

Visuality of Race in Popular Culture: Teaching Racial Histories and Iconography in Media

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ABSTRACT

The repetition of racist imagery from historical to contemporary popular culture is indicative of a lack of visual culture education among artists, designers, and other creative cultural producers working today. This paper addresses the dearth of resources for teaching visual codes and conventions of racial iconography that are recycled in popular media and contribute to the fabrication of racial differences, maintenance of racial hierarchies, and normalization of white supremacist ideology. Inspired by Critical Race Theory in art and visual culture education, the essay proposes teaching tactics and sites/sights that can support students in developing visual understandings of race in popular culture and the practices of racialized looking it invites. Because popular culture is contested terrain, students can learn to be race-conscious consumers of popular culture today. A deeper awareness of visual codes and conventions can foster critical interpretations and creative responses to popular racial constructions. We suggest key vocabulary for scaffolding dialogue and counter-visual strategies for deconstructing racial images and practices of looking.

Keywords: race, representation, popular culture, art, visual culture, racial literacy, critical race theory

VISUALITY OF RACE IN POPULAR CULTURE: TEACHING RACIAL HISTORIES AND ICONOGRAPHY IN MEDIA

In February 2019, the world-renowned designer brand, Gucci, marketed an \$890 stark black wool turtleneck. The sweater has an elongated neck that dramatically extends over the wearer's mouth and nose (see Figure 1). Presented online on a White female model, the sweater features a circular opening in the fabric that outlines and defines the model's mouth with a bright, fire-engine red color. Whether intentional or not, the strategically aligned, bright red, exaggerated lip-esque hole, placed against the jet-black turtleneck evokes blackface,¹ a racist visual practice that has been used to dehumanize Black Americans since the mid-1800s.

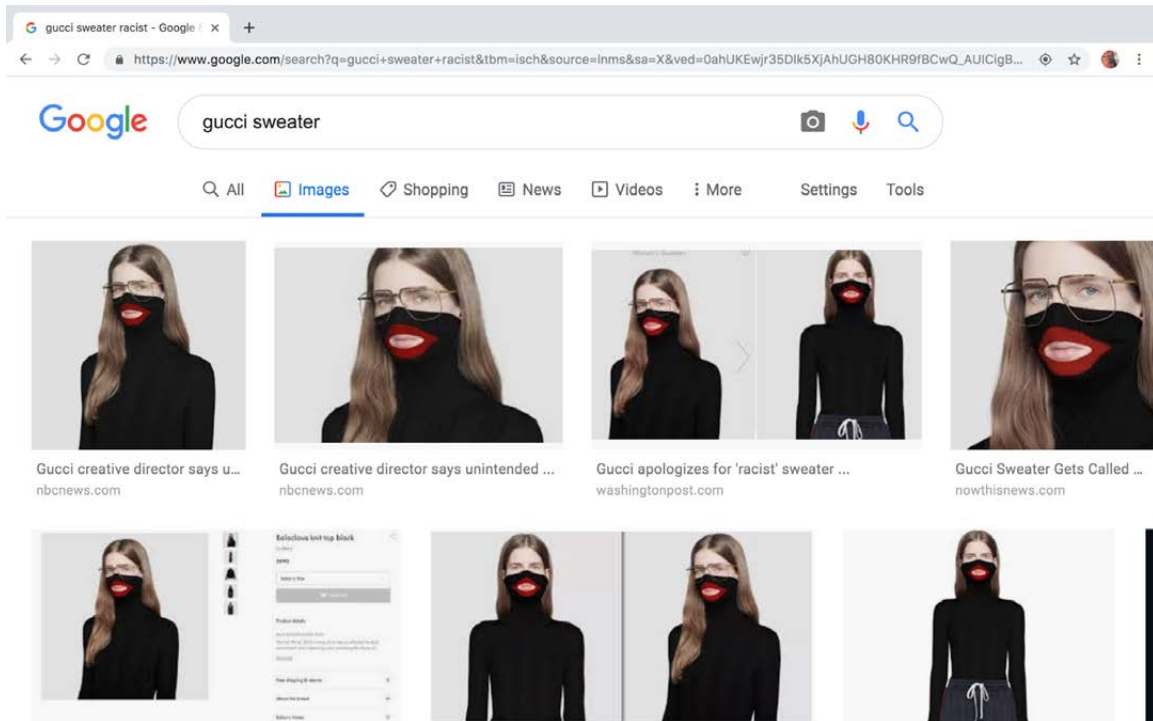


Figure 1. Screenshot of Google search for Gucci sweater, 2019

As evidenced in this contemporary example, the visual repertoire to which today's young people are exposed comes from popular visual culture and digital media, much of which trades in racial narratives and iconography that are just as historical as they are contemporary. From the recent debate about the removal of commissioned statues honoring confederate war heroes in Charlottesville, Virginia, to the release of *Black Panther*, an Afrofuturist blockbuster film providing a counternarrative for African and African American existence, we can see the way community identities and racial ideologies are both assumed and contested through popular culture. We believe the repetition of dominant visualities of race in popular culture is indicative of a lack of knowledge and recognition of historical visual practices, resulting in a recycling of centuries-old representations and techniques that continue to racialize and dehumanize particular bodies.

PEDAGOGICAL POSITIONALITY

As Black women scholars who engage in equity oriented research in the field of art and visual culture education, we are invested in understanding and teaching about popular constructions of race and racial

justice through imagery and visualizing practices. We are interested in thinking about how popular culture might allow us to dig deeper and bring awareness to contemporary racial issues. As we pursue this interest in our teaching practice, we find it difficult to locate instructional resources and strategies that take seriously the role of art and popular visual culture in the construction of race.

Fields such as multicultural education and sociology education use films, advertisements, and other popular media to teach about race and racism, however, it is our observation that the racial images and the contexts in which they were created receive scant attention. More often, images serve as illustrations of other content rather than standing as content in and of themselves (e.g., Bell & Roberts, 2010; Khanna & Harris, 2015; Loewen, 1991; Trier, 2007; Upright, 2015). This oversight is a problem given how visually mediated racial experiences and events are. As Brown and Kraehe (2011) argue, “What gets represented in visual cultural spaces is easily picked up and reproduced in and outside of the media space so it is strategic to target analyses of visual media because it touches the lives of many” (p. 75). Moreover, when the arts and visual culture are engaged as a method of social justice education, the result is often a celebratory rather than critical pedagogy because of a romantic bias that casts the arts as inherently transcendent or transformative of the status quo (Kraehe, Acuff, & Travis, 2016).

In this article, we address the lack of methods for teaching visual knowledge of race and racism with the aim of contributing to the deconstruction of racial images and practices of looking, such as those noted in our introduction. We discuss the visual construction of racial ideologies and hierarchies and how these structures of meaning are maintained and contested over time through popular culture. Inspired by Critical Race Theory in art and visual culture education, we describe key sites/sights and practices we use in our teaching to support learners in developing a visual understanding of race in popular culture and the practices of racialized looking it invites.² We argue that popular culture is a visual carrier of racial narratives and meanings that teaches viewers to see race as real by making racial categories of difference appear self-evident, even natural. Yet because popular culture is contested terrain, we move this argument forward by showing that awareness of its visual codes and conventions can foster critical interpretations.

ORGANIZATION OF PAPER

The design of this paper is multilayered. Throughout the text, we italicize key concepts that we have identified as curricular touchpoints. These concepts are relevant to academic discourse around dominant visualities of race in popular culture, and they should be taught as a scaffold for racial literacy. As critical race theorist Lani Guinier (2009) defines it,

Racial literacy is the capacity to conjugate the grammar of race in different contexts and circumstances. . . . It is sometimes a virulent subtext, at other times a nuanced dynamic.

