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Editorial: Race and TV in Europe. An Overdue Conversation

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EDITORIAL: RACE AND TV IN EUROPE

AN OVERDUE CONVERSATION

Michaela Coel won the 2021 Emmy award in the category Outstanding Writing for a Limited or Anthology Series or Movie for her autobiographical drama *I May Destroy You* (BBC One and HBO, 2020). There were several different triumphs wrapped into the event, in addition to what made the most headlines the next day: Coel's short but sincere acceptance speech encouraging writers to disappear with themselves rather than seek visibility in obsessive comparison with others. If the speech alone broadcast a message that reached far beyond the solipsistic, self-congratulatory circuit of Hollywood's annual TV award show audience, it was amplified by Coel's entire persona as a Black, British writer-showrunner-actor-producer. A young woman who grew up in East London in a Ghanaian immigrant family headed by a single mother, Coel came to sweep the global entertainment world with a show she executive-produced, and to which she refused to give up her IP following a fallout with Netflix and the Creative Artists Agency (CAA) over the rights to her previous show, *Chewing Gum* (2015-2017). A triumph for women, for people of colour, for survivors of sexual assault and, equally important for our project here, for European artists in a globalized television industry. Coel and her show *I May Destroy You* light up all of these crossing avenues of visibility that have rapidly been gaining prominence in the past 5-10 years. Award shows, in particular, have been under scrutiny to demonstrate how the entertainment industry has been responding to widespread social and political mobilization for social justice in the wake of the #metoo and Black Lives Matter movements.

Coel's achievement is undoubtedly something to be celebrated. But it also forces into conversation some rather thorny questions about race and television in Europe. The first one of these is why questions related to race have been so scarcely raised during the nearly century-long history of the medium in Europe in the first place. Here we need to bracket Britain somewhat, where a shared language and cultural roots have sustained a robust industrial and economic exchange between the US and the UK, where public broadcasting coexisted with commercial television from early on, and where the study of television has also evolved in synchrony with other Anglophone environments. However, while the BBC provided a model for the public TV broadcasters that were launched in postwar Western Europe as well as for the state-controlled television systems east of the Iron Curtain, both the serious study of television as a medium and the deployment of race as an analytical and representational category have remained almost entirely absent outside of the UK. This seems like a stunning omission given TV's capacity to provide usable national histories, to shape categories of otherness and belonging, and to neutralize or subvert ideologies as a liaison and translator between public, institutional narratives and private, affective environments. This is true today but was even more true for European television during its era of nation-based, broadcasting monopolies.

We have a dual goal for this special issue on race and European television: to break the silence and begin to describe, both retroactively and with a look to the future, television's specific roles in visualizing, naturalizing, subverting and silencing race in Europe; and to account for the enduring reluctance to do this work in the first place. Given the task, we are not likely to get far beyond some foundational gestures and demonstrations. We use 'gesture' intentionally because, for the most part, even the vocabulary is missing to begin to talk about race and television in conjunction – curious for a continent whose countries justified centuries of brutal colonization, subjugation, exploitation and mass murder by inventing hierarchies based in biological racism.

We suspect that the difficulty of verbalizing race and racism during much of postwar Europe's history and the resistance to taking TV studies seriously have converging reasons: television has been primarily mobilized to uphold the values of traditionally hegemonic groups within nations. Public TV's remit of educating and entertaining the national public was thus implied to produce aspirational, whitewashed versions of their nation's, and continent's, histories. In postwar Western Europe, this involved the normalization of what Laura Stoler calls "colonial aphasia": a notion that supplants colonial amnesia, or motivated forgetting, to foreground the occlusion of knowledge about colonialism and race by refusing to generate vocabulary to name it.¹ What follows is that it is imperative to understand how public service television, from its driest and most directly educational to its most immersive and emotional modes, was also instrumentalized in sustaining "white innocence."² The term "white innocence" was popularized by Gloria Wekker in her book of the same title, and has been echoed in similar expressions such as Charles Mills' "white ignorance"³ and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's "colour blindness."⁴ If television has functioned as an instrument of white innocence and colour blindness, we also need to ask how it may have prepared the post-Wall disintegration of the European idea(l) of an economic and cultural union among the regions into a continent of many divides, among national and European interests, between east and west, between core and periphery, and between progressive-planetary and populist-nativist forces.

