

# Aula 4

## REPRESENTANTING THE OTHER: PART II

### **META**

Explaining students as to how racial difference has been represented in Western society by offering a few specific cases.

### **OBJETIVO**

Ao final desta aula, você deverá ser capaz de:  
Providing students with a concise historical panorama of how racial difference has been represented in Western popular culture, placing some emphasis on the 19th and 20th centuries and citing a few examples mostly from advertising as well as cinema;  
Provoking students to think about racial stereotyping and the way it can be used to exclude the Other.

### **PRERREQUISITO**

Familiaridade com os períodos formativos da literatura inglesa;  
Conceitos-chave da Teoria da Literatura e da história literária.  
Noções de história dos Estados Unidos.

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### INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our eighth class. This will be a continuation of class VI – Representing the Other: news media – through which you were presented to some examples of how black people might be represented in some news media channels. This was done with the objective of demonstrating the way in which the process of representation takes place empirically. For this class, you should keep in mind some of the notions exposed in the previous one, among which are the theoretical perspectives which tried to account for the importance of difference for the production of meaning. It would also be helpful not to forget the cases mentioned so far, since they will add up to a better understanding of the ones yet to be presented.

Still, you should not fail to remember some of the conclusions reached in our previous class, the most important of which perhaps is the one which refers to the ambivalent nature of difference. In this respect, it was argued that there are always two sides to difference: a positive one, since it is an element without which no meaning is possible; and a negative one, because it can also be used to stereotype, marginalize and eventually oppress the Other. Throughout this class, you will have the opportunity to see this at play once more.

Like our previous class, this one is based on a text entitled *The Spectacle of Other* by Stuart Hall. Our purpose here, however, is to provide you with a concise historical panorama of how racial difference has been represented in Western popular culture, placing some emphasis on the 19th and 20th centuries and citing a few examples mostly from advertising as well as cinema.

### PANORAMA

According to Hall, there are three relevant moments in the history of the ‘West’ which produced a massive amount of representations about black people, some of which are still around to this day. The first one can be traced back to the 16th century when Europe – which, in this context, is a synonym for ‘West’ – initiated a commercial intercourse with African kingdoms. This first contact resulted in the slave trade, responsible for the imprisonment and exploitation of numberless amounts of Africans that were spread to the most remote places on the globe. The second one is the European colonization of the African continent followed, in the 20th century, by what came to be known as the Scramble for Africa, a period in which many European nations fought over African territory. As to the third one, it took place after the World War II from post-colonized countries to Europe and North America. As you will see, these encounters will be

reacted to with a widespread production of stereotypes, a whole body of knowledge whose objective was to assign meaning to this new “Other”, the unfamiliar, the different.

Before the 16th century, that is, during the Middle Ages, ambiguity would define Europe’s image of Africa. Over time, such an ambiguous image would turn itself into an unmistakably negative one. Various ideas started to emerge in an attempt to explicate the alleged “backwardness” of the African continent. One of these was that the African people were descendants of Ham (see the biblical account), for which reason they were doomed to servitude. This notion would eventually be used to provide a religious justification for slavery. During the “Age of Reason” – the Enlightenment –, Africa was conceived as being at the bottom of the evolutionary scale. Even those in connection with the world of science and philosophy had very twisted views of the Africans. George Cuvier (1769-1832), for example, a French biologist and zoologist, identified the Negros with monkeys. The German philosopher Hegel, in turn, suggested that Africa had no history. In the 19th century, Africa will evoke all sorts of fantastic representations. It will be seen as a land inhabited by cannibals, in total darkness, and will eventually be used as a justification for European colonization.

The first example we will reproduce comes from commodity advertisement by British companies in the final years of the 19th century, when the British empire was in search of new markets for its products. British contact with Africa resulted in the production of a myriad of representations which were disseminated through various means. Drawings, maps, diaries, travel writings, treatises, newspaper illustrations, photographs and in a very particular way through advertisement which was responsible for shaping the image of Africa in a popular level. Through advertisement, Africa was racialized and portrayed from a very reductionist perspective as you will see.

Owing to the rise of popular press, after 1890, commodity advertisement gained momentum and was able to reach the working classes. The production of commodities was closely linked to the imperial project and, for that reason; it was used to promote imperialistic interests. Many explorers thought that the spread of such commodities would eventually bring about civilization to the remote corners of Africa. So, products would flow to the African colonies accompanied by representations of British domestic life, while raw materials would be sent back to the metropolis along with images which showcased the “civilizatory” work that was being done by those companies whose main objective was to drain the riches of that continent.

