

Television Reviews

A Place to Call Home. Created by Bevan Lee. Seven Productions, 2013-2018. Amazon.

A Place to Call Home (APTCH), available on PBS/Amazon Prime, is a stylish 1950s melodrama that examines how postwar cultural change transforms both the privileged Bligh family and postwar society. The series begins with matriarch Elizabeth (Noni Hazelhurst) attempting to thwart widowed son George's (Brett Climo) relationship with Jewish nurse Sarah Adams (Marta Dusseldorp), as well as granddaughter Anna's (Abby Earl) relationship with Italian-Catholic immigrant farmer Gino Poletti (Aldo Mignone). Elizabeth, seeking to shore up the Bligh legacy, forces grandson James (David Berry) to marry Olivia (Arianwen Parkes-Lockwood), thereby hiding his homosexuality. Critics like Katherine Byrne have panned similar historical dramas such as *Downton Abbey* (DA), claiming it "sanitizes class inequality by framing it in terms of mutual support and even love" (320). APTCH, meanwhile, highlights such class inequality, as Elizabeth, ensconced in her Ash Park estate, sits in stark contrast to the disenfranchised of 1950s Australia.

Ash Park's walls cannot block out an increasingly multicultural world. When the family attends plays and watches movies (e.g., *South Pacific*, *Twelve Mile Reef*, *Roman Holiday*), purchases home decor (e.g., Asian wallpaper motifs, Middle Eastern furniture and textiles), listens and dances to music (e.g., *Come On-A My House*, El Negro Zumbón/*The Black Buzz*), and reads books (e.g., *Giant*, *They're A Weird Mob*) they encounter themes of intercultural exchange and/or conflict, some in oversimplified, stereotypical, and/or racist ways. Thus, when Gino wants to profess his love, he sings *O Sole O Mio* in the Neapolitan language to Anna at the church fete, hoping to break through Elizabeth's façade of steely resistance (S1E2).

APTCH depicts the personal costs of living in a society characterized by a rigid social hierarchy, cultural conformity, and patriarchal families. When Olivia's child is stillborn, she illegally adopts a child born of incest to save her marriage. When Anna tells Gino she is infertile, he annuls their marriage, putting her at odds with social expectations for young women. Even James commits to barbaric, though historically accurate, pseudo-medical interventions to change his sexual

orientation. Lucy Brown argues that historical drama writers engage “‘writing back’ to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to illuminate previously hidden lives, homosexual and otherwise” (263). *APTCH*, by exploring hidden lives and struggles of 1950s life, counters the idyllic misconceptions that social historian Stephanie Coontz argues audiences derive from old television programs: “contrary to popular opinion, ‘Leave it to Beaver’ was not a documentary” (29). In the world of *APTCH* image belies reality, as demonstrated when James and his lover Dr. Henry Fox (Tim Draxl) go to see a romantic movie along with a lesbian couple so the quartet can pose as two heterosexual couples (s4, e3).

APTCH’s characters are primarily white, a frequent criticism of historical dramas, but the series explores how in the 1950s full white privilege requires British ancestry, Protestant Christianity, and social standing. Nurse Sarah, who is Jewish, faces police harassment, gossip, and anti-Semitic slurs while Gino is beaten, harassed, and called names (e.g., dago, wop, eyetie) for dating and marrying Anna. Jewish and Italian people in the 1950s were considered ethnic and not white in the way Elizabeth is regarded as white. Elizabeth’s whiteness is symbolically reinforced through her choice of pastime, tending her English rose garden, as well as in the bride she selects for James: Olivia, “an English rose” as one profile identifies her (“An English Rose”).

Changing standards of whiteness over time illustrate cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall’s assertion that race is a “floating” or “sliding signifier” as its meaning changes across time and context (Jhally and Hall). In the show, the character of Frank Gibbs (Aaron Pederson), a painter and Aboriginal veteran who self-identifies as Black, faces life-threatening systemic racism (i.e., racism in medicine) when he passes out on the hospital steps and is dismissed as drunk by Dr. Fox until Sarah diagnoses a diabetic coma (S5E1). Julieann Coombes argues that the barriers faced by First Nations peoples persist to this day and can include “lack of culturally appropriate communication, racism [...] and family separation” (4). Doctors refuse to release James from a clinic purporting to cure his homosexuality until his father demands his discharge. Henry and Frank’s healthcare disparities can be traced to the same pseudo-medicine that pathologized and marginalized people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals. Gender scholar Siobhan Somerville argues that “early twentieth-century scientific discourses around race became available to sexologists and physicians as a way to articulate emerging models of homosexuality” (264-65). Given this history of medical marginalization, it is not surprising that the National

Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities designates people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals as health disparity populations even today.

