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## Teaching Students to Challenge the Status Quo: Recognizing Oppression in African Film

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The purpose of this paper is twofold: to share experiences and strategies about teaching race and oppression with African films and promote the use of non-Western films in the classroom. Although the scenarios presented in this paper come primarily from my personal experiences teaching film courses, I believe that discussing representations in films can be successful in any classroom when learning involves questioning manifestations of oppression, whether related to race or politics, gender, sexual orientation, age, or class. To become critical thinkers about oppression and better communicators, students need to be exposed to a diversity of voices; and films, because of their visual component, easily attract students' curiosity and attention. Films thus can be successful sources for teachers who are engaged in a pedagogy that celebrates diversity and emphasizes multiculturalism.

In *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks designates the role that teaching should have in society: to challenge the status quo (bell hooks 203). An admirer of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose notion of a committed and revolutionary pedagogy urges teachers to give voice to the oppressed in order to value "education as the practice of freedom," (Freire 81) bell hooks' work carries on Freire's pedagogical principles. Her consideration of a committed education invites teachers to investigate the meanings of teaching and learning. An engaged pedagogy, bell hooks points out, asks for an education that respects students' own set of beliefs and values. It is these beliefs and values that teachers are asked to challenge in order to let students realize that, in confronting the status quo, they (re)discover themselves. Teachers' role (and struggle) in education is to empower students and not to dominate them; therefore, the teacher's goal is to encourage students to realize that learning is a struggle. It is by confronting our beliefs we may achieve freedom. In the light of this pedagogy, teachers should invite students to embrace texts that speak of cultures and peoples different from their own.

In this paper, I am referring primarily to discussions I have had mostly with students in "Introduction to Film" courses while teaching the African film *Black Girl* (*La noire de. . .*) directed in 1966 by Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene. Typically, "Introduction to Film" includes teaching primarily freshmen and sophomores a wide range of national and international films, from mainstream American cinema to international productions. The course often fulfills General Education requirements and is meant to introduce students to the study and appreciation of films. I chose *Black Girl* because it is the first feature length film made in Sub-Sahara Africa and Ousmane Sembene, one of the leading writers and filmmakers in Africa, is highly regarded as the pioneer of Africa cinema.

Teaching and learning about race and oppression with African films offers the opportunity to address diversity in the classroom, but it also entails a struggle: to attract



students to foreign films is problematic, and it is equally challenging to learn from the unconventional stories and unfamiliar historical references often displayed in African films. An example of this struggle is the resistance I found while teaching *Black Girl*. When I decided to include an African film in my class, I had to ask myself three initial questions: 1) How can teachers succeed in inviting students to engage with texts which depict foreign culture? 2) What strategies can I use to invite students to reflect upon race and diversity? 3) How can I provide students the necessary tools to better relate the cinematic images that speak of racial oppression to any other form of oppression (e.g. gender inequality)? I am still addressing these questions each time I enter a classroom, but with experience, I have developed some strategies that have proved successful in bringing students to challenge the status quo, despite their initial resistance.

One successful approach used to introduce race and African cinema is to ask students whether they think racism is over and whether discussing race still matters. Most students usually respond that racism is an “older” issue that belongs to their parents’ generation and that today racism is still somehow present but not as much as it was in the past. Keeping in mind their responses, I then provoke a discussion that leads them to question the concept of race and, most of all, white race. For that purpose, I find it very helpful to refer to the work done by British scholar Richard Dyer. In *White*, a compelling study on racial representations in Western culture, Dyer offers a critical background that helps students form new ideas on whiteness and develop an understanding of why discussing race and representations matters. Dyer’s provocative thinking questioning whiteness offers a place to start: “The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from centrality and authority, not to reinstate (and much less to make a show of reinstating it) when, like male power, it doesn’t actually need reinstating” (Dyer 10). Reflecting upon the meanings of “whiteness” is one way that students learn about diversity and come to understand any form of racial intolerance as an expression of oppression. Reading brief passages by bell hooks and Richard Dyer before and after the screening of *Black Girl* is useful because it invites students to reflect on the meanings and on the tragic consequences of domination based on a racial hierarchy.

Teaching (as well as learning) representations of racial inequality as a form of oppression can be distressing. It can be painful for some to discuss race openly, especially if the classroom is predominantly white. As pointed out by bell hooks, teaching is indeed a painful process, and I believe that, as a teacher, I must be willing to be questioned if I ask my students for a similar openness. She speaks of the pain of knowing that teachers are constantly challenged because of our beliefs and goals. Students also experience pain whenever they let new information enter their lives. When teachers succeed in their goal ~ to teach how to think more critically about any form of oppression~ students “may go home for the holidays and suddenly see their parents in a different light” (bell hooks 43).

One way to invite students to deal with their emotional responses to *Black Girl* is to let them respond in writing to the film soon after its screening. Teaching indeed means to provoke a reaction in students to enable them to face their own selves within their own community and to grow as individuals. To reach that goal, it is necessary to maintain a creative space in which students are free to voice their own opinions. I ask students to write in class a two-paragraph “screening report” in which they first criticize the film and then





defend it. Each student then reads the report aloud to the class, thus allowing each to share but also be exposed to a diversity of voices. In this way, students feel safe in their own environment and understand the importance of voicing their own opinions - contrary to the *Black Girl*'s protagonist's inability to voice opinions, the powerlessness that results from the deadly consequences of oppression.

