1

Reconnecting New Forms of Inequality to their Roots

Measuring the Distance between the Eras of Color-Blind Racism and Jim Crow Racism

THE PERSONAL and professional agendas I pursue in this book grew from a desire to right a wrong. In 1989, members of the media, as well as portions of the political establishment and elements of the criminal justice system in New York City, wrongfully accused a group of black and Latino male teens of sexually assaulting a white female who had been jogging in Central Park. She would become known simply as "the jogger." Six teenage boys were charged with the crime. Five of them would eventually be convicted in two trials; the sixth would settle the charges against him in a plea bargain. About thirteen years after the prosecutions, the Manhattan District Attorney's office petitioned the court to vacate the convictions because the actual rapist had stepped forward admitting his guilt. This person, a known and convicted serial rapist and murderer already serving a life sentence, confessed to the attack and said that he had acted alone. Only *his* DNA could be connected to the jogger. Despite these developments in the case in 2002, some members of the political establishment and the criminal justice system continue to support the wrongful convictions of the young men.

The rape of Trisha Meili, a twenty-eight-year-old investment banker working in Manhattan's financial district, drew international media attention through a narrative focused on an allegedly new type of street crime called "wilding." Simply put, the term meant intentionally behaving in a crazy manner, causing harm to others, and damaging property. According to police, the rape of Meili was the culmination of an evening of wilding in Central Park that began with other incidents of physical assault and harassment. With that police declaration, rape and wilding would become joined in the public consciousness. Although

the other incidents mentioned in the police description of the evening's events included assaults that caused various degrees of injury, one thing can be said for certain: It is unlikely the public at large would ever have heard about the other incidents in the park that night had the jogger not been raped. Meili's sexual assault became the central issue in any discussion of wilding in Central Park on the night of April 19, 1989.

I heard about the rape the same way most New Yorkers did—early the following morning from the news media. But this story affected me differently than it did most people because I worked as a journalist. I wrote for the *Daily News,* and I covered the city for a living. When I arrived in the newsroom the day after the attack, it was clear this would be a big story. I had already suspected as much, but I never imagined on that first day that I would end up spending almost two months working on the story, let alone that I would still be involved with the case nearly a quarter century later. This rape was different. Despite my young age and relative inexperience, the jogger incident stood out to me as an important moment because of the reaction that unfolded in my newsroom and in the city.

The incident seemed to galvanize the media and the public because the teens charged with raping Meili—a white woman—were black and Latino. Even in 1989, when the civil rights gains since 1965 were supposed to have erased racial hierarchies and overt discrimination, the incident revived fears of black men preying on white women and engaging in random acts of violence. Such fears and assumptions were rarely expressed or acknowledged in mainstream discourse as the unapologetic racism of slavery and the Jim Crow era, which ended in 1965, gave way to a more subtle expression of many of the same attitudes, dubbed "color-blind racism" by Bonilla-Silva (2006: 28–29). The sexual assault of Trisha Meili tapped into intractable racist ideas that linked people of color and the underclass with social pathology and sexual transgression.

New York City and other metropolitan areas were in the grip of rising crime rates, some of which were attributed to the spread of crack cocaine (Grogger and Willis 2000). This drug, which is a cheaper form of cocaine, spread in the inner cities, and with the media's help, became associated with blacks and Latinos. Although the use of both powder and crack cocaine grew across the nation in the 1980s, it was low-income black and Latino male youths in the inner cities who primarily became associated with the broken lives, crime, and violence that often accompany drug abuse. For many in the mainstream, the Meili rape appeared to be an extension of the pathologies associated with people of color, which the tougher, post-1970s law enforcement tactics and harsher sentencing had failed to deter.

