the productive possibilities of disjunctures, in its ability to schematize and theorize space even as it may be that his "scapes" persist in the somewhat nebulous categorizations of time.<sup>11</sup>

Appadurai's characterizations of this space as "disjunctural" or interstitial seem also to characterize aptly the relationships between ethnic studies and communication, cultural studies and political economy. Though not without problems, Appadurai's "disjunctures" may be as fruitful as McChesney's critical junctures. Cultural anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo, among others, particularly critique Appadurai's notion of "finance-scapes" for its ahistoricity and lack of focus on "cycles of more tangible accumulation by

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<sup>10</sup> Appadurai's emphasis on "scapes" resonates with James Carey's discussion on maps and their relationship to reality in his essay, "A Cultural Approach to Communication." Carey argues that space can be mapped in different modes with different symbolic forms. Similar to Appadurai's formulations, each of Carey's symbolic forms possess the distinguishing characteristics of displacement and productivity. According to Carey, "to live within the purview of different maps is to live within different realities . . . maps not only constitute the activity known as mapmaking; they constitute nature itself" (1989, pp. 27-28).

<sup>11</sup> Clearly, there have been a number of scholars who take a critical race studies approach to communication, including Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Molefi Assante, Kobena Mercer, and John L. Jackson, Jr. Moreover, there are also scholars, such as Vincent Mosco and others who advocate for a deeper understanding of the compatibility of cultural studies and political economy. However, these areas within communication have still to fully engage each other, and communications remains fairly divorced from much engagement with most work produced in ethnic studies.

dispossession" (di Leonardo, 2008, pp. 11-12). Notwithstanding, these "scapes" fittingly include an element of unevenness, mirroring Stuart Hall's notion of diaspora as "articulation," or rather a combination of structural influences "related as much through their differences as through their similarities" (Hall, 1980, p. 320).

More recently, David Harvey makes a similar argument in his *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, when he critiques Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin for their inability to theorize accurately and robustly the relationship between space and capital (Harvey, 2001, pp. 326- 328). Harvey argues that capitalism, at its very core, works at cross-purposes with itself. Spatiotemporal understandings of capitalism make clear the ways "core features of capitalism" undermine the coherence of a regional (or national) space (ibid.). Describing the paradoxical nature of capitalism, Harvey writes, "The power to undermine depends, however, upon the geographical mobilities of both capital and immobile infrastructures whose relative permanence in the landscape of capitalism reinforces the structured regional coherence being undermined" (Harvey, 2001, p. 332). Harvey, in this way, serves to punctuate a concern with a policy-centered media reform agenda's use of place. If we act as though the state holds *all* the power to establish "technologically-determined spatial constraints," (e.g., mass media) by employing a strategy that focuses on national policy reform, critical communication scholars and media activists may in fact further support the capitalist structures that we are trying to undermine. Similarly, if the rule of the day in neoliberalism is to constitute identity on the basis of consumption, focusing primarily on who owns the media may be more deeply inflected by neoliberalist mores than media reformers care to imagine. More simply, focusing on the "thing" of media leaves out important questions about how, who, why, when and where it is being developed, financed, and used. These questions bring much to bear on what a free media movement might look like.

In an effort to answer these questions, many scholars call for media reformers to look and act globally. McChesney, in his final chapter of *Communication Revolution*, suggests the need for communication scholars "to expand . . . [our historical] research to a global basis and internationalize our research. If the premises for U.S. communication are disintegrating in a critical juncture, so must the assumptions of American scholars as we look at the world" (McChesney, 2007, p. 215). Such a perspective, unfortunately, ignores the complex relationships between the global and the local. Globality is not simply a question of economic flows and U.S. hegemony, but as each of the examples I have provided suggest, it shapes the contours of movements and transnational possibilities for resistance. In each of these examples, the project of African American advocates for equality and racial justice has linked the global (imperialism) to the national (domestic racism). The future of communications and media reform is indeed narrow if it focuses specifically on policy and utilizing governmental channels that have systematically refused access to groups of people, such as African Americans, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, and immigrants.

Moreover, that certain voices are historically (and often currently) and systematically excluded contributes to the very functioning of the United States as a capitalist and imperialist force. Garvey, Robeson, Williams, and others who articulated an international black nationalist agenda before the postmodern era or the "official beginnings" of neoliberalism serve to evidence Harvey's concept of "time-space compression." Harvey describes time-space compression as the *feeling* that the world has suddenly

become smaller, and the “time-horizons over which we can think about social action become much shorter” (Harvey, 2001, p. 123). While this idea resembles McChesney’s use of “critical juncture,” Harvey’s emphasis on the subjective nature (the feeling) of the moment contributes a vital reflexivity about history and resistance. Harvey writes,

Our sense of who we are, where we belong and what our obligations encompass — in short, our identity — is profoundly affected by our sense of location in space and time. In other words, we broadly locate our identity in terms of space (I belong *here*) and time (this is *my biography, my history*). Crises of identity (Where is my place in this world? What future can I have?) arise out of strong phases of time-space compression . . . the most recent phase has so shaken up our sense of who and what we are that there had to be some kind of crisis of representation in general, a crisis that is manifest in the contemporary world primarily by postmodern ways of thinking. (2001, p. 124)

It is also important to consider Harvey’s notion of locating identity in space and time in its obverse — i.e., that we locate space and time in our identity. Identity should be understood here as mutually constituted by the processes of individual and groups navigating conditions of life including physical and ephemeral relationships to the government, place, and history. Exploring crises of identity and, more broadly, crises in representation therefore become ways to understand the intimate structures of capitalism, time and place. The interests of cultural studies and ethnic studies, and their emphasis on issues of identity and representation, would take center stage in projects grounded in political economy and the fight for control over America’s media. Moreover, it allows for a critical evaluation of claims to democracy that presume universal access for all citizens, including marginalized subgroups and communities to participate on even footing.