² This paper is situated in Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1990). Conceived in legal scholarship, CRT has key tenets that guide our analysis of race, including: racism is pervasive in the US and, thus, liberal concepts like colorblindness, meritocracy, and post-racialism are subject to critique; racism is linked to other forms of social inequities such as class, gender, sexual orientation; and, counterstories are crucial to destabilizing racial oppression. CRT in education guides scholars’ analysis of the continued marginalization of historically underrepresented groups across educational levels (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1994). Art and visual culture education is an approach to understanding curriculum, learning, and teaching that extends beyond the fine arts disciplines to incorporate all realms of the visual. It considers the contexts in which people encounter images of all kinds, how the meaning of images is negotiated and contested, and the cultural practices of image-making across formal and informal environments. For us, to address popular culture as an educational site/sight is to concern ourselves with not only *what* we see before us but also *how* seeing is made possible through practices of looking (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). CRT finds its intersection with art and visual culture education through theory and analyses that posit the arts and visualities found in popular culture are central to the creation, maintenance, and normalization of white supremacist ideology, policies, and practices; however, countervisuality is a creative strategy by which consumers and producers of culture negotiate, contest, and overwrite racialized images and their meanings (Herman & Kraehe, 2018; Mirzoeff, 2011).

But always the meaning of race needs to be interrogated and conjugated carefully in light of relevant local circumstances and their historic underpinnings. (para. 14)

To support students in conjugating the grammar of race, we introduce key concepts and vocabularies that enable critical thought and dialogue, particularly among students who have little experience in race talk. We also provide sample classroom activities throughout the paper. These activities are teaching tactics we have used in our own classrooms with preservice teachers because they offer opportunities for counter-visual reflection and discussion aimed at helping students “read” the world profuse with images (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Organized in tables 1-4, the activities and discussion prompts, titled “Suggested Activity,” are snapshots of how we teach students to be racially literate consumers of popular culture today. We understand that even before they ever step into our classrooms, students have already developed racialized practices of looking. Therefore, the teaching tactics shared in this paper aim to help instructors guide students in understanding how visual codes and conventions are interwoven with narratives about race to uphold particular ideologies, beliefs and accepted ways of being in the world. Race is visually mediated, thus any course that deals with race and racism can make use of the visual site/sights, concepts, and active learning strategies we discuss here.

TEACHING HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS: ART, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGIES OF LOOKING

We begin teaching with the premise that the visual has always played a role in the construction of race and racial hierarchy in the popular imagination. In the history of popular culture, racial ideologies commingled with artistic creation, scientific pursuits, and technological inventions. The result is materialized through images and image-making practices. If one examines popularized images and the contexts in which they were made, it is possible to see how visualization, the process by which ideas and social relations are made visible and thus knowable, was and remains an integral aspect of racial formation in the US. As technological advancements have allowed images to be reproduced and mass distributed, racial iconography and meanings that may have originated locally now travel via popular culture, becoming embedded in the everyday visual lexicon of people who consume and enjoy popular culture anywhere in the world.

To teach how the sites/sights of popular culture have contributed to the visual construction of race and racial ideologies, we incorporate a historical perspective. We do this by showing students some of the earliest race representations from what is now the southwestern US, territories that would have been under Spanish rule and link these to early European scientists’ constructions of a racial other first through printmaking, drawings, and paintings and then later with the new technology of photography. The confluence of art, science, and technology enabled and legitimated particular practices of racialized looking that found expression in the popular culture of the time. This historical approach is meaningful in helping students move from thinking of race as a natural or biological phenomenon to seeing how it was (and continues to be) socially constructed by human beings and from thinking of racism as an individual attitude to seeing it as a system comprising laws, rules of reasoning, and ways of perceiving the world (i.e., worldview).

SYSTEMA DE CASTAS: VISUALIZING A RACIAL ORDER FOR A NEW SOCIETY

In our teaching, we have found that *castas* paintings offer an eye-opening point of departure. In the 1700-1800s, *castas* paintings were a popular genre in New Spain, an empire that encompassed much of South America, Central America, and North America, including most of present day US west of the Mississippi River and the Floridas (Katzew, 2004). *Castas* paintings depicted family groupings as a carefully constructed taxonomy of race in which human beings were separated into types (see Figure 2). Each human type was accompanied by a label that referred to phenotype and cultural traits.³

3 The labels included classifications such as:



Figure 2. Ignacio María Barreda. 1777. *Las castas mexicanas* [The Mexican castes]. [Oil on canvas]. Public domain.

Peninsular, a person born in Spain to Spanish parents

Criollo/Criolla, person of Spanish descent born in New Spain

Mestizo/Mestiza, a person born in New Spain with one Spanish parent and one indigenous parent (later this comes to be used for any person of European and indigenous ancestry)

Indio/India, a person who is descended from any indigenous group of the Americas

Negro/Negra, a person of African descent

<p>SUGGESTED ACTIVITY: COLOR CODES</p>
<p>Background Information</p> <p>Color theory is widely considered at all levels of artistic production, from creation to editing to marketing and display. The study of color is used to train the eye to perceive the subtle differences of quality among various hues. Colors are made distinct and nameable in relation to each other. The color scale is commonly used to train artists' visual perception. The scale is an organizational device, but it also asserts a theory of color. This theory claims that color exists on a graded, linear scale--gradations of value from white on one end of the spectrum to black on the other end. The visual logic of a color scale is that white is the lightest of light and black is the darkest of dark. White and black are made to appear naturally distant from and opposed to each other.</p>
<p>Activity for Practice</p> <p>Make a list of everything you can think of associated with the idea of light. Make another list of everything you can think of associated with the idea of dark. What do you notice among the items noted in the first list? What do the items have in common? What do you notice among the items noted in the second list? What do the items have in common? What is the relationship between the items in the light list and dark list?</p> <p>As a whole group, view the <i>castas</i> painting (many can be found online with a simple Internet search). Use visual thinking strategies (Yenawine, 2013) to guide your looking and discovery by answering the following questions: (1) What is going on in the picture? (2) What do you see that made you say that? (3) What more can we find? This questioning strategy builds skills in careful observation, discourse about visual perceptions, interpretation of images and the ideas they convey using evidence, and listening to and considering the perspectives of others, and discussion of various possible interpretations. The instructor adopts the non-authoritative role of discussion facilitator. Allow everyone to respond to the three questions so that new responses may be added beyond what has already been offered and agreements and disagreements may be worked out. This discussion may go on for about 15 minutes depending on the size of the group.</p>

Table 1. Suggested Activity: Color Codes

Through this looking activity, students are often able to identify for themselves that, in addition to dividing humans into types, *castas* paintings were organized as a progression from lighter to darker skinned figures. Figures were commonly arranged in a grid format, with each compartment numbered from one to sixteen. What they see is that racial taxonomies were hierarchical in ways that largely mirror present day race relations and the privilege of whiteness. They quickly grasp that lighter skin represents a higher social status, power, and privilege through its placement on the visual plane.

We provide some additional context after the looking activity so they understand the implications of images like this for creating a racially ordered society. The *systema de castas* or *racial system* was both a cultural and legal invention aimed at bringing order to the interracial unions between indigenous, African, and Spanish peoples in these Americas during the colonial period (Carrera, 2003; Katzew, 2004). It determined many of the rights and restrictions of daily life. Only Peninsulares were permitted to hold public office, and they held the vast majority of the wealth. The state and the Catholic Church expected the lower *castas* to pay more in taxation and tribute.

As illustrated in Barreda's painting, *castas* made visually explicit and concrete the colonial gaze in which popular classifications were created to support a utopian social order based on the imagined superiority of European-born Spanish blood and the gradual whitening of the New World (Martínez, 2008). Originally these paintings were displayed in official public spaces such as museums, government offices, and universities. This meant they served as an early form of public pedagogy that taught its viewer to associate darker skin with lower social positioning.

Then, as now, new technologies develop and this leads to new ways of visualizing racial ideologies. Science and photography are two technologies that we spend time examining in historical context to disrupt their assumed objectivity and authority in shaping ideas on race.

