

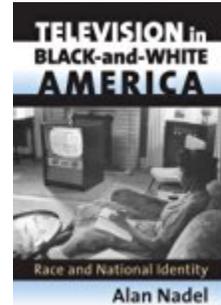
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Alan Nadel. *Television in Black-and-White America: Race and the National Identity*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. 224 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1398-4.

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And Now We Resume Our Regular Programming: The Cold War in Our Living Rooms

Television in Black-and-White America is both more and less the book that its title—and its black-and-white book jacket photograph—first suggests. On the cover, a neatly dressed young black woman, papers and pen in hand, sits in a middle-class 1950s living room and watches a fuzzy TV screen on which a schoolteacherish woman lectures before a chalkboard. Inside, there is much less discussion of what blacks thought about either the television they watched (or the culture it constructed as it excluded them), than discussion of Westerns, Disneyland, and the interstate highway system. It is therefore a surprising but informative book that, ultimately, does deliver on its title premise; it is very much about how Cold War America was *white* America, defined in almost every way that mattered as a male, patriarchal whiteness, and how this “white America does not exist and never did, some imaginary America, associated with highways and suburbia, with public space and domestic security, with the idea of the West, remains cogent for a significant portion of the American population” (p. 185).

Alan Nadel, William T. Bryan Chair in American Literature and Culture at the University of Kentucky, whose books include *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (1998), and *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America* (1997), authoritatively lays out three major institutions in the 1950s that conjoined to create a “national imaginary,” an image and a measurement of what comprised the “real” America: television, the interstate highway system, and Disneyland (p. 6). The

three of these, he argues, formed essentially a hall of mirrors that reflected each other and, in turn, reflected the culture they both created and were created by. All three of these essentially bypassed black Americans and, in fact, women and other minorities, rendering them almost invisible in the media and disempowering them in the construction of a Cold War super-nation. “The interstate highway system, television, and Disneyland—all creatures of the 1950s—shared the decade’s obsession with conformity ... In its relentless consistency, the post-war America of highways and TVs demonstrated unequivocally that, as the newly amended Pledge of Allegiance proclaimed, this was really one nation under God” (p. 53).

Even at the time that the Supreme Court was outlawing segregation in schools and public places, black-and-white television, Nadel points out, was beaming across the country its version of America as a meritocratic Eden of God-fearing, middle-class white families, thriving in the best of all possible worlds. Early newscasts were largely a government-created and content-controlled invention, he points out; later, in the civil rights movement, the violence and bad news on the news served as the occasional aberration that underlined the overwhelming normality of the rest. “That television omitted, ignored, or distorted just about everything in American life is less surprising than that it did at the same time it touted itself as the definitive source of ‘reality,’” writes Nadel. “Even before 2 percent of American households had television sets, the nation was primed to regard television as the ap-

paratus of truth, sine qua non“ (p. 7). The government, advertisers, and producers colluded to frame a picture of a happy postwar America, a neatly self-reinforcing activity: “Since television was the American activity, anything not suitable for broadcast, by implication, was un-American“ (p. 36).

The book shines in its clear, concise history of early television programming, including the ingenious manner in which important decisions, such as whether broadcasts would air on UHF or VHF frequencies, were made. Nadel points out that it was not merely racism that kept 1950s TV so white, even though broadcasters chose for the first-ever broadcast a TV version of the radio show *Amos 'n' Andy*—performed by white actors in black-face. Commercial concerns about not only Southern readiness to accept a TV show about or including black characters (even if it caricatured them), but the national unwillingness to be troubled by what it saw on TV hobbled much early promising content. Advertisers sought content that kept consumers happy, and any hint of controversy was enough to doom an actor or a show (p. 39). The master of happy content, Walt Disney, dominates much of the middle of Nadel’s book, as he did 1950s and 1960s culture; Disney was able to “weave the three hallmarks of mid-century middle-classdom—the car, the home, and the television—into a seamless commercial loop,” Nadel observes (p 49).

