



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

EFLA STUDY GUIDE

Intro Unit: The Politics of Education: Empowerment vs. Propaganda

CLASS 2: Race & Popular Culture: The History of the Coon, Mammy, Pickaninny, and Sambo

OVERVIEW

"To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction....The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically..."

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The racist propaganda developed by Europeans to justify chattel slavery extended beyond classrooms and schoolbooks. It was also embedded in society and popular culture. Beginning in the 1840s, minstrel shows that ridiculed Black people as coons and buffoons became the country's first major form of popular entertainment and were performed on national stages as late as 1960. The portrayals of Black coons, pickaninnies [also spelled "picaninny"], and sambos with grotesquely inflated lips and noses, and oversized teeth and eyes were designed to degrade the image of Black people in the eyes of society. Once Black people became equal citizens under the law, this new wave of racist propaganda served to dehumanize them, and to assign them to a new inferior social position equal to or less than that of a slave. These negative images had a profound affect on the psyche of Black people, but they also shaped the psyche of whites. Not only did many Black people internalize these images, developing low self-esteem, hatred for whites, and to the extreme – hatred of themselves and their physical attributes, many whites developed a false sense of racial superiority. Moreover, these racist images circulated all around the world. Blackface minstrelsy is a product of the West, but it is a global phenomenon in which various white ethnic groups like the Jews, Irish and Italians, elevated their sense of self in relation to these dehumanizing stereotypes of people of African descent.

The racist depictions of Blacks in popular culture, combined with the racist educational curriculum and Jim Crow segregation justified new forms of subjugation. In all facets of society there were ugly, racist images and insults hurled at Black Americans. As a result of this racist propaganda, some Black people began to imitate white cultural standards in a vain attempt at white acceptance. Alexis de Tocqueville, a French philosopher traveling in America in the 1830s observed in *Democracy in America* (1835) the following about Blacks:

The Negro makes a thousand fruitless efforts to insinuate himself amongst men who repulse him; he conforms to the tastes of his oppressors, adopts their opinions, and hopes by imitating them to form a part of their community. Having been told from infancy that his race is naturally inferior to that of the whites, he assents to the proposition and is ashamed of his own nature. In each of his features he discovers a trace of slavery, and, if it were in his power, he would willingly rid himself of everything that makes him what he is.

Without question, many African Americans brought into the racist propaganda and the shame it produced, but many others saw it for what it was and called it – “white people lies.” This class examines the history of the racist depictions of Black people that reinforced the notion of black inferiority.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- ✓ Define the terms *caricature* and *blackface* and discuss the significance of the coon, mammy, pickaninny, sambo, and minstrel shows
- ✓ Understand how the racist caricatures of Black people in popular culture before and after slavery served to reinforce the idea of black inferiority
- ✓ Identify and analyze modern forms of racial caricatures and blackface in popular culture

ASSIGNMENT

Read or view the following materials and answer the study questions.

Ethnic Notions (5 min)

Link: <http://efla.homestead.com/~local/~Preview/Intro2video.html>

Study Questions

1. In the opening book, *ABCs for Dixie*, describe the appearance of the Black characters. What were their occupations?
2. If you were a child reading this book or having it read to you, what conclusion would you make about Black people?
3. Describe the language used in the story. Was it "proper" or "standard" English? What is the significance of the dialect used in the book?

4. What are some of the stereotypes displayed in the “Lazy Town” cartoon?
5. Who were these racist caricatures of Black people created for? Why were they created?

The Authentic History Center: Caricatures of African-Americans: The Coon (15 min)

Link: <http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/3-coon/1-history/index.html>

Study Questions

1. What is a caricature?
2. What is the coon caricature? What are characteristics of the “coon”?
3. What were minstrel shows? Why were they created?
4. What were “Cinematic Coons”?
5. Who was the greatest “coon” actor, according to the article? What characteristics did his character display?

The Authentic History Center: The Mammy Caricature

Link: <http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/1-mammy/>

Study Questions

1. In addition to perpetuating the myth of the “happy slave,” what myth did the mammy promote regarding the slave-master relationship?
2. What commercial value did the mammy have? What has been the most successful and recognizable commercial product featuring the mammy image?
3. Who is Hattie McDaniel, and what were her accomplishments? How did the typecasting of Hattie McDaniel justify the typecasting of Black women in real life?
4. What Japanese image is a replica of mammy?

