

Say It Loud! African-American Audiences, Media, and Identity. Edited by Robin R. Means Coleman. New York: Routledge, 2002. 306 pp. ISBN 0815337620.

Say It Loud incorporates previously published pieces with original work from both emerging and established scholars from the fields of cultural studies, media, and race. Borrowing its name from a James Brown song, the book ultimately succeeds in turning a critical eye towards contemporary African-American media representations. Specifically the work explores the significance of these representations by studying the meanings and identities derived from them by African-American audiences. Editor Means Coleman has previously published a participant focused, book-length study of African-American viewers' readings of Black situation comedies (Means Coleman, 1998).

Means Coleman frames this compilation within the tradition of the reception study with the goal of exceeding the scope of critical media research that offers criticism "in the name of Blackness" without consulting African-American audience members (p. vii). Such practice, the forward notes, limits what we know about African-American viewing habits, reading practices, and media engagement. This book fits in the current trends of critical, cultural, and postmodern studies to interrogate identity, specifically, the participation of media and other discourses in constructing lived identities. The chapters present various forms of sense-making by African-American subjects as they think through texts, figures, labels, and images. Determining the place of media representations in the culture is key, Means Coleman notes, in furthering the work of advocating for progressive and positive images of African-Americans now and in the future. Yet Means Coleman recognizes that in advocating for change there is no one right representation or images that can account for the diversity of identity found amongst African-Americans.

Two of the eleven included chapters are reprinted, specifically, chapters eight, Inniss' and Feagin's (1995) study of Black middle-class readings of *The Cosby Show*, and nine, Bobo's (1988) study of Black feminist readings of *The Color Purple*. These pieces torpedo expectations that there is one, heterogeneous African-American audience response by focusing on media that have created controversy and/or divided opinion. These pieces show how the news media and others have elided differences of gender, sexuality, and class by claiming to offer the African-American perspective. The reality of interpretive media study is less certain and perhaps never resolved to all participants satisfaction. For instance, Inniss and Feagin (1995) demonstrate the inconsistency of middle class African-American responses to *The Cosby Show* in both wanting to acknowledge positive representation while simultaneously questioning the effect of these representations on White viewers. Both articles conclude by acknowledging the dilemmas surrounding these texts and the extent to which resolution is impractical.

As these chapters demonstrate, the focus of the work is not solely to explore the most recent but instead significantly resonant media figures and texts and as such texts overlap across chapters and perspectives (e.g., *The Cosby Show*, *Menace II Society*).

The book is also notable for original scholarship. Chapter two, Cornwell and Orbe's study of responses to the African-American focused comic strip *The Boondocks* is arguably bound to become a classic for several reasons. The comic strip is itself for polarized audiences with its unapologetic critique of the colour line politics of suburban, White, America via a wise beyond his years child-protagonist. *The Boondocks* has taken comics strips in a decidedly different direction by tackling race relations, White privilege, and the war in Iraq. As significant is how the researchers locate an audience of African-American readers through postings found on the Internet bulletin board maintained for the comic strip. This methodology is not without its questions in terms of verifying subjects' identity claims, and the writers acknowledge this. The piece illustrates the potential of the Internet for working with minority audiences when restrictions of space, place, and time might otherwise limit

such research. While there are downfalls to studying reception in this way, (for example, verifying subjects' identities), this only further heightens the work's postmodern sensibility by highlighting identity as evolving, unfixed, and constituted by our participation in live and mediated discourses.

Also notable are chapters seven and eleven. The former is a study by Fisherkeller on the pedagogical function of media in providing a positive identity for one African-American male as he transitions from preteen to adult. I say pedagogical in the sense that some believe that media can provide us instruction in how to live a successful life or, in the case of the latter chapter, provide designs for living where other sources are unavailable. Means Coleman's chapter concludes the book with a selection from her latest manuscript on three convicted murderers' engagement with the media. The chapter reveals how news media simplified what her research efforts prove to be a complicated identity lived in the context of images of African-American masculinity. She is to be commended for the scope of the project and her persistence to work with imprisoned subjects in spite of the barriers posed by the penal system. The pieces, rooted in archival and ethnographic methods, show how the perspective brought by age and life experience allows African-Americans to continually renegotiate their relationships with media.

Having previously reviewed Means Coleman's work (Alley-Young, 2004) I am struck by her desire to privilege the voice of the subject and this is true here as well. This book, aimed at academics in mass communications, cultural studies, and African-American/Canadian studies accomplishes its goal to break from media research traditions that would speak for marginalized audiences. In the process this book deconstructs essentialist views of African-American identity and the contributors urge readers to revisit assumptions about media texts and their relationship to African-American life experiences. That Means Coleman concludes the book with an excerpt of her study of reception of the media amongst convicted murderers only fuels anticipation that she will carry this subject into exciting and contested terrain as she continues to give her subjects a voice.

References

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Gordon Alley-Young
CUNY Kingsborough Community College