

CES 401
Seminar in Culture and Power
Cross-Racial Identifications
Spring 2004

John Streamas

Office hours: Tuesday 3 – 4

Wednesday 1 – 3 and by appointment

112A Wilson Hall

335-4791

streamas@wsu.edu

Required texts

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin, 1972.

Davidov, Judith Fryer. *Women's Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture*. Duke UP, 1998.

Deloria, Philip. *Playing Indian*. Yale UP, 1998.

Gordon, Avery F., and Christopher Newfield, eds. *Mapping Multiculturalism*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Prashad, Vijay. *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*. Beacon, 2001.

Reading assignments and films

Please note that the reading schedule is subject to change, and you will be responsible for knowing and keeping up with changes. Many of our readings will be supplemented by handouts and possibly even a few Web sites. In addition, we will view several films and photographs, even some home movies.

You will be expected to keep up with reading assignments.

Course description

Obviously a course called “Culture and Power” could exist in several departments: anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, art, music, theater, English, communications, American Studies, Women’s Studies, film and media studies, and of course culture studies. That it exists in Comparative Ethnic Studies may be a programming coincidence—maybe we were first to claim it—but we will assume that, for the sake of this course, it belongs here. Therefore we will focus on race as the site of expressions of culture and power.

Course rationale

The university description of CES 401 says starkly, “Complex power relations that develop among competing local, regional, national, and global culture(s).” For all this terseness, a course called “Culture and Power” may take one of many different forms, even within the field of Ethnic Studies. Two years ago the 401 course examined various exercises in visual culture against theories of culture formation, especially Terry Eagleton’s in *The Idea of Culture*.

I have subtitled this semester’s course “Cross-Racial Identifications” to indicate our new direction. Our course will have three units. The first unit, consuming five to six weeks, will introduce various possible senses of “cross-racial identifications.” Our first book, Philip Deloria’s *Playing Indian*, is more than a study of whites in “redface.” In addition to reconstructing the specters of whites outfitted as Indians, it inquires into both implications and motivations of this obvious and problematic manifestation of one type of cross-racial identification. Our second book, Vijay Prashad’s *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*, studies historical instances of solidarities between African Americans and Asian Americans—another, more truly progressive manifestation of cross-racial identification. Is the difference merely a racial one? In other words, do problems inhere only in whites’ presuming to “identify with” other races? Is it more cultural—less a question of whites’ trying to *look* non-white than of their appropriating another people’s culture? Can problems arise when the peoples of one subjugated racial group try to “identify with” the peoples of another? Why would a person of color try to “pass” as white, and what are the implications? Are cross-racial solidarities of the type Prashad studies the best hope for social justice? Or is it possible that none of this matters in the work of social justice?

The second unit, also consuming five to six weeks, will step back and look at the visual aspects of identifications that cross gender and class boundaries. Judith Fryer Davidov’s *Women's Camera Work* provides a useful historical study of women who, in one way or another, may be regarded as pioneer photographers. We will pay particular attention to (“focus on,” in all senses of that pun) her examination of Dorothea Lange’s images of Japanese Americans in wartime concentration camps. John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* is the best kind of art history—political and historical. He argues persuasively that even such a seemingly uncontroversial convention as visual perspective has political implications. And he offers provocative observations on visual images as commodities. His book will, I hope, be our link between the first and third units of the course.

