

Introduction: Reconsidering Gender, Genre, and Race in Broadcast Radio and Television

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This special issue of *Journal of e-Media Studies* is focused on historical trends, shifts, and transformations in past and present broadcast television and radio, as understood through the categories of genre, gender, and race. At a time when both scholarly and industry-related discourses increasingly focus on the significance of "television after TV," convergence and multi-media, multi-platform technologies and audience interactivity, "narrowcasting" and "niche branding," and "complex" and/or "quality" narratives and audio-visual aesthetics typically, though not exclusively, characterizing cable or internet programming, broadcast television's present and past still encompasses the largest number of television viewers and the greatest number (going back to radio in the 1920s and experimental television in the 1930s) of undiscussed programs whose types of address, modes of transmission, and generic categories are staggering in heterogeneity, duration, and sometimes national or international impact.

In gathering essays for this collection, we were inspired by quality scholarship on the history of broadcast media given at numerous conferences—Console-ing Passions, Society for Cinema and Media Studies, American Historical Association, American Studies—between 2012-2014. Most of the papers in this issue were given in earlier versions at one of these conferences. However, we also noticed at this time a decline in conference presentations on topics concerning broadcast television and/or radio history and historiography. The Console-ing Passions Conference was organized by a group of feminist scholars in 1992 as a forum for scholarship on topics on media and gender which were underrepresented at other media studies or cultural studies conferences. The excitement and scholarly excellence of the work coming out of Console-ing Passions over the years contributed to the growth of television and

radio studies, including the presence of related scholarship at so many other conferences and in numerous publishing venues. However, at the 2012 Console-ing Passions conference the number of papers delivered on broadcast television and radio history and historiography topics was barely 13% of the total paper presentations given; by comparison, in 1996 (four years after the first Console-ing Passions conference) close to 24% of the Console-ing Passions conference papers were on historical and/or historiographic topics related to television and radio. At the 2015 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, only 5.3% of the 485 panels had two or more papers focused on television (broadcast or narrowcast) and/or radio history or historiography.

These statistics are noted not to denigrate either media scholarship on other than historically or historiographically-oriented topics (e.g., narrative structure of or fan responses to contemporary programming), or the conferences where so much of this work is shared. However, they do point to a shift in the field of television and radio studies, one which is perhaps largely explained by those terms with which we started this introduction—why wouldn't television, radio, and electronic media scholars concentrate their critical acumen on what is happening in the contemporary moment regarding media convergence and transmedia formats, new types of viewer and fan interactivity, and serialized narratives/complicated characters/high-quality visual aesthetics characterizing much of premium cable (HBO, Showtime) or internet (Netflix, Amazon) programming? After all, these kinds of programs and experiences spur social media memes, video mash-ups, blogs, and internet journalism seemingly created with 24 hours of the end of a "hot" program's latest episode, and the responding discourses can be ready to read and share the next morning on Facebook and Tumblr.

Some media studies scholars have suggested that attention given to what is often referred to as contemporary "quality" television by many industry discourses, popular journalistic essays, and scholarly analyses (all of which often overlap with one another) functions as a process of legitimation. Deborah L. Jaramillo has emphasized the heterogeneous visual and sonic choices made for different kinds of programming within and across time periods in television history to argue that the current privileging of terms such as "cinematic" and even "quality" (which she acknowledges was originally conceptualized within a careful

historical framework) actually maintain and essentialize media hierarchies.¹ When contemporary television is compared to the "cinematic," certain kinds of television ascend to the level that cinema has been awarded since the post-war rise of the auteur theory and subsequent acceptance of film studies in the academy. Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine have argued that much of the "convergence-era validation of television achieves that validation by rejecting the feminized medium 'that used to be' [i.e., network-era broadcast television, especially daytime television]."² They demonstrate that current forms of legitimation echo discourses from the 1940s and 1950s, which praised and prioritized certain types of television (e.g., the live anthology drama) over others to maintain cultural hierarchies privileging literature and theater: "The convergence-era legitimation of television seeks to distinguish the present from these past efforts [of legitimation], even while it repeats many of the same discourses. In so doing, this discourse even further reinforces its ahistorical tendencies, insisting upon a fundamental break, rather than a passage of continuities and discontinuities, between the present and the past."