SCIENTIFIC PHOTOGRAPHS: VISUALIZING THE BIOLOGICAL ORDER OF HUMAN SPECIES

One need only reflect on the power of digital photographs in propelling social media usage and the role of cellphone video footage in galvanizing support for the Black Lives Matter movement to recognize the importance of cameras in shaping how people perceive and understand reality. We find that a historical approach helps students to see how cameras and the photographs that they produce function as technologies of racialized looking.

In Europe in the mid-1800s, photography was popularized by *daguerreotype*, the first commercially successful photographic process (Dinius, 2012). Named after the inventor, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, each daguerreotype is a unique image on a highly-polished silvered copper plate. Daguerre marketed his invention to artists as an expressive tool and to scientists as an instrument for viewing details with precision.

Both artists and scientists adopted the idea that a photograph could capture the true essence of a subject better than many other popular methods of image-making at the time, such as drawing, painting, or printmaking. People understood photographic technology to be a medium that lends itself to distortion and often reflects the intentions of the person behind the lens as much as the subjects in front of it. Nonetheless, the precision and affordability of daguerreotype made it attractive to clients who wished to memorialize loved ones through portraiture. Scientists saw the value of these popular photographs and the artists' skill as capturing the essence of the human being--the qualities of hair, skin, eyes, noses, and other physical features (Rogers, 2010). Thus, scientists employed the same technology, often employing artists, to document and catalog what they believed were bio-racial markers of fundamentally different human kinds.

In 1850, Swiss-born Harvard University scientist Louis Agassiz commissioned daguerreotypes of enslaved men and women in order to provide objective proof that the races were not merely different in outward appearance, but were biologically unique and unequal species. Borrowing from portraiture, Agassiz's scientific photographs showed fully nude subjects against a blank backdrop in upright frontal, profile, and posterior poses (Smith, 2004). Figure 3 is a daguerreotype of Delia and Renty. Delia was the enslaved US-born daughter of Renty, an enslaved African from Congo. These are part of a series of photo-portraits taken of enslaved people on a plantation in South Carolina. Agassiz commissioned the photographs in 1850 for his study of human types.

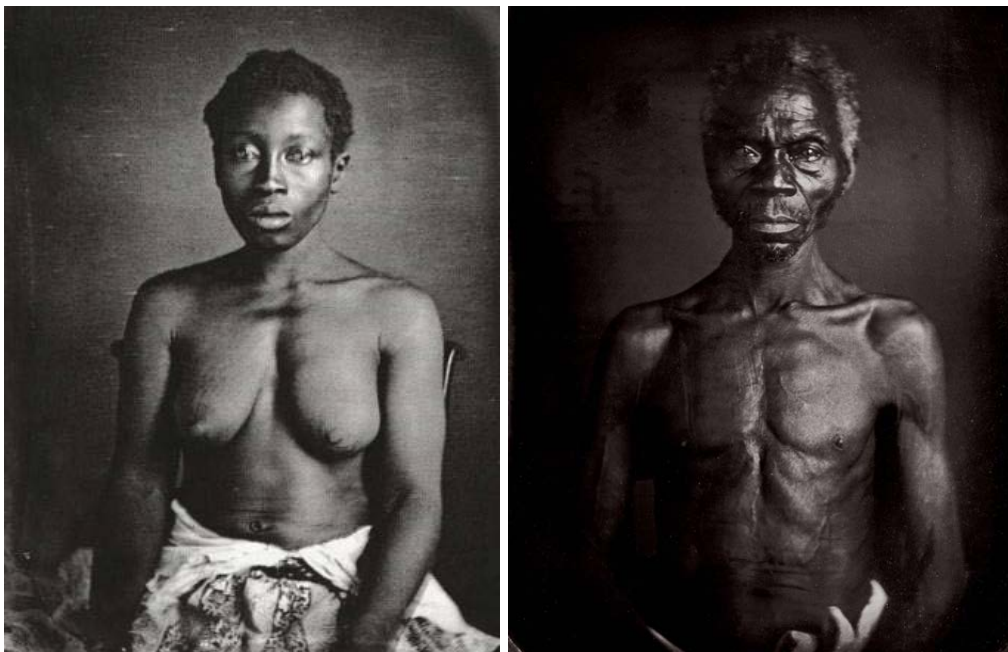


Figure 3. Zealy, J.T., commissioned by L. Agassiz. Circa 1850-1865. Delia; Renty. [Slave daguerreotypes]. Public domain.

Further, English anthropologists incorporated measurement into their individual nude portraits of indigenous peoples of Australia and Asia who lived under British colonial rule. They placed rulers and grids within the photographic frame alongside the non-White subject as a way to bring greater precision and standardization to images (see anthropological photos by John Lamprey from the late 1800s). Measurement lent an aura of objectivity to the side-by-side comparisons between peoples of the world. Thus, essentialist beliefs about the kinds of human differences that matter most were made to appear real, that is to say, natural to the subject of the photograph rather than a product of white racial thought and the colonial project of justifying the subjugation of non-White peoples around the globe.

Francis Galton, a British-born anthropologist and leading advocate of *eugenics*, the movement to improve society through controlled breeding of human types (Bruinius, 2006) created superimposed photographic portraits. These composite portraits were devised to approximate a general figure that would represent the average man of each racial type. Galton, like other eugenicists, believed Anglo-Saxons were the biologically, culturally, and intellectually superior race. The vast archive of images that was created cast non-White bodies as exotic objects of examination and eventually for consumption by curious White audiences in Europe and the Americas.

This can be seen in the case of the 16-year old, Sarah Baartman. Removed from her home in South Africa, enslaved, and transported to Europe, Baartman was dressed in feathers and beads and put on display to be viewed as a part of so-called “freak” shows (Collins, 2002). She was promoted as the “Hottentot Venus.” European onlookers took particular interest in her buttocks (see Figures 4-6). Her image was reproduced and circulated widely in cartoons, periodicals, and other popular media.