The final unit, consuming the last three to five weeks, will look at the culture of work. Our primary text here will be selected essays in the Gordon and Newfield anthology *Mapping Multiculturalism*. While the link between the first two units may seem obvious—cross-racial identifications are at least partly, if not mostly, contingent on race as a physical, visual phenomenon—the link between those two units and the third may be harder to make. After all, if race is constructed partly as a way of assigning labor roles, then who could blame whites for not wanting to do the hard labor performed by darker-skinned peoples? This thought might even reinforce the suggestion that cross-racial identifications, in their good and bad manifestations, are strictly confined to culture, where we are forever reminded that Elvis “stole” his ideas from black musicians and where Marlon Brando, Katharine Hepburn, and Shirley MacLaine presume to don “yellowface” and portray Asians in mainstream films. But the different values attached to different kinds of labor are a kind of cultural capital: prestige, status. According to a national myth, immigrants sacrifice their own happiness by working hard at low-paying, low-status jobs so that their children might graduate from college into high-paying, high-status jobs. This is a myth of assimilation. And surely assimilation is a kind of cross-racial identification. A myth that would probably be construed by white liberals as complementary is the myth of “multiculturalism” or “diversity”—whereby whites in power clear cultural space for peoples of color in order to achieve freedom and equality. But, whereas assimilation fairly openly assumes equality as a function of class status, diversity seems to assume it as a function of cultural status. When conservative politicians, university administrators, and white liberals alike endorse and participate in Black History Month, they loudly proclaim their work toward freedom and equality. When these same already-powerful people denounce racism as the work of ignorant, hateful individuals, they privatize it and reduce it to aberrant cultures. Assimilated persons of color embrace the same privatizing politics. “Multiculturalism” and “diversity” are thereby reduced to a process of leveling of cultures—in which whites in power are obligated only to announce a commitment to “diversity” and clear a space for cultural celebration. Meanwhile old divisions of labor remain—a product not of dysfunctional cultures or even of failed assimilation but of the mutual articulations of race and class. If assimilation were the true path to upward mobility and equality, then why is labor in the US still racialized and stratified? For that matter, why would an “equal” society keep repeating the immigrant myth, forcing newcomers forever to sacrifice for their children? Yet assimilation and “diversity” remain the polar endpoints around which revolves the goal of “equality.” The kind of progressive cross-racial identification that Prashad advocates is discouraged just as much, and in the same way, as labor unions. I hope that we can set aside time at the very end of the term for discussing these issues as they apply to the work done on college campuses, including WSU.

Some foundational formulations

Let me propose seven schemes through which we might read expressions of culture and power in racial sites:

- 1) Natural/eternal/unchangeable <=> social/historical/changeable
- 2) Social/communal <=> personal/individual
- 3) Cultural and (vs?) institutional <=> individual and (vs?) cultural
- 4) Binary (simple: right/wrong) <=> multiple (complex: undifferentiated difference) <=> contextual (historical)
- 5) Public <=> private
- 6) Parallel and coterminous development <=> fluid and uneven development
- 7) Cultural nationalism <=> strategic essentialism <=> social/historical nationalism

Other schemes are possible, perhaps even more useful, and we will discover more as the semester develops. But even the schematic structure above is problematic, as is suggested by my orthography (troubled arrows, virgules, and question marks) and conjunctions (“and” or “vs?”). And so we must use these only as suggestive and provocative, not as definitive binary or tripartite structures governing anything. With this in mind, a summary of issues raised by some of the seven schemes may be useful.

As for (1) above, there is a tendency in some people to assume that what is “natural” is also unchangeable. If they define “human nature” as governed by certain primal fears and instincts, then they may also believe that a “fear of the unknown” translates into racism. According to these people, racism has always existed and will always exist. In this scheme, “nature” substitutes for history. We do not need to learn history if we only understand “human nature.” This scheme is flawed for many reasons, of which I will cite one. Not only does it repudiate history, it also repudiates most religion, science, philosophy, politics, all of education—all of which teach history as a function of various processes of change. This formulation, however, believes nature is static, unchanging and unchangeable. Why should we even bother to confront racism if we are doomed forever to have it? But why would people whose natures are doomed to commit racism try to find cures for diseases and illnesses that afflict everyone or even anyone? It is not enough for us, however, merely to show the evolutionary changes that construct and transform racism. We must also demonstrate that racism *can* end, thereby denying any claims to its immutability.

As for (5), “the American way” is defined by devotion to freedom. Not even the “founding fathers” denied, however, that individual freedoms and social justice often clash. And yet their Declaration of Independence and Constitution are filled with a language of freedom. Rather than defining the limits of free speech in terms of the public good, however, we are expected to celebrate Supreme Court justices who merely talk about shouting “Fire!” in a crowded theater (an unlikely event that could be prosecuted on grounds altogether separate from free-speech issues) and about knowing pornography when they see it (a cowardly diversion to personal whim). Rather than settling Second Amendment disputes in terms of the public good, we are expected to resolve the issue in terms of either individual owners’ rights or statistics on gun-related deaths—both sides resorting to the language of the private sphere. Abortion, cloning, welfare, health care, immigration—we usually hear these issues debated in terms of private, personal rights rather than public, social justice. The attacks against “political correctness” and Affirmative Action derive from this preference for the private over the public. Unfortunately, however, many advocates for victims of domestic violence and workplace hazards also frame their advocacy in terms of the private rather than the public good.

