Robert Gooding-Williams

"LOOK, A NEGRO!"

Robert Gooding-Williams teaches philosophy and Black studies at Amherst College. He is author of Nietzsche's Pursuit of Modernism and editor of Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising. In this essay Gooding-Williams argues that the representations of blacks in Hollywood movies has a harmful influence on American attitudes toward African Americans. He urges the demythification of these racial representations.

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean...

—Frantz Fanon

Your country? How came it yours?

—W. E. B. DuBois

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will investigate the impact of racial ideology (by which I mean, roughly, the interpretation of racial identities in the representation of racially classified individuals or groups) on the trial of the policemen who beat Rodney King and on media coverage of the L.A. uprising. My principal aim will be to analyze critically the ways in which racial ideology, during the policemen's trial and the media's coverage of the uprising, functioned to characterize black bodies and, implicitly, to interpret the sociopolitical status of blacks in the United States.

In pursuit of this aim, my critique of racial ideology will differ from a more familiar approach to ideology critique that, owing most of its influence to the writings of Marx and Freud, attempts to demystify social phenomena by identifying their social origins. Marx, for example, criticizes the fetishism of commodities by showing that exchange values are not simply properties of things, but also effects of capitalist social relations. Similarly, psychoanalysis reveals the significance of otherwise uninterpretable neurotic symptoms by relating them to prior contexts.


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of childhood trauma. Black bodies, however, unlike Marx's exchange values and Freud's neurotic symptoms, do not ordinarily strike us as resembling mysterious fetishes or "hieroglyphics" that have been waiting to have meaning attributed to them.

Black bodies, in fact, have been supersaturated with meaning, as they have been relentlessly subjected to characterization by newspapers, newscasters, popular film, television programming, public officials, policy pundits and other agents of representation. Characterizations of black bodies often represent their actions and/or attributes as consequences of discrimination, social pathology, state policy, unemployment, jungle chaos, physical prowess, genital good-heartedness, or some other cause or causes.

Many of these characterizations are false, and so need to be vigorously contested. But, over and beyond contesting such false characterizations, a critique of racial ideology should also explore the ways in which explanations and other representations of black bodies function as forms of sociopolitical imagination. To be more precise, it should investigate the ways in which these representations present themselves as allegories of social organization and political community. The point of such an investigation would not be to demystify black bodies (that is, the point would not be to identify the social causes of their actions and attributes), but to demystify them, that is, to subject to critical scrutiny the allegories of American social and political life that are embedded in characterizing them.

In what follows, I will elaborate further my concept of racial ideology, drawing on Toni Morrison's discussion of Africanism in American literature and on a recent popular film (popular film being one of the most influential sources of racial ideology in our time) for my examples. I will then use my concept of racial ideology to analyze, first, the defense lawyers' representation of Rodney King to the jurors who exonerated his assailants, and second, the media's representation of black participation in the uprising prompted by the jurors' verdicts. I present this analysis as a possible starting point for further inquiry. It is not intended to be exhaustive of the issues it addresses.

THE CONCEPT OF RACIAL IDEOLOGY

I understand the concept of racial ideology to have as its extension (i.e., the scope of its reference) all racial representations, that is, all representations of racially classified individuals or groups (of individuals). Thus, in contemporary American society, where all individuals and groups are subject to racial classification, the concept of racial ideology applies in fact to all representations of social activity. Though the notion of racial ideology I am proposing may seem at first glance to be too inclusive, since it identifies all representations of racially classified individuals or groups as ideological, its inclusiveness is in fact one of its strengths. By advocating a relatively broad and encompassing concept of racial ideology, I mean to resist the temptation to restrict in advance the proper domain of a critique of racial ideology.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued that "In US society, . . . a kind of racial etiquette exists, a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life . . . Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without conscious teaching or conscious inculcation. Race becomes 'common-sense' a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world." Here, Omi and Winant remind us that racial classification is pervasive in American society. In the most familiar cases, e.g., the classification of individuals as "black" or "white," it proceeds on the basis of visible physical characteristics that
almost everyone learns to read on sight as signifiers of racial identity. Most Americans take it for granted that they are competent and even adept participants in the practice of racial classification; they tend to acknowledge explicitly their participation in this practice only when they encounter individuals whom they cannot immediately racially categorize. First of all and most of the time, racial classification operates as an unthreatened but constitutive dimension of social interaction in American society.

