

Coffy, YouTube, and Uncle Ben: The Use of Film and New Media in the Teaching of African American Studies at the University of Hawai'i

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When students enter my African American Experience courses at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa many are taking part in their first academic engagement with the study of individuals racialized as Black. The great percentage of students are from Hawai'i and, despite the "majority minority" status of the state, they have grown up in a society that, according to the 2000 United States Census, is only 2.8 percent "African American or Black," including individuals who selected both categories of one single race and "in combination with one or more other races" (US Census 2000). The small population of African Americans in Hawai'i is a very diverse group that includes members of the military, university students, travel industry employees, attorneys, medical doctors, journalists, and scholars. Some are transplants and others are local-born. They represent a broad cross-section of socio-economic classes (see Jackson 2004). However, in spite of the diversity of the group, a majority of my students enter the classroom with predominant assumptions of a monolithic African American cultural identity; assumptions often gleaned from available media products such as film, television, music, and news.

Discourse on race and ethnicity in Hawai'i is often constructed around the notion of the islands as a multiracial paradise. And even though these perceptions have been challenged by scholars, journalists, and essayists (see Haas 1998; Okamura 1998; Edles 2004; Halagao 2006), the mythology of multiracial harmony remains embedded in popular discussions. Indeed, the fact of a "majority minority" society with a significant multiethnic population in which individuals racialized as White are in the minority does not necessarily eradicate problematic understandings of individuals racialized as Black (see Takara 2004). I frequently observe that the fantasy of ethnic and racial harmony limits discourse that would help students further

understand the complexity of the African American experience. For although it is the case that students on the U.S. continent could become better educated in various areas of the African American experience (see Pinar 1993; Shujaa 1995; Ladson-Billings 2000), opportunities for the engagement of students in Hawai'i in lessons that promote a better understanding of the African American experience are even more limited. This educational gap often results in the expression of race-based assumptions and epithets that—even though they may be considered innocuous by those who utter them—can provoke acts of violence (see Viotti 2005).

I am keenly aware that my students are frequently confronted with issues and events that are related to the African American experience, and that these events inevitably require them to make sense of the meaning of race in contemporary society. Take, for example, the comments by radio talk show host, Don Imus, who described the mostly African American Rutgers University women's basketball team as "nappy headed hos", or the use of the "n" word in a private, yet well-broadcast, phone conversation by Hawai'i resident Duane the Dog Chapman. Consider the significance of the noose in Louisiana's Jena Six case, or the on-going debates about the contemporary social significance of "hip hop," or the political resonance of conversations about the Black authenticity of Hawai'i born presidential candidate Barack Obama. The various cases *inter alia* need to be put in the context of the history of the African American experience if they are to be properly understood—for example, an understanding of the history of lynching in the United States, the use of racial epithets during the slavery and Jim Crow eras, and the presumption of Black female promiscuity that accompanied racist understandings of Black womanhood. Alarming, as students reflected on

these highly publicized events it was apparent that many of them were at the whim of the sound bite—mere consumers of media without the benefit of a broader and deeper understanding of the social and historical background necessary to adopt a more critical and informed opinion.

Teaching about the African American experience in Hawai'i—as is the case elsewhere — involves teaching about contemporary debates in ways that bring out more fully the context in which the students are raised and that allow for a critical consideration of the ways that African Americans are represented in the media. I believe that this process is most effectively achieved when film and new media are incorporated into the curriculum. Therefore, the very media productions that have to this point distorted student awareness of the African American experience can be used to create a more accurate understanding. In addition, the process of applying students' understanding of key social and political circumstances to a reading of media products also makes them more able to apply this knowledge to readings of media outside the classroom.

In the remainder of this article I aim to demonstrate how I use the content and contextual analyses of a range of film and new media products in the teaching of African American Studies. In addition, I will include examples of ways in which I take into consideration the unique social and cultural circumstances of Hawai'i.