As for (6), those who believe in parallel and coterminous development suffer the opposite logic of those who believe in an unchangeable and unchanging nature (1). They subscribe to such notions as the “domino effect” and “trickle-down” theory—for example, a policy that benefits immigrants from Argentina must also necessarily benefit immigrants from Sri Lanka, in the same way and to the same extent. Similarly, they believe that racism affects all groups in the same way. They reason that, if one subjugated racial group prospers relative to another’s languishing in poverty, then the fault is not systemic racism but rather the personal and cultural deviance of the second group—which means that “society doesn’t owe them anything” and that they must overcome their poverty by working harder and assimilating. Meanwhile, however, advocates for social justice must realize that not all progressive changes will benefit all victim groups equally. Cross-racial solidarities of the sort Prashad advocates promise to minimize uneven progress.

Course policies and requirements

Attendance and Participation: Attendance is mandatory. An attendance sheet will be distributed in each class meeting after the first week. After a third unexcused absence, each new unexcused absence will result in an automatic reduction of your course grade by a half-letter. In other words, if you miss five classes, you will lose a full letter grade; if you miss seven, you will lose two letters; and, if you miss nine, you should drop the course.

Your participation is also required. If you keep up with assignments, you will be able to discuss them in class. You are not expected to talk profoundly about theories of race and culture, though obviously your familiarity with such theories—if you have it—will help. Simply tell us what you glean from the text, and explain why you like or dislike it. Also be prepared to ask others why they like or dislike it. Ideally this will be a discussion among all of us. Attendance and participation will count as 10 percent of your course grade.

Reading Journal: I have initiated an e-mail list for CES 401. (Instructions for subscribing will be provided separately.) Each week you should post at least one response to our texts (readings, films, etc). You need only to indicate whether you liked or disliked the texts and to explain why. Your explanation should be more detailed than just “I liked this chapter in Deloria because it flowed well.” In a few sentences, you can provide enough detail to explain yourself. These Reading Journals will receive no individual grades, so don’t worry about grammar and spelling. I will read them as you post them, and I will save them to review at the end of the term. If you submit them regularly, you will receive credit for 10 percent of your course grade. You will lose this 10 percent only if you fail to turn them in regularly.

E-mail Discussion: At least every two weeks you should respond to each other. Did you disagree with a classmate’s reading of Berger? Why? Have you something to add to comments made in class? or to clarify something you said earlier? Can you suggest books or films that might clarify an issue? Do you wish to praise or encourage someone? Please be civil—we are here to learn from and support each other, even in our critiques. Use this discussion forum as your opportunity to ask questions or make suggestions that you might be afraid to offer in class. And risk saying something stupid or even racist—it may light the fire under someone else’s ideas. Your participation in this discussion will also count for 10 percent of your course grade.

Short Paper: You will write one short paper. Due at the end of the sixth week, it should fill three to five pages and analyze an issue raised by our texts or discussions. It should be typed in a standard font, with standard margins and a title. If you cite sources—you will not be required to do research for this assignment—do so in the MLA reference style. When you turn it in to me, you should also send a copy to the list, preferably as an attachment in a Word file. Your short paper will count as 20 percent of your course grade.

Final Project: The final project should involve some outside reading. It should reflect your engagement with an issue we will discuss in class (or another issue that you discuss with me no later than the ninth week). It

may take the form of a traditional research paper of 10 to 15 pages. Or it may take the form of a short film or video that somehow addresses an issue we discuss, or of a Web site you construct that provides information and advocacy. Detailed instructions will be presented later in the semester, but, if you wish to pursue a non-traditional option, you should start discussing this with me early. The final project will count as 35 percent of your course grade.

Presentations: You will make two presentations during the term. First you will lead the class discussion of one of our readings. A sign-up sheet will be distributed early in the term and you may choose which reading you will lead. Later in the term you will present to the class your Final Project. If your Project is a conventional paper, then you will discuss its arguments, its evidence, and your writing process. If it is a short film or a Web site, then you will show and discuss it. Presentations of the Final Projects will overlap with the third unit of the course. These two presentations will account for 5 percent of your course grade.

Final Exam: The final examination will be a very brief take-home test, to be assigned during the fourteenth week and turned in during the week of finals. It will count toward 10 percent of your course grade.

