

Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Production Studies

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We might consider the propensity in studies of race, gender, and sexuality to analyze onscreen images and major productions as some mix of habit, practicality, and ideological investments. Many of us have been trained in representational or textual analysis, and these practices have long-standing traditions in disciplines that “authorize” TV scholarship. And, of course, we viscerally respond to seeing stories, characters, and production players who approximate our worldview, needs, and sense of self.

High-visibility showrunners and talent signal opportunities to consider emerging practices and players in writing, casting, and producing and are moving analyses of race, gender, and sexuality into production studies. Academic conferences include discussions of Jill Soloway, Kerry Washington, and Constance Wu, and there are scholarly publications on Jenji Kohan, Tyler Perry, and Shonda Rhimes. This much-needed scholarship begins to correct oversights in television studies, generally, and in production studies, specifically. Yet much of this scholarship traces the effects of the worker to the screen or reads speeches, interviews, and tweets to understand how the worker’s identity affects their onscreen product. The focus is also contemporary, as these workers articulate in public forums their encounters with and resistance to misogyny, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. The relative ease of access to such a wealth of research materials privileges contemporary contexts and the effects these high-profile players have on televisual representations.

To analyze television production history proves harder, if only in material terms. Travelling to archives takes money and time, and locating documents buried in and scattered across collections that focus on high-visibility stars, creatives, and executives who are typically white, male, and (presumably) straight is challenging. Editors at academic presses are often not as enthused about what appears to be scholarship based in the minutia of archival findings than a saleable book that picks up on an idea or figure that has been recently energized in popular culture. And, for some, the tenure clock ticks away as time-intensive research slows the pace of scholarly output.

So what I propose about how else we might conceptualize the place of race, gender, and sexuality in production studies might be a tough sell, and it might not be an option that is equally available to everyone. But given that there is little overlap in the Venn diagram of production studies; scholarship on race, gender, and sexuality in television; and historical inquiry, I propose focusing on lesser-known players of television production of the past. What would this look like, and what would it offer us?

To answer these questions, I present a brief example here from my ongoing research on activist workers in American television. Starting as early as 1938, well before the full-fledged development of the television industry, various unions and guilds were discussing who among them should have jurisdiction over television workers. As unionized performers from a range of entertainment fields sought work in television, the Associated Actors and Artistes of America (AAAA) proposed a consolidated television union in 1948, a protracted and contentious process that lasted for many decades.

As the AAAA expanded its jurisdiction, the Puerto Rican Artists and Technicians Association (APATE) resisted this move. They insisted on collectivity that challenged organized labor's prevailing model and defined themselves in a "a very comprehensive way" to include a variety of lesser-seen and less-protected workers in addition to on-air talent and more-visible production workers. This conceptualization of every worker's value and their right to union representation and protections eschewed divisions among guilds and the hierarchical prestige of some workers.

APATE's stance rejected narratives of inclusivity American unions forwarded by remembering and circulating their history of conflicts with the AFL-CIO, when Puerto Rican hospitality staff was barred from unionized hotel and restaurant jobs. APATE's response to an American television mega-union underscored this history of racism and emphasized the colonizing agendas this increasingly empowered body held. In the mid-1970s, after a series of negotiations, APATE achieved their goals and became an associate rather than an affiliate in the union, status that marks the degree of self-governance and self-definition that APATE retained.

The case of APATE demonstrates how expansively we need to consider the players involved in production histories and where we might locate progressive forces within the television industry. The sheer number of institutionalized barriers women, sexual minorities, and marginalized racial subjects faced in the past means that we cannot approach production studies through stories of change-making, top-down policies and visions of major players. Telling the stories of workers who were committed to progressive politics in television oftentimes means that we must frame these stories differently and understand their influence beyond a translation to onscreen representations. These conditions offer us opportunities to rethink how production studies are defined in historical contexts and allows for consideration of what the worker her- or himself experienced, the lived conditions of working in television (and beyond), and the impact workers had against the demands of capitalism in ways that are not immediately visible.