

TITLE: Finding Racial Stereotypes in Popular Culture

GRADES: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA(S): US History (Twentieth Century)

American Democracy

Economics

English/Language Arts

OVERVIEW:

Do media outlets stereotype ethnic groups? Freedom's Journal, the first African-American newspaper, was started to combat stereotypes of African-Americans in the white press. With its independent voice, the black press fought racial stereotypes by showing African-Americans in a positive light. While the mainstream press only reported on crimes committed by African-Americans, the black press focused on their achievements. The black press also took a moral stand against racism in the mainstream media. Frederick Douglass, abolitionist and editor of The North Star, spoke out against what the white press was calling the "Negro problem". The motion picture The Birth of a Nation, which portrayed African-Americans in hideous caricature and celebrated Klan violence, was vehemently protested by the black press. The black press even created its own cartoons as a remedy to the racist cartoons in the white press.

Program Segments:

1) 0:00 – 16:43 *"Too Long Have Others Spoken for Us"*: Freedom's Journal was started to counteract African-American stereotypes in the mainstream press; African-American press united black people after the Civil War; informed, elevated moral and racial consciousness; 1876 federal protection of slaves revoked, reign of terror and mob violence; The Memphis Free Speech and editor Ida B. Wells investigated lynchings; lynch mob destroyed press and ran Wells out of the South; Frederick Douglass declared there is no "Negro problem", but a problem with the American people living up to their Constitution; Robert S. Abbott declared the vehicle for change will be the newspaper.

2) 17:36 – 23:20 *"Standing Up for the Race"*: By 1910, over 275 black newspapers in print; The California Eagle became a force for social change for African-Americans in California; Charlotta Spears Bass began a 40 year career as a publisher, editor and social activist; The Birth of a Nation depicted African-Americans in hideous caricature and celebrated Klan violence, was protested by black press; The Chicago Defender was delivered to a huge African-American audience in the South; lynchings ignored by the white press, were covered by black press; The Defender was partly responsible for the Great Migration.

3) 42:49 – 50:35 *"A Separate World"*: African-American newspapers showed full spectrum of life in black communities that countered many of the prevailing stereotypes; black journalists were stars; Chester Commodore created cartoons with African-American characters, brought dignity to people; J.A. Rogers created serial similar to Ripley's Believe It or Not about black history; black newspapers were training grounds for careers in publishing.

4) 59:00 – 1:11:36 *"Treason?"*: Double V campaign, victory over enemies from without and enemies from within; government felt black press would hinder war effort; FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover wanted to indict a group of African-American publishers for treason; Double V campaign became the catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement.

5) 1:11:36 – 1:24:43 *“Putting Itself Out of Business”*: 1952 Charlotta Spears Bass became first black woman to run for national office; The California Eagle was sold because of declining support; the white media began reporting about the Civil Rights Movement, needed black reporters to cover the story; mainstream newspapers hired African-American reporters away from black newspapers, created “brain drain”; black newspapers had to begin accepting advertisements to stay in business; African-American press could not continue to criticize white America and accept their advertising money; circulation declined in 1960s and power of the black press began to wane.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will analyze current media and determine if racial stereotyping exists.
- Students will consider the causes of and remedies for racial stereotyping.
- Students will write to analyze stereotyping in movies and television, then write to reflect on its personal and societal effects.

MATERIALS:

- The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords video
- Various television programs
- Various motion pictures
- “Night of All-Black Comedies Rankle Some of Their Stars” by David Bauder, Los Angeles Sentinel, July 19, 2000
- “Cartoon Seeped in Ethnic Stereotypes Say Critics” by Tom Lee, AsianWeek, August 2, 2000

TIME:

- 2 class periods (60 minutes each)

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

- Discuss: Stereotypes – what they are (including examples), why they exist, and how they affect people.
- Read “Cartoon Seeped in Ethnic Stereotypes Say Critics” from AsianWeek (August 2, 2000).
- Discuss: Who created the cartoon “Mr. Wong”? Why do they consider it humorous? What stereotypes exist in the cartoon? Why are leaders in the Asian-American community concerned about the cartoon? Is there a difference between politically incorrect humor and racism? Are there any other cartoons, television shows, or movies that portray racial stereotypes?
- Discuss: Is there any difference between people using stereotypes within their own race and people using stereotypes toward a different race? If so, how is there a difference? Why is there a difference? What are some examples to support the positions students take?

