theguardian

The enduring whiteness of the American media

What three decades in journalism has taught me about the persistence of racism in the US

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Wednesday 25 May 2016

Over the course of 2014, America seemed to reawaken to one of its oldest preoccupations: the reality of how race is lived in the United States, and in particular the many stark disparities that persist between black and white people.

The continued existence of racial inequality in the United States was not exactly news – but the shocking deaths of a series of unarmed black men at the hands of the police made the issue impossible to ignore. The killing of Eric Garner, who was wrestled to the ground and choked to death by police on a New York City sidewalk in July 2014, confronted the public with a disturbing question: how was it possible that a black man could be killed for the trifling infraction of selling loose cigarettes? Garner's dying words – "I can't breathe" – captured on video, would soon become the rallying cry of a nascent movement, Black Lives Matter.

When Michael Brown was killed by a policeman the following month, enormous protests erupted, and the attention of the entire country – and much of the world – turned to Ferguson, Missouri. Television news was filled with scenes of mostly black protesters surrounded by heavily armoured riot police, evoking images from an era that American liberals liked to believe was long in the past.

Brown's death, in the heat of the summer, produced a huge swell of anger and a fierce debate, but a tentative conclusion soon emerged: though his death had first seemed disturbing, many came to see him as a flawed victim. Brown had not led an unblemished life: he had shoplifted minutes before his demise, he had smoked pot, and investigators insisted that he had resisted arrest, tussling with the policeman who shot him. He was "no angel", in the uncharitable words of a New York Times story published two weeks after his death. This tone could be heard in much of the

coverage of Brown's killing and the ensuing protests in Ferguson – and not just at that newspaper. What this tone suggested was that a black person who died at the hands of police needed to have been perfect, and utterly blameless, to justify outrage at their death and national attention to the problem.

But such a case came along soon enough, when police officers in Cleveland, Ohio, encountered Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy playing with a toy gun on a deserted playground. What ensued was captured on video, otherwise many would have dismissed an objective account of the incident as the product of fevered black imagination. A white officer is seen jumping out of his car and without pausing even to exchange words, immediately opening fire, leaving the child dead. Here, for all those who had demanded it, was the immaculate victim. A grave problem, it seemed, could no longer be denied.

By late 2014, newspapers and TV networks had begun to dedicate substantial time to the subject of excessive force routinely used by police against black people, and to the protest movement that grew in the wake of these incidents. Television news channels – even the very conservative Fox News – devoted hours of their nightly broadcasts to discussions of this problem, often heated, and to a consideration of its roots. Not coincidentally, minority voices suddenly proliferated on the air.

Having rediscovered the crisis of American race relations, there were reasons to hope that the media might make the colour line, as the eminent early-20th-century black American intellectual WEB Dubois famously called it, the focus of even deeper and more serious ongoing attention. But the attention of US journalism – and along with it, the attention of the nation – soon drifted away. What happened?

The easy part of the answer is that 2015 marked the start of a seemingly endless season of obsessive American political coverage, in the long run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Journalists descended on Baltimore to cover the protests over the death of Freddie Gray in April, but in the months that followed, reporters started to turn their focus to places such as Iowa and New Hampshire, where Republican candidates were already visiting county fairs and meeting voters in greasy spoons.

But what was less predictable, and much more striking, was the brazen way that the Republican candidates competed in pandering to white voters using racial themes. Perhaps they sensed that, after two terms under Barack Obama, many Republican primary voters were incensed by the appearance of cracks in what might be called the hegemony of whiteness. Donald Trump led the way, and provided the most famous

examples – describing immigrants from Mexico as criminals and rapists, proposing to ban Muslims from entering the country – but he was far from alone.

Only months after the country had begun a tentative interrogation of its history of racism, that had all been forgotten. Early on, Trump was criticised for the unusual crudeness of his racial appeals, but by the time the candidate had eliminated the last of his Republican rivals, in early May, the media seemed inured to Trump's rhetoric. But even as the US media has devoted vast time and resources to covering every twist and turn of the primary campaigns, almost none of this journalism has posed deeper questions about the social pathology of racism that makes nativist demagoguery so appealing to white voters. Instead, this fact is simply taken for granted – much like the persistent disparity in rates of unemployment and incarceration between black and white people, or the staggering gap in household wealth between the races. One could say much the same about the crude contempt for Barack Obama that has become a powerful undercurrent in Republican politics over the last seven years.

