



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

EFLA TEACHING 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

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

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Students were assigned the following for homework:

- 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>
- The Authentic History Center: The Mammy Caricature (15 min)
Link: <http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/1-mammy/>
- The Authentic History Center: Description of the Picaninny Caricature (15 min)
Link: <http://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/picaninny/>
- Blacks and Vaudeville: PBS documentary (19:54 min)
Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kbnn3E7Gp8>
- View: Scrub Me Mama With a Boogie Beat Cartoon (6:51 min)
Link: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=lazy+town+cartoon
- Cotton and Chick Watts Blackface Minstrel Show Comedy (3:42 min)
Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_swtbli2F0

- Ten Little Niggers Nursery Rhyme / Book (2 min)
Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfNdwFwV6Ao>

MATERIALS

- EFLA Quiz Intro-2
- Common Excuses Used to Justify Stereotyping (or, How Some People Try To Distance Themselves From These Images)
Link: <http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/commonexcuses.html>

INTRO UNIT CLASS 2: QUIZ Intro-2 (with answer key)

(35 – 45 minutes)

Instructions

- Distribute EFLA Document: Quiz Intro-2 (below), which is based on the homework assignment from the previous class. Give students approximately 15-20 minutes to complete the quiz. The answers are provided. Some answers may vary.
- Once the quiz is complete, call on student volunteers to provide the answers to each of the questions. Facilitate a class discussion by reviewing the answers together. Allow students the opportunity to grade their own quiz. Collect and review graded quizzes for accuracy and place in student folder.

Quiz Questions

“Caricatures of African-Americans: The Coon”

1. What is the coon caricature? What are characteristics of the “coon”?

Answer: The coon caricature was portrayed as a lazy, easily frightened, inarticulate, good-for-nothing buffoon. Although he often worked as a servant, was not happy with his status. He was simply too lazy or too cynical to attempt to change his lowly position. The name itself, an abbreviation of raccoon, is dehumanizing.

The coon caricature was invented during American slavery. Slave masters and overseers often described slaves as "slow" and "lazy" who "wants pushing." The master and the slave operated with different motives: the master desired to obtain from the slave the greatest labor, by any means; and the slave desired to do the least labor while avoiding punishment.

2. What were minstrel shows? Why were they created?

Answer: Beginning in the 1830s, a distinctly American form of theater began to emerge called the minstrel show, consisting of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music performed by Whites in blackface (a makeup made from burnt cork). Minstrel shows were stereotypes of Black culture. They existed to portray Blacks in all of the various caricatures of them for the benefit of mostly White audiences. The coon caricature was one of the stock characters of the minstrel show.

Audiences laughed at the ignorant, lazy, slow-talking fool who avoided work and other responsibilities.

When African Americans won their freedom after the Civil War, minstrel shows transformed the coon into a comic caricature of the emancipated Black who was either a "Zip Coon" or an "Urban Coon". Zip Coons were urban Black dandies, who "put on airs" by dressing up fancy in imitation of affluent Whites. The humor was in the situational irony. The character was ignorant of his foolish appearance. He thought he was as smart as Whites, but his frequent misuse of language and application of warped logic was humorously pathetic. Urban Coons had similar characteristics but also engaged in gambling, dice, and the frequent use of razor blades for solving petty squabbles with other coons. The minstrel coon's ultimate goal was leisure. For him, that was time spent strutting, styling, fighting other coons, avoiding honorable vocations, eating watermelons, and engaging in general buffoonery. If the coon was married, he avoided his domestic responsibilities, argued with his wife, and ultimately allowed her to dominate him. The Coon caricature inspired a short-lived, but intense genre of music around the turn of the 20th century (discussed in a separate section), both in sheet music and in the developing recorded music industry.

"In the minstrel show, Mammy was often a grumpy old hag, whose main purpose was to be a foil for the shenanigans of her Black male partner, who was usually the Coon caricature. When the motion picture industry began to develop in the early 20th century, Mammy quickly made the transition to film. The development of the film industry coincided with the rehabilitation of the Old South myth (described above), and the popularity of movies thus brought Black caricatures into the lives of nearly all Americans, including the millions of immigrants recently arrived from Eastern and Southern Europe. Dozens of early films were set in the Old South and were replete with Mammies." (American History Center)

Minstrel shows began to decline in popularity around the beginning of the 20th century (replaced by vaudeville), and was dead as a form of professional entertainment by 1910, although amateur minstrel shows continued to be performed by local theater and high school productions until the 1960s. By the time the coon made the transition from minstrel shows to film and other forms of popular culture, he was for many White Americans an actual racial type. It was not uncommon for Whites to distinguish between "Niggers" (Coons and Bucks) and "Negroes" (Toms and Mammies), with both terms used within popular culture.

