

Slipping into Darkness: An Ideological Critique of Racial Inequality Coverage in Milwaukee Newspapers, 2010-2014

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SLIPPING INTO DARKNESS: AN IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF
RACIAL INEQUALITY COVERAGE IN MILWAUKEE
NEWSPAPERS, 2010-2014

by

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ABSTRACT

SLIPPING INTO DARKNESS: AN IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY COVERAGE IN MILWAUKEE NEWSPAPERS, 2010-2014

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This ideological critique assessed mainstream and African American newspaper coverage on racial inequalities such as racial segregation and infant mortality in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from 2010 through 2014. Employing Cultural Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Class Theory, this textual research analyzed the texts of 405 reports, columns, and editorials from *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Milwaukee's mainstream paper of record, and *The Milwaukee Courier*, the city's premier African American newspaper.

The study discovered important convergences in the *Courier* and *Journal Sentinel*'s portrayal of racial inequalities as indicators of a racially diseased city and nation. However, the research also revealed important differences in how the newspapers constructed the causes of and potential reforms to such disparities. These differences manifested in contradictory ideologies of racial stasis in the *Journal Sentinel* and racial vigilance in the *Courier*.

Both of these ideologies emerged from coverage in which an avoidance of class discussion became a structuring absence. The divergences and convergences between these two ideologies were indicative of a simultaneous bridging and deepening of the fissures of the African American split image in U.S. news media.

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For my mother.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
INTRODUCTION.....	3
The Impact of a Continuing Color Line	3
Milwaukee: A Singular and Segregated City	4
Racial Inequality Coverage in General and African American Milwaukee Newspapers: An Ideological Critique.....	7
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	9
A Cultural Studies Approach: Addressing Cultural Ideology and Hegemony.....	9
Critical Race Theory: Dissecting a Social Construct and Racial Rhetoric of Difference.....	12
Theorizing Class: Key Concepts in the Taxonomy of Power and Production	16
LITERATURE REVIEW	20
African Americans in the Mainstream Press: Primary Themes and Historic Narratives	20
Contemporary Constructs: Inferential Racism, News Myths, and Black “Difference”.....	23
Little Reported, Oft-Marginalized: Racial Inequalities in U.S. News	26
A New “Post-Racial” Decade: Assimilation Narratives and Black Marginalization in Mainstream News in the Age of Obama.....	30
Splitting the African American Image: The Black Press	33
A Brief Socioeconomic Portrait of Black Milwaukee: Evolution and Change.....	35
METHODOLOGY	39
Research Goals and Scholarly Aims.....	39
Research Materials and Design Choices	40
Collection, Sorting, and Formatting of Materials	43

Ideological Critique: A Textual Approach to Implicit Assumptions	45
ANALYSIS: VISIONS OF RACIAL DISEASE, VIGILANCE, AND STASIS	48
Introduction	48
“Ever-Raw Racial Sores:” Milwaukee and the United States as Racially Diseased.....	50
“It’s Not Like Milwaukee Is Doing Something Wrong:” Rhetorically Constructing the Causes of and Solutions to the City’s Inequality	57
“If It Sounds Like Racism and Acts Like Racism:” Institutional Indictments.....	63
“What Would MLK Do?” Racial Boosterism and Black Agency.....	70
“No Angels:” Inferential Racism and Rehabilitation of Victims of Racial Inequality	73
INTERPRETING A RACIAL DIVIDE: NEWS, RACE, AND MILWAUKEE	79
A Structuring Absence: Avoiding Class and Constructing the Singularity of Black Poverty	80
Bridging the Divide of the “Split Image:” Rejecting Post-Racialism.....	83
Reinforcing the “Split Image:” Conflicting Visions of Accountability and Reform	86
This Study: Four Years of Racial Inequality Coverage in Milwaukee Newspapers.....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY	95

INTRODUCTION

*“I see the mighty city through a mist—
 The strident trains that speed the goaded mass,
 The poles and spires and towers vapor-kissed,
 The fortified port through which the great ships pass,
 The tides, the wharves, the dens I contemplate,
 Are sweet like wanton loves because I hate.”*

—from “*The White City*” by Claude McKay

The Impact of a Continuing Color Line

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois (1904) famously postulated that the “problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (vii). A century and a movement later, that line may have held firm in reality if not necessarily in discourse. Despite a shift in news and political discourse towards colorblind, “post-racial” narratives (Copes, 2013), the continuing reality of racial disparity persists in “generational conditions of concentrated poverty, unemployment, segregation, incarceration, inadequate education, and related ills, which have disproportionately afflicted African American, Latino, and non-white populations” (Ivery, 2011, xvi). Progress made by nonwhites after the 1960s has slowed and in some cases even regressed almost to pre-Civil Rights Movement states (Marable, 2011); indeed, today many African Americans “still live the same separate social lives that [they] did prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*” (Ivery, 2011, xvii).

Structural inequalities of race continue to influence American society, fed by continuing racial discrimination at the root of an “urban crisis” (Marable, 2011). “Most major cities in America today remain largely segregated along lines of race and class,” according to Ivery (2011, xvii). As Andrew Grant-Thomas (2011) has noted, a “tight

relationship between race and place” bifurcates these cities into white and nonwhite neighborhoods, and their inhabitants’ access to civic, social, and economic opportunities can depend almost entirely upon the block in which they reside (p. 151). To Rothstein (2013), this is not an organic phenomenon, but the result of:

a century-long pattern of racially motivated and racially explicit federal, state, and local policies of banking regulation, mortgage guarantees, public housing, law enforcement, planning and zoning, highway and school construction, and urban renewal. (para. 98)

These policies have played a critical role in sustaining racial disparities (Poussaint, 2011). According to Ivery & Bassett (2011), “racial segregation—particularly in terms of residential housing and education—in [their] view and that of leading scholars, remains the fundamental cause sustaining urban crisis conditions in America” (p. 83). It affects black children, for whom being seven times likelier to grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods than white children has often resulted in achievement gaps (Rothstein, 2013). It affects African American men, for whom disproportionately large mass incarceration rates have resulted in a “new Jim Crow” (Alexander, 2010). And it affects black workers of all stripes, for whom poor access to jobs and opportunities has engendered an unemployment rate more than twice that of whites (Rothstein, 2013).

Milwaukee, Wisconsin: A Singular and Segregated City

Nowhere, perhaps, may the urban divide of race be more apparent than in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the city has yet to have fully crossed the color line; indeed, “the Milwaukee area is a prime example of the

boomerang trend toward resegregation” (Richards & Mulvany, 2014). The Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis metropolitan area has the highest rate of black-white segregation in the United States (Causey, 2014a; Tolan & Glauber, 2010). Beside Lake Michigan, a line between black and white has become a gulf, and it is one in which a host of disparities have emerged. In 2010, Milwaukee had the largest black-white male employment disparity of any American metropolitan area (Levine, 2012). Today, the city ties with Chicago in having the highest percentage of African American children in intensely segregated schools (Richards & Mulvany, 2014). Black infants die in Milwaukee at nearly three times the rate of white infants (Stephenson, 2014), and black men in their 30s are imprisoned at dozens of times the rate of white men (Issue of the Week, 2003). If statistics can tell the story of a community, Milwaukee’s would be what Mayor Tom Barrett has called a “tale of two cities” (Brown, 2013).

Yet if Milwaukee’s story is merely that of a nation’s ongoing struggle with racial inequality writ large, that narrative is not one that is often or effectively told in mainstream news media. As Stephanie Greco Larson (2006) explained:

The racial status quo is one of inequality with whites at the top of the hierarchy. Racial minorities are underrepresented in government, education, and corporations; they are overrepresented among the poor and in prison populations. The nation has a long history of legal and extralegal racial oppression, yet, this is inconsistent with American values of equality and fairness. Most Americans abhor the idea that political, social, and economic structures might be racist. This is not the story they want to hear; it is not the one white people believe. So,

mainstream media (the major television networks, newspapers, magazines, and motion pictures) do not tell it. (p. 2)

It is a sentiment understood by Copes (2013), echoed by Stabile (2006), and reinforced by Campbell (1995). Racial disparities and discrimination received little direct coverage from national media in the 1990s and 2000s (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; González & Torres, 2011; Hoerl, 2012). Furthermore, according to Stabile (2006), such issues are not merely poorly represented in the American press; they are often presented in ways that ideologically justify those conditions. This is particularly the case in terms of reporting on black Americans, who occupy a unique position in the “black/white” binary in American society (Baker, 2011). That binary, as Larson (2006) observed, has influenced a host of sometimes contradictory and quite often negative news reports on race and racial disparities. Those narratives are further complicated by a rising tendency in news to construct “colorblind” narratives that suppose the existence of a post-racial America (Copes, 2013). It is a fractious discourse, and one which reflects the historical “split image” of African Americans in the American mainstream and black presses (Dates & Barlow, 1993).

Yet as Larson (2006) asserted, whatever their inadequacies may be, “due to continued racial segregation, the mainstream media are the primary forum through which whites come to ‘know’ nonwhites” (p. 3). The news plays a critical role in communicating racial inequality, as many whites otherwise simply are not privy to the reality of racial discrimination (LeDuff, 2012a). So too are Americans of all races often left outside of any common conversation, according to James J. Zogby (2011), who noted that:

Segregation and discrimination are dynamic realities. They create their own agendas, and they spread and grow like disease. We live adjacent to each other. We work together, but we don't know each other or understand each other. We live in proximity, but living in proximity without understanding can be a dangerous and often volatile mix because under these circumstances, we think we know the other groups, when in fact, all we really know are prejudices about them reinforced by anecdote. (p. 94)

At its best, news broadens that conversation beyond anecdote, enlivens it beyond stereotype, and informs it beyond "common sense" assumptions of race. But if the discourse of that journalistic conversation possibly reinforces racial ideologies (Hall, 1981), it becomes critical to understand such media's dimensions and ideological implications.

Racial Inequality Coverage in General and African American Milwaukee Newspapers: An Ideological Critique

This study sought to further our understanding of how racial inequality was reported in a modern press context. Racial separations and disparities have remained critical issues both in Milwaukee (Kaiser, 2014) and in America (Orfield et al. 2014). Recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, have illustrated the continuing racial fissures in American society (Kristof, 2014), and race relations has come to a critical juncture (Ivery, 2011). Against this backdrop stands journalism, a form of culture that both reflects and helps shape potentially hegemonic ideological assumptions (Kendall, 2011), including those about race (Hall, 1997). It is important, therefore, to examine news discourse on racial issues and to understand its ideological dimensions.

This research constituted an ideological critique of mainstream and African American newspaper coverage of racial inequality in Milwaukee. The study began with the year 2010, when the Brookings Institution evaluated Milwaukee as one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in America (Tolan & Glauber, 2010), and ended with the year 2014, when *Atlantic Cities* research reaffirmed the presence of continued racial inequality in the city (Causey, 2014a). Viewing news discourse through a Cultural Studies perspective—one well informed by considerations of critical race theory and class theory—this ideological critique sought to understand how reports, columns, and editorials constructed a discussion of racial inequalities such as health disparities, issues of discrimination, and de facto segregation. In studying the dimensions of that discussion, this research sought to understand the ideological assumptions and visions of those narratives.

News media help shape ideological narratives, and ideological criticism allows us a vital tool with which to understand those meanings (Cormack, 1992). Yet if ideology attempts to defeat the polysemy of meaning (Rojek, 2009), it is critical to consider the meanings constructed by multiple perspectives on an issue, particularly in a city so firmly bounded by the color line. As such, this study considered coverage from both Milwaukee's mainstream newspaper of record, *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and the city's premier African American newspaper, *The Milwaukee Courier*. In so doing, this research sought to further our understanding of how racial inequalities are reported in news. To that end, this thesis begins with an exploration of theoretical perspectives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“In a civil society consisting of multiple publics, the possibility of interpublic communication is absolutely essential for the expansion of solidarity. The problem is that communication, like much else in public life, is racially stratified.”

— Ronald N. Jacobs, *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King* (2000, p. 144)

Rooted in Cultural Studies, this study augments its theoretical lens with the perspectives of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Michael Zweig’s theory of class. With its foundations in the “intersection of literary and sociological theory,” Cultural Studies provides a solid theoretical foundation for an ideological analysis of cultural products such as news texts (Kovala, 2002, p. 2). This cultural approach is helpfully augmented with Critical Race Theory (CRT), a scholarly tradition that aims to both recognize and find solutions to address racial constructs and inequalities (Zamudio et al., 2011). However, race and class—as well as gender—have traditionally been intertwined in American society (Lavelle & Feagin, 2007). As such, this thesis accentuates its CRT perspective with an examination of the class dimensions of race through Zweigian class theory.

A Cultural Studies Approach: Addressing Cultural Ideology and Hegemony

Rooted in the Marxist tradition of British theorists, Cultural Studies provides an appropriate framework for an ideological critique of the discourse on racial inequality in the Milwaukee press (Becker, 1984; Brennen, 2013). News is a form of culture (Schudson, 2011), and the American press plays a role in shaping cultural representations that may bolster hegemonic ideologies (Kendall, 2011). As such, Cultural Studies’

conceptions of cultural texts, their implicit ideologies, and their role in hegemony offer important insights on this topic. Built upon the scholarship of Hoggart, Williams, and Hall, Cultural Studies is a multidisciplinary approach grounded in the concept that societal power relationships are present and reproduced in the creation of culture (Becker, 1984; Foss, 2009). Specifically, cultural theorists recognize the complex interplay between material relations and social constructions of reality (Grossberg, 2009), viewing culture as:

a circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulate, identities are constructed, inhabited, and discarded, agency is manifested in both individualized and social forms, and discourses are created which make culture itself the object of inquiry. (Giroux, 2009, p. 88)

Thus conceived, culture is a social realm that serves to construct and reflect shared patterns of meanings and ways of thinking through cultural practices, institutions, and artifacts (Williams, 1989). In Cultural Studies, artifacts are legitimate objects of theoretical inquiry as sites of ideological and representational struggles. This theoretical lens recognizes these struggles in all the ephemera of daily life—from magazines and posters to songs and films (Williams, 1981). In this view, culture is, as Raymond Williams (1989) famously asserted, “ordinary.” To untangle the dense webs of social meaning and potentially oppressive ideological assumptions that enweave such culture is the ethical and theoretical mission of cultural critics (Foss, 2009).

These assumptions were a chief concern of Stuart Hall (1997), who viewed the intertwined concepts of representation and ideology as key concepts in the construction of social meanings (Rojek, 2009). In this social constructionist tradition, representation in

its simplest terms is defined as “the production of meaning through language,” whether in the text of a narrative, image, or other form of sign (Hall, 1997, p. 16). This discursive process allows individuals using shared codes—or systems of signs governed by rules common to members of a specific culture—to make sense of their world (Hall, 1997).

What occurs in this representational process, however, is not a linear dissemination of information from producers to consumers. Rather, these meanings are formed in a dynamic communication process in which messages are encoded, circulated, and variably decoded and possibly reproduced, depending upon the interpretations of audiences (Hall, 1980). Representation is never neutral, however. Rather, it “inevitably bears the inflections of class, gender, race, and status,” and, as such, is never separate from ideology (Rojek, 2009, p. 50).

Central to Hall’s vision of media and mass communication analysis, ideologies are the social patterns of belief that groups use to understand and interpret society and its mechanisms (Becker, 1984; Hall, 1986). Reflective of groups’ economic, cultural, or political interests, ideologies are mental frameworks in which subjective “evaluative beliefs” encourage populations to evince certain attitudes and behaviors toward various aspects of their world (Foss, 2009). Mediated texts are embedded with ideological meanings (Rojek, 2009), and the ideologies they contain can serve to make patterns of thought on constructs such as race, gender, or class seem normative (Foss, 2009). No monolithic ideology ever fully defines a culture or shapes its populations; instead, culture and society are a “contested terrain with various groups and ideologies struggling for dominance” (Kellner, 2011, p. 8). In every culture, however, certain ideologies will be

privileged over others, and it is in this process that the workings of hegemony can be observed (Foss, 2009).

Drawing on the philosophical tradition of Antonio Gramsci (1971), Cultural Studies recognizes hegemony as the “dominance that one social group holds over others” (Lull, 2011, p. 33) and the processes by which such groups maintain their control by inducing dominated groups to participate in their own subordination. This consent is never fully won, but must be regularly renewed by persuading people to accept and value hegemonic social frameworks (Kellner, 2011). In ideological terms, hegemony is buttressed through the imposition of dominant ideologies on subordinated groups through varying measures of reinforcement and limitations upon competing ideologies (Becker, 1984).

