

Book Review

Han, B. M. (2020). *Beyond the Black and White TV: Asian and Latin American Spectacle in Cold War America*. Rutgers University Press.

Wonjung Min^{ORCID}

Seoul National University
Asia Center-Center for
Hallyu Studies, Seoul
National University,
Republic of Korea; Pontificia
Universidad Católica de
Chile, Chile

Corresponding to Wonjung Min

Seoul National University
Asia Center, #101 SNUAC,
1 Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu,
Seoul 08826, Republic of
Korea
Email: wjhelena@snu.ac.kr

Received

24 June 2022

Accepted

18 July 2022

This book examines how an “ethnic spectacle”—in the form of Asian and Latin American bodies—played a significant role in the cultural Cold War at three historic junctures: the Korean War in 1950, the Cuban Revolution in 1959, and the statehood of Hawaii in 1959. The book reminds readers that these three relatively “minor” Cold War geographies were central to the expansion of U.S. hegemony as well as the locations for ideological and cultural battles between the United States and the Soviet Union through the transnational passage of ethnic talent from Asia-Pacific and Latin America onto U.S. television. In this way, the race card was deployed as a significant political asset for American internationalism. Further, this book emphasizes in particular how “the migration of ethnic talent—particularly Asians, Latin Americans, and Pacific Islanders—to U.S. television contributed to discourses about race and nation” (p. 10).

This is the first book to include “three seemingly disparate yet interconnected Cold War events” (p. 9) that occurred where Communism and Cold War politics intertwined. As the author states, “the peninsula of Korea and the islands of Cuba and Hawaii appear to be geopolitically and culturally disconnected from each other” (p. 9). However, he finds there to be less connection between these three non-adjacent territories in the sense that Korea, Cuba, and Hawaii all experienced significant economic development via tourism in the 1950s.

The author links these three events to the “ethnic spectacle” in a sophisticated way and acknowledges the important contribution to the U.S. nightclub scene of the examined ethnic performers “despite [their] marginal status” (p. 44), as well as “the false representation of reality promoted through the mass dissemination of images” (Lardner, 1958, p. 55). The book examines three central questions: (1) How do we understand the growing display of ethnic performances in

U.S. nightclubs and on television during the Cold War? (2) How did commercial television portray U.S. Cold War politics? and (3) How did the variety show shape interactions among geopolitics, popular music, and the ethnic spectacle? To answer these questions, the author focuses on the broadcast of variety shows on U.S. television during the Cold War and, attempts to prove how music became a “cultural lens to our understanding of Cold War politics” (p. 7). The author argues that “television as mass media and an embodiment of capitalist logics mediated representations of ethnic spectacle to project a false reality of U.S. race relations in an effort to battle Communism at the crux of the cultural Cold War” (p. 7). Thus, *Beyond the Black and White TV* aims to critically examine “internationalism and racial politics as by-products of the U.S. cultural war and geopolitics” (p. 8).

Each of the book’s four chapters seeks to show “how the triangulation among Cold War geopolitics, globalism, and U.S. racial logics informed the variety show as an early iteration of global television” (p. 19). Chapter 1 studies Las Vegas as a destination site for television entertainers. Chapter 2 examines the performances of Asians performers in variety shows, focusing on The Kim Sisters as a means to examine the trans-Pacific exchange of talent between the United States and Korea. Chapter 3 surveys the growing display of Latin American performances on U.S. commercial television between 1950 and 1970 despite the conclusion of the Good Neighbor Policy in 1947. Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on Hawaii as a newly emerging space of Cold War geopolitics after the Cuban Revolution.

The common theme throughout each chapter is the television productions featuring Asians and Latin Americans, who were treated as unfamiliar and ambiguous races, whose sole purpose was to contribute to the image-making of the United States. Las Vegas evolved into an essential

geopolitical space in which mythical narratives of racial harmony manifested in Cold War, racial logics would enhance U.S. internationalism and a key entertainment supplier to the United Service Organization (USO), as it “organized recreation and resident centers” (Tucker, 2000, p. 229) across the country. The American audience witnessed “a new cultural image of the city inscribed in racial harmony and solidarity” (p. 24) through the medium of television. Las Vegas was often compared with “Oriental Fantasy” at Frank Sennes’ Moulin Rouge in Hollywood (p. 29). In Chapter 1, the author takes *Julia* as an example, demonstrating how the show constructed Las Vegas “as a racially diverse and integrated city that was representative of the United States as a nation” (p. 37). The U.S. government made efforts to use Las Vegas “to disseminate a particular understanding of the nation rooted in democracy, modernization, and racial equality during the cultural Cold War” (p. 38). While Las Vegas producers placed race at the center of their television programs, “the desert continued to be a trope used in constructing the national image of Las Vegas in the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 38). The author points out that during the Cold War, a rush of showcasing performers came in from the Asia-Pacific and Latin America to Las Vegas, helping fuel “the American geopolitical imagination via the interaction between television and ethnic spectacle. However, the ethnic origins of Latin American performers were still often mentioned, “highlighting their foreignness and cementing their status as perpetual aliens and racialized figures” (p. 40).

