What Is Representation?

The Power of an Illusion: Representing Race in US literature and popular culture – Letteratura angloamericana 1 e 2 – a.a. 2023-2024

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What Is Representation?

Late Middle English (in the sense 'image, likeness'): from Old French *representation* or Latin *repraesentatio(n-)*, from *repraesentare* 'bring before, exhibit' (see represent).

- An image, likeness, or reproduction in some manner of a thing

- the fact of standing for, or in place of, some other thing or person…

representation noun

rep·re·sen·ta·tion ˌre-pri-ˌzen-ˈtā-shən -zən-

Synonyms of *representation* >

1 : one that represents: such as

a : an artistic likeness or image

b (1) : a statement or account made to influence opinion or action

(2) : an incidental or collateral statement of fact on the faith of which a contract is entered into

c : a dramatic production or performance

d (1) : a usually formal statement made against something or to effect a change

(2) : a usually formal protest

2 : the act or action of representing : the state of being represented: such as

a : REPRESENTATIONALISM sense 2

b (1) : the action or fact of one person standing for another so as to have the rights and obligations of the person represented

The concept of representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture. Representation connects meaning and language to culture. But what exactly do people mean by it? What does representation have to do with culture and meaning? One common-sense usage of the term is as follows: 'Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.' You may well ask, 'Is that all?' Well, yes and no. Representation *is* an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It *does* involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. But this is a far from simple or straightforward process, as you will soon discover.

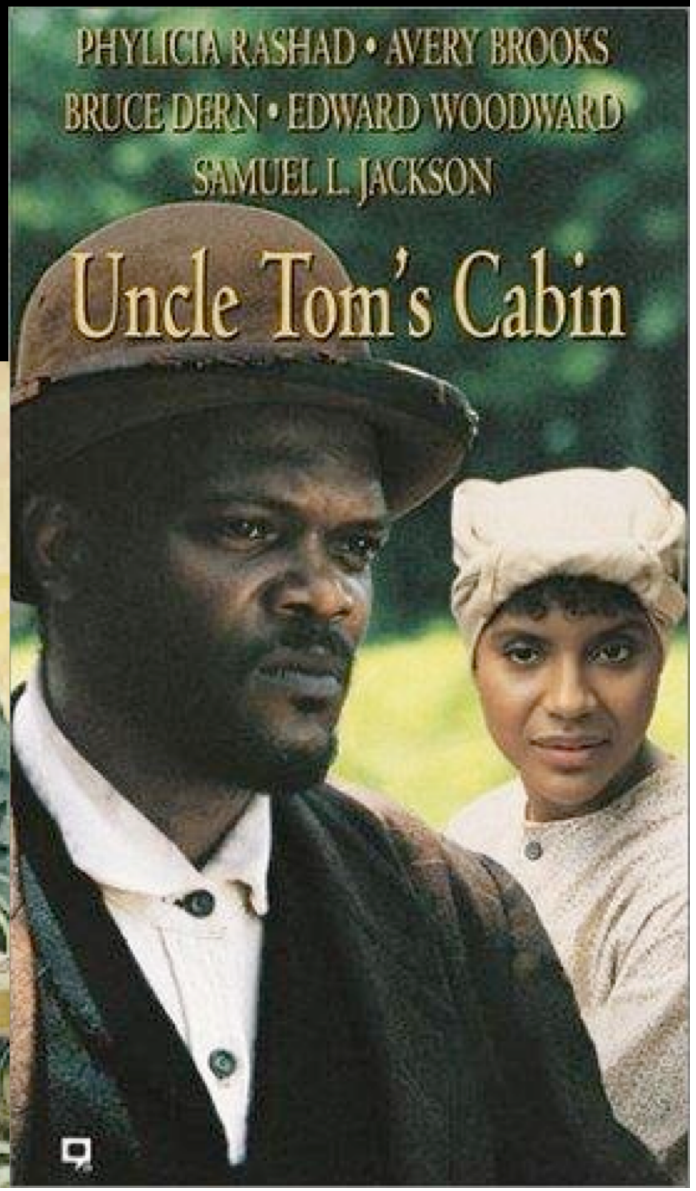
Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation"

René Magritte, *La trahison des images*, 1928

Representation vs. Reality

A businessman embarks on a journey in the first-class cabin of a train in Spain. To his delight, he finds that he's sitting next to the famous artist Pablo Picasso. Gathering up his courage, he turns to the master and says, "Señor Picasso, you are a great artist, but why is all your art, all modern art, so screwed up? Why don't you paint reality instead of these distortions?" Picasso hesitates for a moment and asks, "So what do you think reality looks like?" The man grabs his wallet and pulls out a picture of his wife. "Here, like this. It's my wife." Picasso takes the photograph, looks at it, and grins. "Really? She's very small. And flat, too."

“There is no arguing with pictures, and everybody is impressed by them, whether they mean to be or not.” Harriet Beecher Stowe, on writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 1851



To put it briefly, representation is the production of meaning through language. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* suggests two relevant meanings for the word:

1 To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination; to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses; as, for example, in the sentence, 'This picture represents the murder of Abel by Cain.'

2 To represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for; as in the sentence, 'In Christianity, the cross represents the suffering and crucifixion of Christ.'

The figures in the painting *stand in the place of*, and at the same time, *stand for* the story of Cain and Abel. Likewise, the cross simply consists of two wooden planks nailed together; but in the context of Christian belief and teaching, it takes on, symbolizes or comes to stand for a wider set of meanings about the crucifixion of the Son of God, and this is a concept we can put into words and pictures.

So there are *two* processes, two **systems of representation**, involved. First, there is the 'system' by which all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts or *mental representations* which we carry around in our heads. Without them, we could not interpret the world meaningfully at all. In the first place, then, meaning depends on the system of concepts and images formed in our thoughts which can stand for or 'represent' the world, enabling us to refer to things both inside and outside our heads.

Before we move on to look at the second 'system of representation', we should observe that what we have just said is a very simple version of a rather complex process. It is simple enough to see how we might form concepts for things we can perceive – people or material objects, like chairs, tables and desks. But we also form concepts of rather obscure and abstract things, which we can't in any simple way see, feel or touch. Think, for example, of our concepts of war, or death, or friendship or love. And, as we have remarked, we also form concepts about things we never have seen, and possibly can't or won't ever see, and about people and places we have plainly made up. We may have a clear concept of, say, angels, mermaids, God, the Devil, or of Heaven and Hell, or of Middlemarch (the fictional provincial town in George Eliot's novel), or Elizabeth (the heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice).*

Now it could be the case that the conceptual map which I carry around in my head is totally different from yours, in which case you and I would interpret or make sense of the world in totally different ways. We would be incapable of sharing our thoughts or expressing ideas about the world to each other. In fact, each of us probably does understand and interpret the world in a unique and individual way. However, we are able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways. That is indeed what it means when we say we 'belong to the same culture'. Because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. That is why 'culture' is sometimes defined in terms of 'shared meanings or shared conceptual maps' (see **du Gay, Hall et al.**, 1997).

However, a shared conceptual map is not enough. We must also be able to represent or exchange meanings and concepts, and we can only do that when we also have access to a shared language. Language is therefore the second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning. Our shared conceptual map must be translated into a common language, so that we can correlate our concepts and ideas with certain written words, spoken sounds or visual images. The general term we use for words, sounds or images which carry meaning is *signs*. These signs stand for or

How does the concept of representation connect meaning and language to culture? In order to explore this connection further, we will look at a number of different theories about how language is used to represent the world. Here we will be drawing a distinction between three different accounts or theories: the *reflective*, the *intentional* and the *constructionist* approaches to representation. Does language simply reflect a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events (*reflective*)? Does language express only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say, his or her personally intended meaning (*intentional*)? Or is meaning constructed in and through language (*constructionist*)? You will learn more in a moment about these three approaches.

Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation"

Stuart Hall

- Representation as a Mirror of Reality (Reflective Theory)
- Representation as a Manipulation of Reality (Intentional Theory)
- Representation as Constitutive of Reality (Constructionist Theory)

In the **reflective approach**, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world. As the poet Gertrude Stein once said, 'A rose is a rose is a rose'. In the fourth century BC, the Greeks used the notion of *mimesis* to explain how language, even drawing and painting, mirrored or imitated Nature; they thought of Homer's great poem, *The Iliad*, as 'imitating' a heroic series of events. So the theory which says that language works by simply reflecting or imitating the truth that is already there and fixed in the world, is sometimes called 'mimetic'.

Of course there is a certain obvious truth to mimetic theories of representation and language. As we've pointed out, visual signs do bear some relationship to the shape and texture of the objects which they represent. But, as was also pointed out earlier, a two-dimensional visual image of a *rose* is a sign – it should not be confused with the real plant with thorns and blooms growing in the garden. Remember also that there are many words, sounds and images which we fully well understand but which are entirely fictional or fantasy and refer to worlds which are wholly imaginary – including, many people now

The second approach to meaning in representation argues the opposite case. It holds that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. Words mean what the author intends they should mean. This is the **intentional approach**. Again, there is some point to this argument since we all, as individuals, do use language to convey or communicate things which are special or unique to us, to our way of seeing the world. However, as a general theory of representation through language, the intentional approach is also flawed. We cannot be the sole or unique source of meanings in language, since that would mean that we could express ourselves in entirely private languages. But the essence of language is communication and that, in turn, depends on shared linguistic conventions and shared codes. Language can never be wholly a private game. Our private intended meanings, however personal to us, have to *enter into the rules, codes and conventions of language* to be shared and understood. Language is a social system through and through. This means that our private thoughts have to negotiate with all the other meanings for words or images which have been stored in language which our use of the language system will inevitably trigger into action.

The third approach recognizes this public, social character of language. It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don't *mean*: we *construct* meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs. Hence it is called the constructivist or **constructionist approach** to meaning in language. According to this approach, we must not confuse the *material* world, where things and people exist, and the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others.

Of course, signs may also have a material dimension. For representational

3 notions of representation

- 1- Reflective- meaning is thought to lie in the object and language mirrors/reflects its meaning. "Language works by simply reflecting or imitating the truth that is already there".
  2- Intentional- the speaker attaches his/her meaning to the object. Words mean what the author wants them to mean. However, language is a shared, public construction. Thus, meaning can never be entirely constructed by the author- it depends on shared codes.
  3- Constructionist- objects don't mean anything until we construct a meaning for them. Things exist but don't have a meaning until they enter our system of representation.

Systems of representation

- Representation is the medium through which meaning production happens. It is the link between concepts and language, which are **systems of representation**, consisting not of individual mental images or words, but of ways of organizing and structuring meaning. Objects, people etc do not have stable, given meanings, but rather meanings are produced by human beings, participants in a culture.
- Culture, then, can be defined as a shared system of concepts communicated via a shared language. It rests on shared codes, sets of conventions, that arbitrarily fix the relationship between concepts and signs
- Even in the case of iconic signs (visual language) the relationship between sign and concept is not straightforward.
- Meanings are constructed by systems of representation. Representation is the process or channel or medium through which these meanings are both created and reified. Members of a culture learn and internalize the codes and so become participants in that culture.