The Authentic History Center: Description of the Pickaninny Caricature (15 min)

Link: <http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/3-coon/2-pickaninny/index.html>

Study Questions

1. What is a pickaninny? What are two characteristics of a pickaninny?
2. Why were “pickaninnies” almost always half-naked or pictured with animals? What did their nakedness convey?
3. How are pickaninnies dehumanized in ways not seen with any other caricature?
4. Why is the story of Little Black Sambo problematic? How did versions of Little Black Sambo change once the caricature was introduced to audiences in the United States?

Blacks and Vaudeville: PBS documentary (19:54 min)

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kbnn3E7Gp8>

Study Questions

1. What was one of the reasons whites could make fun of Blacks in minstrel shows and not the other lower-class ethnic groups like the Irish?
2. What old slave-era myth did white minstrel and vaudeville audiences promote to justify these shows?
3. What do you think about the following statement made by one of the white men interviewed for the documentary?

“I told you why they put on cork, not to be black, but to get expressions from the face. When you put on blackface and white lips you can move your lips around and everyone can see them moving around, and that’s a laugh, and I think that anything you do to get a laugh should be in show business...”

4. The same white commentator perpetuates the myth that Dewey “Pigmeat” Markham was happy wearing the degrading blackface when in fact, that was not the case. What had Pigmeat been doing quietly for decades behind the blackface he supposedly donned so “proudly”?
5. What was the T.O.B.A. circuit?
6. Who were the Nicholas Brothers? How did they undermine the racist stereotypes on the vaudeville stage?

7. Who was Bert Williams?

View cartoon: Scrub Me Mama With a Boogie Beat (6:51 min)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=lazy+town+cartoon

Study Questions

1. What are some of the stereotypes portrayed in the cartoon?

Cotton and Chick Watts Blackface Minstrel Show Comedy (3:42 min)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_swtbli2F0

Study Questions

1. How would you describe Cotton's outfit? What is the material made out of? How does his appearance relate to stereotypes of Black people?
2. When Cotton tells Chick that the Civil Service Examiner asked him, "How far was it from the sun to the moon?", he makes a funny remark as to how he answered. What is the significance of this question as it relates to getting a mail-carrying job?
3. What is the difference between the way Cotton speaks versus how Chick speaks? What are the implications of this distinction?
4. When Chick Watts tells Cotton that she would pay him "all that he is worth," what was Cotton's reply? Who is the joke on?
5. What does Cotton do at the end of the skit? Why doesn't Chick stay to do it with him?
6. What types of audiences would find this comedy skit funny?

Ten Little Niggers Nursery Rhyme / Book

Link: <http://efla.homestead.com/~local/~Preview/Intro2video2.html>

Study Questions

1. What was your first reaction after hearing/reading the song/book?
2. Who is singing the nursery rhyme? Why is this important?
3. What happened to the "Ten Little Niggers"? Why were they subjected to so

much violence?

4. Do you think this is a suitable children's nursery rhyme? Why or why not?

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Books

Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. University of California Press, 1996.

Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Blackface Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip Hop*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture*. Tarcher, 2006.

Articles

Eric Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations*, No. 39 (Summer 1992): 23- 50

Link: <https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/0850/Lott%252520-%252520Love%252520and%252520theft%252520-%252520the%252520racial%252520unconscious%252520of%252520blackface%252520minstrelsy.pdf>

Sandra Richards, "The History of Blackface," Northwestern University

Link: <http://dailynorthwestern.com/2009/11/05/archive-manual/richards-speech-the-history-of-blackface/>

"Black Women in the Media: Mammy, Jezebel, or Angry," Atlanta Black Star, March 4, 2014

Link: <http://atlantablackstar.com/2013/03/04/black-women-in-the-media-mammy-jezebel-or-angry/>

Film

Ethnic Notions

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goJ77bYXnLA>

Bamboozled

On-Line Exhibits

History of Minstrelsy from “Jump Jim Crow” to the “Jazz Singer,” University of South Florida Library

Link: <http://exhibits.lib.usf.edu/exhibits/show/minstrelsy>

The Authentic History Center: Primary Sources from American Popular Culture

Link: <http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/>

Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia

Link: <http://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack.htm>