Because racial classification is pervasive because, in fact, there are no occasions in American society in which racial classification is not present as a dimension of social interaction, it is possible and even reasonable to read all representations of the individuals or groups present in American society—by which I mean all visual, verbal, and written depictions of these individuals or groups, fictional depictions included—as interpretations of the racial identities which all racial classifications posit. In a society in which racial classification is a constitutive feature of social life, all representations of social life make implicit reference to racial identities. Thus, all representations of social life can be read as interpretations of racial identities. The critique of racial ideology, as I conceive it, proceeds from the heuristic assumption that all such representations should be read as interpretations of racial identities.

To be sure, readings of the sort I envision are not always informative or illuminating. And readings of this sort, far from being exhaustive, constitute just one of many viable and politically significant perspectives on the representation of American social life. Still, an essential part of a critique of racial ideology is to produce such readings, without presupposing that some racial representations should be excluded a priori from the set of potentially fruitful objects of ideology critique.

THE CONCEPT OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE: GENEALOGY, SOCIOPOLITICAL ALLEGORY, AND DEMYTHIFICATION

The conception of ideology critique I wish to elaborate has three components: (1) the genealogical exposure of racial representations; (2) the reading of genealogically exposed racial representations as sociopolitical allegories; and (3) the demythification of the allegorical content of genealogically exposed racial representations.

My conception of genealogical exposure draws its inspiration from Nietzsche.9 As I conceive it, a genealogical exposure of racial representations discloses the interpretative origins of those representations. Its point, more exactly, is to identify the acts of interpretation which constitute racial representations. Following Nietzsche, I regard an act of interpretation as a characterization of a physical object, individual, practice, or other subject matter that ascribes to it some purpose(s) or function(s) or other significance (e.g., the characterization of the practice of punishment as having the purpose of preventing further harm).10 To disclose the interpretive origin of a racial representation is, for my purposes, to show that that representation has been constituted through the ascription of some purpose(s) or function(s) or other significance to a racially classified individual or group of individuals, and to the racial identity(ies) which he, she, or it has been classified as embodying.

The best examples I know of the genealogical exposure of racial representations can be found in Toni Morrison's study of American Africanism, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. As Morrison defines it, "American Africanism" refers to "the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanklike (or Africanism) presence or persons was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served."11 In her analysis of American Africanism, Morrison attempts to show that in American literature "black matters," that it makes a difference.12 Her aim, as I read her, is to disclose and explore the many ways in which works of American literature spring from and have been influenced by representations of blackness, and to characterize individuals who have been racially classified as black. The questions she asks—"How does literary utterance arrange itself when it tries to imagine the Africanist other? What are the signs, the codes, the literary strategies designed to accommodate this encounter? What does the inclusion of Africans or African-Americans do to and for the work?"—clearly implicate the genealogical dimensions of her project, as they pertain explicitly to the functions which literary works assign to racially classified individuals (what the inclusion of such individuals does to and for a work), and to the ways in which literary works "arrange" themselves as to "accommodate" these functions.13

Morrison's genealogical exposures of Africanist racial representations in American literature show that these representations were constituted through the ascription of multiple purposes and functions to individuals racially classified as black (the black characters appearing in her fictions Morrison discusses). Some of the purposes and functions she identifies are: "surrogate and enabler of self-reflection"; figure for what is "hip, sophisticated, (and) ultra-urban"; means of defining the goals and enhancing the qualities of white characters; and "means of mediation—both safe and risky on one's own humanity."14 What Morrison calls "the serviceability of the African presence" is a constitutive force in American literature, whose pervasiveness she wishes to highlight.15 By bringing into view the many roles and purposes which American writers have ascribed to black characters and figures of blackness, she lets us see a large part of the quite complicated network of meanings which American culture has attributed to what it construes as a black racial identity.16