For Saussure, according to Jonathan Culler (1976, p. 19), the production of meaning depends on language: 'Language is a system of signs.' Sounds, images, written words, paintings, photographs, etc. function as signs within language 'only when they serve to express or communicate ideas ... [To] communicate ideas, they must be part of a system of conventions ...' (ibid.). Material objects can function as signs and communicate meaning too, as we saw from the 'language of traffic lights' example. In an important move, Saussure analysed the **sign** into two further elements. There was, he argued, the *form* (the actual word, image, photo, etc.), and there was the *idea or concept* in your head with which the form was associated. Saussure called the first element, the **signifier**, and the second element – the corresponding concept it triggered off in your head – the **signified**. Every time you hear or read or see the *signifier* (e.g. the word or image of a *Walkman*, for example), it correlates with the *signified* (the concept of a portable cassette-player in your head). Both are required to produce meaning but it is the relation between them, fixed by our cultural and linguistic codes, which sustains representation. Thus 'the sign is the union of a form which signifies (*signifier*) ... and an idea signified (*signified*). Though we may speak ... as if they are separate entities, they exist only as components of the sign ... (which is) the central fact of language' (Culler, 1976, p. 19).

Saussure: the sign is made of 2 parts, the signifier and the signified. The relation between them is arbitrary and fixed by our linguistic codes

Saussure also insisted on what in section 1 we called the arbitrary nature of the sign: 'There is no natural or inevitable link between the signifier and the signified' (ibid.). Signs do not possess a fixed or essential meaning. What signifies, according to Saussure, is not RED or the essence of 'red-ness', but *the difference between RED and GREEN*. Signs, Saussure argued 'are

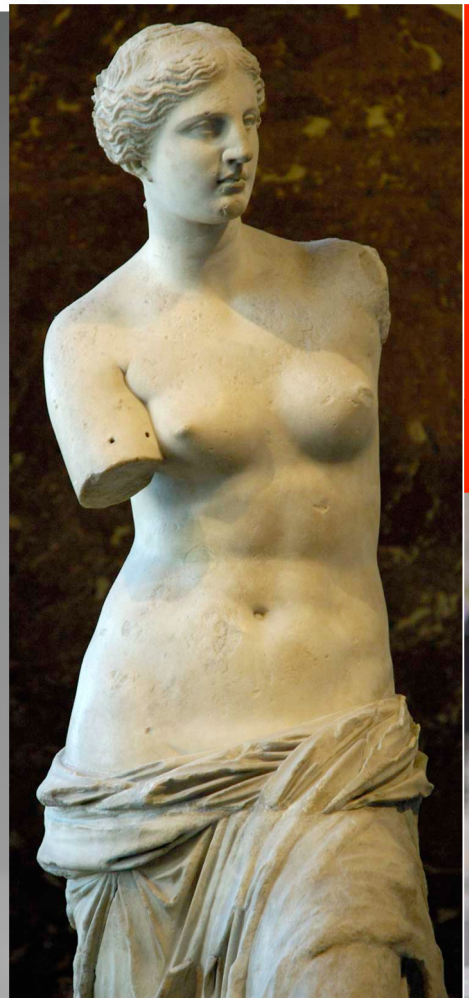
Denotation and connotation:
Signs have a denotative meaning (literal, descriptive) and a connotative meaning (culture-related)

Denotation and connotation

Denotation is the simple, basic, descriptive level, where consensus is wide and most people would agree on the meaning ('dress', 'jeans'). At the second level – *connotation* – these signifiers which we have been able to 'decode' at a simple level by using our conventional conceptual classifications of dress to read their meaning, enter a wider, second kind of code – 'the language of fashion' – which connects them to broader themes and meanings, linking them with what, we may call the wider *semantic fields* of our culture: ideas of 'elegance', 'formality', 'casualness' and 'romance'. This second, wider meaning is no longer a descriptive level of obvious interpretation. Here we are

In addition, this image, like all images, has two levels of meaning. French theorist Roland Barthes described these two levels with the terms *denotative* and *connotative* meaning. An image can *denote* certain apparent truths, providing documentary evidence of objective circumstances. The denotative meaning of the image refers to its literal, descriptive meaning. The same photograph *connotes* more culturally specific meanings. Connotative meanings rely on the cultural and historical context of the image and its viewers' lived, felt knowledge of those circumstances—all that the image means to them personally and socially. This Robert Frank photograph denotes a group

Roland Barthes used the term *myth* to refer to the cultural values and beliefs that are expressed at this level of connotation. For Barthes, myth is the hidden set of rules and conventions through which meanings, which are in reality specific to certain groups, are made to seem universal and given for a whole society. Myth thus allows the connotative meaning of a particular thing or image to appear to be denotative, hence literal or natural. Barthes argued



Encoding/Decoding

Texts contain a variety of messages that are encoded (made/inserted) by producers and then decoded (understood) by audiences. In the process of encoding, the sender uses verbal and non-verbal symbols which they assume the receiver will decode as they intended.

Stuart Hall highlights that audiences can decode/interpret the message in three different ways:

Dominant/Hegemonic Reading - the receiver decodes the message exactly the way it was encoded.

Negotiated Reading - The reader agrees with some part of the message but rejects other parts. They are simultaneously resisting and modifying it in a way which reflects their own experiences and interests.

Oppositional Reading - The reader completely rejects the message. Readers' or viewers social situation has placed them in a directly oppositional relationship to the dominant code, and although they understand the intended meaning they do not share the text's code and end up rejecting it.

MEN WOULDN'T LOOK AT ME WHEN I WAS SKINNY

but...

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Not only are thousands quickly gaining beauty-bringing pounds, but also clear skin, freedom from indigestion and constipation, new pep.

Concentrated 7 times

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured *brewers' ale yeast* imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new process is concentrated 7 times—*made 7 times more powerful.*

But that is not all! This super-rich yeast is ironized with 3 special kinds of iron which strengthen the blood, add energy.

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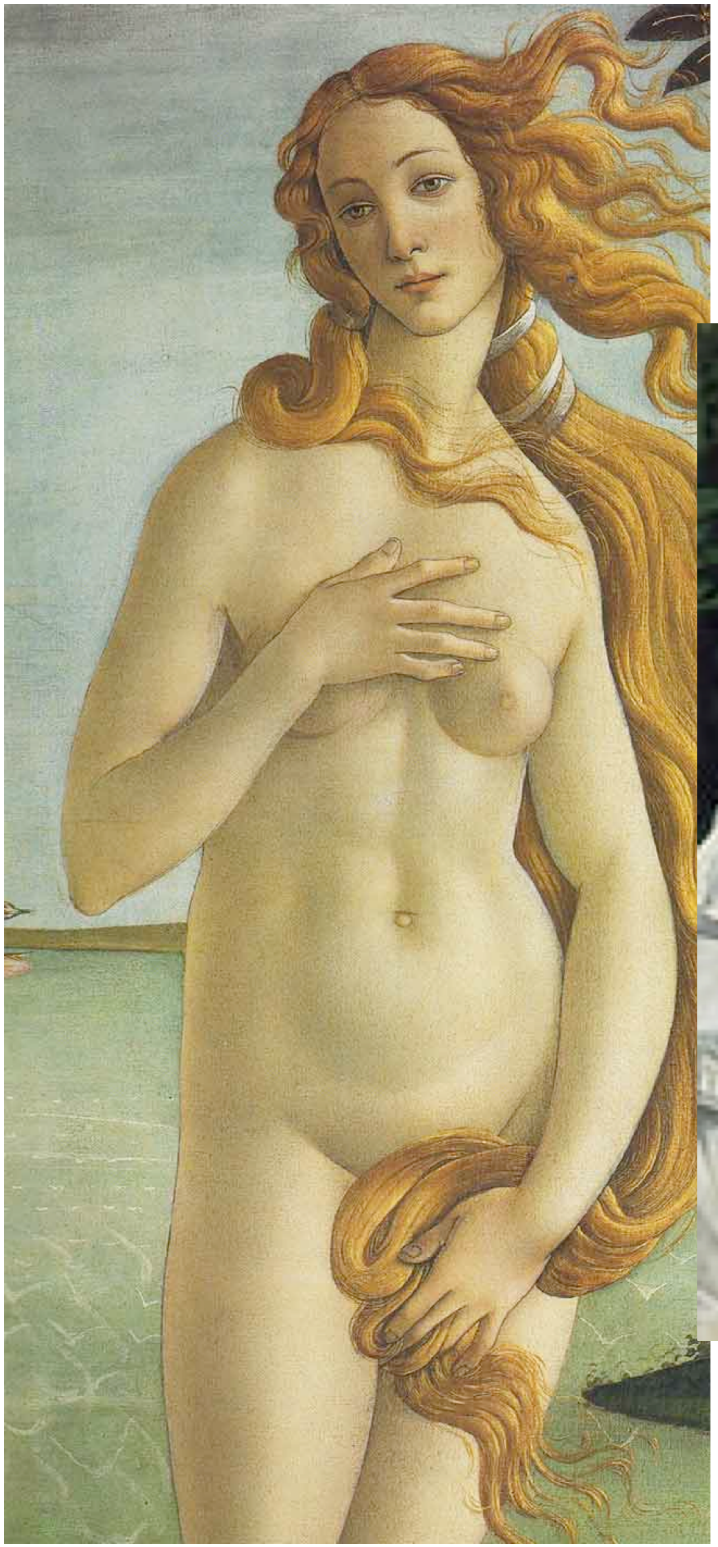

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Michel Foucault and the notion of discourse

- Discourse for Foucault is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular time. Discourse then represents shared knowledge about that topic, it defines and produces it, it controls the ways it can be talked about, it influences the way we think about it. The real exists outside discourse but can only be accessed through discourse.

Sturken & Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*

· Since the mid-1800s, there have been many arguments for and against the idea that photographs are objective renderings of the real world that provide an unbiased truth because cameras are seemingly detached from a subjective, particular human viewpoint. These debates have taken on new intensity with the introduction of digital imaging processes. A photograph is often perceived to be an unmediated copy of the real world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life. We refer to this concept as the myth of *photographic truth*. For instance, when a photograph is introduced as documentary evidence in a courtroom, it is often presented as if it were incontrovertible proof that an event took place in a particular way. As such, it is perceived to speak the truth. At the same time, the truth-value of photography has been the focus of many debates, in contexts such as courtrooms, about the different "truths" that images can tell.

Images and ideology

To explore the meaning of images is to recognize that they are produced within dynamics of social power and *ideology*. Ideologies are systems of belief that exist within all cultures. Images are an important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected. When people think of ideologies, they often think in terms of *propaganda*—the crude process of using false representations to lure people into holding beliefs that may compromise their own interests. This understanding of ideology assumes that to act ideologically is to act out of ignorance. In this particular sense, the term "ideology" carries a pejorative cast. However, ideology is a much more pervasive, mundane process in which we all engage, whether we are aware of it or not. For our purposes, we define ideology as the broad but indispensable, shared set of values and beliefs through which individuals live out their complex relations to a range of social structures. Ideologies are widely varied and exist at all levels of all cultures.

Visual Culture

- The set of ideas, beliefs and customs of a society as they are given visual expression, as well as ideologies and practices of looking. Visual culture consists of all kinds of visual imagery, from the arts to cinema, television and advertising, from graphic design to fashion, from comics to photography, but also of ideas about visuality, about the centrality of sight in epistemology, about its being grounded in biology or culture, etc. It can never be purely visual, since looking is always permeable to other senses

Race and Visuality

The link between race and visuality has become a very productive field of research in the last decades, not only because of their similar social constructedness (both visuality and race appear natural, ahistorical and transparent, but are social facts continuously adjusting to changes and contexts), but also and more importantly because visuality is central to race, and vice versa.