Given the current state of Europe at war with itself and its pasts, with white nationalism, racism, fascism and xenophobia openly and often unapologetically asserting themselves on the news, at the borders, even at friendly football games, it is no surprise that we have recently seen an outpouring of journalistic and academic writing finally naming and diagnosing Europe's race problem. Legal analyses have pointed out the erasure of "race" from judicial vocabulary, most notoriously in post-World War II Germany, which has effectively allowed race and racism to flourish invisibly within the law and policing.⁵ Race has been replaced by other categories, most often nationality and ethnicity, sometimes religion. This is true even in Britain, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Portugal, and Italy – European countries with high populations of people of colour who descend from former colonies or are refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. Europe's racial amnesia and even nostalgia about its own imperial history has been enabled by the fact that, unlike in the US, much of colonialism, racism, segregation and slavery took place elsewhere, as did much of the repression of anti-colonial resistance.

Both racial aphasia and willful academic ignorance about television tend to take on a more intense register in the eastern and southern part of the European Union and its peripheries, in the successor countries of the former state socialist world. Here, the widespread assumption that relative racial homogeneity and the absence of participation in European colonial ventures inoculates against racism and white guilt has been exploited by illiberal governments to build their legitimacy on overtly white nationalist and even fascist propositions. It is tempting to conclude, as many observers in the West have, that Eastern Europeans are simply more racist and ignorant than their more enlightened Western brethren. Thankfully, recent work on race and coloniality in the east of Europe has begun to nuance and historicize this – structurally racist – idea as well.⁶ What emerges from this work is the history of a mutually reinforcing, shall we say, co-dependent, relationship between the two parts of Europe, which pivots around the mostly unspoken but all the more powerfully operative concept of race. Race, or, rather, the idea of "innocent" whiteness, has been long deployed as a solid platform on which to stabilize permanently unfixed Eastern and Southern European national identities in a regional relationship to Western Europe that has been characterized as colonial, semi-peripheral and (self-)orientalizing. This relationship hinges on mutual projections between East and West, manifest in a variety of narratives that have sustained schizophrenic national self-definitions in the eastern regions. Consider the mere number of seminal books and other writing that have used "invention," "imagination" and "mythology" in their titles to reference Eastern Europe's historical formation.⁷ It is this permanent contingency and dependency, enjoying the full benefits of whiteness but unburdened by Western white guilt, that allows present-day populist, ultra-nationalist parties in the region to traverse the playground of white fantasy: to be Christian Europeans and Eurasian nomads at once, protectors of Europe's borders but also superior to the core of Europe by virtue of their tough stand on national autonomy and self-protection.

In turn, Western European economies have been both eager to harness longstanding eastern economic dependency and outsource fantasies of white innocence to the east within the radically uneven playing field of the European Union.

In this way, the Eastern and Southern European region has played and continues to play an active and central role in the global sanitization of racial capitalism. This role encompasses economy and culture as mutually reinforcing spheres where Eastern and Southern Europe have figured as a place of semi-peripheral in-betweenness between East and West, between colonizer and colonized; a shifting non-place available for cultural projection and economic extraction. Rather than something invisible, let alone irrelevant, race turns out to be the glue to Europe's postcolonial fantasy of itself and also the key to unraveling this fantasy across economy, culture and politics. However, uncovering the hidden role of race has so far bypassed television and media studies as a whole.

It doesn't take much persuasion to see TV's, particularly fictional programs', central role in fixing unstable collective identities through providing mythologies and fantasy narratives. Television is a large part of the cultural archive that, as Wekker puts it, "is located in many things, in the way we think, do things, and look at the world, in what we find (sexually) attractive, in how our affective and rational economies are organized and intertwined. Most important, it is between our ears and in our hearts and souls."⁸ Television can play an especially effective role in incubating (rather than inoculating against) racism by virtue of its seemingly innocuous, uncontested messages. Analyzing these may help start creating tools and vocabulary for denaturalizing and naming racism.