These hegemonic ideologies represent the interests of groups in power, and their influence can be profound (Foss, 2009). Indeed, as Hall (1988) suggested, once an ideology has become hegemonic, it accumulates “the symbolic power to map and classify the world for others” (p. 44). Thus, certain hegemonic codes become so dominant and ubiquitous in culture that they become “naturalized” (Hall, 1997). The study of this process—and of the cultural artifacts in which these ideological battles are fought in a continuing attempt to defeat the polysemy of meaning—is a prime pursuit for cultural theorists (Rojek, 2009).

Critical Race Theory: Dissecting a Social Construct and Racial Rhetoric of Difference

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides an appropriate lens through which to examine press discourse on race and racial inequality. As a form of culture, news media

amplify and lend legitimacy to certain perspectives (Schudson, 2011), and the negative representation or invisibility of certain populations in coverage can influence the racial ideology of minority and majority groups alike (hooks, 1995). As such, as Don Heider (2000) noted, scholars:

need to strive to understand how something like the ownership of television stations and the day-to-day practice of news production may work together to systematically exclude certain groups of people, or how large-scale economic discrimination and small-scale daily coverage decisions are also ultimately contributing to similar ends: continued marginalization of people of color. (p. 10)

CRT allows scholars to approach that goal. Emerging in the 1970s, CRT grew primarily out of critical legal studies to become a part of disciplines ranging from education to political science (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Rejecting the idea of the existence of a “post-racial” society, CRT provides a “race-conscious” approach to understanding racial inequalities and seeking potential solutions (Zamudio et al., 2011). CRT acknowledges the reality of racism in contemporary society as well as its historical foundations, recognizing that race is a construct which, like gender, is used to establish or justify social hierarchies and racial inequalities (Oliha, 2011). To challenge the often unquestioned “master narratives” of white normativity, CRT scholars seek to tell stories from the perspective of those subordinated and oppressed by racist power structures (Martin, 2013) as a means of “making visible the structures, processes and practices that contribute to continued racial inequality” (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 5).

A chief contention of Critical Race Theory is that race is a social construct which in its modern form is closely aligned with historical European colonialism and its attendant ideologies (Zamudio et al., 2011). In the words of Steve Garner (2009):

“Race” is a fiction that we turn into a social reality every day of our lives. It lies at the heart of the complex, historical and multifaceted sets of social relationships to which we attach the label “racism.” This is a historical process, a set of ideas and a set of outcomes (benefits for some, disadvantages for others). (ix)

That process is one of racialization, in which racial groupings—like gender binaries—are socially established on the basis of physical traits that are seen as essential in nature (Barot & Bird, 2001). As Hesse (1997) noted, this social creation of racial identities occurs not only on a group level, but also at the individual level as persons assume their specific identities by learning racialized conceptions. Those constructs are unstable and may change over time, though their legitimacy in any particular time is often unquestioned (Gotanda, 1995). The power relationships and social suppositions engendered by this process lead to the “construction of racial difference as natural and fixed” (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 4). This construct has a complex interplay—or intersectionality—with other aspects of identity such as gender and class (Crenshaw, 1995).

Regardless of the artificiality of such constructs, CRT scholars have argued, race remains a central structure in society, and racial inequality permeates nearly every aspect of contemporary American society (Zamudio et al., 2011). These inequalities have both tangible and ideological consequences. The social construction of “biological” explanations of race in white-majority countries is linked with white supremacy, a

doctrine that asserts that whites are biologically superior to non-whites and therefore justified in dominating and excluding them from power (Jensen, 2005). In white supremacist societies, whiteness therefore becomes a kind of “treasured property” which grants its owners “assumptions, privileges, and benefits” (Harris, 1997, p. 277) in the form of white privilege. As Peggy McIntosh (1988) explained, this privilege grants whites a veritable “invisible knapsack” of unearned entitlements and conferred dominance which nonwhites lack.

The other side of this ideological coin is racial oppression and the construction of corrosive social hierarchies, dynamics which often take place in the context of the “othering” of nonwhites from an “essential” or normative whiteness through such means as the traditional American “black-white” binary (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). To CRT theorists, this promulgation of racial ideology occurs both at a macrocosmic level (e.g. colonization, legal processes) and a microcosmic level (e.g. interpersonal relations, microaggressions) (Zamudio et al. 2011). Racism has a profound impact on society, such that, in Charles R. Lawrence III’s (1995) conception, “we are all racists,” often unconsciously so, in terms of our cultural influences (p. 237). So too do media sometimes further racist conceptions through representation, according to Hall (1981). The significant racial inequalities which characterize education, wealth, and housing in American society are but the most tangible consequences of this ideology (Zamudio et al., 2011).

Acknowledging these realities, Critical Race Theory contends that the structural determinism of American society ensures that “our system, by reason of its structure and vocabulary, cannot redress certain types of wrong” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 26).

As such, any approach to social justice that is rooted in racist discourse or that ignores the social realities of race (“colorblindness”) is fundamentally flawed (Zamudio et al., 2011).

While discussing the underpinnings of colorblindness, for example, Gotanda (1995) decried its non-recognition of the realities of historical racial identities, stating that:

if the underlying social reality of race is understood as encompassing one’s social being ... assimilation as a societal goal has grave potential consequences for blacks and other nonwhites. However utopian it appears, the color-blind assimilationist program implies the hegemony of white culture. (p. 270)

Rejecting colorblindness as well as the idea that an historically racist society can engender a functional meritocracy, CRT scholars seek instead to describe the boundaries of racial ideologies and create counternarratives that defy them (Zamudio et al., 2011). In so doing, CRT seeks to “fashion a set of tools for thinking about race that avoids the traps of racial thinking” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, xxxii). With its focus on analyzing and providing counterpoints to “master narratives” of socially constructed race, Critical Race Theory provides an important lens for this study’s examination of racial discourse in the news.

Theorizing Class: Key Concepts in the Taxonomy of Power and Production

When considering race, however, it is helpful to understand its intersectionality with gender and class. Michael Zweig’s (2001; 2004; 2007) class model grants a useful nuance to this study of race in news discourse. This is a critical consideration, as race and class are intertwined in America (Lavelle & Feagin, 2007). Class “permeates all aspects of social existence,” yet it is rarely discussed (Foster, 2007, p. 18). Nor is it often well

understood in the United States, where the politics of other aspects of identity often obscures its true salience, according to Gimenez (2007).

Much scholarship on class descends from the Marxist and Weberian traditions (Newton et al., 2004), both of which conceive of class as fundamental to capitalism (Yates, 2007). Marxist scholarship recognizes a dichotomy between the capitalist class, which owns the means of production, and the proletariat, which owns only its labor power (Gimenez, 2007). This difference defines capitalism and its inevitable exploitation of the working class (Foley, 1986). Further problematizing class, Weber distinguished “class, power, and prestige” as three related aspects of a class system (Newton et al., 2004, p. 63). As Gimenez (2007) noted, Weber envisioned classes as “aggregates of individuals who share the same class situation” (p. 109) defined by their ownership of property or skills and individual status situations such as gender or ethnicity, each of which affects their market position.

Both of these traditions inform Zweig’s (2001; 2004; 2007) theory of class. To Zweig (2007), class “must be understood in terms of power rather than income, wealth, or lifestyle” (p. 173). Envisioning class as a dynamic relationship between groups defined by their power to shape their own working conditions and those of others—as well as other power relationships such as gender and race—Zweig (2007) identified:

class divisions as between the *working class*, 62 percent of the U.S. labor force—a substantial majority of the American people—and the *corporate elite* (or *capitalist class*), who make up only 2 percent. In between these two classes is the *middle class* (36 percent of the U.S. labor force). (p. 173)

These groups are differentiated chiefly by their relative power over working conditions. The ruling class—political and corporate elites—though a tiny percentage of the populace, decides the working conditions of countries; the capitalist class—corporate executives and business directors—makes decisions that affect working conditions of thousands of employees; the middle class—professionals, managers, and small business owners—control some of their own working conditions or those of others; and the working class—nonprofessional manufacturing or service workers—have little control over their own or others' work (Zweig, 2007). Rejecting the popular idea of America as a majority middle class country, Zweig (2001) centered his studies on the working class, which he argued constitutes not only the majority of American society but the majority of the world's population (Kumar, 2004).

In Zweig's (2007) conception, class has a nuanced relation to race, which is not only a social construct but also a power relationship that influences class. Race complicates the power dynamics of class, as "each class is divided by race and ethnicity; each race and ethnic group is divided by class" (Zweig, 2007, p. 179). This stratification has palpable sociological effects: nonwhite populations are thus overrepresented in the working class but are present only in comparatively smaller numbers in the capitalist and ruling classes. Furthermore, across every class, the continued impact of racism leads minorities to generally hold less powerful positions in all sectors of the workforce (Zweig, 2004).

Simultaneously, while poorer working conditions and poverty disproportionately affect nonwhites, poverty in a broader sense "is something that happens to the working class" (Zweig, 2007, p. 176). Race affects but does not override class in a process that

echoes intersectionality. Zweig's (2007) conceptualization of class accentuates this study's understanding of racial discourse, as "investigating class as a question of power also makes it possible to find the organic links among class, race, and gender" (pp. 173-174). To understand how other scholars have undertaken that mission, this study now turns to a review of the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Perhaps the most dangerous myth about American life is that which ignores the very existence of racism. Journalists (of all colors) whose reporting reflects the notion that racial prejudice and discrimination do not factor into the disheartening social, political, educational, and economic conditions faced by so many white Americans contribute to an assimilationist understanding of those conditions.”

— Christopher Campbell, *Race, Myth, and the News* (p. 133)

A rich tradition of scholarship examined the relationship between the American news media and race, particularly in the context of African Americans. Research on racial disparities in journalists’ decisions (Coleman, 2011), topics (Owens, 2008), sources (Zeldes & Fico, 2010), coverage (Dixon & Azocar, 2006; Min & Feaster, 2010; Sylvie, 1995), and news consumption (Appiah et al., 2013; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2008) helped establish the salience of investigating the role of race in news. To understand that issue, this literature review focused upon contemporary and selected foundational scholarship on press discourse on African Americans and racial issues. It considered press themes and representations of African Americans; contemporary racial constructs and the myth of difference; marginalizing press constructions of racial inequality; and assimilative “post-racialism” in the wake of the 2008 election of President Barack Obama. It then briefly addressed differences between the mainstream and African American presses and the recent history of African American Milwaukee.

African Americans in the Mainstream Press: Primary Themes and Historic Narratives

African Americans have had a complex relationship with the American press. The “black/white” binary has been a foundational aspect of race in the United States, and it

has been one well represented in the mass media (Baker, 2011), which are influenced by and sometimes perpetuate racial ideologies (Hall, 1981). As Dates and Barlow (1993) observed, a “split image” of black representation has characterized the American mass media since the colonial era—a binary whose hegemonic manifestation “has been created and nurtured by succeeding generations of white image makers” in contrast to a smaller, counterhegemonic self-representation (p. 3). The hegemonic side of this racial image has been far better represented historically in American news, where it has served to shape discourse on racial issues (Dates & Barlow, 1993). Mainstream news coverage of African Americans has filtered through a press characterized—consciously or unconsciously—by the ideologies of white supremacy and privilege both in practice (Dates, 1993; Heider, 2000; hooks, 1995; Jenkins, 2012; Larson, 2006; Stabile, 2006) and in training (Alemán, 2014). So too has the mainstream, or “general audience,” press largely been aimed at white audiences (Larson, 2006).

Researchers have suggested that African Americans, like nonwhites in general, have traditionally been “excluded, selectively included, and stereotyped” in news coverage (Larson, 2006, p. 93). African Americans have been more heavily featured in news than other minorities, but often in negative, racialized ways and in unequal distribution across news topics. Black Americans have been commonly represented in crime and sports stories, for example, but not nearly as much in political or economic news, according to Larson (2006). Stabile (2006) noted that African Americans have either been demonized or ignored in news coverage. That latter feature—racial absence in American news—was critical, according to hooks (1995). To hooks, the traditional namelessness and invisibility of African Americans in American mass media was a

manifestation of neocolonialism—the process by which a pervasive white supremacy subordinated African Americans, influencing the racial thinking of white and black Americans alike.

The other half of Stabile's (2006) binary of black representation in news—demonization—has been a historical feature of the American press. As a representation of a broader American discourse on race, the U.S. press has generally reflected narratives in which “whiteness is an unmentioned centrality,” one reflected in racial archetypes such as the white ideal of American exceptionalism and impurity narratives of nonwhites in sports media, for example (Butterworth, 2007, p. 231; Brennen & Brown, 2014). Stabile (2006) asserted that mainstream news coverage of African Americans has been historically negative, except for an important, if atypical, window of favorable reporting from Northern news venues during the Civil Rights Movement. Even this conclusion has been contested, however; Larson (2006), for example, noted that even coverage of the movement “varied in focus and favorability,” (p. 177) with no necessarily positive consensus.

What has been apparent to scholars (e.g. Campbell, 1995; hooks, 1995; Stabile, 2006; etc.), however, is that overt racism has been a common characteristic of historical American press coverage of African Americans. This has been the case whether in 19th-century conceptions of “innate,” evolutionary black inferiority (Domke, 2000) and discursive negations of African American civil rights (Domke, 2001) or in early-to-mid 20th-century opposition to black athletes (Drake, 2011) and Southern news opposition to desegregation (Durham, 2002). As will be detailed later, the black press has provided an

important counterhegemonic voice in resistance to these prevailing narratives (Dates, 1993).

Contemporary Constructs: Inferential Racism, News Myths, and Black “Difference”

Overt racism has been relatively rare in modern news coverage of minorities and African Americans, but neither it nor racism in general have disappeared entirely from U.S. press constructions of black Americans. Rather, a subtler form of racial ideology in media—“inferential racism,” in Hall’s (1981) conception—has taken its place. Hall conceived of this form of racism, which is both more common and “more insidious,” as:

apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether “factual” or “fictional,” which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions* [author’s emphasis]. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded. (1981, p. 36)

Inferential racism or “everyday racism” (Essed, 1991) has influenced modern mainstream news coverage of African Americans (Campbell, 1995; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Larson, 2006; Stabile, 2006).

According to Christopher Campbell (1995), inferentially racist “common sense” assumptions, particularly regarding African Americans, have also given rise in American news to three racial myths. The first is a “myth of marginality,” which echoed hooks’s (1995) neocolonialism in its conception of how the media posited nonwhites as undeserving of attention through a lack of minority coverage and occasionally overtly racist narratives. Additionally, Campbell (1995) identified a “myth of difference,” which

posited binaries of “positive” and negative stereotypes of nonwhites (e.g., African Americans as acceptable entertainers or criminals), who are conceived of as fundamentally different from whites. Finally, he recognized a “myth of assimilation,” which posited that racism no longer existed while simultaneously evoking strong resistance to African Americans and structural redresses to institutional racism (Campbell, 1995).

The mythical framework of racial ideologies that Campbell observed in the 1990s has persisted in coverage of African Americans. Revisiting the conclusions of the work 17 years later, Campbell, LeDuff, & Brown (2012) found a continuing promulgation of the myths of difference and assimilation in local reporting on the election of President Barack Obama and on the local crime beat. Indeed, the idea of the apartness and “innate” difference of African Americans, especially in the traditional “black/white” binary, has still found strong support and representation in news discourse (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Larson, 2006). In contemporary news magazines, for example, Luther & Rightler-McDaniels (2013) identified strong patterns of inferential racism in coverage of interracial marriage. This binary was also expressed more subtly in the routinely negative caricatures and loaded language used by news columnists to decry the “moral failures of black people” (Cohen & Solomon 1995, p. 98).

Nowhere was this demonization of African Americans more apparent than in crime news—the only form of hard news in which blacks were highly represented (Larson, 2006). In American crime news, Stabile (2006) located a unique and ideologically powerful criminalization of African Americans, an assertion that extended Campbell’s (1995) notion that, in print news, “criminal activity is portrayed as the

endeavor of choice” for black Americans (p. 127). Studying the history of African American representation from the “penny press” to the early 2000s, she found that blacks are and have been uniquely criminalized and pathologized as threats to a white hegemonic order in stories that conflated race and crime. Stabile (2006) noted that this reporting obscures structural inequalities, denying black Americans the critical status of “victimhood” and its attendant cultural sympathy. Thus, “in the racialized economy of victimization in the USA, the phrase ‘black victim’ is [seen as] strictly oxymoronic” (Stabile, 2006, p. 176).