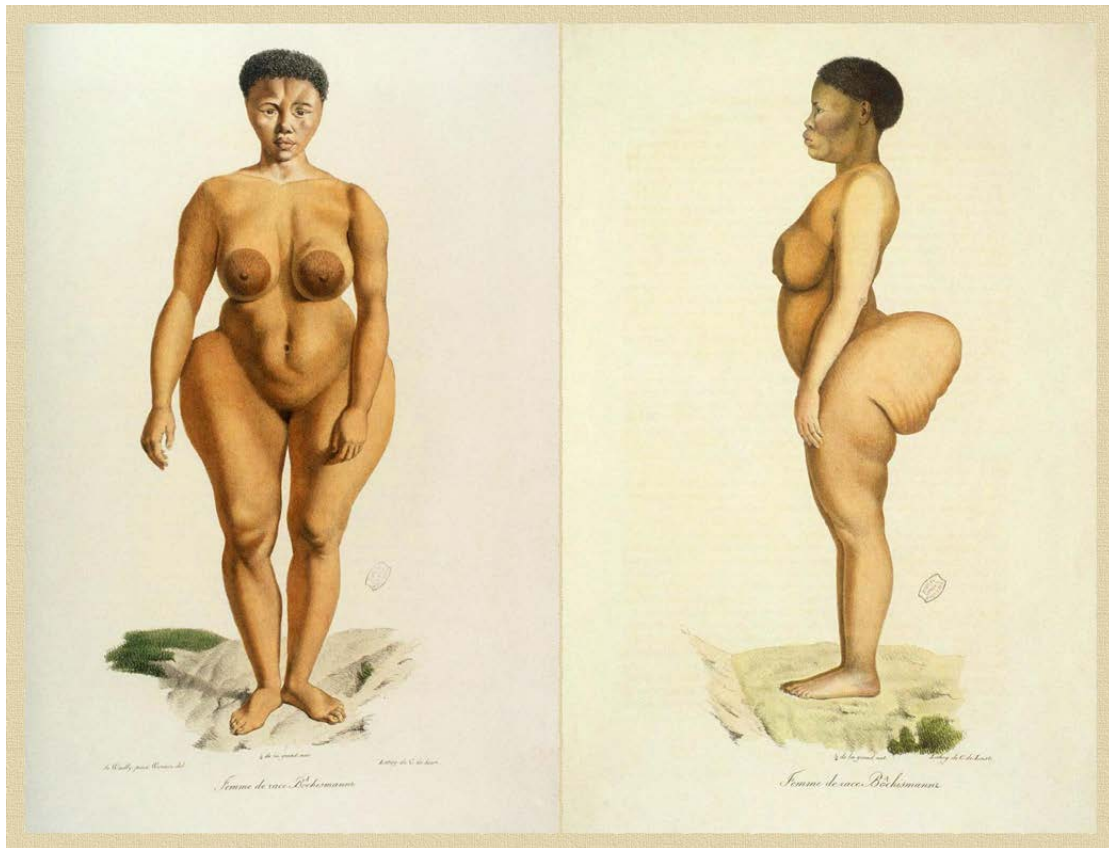


Figure 4. Wermer, Maréchal, Huet, designers ; C. de Lasteyrie, lithograph ; Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Frédéric Cuvier, authors of the text. Uploaded, stitched and restored by Jebulon. 1815. Public domain.

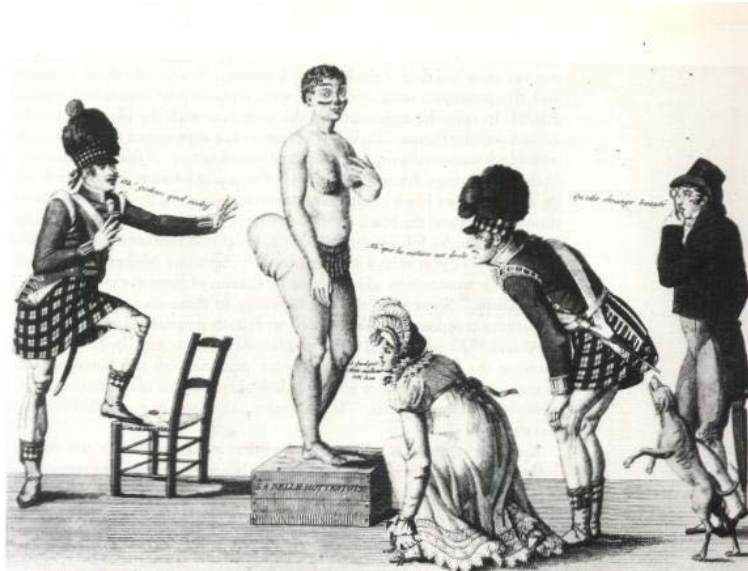


Figure 5. Unknown author. 19th century. "La Belle Hottentot" of Saartjie Baartman. [Print]. Public domain.

JUST ARRIVED
FROM LONDON,
And, by Permission, will be Exhibited here for a few Days,
 At Mr. James's Sale Rooms, Corner of Lord-street,

THAT MOST WONDERFUL
Phenomenon of Nature,
 THE
HOTTENTOT
VENUS,
The only One ever exhibited in Europe.

In viewing this Wonderful LIVING Production of Nature, the Public have a perfect Specimen of that most extraordinary Tribe of the Human Race, who have for such a Length of Time inhabited the most Southern Parts of Africa, whose real Origin has never yet been ascertained, nor their Character, which has been so differently described by every Traveller who has visited those remote Regions of the World; and considering the natural morose Disposition of those People (who are scarcely ever observed to laugh) she is remarkably mild and affable in her Manners. She has had the Honor of being visited by His Royal Highness the PRINCE REGENT, and several Branches of the ROYAL FAMILY, also the principal NOBILITY, of both Sexes, in England, and declared to be a great natural Curiosity, well worthy the Attention of the Public. She is particularly obliged to the Female Sex who have so liberally patronized her Exhibition, and more especially after the malicious Reports circulated to her Disadvantage after her Arrival in this Kingdom; but which have been long since proved to be groundless. Over her Clothing, which is suitable to this Climate, is worn all the rude Ornaments used by that tribe on Gala Days.

N. B. Elegant Engravings of the Venus, by Lewis, sold at the Room.
ADMITTANCE—ONE SHILLING.

CHESTER, PRINTED BY J. FLETCHER.

Figure 6. Unknown author. 1810. Advertisement for the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman in London. [Newspaper]. Public domain.

Upon her death, Baartman's genitals and brain were requested for dissection by a European scientist. The request was granted. Her corpse was cast in plaster, and the cast again was placed on display in European museums. The image of the "hottentot," a term that is now widely considered derogatory, became a dominant racial trope that visually encapsulated European ideas about the primitive, overly sexual nature of African women (Collins, 2002). As these audiences looked at the images, they could "see" evidence that confirmed their own presumptions of superiority as a White race and the supposed primitivism of non-White others.

When teaching the iconography of the Hottentot Venus, we often present students with the music video from singer Taylor Swift's hit single "Shake It Off." Many students are already familiar with the song and move along to the pop tune as they watch the video. The music video stars Swift, a young blonde White American woman. She is dressed like the women dancing behind her: thigh revealing cut-off shorts with high top sneakers, a cheetah print cropped top, and large gold chains and hoop earrings. Looking toward us, the viewer, with eyes wide and mouth open, Swift gawks at seeing the diversely-hued women twerking behind her. Their rear ends are a spectacle, punctuated by a camera close-up of a Black dancer's *derriere*. We ask students to watch the video and look for evidence of the hottentot iconography. They compare and contrast the stills from the contemporary music video and historical Hottentot Venus posters with Sarah Baartman's likeness. To go further, we discuss #SayHerName, a present day racial and gender justice campaign to re-humanize Black women by remembering individual Black women and girls who have been victimized by police violence. It is a strategy that resists the white racial frame that renders Black women's bodies simultaneously hypervisible and highly consumable yet invisible and thus disposable.

Seeing is Believing: Visual Realism and the Fiction of Race

Photographic technology provided a realistic grammar that facilitated the construction and naturalization of social categories of race. For instance, mechanical reproduction and dissemination of the typological photographs discussed above helped fuel eugenics. Followers of the movement believed not only in racial categories but also in the biological, and thus predictable, inferiority of certain types of people, including non-White people as well as those who were seen as mentally ill, or socially deviant (Bruinius, 2006). Eugenicists sought to socially engineer a pure and superior race of White humans by eradicating (through sterilization and miscegenation laws) those deemed not White. For eugenicists, the photographic images taken in the name of science made visible the apparent "proof" of racial types and the "obvious" superiority of the White race. If examined carefully, facial expression, head size, bodily proportions, and other signs of the body captured in a snapshot would indicate the "real" cognitive, moral, and other interior traits.

How did photographs help to catalyze eugenics? For one thing, the photographs were an expression of a white colonial *gaze*. More than just a way of seeing, the gaze in visual culture is defined as the dynamic or relationship (of power) in which looking and being looked at takes place (Mulvey, 1989; Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). It is a social understanding through which individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are filtered. A shared gaze enables members of a society to make sense of the world and to derive meanings in roughly similar ways. Shared sense-making and meanings are how cultures form, and it is through culture that individuals are able to develop feelings, create attachments with others, and ultimately fashion their identities (Hall & du Gay, 1997).

The precision of photographic representation helped people who believed themselves to be White by virtue of a white gaze that projected criminality, feeble-mindedness, laziness, and licentiousness onto the image of the Other (Dolmage, 2014). Pseudo-scientific photographs also influenced intellectual writing and popular culture of Whites in the UK, Canada, and the US throughout the early 20th century. In particular, they sustained a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" narrative that justified the existence of racial inequality, changes in immigration policy, and the practice of selective breeding for a better society.