Therefore, Africa was made known by a plethora of images that would be imprinted on various products among which were matchboxes, toothpaste pots, cigarette packets, board games and soap boxes. The latter, however, has a particular interesting story, since it was charged with a lot of symbolism.

Soap came to symbolize more than a simple item for personal hygiene. It became a fetish-object through which it was possible to purify people both at home – the unwashed poor who inhabited the industrial slums – and in the colonies. According to McClintock (1995, 506), soap was scarce at the beginning of the 19th century, but, a few decades later, it became a valuable item in the imperial commerce. Because it incorporated the spirit of Victorian cleaning rituals – which were taken as a sign of British evolutionary superiority –, it was widely advertised as a potential panacea for all the issues the empire had to tackle. The notion of cleanliness was being advocated in many fronts by the rising middle class: monogamy – which suggested the idea of “clean” sex, industrial capital – clean money; Christianity – cleaned by the blood of the lamb; class cleansing and eventually in the imperial enterprise, since it was believed that the savage should be cleaned and clothed (i.e. civilized). All of these notions could be accommodated by one single object: soap. That is why this commodity became strongly attached to the civilizing mission. Furthermore, the way it was advertised outspokenly reveals the racialization of the Africans.



Pears' Soap Advertisement Caucasian Baby helps clean the “Other” baby

Fonte: <https://thefutureisvisual.wordpress.com/2014/03/26/pears-soap-advertisement-analysis/>

What you see is a soap ad from one of the companies that monopolized the soap market in the second half of the 19th century: Pears Soap. Beforehand, it is important to note that many of the advertisers who worked for such companies saw themselves as an indispensable element for the

expansion of the British empire. Imbued with a sense of responsibility for the maintenance of the civilizing mission, they would incorporate notions of racial superiority into the ads they produced. Soap, therefore, started to represent not only an economic solution for the poor at home and for the colonies, where it was often described as if having magical powers; but also a way of affirming one's racial identity, of distinguishing oneself from the Other, which would be often reduced to their skin color.

In the ad, the message is clear: Pears' soap is able to "clean" black skin white. This is unmistakably corroborated by the caption "I have found PEARS' SOAP matchless for the Hands and Complexion". A white boy holding a Pears' Soap bar in front of a black boy who is about to be bathed with it in a tub. In the next scene, the once black boy looks in the mirror that is being held by the former and realizes he was white from the neck downward, to which fact he reacts with a smile.

There is a claim for racial superiority here which grounds itself on those binary oppositions you have already been introduced to. The white boy embodies all the positive values and notions culturally associated with whiteness: purity, cleanliness, healthiness, etc. Whereas the black boy, who seemed to be startled by his own reflection on the water (notice his eyes), stands for the negative notions often linked to blackness: dirtiness, impurity, etc. But there is more to say about the ad which has a lot to do with idea of a civilizing the other. The white boy plays a leading role in the ad. He is the one who has possession of the soap bar with which his counterpart will be able to "whiten" himself. Also, he is the one who shows the black boy that he has been "cleaned". This could be "read" as the British empire performing its duty of civilizing the Other by teaching them good hygiene habits which were at time a "white" obsession.

The first step towards lightening  
**The White Man's Burden**  
is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness.

**Pears' Soap**

is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place—it is the ideal toilet soap.

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Pears' Soap Advertisement

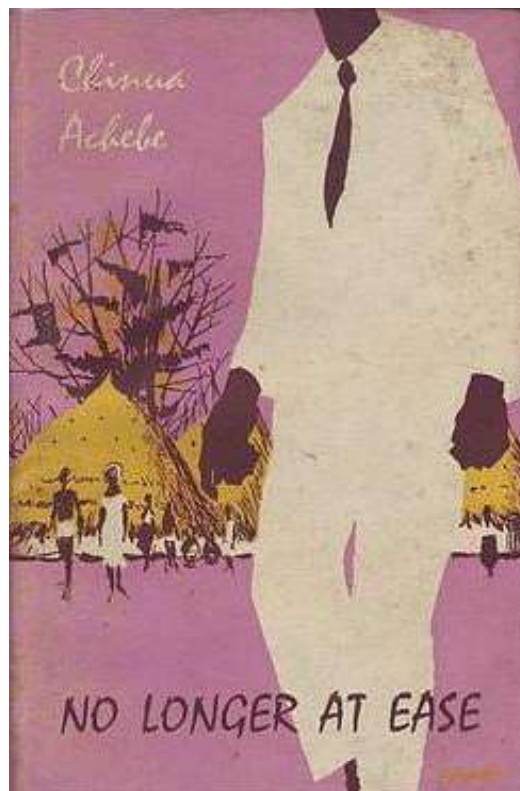
Fonte: <https://thoughtcatalog.com/nico-lang/2013/09/41-mind-blowingly-racist-vintage-ads-you-need-to-see/>