Several studies on crime reporting have supported Stabile’s assertions, particularly in terms of overrepresentation and negative characterizations of “innately” criminal African Americans. In crime news in Boston, for example, Johnson & Dixon (2008) found an “illusion of change” in racialized television and print crime reporting between 1986 and 2001, in which crime stories dominated mainstream coverage of black Americans despite press pledges to improve reporting on minority issues. Furthermore, according to Larson (2006), crime reporting often has constructed narratives that implicitly assumed the guilt of black suspects. In contemporary sports journalism in national newspapers, for example, crimes allegedly committed by white athletes have been presented as part of broader trends in society, while crimes allegedly committed by black sportsmen have been offered as discreet events that reinforce hegemonic stereotypes (Mastro, Blecha, & Seate, 2011).

These athletic representations were part of a broader trend of the “othering” of black men in crime reporting, in which, as Enck-Wanzer (2009) asserted, “[r]acial difference, combined with (hyper)masculinity, reinforce an image of the black man as

being inherently more dangerous than ‘average’ (white) men” (p. 12). When such stories about athletes involved domestic violence in interracial relationships, they often served to ideologically reinforce the primacy of the “black/white” binary and racial adversarialism, as in historical news coverage of O. J. Simpson (Silberstein, 2003) and more recent coverage of Tiger Woods. Each narrative, Brown, Anderson, & Thompson (2012) found, constructed black men as unable to control potentially criminal and “bestial urges” in ways that reinforced the hegemony of white supremacy in news discourse (p. 82). These representations found a gendered complement in the victim-blaming evoked in crime reporting of violence against African American women, echoing Stabile’s notion of the impossibility of black victimhood in the mainstream media (Meyers, 2004a).

Little Reported, Oft-Marginalized: Racial Inequalities in U.S. News

If the myth of difference has characterized crime reporting on African Americans, the myths of marginalization and assimilation have characterized much other news discourse about black America (Campbell, 1995). These ideological constructs have taken on a specific character in reporting on racial disparities in American newspapers. Though racial inequality has played a critical role in defining the lives of whites and nonwhites alike in the United States, particularly in urban areas (Marable, 2011), such issues have been poorly represented or even sometimes ideologically justified in American news (Stabile, 2006). According to Larson (2006), the historical and contemporary mainstream American media have reinforced the ideology of the “racial status quo” and its attendant social policies (p. 3). Echoing Campbell’s (1995) conceptions, Larson (2006) argued that mainstream journalism has marginalized

minorities and racial problems, often “explaining and justifying racial inequality in a way that forestalls major reforms” (p. 3).

Whether regarded as marginalizing or neocolonialist in nature, an absence of coverage has characterized racial disparity reporting (Copes, 2013). Racial discrimination and poverty received little direct attention from mainstream media in the 1990s (Entman & Rojecki, 2000) and 2000s (Hoerl, 2012; González & Torres, 2011). What coverage of such disparities existed was often expressed in assimilative narratives which, according to Larson (2006), did not merely deny modern racism but also asserted that once *de jure* racism ended, *de facto* racism was no longer an impediment to nonwhites, whose success or failure then became the result of their own drive. The ideological implication of this journalistic “morality tale” was that those who fail to succeed in a colorblind world were more at fault for maintaining racial inequality than systemic racism (Larson, 2006). Additionally, as Stabile (2006) asserted, a pathologized black culture, rather than structural inequalities, has been portrayed in news as the root of racial inequality:

The problems besetting African American communities are well documented and include much higher rates of unemployment and poverty than whites; lower wages than whites; lower life expectancy ... In place of understanding the nature and causes of these complicated problems, US society has relied on racist narratives about crime, violence, and victims to explain why African Americans are to blame for everything from the slave trade to lynching to the forms of repression that followed the civil rights era. (p. 182)

Thus, as Cohen & Solomon (1995) noted, news media have been more likely to cover civil unrest than the systemic inequalities that often accompany and give rise to them, which have been viewed instead as “permanent scenery on the social landscape” (p. 101).

This is particularly apparent in the case of poverty, where race and class have intersected in black representation in the mainstream American press. As Gilens (2004) noted, the overrepresentation of African Americans in news photographs of impoverishment in the latter half of the twentieth century resulted in what he described as a “racialization of poverty” (p. 49). Between 1950 and 1992, for instance, 53 percent of the photos of impoverished people in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* featured African Americans, whereas during that time only 29 percent of the poor were actually black (Larson, 2006, p. 98). This distortive overrepresentation has taken such a cultural hold in news and other discourse that “black and poor” are often at least partially conflated in American culture (Meyers, 2004a, p. 112; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gilens, 2004; Zweig, 2007).

Reflecting the hegemony of white supremacy, stories on poverty and welfare have often been constructed as negative narratives of the individual failures of African Americans and, more generally, as a failure of a racial culture (Larson, 2006; Cohen & Solomon, 1995). This pathologization of black culture has been particularly evident in news representations of African American women, who have been portrayed in racialized, androcentric media binaries as simultaneously overbearingly strong and weak (Stabile, 2006). In this way, according to Stabile (2006), black women have been decried for “usurping” the role of black men in families since the Moynihan Report in 1965 while simultaneously portrayed as dependent “welfare queens” or as criminalized, irresponsible

“crack mothers” in paternalistic narratives (Meyers, 2004b). Through such narratives, the failure of black culture and families has often been posited as the cause of racial inequalities in the mainstream press, implicitly justifying disparities as the result of inferiority, according to Larson (2006).

This presentation of racial inequality has also affected reporting on reform efforts (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). In reinforcing a racial “status quo,” Larson (2006) argued, the media has adapted an “adversarial framing” which posits racial reforms not as progressive initiatives but as battlegrounds between white and black interests. Certainly this was so in the case of affirmative action—“*the* [authors’ emphasis] site of ideological battle over race in America for the last quarter of the twentieth century” (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 107). Unlike poverty, affirmative action enjoyed heavy coverage in the 1990s, much of it framed to emphasize the practice’s alleged inimicality to American values (Clawson, Strine, & Waltenburg, 2003). According to Entman & Rojecki, (2000), much print coverage misrepresented public opinion on the issue, instead constructing affirmative action as an ideological site of a white “popular uprising” (p. 108). Such coverage has been part of a larger trend to Larson (2006), who argued that a “binary racial story” has undergirded press narratives envisioning reform of black conditions as a loss for whites (p. 101).

Another important episode in racial disparity reporting in the American press occurred in 2005 during press coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Here, as in other cases, Stabile (2006) noted, the news media denied African Americans the victimhood that white survivors enjoyed, a binary made most evident (and infamous) in August 2005, as two *Yahoo! News* photo captions painted a black youth as “looting” goods in contrast to a

white couple “finding” similar items. Examining conservative news columns and editorials from that same month, Shah (2009) found that media pundits constructed black American survivors as irrational, unsympathetic, and implicitly inferior individuals through overtly racist narratives and language, positing them as a “different breed” who were unworthy of support or assistance, effectively “legitimizing [federal] neglect” of African Americans in New Orleans (p. 8). This regressive and stereotypical characterization extended to mainstream news (Kahle, Yu, & Whiteside (2007), as major newspapers represented poor African Americans unable to evacuate New Orleans as “deviant” in coverage dotted with false or unsubstantiated reports of “rampant looting, shooting at rescuers, and countless rapes in the convention center” (Lavelle & Feagin, 2007, p. 91). The ideological sum of this coverage was one in which black “disaster victims were transformed into criminals” (Stabile, 2006, p. 184).

A New “Post-Racial” Decade: Assimilation Narratives and Black Marginalization in Mainstream News in the Age of Obama

If the myths of difference, marginality, and assimilation characterized crime and inequality reporting on African Americans, the latter myth also emerged in the “post-racialism” which has come to characterize much other news discourse about black America after 2008 (Copes, 2013). With the election of President Barack Obama, assimilative narratives reached a peak in American news (Hoerl, 2012). In terms of African Americans, this image of “black-white sameness,” DeMott (2011) postulated, has created an ideological narrative of a meritocratic America beyond race in which “at work and play blacks are as likely as whites to be found at the top as at the bottom” (p. 37).

This theme found its greatest expression in the implicit “post-racialism” of mainstream American news immediately after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, a critical media event in scholarship of news coverage of race. In the lead-up to the election, the press only slightly modified traditional themes in political reporting of nonwhite candidates, constructing visions of racialized voting blocs (Squires & Jackson, 2010) and frequently mentioning Obama’s race (Holt, 2012)—a theme characteristic of political reporting which has constructed black politicians as racially myopic (Zilber & Niven, 2000). The only initial tweaking of this traditional, hegemonic coverage occurred, according to Walsh (2009) in the envisioning of Obama as “less than ‘Black’” (p. 129).

Obama’s ascension to the presidency, however, resulted in the crafting of a new, celebratory narrative. To Hoerl (2012), the mainstream print and television news’ presentation of President Barack Obama’s election as the realization of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream crafted a “postracial narrative of national transcendence,” one that silenced opponents of hegemonic narratives while emphasizing a unified image of “national progress and unity” (p. 178). Stiles & Kitch (2011) agreed, finding that commemorative journalism produced by major American newspapers presented the election either as a profound racial milestone or at least as a significant victory while simultaneously avoiding “direct engagement with the subject of race relations in America” (p. 127).

The narrative of “post-racial” triumph in an African American politician being elected president coincided with a general near-silence on racial issues in the run-up to the election itself in at least one newspaper of record. *The New York Times*, for example, demonstrated little substantive coverage of African American voters or social justice

issues in black communities during this period (Copes, 2013). This trend continued and even amplified after the election. As González & Torres (2011) noted in their exploration of the stagnation of newsroom diversification, coverage of racial minorities in 2009 and 2010 was “abysmal,” with little mention of nonwhites and—perhaps more importantly—little exploration of stories that might “provide a more nuanced view of the lives of people of color in the US” (p. 352).

As such, in the wake of Obama’s election, the discursive patterns of absence that characterized coverage of blacks actually heightened. This trend coincided with a representational shift in which African Americans were given a “visual presence in portraits of ‘the American Dream’” in a narrative in which a recognition of race, but not of racism, found expression (Stiles & Kitch, 2011, p. 128). As LeDuff (2012b) noted, even when pressing events challenged this narrative—such as when congressman Joe Wilson heckled the president during a congressional address—newspapers largely declined to comment on the potential racial implications of the incident until former president Jimmy Carter himself raised the issue. To Stiles & Kitch (2011), the cumulative effect of this coverage was a “resounding and uplifting vision” in which race became:

one thread in the country’s greatness rather than a contentious issue that repeatedly threatens to unravel the social fabric. In commemorative journalism’s embrace of American mythology, the election of the first Black president of the United States turned out to affirm the American national culture of unity rather than to interrogate themes of social difference and inequalities. (p. 129)

This theme has been but the latest manifestation of contemporary racial myths that have continued to influence mainstream American news coverage of African Americans,

whether in stories of crime, politics, or racial disparities. The counterhegemonic narratives of black media often have opposed these visions, however. It is to that “parallel” press that this study next turns.

Splitting the African American Image: The Black Press in the U.S.

If the racial ideologies presented in the mainstream press sometimes ebbed and flowed to a common current, the African American press has often diverged from that tide. The “split image” noted by Dates & Barlow (1993) was representative of the important differences of culture, coverage, and representation that have characterized the mainstream (“general audience”) and black presses. Such differences were the products of a “deep cultural schism” in racial ideology that has existed since the antebellum era and has continued to characterize the battle over the popular African American image (Dates & Barlow, 1993, p. 5). Black Americans have long tried to create media that counter hegemonic images and better represent their interests than mainstream news venues (Dates, 1993; Larson, 2006).

The black press has historically fulfilled this mission in a “parallel” role to mainstream media (Larson, 2006). Arising with the first black newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, in 1827, the black press persisted and expanded throughout the 1800s and 1900s. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the African American press began a gradual decline in staffing and circulation (Armistead & Wilson, 1997). Though it still plays an important role in shaping discourse about black Americans today, the African American press has become a supplement, rather than an alternative to, the mainstream press for black readers (Larson, 2006). What has united the African American press throughout its

history, however, has been its tendency to view the “black community in a vastly different perspective from the white press” (Dates, 1993, p. 370).

A body of scholarship has illuminated crucial differences of journalistic perspective between the mainstream and African American presses. As Ronald N. Jacobs (2000) noted in his sweeping study of race riot coverage in American news, the black press has often shaped alternative, counterhegemonic racial narratives to mainstream news discourse. Racial advocacy has been a common historical and contemporary component of African American newspapers (Kraeplin, 2008), which have often taken a less objective approach to reportage than mainstream newspapers (Thornton, 2014). Dates (1993) recognized that the black press has sometimes been the sole voice of African American interests in news:

[I]f it had not existed, there would have been no print medium of communications for African Americans that could instill a sense of community, a feeling of self-worth, or keep alive the often muted struggle to escape, first slavery, and then the clutches of segregation and discrimination. (p. 372)

Throughout its history, the African American press has played a “booster” role in encouraging solidarity and news literacy in black communities (Mangun, 2006). In so doing, Jacobs (2000) asserted, African American newspapers have acknowledged and systematically described racial inequality in ways sometimes uncommon or unknown to the mainstream press. Those publications, such as historical newspapers like *The Chicago Defender*, have also editorially demanded reform, racial equality, and African American self-reliance (Thornton, 2014). Additionally, black newspapers have differed strongly

from mainstream or “general audience” publications in their willingness to suggest the viability and value of racial reform, as Larson (2006) noted.

However, the black press has never been univocal, even during the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, African American newspapers differed significantly in their coverage of racial protests during that period (Broussard, 2002). Their editorial vision has been as fractious as that of the mainstream press, and in some respects their coverage patterns have converged with that of the national press, a fact illustrated by the “mediocre” reporting in the black press of certain issues, such as the AIDS crisis, which mirrored broader news trends (Brown, 2012). What has unified African American newspapers according to Larson (2006), however, has been a general trend towards asserting positive black representations that contrast with those of the mainstream press. This has been the case historically, such as in black newspapers’ assertion of black humanity in the wake of racial crises like the murder of Emmett Till (Spratt, Bullock, & Baldasty, 2007) and the slaying of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton (Fraley & Roushanzamir, 2004).

This counterhegemonic tendency has influenced the contemporary African American press. In contrast to mainstream news venues, black newspapers featured coverage of structural racism in the 1990s and often provided a counter-perspective to popular media constructions of affirmative action (Larson, 2006). In the 2000s, the black press has continued this tradition in some respects, opting to editorially and journalistically “contend with the belief that race has lost its meaning” (Thornton, 2009, p. 122). As Dates (1993) noted, despite the black press’s continuing struggle for economic viability and credibility in a “post-racial” landscape, its salience in constructing

alternative visions of African Americans in U.S. news discourse has been considerable. To better understand such discourse in Milwaukee, this study's review concludes with a brief consideration of the history and socioeconomic conditions of black Milwaukeeans.

A Brief Socioeconomic Portrait of Black Milwaukee: Evolution and Change

While a complete history of African Americans in Milwaukee was outside the scope of this research, it was useful to consider the history of black Milwaukeeans and the city's history of racial disparities. Though the first recorded presence of African Americans in Wisconsin dates to 1725, Milwaukee was slow to develop a black population (African Americans in Wisconsin, 2014). Indeed, that population was relatively small for much of the first half of the twentieth century (Dahlk, 2010). From 1900 to 1950, for example, the black population rose from 862 to 21,772, yet the latter total still represented only 3.42 percent of the city's total inhabitants (Geenen, 2006). Southern emigration to Milwaukee in the wake of World War II and beyond boosted this population, however (Post-War African American, 2014). In time it grew significantly, rising gradually in 2013 to nearly 240,000, or 40 percent of the Milwaukee's population (Milwaukee (city), Wisconsin, 2014).