There is not one uniform gaze. Humans are more complex than that. Just as there are diverse ways of

locating and orienting oneself in the world, there also are multiple locations and orientations that inform and enable one's gaze when looking at another person, works of art, picture books, websites, video games, or movies. One's orientations can produce inconsistent, even conflicting, accounts. This is particularly the case in societies like the US that are rich in diversity or fragmented along racial, ethnic, economic, gender, and generational lines. A person's racial identification and experiences within a racialized context will inform how they view and are viewed by the world. Although the relationship between social location and perception is not predictive, the context of seeing--*when and why we look*-- is as significant as the object of the gaze--*what we look at*--in determining that which is visible and its possible meanings. Negotiating racial images and meanings, particularly those that have become iconic and accepted as part of the common sense, is an integral part of visual education.

VISUALIZING RACE IN 20TH CENTURY POPULAR CULTURE

The grand narratives and ideologies about racial superiority that once were conceived and supported via castas and daguerreotypes were further reified as new technologies of cultural production, making racial ideas and images more widely and frequently distributed to the masses. *The masses* is a concept introduced in the 19th century that refers to a unified body or grouping of people and the ways in which that body sway opinions and social practices about what is right or wrong, true or false (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). Mass media are means of communication that are capable of distributing messages from a singular or centralized source, reaching audiences that represent a large portion of the population. Throughout the 20th century, mass media such as radio, broadcast television, film, magazines, and newspapers were largely controlled and used by commercial advertisers and politicians to generate and distribute messages that reflected and promoted dominant ideologies. These ideologies concerned not only race relations but also industries, education, wars, economics, and politics. By disseminating specific messages, sights and sounds, cultural producers represented aspects of US-American culture as though they were widely shared interests.

The landscape of mass media has expanded in the 21st century to include digital technologies such as the internet, the World Wide Web, wireless communication devices like cell phones and tablets. Mass media are pervasive in the modern world, so much so that when people encounter them in daily life, the content may be consumed unconsciously and the meaning internalized with little criticality. This is the broader educational force of cultural production in the new age of media, technology and multimedia. Learning through media can happen anywhere at any time. In this sense, mass-mediated culture is a *public pedagogy* that influences how people understand the world and their place in it (Giroux, 2004). Dominant racial narratives, imagery and sentiments come to be popularly held as they seep into everyday life. Media have become more democratized. A greater number of individuals are now able to access the mechanisms of cultural production, including technological tools such as cameras, camcorders, personal computers, editing software, and online distribution channels such as YouTube, Instagram, and other platforms.

Popular culture has long traded in racist scripts and iconography. The danger is that these attach to actual bodies. Popular culture is one of the most seductive mediums through which socialization occurs. *Socialization* is a process by which people adopt cultural codes and conventions that enable them to operate successfully within societal norms. Although individuals may exercise agency by resisting ideologies and practices that are against their own interests, socialization is a powerful process because it progresses slowly and unconsciously through small, everyday encounters. The nonconsensual, yet consistent engagement with certain messages, especially those disseminated via imagery, is why stereotypes and master narratives can be so successful.

Media Tropes

There are specific ways that mass-mediated popular culture invites particular practices of racialized looking. In the 1980s, about 50 corporations controlled US mainstream media, including television, newspapers, magazines, books, music and radio. Today, five corporations dominate about 90 percent of the mainstream media. These media outlets are owned and operated by wealthy White men who consult with executive boards who are also about 98 percent White and male (pbs.org, 2019). Plainly, White men have monopolized the media, which has resulted in the creation of certain aesthetic preferences and value judgements regarding who and what is desirable, loathsome, and worth looking at. White men who hold media power have been able to buttress their own subjective views of the world with a self-created set of values that idealize and valorize that which is associated with whiteness, while everything non-White is cast as subpar.

In addition to White males being the primary distributors of mainstream popular culture, they also write, produce, and direct the overwhelming majority of mainstream American film and television programming and content (Hunt, Ramon, Tran, Sargent, & Roychoudhury, 2018). For example, a 2018 Hollywood diversity report on research found that only about 1.3 out of 10 film directors are people of color (Hunt et al, 2018). As a consequence, visual representations of US-American culture are often *whitewashed* renderings, reductive and limited in scope because they are constructed around fixed images derived from the White male capitalist imagination. Ideas and images are considered whitewashed when they are conceptualized without the consideration of people of color or the narratives that derive from their experiences and perspectives (Gabriel, 2002).

Racial tropes, stereotypical representations of people in media, contribute to the durability of race over time. According to Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, and Jackson (2008), racial tropes in media, especially film and television, can be persuasive, as they produce cultural memory and implicit knowledge. They consist of characters and storylines that are static and recurring. Racial tropes affect non-Whites differently than they do Whites. Characterizations of White actors are most often perceived as unique to the role of the individual and not at all associated with their racial group as a whole. In contrast, the tropes that have been constructed for non-White people are attached to their entire racial group. This fuels cultural stereotypes with sociocultural consequences for those group members in real time.

Because they are so often repeated, over time racial tropes of non-White people calcify in the memory of people who have encountered them. This is a cumulative process due to repeated and unmitigated exposure to tropes. In addition, the racial characterizations are generally disparaging, as catalogued in Table 2. Despite their empirical inaccuracies, tropes come to feel familiar and thus take on an air of truth. They become a cultural tool for making sense of one's own identity and the subjectivity of others. Biased visual representations of non-Whites in the media facilitate socialization and also guide White people's understandings of non-White people. In addition, the development of positive racial identity among non-White children is undermined by seeing racial tropes in movies, television, and now video games.

In our classrooms, we introduce tools and practices that assist students in their development of visual literacy, as well as racial literacy (Guinier, 2004). Our goal is for students to identify and reflect on how their beliefs about the world are conceived, but also continuously mediated by visualizations of race in the media. Table 2 presents instructional details for an in-class activity that helps students practice being conscious and critical observers of content. This activity guides students in making connections between what they see represented in media and popular culture and what they actually believe, ideologically.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY: TROPE BINGO		
To introduce a unit about representations in film, create a printable bingo table and enter various racial tropes listed in the trope characterization table below. Pass them out to students and have students watch short clips from movies of various genres. Give them bingo chips and ask them to place a chip on the tropes that they identify in the film clips. Once someone calls bingo, follow up with a discussion about the identified tropes and the way these images and characterizations may impact the racial identity development of those represented. In addition, discuss the impact racial tropes in film may have on how we view each other in real time.		
Trope Characterizations		
	Male	Female
Black/ African American	Scary, Violent, Dangerous, Uncle Tom, Comic relief, Drugdealer, Gangbanger	Mammy, Matriarch, Sapphire/ Independent Black Woman, Jezebel, Angry Black woman, Welfare queen
Native American	Savage, Dirty, Alcoholic	Nature worshiper, Magical and mystical
Hispanic or Latinx	Gangbanger, Lazy, Drug dealer	Hypersexual temptress, Short-tempered fireball, Sassy, Exotic
Asian or Pacific Islander	Educated, Nerdy, Broken English, Magical Asian	Meek, Submissive, Thin/Small body frame, “Tiger” mom
Arabs/Middle Easterners	Terrorists, Manipulative	Oppressed, Belly Dancers, Weak, Manipulative
Jewish	Wealthy, but frugal, Business owner	Wealthy, but frugal, Overweight and apathetic, Asexual

Table 2. Suggested Activity: Trope Bingo

At the end of this activity, we ask our students to brainstorm movies or television shows that present characters as multidimensional and intersectional beings. For example, are all of the Black female characters demonstrating the same kind of behavior in the movie/show over a sustained amount of time? What character traits can be identified that are outside of the trope narrative? This activity concludes with students writing a reflection paper about a time when they applied the trope script to others in real time, and how their tacit acceptance of certain tropes impacted their interactions with people from different racial backgrounds. We use this activity to conjure up *flashpoints*, which refers to “a heightened occasion arising from the activation of power that disturbs a seemingly fixed relationship” (Kraehe & Lewis, 2018, p. 3). This activity invites students to identify specific moments in time that have impacted how they make sense of their own differences and the differences of others.