Let me now turn to an example of American Africanism, in order to begin to explain the possibility of reading genealogically exposed racial representations as sociopolitical allegories. The example I have in mind is that of the male-nurse figures who appear in Hemingway's fiction. These male nurses, Morrison points out, are almost always black. "Cooperative or sullen," she writes, "they are Tonto's all, whose role is to do everything possible to serve the Lone Ranger without disturbing his indulgent delusion that he is indeed alone."17 Morrison goes on to discuss at length the functions of these figures, noting both their enabling and disenabling qualities vis-à-vis their white male patrons.18 Her remarks along these lines are striking, in part because of the insight they bring to Hemingway's writings, but likewise because they remind us that fictive individuals of the sort she analyzes pervade American culture. In popular film, for example, figures of black nurses and sidekicks abound, gods sometimes as male, sometimes as female, bound often to Lone Rangers, but sometimes to romantic lovers. A by-now classic example is the figure of Sam (Dooley Wilson), who in Casablanca appears as nurse, as sidekick, and as a desexualized Cupid figure whose raison d'etre is to keep alive the myth of (white) heteroerotic romance. A more recent example is the figure of Oda Mae Brown (Whoopi Goldberg), who in Ghost reprises the role of the Cupid figure by appearing literally as the medium through whom two white heterosexual lovers, estranged by death, can touch each other one last time.19

The nurse, sidekick, and Cupid figures appearing in Casablanca and Ghost, no less than those cropping up in Hemingway's fiction, serve various functions within the
narratives in which they occur. Once the representations of these black characters have been genealogically exposed, the assignment to these characters of particular roles can be read allegorically as commenting on the social and political status of blacks in America. In the cases of Casablanca and Ghost, for example, allegorical readings let us see how the assignment of particular narrative functions to black characters can intimate the view that the African presence in American social and political life, though serviceable, is expendable. More familiar to contemporary audiences than Hemingway's fiction, and, for that matter, than classical Hollywood films like Casablanca, the example of Ghost is especially significant, because it highlights the fact that American Africanism, besides being an essential feature of an established American literary tradition, continues to be perpetuated in contemporary American culture.

Based loosely on Shakespeare's Othello (the dead protagonist's ghost is meant to recall Banquo's ghost), Ghost is about the effort of a dead but "legitimate" white American patriarch and capitalist to defend his realm against the designs of an "illegitimate" usurper. The film persuades its audience to endorse this effort, by confounding it with the expression of an intensely passionate heterosexual love. Personifying a (socially posited) black racial identity, Oda Mae functions in the film to facilitate both the communication of this love and the protagonist's destruction of the "tyrant" who has displaced him. Once she fulfills her function, she is dispensable (as is Sam in Casablanca). Read as an allegorical commentary on contemporary American society, Oda Mae represents the claim that though the black presence in America is not essential to America's identity as a political community, it constitutes a useful, convenient, and sometimes welcome means for propping up and stabilizing the patriarchal and capitalist social order which is the foundation of that community. Ghost's dominant fantasy, reminiscent of the "indulgent delusion" Morrison attributes to the Lone Ranger, is that America can use blacks for its purposes, and yet retain an identity to which a black presence is not essential.

By discussing Ghost, I have hoped to show how a genealogically exposed racial representation can be read as a sociopolitical allegory. I have hoped, too, to begin to explain my concept of demythification. "Demythification," as I use that term, refers to the critical use of evidence and argument to gauge the truth value of the sociopolitical allegories implicit in racial representations. Demythifying Ghost, for example, could involve an appeal to evidence and argument contradicting the view that the black presence in America, though convenient, is not an essential part of America's identity as a nation. Such evidence is readily available and has been for a long time. W. E. B. Du Bois used it, when almost a century ago he attacked the myth which Ghost embraces.

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song... the gift of grief and love and bravery to beat back the wilderness... the third a gift of spirit. Around us the history of the land has centered for three hundred years; out of the nation's heart we have called all that is best to thrive and subsist; all that was worst... Actively we have woven ourselves with the warp and woof of the nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to the nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America be America without her Negro people? (emphasis mine)

Du Bois argues that the Negro has given America its song, built its foundations, and, weing him/herself with the warp and woof of the nation, born the brunt of its struggle for justice, mercy, and truth. His point is that the Negro has played so important a role in creating America, and in fostering its highest aspirations, that America's identity as a distinct political community is not conceivable absent the centuries-long presence of blacks in America. Du Bois demythifies the claim set forth allegorically in Ghost, that this presence has been a peripheral and incidental one, by insisting that America would not be America without its Negro people.