In the context of numerous reports of increasing rates of crime for young black and Latino males, suspicion and skepticism toward these individuals have been treated as commonsensical in the logic of the mainstream. But this logic

also normalizes the privilege assigned to some groups—such as affluent white males—which likely prevents the negative life outcomes experienced by others. The problem with mainstream logic and the practices it engenders is that their underlying assumptions are not regularly challenged. This is especially true of the interworkings of race, class, and gender. People routinely behave in ways that support the mainstream conception of hierarchical social structure, even if they do not realize it and derive no benefit from such behavior. For example, women routinely defer to men, people generally defer to those with more wealth or higher social status, and so forth.

Although claims that we live in a meritocratic society rationalize the existence of these hierarchies, their persistence undermines the fundamental ideas of equality and fairness on which this nation was founded. How do we account for persons or groups who consistently remain at the bottom of such hierarchies, particularly those related to race, class, and gender? For much of the nation's history, these outcomes were explained "scientifically" in terms of natural deficits of the female sex or of those not born into the upper classes, or the innate inferiority of southern Europeans and non-white races. From the early 1900s, science began to show that attributes associated with one's racial classification are not rooted in biology. Since the post–civil rights era, we have largely discredited narratives that use genetics to ascribe certain traits—such as laziness, high intelligence, promiscuity, or leadership—to particular individuals and groups. Also, we have mostly eliminated such genetic arguments as legitimate rationalizations for excluding individuals and groups from fully participating in society.[1]

Many people reference this progress to suggest that race, class, and gender no longer serve as obstacles to full participation in U.S. society and to claim that we are approaching a fully meritocratic society. New ideologies and narratives have been developed to reflect the more inclusive social order. These narratives attribute racially disparate outcomes to individual choice, culture, or market forces; they form the basis of the color-blind racism described by Bonilla-Silva (2006: 28–29), who argues that race-neutral discourse obscures discrimination and the harm it causes. The notion of race neutrality that frames laws, policies, and practices often, in fact, produces or exacerbates racially disparate outcomes. Some examples of supposedly race-neutral laws and practices are the New York Police Department's stop-and-frisk program and the War on Drugs. Consequences of the new refusal to address ongoing issues of racism include racial profiling policies and the persistently small number of people of color in high-level jobs.

The coverage of the Meili rape case demonstrates how the biological explanations of earlier eras could be transformed for a race-neutral frame. Although news stories about the jogger case emphasized the suspects' ages and suggested that their youth might explain the outsized public reaction to the rape, the most

memorable headlines did not refer to age at all. Instead, inflammatory words such as "wilding" and "savage"—words appropriate to an era when ideas about biological inferiority supported traditional racism and its segregationist practices—characterized the coverage. This case became an extreme example of how new narratives about racial groups based on the notion of color-blind racism make it possible for the use of racist tropes from the past and the existence of unequal racial outcomes to be dismissed by mainstream institutions as having little or no relationship to the country's historical and material foundations of racial inequality. Those whites who espouse color blindness could argue that expressions which in the past had been designed to demean a racial group no longer denigrate and subordinate; and racially disparate outcomes which in the past had represented anti-black or anti-brown practices no longer occur due to racism.

As a young African American female journalist watching and participating in the unfolding of the jogger coverage, I felt the sting and the heat of racism as I plotted my own course through the newsroom and the city. I became aware of how the structures of race, class, and gender defined how I operated as I reported the story. The evidence suggests that the case had a long-term impact that reached well beyond the lives of the wrongfully convicted youngsters. It reshaped the margins of race, class, and gender for black and brown low-income males for years to come. The coverage likely contributed to changes in the way we address juvenile justice, with profound consequences for the life outcomes of juveniles of color. Thus, the case stands as a uniquely important element in the evolution of our race-based social structure.

Researching Intersecting Forms of Oppression, Mainstream Media, and Marginality

Savage Portrayals is an autoethnographic study of my experiences covering the rape of the Central Park jogger. The autoethnography, which is based on intensely personal descriptive narratives, is built atop a content analysis of the words and terms used in the newspaper coverage of the rape, the trials, and beyond. I use these two approaches to show the role of the press in constructing racial meaning. I also connect the media coverage of the attack on the jogger to the creation of unequal life outcomes for young, low-income black and Latino males. In addition, I show the relationship between the media's contemporary use of race, class, and gender tropes and the pre–civil rights history of these notions. To do this, I draw from the work of an interdisciplinary group of scholars in the fields of sociology, history, media studies, and cultural studies.

