

Hearing From and Listening To: Dialectical Tensions in the Pedagogical Pursuit of Critical Analysis

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Abstract

As instructors, it is not uncommon to find ourselves faced by a lack of enthusiasm from students when we ask them to participate in the critical analysis of complex issues. It can be difficult to know if it is an outcome of their having limited knowledge of the subject, fear of their perspectives being negatively judged by peers and instructors or an uncertainty of *how* to think critically (not just negatively) about an issue. An outcome of any of these factors can be a silent class or one dominated by a few voices, leaving the instructor unsure as to whether the time has been well spent.

This session built on the lessons learned from our experiences of (more or less) engaging students in the critical analysis of racialized discourses. During the presentation, we identified strategies for teaching students how to critically analyze materials, and shared our classroom experiences of engaging students in these processes. Those attending the presentation were invited to describe their own instructional experiences and to elaborate on processes they found helpful or unhelpful. There was opportunity for participants to utilize the strategies presented through analysis of racialized materials.

Keywords: Racism; History; Contemporary representation; Critical analysis

This paper presents two examples of our methods of critiquing racialized discourses in classrooms. While our focus was on analyzing racist representations, our aim was to outline a process that can be used to help students develop their capacity for critical analysis when approaching other topics. As we explained and identified struggles that students encounter in engaging in critical analysis, we sought our audience's input and perspectives.

Our premise is that identifying racist representations is important because these are not simply remnants of the past, but still exist and have implications for contemporary ways of thinking about and treating racialized persons. We challenge students to consider why and how these representations have important meanings for all of our lives, not just for those who are racialized. There is clear evidence that racist images have had and still have a devastating effect on the self-image and self-esteem of racialized persons; what is more, racist popular culture helps create a shared attitude of contempt for racialized people around the world. These are complex ideas. For various reasons, many students find them difficult and resist the analysis. We encouraged the colleagues in our

session to consider the possible reasons for this resistance as we proceeded to engage in a detailed examination of two series of images.

Example #1

We moved through our analytical process first by focussing on a recent controversy surrounding the tennis champion Serena Williams, who has been an international tennis champion for nearly twenty years. Recently, she returned to competition after having given birth to her first child in 2017. In September 2018, she lost a tournament to Naomi Osaka, owing in part to the umpire's decision to penalize her for "coaching, racket destruction and verbal abuse infractions" (Bieler, 2018, para. 13).

In the aftermath, tennis organizations, retired tennis champions and sports journalists argued either that Williams's conduct was discreditable, or that the episode was evidence of the sport's gender bias, as men are not punished for similar behaviour. Interestingly, the commentaries were silent about the racialized identities of the two athletes; Williams is African American and Osaka is of Japanese and Haitian heritage.

Mark Knight's (2018) cartoon satirizing Williams's reaction to the umpire's ruling, however, escalated the debate about the disputed game. The image features an elephantine Williams, arm muscles bulging, her hair on end, her eyes squeezed shut and her grotesquely wide-lipped mouth open in a scream as she stomps on her racket with both feet. Lying on the ground is an infant soother, with the implication that it has fallen out of Ms. Williams' mouth. To the right of the figure, at a distance and behind the tennis net, stands Osaka represented as an elfin white woman. She gazes up at the umpire as he asks, "Can you just let her win?" Some think the representation fair, others say it is racist.

In order to provide students with knowledge essential for engaging in critical analysis of such material, we would first spend time providing historical information about racialized imaginings of Black women. One of those imaginings is the Sapphire stereotype originating in nineteenth-century, all-male stage performances of blackface minstrel shows; the name "Sapphire" derives from a 1930s radio character named Mrs. Sapphire Stevens (Pilgrim, 2008/2012). The type is a woman who is loud, domineering, aggressive and irrationally angry with all men, even given to perpetrating physical violence against Black men (Harris-Perry, 2011). In other words, she is uncontrollable, dangerous and frightening. Additional aspects of the Sapphire or "sassy mammy" stereotype include characterization as a masculinized, emasculating, uncaring Black woman who is at once terrifying and laughably unfit for motherhood.

After providing such historical context, we would concentrate on Mark Knight's visual rhetoric, asking the students "What do you see?" Observations about Williams might include that:

- The Williams figure is outsized and mannish, which contrasts absurdly with the hyper-feminine costume and her tantrum.
- The hair stands on end, like the fright wig worn by a blackface minstrel performer. In addition, the lips, enormous and widely stretched, is a stereotype also derived from blackface minstrelsy; the image therefore suggests that Williams is a "big mouth."
- The soother signifies Williams's childishness and might be interpreted as a hint that she is not fit for motherhood.

Conversation might also generate salient observations about the Osaka figure, including a focus on the contradiction between Knight's depiction of a slender, light-complexioned woman and that of the real

athlete's body shape and skin tone, as she is powerfully built and dark complexioned. This "whitewashing," together with her positioning—looking upward at the tennis umpire—creates the impression of both her deference to authority and her need of protection, suggesting that she is a helpless, innocent white victim of a monstrous, raging black woman.

