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Book Review: Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television

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Book reviews

Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*. London: Sage, 2002. 202 pp. ISBN 0–7619–7028–2 (hbk) £60.00; ISBN 0–7619–7028–2 (pbk) £18.99

The issue of representation, with its attendant notions of being seen and heard comprehensively in the audiovisual spheres, has been one of the mainstays of cultural studies and related disciplines. In particular, the representation of black people in Britain has been one of the exciting and contentious areas of study within this field, demonstrating how the dominant sections of society and media institutions have represented minority groups and how minority groups have themselves responded to, and struggled for, representation. Sarita Malik's book, based upon her doctoral research, is a timely and welcome contribution to this area. Her study pragmatically focuses on the history of black British representation on television from the postwar period to the present, thereby offering us an up-to-date account.

Malik's notion of 'black Britain' is developed from the important political term given to the alliance of British-African, British-Caribbean and South-Asian groups since the 1970s, while also engaging with the opening up of the slogan along culturally specific lines in the contemporary moment. Despite the loss of its immediate potency since the 1970s, whenever a notion of political blackness is invoked in relation to a predominant white society and its structures, a sense of the need to engage with questions of power and, in this case, how they articulate with regimes of representation, become necessary. Thus a notion of black Britain, while fluid and changing, is still as relevant today as it was in the 1970s.

However, Malik's contention is not one of simple accusatory claims whereby it becomes all too easy to label all black representation on British television as racist. Rather she aims to uncover and develop the work of one of her thesis supervisors, Professor Stuart Hall, the 'racialized regime of representation' (p. 26). This is a system of the signs and symbols of the televisual process that need to be contextualized historically over time – i.e. Britain's colonial and racist relations with, and images of, black people – and how these have been challenged, modified and refuse to go away, albeit in mutated forms, in the historical present. Examples include the



black entertainer, the black sportsperson, the subservient yet exotic Asian and so on. Malik analyses this racialized regime over a wide range of television genres including documentary, news, comedy, light entertainment, youth television, drama, film and sport, as well as paying attention to questions of policy.

The sources which Malik draws upon are eclectic but, as she also acknowledges, are few and far between. Malik laments the underdeveloped and under-resourced nature of Britain's National Film and Television Archive. Moreover, the sources to study black representation and the works of black British television and film-makers themselves are not properly stored in the national archives either (p. 4). In this way, part of Malik's strategy is to uncover a history of black British representation by, wherever possible, acknowledging the relevant primary and secondary sources that exist. She draws upon extended interviews with key black British media practitioners and personnel who have been active since the postwar period as revealing insights into the sociopolitical context of black Britain. Malik also applies a textual analysis to key programmes over the years to ascertain and debate the changing nature of black British representation itself. This is a commendable approach.

One of the book's more poignant chapters focuses on 'the black situation in television comedy' (Chapter 5). As with all of her other chapters, Malik begins by surveying historically and up to the present the sociocultural and institutional contexts to the production of key programmes, analysing important texts along the way and thereby defining the televisual genre under study. In order to understand the evolution of British television comedy and its representation of blackness, Malik reminds us of the articulation of the wider colonial remnants of the black entertainer, the liberal multicultural agenda over the years, and how 'ambivalence' (p. 106) works in and through comedy programmes in which racist stereotypes are constantly set into play and, as alleged by programme-makers, are challenged at the same time. While the comedy programmes of the 1960s, e.g. *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC One), and of the 1970s, *Mind Your Language* (LWT/ITV), were nothing short of white nationalist fervour peppered with the odd dash of British woolly liberalism, more recent programmes since the late 1990s featuring black and Asian actors and characters, such as *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC One) and *Da Ali G Show* (Channel 4), prove more difficult to pin down in terms of whether they subvert racist stereotypes or whether they also contribute to them. In fact, one of the major contentious issues around the popularity of the character Ali G is that he is a white man 'blackened up'. Malik puts forward the following interesting questions to us: in the case of reading *Goodness Gracious Me*:

When is a stereotype not a stereotype? Because these stereotypes are negotiated by Asians and deliberately subverted through visual puns, spectacle and parody, can we safely say that racist readings are not gleaned from the text? (p. 103)



And in terms of the history of the development of British comedy programming, why is it that in the racially sensitive times of the new millennium one of the central tenets of television comedy is still obsessed with, and dependent on, racist humour? (p. 106)

Representing Black Britain not only deals with the images of black and Asian people on British television in their sociopolitical context, it also brilliantly writes and represents a version of that history to us as an important area of study. This book deserves to be widely read by students and researchers interested in contemporary developments in race, ethnicity and diaspora in media, communication and cultural studies.

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Riccardo Fubini, *Humanism and Secularization: From Petrarch to Valla* (trans. Martha King). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 306 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3002-4 (hbk)

In *Humanism and Secularization*, Riccardo Fubini offers a sample of relatively recent Italian scholarship in the field of Renaissance (*Quattrocento*) studies. The original Italian version of the book, *Umanesimo e secolarizzazione da Petrarca a Valla*, appeared in 1990 from Bulzoni. The period that Fubini writes about ('from Petrarch to Valla') is certainly one of tremendous importance in announcing (and, eventually, giving shape to) that set of mental habits, cultural attitudes and mentalities we today call 'our' culture. Too sophisticated and rebellious to belong (in a substantial way) to the Middle Ages, but, at the same time, too indebted to the past to be (fully) 'modern', the *Quattrocento* humanists are accountable for the emergence of 'a new culture' that, in Fubini's own words, broke out of 'the authoritative and publicly sanctioned structures of late scholasticism, that is, of a culture especially intent on the systemization, or itemization, of inherited knowledge and age-old norms' (p. 3). Fubini's book is about *how* precisely some major figures of the *Quattrocento* Italian humanism (Francis Petrarch, Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, Poggio Bracciolini and others) came to be involved in the emergence of this new culture and *Weltanschauung*.

The book is, in fact, a collection of five essays/chapters, relatively independent of each other. The first chapter ('Consciousness of the Latin Language among Humanists: Did the Romans Speak Latin?') tells the story of an interesting sociolinguistic and historical debate, which, in Italy, must have gone as far back as Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, about the relationships between Latin, spoken by an ecclesiastic and scholarly élite,