

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Ethnic Notions

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by Susan Radner



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E*thnic Notions*, a too academically titled but powerful documentary video, depicts caricatures of African Americans in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through cartoons, photographs, motion picture films, sheet music, and household items such as a sugar jars, the distorted images of the Sambo, Coon, Pickaninny, Mammy and Uncle are shown to both reflect and perpetuate racism. Differences between the slavery and post-slavery eras, and between the North and South, as well as the sharp contrasts of these images with the actual lives of African Americans are illustrated. Narrated by Esther Rolle, the film has a commentary which ties together the visual images. It ends with a question: have these stereotypes changed and improved in our post-Civil Rights era? The negative stereotypes served historical purposes: when whites needed to believe that their slaves were not rebellious, they created caricatures of happy, singing and shuffling darkies. During Reconstruction, when newly- emancipated Blacks were demanding the right to literacy as well as the vote, whites created caricatures of Blacks as dangerous, vicious animals. Children were always portrayed as animal-like, though lovable and cute. No recognition of the dignity of African Americans was permitted.

The most poignant section of the video describes black actors' reaction to these stereotypes. Originally played by white men in blackface makeup, the Jim Crow character evolved into the minstrel, who then was played by black men in blackface. The plight of Bert Williams, an early twentieth-century black minstrel, is depicted by a contemporary actor, Leni Sloan. Black actors were forced to perpetuate the negative stereotypes, though they tried to humanize them. Film clips of Hattie McDaniel, Steppin Fetchit, and Paul Robeson as the Emperor Jones illustrate their conflicts.

The film can be useful in the classroom in a number of ways. First, it raises questions about the images themselves: how do these stereotypes still affect us? Are contemporary black images -- Bill Cosby, Aunt Jemima -- an improvement over the older ones? Second, the film can be used as a study of how the mass media define reality. The point is made repeatedly both visually and through the commentary that the result of these caricatures was to deny the essential humanity of African Americans and to perpetuate violence against them. It juxtaposes graphic photographs of lynchings and hangings of African Americans with the stereotypes of Blacks as savages. Questions about who controls the media then follow logically. Finally, students come away with a better sense of the history of racism and history as ideology, topics which have been generally ignored in most American history syllabi.



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