

RACE AND REPRESENTATION: AMERICA IN BLACK AND WHITE

01:082:492
Junior/Senior seminar
Wed 9:50-12:40

Office: Art History Annex
60 College Avenue



Professor Tanya Sheehan
Dept. of Art History
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Office hours:
Wed 1:15-3:15

Course description

This seminar examines representations and interpretations of race in American visual culture from the Civil War to the mid-twentieth century. We will focus our study on two racial categories which profoundly shaped modern American culture: blackness and whiteness. The category “visual culture” will include paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs, films, popular spectacles, and the spaces in which they have been displayed or viewed. Our goal is to explore through a series of themes how the makers, consumers, and interpreters of images have differently responded to the following questions: How does one visually represent black and white identities? Where, how, and why does one look for blackness or whiteness in a visual text or performance? How have white visions of the black “other” shaped American art history and museum practices as well as scientific representation and consumer culture? In what ways can an artist’s identity as an African American or a European American inform his and others’ perceptions of his work? What role have images played in periods of profound racial conflict? Although we will approach these and other questions as art historians, our readings and discussions will be both theoretically informed and interdisciplinary, allowing us to negotiate the terrain of American, cultural, and science studies as well as visual, feminist, and postcolonial theory. In addition to completing three critical writing assignments, students will be required to make at least one visit to a museum in New York City and attend several film screenings.

Graded work and expectations

- 20% Class participation (including 1 image selection/discussion and 1 short presentation of the long writing assignment); demonstrated effort and commitment to course goals
- 40% (2) short writing assignments (3 pages each; the first essay will be based on a museum visit; the second essay will be based on an image you select to discuss with the class)
- 40% Independent research project, consisting of a project proposal, abstract, oral presentation, and formal paper (8-10 pages). Select a visual text whose artist, medium, genre, or specific theme(s) engages with our course themes but was not discussed in class; I will provide you with a list of suggested topics. Engage in an extended formal and cultural analysis of the text that is informed by our course readings and discussions.

Due dates for your assignments are listed in the weekly syllabus below. Your second short writing assignment based on an image of your choice should be emailed to me no later than 2 weeks after your assigned discussion of the image in class.

Rubrics for class participation and written work, as well as detailed descriptions of individual writing assignments, will be provided in separate handouts.

Attendance and prompt arrival at all classes is required; three or more unexcused absences will result in a failing grade. Since this course requires you to complete reading and/or writing assignments each week, late work will seriously impact your learning as well as your ability to fully participate in the class. Late work will receive a 5% grade reduction per day late; if two classes pass after the due date, your work will receive a failing grade. Exceptions will be made in documented cases of illness, family emergencies, religious holidays, etc. Please make sure to keep me and the college deans informed of any circumstances that may prevent you from coming to class and/or passing in your best work on time.

Open communication between students and instructor is very important to me; it also directly contributes to your success in this (as in any other) course. I encourage you to meet with me in office hours or schedule an appointment to discuss any aspect of your performance in the course and/or specific course materials/content. I will also comment on drafts of your written work in person (but not by email).

Writing style/format

All of the writing assignments for this course must be typed and should adhere to the following style: 12-point, Times New Roman font; double spacing; single-sided pages; and 1-inch margins on all sides (you will need to set these in MS Word). Please include internal citations when necessary – e.g., (Smalls, 5) – as well as a bibliography, both of which should adhere to either MLA or Chicago style. MLA and Chicago style guides are available in libraries throughout campus.

Plagiarism and academic honesty

Please familiarize yourself with the definition of plagiarism in Rutgers' official policy on academy integrity: <http://ctaar.rutgers.edu/integrity/policy.html>. As a student in this course, you are responsible for understanding and thus avoiding the varieties of plagiarism in college writing outlined in this policy. Any student who plagiarizes will receive a zero for the given assignment and, in some cases, a failing grade for the course.

Course materials and resources

Required readings

You should purchase the following book, which has been ordered for you at the Rutgers University Bookstore; additional readings will be available to you online.

- Kymberly N. Pinder, ed., *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History* (2002)

Sakai (Rutgers' course webpage system)

All of our course materials, including the syllabus, electronic readings, writing assignments, and the PowerPoint presentations used in class will be made available to you through Sakai. To access these materials, go to <https://sakai.rutgers.edu/portal>.