FOCUS FOR VIEWING:

The following segments of the video and suggestions for showing the segments provide effective preparation and points of focus for this activity.

- **Segment 1: *“Too Long Have Others Spoken for Us”***

For viewing Segment 1, write the following questions on the board or overhead:

- *What does the title of the segment mean?*

The segment shows the birth of the African-American Press, which for the first time gave African-Americans a voice. Its advent gave African-Americans the opportunity to counter the stereotypes prevalent in the Mainstream Press. This answer can be inferred early on in the viewing of Segment 1.

- *What does “soldiers without swords” mean? Explain this weapon metaphor.*

It is similar to the expression, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” In fact, one of those interviewed in the segment uses that expression. The segment also establishes how effective the African-American Press was at debunking stereotypes, which was necessary for African-Americans to win the battle against being considered second-class citizens.

Both of these questions are good ones for students to try to answer before watching the video. It will encourage prediction and anticipation. Plus, they are questions that students are likely to guess at an answer which comes close to answering them correctly. At the point when the Freedom’s Journal is introduced, ask students to refine their answers to the questions. After viewing the segment, you can also discuss the role that the newspapers played in countering the stereotypes presented in the Mainstream Press.

- **Segment 2: “*Standing Up for the Race*”**

For viewing Segment 2, write the following questions on the board or overhead:

- *Why did the African-American Press react negatively to the film *Birth of a Nation*? What kind of effect did this negative reaction have?*

The segment shows scenes from the D.W. Griffith film set during The Reconstruction which negatively portrayed African-Americans and positively portrayed the Ku Klux Klan. The African-American Press vilified the film, causing it to be pulled from theatres in many cities and even some entire states.

- *How did the *Chicago Defender*’s success at encouraging African-Americans to move North lead to the creation of more African-American newspapers?*

After the segment establishes the *Chicago Defender*’s role in the Great Migration, it mentions how the growing African-American populations in cities of the North and Midwest created the need for more newspapers. Students may have to infer slightly from what is presented in the video.

Before viewing this segment, ask students how stereotypes in movies can do tremendous harm. Keep the discussion brief, but encourage students to provide some examples of what they mean. The portrayal of Arabs as terrorists is a good example to use. At the point in the segment when *Birth of a Nation* is discussed, ask students to explain the effect that the African-American newspapers had on the film’s distribution. The end of the segment is the time to discuss the second question. Ask students to explain how more papers would have an impact on stereotypes.

- **Segment 3: “*A Separate World*”**

For viewing Segment 3, write the following questions on the board or overhead:

- *Why were members of the African-American Press so revered by African-Americans?*

One of the segment’s first interviews reveals that members of the press were only behind entertainers and athletes in stature. In many ways they were celebrities because they were such well-respected role models.

- *How were cartoons, photographs and *Your History* effective in countering stereotypes?*

Much of the middle part of the segment focuses on the role of cartoons, photographs and the J.A. Rogers featured called *Your History*, which is described in the video as a Ripley’s Believe It or Not kind of feature on little known facts about African-Americans. The cartoons portrayed heroic African-American figures, instead of the exaggerated stereotypes of the Mainstream Press’ cartoons,

and photographs captured African-Americans in daily life, showing them to be different than the stereotypes portrayed.

Both of these questions can be discussed after viewing the parts of the segment which mention them.

- **Segment 4: “*Treason?*”**

For viewing Segment 4, write the following question on the board or overhead:

- *How and why were the attitudes of many African-Americans changed after World War II?*

One of the people interviewed in the video talks about coming back from the war and being less accepting of the status quo. Newspapers’ pushing of the Double V Campaign throughout the war helped create the dissatisfaction for the status quo.

As soon as the Double V Campaign is understood by your students, stop the video and ask students to hypothesize how and why African-Americans’ attitudes probably changed after the war. Then, as it unfolds in the video they will compare their previous thoughts. At the end of the segment you can expand the discussion to include the fact that dissatisfaction with the status quo included further discontent with stereotypes.