With Trump all but certain to be the Republican nominee, all signs point towards a tense and extraordinarily racialised campaign – and one that will pose a severe test for American journalism, which has been as beset by the crisis of race as the society it claims to rigorously examine.

The intersection between America's age-old race problem and the crisis of race in journalism takes two forms. The first is a simple failure of integration: the news organisations that have traditionally comprised "mainstream" journalism have done little to welcome or encourage African-Americans, who are substantially underrepresented by comparison to their numbers in the overall population. This problem is obvious to anyone who cares to look – and it has become sufficiently embarrassing for a number of publications to make sporadic but ultimately ineffectual efforts to redress it. As soon as one or two hires are made, attention inevitably shifts elsewhere, much as the focus of the press drifted away from racial bias in the criminal justice system once a whiff of the campaign season could be sensed in the air.

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But the second and more subtle issue is a persistent problem of typecasting – a deeply embedded view that regards certain topics as "black" and the rest as "white".

Those black people who make their way into the business are heavily concentrated in stereotypical roles. This has meant sport, entertainment and especially what is euphemistically called urban affairs, often meaning reporting on black people. By contrast, there are very few black journalists writing about politics and national security, international news, big business, culture (as opposed to entertainment) or science and technology – they are essentially absent from large swaths of coverage, and even more sparsely represented among the ranks of editors. This is not a trivial matter, or a subject of concern solely to journalists: the overwhelming whiteness of the media strongly but silently conditions how Americans understand their own country and the rest of the world.

These problems are not new, and they are not unknown: they have been confirmed by survey after survey measuring diversity in the country's newsrooms and on its airwaves, but this is not how I discovered them. The lessons I received in the matter all came through direct experience, inside what many consider America's foremost news organisation.

When I first arrived at the New York Times in 1986, fresh from freelancing in West Africa, I was as eager as anyone can possibly imagine – but more than a little bit nervous about trying to break into the big time of American journalism at the age of 27, as a new father working in a city I had never lived in before. I had never worked in a newsroom; I had never even worked under the close supervision of editors. So there was much to learn. I would have been lying if I had said I was looking forward to covering what seemed to me mundane things such as cops and courts – but, looking back, there is no doubt that my three years in New York gave me an education in journalism I could not have received anywhere else.

This was not the only invaluable education I received in New York – far from it. As an idealistic young black man there was a whole universe of knowledge to be acquired about how this industry handles the question of race in America, and this was vital to one's survival. One quickly learned that the newsroom was a place rife with powerful networks, which nurtured and anointed a few golden boys – and occasionally, although much less frequently back then, golden girls. These networks took shape along lines of educational pedigree, social status and religion – all categories that helped make it appear that race was not relevant. Indeed, to the casual onlooker it all passed for merit.

Some of my first lessons came while paying my dues, working weekends in the nearly-empty newsroom, where I was asked to monitor the police blotter for

noteworthy crimes. Early on, I was bluntly reproached by an editor for bringing the uptown murder of a black person by another black person to his attention, as if I didn't know that these were "penny crimes", in his words, meaning things that could never rise to the level of interest of New York Times readers on a Sunday. If a black man had killed a white man, or if there was white-on-white murder, he explained, this, of course, would be a different matter.

This was not the only kind of race logic common in the business, as I was just discovering at a place that was regarded – and regarded itself – as a bastion of liberalism. I had watched in surprise one winter evening, when a power outage in the Bronx sent editors casting about the cavernous old newsroom for black reporters, something that immediately made painfully clear how few of us there were. In a cast of hundreds, it seemed that it would not take much more than two hands to count us on. It was freely said that white reporters were uncomfortable venturing to that part of the city in the dark – the first of many times I would hear such thinking in my career. These were the high-crime, crack cocaine years, and so off black reporters were sent, based on the theory that even dressed in business suits and ties, as nearly all the staff were in that era, we would be safer and more comfortable in the dark of a ghetto.