Du Bois's eloquence is unusually compelling. But Ghost, it is important to see, is just one of many film and television events that can be usefully subjected to ideological criticism. Less important, therefore, than the details of my analysis of this film is the recognition that what Ghost exemplifies, namely, the use of racial representations to interpret, reproduce, and reproduce America's culture. Although the interpretation of racial identities varies from one racial representation to another, and though the complexity of some racial representations far and away exceeds that of others, the fact remains that American culture lives and breathes by racial representations, using them relentlessly to make sense of American history, society, and politics.

Thus, when we consider the role of racial ideology in the trial of the policemen who beat Rodney King and in the media's depiction of the L.A. uprising, we should acknowledge that in the beginning of the courtroom and media representations of black bodies grow out of a long and ongoing tradition of American Africanism. The racial representations present in Ghost, Casablanca, and the works of fiction Toni Morrison discusses are not a small sample of the great storehouse of interpreted images of black people that American jurors, lawyers, and media pundits have available to them as elements of the culture they have in common. That particular jurors, lawyers, and pundits should have made use of some of these images in the contexts of the Simi Valley trial and the television coverage of the L.A. uprising simply marks them as Americans.

Racial ideology in contemporary America works relentlessly to exclude blacks from many white Americans' conceptions of who their fellow citizens are. The antiblack sentiment reported in a recent New York Times article about the Greenwood section of Chicago begins to tell the story. Putting succinctly all he claims to know about black Americans, 23-year-old William Knepper says that "they came from Africa, and they can get away with a lot of stuff because they're black, they're a minority." Peggy O'Connor, a waitress and the wife of a police officer, is a bit more blunt: "I don't want to be too close to them. I think they've been whining too long, and I'm sick of it." As this turns out, the image of the whining black recurs frequently among white Americans, as according to a poll CNN reported on the weekend of the L.A. uprising, 46% of the whites queried agreed that blacks "[are] always whining about racism." For many whites, then, black speech is not the speech of fellow citizens, but the always-complaining speech of spoiled children. Casting blacks in the infantilizing role of whiners from Africa, the racial ideology of these white folk works against the possibility of recognizing blacks as partners in a broadly conceived social and political enterprise.

Read as sociopolitical allegory, the remarks and thoughts of Knepper, O'Connor, and many others can be said to envision America as a white nation that has got itself bent by a bunch of whimpering interlopers who get away with too much. Du Bois's words . . . exemplify a discursive strategy for demythifying and resisting this vision.
Other discursive strategies are possible as well. Absent demystification and resistance, we should anticipate endless echoes of Fanon's leitmotif:

Look at the nigger! ... Mama, a Negro! ... Hell, he's getting mad. ... Take no notice.

For a clear discussion of Marx's critique of the fetishes of commodities, see Semya Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 114-38. For an account of Freud that points implicitly to the affinity between Freud and Marx to which I have alluded, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,* in *Contemporary Hermeneutics,* ed. Joseph Bleicher (London: Routledge, 1980), 193-94. I should add, finally, that the conception of ideology critique as demystification and denaturalization that a form of consciousness is ideological if, to borrow the words of Raymond Geuss, "it contains essentially an 'objectification' mistake, i.e., if it contains a false belief to the effect that some social phenomenon is a natural phenomenon, or, to put it another way, human agents or 'subjects' are suffering from ideologically false consciousness if they falsely 'objectify' their own activity, i.e., if they are deceived into taking that activity to be something 'foreign' to them, especially if they take that activity to be a natural process outside their control." See Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Heidegger and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 14.


For Robert Miles, *Race* (New York: Routledge, 1980), 63-84. Here, I also wish to emphasize that the rules of racial classification differ from place to place, and that in a single place they may change over time. For more on this, see Omri and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States,* 60ff. I should also note here that when, in this essay, I write of "whites," "blacks," "anti-black sentiment," etc., I am myself producing racial representations and, therefore, racial ideology. Thus, my own discourse can itself be taken as an object of ideology critique as I have conceived it.

Some of these interpretations will be contesting received interpretations. Sometimes the object of contestation will be racial classifications themselves. (See, for example, Michael Jackson's "Black or White" MTV video.)

