

Using Essex History Seminar:
“The Culture of Jim Crow”
Lesson Plan

Title: Historiography and Jim Crow in popular culture

Author: Nancy Ronan

Grade Levels: 10; 11

Time Frame: three classes (block scheduling)

Links to Massachusetts History and Social Studies Frameworks:

USI.40 Explain the policies and consequences of Reconstruction. (H, C)
the opposition of southern whites to Reconstruction
the rise of Jim Crow laws

USII.9 Analyze the post-Civil War struggles of African Americans and women to gain basic civil rights. (H)

USII.10 Describe how the battle between traditionalism and modernity manifested itself in the major historical trends and events after World War I and throughout the 1920s. (H)

C. racial and ethnic tensions

Essential Objectives:

Students will:

examine how Reconstruction historiography legitimized Jim Crow in popular culture
identify Jim Crow stereotypes in popular culture
investigate the reaction of African-Americans to their depiction in popular culture

Procedures:

Lesson 1. Introduction to historiography

Guiding Question: How did first phase Reconstruction historiography reinforce and perpetuate Jim Crow in popular culture?

In a short interactive lecture teacher will introduce the basics of historiography, including: basic definitions, historical relativism and revisionism, and major schools of thought in American history. The change in interpretation of a historical period over time will be illustrated by Reconstruction historiography. The basic framework for this portion of the lecture is below:

The First Phase

Timeframe: about 100 years, from the end of the Civil War until the 1960s

Traditional Interpretation:

Congress, dominated by Radical Republicans, sought revenge on the South, imposing military rule and

allowing carpetbaggers, scalawags, and ignorant freedmen to loot the downtrodden, powerless South.

Reasons for Interpretation:

White northern and southern historians, influenced by southern Democratic rhetoric, believed the evidence supported (1) that the South could have solved its problems better without the intervention of Congress and, (2) freedmen were incapable of assuming personal and economic responsibility and the basic duties of citizenship. African-American historians who wrote against this interpretation were ignored. *Plessy vs. Ferguson* set the precedent for “separate but equal” and thus reinforced racism in the North as well as in the South. This historiographical interpretation was legitimized in the early twentieth century through the work of a distinguished group of (white male) historians at Columbia University. The principles of Social Darwinism and the popular “science” of eugenics also supported this interpretation.

The Second Phase

Timeframe: the 1960s; African-American, and a few white, historians had offered this interpretation as early as the 1930s, but were ignored by mainstream historians.

Revisionist Interpretation:

This period focused on the achievements of Radical Reconstruction, including the 14th and 15th Amendments, public education, the new Southern state constitutions, and rebuilding of the infrastructure and social services; it stressed that corruption in government, politics, and business was a national evil in the second half of the 19th century, not just a southern problem; it stressed the active participation of the freedman.

Reasons for Interpretation:

The “Second Reconstruction” of the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, was a major impact; a new white generation in the South believed in Civil Rights; the interpretations of African-American historians were accepted as their status was elevated in the academic world and in popular culture; a historiography based almost exclusively on white sources was rejected through the utilization of social, cultural, and oral history.

III. The Third Phase

Timeframe: late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries

Post-Revisionist Interpretation:

challenges the term “Radical”, especially when compared with periods of post-war radical reform in other countries; focuses on the positive African-American legacy rather than the white backlash; stresses role of ordinary African-Americans in ending slavery, fighting the Civil War, and participating in Reconstruction; views achievements and failures of African-Americans during Reconstruction as laying the groundwork for the Civil Rights struggles and victories of the mid-twentieth century.

Reasons for Interpretation:

Conservative as well as liberal historians, impacted by globalization, a shift which sees U.S. history in a world context, and the wars in the Middle East, are revising prior interpretations; the shift in

historiography to an emphasis on social history has elevated the importance of the ordinary person, and continues to provide new sources of evidence.

Group Assignment: Reconstruction Historiography

The excerpts below are taken from histories of Reconstruction which exemplify of the three phases of Reconstruction historiography. Read each, then label them according to which phase you believe they exemplify. (N.B. Dates may not necessarily be indicative of the phase of historiography.)

“The United States was not the only nation to experience emancipation in the nineteenth century... Reconstruction was...the only effort...to bring the former slaves within the umbrella of equal citizenship...Alone among the societies that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century, the United States, for a moment, offered the freedmen a measure of political control over their own destinies. However brief...Reconstruction allowed...a remarkable political and social mobilization of the black community. ...It raised their expectations and aspirations, redefined their status...and allowed space for the creation of institutions that enabled them to survive the repression that followed...it established principles of civil and political equality that...planted the seeds of future struggle...[a] vision [of] a society in which social advancement would be open to all on the basis of individual merit, not inherited caste distinctions.” (from Eric Foner, “Was Reconstruction a ‘Splendid Failure’?” in *Taking Sides*, Larry Madaras and James J. SoRelle, eds., 1993.)

“One fact and one alone explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive of Negroes as men.” (W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 1935.)

“A black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created by civilization of any kind.” (John W. Burgess, Columbia University)

“This book is the...story of a black tenant farmer from east-central Alabama who grew up in the society of former slaves and slaveholders, and reached maturity during the advent of segregation law...I met Nate Shaw in January, 1969. He had just turned eight-four years old...Nate had apparently put his whole life into stories...Nate Shaw stayed in Alabama because he believed his labor gave him a claim to the land. He watched his neighbors pick up and leave but...though he loathed his situation, he thought, ‘Somehow, some way, I’d overcome it...I was determined to try.’ ” (from Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, 1974.)

