

High Contrast: Representations of Black Women in White America

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What does Josephine Baker have in common with Anita Hill, Oprah, or the woman at the center of the recent Duke Lacrosse scandal? The black woman in American society has been very much of a complicated public figure throughout history. She is often represented in several scandals *and* the talk of much public discussion. Regardless of her seeming omnipresence in society though, perpetuated images or representations of the black woman rarely have been explicitly explored and discussed.

The idea of this student seminar is to explore these representations and images of black women prevalent in white America that circulate more widely than we tend to imagine. We will begin to study how these images become what is “natural” or “normal” and the power of such common descriptions. In consultation with not only Professor Jerry Miller of the Philosophy Department, but also with the help of Professor Kim Benston of English, I have created a focused, extensive list of relevant media to explore this topic. To help us examine this question, we will turn to artistic expression as a means of connecting the representations and visual depictions of black women to understanding their place in society. Through artistic expression by artists of different backgrounds presenting their opinion of black female experience, we will attempt to examine the multifaceted and complicated reason for such promotions and current societal constructions of black women. Useful questions to frame our discussion of representation would include (but are not limited to):

- Who is representing black women and to what audience? Why might some representations be more prevalent in society than others?
- Is it possible to represent black women without objectifying them? If characters are attractive or sexy can objectification be avoided?
- How does thinking about how we represent black women contribute to our own understandings of ourselves? How do representations affect how white women, black men and white men identify themselves?
- What implications does our discussion and findings of black female representation in white society have for other groups in other contexts?

Each week, we will attempt to focus on one or two perspectives of the black female identity through representation based on common themes we discover in the selected works. We can begin by examining black female artists and their interpretation of what it

means to be a black woman. Then we can see what perspectives others from other backgrounds promote (consciously or subconsciously) about the identity of black women through their work. After we have looked into these perspectives, we should be able to compare and contrast the many ways black women are represented to draw conclusions regarding the reasons for such representations and implications these images have on society. While I will ultimately be responsible for the speaker, final syllabus and organizing discussions, everyone who participates in the seminar will have the opportunity to lead a discussion at some point through the semester. Their topic of discussion should be something they find particularly relevant to the subject matter or implications as we examine major themes and perspectives week-to-week.

As a meaningful special addition to the student seminar, I propose a trip to view an art exhibit in October 2007 at the Whitney Museum of American art in New York City of Kara Walker's newest work entitled, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. "Kara Walker was born in Stockton, California in 1969. She received a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art in 1991 and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. The artist is best known for exploring the raw intersection of race, gender, and sexuality through her iconic, figures."