



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, Pickinenny, 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, picaninies, 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, pickinanny, 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 Pickinanny 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=-_swtbi2F0

STUDY QUESTIONS

From Ethnic Notions

1. In the opening book, *ABCs for Dixie*, how did the black characters look? 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. How was the language in the story? Was it proper 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 the racist caricatures of black people created for? Why were they created?

From Caricatures of African-Americans: The Coon

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

From Lazy Town Cartoon

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

From The Picanniny Caricature

1. What is a picaninny? What are two characteristics of a picaninny?
2. Why were “picaninnies” almost always half-naked or pictured with animals? What did their nakedness convey?
3. Why was the Sambo character problematic? How was the original version by Bannerman changed?

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?

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 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?
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?