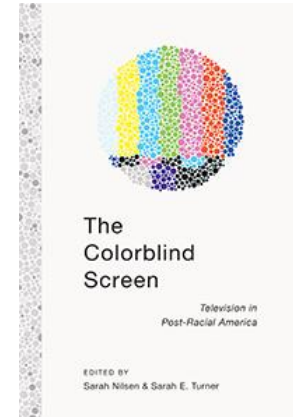


Sarah Nilsen and Sarah E. Turner (Eds.), **The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014, 363 pp., \$71.00 (hardcover), \$27.00 (paperback), \$22.95 (e-book).

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Sarah Nilsen and Sarah Turner’s edited volume, ***The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America***, considers how American politics of multiculturalism, along with colorblind racism, contribute to a unique atmosphere in television where race is briefly taken into account in celebration of diversity, but then immediately dismissed as inconsequential. This volume adds a new dimension to recent works on television that highlight the various ways the medium has evolved, transitioned, or transformed over the last three decades (see Lotz, 2007; Spigel & Olsson, 2004). These studies document the changes in television as a result of deregulation, media convergence, changes in programming, the introduction of new technologies, shifts in audiences’ viewing habits, and so on. While recognizing the valuable contributions such works make to the field of media studies, I think it is wise to examine what is meant by “change,” “transformation,” and “evolution” with respect to contemporary television. In discussions about how television has changed, there is a failure to account for the ways the medium has, when it comes to representations of racial difference, perpetuated an *illusion* of progress. Put simply, notions of television’s evolution are complicated by the medium’s racial paradox: At this moment in the 21st century, racial politics on television appear to be both progressive and regressive. Nilsen and Turner address this paradox in their collection of essays.

Like several of the essays in this volume, Nilsen and Turner situate the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency as central to contemporary colorblind racial ideology and ideals. Colorblind racial ideology is described as a post-civil rights “ideological rhetorical stance” that encompasses a set of beliefs “that posit that racism is a thing of the past and that race and racism do not play an important role in current and economic realities” (pp. 3–4). Colorblindness reifies and legitimizes racism by protecting certain racial privileges and by minimizing the legacy of systemic institutionalized racism and its residual effects on racial minorities. Each of the chapters in *The Colorblind Screen* is concerned with unpacking the myriad ways television serves as a discursive vehicle through which colorblind racial ideology manifests. Nilsen and Turner cogently articulate the primary thread that ties these chapters together in the anthology’s introduction: Contemporary television “secures and encourages rather than challenges” (p. 6) racial apathy.

After Nilsen and Turner’s introductory chapter, the remaining 13 chapters of *The Colorblind Screen* are organized into four parts. The three chapters in Part I, “Theories of Colorblindness,” offer varied yet complementary conceptualizations of “colorblindness,” “colorblind racism,” and “post-race.” Doane (chapter 1) theorizes colorblind racial ideology as a fluid rather than static set of contradictory

claims about the nature of race in the United States. Mukerjee's essay (chapter 2) outlines the strategic differences between colorblindness and post-race, and posits that the latter emerges as a defining moment in the discursive history of the former. Last, Bonilla-Silva and Ashe (chapter 3) conceptualize colorblind racism as an "ideological anchor" of a new racial regime described as the "New Racism."

The first two chapters in Part II, "Icons of Post-Racial America," offer close readings of American cultural icons. Peck (chapter 4) explores how media mogul Oprah Winfrey built her cross-racial popularity by harnessing colorblind ideologies. In chapter 5, Leonard and Hazelwood examine the ways racial discourse was employed in sports media commentary about the 2011 NBA lockout and controversies surrounding basketball star LeBron James. The remaining chapters in this section explore portrayals and audience perceptions of Arabs and Muslims on contemporary television. Alsultany (chapter 6) introduces several representational strategies that have been used to depict Arabs and Muslims after 9/11, and argues that these strategies reassure America's racial sensitivity while simultaneously perpetuating the belief that Arabs and Muslims are a national security threat. Imbahim (chapter 7) contrasts the varied ways audiences react to and interpret portrayals of Arabs and Muslims on cable television comedies.