### ***New Beginnings: Centering Racial Justice in Media Reform Ideologies***

Michael Schudson critiqued public journalism advocates for confusing definitions of “publics” with definitions of “community.” The former are spaces “where strangers meet to consider and to build a common life under rules by which they are treated as moral equals,” (Schudson, 1999, p. 131) whereas communities are often described as either constituted by geographical proximity or “imagined,” as argued by Benedict Anderson (1983). A media reform movement that takes policy as its primary focus seems to only operate at the level of a presumed public, even as invocations of “community” are ever present in its rhetoric — a rhetoric that also leans upon conceptions of democracy, social progress, and Founding Father’s intentions for legitimacy. The pressing concern therefore is how might we think about democracy and community in such ways that individuals and groups do not need to sublimate their needs or unique histories in service of a greater good. And how different would the media reform movement look if it were focused on issues of social justice, centering racial justice, feminism, queer liberation, workers’ rights, and other concerns as core tenants in a global fight against corporate ownership of the media?

Epistemologically, this refocusing requires new conceptualizations of several key terms: history, democracy, community and progress. The interrelatedness of history and democratic claims suggests that we must think critically about our deployments of history to support democratic, and sometimes patriotic,

claims in the present. Regarding history as a reflexive practice and the past as containing a multiplicity of experiences and constructions compels us to rethink democratic policy reform as our only, or even primary choice. Moreover understanding democracy as a term with contested and often contradictory meanings requires theorizations of media reform to expand its agenda beyond the proper passing and enforcing of national policy to a critical evaluation of representation — i.e., to be cognizant of both structure and form. Quoting James Carey, Schudson writes that contemporary subjects must recognize that “the story of our lives is both ‘part of a narrative of a public community, a community of general citizenship rather than one restricted by class, race, gender and so on,’ and at the same time, find that ‘our lives are also embedded in communities of private identity — family, city, tribe, nation, party or cause’” (Schudson, 1999, p. 129).

Schudson’s framing of James Carey’s assessment of contemporary life is provocative. However, Carey’s description is built on rather simplistic notions of public and private. Certainly the “public” cannot function properly without first addressing “private identities” and their public circulation. A general citizenship cannot exist without the impetus to look beyond the realities of class, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnonational difference.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, private identities frequently take on public lives that exceed the bounds of the nation-state, as evidenced by the numerous figures of the black diaspora discussed above. The example of each of these men’s lives was to connect to a global community, one that was not necessarily premised on place but on Harvey’s concept of “time-space compression” and perhaps tacit anxieties about black masculinity.<sup>13</sup> While Klinenberg (2007, pp. 1-16) makes clear the impact of commercialization on a conception of community as neighborhood, like in his discussion of corporate media’s failure to aid the community of Minot, North Dakota, following a chemical spill, we must also understand community as exceeding one’s locality. Taking an explicitly pan-African stance, communities can also be forged through shared experiences in struggle. However, my argument is not simply a question of pitting and preferring the global over the local; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, makes clear that U.S. incarceration rates make it such that millions of families, disproportionately black, need to fashion a community that joins rural/urban as a result of racist criminal justice policies (Gilmore, 2007). Organizing for racial justice in the United States has often, if not always, required a critique of particular local social conditions that are often connected to broader critiques of space (e.g., anti-imperialist struggles) and time (e.g., a sense that working toward liberation has begun since the first ship set sail in the Middle Passage).

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<sup>12</sup> Russ Castronovo argues that, “an insistence on grappling with material conditions, a refusal to absorb embodied differences under consensus, and other legacies of radical democratic action lie within U.S. citizenship. These stirrings fade when citizenship is reduced to a formal game where the stakes of recognition and exclusion are as absolute and final as death, but at the edges of legal incorporation and political dispossession, the dead walk, too: citizens are reanimated by republican, feminist, and Africanist senses of subjectivity that materialize in the seams of abstract personhood” (2001, p. 3). Castronovo elucidates part of my argument about the need for greater consideration of the mechanisms for change operating in the media reform movement.

<sup>13</sup> In the epigraph to Hazel Carby’s *Race Men*, Philip Brian Harper explains that, “all debates over and claims to ‘authentic’ African-American identity are largely animated by a profound anxiety about the status specifically of African-American masculinity” (Carby, 1998, p. 1).

Practically, it requires media reform leaders to eschew the use of democratic and patriotic claims about how media should be, and once was, the voice of America writ large. It also requires a more flexible understanding of the global that surpasses simplistic versions of U.S. cultural imperialism to think about how Appadurai's various "scapes" serve to provide meaningful disjunctures that shape the contours of social justice movements. In other words, it requires the media reform movement to move from, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., a "'thing'-oriented" — i.e., who should control the technology movement to a "'person'-oriented" movement — that is, who and how can we use technology for broad social change, because a "civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral . . . bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy" (King, 1967).

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