

*Number 15 (Summer 1995)*

**Darrell Y. Yamamoto. *Monitored Peril.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 293 pp.**

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Television has been one of the most influential media in constructing the racialized social image of Asian Americans. Through meticulous examinations of roles and stories given to Asian Americans in television and combined with careful analysis of political and social events, the author successfully reconstructs a comprehensive history of Asian Americans in the entertainment world over the period of the past five decades. In fact, this book merits more than a mere media study of Asian Americans for its delivery of a critical view of historical relationships of the United States with Asia which are responsible for creating continuously popular and distorted images of Asians.

There are seven chapters under the illustrative headings *White Christian Nation, Asians in the American West, War Against Japanese America, Asian Americans and U.S. Empire, Southeast Asian America, Contemporary Asian America, and Counterprogramming.* They superbly chronicle the precarious formation and maintenance of Asian American communities through the eyes of television. Early portrayals of Asian Americans were closely related to their menial occupations which placed them in total subordination to their white superiors and which has become to some degree a permanent fixture of their TV representations even up until today. The strength of Asian settlers and their contributions to the economy of the West by Chinese railroad laborers or Japanese farmers were ignored in popular characterization of Asians as docile and inarticulate beings in western melodramas such as *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke*.

Precipitated by intense hostility against the Japanese at the outbreak of the Pacific War, 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry were removed from the West coast defense zones to ten inland internment camps. This sensational event, however, was not told to the public in television programs. Not all of the Japanese Americans went to the camps quietly in submission to the Executive Order. Some Japanese Americans distinguished themselves with courageous acts of demanding constitutional rights or by leading mass protests by the internees, but commercial television was not interested in making heroes out of the non-stereotypical Asians.

During the cold war period, television undertook a mission of anti-communism propaganda for which stories of Asian orphans became the most exploited subjects to condemn communist evil and justify American involvement in warfare in Asia. The American defeat in the Vietnam War led to the prolific production of military melodramas which euphemized essentially the colonial war in the Southeast Asia into a sad American tragedy. In the absence of national pride to celebrate the war individual bravery and heroism on battlefields were romanticized, creating a generation of new heroes personified by Sylvester Stallone, Chuck Norris,

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and the like, whereas the Vietnamese perspective of war was peculiarly silenced.

It was only in documentaries and talk shows that Asians were treated fairly and their problems given a serious look. The steady flow of Asian immigrants since 1965 is building up visible communities. These new Asians who are spreading into enclaves of other ethnic minorities are causing interracial hostility much to the guilt relief for white liberals to know that racism is universal under appropriate social conditions. On the other hand, Asians as strong economic competitors have also renewed the hatred and resentment of white supremacists. In commercial television, however, Asian Americans are still excluded from sharing time as well as playing parts of true self without Euro-American distortion. In the brief but illuminating epilogue, the author makes three suggestions of changing the situation by increasing public-supported independent filmmakers, facilitating their access to commercial media institutions, and accelerating legal-political challenges to discriminatory employment of Asian professional writers in the television industry.

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**Paul G. Zolbrod. *Reading the Voice: Native American Oral Poetry on the Page.* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995) 146 pp., \$25.00 cloth.**

Paul Zolbrod is known well by scholars of Native American studies for his work on the Navajo and for his commitment to the understanding of Native literature. In this book he takes bold steps to redefine much of what scholars have taken for granted about criticism and definition of the writings and performance literature of Native peoples. He is to be both commended for his approach and questioned.

In challenging the language of contemporary western literary criticism, Zolbrod must use the language that already exists, and herein lies the confusion. Poetry, song, literature, sacred texts, performance—all are incomplete in and of themselves to describe the body of material Zolbrod examines. He begins by stating, "This is a book about poetry" (vii); however, the definition of poetry Zolbrod uses is his own. In the first chapter, he states, "traditional Native American material is not literature strictly speaking." These two statements form the crux of his argument; and the book seeks to explain his meaning and to explicate his new definition of poetry: "I'd define poetry as that art form whose primary medium is language, whether written or spoken (or sung); whether recorded in print, on video or audio tape, or whether packaged in the human memory according to various mnemonic techniques" (7). For