



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, Pickinny, and Sambo

OVERVIEW

The racist propaganda developed by Europeans to justify chattel slavery extended beyond classrooms and schoolbooks. It became embedded in society and popular culture. Beginning in the 1840s, minstrel shows that ridiculed blacks as coons and buffoons became the country's first major form of popular entertainment and were performed as late as 1960. The portrayal of black people as coons, picaninnies, and Sambos with inflated lips and noses, and oversized teeth and eyes was designed to degrade the image of black people in the eyes of society and to undermine the idea of Black equality. This history was the centerpiece of Spike Lee's critically acclaimed *Bamboozled* (2000). Once blacks 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 effect on the psyche of black people and many internalized them, 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. Blackface minstrelsy is a product of the West, but it is a global phenomenon in which various groups 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 overtones of the education curriculum, and the degrading and inferior separate "blacks only" and "Whites only" public facilities, undermined any notion of future equality between the races. Everywhere blacks looked or turned there were ugly, racist images and insults hurled at them. Many blacks, ashamed at being black because of this virulent racist propaganda, began attempting to imitate white people and culture in a vain attempt at white acceptance. Alexis de Tocqueville, a French philosopher travelling 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 – “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 term caricature and discuss the significance of the coon, pickininy, 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 stereotyping in popular culture

ASSIGNMENT

Read/View the following:

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

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

Jim Crow Museum: The Pickininy 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 cartoon: Scrub Me Mama With a Boogie Beat (4 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

Quiz Intro Unit Class 2 (20-30 min)

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

From Caricatures of African-Americans: The Coon

1. What is a caricature? What is the coon caricature? What are characteristics of the "coon?"

Answer: Caricature: a picture, description, or imitation of a person or thing in which certain striking characteristics are exaggerated in order to create a comic or grotesque effect.

The coon caricature is one of the most degrading and insulting of all anti-Black caricatures. The name itself, an abbreviation of raccoon, is dehumanizing. The coon 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 coon caricature was born during American slavery. Slave masters and overseers often described slaves as "slow," "lazy," and "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 a send up 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.

With African Americans freed by the Civil War, minstrel shows transformed the coon into a comic caricature of the emancipated Black, 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. 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 in the popular culture.

3. What are "Cinematic Coons?" Who was the greatest "coon" actor? What characteristics did his character display?

Answer: The coon, like the mammy and Tom, have a long history in the movies. Coons abounded in the silent era in such films as *Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1907), *The Sambo Series* (1909-1911), *How Rastus Got His Turkey* (1910) and *Chicken Thief* (1910 or 1911). These early coons laid the foundation for the greatest movie coon actor of all time, Stepin Fetchit. During the 1930s, Fetchit played the quintessential slow-talking, shuffling, lazy, dimwitted rascal. His characters could never correctly pronounce a multi-syllabic word. Studio executives, thinking he was illiterate, allowed him to improvise some of his lines. Fetchit's coonish acting was aided by his physical appearance. He was tall and skinny, with a shaved head and a way of creating a vacant look in his eyes as he shuffled. Fetchit's coon characters were racially insulted, and sometimes physically abused by White characters. In *Judge Priest* (1934), Fetchit was pushed and shoved, and verbally insulted by Will Rogers, and yet he followed the White star around the film, speaking in a barely intelligible dialect and scratching his head in an apelike manner. Fetchit himself was parodied in a 1937 Warner Brothers cartoon, *Clean Pastures*, where a coon angel is tasked with bringing more Black souls from Harlem up to heaven. He meets with no success, until

rhythm is introduced, and then the other Blacks dance their way into heaven. Other cartoons also featured the coon, most notably in the Universal/Walter Lantz short *Scrub Me Mama With a Boogie Beat*. The cartoon is set in the South, in a town called Lazy Town, where Blacks are so lazy they can barely move, and have to use their fingers to keep their eyelids open. Only when a light-skinned, glamorized Harlem girl shows up do the town's inhabitants discover more pep.

Stepin' Fetchit was the first Black actor to achieve mainstream success. He became a real racial type to many White Americans. He was so successful that he spawned several imitators, including Willie Best (*Sleep 'n Eat*), who appeared in 124 films, and Mantan Moreland, an actor with the physical ability to make his eyes bulge out when acting scared, which he used most notably in his role of the scared manservant of Charlie Chan in numerous films.