1 Europe's Racial Television Histories

"Europe" names a continent but it also gestures towards shifting notions of culture. Unlike Britain or the U.S., which are nation-states, reflections on European TV require differentiations depending on both the specific nation-state and its changing relationship to the institutions of television. Considerations of race in European TV thus require a level of specificity depending on the particular histories of the place of race both in that nation's own discourses on identity and history, and its relation to television.

For example, in the case of Britain, political processes of multiculturalism in relation to the "public" are markedly different from the French republican emphasis on equality and a concomitant unease with addressing issues of racial difference. In Britain, the effects of colonialism were seen in legal responses such as the British Nationality Act (1948), which led to widespread immigration from the colonies, colouring, as it were, the whiteness of the national imaginary, in the context of increasing racial tensions. Almost three decades later, the "problem" of race was institutionalized in the Commission of Racial Equality (CRE) in 1976, the disbanding of which in 2006 led to the formation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. This, often problematic, engagement with the reality of racism in Britain seeped into mainstream media discussions, including around public service television and its critical academic analyses. These national imaginaries were also replicated within broadcasting systems, also determining what aspects were focused on in the study of television in the humanities and social sciences.

For example, the close connection between television as a "public service" established in Britain with the BBC also meant that the study of TV was framed by a focus on the public sphere.⁹ Black cultural productions in Britain, on the other hand, were increasing with the pioneering work of the Black Audio Film Collective, and films such as Isaac Julien's *Black and White in Colour* (BFI, 1992), a documentary about the history of black people in British television; while publications on the rich history of Black British performers were produced, such as Stephen Bourne's *Black in the British Frame*.¹⁰ Yet, as Bourne himself presciently remarks, his book's factual and historical focus would consign it to something of a theoretical oblivion within critical studies of media.¹¹

The focus on the public, found in both Public Service Broadcasting and in studies of television, also spread to the Scandinavian countries. This is exemplified, for example in Peter Dahlgren's *Television and the Public Sphere* and his explicit acknowledgment of the models and inspiration set by British researchers such as Paddy Scannell.¹² In her review of the PSB model, Trine Syvertsen's observes that "public broadcasting forms of governance may be seen as an attempt to create communication structures that are accountable to neither the market nor the state but to the

public at large.”¹³ The focus on obligations to the public, privileges for the broadcasters, and control mechanisms would have implied asking what kinds of obligations accrue towards which specific notion of the public. It would have also meant asking what role racial difference played in the national histories which conditioned these PSB institutions. The (sometimes) critical engagement with Jürgen Habermas’ concept of the “public sphere” did not ignore questions of cultural difference *within* the catch-all notion of “the public.” For example, a few pages are devoted to gender and feminist engagements with Habermas in Dahlgren’s book. But a full-fledged engagement with how racial difference structured society and destabilized homogenous notions of the public has still not occurred.

Obviously, a meticulous and comprehensive survey of all European nations and their TV institutions is beyond the remit of this Introduction; however, the brief examples above sketch at least a part of the reason why the relation between race and European TV did not acquire the kind of substantive research and institutional role that would compare to research in the U.S., such as Herman Gray’s *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (1995) now republished in 2004 with a new introduction, and his *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (2005) and bell hooks’ *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, also republished with a new introduction in 2015.¹⁴ In roughly the last two decades, however, in the British context at least, increasing attention has been paid to the relation of race to television, including Sarita Malik’s analyses of race and public service television (2001, 2008, 2013), Francesca Sobande’s feminist analyses of race on television (2019, 2020), and Anamik Saha’s forceful arguments for adding racial studies of industrial production to studies of representation.¹⁵

Even though public broadcasting also provided the blueprint for socialist televisions, these functioned within a much more restricted understanding of the “public sphere” and civil society. We now have some valuable accounts of the negotiations between party authorities, broadcasting institutions and audiences within the different socialist European countries, which reveal a surprising amount of freedom in some cases but also a great deal of variety within the region.¹⁶ However, none of this recent work on socialist television history centers around race.