However, when discussing racial issues in *Black Girl*, students initially tend to respond negatively. One reason is the film's unfamiliar structure. *Black Girl* lacks the conventional formula prevalent in mainstream American cinema that relies on the following elements: the presence of a protagonist and an antagonist, a climax and a resolution, often with a happy ending. Ousmane Sembene's film is set in a post-colonial African country, so the setting is as unfamiliar as the narrative structure.

Based on the short story written by Sembene and inspired by an real incident, the film tells the story of Diouana, a young Senegalese woman who moves from Dakar to the French Riviera to fulfill her desire to live the "French life," a glamorous lifestyle she has been fantasizing about by studying the images of white fashion models in French magazines. Leaving her home and family, however, and moving to France to work as a nanny for a white French family makes her aware of the cruelty and unfairness that hides beneath the alluring French life style.

As the film title suggests, Diouana is *just* a black girl, and her unhappy life and tragic death foreground the Senegalese filmmaker's intense inspection of white hegemony and its devastating effects on the oppressed. Ousmane Sembene chooses voice-over to narrate the film, suggesting that Diouana lacks a voice, exemplifying how imperialism has deprived her of an identity. Although students find this film difficult for its historical references and for the distance they feel from Diouana's lifestyle, they nonetheless acknowledge that, hearing her inner thoughts, her anger and frustrations, makes them feel closer to the young woman. Students usually react with surprise as if this realization signifies that they too can feel and experience what oppression does to an individual. Students most commonly reach this conclusion only after discussing the film. The more they talk about the reasons they don't like *Black Girl*, the closer they come to appreciate the film's meanings. Their initial negative response to the film is due mostly to other factors such as an assumption that foreign films are demanding because they are in another language. In this film, too, the dramatic ending of Diouana's suicide alienates students.

A strategy to deal with these obstacles is to prepare students by asking questions that let them investigate their own expectations (but also resistance) when they approach films that speak of cultures and historical periods unrelated to them. Before screening *Black Girl*, I ask students what words, associations, and even stereotypes come to mind when they think of Africa. The responses usually reflect a strongly rooted African imagery of jungles, famine, AIDS, poverty, wars, and genocides. Displaying two maps, one of current and one of colonial Africa, helps students realize and track the immense changes of borders within the continent. The discussions after the screening show that films are made not only for entertaining but also for informing. The new knowledge gives the students the power to be actively involved in the world and better appreciate the films that speak of realities different from their own.



“Why did she commit suicide,” students ask in their writing or orally. Diouana’s decision to end her life is meant to show the deadly outcomes of oppression and the African response to Imperialism. In order to deal with this difficult aspect of the film, I follow an important suggestion that bell hooks makes to teachers: to rely on our own sense of compassion and experience when dealing with texts that expose students to diversity (bell hooks 42-43). An open discussion about Diouana’s decision to kill herself as a way to terminate the slave-master relationship lets students open up new ways of thinking in which their beliefs are questioned, beliefs implied by their own culture and racial identity. In this way, students, whose sense of self is still forming, learn as they search for a balance between their knowledge and what they are learning in the classroom.

It is at the core of an engaged pedagogy to constantly modify pedagogy as much as knowledge in order to adjust to students’ learning and needs. For reaching this goal, I also rely on my own experience, a professor who is privileged because of skin color and education and yet perceived as marginal because of my own gender and ethnic background. Referring to my own background as a foreigner, as someone whose accented speech informs others that I am an outsider, I share with students my experience of being perceived as other and living in a country not my own. I explain that I am marginalized in academia as an Italian who chose to pursue an American degree in films and not in Italian language or literature and so I failed to meet traditional expectations. By revealing myself to students, not only do I share my experiences but I also show the respect I have for them. I show students that learning means sharing. Teaching does not aim to dominate but to invite them to question and investigate the world around them. This effective strategy can be used by anyone based on their own situations and personal experiences.

In addition, sharing my experiences with students addresses a much larger goal: to integrate theory and practice in the classroom, entailing a constant willingness to question our own voices as teachers. We want students to realize that a discussion on race or any form of oppression is not a closed but an on-going debate. Moreover, I want them to realize that cinema is a powerful ground for beginning an interrogation of oppression.

I believe my teaching entails a commitment to offer ideas to other educators whose focuses on diversity in the classroom rely on films, so I list here some additional teaching ideas. Before *Black Girl*, I teach another foreign film, the Chinese *Raise the Red Lantern* and discuss oppression from a gender perspective. Screening any film dealing with oppression prepares students to question images that speak of cultures and values different from their own.

Teaching race and oppression with an African film become more successful if I invite students beforehand to understand the relationship that exists between race and cultures by showing clips from American films that have representations of African Americans (e.g. Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*). These clips let students develop a deeper knowledge that also questions racial representations in the United States. Indeed, it is useful to refer to classic Hollywood films that deal with representations of race, gender and class and critically view the evolution of racial representations in cinema. Such classic Hollywood films include *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *Imitation of Life* (1934). Other films that deal with racial issues such as intolerance and stereotyping are the unconventional American comedies, Mel Brooks’ *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and John Waters’



*Hairspray* (1988). All these films represent valuable resources for teachers who want to continue discussing race and cinematic representations since these films speak of paradigms used by filmmakers either to promulgate racial hierarchy or to challenge it.

Teaching to transgress, bell hooks emphasizes, means that we as teachers have a responsibility to create a learning environment in which students learn to be open-minded and free to “move beyond boundaries” (207). As I have discussed in this paper, African films offer an opportunity to achieve this goal. Films such as *Black Girl* demand students’ attention but also require in-depth discussions if we want to raise students’ awareness of films as political weapons and expressions of oppression.

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The films cited in this paper can be found online (video rentals) and in most video stores

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