

Overall, the entire book attempted to prove that no matter how resistant to change film and television production companies might be, media and cultural agents have to negotiate new terrain and cultural policies to meet global market demands that “are shifting focus to creative labor of audiences and interactive media users” (p. 155). This creative labor is going to play a huge role in the future shape of global media economies and ecologies and the people that produce for them.

There is a large amount of information packed into 236 pages that cover a huge range of issues. At times, the reader can become lost on a tangent, albeit one related to the subject at hand, but it can be distracting. One also could argue that while the examples presented are very convincing and well analyzed, a broader look at programs coproduced by other countries, ones perhaps less developed but still prolific in production, might strengthen the overall argument. Baltruschat does discuss this and does reference other countries, but it seems there are places here and there where this can be expanded upon to help more clearly illustrate the global nature of media production and coproduction process and the cultural relevance.

A strength of this book is that it is written to appeal to a wide range of readers. The industry faction can glean much knowledge about what these productions do, and must do, and find many interesting venues for thought and discussion. Broadcasters and producers can learn what sells and what is involved in the production process; marketers and promoters can see specifically how the “event mentality” is used and is working in one of the most popular reality television programs out there; and the average person who simply wants to understand more about the programming content he or she receives on a television or movie screen will find some relevant answers. In addition, the many who worry that today’s media programs are failing to deliver culturally relevant material, no matter in what continent or by whom that content is produced, might find some potential solutions or at least spark some relevant and timely discussions.

Global Media Ecologies is a book deserving of a place in the realm of global media studies. Its appeal lies in that it does what it sets out to—create a compelling, intricate, yet well-researched and presented argument that the global media economy is changing and producers in every country must change with it.

Elizabeth Abel

Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow. Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 2010. 391 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-26183-9 (paperback). pp. ISBN 978-0-520-26183-9 (paperback).

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Photographs of the 20th-century South can be striking: Grainy shots of lynching, protests outside of schools and bus stations, worship at open-casket funerals, images of grieving

after assassinations. Such visuals have become iconic of the early to mid-1900s in America's Southern Jim Crow era. Indeed, these are the images that our collective memory may easily recall about the Civil Rights movement. But in the past, such images have had little meanings associated with them outside of depictions of racism. Until now.

In Elizabeth Abel's *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow*, these images are interpreted differently. Through a critical analysis of signs—and not just the literal ones, those with notice of a demarcated space stamped into tin—Abel enters into a world likely foreign to some readers: one of restriction and constraint visually represented in public signs classifying space for some people and not for others. Abel's book, then, tells a story of the past through critical theory and the truly political nature of Jim Crow signs, examining their influence on and meanings of gender, intellect, protest, and revival.

Abel's writing—an interpretation of visual communication during Jim Crow era and of what the signs may mean for us today—reveals a depth that is often missing when discussing America's past: Jim Crow signs are simple, sometimes with one word “White” or “Colored,” but they are signs that made clear what was off-limits for minorities and their supporters, and, more so, became daily reminders of social inequality and politically supported (indeed, mandated) racism, hatred, and control.

Rooted in the works of Foucault, Barthes, Boas, and Sontag, among others, *Signs of the Times* provides a relevant interpretation of yesterday's South that pushes traditional—and certainly normative—explanations of visual communication from around the Civil Rights era. Abel's interpretation of otherwise simple signs also reveals the gendered meanings behind photographs of a Jim Crow South and of the signs themselves. Her attention to gender is not limited merely to gendered and racialized restrooms. Abel expands her exploration to underscore Jim Crow's “insult to black femininity” (p. 129) through language on signs themselves—“Colored Women to the Rear” (p. 128), for instance, links women to segregation and through the word “Rear” to an “ungendered body part” (p. 128). She asks which plays a larger role in segregation and signage, gender or race? She delves into the stripping of gender and masculinity of African American men in Jim Crow signs, as well as the merger of men and women under the asexual term “Colored.”