Race is largely constructed within visual regimes of power. The visuality of race is exemplified by Fanon's well-known episode in "The Fact of Blackness": 'Look, a Negro!'", where he visualizes his "inscription" in a racial regime as a breaking down of his corporeal schema, replaced by a racial epidermal schema.

Race is created by assigning meaning to physical difference, in terms of cognitive ability, behavior, morality etc. But seeing race produces both the Other and the Self. As Shawn Michelle writes:

"looking produces racialized viewers, not simply racialized objects of view"

THE FACT OF BLACKNESS

"Dirty nigger!" Or simply, "Look, a Negro!"

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

"Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

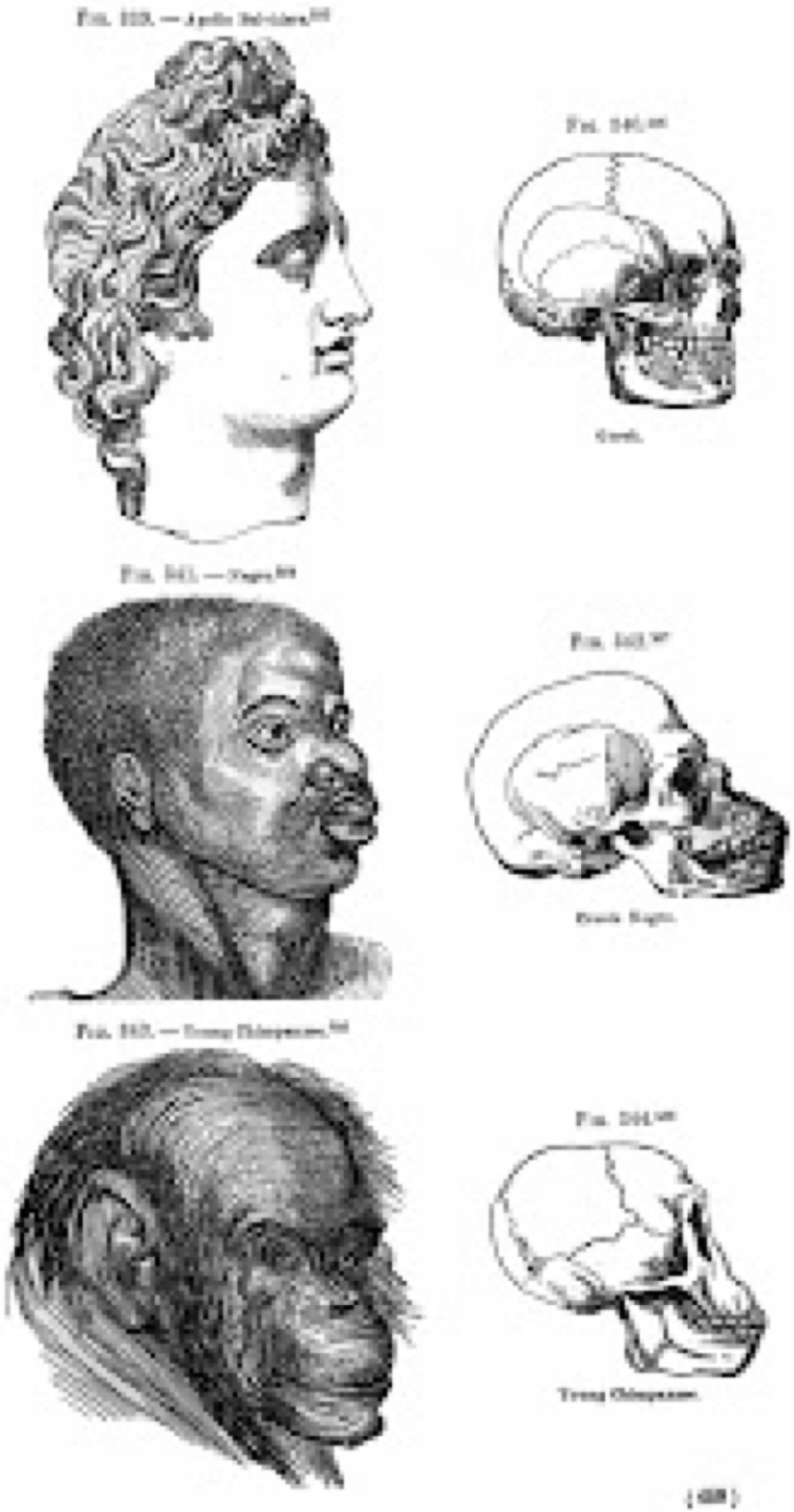
"Look, a Negro!" It was true. It amused me.

"Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

"Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.

Race as scopic regime

The concept of scopic regimes means that there are specific ways of seeing that are manifestations of culture. Vision is not universal. The act of seeing is not innate, but constructed culturally. An example of a scopic regime is a gendered way of seeing. By establishing an assertive, voyeuristic view of the subject a male gaze is enacted, while a more passive view reflects the cultural understanding of a female's view.



Nott and Gliddon, *Indigenous Species of the Earth*, 1857

What is “race”?

- Phenotype: The observable physical and/or biochemical characteristics of the expression of a gene; the clinical presentation of an individual with a particular genotype; an individual’s observable traits, such as height, eye color, and blood type.
- Genotype: an individual’s collection of genes. The expression of the genotype contributes to the individual’s observable traits, called the phenotype.

What we know about race: J. D. Anderson's quiz

- We may not always be able to define race but we can always tell race when we see it.
- Anthropology provides evidence that all human beings are black.
- Race is a biological and scientific concept and does not change over time or vary from society to society.
- Race and Racism have been around since the beginning of time and will continue to exist as long as there are multiracial societies.
- Race and Racism didn't fully emerge until the 18° c.
- Racism has always been more of a problem in the Southern US than in the other regions.
- Racism does not explain the cause of slavery in America, but rather the other way around.
- Since the victories of the civil rights movement, race and racism have declined as a significant political issue in America.
- Racial prejudice is the natural reaction of fear and suspicion automatically stimulated in the brain by the appearance of someone physically different from ourselves. This explains why humans naturally feel more comfortable around people of the same skin color.
- Race and Etnicity are products of history, creations of men and women rather than nature, and as such can be changed by men and women.

answers

- We may not always be able to define race but we can always tell race when we see it. **F**
- Anthropology provides evidence that all human beings are black. **T**
- Race is a biological and scientific concept and does not change over time or vary from society to society. **F**
- Race and Racism have been around since the beginning of time and will continue to exist as long as there are multiracial societies. **F**
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- Racial prejudice is the natural reaction of fear and suspicion automatically stimulated in the brain by the appearance of someone physically different from ourselves. This explains why humans naturally feel more comfortable around people of the same skin color. **F**
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What Is Race?

- The contemporary scholarly consensus is that the concept of race is a modern phenomenon
- Neither the ancient Greeks and Romans nor the medieval Jews, Christians and Muslims sought to classify humans into discrete racial categories. Phenotypical differences such as skin color and hair texture were noticed but did not ground discrete categories of biological difference.

Blumenbach

- The “science” of race was founded by the father of modern anthropology, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840). In his doctoral dissertation, “On the Natural Variety of Mankind” (177)5, Blumenbach identified four “varieties” of mankind: the peoples of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. He later introduced a fifth variety of mankind, that inhabiting the South Pacific islands, and coined the term “Caucasian” to describe the variety of people inhabiting Europe, West Asia, and Northern India. However he supported the monogenetic theory and attributed variety to the influence of the environment.

[H]istorically it is pretty well proved now that the ancient Greeks and Romans knew nothing about race. They had another standard—civilized and barbarian—and you could have white skin and be a barbarian and you could be black and civilized.

C.L.R. James, *Beyond the Boundary* (1973)

There is little doubt that many blacks were physically assimilated into the predominantly white population of the Mediterranean world, in which there were no institutional barriers or social pressures against black-white unions. In antiquity, then, black-white sexual relations were never the cause of great emotional crises.The ancient pattern, similar in some respects to the Mahgrebian and the Latin American attitude toward racial mixture, probably contributed to the absence of a pronounced color prejudice in antiquity.
Frank Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice* (1983)

According to Eric Foner only after the American Revolution did the concept of race need to emerge "as an explanation for the existence of slavery in a land that proclaimed that all men were created equal." According to Foner, it was not racism but the demand for labor that led to slavery, and slavery in a democratic republic required racism as a justification. The few Africans who arrived in the early Virginia colony held a status that was comparable to that of English indentured servants. The laws of the 1660s and 1670s that codified slavery are evidence that the status of people of African descent remained fluid and ambiguous for several decades. When Africans became fixed at the basest level of society and the need to control their labor resulted in a deterioration of their rights, Africans gradually came to be seen as an intrinsically degraded people. Foner contends that slavery was not simply an exception to the development of democracy for white people; for the large numbers of Americans who supported the existence of slavery, the enslavement of black Africans was the very basis for the freedom of white people.

In the nineteenth century the polygenesis theory disputed the previously predominant monogenesis theory, which held that all human beings descended from Adam and Eve, or a common ancestor. The new thesis held that the differing races had separate and distinct origins, not a single common ancestry, and that each racial type fit most properly into a climate and environment most suited to it. This theory was at the basis of so-called “scientific racism,” which applied new technologies and pseudo-sciences such as phrenology to demonstrating the inferiority of blacks and other dark races. Not all scientists agreed to it and many African American intellectuals defended monogenesis and environmentalism, and argued for the accomplishments of Egyptian and African cultures.

Statement on Race – American Anthropological Association (1998)

- In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies *within* so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic "racial" groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within "racial" groups than between them. In neighboring populations there is much overlapping of genes and their phenotypic (physical) expressions. Throughout history whenever different groups have come into contact, they have interbred. The continued sharing of genetic materials has maintained all of humankind as a single species.

DNA studies do not indicate that separate classifiable subspecies (races) exist within modern humans. While different genes for physical traits such as skin and hair color can be identified between individuals, no consistent patterns of genes across the human genome exist to distinguish one race from another.