We recognize that the trope characterization table in the bingo activity is presented within the male-female binary. The binary is a part of the dominant trope construction. By and large, transgender and gender non-conforming people are invisible in popular culture. To transgress the binary is to be unintelligible within the cultural script that makes tropes recognizable. However, when transgender and non-binary people have been introduced in film and media, the characterizations generally are not nuanced. Primarily, characters are not

nuanced according to their intersectional experiences of racialization as queer people; instead, characters who are gender non-conforming are caricatured in similar ways. Regardless of race, transgender and non-binary characters are portrayed as mentally ill, as sex workers, or as peripheral comic relief (Feder, 2020). The trope bingo activity can be extended to address these problematic characterizations, as well as the ways the gender binary perpetuates the invisibility of transgender and non-binary identifying people. Ask students to modify the bingo boards to include the consideration of gender binary tropes.

Dominant Popular Culture

According to Lemons (1977), popular culture is “neither high or art culture, nor is it folk culture, but it is something in between which is produced by the entertainment industry for mass consumption” (p. 103). Popular culture mirrors what the masses are thinking, feeling, their attitudes, concerns, desires, likes, and dislikes. At the same time popular culture promotes dominant ideologies, identities, ways of thinking and feeling. Thus, it becomes easy for those in powerful media corporations to suggest that they are merely supplying on the screen, over the sound waves, and in print that which the public demands. Historically, dominant popular culture was created by Whites (males mostly), for White consumption. As a result, dominant popular culture representations of Whites were flattering, whereas representations of non-Whites were largely negative and exaggerated in ways that were reductive, flattening the complexity and diversity of non-White individuals.

Popular culture utilized a catalog of staple ethnic and racial characters that were intended to “other” non-Whites in the US. Black people were represented with monkey-like characteristics, like big, wide gaping mouths, large ears, oversized hands and feet, and sloping foreheads. These images were used for things like product advertisements, trading cards and golf tees (see Figure 7). Popular culture reflected White society’s low regard for people perceived as not White, thus reproducing and reaffirming white superiority through images. Negative portrayals of those deemed not White, which would have included some European ethnic groups, contributed to their ongoing oppression. The Irish, for example, were characterized as uncivilized, unskilled and impoverished. They were forced into labor that was deemed “too diseased and too deadly” even for Blacks who were enslaved (Lemons, 1977). Nineteenth century anti-Irish cartoons were featured in mainstream magazines like *Harper’s Weekly* and *Puck*. Irish immigrants and their descendants were portrayed as drunken ape-like barbarians who were lazy and lawless. The Irish were more closely associated with Blacks than they were with Anglo-Americans. These visual representations also drew from pseudo-scientific race theories that posited non-Whites as less than fully human.

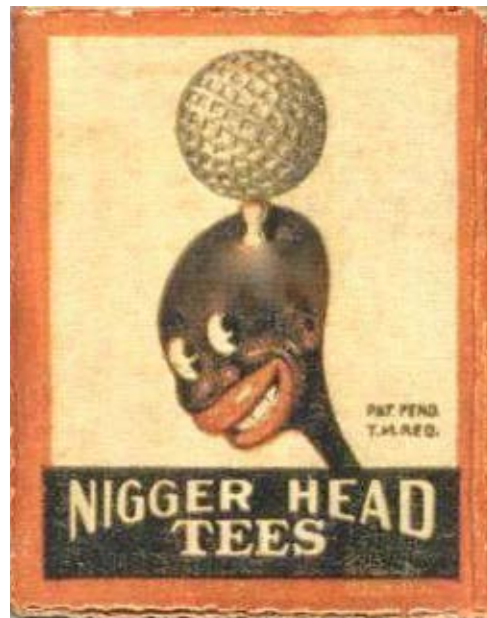


Figure 7. Philpot Brokerage company of San Francisco. Circa 1920-1950. Nigger Head [Golf] Tees. Public domain.

Minstrelsy as Popular Culture

Minstrelsy was America’s first national mainstream popular culture (Lemons, 1977). Minstrel shows extended the visual technologies of paintings, photographs and print to live drama and entertainment. They functioned similar to any other new technological advancement in that they reproduced and disseminated racialized images of people of color. Minstrel shows, which included live comic skits, music, and dance, became popular in the 1840s as a way to “depict” Black life to Whites in the North.

Minstrels were negative caricatures invented by and for White desire and power. White men would transform into “Black characters.” To them, this meant painting their skin pitch black instead of brown and exaggerating their facial features to resemble monkeys. Essentially, White men would apply greasepaint or burnt cork to their faces and fire red paint to their lips (see Figure 8). This practice in minstrelsy is understood as *blackface* (Lott, 2013). The White caricaturization of Blacks obscured the inhumanity of slavery by depicting it as amusing and amoral. White men even portrayed Black women in minstrel shows, as there were very rarely female performers in the antebellum minstrel shows. Minstrelsy was a spectacle that perpetuated and expanded the narratives regarding racial inferiority that were woven throughout history and at the crux of scientific racism (Lemons, 1977; Lott, 2013).



Figure 8. Strobridge & Co. Lith.; Wm. H. West's Big Minstrel Jubilee. 1899. "Four of Our Nation's Fun Makers." [Color lithograph]. Public domain.

Blackface minstrelsy was a visual exercise of racial power, a strategic practice used to create visual images that helped to normalize racial myths and codes. Whites engaged racial fantasies to portray Blacks as slovenly, ignorantly happy, eager to entertain, sexually promiscuous, and cognitively immature. Minstrel shows cemented racist tropes of Black people. As Black actors became more accepted on stage and in films, even *they* were forced to wear blackface. Ironically, White audiences often complained that the Black actors' faces were not "Black" enough (Lemons, 1977; Lott, 2013).

"The minstrel show had the blackface character as its focus; vaudeville inherited him and passed him on to the musical theater, the movies, and radio" (Lemons, 1977, p. 103). Films in early history were bound up with, even dependent on blackface minstrelsy. For example, D.W. Griffith's 1915 film, *Birth of Nation*, originally titled *The Clansman*, is cited as the first 12-reel film in the United States. The *Birth of Nation* was the first film to be shown in the White House under President Woodrow Wilson. While not intentionally so, President Wilson's initial praise of the film secured and supported White society's belief that Black people were inhuman and that the Ku Klux Klan's work needed to be continued in America. Nevertheless, Griffith is acclaimed for his pioneering film production, and cinematic innovations, like his use of close ups, fade outs, large battle scenes, color sequencing, and special use of subtitles that graphically verbalized imagery. The film influenced films produced long after. It is recognized even today as one of the top 100 American films. Just as the film is lauded for establishing film as an art form, its content had an equally significant impact on race relations in the United States. Most members of the cast who portrayed the Black characters were White men in blackface. The visual rendering of Black men as violent rapists, unintelligent, and animalistic further solidified the already normalized belief that Black people were not human, but dangerous, savages.

The White actors in *Birth of a Nation* vilified the Black people so ferociously that the film ushered in the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan up to a decade after it was released. The racist film ignited a sense of urgency for White people to revitalize the work of the Ku Klux Klan on the strength of saving their White women from rape and their country from pillage. Essentially, White people applied makeup to darken their skin in order to depict just about any race of people in film and on stage. Brownface, or "redface," was used to portray Native Americans, Hispanics, Latinx, and Middle Easterners. Even six years before D. W. Griffith presented the film *Birth of a Nation*, he wrote and produced *Comata, the Sioux*, a 1909 film about a Native American woman who falls in love with a cowboy (Behnken & Smithers, 2015). All of the actors were White, even those portraying the Native American characters.