I contextualize my personal narratives and the representations used in the press coverage within America's raced, class-based, and gendered social structure through the incorporation of sociological studies of systemic racism and

the formation of racial categories (Bell 1992; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Du Bois 2003; Feagin 2001; Ferber 1998; K. E. Fields 2002; Omi and Winant 1994) as well as some scholarship on African American history (Allen 1997; Bardaglio 1994; B. J. Fields 1990; Fredrickson 1971a; J. D. Hall 1983; Roediger 1999, 2005; Saxton 1984, 2003; White 1999). I use theories and studies of intersectionality[2] to demonstrate how structures of race, class, and gender came together to delimit my interactions during this period. Intersectional analysis interprets how structures of race, class, and gender intersect in myriad ways to create unique social locations that both oppress and privilege their members. My content analysis of newspaper coverage of the jogger story aims to draw connections between media representations and the real world. Therefore, I also incorporate the work of media studies and cultural studies researchers to provide an analytical foundation for examining the role of the media in shaping our contemporary social order (Gans 1979; S. Hall 2007; S. Hall et al. 1978; Tuchman 1978; van Dijk 1993a, 1993b). I use these wide-ranging areas of scholarship to investigate American social structure, as well as to examine what is central to our society, what we marginalize, and what holds us together—in other words, the main currents of our world. Thus, this investigation of the media coverage of the jogger case looks at the mainstream: what shapes it and how it operates to maintain affluent white males in a position of dominance.

I see the mainstream as a site for corralling support for dominant groups. As an instrumental entity, it includes and excludes categories of people, cultural symbols, forms of meaning making, forms of expression, and forms of interaction in the society based on the needs of the dominant groups.[3] The degree of one's possession of the attributes of the mainstream determines how easily one can gain right of entry to navigate its institutions. Historically, in U.S. society, people who are white, middle class or affluent, citizens, and male typically access and plot a course through the mainstream with relative ease. People possess the requisite traits for entrée into the mainstream in varying degrees; and they are shut out in varying degrees depending on the features they hold. *Savage Portrayals* looks at how in the era of color blindness the mainstream media coverage of the rape of the Central Park jogger maintained white male group dominance and further marginalized low-income black and Latino males through vilification of the purported attackers and defining them as hyperdeviant.

Our History of Racial Formation

To connect the contemporary forms of racial groupings and racial representations in the U.S. social structure to the particular race, class, and gender history of the country, I use the racial formation theory developed by Omi and Winant (1994). This theory contends that given the ways in which the notion of race

has been used in the history of the development of capitalism, the European conquest of the New World, colonialism, and slavery and the slave trade, racial classifications are both structural and representational concepts. During the aforementioned periods of history, societies organized themselves around their notions of race, and in the process, categories of race were "created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 1994: 55). This process is what Omi and Winant called "racial formation." In this context, race is defined as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi and Winant 1994: 55).[4] And the race-based social movements, policies, state actions, collective activities, and individual interactions that were employed in the process of racial formation are referred to by Omi and Winant (1994) as "historically situated racial projects."

I argue in this study that the development of the contemporary mass media was a type of historically situated racial project because it helped to consolidate the category of people we classify as "white" (see Byfield, forthcoming). The inauspicious beginnings of our modern media system provided the foundation for contemporary racial representations. The role of the press in the construction of what it means to be "white" and "black" is among the racial projects my study analyzes. From the nineteenth century, the white, black, and alternative presses have participated in a variety of racial projects to develop hegemonic and counterhegemonic constructions of the black male image. Such racial projects promote the transformation of the meanings of racial categories, which makes the construction of those groups an ongoing enterprise.