"The Mammy Caricature"

- 3. In addition to perpetuating the myth of the "happy slave," what myth did the mammy promote regarding the slave-master relationship?**

Answer: Mammy promoted the lie that White men, particularly slave owners, could not possibly be sexually attracted to Black women.

“[Mammy] was created during the era of American slavery as manufactured evidence that black slave women were content and even happy to be slaves, and thus, that slavery was a humane institution. Although she had children, sometimes many, she was completely desexualized. She ‘belonged’ to the white family, though it was rarely stated, and she was a faithful worker. She had no black friends; the white family was her entire world. Mammy was obese, old, very dark-skinned, and she always wore a bandana.

These physical traits were intended to protect the myth that White men did not find Black women attractive, and that there was no sexual contact between them within the intimate confines of the antebellum plantation. This was a lie, perhaps the biggest told about the slave-master relationship. The primary sources on American slavery make it all too clear that sexual exploitation of Black women by their White masters was pervasive.”

“Description of the Pickanniny Caricature”

4. Why were “pickaninnies” almost always half-naked or pictured with animals? What did their nakedness convey?

Answer: The pickaninny caricature shows black children as either poorly dressed, wearing ragged, torn, old and oversized clothes, or they are shown as nude or near-nude. This nudity suggests that black children, and by extension black parents, are not concerned with modesty. The nudity also implies that black parents neglect their children. A loving parent would provide clothing. The nudity of black children suggests that Blacks are less civilized than whites (who wear clothes), and these black children were like animals.

The nudity is also problematic because it sexualizes these children. Black children are shown with exposed genitalia and buttocks -- often without apparent shame. Moreover, the buttocks are often exaggerated in size, that is, black children are shown with the buttocks of adults. The widespread depictions of nudity among black children normalized their sexual objectification, and, by extension, justified the sexual abuse of these children. The nudity was therefore pornographic, playing into perverse sexual desires of the audience.

“Blacks and Vaudeville: PBS Documentary”

5. Who were the Nicholas Brothers? How did they undermine the racist stereotypes on the vaudeville stage?

Answer: The Nicholas Brothers never performed in blackface. Instead, they performed in tuxedos and performed with class and dignity and because of that, they were never even asked to wear blackface. However, they didn't get many parts in movies because they refused to do racist scenes.

6. Who was Bert Williams and Hattie McDaniel?

Answer: Bert Williams was one of the pre-eminent entertainers of the Vaudeville era and one of the most popular comedians for all audiences of his time. He was by far the best-selling black recording artist before 1920. In 1918, the New York Dramatic Mirror called Williams "one of the great comedians of the world."

Williams was a key figure in the development of African-American entertainment. In an age when racial inequality and stereotyping were commonplace, he became the first Black American to take a lead role on the Broadway stage, and did much to push back racial barriers during his long career.

NOTE: The quote about Bert Williams said to have come from George Washington Carver actually came from Booker T. Washington. He was also 47, not 46 when he died.

"Hattie McDaniel was the most well known of the film mammies. She played the caricature in more than half a dozen films before playing Scarlet O'Hara's sassy but loyal servant in *Gone With the Wind* in 1939. McDaniel won an Oscar for best supporting actress, the first Black to win an Academy Award. Hattie McDaniel was a gifted actress who added depth to the character of mammy. But McDaniel's story highlights the difficulties Black Americans faced as a consequence of the mainstreaming of Mammy. McDaniel became typecast. If she was in a film that was set in the present, well after slavery, she was a maid—still the domestic servant."



QUIZ Intro-2

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. What is the coon caricature? What are characteristics of the “coon”?
2. In addition to perpetuating the myth of the “happy slave,” what myth did the mammy promote regarding the slave-master relationship?
3. What were minstrel shows? Why were they created?
4. Why were “pickaninnies” almost always half-naked or pictured with animals? What did their nakedness convey?
5. Who were the Nicholas Brothers? How did they undermine the racist stereotypes on the vaudeville stage?
6. Who were Bert Williams and Hattie McDaniel?

Class Activity 1

(45 – 60 minutes)

MATERIALS

- Common Excuses Used to Justify Stereotyping (or, How Some People Try To Distance Themselves From These Images)
Link: <http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/commonexcuses.html>

INSTRUCTIONS

Engage students in a discussion using the questions outlined in the document, “Common Excuses Used to Justify Stereotyping.” After reviewing the questions, ask students the following:

- Discuss an incident in which someone used one of the justifications listed in “Common Excuses Used to Justify Stereotyping.”
- How did you, or others, respond?