Old School Media – Early Cinema, Resistance, and Propaganda

D. W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation* played a role in perpetuating the racist and discriminatory conditions experienced by African Americans by constructing a violent tale of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in what is conceived as a heroic effort to curtail Black presence in post-Civil War social and political arenas. The film, notably described by President Woodrow Wilson as “history written with lightning,” presents students with an opportunity to see the way in which the power of a new medium bolstered an oppressive social and political system that disadvantaged African Americans. However, in spite of its racist message, I believe that a screening of *Birth of a Nation* can also be used to challenge modern students to consider alternative readings of media texts.

One of the main reasons that I have for showing excerpts from the film is to make students aware of the impact of the medium at the time, because its effect upon

early twentieth century audiences is almost as important as the content itself (see Rocchio 2000). *Birth of a Nation*, based on Thomas Dixon's book and play *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, takes the popularly successful text into a new arena in which the nascent medium of film is used to construct a feature-length, live-action representation of the story. For the first time, a mass audience experienced a medium that conveys a sense of reality in a way that books or photographs cannot. I show the film at the point when students have learned about the Reconstruction era, the implementation of the Jim Crow system, the beginning of the terrorist activities of the Ku Klux Klan, and the anti-lynching movement. As a result, they are clearly able to understand that the Dixon story and Griffith's cinematic production are historically inaccurate. Armed with an awareness of historical facts, they are in a better position to analyze the socio-political purpose and impact of a false story told through a medium that had enormous influence in shaping the social and racial landscape of the time. The students' awareness of the problematic fact that information is presented by the film as “history,” and their understanding of the excitement that the new medium of film would have had for early audiences, helps them to understand how information can be used to create a distorted picture of the past. I encourage them to consider that the Internet can also be considered in the same way—as a contemporary source of potential misinformation that can produce invidious effects.

After I show Griffith's classic “cliff scene” in which a White woman leaps to her death rather than face contact with a Black soldier—a scene that is best understood in the context of the legal, social, and political discourse around the topic of miscegenation that was prevalent at the time—I bring students into the world of African American resistance to the film's message via an excerpt from African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux's 1920 film, *Within Our Gates*. Micheaux's film features a scene that counters Griffith's “cliff scene” by showing a White man attempting to rape a Black woman. The woman stands on a chair and holds her arms up in an attempt to protect herself from the man's advances. The act is conspicuously a cinematic match to Griffith's White woman raising her arms to fend off the approaching Black soldier. However, in Micheaux's scene a birthmark is revealed on the woman's shoulder, which makes her would-be rapist aware that he is about to attack

his own daughter from what is described as a “legitimate” relationship with a Black woman. The scene presents a richly meaningful example of the methods which Micheaux is using simultaneously to correct a wrong via the same medium as Griffith and to readjust the impact by presenting the well-documented reality that the circumstances of rape were more than likely the reverse of Griffith’s popularly based assumption that Black men were raping White women (see Courtney 2005; Siomopoulos and Zimmerman 2006). In addition, Micheaux’s film, by depicting the legitimacy of the young woman, serves the early twentieth century African American racial uplift project that promoted puritanically bourgeois notions of Black sexuality, Black womanhood, and things moral by presenting a representation that countered the images of Black women as hypersexual, licentious, and immoral.

In a further effort to give students a sense of the early twentieth century African American experience, I show sections of the 1927 silent film *Scar of Shame*, directed by Frank Perugini, one of numerous white directors of “race films.” The film, which tells the story of a relationship between an African American classical musician and an African American woman from a less than honorable background, provides an illustration of the discussions we have in class about the color-hierarchy within the African American community by highlighting the significance of social class distinctions within the community, and the overall focus on racial uplift—a theme that is also dealt with in *Within Our Gates*. The scenes from *Scar of Shame* further support my students’ understanding of DuBois’ “talented tenth” and related projects meant to redefine the meaning of African American cultural identities in the United States. The film is melodramatic yet, significantly, it offers students the opportunity to witness the lives of individuals involved in an important social project meant to demonstrate that African Americans were upright members of society who were indeed worthy of full citizenship.

