

February, 2014

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Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen

By Kathleen Rowe Karlyn

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. ISBN 9780292737549. 322 pp. £20.00 (pbk)

African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900-1960

By Charlene Regester

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. ISBN 9780253221926. 368 pp. £21.99 (pbk)

Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film

By Corinn Columpar

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010. ISBN 9780809329625. 272 pp. £31.50 (pbk)

A review by Mantra Roy, University of Washington

The authors of these books engage with three specific historical trajectories, all related to the politics of representation and self-perception. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn expresses concern over the misrepresentation of mother-daughter relationships portrayed in Hollywood films and TV series in the light of intergenerational feminisms. Charlene Regester examines the lives and careers of nine African American actresses in pre-Civil Rights Hollywood and exposes the forces of invisibility, racial and sexual stereotyping, passing, and attempted resistance. Finally, Corinn Columpar bears witness to the Fourth World, the Aboriginal peoples, and their negotiation with Eurocentric portrayals of their identities in films from USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as their attempts to control their representation on celluloid. From their respective perspectives on gender, race, and ethnicity, read together, the three texts form a insightful narrative of the (mis)representation of identities and the ensuing critical negotiations.

In *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers*, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn engages with the representation of mothers – and, more innovatively, of their absence – in recent American films and television series. She identifies the complex position of mothers and maternal figures in young girls' narratives in the context of Girl Power and Girl World consumerism through the late 1990s into the late 2000s. The introduction charts the different waves of feminism in the United States and their tenets, including the rise of Girl Power and postfeminism, and includes a section

on motherhood, mothers and daughters and their representation in Western literature and cinema, thereby offering an extremely informative section to media students interested in feminism and motherhood.

In "Postfeminism and the Third Wave" Karlyn critiques postfeminism in the context of Girl Power. She argues that in *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) teenager Rose's rejection of her mother during a moment of crisis (the shipwreck) offers a message that is detrimental to the relationship between young girls and their mothers in real life. Karlyn critiques the film's presentation of Rose's mother's limitations under patriarchy as problematic, especially because Third Wave feminism and Girl Power conceive popular culture as a site of empowerment and the teenager's rejection of a mother figure in this mainstream film suggests a problematic acceptance of that patriarchy-imposed vilification of the mother, disguised as a story about the daughter's rebellion.

In the second chapter, 'Trouble in Paradise' Karlyn examines tales of incest that marginalize mother-figures and focuses on the dubious relationship between adult or middle-aged fathers or father-figures, and young girls or nymphets. Karlyn examines how popular culture often holds absent, ambitious or ineffective mothers and dutiful wives culpable for incestuous relationships between father-figures and young girls and observes that a "collusive" mother is first blamed and then punished (67). In subsequent chapters, Karlyn notes that mothers are increasingly stereotyped as monstrous or ineffectual. She also demonstrates how Second and Third Wave thoughts clash and collide in films like *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995) in which the lead young girls ultimately conform to patriarchy. In 'Final Girls and Epic Fantasies: Remaking the World' Karlyn focuses on the horror genre that mythologizes Girl Culture and Girl Power. The chapter illustrates how, in the first three *Scream* films (Wes Craven, 1996-2000), Third Wave feminist ideals prevail in the context of the "Final Girl", a physically powerful teenage girl who harbors righteous rage and has weak father figures and absent or demonized mother-figures. Karlyn suggests that erasure of mother-figures is misunderstood as a key feature of Third Wave feminism, at least as depicted in these films which otherwise celebrate several tenets of the movement.

Karlyn devotes her next chapter to the career of Reese Witherspoon, whom she regards as a Third Wave postfeminist and argues that Witherspoon demonstrates through her films how smart young girls, with or without Girl Power, can be a force to reckon with. While unruliness, postfeminism, and lack of vulnerability have defined Witherspoon's characters, Karlyn argues that the actor's more recent characters in films like *Walk the Line* (James Mangold, 2004) turn toward unrepentant motherhood. Thus, Karlyn traces the evolution of a strong woman/mother on screen from the image of Girl Power that Witherspoon subtly debunked in *Legally Blonde* (Robert Luketic, 2001).