Around that same time, I was sent to cover the aftermath of a huge shootout in the Bronx between a notorious drug dealer, Larry Davis, and the police, in which the suspect briefly escaped. My reward, after Davis was captured, was being assigned to cover one of his trials, which an editor advised me not to take too seriously, regarding it as a foregone conclusion – despite Davis hiring a famous civil rights attorney, William Kunstler, who tied the prosecution up in knots by emphasising what most black people intuitively knew or suspected: a rich history of police abuse and procedural irregularities. After this, I was briefly assigned something called "the race beat", which was basically intended to mean covering black civil rights complaints against the city in that highly polarised era. This was in keeping with perhaps the oldest tradition in the business, since its integration began tentatively in the 1960s: let black people cover black topics, which were perceived as impenetrable, if not outright dangerous.

In those days, a tiny coterie of black reporters often huddled together to fume over coverage of the 1988 presidential race by an all-white political staff, whose dismissive treatment of Jesse Jackson, the sole black candidate, often bordered on insulting – repeatedly describing him with code words such as "street smart". Early one morning, a pair of black colleagues successfully goaded me into challenging the

brilliant and deadly serious managing editor, Joseph Lelyveld – then the second-most-powerful person in the newsroom – over one story's description of Jackson as "flamboyant", which seemed to us gratuitously pejorative. Approaching Lelyveld to challenge him was as forbidding as seeking an audience with the Wizard of Oz. My friends stood in the wings, watching as the two of us, side by side, looked at the definition of "flamboyant" in a giant tabletop dictionary, which led Lelyveld to admit our complaint was correct.

My big break came when I was sent on a series of short-term deployments to cover a series of military coups and popular uprisings in Haiti – on the same logic that had seen black reporters dispatched to cover the Bronx. There was a white correspondent covering Haiti at the time, who was very good at gaining access to diplomats and political sources, but seemed to shun the frequently chaotic events in the streets, which were filled with angry and presumably dangerous black protesters.

I had been lobbying my editors for nearly three years for a full-time foreign assignment of my own, enrolling in Spanish classes, reading histories of India, and visiting Mexico. When the call came to tell me I had finally been named as the fourth black foreign correspondent in the long history of the newspaper, it was to inform me that I was being sent to cover the Caribbean. This was neither what I had hoped for nor imagined, but it was an innovation of sorts; the traditional move had been to send people like us to Africa.

Black colleagues on the staff were proud of me nonetheless, so much so that a fistfight nearly broke out when one of them, a friend named Don Terry, overheard a white reporter who was roughly our age grumbling openly that I had unjustly benefited from affirmative action. This was a standard complaint, a claim that filled the air with every word of our advancement: never mind that I had performed well enough in Haiti to repeatedly win in-house prizes at the paper, or that I spoke excellent French and was already becoming passably fluent in Creole. By this time, I was far enough along in my apprenticeship so as not be surprised by such sentiments.

In his memoir, My Times in Black and White: Race and Power at the New York Times, Gerald Boyd, one of the first black people to rise to a senior management position at the newspaper, recalled that when he was first hired, in 1983, a senior editor told him: "I really enjoy your clips – they're so well written. Did you write them yourself, or did someone write them for you?" As he rose through the ranks, he was frequently told by his superiors that he would be "our Jackie Robinson" – the

man who broke the colour barrier in professional baseball in the late 1940s. Like me, Boyd was assigned to the "urban affairs" beat, and then to Atlanta, a job he was told was perfect for him, since he could "cover the South as a black man". Boyd overcame these indignities to rise to the number-two job at the paper – inducing resentment among some white peers. Finally, he was brought down by a scandal involving a young black reporter, Jayson Blair, who had fabricated information in a string of stories. Boyd was forced to resign along with the paper's top editor, Howell Raines, and suggested in his memoir, which was published after his death in 2006, that he had been judged guilty by association, simply because he and Blair were both black.

These experiences were not in any way unique to the New York Times. In Volunteer Slavery, her memoir of working at the Washington Post in the same era, Jill Nelson describes joining the paper's prestigious new Sunday magazine after a successful freelance career, only to find its culture dominated by white editors with no interest in people of colour. "For the average white newspaperman, those worlds beyond the narrow one he inhabits exist primarily as paths to career development," Nelson writes. "When it comes to black folks, we exist mostly as potential sociological, pathological, or scatological slices of life waiting to be chewed, digested, and excreted into the requisite number of column inches in the paper."

