



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

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## Recognizing Stereotypical Images of African Americans in Television and Movies

Curriculum Unit 96.03.05  
by Steven F. Gray

The practice of racial stereotyping through the use of media has been used throughout contemporary history by various factions in American society to attain various goals. The practice is used most by the dominant culture in this society as a way of suppressing its minority population. The Republican parties use of the Willie Horton image in the 1988 Presidential campaign, is a small example of how majority groups have used racial stereotyping in the media as a justifiable means to an end. The book *Unthinking Eurocentrism* by Stam and Shohat supports this notion when they write “the functionality of stereotyping used in film demonstrates that they (stereotypes) are not an error in perception but rather a form of social control intended as Alice Walker calls “prisons of image.”(1)

The modern usage of the word stereotype was first introduced in 1922 by American journalist Walter Lippman in his book *Public Opinion* . The major thesis of this book is that in a modern democracy political leaders and ordinary citizens are required to make decisions about a variety of complicated matters that they do not understand. “People believe that their conceptions of German soldiers, Belgian priests, or American Klu Klux Klansman for example are accurate representations of the real members of those classes . . . the conception in most cases is actually a stereotype acquired by the individual from some other source other than his direct experience.”(2)

Historically the “other source” people developed racial stereotypes were from literature and then radio. In 1933 Sterling Brown the great black poet and critic, divided the full range of black characters in American literature into seven categories; the contented slave; the wretched freemen; the comic Negro; the tragic mulatto; the local color Negro; and the exotic primitive. Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. speaks of Dr. Brown’s work in the article *TV’s Black World Turns but Stays Unreal* . “It was only one small step to associate our public negative image in the American mind with the public negative social roles that we were assigned to and to which we were largely confined.”(3)

The use of racial stereotyping is destructive to American society on two fronts. First it connotes to the majority population of America that the negative actions of a few minorities sum up the collective values of the whole minority community. For example, in urban America to be a mugger is synonymous with being African American or Hispanic. As a result of media images, the immediate image we accept as norm is that of whites being mugged by blacks and Hispanics. While of course, black and Hispanic men have mugged whites, to have this be a dominant image goes against many national and local crime statistics. Discussing racial imaging in the book *Questioning the Media*, Ash Corea explains “stereotypes seek to portray African-Americans as a “problem” in an otherwise harmonious country.”(4)

In contemporary American society the most affective way in which stereotypes are perpetuated is through the mediums of film and television. Images from these mediums constantly bombard American children with negative and unrealistic portrayals of African-American life or deny the existence of African-Americans in a “true” American society at all.

Stam and Shohat explain “the mark of the plural” in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. They explain how “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 negative essence. Representations thus become allegorical.”(5) They further explain how stereotyping “of other communities participate in a continuum of prejudicial social policy and actual violence against disempowered people placing the very body of the accused in jeopardy.”(6) The nationwide manhunt for the fictitious black killer of Susan Smith’s children supports their assertion.

The second effect of stereotyping is that the group being stereotyped begins to internalize the negative images and actually mimic some of the behavior and attitudes portrayed in the negative imagery. One of the most famous examples of internalization of stereotypes is the experiment first used in the case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. In this experiment black children were shown almost identical dolls, the only difference being skin color (one black, one white). When the children were asked which dolls were pretty, nice, smart, clean, etc. child after child pointed to the white doll. However, when asked which doll was ugly, dumb, dirty or evil the black doll was almost always selected.

I have been a 5th grade school teacher in the New Haven public school system for three years. As a result of close interaction with and observation of my students I have become painfully aware of how negative stereotypical images from television, movies and to a lesser extent literature affect young black children. All too often, children imitate negative stereotypical behaviors exhibited in these mediums.

For example, many children now imitate the dress, dialect and violence associated with the “gangsta” lifestyle portrayed in the currently popular, “in the hood” movie genre. In these films, violence is used as a means of solving problems, sometimes without repercussions and is often glorified. Mothers are on welfare, fathers are unemployed, drunkards, or absent altogether. If taken individually, some elements may be present “in the hood” but are no means the norm.