Racial inequality has characterized the black experience in Milwaukee since the early twentieth century (Trotter, 2007). Racial discrimination—whether in “racial covenants, discriminatory real estate and loan practices, and overt racism” (Jones, 2009, p. 19)—restricted much of the population to a small “black district” that would become the genesis of Milwaukee's Bronzeville, coming to host 90 percent of Milwaukee's African American population as of 1940 (Jones, 2009). A unique community emerged

within these bounds, however, gradually expanding in Milwaukee's post-war industrial era despite rampant discrimination in housing and employment (Trotter, 2007) that ensured that "the level of segregation in Milwaukee equaled Birmingham, Atlanta, and other southern cities" (Jones, 2009, p. 24). In the 1960s and early 1970s, those tensions fueled an aggressive civil rights activism in Milwaukee in open housing and voting rights campaigns that turned the city, for a time, into the "Selma of the North" (Jones, 2009, p. 255). The gains of the movement were significant, both symbolically and tangibly (Geenen, 2014), but broader trends set a precedent that continues in part to this day. As Trotter (2007) noted:

As the city's manufacturing and social welfare base dwindled, Milwaukee's black community entered a period of profound socio-economic dislocation, suffering, and social conflict. Black unemployment rose to about 26 percent in 1986, nearly three times the metropolitan figure, while the percentage of blacks living in poverty households went from under 30 percent to 42 percent in 1990. (p. 299)

That same year, Milwaukee was noted as the "fifth-most segregated big city in the country" (Gurda, 1999, p. 388).

For African Americans in Milwaukee today, "hypersegregation and large concentrations of poverty and inequality" have become a concrete manifestation of this legacy (Jones, 2009, p. 27). As historian John Gurda (1999) noted, "poverty was not exclusively a black phenomenon" in Milwaukee's history, and nor is it so today (p. 389). But it has often fallen disproportionately on African American Milwaukeeans, for whom economic progress has been sluggish since 1990 (Levine, 2000). Despite major progress in certain areas as well as the continuing efforts of vibrant coalitions—including a

network of organizations such as the Milwaukee Urban League and Black Health Coalition of Wisconsin—and city- and state-level initiatives to combat the systemic inequalities that characterized the city, the position of Black Milwaukee has remained a singularly precarious one, according to Marc Levine (2000):

Moreover, when the economic state of black Milwaukee is compared to conditions for African Americans in other, comparable metropolitan areas, the conclusion is inescapable: Black Milwaukee remains the most economically disadvantaged big city African American community in the country. Clearly, as we begin the 21st century, metropolitan Milwaukee's greatest policy challenge remains overcoming the racial inequality that remains entrenched in the region's social and economic landscape. (p. 172)

This inequality has affected nearly every aspect of the lives of modern black Milwaukeeans, such as in the city's nationally unparalleled black-white male employment disparity (Levine, 2012). Significant efforts have been underway to address these trends in infant mortality (Brown, 2013), education (Richards, 2014), employment (DeLong, 2014), and enterprise (Brown, 2014). Yet, as Stanley F. Battle and Rick Hornung (2000) state in *The State of Black Milwaukee*, much remains to be done—and more remains to be seen—“[i]f Milwaukee is committed to equality and fairness for all of its residents” (p. 11). It is against this backdrop of historical inequality and continuing attempts at reform that any study of racial issues in news media of Milwaukee would be helpfully contextualized. Having done so, this study now turns to a discussion of methodological considerations.

METHODOLOGY

“What can you do about the racial exclusion, stereotyping, and system-supportive themes and messages in the mainstream media? ... You can see through the racial message in the media by becoming a critical viewer and reader.”

— Stephanie Larson, *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment* (2006, pp. 277-278)

Research Goals and Scholarly Aims

As previously noted, this thesis’s chief aim was to understand how racial inequalities were reported in contemporary American newspapers in Milwaukee. Viewing news discourse through a theoretical prism of Cultural Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Class Studies, this ideological critique analyzed 405 reports, columns, and editorials from *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Milwaukee’s mainstream paper of record, and *The Milwaukee Courier*, Milwaukee’s foremost African American paper, from 2010 through 2014. In so doing, this research attempted to further our understanding not only the textual features and dimensions of such coverage but also to understand its broader ideological implications in a news landscape that scholarship has characterized as dominated by post-racial (Copes, 2013) ideologies and negative narratives about African Americans (Stabile, 2006). Specifically, this thesis aimed to understand *how contemporary mainstream and African American newspapers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, discussed issues of racial inequalities from 2010 through 2014 and what ideological implications of race and class underlay those discussions.*

This study sought to provide an ideological perspective on reporting of racial inequalities. Existing research largely considered the issue either from a broader

perspective on racial narratives (Larson, 2006; Stabile, 2006) or from the prospective of media framing (Gandy & Zhan, 2005; Rasmussen, 2014). As such, this study's goal of providing a focused critique of the ideological implications of city newspapers' reporting of racial disparities provided a salient contribution to this literature, particularly when contextualized against the backdrop of a city renowned for its disparities.

Additionally, this research sought to further our understanding of what differences and similarities existed between African American and mainstream coverage of these issues. A body of scholarship has examined historical differences between the two presses, (e.g., Broussard, 2002; Jacobs, 2000; Thornton, 2014). Very little of this scholarship, however, examined contemporary reporting on disparities in black newspapers, and that which did utilized a framing perspective (Rasmussen, 2014). This study sought to further our understanding of the continuing "split image" of African Americans in the modern press from a methodological perspective that could tease out important "common sense" narratives underlying news media (Cormack, 1992).

Research Materials and Design Choices

This study sought to achieve an understanding of contemporary racial inequality reporting in the Milwaukee press. To that end, the researcher chose the two most prominent mainstream and African American newspapers in Milwaukee, respectively: *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and *The Milwaukee Courier*. This was an important consideration, for, as Thornton (2009) has noted, to scrutinize only mainstream media "as the primary font for understanding the social landscape is to limit insight into the complexity of the issues we face as a society" (p. 123). Furthermore, important

differences characterized the visions and missions of the white and black presses (e.g., Dates, 1993; Larson, 2006; Stabile, 2006; etc.).

It was important, therefore, to consider both perspectives, and these two newspapers provided a solid foundation for that examination. Having won eight Pulitzer Prizes, *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* is the mainstream paper of record in Milwaukee, the largest newspaper in Wisconsin, and one of the nation's largest metropolitan dailies (Journal Communications, 2014). As of 2013, the newspaper had a Sunday print circulation of approximately 319,000 (Kirchen, 2014). In terms of its mission, the *Journal Sentinel* stated that its stories “deliver award-winning news and information on multiple digital platforms to a growing audience while maintaining a strong focus on serving our community with journalism that makes a difference” (Journal Communications, 2014). This community is one of a general readership located primarily in the Milwaukee metropolitan area and Wisconsin, but also to a lesser degree in the United States as a whole (Journal Communications, 2014). Conversely, the oldest African American newspaper in Milwaukee, *The Milwaukee Courier*, is one of Wisconsin's largest black weeklies (Adams, 2013) and has a circulation of approximately 40,000 (Ivey, 2013). In terms of its mission, the *Courier* billed itself as “The newspaper you can trust since 1964,” being targeted primarily towards a Milwaukeean audience (“About Us,” *n.d.*). The preponderance of articles in the *Courier* utilizing a direct address to African American audiences was instructive as to the newspapers' target demographic.

These two publications represented the most reputable, established newspapers of their respective press traditions in Milwaukee and were thus ideal for this study. Indeed, their dissimilarity from each other and adherence to their respective traditions actually

constituted a strength in terms of comparison. The two newspapers' rooting in the objective tradition of the mainstream press and the advocacy focus of the black press, respectively, allowed the researcher to simultaneously compare the papers while making broader inferences about the papers' traditions as a whole (Dates & Barlow, 1993).

To gain a sense of their respective coverage of racial inequalities, the researcher considered every relevant news article, editorial, and column from each newspaper on racial inequalities from 2010 through 2014. Three reasons undergirded this decision. The first was that the years, 2010 through 2014, provided a concise range featuring a variety of important incidents in Milwaukee's recent history, including, for example, ongoing efforts to stem the city's black infant mortality (Brown, 2013). The second was that the period presented the most current range possible. Finally, drawing upon John Pauly's (1991) assertion that qualitative researchers treat selection as a "narrative dilemma" in which they may discern "key moments" (p. 12), the researcher chose the range for its symbolic bookends: in 2010, the greater Milwaukee metropolitan area was cited by the Brookings Institution as the most segregated in America (Tolan and Glauber, 2010), and in 2014, an *Atlantic Cities* study reaffirmed those findings (Causey, 2014a). Those reports were controversial and striking, and examining the period between those dates provided a unique insight into how Milwaukee's print media reflected the change (or lack thereof) in a city's conception of itself and its racial disparities between those two periods.

This study considered the text of 405 stories from the two newspapers from January 1, 2010 through December 31, 2014. Specifically, the selection included 235 articles from the *Journal Sentinel* and 170 from the *Courier*. The decision to utilize news

reports, columns, and editorials arose out of a desire to get a full sense of the press discourse of each paper. If news media served as sites of ideology (Cormack, 1992), this ideology was often revealed both in the overt statements of editorials as well as in the inferential constructions and news decisions of “objective” reports. Focusing specifically upon news discourse, this study omitted reviews, obituaries, and letters to the editor. To gain a fuller picture of news discourse on racial inequalities, this study sought to include not only stories that specifically dealt with racial inequalities (historical and contemporary) but also those that contextualized other events against these issues. Those stories that only mentioned the topics in passing were excluded from the selection, as were stories dealing with other forms of disparities.

Additionally, a specific decision was made to focus on white-African American racial inequalities. The researcher made this decision for two important reasons: African Americans have occupied a singular and often negative place in American news discourse as symbolic embodiments of nonwhiteness in the traditional “black/white” binary (Campbell, 1995; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Larson, 2006; Stabile, 2006). Additionally, a preponderance of news coverage and local studies has concerned African Americans in Milwaukee, who have confronted some of the worst disparities not just in Wisconsin but in the United States (Brown, 2013; Levine, 2012; Richards & Mulvany, 2014). If there has been a face to inequality in Milwaukee, it has been most prominently an African American one. It is for these reasons that the researcher focused on black-white segregation and disparities.

Collection, Sorting, and Formatting of Materials

The researcher employed two online databases, *Newsbank* and *Ethnic Newswatch*, to compile the texts of stories from each newspaper for analysis. The decision to use these two databases was an eminently practical one: *Newsbank* constituted the only complete collection of *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* for the full time frame of this study, and *Ethnic Newswatch* was the only Marquette University-accessible database to feature articles from *The Milwaukee Courier*. While each database had its strengths and limitations, each provided full-text access to the respective newspapers' archives. To ensure that this study included the fullest possible picture of each paper's respective coverage, the researcher employed a variety of search terms and their variations and cognates.

These terms included: "racism," "racist," "racial," "inequality," "inequalities," "disparity," and "disparities." After conducting these initial database searches and gathering the resulting documents, the researcher sorted the stories, including only those articles that either concerned racial inequalities or were contextualized against them according to the guidelines previously mentioned. For this reason, the researcher excluded a small selection of articles that dealt with gender disparities with no mention of race. The researcher also excluded articles dealing with unrelated topics (e.g. segregated funds, a financial term which occurred in a variety of *Journal Sentinel* articles reporting on business events).

After double-checking the selected articles after completing each of the respective searches, the researcher then compiled the articles into .PDF format in chronological order using *Newsbank* and *Ethnic Newswatch*'s respective print functions. The researcher

then constructed a list of the articles as a next step. Before beginning the ideological analysis, the researcher also conducted a brief comparative examination of the respective bodies of articles and discerned if any recurring patterns of coverage on certain events were noticeable in headlines. In doing so, the research attempted to discern if any convergences or dissimilarities existed between the two papers' coverage patterns of these events at first glance. Once that step was completed, the researcher undertook a full ideological criticism and comparative analysis on each newspaper article according to the following precepts.

Ideological Critique: A Textual Approach to Implicit Assumptions

Ideological criticism (Cormack, 1992; Foss, 2009) granted the researcher an appropriate methodology for the consideration of the discourse on racial inequality in Milwaukee newspapers. Such publications served as important mediators of ideological narratives through excluding or giving primacy to certain stories, perspectives, and sources (Cormack, 1992). The media's selection of the latter was often influenced by its tendency to hold inherent "biases toward conventional over dissident opinions" (Schudson, 2011, p. 53). This focus implicitly reflected the processes by which hegemonic ideologies were reinforced. In this manner, the "news do not so much occupy the middle ground as define what the middle ground is"—its work, therefore, has been inherently cultural and ideological (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 169).

A "central concept in textual analysis," ideological criticism provided a vital means with which to understand these processes (Brennen, 2013, p. 201). It is an approach that has seen broad usage in evaluating news. Such studies include, for

example, considerations of rhetorical construction of Japanese-Americans and Arab-Americans following Pearl Harbor and September 11, respectively (Brennen & Duffy, 2003); the journalistic constructions of Arab countries following the September 11 strikes (Ibrahim, 2008); the ideological assumptions of obituaries in financial publications (Moore, 2002); the interplay of hybridity and otherness in Latina representations in popular media (Shugart, 2007); the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity in sports journalism (Trujillo, 1991); and the sexualized news constructions of female athletes (Shugart, 2003). These varied studies demonstrated the flexibility of ideological criticism in evaluating news discourse.

Influenced by numerous scholarly traditions such as Cultural Studies, Structuralism, and Marxism, ideological criticism “looks beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests” (Foss, 2009, p. 209). Accepting the idea that multiple ideologies existed within cultures and were represented in artifacts, this methodology sought to uncover the ideological assumptions implicit in such cultural products (Foss, 2009). In this tradition, researchers have sought to understand if texts feature either multiple ideologies or possibly feature a dominant, hegemonic ideology. Particularly in the latter case, qualitative researchers often envision these texts as reinforcing certain values or ideas, thus functioning as “sources of power” (Brennen, 2013, p. 202).

As Cormack (1992) explained, an ideological critique approaches cultural artifacts through five analytical categories: content, structure, style, absence, and mode of address (p. 28). In terms of content, critics assess how a text expresses a view of reality through explicit judgments or assertions, choices of terminology and vocabulary, and

depictions of characters and actions. Historicization is a key feature of the content of news texts, as journalists place each of their stories in an implicitly intertextual, historic relationship with other events (Cormack, 1992). Ideological critics also analyze structural features such as the opening and closing of texts and how those cultural products construct binary oppositions (e.g., black/white). Furthermore, the absences or “avoidances” of “elements which might have been expected to be in the text but which are missing from it”—or which perhaps structure texts’ ideological vision—also constitute a key dimension for the researcher to consider (Cormack, 1992, p. 31). The literary style and tone of a text (e.g., whether it employs objective or subjective conventions, hyperbole, etc.) is also important to understand. Finally, ideological critics also seek to understand how a text directly or indirectly addresses its audience, what audience it seeks to address, and what interests it assumes that audience to hold. Through evaluating these features, researchers illuminate the ideologies present in artifacts, “clearing a space in which existing arrangements can be evaluated and perhaps altered” (Foss, 2009, p. 214).

In the tradition of ideological criticism, the researcher analyzed each article using the five analytical categories noted by Cormack (1992) and developed an understanding of the meanings suggested by those artifactual features. Following the analytical tradition of Stuart Hall (1975), this study also considered how such texts exhibited key words, repeated phrases, and textual “selectivity, emphasis, treatment, and presentation” (p. 11). Each of these considerations undergirded the researcher’s analysis, allowing him to establish categories to develop a framework not only for the newspapers’ discussion of the topics but also for the ideological assumptions that underlay them (Foss, 2009).

ANALYSIS: VISIONS OF RACIAL DISEASE, VIGILANCE, AND STASIS

“Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?”

—from Langston Hughes, “Dream Boogie”

Introduction

The story of racial inequality that emerged from *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and *The Milwaukee Courier* in 2010-14 was as complex as it was ideologically charged. This research considered 405 news reports, columns, and editorials from the two newspapers—specifically, 235 from the *Journal Sentinel* and 170 from the *Courier*. Analyzing these articles through an ideological critique informed by Cultural Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Zweigian Class Theory, this study found that the two newspapers differed almost entirely in their pattern of coverage and journalistic ethos.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel discussed racial disparities through beat and watchdog coverage supplemented by a variety of columns and editorials. Centering its coverage predominantly on local events, the *Journal Sentinel* focused particularly on issues of African American infant mortality, racial profiling and police brutality, de facto segregation, and educational disparities. These reports included a number of beat articles as well as special reports, including an extensive series on infant mortality, “Empty Cradles,” and a series of reports on allegations of racialized police brutality in the death of Derek Williams, a 22-year-old African American. What united this diverse coverage was an overt commitment to traditional journalistic precepts; in its reportage, the *Journal*

Sentinel presented a largely neutral, dispassionate mode of address aimed at general audiences.