Indeed, Abel's deep semiotic analysis of race and masculinity within images and her “remaking of racial signs” twist, for example, the more conventional perception of lunch counter sit-ins. Lunch counters, she argues, become signs and symbols themselves, and the news photographs of them, too, carry engrained messages. Instead of being seen as mere snapshots of protest, Abel identifies these photographs of lunch counters as comments on spaces of intellectual development, gendered discourse, economic and cultural exchanges. Lunch counters become scenes of gendered and political discourse in an otherwise everyday, ordinary setting that remained absent in the telling of newspaper photographs of their day and, still, in more traditional analysis today.

Signs of the Times cannot be completely praised, however. For those of us always searching for complex, challenging, yet approachable readings on racism, especially covert racism, within society, Abel's descriptions of her readings of images can

sometimes distract from her arguments. Case in point: Revealing the “awkwardness” of segregated drinking fountains in public spaces, where men stand, stoop and bend their bodies beneath signs of their race to replenish, Abel republishes and describes a 1951 Dairy Queen advertisement of a White man hugging an oversized ice cream cone, with a segregated drinking fountain behind him (p 151). In this image, Abel pays close attention to the often-unmentioned aspect of masculinity, and gender in general, which become a large focus of Abel’s exploration of Jim Crow’s power laws, rules, and images. But her use of language, sometimes, tends to distract from her message.

In this particular image of the man and his ice cream cone, Abel tells us that the White man stands to enjoy his cone in a space in which we normally see African Americans crimped over a fountain. The man, with his short hair and shaven face, is not stooping, but is standing proudly in an otherwise oppressive public space. But, as with some descriptions that resemble language and sometime over-the-top detail as if from Francis Cress Welsing’s *The Isis Papers*, Abel’s descriptions can sometimes smack of eccentrics: The man, whose mouth starts to approach the ice cream’s twisted top is represented with a low camera angle to show the figure as standing tall, “maintaining whiteness directly from a potent source of racial renewal that conflates into a single oversized object a mammoth white breast and the huge white phallus that results from sucking it” (pp. 151-152).

Still, Abel’s interpretations—surely made from a person who has been immersed physically, emotionally, and through scholarship in the collection and interpretation of Jim Crow signs—should not be dismissed. Indeed, racism is often disregarded by “objective” observation of images that strives for a “truth” and ignores the interpretive nature of such discourses grounded in politics, “culture,” and history. For example, an initial reading of a cleaner’s truck from the 1920s Alabama that says, “We wash for white people only,” (p. 70) is hard to be read the same way once one reads further on the truck’s side: The vehicle belongs to Imperial Laundry, and the reader is empowered through Abel’s writings to see Imperial Laundry as a metaphor of U.S. domination and imperialism internationally and domestically.

Today, photographs of racialized water fountains and buses, marches, and murders are often used in U.S. classrooms and on TV documentaries to educate new generations about racial hatred. But Abel’s interpretation of the power and possibilities within Jim Crow signs shows us that such signs can have a new and energized form of communication with relevance for today.

However, as perhaps another limitation, Abel brings the reader into the contemporary through popular culture and popular politicians, such as Obama, yet stops short of making stark comparisons between the signage of yesterday and today. Though she lays a foundation from which one can begin to explore meanings within text scrawled on brick and boards, images painted and perceived on billboards and within advertisements, on TV, in news photographs, and in school textbooks, she does little to connect for us the deeper meanings of today’s language, images, signs, and communication regarding place, space, and race.

Indeed, if we turn to Abel's work we may better approach elements of today's visual communication that are just as evident, the meanings just as mysterious as those during Jim Crow. Many of the same desires that motivated the scrawling of "Whites Only" (p. 9) here and "No Dogs, Negros, Mexicans" (p. 171) there in the mid-1900s still reveal themselves today. For a moment, imagine: Over the past decade, some of America's public schools—in effect, a public space just as water fountains, lunch counters, churches, parks, and town squares—continue to be racially segregated, shuttered, and subtly demarcated as "failing" spaces by public and political rhetoric and its visual representations. Perhaps, to further Abel's work, such exploration of societal messages she does about race, gender, and power within public space can continue by relooking at history through contemporary times, making her work that much more relevant.