One of the most notable shifts in the conceptualization of racial categories is the transition from viewing them as a matter of biology to accepting race as a social construction. Interpreting race as a biological factor essentialized the concept. Regarding race as biology meant that the various racial categories in which people were grouped were assigned irreducible meanings, yet these meanings were contingent on the era in question. For example, whiteness would be equated with morality and blackness with hypersexuality, as if these traits had been encoded in the DNA of those who were members of these racial categories. Late-nineteenth-century mainstream constructions of the black male image depicted black males as the "black beast rapist" and imagined this character to be biologically controlled (Fredrickson 1971a).

Social scientists began discrediting biological notions of race from the early twentieth century (Omi and Winant 1994). Moving forward, it became more and more acceptable in the mainstream to view racial categories as socially constructed phenomena (Banton 2009; Omi and Winant 1994: 65). While thinking of race as a biological phenomenon fell out of favor, particularly after the modern civil rights movement, there developed the converse conceptualization of race as an illusion. Scholars argue that this view too is flawed (see Bell

1992; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin 2001; Omi and Winant 1994). Societies and systems of signification have been constructed around the meanings assigned to the various categories of race. But whether or not race exists as a biological factor, it continues to be real for people as they interact and find their way in institutions and through other social structures in society. Deeply embedded structural inequalities reproduce racial disparities that continue to give meaning to racial representations created by dominant groups, even in the post–civil rights era.

In New York City at the time of the Central Park jogger incident, many of the events unfolding in the city and providing the backstory for this period revolved around race or were racialized (i.e., viewed through the prism of race). There had been several violent racial confrontations; a crack cocaine "epidemic" that had fueled street crime and drug-related violence; a vigorous tough-on-crime agenda in the local, state, and national political arenas (i.e., the War on Drugs); a rebounding financial sector recovering from a crippling recession; and a mayoral campaign infused with racial tension because it involved the first serious African American candidate for mayor of New York City. Viewing these events through the contemporary lens of racial color blindness prevents one from seeing their relationship to traditional systems of inequality based on race and gender. Dominant groups would interpret the violent racial confrontations as unique incidents, the crack problem would be seen as immoral behavior in poor black and Latino communities, the War on Drugs would represent race-neutral laws and policies, the dearth of employment opportunities for people of color in the public and private sectors would be interpreted as a result of the unpreparedness of those people, and the racial tension some perceived in the mayoral campaign would be viewed as race baiting.[5]

My impressions while covering the jogger story were that race more than any other categorical life factor, such as gender or class, was central to the case. Evidence for this seemed abundant, from the language in the media coverage to the commentary from average citizens as well as public and elected officials, some of whom I interviewed for the story. When some media reports and the assistant district attorney trying the case argued that the incident and the ensuing handling of the case by the media, politicians, and prosecutors had nothing to do with the race of the people involved, I initially interpreted these assertions to be platitudes being used to deflect complaints about racism. Reflecting on the case from a sociological perspective, I now construe such statements as reflecting two things: the ideology of color-blind racism and the new social locations being created by contemporary intersections of race, class, and gender. In the post–civil rights ideology of color blindness, mainstream whites use racial frames that minimize racial discrimination. When these whites tell themselves that they do not see color, actions or policies that lead to disparate racial outcomes can be ignored because discrimination based on biological factors is no

longer perceived to be a major problem (Bonilla-Silva 2006: 29). Purveyors of such discourse are unconcerned about or unaware of the greater likelihood of a group such as low-income black and Latino males being denied their rights.

Unlike the period of "traditional" racism, post–civil rights society has to contend with inclusion. American institutions can no longer exclude people based on race and gender. In this new era, nonbiological attributes such as expressions, geography, and dress are used to construct identity and often to represent one's social location. Leaders of institutions can exclude people who possess what are perceived to be attributes from a particular social location without running the risk of being accused of racism. For example, low-income black males have a disproportionately high rate of criminal convictions. With nearly "one in three young black men . . . [expected to] spend some time in prison," this condition is used as a defining feature of their particular social location (Pager 2007: 3). Members of this group are frequently shut out of jobs because employers frown on criminal convictions, but employers who exclude such individuals cannot be accused of racism. Thus, racial analyses must now focus on the conditions that allow those in power to discriminate against a group of people from a particular social location who have features or attributes that exclude them from the mainstream.

