Living Color: Race and Television in the United States
Reviewed by Innis Barton

Living Color: Race and Television in the United States is a much needed contribution to the study of race and representation on television. The eleven essays included in this anthology, edited by Sasha Torres, explore a variety of genres beginning with late 1940s productions and continuing through those of the 1990s. Conspicuously missing (as noted by Torres in her introduction) is any work done on 1970s television and issues of race and representation. A notable absence, but one which concretizes the need for continuing work in this field. Ordered chronologically, the essays attempt to destabilize the typical black/white binary of racial discourse while conceptualizing race in conjunction with categories of gender, sexuality, and class.

Six of the eleven essays do focus on issues of African American representation on US television. Phillip Brian Harper’s “Extra-Special Effects: Televisual Representation and the Claims of ‘the Black Experience’” and Stephen Michael Best’s “Game Theory: Racial Embodiment and Media Crisis,” focus on notions of African American celebrities and representation. Best’s piece deals with television’s affinity for documenting the crises of such African American athletes such as O.J. Simpson, Mike Tyson, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Arthur Ashe and its links to construction of “liveness,” which by implication raise images of death. Best’s “body” versus “flesh” theorizing differs from Harper’s study of the “vexed nature of discussion” by African Americans on 1960s black television performers. Harper begins his analysis examining the commentary surrounding Bill Cosby and Diahann Carroll, establishing African American televisial representation as (potentially) having a “dual effect.”

The mere appearance of black performers on television can further the integration of blacks generally throughout the society as a whole; on the other hand, their acting in fictional series also specifically entails a process of social differentiation within the black populace.1

Harper furthers his analysis by examining Room 222 (1969-1974). A controversial text (for African American critics), Room 222 clearly details the debate between “simulacral and mimetic realism” as methods of depicting the “black experience.”

Mimi White’s “Reliving the Past Over and Over Again: Race, Gender, and Popular Memory in Homefront and I’ll Fly Away” is the most in-depth textual analysis of fictional texts in Living Color. Using voice over and newsreel footage, these early 1990s series establish themselves as historical narratives. White explores the interconnections of race, class, gender, and national identity as each show focuses on overdetermined social moments (immediate post-W.W.II and the early 1960s, respectively). The historical narratives complicate an analysis of these shows, as good intentions do not always accurately detail the past. Furthermore, White illustrates that both series play out sexist and racist beliefs and actions as progressive historical representation.

I have read through the overdeterminations of the programs as historical fictions in the context of dramatic series/serial television, to specify the difficulty of even defining an acceptable status for these images and stories, a problem that has everything to do with history, including the history of television representation.2

White’s essay serves to illustrate the ambiguities inherent in interpretations of these historical televisual images. Two essays deal with the King-LA Rebellion images of the early 1990s. John Caldwell’s “Televisual Politics: Negotiating Race in the LA Rebellion” explores the exposure of the televisual apparatus as it attempts to manage difference, build consensus, and “stylistically packag[e] the dangerous other” (191). Caldwell argues against several previously established premises of television studies, most notably the theory that the norm of the televisual apparatus is feminine and that historification is not
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a regular televisual strategy. Caldwell, in his ideological and historical look at news (and fictional) images of the LA Rebellion, debunks both theories. His analysis follows the televisual images from the first uses of the Halliday video to the start of the 1992–93 season premiers. Several season premiere episodes are also addressed in Torres’ “King TV.” Torres divorces fictional and nonfictional texts from the televisual “flow,” studying them in terms of national ideologies of television and race. Ultimately, she interrogates the use of nonfiction liveness in two fictional series: L.A. Law (1986–1994) and Doogie Howser, M.D. (1989–1993).

Concentrating solely on news programs, Jimmie L. Reeves’ “Re-Covering Racism: Crack Mothers, Reaganism, and the Network News,” examines the conflation of family values rhetoric and “cultural民ignism” during the Reagan-Bush years of the 1980s. Tracing the methods of presenting stories of cocaine and crack use by mothers, Reeves uncovers a subtle slip from a “discovery of recovery,” which stresses giving help to cocaine users, to “discourses of discrimination,” which ultimately demonizes black mothers and their children.

The remaining five essays move away from the black/white binary typical of racial discourse. Pamela Wilson’s “Confronting ‘the Indian Problem’: Media Discourses of Race, Ethnicity, Nation, and Empire in 1950s America” and Mark Williams’ “Entertaining ‘Difference’: Strains of Orientalism in Early Los Angeles Television” both explore issues of race representation on early television. Wilson’s historical and cultural analysis looks at nonfiction accounts of the debates surrounding the proposed termination of tribal lands during the 1950s. She traces the print and televisual coverage, pointing out that even in white male controlled documentaries, like NBC’s The American Stranger (1958), there is a space (however inconsistent) for tribal leaders and other Native Americans to speak for themselves. Williams’ textual analysis of local LA programs is limited to one show each of Harry Owen and His Royal Hawaiian and Musical Adventure with Korla Pandit. The marginalized discourse is conveyed through performance and entertainment genres, and in each show visual codes and verbal narration ultimately position these discourses in a safe context.

Hamid Naficy picks up this strain of local L.A. television with a more recent study in “Narrowcasting in Diaspora: Middle Eastern Television in Los Angeles.” Looking at KCSI-TV, itself marginalized as an “independent” station, Naficy explores how the variety of shows geared toward an exiled Middle Eastern audience typically reflects a concern with the past and present, often conservatively in terms of a long-distance nationalism (for Iranians, this entails an anti-Islamist and pro-royalist discourse). Naficy also addresses the audiences for the individual shows, detailing how different generational and ethnic/religious backgrounds affect the type and style of material presented. Read in conjunction with the Williams’ article, one notes the changes brought about by cable and satellite television. In the 1940s/1950s, the shows Williams discusses were unable to make the transition to national television. On the other hand, many of the programs studied by Naficy are national and international in origin, being broadcast to cable channels across the country.

José Esteban Muñoz’s combination of social theory and Foucauldian social analysis in “Pedro Zamora’s Real World of Counterpublicity: Performing an Ethics of the Self” presents Pedro Zamora (a gay, HIV+ male, featured in the 3rd season (1994) of MTV’s The Real World) as publicly performing an “ethics of the self” that allows him to preach to the not-yet-converted. Though Muñoz’s analysis of the other gay participants in the series is underdeveloped, he does point to the amazing ability of Zamora to challenge mainstream discourses of both gay and Latino identity and existence. Zamora’s life provided The Real World with its first committed love story, and while its narrative structure attempted to downplay this importance, Zamora and his companion’s commitment ceremony (along with scenes of loving intimacy) are outstanding and unusual for a mainstream television program.

Finally, Brian Locke’s “Here Comes the Judge: The Dancing Itos and the Televisual Construction of the Enemy Asian Male” looks at an understudied aspect of the O.J. Simpson trial; racial stereotypes circulating around Asianess. Locke suggests that the black/white binary that exists in the United States “allows” racist representations to exist. Using historical precedents, Locke analyzes the multiple appearances of The Dancing Itos on The Tonight Show (with Jay Leno, 1992-present). The visual markers of Asianess are employed in a racist fashion, but there was no overwhelming charge of racism made against the group. Locke’s article brings Living Color around full circle, giving a solid reason why Torres calls for the destabilization of the black/white binary. If the binary is not deconstructed, other marginalized and minority groups will fall victim to the same racist characterizations that allowed for the appearance of The Dancing Itos.

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