In 1994, after four years of covering continuous tumult in Haiti and the winding down of the cold war in Central America, I received a call asking me to do what the paper's three previous black foreign correspondents had all done: to go – or go back, in my case – to Africa. It was an extension of the race beat into the world of international coverage.

From my earliest days at the paper, I had told my editors that although I was determined to work overseas, I did not want to be sent to Africa. To be clear, this was in no way due to a lack of interest in the continent on my part, but rather because the news business itself accorded such little attention to Africa, and when it bothered to it tended to cover it in only the most sporadic and stilted ways, as if Africans were as impossible to grasp as extraterrestrials.

It didn't help when a white senior editor at the paper who had himself been a correspondent in Africa tried to encourage me by saying that between the episodic hard news provided by the occasional conflict or coup, one could amuse oneself there scribbling postcards about the exotic and primitive, or what he called "oogah-boogah".

But the paper pressed hard for me to accept the posting, and I complied, covering the continent again for four-and-a-half years – during which the biggest stories were the ferocious wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and especially Zaire (now Congo). Late in this African stint, an unexpected call came from my editor in New York. Where would I like to go next, he asked? With little more premeditation than a gut sense of which bureaux were likely to be opening up soon, I blurted "Tokyo!" To which, after an awkward moment's pause, he replied stutteringly, "Really? Could you do that? How would you cover Japan?" I told him to give me a chance to study the language first and I would manage, and to his credit I was soon given the job.

Many years later, I learned that my closest black colleagues in New York had celebrated this news, with one of them, Michel Marriott, exclaiming, "Howard has reached the river!" Someone had escaped, or so it seemed, what we sometimes called the "corporate negro calculus" – the careful tending of our presence, never dramatically expanding our numbers but also never letting them fall too low, all the while keeping us employed in predictable roles, while breaking the pattern every so often with the occasional exception. To be clear, the New York Times did not stand out in this regard. Few other publications did any better.

Michel revealed to me that his strategy in those early years was to focus on subjects that he knew white peers would find unattractive – which frequently meant doing things that required going deep into black communities, often during moments of violence or trauma. "You would try to do a really good job, to really bring it, and hope that this would win you some recognition," he said. Michel was already an extraordinary journalist, and this strategy and his talents led him to cover racial tensions in New York, Miami and Los Angeles, where he reported on the 1992 riots with distinction.

The limits of his political approach to race within the paper became apparent, though, when he successfully pushed to cover computers, games and consumer electronics during the technology boom of the 2000s. There was immediate pushback from his white colleagues, who claimed he had no background in tech and was not the right person for the job. A black man occupying this space did not fit preconceptions, any more than me heading to Tokyo did, and perhaps even less. Implicitly, it also meant depriving a white person of a coveted job covering a hot sector, and the ensuing resentment, much like the howls against supposed affirmative action that I had faced upon ascension to the foreign staff, laid bare the limits of liberal generosity in our profession.

As a black reporter, one had little choice but to get used to lots of little insults; many of them came from unexpected places. From my earliest days as the New York Times bureau chief in Tokyo, I struggled with a veteran Japanese office manager in late middle age, who had almost immediately begun to defy me at every turn. I learned from his fellow Japanese office employees, for example, that they should run by him all my requests for research on stories, before doing anything to assist me. Little by little I learned that he resented that the Times had sent a black man with an African wife to cover Japan, interrupting an endless line of white bureau chiefs, many of whom had Ivy League educations and academic backgrounds in Asian affairs. He took it as a sort of implicit downgrade of his country.

Naturally enough, the history of black people in journalism shadows the history of race in America itself, which across the ages has slowly and ever reluctantly ceded space to people of African ancestry. In the public sphere, this happened first in entertainment, meaning song and dance, then in sport, all areas where black people still enjoy heavily disproportionate representation. The opening eventually reached journalism, which for most of its history in America had been a strictly segregated industry.

