

SC308: Race, Representation and the Myth of Colorblindness

Mondays 3-5:30 PM, Devlin 227
Fall 2005

Instructor: Chiwen Bao
Office Hours: Mondays 11:30 AM-1:30 PM and by appt
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In our post-civil rights era, colorblindness is hailed as the new state of the American mind where the saying goes that it doesn't matter whether you are black, white, "green" or "blue," because everyone can experience the same opportunities, freedoms and pleasures in this capitalist and democratic society. This ideological colorblindness is one of the latest exemplary permutations of our rhetoric of "The American Dream" and meritocracy. Logic follows that race-less-ness results from the end of (de jure) segregation, the banishment of Jim Crow laws, and the implementation of policies that ostensibly allow for everyone to have similar access to life opportunities regardless of skin color. However, when we turn to realms of representation, we see that race remains a highly codified meaning system where knowledge on race is readily transpired through media representations. Moreover, we find that we have an outstanding cultural literacy and perceptual fluency with racial representations, as shown through the way we can ostensibly yet readily discern what acting "white" or representing "whiteness" is as opposed to acting "black" or representing "blackness."

To examine this paradox of ideological colorblindness and racial signification, we will first examine the discursive and socio-historical context in which we are situated. Then, we will examine domains of representation in the realm of popular culture, especially areas where racial imagery is highly trafficked, to see how media help produce and re-create salient racial coding schemes and meaning-making systems that animate the representations and patterns of consumption. Subsequently, we will explore the consequences and implications of how schemes of racial representation work in conjunction with rhetoric on meritocracy and colorblindness to maintain hegemony and inequality. Finally, we will examine and imagine possibilities of resistance within this regime of racial rhetoric and representation.

Note: Since this course will involve openly discussing issues that may arouse numerous emotions, including discomfort and even anger, please be intellectually, mentally and emotionally prepared to:

- 1) interrogate and explore your own assumptions and belief systems**
- 2) have others *respectfully* interrogate and explore your comments and**
- 3) *respectfully* interrogate and explore others' comments.**

Requirements:

45% class attendance and participation

20% 6-8 page analytic paper

35% 16-20 page final paper or project (due by 5 PM Friday, Dec. 9)

Class attendance and participation (45%)

Because this is a seminar, your engagement with the material and contributions to class discussions will constitute the backbone of this course. Please recognize that you are empowered with partial ownership of this course, its direction and success. Each class meeting will open with a brief discussion to review that week's materials during which you will help others and yourself clarify the readings and understand major arguments. Then, we will delve into more complex questions raised by the material. Please be prepared each class period with at least one question for this latter portion of our discussion.

Analytic paper (20%)

Essay questions will be distributed in class on 10.3 and papers are due in class on 10.24. Your analytic papers will respond to one of the questions by drawing on the texts used in class.

Final paper or project (35%)

Papers will be on a topic or question that has been raised by the readings or course discussions and that you are interested in exploring further. You will use texts from the course and several outside references/sources to support your thesis/argument. If you choose to do a final project instead of the paper, you will also explore a topic or question raised during the course, but are welcome to explore a range of multimedia options, like music, film, poetry, etc. for the (re)presentation of your ideas/arguments. Your project will entail the amount of work equivalent to that which would go into the final paper. Communicate with me (via e-mail, phone, or in person) about your final paper or project by 11.7. You can also share your project idea with other seminar participants to gather ideas, but ultimately the project is yours and all academic (and general) integrity rules apply.

Academic Integrity:

For information on Boston College's Academic Integrity and Plagiarism Policy, please see http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/enmgt/stserv/acd/univ.html#integrity

Readings: Textbooks are available at the bookstore and on reserve at O'Neill and all other readings are available online.

Required Texts:

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Dyson, Michael Eric. Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Entman, Robert M. and Rojecki, Andrew. The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Holt, Thomas C. The Problem of Race in the 21st Century. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

hooks, bell. Black Looks: Race and Representation. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992.

Kelley, Robin D. G. Yo' Mama's DisFunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997.

McGruder, Aaron. A Right to Be Hostile: The Boondocks Treasury. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003.

Wallace, Michele and Dent, Gina. Black Popular Culture. New York: The New Press, 1998.

