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Screening Race: Constructions and Reconstructions in Twenty-first Century Media – Editorial

Loretta Goff and Caroline V. Schroeter

Racial minorities have long been excluded, marginalised and misrepresented on the big and the small screen. Often, the representation of ethnic minorities is lacking authenticity and is still characterised by decades-old stereotypes. Our increasingly diverse global society is still not reflected in the shows and films we see on TV or in the cinema. However, the representation of race has changed over the last decade. The shifting global political and societal milieu has contributed to a slow rise and an increased presence of minorities on screen, which has generally been greeted by a wave of enthusiasm. Social concerns such as the accumulation of frustrations and racial tension on an international level, Donald Trump's presidency and the exhausting election campaigns in the US and Europe have characterised 2016–17. In a time of police brutality and resurging white nationalism, new films and TV shows ignite public discussion about race and the role of minority groups in the twenty-first century.

The increased attention to and critical engagement with race and identity on screen and in the media, including a spate of films and miniseries chronicling episodes in American as well as international history from the past centuries, are at the core of a growing public engagement with questions of civil rights and social justice, which—among others—has sparked movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #OscarsSoWhite. With their ability to display iconic images to mass audiences and to be particularly powerful in reimagining history, film and TV are key players in the public conversation about race and identity. Filmmakers and media artists across the world are creating images that have become part of our modern culture and that deeply influence the public understanding of these concepts.

American author, feminist and social activist bell hooks speaks of the "levelling power" of film, its ability to "reach both into the ivory tower and out to the people on the street in a way that few elements in Western culture can" (Sealey 14). Do films like *The Birth of a Nation* (Parker, 2016), *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016), *A United Kingdom* (Asante, 2017), *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), *Loving* (Nichols, 2016), *The Handmaiden* (Chan-wook, 2016), Ava DuVernay's *13th* (2016), *O.J.: Made in America* (Edelman, 2016), *I Am Not Your Negro* (Peck, 2017), *Hidden Figures* (Melfi, 2016), or *Fences* (Washington, 2016) demonstrate this levelling power, or is there a danger of oversimplifying and even misrepresenting highly complex issues like race and identity? Was 2016, as Scott and Dargis claim, a year in which filmmakers "found fresh uses for old techniques and told stories that combined the force of novelty with the shock of

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recognition"? How are media formats and platforms like TV, web series and mobile social media influencing the representation and construction of race and identity today? What do these say about our changing society and the role of the media in it? Do TV series like *Fresh off the Boat* (Khan, 2015–), *Master of None* (Ansari and Yang 2015–), *The Mindy Project* (Kaling, 2012–), *Black-ish* (Barris, 2014–), *Jane the Virgin* (Snyder Urman, 2014–) or *Underground* (Green and Pokaski, 2016–2017) reflect an overarching, global trend of a changing representation and presence of minorities on screen?





Figure 1 (above): The Huang family driving from Washington D.C. to their new home in Florida. *Fresh off the Boat.* ABC 2015–. Figure 2 (below): Eddie Huang (Hudson Yang), the rebellious protagonist, fighting about his culture with a peer at school. *Fresh off the Boat.* ABC 2015–. Screenshots.

ABC's sitcom *Fresh off the Boat*, for example, interrogates the experience of a Taiwanese-American, restaurant-owning family who moved to Florida. The show aims "to reset TV's defaults" (Nussbaum) about Asian-American citizens by focusing on the increased representation of Asian Americans and their perspective on screen. *Black-ish* deals with the racism that African Americans are confronted with daily, regardless of their class or background. Dre Johnson (Anthony Anderson), the protagonist and father of the family, tries to make his upper-middle-class black family aware of racism and aims to increase their consciousness of race. He is worried that his children are too assimilated to white culture and that they are "aren't black enough" (Nussmann), making them forget where they come from—black urban culture. Through interracial as well as intraracial observations (Poniewozik), the show highlights the realities of the "black experience" while at the same time pointing out that there is no such thing as one unified, universal "black experience".



Figure 3: The Johnson family being presented as a "mythical" phenomenon in a white neighbourhood in *Black-ish.* ABC 2014–. Screenshot.

Another series that shows a different perspective on race, identity and history is WGN's *Underground.* The show tells the story of two enslaved, heroic African Americans, Rosalee (Jurnee Smollett-Bell) and Noah (Aldis Hodge), who escape from bondage with the help of Harriet Tubman (Aisha Hinds) and the underground railroad. The story is told almost exclusively from an African-American perspective and centres around the fight for the abolition of slavery.