The next chapter 'Teen-Girl Melodrama' is concerned with mother-daughter relations in TV series such as *My So-Called Life* (Winnie Holzman, 1994-1995) and examines those relations in the contexts of alcoholism, homelessness and financial constraints, demonstrating how the texts offer no easy postfeminist utopia. At this point in the book, Karlyn's skepticism of Third Wave Girl Power is clear and she emphasizes the need for bonding with mothers as a response to feminism's anxieties about mother-daughter relations. This skepticism deepens in the following chapter, 'Girls of Color', where Karlyn suggests that the cultural phenomenon of Girl Power matters less to girls from ethnic minorities than do issues of race, ethnicity, and family. This seems problematic because the pressure to assimilate into mainstream American culture has always complicated minority groups' relationship with it and this need not be a charge leveled specifically at the Third Wave. Karlyn also never comments on the historical struggles with *self*-perception that most minority groups have encountered, something which is central to Charlene Regester's book reviewed below. Karlyn sees feminism's success too simplistically in narratives which, for example, pit young female ethnic minority basketball players against tradition-bound gender roles (*Love and Basketball* [Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2000]). This is Karlyn's weakest chapter because she does not address the complicated relationship between mainstream Girl Power culture and minority groups.

By the time Karlyn comes to the last chapter, 'The Motherline and a Wicked Powerful Feminism' she seems to have found a solution to the inter-generational gap between Second Wave feminists and postfeminists of the Third Wave: mother-daughter bonding, biological or otherwise. Karlyn argues that a healthy relationship between mothers and daughters leads young girls to become confident, strong, and successful women. She examines *Antonia's Line* (Marleen Gorris, 1995) as an example in which multi-generational unruly women of a matriarchal family thrive on a strong bonding between generations of daughters. She concludes the book with a call for a powerful wicked feminism embraced by strong women deemed unruly by social structures.

Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers is an important contribution to the field of feminist media studies because Karlyn locates the multiple tensions between feminism and postfeminism in the matrix of Girl Power, globalization, class warfare, economic meltdown, broken families, unstable youth, and addictions. She also identifies a strong nurturing bond between mother and daughter as a locus of sustenance for contemporary feminism. But the book's main weakness remains its failure to develop a sufficient and convincing theorization of the ethnic minority perspective in the context of Girl Power and consumerism.

While *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers* bears witness to the need for strong mother-daughter relationships in contemporary feminism through

a broad cultural and media studies perspective, in *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900-1960*, Charlene Regester is much more historically focused in uncovering the struggle for visibility of nine African American actresses in pre-Civil Rights Hollywood. Locating the actresses' lives and careers in the nexus of sexuality, demeaning roles, rampant discrimination, segregation, stereotyping, the white male gaze, and white appropriation of black actresses' identities, Regester intricately outlines a discourse of black stardom. In her introduction Regester clarifies her choice of actresses: they were the most popular and prolific African American stars in mainstream Hollywood from the silent era to the 1960s. Drawing on critical race studies, from W. E. B. DuBois to Hortense Spillers, through nine separate chapters, Regester examines these black actresses' lives as they became commodified in terms of their race and gender.

In the first chapter Regester discusses the racist politics of the time via Madame Sul-te-Wan's appearance in *Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915), and her subservient, native islander role in (*King Kong* [Merian Cooper, 1933]). From the outset she draws out the invisibility inscribed on black actresses like Wan whose work was not even mentioned in most reports. But while Wan's darker skin color was utilized as a trope of evil and subordination, the mulatto identity of Nina Mae McKinney, the focus of Regester's second chapter, found herself an object of white male desire following her most famous role in *Hallelujah* (King Vidor, 1929). Regester argues that McKinney employed her sexuality as a major selling point, which enraged the black press.

The third chapter focuses on Louise Beavers and Regester notes the ambivalences black actresses encountered in their search for satisfying careers at the cost of doing stereotypical, subservient roles. Regester makes an important argument when she asserts that Beavers' most famous role as Delilah, a single mother and housemaid in a white single mother's household in *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl, 1934) demonstrates that her subservience was a survival strategy in 1930s' America. Gradually, we meet politically active actresses who accepted less respectable roles on screen only to resist them in their real lives. For example, Fredi Washington, who denied her black identity and masqueraded as white in her role as Peola in *Imitation of Life*, moved to Europe in active resistance to Hollywood that offered little to a black woman. Through a study of the conflict between her (white) body and her social being (her black identity), Regester comments more generally on the contentious race question in America in 1930s-40s.