- **Segment 5: “*Putting Itself Out of Business*”**

For viewing Segment 5, write the following question on the board or overhead:

- *How did many prominent African-American journalists’ leaving African-American papers for mainstream newspapers help counter stereotypes of African-Americans among white people?*

Students will have to infer this from the video. What students can likely figure out is that many white people’s first exposure to African-American writers didn’t occur until they began writing for the Mainstream Press.

Given that this is a question of pure inference, you can have students try to answer it before and/or after the segment. You should emphasize how everything which counters a prevailing stereotype — no matter how big or small it seems — has an impact on diminishing the impact of stereotypes in the media.

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

- Have students think about current racial stereotyping in the media. As a class, brainstorm a list of stereotypes and how they are used in music, television and motion pictures. Have students keep a log for one week in which they will record their observations about racial stereotyping in the media (including news stories, advertisements, television programs, music, music videos, billboards and movies). In the log, students will describe each instance of racial stereotyping they find. Questions to consider while analyzing media might include: What racial stereotypes are being shown? What action is taking place? What role does the ethnic character have? Is this person part of the majority or minority in this particular program? How are the other characters treating this person? In your opinion, was this person being negatively stereotyped? Are there any positive racial stereotypes? If so, was this person being positively stereotyped? What was your personal reaction to this program?

- After collecting data, students may share and discuss what they found with members of the class.
- Students should then write to analyze the portrayal of different races in American media and write to reflect on its personal and societal impact. Questions to consider might include: How do stereotypes begin? How are they overcome? How do they make people feel? Why do people use stereotypes? Do stereotypes affect people in ethnic groups differently than people who are Caucasian? If so, how?

EXTENSIONS:

- *History:* Have students view clips from older television shows and movies. Some examples might include “Amos & Andy”, *Gone With the Wind*, old westerns, etc. Discuss how ethnic groups are portrayed in these instances and whether or not progress has been made over the years.
- *Community:* Have students analyze local media for racial stereotypes and report their findings. If stereotypes exist, have students write letters to media outlets explaining their findings. AND/OR have students examine stereotypes that exist within their school. Students can then write a Letter to the Editor of the school newspaper to point out that stereotypes exist, perhaps going so far as to suggest ways to decrease stereotypes within the school.
- *Culture:* Have students analyze media reports about sports stars from different ethnic groups. Are these reports using any racial stereotypes? Have students explain their findings.
- *Media Advocacy:* Have students read “Night of All-Black Comedies Rankle Some of Their Stars” from the Los Angeles Sentinel (July 19, 2000). Discuss whether a lineup of black-themed shows is promoting integration or segregation. What is the network’s defense of its schedule?

ASSESSMENT:

- Evaluate students’ media logs with regard to depth of research and understanding the assignment. Read and respond to each student’s reflective writing.

STANDARDS:

HS History Grades 9-12

- Historical and Social Sciences Analysis Skills
- Chronological and Spatial Thinking: Students compare the present with the past, evaluating the consequences of past events and decisions and determining the lessons that were learned.
- Historical Interpretation: Students show the connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments.

HS U.S. History and Geography Grade 11

- Standard 11.8: Students analyze the economic boom and social transformation of post-World War II America; Discuss forms of popular culture
- Standard 11.11: Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.

HS Principles of American Democracy & Economics Grade 12

- Standard 12.8: Students evaluate and take and defend positions on the influence of the media on American political life. Discuss the meaning and importance of a free and reasonable press.

HS English-Language Arts Grades 9 & 10

Writing

- Standard 1.0: Students write coherent and focused essays that convey a well-defined perspective and tightly reasoned argument. The writing demonstrates students' awareness of the audience. Students progress through the stages of the writing process as needed. Use clear research questions and suitable research methods (e.g. library, electronic media, personal interview) to elicit and present evidence from primary and secondary sources.

HS English-Language Arts Grades 11 & 12

Writing

- Standard 1.0: Students combine the rhetorical strategies narration, exposition, persuasion, and description to produce texts of at least 1,500 words each. Student writing demonstrates a command of standard American English and the research, organizational, and drafting standards outlined in Writing Standard 1.0.