When using media to make historical circumstances resonate with greater significance for my students, it is useful to show how content and context interact. During lectures and discussions about the African American experience during World War II, my students screen sections of the 1944 U.S. War Department film, *The Negro Soldier*. Considering the resistance to Blacks serving in the war and the ubiquity of anti-Black discrimination at the time,

my students are often surprised that the film includes a cinematic history of Black participation in American conflicts dating back to the Revolutionary War. However, students are also aware that there was a significant challenge launched against the ban on Black participation in the war effort, including A. Philip Randolph’s threatened march on Washington D.C. if defense industry jobs were not opened up to African Americans. So, even as the *Negro Soldier* brings forth a history that arguably is still not widely known and represents a media prelude to the Civil Rights movement, students are able to read it as a propaganda document. Interestingly, I’ve seen my students become savvy enough to read the film as part of a project designed to raise the morale of Black troops and secure the support of African Americans at home; further communicating the contradictions inherent in the project of fighting fascism abroad while simultaneously experiencing discrimination in the military and the United States.

Education through Blaxploitation – Difficult Texts in Difficult Times

The MGM Lion roars and the deep pluck of an electronic bass rolls underneath. As the film opens, Richard Roundtree strolls down a New York City Street in a dark leather jacket. The students know from the music, the swagger, and the city backdrop that Richard Roundtree embodies 1970s coolness. However, my students must also consider this “coolness” in light of the historical and social context of the African American experience. Through lectures and readings, they learn that Gordon Parks’ 1971 film, *Shaft*, is part of a larger cinematic movement known as Blaxploitation. But, the important issue for them to consider emerges out of the question: What does Blaxploitation say about American society?

I use the opening scene of *Shaft* to demonstrate that the film emerges out of a socio-political context that facilitated a shift in the production of African American cinematic representations. In other words, Roundtree’s strut can be interpreted as an historical and social document. Hollywood producers and independent filmmakers saw it as economically viable to bring forth a series of movies in this vein in the 1970s, and by looking at the film in this way students gain a better insight into how the Black Power movement emerged from the Civil Rights era. The contentious social and political debates of the late 1960s and

early 1970s created the economic conditions for marketing a strong Black superhero *à la* John Shaft—a representation of an African American man far removed from the black soldier in Griffith’s classic whose physical proximity could cause a white woman to leap from a cliff.

Shaft offers students a very lively and useful presentation of the prevalent discourse of the time. While the idea of John Shaft could still appear threatening to mainstream America, my students realize that the portrayal of an African American helping to remove heroin from the streets without compromising his dignity or appearing neutered represented a significant social change in people’s perceptions of African Americans. Also, students learn that the film’s commodification of radical African American identities is an aspect of the movement towards more neo-conservative ideologies and post-Civil Rights era discourse that suggested that racism and discrimination were no longer prevalent aspects of the African American experience.

I also show students the opening scene of the 1973 film, *Coffy*, starring Pam Grier and directed by Jack Hill, one of numerous white directors of Blaxploitation era films. The story features a revenge tale, in which the lead character avenges the drug-related death of her sister. The students are lured into the “groovy” movie by Roy Ayers’ music running through the opening credits and before they know it they are catapulted into a classic “Blaxploitation” scene of sexuality and violence. Students watch *Coffy* lure a drug dealer into bed under the guise of trading sexual favors for the proverbial “fix,” only to shoot him and his partner. The *Coffy* screening begs the question: Why show the students such unseemly scenes and characters as representations of the African American experience? I believe that there are four reasons for this. First, the film offers a window into the harsh social and political circumstances that could motivate an African American woman to take control of her life, albeit through violent means. Second, it reflects the period’s prevalent representation and criminalization of militant African American women identified with such high profile legal cases as Angela Davis’ prosecution as an accomplice to a plot to free the “Soledad Brothers.” Third, the film counters predominant assumptions that African Americans were supportive of extra-legal activities, particularly in the distribution and sale of illegal drugs. Fourth, as an example of exploitative cinema, it invites students to explore the contradictions in *Coffy*’s violent acts of revenge for the

social evil of drug dealing. As a result the film perpetuates the myth of the hyper-sexualized African American woman that early twentieth century racial uplift proponents worked so hard to dispel.