In *The Milwaukee Courier*, however, an equally traditional commitment to African American advocacy and boosterism predominated. Perhaps following the more recent trend in black newspapers to serve as supplementary media to mainstream news (Dates, 1993), the *Courier* focused less on local news than on national occurrences and commentary. The newspaper's articles focused particularly on general issues of past and present racial discrimination, health disparities, and politics. This coverage included a host of columns such as a series on race relations, "We're All Accountable to the Movement," and a variety of pieces on the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. The newspaper addressed each of these topics through a mixture of opinion pieces and often-overtly subjective reports featuring numerous direct addresses to an African American audience. This advocacy- and community-oriented ethos extended not only to the newspaper's journalistic voice but also to its vocabulary and style set, for example, which emphasized the importance by race by ubiquitously capitalizing racial terms (e.g., "white," "black").

If the two publications differed almost completely in their journalistic approaches, however, they were united in their construction of an overwhelmingly negative portrait of racial inequalities in Milwaukee. The *Journal Sentinel* and *Courier* each presented a pessimistic portrait of racial disparities, highlighting the issues (e.g. de facto segregation, infant mortality, etc.) as important indicators of an unhealthy and racially diseased Milwaukee and America. Yet this apparent convergence existed within two very different patterns of coverage rooted in contradictory ideological visions. The *Journal Sentinel*

portrayed racial inequalities such as de facto segregation and infant mortality as terrible social problems that should be—but likely could not be—resolved by institutional efforts, encouraging an ideology of racial stasis that sometimes impugned the victims of existing disparities. The *Courier*, however, portrayed racial disparities as the horrific legacy of an institutional racism that African Americans could and must confront, emphasizing a contradictory ideology of racial vigilance.

The *Journal Sentinel*'s and *Courier*'s often contrasting ideological visions found sharp expression in how the two newspapers textually constructed the importance of racial disparities, their causes and potential solutions, and the victims of inequality.

“Ever-Raw Racial Sores:” Milwaukee and the United States as Racially Diseased

Perhaps the most ubiquitous feature of the content of both newspapers was the character of Milwaukee itself. Whether juxtaposed against a national context or analyzed in isolation, Milwaukee emerged in each newspaper's narrative reality as a segregated and racialized city in which pervasive white-black disparities have produced “ever-raw racial sores” (Romell, 2012). In the *Journal Sentinel*, assertions of the city's racial divides were a formulaic aspect of reports and columns alike. Numerous *Journal Sentinel* articles asserted that Milwaukee was “one of the most racially and economically segregated cities in the nation” (Schumacher, 2013) and “the worst in the nation in terms of racial disparity in education” (Gebelhoff, 2014). The *Courier*'s coverage echoed and amplified these statements about Milwaukee in piercing and subjective vocabulary, stating how “the city is in a crisis” in which a “vicious cycle” (“MICAH Declares State,” 2011) of segregation and incarceration had produced a “devastating impact” on African

Americans (“Local NAACP Release,” 2011). As one of these *Courier* reports bluntly stated, “the list” of the city’s racial ills “goes on and on” (“MICAH Declares State,” 2011)—both in the reportage and, through narrative emphasis, in the mind of the reader.

The destructive power of Milwaukee’s racial disparities and the bifurcated internal communities it has produced were consistent features of each newspaper’s coverage. The opening of one October 4, 2014, column in the *Courier* exemplified this narrative construct, stating that, “There are two distinct cities in Milwaukee: one city that is predominantly poor, blighted, impoverished, and predominantly Black side-by-side with another city that is wealthy, prosperous, economically vibrant, and predominantly White” (Islam, 2014b). Similarly, a report in the *Journal Sentinel* gave center stage to an economist’s claim that Milwaukee’s segregated “racial-spatial” mismatch was a “central economic challenge facing the region” (Romell, 2014). Having constructed this divide, both newspapers provided the reader with repeated illustrations of how that segregation and its resulting disparities were not simply ambient features of Milwaukee, but ongoing threats to local African Americans both at an individual and statistical level.

In the *Journal Sentinel*, for example, one feature article on infant mortality detailed the pregnancy of a 23-year-old woman, Jasmine Zapata, as an example of the stress that segregation and racism could produce in African American mothers (Johnson & Ghose, 2011). Another similar report followed the redemption of Ranard Morris, an African American Milwaukeean who struggled with addiction after having “lost his innocence about race and class” amongst the “ghetto trapdoors” of segregated black Milwaukee (Luthern, 2014a). In broader terms, the *Courier* posited racial disparities as a “devastating” (Morial, 2013a) driver of “socioeconomic disparities between Whites and

minorities” (Allen, 2014). If these characters and statistics underlined the severity of the inequalities and their racial and class implications, sources and columnists in both newspapers’ respective narratives employed specific phrasings that reinforced to the reader how these disparities were “unacceptable” (Herzog, 2014) and “dehumanizing” (Harris, 2012) phenomena that should “shock everyone” (Causey, 2014b).

These racial woes came into sharp relief in the coverage not merely within Milwaukee but also in a notable structural binary of a largely non-white urban Milwaukee and the largely white suburbs surrounding it. Both the *Courier* and the *Journal Sentinel* employed “suburban” and “urban” as a sort of respective vocabulary shorthand for “white” and “black,” with numerous articles dramatizing how “hyper-segregation” had produced the “wide gap between metro Milwaukee’s urban heart and its suburbs” (Romell, 2014), a divide not only of race but also of class and economic opportunity (Glauber, 2010). These binary connotations, which effectively fused race and class by interweaving depictions of African Americans and poverty, were typical of both newspapers. However, particularly in the *Journal Sentinel*, articles did not merely illustrate the existence of this binary, but also portrayed a series of similarly constructed stories which portrayed suburbs as attempting to halt or push back integration attempts—whether in South Milwaukee’s attempt to demolish a building complex housing a sizable percentage of its black population (Tolan, 2010); allegations that Waukesha County engaged in housing discrimination (Pabst, 2011); and local apartment managers’ attempts to stop African Americans from gaining housing in La Crosse (“Regional News Watch,” 2011).

This theme of suburban maintenance of racial binaries found its fullest expression in the *Journal Sentinel* in a series of articles on the “battle of New Berlin” (Glauber & Johnson, 2011), the tale of New Berlin’s failed attempt to prevent the construction of an affordable housing complex within its city limits. The characters and actions portrayed in this reporting were specific and ideologically instructive. The reports included specific mentions of death threats, tire slashings, racial epithets, federal intervention, and the presence of an anti-housing “Concerned Citizens of New Berlin” council (Diedrich & Vielmetti, 2011; Johnson & Glauber, 2011). The ostensibly objective content of these articles subtly evoked imagery from the Civil Rights Movement era to portray New Berlin to readers as an implicitly racist community attempting to stop an influx of “prospective tenants [who might] be African Americans or other minorities ... not wanting New Berlin to turn into Milwaukee” (Diedrich & Vielmetti, 2011). While this subtly indicting reportage did not always extend to the city of Milwaukee itself—as will be shown—such articles’ content seemed to suggest to readers not only the presence of the urban/suburban racial binary but also the racialized mechanisms allowing its perpetuation.

Beyond descriptions of the dichotomous communities within and around Milwaukee, however, a broader set of structural binaries in the *Journal Sentinel* and *Courier* juxtaposed the city against both America and other nations. Within the *Journal Sentinel*, Milwaukee’s rampant black infant mortality rate was repeatedly described not only as one of the worst in America but also as being worse than numerous “Third World” countries such as Bosnia, Uruguay, or Kuwait (e.g., Stephenson, 2011a; Stephenson, 2012; Stephenson & Herzog, 2012). This implicit differentiation of

Milwaukee from America also found expression in the *Courier*, where one column, for example, likened the city to a devastated Haiti, noting that “comparisons can be made to what happens when the infrastructure of a community begins to collapse without provisions for education, job creation and healthcare” (“Connecting the Dots,” 2010). These structural juxtapositions, combined with the aforementioned narrative and vocabulary choices, encouraged the reader to ideologically envision the city’s racial inequalities as profoundly inimical not only to African American Milwaukeeans but also, implicitly, to American standards.

Though both newspapers largely converged in their narrative emphasis on the depth and urgency of Milwaukee’s racial disparities, the *Journal Sentinel* and *Courier* differed significantly in their positioning of Milwaukee within broader historical narratives of local and national devolution, respectively. In the *Journal Sentinel*, reports repeatedly historicized Milwaukee as a shadow of its former self in terms of employment and infant mortality disparities between African Americans and whites. In article after article, sources asserted how they had “seen Milwaukee change” with a “loss of [African American] jobs and sense of family and community” (Pabst, 2012) as the community underwent “a slow death” (Luthern, 2014a). A pointedly headlined report, “Where city factories, and now babies, die,” made this descent in the African American community in the wake of manufacturing’s decline and poverty’s rise clear:

It starts as one household after another loses income and cannot patronize neighborhood merchants, who go out of business. Storefronts become vacant and unlighted, inviting crime. Housing prices plunge, or stay depressed, leaving owners without equity for loans. Chronic financial uncertainty creates tension in

the household. Families go into survival mode. Physical fitness and schoolwork fall by the wayside.

In Milwaukee, such a chain reaction transformed the central city.

In 1970, the city's black poverty rate was 22% lower than the U.S. black average; today, Milwaukee's black poverty rate is 49% higher than the national rate. In 1970, the city's median family income for African Americans was 19% higher than the U.S. median income for black families. Today, it's 30% lower.

(Schmid, 2011)

The result of this gradual historical deterioration, the *Journal Sentinel's* coverage suggested, was to place the city on the precipice of an impending crisis of racial inequality—a judgment given overt life in repeated comparisons of Milwaukee to Detroit, Michigan, and Ferguson, Missouri. While reports compared Milwaukee Public Schools' test scores to Detroit and quoted sources stating that, “We’re closer to being Detroit than most people think” (Richards, 2013), later reports in the wake of the police shooting of Michael Brown voiced concerns that Milwaukee “is just a death or two away from being Ferguson,” as “[a]ll of the same ingredients are here . . . poverty, joblessness, despair, segregation, and various other racial inequities,” only awaiting a “spark” (Garza & Walker, 2014). The ideological vision of this coverage painted Milwaukee as a community in crisis, one in which social indicators such as African American-white disparities in infant mortality functioned as a “canary in a coal mine” (Maslin, 2014) of an unhealthy and racially poisoned city.

This historicization of Milwaukee found a very different expression in the *Courier*, which situated the city not so much as a shadow of its former self but as merely

one of the most obvious products of a racially devolving country, one in which “something is heinously wrong” (Young, 2013). In article after article, the *Courier* characterized America itself, rather than Milwaukee, as an entity in decline. Focusing more on national-level commentary on race relations than on local issues, numerous columns asserted that the United States as a country had lost sight of the goals of racial egalitarianism (Theoharis, 2013), “simmering in [the] racial injustice” of institutionalized discrimination (Browne-Marshall, 2013a) with “racially motivated murders, voter suppression tactics, stop and frisk abuses, and discriminatory lending cases” (Browne-Marshall, 2013e). This devolution, several columns directly concluded to readers, had left an African American “community in peril” (Islam, 2014a) at all social levels, as, “We all must agree that the state of the Black community is in serious and unprecedented decline both nationally and here in Milwaukee” (Islam, 2014b).

The Milwaukee Courier’s choices in judgments and phrasing, which not only suggested a historical perspective to readers but assumed a shared racial interest, characterized its overtly ideological vision of America, which used the plight of African Americans in Milwaukee and elsewhere as a barometer of America’s failing racial health, turning the *Journal Sentinel’s* “canary” metaphor to a broader purpose. This theme found strong expression in an August 10, 2013, *Courier* column, “You are Trayvon,” which argued that George Zimmerman’s “murder and his acquittal” in the case of Trayvon Martin might open the door to even greater racial injustice in the United States:

Black people in America are like the canary in the coal mine, says Harvard Professor Lani Guinier. A sick canary predicts deadly trouble in the mine below.

The fate of African Americans can reveal the future of others in America. Soon, everyone is Trayvon. (Browne-Marshall, 2013d)

This ideological assertion, combined with the direct address in the headline, entreated the reader to envision the United States as racially diseased and declining, its racism a threat not only to African Americans but to “everyone.”

The vision of black America’s plight as a bellwether of the nation’s racial health was echoed in articles that posited Milwaukee’s racial disparities as indicators of its social failure. *Courier* columnists wrote that “we cannot build an economy on poverty and segregation” (Dorsey, 2013) while “African Americans in Milwaukee and their leaders exist in the warm bosom of bigotry” (Harris, 2012). These judgments, nearly always made with at least some national context and historicization, were characteristic of the overarching condemnation of national race relations and social justice in the *Courier*, whose stylistic subjectivity made its ideology apparent. Despite these important differences of historicization and style, however, both newspapers’ narratives entreated the reader to view the city’s black-white disparities, its “ever-raw racial sores” (Romell, 2012), as indicators of a racially diseased community.

“It’s Not Like Milwaukee Is Doing Something Wrong:” Rhetorically Constructing the Causes of and Solutions to the City’s Inequality

Little, if any, accord existed between the *Journal Sentinel* and the *Courier* in their rhetorical strategies for constructing the causes of racial disparities in Milwaukee—and what institutions, if any, should be held responsible for attempting to redress them. The *Journal Sentinel* followed a traditional journalistic objectivity, rhetorically attacking egregious cases of active racial discrimination while presenting a portrait of responsible

Milwaukeean institutions attempting to solve potentially unsolvable social ills. In the case of the *Courier*, however, a subjective rhetorical strategy directly attacked city institutions and politicians, embracing an ideological paradigm that encouraged African Americans to directly redress their disparities. This significant difference of journalistic ethos, rooted in the respective traditions of the mainstream and African American presses, had significant ideological implications.

The *Journal Sentinel* rhetorically constructed a mixed portrait of the Milwaukee's institutional culpability in racial disparities, decrying "active" racist incidents (e.g. police brutality, racial profiling, etc.) through watchdog reportage while absolving the city of blame for "passive" disparities (e.g. racial segregation, infant mortality, etc.) in beat coverage and columns. Certainly the newspaper condemned instances of racially tinged violence, particularly in the case of law enforcement. From 2010 through 2014, the *Journal Sentinel* constructed a brutal vision of racial incidents between the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) and African American Milwaukeeans through harshly adversarial watchdog reportage.

A January 22, 2012, front-page report, "Jude settlement reached," was particularly representative of this coverage. Describing the settlement of the lawsuit of Frank Jude, Jr., a Milwaukee man assaulted by off-duty MPD officers, the report opened by noting how Jude was "brutally beaten" by officers in a case that "rocked the city and Police Department" (Diedrich, 2012). The article described at great length how Jude was subjected to what a federal prosecutor described as "an intentional, methodical, purposeful, extensive beating over 15 minutes full of sickening acts" by "white attackers" using "racial slurs" (Diedrich, 2012).

This sharply negative phrasing continued beneath in a subhead, “Botched investigation.” The section asserted that, “From the outset, the investigation was badly handled,” describing how an “all-white jury” acquitted the officers prior to an eventually successful federal prosecution (Diedrich, 2012). The report concluded in part with a description of how “[q]uestions remain” about whether the policemen were part of a “rogue group of officers” which an unnamed police supervisor described as a “‘brutal and abusive’ gang” (Diedrich, 2012). The phrasing, overt judgments, and structure of the report—combined with the near-absence of official responses from the MPD—invited the reader not only to condemn the incident and officers involved but also to suspect the credibility of the MPD as a whole.

It was a tone reproduced in dozens of prominently featured reports in *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* on racial incidences that constructed Milwaukee law enforcement as fundamentally suspect. Both reporters and sources alike critiqued the MPD for its role in incidents such as the death of Derek Williams and the shooting of Dontre Hamilton. Reports described, for example, how church leaders had become disillusioned with how MPD Chief Edward Flynn’s positions had seemingly regressed to the “racist policies of former Chief Harold Brier” (Johnson, 2012), asserting how the MPD had been “battered by a series of scandals” (Diedrich & Barton, 2013). Another report noted how a nonprofit coordinator working with the MPD considered the organization a “partner-in training” which he hoped his organization would be able to teach to look at the community not as “the most dangerous, the most uneducated, as the poorest” African Americans in the city, but as “people” (Luthern, 2014b). These probing reports, typical of the newspaper’s coverage of what one reporter described as

Milwaukee's "tangle of race, class, crime and history" (Luthern, 2014b), presented readers with a firm, if ostensibly objective, ideological condemnation of the actors involved in incidences of open racial discrimination and violence, for which, in the words of one clergyman, "Someone has to be held accountable" (Johnson, 2012).

