Race Class and Media Imagery

By Dr. Lorne Foster

As a Third World sociologist, Dr. Arnold Itwaru has in the past been highly criticized by Third Worlders. The problem for Third Worlders is that much of his sociology has been firmly ensconced in an old German intellectual tradition - which has honed its focus by bridging the gap between the classical Marxist model of historical materialism and Freudian psychoanalysis – at the expense of what many Third World scholars see as the colorization of the post-modern world.

Roughly speaking, the rub seems to be that German intellectualism has advanced the thesis in the past that even when life seems to be about colour, it is really about the psycho-material relations of class. While Third World or "Third sociology" has typically advanced the thesis that today even when life seems to be about class, it is really about colour. Here, class and race are different foundational concepts and points of departure for the analysis of social life. For German intellectualism all racism is political. For Third sociology all politics is racial.

However, in his book, *Negative Ecstasy: The Star Trek Seductions & other Mass Deceptions*, Arnold Itwaru finally answers his detractors in part by actually bringing together his interests in German social theory and Third World authenticity – by recovering his lush brown-bodied memories within what he calls "the techno-capitalist mass media and consciousness industry."

Today, Itwaru argues, White supremacy is routinely achieved through "technological colonization " – the subtle use of technology to exercise various strategic projects of ethno-racial control and containment.

Through his analysis of the seductions of media from rock videos to Live Aid concerts, Itwaru exposes a mass communications mode that subjects its citizen-subjects to procedures of mass deception. Black folks, for instance, tend to be marginalized, infantilized or tokenized in media imagery from Star Trek to Disney.

"Let us take Worf, the African Klingon, and Jordie, the African American engineer" in Star Trek, says Itwaru:

"They are both Africans who are being commanded by a
European military man, and they are comfortable with this.
Indeed they respect Captain Picard highly. Their loyalty to him is
never in question. And many viewers of the series find nothing
wrong here. But the history of African Americans has been one
where British-European military men in their supremacist racist
mania have been the principal orderers and violators of African
peoples. To have Africans depicted as being eager and respectful
to the 'White' man of power who orders them around, smacks of

> the sanitization of the superiority-inferiority dialectic of racist
> domination. It is where the 'White' man is the man of
> commanding institutional power, and the African American man
> is without power, the inferior who carries out the superior's
> commands, ordering them to 'Make it so!'"

The complex articulations of mainstream media, typically territorialize Blacks through under-representation in areas that count, and over-representation in areas that don't count - leaving them susceptible to social and psychological damage through the internalization of attenuated images that trivialize, belittle, discredit, discount, abridge or reject.

Itwaru reminds us that the misrepresentational basis of media-race relations actually constitute fundamental relationships of power and inequality. Whereas in the past, White supremacy was largely maintained though unrelenting brutality and colonialist exploitation, we now live in a subtle and highly complex world where media construct and constitute the very reality of our existence. Mass media technology seeks to configure us in its image of us to facilitate its control of us. Here, being Black means that the mass mediated images of you can be more real but less human than you are. So, we are often seduced by media representations based on privileged discourses that configure public reality in a way that is anathema to the rich texture of an authentically differentiated world, and can only lead to a one-dimensional and distorted life.

This process of seduction, of negative ecstasy, involves the aggregation of life on the basis of racial imagery that facilitates White control through procedures of mass deception that have dysfunctional and limiting effects on society as a whole, at the expense of creating an affirmative and inclusive culture that allows for a multi-dimensional humanity. However, knowledge is empowerment, and reclaiming control over media representations of race serves as a countering force to the privileged discourse that functions as a strategy of ideological control and containment. Isolating and challenging the misrepresentational basis of media-race relations through effective direct action is a complex and demanding undertaking. Yet, the very first step on this long path is already taken once media-race representations are acknowledged as expressions of power.

Or as Arnold Itwaru challenges – "The critique must continue. It is now and always your turn."