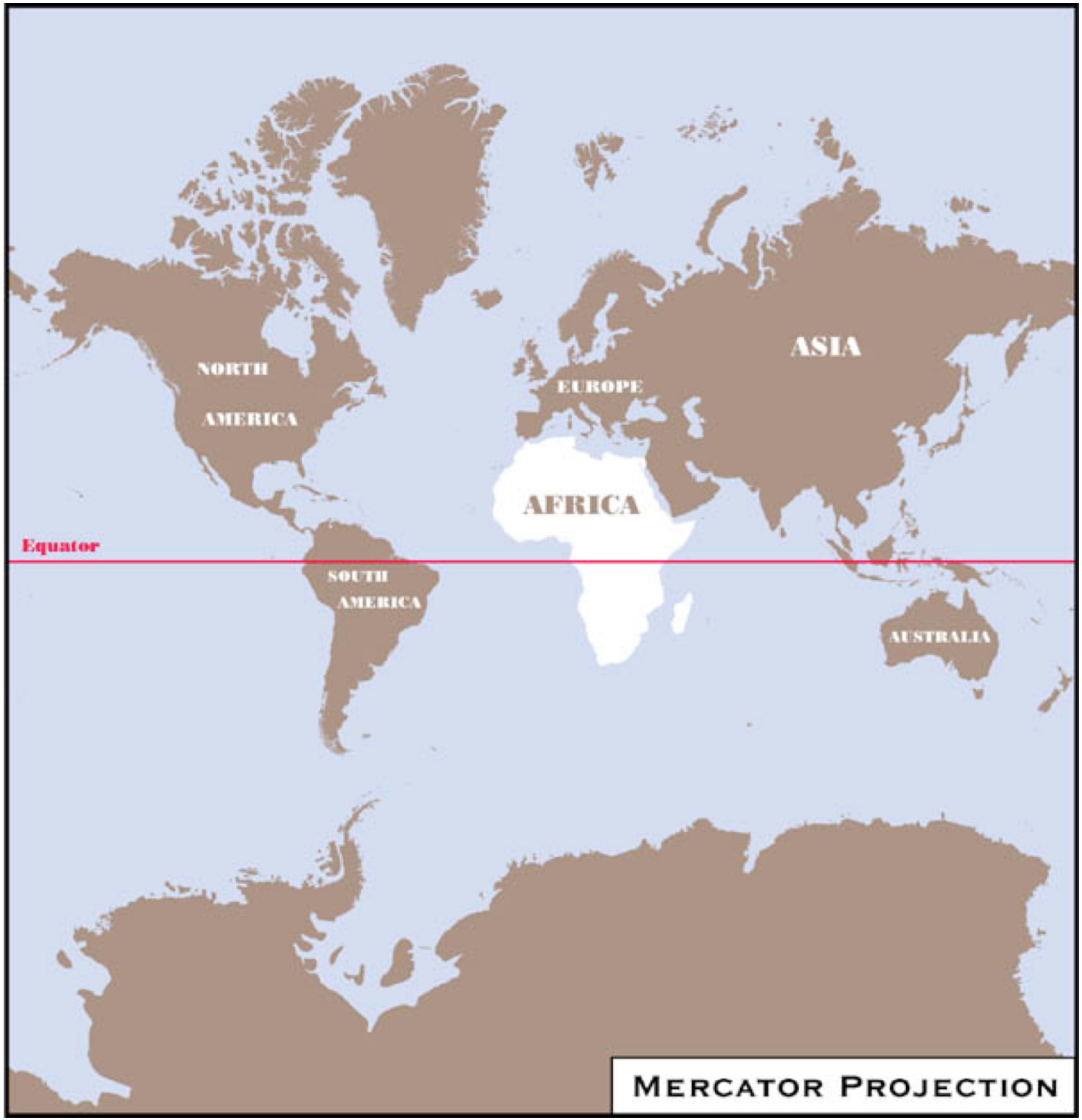
Race is “a **symbolic** category, based on **phenotype** or **ancestry** and constructed according to **specific social and historical contexts**, that is **misrecognized as a natural category**.” (Desmond & Emirbayer, “What Is Racial Domination?,” 2009)

Omi and Winant, "On the Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race"

The socially constructed status of the concept of race, which we have labeled the *racial formation* process, is widely recognized (Omi and Winant, 1986), so much so that it is now often *conservatives* who argue that race is an illusion. The main task facing racial theory today, in fact, is no longer to problematize a seemingly "natural" or "common sense" concept of race—although that effort has not been entirely completed by any means. Rather our central work is to focus attention on the *continuing significance and changing meaning of race.* It is to argue against the recent discovery of the illusory nature of race; against the supposed contemporary transcendence of race; against the widely reported death of the concept of race; and against the replacement of the category of race by other, supposedly more objective categories like ethnicity, nationality, or class. All these initiatives are mistaken at best, and intellectually dishonest at worst.

The Power of an Illusion

- The fact that race is symbolic and socially constructed and not a reality does not mean that it does not exist or has no importance in the real world. The symbolic is able to “create” realities of a different order. Race structures the way we think about others and ourselves, it affects the life of real people, it enforces a definite social order and has cultural ramifications.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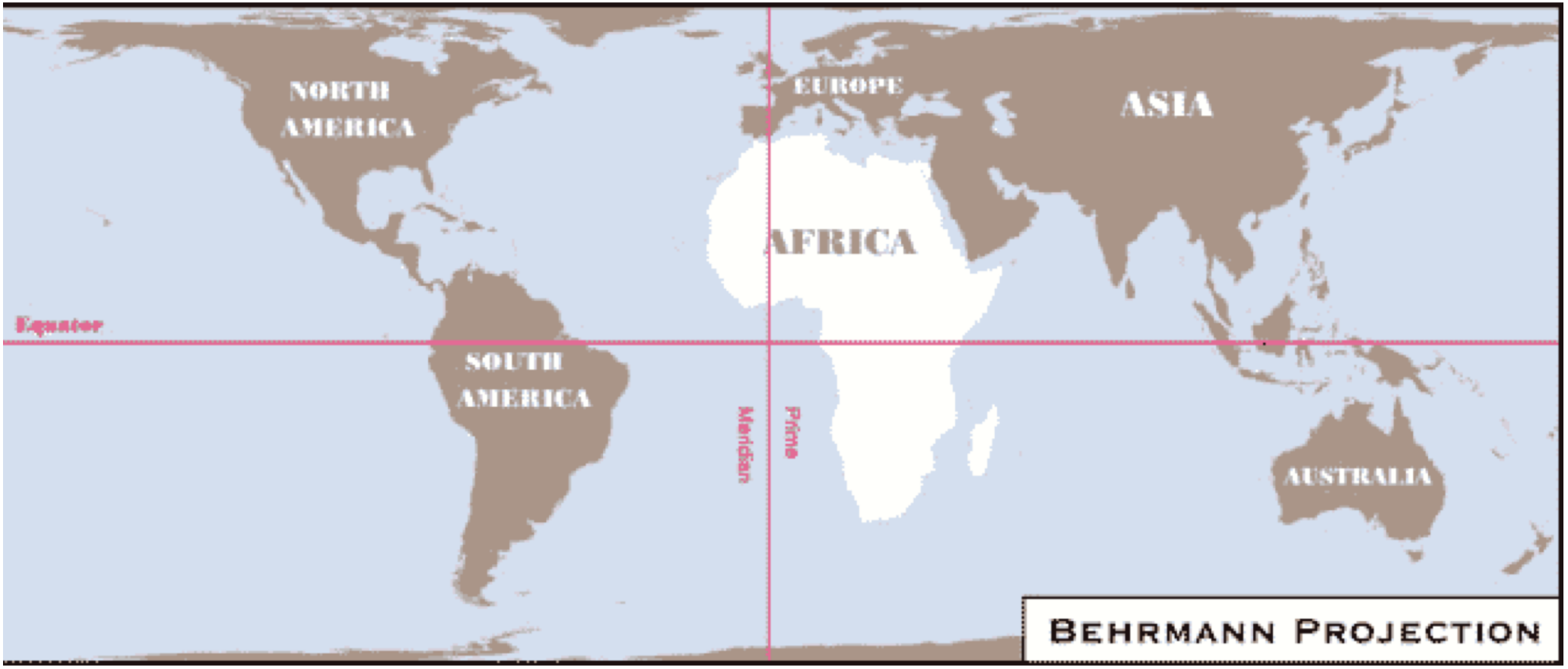
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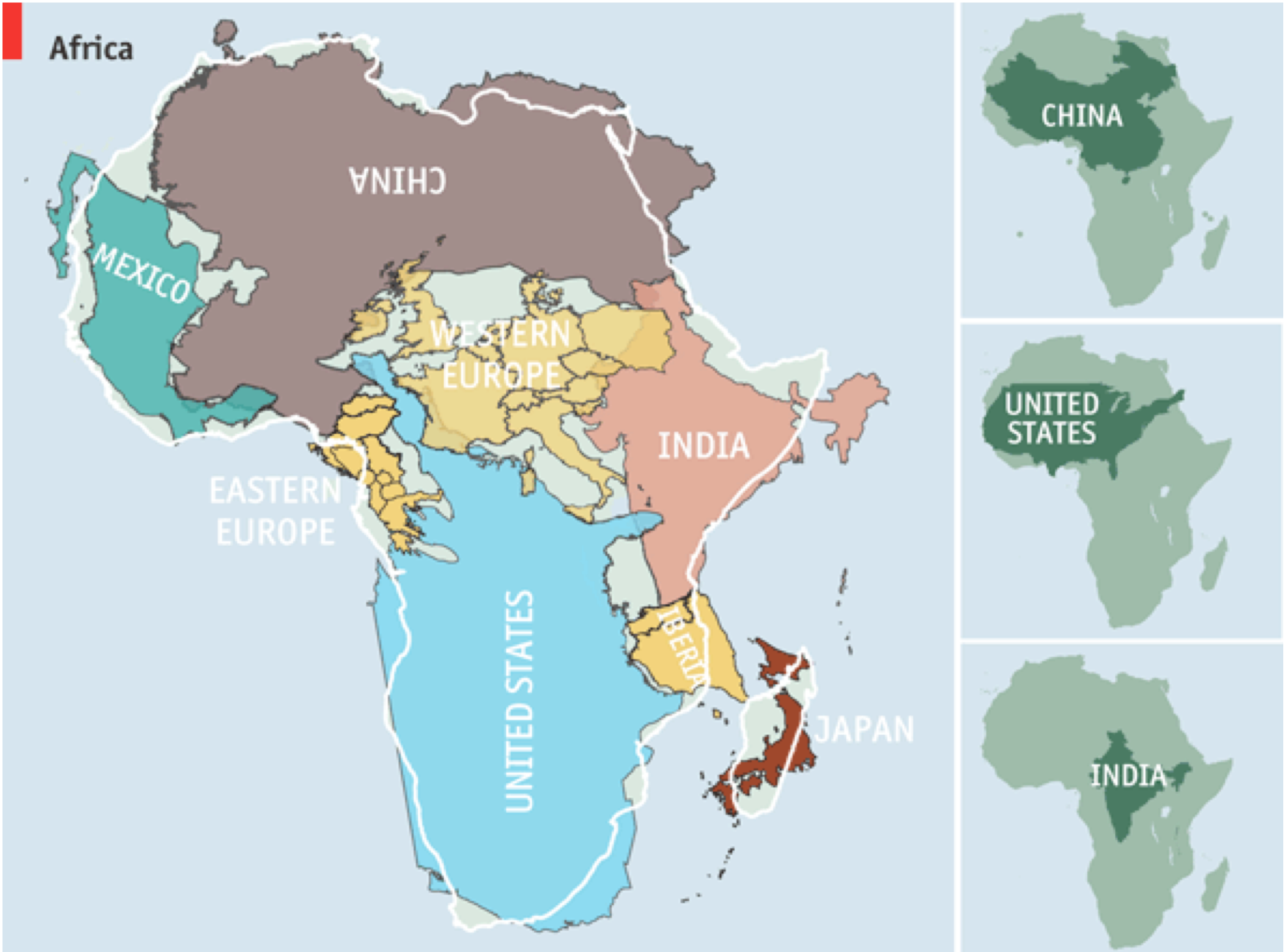
Africa
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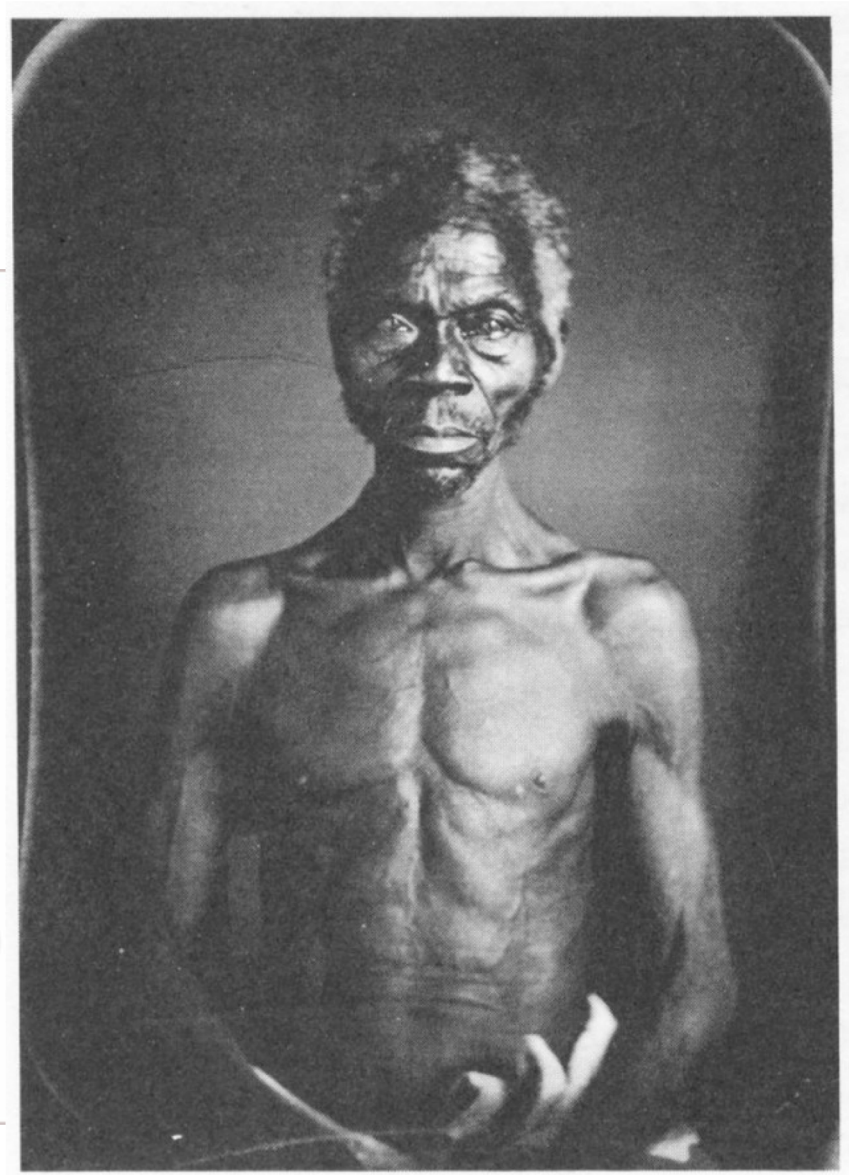
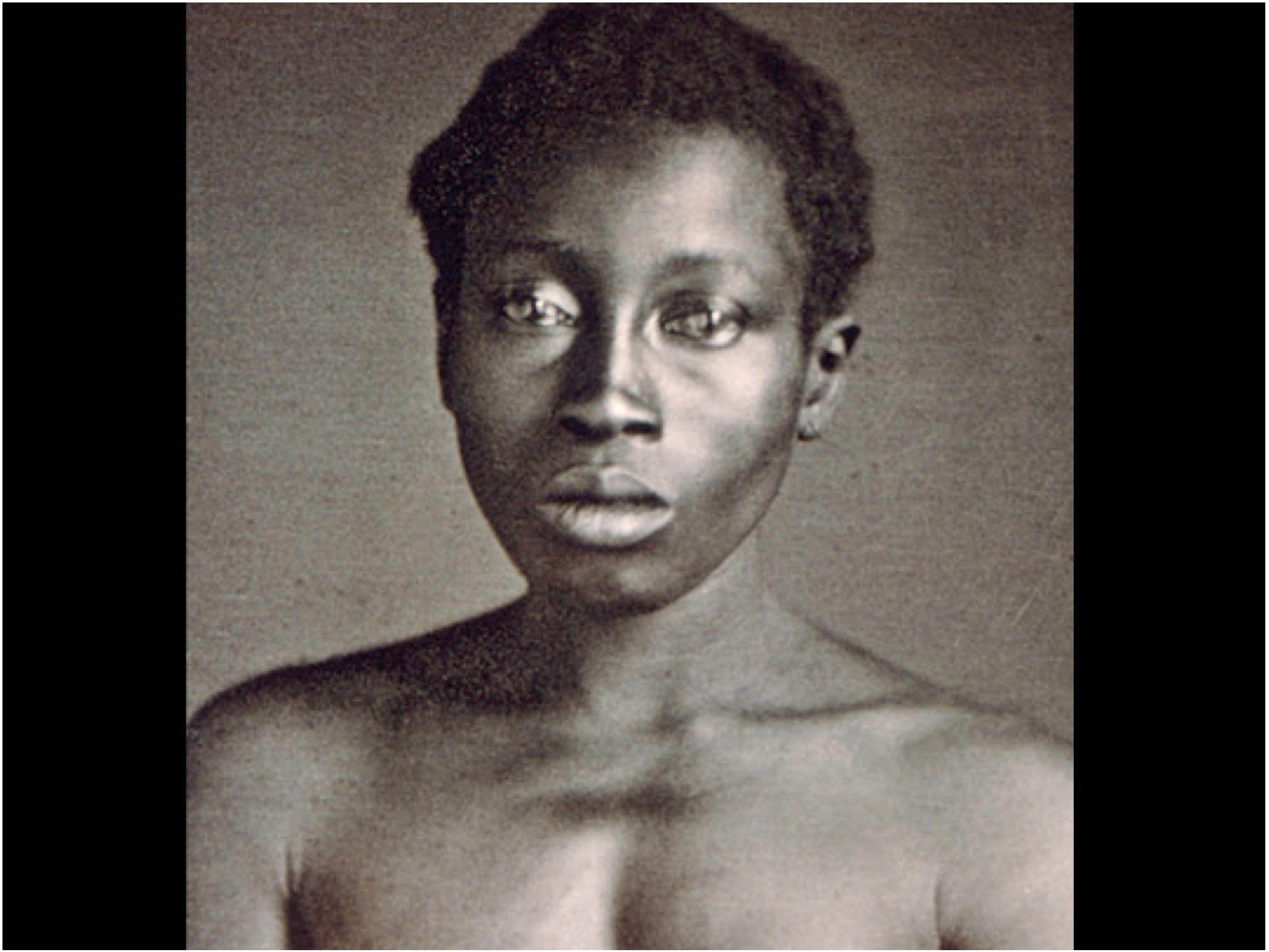
MEXICO
WESTERN EUROPE
INDIA
EASTERN EUROPE
UNITED STATES
IBERIA
JAPAN
CHINA
UNITED STATES
INDIA