In its coverage of alleged police brutality and racial profiling, the *Journal Sentinel's* ideological vision largely coincided with that of the *Courier*, which evoked a similar skepticism of authorities involved in such instances of "active" racial discrimination. While the *Courier* did not cover the Frank Jude, Jr. case, it featured two reports on the police-related deaths of Dontre Hamilton and Derek Williams which evoked a similar skepticism of the MPD. Linking the Hamilton and Williams cases with the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, one *Courier* report, for example, gave center stage to sources such as a local activist who asserted that Hamilton and Williams, amongst others, were "the victims of police brutality and white vigilantism in Milwaukee" (Stokes, 2014). On a broader level, a 2014 column characterized the deaths of Brown and Trayvon Martin as "tragic and unnecessary killings of un-armed Black youth" (Young, 2014), encouraging the reader to condemn the authorities involved in those incidences.

Similar to the reportage of the *Journal Sentinel*, the *Courier* also emphasized the suffering of the victims of the alleged brutality, noting, for instance, how Derek Williams was ignored while "pleading for help for seven to eight minutes before he collapsed and died" in the back of a police car (Hollmon, 2012). The *Courier* differed from the *Journal Sentinel*, however, in its broader indictment of American law enforcement practices in general, however, particularly in columns. That was the case, for instance, in columns

that denounced the New York Police Department's "Stop and Frisk" policy as "baseless stops" as part of a "war on Blacks and Latinos" (Browne-Marshall, 2013a) and a similar opinion piece on racial profiling that stated that, "It's no secret in the black community that black lives aren't valued by the authorities" (Sistrunk, 2014). Though the intensity of the *Courier's* phrasing and the broadness of its scope differed from that of the *Journal Sentinel*, the two newspapers accorded in evoking an ideological skepticism of law enforcement in instances of "active" racial discrimination.

If a sometimes overt tone of castigation characterized the *Journal Sentinel's* watchdog coverage of "active" allegations of police brutality, however, a contradictory ethos characterized its coverage of "passive" disparities such as infant mortality. In the case of Milwaukee's nearly unparalleled black-white student achievement and infant mortality gaps, beat coverage regularly condemned the inequalities themselves, often through vocabulary. In article after article, for example, sources and reporters described the disparities as "dismal" (Richards, 2013), "morally reprehensible" (Evers and Means, 2014), and "unacceptable" (Herzog, 2014). This phraseology rhetorically constructed such gaps as unconscionable manifestations of an inequality that "cuts to the core of human existence" (Poston, 2011).

However, these same reports also presented such disparities as historically intractable issues of racialized inequality without any institutional cause and, potentially, beyond hope of redress. Unlike the sharp indictments of the *Journal Sentinel's* watchdog pieces, this often formulaic reportage presented readers with a cast of responsible institutions such as the City of Milwaukee that "vowed to combat" (Johnson, 2010) and had "declared war" (Stephenson, 2011b) on such disparities by setting "modest" but

“realistic” goals (Herzog, 2011) to end them. Such institutional actors were presented in dozens of reports undertaking seemingly futile attempts to combat possibly unfixable inequalities that writers characterized as “perennial thorn[s]” in Milwaukee’s side (Richards, 2011) or, in the bizarrely racialized phrasing of one unattributed editorial, as the historical “twin tar babies of overt racism and segregation” (“Advisory Hits: Quick,” 2010). This portrayal, which characterized the majority of the newspaper’s coverage of “passive” inequalities, defined the issues as seemingly unresolvable aspects of Milwaukee, or, as one report stated of infant mortality, as “exceedingly complex” issues whose causes were “elusive” (Borowski, 2011).

The juxtaposition of these two elements—apparently consistent institutional efforts at reform and the difficulty or impossibility of redressing racial inequalities—formed a repetitive, “stock” feature of dozens of articles. A March 10, 2011 report, “Health chief tells of Milwaukee plans to cut baby deaths,” was representative of this format, one whose tone was exemplified in the phrasing of the article’s nutshell paragraph:

Health officials, having declared war on Milwaukee's infant mortality crisis, outlined their plan of attack to a Common Council committee Wednesday whose members agreed that the rate at which Milwaukee children die during their first year of life is a travesty but seemed to doubt that much of substance can be done to ease the problem. (Stephenson, 2011b)

Here public officials were depicted taking aggressive action with vocabulary choices stressing the “war” and “plan of attack” they have embarked upon—a course of action immediately undercut by the seeming unassailability of the disparity itself, one that a

source asserted “goes back a long, long, long time” (Stephenson, 2011b). The report’s structure only served to reinforce this implied ideological vision of racial stasis.

Complementing the ambiguity of its introduction, the report ended by describing Milwaukee’s public health commissioner’s two “concrete goals” to reduce the racial gap in infant mortality and halve the overall rate, then adding that the commissioner “doubted either goal would be reached during his tenure” (Stephenson, 2011b). In this article, as in much of the coverage, the lack of any suggestion that institutional failures might play a role in perpetuating such inequalities became a structuring absence, allowing these articles to rhetorically construct a vision that endorsed institutional redresses while positing the impossibility of reform. This implicit ideology was one that encouraged readers to agree with the idea that, as a demographer in one representative article stated, “It's not like this year Milwaukee is doing something wrong ... It's an historical thing to a large extent” (Tolan & Glauber, 2010).

“If It Sounds Like Racism and Acts Like Racism:” Institutional Indictments

No such racial ambiguity characterized the ideological voice of the *Courier*, which rhetorically constructed racial disparities as the direct, intentional products of institutional forces that must be redressed by African Americans themselves. Unlike the *Journal Sentinel*, which affected a traditional journalistic objectivity and neutral mode of address, the *Courier* embraced an advocacy role, directly exhorting its impliedly African American readers to discern racial disparities as “effectively institutionalized” (Sen, 2014). It was an assertion given full expression in a 2010 column that stated, “We conclude that if it sounds like racism and acts like racism, then it probably is racism!”

(“If It Sounds,” 2010). On a national level, columns in the *Courier* repeatedly decried racial disparities and discrimination. Rather than characterize these inequalities as unsolvable, the newspaper’s reports and columns—which largely stylistically converged in their direct, subjective address to readers—constructed them as intentional phenomena through telling vocabulary and phrasing, characterizing police profiling as “a war on Blacks and Latinos” (Browne-Marshall, 2013a); police brutality as “Society-on-Black crimes” (Browne-Marshall, 2013d); and disproportional African American imprisonment as “intentional mass incarceration” (Morial, 2013a). Through such phraseology, the *Courier* represented disparities not as ambiguous historical phenomena but as intentional, artificial outcomes of institutional racism.

These same institutional indictments characterized the *Courier*’s columns on racial inequalities in Milwaukee, which rhetorically constructed a narrative reality positing the community’s African Americans in a structural binary with the city’s administration. A March 31, 2012, column arguing that longstanding racial discrimination fueled allegations of financial corruption that derailed a black politician’s campaign to become Milwaukee’s first African American comptroller—pointedly titled “The railroading of Johnny Thomas”—was representative of this general theme. The column opened by asserting that:

Somewhere somebody is either laughing or crying at how far Black America has come and how far we have to go. Our plight is not just measured by how many raging rivers of oppression we must cross but also by the deep oceans of bigotry that we must endure. African Americans in Milwaukee and their leaders exist in the warm bosom of bigotry, hatred, oppression and segregation; a place where it

is easy to forget or even ignore the putrid smell of a history drenched in a dehumanizing apparatus that is tightly held together by the forces of exploitation, hatred and lies. (Harris, 2012)

The column challenged the allegations against Thomas, arguing that the candidate became a victim of “an elaborate plan” by a city establishment taking steps to ensure that “no African American will ever be elected to a city-wide office” (Harris, 2012). Noting that “the establishment pull[ed] the trigger before they had sufficient evidence,” the column used Thomas’s story to dramatize allegations of longstanding racial discrimination within Milwaukee. In so doing, it counterpoised local African Americans with city officials, implying that the latter were, if not among those who may be “laughing” at Black America, at least among those who sought to exclude African Americans from power (Harris, 2012).

This oppositional framing, typical of the coverage, reappeared in multiple opinion pieces, such as a 2013 column alleging that the City of Milwaukee propped up a “poverty industry” in which “\$2 billion per year is used to maintain poverty and regulate the poor,” who were implicitly African American (Dorsey, 2013). It also occurred in two 2013 news articles which directly accused the *Journal Sentinel* of targeting black politicians while ignoring racist incidents (“Journal Communications Offers,” 2013), and pretending that all “structural racism was vanquished” through the Civil Rights Movement (Theoharis, 2013). These articles were remarkable not only for their overtly ideological judgments, vocabulary, and structure, but also for what was lacking from them.

Unlike the *Journal Sentinel*, which relied largely on institutional forces in its reporting on “passive” racial inequalities, the *Courier*’s news reportage and columns

were marked by an almost complete lack of official response. This structuring absence allowed the newspaper to extol a racially-focused ideology encouraging readers to view racial disparities not as abstract historical forces but as matters of institutional intent. Indeed, though both the *Journal Sentinel* and the *Courier* ideologically constructed the causes—or lack thereof—of Milwaukee’s racial disparities, only the *Courier* constructed “passive” disparities as the direct products of institutional racism.

This idea of institutional intent also found expression in the *Courier’s* envisioning of African Americans as a community in unique danger. As previously discussed, the *Journal Sentinel* constructed a narrative reality that emphasized the role of institutional reform in addressing racial disparities while simultaneously absolving those institutions from blame for “passive” inequalities. In contrast to the traditional journalistic “top-down” approach in the *Journal Sentinel*, which often posited “passive” racial disparities as potentially incurable, the *Courier* emphasized how horrible but solvable disparities might lead to an impending complete disenfranchisement of African Americans without black intervention.

The theme of black America dangling from a sort of racial precipice was particularly prominent in the publication. In addition to placing African Americans in a structural binary with local and national institutional forces, the newspaper also repeatedly depicted disparities as not merely intractable, but actively worsening. In numerous reports and columns, the *Courier* stressed the vulnerability of black Americans in Milwaukee and nationwide, particularly through a pessimistic phraseology referring to a community which had descended into a “precarious position” (Young, 2013); whose “vulnerabilities remain clear” (Graves, 2010); which found itself in “unprecedented

decline” (Islam, 2014b), and which had “been played cheap, politically” (Browne-Marshall, 2012). If the *Journal Sentinel* constructed a vision of institutional forces attempting if not necessarily succeeding at reforming racial disparities, the *Courier* inverted this view almost entirely, instead constructing a narrative reality in which racist institutions had nearly succeeded in completely “roll[ing] back rights for people of color” (Brock, 2011) who stood to become a “permanent underclass in America” (Islam, 2014b) if they did not take immediate action.

This theme of institutional forces acting against African American interests also found expression in the *Courier*’s coverage of affirmative action programs. In several reports and columns, the newspaper presented affirmative action as an embattled initiative under siege by political forces attempting to “destroy a symbol of Black progress” (Browne-Marshall, 2013f). Both the phrasing and assertions of these articles were instructive as to the *Courier*’s ideological implications. In one column, for example, a *Courier* writer characterized developments such as the U.S. Supreme Court’s willingness to consider the *Fisher v. University of Texas* case as “another pale horse” denoting an “ominous sign for defenders of affirmative action” (“Capitol report – Behold,” 2012). In another article, a columnist described how the initiative’s defenders had become “out-numbered and out-gunned” by conservatives “enraged by the very existence of Affirmative Action” and its benefits to African American social and political progress (Browne-Marshall, 2013f).

These actions, another opinion piece asserted, were driven by what it characterized as “racial incidents and falsehoods” such as the idea promulgated by Virginia Senator James Webb that “continuing affirmative action programs are harming

Whites” (Fulwood, 2010). Furthermore, *Courier* columns also posited such initiatives to end the program as signs of a continuing, worsening institutional attack on African American rights—a theme made particularly apparent in a 2013 column on *Schuetz v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*, a U.S. Supreme Court case which would decide whether Michigan could ban affirmative action programs:

This time, Michigan voters decided to end Affirmative Action in public university admissions. The next referendum could end voting rights protections, equal opportunity in employment, and fair housing rights.

Chief Justice John Roberts said, "Race is a lightning rod." In America, racial justice will be an ongoing struggle.

As African Americans and others gain political power, conservatives will devise ways to try and stop them.

Their sights are set on Affirmative Action. Who knows what the next target might be. (Browne-Marshall, 2013f)

Through such phraseology and assertions, the *Courier* invited readers to ideologically envision attacks on affirmative action initiatives not as mere legislative movements, but rather as ongoing institutional attempts to destroy or set back “Black progress and the future of [young Black and Latino] students” (Browne-Marshall, 2013f).

This vision sharply contrasted with the portrayal of affirmative action in the reporting and editorials of the *Journal Sentinel*. Whereas the *Courier* portrayed the program as a positive initiative beset by racially motivated challenges, the *Journal Sentinel* presented affirmative action as an outdated “racial preference” system existing on borrowed time (“Scholarship Programs Should,” 2011). Like the *Courier*, the *Journal*

Sentinel presented the initiative in a precarious position. This was the case, for example, in one 2013 report which used phrasing to depict the *Fisher v. University of Texas* case as a close call for a program which “survives for now” after having “dodged a bullet” (“Racial Diversity Can,” 2013). It was in the newspaper’s coverage of a November 2011 incident in local government, however, that a contradictory portrait of affirmative action to that of the *Courier* fully emerged.

In two reports and one board editorial, the *Journal Sentinel* covered an incident in which the Wisconsin State Assembly voted to eliminate race as a factor in a scholarship initiative for disadvantaged students, the Talent Incentive Program, not knowing that it had already been eliminated in 2010. Describing the voting session as a “bitter overnight debate” marked by political partisanship and accusations of racism (Marley & Stein, 2011), the *Journal Sentinel* asserted that the “9-hour bill debate was for naught” (Stein, 2011). A follow-up report opened with the seemingly flippant phrase, “Never mind,” noting that it was the only “upshot” of a process in which “Assembly lawmakers – who pull[ed] more all-nighters than some college students – ground through that painful process yet again this week” to eliminate a program already done away with (Stein, 2011).

This phrasing, which characterized the vote effectively as a silly attempt to decide a racial issue that had already been settled, found more overt expression in a board editorial which addressed the incident, pointedly titled, “Scholarship programs should be colorblind” (2011). Asserting that the incident engendered “a long and sometimes nasty debate – a debate, as it turns out, over a moot point,” the editorial asserted that the legislators nevertheless “got it right” in voting to eliminate the program (“Scholarship

Programs Should,” 2011). Asserting that “[b]eing disadvantaged knows no color,” the editorial concluded that it “is a question of fairness” to remove “racial preferences” from such programs and that “lawmakers were a little late to this debate” (“Scholarship Programs Should,” 2011).

The phrasing used to refer to the program itself was also instructive; whereas the *Courier* referred to affirmative action as a “symbol of Black progress” representing the “future” for minority students (Browne-Marshall, 2013f), the *Journal Sentinel*’s reports and editorial referred to affirmative action as a system of “racial preferences” (“Scholarship Programs Should,” 2011) for “minority preferential treatment” (Stein, 2011). Through such choices in phrasing, assertions, and editorial statements, the *Journal Sentinel* endorsed an ideological vision of institutional colorblindness. It was one that subtly encouraged readers to view affirmative action initiatives as outdated and unfair programs emanating from a racial debate which had already been settled, in distinct contrast to the *Courier*’s vision.

“What Would MLK Do?” Racial Boosterism and Black Agency

The most distinctive feature of the *Courier* in comparison to the *Journal Sentinel*, however, was its racial boosterism and emphasis on African American agency in racially-conscious efforts to combat inequality. Embracing an advocacy journalism paradigm, the *Courier* featured a plethora of boosterist reports and columns that included some form of direct address to African American readers, even in otherwise hard news. For example, in a June 28, 2014, report on how a number of well-known African American and Latina activists had written a letter urging President Obama to realign the “My Brother’s

Keeper” initiative to include nonwhite girls and women, the article began with a hard news account of the development, detailing both the contents of the letter and how it was signed by “[m]ore than 1,000 women of color,” including major arts and entertainment figures (Curry, 2014). After these initial facts, however, the report devoted its conclusion to sources directly exhorting black readers to take part in “working to remove the obstacles” facing African American girls, asking, “How can we in good conscience do anything less?” (Curry, 2014).

