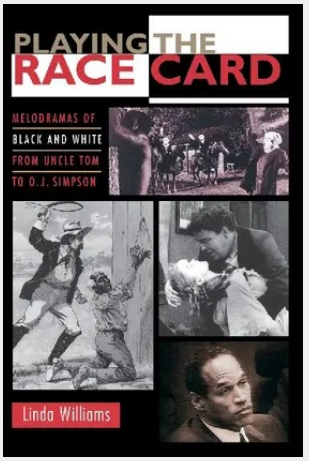
Williams

Playing the Race Card

Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson



The black man suffering at the hands of whites, the white woman sexually threatened by the black man. Both images have long been burned into the American conscience through popular entertainment, and today they exert a powerful and disturbing influence on Americans' understanding of race. So argues Linda Williams in this boldly inquisitive book, where she probes the bitterly divisive racial sentiments aroused by such recent events as O. J. Simpson's criminal trial. Williams, the author of Hard Core, explores how these images took root, beginning with melodramatic theater, where suffering characters acquire virtue through victimization. The racial sympathies and hostilities that surfaced during the trial of the police in the beating of Rodney King and in the O. J. Simpson murder trial are grounded in the melodramatic forms of Uncle Tom's Cabin and The Birth of a Nation. Williams finds that Stowe's beaten black man and Griffith's endangered white woman appear repeatedly throughout popular entertainment, promoting interracial understanding at one moment, interracial hate at another. The black and white racial melodrama has galvanized emotions and fueled the importance of new media forms, such as serious, "integrated" musicals of stage and film, including The Jazz Singer and Show Boat. It also helped create a major event out of the movie Gone With the Wind, while enabling television to assume new moral purpose with the broadcast of Roots. Williams demonstrates how such developments converged to make the televised race trial a form of national entertainment. When prosecutor Christopher Darden accused Simpson's defense team of "playing the race card," which ultimately trumped his own team's gender card, he feared that the jury's sympathy for a targeted black man would be at the expense of the abused white wife. The jury's verdict, Williams concludes, was determined not so much by facts as by the cultural forces of racial melodrama long in the making. Revealing melodrama to be a key element in American culture, Williams argues that the race images it has promoted are deeply ingrained in our minds and that there can be no honest discussion about race until Americans recognize this predicament.

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