This second image is also an ad featuring PEARS' soap. Once again soap – which embodies the ideals of cleanliness – is side by side with the idea of civilization. In the foreground, there is a white man, well-dressed in a white suit, washing his white hands in a white sink. In the background, we see ships taking Pears' soap to remote places. But particularly interesting is what we see on the right-hand corner of it, which seems to be depicting an encounter between a missionary and a dark-skinned native. The former is standing and handing over a Pears' soap bar to the latter, which is on one knee with arms outstretched for it. The first lines of the caption make clear

what is being suggested by the picture “The first step towards lightening the White Man’s Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness”. In other words, soap embodied the idea of cleanliness, which, in turn, was linked to civilization, which found its ultimate expression in the British empire in this context.

In this ad, the native is reduced to a subservient savage who inhabits a dark region and needs to be taught civilized manners. The caption continues “Pears’ Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances...” The dark corners are represented by the setting of the aforementioned encounter, a place of wilderness, no material progress when contrasted with the furnished room in which the white man is.

Before we move forward into the class, one comment should be made on the currency of such a practice. You might think that racially-controversial ads are 19th-century phenomena. But here it is a curious case for consideration. On October 8th, 2017 the New York Times published an article reporting on a controversial ad allegedly posted by Dove on Facebook which caused a lot of negative reactions for its racially-charged message. After being accused of racism, the ad was dropped. What are your thoughts on that? Do you think there can be any similarity between the soap ads we have been discussing and this beauty product ad? It is not our objective to dwell on such a case here; therefore, we will leave the matter for your personal consideration.



Facebook ad for Dove body wash

FONTE: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/08/business/dove-ad-racist.html>

Let us turn now to the United States. Hall, citing Frederickson (1987), shows that the emergence of a racialized ideology – an organized discourse on race – did not made its appearance in the United States until the abolitionist movements posed a threat to the institution of slavery. Pro-slavery writing would resort to the old images of Africa to justify servitude. Among such images was the one which depicted Africa as being a continent abandoned to savagery, cannibalism, devil worshiping and a place pestered by all sorts of evils. As you will see, even biological as well as anthropological arguments were advanced to explain the inferiority of negro people. Also, slavery advocates would mobilize white people's fears – such as that of the degeneracy of the white race if miscegenation was allowed – to hamper any change in the status quo.

Those negative images of Africa found firm ground on a set of binary oppositions in which black people are always assigned inferior roles or embody negative values. Therefore, a racialized discourse was put in motion. Through it, whiteness represented civilization, refinement, knowledge, belief in reason, developed institutions and ultimately a civilized restraint in emotions and sexual life, all of which was linked to Culture; blackness, in turn, stood for savagery; coarseness, superstitions, and an unrestrained sexual life, that is, an inability to control one's instincts and emotions, all of which were associated with Nature. The supposed uncontrollable sexual urge will be often resorted to in many popular representations of black people.

From that binary opposition – Culture/Nature – also emerged the idea that black people could only be happy under white tutelage. White dominance over black people was believed to be an inevitable fate, since culture is developed – at least so they thought – to subdue nature by organizing reality and setting up rules to restrain primitive impulses. In this context, anthropology was mobilized to provide “scientific” evidence for such a claim, the result of which was the production of a “racialized body of knowledge” that tried to explain – and to some extent prove – black people's inferiority, making their bodies the incontestable evidence.

### ASSIGNING MEANING TO RACIAL DIFFERENCE

According to Hall, there were two basic stereotypes around which many popular representations would gather during slavery time in the United States. The first one referred to black people as being made to serve, and, at the same time, unwilling to work for they were said to be naturally lazy. The second one depicted black people as being unable to achieve ‘civilized’ refinements, as being primitive and ignorant. These two notions will give rise to many other negative representations of slaves that will be around to this day. One of the most utilized devices for the fixation of such meanings was the naturalization. What those who advocated for the inferiority



of the black people tried to do was the naturalization of racial difference. That was the only way of fixing meaning permanently. If you prove that the negro is “naturally” lazy, then there is not much which can be done to change it. You can, therefore, continue your rule over them because that is the way things should be.