A host of columns also utilized this direct address to readers in diverse circumstances. Several columnists asserted, for example, that “We must create more opportunities for Black men” (Morial, 2013a); that “we must fight back” (Lathen, 2010) against the tobacco industry’s targeted advertising to African Americans; and that, “[W]e must continue the march for freedom” in the spirit of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s legacy (Jackson, 2013). The majority of this coverage—both in reports and columns—explicitly assumed an African American readership and ideologically encouraged those readers to believe in their own agency in combatting racial disparities.

This direct address was a key element of the *Courier*’s rhetorical strategy to exhort its African American readers to directly combat racial inequalities. In article after article, the *Courier* encouraged readers to take up the mantle of the Civil Rights Movement, an address encapsulated in the closing paragraph of a representative January 20, 2012, column notably headlined “What would MLK do?”

America's last warriors of the civil rights era are passing away. Their powerful legacies have become our inheritance. The battle is inherited, as well. As living testaments to the dream, it is time to step forward and embrace our destiny.

Remember Dr. King's assurance: “the arc of the moral universe is long. But, it bends toward justice.” (Browne-Marshall, 2012)

Calls to readers to emulate or focus upon the legacy of King were a ubiquitous characteristic of these articles, one well reflected in a host of headlines such as “A Legacy to Honor: A Dream to Achieve” (Brock, 2011); “Capitol Report – What would Dr. King do and say?” (2012); “An apology to Dr. King” (2012); or “A Tribute to Dr. King” (2011). The continuous referencing of King’s legacy served to encourage the reader to implicitly historicize her or his own actions against those of civil rights leaders.

Such articles not only challenged African Americans to directly seek to redress racial inequalities but also emphasized their ability to do so through phrasing and structural choices. Often used as a “stock” conclusion to articles about racial disparities, these calls to action asserted, for example, that “we [African Americans] have choices,” (Malveaux, 2012) and that “Black Americans have options” and “should not become cynical or hopeless” (Chavis, 2012). This latter assertion—that African Americans should not (and perhaps cannot afford to) despair—found expression in a January 9, 2010, column profiling the successes of local African Americans, which called on black Milwaukeeans to remain hopeful in the face of crippling inequalities:

When we see the statistics demonstrating achievement and employment gaps, it's easy to get down. ... While these statistics bear a stark reality they don't tell the whole story. We need to recognize that we can succeed even in the worst of times... (Sykes, 2010)

Such articles vividly depicted a view of racial disparities that was simultaneously pessimistic and boosterist, highlighting the worsening state of ongoing inequalities while

encouraging African American readers to adapt a continuing racial vigilance and activism in the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement.

“No Angels:” Inferential Racism and Rehabilitation of Victims of Racial Inequality

If a sharp divide characterized the *Journal Sentinel* and *Courier’s* vision of the causes of and solutions to racial inequalities, a no less significant rift emerged from the newspapers’ contradictory narrative construction of those affected by such disparities. In the *Journal Sentinel*, occasionally probing portrayals of African Americans in feature reportage on issues such as infant mortality coexisted uneasily with inferentially racist characterizations of young black men. Particularly in the case of the newspaper’s “Empty Cradles” series on infant mortality, which included several dozen articles during the 2011-2014 period, the *Journal Sentinel* featured a selection of in-depth studies of individual African American mothers struggling with pregnancy issues such as the stories of Jasmine Zapata (Johnson & Ghose, 2011) or Iesha Houff, a young mother raising her newborn daughter after a high-risk birth (“A New Mother’s,” 2011). These articles, which detailed the mothers’ struggles with the “stressor of racism” (Johnson and Herzog, 2011) in neighborhoods “in which the infant mortality rate rivals that of Albania” (“A New Mother’s,” 2011), took pains to sympathetically dramatize the struggles of those affected by racial inequalities.

The publication’s relatively sensitive portraits of the victims of racial issues such as high black infant mortality, however, coexisted uneasily with a profound skepticism toward and occasionally inferentially racist characterization of young African American men dealing with alleged discrimination. Particularly in its opinion pages, the *Journal*

Sentinel often represented young black men as uncivil or threatening. This was the case, for example, in a series of columns on allegations of racial discrimination against black youths in Milwaukee-area shopping malls. One January 7, 2010, column, for example, “Mall policy again aimed at black youths,” described how a new rule banning unaccompanied teenagers arose from the actions of “mainly black kids” who visited the mall, asserting that while readers were split on whether or not the policy itself was racially motivated, the incident itself sprung from

some young black people who have failed to observe proper etiquette and in some cases acted like thugs in public. It’s also about some young people who gain a sense of power when they realize every white person in the area is suddenly afraid of them. (Kane, 2010a)

This phrasing was important, as the author effectively rendered the ambiguity over the mall ban pointless, having directly asserted that in either case, the blame fell squarely upon the black youths in question. This ideological vision of young, uncivil African American men causing a potentially discriminatory situation for which “well-behaving youth of all races have to pay the price” (Kane, 2010a) also appeared elsewhere in the *Journal Sentinel*’s coverage. In other columns, writers employed similar phrasing and vocabulary to describe young black men in malls as potentially behaving in “wolf-pack behavior” (“Advisory Hits: Quick,” 2010) and as acting as “a bunch of knuckleheads” whose violent behavior stymied interracial mingling at the Milwaukee lakefront (Kane, 2010b). These columns on racial incidents in public spaces in Milwaukee were specific to the *Journal Sentinel*, as the *Courier* did not report on these incidents.

The theme of unruly black youths harming the cause of racial progress may have reached its apex, however, in a January 9, 2011 report, “Mayfair is a cultural crossroads.” Structured almost as a parable, the report began by dramatizing how the city’s Mayfair Mall had served as a “melting pot ... where black and white, rich and poor, young and old, mix[ed] on equal terms” in the midst of Milwaukee’s intense segregation (Glauber, 2011). It then detailed how when implicitly black “teens raced through the mall, Mayfair be[came] an unwitting symbol of a fractured society” as it was forced to introduce new measures to ban unaccompanied teens (Glauber, 2011). Effectively creating a parable of how an oasis of integration was possibly deconstructed by unruly African American youths, the assertions and language in this article and others regurgitated inferentially racist stereotypes of uncivil, threatening black men, subtly encouraging the reader to view them as at least partially responsible for perpetuating Milwaukee’s segregation.

Indeed, this same inferentially racist questioning of the civility of black men extended to the victims of overt racial violence as well, as in the case of a *Journal Sentinel* column by African American writer Eugene Kane (2012) which described how two alleged male victims of police brutality became symbols of racial injustice against black Americans despite their supposed personal shortcomings. The structure and phrasing of the article were equally telling. Opening by declaring, “Let’s get it straight: Rodney King was no angel,” the column went on to compare King with fellow victim Frank Jude, Jr., a black Milwaukeean who, too, was judged “an imperfect role model due to his personal troubles” (Kane, 2012).

Although the column argued that the pair’s cases “helped convince some doubters” that police brutality against African Americans actually existed, it also

repeatedly critiqued the two men, stating that King “wasn’t the perfect candidate for the job” of becoming a racial symbol and closing by asserting that, ““Can we all get along’ will be his final epitaph. Few people have had a better one, whether they deserved it or not” (Kane, 2012). Though any explanation of what relevance the supposed virtue of the two men had to their status as victims of police brutality was absent from the column, the article’s structure—which began and ended by impugning black men as much if not more than the abuses they suffered—is instructive as to the general ideological implication of these articles: that black men, whatever their situation, were “no angels.”

A very different portrayal of these same victims of alleged racial discrimination emerged from the *Courier*. Whereas *The Journal Sentinel*’s opinion pages often employed inferentially racist characterizations of African American males, the *Courier* sought to rhetorically humanize and historicize the plight of black men. In a number of reports and columns particularly on issues of police brutality, the *Courier* historically situated modern African American males as the blameless victims of a long-institutionalized racial violence, with one representative column comparing their position to that of Emmett Till, arguing that his story “illuminates a continuing stark reality of America and the Black man’s place and unique circumstance, both past and present” (“In Memory Of,” 2011). This sentiment also found expression in an article discussing protests stemming from the police shooting of Michael Brown:

The tension between police officers and young, black men is nothing new. It's not isolated to Ferguson or North County or even St. Louis.

Though slavery ended nearly 150 years ago, young black men have been treated as second-class citizens by politicians and police ever since. (Sistrunk, 2014)

Both in phrasings and explicit judgments, these articles offered a significantly different ideological position from that of the *Journal Sentinel*, characterizing, for example, “attempts to impugn Trayvon [Martin]’s” virtue as racist efforts to “actually put a dead boy on trial” (Morial, 2013b); asserting how a new “Jim Crow” era left African Americans, particularly young men, to “face a lifelong struggle against the criminal justice system of the nation” (Sen, 2014); and arguing that “we must stop perpetuating the negative, dangerous image of black men that the world is so comfortable viewing” (Sistrunk, 2014). Focusing their rhetorical vision on depictions of institutional racism and historicizing contemporary incidents of racial discrimination against past abuses, the *Courier*’s coverage inverted the racial skepticism of the *Journal Sentinel*, instead placing the onus of responsibility for racial violence and discrimination on institutional forces. In so doing, these articles attempted to ideologically rehabilitate the image of otherwise maligned black men in racial incidents to readers situated in a society one *Courier* column referred to as dominated by a “prevailing opinion ... that a Black Male has no value” (Islam, 2014a).

While each newspaper took pains to highlight the severity and unacceptability of Milwaukee’s racial inequalities, *The Milwaukee Courier* and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* constructed significantly different narrative views of the causes of those disparities, their potential solutions, and their victims. These respective bodies of reportage endorsed two contradictory ideological visions: one of racial stasis that

emphasized the intractability of entrenched disparities and sometimes impugned its victims in *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*; and one of racial vigilance, in which African Americans were exhorted to combat artificial inequalities created by institutionalized racism in *The Milwaukee Courier*. The salve to soothe Milwaukee's "ever-raw racial sores" (Romell, 2012), the two newspapers seemed to imply, may rest either in the hands of its victims or may be nonexistent. What was apparent, however, was the existence of a scathing portrait of those wounds—one that dominated coverage of racial disparities and discrimination in Milwaukee in both newspapers. It is to the broader societal implications and literary connections of this coverage and its resultant ideological visions that this study turns to next.

INTERPRETING A RACIAL DIVIDE: NEWS, RACE, AND MILWAUKEE

*“For one brief golden moment rare like wine,
 The gracious city swept across the line;
 Oblivious of the color of my skin,
 Forgetting that I was an alien guest,
 She bent to me, my hostile heart to win,
 Caught me in passion to her pillowy breast;
 The great, proud city, seized with a strange love,
 Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove.”*

— Claude McKay, “*The City’s Love*”

This study sought to unveil the ideological visions underlying reporting on racial inequalities from 2010 through 2014 in Milwaukee’s premier mainstream and African American newspapers, *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and *The Milwaukee Courier*. Rooted in Cultural Studies as well as Critical Race Theory and Zweigian Class Theory, this analysis assessed press coverage of a city’s black-white disparities in a period in which racial inequality in Milwaukee and Wisconsin reached unparalleled levels (Austin, 2011; Jacobs, Kiersz, & Lubin, 2013; Toner, 2014) and national disparities approached levels considered “staggering” (Heath, 2014; Hsieh, 2014; Irwin, Miller, & Sanger-Katz, 2014).

In so doing, this study revealed important and sometimes surprising convergences and divergences between the two newspapers’ reportage and ideological visions. In the case of the *Journal Sentinel*, this study reaffirmed the continuing presence of an adversarial watchdog press on issues of race. It was one that belied the typical invisibility of racial inequality in mainstream news while sometimes reflecting a more traditional vision of racial stasis and, in some cases, victim blaming. In the case of the *Courier*, this

analysis suggested the existence of a pessimistic ideology of racial vigilance underlying the traditional boosterism and racial advocacy at the heart of the African American press.

Together, however, the *Journal Sentinel* and *Milwaukee Courier*'s respective ideological visions of racial stasis and vigilance reflected two newspapers simultaneously bridging and deepening the fissures of the African American "split image" (Dates & Barlow, 1993) in American news media. Examining news stories as culturally important texts reflecting broader issues of power and ideology (Rojek, 2009), this analysis also reflected the continuing evolution of a national racial ideology. This is a crucial concern in an era dominated by what one columnist has referred to as an American "public hypocrisy on race" in which "open bigotry" is condemned while "policies and procedures that sustain our system of racial inequality" are ignored (Bouie, 2014). This section interprets the study's findings, examining a critical absence within the coverage, assessing the theoretical and literary implications of the study, and detailing the research's scholarly contribution.

A Structuring Absence: Avoiding Class and Constructing the Singularity of Black Poverty

Just as a surfeit of detail characterized the watchdog coverage of the *Journal Sentinel* and the national commentary of the *Courier*, so too did an extremely significant omission: the absence of class. The researcher approached the project expecting class discourse to compose at least some of each newspaper's coverage of racial disparities, particularly given Milwaukee's well-known issues with black unemployment and poverty following the decline of the manufacturing sector (Levine, 2000). Indeed, these issues had given rise to a racial divide in Milwaukee so prominent that even as of 1991, a *New*

York Times report, for example, noted how the city was “leaving blacks behind” in terms of employment (Wilkerson, 1991). Furthermore, in the 2010s, research found that the city had reached the largest black-white employment gap of any American metropolitan area (Levine, 2012) and that Milwaukee had the second-highest rate of black-white poverty in the United States (Levine, 2013). Therefore, one would have reasonably expected that these ongoing divides would have made the issue of class extremely salient in any press discussion of Milwaukee’s racial inequalities.

Yet during this same period from 2010 through 2014, with very few exceptions, both the *Journal Sentinel* and the *Courier* were nearly silent on issues of class. A few isolated reports in the *Journal Sentinel* briefly touched on the interplay of race and class. A 2011 report on the fall of the city’s manufacturing economy noted how “Black Milwaukeeans were downsized with unprecedented force” in low-skilled occupations, exacerbating existing socioeconomic disparities (Schmid, 2011), and another report noted how Milwaukee’s “racial-spatial mismatch” of hyper-segregation limited black Milwaukeeans’ social mobility (e.g., Glauber, 2013). Two reports in the *Courier* also mentioned how Milwaukee’s “abysmal jobless rate for African American men is second only to Detroit” (“UWM Study: More,” 2010) and how class-based income inequality “demands our attention” as part of a continuing civil rights struggle for black Americans (Chavis, 2011).

These articles, however, constituted atypical exceptions to the rule of the generally class-free coverage featured in the 405 news reports, columns, and editorials that this study analyzed. Rather, in the majority of the reportage, class was almost entirely obscured. What limited coverage which addressed the issue filtered its discussion

of class largely through the lens of a “suburban/urban” binary. As this study found, both the *Courier* and the *Journal Sentinel* utilized “suburban” and “urban” as code words for “white” and “black,” respectively.

Particularly in the *Journal Sentinel*, however, this “urban/suburban” binary also served as a broader code for an implicit structural binary of “impoverished/affluent.” Vocabulary and phrasing choices in the newspaper vividly illustrated this construct. Numerous reports referred to the distinct characteristics of Milwaukee’s “central city,” an area dominated by “signs of poverty” (Romell, 2013); associated with “low-income” demographics (Meyerhofer, 2014); and filled with “unemployment and a sense of hopelessness” (Johnson, 2012). These descriptions existed in stark contrast with reports’ descriptions of Milwaukee’s outlying suburbs. In the *Journal Sentinel*, reporters described these locales as “affluent” areas occupied by “stable middle-class homes” (Schmid, 2011) and characterized the areas as “well-to-do” (Gilbert, 2014).