Course Outline:

1. Introduction: The perennial question, “What’s going on?” (9.12)

2. Contextualizing and exploring an ideology of colorblindness

Historicizing our racial discourse (9.19)

- Holt

The workings of an ideology of colorblindness (9.26)

- Bonilla-Silva

3. Sampling color-conscious representations and their consequences

Terror alert: Representations of race, violence and criminality (10.3)

- Entman and Rojecki
 - Chap. 3 “Culture, Media, and the White Mind: The Character of Their Content”
 - Chap. 4 “The Meaning of Blackness in Network News”
 - Chap. 5 “Violence, Stereotypes, and African Americans in the News”
- hooks, chap. 11 “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination”
- Judith Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising (available after noon on 9.28 in my mailbox)
- Robert Gooding-Williams, “Look, a Negro!” Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising (available after noon on 9.28 in my mailbox)
- Dyson, chap. 2 “Obsessed with O.J.: Meditations on an American Tragedy”
- (distribute essay questions)

Danger zone: Race and space in the urban ghetto (10.17)

- Kelley
 - Introduction
 - Chap. 1 “Looking for the ‘Real’ Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto”
 - Chap. 2 “Looking to Get Paid: How Some Black Youth Put Culture to Work”
- Julianne Malveaux, BPC, “Popular Culture and the Economics of Alienation”
- John Jeffries, BPC, “Toward a Redefinition of the Urban: The Collision of Culture”
- Entmann and Rojecki, Chap. 6 “Benign Neglect in the Poverty of the News”
- Philip Brian Harper, “Class Acts: The ‘Street,’ Popular Music, and Black-cultural Crossover,” Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity

Busting the block and screening race (10.24 and 10.31)

- Bamboozled (in class viewing on 10.24)
- (papers due on 10.24 in class)
- Craig Watkins, “Producing Ghetto Pictures,” Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema (10.31)
- Entman and Rojecki (10.31)
 - Chap. 9 “Prime-Time Television: White and Whiter”
 - Chap. 11 “Race at the Movies”
- Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, “White Responses: The Emergence of ‘Enlightened’ Racism” Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream (10.31)

4. Constituting race in the representations

Race, authenticity and cultural production (11.7)

- BPC
 - Stuart Hall, “What Is This “Black” in Black Popular Culture?”
 - Isaac Julien, “Black Is, Black Ain’t: Notes on De-essentializing Black Identities”
 - Manthia Diawara, “Afro-Kitsch”
 - Tricia Rose, “Black Texts, Black Contexts”
- Dyson
 - chap. 13 “Race and the Myth of Black Purity”
 - chap. 20 “Mariah Carey and ‘Authentic’ Black Music”
- Carl Hancock Rux, “Eminem: The New White Negro,” Everything but the Burden
- Andrew Ross, “Mr. Reggae DJ, Meet the International Monetary Fund,” Real Love: In Pursuit of Cultural Justice

Gender and sexuality: Complicating the racial problematic (11.14)

- Dyson
 - chap. 6 “The Lives of Black Men”
 - chap. 28 “Benediction: Letter to My Wife Marcia”
- hooks
 - chap. 4 “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace”
 - chap. 6 “Reconstructing Black Masculinity”
- BPC
 - Jacquie Jones, “The Accusatory Space”
 - Michele Wallace, “Boyz N the Hood and Jungle Fever”
 - Lisa Kennedy, “The Body in Question”
- Tricia Rose, “Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music” Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America

5. Exploring politics of representing and consuming race

Politics of representation and interpretation (11.21)

- BPC
 - Cornel West, “Nihilism in Black America, Racial and Political Representation of Black America”
 - bell hooks, “Dialectically Down with the Critical Program”
 - Jacqueline Bobo, “The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers, Audiences”
 - Houston A. Baker, Jr., “You Cain’t Trus’ It: Experts Witnessing in the Case of Rap”
 - Sherley Anne Williams, “Two Words on Music: Black Community”
- Dyson
 - Chap. 16 “Screening the Black Panthers”
 - Chap. 25 “Public Enemy: Rap’s Prophets of Rage”
- Entman and Rojecki, Chap. 8 “Black Power”
- Melvin Gibbs, “ThugGods: Spiritual Darkness and Hip-Hop” Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture

Recommended:

- Tricia Rose, “Prophets of Rage: Rap Music and the Politics of Black Cultural Expression” Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America

Consuming race and representations (11.28)

- Saidiya V. Hartman, “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance” Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in 19th Century America
- Entman and Rojecki, Chap. 10 “Advertising Whiteness”
- hooks
 - chap. 2 “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance”
 - chap. 7 “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators”
- Gina Dent, BPC “Black Pleasure, Black Joy”
- Dyson, chap. 4 “Crossing Over Jordan”
- Greg Tate, “Introduction: Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects” Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture

6. Resisting representations, revolutionizing imaginations (12.5)

- McGruder, A Right to Be Hostile: The Boondocks Treasury
- Kelley
 - Chap. 5 “Looking forward: How the New Working Class Can Transform Urban America”
 - Epilogue “Looking b(l)ackward”
- Entman and Rojecki, chap. 12 “Reflecting on the End of Racial Representation”
- hooks, Introduction “Revolutionary Attitude”
- Manning Marable, BPC “Race, Identity and Political Culture”
- Dyson, chap. 27 “Gangsta Rap and American Culture”