However, Hattie McDaniel, the first African American actress to win an Oscar, for her role as Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), lived a life in which her on-screen subservience merged with her off-screen diffidence. Regester underscores her history with the negative impact of the black press that often highlighted McDaniel's personal life's

problems as weaknesses. Regester then moves to Lena Horne and identifies the subtle racial politics played by Hollywood when it prioritized lighter-skinned mulatto actresses like Horne over darker African American actresses. As a commodified mulatto entertainer, Horne was the first black actress to sign a major contract with MGM studios. Regester notes that Horne's physical presence made her suitable as neither a white nor a black identity, which allowed for several offers of roles but problematized her personal image in the press. Regester thus highlights the contradictions of being a successful mulatto actress of the time: though she was hypersexualized and constructed for white spectators, Horne was able to refuse maids' roles.

By contrast Hazel Scott, a child prodigy pianist, was more or less limited to roles playing herself – a black jazz artist – showing how limiting the system was to these actresses' potential, simplistically exploiting their racial and sexual otherness. In her personal life, Scott became active politically through the 1960s when she refused to perform for segregated audiences and decided to wear her hair in a natural style. Regester thus showcases an extraordinary black performer who publicly resisted her marginalization both on and off-screen.

In the eighth chapter, Regester explores the life and career of Ethel Waters who received mammy-maid roles and found herself pitted against the sexy image of Lena Horne. Their clash, observes Regester, is testimony to the way Hollywood exploited black actresses by commodifying one's sexuality (Horne) and denigrating another for the lack of it (Waters). Finally Regester turns to Dorothy Dandridge, Hollywood's "dark star" (286) with a tormented life. Beautiful and appearing alongside a white male co-star, Dandridge's body became a site for white spectators' racial and sexual fantasies. Regester comments on how Dandridge was exploited by the studios when her sexual desirability was pitted against her racial undesirability. Regester's important contribution in this chapter is her critique of Hollywood's tendency to exploit black male and female sexuality by pitting Dandridge's hypersexualization against an emasculated Belafonte on screen.

A major tribute to nine talented black actresses and their complicated negotiations with white mainstream entertainment industry before Civil Rights, *African American Actresses* is an invaluable asset for students of ethnicity and race in Hollywood. Not only does Regester bring the early twentieth century American racial scene alive by detailing the politics that informed choices and roles of African American women actors, she also contributes richly to studies of stardom as refracted by the socio-cultural and political status of black people and women in America.

Delving deeper into the politics of representation and the critical act of bearing witness, Corinn Columpar offers a related discussion of Aboriginal identity and the construction of 'primitiveness' in *Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film*. The book usefully introduces concepts of the Fourth World, transnational cinema, and the politics of defining primitiveness vis-à-vis white and Eurocentric identities, all being well covered in the opening chapter "The Cinema of Aboriginality as Transnational Phenomenon." Referring to postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha and cinema theorists like Hamid Naficy, she locates Aboriginal identity and its representation within transnational cinema by emphasizing the relationship – crucial to the medium – between location and identity. This is an important contribution because experiences of deterritorialization and destabilization have informed Aboriginal identities in USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the four settler societies Columpar examines.

Columpar argues for a more nuanced definition of the Fourth World and Indigeneity; according to her, the crucial ties between blood, memory, land, and indigenous identity cannot be ignored. But she is careful to observe that her work respects the necessarily local identity of any Aboriginal group while contextualizing their representation in a transnational context. Columpar also highlights the genre of "contact narratives" (21-22) and explores the genre's recent flexibility in films made in the above-mentioned countries. Her two main tasks in the book are as follows: the first part critically examines how notions of racial and gender difference are problematized by films set in the contact period when colonial Europeans were first discovering aboriginal groups; the second part examines films about the contemporary identity issues of Aboriginals and are directed by Aboriginals themselves.

Columpar begins Part I, "Making Contact, Producing Difference", with the distinction between contact narratives produced in the decolonization period from their predecessors: boundaries are negotiated in different ways. Consequently, she argues, contemporary filmmakers "indigenize – or primitivize [...] the origins of the nation" while their predecessors were insensitive to casting, accents, and racial inclusion (33). Columpar compares and contrasts the reception of two films on Native Americans, Hollywood's *Dances with the Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) and Quebec's *Black Robe* (Bruce Beresford, 1991), and concludes that while Euro-American critics discussed the romanticism in the films, Native American critics focused on the anachronisms and minor roles offered to Native American actors. Columpar thus emphasizes the error of omission committed by both sets of critics.