In 1978 Fetchit was elected to the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame. But his body of work is remembered as the most extreme embodiment of the coon caricature. He unsuccessfully attempted a comeback in the 1950s, but by then his coon caricature was just embarrassing. Despite this legacy, the coon caricature has made something of a comeback in the modern era. In his most recent form, he is anthropomorphic, giving rise to yet another excuse, "how can that be racist if it's not even human?" An honest evaluation of these new images makes it clear, however, that several movie directors have introduced modern coons into their films as comic relief, just like the minstrels of old, and their "human" characteristics are unmistakably coonish.

From Lazy Town Cartoon

1. What are some of the stereotypes displayed in "Lazy Town?"

Answer: The cartoon is set in the South, in a town called Lazy Town, where Blacks are so lazy they can barely move, and have to use their fingers to keep their eyelids open. Only when a light-skinned, glamorized Harlem girl shows up do the town's inhabitants discover more pep. The men all personify the "coon" character. The mammy character is represented as well as the pickinny and although they are both women, it is men who play their voice. There are many more, credit students for all right answers.

From The Picanniny Caricature

1. What is a picaninny? What are two characteristics of a picaninny?

The picaninny was the dominant racial caricature of black children for most of this country's history. They were "child coons," miniature versions of Stepin Fetchit (see Pilgrim (2000)). Picaninnies had bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths into which they stuffed huge slices of watermelon. They were themselves tasty morsels for alligators. They were routinely shown on postcards,

posters, and other ephemera being chased or eaten. Picaninnies were portrayed as nameless, shiftless natural buffoons running from alligators and toward fried chicken.

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

Answer: The picaninny caricature shows black children as either poorly dressed, wearing ragged, torn, old and oversized clothes, or, and worse, 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).

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 normalizes their sexual objectification, and, by extension, justifies the sexual abuse of these children.

3. Why was the Sambo character problematic? How was the original version by Bannerman changed?

Answer: the book does have anti-black overtones, most notably the illustrations. Sambo is crudely drawn, an obvious caricature. Black Mumbo is drawn as a stereotypical American looking mammy, though she is not obese. The caricature of Black Jumbo is softer, though it is similar to the Dandy caricature. The names Mumbo and Jumbo also make the characters seem nonsensical at a time when blacks were routinely thought to be inherently dumb.

The illustrations were racially offensive, and so was the name Sambo. At the time that the book was originally published Sambo was an established anti-black epithet, a generic degrading reference. It symbolized the lazy, grinning, docile, childlike, good-for-little servant. Maybe Bannerman was unfamiliar with Sambo's American meaning. For many African Americans Little Black Sambo was an entertaining story ruined by racist pictures and racist names. Julius Lester (1997), who has recently co-authored *Sam and the Tigers* (Lester, Bannerman, Pinkney, & Bierhorst, 1996), an updated Afrocentric version of Little Black Sambo, wrote:

When I read Little Black Sambo as a child, I had no choice but to identify with him because I am black and so was he. Even as I sit here and write the feelings of shame, embarrassment and hurt come back. And there was a bit of confusion because I liked the story and I especially liked all those pancakes, but the illustrations exaggerated the racial features

society had made it clear to me represented my racial inferiority -- the black, black skin, the eyes shining white, the red protruding lips. I did not feel good about myself as a black child looking at those pictures.

All American children did not see the same book, however. Though the authorized Stokes edition sold well and never went out of print, a host of other versions quickly began to appear from mass-market publishers, from reprint houses, from small, outlying firms unconstrained by the mutual courtesies of the major publishers. A few are straight knock-offs of the book that Bannerman made, without her name on the title page; the majority were reillustrated -- with gross, degrading caricatures that set Sambo down on the old plantation or, with equal distortiveness, deposited him in Darkest Africa. Libraries stocked the Stokes edition, and a few others selectively. But overall the bootleg Sambos were much cheaper, more widely distributed, and vastly more numerous.

From Blacks and Vaudeville: PBS documentary

1. What was one of the reasons whites could make fun of blacks in minstrel shows and not other lower-class ethnics like the Irish?

Answer: "Because you couldn't make fun of an all-Irish audience without getting run off stage. Black people were forced to sit in the upper balcony or not allowed to enter altogether."

2. What old slave-era myth did white minstrel and vaudeville audiences promote to justify these shows?

Answer: "That blacks were happy during slavery and ok with 'separate but equal'...that blacks were simple, happy creatures who loved to entertain and had lots of free time to do it..."

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..."

Answer: see answer 2 in "Common Excuses Used to Justify Stereotyping" below for reference. Also, the jokes that were being told during these shows were racist -- blackface was not created to make facial expressions stand out as the guy being interviewed suggests.