Underground's versatility in depicting race, identity and rebellion as well as the show's "blend of mythologizing and historicizing … spurs an audience to clamor to know more" (Fieberg).



Figure 4 (above): Female-centric *Underground* portrays nineteenth century women fighting together against slave holders. WGN American 2016–. Figure 5 (below): Black and white Americans fighting together for the abolition of slavery in *Underground.* WGN American 2016–. Publicity stills.

Media representations of race have changed and shaped how we perceive the world around us. The construction and performance of identity on screen influences our individual identity performance as well as societal opinion on particular identities. However, these constructions often come with complications, notably in terms of what tropes are used to represent specific national, racial or ethnic identities, as well as the balancing act of composite identities and hyphenated subjects.

Identity is not something that can easily be pinned down. As such, certain categories, including race and nationality, are used as a way to group people into more specific demographics. These categorisations then become one way of defining identity—based on generalisations and, often, stereotypes of these groups and their behaviours. However, individual and group identity constructions remain subject to ongoing renegotiation, ultimately realised in our various identity performances. Stuart Hall notes that "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (4). Not only does this speak to the need to continuously re-evaluate our identities, it also acknowledges the importance of representation in the construction of them. Therefore, it is vital that we also continue to interrogate how these representations construct different types of identity, problematically or not.

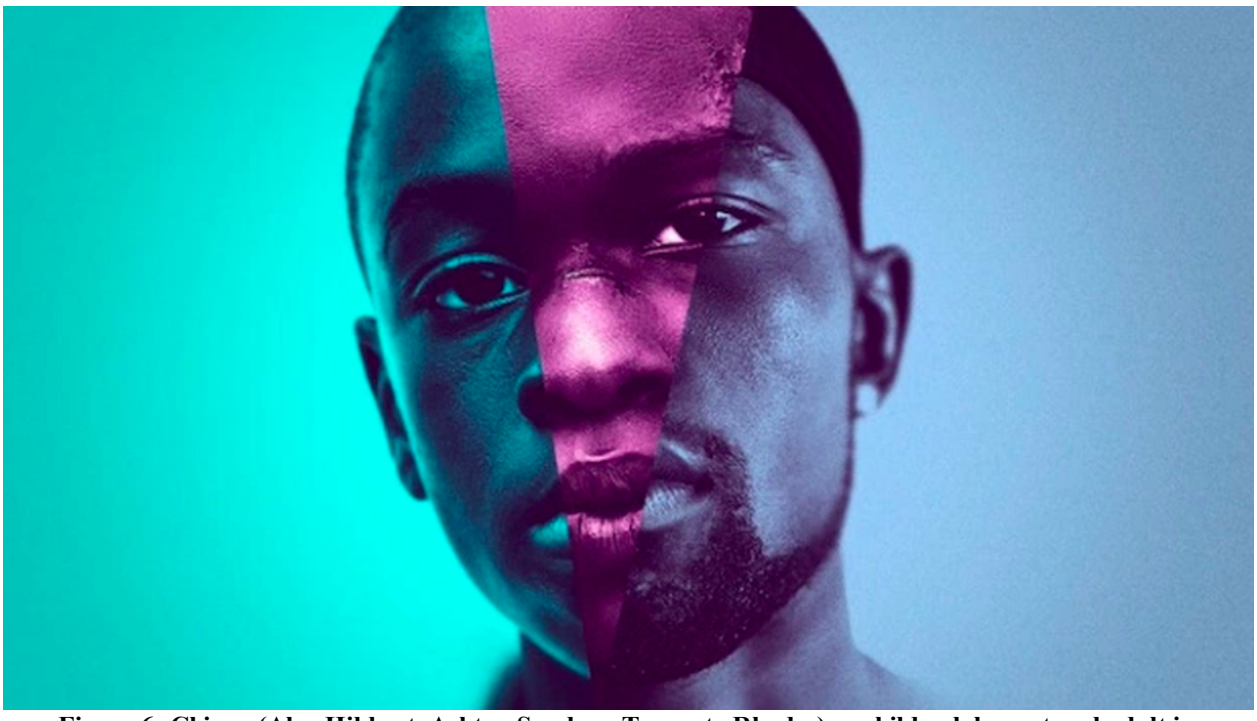


Figure 6: Chiron (Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, Trevante Rhodes) as child, adolescent and adult in *Moonlight*. A24 2016. Publicity Still.