Part III, "Reinscribing Whiteness," contains three chapters. The ways in which the popular AMC series *Mad Men* strategically erases the racial turmoil of the civil rights timeline in favor of construing a narratives that allow audiences to sympathetically identify with the shows' white characters is the subject of Nilsen's chapter eight. In chapter nine, King offers a detailed analysis of how advocates of white power interpret and discuss television online. Turner's essay (chapter 10) offers an examination of how the Disney Channel displays diversity through its multicultural cast programs without actually "doing" diversity."

Last, "Post-Racial Relationships," the final part of *The Colorblind Screen*, consists of three chapters that approach the topics of racial and ethnic diversity, and the portrayal of multiracial characters in varied ways. In chapter 11, Davé supplies in-depth readings of television comedies that depict Indian weddings, while, in chapter 12, Krestedemas introduces the idea of culture-blind racism and explores viewers' perceptions of representations of Latino/a identity on the comedy *Ugly Betty*. In the anthology's final chapter, Huh interrogates how race is used visually and narratively in the science fiction series *Battlestar Galactica* to represent our current state of anxiety around detecting racial difference.

The Colorblind Screen has several strengths. Many of the chapters maintain an exemplary balance between explicating theory and historical context, and providing concrete analysis. The theory-oriented chapters in Part I of the volume nuance understandings of colorblind racism and colorblind racial ideology and are great additions to existing conceptualizations of these ideas. Additionally, the case studies throughout the anthology utilize a diverse range of theoretical frameworks, such as cultural theory, theories of hegemony and neoliberalism, cultivation theory, and stereotype theory, which enrich the volume. Another significant strength of this work is its inclusion of several audience reception studies. In studies of colorblind racial ideology in media, the audience is infrequently considered; therefore, the presence of these reception studies is especially noteworthy. Finally, this anthology is also to be commended for its racial inclusiveness. Studies about colorblind and/or post-race ideologies in media tend to focus exclusively on race in terms of a black and white dynamic; however, many of the essays in this

collection acknowledge and problematize what colorblind/post-race ideologies mean for groups that have been racialized in ways that cannot be understood within a black/white binary framework.

Though I have mostly praise for *The Colorblind Screen*, there are some weaknesses. With few exceptions, the term "colorblind" is used interchangeably with "post-race" throughout without unpacking how these concepts have been employed and distinctly conceptualized in prior works. Mukherjee and Bonilla-Silva and Ashe make clear in their respective essays that the two constructs are undoubtedly connected; however, I think that an acknowledgment of the theoretical genealogies of these concepts would have been useful in Nilsen and Turner's introduction. Next, the organization of the second part of the volume is confusing; it signaled a discussion of post-racial icons, but only two of the essays explored this topic. The remaining two essays do not interrogate specific icons, and while they add an important dimension to the volume as a whole, they are out of place in this section. Finally, although some of the contributors incorporate secondary-source comments from show writers and producers into their analysis of specific shows, no essay in this volume offered an empirical study of how colorblind racial ideology manifests in the development, production, and distribution phases of television. Although several of the contributors gesture to—and in some cases talk briefly about—colorblind strategies employed in casting discussions, I think a chapter exploring this topic in greater depth, or one that looked at the day-to-day production practices within television, would have further strengthened this collection.

Overall, *The Colorblind Screen* is a timely anthology that joins a small—but, I hope, growing—number of works that address colorblind and post-race discourses in media (see Catanese, 2011; Joseph, 2013; Squires, 2014). This collection demonstrates the continued need to consider the central role television plays in the articulation, construction, and contestation of contemporary racial politics. While this is a multidisciplinary volume, it should be of particular interest to scholars in media studies and cultural studies. This collection is essential for anyone interested in exploring current racial politics and representations of racial difference in media.

References

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