

Race in 21st Century Television: How Much Has Changed

Let's Not Let Ourselves Off the Hook: Studying Race and 21st Century Television

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I feel old, or perhaps it is just jaded as I consider the questions at hand regarding race and contemporary televisual representation. This is my second (or third?) *Flow* Conference roundtable with a focus on racial and ethnicity diversity in American television, and I'm disheartened to see how relevant and timely these questions still are. Don't get me wrong, I see some small shreds of progress, in the form of a handful of series led by writers and producers of color and in relation to a few interesting protagonists of color that can be found if you look hard enough. Mindy Kaling, Key and Peele, *The Walking Dead*, *East Los High* and other web TV shows, fleeting moments on *The Bridge*, ABC's forthcoming *Jane the Virgin*, and even independent documentaries that air on PBS encourage me to think wistfully that perhaps one day this roundtable discussion may not be necessary. My frustration with any mention of post-racial representation aside, there are also moments when I feel television offered off-the-Box in particular, on sites such as YouTube, Hulu, and Netflix, provides glimpses of a more culturally pluralistic, not completely male- and straight-centric viewing world that may over time compete in viewers and dollars with what is now offered on mainstream television.

However, I feel a need lately to go all Old School Critical Race Scholar on these questions when it comes to programming on the broadcast and cable networks. Latinas and Latinos are still dramatically, demeaningly still only seen on the margins if at all on television, with only ABC batting an eye, even while Latinos will before long become 20% of the American audience. On mainstream television characters of color are seldom fully realized and non-white cultural communities are all but nonexistent. Ethnic comedies and dramas are for all intents and purposes dead on the networks, unless ethnic is interpreted to mean European American. Sorry to depress anyone wishing to embrace a rosy post-racial attitude, but symbolic annihilation is so engrained in American television and our experiences with it that we don't even notice it most of the time unless we're studying it.

And employment behind the scenes is still shockingly white and overwhelmingly male. There are a few successful writers, producer, and actors of color who are having an impact today, but unfortunately these figures are actually quite rare. As I learned in the past from Kim Myers, Diversity Representative of the Writers Guild of America West, writers of color are in fact struggling far more than they were a decade ago to find work in television, even while Shonda Rhimes, Tyler Perry, and Mindy Kaling are held up as examples of the so-called post-racial environment.

Given that these facts and arguments about American television have been said and resaid over the last decades, I think we need push ahead to think of new and more productive questions, and ways in which to engage in research projects that can be meaningful within the media production and consumption environment in which we live. I want to urge scholars from the critical and cultural studies camps such as I most

identify with to consider how to bring questions of audience, impact, and intervention into our research. Sure, textual analysis is cheaper and easier to carry out, but if our findings all end with a “so, now what?” I have to wonder if we have become part of the problem. If we are the people earmarked in our media studies departments to “study race and media,” what is our responsibility in that regard? Do the trappings of “academic objectivity” become our shield in these scenarios? I’d like to have more serious discussions of these questions.