

Stereotypes at the World Fairs

By David J. Cope

Overview

In this lesson, students will study primary and secondary sources to discover stereotypes--and how they were created--that African Americans faced during the Jim Crow era from the 1893 Columbian Exposition and the 1939 New York World's Fair. Students then will research stereotypes in advertisements today. This lesson, easily adapted for upper elementary through high school students, serves as a great complimentary lesson to the beginnings of the Jim Crow era.

Time Required

One to two days for background readings, discussion, Internet research, and the in-class activity.

Materials Needed

1. Internet access to these sites:
 - <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/149/149syllabus12racist2.html>
 - <http://www.areditions.com/rr/rra/a025.html>
 - http://www.adage.com/century/ad_icons.html
(If school Internet access is unavailable, teachers can print the necessary information and distribute)

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

Have the students define and come to a consensus on what a stereotype is. After writing their definition on the board, ask students to explore and discuss stereotyped groups within the school and their "characteristics" by answering these questions:

- Why and how do we use stereotypes?
- How do stereotypes make some people feel superior and some feel inferior?

Procedures

1. Ask the students if these product characters stemmed from real individuals:
 - Aunt Jemima (sort of);
 - Uncle Ben (yes);
 - the Cream of Wheat chef (sort of); and
 - Betty Crocker (no)

Then, explain the history of the product character "Aunt Jemima," as follows. Chris L. Rutt and Charles G. Underwood bought the Pearl Milling Company in 1889. While attending a vaudeville show, Rutt heard a catchy tune entitled "Old Aunt Jemima" and named the company's product, pancake mix, after the song. The company went broke, and Rutt and Underwood sold their formula to the R. T. Davis Milling Company in 1890. Davis Milling exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition. They constructed the world's largest flour barrel--12 feet across, 14 feet long, and 16 feet in diameter--and hired Nancy Green to portray "Aunt Jemima" beside it.

Born a slave in Montgomery County, Kentucky, in 1834, Nancy Green's engaging personality drew masses of customers to the Davis exhibit where they ate over one million pancakes, allowing for over 50,000 orders from merchants throughout the country. Impressed by Mrs. Green's performance, the Davis Company signed her to a lifetime contract. Company artists included a caricature of her as a black mammy on the pancake packages, and the company sent her on nationwide promotional tours. Sadly, she was hit and killed by a car in Chicago on September 24, 1923.

After you have explained this history to the class, ask students the following questions:

- How would the stereotype of a mammy help to sell pancake mix?
 - Do you find this offensive?
2. Once students have read about the difficulties African Americans faced in acquiring jobs at the two fairs in the essays "African Americans and 'The White City'" and "African Americans in 'The World of Tomorrow,'" instruct them to enter the <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/149/149syllabus12racist2.html> web site. Ask students:
 - What stereotype does this postcard utilize?
 - How does the stereotype portrayed play into both fairs' hiring policies?
 3. Tell students to enter the **Jim Crow Image Gallery: Jim Crow Collection** . Have them identify other examples of stereotyping in the advertisements presented.
 4. Introduce students to Will Marion Cook, who influenced Anton Dvorak (see the lesson "African-American Artists in 'The World of Tomorrow'" on this site) and prepared the program for "Colored People's Day" at the Columbian Exposition. At the fair, he met Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frederick Douglass' assistant at the Haiti pavilion. They proceeded to write "In Dahomey" in 1902, the first American musical created and performed entirely by African Americans.

Then, have the class enter the <http://www.areditions.com/rr/rra/a025.html> site, read through the song titles written for the show, and answer the following:

- How did the titles of the musical numbers from "In Dahomey" play into the stereotypes of the era?
 - Why would talented and noted African-American artists write material that appealed to these stereotypes?
 - Do composers of popular music today use stereotypes to sell their music?
5. Ask each student to bring in a current magazine. Divide the class into groups of two or three and have them search the magazines for advertisements that play into modern stereotypes. Ask them:
 - How many of the products or services advertised do you or a member of your family use?
 - Does the ad copy with the stereotype affect your purchase?
 6. Follow up on images in other ad campaigns by having the students enter the http://www.adage.com/century/ad_icons.html web site.

Assessment

Assess the students through observations made during the class discussions and through the written assignments and projects in the Procedures section.

Related Works

Appelbaum, Stanley. *The Chicago World's Fair of 1893 -- A Photographic Record*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1980.

_____. *The New York World's Fair 1939/1940 in 155 Photographs by Richard Wurts and Others*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1977.

Interdisciplinary Links

The review of the show tunes for "In Dahomey" allows for a great interdisciplinary link with the music curriculum.

This lesson was submitted by David J. Cope, Honors teacher at Titusville Senior High School, Titusville PA.