While the essays in this issue don't explicitly engage in such debates about legitimation, what Jaramillo, Newman, and Levine demonstrate is that what we choose to analyze about/of television and radio—what time periods, what kinds of programming, audiences, and modes of transmission—is always a historical project. Given that these scholars point out how a concept of the "cinematic" is used in processes of legitimation, perhaps there is some irony in invoking Thomas Elsaesser's recent exploration of film historiography at this point, but he has written valuable cautionary advice against genealogical and evaluative, progress-based histories. He advocates, following Foucault, an archaeological approach to film history: "For an archaeological approach . . . it may be a matter of not only broadening the range of questions considered pertinent, but once more to shift the angle of inquiry and revise one's historiographic premises, by taking in the discontinuities, the so-called dead-ends, and by taking seriously the possibility of the astonishing otherness of the past."³ Instead of a genealogy that discovers origins and charts a notion of progression—for our purposes, a progression, say, from a "low-culture" broadcast media past to a "high-culture" narrowcast media present—media history might be "best described as a series of discontinuous snapshots that illuminate a whole topography: the task is to

map this field as a network, rather than as discrete units."⁴

Kelly Kessler, in her "Primetime Goes Hammerstein," analyzes recent practices of musical generic tropes and performances (singing and dancing) in non-musical television programs, and does so by employing a historical context going back to early television and a methodology that connects "discontinuous snapshots" of historical trends and shifts in television's use of Broadway talent in the 1950s-60s, film musicals of the 1990s responding to television's MTV music videos of the 1980s, and Broadway's move towards spectacle and musical adaptation of popular films in the 1990s-2000s. Employing concepts of "quality" and "complexity" to discuss the selective (or "special episode") use of the musical number or musical narrative in contemporary programs like *Scrubs*, *Pushing Daisies*, and *Grey's Anatomy*, Kessler divorces these terms from their current evaluative function and marshals them to map the field of musical performances in broadcast television as points in a network that was enabled in its current form by convergence-era changes ("fan interactivity," "niche address," genre-blurring blends of parody and sincere melodramatic excess), but only could coalesce through the parallel but discontinuous developments in theater, film, and music video industries and productions of the last several decades.

In their "Flashback/Flashblack," Bambi Haggins and Kristen Warner engage in dialogue about representations of blackness and gender in broadcast television history. They discuss how external pressures have succeeded or failed to generate changes within broadcast networks' representations of blackness, from the creation of the 1960s sitcom *Julia* as a remedy for the retrograde *Beulah* of the 1950s, to the network programming responses in the late 1990s-early 2000s towards the threatened viewer blackout/brownout spurred by the NAACP, the National Council of La Raza, and the National Asian American Telecommunications Association after the 1999 Fall television season included no people of color. While 1960s fare like *Julia* and *I Spy* offered the relevant, but "safe and sanitized" character of color to maintain the majority white mass audience, 1990s-2000s programs like *Living Single*, *Mo'Nisha*, *The Parkers*, and *Girlfriends*, represented the attempts of up and coming networks (or "netlets) CW, Fox, and UP, to narrowcast to a primarily black audience as a way to compete with the other broadcast networks and the growing power of cable channels, as much as any desire to