Gender in the Era of Color-Blind Racism

The 1970s not only ushered in a changing discourse on race but also saw a changing discourse on gender. Proponents of the ideology of color blindness argued for a diminished role for the state in managing racial interactions because legal segregation was over. But, in contrast, the changing discourse on gender called for an increasing role for the state (Bumiller 2008). The women's movement was largely concerned with prosecuting a "war" on sexual violence and would require the state to fulfill its duty to protect women equally. But, as Bumiller (2008: 5) points out, the concord between the women's movement and the neoliberal state for the purposes of protecting women from rape and intimate partner violence expanded the reaches of the state "beyond feminist organizations and their agendas." The state, in its agreement with this aspect of the feminist agenda, incorporated feminist as well as other organizations in its "regulatory role" (Bumiller 2008). It required these organizations, many of which were part of the health and social services bureaucracies, to use the state's agendas and priorities to manage the women who used the services intended to help and protect them from sexual violence. The state prioritized welfare reform and crime control. Bumiller (2008: 7) notes

> Mainstream feminist demands for more certain and severe punishment for crimes against women fed into these reactionary forces. This

resulted in a direct alliance between feminist activists and legislators, prosecutors, and other elected officials promoting the crime control business. Although the feminist's "gender war" did not have the same impact on incarceration as the "war on drugs," it still contributed to the symbolic message. . . . The prominence of sexual violence on the crime control agenda led to the creation of specialized sex crime units in large urban police and prosecutors' offices.

What mainstream feminists failed to recognize was the different impacts the state's policies and agendas had on women, depending on their race or class or some other attribute, such as citizenship status. Bumiller (2008) argues that one of the big failings of the gender war has been its failure to adequately address how racism has historically been at the foundation of people's conceptualizations of sexual violence. Black women *and* black men were victimized historically by American society's approach to sexual violence. Black women were subjected to sexual violence with no recourse when slavery denied them any rights over of their own bodies and white male property owners could rape at will and blame their actions on the black woman's sexual appetite. As late as the 1970s, black women who were raped were less likely to have their sexual assault viewed as an act worthy of legal consequence (Lizotte 1985). Conversely, black men were vulnerable to lynching, particularly in the period after the Civil War and into the twentieth century, often due to trumped-up charges based on their so-called biological propensity to rape white women. Scholars have blamed this post–Civil War development on fear of the economic competition black men posed as freedmen.

In the contemporary world, the war against sexual violence heightened fear of the stranger, and one particularly dangerous stranger was seen to be the black male (Bumiller 2008). Thus, embedded in the American imagination of sexual danger is the black male (Bumiller 2008; A. Davis 1981). With this history, treating the issue of sexual violence as "race neutral" would be problematic, according to Bumiller (2008: 21). However, in line with the ideology of color-blind racism, mainstream feminists advanced an agenda based on the idea that race could be a neutral concept in America. Regarding the gender wars of the 1970s, Bumiller (2008: 22) notes, "When the war against sexual violence emerged on the public agenda, it revived the specter of black men as sexual predators, while continuing to devalue the safety of black women." This had consequences for both black women and black men.

Many black feminists would argue that the inability of mainstream (i.e., predominantly white middle- and upper-class) feminists to recognize the disparate impact of the feminist agenda on women outside the mainstream came from the mainstream feminists' lack of awareness about the ways in which structures based on race, class, and gender can intersect to create distinct social

locations that distinguish one woman from another, marginalizing black wom-
en's membership in the categorical grouping "women." In her essay "Individu-
ality and the Intellectuals: An Imaginary Conversation between W.E.B. Du Bois
and Emile Durkheim," social theorist Karen E. Fields (2002) investigates the
relationship of the individual to the collective, particularly when the collective
of which one is a part becomes complicit in one's own subordination. One of
the issues Fields addresses is the naturalization of one's objectification within
collectivities, in other words, the process of group membership.

