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## Book Review: Technicolored: Reflections on Race in the Time of TV by Ann duCille

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**duCille, Ann. *Technicolored: Reflections on Race in the Time of TV*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 352 pages. \$27.95.**

Ann duCille, Professor Emeritus at Wesleyan University, introduces readers to a limited litany of various television programs and actors, hailing black theatrical representation since its advent in the 1950s and correlated with historical events. For many readers, the author's assessment—a portion of which is commentary and the other part memoir—is an introduction to early television shows that ended before several generations had the opportunity to make their own analysis of them. This text provides ample American history as well as critical race theory analysis suitable for anthropologists, sociologists, and students of the visual arts.

*Technicolored: Reflections on Race in the Time of TV* explains that black actors' appearances on the small screen are oft-times compromised, reiterating tropes reminiscent of buffooning, hypersexualized, black American entertainers of yore. The professor refers to these incessant stereotypes heaped into the living rooms of both black and white viewers as "stigmatic blackness;" to otherwise be viewed as a distant object mitigated to appeal to white American society's perception of the "other."

Professor duCille examines in detail other races who were racially profiled in the development of early television. For example, she discusses the original Lone Ranger and the stereotype of the Native American, Tonto, with uncultured mannerisms. However, she neglects to analyze that the Lone Ranger was another form of imitation face; that this character was based on a real-life black hero Bass Reeves, a western bounty hunter who was successful in capturing most of the fugitives he sought to arrest.<sup>1</sup> In this instance, the western hero depicted on television as intelligent and courageous is falsely depicted as a white man, though in reality he was a black

American. Thus, the notion that no black American could portray a positive, intelligent hero forced his true story to be white-washed with a Caucasian actor.

The author then dedicates an entire chapter to the depiction of perfection in the guise of whiteness embodied in the blonde, young white actress Shirley Temple. duCille notes that movie directors portrayed little black girls in Shirley Temple movies no better than they did adults, including Bill 'BoJangles' Johnson and Hattie McDaniel, who performed whatever tasks necessary to indulge the white central character while still manifesting the stereotype of uncultured black Americans. A similar, subtle theme runs throughout the stint of the television series 'Heroes' (aired on NBC from 2006-2010), that to save the world, everyone endowed with extraordinary powers were obliged to save the blonde white cheerleader. This white supremacist narrative can be observed in everyday social interactions in the United States today as witnessed through the Susan Westwood racially-charged crime against two black women bystanders whom she threatened with violence and demanded that these strangers coddle her white female privilege based on her declaration that she was white, blonde, and beautiful.<sup>2</sup>

The criminal offense, captured on video, only provided proof of the long-standing plague that black women in America have endured for decades under racism and gender politics; to be accosted, interrupted and disrupted by certain Caucasians who falsely believe all activity, transactions, and interactions must cease to acknowledge their presence. Ironically, some blacks and other people of color have emulated this behavior harboring a similar psychological defect, justifying such conduct by exploiting differences found within their own or another non-white racial grouping.

Throughout the text the author discusses the black middle-class experience: to be educated and to speak properly is deemed by urban blacks and racist whites as denying one's own blackness. This 'blackness' is depicted in various media stereotypes that American white society uses to justify their discrimination and oppression. These same blacks will berate those who do not share their belief systems or urban cultural lifestyle. Thus, *non*-urban blacks are denied their blackness by their racial contemporaries and counterparts "eclipsing other less colorful notions of what it means to be black, while reinforcing the most stigmatizing images of black people," (p. 264) a notion that middle-class blacks of the old guard fought for decades to combat.

The next chapter proceeds with an overview of the *Loving v. Virginia* case in which the United States Supreme Court declared Virginia's anti-miscegenation laws violated the U.S. Constitution as applied through the 14th Amendment. Consequently, the author asserts that television executives experimented with interracial relationships during the 1960s-1970s. She cites to the famous lip lock between Captain James T. Kirk and Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, admitting that England had surpassed the United States in its racial progress a few years earlier with a British television show depicting an interracial couple engaging in a similar display of affection.

Professor duCille centers the following chapter on the now infamous, once iconic William (Bill) H. Cosby, Jr., Ph.D. The author examines "palatable blackness," a near squeaky clean, nuclear black family with parents who are highly successful in their professions encapsulated in *The Cosby Show*. Although the author does not acknowledge this, *The Cosby Show* contained the elements that *Julia* starring Diahann Carroll and a Norman Lear production

both lacked in its depiction of a middle-class, progressive yet traditional family unit. She then highlights society's failure to distinguish between black persona and black individual amid recent allegations made against Bill Cosby and the detriment to any racial progress his family-oriented shows made in mainstream society. Yet, critics still dismantled the realism of this pivotal program for its *lack* of blackness; insufficiently addressing race relations as poignantly as another, more recent upper middle-class, family show *Black-ish*.

The author reminds the reader of the double-edged adage that when a black person does any act he does not solely represent himself, he represents the entire category of blacks. Yet, duCille correctly concludes that black actors and stereotypical fictional characters they play do not represent all black Americans, though society erroneously considers them a true reflection of the black collective.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Bass Reeves, American Lawman, Britannica Encyclopedia  
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bass-Reeves>.

<sup>2</sup> See 'She Was White and Hot, Now She's Unemployed,' October 29, 2018, The Washington Post, Cleve R. Wootson, Jr. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/29/she-was-white-hot-racist-video-now-shes-viral-unemployed/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.bcfe510b6ecd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/29/she-was-white-hot-racist-video-now-shes-viral-unemployed/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.bcfe510b6ecd)