4. The same white man being interviewed about Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham perpetuates the myth that Pigmeat was happy wearing the degrading blackface

when in fact, what had Pigmeat been doing quietly for decades behind the blackface he “proudly” donned?

Answer: Pigmeat had been bleaching his skin for 40 years because he was ashamed of his black skin. Black people have a history of telling white people what white people want to hear as a strategy to gain favor or to stay out of danger of whites. A great example of this philosophy comes in a passage from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. When dealing with the white man the narrator, an “invisible” black man, is instructed by his grandfather to:

“Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open...Learn it to the younguns,” he whispered fiercely; then he died.”

5. What was the T.O.B.A. circuit?

Answer: Theater Owners Booking Association, or T.O.B.A., was the vaudeville circuit for African American performers in the 1920s and 1930s. It has also derogatorily been referred to as “the Chitlin Circuit.” The theaters mostly had white owners (Athens, Georgia's, recently restored 1909 “Morton Theater”—operated by “Pinky” Monroe Morton, being a notable exception) and booked jazz and blues musicians and singers, comedians, and other performers, including the classically trained, such as operatic soprano Matilda Sissieretta Joyner Jones, colloquially known as “The Black Patti”, for black audiences.

The association was established following the work of vaudeville performer Sherman H. Dudley. By 1909, Dudley was widely known as the “Lone Star Comedian” and had begun an attempt to have a black-owned and operated string of venues around the United States. By 1911 Dudley was based in Washington, D.C. as general manager and treasurer of the Colored Actors' Union, and set up S. H. Dudley Theatrical Enterprises, which began buying and leasing theaters around Washington and Virginia. By 1916 the “Dudley Circuit” had extended into the south and Midwest, enabling black entertainers to secure longer-term contracts for an extended season; this circuit provided the basis for T.O.B.A.[2] His circuit was advertised in a weekly column published in black newspapers, “What's What on the Dudley's Circuit”, and by 1914 it included over twenty theaters, “all owned or operated by blacks and as far south as Atlanta.” T.O.B.A. was founded by people associated with Dudley's circuit.

The organization had more than 100 theaters at its peak in the 1920s. Often referred to by the black performers as Tough on Black Artists (or, by Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, as Tough on Black Asses), the association was generally known as Toby Time (Time was a common term for vaudeville circuits). It booked only black artists into a series of theatres on the East Coast and as far west as Oklahoma. T.O.B.A. venues were the only ones south of the Mason-Dixon line that regularly sought black audiences, according to one reference. T.O.B.A. paid

less and generally had worse touring arrangements than the white vaudeville counterpart. But like white vaudeville, T.O.B.A. faded from popularity during the Great Depression.

Its earliest star performers included singers Ethel Waters, Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Edmonia Henderson, Mamie Smith, Minto Cato, and Adelaide Hall; comedian Tim Moore with his Chicago Follies company (which included his wife Gertie); the Whitman Sisters and their Company; musicians Fletcher Henderson, Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Joe "King" Oliver, and Duke Ellington; comedians Sandy Burns, Salem Whitney Tutt, Boots Hope, Seymour James and Tom Fletcher; future Paris sensation Josephine Baker; songwriter and pianist Perry Bradford, the mime Johnny Hudgins; dancers U. S. Thompson, Walter Batie, Earl "Snakehips" Tucker, and Valaida Snow; comic monologist Boots Hope; and many others. In addition, later well-known names such as Florence Mills, Lincoln "Stepin Fetchit" Perry, Hattie McDaniel, Mantan Moreland, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Dewey Pigmeat Markham, Johnny Lee, Marshall "Garbage" Rogers, Amanda Randolph, Chick Webb, Cab Calloway, a young William Basie (before he came to be called "Count"), and four-year-old Sammy Davis, Jr. all performed on the T.O.B.A. circuit.

The most prestigious black theaters in Harlem, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., were not part of the circuit, booking acts independently; The T.O.B.A. was considered less prestigious. Many black performers, such as Bert Williams, George Walker, Johnson and Dean, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Tim Moore, and Johnny Hudgins also performed in white vaudeville, often in Blackface.

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

Answer: They 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.

7. Who was Bert Williams?

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.

Intro Unit Class 2: Activity 2 (15 – 20 min)

Instructions:

Engage students in a discussion of the questions presented in the document below. Ask students to discuss an incident in which someone used one of the justifications below. Did they know how to respond?

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>