

Center for Race & Ethnicity

Race, Ethnicity and the Moving Image

A conversation about the representation of racial and ethnic groups in film.

In this issue:

- *Race, Ethnicity and the Moving Image*
- *Greetings from Asbury Park*

Panelists: Carter Mathes, English; Deepa Kumar, Journalism and Media Studies; Barbara Cooper, History

Selected Events—Center for Race & Ethnicity—191 College Ave

Lecture with Louis Masur (Trinity College)—The photograph That Shocked America: A Discussion of the Cultural Politics of Race and Photography

Friday
Feb 15

Roundtable – Race, Ethnicity, and the Subprime Mortgage Crisis

Friday
Mar 7

Student Conference—Graduate Forum on Race & Ethnicity

Saturday
Mar 8

Interdisciplinary Conference—DNA, Race, and History

Fri-Sat
Apr 18-19

Film and Discussion—Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin

Thursday
Apr 24

Roundtable—Between Privilege and Poverty: Perspectives on NJ Disparities

Friday
April 25

This wide-ranging roundtable explored the ways images of race, place, and identity take on a special power through the medium of film.

SEEING AND SUBVERTING HOLLYWOOD STEREOTYPES

Showing a clip from the documentary *Reel Bad Arabs*, Deepa Kumar noted that Orientalist stereotypes about Arabs dating back to the European colonial era remain ubiquitous in Hollywood movies. In order to read the constructed nature of these images, she argued for the need to “take seriously the artifacts that come out of popular culture; [we must] look critically at how race, gender, or ethnicity is represented in these artifacts and not only read them as entertainment.”



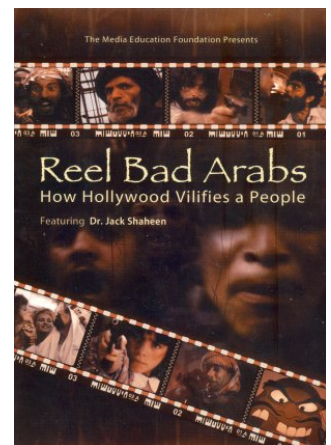
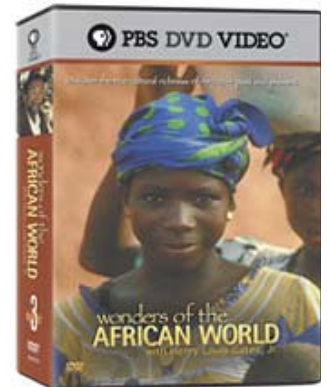
Jim Jarmusch’s film, *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) consciously defies such Hollywood stereotypes by departing from previous depictions of urban black culture. As Carter Mathes pointed out, the film’s story of an African-American man (Forest Whitaker) on permanent retainer to an Italian-American mobster in Jersey City,

“introduce[s] complex characters that resist simple classifications.” The film’s coupling of a hip-hop soundtrack (Wu Tang Clan’s RZA co-produced the film) and Samurai codes further refigures the way in which Orientalist representations of Eastern thought are received and circulated, with *Ghost Dog*’s Samurai practice evoking “a conscious move...to portray an alternative space of empowerment that challenges static representations of race and cultural identity. The film’s dynamic fusion of sound and narration challenges us to constantly rethink the permanence of racial and ethnic stereotypes.”

VIEWING AFRICA THROUGH THE LENS OF U.S. RACE RELATIONS

Media depictions of Africa and its peoples are shaped by American preconceptions about the continent and its peoples, notes Barbara Cooper—a historian whose work focuses on the Hausa-speaking region of Niger in the west African Sahel. Cooper explained that the Henry Louis Gates documentary *The Wonders of the African World* has frustrated many Africanist scholars because it fails to acknowledge decades of historical work on the African populations Gates visits, and imposes American views of race and African history on Africa’s diverse peoples.

An informal and chatty interviewer, Gates tells one



Persian man that if he came to Boston he would be black; and responding to another woman's personal history expresses amazement that Africans sold other Africans into slavery. Cooper suggested that such flat-footed assumptions might be read less as naïve, than as a performance. "The visual images...may move beyond what Gates actually presents," Cooper argued. "By including himself in the frame of the documentary and asking uncomfortable questions, [Gates] is playing the trickster by pushing the context of race."

USING PROBLEMS AS PEDAGOGY

As Cooper's reading suggests, the problematic nature of images may be the very thing that make them useful in teaching, a point about which each of the panelists agreed.



"It's very hard to talk about race in the classroom – but film passages allow us to talk about it, because we are talking to the screen and not to one another." -Barbara Cooper

Documentaries like *Reel Bad Arabs* are similarly helpful. "They put together a series of images from various sources that establish a pattern of representation that is racist," Kumar explained. "When fifteen or twenty clips are strung together, students are more clearly able to see the problems of stereotyped representation."

Posing the challenging question of how students might approach a collaborative film like *Ghost Dog* from the perspective of black film history could also open up conversation about the mediated nature of race and representation, Mathes added.



GREETINGS FROM ASBURY PARK – REDEVELOPMENT AND INEQUALITY IN FILM

The Center for Race and Ethnicity is involved in a wide range of activities, engaging with schools and departments across Rutgers University with an interdisciplinary approach. One of the events the Center co-sponsored recently was a screening of the documentary "Greetings from Asbury Park" and discussion with the filmmaker. Director Christina Eliopoulos documented a community of blacks and immigrants caught between redevelopment schemes on the New Jersey coast. Peter Dickson, discussant, termed such schemes using eminent

domain "socio-economic cleansing" and pointed out that redevelopment often exacerbates inequalities, instead of improving communities.

QuickTime™ and a TIFF (LZW) decompressor are needed to see this picture.

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GENERAL INFORMATION about the Center for Race and Ethnicity and its activities.

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu>

Teaching Race and Ethnicity across Disciplines (syllabus exchange) <http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/TeachingRaceAndEthnicity.html>

Katrina conference and forthcoming volume <http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/KatrinaAuthorMeeting.html>

Other Roundtable Discussions <http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/TeachingUnimaginableExperiencesSummary.htm>

- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.