We would go on to ask what is communicated about Williams through such representation; for, ultimately, this cartoon mocks Williams's impotent rage in the face of white male authority. Moreover, the soother suggests that she belongs neither in the public realm nor in the domestic role as a mother.

We have sometimes found that students are not forthcoming in expressing their ideas. There can be resistance to critically analyzing racist cartoons such as Knight's. The resistance might take the form of the argument made by the British journalist Rod Liddle (2018) in Knight's defense. He claims that it is impossible to draw Black characters *without* racist characteristics; that it just cannot be helped. To help students understand the vacuity of such a rationalization, we would show them that it can be done.

Keeping in mind that a newspaper cartoon is meant to convey the essence of an event in public life, Nate Beeler's (2011) image accomplishes that aim without demeaning the racialized figure. Beeler's caricature of Williams is absent of stereotype, neither asserting nor insinuating racism. What is more, Williams has forcefully thrown the racket, represented as the male gender symbol and marked with the word "Sexism," onto the ground. We ask students how Beeler's cartoon compares to Knight's, for Williams is represented naturalistically, and the incidence of racket abuse is shown as defiance rather than rage.

This comparative strategy has an added advantage in that it addresses another possible resistance to analysis; namely, that students may remain silent when presented with *any* images of Black people for fear of having missed the obvious—they might gain the impression that *all* representations are suspect.

Example #2

Helping students engage in critical analysis of material that has clear racist features can be fairly straightforward, but other materials can be more complex because less overt. After providing students with instruction on the importance of history in understanding how racism has become embedded in representation, and guiding them through the analytical process, we would ask them to work together to identify the ways in which images or materials are problematic or contentious.

To demonstrate how we go about guiding students in the analysis of more complicated material, we selected the example of an episode, a masterfully-produced musical interlude, from Disney's *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995). As in our previous example of a newspaper cartoon, we would have previously provided students with background information that informs them of the centuries-old white American popular culture fictionalizing of an Algonquin woman's life story and the attendant mythification of colonialism, and would have explained that the film's appeal lies in a rendering of colonial occupation as a natural—and positive—consequence of love and respect between an Algonquin woman and an English man.¹

We ask of students that as they watch the film clip they consider its elements, such as music, dance, animals and nature, and consider what makes the animation aesthetically appealing. Following a lengthy

discussion of those aspects, we ask students to analyse how the presentation of the characters supports arguments that they are harmless or even inspiring:

- The natural environment poses no hazards; instead, it is a playground populated by unthreatening anthropomorphized animals.
- The varied landscape – from mountainous to aquatic – is effortlessly traversed.
- The animated hero and heroine's movements are patterned on choreographed dance, so that the two characters engage in a pas de deux in which the female, Algonquin, dancer is the admired focus of attention.
- The music is instrumental and textured; the lyrics are plaintive, a call to conciliatory action between themselves and their peoples.

Our aim is to demonstrate how various elements of the production seduce the viewer into wanting to believe this is an authentic version of the past. Such a task is difficult for some, because when they try to address the matter, they have to consciously undo ways of finding pleasure in films like these that have been part of their childhoods. If racist images and stories *are* embedded in their own personal histories, they must attempt to resist nostalgic enjoyment of it. For some, relinquishing the pleasure induced by Disney's matrix of inspired lyricism of music, movement, colour and idealized nature is an intractable problem. However, by providing the means to competence in analysing visual rhetoric, students can comprehend the stakes involved in refusing responsibility for collective history—and know that complacency is not an option.

Our method in presenting the racist images involves the following four steps:

1. Identify the historic ways in which the socio-cultural group related to the image has been persecuted.
2. Discuss the ways in which the image's design makes it aesthetically appealing.
3. Ask how the presentation of the image calls on a nostalgia that would support arguments that it is harmless.
4. Analyze how the design of the image reproduces racist beliefs about the socio-cultural group.

Summary

We were excited about the level of interest expressed by those attending the session. Although we had designed the presentation anticipating that participants would engage with the materials from the standpoint of being instructors, we were delighted to hear student perspectives. Participants elaborated on explanations for the reticence of students, voicing their thoughts about materials such as those included in the presentation, providing insights that we had not considered. For instance, there was mention of this kind of learning being “transcendentally violent,” thereby requiring the embracing of self-doubt, which can be frightening. A second view expressed was that taking a critical perspective toward issues of racism necessitates a relinquishing of complacency, meaning giving up one's sense of self-satisfaction with how one understands the world and acts in it. There was much discussion about how nostalgia for feelings of childhood pleasures influences adult perspectives toward the *Pocahontas* film and the complexity of Indigenous viewpoints about popular cultural representations of this type. As mentioned at the beginning of this report, it had been our intention that the analytical process we presented in relation to racialized materials would be extended to other social issues, and we were pleased that this naturally occurred as the discussion proceeded. The success of this presentation grew out of the dynamic involvement of the audience, and we express our thanks to them.

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