Across six seasons audiences watch the Bligh family evolve from an elitist dynasty to a culturally diverse, chosen family headed by an interfaith couple by series end. The reimagined Bligh family is united through fellowship and love rather than blood and marriage, coming to include: various religions and social classes; a twice-widowed loner; a disabled Aboriginal veteran; and five single parents, including two gay fathers, three divorcees, and a range of political perspectives. Perhaps this reinvention is attributable to the tendency that Brown has noted in some historical dramas like *DA* to “examine the past with modern, perhaps even rose-colored, sensibilities in mind” (268). However, recent historical dramas, for instance Ryan Murphy’s recent Netflix series *Hollywood*, have taken off the rose-colored glasses to deliberately rewrite our classist, racist, and homophobic social histories. Bevan Lee’s transformation of the Bligh family is a promising first step in diversifying the popular imagination of an era addicted to images of conformity in service of the heteronormative nuclear family rather than striving for a yet-to-be-realized future that everybody can call home.

Gordon R. Alley-Young
Kingsborough Community College - City University of New York

Works Cited

- “An English Rose.” *Yahoo! Lifestyle*, Yahoo Australia, 1 May 2014, au.lifestyle.yahoo.com/an-english-rose-17099607.html.
- Brown, Lucy. “Homosexual Lives: Representation and Reinterpretation in *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey*.” *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Drama from The Forsyte Saga to Downton Abbey*, edited by James Leggott, and Julie Taddeo, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, pp. 263-73.
- Byrne, Katherine. “Adapting Heritage: Class and Conservatism in *Downton Abbey*.” *Rethinking History*, vol. 18, no. 3, Sept 2014, pp. 311–27.
- Coombes, Julieann, et al. “The Journey of Aftercare for Australia’s First Nations Families Whose Child had Sustained a Burn Injury: A Qualitative Study.” *BMC Health Services Research*, vol. 20, no. 1, June 2020, pp. 1-11.
- Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Basic Books, 1992.

Jhally, Sut, and Stuart Hall. "Race: The Floating Signifier." Media Education Foundation, 1996.

"National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities: Overview." US Department of Health and Human Services, www.nimhd.nih.gov/about/overview/#:~:text=NIH-designated%20U.S.%20health%20disparity,and%20sexual%20and%20gender%20minorities.

Somerville, Siobhan. "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1994, pp. 243-66.

That's So Raven. Created by Michael Poryes and Susan Sherman. Buena Vista Television, 2003-2007. Disney+.

With the recent launch of the Disney+ streaming service, audiences can now revisit a great deal of the historical Disney catalogue in one location. The numerous Disney Channel series particularly provide the potential for nostalgic audiences to revisit the programming from their youth and allows young viewers to engage with this youth-oriented programming for the first time. Therefore, it is important to revisit and analyze some of the most influential of these works and explore what relevance they may have for contemporary viewing. One of the most important Disney Channel series, for representational and industrial reasons, to reappear through Disney+ is *That's So Raven* (2003-2007). The show remains relevant because of its politics of relational empowerment, defined here as encouraging viewers to find internal confidence through the identification with characters on screen. The protagonist, Raven Baxter (Raven-Symoné), represents an especially intriguing intersectional and empowering figure for young audiences.

That's So Raven centers on Raven, a psychic African American teenager and aspiring fashion designer. Raven's psychic powers manifest themselves through visions, with Raven seeing brief flashes of future events. Each episode's narrative relies on Raven's response to her visions as she tries to ensure or prevent something from happening. Throughout, Raven, along with her best friends Chelsea (Anneliese van der Pol), a naïve, nature-loving white girl, and Eddie (Orlando Brown), an aspiring African American rapper, don various disguises and embark on wacky adventures. When things invariably fail to go as planned, comedy ensues.