Plagiarism and language policies

In an academic setting, plagiarism is unethical. In a judicial setting, it is illegal. But, even politically and socially, it resembles the plundering acts of colonizers, who take only what they regard as most valuable from the colonized. While this is mostly the bodies and labors of the colonized, it is often also their cultures and ideas. The university's official definition of, and sanctions against, plagiarism are available in campus publications. You are expected to know them, for penalties will be enforced.

Abusive language will not be tolerated in class. Apart from prohibiting hate speech, however, we are still obligated to say that, for example, a racist idea is a racist idea, provided that we explain our charge on intellectual as well as ideological grounds. "Political correctness" exists only in the minds (and eyes and ears) of people who have something to lose, and who fear they will lose it to hordes of angry dark-skinned peoples.

A note on personal styles and communal discourse

Scheme (4) above proposes three ways of regarding human events, the third of which is a contextualizing, historicizing way that rejects the standards and norms of the elite without at the same time rejecting narratives of oppression and justice. Years ago I was urged by Delia Aguilar to attend a lecture by Barbara Harlow, an English professor. Harlow covered landmines in Cambodia, Churchill's participation in the Boer War, Dickens, Princess Diana, Chaucer, European colonialism in Africa and Asia, and Latin American revolutionary poetry. Stopped at any point in her lecture, a listener might have been hard-pressed to link all these topics. Yet, by the end, this same listener would know that she had indeed linked them. Harlow's was the most brilliant lecture I have heard. When we read Berger, we will see a mind working in similar ways—linking apparently disparate subjects into a coherent and necessary argument. This is also what, as Berger observes in his art histories, the best artists do. When we link different topics, we map them in history. We make them actors in narratives of oppression or justice. And we can better situate ourselves in those narratives, learning how to become agents of justice.

In the section above, I urged that we avoid abusive language but that we also engage in honest discourse. Here I will add that this discourse earns its honesty by linking—by contextualizing. The cross-racial solidarities Prashad advocates are all about historically aware linking. There will be days when I will say very little about the assigned texts, will seem to be discussing an entirely unrelated topic. My goal on these days is to achieve some links to the readings by the end of class, or by the end of my discourse. If, at the end, my argument remains unclear or still seems unrelated to the texts, challenge me to link better.

Finally: a friend once said that Ethnic Studies is "the most dangerous department in the university." Let us prove him right. The corporatizers who own and manage our campuses clear a space for us only grudgingly, only when they contain us in their construction of "diversity." Let us break the barriers and scare the bosses, in the name of social justice.

Special accommodations

(This is the official university statement, written by bureaucrats who are more afraid of being sued by disabled students than they are delighted by the presence of these students. Note the bureaucratic jargon marked by weak and passive verbs. I did not write this.)

Reasonable accommodations are available for students who have a documented disability. Please notify the instructor during the first week of class of any accommodations needed for the course. Late notification may cause the requested accommodations to be unavailable. All accommodations must be approved through the Disability Resource Center (DRC) in Administration Annex 206, 335-3417.

Schedule

Single-author texts are identified by author's last name, the anthology by the initials *MM*.

1/13: Introduction, syllabus.

1/15: Handouts: *New York Times* article, Berger. Discuss culture and labor.

1/20: Handout: Ong. Deloria, Introduction.

1/22: Deloria, Chapter 4.

1/27: Deloria, Chapters 5 and 6.

1/29: Deloria, Conclusion. Prashad, "The Forethought: Raw Skin."

2/3: Prashad, Chapter 1.

2/5: Prashad, Chapter 2.

2/10: Prashad, Chapter 3.

2/12: Prashad, Chapter 4.

2/17: Prashad, Chapter 5.

2/19: SHORT PAPER DUE. Film TBA.

2/24: Berger, entire book.

2/26: Davidov, Prologue.

3/2: Davidov, Chapter 1.

3/4: Davidov, Chapter 3.

3/9: Davidov, Chapter 4.

3/11: Davidov, Chapter 5.

3/23: Film and photographs TBA.

3/25: Handout: Smith.

3/30: Handouts: Casid and Piper. Final project presentations.

4/1: Handouts: Fusco and Oguibe. Final project presentations.

4/6: Handouts: Tagg and Berger. Final project presentations.

4/8: *MM*, Introduction (only pages 1-10) and Chapter 23. Final project presentations.

4/13: *MM*, Chapters 18 and 19. Final project presentations.