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Common Excuses Used to Justify Stereotyping (or, How Some People Try To Distance Themselves From These Images)

From the Authentic History Center: Teaching Diversity with Multimedia

When viewing the artifacts in The Authentic History Center's collection, some of you will try to distance yourselves from the harm in these images by giving excuses for them. For that reason, consider reading this section before continuing on into the collection. Common excuses used to justify stereotyping include:

1. It's okay to stereotype one group because other people/groups are stereotyped as well.

This is flawed logic. Humans should operate on the premise that it's never acceptable to intentionally stereotype races of people, regardless of how many races are caricatured. Consider the old saying, "two wrongs don't make a right." With this in mind, it should be noted anyway that since Caucasians have long been in control of the country's imagery, they have had a free ride from being caricatured for hundreds of years now, at the expense of every other race. Some of you will say, "What about all of those 'redneck' jokes? Isn't that stereotyping of Whites?" While much of this humor is stereotypical and distasteful, it is based on regional and economic differences, not on skin color; and since it originated by Whites, it's a self-parody, which is not the same as when one race caricatures another. Ask yourself, did the government discriminate against "rednecks" based on their...redneckness? Were they enslaved for two hundred fifty years and then legally segregated for another hundred years?

2. If it's funny, then it's not offensive.

Some stereotyping is intended to be funny. If your first reaction is to laugh at a racist joke or image, you're not alone, and it doesn't necessarily mean you are a racist. However, you should then stop and consider why it is that you're laughing. Maybe you're just enjoying the sense of security you get by being part of the "in group" that gets to laugh, rather than a part of the "out group" whose differences are being laughed at. We all want to be insiders. Chances are that the person being stereotyped does not share your opinion about the humor and feels offended. Something can be funny and offensive. If you're hurting other people, you're hurting yourself too, because you're limiting your development as a human being. Next time, try to think about and feel for that other person before laughing. Develop empathy.

3. These stereotypes are so old that they're not offensive anymore.

While these stereotypes are often very old, they're not "history." Most caricatures never completely die. Some are still around virtually unchanged, while others have evolved and become a little less obvious. New caricatures appear all the time. Some old images from the early 1900s are being slapped on mouse pads and watch faces and sold as new, "nostalgic" items; there is a huge Internet and antique store market for reproductions of old racist artifacts; and new items with new images frequently enter the marketplace. The bottom line is that racist artifacts are still being made and sold today on the Internet and in retail stores, and the stereotyping they promote is still being used to justify prejudice and discrimination.

4. These images are understandable because it was just a normal part of life back then.

It's true that inhumane treatment of humans by other humans has a long, long history, and that we really didn't get around to thinking much about basic human rights until The Enlightenment in the 18th century. It is a good idea to use "historical perspective" when studying history, which means you have to try to judge people and their behaviors based on the ethical and moral standards of the time period in which they lived. In doing so, remember that there were voices during the Colonial and antebellum days of slavery who were saying it was wrong. There were people in the US who were against the dispossession of the Indian peoples, and later, the efforts to force Indians to abandon their culture and assimilate into the general populace. There were people who protested the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII. Racism certainly was extremely common and obvious throughout American history, but that doesn't mean it was right. Racism was sometimes public policy, and that's part of the country's heritage. Americans have made efforts to correct some of these past mistakes, which is extremely important to remember. We study these images to understand the past, to celebrate the progress made, and to be more aware of the work still to be done. If we pretend these things didn't happen, we diminish ourselves, and we set the stage for history to repeat.

5. If the image is "cute" or part of a child's toy, it's not offensive.

When viewing these items, you must teach yourself to view an item in context with the history of all of these items. One "cute" item by itself probably wouldn't be problematic. But individual items don't exist in a vacuum. You can't pretend that they do. Even if the item is a cherished toy from your childhood, you must think about the item's relationship to all of the other items in the collection, and the history of the caricature it represents. See the explanation of the continuum below for more details.

6. *If the image didn't intend to be racist or offensive, then it isn't.*

Some of the items you'll see in the collection were obviously intended to be hurtful. Most of these fall into the category of novelty items, and we can more easily categorize these items as being racist and highly offensive. However, many of the images you'll see didn't intend to be racist at all. Many corporate icons and name brand products featured racist images, especially from the 1870s to the 1960s. These images still caused harm, and they helped to legitimize and perpetuate the caricatures, thereby justifying continued discrimination. Many Whites with little or no contact with non-Whites based their mental image of these "others" on these images.