Eventually, many non-Whites became emboldened to counter these negative dominant popular culture representations by creating their own imagery in protest. For example, in 1898, African American Bob Cole, a graduate of Atlanta University, created the nation's first all black full-length musical comedy, *A Trip to Coontown*. This musical countered the minstrel format that usually dehumanized Black Americans. The show was written, organized, produced and managed by all Blacks. Further, events such as the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, the domestic reaction to Nazi racism in the 1930s and 1940s, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and the 1960s, and the Black Power Movement in the 1960-1970s gave momentum to the efforts to disseminate positive representations of non-Whites, particularly Black people in America (Gates Jr., 1992; Lemons, 1977). Nevertheless, while most of the imagery distributed in the 1800s and early 1900s have disappeared from popular media, the imagery has carried over and passively continues to enter our psyches, which impacts implicit bias. Even in the twenty-first century, research shows that the majority of US-Americans unconsciously associate Blacks with apes and society is more likely to condone violence against Black criminal suspects based on the broader ideology that Blacks are not fully human (Goff et al., 2008).

Cartoon animation carried forth traditions that originated in blackface minstrelsy. "With their white gloves, wide mouths and eyes, and tricksterish behavior," Mickey Mouse and other popular characters carried "the tokens of blackface minstrelsy in their bodies and behaviors yet no longer immediately signif[ied] as

such” (Sammond, 2015, pp. 1-3). Animators would “black up” the characters with exploding firecrackers and bombs that left soot on their faces. The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia has an online collection of popular family cartoons that serves as an archive of racial tropes. These may be analyzed for the cultural codes and conventions that hide in plain sight by tracing their path from early photographs of race scientists to minstrel stage actors to present-day animations wherein language and sound combine with the visual.

Animation highlights how visual expressions of minstrelsy were not the only means of racially marked cultural performance. *Blackvoice* minstrelsy in cartoons and animation is the white appropriation of racialized speech that is most closely associated with “Blackness” or the culture of Black people (Chaney, 2004). Blackvoice in cartoons is most evident during interracial speech exchanges during which certain dialects and speech patterns demarcate Blackness, or Otherness. Even animal characters in cartoons assume trope-like character traits that help audiences conclude that the characters are racial Others. The hyenas in Disney’s *The Lion King*, are an example. In this movie, the hyenas are sneaky, dangerous, and not to be trusted by the lion cub, Simba. The voices given to the hyenas imitate the qualities of speech--vocal intonation, accents, and cadence--commonly used in media representations of Black people living in inner city neighborhoods. Pedro in Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp* can be read as brownface in its overplayed vocal interpretation of Mexican and Mexican American accents in the form of a Chihuahua (also the name of a state in México).

In addition to voices, cartoon characters take on slang, mannerisms, and fashion styles that read “Black,” while the person behind the character is actually White. The *Simpsons* cartoon also has received criticism for its brownvoice minstrelsy with the character Apu Nahasapeemahettilon, a South Asian Indian who was voiced by Hank Azaria, a White actor from the US (Shilpa, 2013). The show’s writers and producers are also White men, and despite years of criticism, the creators defended the practice as innocuous because it is intended as humor (Kondabolu & Melamedoff, 2017).

Cultural Appropriation, Appreciation, and Re-appropriation

To only see blackface and brownface as White America’s attempt to dehumanize people of color and manipulate the racial narrative would be naive. This practice was also an attempt to “try on” different racial identities, ethnicities and cultures. Lott (2013) confirms,

Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed--minstrelsy’s mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation.... The very form of blackface acts--an investiture in black bodies seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of ‘blackness’ and demonstrates the permeability of the color line. (p. 6)

The ability to take on and off certain racial and cultural ways of being represents privilege, but also reveals the desire to have a certain experience that is situated within a culture in which you are not a member. The contemporary name for this practice of “borrowing” is cultural *appropriation*.

Cultural appropriation is described as the practice of using or “taking” another culture’s intellectual property, cultural expressions, artifacts, history and ways of knowledge (Ziff & Rao, 1997). Cultural appropriation becomes problematic when the group being “taken” from has been marginalized and even oppressed for having specific cultural habits and ways of being, but once these cultural habits and ways of being have been adopted by the dominant group, then these traits are accepted and even desired. For example, for centuries, Black women have worn their hair in “cornrows” for varying reasons, such as to protect their hair from environmental damage, to manage the pure volume of their curl, as well as to honor the Afrodiasporic connections passed on through ancestral traditions. However, in some workplaces, swimming pools and even in schools in the US (e.g., Kentucky), cornrows have been banned, citing reasons like they are unprofessional, unsanitary, and that they are a distraction to others. Students of color have been suspended from school for

wearing their hair in certain styles, like twists, cornrows and dreadlocks (Roberts, Torres & Brown, 2016). It has only been since the creation of the Crown Act of 2019 that Black individuals have been ensured protection from discrimination based on raced-based hairstyles (thecrownact.com, 2020).

In 2016, the *New York Post* featured cornrows as “the hot new trend.” The *Post* and other news media sources even renamed cornrows to “boxer braids,” completely stripping the cultural history from the hairstyle. The renaming of cornrows and their new label of “trendy” appeared after reality star and social media personality Kim Kardashian and other high-profile White actresses and models were seen wearing the hairstyle in public. This example represents the imbalance of power that is aligned with cultural appropriation. Those from the dominant culture can assume traditional dress, hairstyles and practices of non-Western cultures, while willfully ignoring the challenges and struggles experienced by the people from those very cultures they are borrowing from. The ability to accept some aspects of a culture because they are “cool,” “different” or “in trend,” yet leave other aspects that have historically resulted in oppression when compared to the Western culture, demonstrates privilege. Contrastingly, *cultural appreciation* is characterized as having an authentic interest in another culture to the point of learning its origin, history, people, beliefs, perspectives and practices. Cultural appreciation, actually, oftentimes results in a person’s decreased desire to appropriate the culture because they have an advanced understanding of the culture and recognize that appropriating certain aspects of it are disrespectful.

It is imperative that our preservice art teachers leave our art education classrooms understanding the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. This is a significant goal of ours because, unfortunately, there are art curricula resources online that are cesspools of cultural appropriation, advertising “multicultural” art lessons that use age-old stereotypes that essentialize whole groups of people (Acuff, 2014). Our preservice art teachers frequently look to these online resources as prompts and starting points for their very own units of instruction. As teacher educators, we find it necessary to teach our students critical questioning skills that embolden them to identify problematic curricular materials. Table 3 details a discussion activity that has helped our students hone in on their critical questioning practice. The activity centers the work of the controversial contemporary artist Nikki S. Lee, a Korean born woman who “tries on” different cultures as a means of “identity play.” Reviewing and reflecting on Lee’s work as it is described in detail in the table beckons students to consider questions such as: What is the context under which I am adopting another’s culture? Is it for entertainment? Am I honoring the cultural item’s (dress, hairstyle, practice) original intent if I wear it as an accessory (or practice it for pleasure)? Is it respectful to alter its cultural meaning? Am I interested in understanding how and where the dress, hairstyle, practice, etc. originated? In what ways am I committed to supporting this culture in ways that do not benefit me? Asking these questions as they consider their curricular choices can prevent teachers from causing trauma and harm to their students of color, whose culture may be at the center of cultural appropriation.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY: "TRYING ON" IDENTITY

Background Information

Nikki S. Lee, a Korean artist based in New York, is well known for her series titled, *The Projects*. In the series, Nikki immerses herself in different racial and cultural groups, eventually "taking on" the identity of the specific group. To transform, she experiments with her physical attributes (darkening her skin color, changing hair, applying stage makeup) in an effort to align her phenotype with those in the group in which she is immersed. Lee's series includes the "Hispanic Project," the "Hip Hop Project," the "Lesbian Project," the "Schoolgirls Project" the "Exotic Dancer Project," the "Seniors Project" and more.