Recently, a number of films and television shows have begun depicting racial identities through new perspectives, including a foregrounding of a character's identity as compared to their performance of such—a look behind the mask. *Moonlight*, which won the 2017 "Best

Picture" Academy Award, intricately follows the life of Chiron (Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, Trevante Rhodes)—jumping from his childhood to teenage years and on to early adulthood—in a rough Miami neighbourhood. Throughout these stages in his life, Chiron struggles with how he performs his identity, both as black and as gay—a group that has faced a lack of representation. At the heart of this film is the identity and humanity that we see behind Chiron's public performances, and a deliberate steering away from stereotype. As a result of this, the film was able to resonate with many and received rave reviews. Perhaps most importantly, however, is that: "*Moonlight* manages to justify (for those who still require it) an increased call for diversity within two hours, as well as to provide a reflective experience for audience members who rarely get to see anything loosely resembling their lives on screen" (Lee).



Figure 7: Issues of minority representation are challenged in *Master of None*. Netflix 2015–. Screenshot.

Master of None, the popular television show created by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang for Netflix, also ensures that a variety of minority voices are heard and highlights the differences between expectations or assumptions and actualities. One episode in particular, "Indians on TV", deconstructs the representation of Indians on screen in the United States, including the use of white actors in Indian roles and the limit to how many Indian actors can participate in one show. Not only are the characters required to audition for acting opportunities with Indian accents rather than their American ones, they face racist categorisations and are often placed in stereotypical roles. This episode is particularly effective in making its point, as one reviewer points out, because "it doesn't set out to finger-wag at easy targets nor preach platitudes to an outraged base. All it does is just depict how difficult it is for minorities to navigate a world that insouciantly marginalizes their existence. Ansari and Yang … set their sights on a capitalist system that facilitates the normalization of social ills" (Murthi). The audition experiences of Dev (Aziz Ansari) and his friend Ravi (Ravi Patel) in this episode, and the contrasts between their identity performance in daily life and those stereotypical ones they are required to perform for roles, challenge assumptions, open a dialogue, and make us aware of both the unreliability of representation and its influence within this capitalist system.

Challenging dominant representations was also key to Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. The writer-director expressed that he wanted to create "a movie that served the black audience, which has never had this type of representation" (Kilday). Indeed, Peele's film overturns various representational tropes by adding horror to the comedy of films such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967) wherein a black partner is introduced to a white family, and by creating a horror film where it is the black character who is the celebrated survivor at the end rather than the white family. Through this reconfiguration of certain genre tropes and his depiction of racism in a purportedly postracial society, Peele created a well-received social horror that resonated with audiences—once again demonstrating the power of representation and importance of perspective and reconstruction.



Figure 8: Race and horror in *Get Out*: Daniel Kaluuya as Chris Washington. Universal Pictures 2017. Screenshot.

In this issue of *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* we bring together eight articles from around the world that interrogate the representation of race, ethnicity and identity on screen. These articles cover film, documentary and television and engage with the challenges of screening race through a number of different methods considering power (im)balances, processes of othering, humour, resistance and authorship. Despite the various international perspectives contained in this issue—and accompanying disparate cultural contexts—the recurring threads of stereotype, misrepresentation and attempts at reconstructing racial identities weave all of these articles together, just as they can our various cultures. Through the analyses of these articles, the necessity of continually questioning and reconstructing representations of race and identity is made evident.

The representation of racial tensions between white Australians and those of Middle-Eastern appearance, boiling over in the 2005 Cronulla riot in Sydney, is central to the opening article, Kenta McGrath's "Riot and Revenge: Symmetry and the Cronulla Riot in Abe Forsythe's

Down Under". McGrath engages with the riot and the revenge acts that followed it, deftly considering how Forsythe's film mirrors this symmetry through a balancing of its narrative, characters and certain formal qualities. However, he proposes that this equivalence also detracts from the film's antiracist intentions because of the imbalances evident in the power dynamic between these two groups in Australian society.

Issues of race and nationality, this time through the "fish out of water" experience, continue to be interrogated in Loretta Goff's article, "'Racism's part of my culture': Nation, Race and Humour in *Irish Jam* (2006) and *The Guard* (2011)". Goff analyses how humour is used to frame and ridicule national, racial and cultural identity constructions in each film's representation of its African-American lead character in Ireland. Considering how these various identities are at times conflated, the use of stereotype and Irish whiteness as a "safer" platform for the discussion of race, Goff argues that, while the different instances of humour in both films act as social correctives for racist behaviour, the films ultimately remain conservative in their approach, tackling some instances of stereotype and racism while allowing others to continue.