Overall, an examination of the contradictions inherent in the Blaxploitation period help students to acquire the skills and knowledge to further interrogate the complexities of the African American experience and the flawed outcomes of what are presumed to be advances. Students, therefore, come to see the contemporary discourse around African American pop-cultural products (e.g., film, television, hip hop music) as derived from earlier pop-cultural moments with similarly nuanced debates.

On-Line Life and Making the Past New

The Internet is a rich medium that offers educators many opportunities to access visual and audio documents, though they often have to remind students that all data are not created equal. For example, when we discuss slavery and, later in the course, when we discuss the Works Progress Administration (WPA), students are encouraged to visit the Library of Congress on the World Wide Web and access the WPA interviews in which the audio-taped recordings of former slaves have been converted to digital format (<http://memory.loc.gov/>). Students marvel at hearing the voices of former slaves tell their stories. Listening to the voice of an actual former slave lessens the distance between past injustices and present circumstances, and it helps students to understand that they too are the inheritors of the legacy of American slavery.

The culture of contemporary Hawai’i has been shaped in part by networks of social and cultural alliances created by the descendants of the predominantly Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, and Filipino laborers who came to the islands beginning in the late nineteenth century to work the sugar and pineapple plantations. So, in contrast to the continental United States, a consideration of plantation life in Hawai’i is not framed by the experience of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Most notably, the impact of the enslavement of Blacks in the Americas takes a peripheral position in the Hawaiian Islands, as the unique circumstances of Hawai’i’s plantation-era history of labor exploitation and ethnicity-based stratification are more prevalent in social and political discourse, as well as in the curriculum (see Takaki 1983; Rosa 2004). But when the 1941 voice of former slave Mrs. Laura Smalley

of Hempstead, Texas resonates through my University of Hawai'i classroom, it makes the experience of slavery more real for my students. Mrs. Smalley speaks across the decades to explain a life experience that is rarely given much thought by students here because of its distance in time and place from the history of ethnic divisions with which they are most familiar.

The website YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>) also offers numerous opportunities to bring media into the classroom for student discussion and analysis. In covering the Civil Rights movement, I've found it useful to show a clip of what is described as "rare live footage" of a late 1950s Billie Holiday performance of the song "Strange Fruit." The students know that lynchings such as the 1955 killing of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, as well as other racist acts of violence, are not remote phenomena, and Billie Holiday's performance of the 1939 Abel Meeropol song opens a window into the efforts of the anti-lynching movement. The song was frequently banned from broadcast—evidence that the demands of the marketplace and various socio-political interests aimed to limit resistance and restrict freedom of speech on the topic. And so a viewing of the haunting black and white footage of Billie Holiday drawling Meeropol's lyrics, "Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root," introduces students to an important American performer, highlights the many dimensions of racism in U.S. society, and offers a penetrating social commentary on the violence and terrorism prevalent in the southern United States at the time.

Another example from YouTube that I find useful to show my students is a video of Gil Scott Heron's 1974 song, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." The video, featuring colorful post-psychedelic 1970s-style animation, presents Heron's lament for contemporary politics, and expresses the sentiment that the medium of television has fostered complacency and the co-opting of events that might otherwise have helped bring about social change. After viewing the Heron video, I ask students to listen to the 1995 Brooklyn Funk Essentials song, "The Revolution Was Postponed Because of Rain" which, as the title implies, is critical of the lack of passionate interest in politics and deplores the new cultural and political priorities that impede African American revolution in the post-Black Power era.