In her second chapter, she chooses several films that demonstrate the articulation of an "Aboriginal subjectivity" that produces both a "speaking [...] subject and a spectator capable of seriously listening" (78). But in her discussion of *Utu* (Geoff Murphy, 1983), Columpar demonstrates how the international shorter version of the film represents Te Wheke more as an

outlaw than the former loyalist he once was, thus disempowering his story. She concludes the chapter with the discussion of two documentary shorts that mobilise a counter-history by focusing on the actors who played Australian Aboriginal cinematic icons, Rosalie Kunothe-Monks and Tom E. Lewis. Shifting between "reaction" and "reflection," Columpar claims, such documentaries offer "transformative potential" in portraying gender and racial identities (110).

Part II "Mapping the Fourth World" begins with an argument against the relativist's implication that contact narratives are irrelevant and the inscription of Aboriginal cultures as "vanishing race(s)" (111). Columpar posits films like *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002) that engage with contemporary social forces which relativize the legacy of colonial history and locate daily negotiations of "dual national allegiances and competing cultural influences," as well as interrogating the very notion of 'home' (117). In "Land Claims: Dramas of Deterritorialization" Columpar compares two films, *Powwow Highway* (Jonathan Wacks, 1989) and *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre, 1998) to argue that Indigenous films written, directed, and co-produced by Native Americans (like the latter) allow for contemporary and relevant representations of identity and home. *Smoke Signals*, the screenplay for which was written by Sherman Alexie, addresses questions of ethnicity and generation and offers a more nuanced view of reservation life.

Columpar draws our attention to urban centers as new contact zones with potential for both struggle and possibility. *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori, 1994), made in New Zealand, raised awareness about domestic violence among Maori in urban centers and earned critical acclaim among Maori viewers and critics. Instead of representing static and stereotypical images of reservation-bound Indigeneity these films, as Columpar demonstrates project dynamic images of young Native Americans who assume agency and battle social limitations, including in the home-space, in mainstream America.

In the last chapter, Columpar examines self-reflexive films that engage with "aesthetic and political (self-)representation" by foregrounding issues of "(split) enunciation" (155) and "cultural differentiation" (157). Through *beDevil* (Tracey Moffatt, 1993) Columpar locates multivocality and non-Western storytelling strategies as appropriate cinematic aesthetics to represent the complex Australian Aboriginal identity. In the last film she analyzes, *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), the directorial debut of Sherman Alexie. Columpar stresses the split in enunciation as she explicates how the viewer is positioned differently vis-à-vis the text through multiple rhetorical strategies, thereby bearing witness to the process through which such transformation occurs among people who have been otherwise reduced to "static images and entrenched stereotypes" (179-180).

Unsettling Sights is a rich resource for students interested in Aboriginal cinema and Aboriginal representation in cinema. While Columpar successfully critiques stereotypical representation of Indigenous peoples in cinemas of four countries, her most important contribution is the detailed analysis of Aboriginal films made by Aboriginal directors, actors, and producers that contextualize contemporary Indigenous lives in terms of their liminal but fluid identities, within and without reservations. Her explanation of the self-reflexivity involved in these films' examination of the communities' own problems, as well as her awareness of their relationship with the historical colonial context, is exemplary and fascinating.

Indeed, all these three texts can be read as contact narratives involving contestation, liminality, hybridity, and transformative potential. They respectively tackle the cross-generational contact between Second and Third Wave Feminist concerns about mothers and daughters; the contact between African American actresses and white Hollywood before Civil Rights; and the contact between mainstream representation of Indigenous peoples and their *self*-representation. *Unruly Girls*, *Unrepentant Mothers* and *Unsettling Sights* critique the politics of representations and suggest ways to rectify stereotypical misrepresentations by analyzing notable films, TV series, and documentaries. By contrast, the purpose of *African American Actresses* is limited to more straightforward description of nine African American actresses' lives and their struggles for visibility and respect during a time when racial discrimination was the norm of American life. However, all three texts focus on the complex issues of identity and the struggles of marginalized groups in asserting and affirming their complex identities as they negotiate with mainstream points of view. Students interested in identity politics and representation of racial and gender minorities will find each of these books very useful.