

## Television Studies

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Janet McCabe and Kim Akass's "Feminist Television Criticism: Notes and Queries" (2006) offers an expansive notion of feminist television studies: "Never monolithic, the wide-ranging knowledges produced by feminism since the 1970s are quite remarkable, reliant upon diverse aims, separate objectives and different intellectual concerns."<sup>1</sup> Feminist inquiry in television studies offers a roomy berth. Through this critical lens, some of us explore television in relation to other popular media and the televisual landscape of their day. Others focus on how industrial factors or government policy shape the content of programming. Still others are committed to television audience research, production cultures, or transmedia storytelling.

This essay aims to map a genealogy of feminist television studies that embraces the personal, pedagogical, and political and, as such, the aims, objectives, and intellectual concerns that are and always will be "in progress." Feminist television scholars initially embraced the second wave ethos of "the personal is political" and sought to contest the ways in which femininity and gender (not to mention sexuality, domesticity, and consumerism) were often excluded in existing discourses about television. In the words of Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel, their work in feminist television criticism responded to a call "to action growing out of a deep conviction that women's oppression was very much related to mass media representations and that change was not only urgent, but possible."<sup>2</sup> In the current sociopolitical climate, there is also a sense of great urgency for feminism, and for feminist television studies, to expand the interrogation of hegemony and oppression in television—from pitch to production, from marketing to reception—by employing an intersectional approach.

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For the better part of two decades of teaching television, one of my central goals has been to help my students complicate their thinking about televisual representations, genre, and narrative conventions—to prompt them to consider how gender, race, class, sexuality, gender identity, and region can inflect how television stories are told, received, and read. For better and for worse, intersectionality is part of the national dialogue on feminism in 2018. Even in the most powerful feminist moments of recent memory, such as the 2017 Women's Marches and the "#MeToo" social media campaign, issues of difference (race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity) have come into question.

Doing work in feminist television studies informed by intersectionality is an ongoing process of applying a variety of methodologies to answer questions that relate to the expansiveness of women's experiences and how they have or have not been represented on television. My admittedly elliptical genealogy is informed by my point of annunciation as a working-class-bred, Black, late Boomer, female, feminist media scholar. In addition, my version of television studies primarily focuses on the relationship between issues of representation and US television's reflection and refraction of "American" culture. The following are pivotal texts that have and continue to influence my movement toward an intersectional approach to the history of the medium, audience research, the representation of marginalized communities, and the impact of industrial practices on cultural production.

In my first graduate seminar at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1994, John Caldwell's "Television and Society," I was introduced to Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (1992). As a former high school American history teacher, I found Spigel's volume particularly appealing because it provided a model for how to do cultural media history informed by feminist inquiry. Rooted in extensive archival research, *Make Room for Television* questions the cultural contexts of the medium in relation to gender and domesticity as well as public and private space in the 1950s. Spigel uses advertising, women's magazines, and the popular discourses of the day on the family and the medium to provide the kind of socio-historical contextualization that makes textual and industrial analysis all the more meaningful. There is power in Spigel's assertion that the transition from wartime to life post–World War II "resulted in a set of ideological and social contradictions concerning gender and the family unit . . . [with] illustrations of domestic bliss and consumer prosperity present[ing] a soothing alternative to the tensions of postwar life."<sup>3</sup> By mobilizing a multiplicity of sources, she positioned television, its programming and consumption, within the context of a

specific sociocultural historical moment so effectively that it challenged me, as a not-so-young graduate student, to consider how the methodologies of her feminist cultural television history could be used to determine what questions about television I wanted to ask and how to support the “answers” concretely and vividly.

I came to discover that the questions I wanted to ask about Americans’ relationships with television required engaging the audience. Ellen Seiter’s *Television and New Media Audiences* (1999) was my introduction to both ethnography and qualitative audience research. By engaging various groups in “their spaces” (including teachers and parents, at home and in the classroom) over an extended period of time, Seiter detailed the in-depth observations made by her respondents regarding television consumption while also acknowledging how they were in conversation with gender as well as age and class. While some of their responses were contextualized in terms of specific issues around access to and authority over television, other elements could be extrapolated into broader assertions about how we read TV. Seiter’s discussion of “lay theories” of media effects . . . [that] constantly inform practices of media consumption” was particularly compelling because it drew attention to the untapped expertise of the audience.<sup>4</sup> That interplay between lay theories, television consumption, and what the responses communicate about television’s role in our daily lives and our constructions of ourselves was revelatory and, indeed, has proven to be an empowering pedagogical tool when teaching television to savvy media babies.

In many ways, Beretta E. Smith-Shomade helped teach me how to do television studies as a Black woman media scholar who wanted to talk about race and gender, and my graduate student mentor’s book *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television* (2002) showed many other television scholars as well. Smith-Shomade’s complex and nuanced readings of Black women’s representation in mainstream television between 1980 and 2001 reflect an inherently intersectional approach that acknowledges class and gender as well as race. In the process of refuting essentialized notions of positive and negative representations, she explores the pleasures of the varied niche and mainstream texts in conversation with forms of popular music and video. Smith-Shomade also contextualizes the style and content of the programming in relation to the cultural and industrial politics of the 1980s and 1990s. Just as Spigel claimed a space for feminist television cultural history, *Shaded Lives* is both a model for interrogating Black women’s media representation to “deconstruct or, at least de-center systems of power” and a call to arms: “Only through vigilance, control of vision,

direction, and distribution will the representations of African-American women begin to consistently resist, reposition or possibly even escape objectification and assume sustained affirming agency.”<sup>5</sup>

Kristen J. Warner’s *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (2015) brings together aspects of the personal, the political, and the pedagogical valorized in the previously mentioned texts. Warner begins by addressing the notion of color blindness on a personal level with an anecdote about blending in during a social gathering (as a Black woman in a predominantly white space) as a means of stating the goal of the book: “to explore how framing colorblindness as a way of seeing, as a mode of behavior, as a mode of production in casting primetime television enables a close examination of the small and subtle methods used to trap us as a society into this vicious and painful cycle.”<sup>6</sup> This accessible and rigorous study mobilizes industry studies, textual analysis, and ethnographic research to call into question how the “progressive” processes of cultural production and production culture responsible for what we see on contemporary American television cannot be unpacked without engaging the politics of gender, race, industry, and media.

Spigel, Seiter, Smith-Shomade, and Warner model how feminist television studies can address and include myriad voices, identities, methodologies, and ideological impulses. In a time when acknowledgment, inclusion, and solidarity are needed on so many fronts, it is imperative to act, think, teach, and write with intersectionality in mind. I am embracing this directive, and I know I am not alone. ■

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#### NOTES

1. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, “Feminist Television Criticism: Notes and Queries,” *Critical Studies in Television* 1, no. 1 (2006): 108.

2. Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D’Acci, and Lynn Spigel, eds., “Introduction,” in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (London: Clarendon, 1997), 5.

3. Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 43.

4. Ellen Seiter, *Television and New Media Audiences* (London: Clarendon, 1999), 6.
5. Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *Shaded Lives: African-American Women and Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 187.
6. Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xiii.