“If it was worth four years of civil war to save the Union, it was worth a few years of radical reconstruction to give the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights.” (from Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 1965.)

“Slavery had served to discipline the labor force, but the first reaction of the Negro to emancipation was to acquire a gun, a dog, and frequently a new wife to accompany him on his wanderings...becoming victims of every salesman who offered hair straightener, skin bleaches, and even patriotically striped stakes...to mark off the land which the government would soon distribute...Stealing from the whites... soon became an accepted means of subsistence...Their impudence... irritating to the Southerners... Among the better classes, the tendency to withdraw from their former kindly patronage of the Negro was marked. The old master class had not shared in the race prejudice that characterized the poor whites.

Although the slaveowner had believed that the Negro was inferior, he had wished him well and had made...adjustments... to work with him in slavery. With the withdrawal of such a patriarchal cordiality, the prejudices of the poor whites became the dominant philosophy of the South.” (William B. Hesseltine and David L. Smiley, *The South in American History*, 1936; 1964.)

Lesson 2. *Gone With the Wind* and Phase I Reconstruction Historiography

Guiding Question: How does *Gone With the Wind* depict Phase I historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction in popular culture? How does it reinforce Jim Crow stereotypes?

In a short introduction, identify stock Jim Crow characters. Then provide students with the following list of what to look for in *GWTW*:

devastation of the South; the “rape” of the land
the ante-bellum southern woman compared with the post-war southern woman
paternalism, before and after the war; the plantation “family” before and after the war
the Mammy, the Picaninny, Jim Crow, Zip Coon
Yankee scavengers; carpetbaggers; scalawags; freedmen
vulnerability of southern women at the hands of Yankee scavengers; carpetbaggers; scalawags;
freedmen
are southern women used as symbols of the South?

Scenes of *GWTW* DVD to be used:

Side A

"Dressing Scarlett"
"Twelve Oaks"
"Scarlett's Admirers"
"Return to Tara"
"Scarlett's Pledge"

Side B

"Sherman!"
"Working the land"
"Yankee Visitor"
"Ready to wear"
"Appeal to Rhett"
"The lumber mill"
"Shanty town assault"

Lesson 3. *The African-American reaction to Birth of a Nation*

Guiding question: How did African-Americans react to the depiction of Jim Crow stereotypes in popular culture?

Teacher should introduce the film *Birth of a Nation* in a brief lecture which connects Phase I Reconstruction historiography Thomas Dixon's *The Klansman* and D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* their importance in popular culture

of the period

the re-emergence of the Klu Klux Klan as the organization which once “saved the South from the anarchy of black rule” and will do so again

The use of black face and “white” face in the film, and the stock Jim Crow characters utilized in the film should also be pointed out.

Teacher should then show the clip of Gus stalking the little sister as she frolicks in the woods on her way to fetch water, which culminates in her suicidal leap from the cliff. In a discussion following the clip teacher should assist students in making the types of connections they made when they viewed *Gone With The Wind*.

Students should then work with *Boston Globe* newspaper articles which reported on the African-American reaction to the release of *Birth of a Nation* in Boston. Illustrates Phase II and III of Reconstruction historiography in that the voice of ordinary black Americans, the “other side,” are heard in protest.

It would be best if students could view articles on a computer screen, with the ability to increase the size of the type. If not, students should work in pairs or small groups. They should read the articles in their original form (blown up for clarity), not transcribed. They should first identify basics such as publication, date, title of article, and a brief summary of article. A bibliographic entry for each article could also be assigned. Each student or group of students can examine one article or all articles. After reading, identifying, and summarizing the articles, students should be led in a discussion that addresses the guiding question for the lesson.

Articles:

“Mayor Curley Hissed” April 16, 1915

“Birth of a Nation Causes Near Riot” April 18, 1915

“Colored People to Storm State House” April 19, 1915

“Colored Women Form a League” April 16, 1915

“Say Box Office Discriminated” May 1, 1915

“Not Sure it is Best to Stop It - Colored Preachers Protest at Meeting on Common” May 3, 1915

“Arrest Eight of Objectors” June 8, 1915

“Demonstration by 20 Negroes” June 14, 1915

“Censors Bar *Birth of a Nation*” May 17, 1921

Extensions:

Ask students to research to find other films illustrating the African-American experience and match them to the phases of historiographical interpretation. For example, *Roots* would be Phase II and “Glory” would be Phase III. The Blaxploitation films of the 1960s-1970s make it interesting: were they a new liberating genre, or Jim Crow redux?

Identify origins, stock characters, and use of blackface in minstrel shows. Then use a series of clips, either shown separately in the following sequence or edited together. The following selections illustrate both the basic and the upscale minstrel show, and how minstrel show stock characters get carried into cartoons and children’s shows and therefore into the subconscious of children. There is no better way to reinforce racial stereotypes:

Blackface Montage from Spike Lee’s “Bamboozled”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C45g3YP7JOk>

Black & White Minstrels

<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/videos/minstrels.htm>

Black Stereotypes in Cartoons

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LMrdcs4ucc&feature=related>

OR

Racist Cartoon Clips

<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/videos/cartoonclips.htm>

The Little Rascals: "School's Out"

<http://www.broadcaster.com/clip/5795>

NB Buckwheat > eye rolling, mother marries 3 times, fishin', wants watermelon