Naturalization of racial difference was so effective during the 18th and part of the 19th centuries that little questioning of slavery was done especially in the Southern states. To treat slaves as being less human was common place and, for that very reason, did not provoke any criticism. Up until second half of the 19th century, a whole set of stereotypes will be put in circulation without encountering any significant resistance. Stereotyped representations, however, although most frequently negative, could also take a sentimentalized form. One of the most well-known examples of that type of stereotype is Uncle Tom, in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Although pro-abolitionist, Stowe creates a slave who was a model of Christian virtue, but for that very reason unrealistic. He was subservient, unable of wrongdoing, obedient and innocent to an extreme. Positive or negative, stereotypes more often than not produce pernicious effects, because they reduce individuals to a few characteristics which are later said to be part of their nature or ‘essence’. Therefore, every stereotype is a reduction and as such it eclipses other important traces of a group or individual.

#### THE NEGRO IN THE BIG SCREEN

The abolition of slavery did not mean the end of such stereotypes. This whole set of idealized representations made its way well into the 20th century and its presence can be easily noticed in early American movies. Citing Donald Bogle’s book *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies and Bucks: an interpretive history of blacks in American films* (1973), Hall alludes to the five stereotypes identified by this author that would be able to accommodate the representations of black people which pervaded filmic productions in the second half of the 20th century.

The first ones were Toms – or good negroes that were persecuted, insulted, wronged, but that were unable to stand for themselves or to turn against their masters; there were the coons – natural entertainers, but unreliable, lazy and incapable of speaking proper English; the Tragic Mulatto – a woman of mix-raced who, even though attractive, always faces a tragic ending due to her black ascendancy; the Mammies – the housewife type, totally devoted to their white masters and the Bad Bucks – big, strong, violent and over-sexed negroes (HALL, 1995, p. 251).

The movie which had put those stereotypes into the big screen was D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Of course, ever since many

changes have been attempted to improve negro's image in American main-stream cinema, but the old stereotypes have really went out of circulation.

At first, as it would be expected, black people were given subordinate roles, such as that of servants or jesters. A famous example is that of Bill Bojangles Robinson. Even though he become one of the most well paid black actors from his day, his main role was basically to butler and dance to a child star named Shirley Temple (see the picture)



Bill Bojangles Robinson dancing with Shirley Temple

Fonte: <https://www.npr.org/2014/02/14/276986764/shirley-temple-and-bojangles-two-stars-one-lifelong-friendship>

There was also Louise Beavers whose main roles would be either that of a maid, servant or slave. To some extent, her roles incorporated the mammy stereotype – the black domestic servant, good-natured often overweight and loud (see picture)



Louise Beavers playing a maid.

Fonte: <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/84059%7C0/Imitation-of-Life.html>

According to the aforementioned study by Bogle, in midst of the 20th century, some movies started to address the issue of race, but in a very incipient fashion and from a liberal perspective. For the first time, black actors as Sidney Poitier were given leading roles, but not before some changes were made. Poitier's roles, for example, were the opposite of the stereotypes about black people: he was educated, intelligent, in one word, he represented the negro that liberals had imagined.



Sidney Poitier

Fonte: <http://www.blogosanospardidos.com.br/2017/02/10-fotos-de-sidney-poitier.html>

In his roles he would also be featured as almost sexless and always in total control of his emotions, never acting on impulse which, to some extent, was also a stereotyped image of negroes. We could go on listing more cases, but our point seems to be clear by now.

### CONCLUSÃO

What we want you to take away from this class is how representation as a signifying practice has been mobilized, in diverse moments, to assign meaning to racial difference. Also, you should bear in mind the various stereotypes imposed upon black people and how they have not gone out of circulation. On the contrary, every now and then they come to light in many different disguises and on varying degrees. Another important point that we should make is that, as you probably have noticed, the practice of stereotyping – that is, reducing someone or a group to a set of fixed or essential characteristics that are portrayed as being natural – is always linked to a will to rule the Other, to be placed over the Other. Such a will underlies, for example, the pro-slavery discourse which, by arguing that negroes were naturally subservient and childlike, suggested that they could only be happy under white rule. In some cases, even “scientific” explanations were fabricated to give those representations more credibility. We hope that also became evident in the soap company examples we offered in which the representation of racial difference served to advance a claim of racial superiority.



### ATIVIDADE

Answer these questions below in English:

Do some online research and try to find a photo or a movie/series scene in which you think there is a racial stereotype is being reinforced.

Esta atividade objetiva verificar se você compreendeu satisfatoriamente um dos principais pontos desta aula.



### PRÓXIMA AULA

MITO E MITOLOGIA: O CASO DA INGLATERRA

## REFERÊNCIAS

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