4/15: *MM*, Chapter 20. Final project presentations.

4/20: FINAL PROJECT DUE. Film TBA. Final project presentations.

4/22: Handout: Deloria. *MM*, Chapter 4. Final examination assigned. Final project presentations.

4/27: Handouts: Giroux and Johnson, Kavanagh, and Mattson. *MM*, Chapter 3. Final project presentations.

4/29: Handout: Reread Berger handout assigned for 1/15. Final project presentations.

5/5: FINAL EXAM DUE IN MY OFFICE, 112A WILSON HALL, OR IN MY DEPARTMENT MAILBOX IN WILSON 111, BY 4:00 PM. *Do not slip your paper under my door.* Keep a copy for your own records.

Supplemental readings

Note: This is a very short and selected list of readings that you may find helpful in understanding the issues raised in class. It is not comprehensive, nor is it as interdisciplinary as it might be: for example, you will find here few books or articles coming from the social sciences. Also, I have favored very recent books with which you may be unfamiliar. If I had tried to include specific topics—for example, films about

“passing” (such as *Imitation of Life*) or films in which actors cross races in “blackface,” “yellowface,” or “redface”—this list would have been much longer. Finally, you should check the references in our texts for good sources. For example, note 31 on page 233 of Deloria lists some standard examples of mostly mid-century racial crossings such as Griffin’s *Black Like Me*. (I differ with Deloria’s reading of Mailer’s essay “The White Negro,” but you should read it and judge for yourself.)

- Aguilar, Delia, and Anne Lacsamana, eds. *Women and Globalization*. Prometheus, 2004 (not yet published).
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992.
- Bender, Daniel E., and Richard Greenwald, eds. *Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Berger, John. *Selected Essays*. New York: Vintage, 2001.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. *Crusoe’s Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America*. New York: Routledge, 1990. This is the first, and perhaps still the best, serious indictment of trends in cultural studies.
- Callinicos, Alex. *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003.
- Chang, Grace. *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Cambridge, MA: South End, 2000.
- Dahbour, Omar, and Micheline R. Ishay, eds. *The Nationalism Reader*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1995.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Idea of Culture*. London: Blackwell, 2000.
- Edgar, Andrew, and Peter Sedgwick, eds. *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Guillaumin, Colette. *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Harden, Jacalyn D. *Double Cross: Japanese Americans in Black and White Chicago*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette, ed. *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.
- Johnson, Benjamin, Patrick Kavanagh, and Kevin Mattson, eds. *Steal This University: The Rise of the Corporate University and the Academic Labor Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Kumar, Amitava, ed. *World Bank Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- McQuillan, Martin, ed. *The Narrative Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas, ed. *The Visual Culture Reader*. 2d ed. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Monmonier, Mark. *How To Lie With Maps*. 2d ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996. This book examines another kind of visual culture that is surprisingly easy to manipulate for the gain of the powerful.
- Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 11, number 1 (Spring 2003). A special issue of this journal is titled *The Afro-Asian Century*. See especially articles by Vijay Prashad, Daniel Widener, Yukiko Koshiro, and Bill V. Mullen, as well as the Guest Editors’ Introduction by Andrew F. Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. London: Verso, 1994.
- Revoyr, Nina. *The Necessary Hunger*. New York: St Martin’s, 1997. This is a novel set in 1980s Los Angeles, and its topics include high school basketball and a love between two young women, one Japanese American and the other African American but both living in the same house.
- Salgado, Sebastiao. *Migrations: Humanity in Transition*. New York: Aperture, 2000. This is one of Salgado’s recent photographic projects. Others include books on industrial workers and refugee and migrant children.
- Saltman, Kenneth J., and David A. Gabbard, eds. *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003.
- Sanborn, Geoffrey, ed. *Typee*, by Herman Melville. 1846. New Riverside Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. Aside from Melville’s novel, his second, read especially Sanborn’s editorial commentary; and read the article by Gananath Obeyesekere, part of an ongoing debate with Marshall Sahlins over, among other issues, the culture and politics of cannibalism in the Pacific Islands.
- San Juan Jr, E. *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002.
- Smith, Shawn Michelle. *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Wells, Liz. *The Photography Reader*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. 2d ed. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Williams is one of the founders of what is today called “cultural studies,” though he might want to disown it, if he were alive. Also valuable are his books *The Country and the City*, *Marxism and Literature*, and his reference/essay book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*.