EBOLA AND AFRICA's TRUE SIZE

"Where Africa was a case of the unspoken, Europe was a case of that which is endlessly speaking—and endlessly speaking us. The European presence interrupts the innocence of the whole discourse of 'difference' in the Caribbean by introducing the question of power. In terms of colonialism, underdevelopment, poverty and the racism of colour, the European presence is that which has positioned the black subject within its dominant regimes of representation: the colonial discourse, the literatures of adventure and exploration, the romance of the exotic, the ethnographic and traveling eye, the tropical languages of tourism, travel brochure and Hollywood, and the violent, pornographic languages of ganja and urban violence. How can we stage a dialogue with Europe so that we can place it, without terror or violence, rather than being forever placed by it?" (Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 1990, 233).

“The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization.” (Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 1990, 225)





Richard Dyer on stereotypes

- Stereotypes are usually understood as **a necessary ordering process** and a shortcut that enables societies to make sense of themselves. Problems with these notions: **order (stereotype) is not perceived as partial and relative, but held as absolute and certain**; not only is order (stereotype) historical, it is also a **product of power relations**

- Stereotypes are taken to represent and express our beliefs, values, ideas, in other words a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before the stereotype. Quite on the contrary, it is from stereotypes that we learn our ideas about social groups. The consensus evoked by the stereotype is apparent, stereotypes express particular definitions of reality

Stereotypes: what for?

- The function of stereotypes is to maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly who is within the pale and who is without. Their role is to make visible, fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and not so far from the norm. The degree of rigidity of a stereotype indicates the degree to which it is an imposed representation of a reality whose fluidity is perceived as a threat.

Stereotyping as representational practice

- Denotative level of meaning
- Connotative level of meaning
- Ambivalent message, meaning floats, it cannot be fixed
- Stereotypes help fix it by discarding all potential meanings except one

Slavery and racial stereotypes

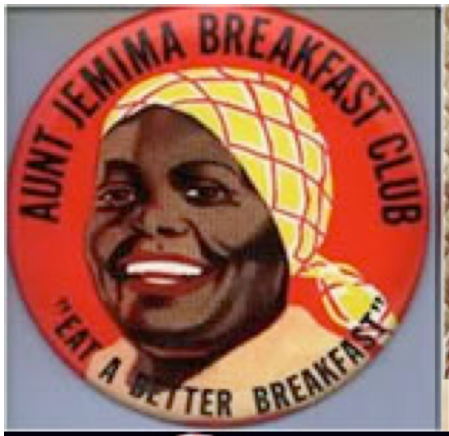
- Racial stereotyping of blacks as docile, childish, uncivilized, in need of guidance, happy-go-lucky, justified their enslavement in the plantation system: they were not able to take care of themselves, they were happy in their subjugation because they recognized their inferiority
- Slavery was represented as a patriarchal institution, where the father/master took care of his children/slaves
- Visit Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/

Stereotypes of blackness created in slavery

- Sambo: one of the most enduring stereotypes in American culture. The Sambo stereotype flourished during slavery in the United States. In fact, this stereotype is based on the notion of the "happy slave," a jolly, overgrown child who was happy to serve his master. In this way, the institution of slavery was justified. Although Sambo was born out of a defense for slavery, it extended far beyond these bounds. It was transmitted through music titles and lyrics, folk sayings, literature, children's stories and games, postcards, restaurant names and menus, and thousands of artifacts which made all white Americans familiar with this wide-eyed, grinning black man.

Stereotypes of blackness created in slavery

- The Mammy was a large, independent woman with pitch-black skin and shining white teet. She wore a drab calico dress and head scarf and lived to serve her master and mistress. The Mammy understood the value of the white lifestyle. The stereotype suggests that she raised the "massa's" children and loved them dearly, even more than her own. Her tendency to give advice to her mistress was seen as harmless and humorous. Although she treated whites with respect, the Mammy was a tyrant in her own family. She dominated her children and husband, the Sambo, with her temper. This image of the Mammy as the controller of the African-American male, was used as further evidence of his inferiority to whites. Because Mammy was masculine in her looks and temperament, she was not seen as a sexual threat to white women. Her obese figure with her ample bosom and behind was the antithesis of the white standard of female beauty.