2 Contributions

Two of the contributions examine race in contemporary fictional TV within the British context. Jeanelle Hope’s essay “Ode to Black British Girls” intervenes in the current debates around diversity in media programming in the U.K. Through a close textual analysis of Michaela Coel’s sitcom *Chewing Gum* (2015-2017) and its aesthetic experiments, Hope shows how a form of “Black girl surrealism” reimagines Afrosurrealism to construct an innovative televisual form for visualizing Black British womanhood. The sitcom, Hope argues, engages with different historical strands of Black British feminism by deploying and transforming discourses around sexuality, political blackness and misogynoir. Her analysis of this new form of irreverent, interventionary and politically defiant representation of black women’s sexuality is situated within the broader media context of the specific British media landscape, especially around issues such as “colourblind casting” and the need for greater diversity in the media industries. In their essay, Júlia Havas, Anna Mártonfi and Gábor Gergely shift the focus onto contemporary prestige BBC dramatic series that feature Eastern European characters. Their case studies, vampire horror *Dracula* (BBC1, 2020), period medical drama *Call the Midwife* (BBC1, 2012-), and crime thriller *Killing Eve* (BBC America, 2018-), have been universally celebrated for their complex narratives and progressive politics. At the same time, their consistent association of Eastern Europe with bodily contagion, geographic invasion, parasitism, backwardness, deviance, and savagery replicate the very ideas that have been circulated to whip up xenophobia and racism towards Eastern and Southern Europeans in Brexit-era Britain.

Three contributions highlight how race as a category moves, adapts, and is visualized in reality formats that travel across different national environments. Aitaki and Carlsson's analysis of the Swedish reality format *Bonde Söker Fru – Jordan Runt* [*Farmer Seeks A Wife - Around the World*] (TV4, 2019-2020) breaks down the racialized tropes through which the "World" in the show's title is fleshed out through particular framings of Swedish North-to-South emigrants. As the authors argue, the Swedish participants on the show embody "white mobility" in three distinct figurations: the tourist, the adventurer and the philanthropist. Across all three, migration comes across as a self-fulfilling adventure, a practice of easy, privileged mobility embodied by an "essential Swedish whiteness" thriving against exoticized locales in Spain, Mozambique and Australia.

Catherine Baker examines the Croatian edition of the Dutch (Endemol) reality format *Your Face Sounds Familiar*, where contestants impersonate popular musicians, often through cross-gender and at times cross-racial drag. The appearance of blackface on the Croatian version, *Tvoje lice zvuči poznato* (2014-) has recently become controversial. Baker takes us into the complexities of these representations. She points out the limits of critical race theory in assessing cases where global popular culture originating from Western centres confronts radically different local articulations of race and racism embedded in national and regional histories.

In a similar vein, Martin Yoanis Marinos asks how race and racism are visualized in the Bulgarian documentary reality show *Nichia Zemja* [*No Man's Land*]. In particular, Marinos combs through the program's episodes to detect patterns in its depiction of the Roma minority. Marinos concludes that the longstanding designation of the Roma an 'ethnic' minority in Bulgaria – and in all of Europe – has allowed blatantly racist attitudes to flourish, as confirmed in the tropes that the show assigns to Roma subjects: criminality, backwardness and a demographic threat. Marinos's analysis cautions that these tropes flourish under the cruel conditions of postsocialist neoliberal competition, and (reality) television can be particularly effective at scapegoating an already demonized racial minority.

Finally, Andrea Meuzelaar conducts an archival analysis of the images of Turkish and Moroccan labour migrants in the Dutch television archive of *Sound and Vision* from the 1960s to the 2010s to track the changing modes through which they have been racialized over time. She identifies four discursive parameters through which racialization is given form: the guest worker, the ethnic minority, the *allochtoon*, and the 'dangerous Muslim.' The essay also insists on the performative dimension of archival practices that code images of Muslim immigrants, racializing them through a combination of words and images that shift the frames around which they are represented in Dutch television.