An educator would be foolish to suggest that viewing images is the major cause of negative behaviors present in some of today’s school aged children. Unemployment, poor housing, and lack of education are some of the ills which heavily shape negative behavior patterns. However, it would be absurd to assert that these portrayals have no effect at all. Many studies have documented the time children spend in front of the television (I assume that a significant amount of time is spent watching movies on the VCR). *The Washington Post* of June 23,1996 reports, “In a 1994 survey, nearly one of two black fourth graders said they watched six hours or more of television daily, according to the National Center of Education Statistics, the research arm of the U.S. . Department of Education. That’s more than three times the rate at which their white classmates reported spending that many hours in front of the television. It is nearly double the 27 percent of Hispanic fourth-graders who said they watch at least six hours a day . . .”(7) To help resolve this problem educators have to develop programs that teach children how and why television and movie images are manipulated and how these manipulations affect them.

This curriculum unit will provide elementary school teachers with a framework to begin to help their students understand and define a stereotype. Recognize common stereotypes and stereotypical themes in film and television and illustrate some damaging effects perpetuating stereotypes through behavior. Finally, how to constructively deal with others stereotyping them.

Teaching these skills are it essential considering the recent decision in the *Sheff vs. O’Neill* case. In the not to distant future inner-city children will be forced to interact with white children in the suburbs. They must understand that their behaviors could significantly shape white Nutmeggers perceptions of African American people in the future.

The scope of this paper is limited to stereotypical views of African-Americans in film and television. This is a

function of my school and class demographics. L.W. Beecher Elementary School is an inner-city school servicing approximately 450 children from ages five to twelve years of age. Beecher's racial makeup is 92% African-American, 7% Latino, and 1% Caucasian.

## Strategies

My unit will be taught within the context of film and television. All of the unit's activities will revolve around watching selected movies and documentaries and discussing these materials in small and large groups. Preceding each discussion students will perform various writing assignments on topics being discussed. Assignments would include but not be limited to journal writing and essays from various writing prompts. In addition, problem solving activities such as role playing will be included. Math and social science will be integrated into some of these activities.

The curriculum unit will be taught over a period of five weeks. It would start at the at the beginning of the academic quarter. Math and writing skills needed to fully comprehend and enjoy the unit will be sufficiently covered by this time.

Due to the controversial content within the unit parents will be asked for permission to let their child participate in the unit	The activities included in this unit directly correlate with many standards of the New Haven Public Schools Curriculum Framework Document <i>Vision Statements and Standards</i> (April 96). In addition, my choice of activities reflect the need to increase writing proficiency of fifth grade students. According to a report by the State Department of Education, only 7% of New Haven public school students tested, have attained mastery in the skill of writing.
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## I. Defining Stereotypes

In the first unit objective students will be able to define racial a stereotype and the practice of stereotyping. This will be accomplished through nine activities.

I will first ask the students their responses to help me fill out the K and W of a K-W-L chart. I will place their answers on flip chart paper. These charts will be placed on a bulletin board to remain up during the duration of the unit.

It has been my experience that definitions themselves do not impress children. As a result, students will first be next be asked to brainstorm and list of ideas that come to mind when thinking of defining the word stereotype. The ideas will be recorded on the chalkboard. Then an academic definition of the word stereotype will be presented. The following definition from *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* will probably be used, "A standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and represents an oversimplified judgment." The two definitions will be compared.

Next, on large black construction paper there will be placed several photos of stereotypical black images. The class will be asked to divide into small groups. Each group will describe and discuss the image before them. As they are discussing the images, one student from each group will record his/her group's responses. The groups will have ten minutes to complete this activity. Once completed, the teacher will ask a representative from each group to report their group's responses to the class. as the groups are reporting, the teacher will record the responses underneath the corresponding pictures. Afterwards, the teacher will reveal who/what each picture actually is or represents and point out the stereotypical responses given. Next the teacher will facilitate a discussion among the group of what led them to their responses and why they were taught to think of the images in the way that they did. The last part will be used to place their responses and discussion back

into the context of the dictionary definition, thus giving students insight into stereotypes.

