Response #1: On Ethnic Notions

Due in Friday cluster meeting

Format requirements apply (see syllabus).

This Emmy Award-winning documentary by Marlon Riggs uses objects and images from U. S. history to trace white attitudes toward African Americans. It is narrated by Esther Rolle, the African American actor you might have seen as the mother in the long-gone sitcom “Good Times”—from which she resigned because of its racism.

The film is extremely powerful and disturbing to most viewers, whatever their race. Through these visual images, you will probably learn a lot about the history of U. S. racism that you didn’t know.

While you are watching the video Thursday night, notice which objects or images you find most disturbing, most revealing, or most interesting. Make notes if you wish, but it isn’t necessary and it will be dark! Then, immediately afterward, narrow it down to ONE object or image to write on—the most powerful or memorable for you. Make some notes about the one you’ve chosen and your memories of seeing it.

In your first paragraph, merely describe the object or image you’ve chosen, in a very detailed way. Make me see it as you saw it. Then, in a second paragraph (or more), tell me why you selected it: what disturbs you about it; what it says to you or to all of us, and/or why it’s important.

Pay attention to paragraph organization and punctuation. Proofread. Don’t “try” to sound like anything; write in a personal voice.

Some Reviews of Ethnic Notions:

"Riggs packs enough in one hour to fill a documentary three times its length...Hearing the songs, watching the films and seeing all the artifacts are what make Ethnic Notions roll with the power of a juggernaut... It's nothing short of astounding." New York Post

"Decades of studying Afro-American history did not prepare me for the devastating impact of one- and-one-half centuries' worth of vicious racial stereotyping. Anyone claiming to understand our nation's past must see this documentary." Nell Irvin Painter, Professor Emeritus, Princeton University

"Downright superb! The visual presentation packs a wallop that would be impossible with words alone. Because it covers the entire course of American history from the 1820s, it will be useful for US history survey courses, as well as sociology and social psychology. I can think of very few people who would not benefit from seeing it."

Winthrop Jordan, University of Mississippi

"Disturbing but absorbing... With no rancor and considerable scholarship it lays out how stereotypes helped white society justify slavery, segregation and even lynchings." Los Angeles Times

"A classic! Should be required viewing for every American. It helps us better understand the dangers of Black stereotypes so deeply rooted in our culture." William Ferris, former Executive Director, National Endowment for the Humanities

"A historically accurate, thoughtful, skillfully-crafted treatment of the racial stereotypes and images that have plagued Black people since slavery. It is a compelling documentary, a superb teaching aid, and an impressive work of art." Darlene Clark Hine, Northwestern University