AUNT JEMIMA BREAKFAST CLUB
"EAT A BETTER BREAKFAST"

USE
AUNT JEMIMA

COMING....
AUNT JEMIMA
IN PERSON
Pancakes
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
ELECTION DAY NOV. 7
By Reverend Hawkins

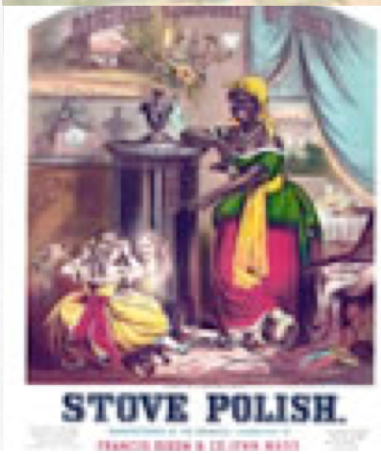
AUNTY
Brand

MAMMY

Aunt Jemima in 1921]

No Artificial Coloring or Preservatives
Aunt
Jemima
since 1889
Buttermilk
COMPLETE Pancake & Waffle Mix

Mm-m-m!
Every Bite Is Happifyin' Light
AUNT JEMIMA
PANCAKES
Pipin' Hot, on-the-Dot Supper Menu
Aunt Jemima Pancakes*
Broiled Sausage and


STOVE POLISH

MAMMIES, MATRIARCHS, AND OTHER CONTROLLING IMAGES

Patricia Hill Collins

Betye Saar, "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima," 1972

The first controlling image applied to African-American women is that of the mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white "family," the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination.

life require perpetuating the symbolic structures of racial oppression, the mammy image is important because it aims to shape Black women's behavior as mothers. As the members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black women are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference r, behavior many are forced to exhibit in mammy roles. By teaching Black ly children their assigned place in white power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression. In addition, employing mammies buttresses the racial superiority of white women employers and weds them more closely to their fathers, husbands, and sons as sources of elite white male power (Rollins 1985).

While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in white homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the "good" Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the "bad" Black mother. The modern Black matriarchy thesis contends that African-American women fail to fulfill their traditional "womanly" duties (Moynihan 1965). Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly cannot properly supervise their children and are a major contributing factor to their children's school failure. As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculate their lovers and husbands. These men, understandably, either desert their partners

The Matriarch/Angry Black Woman

Like the mammy, the image of the matriarch is central to interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children. Assuming that Black poverty is passed on intergenerationally via value transmission in families, an elite white male standpoint suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on white, middle-class children and that this deficiency seriously retards Black children's achievement. Such a view diverts attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children and suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. Those African-Americans who remain poor are blamed for their own victimization. Using Black women's performance as mothers to explain Black economic subordination links gender ideology to explanations of class subordination.

The breeder/welfare queen

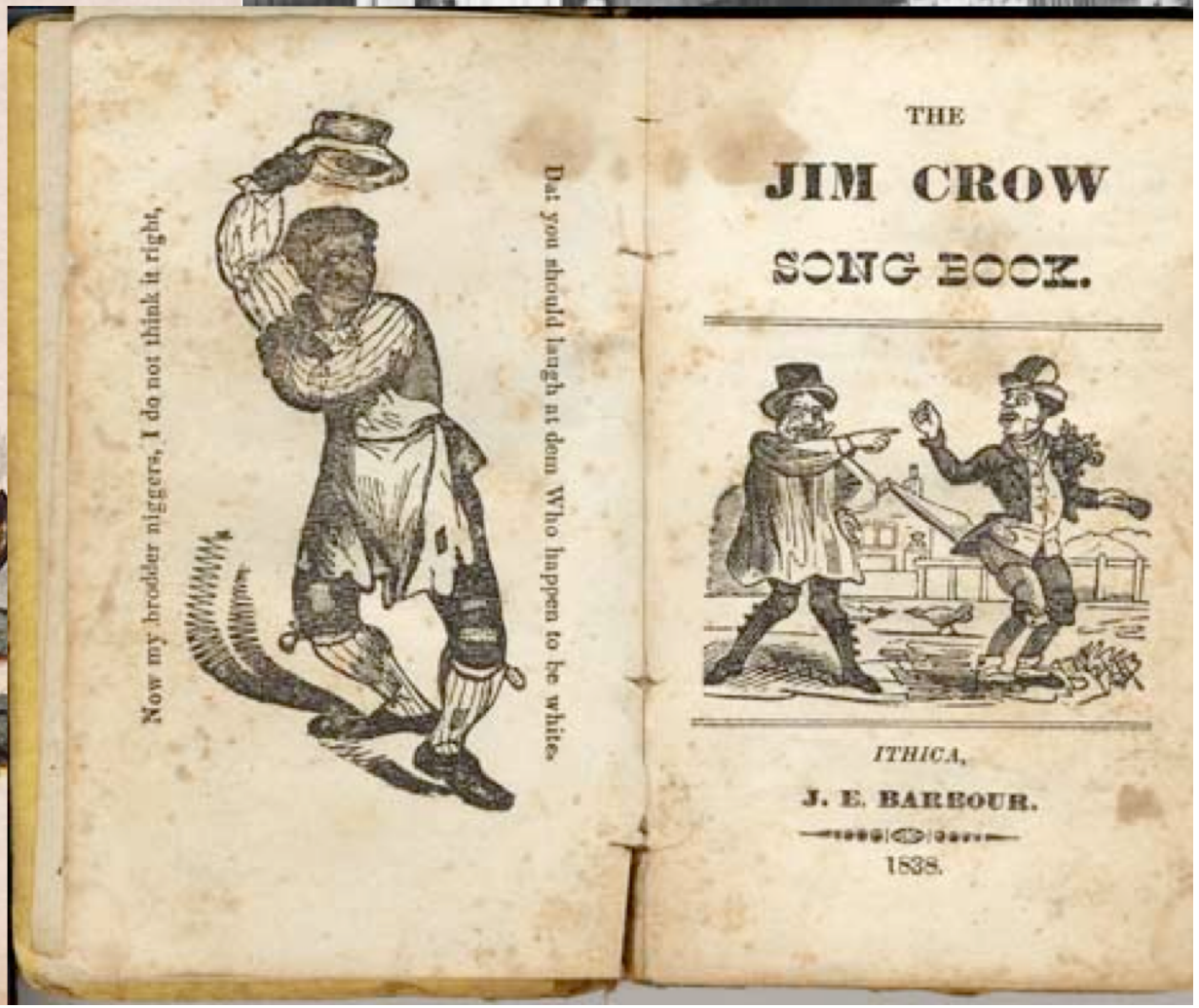
The Jezebel

The fourth controlling image—the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman—is central in this nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression. The image of Jezebel originated under slavery when Black women were portrayed as being, to use Jewelle Gomez's words, "sexually aggressive wet nurses" (Clarke et al. 1983, 99). Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women (Davis 1981; Hooks 1981; D. White 1985). Yet Jezebel served another function. If Black slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, then increased fertility should be the expected outcome. By suppressing the nurturing that African-American women might give their own children which would strengthen Black family networks, and by forcing Black women to work in the field or "wet nurse" white children, slaveowners effectively tied the controlling images of Jezebel and Mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery.

Jim Crow

The stereotyping of blacks was spread by the 19th-century blackface minstrel show, a form of entertainment where white performers darkened their faces with burnt cork and entertained the audience with “coon” songs and antics. One of the most popular characters was Jim Crow, a "city dandy” that was the northern counterpart to the southern "plantation darky”. T.D. Rice is the acknowledged creator of Jim Crow. His model was an old, crippled, black man in rags, whom he saw dancing in the street. During that time, a law prohibited African Americans from dancing in church because it was forbidden to cross feet. So African Americans developed a shuffling dance in which their feet never left the ground. White actors throughout the north began performing ”Jim Crow" to enormous crowds. This popularity continued, and at the height of the minstrel era, the decades preceding and following the Civil War, there were at least 30 minstrel companies performing across the nation. This caricature became the image of the black man in the mind of the white world and was even more powerful in the north where it was often the only way white people came into contact with blackness.

MR T. RICE
AS
THE ORIGINAL JIM CROW
New York Pub.d by E. RILEY N.o 29 Chatham St

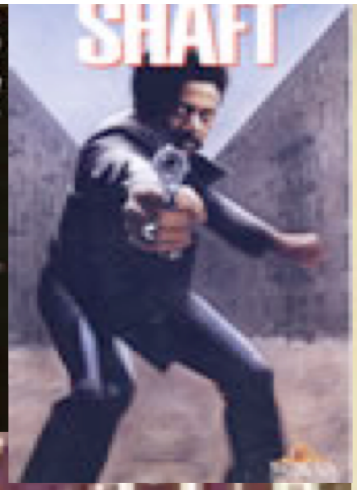


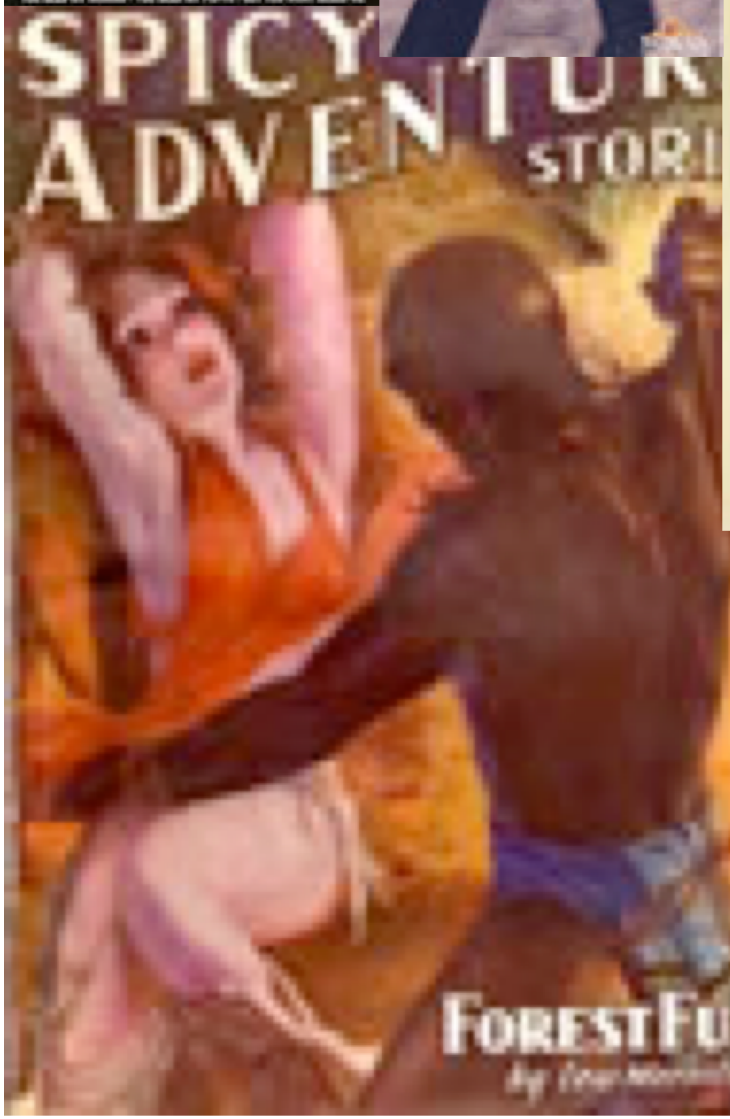
The Beastly Savage

After Emancipation the image of African Americans as apelike savages became pervasive, almost supplanting that of the childish, happy black. Like the Sambo, however, the black beast aimed at showing black men' inability to control their drives, behave rationally and become free citizens of the US. Scientists conducted tests and measurements and concluded that blacks were savages for the following reasons: "(a) The abnormal length of the arm...; (b) weight of brain... Negro 35 ounces, gorilla 20 ounces, average European 45 ounces; (c) short flat snub nose; (d) thick protruding lips; (e) exceedingly thick cranium; (f) short, black hair, distinctly woolly; and (g) thick epidermis."