Raven's – and to a lesser extent her friends' – exploits are in part successful because of their transformative comedy. In *Divas on Screen: Black Women in*

American Film, Mia Mask identifies the “comedic charisma of transformation,” whereby humorous appeal comes from the “playful corporeal performance of various identities, which interrupt and destabilize the status quo” (114). Perhaps the most recurring comedic device used throughout the series is disguise. In most episodes, Raven finds herself in various situations that require costumed infiltrations into spaces where she would not be able to enter herself. In “If I Only Had a Job” (S1E18), Raven disguises herself as a fictional popstar to abuse celebrity privilege and get her father his job back. In “Five Finger Discount” (S3E5), Raven dons a mall cop uniform to prevent her brother from shoplifting. In each instance, Raven’s comedic charisma of transformation not only allows the audience to derive pleasure from vicariously playing dress-up, but also through watching Raven destabilize various social boundaries.

The first way to understand how Raven embodies an empowering intersectional figure is through her feminist potential. Undoubtedly, Raven can be viewed through the lens of postfeminist Girl Power, which activates girls to define their own form of femininity. This activation, however, is largely catalyzed through consumerist notions of being able to assemble said definition of femininity through purchasing (Genz and Bradon 79). For this reason, products, and in particular clothing, seem to play an integral part in Girl Power’s presentation of femininity. Raven, with her extensive collection of trendy, multi-colored, and high-heeled outfits could easily be read as an embodiment of consumerist Girl Power. Yet Raven’s girliness is not created solely through the accumulation of products, but instead comes from individual creation. The majority of the ensembles she puts together are either directly sewn and constructed by Raven or are repurposed from other existing clothes and materials. If Raven’s wardrobe is read as an identification of her specific portrayal of femininity, her Girl Power aesthetic is not purchased, but rather, individually constructed.

The intersectional empowerment from Raven continues through her Blackness. The argument can be made – and Treva B. Lindsey has – that Raven’s empowering potential lies exclusively in her visibility as an African American girl onscreen, as the show tends not to engage in racially conscious storytelling (23). On some level, this is true: as with most Disney Channel programs, much of the series takes place in a fantasized post-racial utopia; however, one episode in particular, “True Colors” (S3E10), makes sure to emphasize Raven’s specifically Black experience. When Raven and Chelsea apply for a retail job, Raven does not get offered a position because the manager “[doesn’t] hire Black people.” The episode’s content is, of

course, handled in a gentle way to make it palatable to young audiences, but the manager's act is described specifically as racist. To expose the manager's behavior, Raven and her friends team up with a local news reporter to catch the manager saying something racist. As Morgan Genevieve Blue writes in her analysis, "the episode simplifies racism as a problem of individual prejudice against Blackness, solved by making the crime and criminal publicly visible" (69). In addition to Blue's reading, the episode also serves as an empowering narrative for Black action against racism. While the series does not explicitly detail dismantling white supremacy as a system, Raven's individual accomplishment makes a difference, which allows the viewer to connect with, and perhaps learn from, her action. Though few episodes engage directly with race as much as this one does, it is an important example of the show's overall goal: to represent and empower Black girls.

Less directly than the two sites of potential empowerment described above, Raven Baxter can be viewed as a relational figure through her queerness. Beyond the obvious queerness of Raven's gender-bending performances of various masculinities and femininities through her many disguises, queer possibility also exists through the character's psychic secret. Throughout the series, Raven only discusses her psychic powers with her closest friends and family members. Frequently referred to as her "secret," Raven fears her psychic abilities becoming publicly known and being ostracized for it. This indirectly represents a facet of queer experience many young queers experience – living with a secret that could lead to othering. The episode "Double Vision" (S3E7) comes closest to an explicit presentation of queerness, as it features a "psychic coming out" storyline. Raven discovers that Ben, a boy at school, is also psychic. The two bond and relate over their shared experiences, which allows Ben to come out to Raven as a psychic. Unlike Raven, Ben has not even shared his secret with his family, and Raven encourages him to be honest with the ones he loves. Though the show never engages directly with queerness – again, unsurprising due to the studio of its creation – Raven's queerness allows for identification, relation, and empowerment.

Through the show's intersectionally empowering comedic figure, Raven Baxter, *That's So Raven* remains an important children's program for understanding how representation is configured for young viewers and nostalgic audiences.

Brecken Hunter Wellborn, MA

Independent Scholar

Works Cited

Blue, Morgan Genevieve. *Girlhood on Disney Channel: Branding, Celebrity, and Femininity*. Routledge, 2017.

Genz, Stéphanie and Benjamin A. Brabon. *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh UP, 2009.

Lindsey, Treva B. "'One Time for My Girls': African-American Girlhood, Empowerment, and Popular Visual Culture." *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2013, pp. 22-34.

Mask, Mia. *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film*. U Illinois P, 2009.