In the 1950s and 1960s, very much belatedly, it was decided that black people should be allowed to write about race in the mainstream press. A sudden urgency attached to this discovery after violent attacks on civil rights demonstrators in the South, and especially after the urban riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr in 1968. A great uncle of mine, Simeon Booker, had been in the forefront of this wave, as the first African American reporter hired by the Washington Post, in 1952. Booker says the publisher, Phil Graham, told him: “If you can take it, I’m ready to gamble.” The roles newly granted to black people in the press were often dressed up in euphemisms of various kinds, with terms such as “urban affairs”, and in their own way they constituted a new ghettoisation.

When I joined the New York Times, there were no black reporters covering presidential campaigns. Thirty years later, to its credit, the Times, which remains America’s leading newspaper, has its first black editor-in-chief, Dean Baquet. But in a year of open and often shrill racism on the campaign trail, there is only one black reporter, newly hired, covering the presidential elections – and similar circumstances can be found at other top newspapers.

Looking at the traditional media industry as a whole, there are relatively few organisations where things are dramatically better. This is not to say that black

people have not come to penetrate previously off-limits areas of the American media. In small numbers, with great perseverance, they have. Television news, in particular, seems to have grown more diversified, with the inclusion of black commentators, for example, now de rigueur on many networks. In the newspaper industry overall, however, the numbers of African Americans have been dwindling, from 5.4% of employees in 2003 to 4.8% in 2013, according to the Pew Research Center.

Though the history of race in America makes this an especially important issue in the US media, there are comparable narratives in many other societies – mirroring the way that an entrenched majority only reluctantly cedes any authority to a growing minority in the business. British journalism, for example, has by any objective measure done even less to integrate than American news organisations, especially at the highest levels of the profession.

It must be said that in the past few years, a small number of prestige publications – often magazines such as the New Yorker, New York magazine, and the New York Times magazine – have made visible efforts to hire high-profile black writers. This has taken place amid a broader democratisation of the media, owing to the proliferation of online publications with national ambitions – which has allowed many new non-white voices to emerge. But it's still difficult to tell whether this marks the beginning of an important shift, or is simply a short-term trend.

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For decades it has been clear that space is made in the firmament for a tiny number of black journalists at any given time, if mostly to write about race. These figures, however brilliant, find themselves transformed into unwilling emblems of inclusivity – the journalistic and literary equivalent of a black president, a figure whose ascendancy can be cited by white people as proof that we don't have a race problem any more.

For the past few years, this role has been thrust most of all upon Ta-Nehisi Coates – especially since the publication, in May 2014, of his blockbuster cover story in the Atlantic, The Case for Reparations. This was clearly a work of enormous ambition, and it announced itself as such: "American prosperity was built on two-and-a-half centuries of slavery, a deep wound that has never been healed or fully atoned for – and that has been deepened by years of discrimination, segregation, and racist

housing policies that persists to this day. Until America reckons with the moral debt it has accrued – and the practical damage it has done – to generations of black Americans, it will fail to live up to its own ideals."

For Coates, the oppressive regime that black people were subjected to, first in the American South and later in northern industrial cities, such as Chicago, was nothing less than a "kleptocracy", one that worked zealously to keep black people in "debt peonage". This all flew in the face of a cherished and prevalent idea in the US: that the place of African Americans in the society has been transformed dramatically for the better – first through the arrival of legal equality, thanks to the 1965 Voting Rights Act and other anti-discrimination laws dating to the 1950s and 1960s, and then by decades of state investments in social welfare programmes. In the popular imagination, this happy narrative concludes, finally, with the exclamation point of a black president, Barack Obama.

Coates's work firmly rejected that sunny narrative – which made its popularity all the more astounding: the venerable Atlantic boasts a rich journalistic history, but it has not been known for provocation, and yet The Case For Reparations quickly became one of the most-read online pieces in the magazine's history. A year later, in the summer of 2015, Coates published his second book, Between the World and Me: Notes on the First 150 Years in America, which takes the form of a letter to his teenage son. In it, Coates expounds more on his unsparing vision of race in America, denouncing what he calls "an apparatus urging us to accept American innocence at face value and not to inquire too much".

Space is made in the firmament for a few black journalists, who are turned into unwilling emblems of inclusivity

An extraordinary deluge of plaudits began raining down on Coates with the publication of this book. The many prizes and honours that he won in quick succession included a MacArthur fellowship – known popularly as the "genius grant" for its no-strings-attached $625,000 prize, paid over five years – and the prestigious National Book award for nonfiction. Suddenly, the exceedingly white cream of the American book and humanities world were seemingly falling over themselves to celebrate a black man whose work, without too much of a stretch, could be described as a giant thumb in their eye. ("I don't know why white people read what I write," Coates has said. "I didn't set out to accumulate a mass of white fans.")