Regardless of the relative accuracy or inaccuracy of these descriptions, what was important was the ideological implication of this binary construct. Previous scholarship has noted how the overrepresentation of African Americans in news photographs of impoverishment resulted in a distortive “racialization of poverty” (Gilens, 2004). The texts of the *Journal Sentinel*’s reports, however, suggested the potential emergence of an even starker dichotomy in print news. Through almost wholly conflating “black” and “poor” as well as “white” and “affluent” through the “urban/suburban” binary—while simultaneously making virtually no reference to white poverty—the newspaper’s coverage subtly encouraged readers to ideologically envision poverty not so much as racialized but as *inherently* racial. Though Milwaukeean historians such as John Gurda

(1999) have noted that the city's poverty has never been "exclusively a black phenomenon" (p. 389), it appeared as just that in the overwhelming majority of the *Journal Sentinel's* reportage.

Furthermore, both in the *Journal Sentinel* and the *Courier*, the relative invisibility of class became a structuring, hegemonic absence, allowing each newspaper to encourage readers to ideologically condemn Milwaukee's racial disparities while simultaneously avoiding grappling with broader, structural issues of class in American society. If one accepts Zweig's (2001) vision of class as working power dynamics that both influenced and are influenced by race, this absence became a critical omission, particularly in a period characterized by the worst American income inequality since the Great Depression (Matthews, 2014).

Bridging the Divide of the "Split Image:" Rejecting Post-Racialism

What was present in the coverage of the *Journal Sentinel* and *Courier*, however, was equally important. As Dates & Barlow (1993) asserted, a "split image" of black representation has existed within the American press. Further scholarship (Copes, 2013; Larson, 2006) suggested that this divide has engendered vastly different news approaches to reportage on racial inequality between hegemonic (i.e. white) news venues and counterhegemonic African American news sources. However, the findings of this study partially belied those traditional findings, if only in the context of the Milwaukee press. Indeed, perhaps the most surprising revelation of this study was the discovery of an important convergence in the *Journal Sentinel* and *Courier's* ideological acknowledgment and representation of racial inequalities. As previously discussed,

neither newspaper marginalized issues of racial inequality, instead constructing them as ideologically unacceptable symptoms of a racially diseased city and nation in decline. In this manner, each newspaper at least partially made visible the “processes, and practices that contribute to [the] continued racial inequality” highlighted by Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 5).

While the *Courier's* reflection of this ideological position was reflective of the broader advocacy tradition of the African American press (Kraeplin 2008), the *Journal Sentinel's* prominent coverage of racial disparities presented a distinct and unusual counter example to scholarship suggesting that racial issues were minimized or invisible in the mainstream press (Larson, 2006; Stabile, 2006). Both in watchdog coverage on police brutality as well as in beat coverage and special reports on infant mortality, the *Journal Sentinel* highlighted and dramatized the debilitating effects of racial inequalities, particularly in cases of “active” racial discrimination such as racial profiling. In so doing, it encouraged readers to hold an ideological position that these disparities were, in the words of a source quoted in a 2011 report on infant mortality, a “tragedy ... which we can prevent and we should prevent” (Poston, 2011).

In the *Journal Sentinel's* news reports on police brutality and infant mortality—if not in its opinion pages—the cultural status of “victimhood” was, in fact, granted to African Americans in a partial exception to Stabile's (2006) conclusion that the “phrase ‘black victim’ is [seen as] strictly oxymoronic” in American media (p. 176). Indeed, as this study demonstrated, the mainstream Milwaukee press actually broadly converged with the African American press in its exceptionally adversarial coverage of police. While the *Journal Sentinel* never overtly described incidents of alleged police brutality as

“Society-on-Black crimes,” as one *Courier* column (Browne-Marshall, 2013d) did, it nevertheless frequently represented local law enforcement institutions and officials as suspect and potentially racist, as in its reporting on the beating of Frank Jude, Jr. (Diedrich, 2012). If only in this instance, the news reports of each newspaper at least partially subverted the criminalization of African Americans typical of the American crime beat (Stabile, 2006).

Furthermore, both newspapers rejected the idea of America as a “post-racial” nation. This was the case in the *Courier*’s sometimes overt opposition to the concept, such as in a 2013 column that asserted that “at the end of the day, we do not live in a postracial society, irrespective of having a Black president in the White House” (Young, 2013), or in a 2014 report which prominently featured a source stating that “this country is not post-racial, this country is not free” (Stokes, 2014). It was also expressed in the reportage of the *Journal Sentinel*, which implicitly rejected the concept in its highlighting of continuing de facto segregation and racism as the “elephant in the room” at least partially responsible for Milwaukee’s racial disparities (Johnson & Herzog, 2011).

In this instance, this study’s findings suggested that the ideology of post-racialism common to American media (Copes, 2013; Hoerl, 2012; Stiles & Kitch, 2011) need not necessarily be an inescapable feature of modern print newspaper coverage. Contrary to the prominent news construct of a “postracial narrative of national transcendence” in the wake of President Barack Obama’s 2008 election (Hoerl, 2012, p. 178), the ideological vision that arose from the *Courier* and *Journal Sentinel*’s coverage was of the ongoing decline of a racially diseased nation and city, respectively.

This study was limited to recent coverage of racial inequalities in Milwaukee newspapers. However, given the prominence of the *Journal Sentinel* as one of the nation's largest metropolitan dailies, these findings may at least suggest a limited contemporary distention of the traditional, racially hegemonic "master narratives" (Zamudio et al., 2011) of the American press. This reconfiguring of traditional narratives for a shared indictment of racial inequality in both the *Journal Sentinel* and the *Courier* thus represented a not insignificant bridging of at least one aspect of the African American "split image" in the mainstream and African American press.

Reinforcing the "Split Image:" Conflicting Visions of Accountability and Reform

If the *Courier* and *Journal Sentinel* partially bridged some of the fissures at the heart of the "split image" of African Americans in reporting on racial inequality, the newspapers simultaneously reinforced these divides in other respects. As this study discovered, the publications significantly diverged in their ideological conceptions of institutional responsibility for racial disparities and how (and by whom) those inequalities might be addressed. The *Courier* constructed a vision of intentional racial inequalities that encouraged African American readers to embrace an ideology of racial vigilance. Here the newspaper vividly dramatized and ideologically reinforced the CRT concept of structural determinism, the idea that existing societal structures cannot address racial wrongs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In so doing, the *Courier* reflected the traditional boosterism and advocacy of the African American press (Mangun, 2006) and, in its direct address to African Americans to redress their own injustices, the black press's emphasis on black self-reliance (Thornton, 2014).

However, in its construction of a near-absolute binary of racialized institutions and individual African Americans, the *Courier's* coverage also suggested the existence of a fatalistic ideological vision characterizing the black press's reporting on racial inequalities. Both in its news reports and columns, the *Courier* not only suggested that racial disparities emerged directly from intentional institutional policies but also that such disparities would inevitably continue and, in fact, worsen if unchecked. In a representative 2010 column urging African Americans to boycott Arizona for imposing an anti-immigration law, for example, a *Courier* writer likened the practice to racial profiling and stated that:

Let us be clear: Whether we are among the first to stand against this type of injustice or not, we will be among the first victims of any injustices wrought. That's a guarantee. If history has shown us nothing else, our vulnerabilities remain clear. President Obama himself remains a subject of suspicion, scorn, and vilification by those who refuse to accept his very legitimacy as an American simply because of his skin color and his name. (Graves, 2010)

Through such columns, the *Courier* constructed racial discrimination against African Americans as effectively inevitable without racially-conscious black intervention. So, too, did it suppose the improbability of institutional self-reform without pressure from African Americans, a sentiment that found expression in another opinion piece which asserted that, "History has shown that Black people make no progress in American without a struggle" ("If It Sounds," 2010). That struggle, as this study found, was one that the *Courier* exhorted readers to join as part of a continuing Civil Rights Movement emphasizing both political engagement and the value of remaining race-

conscious reforms such as affirmative action—in direct contradiction to the *Journal Sentinel*'s overt editorial and implicit reportorial stance on the issue.

Set against the newspaper's construction of the "unprecedented decline" of the black community (Islam, 2014b), the *Courier*'s ideological vision also rhetorically asserted the singularity of African Americans' suffering from racial disparities and suggested that institutions and other racial groups felt little, if any solidarity with black Americans. This was the case, for example, in *Courier* columns that discussed how the African American experience was marked by "*far more pain* [researcher's emphasis] than experienced in other communities," (Malveaux, 2012). It also arose in opinion pieces asserting that many white politicians rejected the idea of African American rights, instead seeming to be "longing for a time when Whiteness meant possessing power with impunity, at least with regard to people of color" (Browne-Marshall, 2012), and that implicitly white supremacist institutions were attempting to "roll back rights for people of color" (Brock, 2011).

This sense of a complete lack of solidarity from others towards African American suffering found expression even in discussions of other non-whites, as in one unusual and inferentially racist 2013 column, "Law of the Land: Immigrants Need Lessons in Racial Justice" (Browne-Marshall, 2013b). Charging that "upon arriving here [immigrants] boldly turn against African Americans as if to be anti-Black is one way to become fully American," this column asserted that, "If Blacks are visibly fighting, protesting, suing, and making demands, it is because others refuse to take on those challenges. Yet, once Blacks succeed, then other groups quickly reach for a share" (Browne-Marshall, 2013b). Through the assertions of columns such as these, the *Courier* encouraged readers to

envision African Americans in a lonely, singularly painful struggle against racial disparities with few, if any, allies.

Here the study's findings complemented existing scholarship on the African American press, suggesting the dimensions of a complex and structurally determinist ideology undergirding African American newspaper reportage on racial disparities, if only in a Milwaukee context. This paradoxically boosterist yet exceptionally pessimistic vision of racial vigilance illustrated the continuing presence of the "deep cultural schism" of racial ideology between mainstream and African American news constructions of black Americans (Dates, 1993).

The other side of this schism came into sharp relief in the *Journal Sentinel's* ideological conception of institutional accountability and redress for racial inequalities, one that simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed earlier findings. As previously discussed, a complex ideological vision emerged from the *Journal Sentinel's* coverage which castigated institutions involved in instances of "active" racial discrimination while presenting institutions attempting to redress seemingly unsolvable "passive" disparities almost entirely without critique. This latter construct had significant implications. Focusing on the importance of institutional solutions to racial disparities, the *Journal Sentinel* strongly subverted Campbell's (1995) myth of assimilation. Rather than deny the existence of racism or suggest that structural reform is unnecessary, the newspaper fully acknowledged the severity of "unacceptable" (Herzog, 2014) racial disparities and stressed the importance of institutional reform, implicitly rejecting the CRT idea of structural determinism.

An important aspect of Campbell's myth that the *Journal Sentinel's* coverage of racial inequalities did not subvert—if only in its columns—was an oppositional framing of African American men, however. As this study found, the newspapers' opinion pieces regurgitated a number of inferentially racist tropes of threatening black men, positing black youths as at least somewhat responsible for perpetuating the city's segregation. In so doing, these columns followed in a long tradition of news coverage “othering” black men as inherently dangerous (Enck-Wanzer, 2009; Silberstein, 2003), suggesting the continuing primacy (and perhaps implicitly the appropriateness) of the “black/white” binary. These columns also suggested that even in newspapers in which watchdog coverage affirmed the victimhood of black Americans, the portrait of African American men emerging from those publications' opinion pages still remained a pathologizing and criminalizing one that presumed the “unmentioned centrality” of whiteness (Butterworth, 2007, p. 231).

Furthermore, this indictment of individual African Americans served as a distraction from a broader absence of criticism or questioning of Milwaukeean institutions associated with ongoing “passive” inequalities. Given the depth and severity of issues such as Milwaukee's black-white infant mortality disparity, one would have expected to have seen at least some questioning or critique of civic institutions' relationships with and efforts to address these gaps, either via sources or analysis. Certainly these suggestions were evident in the *Courier*, for example, which directly impugned the city for its alleged support of a “poverty industry” (Dorsey, 2013) and alleged attempts to deny African Americans access to political power (Harris, 2012).

Yet these critiques of local institutional forces were almost entirely absent from the *Journal Sentinel's* coverage of Milwaukee's "passive" racial disparities, with criticisms of civic institutions appearing only in reports on the suburb of New Berlin's struggle against affordable housing (e.g., Glauber & Johnson, 2011; Diedrich & Vielmetti, 2011) as well as in a smattering of articles on historical segregation (e.g., Richards, 2010; Luthern, 2013). In essence, these critiques appeared only when a boundary of distance or of history separated the subject of such reports from present-day Milwaukee. In part, the *Journal Sentinel* in this instance provided a potent media case study of the "time-warp aspect of racism" noted by CRT scholars Delgado and Stefancic (2000)—the idea that individuals often "only condemn the racism of another place ... or time," envisioning the racism of their own milieu as "unexceptionable, trivial" (p. 228).

The findings of this study also suggested a further implication of this rhetorical strategy. If the ideological sum of this coverage mostly rejected the myth of assimilation (Campbell, 1995), it may also have helped to illustrate another: what this research refers to as the "myth of absolution." Specifically, the *Journal Sentinel* focused on institutional reform to seemingly incurable "passive" racial disparities while either avoiding criticism of local institutions and, in columns, diverting the suggestion of blame for those inequalities to their victims. In so doing, the newspaper subtly ideologically absolved city institutions of any responsibility for potentially perpetuating or failing to substantially address ongoing "passive" disparities.

Through an absence of critique in news reports and a diversion of blame in columns, this research suggested, such coverage recognized "passive" racial disparities while implying the blamelessness of institutions depicted as attempting to combat them.

The resulting portrait of racial disparity emphasized the manifestations of “passive” racial inequalities while largely obscuring the possibility that institutional actors or policies may have engendered them—thus presenting the reader with an ideological vision of segregation without segregators, and racism without racists. In these contradictory ideological visions, the *Journal Sentinel* and the *Courier* diverged significantly, reflecting and reinforcing the “split image” of African American representation (Dates & Barlow, 1993) in the mainstream and black presses.

This Study: Four Years of Racial Inequality Coverage in Milwaukee Media

Utilizing a framework of Cultural Studies as well as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Class Theory, this ideological critique attempted to understand how African American and mainstream-audience newspapers in America’s most segregated metropolitan area (Causey, 2014a; Tolan & Glauber, 2010) discussed and ideologically constructed issues of racial disparities. In so doing, this study complemented existing research on racial inequality reporting utilizing media framing (Gandy & Zhan, 2005; Rasmussen, 2014), supplementing that body of scholarship with an ideologically-focused critique. This study also provided a comparative scholarly perspective on the ideological construction of racial disparities in the contemporary African American and mainstream presses, a relatively unexamined research space outside of a single study of media framing (Rasmussen, 2014).

This study discovered important convergences in the *Courier* and *Journal Sentinel*’s portrayal of racial inequalities as indicators of a racially diseased city and nation. However, the research also revealed important differences in how the newspapers

constructed the causes of and potential reforms to such disparities. These differences manifested in contradictory ideologies of racial stasis in the *Journal Sentinel* and racial vigilance in the *Courier*. Both of these ideologies, this study suggested, emerged from coverage in which an avoidance of class discussion became a structuring absence. The divergences and convergences between the *Courier* and the *Journal Sentinel*'s respective ideological visions were indicative of a simultaneous bridging and deepening of the fissures of the African American "split image" in American news media (Dates & Barlow, 1993).

More generally, however, this study also provided a helpful window into ideological news constructions of racial inequality in an era in which black and white Americans continue to "live in different worlds" in their perceptions of racial discrimination and disparity (Balz & Clement, 2014). From a Cultural Studies perspective, texts such as newspaper reports are important cultural sites that function as "sources of power" (Brennen, 2013, p. 202). No text is free of ideological assumptions, and these implicit assumptions can encourage readers to view certain ideals and patterns of thought as normative (Foss, 2009). News media, particularly, help their readers to construct ideological visions of current events. In so doing, these cultural texts may potentially reinforce racial ideologies (Hall, 1981).

It was important, therefore, to interrogate the implicit racial ideologies represented in news coverage of racial disparities, particularly in a city as thoroughly segregated as Milwaukee. As Alvin F. Poussaint (2011) asserted, racial segregation has remained a critical issue at the heart of America's "urban crisis," one which is not merely a phenomenon "determined by personal choice and race-neutral economic and civic

factors” but a situation which influences and is influenced by racial discrimination and disparities (p. 83). Racial inequalities, by their very nature, pose insistent and uncomfortable societal and ideological questions. *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and *The Milwaukee Courier’s* answers to these questions—sometimes convergent, sometimes divergent—illustrated the continuing divides of racial ideology that characterized American society during a critical juncture in national race relations.

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