answer the complaints of the NAACP. Haggins and Warner contrast these mixed results with the way HBO's *The Wire* was able to "pull the prime demographic of an HBO audience into the harrowing experience of people of color in black urban spaces," but at the cost of perhaps leading white audiences to believe that, because they watched or were fans (even scholars) of the program, they know Baltimore's black community or "understand Blackness." They conclude their dialogue with some observations about the frustrations and ironies set in motion by *New York Times* television reporter Alessandra Stanley's recent positioning of show-runner Shonda Rhimes—whose *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder* are among the most highly-rated and discussed programs currently on broadcast television—as "an angry black woman." Haggins and Warner are skeptical about Rhimes's strategy of creating "colorblind" shows to avoid both the mass audience safeness of *Julia* and the specialized audience address of the UP comedies or the HBO prestige dramas, but they recognize that she was trying to create a formula that would exist outside this type of racial and gendered stereotyping while allowing her to use social media (such as Twitter) to build a fan base and control her message. The 1960s moment of *Julia*'s "White Negro" might be, in terms of broadcast television's logics, discontinuous from the 2010s moment of Rhimes's colorblind productions and Stanley's positioning of her as "an angry black woman," but they are linked by the "stereotypical [racial and gender] pigeonholing" that still persists both behind and in front of the camera in popular media.

Jennifer Hyland Wang, in "Recipe for Laughs: Comedy While Cleaning in *The Wife Saver*" examines a Depression-era radio program in terms of the gendered and sexed stereotypes it invoked and transgressed. Like Kessler, she is interested in historical and industrial contexts for genre hybridity; like Haggins and Warner, Wang contextualizes broadcast industries' long histories of address to targeted audiences, and she is careful to parse the logics of representational transgressions emerging out of structures or systems that support cultural and social hierarchies. *The Wife Saver*, a daytime program on the air for eleven years, blended the household hint/homemaking genre with comedy. Week-day daytime radio—at least before the hours children were assumed to be home from school—almost exclusively addressed women's positioning in (middle-class) separate sphere culture, which designated

the private, domestic sphere as women's place, as opposed to the public sphere inhabited by male bread-winners. Homemaking programs, both local and national, were considered by sponsors to be successful vehicles for reaching a female audience in part because they usually employed knowledgeable and sincere female hosts who forged intimacies with their listeners. Wang argues that *The Wife Saver*, in combining comedy—a genre considered too difficult to enjoy by the distracted homemaker listener and too distancing to support the host's empathy with the female audience—with the household hint genre enabled recognition of domestic labor while mocking the domestic ideal. The program not only surprised and entertained by blending genres, but also by casting a male host, who often made satiric jokes about his ineptitude and about expectations for household and feminine perfection; host Allen Prescott forged a different kind of empathy with female listeners, giving voice to their darker thoughts about domestic labor, which both humor and the household hint genre worked to "manage." However, as Wang argues, Prescott's identification with the feminine threatened gender hierarchies and heteronormative ideals. For that reason, publicity that contributed to his star persona stressed his ambivalence with being a man in a woman's world.

The Wife Saver both invoked and contained female discontent and self-recognition in the 1930s and 1940s, but by the 1950s "containment" was a concept for managing both geo- and domestic politics. What was supposed to be contained were the possibilities and conditions enabling both external (i.e., communist) and internal (i.e., domestic) subversions of the patriarchal, capitalist structures that supported "the American way of life." Television historians have frequently examined 1950s television programs in terms of this political containment context—not surprisingly, family sitcoms of that era have received scholarly and popular attention in relation to their alleged support of domestic containment. In "Dreams and Disruption in the Fifties Sitcom," Joanne Morreale examines dream sequences in four filmed family sitcoms from the 1950s—*Molly, I Married Joan*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Father Knows Best*—to demonstrate how they managed anxieties related to women's empowerment (or desire for empowerment), a potential threat to domestic containment ideology. Morreale argues that the television sitcom's stylized dream sequences as borrowed from previously established Hollywood film conventions could be understood