This, to be sure, was great work being celebrated, and yet at the same time it was hard to avoid the feeling that we were witnessing the re-enactment of an old, insidious ritual of confinement, even though it was being carried out via fulsome praise. Coates was doing, after all, the one thing that black writers have long been permitted – if not always encouraged – to do: write about the experience of race and racism in the world and in their own lives.

The media industry has long been selective in opening up spaces for African American people, while silently reserving all the rest for members of the white majority – and the showering of great prizes on black writers such as Coates, however deserved, was in a way a celebration, by the people who maintain this exclusion, of their own enlightenment and generosity.

There is a tradition of elevating a single tenor for the entire race, or less commonly, a small number of people who were deemed worthy of the attentions of a national audience. This is where the James Baldwin comparisons that have so often been drawn with Coates become interesting. Baldwin, like Coates, occupied this carefully guarded stage. To be sure, neither of them were asked their feelings about this, and if they had been, neither could have approved. Coates, for his part, has rejected the very mantle of the public intellectual. Baldwin, before him, had clearly understood this trap and rebelled against it, vowing not to allow himself to become “merely a Negro, or even, merely a Negro writer”.

This process of assigning discrete bandwidth to a singular black figure for a limited, if indeterminate period of time (the whims of the majority will decide) is ultimately a mechanism for feeling good about oneself. That figure can always be pointed to, cited at cocktail parties, maybe even invited, as evidence that black opinion is being heard, even better, perhaps, if it is angry, because that demonstrates white forbearance.

That singular figure, then, quickly becomes the start and finish of any belated attempts to demonstrate one’s efforts at “diversity”. I witnessed this dynamic in action last year, during a staff meeting at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, where I am now a professor. There was a discussion under way about the need to achieve more diversity in the classroom, and one of my white colleagues earnestly explained that he had tried hard to address this problem. “We invited Ta-Nehisi Coates to speak,” he protested. “But he was fully booked up.”

The importance of diversity in the media – as in other sectors of society – is not about scoring points in some imaginary scale of civic virtue. It has nothing to do with

the granting of favours – or even concessions – by a white majority. It is akin to restoring vision to a creature with impaired sight, making it whole and allowing it to function at the full limits of its perceptive and analytical capacity. The majority cannot understand this – cannot realise that it is partly blind – because its own provincialism has persisted uninterrupted for so long.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with an editor when I left West Africa for Asia, and was replaced by a Canadian reporter of Japanese heritage, Norimitsu Onishi. When I expressed excitement that a non-white person would be filling this job, in a region where coverage has so long been dominated by unchallenged white paradigms of race, the editor was puzzled. “Really, do you think that would make a difference?” the editor asked me. “I had never thought of it that way.”

The tokenism of various kinds that still represents the media’s best efforts at diversity remains a sort of mockery of the term. Going beyond this requires more than hiring non-white reporters and editors – though that is necessary. Meaningful diversity, of a sort that changes how news organisations see the world, requires boosting the number of non-white figures in positions of editorial decision-making from top to bottom. The industry employment statistics are disheartening enough, but in many ways they understate the scale of the problem: the people whose decisions shape the news Americans read and watch are almost all white – as I was reminded, almost by accident, last year.

One nearly snowed-in weekend afternoon, I returned to my university office to fetch a book I had forgotten there. In doing so, I stumbled into a milling crowd of editors who had gathered there to vote in various committees for the prestigious National Magazine awards. Surprised by what I found, I lingered a few moments to take in the scene: except for a lone woman of Asian descent spotted in the elevator, everyone else I chanced upon was white. As if in a deathbed experience, in that instant, my entire career flashed before my eyes. This little microcosm consisted of the people who hire and fire throughout the American magazine world. They decide what will be commissioned and published, and exactly where this content will appear. Careers rise and fall on the basis of their judgments. Here, they were gathered to decide what was the most important work in American journalism over the last year, and they were quite nearly all white.