But it is Nadel’s complex casting of Disney as the “perfect Cold Warrior,” building on other scholarship on the extraordinary effect of Disney and Disneyland on postwar American identity, that demonstrates the interdependence of his three variables on that time. For instance, it was Disney’s re-imagining of Davy Crockett and his purging of the racist elements of the Alamo that helped reshape this country’s collective memory and understanding of the American West (p 75). Disneyland was not only the “perfected” American West, but Disney’s image of America’s perfect public space, controlled and positive and where integration really meant convergence of the nation’s commercial and national values: “If Disneyland was the common place—the town square—where America integrated its history and destiny, its technology and its geography, its family and industry, it was also the place where all the significant elements of that unprecedented integration were white” (p. 84). Interstate highways, which obliterated many minority communities and created white, middle-class suburbia, an environment in which Cold War conformity thrived, let postwar Americans “relive” the breaching of the Western frontier. They also brought Americans to Disneyland, where consumers

“were reassured that their lives had stature as representatives of the West” (p. 69).

Disney’s recreation of Western legends through his shows and his theme park readied the ground for the many television Westerns that followed, ranging from *Gunsmoke* to *The Rebel* to *Bonanza*. Between 1957 and 1960, Nadel notes, half the top ten shows and half the top twenty shows were Westerns, accounting for almost a quarter of all programming (p. 86); the genre lived on, he argues, in such updated shows as *Route 66* (p. 176). Those programs effectively equated the conquest of the American West a hundred years ago to the recent conquest by the global West in the light of America’s victory in World War II. Westerns, Nadel explains, let contemporary Americans celebrate their sense of technological and even moral superiority in the world, and they reaffirmed for competitive, future-facing Americans the idea of Manifest Destiny, a notion that Nadel and others trace back to a belief in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race (p. 81). Analyses of the dialogue, characterizations and plot lines of several television shows demonstrate how “the history of the American West was merging thematically with both the Cold War West and the desired future of the American West. Western history and Western destiny consolidated” (p. 111). Nadel compares, for instance, the patriarchal Joseph Kennedy and his three sons, one of which took the presidency on the theme of “the new Frontier,” to Ben Cartwright and his three sons on *Bonanza*. As written, Western heroes’ proud reliance on their weapons, their fierce sense of property, and their dislike of external interference even allowed TV to introduce an element of romanticism and sympathy for the conquered post-Civil War South and, by extrapolation, the post-*Brown v. Board* South, Nadel argues. Particularly in *The Rebel*, the story of Johnny Yuma, an ex-Confederate soldier-turned-wandering horseman, TV showed us that whiteness and resistance to federal mandate even redeemed the rebel. “To put it simply, in the west of the adult Western, Confederate symbology is far more commonplace than black cowboys,” says Nadel (p. 141). As desegregation battles raged in real time, “[i]t was almost as if television were keeping the promise that had unified the nation, while the federal government and the Supreme Court were undermining it” (p. 137). While some interpretations of television symbolism might be more palatable to some media critics than others—Nadel describes, for instance, *The Fugitive* as akin to an updated and inverted odyssey of a fugitive slave—the depth of his analyses is admirable and provocative.

Television in Black-and-White America is a book

whose application of three variables to a time and a culture results in both very broad and very specific strokes. Its great strengths are the depth of the context it offers for those who want to understand the psychology of that era and to apply Nadel's slate of metrics to others beyond the white males for whom the Cold War culture seemed uniquely designed. For instance, Nadel rarely addresses gender issues here, though he does observe wryly that, for women characters on *Bonanza*, a desire to marry into the Cartwright clan never worked out well. In the end, the blackness referred to in the title is revealed as an important force, in Cold War American culture, chiefly as it demonstrated the opposite of white. And in that era's lexicon, white was not just the dominant race: it stood for

"the absence of emotional, political or philosophical pigmentation ... In this sense, whiteness means Cold War television—in regard to anything but communism—was white in the sense that white is the most neutral of colors," Nadel notes, "deployed by a medium that had honed the craft of equating neutrality with normality" (p. 41). Some readers may see parallels to today's America that extend beyond its current president, a Texan frequently photographed in a cowboy hat and working at his ranch, and current pressures to inhibit dissenting (read: unpatriotic, un-American) views; in any case, the effects of that time and its culture, Nadel says, can hardly be overestimated.

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