

**The Media Reader on
Representations of Race, Gender,
Disability, Body Size, Age, and
Sexuality**

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&

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Series in Critical Media Studies



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For our mothers, Suzanne Cooper and Julia Heldman.

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Preface

The goal of this reader is to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of media representations of marginalized groups. This book is written for undergraduate and graduate students, but will also be of interest to industry insiders and media inclusion advocates. After reading this book, you will gain a solid understanding of different approaches to studying media, why media are such a powerful force in shaping our culture, and the current state of representation for people of color, women, disabled individuals, older adults, people of size, and LGBTQ+ people.

We approach the topic of media representations as academics and practitioners. Both authors have worked in the media research advocacy space for a combined three decades, and we have witnessed the challenges to making media more inclusive firsthand. We have been in countless writer's rooms and executive suites in Hollywood, sharing data that enables decision-makers to make more inclusive content. The general reception to our advocacy has been enthusiasm in the room, followed by inaction when we leave, because Hollywood is not incentivized to make socially just content. But in every film production company, TV set, advertising agency, etc., there are people who swim upstream in demanding more inclusion. These executives, actors, ad directors, writers, and others speak up when they see an opportunity to cast against convention, remove a sizeist slur, or cut a storyline that freezes Indigenous people in the past. Equipped with data, the insiders who push for inclusion have made a difference. This book shows that they have moved the needle for most marginalized groups, although only a few have achieved representational parity. Our hope is that this book, the first to comprehensively assess representations of all the major marginalized groups in the US, will be a crucial tool for today's students and tomorrow's content creators.

This reader is situated in a rich body of literature that emerged in the early 1990s in the US that applies a Cultural Studies lens to the topic of media representation. Cultural Studies is a politically engaged approach that draws from many disciplines across the social sciences and humanities to better understand how culture influences how power is distributed in a society. We define power as the ability to influence the way others act or think through superior resources or social status. Definitions of "culture" vary, but generally include a shared set of learned behaviors and activities, and values and symbols that differentiate one group of people from another, all of which are learned through a process of socialization. Sociologist John Paul Lederach defines culture as "the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for

perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them.”¹ Popular culture—film, TV, video games, ads, pornography, etc.—plays an outsized role in creating culture. Media are a primary socializing agent that shapes perceptions and interpretations of the world, that in turn shape behaviors and activities. The cultural analysis approach assumes culture is constantly shifting and shiftable because pop culture is ever-changing. This approach also assumes that pop culture is a potent tool the powerful wield to maintain their power. People and groups with social, political, and economic power employ popular media to advance cultural narratives that benefit their identity groups, whether consciously or not. A primary focus for this reader is the role of entertainment media in marginalizing already marginalized people in US society, through erasure and stereotyping.

This reader brings together media studies, American Studies, political science, ethnic studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, queer theory, sociology, disabilities studies, Fat Studies, psychology, history, and ageism studies to shine a light. This cross-disciplinary approach is crucial to understanding why and how Hollywood has erased and stereotyped traditionally marginalized groups, and why this matters. We provide an overview of the rich theories and debates in media studies and then apply a critical approach to the history and current status of representation for six major marginalized groups in US society. This reader also delves into Hollywood’s long history of excluding marginalized people behind the scenes and erasing them on the screen, and activist efforts to make entertainment media more inclusive.

This reader is premised on the assumption that entertainment media is a powerful influence on culture, especially since some readers may consider film and TV as exclusively entertainment and not cultural “educators.” Media both reflects our cultural values and shapes them, so the arrow goes both ways. Another core assumption is that media is a powerful tool for the powerful, meaning media is used to benefit those who make it and other elites who profit from it. To this end, it is important to understand how media is made, what gets made, and how it impacts audiences who view it. This book is primarily focused on what gets made, with nods to how it’s made and how it affects viewers. We propose that whose stories get told, and how they get told, are a great indication of whether and how a society values that group.

This book equips readers with the necessary tools to understand how power functions and operates in the media landscape, and what steps you can take to

¹ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

further social justice through media. Entertainment media is a site where cultural values are constantly contested in ways that shape who has value and resources in society. Our goal with this reader is to prepare you to recognize and address social injustices in media to advance a better world, a world that includes and values everyone. We start with the premise that social justice is the goal— a world with an equitable and fair distribution of privileges, value, opportunities, and resources. To this end, we see entertainment media as a primary site where social values and justice are contested.

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