Zeynep Koçer and Mustafa Orhan Göztepe consider problematic representations of Kurdish identity in cinema in Turkey prior to the period of the Kurdish Initiative before moving on to a discussion of newer constructions of the minority identity from this time. In their article, "Representing Ethnicity in Cinema during Turkey's Kurdish Initiative: A Critical Analysis of *My Marlon and Brando* (Karabey, 2008), *The Storm* (Öz, 2008) and *Future Lasts Forever* (Alper, 2011)", they make the case that each of their chosen films combats the stereotypes of Kurdishness in mainstream cinema through representation of different aspects of the identity: as transnational, as repressed through discrimination and as modern and urbanised, but with traumatic memory.

Examining the representation of another minority group in "The Fight for Self-representation: Ainu Imaginary, Ethnicity and Assimilation", Marcos P. Centeno Martín similarly discusses problematic constructions of the Ainu in Japan before focusing on the shift in "ownership" of Ainu representation in Tadayoshi Himeda's documentaries. These films, rather than exoticising the Ainu and perpetuating stereotypes for an outside, touristic audience, addressed issues of assimilation and presented the Ainu as a people struggling to recover their traditions and reconstruct their past. Centeno Martín argues that these films reflect the director's desire to remove the notion of otherness that had come to be associated with representations of the Ainu, and that, by allowing the Ainu control over their own image, Himeda was able to reconstruct Ainu iconography and overcome certain obstacles of ethnographic filmmaking.

In "Multicultural Glasgow: Imagining Scotland as a Space of Cultural Intersection in Scots-Asian Films of the 2000s", Emily Torricelli assesses the "Scottishness" of nonwhite Scottish identities on screen. In particular, her article considers *Ae Fond Kiss* (Loach, 2004) and *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (Parmar, 2006) to explore Scottish film and, by discussing the reception of both films, Toricelli brings our attention to the diversity and hybridity of Scottish identity. To her, these films construct the Scottish city of Glasgow as a space of intercultural exchange and show how Scottish citizens originating from all over the world have come to understand national identity in various ways.

Michael Wayne, in "Depicting the Racist Past in a 'Postracial' Age: The White, Male Protagonist in *Hell on Wheels* and *The Knick*", discusses how race and racism are portrayed in *Hell on Wheels* (2011–2016), *Deadwood* and *The Knick* (2014–). He demonstrates how these TV shows promote postracial ideologies by using non–politically correct portrayals of race and racial minorities. Wayne suggests that, by focusing on morally ambiguous white, male protagonists in contexts associated with morally unambiguous racism, these prime-time TV dramas open up a conversation that confronts the issues of interpersonal as well as systemic racism in America. However, audiences are not challenged with dominant postracial ideologies, which, according to Wayne, reflects market realities created by the ongoing expansion of viewer choice.

In "How to Get Away with Colour: Colour-blindness and the Post-Racial Illusion in Popular American Television Series", Emiel Martens and Débora Póvoa investigate whether the American TV show *How To Get Away With Murder* challenges the decades of stereotypes and discrimination of minorities on American screens. They argue that the series seems to be set in a fictional, deracialised America and that it exhibits a problematic and ambivalent racial colour-blindness.

Concluding this issue, Caroline V. Schroeter explores the complexities of Nate Parker's cinematic slave narrative *The Birth of a Nation* (2016). Parker aims to represent the "oppressed" but by enveloping his message in the language of the "oppressor" (i.e. classic Hollywood cinema conventions that D.W. Griffith helped solidify), he considerably undermines his work. Schroeter argues that, although he attempts to invent a new category of film and intentionally sets his film up as an oppositional force, attacking Griffith's 1915 namesake epic, Parker's employment of a directing style that is heavily reliant on the conventions of classical narrative storytelling and codes makes such aspirations problematic. Schroeter examines the structural elements of classical Hollywood narration and demonstrates Parker's use of classical features. In this context, she considers whether Parker adopts the dominant mode in order to subvert it as an independent black film, or whether his radical black power message falls short as a result of his reliance on (white) industry standards.

We hope that this issue of *Alphaville* provides the reader with innovative and fresh perspectives on cinematic representations of race and identity and contributes to a wider debate on the construction and deconstruction of these phenomena on screen. The collection of articles demonstrates the need to investigate the influences of cinematic representations of race and identity further and expresses the role they play in shaping national and individual identity performances across the world.

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Caroline V. Schroeter is a PhD candidate and recipient of the University College Cork Celtic Studies, Arts and Social Studies PhD Excellency Scholarship. Her upcoming publications are entitled "From Griffith to Parker: Constructing and reconstructing race and the history of the US South in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915–2016)" (Kentucky UP) and "Racism and Slavery in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries" (Greenwood Imprint). Caroline's research focuses on North American literature and film, cinematic education, African American representation, audience

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