The next activity will be integrated with the *Addison Wesley* 5th grade math textbook lessons on percentages (section 9-8) and graphing (section 7-8). These lessons will be taught in the previous academic quarter but will be reviewed the morning of the activities presentation.

Students will be provided with and asked to read a copy of the stereotype entry in the *International Encyclopedia of Social Science*. This three page entry begins by explaining how the original use of the word stereotype is fundamentally different from its current usage. It then goes on to explain how stereotyping has been used as a social science concept without being precisely defined. It then introduces Walter Lippman, who first used the modern usage of the word in his book *Public Opinion* (1922). The article summarizes Lippman's work and provides the four characteristics of a stereotype.

The entry then documents and describes empirical research performed on the subject of stereotyping. It reveals that very little systematic investigation has been conducted on the subject. However, that "there have been very few attempts to set up criteria for classifying an individual's concept in a particular area into "stereotypes" and "nonstereotypes." In empirical research, the term stereotype has usually been employed simply as a pejorative term designation for group concept.

The entry next describes a study performed in 1933 by Daniel Katz and Kenneth Braly. In this study a group of 100 White American college students were asked to select from a list of 84 traits those they considered characteristics of each one of ten ethnic groups; then they were asked to choose the five "most typical" traits for each group.

The students in the class will repeat a modified version of this experiment. Students will survey 100 fourth and fifth grade students and have them choose character traits of whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asians. The students will then be asked to list five typical traits of each group.

Students will then be placed into groups of four. Each group will then be given copies of the surveys and asked to construct a wheel or bar graph depicting the percentage of responses for the five typical traits for each ethnic group. They will then be asked to discuss and record their responses to their work. Individual responses will be recorded in each student's personal response journals.

A group discussion will then take place revolving around discussion questions including but not limited to;

Why do you think the respective ethnic groups were depicted as they are in the responses to the survey ?

Do you think the responses give a true depiction of the groups ?

What is wrong with the depiction's ?

What can we do to make sure this group does not continue to be viewed in this way ?

The next activities will focus on screening two documentaries which place racial stereotypes in the media in a historical context. It will take approximately four days to view both films (30 min. per showing 15 min. for discussion).

Students will first watch *Black History; Lost Stolen, and Strayed* (1967). Narrated by Dr. William H. Cosby the documentary chronicles the historical misrepresentations and stereotypical depictions of Black Americans.

Students will next view *Ethnic Notions* by Marlon Riggs. This film stresses the pain caused by stereotypes represented in racist cartoons, toys and alternates citations of racist materials with interviews with African-American performers and scholars.

At the end of each screening I will answer any questions the students may have about the films and start a class discussion revolving around their feelings about the respective films. Next, I will have them write their personal views on each film in their personal responses journals.

I will assess students comprehension of the objective by assigning a 250 word essay. The topic of the essay will have children define what a stereotype is and compare how the two films explained the concept of stereotyping.

## **II. Identifying Negative Stereotypical Images**

In the next objective of the unit, students will be able to identify various incarnations of stereotypical images of blacks in film and television. I do this through a series of four activities. I anticipate teaching this objective over a two week period. Movies will be shown in two parts allowing time after each viewing for questions and discussion. All other activities will done in one class period a day.

First, students will be provided with a copy of Donald Bogle's list of "the five black pantheons"(historical portrayals of blacks in American cinema) from his book *Toms, Coons, Mullatoes, Mammies and Bucks* . These images, the coon, the tom, the mulatto and the mammy appear constantly in early cinema and continue to be used today in both cinema and television. Bogle described the five black pantheons as follows:

### **The Tom**

Toms are always chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted. They keep the faith never turn against their white masters and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless and oh-so-very kind. They endear themselves to white audiences as heroes of sorts.

### **The Coon**

The coon developed in to the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coon emerged as a no account nigger. Those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting craps or butchering the english language.

### **The Mammie**

Mammie the third black type can be called a female coon. Mammy is distingused, however, by her sex and her fierce independence. She is usually big fat and cantankerous.