7. *If it doesn't include the word "nigger", then it's not racist.*

Most people can agree that when used with an obvious intent to harm, the word nigger is racist (for a good history of the word, go here). Unfortunately, many people conversely believe that only that word (and its ethnic counterparts) is racist, and that everything else is okay. That's simply not true. All of these items exist on what is called a continuum. Think of it as a scale, from most racist down to least racist. While items with the word "nigger" are blatantly offensive, they are only one end of a continuum. They still exist because they're connected to all of the lesser caricatured items that too many people accept. Consider the blatantly offensive "Nigger Head Oysters" product. This a modern item, a reproduction of a real product that was produced in the early 1900s. It exists because it's part of a continuum of lesser caricatured items, heading toward the right. The last item, produced in 2003, is a trash-talking pimp doll. It too is a racist item, it just falls on the farther end of the continuum. Many people today find it humorous. Because so many people do, it contributes to acceptance of the more offensive images.

8. *Blacks call each other "nigger" so I should be able to.*

Recently, "shock jock" Don Imus received national attention when he referred to the women's NCAA runner-ups as "nappy-headed hoes." Public outrage by prominent African American leaders soon pressured NBC to fire him. Some saw this as appropriate, while others saw evidence of a double standard. Why was it unacceptable for Caucasian Don Imus to say this, while Black comedians and rap artists can get away with the same language, and with calling each other nigger? Public use of that language, regardless of who speaks it, is harmful and offensive. That many young African Americans have appropriated such language in public discourse is a source of concern and frustration for African Americans of the Civil Rights Era. Many of them have publicly criticized certain rap artists for perpetuating stereotypes. Young Black Americans are not born with a complete knowledge of Black history any more than is anyone else. Their ignorance has, in some cases, helped keep old stereotypes alive and has allowed too many other young Americans to claim license to use the same kind of language in public.

9. *This is a positive stereotype--what's wrong with that?*

Some stereotypes could be qualified as "positive" ones, like some of the team mascots that are so common in the US. These are commonly justified as being okay because they "honor" their subjects. The team mascot debate will be covered in detail in the Native American section, but it's important to remember that even so-called positive stereotypes do harm because they depict real human beings as being unreal. Additionally, when the subject involves Native Americans, these "positive" images consistently characterize Indians as a people of the past, not of the present (or future), further confirming their "other" status and drawing attention away from contemporary Native American issues.

10. *If I don't find it offensive, then it isn't offensive.*

What each person finds offensive is going to vary based on that person's values, past experiences, and education. The more a person has been stereotyped and discriminated against, or the more a person is exposed to materials such as those collected here, the more sensitive that person is going to be about such issues. Just because you don't find something offensive doesn't mean it isn't harmful to someone else.

11. *We should all just relax and not worry about this stuff. It's really no big deal.*

It would be nice if this were true. Unfortunately, we will never stop talking about race. Because of this, we must learn to talk about race better than we do now. Ignoring racism, pretending it doesn't exist is not the way to talk better about it.

From the Authentic History Center: Teaching Diversity with Multimedia
<http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/commonexcuses.html>

Homework Assignment for Intro Unit Class 3

(Total Reading Time: Less than 1 hour)

Assign the following for homework:

- James C. McKinley, Jr., "Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2010 (7 – 10 min)
Link: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html?_r=0
- David A. Love, "Arizona's Ethnic Studies Ban Whitewashes History," *The Griot Opinion Column*, May 13, 2010 (7 – 10 min)
Link: <http://thegrio.com/2010/05/13/arizonas-ethnic-studies-ban-whitewashes-history/>
- Josh Eidelson, Students and Teachers Battle Conservatives Over AP History Curriculum, *Bloomberg Business—Politics and Policy*, October 3, 2014 (5 min)
Link: <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-10-03/students-and-teachers-battle-conservatives-over-ap-history-curriculum>
- Gene Demby, "Lots of Confusion Over Teacher Firings at Howard University Middle School," *NPR*, February 3, 2015 (5 min)
Link: <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/03/383574693/lots-of-confusion-over-teacher-firings-at-howard-university-middle-school>
- Marc Santia, "Children Barred from Writing about Malcolm X in NYC School," *NBC New York*, February 10, 2014 (5 min)
Link: <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Malcolm-X-Essays-Banned-Queens-School-Black-History-244745971.html>
- Olivia Katrandjian, "Teacher Who Assigned Math Homework with Slavery Questions Resigns," *ABC News*, January 21, 2012 (5 min)
Link: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/01/teacher-who-assigned-math-homework-with-slavery-questions-resigns/>
- Brown at 60: The Doll Test, NAACP Legal Defense Fund
Link: <http://www.naacpldf.org/brown-at-60-the-doll-test>