within a generic verisimilitude, but transgressed the domestic situation comedy's "cultural" verisimilitude, which, through adoption of a telefilm "anti-style" strived for "realistic" depictions of suburban family life. Like *The Wife Saver's* dark humor about domesticity, these dream sequences, filmed with special effects and surreal narrative logics that suggest an "excessive" style, disrupted the sitcom's narrative form and content "to make visible what is repressed" in the social sphere and the typical televisual sphere. Instead of collapsing all series that belonged to the 1950s family sitcom into one another or into the repressive social mechanisms of 1950s social and political structures—as many scholars and popular commentators once did or still do when writing about the genre—Morreale distinguishes the female-comic dominated sitcom of the late 1940s and early 1950s (*The Goldbergs*, *I Love Lucy*, *I Married Joan*) from those focused on the suburban family unit (*Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*) of the mid to late 1950s.⁵ She argues that the dream sequences in television sitcoms across this historical movement become more visually and narratively elaborate as anxiety about female independence and empowerment becomes more socially threatening and female subordination more televisually normative.

In "Queen for a Day: Gender, Representation, and Materiality in Elizabeth II's Televised Coronation," Jennifer Clark addresses some of the same concerns as the other scholars whose work is included in this issue of *Journal of e-Media Studies*: female empowerment, in/visibility of marginalized identities and labor, 1950s broadcast television's address to a mass audience, and representational strategies of electronic media that both contain and expose ideas and realities threatening to portions of that mass audience. However, Clark's focus is on non-fiction programming, specifically "special news event" programming that includes public rituals and ceremonies considered significant to the national (or international) body. She analyzes how the BBC's visual strategies for the televised coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 underscored the new monarch's power as maternal. They did this by providing a compelling visual text that attracted an unprecedented number of viewers in both England and America, but which concealed the material effects of monarchical rule (the exploitive practices of empire and inequality) through familial representations, representations that have continued in various forms in the Queen's annual

television Christmas address and the televised activities around the Queen's Jubilee in 2012. Clark provides fascinating archival data detailing debates within government committees and the BBC about whether to show close-ups of the Queen during the coronation ceremony, or to have television cameras present at all. She theorizes that television coverage of the ceremony threatened to reveal the materiality and contingency of the Queen's body, "the gendered flesh of the monarch," thereby threatening the concept of "non-corporeality" which supports the idea of the monarch as governing the "body politic." Clark also uncovers evidence that the material labor of ordinary, working-class women, who prepared the coronation route and site and cleaned them up later, was discussed by committees but not represented within the television coverage, which was embedded in a tightly-structured "flow" favoring government imperatives. The broadcast flow in which the coronation was aired in the U.S. segmented and interrupted the event coverage with commercials, and on NBC, even a comic bit with the *Today Show's* mascot, chimpanzee J. Fred Muggs. Undergirded by decisions that preserved representational and social inequality—for example, keeping working-class female labor off the television screen during coronation coverage—the BBC used their way of televising the royal event as an opportunity to claim that the sanctity of the ceremony was preserved by the superior, non-commercial, public service practices of British broadcasting, as opposed to the American broadcast practice of segmenting programming with indecorous and uncouth commercial or comedy breaks.

In "Haphazard Archive: The Epistemological, Aesthetic, and Political Contradictions of U.S. Television," Lynne Joyrich uses the "we interrupt this broadcast [of *The West Wing*]" televised announcement of the military start of "Operation Iraqi Freedom," the Second Gulf War waged under the George W. Bush administration in March 2003, as an example of the interrelation among American commercial broadcasting practices of scheduling, advertising, and programming on the one hand, and the president's PR campaigns and political strategy on the other. Joyrich argues that her capture—via off-air VHS taping—of this televisual moment is an archival practice that revealed "the way we imagine TV's production of the national and international, the patriotic and the irreverent, the domesticated temporal and the geopolitized spatial," as well as broadcast television's plotting and conspiracy theorizing