In Chapter 2, the author uses The Kim Sisters to illustrate the narrative of exchange surrounding the borrowing of Orientalism from the 1950s to the 1970s, which historian Trina Robbins (2010) characterized as the “Silver Age of Chinese nightclubs” (p. 43). The Kim Sisters was a female trio from South Korea who played an instrumental role “in uplifting the popular variety show into a televisual spectacle of U.S. cultural

internationalism when U.S. militarism converged with Cold War racial and sexual politics” (pp. 42–43). The group made their presence felt on the *Ed Sullivan Show* as a “race card.” As the author states, “the circulation of a wide range of popular American music across the globe, including rock 'n' roll and jazz, was a way to claim American hegemony” (p. 49). Ethnic entertainers such as The Kim Sisters’ cultural appropriations of popular music underlined America’s cultural power and dominance, as they performed songs that were familiar and easily recognizable by the U.S. audience. The author pays attention to the fact that “the use of code-switching during the musical performance highlights cross-cultural dialogue among three people from different nations and underscores the rhetoric of exchange as an essential narrative informing the performances of Asians in the variety show” (p. 55). He states that “The Kim Sisters’ reception in the American press points to how television framed them within the dominant structures of American Orientalism as both racialized and sexualized subjects to meet the demands of the white American audience” (p. 66). While “The Kim Sisters conformed to the Orientalist codes and exploited and Japonisme boom when they performed the Japanese song ‘Shina no yoru’ (China night) with Asian parasols” (p. 67), they “had to participate in the act of self-Orientalism in order to reach stardom and as a means to assert their agency” (p. 68).

Korea and Cuba are strangely connected. During the Korean War (1950–1953), sugar prices suddenly increased due to the growing demand across the world and it helped Cuba sustain its economy. If the author defines the appearance of Asians on U.S. television after the Korean War as a narrative of exchange, in Chapter 3 he describes Latino entertainers and the Cuban Revolution as a narrative of partnership. The author again discusses how the U. S. government actively sought to construct and disseminate a new national image across the globe based on

America’s rhetoric of freedom, democracy, and capitalism since the conclusion of World War II. The author examines *Viva America*, the network’s most popular music program at that time, which “showcased local Latin American talent, underscoring the program’s fidelity to cultural authenticity” (p. 78). The appearance of Latin Americans was strongly interconnected with the U.S. Good Neighbor policy at the time. The U.S. government constantly backed up to promote Latin American music after the Good Neighbor era, “when the music division at the Pan American Union took the first steps to acquire monographs on the history of music in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico” (Kim, 2000, p. 6). Latin America emerged as an important geopolitical site of the Cold War, and, after the Cuban Revolution, the United States saw Mexico as “a political ally that could help them in their fight against Communism” (pp. 96–97).

However, in the wake of the growing influence of Communism in Latin America, tourism was redirected from Cuba to the Hawaiian Islands in the North Pacific Ocean. In Chapter 4, the author explains that Hawaii became the center of national attention because it was granted statehood and that “Cuba was undergoing a significant political change as a result of the revolution in 1959” (p. 105). The representation of Hawaii in U.S. commercial entertainment programming, and especially in variety shows, unveiled the islands “as the new gateway of transpacific exchange, where the East and the West would coexist harmoniously” (p. 107). The narrative of Hawaiian racial exceptionalism, manifested in the Hawaiian spectacle, represented “how East meets West at the crossroads of the world [...] in Hawaii” and was an example of “the old blending with the new” (“TV shut-off,” p. 26). The nationality-constructed rhetoric about how the United States embraced racial diversity as a means to “suppress Communism was also subject to severe criticism” (p. 112). However, in the wider political context of Cold War, the use of Hawaiian

performers demonstrated “the significant role that television could play in real estate development by bringing Hawaii to the forefront of national attention” (p. 117). Many Hawaiian performers who became cultural ambassadors and participated in U.S. diplomatic efforts during the Cold War concurred with the popularization of Hawaiian music on the mainland.

Through this book, readers can find that “variety shows promoted tourism of the Asia-Pacific and Latin America, underscoring mobility and ethnic spectacle as key logics of globalism” (p. 12) and used “the travel narrative as a means to produce and circulate geopolitical knowledge amid fluctuating U.S. foreign relations with the Asia-Pacific and Latin America” (p. 12). In this way, “the listener/viewer imagines and experiences the forging of new cultural horizons, further constructing the possibilities of a new transcultural configuration among Asians, Latin Americans, and blacks within the United States” (p. 12).

In *Beyond the Black and White TV* the author has chosen an interdisciplinary approach for the methodological framework. The use of archives, institutional history, textual analysis, oral history, cultural studies, and diplomatic history all play an analytical role that investigates “the interconnections among the U.S. commercial television industry, race, ethnic performances, and Cold War politics” (p. 16). In this way, the author clearly illustrates how “music thus became both a productive and contested space of creative interplay of cultural interventions and interactions” (p. 8). Therefore, music is “an ideologically inflected space used to investigate the different “-isms” significant in Cold War geopolitics: racism, Americanism, Orientalism, sexism, liberalism, internationalism, and globalism” (p. 8).

This book illustrates the process by which various races coexist to construct a state and how television programs are used to form national identity. Each chapter flows naturally and logically; thus, the reader can clearly understand

the connecting points of the three events. After reading this book, one feels that the author has wonderfully turned his own in situ observations and concerns into academic outcomes. Readers tired of examining the Cold War only in the context of international politics will enjoy understanding the conflict through various experiences of racial diversity and ambiguity.

REFERENCES

- Han, B. M. (2020). *Beyond the black and white TV: Asian and Latin American spectacle in cold war America*. Rutgers University Press.
- Kim, J. (2000). *Ends of empire: Asian American critique and the Cold War*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Lardner, J. (1958, July 5). A happy Sullivan day. *The New Yorker*.
- Robbins, T. (2010). *The golden age of Chinese night-clubs: Forbidden city*. Hampton Press.
- Tucker, S. (2000). *Swing shift: “All-Girl” bands of the 1940s*. Duke University Press.
- TV shut-off is seen if war needs to grow. (1950, July 15). *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1950/07/15/archives/tv-shutoff-is-seen-if-war-needs-grow.html>