
BOOK REVIEW

***Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture*, by Erica Chito Childs. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009, 250 pages, \$75.00 Cloth, \$27.95 Paper. ISBN: 9780742560802.**

KASEY HENRICKS
Loyola University Chicago

Abstract: In *Fade to Black and White*, Erica Chito Childs (2009) builds upon previous work to demonstrate how interracial representations are problematized in popular culture media. Childs identifies numerous areas in which popular culture media can reinforce the racial status quo of inequality, and thus this book serves as a preliminary step toward future solution-driven research. Through her tri-framed theoretical argument, Childs contends that interracial representations in popular culture media meet one or more of the following criteria: 1) presents interracial relationships as deviant; 2) protects, defends, privileges, and empowers whiteness; and 3) perpetuates racist attitudes and practices while simultaneously denying, in colorblind fashion, whether race matters. Despite the book's shortcomings, which include methodological limitations in terms of sample selection and the exclusion of the audience from analysis, *Fade to Black and White* is a significant addition to the sociology of race. The author clearly demonstrates how interracial representations are problematized, and readers will be exposed to a critical perspective of popular culture media and the images and discourses they create.

Kasey Henricks is a Ph.D. student at Loyola University Chicago. His research interests lie in critical race studies and social inequality. Currently, he is working on several projects. The first includes an investigation of the Illinois Lottery and its role in reproducing racial inequality through education finance. The second includes an analysis of *racetalk* and how it fluidly changes according to social context and group composition. Contact can be directed to him at khenricks@luc.edu.

* Kasey Henricks is a graduate student at Loyola University Chicago, and correspondence can be directed to khenricks@luc.edu.

In *Fade to Black and White*, Erica Chito Childs (2009) builds upon previous work to critically address how interracial intimacies are represented in popular culture media. Childs identifies numerous areas in which popular culture media can reinforce the racial status quo of inequality, and thus this book serves as a preliminary step toward solution-driven research that “changes the channel.” In many ways, *Fade to Black and White* is a significant addition to the sociology of race. Childs demonstrates how popular culture media problematizes interracial representations by shifting critical focus to ideas that construct interracial couples and the processes by which such representations have been created. Despite its usefulness, however, this book is not without flaw. Kerry Ann Rockquemore (2006) critiques earlier work of Childs as being “overly concise on methodology” and “[generalizing] clearly nonrepresentative data” (p. 535). These same limitations are present in *Fade to Black and White*, particularly as it concerns sample selection and excluding the audience from analysis. These limitations are discussed in more detail below, but first a brief summary of the book is provided.

Drawing from an eclectic blend of theory including symbolic interactionism, intersectionality, and critical race theory, Childs (2009) offers a rich analysis in which she contends that interracial images and discourses in popular culture 1) present such relationships as deviant; 2) protect, defend, privilege, and empower whiteness; and 3) perpetuate racist attitudes and practices while simultaneously denying, in colorblind fashion, whether race matters. Childs argues that this work is highly important because popular culture media allows viewers to “experience how interracial couples are understood and represented” and “examin[e] the contemporary discourses and worldviews on the issues of race” (p. 11). Products of media, though not real in any natural sense, can have real consequences as consumers partake in interracial exchanges without being active participants. Considering that social and spatial isolation remains highly significant in distancing racial

groups, particularly those who are white (Bonilla-Silva 2006), these interracial representations may be the only interracial contact some people have. If these representations defend the racial status quo, then they deserve further examination due to the possibility that individuals may respond to imagined and often distorted information as if it were real and accurate (Gallagher 2003). In this sense, Childs demonstrates that popular culture media can whitewash race relations by constructing interracial relationships as problematic, portraying white as good and black as bad, while simultaneously perpetuating and denying racism. While *Fade to Black and White* presents a theoretical argument that is highly sophisticated and fully developed, it has some methodological problems that detract from the book's overall contribution to the literature.

Childs does not provide sufficient detail describing the sampling process by which media were selected for analysis and why. Instead, she arbitrarily chooses to study television shows created after 1995 and films created during or after the 1990s were selected, and the reason for this cut-off was not explained. Of the television shows and films in this era, Childs examines only a select number on the basis of high profile and mass marketing statuses. Readers are left not knowing why these years were chosen as "cut off" points, nor do readers know exactly how high profile and mass marketing statuses were measured was also unexplained. This lack of transparency in a nonrepresentative sample is problematic because a critique of selective inclusion can more readily be applied. Selective inclusion refers to the biased process by which a researcher may decide what data are or are not relevant, or may include or exclude certain data in order to support the conclusions they had hoped to reach. Selective inclusion can result in nonrepresentative samples, leading to data that cannot be applied to the population as a whole. Such criticism could have been avoided had Childs simply explained the sampling process or justified the selected case studies as having broader theoretical applicability. The lack of transparency in terms of the methodology may cause readers to unnecessarily discount Childs' overall analysis. However, considering that interracial relationships

are strongly underrepresented in media outlets, the sheer number of case studies Childs presents seems to be an exhaustive analysis. Readers are likely to be hard-pressed to find examples that remain unaddressed or that cannot be explained by the author's theoretical argument.

Childs meticulously analyzes media and gives significant attention to its producers, but the audience remains absent from her analysis. In other words, Childs does not examine how interracial images and discourses are received and interpreted. This is problematic, as Stuart Hall (1981) argues, because audiences have agency and do not automatically assume passive roles, uncritically accepting whatever is projected onto them. Even Childs acknowledges this as she writes, "the viewer can accept or reject the dominant ideology that is produced" (p. 4). Despite this acknowledgement, the author places narrow empirical focus on interracial representations and their creators. Omission of the audience from empirical analysis ultimately undermines Childs' generalized conclusion that interracial images in popular culture maintain the status quo and reproduce racial inequality. Such a claim remains empirically unsubstantiated without demonstrating how audiences receive and respond to such interracial representations.

Despite the methodological shortcomings, I highly recommend *Fade to Black and White* as a must-read. Through her rich analysis, Childs demonstrates how popular culture media problematizes interracial representations and discusses what implications this has for contemporary and future race relations. This book is accessible and engaging, and readers will be exposed to a critical perspective of popular culture media and the interracial representations they create. Hopefully, these readers will agree with Childs that it's time to change the channel.

REFERENCES

- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2006. *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in*

- the United States*. 2nd ed. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Gallagher, Charles A. 2003. "Miscounting Race: Explaining Whites' Misperceptions of Racial Group Size." *Sociological Perspectives* 46(3):381-396.
- Hall, Stuart. 1981. "The Whites in Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media." Pp. 89-93 in *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties*, edited by G. Bridges and R. Brunt. London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd.
- Rockquemore, Kerry Ann. 2006. "Review of *Navigating Interracial Borders: Black-White Couples and Their Social Worlds* by Erica Chito Childs." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69(3):534-535.