My conception of racial ideology, as a system of racial ideologies that can be read as interpreting the racial identities which racial classifications posit, seems to me to be logically compatible with Barbara Fields's conceptions of racial ideology as a "medium" that mediates the comprehension of social reality. See Barbara Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward,* ed. James Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143-75.

In general, a complete analysis of any given instance of racial ideology must also take into account those analytical perspectives that focus on the interpretation of class, gender, and sexual identities in the representation of American social life. Still, it seems to me that a critique of racial ideology can be usefully undertaken as a distinct endeavor. Thus, I believe that we can approach racial ideology more or less as Eve Sedgwick suggests we should approach gender and sexuality: "In the twentieth-century Western culture gender and sexuality represent two analytic sites that may productively be imagined as distinct from one another, say, gender and class, or class and race. Distinct, that is to say, no more than minimally, but nonetheless usefully."


[1] Ibid., 1.

[2] Ibid., 16.


[4] Ibid., 78.

[5] Here, I want to emphasize that genealogical exposure and the critique of racial ideology need not restrict themselves, as does Morrison's discussion, to works by whites. Wilson Moses, for example, discusses the figures of the black Messiah and the Uncle Tom as they appear in literary representations of blacks produced by blacks as well as whites. See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiah and Uncle Tom's Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982).


[7] Ibid., 254.

"The reading of Ghost I sketch below derives from an essay in progress, entitled "Blacks' Cupids, White Desires: A Reading of Casablanca and Ghost." For a brief but helpful discussion of Ghost that begins to address some of the issues I think important, see Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 131-34. Modleski's treatment of Ghost comes at the end of a thoughtful chapter ("Cinema and the Dark Continent: Race and Gender in Popular Film") on the interplay of racial and gender ideologies in a number of well-known American films. For an older but still-useful analysis of the representation of race in American film, see James Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Dell, 1970). See also Thomas Cripps, *Stevie Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[8] A fuller reading would also take into account issues of gender and sexuality.

[9] The paradigmatic case in expression of this claim is the portrait of the black "good souls" in D. W. Grifith's *The Birth of a Nation.*

[10] The tendency to overlook issues of race in allegorical readings of popular film is a widespread one, for example, Frederic Jameson's reading of *Somewhere Wild,* which completely ignores the film's obsession with figures of racial blackness, including its deployment of black cupid figures. Jameson's discussion of *Somewhere Wild* is contained in chapter 8 of his *Postmodernism,* or *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham:
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22Here, I mean to leave open the possibility that not all allegorical commentaries or messages are false. See, for example, my discussion below of the Amherst College effigy protest.  

23The claims set forth by a demythifying critique will vary with the allegorically expressed claims under consideration. Thus, a demythifying critique of the Cosby show would proceed along different lines than a demythifying critique of Ghost.  


25As far as I can tell, DuBois's argument does not entail the questionable view that the history of America can be readily comprehended by means of an organic model of historical development. For more on this issue, see Robert Gooding-Williams, "Evading Narrative Myth, Evading Prophetic Pragmatism: Cornel West's The American Evasion of Philosophy," The Massachusetts Review (Winter 1991-92): 517-42.  


27The poll was taken on 30 April 1992 by the firm of Yankelovich, Gracy, Shulman, located in Westport, Connecticut.  

28Television media's tendency to use images of black bodies to represent people on welfare contributes substantially to the view that black people, in general, are clients but not citizens of the larger political community. Note also Gertrude Ezorsky's observation that "15 to 19 percent of whites would not vote for a qualified black candidate nominated by their own party either for governor or president. According to Linda Whilms, senior research associate at the Joint Center for Policy Studies, their 1986 poll showed that 'the higher the office, the more whites there were who would admit that they would never vote for a black.'" See Gertrude Ezorsky, Racism and Justice, 13.  

For an insightful discussion of the ways in which the failure of whites to recognize blacks as fellow citizens has (nun)shaped contemporary policy debates about race in America, see Adolph Reed and Julian Bond, "Equality: Why We Can't Wait," The Nation 20 (December 1991): 736. For a provocative philosophical discussion of the issues of recognition, membership, and citizenship which I have raised here, see Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 31-63.

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