(her hunch that she could get the president's "unscheduled" announcement on tape at a particular night was based partly on "forecasts" by news anchors and political commentators speaking earlier in the day on television news programming as well as her belief that Bush would not interrupt a "patriotic" program like *American Idol*). Joyrich's observations about how many scholars and viewers, especially in the days before DVD sets of programs and on-line streaming, have archived broadcast television by both "planned" or timed tape capture of scheduled programming and accidental or at the moment taping in the midst of on-going flow, initiate a much-needed conversation about the role of archives and the nature of archives for the study of television. Do all television archival practices produce "haphazard archives," demonstrating our inability to ever access "everything" that is on or is television? For all the material frustrations (where to store all those videotapes or DVDs? How to lend to and borrow from the collections of others? How to reconcile television's endless flow with a tape or DVD's pre-programmed amount of time for recording?) of such "haphazard archives, Joyrich believes they demonstrate, with their inclusion of news updates, live news eruptions, weather reports, infomercials, etc., the quotidian aspects of television and television viewing, as well as first viewing and televising contexts for texts that are or someday will be celebrated as "quality" or notable historical events. She acknowledges the importance of recent scholarly work on television convergence (moving "outside" of the tv box) and on television aesthetics ("complex television" in a new "golden age"), but also expresses concern that television, as the site of an intersection of inside and outside, aesthetics and politics, communication and commerce, public and private, old and new, continuity and discontinuity, distinction and dispersal, mass and individual, is getting less scholarly attention. Joyrich's conclusion returns us to Elsaesser's argument about productive historical inquiry about media—in her focus on viewing, collecting, and exchange, and how they come into play in pedagogies and writings of television history, she shifts "the angle of inquiry" and takes in "the discontinuities" in broadcast television as well as "the possibility of the astonishing otherness of the past."

Taken together, the essays in this issue of *Journal of e-Media Studies* engage broadcast television history through a range of methods: a long duree explores how television culture has situated the visual and gendered presence of

black females; specific points of narrative illustrate resistance to suburban housewife subjectivity revealed through the experimental techniques of dream sequences; understanding a popular television genre is expanded through situating the genre within the traditions of related popular entertainment forms; in the male-dominated voice of radio women's programs, masculinity addresses and expresses female subjectivity; the visible and invisible labor of women, royal and commoner, produce the televisual spectacle of a coronation of a queen; and personal VHS archives capture not only the desired object of study but also the ephemera of the show's historical context. Employing a variety of archival sources and entries into history, these essays shift the field's recent angles of inquiry and illustrate the importance of a continual re-consideration of broadcast media history. There are many discoveries yet to be made.

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About the Author

Mary Desjardins is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Dartmouth College. She is author of numerous essays in journals and book collections on film and television history, feminism and media, and star culture. Her book, *Recycled Stars: Female Film Stardom in the Age of Television and Video* was published by Duke University Press in 2015 and her monograph on *Father Knows Best* is due out in late 2015 from Wayne State University Press. She is also co-editor of *Dietrich Icon* (Duke University Press, 2007). She was on the board of Console-ing Passions from 2003-2015.

Mary Beth Haralovich is Professor of Theatre, Film and Television at the University of Arizona. Her research concerns the social history of US film and television—the study of how film and television participate in our national cultural life. She is co-editor of *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays* (Duke University Press, 1999) and the author of many essays on topics such as film and television melodrama, studio-era film promotion, and television history, including studies of programs about suburban family living, private eyes, international spies, and reality television. She is one of the founding members of Console-ing Passions.

Endnotes

- ¹ Deborah L. Jaramillo, "Rescuing Television From the 'Cinematic': The Perils of Dismissing Television Style," in *Television Aesthetics and Style*, eds. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 67-75.
- ² Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 10.
- ³ Thomas Elsaesser, "Early Film History and Multi-Media," in *New Media Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, eds. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 20.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ⁵ Theorizing and historicizing the 1950s sitcom has been important to the history of feminist television scholarship. See, Lynn Spigel's groundbreaking *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); essays in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); essays in *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, eds. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). For recent studies that question the equation of 1950s sitcoms with all that was socially and politically repressive about the 1950s, see Joanne Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012) and Mary Desjardins, *Father Knows Best* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, forthcoming 2015).