Armin Langer looks at the career of infamous Israeli-born German comedian Shahak Shapira, whose humorous talk show on ZDF drew up uncomfortable comparisons between the Nazi concentration camps and contemporary, antisemitic far-right movements in Germany. While Shapira's show proved to be too edgy for public TV, it did successfully disrupt official narratives about the Holocaust. The two essays in the 'Discovery' section both revolve around the continued processing of the Holocaust on German TV. Sue Vice explores the gendered dimensions of racialization in Claude Lanzmann's television documentary *Four Sisters* (2017) by focusing on the transition from the cinematic dimensions of *Shoah* to its framing in television. Vice's in-depth reading of Lanzmann's interviews with four women survivors reveals how "expulsion, segregation and enslavement, exertion of control over reproduction as well as over life itself" is constructed through specific aesthetic considerations pertinent to television in comparison to film, such as the absence of panoramic landscape shots. Vice argues that both the focus on women in the documentary and the engagement with TV as a 'feminised medium' are reclaimed in *Four Sisters*, thus correcting an aspect of Lanzmann's oeuvre that has been sidelined till now.

As we stated at the beginning, these contributions are all broaching a new subject, finding, borrowing and adapting the very vocabulary and methods along the way. Our hope is that this issue will provide the impetus and inspiration for more queries and avenues that take the issues posed by our contributors into the study of television history and industry.

Notes

1. Laura Stoler, "Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France," *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (2011): 121-156.
2. Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
3. Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 13-38.
4. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Racism without Racists: 'Killing me Softly' with Color Blindness," in *Reinventing Critical Pedagogy: Widening the Circle of Anti-oppression Education*, eds. César Augusto Rossatto, Tickie Lee Alleen and Marc Pruyn (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 21-34.
5. Eddie Bruce-Jones, "Black Lives and German Exceptionalism," *VerfBlog*, July 23, 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/black-lives-and-german-exceptionalism/>. See also Mathias Möschel, "Color Blindness or Total Blindness? The Absence of Critical Race Theory in Europe," *Rutgers Race and the Law Review* 9, no. 1 (2007): 57-128.
6. For just a few representative titles from what is now a substantial body of work, see Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Dušan Bjelić, "Toward a Genealogy of the Balkan Discourses on Race," *interventions* 20, no. 6 (2018): 906-929; Manuela Boatcă, "No Race to the Swift: Negotiating Racial Identity in Past and Present Eastern Europe," *Human Architecture: Journal of Sociology of Self-Knowledge* V, no. 1 (2006): 91-104; Aniko Imre, "Whiteness in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe: The Time of the Gypsies, the End of Race," in *Postcolonial Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, ed. Alfred López (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Angéla Kóczé, "Transgressing Borders: Challenging Racist and Sexist Epistemology," in *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*, eds. Sam Beck and Ana Ivasiuc (New York: Berghahn, 2018); Matthias Moschel, *Laws, Lawyers, and Race: Critical Race Theory from the United States to Europe* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014); Anca Parvulescu, "European Racial Triangulation," in *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe: Contexts, Practices and Politics*, eds. Sandra Ponzanesi and Gianmaria Colpani (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016); Sunnie Rucker-Chang, "African-American and Romani Filmic Representation and the 'Posts' of Post-Civil Rights and Post-EU Expansion," *Critical Romani Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018); Marius Turda, ed., *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900-1945: Sources and Commentaries* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).
7. Vesna Goldsworthy Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Mariiā Nikolaeva Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Barnor Hesse, "Racialized Modernity: An Analytics of White Mythologies," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 4 (2007): 643-663.
8. Wekker, *White Innocence*, 19.
9. See for example, Paddy Scannell, "Public Service Broadcasting and Modern Public Life," *Media, Culture and Society* 11, no. 2 (1989): 135-166.
10. Stephen Bourne, *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television* (London & New York: Continuum, 2001).
11. Bourne observes "There is a wall of silence around the history of our nation's black people. And, I'm sorry to say, the academic world plays a role in keeping this history secret. For instance, *Black in the British Frame* is not a theoretical study, and because of this, it will be attacked or ignored by film and television theorists" (xiv).
12. Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media* (London: SAGE, 1995).
13. Trine Syvertsen, "Challenges to Public Television in the Era of Convergence and Commercialization," *Television and New Media* 4, no. 2 (2003): 158.
14. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) and *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Also bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2014).
15. Anamik Saha, *Race and the Media Industries* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018).
16. For a detailed summary of scholarship on Eastern European television, see Anikó Imre, "Eastern European Television," *Oxford Bibliographies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).