

Media Pandering: The Good, the Bad, and the... Inclusive?

“For Whom?: The Subjects and Objects of Pandering”

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My take on “pandering” comes from two different but related responses to this prompt. The first response, the one I assume was accepted for this roundtable, was written for the proposed session, “Undisciplining U.S. Television Studies,” by my colleague Melissa Phruksachart. She used the frustrations about media representation and criticism from Mary Beltran and Mary Celeste Kearney’s 2014 *Flow* position papers as points of departure to “take stock of the scholarly apparatus of media studies” by interrogating its “intellectual and material conditions.”

Mary Celeste Kearney’s paper laments a political declension in media studies since the 1990s, noting the partition of “subfields resistant to questions of power” from “identity-based research.” Yet, instead, I see two recapitulations – one that goes against and one alongside Kearney’s position. First, the refutation: the 1990s that Kearney celebrates as a high-point of cultural studies were disparaged by Black feminist Barbara Christian in her 1987 “The Race for Theory” for delegitimizing the politics of Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies at their moment of institutionalization. In the same way, the 2010s have declared the “death of traditional media” right as digital technologies democratize media production, people of color enter broadcast television beyond tokenization, and the study of media becomes standard in Ethnic Studies.

Second, the agreement: Kearney’s 2014 theorizing of media studies’ institutional itinerary in the neoliberal university and academic capitalism presages Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia’s 2016 article for the *L.A. Review of Books*, “Neoliberal Tools and Archives: A Political History of Digital Humanities.” The *LARB* article paints the field in too broad of strokes, but the rampant defense of access, making, literacy, and intervention of DH’s best moments in the wake of the *LARB* article often took place to shield DH from criticism. The problem is not the digital, but the rush to the digital and what gets lost underfoot – the issues raised in Christian’s seminal essay.

I recognize that I am a relative newcomer to Media Studies, given my training in an American Studies that, however clumsily, embraces questions of difference, when I say: placing “race as representation” under erasure in Media Studies, as per Phruksachart’s provocation, asks after the Media Studies’ methodological usefulness for difference beyond the critique of racial liberalism, and the institutional legibility and cultural capital accorded to the field’s endisciplining as masculinized whiteness. So, turning to media scholars, I ask: If the disciplinary forms of Media Studies are always in decline, and if we have always already moved on due to scholarly lag, do we need Media Studies to analyze racialization? Or is the participation of scholars of social difference in Media Studies itself pandering to the field’s sense of itself?

And thus, the second response I wrote for this roundtable, but perhaps did not make the cut. The Joseph Cain essay that anchors this CFP’s inquiry uses “pandering,” and the hierarchy of audiences and expectations that structures the act, for its connotations of immoral and distasteful excesses. “Pandering” as media diversity violates the supposed “universal” public of media texts. My issue is not the attempt to decenter the normative viewer, but in the equivalences

drawn between the agencies of the narrative subject, implied viewer, circumstantial viewer, and the political economies underwriting them all by not questioning the politics of taste themselves.

In my work, I reactivate the category of the middlebrow to think about representational strategies related to diversity, such as the moment in *Black-ish* addressed by this call for responses. Contemporary politics of “diversity” (as opposed to difference) are rife with moralisms, as seen in certain discussions between non-Black liberals about what Black Lives Matter “should” or “should not” do, to maintain a white liberal hegemony of “diversity.” So, can we consider pedagogies of difference beyond morality to go after ethical questions?

As a non-Black person of color, I am not sure where to go. U.S. sitcoms about cultural difference, from *All-American Girl* to *Fresh Off the Boat*, have been plagued by white audience surrogates, oftentimes due to network interference. *Black-ish* is clear that the protagonist Andre is not narrating to a Black audience, not only through the show’s introductory monologues, but also through the show’s public/private divide. Act II often involves Andre bringing family issues to meetings at his workplace, where his Black coworkers represent the voices of (often misguided) racial authenticity to his white boss and two coworkers, who respond with a distasteful familiarity or outright disregard for the issues of race, gender, and family at hand.

The moral center of these workplace jokes seem to exist between Black outlandishness and white insensitivity – and, indeed, *Black-ish*’s pilot episode sets up the central conflict as being about Black “culture” instead of classed performances of whiteness. If we think of this show as socially useful pandering, who is being indulged?