These stereotypes of the animal-like savage were used to rationalize the harsh treatment of slaves during slavery as well as the murder, torture and oppression of African Americans following emancipation.

SWEET SWEETBACKS
BAADASSSSS SONG


SHAFT


SPICY
ADVENTUR
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FOREST FURY

'REGENERATION'

JUMBO
COMICS
10¢
SHEENA

That the field of representation remains a place of struggle is most evident when we critically examine contemporary representations of blackness and black people.

I was painfully reminded of this fact recently when visiting friends on a once colonized black island. Their little girl is just reaching that stage of preadolescent life where we become obsessed with our image, with how we look and how others see us. Her skin is dark. Her hair chemically straightened. Not only is she fundamentally convinced that straightened hair is more beautiful than curly, kinky, natural hair, she believes that lighter skin makes one more worthy, more valuable in the eyes of others. Despite her parents' effort to raise their children in an affirming black context, she has internalized white supremacist values and aesthetics, a way of looking and seeing the world that negates her value.

Of course this is not a new story. I could say the same for my nieces, nephews, and millions of black children here in the States. What struck me about this little girl was the depths of her pain and rage. She was angry. And yet her anger had no voice. It could not say, "Mommy, I am upset that all these years from babyhood on, I thought I was a marvelous, beautiful gifted girl, only to discover that the world does not see me this way." Often she was "acting out"—behaving in a manner that in my childhood days would have made older "colonized" black folks talk about her as evil, as a little Sapphire. When I tried to intervene and talk with her mother about the need to directly address issues of race and representation, I sensed grave reluctance, denial even. And it struck me that for black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is

bell hooks,
Black Looks: Race and Representation
1992

not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identify. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted. These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair enter.

To face these wounds, to heal them, progressive black people and our allies in struggle must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority of place in our political movements of liberation and self-determination (be they anti-imperialist, feminist, gay rights, black liberation, or all of the above and more). If this were the case, we would be ever mindful of the need to make radical intervention. We would consider crucial both the kind of images we produce and the way we critically write and talk about images. And most important, we would rise to the challenge to speak that which has not been spoken.

W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Exhibit of American Negroes" and the "war of images"

At the turn of the century, W. E. B. Du Bois compiled a series of photographs for the "American Negro" exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. He organized the 363 images into albums.

Du Bois was, committed to combating racism with empirical evidence of the economic, social, and cultural conditions of African Americans. He believed that a clear revelation of the facts of African American life and culture would challenge the claims of biological race scientists influential at the time, which proposed that African Americans were inherently inferior to Anglo-Americans. The photographs of affluent young African American men and women challenged the scientific "evidence" and popular racist caricatures of the day that ridiculed and sought to diminish African American social and economic success. Further, the wide range of hair styles and skin tones represented in the photographs demonstrated that the so-called "Negro type" was in fact a diverse group of distinct individuals.

This image is the photograph the late Trayvon Martin used to represent his Twitter identity in late 2011, under the screen name "T33ZY_TAUGHT_M3." Although the Twitter account was deleted, The Daily Caller retrieved it from the social analytics website PeopleBrowsr. The upper-arm tattoo in the image matches one in a close-up photograph on Martin's MySpace page. (Image: Twitter)

HEALTH CARE: Who's Afraid of Rationing?
GAYS: Tony Kushner on Stonewall 25
Newsweek
TRAIL OF BLOOD
BK4013970
LOS ANGELES POLICE
TIME
An American Tragedy
BK4013970
LOS ANGELES POLI
11POINTS.COM

11POINTS.COM

STEREOTYPE, REALISM AND THE STRUGGLE OVER REPRESENTATION

Ella Shohat/Robert Stam

Many oppressed groups have used "progressive realism" to unmask and combat hegemonic representations, countering the objectifying discourses of patriarchy and colonialism with a vision of themselves and their reality "from within." But this laudable intention is not always unproblematic. "Reality" is not self-evidently given and "truth" is not immediately "seizable" by the camera. We must distinguish, furthermore, between realism as a goal – Brecht's "laying bare the causal network" – and realism as a style or constellation of strategies aimed at producting an illusionistic "reality effect." Realism as a goal is quite compatable with a style which is reflexive and deconstructive, as is eloquently demonstrated by many of the alternative films discussed in this book.

UNTHINKING EUROCENTRISM

Ella Shohat/Robert Stam

Multiculturalism and the media

THE BURDEN OF REPRESENTATION

The hair-trigger sensitivity about racial stereotypes derives partly from what has been labeled the "burden of representation." The connotations of "representation" are at once religious, esthetic, political, and semiotic. On a religious level, the Judeo-Islamic censure of "graven images" and the preference for abstract representations such as the arabesque cast theological suspicion on directly figurative representation and thus on the very ontology of the mimetic arts.[7] Representation also has an esthetic dimension, in that art too is a form of representation, in Platonic or Aristotelian terms, a mimesis. Representation is theatrical too, and in many languages "to represent" means "to enact" or play a role. The narrative and mimetic arts, to the extent that they represent ethos (character) and ethnos (peoples) are considered representative not only of the human figure but also of anthropomorphic vision. On another level, representation is also political, in that political rule is not usually direct but representative. Marx said of the peasantry that "they do not represent themselves; they must be represented." The contemporary definition of democracy in the West, unlike the classical Athenian concept of democracy, or that of various Native American communities, rests on the notion of "representative government," as in the

rallying cry of "No taxation without representation." Many of the political debates around race and gender in the US have revolved around the question of self-representation, seen in the pressure for more "minority" representation in political and academic institutions. What all these instances share is the semiotic principle that something is "standing for" something else, or that some person or group is speaking on behalf of some other persons or groups. On the symbolic battlegrounds of the mass media, the struggle over representation in the simulacral realm homologizes that of the political sphere, where questions of imitation and representation easily slide into issues of delegation and voice. The heated debate around which celebrity photographs, whether of Italian-Americans or of African-Americans, will adorn the wall of Sal's Pizzeria in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) vividly exemplifies this kind of struggle within representation.

Since what Memmi calls the "mark of the plural" projects colonized people as "all the same," any negative behavior by any member of the oppressed community is instantly generalized as typical, as pointing to a perpetual backsliding toward some presumed negative essence. Representations thus become allegorical; within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community. Representations of dominant groups, on the other hand, are seen not as allegorical but as "naturally" diverse, examples of the ungeneralizable variety of life itself.[8] Socially empowered groups need not be unduly concerned about "distortions and stereotypes," since even occasionally negative images form part of a wide spectrum of representations. A corrupt White politician is not seen as

life itself.[8] Socially empowered groups need not be unduly concerned about "distortions and stereotypes," since even occasionally negative images form part of a wide spectrum of representations. A corrupt White politician is not seen as an "embarrassment to the race;" financial scandals are not seen as a negative reflection on White power. Yet each negative image of an underrepresented group becomes, within the hermeneutics of domination, sorely overcharged with allegorical meaning as part of what Michael Rogin calls the "surplus symbolic value" of oppressed people; the way Blacks, for example, can be made to stand for something beside themselves.[9]

This sensitivity operates on a continuum with other representations and with everyday life, where the "burden" can indeed become almost unbearable. It is this continuum that is ignored when analysts place stereotypes of so-called ethnic Americans, for example, on the same level as those of Native Americans or African-Americans. While all negative stereotypes are hurtful, they do not all exercise the same power in the world. The facile catch-all invocation of "stereotypes" elides a crucial distinction: stereotypes of some communities merely make the target group uncomfortable, but the community has the social power to combat and resist them; stereotypes of other communities participate in a continuum of prejudicial social policy and actual violence against dis-empowered people, placing the very body of the accused in jeopardy. Stereotypes of Polish-Americans and Italian-Americans, however regrettable, have not been shaped within the racial and imperial foundation of the US, and are not used to justify daily violence or structural oppression against these communities. The

TOURNAMENT
OF CHAMPIONS

Plate 2.1 Sandy Huffaker 'White is a flesh colored band aid', from Preston Wilcox (ed.) *White Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1970)

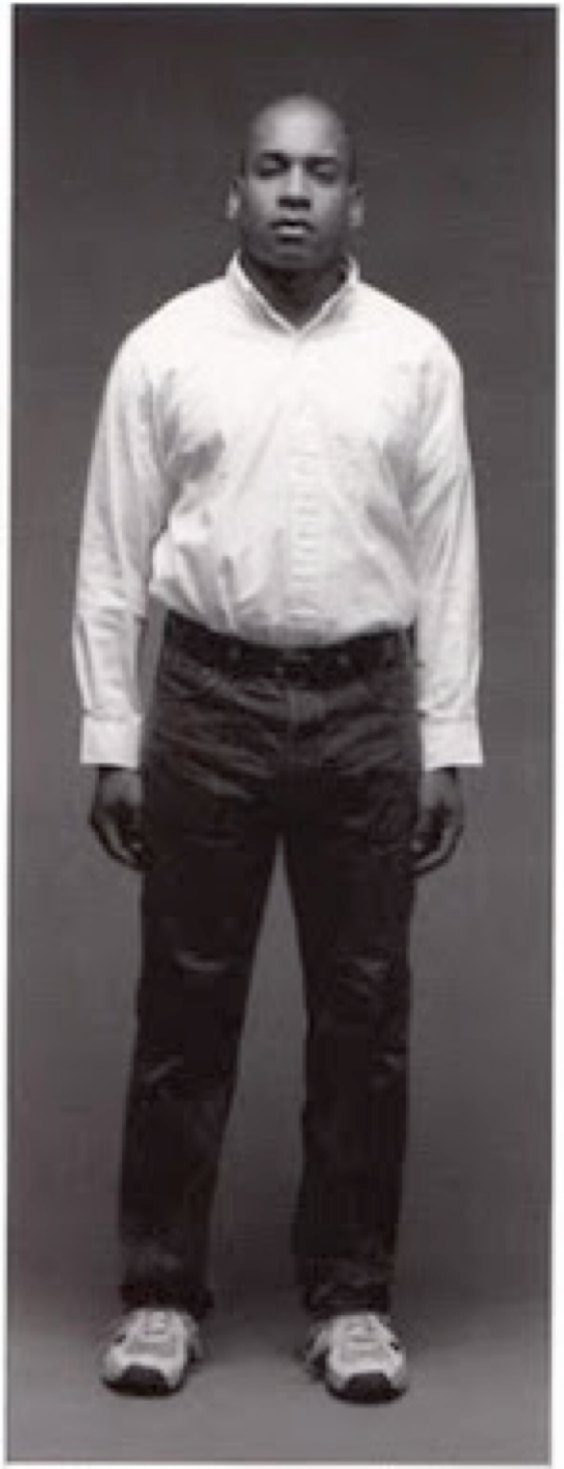
1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

Whiteness as default setting

I've never been stopped by a cop who just wanted to know who I was and what I was up to. I've never been accused of "furtive movements," the rationale New York City police use for the hundreds of thousands of times every year they question black and Hispanic men. I've never been frisked on the street, and nobody has ever responded with fear when I got in an elevator. That's not because of my inherent personal virtue. It's because I'm white.

My privilege as a white man is to be unnoticed if I choose, because when I step into an elevator or walk through a store or pass a cop on the street, I'm an individual. No one looks at me and says, "Hmm—white guy there," because I'm the default setting. I'm not suspicious, I'm not a potential criminal, I ring no alarm bells in anyone's head.