Weekly syllabus and required readings

Jan 23 – Race-ing American art history I

Kymerly N. Pinder, “Introduction,” in Pinder

Jan 30 – Race-ing American art history II

Albert Boime, Blacks in Shark-Infested Waters: Visual Encodings of Racism in Copley and Homer,” in Pinder

Guy C. McElroy, “Race and Representation,” in *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940* (1991), xi-xlix

Kymerly N. Pinder, “Black Representation and Western Survey Textbooks,” *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 3 (September 1999): 533-538

James Smalls, “Ghost of a Chance: Invisibility and Elision in African American Art Historical Practice,” *Art Documentation* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 3-8

Feb 6 -- Sculpting race in the nineteenth century

Michael Hatt, “‘Making a Man of Him’: Masculinity and the Black Body in Mid-Nineteenth Century American Culture,” in Pinder

Melissa Dabakis, “‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ Anne Whitney, Edmonia Lewis, and the Iconography of Emancipation,” in Patricia Johnston, ed., *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture* (2006), 84-102

Joy S. Kasson, “Narratives of the Female Body: The Greek Slave,” in Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy, eds., *Reading American Art*, 163-189

Feb 13 – The racial politics of museum display

Maurice Berger, “Are Art Museums Racist?” in *How Art Becomes History: Essays on Art, Society, and Culture in Post-New Deal America* (1992), 143-170

Fred Wilson, edited by Lisa G. Corrin, *Mining the Museum: An Installation* (1994; browse entire book; read Lisa G. Corrin, “Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves,” 1-22)

Project proposals due today

Feb 20 -- Visualizing race science

Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” *American Art* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 38-61

Tracy Lang Teslow, “Reifying Race: Science and Art in ‘Races of Mankind’ at the Field Museum of Natural History,” from *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture* (1998), 53-76

Writing assignment #1 due today

Feb 27 -- Whiteness and photography

Richard Dyer, "Coloured White, Not Coloured," in *White* (1997), 41-81

Mary Niall Mitchell, "'Rosebloom and Pure White,' or So It Seemed," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (September 2002): 369-410

Shawn Michelle Smith, "'Baby's Picture Is Always Treasured': Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family Photograph Album," in *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (1999), 113-135

Mar 5 -- Performing blackness and whiteness I

Eric Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992): 23-50

James W. Cook, Jr., "Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P. T. Barnum's 'What Is It?' Exhibition," Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, 139-157

Thomas Fahy, "Exotic Fantasies, Shameful Realities: Race in the Modern American Freak Show," in Townsend Ludington, ed., *A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States* (2000), 67-92

Mar 12 – The blacks and whites of early cinema

Donald Bogle, "Black Beginnings: from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *The Birth of a Nation*," in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1991), 3-18

Richard Dyer, "Into the Light: The Whiteness of the South in *The Birth of a Nation*," in Richard H. King and Helen Taylor, eds., *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures* (1996), 165-176

Screening: selection of Thomas Edison shorts, including *Watermelon Eating Contest* (1896), *A Morning Bath* (1896), *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903), *A Scrap in Black and White* (1903), *The Strenuous Life; or, Anti-Race Suicide* (1904), and *The Watermelon Patch* (1905); Thomas Edison and Edwin S. Porter, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903); D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)

March 23 – Performing blackness and whiteness II

W. J. T. Mitchell, "Living Color: Race, Stereotype, and Animation in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*," in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, 294-308

Screening: Spike Lee, *Bamboozled* (2000)

April 2 -- Identity and the (African-)American artist

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "'Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles': Silhouettes and African American Identity in the Early Republic," in *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (2006), 44-56

Lowery Stokes Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (December 1994): 587-590

bell hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat," in Pinder

Project abstracts due today

April 9 -- Race-ing American modernism

Donna M. Cassidy, "The Invisibility of Race in Modernist Representation: Marsden Hartley's North Atlantic folk," in *Seeing High and Low*, 247-265

Judith Wilson, "Sargent Johnson: Afro-California Modernist," in Pinder

Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (1990), 39-50

Richard J. Powell, "In My Family of Primitiveness and Tradition: William H. Johnson's *Jesus and the Three Marys*," in Mary Ann Calo, ed., *Critical Issues in American Art*, 285-294

April 16 -- Explorations in black and white I

Presentation and discussion of research projects

April 23 – Explorations in black and white II

Presentations continued

April 30 – Explorations in black and white III

Presentations continued; last class

May 7 Final papers due by noon in my dept mailbox and uploaded to Sakai