### **The Tragic Maluatto**

The fourth figure in the black pantheon explored the plight of the fair skinned black trying to pass for white. Usually the mulatto is made likable (because of their white blood) and the audience believes that their life could have been productive and happy had they not been a victim of divided racial inheritance.

### **The Buck**

The last figure described by Bogle is the black buck. Bucks are always big, brutal oversexed black men.

After giving the list to the students they will be asked to read the list silently to themselves. I will then have

choral reading of the list with the students to be followed by a class discussion and questions about the images. Students will next answer the following questions in their personal response journals;

Have you ever seen these stereotypes in any television shows or movies that you watch ?

What shows were they ?

What stereotypes that you have read about did the people in these movies show ?

How did seeing people act this way make you feel ?

I will then show excerpts from television shows that clearly depict the images Bogle describes. My selections include but are not limited to *Amos and Andy* as examples of the tom and coon; *Good Times* , and *That's My Mama* which contain clear cut examples of the mammie and in the first two also show perfect examples of the comic coon; *A-Team* and *Hawk* as the buck; and *A Different World* with Whitley as the tragic mulatto.

To give students clearer examples and historical perspective I will then show Marlon Riggs' *Color Adjustments* . This documentary chronicles the history of black representation on T.V. Questions will be taken after the viewing.

The next activity in this section will be to screen the film *Birth of a Nation* with the students. I chose this film because of its historical importance in American film making and because it contains all of Bolge's " five pantheons" in one form or another. After each viewing of the film I shall hold class discussion which students will respond to in their journals.

In my final activity, I will assess student understanding of objective through a 250 word essay. The essay shall ask students to describe each of the five stereotypes in film and television an give an example of each. The description must detail behaviors the characters exhibited that make them fit the stereotype.

### **Recognizing Negative Effects of Racial Stereotyping**

In the final objective students will be able to recognize the negative effects of racial stereotyping on themselves and others. This objective is the most important of all. when students recognize and understand the harmful effects of perpetuating stereotypes through their negative behaviors, they may begin to change their conduct.

To facilitate this objective I will use five activities. The first would be screening the movies *Boys in the Hood* and *Menace to Society* . Each screening would take approximately two days, 45 minutes viewing time and 15-20 minutes for discussion and writing activities.

The first film *Boys in the Hood* depicts certain realities of African-American life in urban America. The story revolves around the lives of a group of young African American males in Compton, California. These characters are constantly faced with overwhelming obstacles (gangs, sex, drugs) in their everyday lives. Each reacts differently to these stimuli depending on their circumstances. In the end, the only one to overcome his situation is the young man with the least stereotypical traits.

In contrast to this film, in the movie *Menace to Society* almost all of the characters (which are also young black males) are portrayed stereotypically . They are all either undereducated, drugdealers or users, violent, and have no regard for their lives or lives of others. Their behavior leads to their eventual downfall and death.

After each days screenings, I will hold a question and discussion session about the films. For the purpose of this objective discussion questions will be more reflective in nature. The would include but not be limited to; What stereotypical behaviors did the characters in the stories have? Do you sometimes act like the characters in the film? Why?

How does the way you act affect others (mom, dad, classmates)?

Do you think if the characters changed the way acted, they would have turned out differently? If you changed some of your behaviors what would you change? Why?

After discussion students would write their responses to these questions in their response journals

In the third activity students will roleplay. The class will first be divided into five groups of four. I will then give each group a situation from one of the movies previewed. They will be instructed to play the roles both a stereotypical and nonsterotypical manner. Each would be given 10 minutes to discuss their roles. Groups would then perform their interpretations before the class. After each group's performance, I will lead the class in a discussion of the positive and negatives of each portrayal. This activity will also be performed in my team members rooms.

I will assess students learning of the objective by having them write a 300 word essay in response to the prompt "What are some of the negative things I do that might be considered stereotypical and how can I change them".

I will end the unit by having each student fill in the K of their personal K-W-L charts. I will then fill in K on the giant K-W-L chart from their responses.