Fields (2002: 438) builds her argument on Durkheim's ([1912] 1995) semi-
nal study *Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* in which Fields states, "Durkheim
studies the collective alchemy by which *reason* converts bald-faced inventions
into external and constraining facts of nature, capable of resisting individual
doubt." Thus, within collectivities we develop "abstract notions of common
essence" (K. E. Fields 2002: 438). Durkheim ([1912] 1995) discovered this
social fact in his study of aboriginal Australians' racial identification, in which
clans used totems such as kangaroos to signify their identity and in which they
claimed a shared identity with the actual kangaroo. "Through periodically
repeated ritual, and through symbolic reminders between times, the name-
essence is experienced as palpably real. In that way, it gains an objectivity that
makes individual dreams of repudiating the shared identification not so much
undreamable as irrelevant. Such shared identifications are not negotiable con-
tracts" (K. E. Fields 2002: 438). Mainstream white feminists wanted to use the
jogger as an iconic symbol for all women.

The shared identification used by members of categorical groups is made
real to members, says Fields (2002: 439), through "frenzied rites" that Dur-
kheim ([1912] 1995) called "effervescences collectives." I am arguing here that
the frenzied rites that Durkheim saw in his assessment of racial identification
among aboriginal Australians could serve as an analogy for racial projects
throughout U.S. history, such as the very formation of the United States, the
establishment of state and federal policies that separated Native Americans
from their lands, lynchings, the modern civil rights movement, and possibly
even the events surrounding the Central Park jogger incident. Durkheim
([1912] 1995) points out that the product of the effervescences collectives is the
shared identification objectified in the form of a totem.

As the mainstream media represent primarily the dominant parties among
race, class, and gender groupings, the outsized response to the jogger's rape
became a frenzied rite or a racial/political project that strengthened categorical
group loyalties along the lines of race, class, and gender. The challenge this rape
presented in the city at the time spun around how the people who were subor-
dinated in each of these groups would view the incident and how fairly those
who were dominant within each of the groups would treat the young suspects
and their supporters. The scene outside the courthouse during the trials of the

accused would sometimes include supporters of the jogger (mostly white women) and supporters of the young suspects (mostly people of color, both male and female) in confrontational opposition. In another arena, the case pitted the black press and the mainstream press against each other.

The white women, representatives of the mainstream women's movement, were driven by their opposition to sexual violence in general; but underneath the reaction in this particular case also lay, as Bumiller (2008: 22) states, the "specter of black men as sexual predators," a powerful symbol uniting whites as a group. Some supporters of the suspects, drawn to the injustices being inflicted on the teens, no doubt had on their minds past racially unifying frenzied rites, such as the Scottsboro case, in which nine black boys in Scottsboro, Alabama, were falsely convicted of raping two white women as the groups traveled on a freight train in the south.[6] Crenshaw (1991) notes that an analysis that focuses on either race *or* gender without considering how these axes of oppression and privilege intersect may end up contributing to oppression in other areas:

> When feminists fail to acknowledge the role that race played in the public response to the rape of the Central Park jogger, feminism contributes to the forces that produce disproportionate punishment for Black men who rape white women, and when antiracists represent the case solely in terms of racial domination, they belittle the fact that women particularly, and all people generally, should be outraged by the gender violence the case represented. (p. 1282)

The black presses in the city were largely focused on evident racial disparities in the treatment of the young suspects. They also criticized the disparity in the treatment sexually assaulted black women receive.

