On December 6, 1865, the United States Congress ratified the Thirteenth Amendment which abolished chattel slavery but left out people convicted of crimes, resulting in Black codes that criminalized Black people for minor crimes as a way to perpetuate enslavement. Daniel A. Novak describes the codes as “intended to reproduce, within the new limits, a close approximation of the now forbidden master-slave relationship.”[1] Even though the amendment legalized slavery, its legacy continued into the era of Jim Crow from the 1890s into the 1960s by enforcing racial discrimination against African Americans.[2] Amid these injustices, African Americans engaged in a nationwide movement for equal rights in the mid-twentieth century, which in turn resulted in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet the legacy of slavery and racism toward African Americans persists.

While African Americans were making demands for justice and equality, Alison Page makes us understand in her new book, *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery*, a different strategy to manage open racism was being established within the media. Such tactics played a critical role in teaching viewers and users about new racial norms, behaviors, and feelings that aligned with racial upheavals in the post-1960s era. Page, assistant professor of media studies with a joint appointment in the Institute for the Humanities and the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at Old Dominion University, explores the relationship between racial formation, affective governance, and media culture surrounding US chattel slavery in the second half of the twentieth century. She highlights how media culture from the 1960s to the present has played a significant and continuous role in educating viewers on how to act and feel in accordance with new racial norms. Using media visuals and secondary sources, Page argues that emotion produced by the pedagogical use of the history of slavery was, and remains, a powerful site through which race and racial subjectivity are shaped and managed.

Following the introduction, titled “Racial Formation and Post-Civil Rights Governance,” are four chapters that explore how media and the visual, together with policy, political discourse, consumer culture, and school curricula, have served and continue to serve as guides for undoing racism while simultaneously taming emotion. In chapter 1, “The Restless Black Peril: Race, Television Documentary, and Emotion,” Page draws on four documentaries regarding race, slavery, and civil rights that aired in the United States between 1960 and 1968 to argue that the shifting racial formations during the period were associated with producing and disciplining the emotions of
rage and fear. She examines how the selected documentaries pathologized Black anger and rage while simultaneously reinforcing white innocence and fear.

In the second chapter, “Feeling Slavery: Roots and Pedagogies of Emotion,” the author demonstrates how racial formations transformed in the 1970s from a detached to an emotional approach to racism. Using the 1977 television miniseries Roots and its accompanying educational curriculum as a case study, Page examines the differing affective impacts on both Black and white viewers. Black viewers were encouraged to feel pride as a way to overcome shame (though this deviated from the goals of the earlier Black Power movement and diverted attention from structural racism), while white viewers were taught admiration for Black struggle and sympathy for African Americans.

In chapter 3, “Choosing Freedom: Empathy and Agency,” Page explores another shift in racial formation from emotions to neoliberal multiculturalism to suggest that whiteness is constituted partly through empathizing with a racialized other. Such empathy, according to the author, is produced through the media by interactivity and immersion in educational video games or edugames. Page uses the Mission 2: Flight to Freedom, a role-playing edugame about US chattel slavery that was designed to teach history to middle school students, to argue that neoliberal multiculturalism consists of a fusion of discourses of colorblindness, choice, and agency, which merge to produce a racial formation where whiteness is distanced from racism through empathy.

In the final chapter, “‘How Many Slaves Work for You?’ Algorithmic Governance and Guilt,” the author turns to the rise of big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and algorithmic culture, which promote data and technological fixes as solutions to complex issues, thereby promoting colorblind answers to questions of race and racism. According to Page, algorithmic governance meets affective governance in the former’s emphasis on neutrality. She uses the website and accompanying app Slavery Footprint to explain how users are engaged through neoliberal discourse about empowerment and consumption to solve issues of twenty-first-century slavery. In her conclusion, “Refusing Prescription: Kara Walker and Black Feminist Cultural Production,” Page returns to the idea introduced at the beginning of the book by probing how Black feminist cultural production has theorized, countered, and challenged dominant uses of the history of slavery to shape emotion and subjectivity.

Media and the Affective Life of Slavery contributes to scholarship in many ways. First, it examines how critical media studies addresses the question of slavery by managing racism through the control of emotions. Also, the book addresses the idea of temporality. By drawing from Saidiya Hartman’s theory of the “afterlife of slavery,” which refers to the countless ways that slavery still exists in the present, Page argues against viewing time in relation to the hegemonic progress narrative that dominates discourse of racial struggle whereby slavery is located in the past.[3] Instead, she contends that time in this context is unending. Additionally, the book delves into the interesting relationality of whiteness and Blackness as intertwined racial formations by clarifying the misconception that slavery was only about Blackness and anti-Blackness; it was also about the production of whiteness. Furthermore, Media and the Affective Life of Slavery explores how Black feminist cultural production has challenged media about the history of slavery.

Through her use of media sources—documentaries, television miniseries, video games, websites, and apps—to interrogate how media instructs viewers on how to act and feel toward racism, Page introduces a nuanced approach to critical studies on slavery and its afterlife in the United States. Media and the Affective Life of Slavery requires a careful and thorough reading.
to follow the course of US media’s involvement in dealing with racism through emotional controls and influences. No doubt, the author has carried out rigorous research that has been skillfully articulated into a monograph. As a result, the book is recommended to scholars of slavery, racism, and media studies.

Notes


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