

Teaching Race, Gender, and Intersectional Theory
Visuality Module Handout

The Stereotype as Taboo/Fetish

“In *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Glenda Carpio questions whether the possibility exists for contemporary artists to untether stereotypes from their fetishistic moorings, even as she remains wary that such work risks ultimately reinforcing the lure of stereotypicality: ‘As the prominence of stereotype-derived art in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries attests, the idea of forever cleansing the American psyche of its racial fetishes may be not only a futile project but one that might fuel the power of the fetish all the more by making it taboo and therefore seductive.’ The dilemma Carpio speaks of serves as the foundational question for this chapter and its examination of some of the ways *Coonskin* courts this risk of redirecting the force of antiblack iconography” (Gillespie 21).

Free Write on *Song of the South* (1946)

What is your immediate response to this text?

What if we ask Carpio’s question about *Song of the South*? What is your opinion about Disney’s decision not to release this film on home video?

The Racial Grotesque Today

“*Coonskin* is always timely as the racial grotesque is never simply the anachronistic revival of a dead phenomenon but is also a creative practice attendant to the continued impact of racialization and white supremacy” (Gillespie 22).

“The film has much to say about the Age of Obama, postrace, radical white (e.g. Tea Party, birthers), or perhaps Third Reconstruction times of the early twenty-first century. Perhaps this is the perfect time for the majestic indignity of the racial grotesque to startle and thrive” (Gillespie 48-49).

Think-Pair-Share

In Footnote 89, Gillespie lists contemporary artists that “traffic in the racial grotesque” (173). We have chosen two images from Jabari Anderson’s speculative comic-book series *Gullah Sci-Fi Mysteries* (2013). Looking at either or both of these images, respond to the following question:

How does Gillespie’s concept of the racial grotesque apply to these images? How do they use the racial grotesque to speak to our contemporary moment?

Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin and Cultural Criticism* (1992)

Carnival, for Bakhtin, refers to the pre-Lenten revelry whose origins can be traced back to the Dionysian festivities of the Greeks and the Saturnalia of the Romans, but which enjoyed its apogee[1] of both observance and symbolic meaning in the High Middle Ages. In that period, Bakhtin points out, carnival played a central symbolic role in the life of the community. Much more than the mere cessation of productive labor, carnival represented **an alternative cosmivision** characterized by the ludic[2] undermining of all norms. The **carnavalesque** principle **abolishes hierarchies**, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions. In carnival, **all that is marginalized and excluded**—the mad, the scandalous, the aleatory[3]—**takes over the center** in a liberating explosion of otherness. The principle of a **material body**—hunger, thirst, defecation, copulation—becomes a positively corrosive force, and **festive laughter** enjoys a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts. (86)

Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (1990)

The **grotesque body** cannot be a **spectator** to events, it can only be a **participant**. (444)

The grotesque body ... does not emphasize the **eyes**. The organs that matter the most to it are the **nose** and the **mouth**, which protrude into the world or ingest from the world. (450)

The primary reflex of the carnival body, when it is not defecating or ingesting, is to laugh. **Carnival laughter is neither negative nor unidirectional** and does not pass authoritative judgments: valuing the unfinished in everything, it is always ambivalent. (444)

The “carnival sense of the world” ... is a view of the world in which all important value resides in **openness and incompleteness**. It usually involves mockery of all serious, “closed” attitudes about the world, and it also celebrates “**discrowning**,” that is, **inverting top and bottom** in any given structure. Discrowning points symbolically to the **unstable and temporary nature of any hierarchy**. Bakhtin generalizes these two actions into one ambivalent gesture: “debasement” or “casting-down.” Under noncarnival conditions, such debasement might signify humiliation and loss of power. In the carnival symbolic, however, **a casting-down is always a positive gesture as well, a bringing-down-to-earth and thus a renewal and refertilization**. [...] Or, in a more concrete image, carnival insults are like **the slinging of excrement, which fertilizes and fosters growth**. (443)

This **oppositional strategy** [of the grotesque] was designed **to destroy all habitual linguistic and ideological “matrices.”** To do so, **unexpected connections of words and images** were created in order to upset languages and conceptions “shot through with centuries and millennia of error.” [...] [The grotesque] was **a temporary means to a new world**, whose matrices would not themselves turn out to be grotesque. (437)

[1] The highest point in the development of something; a climax or culmination.

[2] Showing spontaneous and undirected playfulness.

[3] Depending on the throw of a dice or on chance; random.

