

Class 4

Readings:

Johnson, Mat & Warren Pleece (2008). *Incognegro*. Vertigo (ISBN-13 978-1401210977)

Related Resources

<http://www.michaelstevenson.com/contemporary/artists/muholi.htm>

<http://muzane.wordpress.com/>

Today the class was visited by a special guest; Zanele (Za-Nelly) Muholi who is the Ida Ely Rubin Artist-in Residence. She also brought along several companions. The addition of four additional people changed the dynamic of the class. The women who visited brought with them diverse histories, perspectives, and opinions. This challenged the class in new ways and added a lot of lively discussion.

Press release about Zanele's stay.

http://web.mit.edu/arts/announcements/prs/2009/0126_Muholi.html

Incognegro

The class read a graphic novel called *Incognegro*. The novel tells the tale of a black journalist who goes undercover in the 1930s South to investigate a possible trumped-up murder charge against his brother—a charge that could lead to a lynching. The journalist is very light skinned and is easily able to cross between black and white worlds.

The class was very impressed with the way that subtle details in the drawing of the characters transformed and signaled his race to the readers. Certain signifiers were present when he was “performing” one race or the other. For example, the character removes the curliness from his hair. This illustrates that context is important to determine race, and references nicely back to William and Ellen Craft from last class. The fact that the character chooses to be black or white, demonstrates that race is arbitrary.

Race in South Africa

Zanele speaks about the way race and skin complexion play out different in South African than in the US. Skin color is often related to class; being dark often correlates with the perception of lower class. In South African people are categorized as white, black, or colored. The colored category comprised people of mix race or those of Indian or Asian descent. Obviously the complexities of race in South Africa could be a whole class, so we merely scratched the surface. Zanele brought up Ernest Cole, a South

African photographer who changed his identity from black to colored in order to have more power.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Cole

Codes of Gender and Sexuality

We had a discussion about the way people's gender and sexuality are codified and perceived. People whether consciously or unconsciously transmit cues. For instance, butch lesbians and transmen dress similarly, but are perceived and understood differently by people around them. This elicited comments about "gaydar", that is the ability of GLBT people to read cues to ascertain the sexuality of other GLBT people.

Apparently in Ghana, "butch" is not understood as a term. A woman could wear a tie, but is still viewed as a woman. In addition, there is a whole category of women (in Africa) who don't identify as lesbian, but still sleep with women. They do not view themselves as homosexual. This was compared to the men of Ancient Greece who routinely had sexual relations with other men. Also, Thailand is very innovative and progressive in their response to transgender people. The term kathoey is a Thai word that refers to male to female transsexuals. Some schools even provide separate restroom facilities for kathoey.

Choosing Sides

The class began to discuss the idea of gender and racial lines. In our society we often have to choose sides. Are you a Democrat or Republican? Are you male or female? Are you gay or straight? We often have to be on one side or the other. When people choose not to choose, what happens?

I think it relates to the whole "gender queer" movement, in which people who don't necessarily feel the need to pick a gender.

This idea really rocks the boat. People like to be able categorize people, to put them in a box. Bisexuality is also like this. Do you like men or women? People are uncomfortable with the in-between.

One class member said that "Gender neutrality is exciting but dangerous."

South Africa and Sexuality

The class watched a clip of Zanele's film about South African black lesbian women. South Africa recognizes same sex unions, but is also a very homophobic society. How do we reconcile these ideals? The women from South Africa called the culture for lesbians "discriminating and dangerous." They think the fact that same sex unions are legal reflects of how society wants to be and not a reflection on how it is now.

There is a strong notion that marriage is not just the joining of two people but of two families. It's a way to build relationships and community. Many families still use dowry, and same sex unions complicate these ideas. Who pays a dowry, etc?

Being Out

The class has a discussion about choosing when to be out. It's a personal decision for many and has many real world implications such as work and family. (I recently read a statistic stating that the majority of transgendered people are unemployed). One class member works with children and felt that people are particularly sensitive when children are involved. Zanele said she wears it on her sleeve and will let anyone know, not just during gay pride, but everyday. She wants to be proud and not live in shame in the closet.

This begs the question, "Should people come out to be a role model of what a happy functioning gay person looks like?"

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