In order to show students the ways that social and political changes are articulated in various sectors of

our society, I take them on a journey to the Ferris State University website, "The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia" <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow>. Here they can view a range of products and advertisements that reveal the historical acceptance of racist representations of African Americans. And even though items such as the golf product, "Niggerhead Tees," no longer exist, the African American cook on the Cream of Wheat box can still be found at the local Safeway. Aunt Jemima received a makeover in the 1980s to shed her plantation-era mammy look, yet her brand-name origins are still rooted in a particular moment—a moment when the African American status was that of a lowly servitor such as a cook or maid.

The Jim Crow Museum visit also raises the topic of rice—a product that is an integral part of local cuisine throughout the Hawaiian Islands. It is also a highly significant factor in a consideration of the part played by food production on plantations in the southern United States. Students deconstruct the social significance of the product labeled "Uncle Ben's" rice, and consider its role as a product icon. I explain that "Uncle" was used as the familiar title for older Black men to whom the larger White society could never offer the more respectful "Mister." It was widely used as a generic reference to older Black men. We also discuss the use of the product title, "Uncle Ben," to sell rice—the long history of similar representations of Black men, and the assumption implicit in the name that a Black man would have expertise in the area of harvesting and cooking rice (see Pieterse 1992).

The Uncle Ben's corporate website, launched in 2007, provides the visitor with an interactive exploration of the headquarters of *Chairman* Uncle Ben (<http://www.unclebens.com>). But armed with the history of Uncle-Ben-like representations of black men in mind, students see things differently—they now find themselves in a corporate world that is painstakingly striving to erase this history and reinvent the icon that is such a vital part of their corporate image (Elliot 2007). This more nuanced understanding of the historical circumstances and social conditions enables students to see the Uncle Ben representation as out of step with contemporary understandings of African American identity, and they come to understand more fully the manner in which social movements and discourses of justice have had an impact on corporate presentations. As the students explore Uncle Ben's office, they see how his image has

been completely reconstructed. For example, his bow tie, once conceived as a common sartorial adornment of the subservient house slave, is now considered a part of a collection that has been “a fixture of [his] wardrobe” and is worthy of a trophy that reads “Golden Bow Tie Award” (<http://www.unclebens.com>). Students can run their cursor over his large corporate desk to read his journal, which recounts an active schedule of lectures, product approvals, and world travels. The text is filled with Uncle Ben’s proverbs and witticisms that reflect an educated life of the mind, as well as a business-oriented obsession with rice. In short, he is transformed into a genteel, high-powered corporate executive with worldly interests. The website, rich with opportunities for students to explore various dimensions of Chairman Uncle Ben’s life, reinforces his new role as the knowledgeable and wealthy uncle that everyone wishes they had, rather than the servant “uncle” reminiscent of a nineteenth century house slave.

In the context of the Hawai’i plantation experience, the revision of Uncle Ben’s “image” underlines the differences in the meaning of “uncle” in Hawai’i and in the continental United States. In Hawai’i “uncle”—and “auntie” for that matter—does not carry the same legacy of oppression. It is an honorific that is comfortably extended to family friends. In the African American context the usage of “uncle” takes on a very different meaning. And students who do not initially grasp the offensive connotation that “uncle” has for African Americans learn to see that a major corporate revision signifies that the prior representation of Uncle Ben is now deemed inappropriate. Furthermore, students gain insight into how a modern corporation employs new media to preserve an icon that supports its brand while simultaneously distancing itself from the horrid circumstances that facilitated the creation of that icon.

Conclusion

I have argued and demonstrated here that film and new media can be used to teach students to comprehend the complex historical, social, political, and cultural dimensions of the African American experience. Whether they are located in Hawai’i or anywhere else in the U.S., when students hear the voice of a former slave in a WPA interview, experience Billie Holiday’s voice, see the grimace of Pam Grier in the face of a drug dealer, or visit the corporate headquarters of the stylish Uncle Ben, they are engaging with the African

American experience in a way that transcends textbook instruction. It leads them to view the world from a new vantage point—one that inspires a more informed perspective on a painful past.

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