Paul Waldman, “The Privilege of Whiteness,” *The American Prospect* 2013



Self-portrait exaggerating my black features

Self-portrait exaggerating my white features

Countering Racial Stereotypes

"The Other invoked in stereotype might turn the tables by accentuating the stereotype's anxiety, its implicit instability. Although stereotypes cannot be reappropriated without invoking their racist history, they can nonetheless reveal in their performances the inner dynamics of this history, which already suggest the potential for disruption"

Josephine Lee, "The Seduction of the Stereotype,"

Performing Asian America, 1997

JOSEPHINE BAKER - 1927

Race as “floating signifier”

- Stuart Hall argues in his lecture “Race -The Floating Signifier” that race is a signifier which has meaning in a culture, but the meaning of skin color is not fixed. The significance and social viewpoint of skin color changes between different cultures. In addition, the meaning of skin color slides and floats on the scale of interpretation held by members of a society.

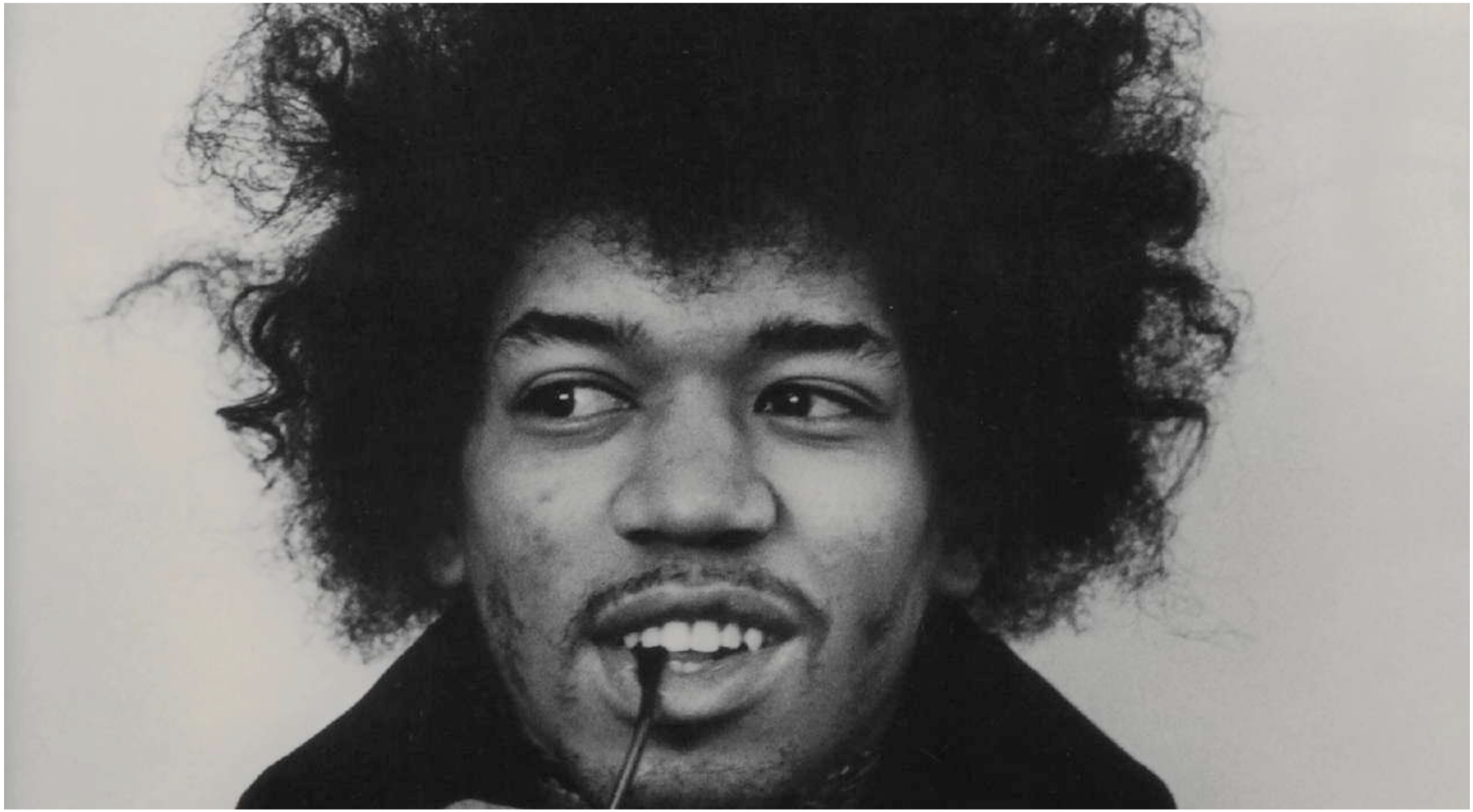
Structure of Recitatif (1983)

- First meeting: orphanage, late 1950s; Twyla and Roberta are 8 years old
- Second meeting: Howard Johnson's, about 10 years later, late 1960s (Hendrix died in 1970)
- Third meeting: fancy supermarket, 12 years later, late 1970s; gentrification of Newburgh; both are married with children
- Fourth meeting: some years later; demonstration against busing (enforcement of school desegregation laws)
- Fifth meeting: some time later, in a diner

“Morrison deliberately sets out to upset the comfort level of readers who want racial clarity of entry into literary texts. She creates characters not easily identifiable as black or white. In fact, she wrote the story as an experiment; in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), she comments: “The only short story I have ever written, ‘Recitatif,’ was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial.” By so doing, Morrison unseats the received expectations we have of African American literature and African American writers. She thereby positions readers with a racial discomfort that they either overcome, entering the text by the rules she creates, or that they consistently try to overcome by probing the text for blackness or whiteness eagerly waiting and watching for the disguise to slip and the racial markers to reassert themselves.”

Trudier Harris, “Watchers Watching Watchers: Positioning Characters and Readers in Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’ and Morrison’s ‘Recitatif’”

Jimi Hendrix



The Afro hairstyle

Busing

I-DON'T
FORCED BUSING
FORCED-BUSING
THIS NOT-THE
FREEDOM I WANT
FOR MY KIDS. DO YOU?
Spend Money
for
Education
Not
Buses
NO FORCED
BUSING
ONLY
VOLUNTARY
BUSING!

It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning-it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race. And Mary, that's my mother, she was right. Every now and then she would stop dancing long enough to tell me something important and one of the things she said was that they never washed their hair and they smelled funny. Roberta sure did. Smell funny, I mean. So when the Big Bozo (nobody ever called her Mrs. Itkin, just like nobody every said St. Bonaventure)-when she said, "Twyla, this is Roberta. Roberta, this is Twyla. Make each other welcome." I said, "My mother won't like you putting me in here."

"Oh," she nodded her head and I liked the way she understood things so fast. So for the moment it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper standing there and that's what the other kids called us sometimes. We were eight years old and got F's all the time. Me because I couldn't remember what I read or what the teacher said. And Roberta because she couldn't read at all and didn't even listen to the teacher. She wasn't good at anything except jacks, at which she was a killer: pow scoop pow scoop pow scoop.

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I saw Mary right away. She had on those green slacks I hated and hated even more now because didn't she know we were going to chapel? And that fur jacket with the pocket linings so ripped she had to pull to get her hands out of them. But her face was pretty-like always, and she smiled and waved like she was the little girl looking for her mother- not me. …
To tell the truth I forgot about Roberta. Mary and I got in line for the traipse into chapel and I was feeling proud because she looked so beautiful even in those ugly green slacks that made her behind stick out. A pretty mother on earth is better than a beautiful dead one in the sky even if she did leave you all alone to go dancing.

I looked up it seemed for miles. She was big. Bigger than any man and on her chest was the biggest cross I'd ever seen. I swear it was six inches long each way. And in the crook of her arm was the biggest Bible ever made.

Mary, simple-minded as ever, grinned and tried to yank her hand out of the pocket with the raggedy lining-to shake hands, I guess. Roberta's mother looked down at me and then looked down at Mary too. She didn't say anything, just grabbed Roberta with her Bible-free hand and stepped out of line, walking quickly to the rear of it. Mary was still grinning because she's not too swift when it comes to what's really going on. Then this light bulb goes off in her head and she says "That bitch!" really loud and us almost in the chapel now.

But she was waiting for me and her huge hair was sleek now, smooth around a small, nicely shaped head. Shoes, dress, everything lovely and summery and rich.

I was dying to know what happened to her, how she got from Jimi Hendrix to Annandale, a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives. Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world.

We went into the coffee shop holding onto one another and I tried to think why we were glad to see each other this time and not before. Once, twelve years ago, we passed like strangers. A black girl and a white girl meeting in a Howard Johnson's on the road and having nothing to say. One in a blue and white triangle waitress hat-the other on her way to see, Hendrix. Now we were behaving like sisters separated for much too long. Those four short months were nothing in time. Maybe it was the thing itself. Just being there, together. Two little girls who knew what nobody else in the world knew-how not to ask questions. How to believe what had to be believed. There was politeness in that reluctance and generosity as well. Is your mother sick too? No, she dances all night. Oh--and an understanding nod.

I knew I was supposed to feel something strong, but I didn't know what, and James wasn't any help. Joseph was on the list of kids to be transferred from the junior high school to another one at some far-out-of-the-way place and I thought it was a good thing until I heard it was a bad thing. I mean I didn't know. All the schools seemed dumps to me, and the fact that one was nicer looking didn't hold much weight. But the papers were full of it and then the kids began to get jumpy. In August, mind you. Schools weren't even open yet. I thought Joseph might be frightened to go over there, but he didn't seem scared so I forgot about it, until I found myself driving along Hudson Street out there by the school they were trying to integrate and saw a line of women marching. And who do you suppose was in line, big as life, holding a sign in front of her bigger than her mother’s cross? MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO! it said.

“Throughout “Recitatif,” Morrison has her readers watching and waiting as they hope that Twyla, the narrator, will provide some clue to her racial identity. And we enter the story like eager detectives, for we believe that our received tradition of knowledge about racial markers will allow us to uncover what Twyla and Morrison are so intent upon hiding. So we ask questions: Is Twyla a name usually assigned to black girls or white girls? It sounds black, but . . . a dancing white woman could name her daughter Twyla, because there would be a less-than-sticking-to-white traditions attached to her. And what about Twyla’s dancing mother? Is being a potential stripper more a black occupation than a white occupation? Or has class reduced a white woman to such an occupation? And the illness attached to Roberta’s mother—is it not just like a white woman to be “sick” and allow her daughter to spend time in a shelter? The cultural/racial stereotypes keep coming at us, and we keep reading, watching, and working hard to uncover the real racial identities.”

Trudier Harris, “Watchers Watching Watchers: Positioning Characters and Readers in Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’ and Morrison’s ‘Recitatif’”

Absence of racial markers aside, black and white human beings on American soil seem incapable of peaceful coexistence without tension based on race. It is the norm, and everyone seeks after the norm. Twyla and Roberta need each other, need to know that the other one exists in order to define themselves…. Twyla and Roberta move from their peaceful coexistence as children to reinventing prejudice during the marching scenes. They need the conflict to know who they are. In this context, on American soil, racism is just as natural as breathing. As Gwendolyn Brooks asserts of the whites who stoned little black children in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, racists are not two-headed monsters: "They are like people everywhere." Twyla and Roberta are like people, especially Americans, everywhere.

Trudier Harris, "Watchers Watching Watchers"