## Lesson Plan

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***Objective Students apply a non fiction reading strategy to gain meaning.***

***Materials Flipchart paper, black marker, K-W-L chart dittos, pencils, pens.***

### ***Procedure***

1. Initiate lesson by explaining to students that when working nonfiction materials the K-W-L strategy can help them understand what they learn.
2. Draw the chart on flipchart paper with marker.
3. Explain that the letters K-W-L represent the words *K* now, *W* hat (to Know) and *L* earned
4. Model how to use chart on the board by filling in first column with student responses.
5. Have students fill in the K-W-L chart ditto and complete the second column, writing questions they have on the subject.
6. Place student questions from second column on flipchart paper and discuss.
7. Close lesson by reviewing what was learned.



***Assessment I will assess student comprehension of objective by their completed K-W-L dittos at the end of the unit.***

## **Lesson Plan**

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***Objective Students will be able to define stereotype and the practice of stereotyping.***

***Materials Blackboard, chalk, photos on black construction paper, writing paper, pencils, pens, long computer printout giving dictionary definition of stereotype.***

### ***Procedure***

1. Initiate lesson by asking students to use brainstorm strategy to come up with a definition of the word stereotype.
2. List student responses on the blackboard.
3. Place computer paper with definition on blackboard. Explain how their definitions both match and are different from the one on the board.
4. Tape pictures on the board.
5. Split class into groups of four and discuss cooperative learning rules with students.
6. Have each group discuss what they think about the pictures.
7. Have one person from each group recite the groups responses to each photo. Write their on the board under the respective picture.
8. After each group has reported, reveal facts about each photo. Next point out and ask why what they thought and what actually was, was different? 9. Close lesson by referring back to dictionary definition.

***Assessment I will assess student comprehension of the objective by an essay to be written at the end of the objective activities.***

## Lesson Plan

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**Objective** Students will be able to identify various incarnations of stereotypical images of blacks in film and television.

**Materials** Copies of Donald Bogle's list of the black images of blacks in film, video of television depicting the images, response journals, dittos with questions, pens, pencils.

### Procedure

1. Initiate lesson by reviewing the previous day's lesson and going over the objective of today's lesson.
2. Pass out Bogle's list to students. Have them read the list silently.
3. Proceed with choral reading of the list.
4. Show video.
5. Initiate class discussion revolving around reading and video.
6. Pass out questions. Have students answer questions in personal response journals.
7. Close lesson by asking for volunteers to repeat some of their answers to questions, place answers on the blackboard.

**Assessment** I will assess student understanding of the objective through an essay to be given at the end of the unit objectives activities.

## Notes

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1. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 198.
2. Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, (New York: Macmillan Press, 1922), 111.
3. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "TV's Black World Turns—But Stays Unreal", *New York Times* (November 12, 1989): 66-67.
4. John Downing, Ali Mohammad, Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, *Questioning the Media* (Sage Publications, 1990), 259.
5. Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 183.

6. Ibid

7. Jon Jeter, "Alarm Over TV Time Highlights Viewing Habits of Black Children", *The Washinton Post* (June 23, 1996): A8.

The following is a list of films and television shows to be screened during the unit. Other shows may be added or substituted.

## Films

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Black History Lost Stolen and Strayed

Birth of a Nation

Boys in the Hood

Color Adjustments

Ethnic Notions

Menace to Society

## Television Shows

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A Different World

A-Team

Good Times

Little Rascals

That's My Mamma

## Children's Reading List

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Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*. New York: Continuum, 1989.

Braley, Daniel; and Daniel, Katz "Racial Stereotypes of One Hundred College Students." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 1933.

## Teachers Bibliography

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Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*. New York: Continuum, 1989

This books reveals and gives a historical perspective on the various incarnations of black stereotypes in American cinema.

Cripps, Thomas. *Black Film as Genre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

This book attempts to explain "what is a black film" and critiques six examples of the genre.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "TV's Black World Turns—But Stays Unreal", *New York Times* (November 12, 1989): 66-67.

In this article Dr. Gates reveals how despite the success of television shows such as "The Cosby Show" stereotyping of blacks on T.V. is still prevalent.

Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film* . Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

The book chronicles blacks misrepresentation in American films.

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