In her preliminary research of the groups that she would enter, Lee had a choice regarding which characteristics to take on during her immersion. For example, in the "Hip Hop Project," Lee surrounds herself with a particular "type" of hip-hop artist, seemingly, those who fit inside of her understanding of what hip hop looks like. Based on the images she constructed, Lee identified hip hop artists as bandana and gold chain wearing Black men who entertain an abundance of oversexualized Black women. Lee herself, transformed into one of those women, darkening her skin with makeup, donning revealing clothes, and posing in ways that evoke sensuality. However, there are subcultures within hip hop that do not look and perform like those who Nikki chose to portray. So, the way that hip hop identity was fashioned is reflective of Lee's own perceptions and decisions concerning the use of ethno-racial codes. This point can be made for any of Lee's ethnographical "projects." Lee's body enters freely in and out of the varying communities that she infiltrates. She gets to decide when, where and how long she wants to perform within a specific culture.

Activity for Practice

Lee has been heavily critiqued for her method of assimilation into certain racial and cultural groups for her artwork. Conduct an internet search using the keywords "Nikki S. Lee The Projects." Click on "Images." Alongside students, co-generate a list of the varying identities that you think Lee "tries on." Make the list based on imagery alone; do not look at the titles of the images in your search. After you have compiled a list, refer back to the image captions to find out whether or not your list of identities align with Lee's representation. Lead a class discussion with the following discussion prompts: How did Lee's representations of certain identities affirm White people's imagination? In what ways does Lee's work play into trope characterizations? Did you find yourself referring back to these trope scripts to help you identify certain identities? How do Lee's intentional choices speak to her power to validate essentialized characterizations of certain people? In what ways does her art reduce race, ethnicity, culture and gender to particularized clothes and body type? Issues of cultural appropriation are forefronted in critiques of Lee's work, and some critics even call her work modern day blackface and brownface. Do you agree? Why, or why not? And can Lee's work be characterized as a form of cultural *appropriation* or *appreciation*? In addition, Lee's identity explorations bring up reflective questions such as, *Who* gets to "try on" racial, cultural, and gender identity?

Table 3. Suggested Activity: "Trying on" Identity

During this activity, students may struggle to be decisive about Lee's artwork and her use of cultural appropriation. Where is the line drawn? Lee's work is so multidimensional, this activity may actually leave students with more questions than answers. Nevertheless, one of the goals of this activity is for students to recognize that critical questions must be asked as they encounter information and imagery, especially as it relates to humans and their cultural landscape. As a teacher, accepting information and using it in their classroom without interrogating it can lead to them being implicated in perpetuating racism.

Cultural re-appropriation refers to the process of recovering cultural texts (art, artifacts, ideas, rituals,

language, imagery) that have been “borrowed” by those from the dominant culture for their own social, political, cultural and/or economic gain. Re-appropriation also happens when an oppressed group reclaims once pejorative texts that were meant to disparage their cultural community and shift their connotation to be empowering. Cultural meanings are fluid and can evolve through different interpretations, engagements and negotiations (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). Contemporary visual artists recognize the fluidity through which culture is constantly remade and thus assume *counter-visual strategies* as a means for cultural re-appropriation. For example, Carrie Mae Weems, Byron Kim, Yong Soon Min, Hank Willis Thomas, Nicholas Galanin, and Michael Ray Charles’ use tactics like recontextualization, juxtaposition, abstraction, repurposing, and the reconfiguration of imagery to “dismantle the visual strategies of the hegemonic system” (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 24) and resist dominant racialized meanings that are attached to certain bodies, places, and cultural texts. Table 4 presents an activity that allows students to explore the ways artists have used their practice to claim agency in the ways that they are represented. Betye Saar’s work invokes a media trope, Black woman as mammy, but counters this visual by adding artifacts that compel her audience to accept a different story.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY: RECLAIMING VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS
<p>Background Information</p> <p>Chris Rutt, the founder of the ready made pancake mix “Aunt Jemima,” came up with the product name and visual concept after watching a minstrel performance in which a White female actress wearing blackface sang a song titled, “Old Aunt Jemima.” “The song features a mammy, a racial stereotype of the Black female caretaker figure devoted to her White family. This image of supposed Southern hospitality inspired the hopeful entrepreneur” (Fauzia, 2020, para. 6). Believing this was a marketable concept, in 1893, Rutt and his business partner Charles Underwood filed a trademark for “Aunt Jemima” and attempted to sell the product nationally. After failing to get the product off the ground successfully, Rutt and Underwood sold the company and their recipe to R.T. Davis, owner of R.T. Davis Milling Co. Davis hired a Black woman, Nancy Green, to be a model for his newly acquired products. In line with minstrel iconography, Ms. Green was presented as a mammy trope on the original products. Over its 120-year lifespan, the product logo evolved from Ms. Green’s face to a fictional Black woman who is presented as more contemporary, donning pearl earrings and a lace collar. However, the name and concept behind “Aunt Jemima” has remained.</p> <p>Betye Saar is a Black American, female artist best known for her collage and assemblage work. Also a printmaker, Saar uses her work to address political, racial, religious, and gender concerns. She uses found relics and ordinary objects to make commentary that delves into the past, while simultaneously considering the future. Saar’s “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima” recoups historical racial iconography, the Black mammy trope, and replaces it with a multidimensional narrative about Black female existence.</p>

Table 4. Suggested Activity: Reclaiming Visual Representations

This activity emphasizes the artist’s role in renegotiating the distribution of oppressive visual imagery. If we have learned about race and racism by what we have seen, we can learn about anti-racism by what we see. Artists are leaders in disseminating counter-visual images that help the world conceive new and more multidimensional narratives. To go further, students can be led through a discussion about the evolution of Aunt Jemima’s appearance over the years, including the steps taken in 2020 by food company Quaker Oats to “[retire Aunt Jemima](#)” as their breakfast products’ logo. Does the evolution and now removal of the iconic image negate its racist visual origins? How do we reconcile this tension? This discussion is effective for scaffolding dialogue around tropes, minstrelsy, and blackface and the way these visual tools continue to impact the way we engage with each other in today’s world.

CONCLUSION

Race is visually mediated. It is formed by what we have learned to notice and perceive. Through casual encounters with racially encoded pictures, objects, and moving-images, we learn to “see” each other in racial terms. Indeed, what we think we see is as significant in visualization processes as is that which is objectively present within a field of vision. To counter racist practices of looking, we have argued for the importance of (1) recognizing racial iconography as an integral part of US-American popular culture and (2) understanding popular culture as a highly visual and seductive medium through which racial hierarchy (white supremacy) is socially constructed, learned, and contested.

The technological means for producing and consuming popular visual culture increasingly are embedded in daily life. Cameras, camcorders, editing software, sharing sites, and screens for viewing content are less expensive and more readily available than ever before. In this context, there is a growing opportunity for counter-visualities to gain prominence. But artists, designers, critics, and other creatives who participate in the making of culture need to be educated in the dominant visualities of race. If not, we can expect to see white supremacist imagery resurface again and again with each new generation.

A curriculum that focuses on dominant visualities of race should include opportunities to identify racial tropes as they are represented in popular visual culture and as they are reiterated in newer forms, mediums, and contexts. The curriculum should also support students’ competence and confidence in talking about what they see in popular culture. Thus, key vocabularies for naming and framing visual phenomena are fundamental knowledge for critical interpretation of and dialogue about contemporary racial issues. The visual and verbal lexicon we propose is, in fact, what we use in our classrooms with our students to uncover older meanings and construct newer ones through counter-visual engagement with popular culture. More scholarship is needed to extend this lexicon and the activities to support further curriculum development on racial histories and iconography in and through popular media.

Our pedagogy is one that goes beyond the common practice of teaching that stereotypes are problematic. We find that approach can lead students to think the appropriate and only response to racism and other forms of oppression is to avoid difficult topics altogether. Race avoidance does not dismantle racial injustice but very likely contributes to more insidious forms of structural and microaggressive racism. Instead of an evasive politically correct response to stereotypes, we want students to dig in and explore the mechanisms of racist imagery in popular culture and the provocative modalities by which white supremacy is fomented. In having the tools to know how it all works, students may develop a greater sense of agency, moving from mere subjects of history to being co-creators of the world they wish to see.

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Acuff & Kraehe

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