People who are subordinate within the large group collectives do not have the same relationship to the symbols that unite the group as those who are dominant. The collective's icon (e.g., the jogger, in this case) becomes an object of oppression, something that reinforces the marginalization of those subordinate within the group. Because there is a disparity in outcomes between white and black rape victims, using the jogger as a symbol of sexual violence for all women makes the black woman's experience invisible within the category of women. When black women did not participate in the frenzied rites used to build group loyalty (i.e., did not vigorously support the jogger), they were perceived as being more concerned with race than with gender.[7]

Black feminist scholar Valerie Smith (1998: xx) contends that the jogger case had a particularly polarizing effect because the mainstream press's approach to the case was based in part on the "presumptive blackness of rapists and whiteness of rape victims." But the significance of this case does not hinge simply on the fact that it stands as further proof that race, class, and gender are

inseparable. It also provides evidence of how, in the age of color-blind racism, issues of race, class, and gender can mask each other. I am particularly drawn to Smith's assessment of the case and her approach to intersectional analysis. She argues that the case should be viewed as a cultural event or moment that collapses categorical life experiences of race, class, and gender unto themselves. She contends that when one categorical life experience obscures the others, it "masks both the operation of others and the interconnections among them" (1998: xv).

In the case of the rape of the jogger in Central Park, people were so polarized that issues of race appeared to drown out concerns in other areas. However, in this particular instance, despite the horrific violence heaped on the jogger, another vulnerable group—young black and Latino male teens—was further marginalized and suffered injustices because of the way the press, prosecutors, and politicians handled the incident (Bumiller 2008; Crenshaw 1991). I argue here that the media, as an instrument of mainstream society, played a major role in the negative outcomes for the young suspects.

Everyone, regardless of their social location, must contend with the mainstream and its criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Mainstream discourses, narratives, and mores marginalize those who do not serve the interests of affluent white males. In the context of the events surrounding the rape of the Central Park jogger, the five teens accused did not stand a chance. Numerous scholars have already established that the media is one of the most important institutions in shaping mainstream opinion (e.g., Gans 1979; Herman and Chomsky 1988; van Dijk 1993a, 1993b). The focus of my study is on the role of the media in reconstructing a new mainstream from some of the contemporary narratives about race. In the more inclusive mainstream of the post–civil rights era, American society supposedly left behind biological notions of race. But groups that were subordinated under the biological conceptualization of race are again marginalized and oppressed in the new racial order. Young black and Latino males continue to be one of the most "otherized" groups in society, particularly if they articulate their identity using manner, speech, and forms of meaning not sanctioned by the mainstream.

Although the mainstream is often a central part of the discussion in social science research particularly, in the context of theories or notions about ethnic and racial assimilation, multiculturalism, or upward mobility (Alba and Nee 2005; Omi and Winant 1994: 14–23; Romero 2011; Young 2008), it is often discussed implicitly in the context of methodology. I take the position that the mainstream and the way it operates must be visible in our analyses, particularly because all groups must contend with mainstream filters. In the era of color-blind racism, it behooves us to examine how the mainstream continues to be a force for inclusion and marginalization in a society that legislates inclusion.

Methodology

This is a mixed methods study using both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide insight into the things that create meaning within the categorical groups one belongs to. These techniques are applied to the media coverage of the Central Park jogger incident to generate empirical data that will allow us to better understand how the mainstream—through contemporary discourses, narratives, and mores—impacts the construction of large categorical groups of race, class, and gender, among other things. To see what forms of expression, interaction, and meaning making are allowed in the mainstream and are significant to this case, I conducted a content analysis of fourteen years of newspaper coverage of the jogger incident and an autoethnography based primarily on my own experiences as a journalist covering the case. This study is not a measure of the accuracy of the rendition of reality produced by the media. Social theorist Niklas Luhmann (2000) argues in *The Reality of the Mass Media* that because the media form a knowledge-producing or cognitive system, it is impossible to make a distinction between the internal reality of the newsroom and the external reality of the world outside the newsroom. There is no way to know the actual genesis of the knowledge being generated in news products because one cannot determine which reality (internal or external) served as the primary source for that knowledge. Luhmann (2000: 5–8) solves the problem by suggesting that people researching cognitive systems should "observe observers as they construct reality" and discern *how* they construct reality. My content analysis and autoethnography aim to achieve this.